



# HEART OF THE DOMINI

MATES OF THE DOMINI FIVE

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Heart of the Domini  
Mates of the Domini  
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*This one goes out to all the girlies who are struggling against yourself. We don't need their validation, we don't need their permission, we don't need their understanding. You're enough, love. We're enough.*

## Summary

### **HATTIE HAS FINALLY MADE PEACE WITH HERSELF**

It's been a long time coming, but she has reached a place of understanding. And it's a good thing, because it's all being put to the test. Her ex is back, testing the foundation of her carefully rebuilt self-esteem. Tuvo is there, testing the boundaries of the friendship she's trying to make between them. Standing between these males, she's struggling to remind herself to be strong.

### **TUVO IS DETERMINED TO MAKE PEACE WITH HATTIE, AND NOTHING ELSE**

He owes her penance for his hurtful words, he knows that, but the need to give into his mate is breaking him inside. He's denied his instincts too long, and he's finally breaking. But he can't. She's too soft, too small, too delicate. He'll hurt her. He'll break her. But he has to protect her. From the forces conspiring against them, and from her previous lover who puts a familiar hurt in her eyes.

### **HATEFUL FORCES ARE STACKED AGAINST THEM, THREATENING ALL THAT THEY'VE BUILT**

Most are happy to welcome their new alien friends, but those who don't are powerful and dangerous. A plot against the treaty is a threat to the peace between Earth and the Coalition. Surviving in the wilds of the Amazon, facing down human traffickers, and building trust between species. One way or another, it all ends here. The only question that remains is what their relationship when the dust clears.

Heart of the Domini is a standalone MF romance that is the finale of a series with an overarching story. Each book can be read as a standalone, but, for max enjoyment, are best read in order.

# Warning Page

(If you have potential triggers or concerns about sexual content, please protect yourself first. Beware of potential spoilers below this point)

**SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER SPOILER**

Triggers: Animal deaths, eating wild animals, mild to mod violence, mentions of SA and human trafficking.

Kinks: Size difference, breeding.

**END SPOILER END SPOILER END SPOILER END SPOILER**

# Story so far

The rough days of first contact with Earth...

Five humans were abducted off the street one night, and brought into a massive universe they had no idea existed. After saving an alien trapped with them, he brought them to his home and made them his sisters and mated one. The result of which was the impossible - a hybrid baby.

The Earth has agreed to the terms of the treaty, but those who reject the idea of aliens and their desire for human mates stand in their way.



# Chapter 1

## *Hattie*

Always a bridesmaid...

Well, to be technical, this was the first time she was a bridesmaid for this group of friends, but it wasn't the first time she had seen one of them bound in matehood. And it definitely was not the first time she had been a bridesmaid.

Hattie stood at the end of the aisle in a beautiful greenhouse in the botanical garden her friend, Alanna, had chosen for her wedding venue. A smile was fixed on her face as she looked towards the back. Eager to witness her friend appear. She had already seen her in her dress, of course, but that didn't lessen her excitement for *this* moment, when she appeared in front of everyone else.

And she was trying very hard not to look at Tuvo. The big, broad, and drop-dead sexy alien mountain of a male that never failed to make her heart flutter and pussy drip with wanting was directly across from her.

A guy that had said, in no uncertain terms, that he was *not* interested.

Because Hattie was always a bridesmaid.

By this point in Hattie's life, all her high school friends were married – some of them multiple times over. Her culinary school friends were married. Her coworkers had all been married – except for, like, one who never wanted to be married in the first place. And now, all the girls she had been abducted with were happily mated to their alien hunks.

And here was Hattie, once again, filled with joy for them and despair for herself.

Was there something wrong with her?

Surely, there wasn't something about her so irredeemable that she couldn't find anyone that wanted her who wasn't also completely reprehensible.

Okay, she was short, but that wasn't a huge deal breaker, right?

And okay, she was sometimes optimistic to the point of obnoxiousness, but that couldn't be a reason for her to be unwanted, right?

And maybe she carried more weight than most people, but Hattie knew how to take care of herself and dress to show off her curves in their best light, so really that wasn't the worst thing ever? Right?

Maybe there *was* something wrong with her-

No!

Stop that.

She very nearly shook her head to banish the morose thoughts. Ones that she had been battling since, truthfully, before she dumped her ex. Thoughts that were now engrained in her head because *he* had put them there.

The same guy that was sitting on the bride's side of the aisle, grinning at her with a self-important smirk on his face. He was the only person not looking towards the back where the bride was already visible in silhouette behind gauzy, white curtains.

Hattie was trying not to look at *him*, either.

This had been a trying few weeks. Sometimes, she found it difficult to keep a smile on her face and continue on like she was okay.

It seemed like a lifetime ago now that Hattie had been abducted by aliens. She had been closing up her catering business for the night, ready to walk home, then one thing led to another, and now here she was, bridesmaid in a wedding ceremony on Earth between her friend Alanna and First Voice Survii of Turv. The final nail in the treaty to make Earth a protectorate of the Coalition – a powerful, multi-species

conglomeration of aliens. She was an adopted sister to the leader of a planet, her catering business was well and truly defunct, and her ex-boyfriend was trying to weasel his way back into her life for the social media clout because, hey, she was famous now.

Her life was really weird.

Hidden out of sight, the musician on the piano changed the tune. That familiar trill turned into the even more familiar bridal refrain, warning the gathered guests that the big moment had finally arrived. They stood, smiles stretched across their faces.

The curtains pulled back, finally revealing Alanna in her shimmering, white silk dress. Tight on her gorgeous body. A bright smile on her face. Literally having her perfect dream wedding in Geneva at the expense of the United Nations.

And Hattie was happy for her. She really was! Alanna deserved good things. She was a great friend and good at bringing people together. She had taken to being kidnapped like a champ and had immediately immersed herself in alien culture, allowing her to be the best person to be the go between for Earth and their alien visitors.

That's why Hattie felt so guilty. Because she was envious. She *wanted* what Alanna had. What all her friends had.

Alanna and all the other bridesmaids were mated to alien beefcakes. Each male was lined up across from them, looking positively sinful in fitted, violet tuxedos – because black was too harsh on their camouflaging skin and purple was the wedding color.

Survii, fashionable and sexy, was the only domini with waves in his hair because he preferred looking good over catering to his camouflage reflex. Atem, Hattie's alien brother, with big arms and a big heart, had a big smile as he watched Alanna approach. Havali, absolutely gorgeous with an aristocratic face that looked like it had been carved from marble by a master, stood with the easy confidence of a male that knew his worth. Romival, the smartest man on his home planet, and almost definitely on Earth, wasn't as buff as the other domini beside

him, but instead seemed lean and tight – like a swimmer or a runner.

And then there was Tuvo.

He stood between Atem and Havali, the biggest, buffest dude in the room. Hattie, when standing beside him, could look straight forward and not even have a conversation with his nipples. Even in a tailor fitted suit, he looked like he was about to burst out of the seams.

He was so *fine*.

Tuvo was the only domini Hattie knew who had scars on his body. Alien medical technology could heal without scarring and could repair scars once they were already formed. Including stretch marks – to Hattie’s absolute delight. But Tuvo was covered in a multitude of jagged marks. Four long lines on his cheek were his most recent addition – courtesy of Havali. The domini were a combat loving race and they took their fights seriously, even between allies. It looked like Tuvo had his nose broken at least once, his long, pointed ears had nicks cut into them, and there was a kink in his tail.

Hattie didn’t know why Tuvo allowed himself to be scarred up, but it did wonderful things for her lady parts. It was like the proof of his strength and skills was written right there in his tough, color changing skin for all to admire.

What really drew her to him, however, were his eyes. He was the only domini she knew that had such brightly colored eyes. They were like a cross between green and blue, leaning more heavily towards blue. Green was a very rare eye color for the domini. Most were red or blue, even pink. Green was the rarest eye color.

And she was staring at him again.

Alanna reached the front of the aisle, and the ceremony began, but Hattie almost missed it while staring at Tuvo. Caught in his thrall. In the brightness of his three eyes that had almost no white, their marquis shape angled so their inner corners pointed towards the center of his face.

He kept his hair short and shaved in a strict, military style haircut. Which was suitable since he, himself, was a military man. Not just a regular soldier though – he was First Warrior. Leader of the entire domini military – both in space and on Turv. He was an incredibly impressive male.

No wonder he didn't want her.

Nope! No! That was a negative thought again.

Hattie was delightful, dang it! She might not be well-connected and educated like Alanna. Or brave and strong like Peony, the maid of honor. Or gorgeous and talented like Scarlet, the tall redhead at her back. Or even willowy and dedicated like Holly, the blonde who brought up the rear. But Hattie was a great cook and a great friend, and she was beautiful in her own way too!

That evil little voice her ex-boyfriend Keith had put in her head was going to stop talking to her one day. Until then, she just had to keep drowning it out with endless positivity.

Because she *was* good enough. She *was* worthy of a good male. Just because Tuvo didn't like her curves or her softness didn't mean that nobody would.

She was worth it. She knew she was.

So, she could smile and be genuinely happy for her friend at her wedding no matter what. Even when, after the ceremony, she had to walk back down the aisle arm-in-arm with Tuvo himself.

And if she nearly got dizzy just from the strength of his forearm as he led her away, that was a secret she was going to take to the grave.

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“Say, cheese!”

A sudden flash blinded Hattie before she had time to react. She hadn't even noticed Keith coming up to her side until he had already taken the selfie of the two of them – his arm around her shoulder, having yanked her close, like they were still dating.

“What are you doing?” She asked, pulling back.

Not quickly enough. He had gotten the picture he wanted. She could see it on his phone screen – him beaming, her with an odd, expressionless face. He scowled at it.

“Would it kill you to smile, Hats?”

“I-”

“It’s fine. I can add some filters,” he dismissed her, already messing with it.

Hattie sighed but didn’t argue. He already had the picture. And it was hardly the first. Ever since she returned to Earth, he had been trying to get pictures and videos of them together. To make it look like they were still a couple.

Her parents hadn’t been able to stay in Geneva with her. Her father’s job wouldn’t let him have that much time off. So, they had left a couple weeks ago. They still talked to her every day, unable to resist video chatting with her after she had been missing for almost a year.

Keith, however, had a very nice and understanding boss. A good man with a loving heart who was extremely empathetic towards a loving boyfriend who was finally reconnected with his missing girlfriend. Keith was allowed to work off his laptop so he could stay with her.

But they weren’t together anymore, and Keith was really just here to get a bunch of content for his social media accounts. Pictures and videos and posts about how *cool* the aliens were. All for clout because the aliens could not stand Keith.

Hattie wasn’t comfortable with Keith. And because she wasn’t comfortable with him, and kept trying to push him away, her alien brother was always on the verge of fighting him. Quite literally. The domini solved their problems with violence. Never to hurt or kill each other, just a display of aggression and proof of strength.

Keith, though he was taller and fitter than Hattie, and not unattractive by human standards, didn’t stand a chance against any of the domini. Even Romival, the shortest, leanest, of the

males, was still taller and more muscular than Keith. A fight between her ex and any domini was a forgone conclusion.

Hattie ignored Keith and his attempt to alter a prettier expression on her face – and to take her waist in a bit – and instead returned to watching the reception.

Alanna and Survii were having their first dance. Both of them looked so dreamy and happy. Hattie was waiting for the bartender to finish making her drink while mentally composing a list of all the things she would need to go home.

Alanna and Survii were about to go off on their honeymoon. It was a perfect time for her to cross the ocean and visit her parents. She was going to be returning to Turv with the aliens when it came time to leave Earth. But before that, she wanted a chance to see her childhood home again and eat some of her mom's cooking.

Hattie's love of food and feeding others had come straight from her mother. It was a tradition she carried on proudly. Just as she carried on her father's work ethic by taking that love and turning it into a thriving business. And though Hattie enjoyed cooking for the people she loved, sometimes, she liked having people cook for her as well. And no one cooked with love like her mother.

She had to ask the others if it was safe to go, of course. Not everyone on Earth was happy with aliens or the idea of interspecies relationships. There had been a whole incident at the hotel a few weeks ago. If men charging their truck through the front doors and unloading huge guns their direction could be called an 'incident'.

It had been terrifying. A tragedy. Yet Hattie's biggest memory of that moment had been Tuvo picking her up like she weighed nothing and carrying her up multiple flights of stairs. He hadn't even been breathing hard. Hattie couldn't remember anyone ever making her feel so dainty and delicate.

Not that it was ever going to happen again. She didn't plan to ever encounter another dangerous situation like that, and therefore there was no reason for Tuvo to carry her.

A shame.

“There. Now *that’s* pretty,” Keith declared, beaming at the picture he had doctored. He had added a makeup filter, made her skin shinier, artificially pulled in her belly, and tilted up the corner of her lips so she looked like she was smiling. He had even added hearts and sparkles all around the border, giving it a romantic air it certainly didn’t have in real life. He tapped her picture. “You look great, Hats. The dress is super cute.”

“Keith-”

He already hit ‘post’ and just like that, his socials were exploding. People were desperate for more information about the aliens and the kidnapped women. He was super popular online for no other reason than he was the only one posting like this.

“How about a dance?” He asked, smiling as he slid his phone back into his suit jacket. A suit he definitely didn’t own – unless he had a drastic personality change in the year she had been gone. It wasn’t impossible, but she highly doubted it.

“I’m okay,” she said, accepting her drink with a smile at the bartender.

“Come on. Everyone else is doing it.”

He wasn’t wrong. The first dance was over and now Alanna and Survii were being joined by multiple other couples – including Scarlet and Havali. The handsome alien male danced the waltz like he had been doing it for years. They were both so beautiful, it seemed almost unfair. Both dazzling and graceful and glowing with happiness.

And pregnancy.

Scarlet wasn’t showing yet, but she was carrying Havali’s baby. Across the room, sipping at water Romival had brought her, Holly was also pregnant and *definitely* showing. Peony wasn’t pregnant, but she was a mother already. She and Atem were constantly using their comm to talk to the *Jutiron Stor*, the massive starship orbiting just beyond the moon, and their infant son who they hadn’t wanted to risk bringing down to the planet. Alanna wasn’t pregnant, as far as Hattie knew, but it



would only take one quick trip to the medical scanner to have her ovulation restored and she would be.

Hattie hadn't turned off her period like the others. She didn't want birth control. She wanted a *domini* male to look at her, fall instantly in love, claim her as his mate, and put his baby inside her immediately.

Well, she wanted Tuvo to do that, but he had made his disinterest clear. So, she obviously wasn't his mate. *Domini* knew their mates on sight and would stop at nothing to claim them. And while Hattie had liked Tuvo on sight, he had not felt the same.

"Why don't you want to dance?" Keith asked, oblivious to her longing thoughts for a *domini* male and a *domini* baby. She did not want a human man anymore. She was pretty sure Keith had ruined her for all of them at this point.

"Because these heels are hurting my feet," she said, not even really lying. It was the first time she had worn heels since being abducted – and probably a bit before that, actually. The *domini* didn't wear heels, and she hadn't even tried to put on a pair since coming back. But for a formal wedding, she could hardly say no. Especially as a bridesmaid appearing in pictures with all the other girls wearing heels. She was short enough already without being the only one not on stilts.

And she *wanted* to. She felt pretty in the heels. In the long, purple, bridesmaid dress. Her hair and makeup had been done by professionals. She smelled great, she looked great, she *felt* great. If only Keith would stop with his backhanded compliments!

But she could hardly express her frustration when her overprotective alien brother was likely to beat his face in if she let on just how uncomfortable he made her.

She didn't like Keith. He had wrecked her self-esteem in their two-year relationship. She was still fighting the voice he had left in her head. But just because she didn't like him didn't mean she wanted Atem to stomp him into the dirt.

“Come on, Hats. You *owe* me a dance,” Keith said, rolling his eyes, exasperated like she was putting him out.

Hattie sipped at her drink before deciding to just do it. She wanted to talk to him without his phone in his hand anyway. It was the entire reason she had invited him here. She knew it would give her a chance to speak with him uninterrupted – as distasteful as the idea was.

The only reason she had let him stay here initially was because she didn’t want to embarrass him in front of the entire world. She had tried to insist, multiple times, that he leave since then without making a big deal about it – either to him or the security team who would doubtlessly throw him out on his butt. But it was time now to put on her big girl panties, put down her foot, and *end this*. For good.

“Sure. Let’s go,” she said, steeling her nerves.

She barely even got a chance to stand before he grabbed her hand and yanked her to the floor – a huge, self-satisfied grin on his face. He brought her around, putting his arms around her waist, and started swaying with her. He couldn’t actually dance.

“Where’s the photographer?” He asked, looking over her head. “She’s supposed to be getting shots of the wedding party, right? Think she’ll let me have the ones with us?”

“Keith.” She straightened, putting her face in his view, forcing him to look at her. “Keith! Can we talk?”

“Yeah, sure. I’m listening.” He smiled that charming grin that initially caught her heart.

Keith wasn’t an ugly guy. He was very classically attractive. Blonde hair with just a hint of a curl flopped neatly over a pair of deep, blue eyes. He wasn’t cut like the domini males, but when he took off his shirt for his posts, people were appreciative.

Hattie had honestly thought she had a catch when they first started dating. And that feeling only grew as he started chipping away at her. Constantly remarking on her appearance. Telling ‘jokes’ about her weight that hurt her

feelings, and then not stopping when she told him so. Never failing to remind her that she couldn't do better than him.

And she had believed him. For a long time. Until the moment she realized what he was doing. Then, she broke up with him. He had still been calling and texting her, trying to force her to change her mind, when she had been abducted.

No one had known about their breakup yet, so when Earth had been informed that she and the others were returning, he immediately slotted himself in as her lover. He had a free ticket to Geneva to meet her, was staying for free in a fancy hotel with the rest of the families, and his social media presence was off the charts.

He told everyone on Earth that they were still together. He was treating her like they were still together. He hadn't tried to force himself into her room or anything, but he was taking couple selfies and calling her by that nickname she never liked and was always trying to touch her.

He was *very* lucky she didn't want Atem to beat him up, because it would only take her permission.

"Keith, you need to go home," she stated firmly.

"Huh? Why?" He had the audacity to look surprised.

"Because we are not together. Because you shouldn't be here."

"This again, Hats," he sighed, long suffering and slightly annoyed. "I thought you were over this already. You've had plenty of time to calm down."

"Keith. We. Are. *Not*. Together." She spoke slowly. Forcefully. Making sure he knew she was not backing down from this decision. "I'm going back to Turv once we're done here."

"Why? The alien men didn't want you. I'm the only one who wants you."

She didn't even react anymore when he said things like that. She knew he was only saying it because he was trying to manipulate her. Seeing the hand of the magician ruined the magic.

“I’m going to visit my parents after this. I’m taking you with me.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, like he had accomplished something.

“So, you can go to your *own* home,” she stressed. “I’ll visit my parents, then come back to Geneva, and you are staying there. Because we *aren’t* together.”

“But we can still have dinner and stuff, right? Nothing wrong with a couple of friends hanging out, is there?”

“No.” She held firm. “We’re not friends, Keith. We’re exes. I don’t want to embarrass you, and I don’t want to hurt you. I just want you to let this end.”

“Come *on*, Hats-”

“No.” She was the one who cut him off this time, and she could tell by the way his eyes flashed that he didn’t like it.

“Fine.” He grumbled. “Don’t know why you’re bothering though. You’d really rather fuck one of those things than a real man?”

“I’d rather fuck no one than ever touch you again,” she assured him.

She was immediately rewarded when he ripped himself out of her arms.

“I can’t even talk to you when you’re dramatic like this, Hats. We’ll continue this later.”

She said nothing as he melted back into the crowd. No doubt to make more videos of himself at the wedding. He had to show his new followers just how great his life was right now. Because appearances mattered to him more than reality.

Sighing, Hattie stepped off the dance floor and returned to the drink that the bartender had been watching for her.

And she felt better. Tired, but accomplished. She had stood her ground. More than that, Keith’s disparaging comments hadn’t affected her. A year ago, hearing him say those things would have made her feel guilty and irrational – just like he wanted. But not anymore.

She was freeing herself from him and it felt so good!

## Chapter 2

### *Tuvo*

The tiny human male was walking away. And he was lucky he was, because if he had kept touching Hattie to her discomfort, Tuvo would not be able to control himself.

His aggression was at an all-time high after so long denying the mating urges that were squeezing his brain in a vice. A terrible pressure that tightened every time he looked at her. His perfect little mate. So beautiful and happy and bright.

And *small*. And *soft*.

Too small and too soft.

Tuvo took pride in being big and strong. He liked that he could stand in nearly any fight and come out the winner. Atem, *Dominani* of his people, was the only one who could defeat him. Tuvo had trained him personally as they grew up together. As he trained the greatest warrior and scholar and leader of all Turv, Tuvo had trained his own body as well. He fought in many battles, defended many creatures that couldn't defend themselves, and held himself with pride. He was big and strong, and he used those qualities to the best of his abilities.

And his stupid mind had decided that his mate was the tiniest, softest, sweetest human. He would destroy her if he tried to fuck her. His cock wouldn't fit in her little body. The other females all commented on how large they found their mates, and Tuvo was larger than all of them, while Hattie was smaller than the other females.

They were two pieces designed to match but made to different sizes. He wanted her with a pain that was raking through his

brain like claws on sensitive flesh. Hurtful and aching and yearning so hotly that it burned him from the inside.

He *needed* her. With a painful desperation, he needed his mate. His head was being crushed from the strength of that desire. His sac ached. His knot throbbed. His cock was always hard, and his own hand couldn't even provide relief any longer. He couldn't come without his female. But he couldn't come *with* his female, not without hurting her.

So, he watched her from afar. He yearned for her. He hated that he drove her away, but in a way, he was grateful. It had been so much harder to resist when she had been giving him those desirous glances and hopeful smiles.

His only consolation was her humanity. She couldn't feel the aching pain of an unfulfilled bond the way he could. She could still live her life without him. Safe and unharmed.

And preferably away from that puny male that so obviously disturbed her.

Keith Willard. Male. Thirty-two Earth years old. He had employment in the office of a company that crafted metal fittings for machinery. He also spent an inordinate amount of time on the Earth equivalent of the subnet, showing off himself on social sites. He had at least three *lovirii*, pleasure mates, in his past, not including Hattie. All of those relationships ended with considerable sour feelings on both sides. He had no history of great deeds or accomplishments.

He was, in a word, ordinary.

And he dared to put his hands on Tuvo's mate. He wasn't worthy.

Hattie watched the male leave her with a long sigh of relief. Then, with a smile on her face, she returned to the drink that male had interrupted her enjoying. With them separated, Tuvo began to relax again.

This entire wedding was a test for him. Because nearly all of Alanna's female attendants were mated, Survii's groomsmen were paired with them. By process of elimination, that meant Tuvo had to be paired with Hattie.

He had to feel her warm hands on his arm as he guided her down the aisle. He had to stand beside her as they took commemorative photos of the wedding party. He had to pretend like he didn't want to pick her up and ravish her. To fuck a pup into her belly. To claim her as she deserved.

But he had survived both of those things without acting on his impulses. He remained strong. And he didn't break the teeth of that male who dared to touch her despite her wishes.

He should earn an honorable name for that alone, really.

“Are you brooding?”

Tuvo didn't even turn as Havali came to join him where he stood, leaning against the wall, present at but not part of the claiming party going on around him. The humans put much more ceremony and pomp into a claiming than his own people. The dancing had led into a ceremonial cutting of a large, tiered pastry that surely symbolized something but was lost on him.

“Are you ignoring me now because you're brooding?” Havali asked, leaning against the wall with him, a knowing grin on his face.

Tuvo had to resist the urge to punch it off of him. He was on Earth and humans were peaceful. They would not understand if he started a physical fight with Havali. No matter how much the aggression would help him feel better.

“Her former *lovirii* has wandered off,” Havali continued, as if he were oblivious to how close he was to getting his nose broken. “This is a good chance for you to dance with her instead. Human dances are very easy to learn, I assure you.”

“I am not dancing with Hattie.”

“You should. Might help you stop brooding.”

“You're trying to make me fight you, Havali.”

He laughed, unconcerned. He knew that Tuvo would not risk the treaty they were attempting to establish by frightening the humans with domini aggression. They were such a soft, gentle species. They didn't tolerate violence well.



“Perhaps, I’m just looking out for Hattie’s best interests. And yours. I know you’re-”

“You know nothing,” Tuvo snapped with a growl. Forcing himself to keep the sound low so as not to frighten the humans. They were definitely a prey species. Predators, but prey all the same. Their intelligence and adaptability were surely what made them apex creatures on this planet for it certainly wasn’t any physical capability.

Havali wasn’t at all disturbed by his temper. “Come. There’s apparently a human tradition we’re meant to participate in.”

Tuvo frowned, his tail lashing at the air. “I thought we had finished those. The pictures were supposed to be the last thing. We’re only supposed to party after that.”

“Yes, and the females were giggling riotously when they told me,” Havali smirked, “so I do believe they’ve kept it from us on purpose. Come on. All unmated males must attend, and since you refuse Hattie, you qualify.”

All unmated males? He was not unmated. He had a mate. That he refused to touch.

Grumbling, he pushed himself off the wall and stalked forward. Someone had brought a chair and Alanna was sitting on it. The entire dancing space had been cleared, giving room for her and her mate. The females were tittering their excitement, the males were rowdy and encouraging, yelling words Tuvo couldn’t understand at Survii.

He was still working on his English. Tuvo wasn’t unintelligent, but he had little skill for learning without proper neural imprints. He knew only a few basic phrases in the human tongue, but it didn’t help him now.

Hattie was there, across the dance floor. Tuvo watched her so closely, he almost completely missed the tradition unfolding before him.

Almost. It was very hard not to notice when Survii stuck his head under Alanna’s skirt. Tuvo ripped his lower eyes from Hattie – his upper eye never leaving her – and stared in shock as Survii used his teeth to obtain a garter from around

Alanna's thigh. It was apparently a whole thing for the humans as they cheered him on with salacious calls that needed no translation.

Tuvo was so confused. He thought humans were supposed to be, on the whole, modest. They were highly sexual as a species, but in social situations, they did their best to hide that. He wasn't sure why they denied that part of themselves, but he considered it similar to the way that the domini fought in non-lethal ways to control their aggressive impulses. A means of control over a wild part of themselves that kept society functioning.

That was completely gone now as Survii molested his female in front of everyone. And she appeared equally delighted and embarrassed. The crowd was encouraging. It was very strange.

It only got stranger when Peony explained what was happening.

This ritual was the first part of some kind of passage of good fortune. Alanna was to toss some flowers like the ones she carried down the aisle at unmated females. And then Survii was supposed to surrender that cloth he just pulled off Alanna to the unmated males in a similar way. The two who caught the items were considered to be blessed and the next to be mated. Or something. Turv didn't really understand things like fate and fortune – the domini did not have those concepts in their history. He knew about them only because most other species did.

He was still trying to understand the ceremony when Alanna tossed her flowers.

And Hattie caught them in the air.

His chest immediately tightened. The urge to growl rose in his throat. She was the next to be mated. He was her mate. They should do it now.

But no. They couldn't. *He* couldn't.

But he certainly couldn't allow one of these other males to do so either.

He was so focused on her, he almost missed the moment that Survii suddenly tossed Alanna's garter towards him. He caught it purely by reflex, identifying it only after the silky fabric was already in his hands.

And the room burst into laughter. Survii, apparently, was supposed to throw it randomly, not toss it to a specific person.

But Tuvo refused to relinquish the item.

It was his now. He did not care about the fortune thing, but he did care that this object was the mate to the object Hattie now held. The two of them were bound in the meaning of the ceremony.

Hattie smiled at her little bouquet, then lifted her eyes to him. And it was like the entire room just melted away. There was nothing but her and those deep, dark eyes that seemed so big in her face. They blinked at him over her little button nose covered in a smattering of adorable little dots. Her full, luscious lips curved into something that might have been a smile.

Hattie was all delicious curves and plump softness. Her lips, her breasts, her thighs. Every length of her thick and full and sexy. Her body begged to be caressed. Her hair to be grabbed. Her lips to be kissed. She was decadence and luxury and joy.

And she was his.

"Easy." That was Havali's voice in his ear, his hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down because – *krik* – he was growling. And not at all subtly.

Hattie had turned from him, and her back was a challenge. A call to hunt. He needed to chase his mate and rip away that fluttering dress so he could claim her as his own. Squeeze her tight. Fuck her deep. Plant his pup in her belly as she screamed her ecstasy to the strange, blue sky.

"You're growling louder," Havali said, his voice less playful. "Calm it down. The humans are getting uneasy."

Tuvo cleared his throat, trying to stop the sound. It didn't want to stop. *He* didn't want to stop. He wanted his female.

Havali pulled him away from the humans. Through the wide, open doors. Into the beautiful private garden just for this celebration hall.

Earth was so *green*. For him, green was the color of the sky, the water. But on Earth, those things were blue, and it was the plants that were green. It made Tuvo feel like he was drowning. Or maybe those were the emotions and needs he couldn't repress.

He would be happy to return to Turv, where the plants were properly purple. Where he could delegate the protection of Earth to a general stationed here. Where he could see Hattie safe and away from the dangers of prejudice that existed on her planet.

Everything always came back to her.

"Tuvo."

Havali again. The sound of his voice was becoming aggravating. Tuvo was growling again. There were no humans to frighten nearby though, so he let it happen.

"*Tuvo*," Havali stressed, coming around to stand in front of him. "You can't keep this up. You are going to hurt yourself. You are already more aggressive than normal. If you keep pushing yourself like this, you're going to break."

"I'm not going to kill her former *lovirii*."

"Of course, you're not. Atem wouldn't let you. But you would do a lot of damage. The humans are *fragile*. Their males almost as much as their females. Even if you strike them with a closed fist, you would likely decimate them."

Tuvo's growl deepened. With annoyance this time, because he *had* fisted his hands. The urge to break something, preferably that male's hands, was getting worse.

"I'm fine," he growled between his teeth, hating how angry he sounded. "I'll *be* fine. We're almost done here. Once Survii and Alanna return from their honey-thing-"

"Moon," Havali snickered.

“-we’ll go back to the *Stor*. She’ll be secure again. I’ll be fine. I just need to keep some distance between us. That’s all.”

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“Tuvo, I need you to take Hattie home.”

Unprepared for the request made by his *Adassani*, Peony, the delightful human female mated to Atem, Tuvo paused in the act of bringing a glass of water to his lips.

He was at a second mating party for Survii and Alanna. This one was far more rigid and attended by leaders on Earth rather than her friends and family. Hattie’s former *lovirii* had not shown his face to this event, so he was already feeling calmer. Just watching her laughing and having fun was sometimes enough to ease the aggression digging its claws into his head.

Sometimes.

He could say that, overall, he wasn’t having a bad time. The music was soft, the people were harmless, and Hattie was smiling. That was enough for him.

Until Peony suddenly broke away from the crowd and approached him with a wide, devious grin.

“Accompany her home?” Tuvo repeated, not sure he understood.

“Well, home as in, to her parents’ house,” Peony clarified. “She wants to go while Survii and Alanna are on their honeymoon. In fact, we all thought, if you didn’t mind, we could take our own little vacations.”

“Vacations.” He repeated the word dully, gut already tightening as he considered the amount of work that would have to go into securing all of them as separate groups. It was difficult enough when they were all together. Survii and Alanna were going to a private island that had no other people on it, so they would be fine. But if *everyone* split up...

“Please.” Pony gave him a beseeching look. “Hattie really wants to go home. And you owe me, remember? You said you’d talk to her. And you still haven’t. This could be your chance.”

Tuvo flinched at the reminder. He had insulted the small female by demeaning her efforts in childbirth before he understood what such a thing involved for humans. When he asked her for some task to perform in penance, she had demanded he speak to Hattie. To apologize for the pain that existed between them now because he had once remarked on her size. Or maybe because he rejected her when he did so.

Not to her face! And he certainly hadn't meant it to be an insult. Atem had been warning him and the others from sniffing around his sisters. A warning clearly no one had heeded. Tuvo had assured him then that he had absolutely no intention of courting Hattie. Not when fucking her would likely rip her apart.

But she had overheard him, and his careless words had hurt her. Peony was a good female, a good friend, and so had demanded he fix this rift between them as his penance.

He had managed to avoid doing it while accompanying Atem to the Coalition gathering that voted to give Earth a protectorate status. And then had managed to avoid it again by claiming he was busy keeping security for everyone here on Earth.

But Peony was right. If he could safely separate everyone, and he protected Hattie himself, it would be a perfect time to talk.

He couldn't have her, but he could at least ease the hurt he had caused.

"I'll speak to the security team," he finally said. "I can't guarantee that I'll be able to do it, but I'll see if we can spare the numbers to keep everyone safe and allow them freedom to roam."

Peony beamed. "Thanks, Tuvo! You're the best!"

She turned, lifting her thumb upwards at the other females. It was a human signal he hadn't encountered yet, but apparently it was a good thing because they all began to smile and chatter excitedly.

Including Hattie.

Well, if it was for her...

“Oh, by the way,” Peony caught his attention again. “You’re going to be taking Keith back with you. Is that okay?”

Tuvo growled. Stuck in a tiny, old fashioned flying craft with that male?

“Easy, big boy,” Peony laughed. “You *have* to take him home. He’s not staying with you, but he has to get back to the States. And then, I promise, you’ll be done with him. Just don’t cave his face in on the flight back.”

“I am in perfect control of myself,” he assured her, pretty sure he wasn’t lying.

“Sure. Thanks, Tuvo.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I have to determine that you can actually go.”

“Considering it is still a favor. Don’t do it if it’s too dangerous.”

“I assure you, I won’t,” he promised.

Nothing and no one would ever make him risk Hattie’s life. Such a thing was too precious to take chances with. But he also couldn’t lock her away in a box and expect her to be content that way, no matter how safe it was.

Hattie wanted to see her parents. He would make it happen somehow.

He pulled out the phone that he had been given by the human head of security. He didn’t speak English, and the male, Bertrand, didn’t speak Domtri or Standard. However, human communication devices came with handy little pictures called emojis that could serve as a basic system of communication. It was a bit tedious, but over the last few weeks, Tuvo and Bertrand had managed to form some basic communication using the little pictures.

Tuvo trusted Bertrand about as far as he could trust any human. Not enough to grant him the privilege of protecting Hattie’s life, but enough to help him coordinate protecting the others in order to grant her request.

Anything for Hattie.

## Chapter 3

### *Hattie*

So, the going home plan was approved.

But it came with a stipulation.

She had to take Tuvo with her.

Hattie took a seat at the bar of the big reception hall in the UN building, people watched the most powerful individuals in the world, and contemplated the condition.

She couldn't really be mad about it. As much as it sucked, she *did* need protection. While the majority of Earth was excited about the idea of making contact and establishing trade with aliens, there were those that definitely were not. And they were grouping up. One such group was responsible for the hotel attack that had them on such tight security measures.

So, while Hattie wanted to believe in the goodness of others, she couldn't exactly argue about the need for an escort.

But why did it have to be Tuvo?

The answer was obvious. Only five aliens, all domini, had come down to Earth to start the negotiations. Five male domini, four of whom were mated. That left only Tuvo and Hattie as the odd not-couple out. The spares. And so, it only made sense to pair them up.

It was fine.

Well, it wasn't *fine* fine, but it was fine.

Hattie frowned into her drink, trying to figure out her own emotions.



When she had first landed on Turv, she had been so excited about the alien world. The technology, the beauty of a foreign planet, the people! The domini were amazing. So passionate and honest. They had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, but she appreciated their forwardness.

And she really appreciated the First Warrior.

From the moment she spotted Tuvo at their welcoming party on Turv, Hattie had been fascinated. She could admit to having a fetish for big guys, but that was easy to fulfill considering her short stature. But it was like Tuvo was every secret fantasy she hadn't known she possessed rolled into one gorgeous, growly package.

Big and strong and unapologetic about his stoicism. But also kind and duteous and never unaware of just how much bigger and stronger he was than others. He knew the strength he had and how easily it could hurt people, and so he was careful. Mindful. And she loved that! She didn't care if he was a bit grumpy on the outside. If anything, she liked him more because of it.

There was just something so cute about big, grumpy guys who wouldn't hurt a fly – but who would, and did, destroy entire armies because he had to protect others.

He was exactly her type, and she hadn't made her interest a secret. To anyone. If anything, she was a bit embarrassed to look back on herself now.

The eager way she had sought him out had been so desperate. She wanted to be the only one preparing his meals if he was visiting the palace. She had begged Holly and Peony for advice in tempting a domini male into being interested.

She knew about their mating instincts now. Domini knew upon first seeing their mate that they were *The One*.

And she found it so romantic! Beautiful! And once they went through with the claiming, it was like a biological lock being put on their mind and bodies. They wouldn't be able to feel desire for anyone but their mate. And she loved that!

Some part of her hadn't wondered if, maybe, there was a little of that in *her*. Why else would she want Tuvo so much, so quickly? It wasn't unheard of for humans to experience love at first sight. That was how her parents fell in love, after all.

She held onto that hope for months. Doing anything she could to try to catch the First Warrior's attention.

Right until the moment he made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't interested.

And he did that by remarking that he could never touch someone of her *size*.

Hattie wasn't ashamed of her body. She was healthy, she loved food, and she thought she looked pretty, even with all the extra curves.

But after Keith had spent so much time 'jokingly' remarking on her body and its size, hearing that same thing from Tuvo hit that much harder.

He had said absolutely not. He called her fat. And that was the end of it.

Hattie had immediately turned self-destructive and needed her friends to remind her that starving herself wasn't the solution. That there didn't need to *be* a solution. She liked her body until everyone else made her unhappy with it! She just had to remember that.

So, she had sworn off men. Males. Sworn off Tuvo in particular. And she had been going about her life, enjoying her food, laughing with her friends, reminding herself that she was happy in her body, and, maybe, ignoring Tuvo altogether.

But she couldn't do that anymore. Not if he was going to be personally escorting her to her parents' house and staying there with her. Because he would have to since staying at a hotel would ruin the whole point of being there as security.

Hattie took a bracing drink and squared her shoulders.

She could do this!

Tuvo had made that remark about her size, but he hadn't meant it in a demeaning way. Not the way Keith had, anyway.

The domini didn't think in terms of skinny being attractive or big being ugly. She had just taken it that way because of her past with her ex. Tuvo just didn't prefer someone like her, and that was okay. She had worked her way through that. She was back in a place where she could tell that negging voice in her head that it had no idea what it was talking about and not being Tuvo's type didn't mean anything.

After all, she was a human. She didn't know her mate at first sight. She had to find hers the old-fashioned way. That had just been lust at first sight.

And it was gone now.

She had been sure to kill it dead and bury it deep because there was no point being upset because you weren't someone's type. She was a big girl; she could put on her big girl panties and deal with reality like everyone else.

And because she was an adult, she could certainly have a friendly relationship with Tuvo even after the rejection. She had been avoiding him to this point for her own mental health.

But enough of that.

It was time to bury the hatchet!

Hattie downed the last of her drink and turned to hop off her barstool-

-only to come up short at the sight of the older man standing right behind her.

"Oh!" She cried out at the same time he did, putting a hand to her chest. "You scared me!"

"*You* scared *me*," he laughed, falling back a step. "I wasn't expecting you to turn so suddenly like that."

Grinning along with him, Hattie stood. "Were you trying to sit?"

"No. I was coming to meet you, actually." He gave her a friendly smile. "I wanted a chance to introduce myself to you, Miss Sweet."

"Huh? Me? Why?"

He reached into his coat and pulled out a business card with a flourish. “My name is Phillip Morrison. It’s a pleasure.”

“Morrison? As in...”

“Morrison Inc? That one exactly,” he laughed like admitting to being an ultra-billionaire was a super normal thing.

Hattie didn’t know why she was surprised. To this point, she had met the leaders of every large country who all treated her like an old friend. A politician thing, she guessed. She had also met a super famous band because they played for Alanna’s first reception and a few other famous people at this one that had managed to get an invite – usually on the arm of a politician. But somehow meeting one of the wealthiest men on Earth was shocking.

“Er, nice to meet you,” she greeted, shaking his hand.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he assured her. “I’m so happy you and the others came back to Earth safely. And brought new friends with you. I’ve even offered one of my islands for the happy couple’s honeymoon.”

“Oh, that’s really nice of you,” Hattie smiled. She wasn’t expecting him to be so magnanimous. She supposed when you had a lot of money, you could afford to be that charitable.

He smiled congenially, waving away her words. “I just had a quick question for you. If you don’t mind.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“I know the other women are going to be returning with the aliens to their home planet. Turf?”

“Turv.”

“Ah. Right. My bad. They’re all married to the men though. And you’re not.”

Ouch. Hattie kept her smile in place. “I mean, yeah.”

“So, I was wondering if you would be staying here. I’m sure you have a great deal of information that you could share with us. And since you’re not married, you’ve no reason to return. You’re not planning on marrying one of those men, correct?”

“Er, well, they’re not men, and they call it mating...”

Morrison made a face. “Yes, that just sounds so... strange...”

“I am planning on returning though. Turv is my home now.”

He frowned. “But, in that case, won’t you have to marry an alien?”

“It’s not required.”

“Isn’t that the whole point of the treaty, though? Aliens taking our women.”

Hattie laughed. “I mean, kind of? That’s a weird way to put it though. They want the chance to take us as mates. I think it’s sweet. But it’s not like I need to be mated for citizenship.”

“I see,” Morrison said, frowning.

Hattie gave him a curious look. “Is something wrong?”

He hastily smiled back at her. “No. Not at all. Thank you for telling me that. Have a nice day, Miss Sweet.”

“Hm?”

Confused, Hattie watched him go. What was that about?

She thought about it for a few more seconds before shrugging, figuring that it didn’t matter, and turning to find Tuvo.

The UN conference hall was lovely and huge. It wasn’t so easy to track down a single person amongst the crowd. The domini males stood out by virtue of being larger than everyone else in the hall. But being shorter than everyone else, Hattie couldn’t really see over people’s heads to spot them.

She finally found the male in question standing along the walls where a lot of the personal assistants and bodyguards for the various VIPs were waiting unobtrusively out of the way.

The moment she stepped out of the crowd, Tuvo’s eyes locked on her.

And it hit her like a punch in the gut.

Why did he have to be so sexy? His arms were crossed over his broad chest, and his forearms were bare as he had rolled up his Earth style dress shirt. His hair was getting just a bit long

since he hadn't had a chance to cut it, and she longed to see if the strands were soft or if they were just as hard and rough as the rest of him.

Upon catching sight of her, he dropped his arms and stood straight. His blue-green eyes flashed in the fancy light of the crystal chandeliers overhead. He didn't come to meet her, but he did watch her as she closed the distance.

"Hey, Tuvo," she greeted in Standard, trying for normal. Probably the first time she had ever greeted him in a normal way instead of excited and eager for his attention.

"Hattie," he inclined his head. "Are you enjoying the party?"

She beamed. "Yeah. I'm having a great time. The music is nice."

"Yes. It's very nice. Human music is very melodic."

"Yeah, you guys seem to emphasize drums more."

"Indeed."

"Uh-huh." Oh, god, this was painful. It felt like there was so much between them for her *not* to say that she was struggling to find something inoffensive *to* say.

"Hattie."

"Yes?" She perked up immediately. A thrill going through her that he addressed her so casually. Even before she had started avoiding him, they hadn't really talked.

She definitely shouldn't be so happy about that. That wasn't a friendly thing to feel.

"I've been talking with Bertrand to start setting up our security for the separation. Romival helped me translate."

"Yeah? You think it will work?" She perked up immediately. No amount of awkwardness could keep her from being excited to see her parents again.

"We're constricted by numbers. Separating all of us into five groups means splitting our security by five. But if Survii and Alanna only take one or two people since they won't need

anyone on the island, and you and I take no one, we can probably swing it.”

“Take no one?”

He grunted in affirmative. “We’re going to contact Alanna’s uncle. Since he is the ruler of the country we’re visiting, we can trust him to set us up with security. So, we’ll only be without security for the duration of the flight.”

“Oh. I see.” She beamed, bouncing excitedly. “So, then our security team now will only need to be split three ways. Minus one or two for Survii and Alanna.”

“Exactly.”

“And then... So, that would mean you and I would be alone on the plane?”

He gave her a long look before answering, “Aside from the pilot. I cannot fly an Earth aircraft. They aren’t made to Standard.”

“Right,” she rubbed her arm self-consciously, forcing a smile. “Of course.”

“Are you uncomfortable with me being there?” He asked, voice softening.

“No!” She answered, perhaps a bit too quickly and loudly. “Sorry. No. Definitely not. You’re doing me a huge favor by going out of your way like this. Thank you.”

He waved away the words. “Don’t worry about it. I’m... grateful.”

Her head cocked curiously. He took a breath, straightening his shoulders.

“Hattie, I owe you an apology.”

“Oh, no,” she hurried to assure him. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I jumped to conclusions-”

“No, I was being unkind to you-”

“-should have just come to you directly-”

“-no reason for me to say those things-”

“-really fine, I promise.”

He let out a breath. “I already know that fine doesn’t mean fine for human females. Romival has already given me that warning.”

Hattie laughed. “Okay, fair. But I *am* fine, Tuvo. Really. You don’t have anything to be sorry about. I’m sorry that I judged you as a human when I should have judged you as a domini.”

“And I’m sorry that you were forced to find out that way. I should have been direct with you. It is not an easy conversation to have, but I never meant to make you feel bad. Especially not so bad that you stopped *eating*.”

She sighed. “Yeah. Sorry. That was a bit dramatic of me.”

“No, I...” He hesitated, hand reaching out for her. He let out a long breath before dropping it back to his side.

She offered him a shy smile. “Maybe we can just... start over?”

“Start over?”

“Yeah. Humans, you know, we don’t fight to clear the air. And I don’t think I could beat you anyway,” she laughed a bit breathlessly, imagining those big, thick arms tightening around her. His heavy body weighing her down. “Er, yeah. So, when we’re trying to make things up with each other, sometimes, we just ask to start the relationship over.”

He chuckled once. “Start it over? You mean, pretend as though we never met each other?”

“Well, not that literal. But essentially, yeah. No hard feelings. No past mistakes. Just us meeting again on neutral terms.”

Tuvo looked thoughtful for a second before grunting. “Very well. I should like to start over with you, Hattie.”

She smiled, heart jumping with excitement. “Thanks. I’m glad we can just... put all that behind us.”

“Put what behind us?”

“You know... that whole *thing* with...” She trailed off at the knowing, amused look in his eye. Bursting into laughter she



smacked his arm. “Oh, you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said, almost fully seriously. “I need to go see to the preparations for our journey.”

“How soon are we leaving?”

“Might take a day or two.” He thought for a second. “Yeah, a day seems like enough time for me to get everything in order.”

“Really? Only a day? To call the president and organize five different security teams and coordinate all of that? You only need a day?”

“You wanted to see your family, correct? And if we do it quickly, there’s less chance that something can go wrong. So long as our security team keeps things in order.”

Hattie beamed, rushing forward. She threw her arms around him, eager to give him one of her signature hugs. They had the best ratings. She squeezed tight, trying not to think how good it felt for her soft body to mold to his harder one. Or how nice he smelled. Or how adorable it was when his hand cautiously came up and patted her on the back.

Pulling away, she beamed at him. “You’re amazing, Tuvo. You know that?”

He offered her a very soft smile. Just the slightest upturn of his lips. “It’s not a big deal, Hattie.”

“Still, thanks. A lot. This means so much to me.”

Still warm from the hug, she whirled around and returned to the party.

He was just a friend.

No matter how much her body ached from that one hug. Desperate for him.

A friend. Only.

# Chapter 4

## *Tuvo*

Three Earth aircraft sat, waiting, on the tarmac being readied for takeoff. Their security team was handling the transfer of luggage and overseeing the teams preparing the craft. There would be no mistakes here.

Not when everyone's life was at risk.

There wasn't much left for him to do. The security teams were set, the plans were made, Alanna's uncle would have a team waiting for when Hattie and Tuvo landed. They were as safe as they could be.

Turning, he reached into his hip pouch and pulled one of the two communicators that they had brought down to the planet. The only alien technology that came with them. Earth wasn't allowed to advance beyond their naturally attained level before they became proper members of the Coalition, not just a protectorate. Anything brought to the surface had to be carefully checked. The communicators were very simple. They could only transmit sound and only connected to the *Jutiron Stor*.

He turned and offered one to Survii, who looked surprised.

"You're giving this to me?" He asked, plucking it from his hand.

"You two are going the furthest," Tuvo said. "You'll otherwise be out of range of communication. That is unacceptable. Take this just in case."

Survii nodded – a human gesture that had an affirmative meaning. The others had adopted the human movements much more easily than himself.

Survii tucked the device into the pocket of his human pants before asking, “Will you be keeping the second one?”

Tuvo grimaced and admitted, reluctantly, “Yes.”

The others gave him curious looks, but it was Atem who answered, “He tried to give it to me. But Peony and I are staying in Geneva. We’ll have the best portion of the security team. Moreover, we’re closest to the others. If necessary, we can be back together quite quickly. The four of you-” he looked between Survii, Alanna, Hattie, and Tuvo, “-are going the furthest. I’d rather you have the comms.”

Tuvo couldn’t stop his displeasure from showing. He would much rather his *Dominani* have the second comm. Atem and Peony were, objectively, more important than himself. After all, it wasn’t hard to find a skilled warrior amongst the domini.

But the part of him that demanded that Hattie be placed above all others was eager for the comm. Atem, the male he thought of as a brother, had argued for him to take it, but Tuvo hadn’t protested very hard.

Looking at the others, he started setting his rules for the separation. “If any of us have to summon the shuttle and return to the *Stor*, the moment we’re back, we send the shuttle for the others. So, if the shuttle shows up, climb aboard and get out. No questions. Got it?”

“Yes, dad,” Peony said with a sarcastic, good-natured smile that made the others chuckle.

He could not join in their levity. “I mean it. Separating and going back amongst the Earthlings opens us up to potential attacks. We have to be cautious. We can enjoy ourselves, but we have to be aware that not all Earthlings are accepting of us and the relationships between us.”

“We’ll be careful,” Alanna promised with a reassuring smile. “Any other rules?”

“Don’t leave your security team. Don’t go anywhere you haven’t already cleared beforehand. In case of emergency, we – and I mean us domini specifically – are allowed to kill any humans that are attempting to kill us. We’ve already warned

the Earth of this. I'm warning you now, females. I know you're delicate and you don't appreciate violence, so I'm telling you what will happen so you can prepare yourselves mentally if it comes to that.

"Two weeks," he finished firmly, looking at them in turn. "That's how long you have. By the end of two weeks, I want everyone back here. If you aren't back by then, I'm coming to get you."

"Yes, sir!" Alanna put the side of her flattened hand against her forehead in the human version of a salute – he was pretty sure she was mocking him as Peony had, not showing true respect to his military command.

"Relax, Tuvo," Peony laughed, nudging his side. "We're okay. Right, Atem?"

His *Dominani* grimaced. "I didn't want to separate at all. I was outvoted."

"You're also paranoid."

"An aversion to being killed is not paranoia."

They were both right as far as Tuvo was concerned. Atem did have, as Peony called them, trust issues – but he had seen his family assassinated as a child, so he could hardly be blamed for that. That being said, Tuvo had voted alongside Atem to *not* separate, so he could probably be called paranoid as well. Despite his mistrust having grown from the humans' own actions.

"Sir!"

That was a male calling out to him, using an English honorific. One of the few words he had come to know in his time here. He turned as one of the security team jogged up and said something that he did not understand.

Scarlet, the blood haired human female, translated for him.

"The plane to Paris and London is ready," she said, sharing an excited look with Havali. They were going to Paris, while Holly and Romival would be going to London.

He thanked the male and got another human salute – probably more genuine than Alanna’s – before he jogged off again to oversee the other two planes.

Holly was visibly pregnant, and Scarlet was not yet visibly pregnant. The two of them and their mates were going to be sharing a plane to their destination. Romival, Holly’s mate, was not happy about his female being out of her nest, but Havali’s instincts hadn’t been triggered yet, and he smiled at Scarlet like giving her this was all he wanted in the world.

The four of them bid their farewells before climbing the wheeled staircase into their aircraft. It had already taxied away and screamed down the runway by the time they were informed that the second aircraft was ready.

This one was for Hatti and Tuvo.

The human male, *Keith*, was already inside. He had come with Hattie to the tarmac but immediately climbed into the aircraft. Like an overeager pup. Tuvo was just glad he didn’t have to deal with him yet.

There were more farewells. Hattie gave hugs to everyone as they said goodbye like they weren’t going to see each other again in mere days.

Not that he could blame them. After having received one, he understood why everyone enjoyed being hugged by Hattie. She was so warm and seemed to hug with the whole of her body. She clung on like enjoying the embrace was all she wanted in her life, and even their size difference didn’t diminish the simple pleasure in it.

And he was grateful that she didn’t appear to have felt his cock. It likely would have poked against the underside of her breasts and there was no disguising that.

“Two weeks,” he repeated firmly. “Be careful. And use the comm if you need to. And don’t forget to get the others if something happens.”

Survii chuckled, completely unbothered as he put an arm around his mate. “Relax, First Warrior. We’ll be fine. Now, get going. Hattie’s eager to see her family again.”

Tuvo grabbed her bag and followed Hattie up the steps, pausing at the top so she could call out her farewells to the others one last time. She bounced on her heels, waving her hand wildly in the air as she smiled so brightly, it seemed to him like the blinding rays of the sun. Beautiful and life giving and painful.

Because it couldn't be his.

Finally, she turned and walked into the plane. He followed after, automatically checking the cabin to make sure everything was in place.

Apparently, these aircraft, as ancient as the technology seemed to him, were the height of human luxury and speed when it came to travel. They usually had many humans crammed into them to take on their journey, but these were for private use. The only people on board, besides Hattie and himself, were the pilot – who remained safely ensconced in his cockpit – and *Keith*.

The obnoxious male had his human comm device in hand and was using it to take photos of himself on the soft, leather chairs with a glass of the nasty, sparkling, human alcohol in hand. He looked ridiculous as he made various faces and tilted his head in different directions while moving his phone around to get the perfect shot.

His Hattie truly was a patient and kind female if she tolerated him touching her.

She was ignoring him now, however, as she approached the storage for the luggage – hers rolling behind him as his own was tossed over his back.

“In here,” she directed, smiling. “And thanks again. You really didn't have to carry those.”

“I wanted to,” he assured her as, overhead, the pilot's voice declared something.

“We need to take our seats,” Hattie translated. “We're taking off now.”

Tuvo nodded and gestured for her to go first.

The private plane wasn't huge, but it was luxurious. The front chairs were big enough to be comfortable despite having to stoop as he walked across the cabin. They were in two rows of two and Hattie chose the window, furthest from Keith. Tuvo was only too happy to take the seat beside her, blocking the male's view of her.

The plane was already moving by the time they buckled in. Hattie pulled out her human comm device and set it to a special mode that, apparently, the plane required in order to fly correctly. Tuvo didn't know enough about human technology to know why or what would go wrong if left out of that mode, so he just followed her lead.

Their phones rendered useless, he put his back in his pouch as Hattie leaned forward and frowned at Keith – still posting pictures of himself to the human subnet.

Tuvo didn't need to speak English to know she was chastising him for not yet disabling his device. Keith did not appear impressed, his two eyes rolling in his head.

Tuvo growled. He knew that gesture – it was a sign of disrespect.

Keith heard him and jumped. He sort of glared, though not directly at Tuvo, and scoffed as he reset the mode of his comm. He then tossed it onto the empty chair beside him and held up his now empty hands, giving Hattie another disrespectful look.

Tuvo's growl got louder.

Keith clicked his tongue and turned away, muttering something under his breath. Tuvo heard him fine but didn't understand. Hattie did however, and her face flushed as though embarrassed.

“What did he say?” Tuvo asked, looking between her and Keith. The male was silent now, glaring out the window as the plane began to jet forward, rushing to build up the necessary speed in order to achieve lift. So old fashioned, it was quaint.

Hattie averted her eyes, answering him softly. “Nothing important.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“You’re just going to get mad.”

“I promise not to punch him. As long as it wasn’t about you.”

She looked surprised. “Me?”

*Krik.* That was too close to being honest about his feelings. He cleared his throat, casting his mind around for a quick excuse.

“I am your guardian in Atem’s place. If he is insulting you, I need to know so I can defend you.” Yeah, that was good. And allowed him the opportunity to get mad later as well without her looking too deeply into why.

She was still safe from him.

Hattie gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you, but I know that means violence. You can’t beat him up, no matter how much you might want to.”

“That’s debatable. What did he say?”

“Nothing about me.”

“Then, what did he say about me? Don’t I deserve to know that?”

She bit her lip before sighing, giving up. “He called you... a simp.”

Tuvo frowned. “Is that an English word?”

“Yeah. It’s the shortened form of simpering.” Her face was red again, embarrassed. A non-camouflaging reaction that the humans experienced sometimes. “He was accusing you of being too nice to me and white knighting.”

“Another term I am unfamiliar with.”

“You know... trying too hard to defend me just because I’m a girl.” She wasn’t even looking at him this time, her fingers curling nervously through the ringlets in her long, brown hair.

Tuvo was only confused further. “I can be too nice to you? Too defensive, I can understand, but I haven’t even threatened him. It was just a little growl.”



Hattie laughed, shaking her head. “Forget it. It’s a stupid guy thing. He’s just mad that I was telling him what to do.”

“The flight mode for the comms?”

“Airplane mode, yeah. He says it’s not even a thing anymore, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. He can be without his phone for a while. And we have wi-fi. He can connect to that. He’s just being mad because he doesn’t like people giving him orders.”

“He is clearly not involved with the military then.”

“No, definitely not.” She laughed before suddenly making a face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Just... Why is our easiest conversation about my ex? Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure,” he inclined his head. “What did you have in mind?”

## Chapter 5

### *Hattie*

Crud. She had asked for a topic change but didn't actually have a topic in mind to change to. And she didn't want to lapse back into uncomfortable silence. She was making progress! They were being friendly and companionable. That was the goal!

The goal was not to get hot and bothered every time her arm brushed against the corded steel that was his forearm in the space between their seats. Or to be hypnotized by the woodsy, masculine smell that came from him. Or to fall deep into those blue-green eyes and float away like they were the ocean pulling her out to sea.

Crud.

“What’s your favorite food on Earth so far?”

She winced at the first question to come flying out of her mouth. Of course, it was about food. He had made that comment about her size and food was the very first thing she brought up.

But she liked food, dang it! And she was genuinely interested. She wanted to know what he was enjoying down here and what he didn't.

“Those mushrooms we had at Alanna and Survii’s mating ceremony,” Tuvo said after a pause to think while she was busy berating then uplifting herself. “The ones that came on the side of the raw meat?”

“The portobello mushrooms?” She smiled. “I’m not surprised you guys like that one.”

“It was very good. Cooked very well. But the raw meat surprised me. I thought humans couldn’t eat raw meat.”

Hattie chuckled. “Steak tartare. It’s one of the only meats humans eat raw. Besides fish, but you guys don’t eat fish.”

Tuvo grimaced. “I cannot even stand the smell.”

“A shame, because fish on Turv is *delicious*. It took me forever to find some, but when I fried it up with some of that sweet-spicy sauce I made? Ugh, so good. The girls loved it. The guys in the kitchen with me though? Not so much.”

“I imagine,” Tuvo chuckled, the deep rumble striking right in her belly, heating her blood, and warming her heart. That small smile on his harsh features did good things to her insides. “It probably took forever to get the smell out.”

Hattie stuck her tongue out at him before laughing. “Yeah. The guys in the kitchen are really nice though. They never seriously complain when I’m in there trying my human experiments. And they taste test my food. Most of it, anyway.”

“Your attempts to build a menu both species can enjoy?”

“Yeah! I’m going to make a whole list! That way, if there’s any other humans that end up mating a domini, they’ll have menu options. Ready and waiting for them.”

He gave her a long look until she shifted in her seat. “What?”

“You became very passionate speaking about that. This goal is important to you?”

“Well, yeah.” She mumbled, shrinking in her seat. “I know it probably doesn’t sound important, especially compared to militarily protecting all of Turv, but food *is* important. An army moves on its belly, you know. That’s a human phrase. And food is a huge part of being human. A lot of important parts of many different cultures are built around food. Holidays involve people coming together over food. To break bread with someone is literally a phrase which means to foster feelings of understanding and good relations.”

“Bread is the human staple food, yes?”

“Yeah. Food is super important. There’s nothing else like it. I mean, we could all be drinking protein smoothies and taking vitamins and call it good, but no one does that. Because food is *life*. It’s joy and togetherness and...” Her voice trailed off as she realized she was, again, the fat chick sitting there espousing how good food was.

To the guy who rejected her because of her size.

She was trying really hard not to let it bother her, but how could it not when Keith was sitting right there – already connected to the plane’s wi-fi – reminding her of what happened the last time she had explained her love of cooking to a guy.

“Don’t stop.”

She looked back at Tuvo, surprised by the soft eagerness in his words.

“What?”

“Don’t stop,” he said again, giving her such a heartbreakingly tender look, it hurt to see. “You’ve never looked so alive and eager before. Tell me more. I want to hear about your dream.”

Hattie suddenly found it hard to breathe. Trapped in Tuvo’s gaze. In the kindness, the simmering joy, there. Like he really was interested in what she had to say. As if he really did care.

“Tuvo, you-”

“Yo, Hats,” Keith called to her without looking up from his food. “I’m hungry. This place has a kitchen, right?”

“Er, yeah.” Frowning, she leaned past Tuvo’s large chest to look at him. Tuvo wasn’t growling, but he certainly didn’t look happy about the interruption.

“Can you make me something?” Keith gave her a smile. “You’re such a good cook. I’ve really been missing your food. And we don’t have any sky waitresses since Tiny over there is obsessed with security or some shit.”

Hattie frowned. He had complimented her, yet somehow it didn’t feel like it.

“What did he say?” Tuvo asked in Domtri, glaring at Keith like he might be tempted to pick him up by the throat for daring to speak to her at all.

“Oh, nothing. He just said he was hungry.”

“I fail to see how that’s your problem.”

“He wanted me to cook. There’s a little kitchen here. I can’t promise anything gourmet, but I know we have food. Are you hungry, Tuvo?”

He glared at the male for a second more before turning back at her. The speed with which his expression softened melted her.

“I could eat. Would you mind letting me watch and, if I can, help?”

“No, come on,” she beamed, trying not to look too excited as she bounced to her feet. The flight was going to be about ten hours – faster than a commercial jet, but still long. They had a lot of time to kill and taking on the challenge of cooking in the sky sounded like fun.

Tuvo stood to follow her to the small kitchen that, usually, would be where any stewards would be working. But since Tuvo wanted no one but the most necessary personnel – i.e. the pilot – to be with them, it was her space now.

It was kind of cool, in a new experience way.

As Tuvo stood to follow her, having to bend his head to walk through the jet, Keith, once again, called him a simp. Under his breath, because he definitely wasn’t going to call him that straight to his face.

Tuvo growled at him as he passed.

Hattie ignored both males as she led the way.

Cooking with Tuvo, even with the limited supplies and ingredients she had on the jet, was a strangely enjoyable experience. Not because she liked cooking in a tiny kitchen where her hips and butt kept hitting things and Tuvo had to crouch in the entrance, but because Tuvo was interested in what she was doing.

He asked questions. He asked to taste the food. He even tried the bread, though Hattie knew he couldn't actually eat it. The domini didn't eat grains – it was like they, as a species, all had a gluten intolerance. But he tried it because it was a coffee cake, and she made a sound of delight upon tossing a bite into her mouth. He enjoyed the sweetness, not the bread.

But he ate it. And he tried the warmed nuts and the salad and the chicken – he ate the meat raw. She found it odd to give him raw chicken. It went against everything that had been drilled into her in culinary school, but he chewed it with all apparent enjoyment.

She spent a while sampling food with him, laughing and trying things that were new for no other reason than they were doing it in the sky. Like being thirty thousand feet in the air somehow made the usually mundane chore that much more fun.

Or maybe that was because Tuvo was there with her. Giving her that understated smile that barely turned up at the corners as he watched and took an interest in what she was doing.

“Hey, what’s going on back here?” Keith asked sometime later, walking towards the small kitchen with a frown on his face. “Are you cooking or what, Hats?”

“Oh!” She winced guiltily. “Sorry. I kind of forgot. H-Hold on, I’ll make you a plate.”

He stared at her in slack jawed amazement as Tuvo ate the raw chicken pieces coated in garlic and herb butter she had made for him.

“Seriously, Hattie?” Keith grumbled. “You can’t even do this much? I asked for one thing.”

Tuvo started growling. Unable to understand Keith but picking up his tone.

“Sorry,” Hattie said, meaning it. She had come back here with the intention of cooking for him, after all. She had just gotten distracted.

Keith gave a long-suffering sigh. “See, Hats, this is why you’re never going to keep a guy. No one else would be

willing to put up with this kind of thing.”

“I said, I was sorry,” she said softly, hating how easy it was for him to make her feel small.

Tuvo was already on his feet, snarling at Keith as he slammed his bowl on the counter.

“No, Tuvo, it’s fine,” she rushed to say, ready to take full blame for this one.

She didn’t get the chance as the intercom dinged overhead and the pilot spoke-

*“Hey, everyone. Bit of an update. I’m getting some notifications that the engine might be having some difficulties, so I’m going to have to make an unscheduled stop. Our closest airport right now is in the Azores. Some islands out here in the Atlantic. I’ve already contacted the airport and we’ve got clearance to land and do some repairs. We’ll be there in about an hour.”*

The intercom dinged and Keith immediately looked frightened.

“Engine trouble?” He repeated, peering out the window at the seemingly endless expanse of blue surrounding them. “What the fuck does that mean, ‘engine trouble’? It’s a private jet. What kind of bullshit is this!?”

“Hattie?” Tuvo stepped between her and the ranting Keith. “What did he say? The pilot? What’s happening?”

She translated quickly and Tuvo looked thoughtful.

“Very well,” he said. “It can’t be helped. “Let me help you set the galley to rights, then we’ll take our seats.”

They quickly cleaned and stored everything before returning to the front and sitting. Keith was already there, recording more videos of himself. Hattie could see the caption now...

*When your privet jet has engine trouble...* Probably with him rolling his eyes. Yup, there it was. The persona he cultivated online was blatantly braggadocios. He definitely wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to ‘complain’ about something like this.

Hattie tried to sit away from the window this time – to put herself between Keith and Tuvo. She wasn't given the chance.

When she started to turn to take her seat, Tuvo's hands were suddenly there, gripping her with a surprisingly gentle strength, and steering her back towards her original seat. He did it so effortlessly, so smoothly, she didn't even stumble in her steps.

She plopped down, because that's where her momentum was taking her, and turned as Tuvo sat next to her. Keeping himself between her and Keith instead.

He buckled his seatbelt and relaxed back. Like he hadn't just effortlessly manhandled her.

Like her body wasn't on fire from being manhandled.

Not in a domineering way, but in an effortless, oddly kind way. He had adjusted her course without even disturbing her. Strong and dominating but gentle and thoughtful at the same time. How could one male do both so easily?

Hattie loved it when a guy took control of a situation. When she didn't have to think about every little decision. When she didn't have to tell someone to clean the kitchen or pick up their dirty clothes out of the bathroom or to clean up a mess they made.

Tuvo didn't ask to sit between her and Keith and act as a barrier to the male he very clearly saw as some kind of emotional threat to her. He just did it. Like he helped her clean the kitchen and put away the half-cooked food. Like he had carried the luggage here and organized the security and was now on his phone, connected to the wi-fi, messaging Bertrand to ask him for assistance. He didn't even require her to translate since he and Bertrand had a whole language based on the hieroglyphic properties of emojis.

It was probably the most attractive thing about him. Hattie loved a guy who took charge without being rude or forceful about it.

No! Those were wrong thoughts!

They were *friends*!



She appreciated *friends* who took charge and cared for her and looked so deliciously sexy lounging in a private jet, his huge hands completely engulfing his phone.

Hattie popped her ears as she felt the pressure in them increasing with their descent and looked out the window at the distant water rushing below them. Trying her very hardest not to think about how much fun it would be to climb into Tuvo's seat and bounce on his dick.

In a friendly way. Of course.

# Chapter 6

## *Tuvo*

Human aircrafts didn't come equipped with evac pods. If something went wrong, their deaths were almost assured. So, if the plane was reporting engine problems they would, naturally, take it seriously and react, regardless of the legitimacy of it. They couldn't check until they were on the ground, and they would rather land emergently for no reason than let the plane crash.

A precaution that Tuvo agreed with. From this height, falling into the water would kill Hattie immediately. Her skin was too thin, her body too soft, to survive that kind of blow. He didn't even think he could live through it, and his body was designed to survive great falls.

The domini were a climbing species. His race had evolved in massive trees as large as the skyscrapers he saw making up cities on Earth. Falling was part of life. His body was designed to take the force of a long fall, his claws strong enough to stop him if he dropped out of a tree.

But this height was still far from the survivable limit for a domini – even accounting for landing on water, which would only be slightly softer than stone.

It was unplanned, an inconvenience, but he would rather the aircraft land and find out that the notification for the engine was the only thing broken than to stay in the air and fall out of the sky because he was stubbornly intent on staying on course.

The landing went off without a hitch and their plane taxied towards the end of tarmac where the island planes were disembarking visitors.

Keith was already taking pictures of himself and the window as the cockpit door opened, and the human male pilot emerged.

Human males were, like their female counterparts, sexual and feminine without intending to be. Tuvo had grown accustomed with their features to them to tell the genders apart on sight, but it had been a bit difficult at first.

The human pilot was named Rodger, and he was a middle-aged male with graying hair and a softening body. He wore a crisp uniform of black pants and a white shirt that he straightened as he emerged from his cockpit and began speaking to Hattie.

“He says, he needs to get in contact with some engineers here on the island,” Hattie translated, looking at him. “They can service the plane here, but it will cost us.”

“Here,” Tuvo said, handing her his phone. The Earth government had taken on all costs for their visit, including this flight. “Did he say how long it would take to fix the aircraft?”

Hattie asked in her tongue. The pilot shook his head, the no gesture.

“He says, he’s not sure. He doesn’t know the exact problem yet, but he’s going to work on it as fast as he can. But he says not to get your hopes up for us leaving today. Probably tomorrow. If not later. He’ll know more once they can run diagnostics, but he needs an engineer first.”

Tuvo grunted in understanding. “Call Bertrand, tell him what’s occurred. We need to figure out where we’re going to be staying.”

Tuvo was loath to leave the plane alone. Not when he knew it was such a prime target for the anti-alien hate groups that had formed on Earth. Ones that had already attacked them before. And while an unscheduled stop meant there likely weren’t any antagonistic forces here, Tuvo didn’t like to be careless with anyone’s safety – much less Hattie’s.

She finished her call and told Tuvo that Bertrand said the plane repair costs were approved and that she could use the

credit card she had been given by the Earth government to buy them a place to stay and anything they might need while they were here.

“Go onto the island,” Rodger told him through Hattie. “I’ll stay on the plane and watch over it. I’ll help the engineers. I promise, no one will step foot on this plane that’s not authorized. I’ll be watching them the whole time.”

“I found us a place,” Hattie said after she translated, showing him his phone. “It’s like one of those rental homes for vacationers? It’s not very big, but it is on a private beach. I didn’t have many options considering how sudden our arrival was, but it’s a great deal and it’s not near the city or in a hotel, so it will be easier for you to defend it and blend in. And look, see? There’s a grocery store within walking distance. We can get supplies if we need to stay.”

It was a good plan, overall. He told her to rent the cabin before he gathered their luggage. Keith was complaining about something, but Tuvo didn’t ask Hattie to translate. He rather wished the male would stay with the pilot and the plane, but of course he didn’t.

The small human followed them off, grumbling as he carried his suitcase down the stairs. Tuvo remained close to Hattie as they approached the airport personnel who had gathered at the base of the stairs leading out of the plane. They stared, shocked, at the sight of him, but he was rather used to it by now. Earth was uncontacted, after all.

Hattie was chipper and polite as she explained their problem. The aliens had been broadcast to the entirety of Earth by now. While seeing him was certainly a shock, it wasn’t so much of one that they weren’t able to gather themselves after hearing her story.

And they were kind. The group – which included two women and four men – offered an airport shuttle to drive them to the cabin she rented. They promised to help with the servicing of their plane. They then asked, very nicely, for pictures with Tuvo and Hattie.

Which he was happy to provide. He wanted to foster good feelings, even just through something small like this.

After taking pictures for a while, they summoned a shuttle to drive right up to them on the tarmac. Hattie had the paperwork necessary to visit foreign countries on her planet, but Tuvo did not. He had special permissions from the combined governments of Earth, but that wasn't exactly something that a normal customs survey was equipped to deal with, so they just avoided it altogether.

Tuvo took pictures with the driver as well, and then they were off.

The island they had landed on was lovely. The sky seemed somehow brighter here. The blue was almost blinding in its vibrancy.

The only unpleasant part was Keith taking photos of himself. He was in the front seat of the vehicle, leaving Hattie and Tuvo to share the back. He kept angling his phone to try to get them in the shot – but Tuvo looked away, refusing to give him that.

Petty? Perhaps. But at least the other humans had asked first.

The small home Hattie found was made of heavy stone painted a faded pink far off the main road and surrounded by tropical trees, giving them plenty of privacy. It was just a short walk from a private beach – a length of sand that belonged to the homes built here, each one separated by a fair amount of distance.

It was a cute home, though not particularly large. Which wouldn't have bothered Tuvo at all if it weren't for Keith's presence. He didn't think he'd be able to escape him.

A fear that was confirmed when Hattie found the keys within a coded box and let them in.

The home was nice. It was clean, well furnished, and had a pleasant smell.

But it was essentially one big room with a smaller room for a privy in the corner. The front door was closest to the kitchen, and a table with two chairs had been set between the kitchen

area and the bedroom area with no other demarcation between the two.

Two beds were pushed against the wall, opposite a human television – like a primitive version of a holoscreen. A thick rug covered the stone floor and the wall opposite the front door was all glass, giving them an amazing view of the beach.

“Dibs!” Keith declared, a word Tuvo didn’t recognize as he rushed to drop his bag on the bed next to the glass, clearly claiming it as his own.

Hattie frowned at him but didn’t attempt to argue as the human male turned from the bed to a machine on the wall. Tuvo realized it was an air-cooling device when he turned it on.

Tuvo set Hattie’s luggage by the second bed, then dropped his near the wall beside it.

Hattie had already opened the fridge, noticing it was empty.

“We’ll have to order something,” she said, looking at him over her shoulder. “We can get food to cook tomorrow if we’re stuck here any longer. Work for you?”

He grunted in affirmation as Keith snuck by him to go into the bathroom. He made some kind of sound of discontent before shutting the door.

“What’s his problem?” Tuvo asked, doing his very best not to sneer, as he joined Hattie in the kitchen corner.

“Hm? Oh, he’s just upset that this place isn’t very social worthy. It’s not really the kind of place you can brag about online. It’s nice, I like it, but I think he was hoping we’d be spending money to get a luxurious, five-star experience.”

Tuvo wasn’t sure what the number of stars had to do with anything, but he understood the rest of the sentiment. “He is very concerned with looks.”

“Yeah.” Hattie leaned against the counter next to him, scrolling through her phone. “He always has been though. He would make this perfect life for himself online, but in reality, nothing was ever good enough for him.”

“There’s probably some wisdom in the Omoni Otorsí about that,” Tuvo mumbled. Immediately rewarded with a giggle from Hattie.

“Oh, how about this place?” She lifted his phone for him to review the pictures of food she had pulled up. “They’re vegetarian, since I don’t think we can order raw food. But they have eggs and a mushroom salad that looks really good. See?”

“I do enjoy Earth mushrooms. Your varieties seem more savory than I’m used to. I think I prefer them over my own.”

“A shame, because I was going to order a caramel milkshake from this place. The britzi mushrooms from Turv taste a lot like caramel. I bet you’ll like it.”

“Order us a couple then. And the mushroom salad. And that. That looks good.”

“It’s a burger. Black bean base. You won’t like it, the bun is bread. But look, they also have roasted watermelon.”

Tuvo grunted in agreement as she showed him the various options available. She debated against a few different ones, and he told her to just order them all.

“I can’t do that,” she said regretfully.

“I don’t see why not. Order whatever you like, and I’ll eat what you can’t.”

“Huh? You sure?”

“Very sure. I’m not picky about my food. And you know what I can’t eat, so I trust you’ll pick something appropriate.”

Hattie beamed at him as the door to the privy opened and Keith emerged. Hattie immediately offered him Tuvo’s phone to pick something as well because she was a nice female like that, and she enjoyed feeding people.

Apparently, Keith was not interested in the offerings, however. He made a bunch of noise that Tuvo didn’t bother to ask to be translated. He didn’t really need it. He sounded exactly like a pup complaining about being forced to eat their vegetables.

It took too much time for Hattie to convince him to just order something. Far past the point that Tuvo would have given up and let him either fend for himself or go hungry.

Eventually, however, their food was ordered. Hattie took her turn in the privy, bringing her sleeping clothes in with her to change as it was getting late, and leaving Tuvo and Keith alone in the bedroom. It was immediately silent and awkward.

Tuvo opted to ignore him as he picked up Hattie's bag and dug inside for the knife that he had given her some time ago.

The first attack on the humans at a hotel in South Africa had been quick and violent. Tuvo and the other males had immediately evacuated the females and themselves back to the *Stor* and would only return with strict security.

One of those measures being mandatory self-defense lessons for the females, as well as daggers that Tuvo had given out to each along with lessons in how to wield it. They couldn't bring advanced technology to Earth, but blades were hardly advanced. Even if the reinforced metal in the blade made it far sharper and stronger than anything Earth was currently producing. They wouldn't be able to replicate the forging techniques just by looking at the dagger.

Hattie had not been the best in self-defense. She held her own valiantly, but her soft body simply wasn't made for it.

The dagger, however, was a different story. Her quick little chef hands were very comfortable around the hilt of a knife, and she cut without fear or hesitation. He was actually rather proud of how well she had done with it so far.

Taking the knife, he moved to put it at the head of her bed.

Keith chose that moment to say something, catching Tuvo's attention. He frowned at the human male to find him lying in the very center of the bed he had claimed, spreading out his legs and resting his head back against his hands. He smirked at Tuvo and repeated what he said, but slower and with tighter enunciation as though that might help him understand.

"I've no idea what you're saying," Tuvo replied in calm Standard. "Stop talking to me unless it's important. I have



nothing to say to you.”

Keith laughed and repeated that new word Hattie had just taught him, “Simp.”

Tuvo really wasn't sure why that was supposed to be insulting, so he said nothing as he turned to pull his own sleeping clothes from his bag.

He took off his shirt, intending to change there since he didn't care if Keith saw him nude. Hattie was still in the shower and wouldn't see him at all – a shame. The moment his shirt was over his head, revealing his scarred chest, Keith suddenly found himself much more fascinated with the control of the television than insulting Tuvo.

He was still scrolling through the limited options – for the fifth time – when there was a knock at the door. Tuvo had to force him up, literally grabbing him by the arm and yanking him to his feet, to get the food delivery. While Keith was doing that, he stepped out of sight around the corner of the bathroom so he couldn't be seen.

He didn't want his presence to be a bigger deal on the island than it already was. So, he waited while Keith chatted and accepted the food. The moment the door shut, he stepped around and watched as Keith put the bag on the counter.

Immediately, the other male was fishing around for his order – some kind of egg-based food that he sniffed at appreciatively as he returned to eat on his bed.

Tuvo spread the rest of the offerings on the table and sniffed at them curiously. The spices were unfamiliar, but they didn't smell bad.

It took some time for Hattie to finish her shower. She luxuriated in such things, and he didn't mind waiting. When she finally left the room, clad in a cute, pale blue night dress that swirled around her luscious thighs, Tuvo found himself hungry for something that wasn't food. Her skin was bright red and shiny from the heat of the water. She had piled her hair on her head inside a towel, exposing her neck. He was fascinated by the lucky drop of water that got to slide down

the slope of it, down her chest, between her breasts. He wanted to follow it with his tongue as he laid between those thighs so she could grind her little cunt against his abdomen.

“Hey! Food’s here,” she declared brightly, oblivious to the aching in his neglected knot and the way his cock twitched as she pushed some orange vegetable coated in a dark sauce between her lips and made a deep moan of appreciation. She nodded in approval, pointing to the dish with an approving smile as she chewed.

She was adorable and sexy at the same time. He sat at the table and just watched her eat. She had no idea how she tortured him with her little pleased sounds, her plump lips parting, her tongue licking at her fingers.

She kept encouraging him to eat – usually the things she had just taken a bite of and wanted him to try in turn. He might as well have been eating dust for as much attention he was paying the food. He took bites and chewed appreciatively because it made her smile and got her excited.

It was the best damn meal he’d ever eaten, and he couldn’t describe a single dish.

They finished and cleaned up. Keith called Hattie over, holding out and shaking the white box his food had come in. Before Tuvo could growl and force him up to throw it away himself, Hattie had already crossed the room and taken it from him.

His female was too generous. Tuvo snarled at Keith as she stepped into the bathroom to let her hair down and brush it through. Keith pretended very hard not to see him as he focused on the television program about a group of friends inside a small apartment – he wasn’t sure the point of the show since the story was told mostly through dialogue.

He went to his bag and crouched, digging through it for the pills he needed to take every day. The humans were welcoming to them, but they were not blood drinkers. They didn’t have easy sources of blood and had no way to prevent it from clotting before consumption. So, the domini had brought

little tablets with them that provided the nutritional needs they usually got through drinking without upsetting the humans.

He had just tossed a pill back when Hattie emerged from the bathroom and paused between the two beds, looking between them with a strange look on her face.

# Chapter 7

## *Hattie*

How had she not thought about this immediately?

There were three people and only two beds. Keith had obviously claimed one and was lying dead center, taking up as much room as possible, as he scrolled through his phone.

Tuvo was crouched by the other, taking his blood pills. The knife he gave her was sitting on the bed and she wasn't sure if that was for him or her. Not that it really mattered. There was nowhere else for him to sleep. The little house didn't have a couch and there wasn't enough floor space for Tuvo to stretch out. He might not even fit on the bed without curling up his legs.

Which meant she now had a choice.

Keith grinned, lowering his phone before batting the blanket beside him. "Come on, Hats. We're adults. We can share a bed without it being weird."

They so could not. Especially not when they used to date. And the way he suddenly ran his fingers through his hair, trying to give it a mussed look, made her concerned he would use the opportunity to take pictures of her sleeping beside him for his socials. It was one thing to get caught in a selfie, but she wasn't going to let the world think they were having sex.

But on the other hand, there was Tuvo.

She *definitely* couldn't share a bed with him without it being weird. Not when her feelings hadn't gotten the message that there was no benefits package to this friendship. Not when her thighs were already slick, and it wasn't from water.

Tuvo stood straight, all the muscles in his abdomen and back clenching with the easy movement. He had no shirt on, only loose, fluttering pants. Hattie both hated and loved the domini habit of letting their skin breathe and camouflaging against their surroundings as often as possible. Staring at the long expanse of muscle and scarred flesh on Tuvo's body was exciting and thrilling, in decidedly unfriendly ways. She didn't think she was strong enough to lay next to him half naked and not let her fingers 'accidentally' touch him a couple times in the night.

If she could even put space between them considering how large he was and how little room that would leave her if they got on the same bed.

"The bed is yours," Tuvo said, gesturing to it. "I got your knife out. Keep it in reach. We should be safe, but I'd rather you be careful."

"Tuvo, no, you take the bed," she insisted. "You're too big to lay on the ground."

Tuvo gave her a look like she had said something stupid. "Hattie, do you honestly think I'm going to allow you to sleep on the ground? Get in the bed before I put you there myself."

It wasn't an empty threat. Tuvo could pick her up like she might actually be dainty, without a single grunt of effort. If he wanted her in bed, she would be there.

And those weren't friendly thoughts either.

"What is he saying?" Keith asked, levelling a finger at Tuvo. "Hats, come *on*. You're not seriously thinking about sleeping with him. I'm right here."

"Don't say it like that," Hattie frowned, fingers wringing together.

Tuvo was growling again, glaring at Keith. "Hattie, don't let him make you uncomfortable. You can take the bed. I promise you, I've slept in worse places than upright against a wall."

"No, really, it's fine. We can share," she said, probably a bit too quickly.

Tuvo stared at her. His three eyes hard. She was acutely aware of how she looked in her cute, short nightgown. Like she had some kind of plan. But she hadn't realized she'd be sharing a room with anyone, and she liked wearing cute nightgowns, so it was the only thing she had packed.

"We're adults," she told Tuvo, unable to look at him. "The bed is big enough for both of us. It's fine."

"Hats, seriously?" Keith's lip curled. "I know you aren't going over there."

"Keith, it's fine," Hattie smiled at him a bit too quickly. "Tuvo's a gentleman."

"We used to fuck, and you're not going to lay down next to me?"

"That's actually a reason why I shouldn't," she said, taking a deliberate step towards the other bed. "I don't mind sharing with Tuvo."

She was a bit too excited to share with Tuvo. Did he notice? The way she swallowed convulsively as her heart pounded in her chest. Or how her thighs rubbed together with each step, slick from her eager pussy. She was really bad at being his friend.

Tuvo stepped away from the side of the bed and gestured for her to lay down – on the side furthest from Keith, she couldn't help but notice.

She gave him a careful smile as she stepped past him, doing her best not to touch his body, before sliding under the blanket. The freshly cleaned linens were soft and warm as she pulled them up. She stayed as close to the edge as she could while Tuvo turned off the lights. He took the remote from Keith and turned off the TV as well, eliciting a sound of protest from her ex.

She snickered quietly behind her hand, happy neither of them could see. Keith was the kind of guy that would fall asleep watching TV, but she preferred it to be dark and quiet. She was grateful that Tuvo felt the same.

That brief moment of levity ended, however, when he climbed into bed beside her.

She was right, he did have to pull up his legs to fit them on the bed. But his weight also created a dip that had her falling towards him. He was just so *big*. Deliciously big. Even laying on his side, he dominated the space. Staring at her as he hid the dagger under his pillow so he could easily reach it in an emergency.

Hattie pulled the blankets up to her chin, staring back. His chest was right in front of her. She wouldn't even have to stretch to run her fingers over the dips and valleys of his muscles. She could hear each breath he drew into those huge lungs. If she got any closer, she could probably hear the beating of his heart.

"Sleep, *kiry*a," he whispered, using a word she didn't recognize in ancient Domtri.

A pet name. She had a pet name. She didn't care if it meant 'shorty' or was just a way of a senior officer addressing a junior one, she luxuriated in it as her eyes closed. Her body eager to obey this mountain of a male.

In the dark of the night, with him so close, she didn't even bother to pretend that her feelings for him were only friendly. At least, for one night, she could let them be more.

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What time was it?

It had to be early. The room wasn't lit up, but the shadows definitely weren't as deep as they had been last night. The air had that special silence that only came from multiple people sleeping in the same space – still but somehow alive.

Hattie was warm and comfortable. Super comfortable. She wasn't sure why she had woken up, but she was quite happy to go right back to sleep.

She yawned, eyes not even wanting to open as she snuggled back into the warmth and strength at her back. Something tightened around her waist in response, tugging her closer. And that was just right too.

So comfy. So sleepy. So hard.

Hard...

Oh, that's why she had woken up. Something hard was trying to press between her thighs.

Without even thinking, she tilted her hips back, creating a space for that hardness to slide upwards, under her gown. Pressing insistently along her slit. So big and hot and alive with a throbbing pulse that made her belly clench with desire that roused her further.

Just enough to remember there shouldn't be anything hard between her thighs.

To remember that she was sharing a bed with Tuvo, and she should be right there on the edge of the bed, not rolled back towards the center.

A soft growl, right over her head, made her gasp as that length moved slowly between her legs.

That was Tuvo. His chest at her back. His growl in her ear. His arm around her waist.

And his cock moving slowly, fucking her thighs, only her panties separating them. The thin fabric was already damp from the wetness leaking from her pussy. His pants... How had he come out of them?

Hattie bit her lip to avoid moaning as the shaft of his cock reached all the way up to her rub against her clit. How?! Was he really that big?

No. This was wrong. This wasn't what friends did.

But she couldn't stop him either. She didn't want to.

A moan was building in her throat, forcing up against her mouth, begging to be freed as Tuvo curled tighter around her. Surrounding her. Forcing her body to curl in as well, pushing her hips out further and giving him a better angle to hump against her.

And she let him. She didn't even try to fight.



Her fingers curled into the blanket, squeezing tight as her arousal grew. Deepened. Silently begging for more as she struggled not to move.

Was Tuvo even awake? Did he know what he was doing?

If he wasn't, if he didn't, she should stop him, right? That was the right thing to do. He wouldn't be doing this normally if he was conscious and aware of his actions.

She tried to call his name, to wake him up, but the moaning, breathy whisper wasn't even loud enough to break the stillness of the morning, much less rouse the big male behind her.

Because she didn't want him to wake up.

She wanted to come. She wanted more pressure against her clit. She wanted to spread her legs properly and give him the space he needed to shove that monster into her aching pussy.

Fuck, that thing would *hurt*, and she craved that pain.

She wanted him to stretch her out. To resize her body into a sleeve for his cock. She wanted to feel it all the way in her belly and know that no one ever had, or would ever again, reach as deep as he split her in half.

Her free hand was roaming lower. Down her belly. Until she could feel the shifting movement of his cock. She hesitated, then kept going until she could cup the head in her palm. The huge head, weeping precum and soaking his pants.

He was *massive*. Would it even fit?

Hattie whimpered, eager to find out.

She should stop now. She definitely couldn't let this continue.

But she did.

She was so close to coming. She could feel the pressure of it building in her belly. Aching for release she had long been denied.

She palmed his head, keeping it close, getting more friction as his humping picked up speed. His growl deepened. His arm around her tightened.

“Hattie...”

He was awake now. But he wasn't stopping. He wasn't letting her go.

His movements weren't instinctual anymore, they were deliberate. Harshly stroking her slit as he ruthlessly drove her to her peak.

Hattie brought up her free arm and bit herself, struggling to muffle her sounds as her entire body tightened and shook, the orgasm crashing over her without mercy.

Tuvo's growl of approval only made it better. The rumble vibrated through her entire body as he continued thrusting. Continued humping.

He hadn't come yet, and she was desperate for it. She wanted to feel him explode against her. To coat her belly in his spend and mark her as his.

A third loud groan froze them both in place.

Hattie's eyes widened as she remembered.

Keith!

He was right there, sleeping barely feet away, and she had let Tuvo hump her to orgasm. No, she hadn't just let it. She had encouraged it. She had participated.

Tuvo's grip tightened just a second, and she worried he was going to continue.

She wanted him to continue.

But he eventually released her. Pulling his hips back. Dragging his still hard cock all along her slit as he slid himself free.

He hadn't gotten to come.

That seemed so unfair.

Hattie should do something about that. Like take him into the bathroom where they could pretend they had privacy, and she could suck him dry.

“Ugh, it's so fucking *early*,” Keith complained from his bed. “The fuck am I doing up this early... Shit, I gotta piss. Damn

it, I'm never getting back to sleep.”

Hattie said nothing, doing her best to emulate a statue as Keith, grumbling to himself, stumbled out of bed and to the bathroom. Bleary eyed and focused on getting to the toilet, he didn't spare Hattie or Tuvo a glance.

The moment the door shut, loudly, behind him, Hattie turned her head back and up.

Tuvo wasn't even pretending to not stare. His eyes were wide open, all three of them pinned on her, his grip tight and unmoving around her body. She couldn't read a single emotion on that stoic face, and it made her belly clench with unease.

And now that she had come, and she could actually think properly, she realized what she had done, and it made her sweat bullets.

Tuvo said nothing for so long she had to avert her gaze. She couldn't handle it anymore.

His arm around her waist tightened for just a second, like he was considering pulling her back.

But no. Of course, not. He had been the one who made it clear that he would never touch her.

That was just...

Horny sleeping. He hadn't known it was her. He hadn't known what he was doing. He had been asleep and, like her, too turned on to stop when he woke up.

That's all.

As if to prove it, he finally released her. The bed creaked and shifted as he got to his feet, surreptitiously adjusting his hard on back into pants as he did so.

“I, er... I'm going to check the perimeter,” he said, voice stiff. Not even looking at her now as he rushed to the sliding glass door at the back.

Hattie bit her lips, fisting the blanket in both hands, as Tuvo took off into the dawn at a steady jog. Still half naked.

Practically running to get away from her.

# Chapter 8

## *Tuvo*

What the *krik* had he been thinking?

Condemning himself, Tuvo jogged circles around the little vacation home, climbed the trees, even went swimming, until his cock calmed down. His knot was still painful and swollen, but that had been near constant for the last few tendays.

The distance he was forcing between himself and his mate was having a negative effect. And after that debacle this morning, he was seriously considering just burning out that part of his brain that refused to acknowledge that she was too small for him.

*Krik*, his cock had gone all the way through her plump, soft, delicious thighs. The heat of her little cunt rubbed eagerly against him. Her hand circled around his head.

“*Kriking* idiot,” he chastised himself.

By the time he finally calmed down enough to hide his cock, if not his knot, and returned to the house, Hattie and Keith were both up and dressed for the day. They had eaten leftovers for breakfast. Hattie had even saved him some.

Tuvo ate quickly and took a shower. Which was difficult as the stall was not made for someone of his size. He had to crouch to get his head under the spray. This cleanser was even smaller than the ones at the hotels.

He tried to take himself in hand, to relieve some of the pressure that had built up, but nothing happened, no matter how hard he jerked at his cock. He only succeeded in getting hard and feeling the frustration of being denied release.

He couldn't do it without his female. His body was rejecting itself now. A sign of how badly the unfulfilled bond was messing with him. How long would it take to do permanent damage to his cock and knot, he wondered?

His attempt at masturbation a failure, he eventually gave up and changed into his human clothes. The jeans at least did a better job of hiding his erection than his sleeping pants – but they were a lot more painful now that he was hard.

He returned to the room to find that the back doors had been opened, allowing a fresh breeze into the room. Keith was down at the beach – taking pictures of himself, of course. Hattie was in one of the deck chairs, looking positively radiant in the sunlight.

Her hair had dried in the night, and the natural ringlet curls begged for his fingers. She had dressed in a pretty, pale blue dress that was tight under her breasts and flowed down to her knees. Her little feet were bare, tempting him with the peeks at her toes – painted teal.

“Hey,” she greeted him, wiggling those little feet. “Enjoy your shower?”

“It was certainly an experience,” he said, rubbing his neck.

She laughed, the sound slightly strained. “Yeah, it was probably a bit small for you.”

“A bit.”

Their conversation was stilted again. Overly polite and formal. Because of him. Because his dreams of his female had made him desperate for her. Having her in his bed, in his arms, had driven him from his mind.

And he practically fucked her right there. With her previous *lovir* beside them! Without even asking her. Without warning her of the size of his cock.

Hattie was so tiny. So soft. So delicate.

He would rip her apart.

And hurting her would destroy him.

“I called the pilot,” she was saying, oblivious to the torment he was going through. “He said he found the problem. Something about the electrical equipment? I think? He said, the engineers here can fix it, no problem. They’re getting a part shipped over from one of the other islands, and it will take some time to install and test to make sure everything is good. He said another day or two and we should be ready to go.”

Tuvo grunted in understanding. This was work. Duty. *This* is something he could focus on. Something he could do for his female.

Even if he failed her in every other way.

“Then, we’ll stay here for a couple days. We seem to be safe enough.”

“Yeah. There are worse places to be stranded.” She laughed again, more genuinely this time. “Keith certainly seems to be enjoying himself. He’s already found a party tonight. It’s a tourist thing, I think?”

“I care not for that male.”

“That’s apparent,” she threw back her head, positively mirthful this time. “We just have to put up with him for a little longer. Then, he’ll be home talking about how he hung out with aliens, and we’ll be mercifully alone.”

“I cannot wait to get back to Turv and not have to worry about any of this.”

“Oh, yes,” she stressed, head falling back. “I miss it so much. Is that bad of me?”

“Why would it be bad of you?”

“Because Earth is supposed to be my home.” She smiled indulgently at the blue water rushing over the pale sand. “I was so excited to get here, but now that I am here, I just want to go back to Turv. I mean, I still want to see my family, but...”

“Earth isn’t home anymore.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” She grimaced, still laughing. “Earth just isn’t home anymore. It makes me feel like a traitor, somehow.”

“You are not bad for that, Hattie,” he assured her. “Home is a nebulous thing anyway. I’ve changed my home many times in my life. And I always missed my old home, but never as much as I miss my current home while I’m gone.”

“Why have you changed your home many times?”

“You know Atem was raised with me by my parents, right?”

“Yeah. After his were assassinated, right? He went to your parents because he was trying to avoid being taken in by their killer.”

“That’s right. He had no one to turn to, so he turned to me. That’s a trust I’ve strived all my life to be worthy of. To never betray. My parents were the only ones that believed him when he identified the assassin. They knew the danger he would be in. They upended our entire lives to get him away from Calvitorum. I hated to leave my home behind.

“And I hated to leave that home later when I joined the military. When I began my training. And I missed the home I made when I left training. I missed Turv when I was stationed in various bases throughout the universe. And I missed those bases every time I was transferred to a new place.

“Then, when I came back to Turv, back to Calvitorum, it didn’t feel like home anymore. And it wouldn’t feel like home for years. Not until Atem was *Dominani*.”

“You’ve lived an interesting life,” Hattie said, drawing his focus back to her face. She had turned in her chair and was staring at him as though fascinated.

“Home is constantly changing,” he said. “And it doesn’t make you bad for making a new home. You can miss your old home without feeling that connection to it anymore.”

She grinned at him. So brightly. So warmly. It stole his breath.

“What?” He asked.

“You’ve never opened up to me like that,” she said softly, as though in awe. “It’s nice. Thank you for telling me.”

Had he really been so taciturn with her? He had been trying to keep his distance, but he hadn’t intended on being unfriendly.

They were starting over though. As friends. He could talk to his friends.

He could resist fucking his friends through their clothes.

“I’m going to walk to the grocery store later,” she said when he remained quiet, like she knew he wasn’t going to be able to think of a reply. “Get us enough food for a couple days.”

“All right. I’ll go with you.”

She grimaced.

“What? You don’t think I should?”

“No offense, Tuvo, but you’re hardly, er, subtle. Even if we put you in a hoodie and hide your tail, you’re a mountain. Everyone would notice you. If I go by myself, I can get food and return without making a scene.”

“You can’t go on your own.”

“It’s only a couple miles.”

“This island is unknown. You’re not going on your own. If you won’t take me with you, take him.”

“Keith?” She frowned at the male. He had set his phone on a rock and was recording himself walking in the water. “I mean, I guess.”

“We just have to put up with him for a little longer,” he mimicked her, making her laugh. “He is obnoxious, but he won’t let you come to harm at least.”

“Not physically, anyway,” she mumbled.

Before he could ask what she meant, she was standing, straightening her dress.

“Got any requests for dinner?”

“Whatever you like.”

“No pressure,” she laughed. “Okay. I’ll see what the store has and make a menu from there. Keith has already asked for steak, but that’s going to be stupid expensive on an island. If they even have it. But you like steak, right?”

“Don’t get it if it’s not worth the price. I’ll eat whatever.”



She smiled. “Don’t tell me that. I’ll get creative.”

“Surprise me,” he assured her with a smirk. “I’ll be glad to eat it.”

## Chapter 9

### *Hattie*

Steak was, indeed, stupidly expensive. But chicken was cheaper, and she knew that Tuvo liked it, so she put it into the basket on her arm.

The small grocery store was part of a chain on the islands. It wasn't huge, but it had a decent selection of items. She was thinking about making chicken parmesan. Or maybe Alfredo – she had seen some glass jars of the sauce that would be easy to spruce up. And she could add Tuvo's chicken, raw, after the pasta was already cooked.

Shopping was pretty fun, even if the only thing she was buying was food.

Keith wasn't even being extra annoying. Probably because he wasn't bothering her. He had found a cute girl sitting at the front at check out and Hattie had left him there. She wasn't out of his sight, the store wasn't that big, so she wasn't worried.

Deciding on chicken parmesan on a bed of pasta Alfredo, she went back to the jar section to get some tomatoes for the chicken.

As she was walking that way, she passed by produce and a familiar sight caught her eye.

Were those celti berries?

Even as she had that thought, she was telling herself not to be stupid. Celti berries were native to Turv and were only ripe after the rainy season. They were extremely sweet and juicy, and she had come to enjoy them a lot.

They also bore a striking resemblance to blueberries, which is what she had seen.

The sight sent a strange pang of homesickness through her chest. The blue celti berries had once been a small connection back to Earth – even only visually. And now, here again, they were serving as a connection back to Turv.

Picking up a little plastic container, she smiled before putting them in her basket.

“What you making with those?”

She turned, surprised to see Keith had come up behind her. “You’re back quick. Did you strike out with the girl behind the counter?”

He scoffed, crossing his arms. “Yeah. Turns out, she only speaks Spanish-”

“Portuguese.”

“What?”

“They speak Portuguese here.”

“Same thing. She don’t speak English. Had to give that one up. What are the blueberries for?”

Hattie stifled laughter, wondering if the girl actually only spoke Portuguese or if she was just trying to get out of talking to Keith. “Muffins. Maybe pancakes. Or maybe a cheesecake? Since Tuvo can’t eat grains. You think he can eat gluten free foods? I’m not sure if it’s the gluten they can’t eat or the grains themselves.”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. I’m down for pancakes. They got syrup?”

“No. Just butter.”

“That’s disgusting. What kind of pancakes don’t have syrup?”

“You know, not every country shares America’s diet preferences, right?” She asked, giving him a look as she continued to the jars and cans.

“Be a lot cooler if they did.” He sighed, impatient as she perused her options. “What’s taking so damn long? There’s like three things in this store.”

“I have to cook for two different species and my options are limited. Give me a minute.”

“It’s been like thirty.”

“It’s been like ten.”

He groaned, rolling his eyes. “See, Hats, this kind of thing is why you’re single.”

“Because I take too long shopping?”

“No. I mean, yeah, that too, but you just don’t get men.”

“Clearly not,” she mumbled, not really paying attention as she debated her choices.

“It’s okay, though. I kind of like how awkward and clueless you are. It’s cute.”

“Glad you approve.” She added the Alfredo sauce. Alfredo with grilled/raw chicken as desired with blueberry cheesecake sounded great. She just needed some cream cheese and...

As she ran through the recipe list in her head, she meandered around the store. Never in any real order, just trying to get things as she thought of them. It made her shopping style rather chaotic, but it followed her thought process and that was easiest for her.

Keith, however, got annoyed very quickly.

He complained about everything. How long she was taking, how she had to keep doubling back, what she was cooking, the store itself, the girl at the front who wasn’t falling for his charms. Charms Hattie had to remind herself that he did, in fact, have at one point. He just wasn’t showing them to her anymore because she had already seen behind those particular curtains.

She finally finished her shopping and went up to the front while Keith waited outside.

The girl behind the counter did, in fact, speak accented but clear English.

Hattie accepted her receipt with a thanks, gathered her groceries in the reusable bag she had taken from the house,

and walked outside. Keith was there, snapping selfies again, but he fell into step beside her as she started back down the road towards their rental.

This area wasn't exactly urban, but it wasn't exactly isolated either. There were a few other businesses scattered around, like a little shopping hub for the various houses that were in the area. It was quaint and peaceful – the road wide enough for a car though no one was driving.

“Explain to me again why I'm not allowed to go the beach party?” Keith started without preamble or warning.

“We're not on vacation. And it's dangerous for us to travel without security.”

“No, it's dangerous for *you* to travel without security. I'm not part of the alien delegation thing. I don't see why I got to suffer.”

“It's a party Keith. You're not suffering. And Tuvo already said no.”

“Yeah, cause he's my fucking dad,” he scoffed. “Why do you even bother with that guy? He's so fucking serious and uptight.”

“He's a good male. He's worried about his job and keeping us safe.”

“He's controlling and a literal *alien*. Did you forget that part?”

“I was an alien on his planet for a long time. It never bothered me. Why should it bother me now that our roles are reversed? And he's not controlling.”

“You literally don't do anything without his permission. When I asked you what was for dinner, you said you had to *ask* if you could go shopping.”

“Yes, because it might be dangerous.”

“Yeah, the receipt might give you a papercut or something,” he said, as though shocked. “Get serious, Hats. Isn't this some kind of anti-feminist thing?”

“Anti-feminist?”

“Yeah. You know, for this big, strong man to come into your life and tell you what to do?”

“First off, he’s not a man. He’s a domini. Second, he’s not telling me what to do with my life. He’s watching out for my safety. That’s his job. It’s the entire reason he’s here.”

“Tch. Whatever. I just think it’s weird.”

“What is?”

“The way he stares at you! It looks like he’s going to eat you!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, even as her belly swooped with excitement. Did he really look at her like that?

“Come *on*, Hats,” he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her to a stop. “Get real. Are you seriously going to return to his planet after this?”

“Of course. Turv is my home.”

“No, *Earth* is your home. Your parents live here. I live here-”

“What do you have to do with it?”

He chuckled like she had told a joke, giving her those eyes.

*Those eyes.*

Those big, blue, do-me-baby eyes.

“Come on, Hats. You know, me and you...”

“Broke up. A long time ago. Before my abduction. B.A. – Before Abduction.”

“You know you didn’t mean that. You were just having a moment.”

“An unending moment.”

“I know we had our problems. There at the end, we both said some things we didn’t mean.”

“No, I meant all of it.”

“But we can work through this. I love you, Hats. You’re my girl.”

“You were literally hitting on the checkout girl like ten minutes ago.”

“Psh. Thirty.”

“Keith, you’re not listening.” She took a step back from him. “My home is on Turv. My family and I won’t be separated forever. Earth will be connected to the Coalition through a communications array, and I’ll be able to call and visit whenever I want. I’m not saying goodbye forever.”

He laughed at her, all that cute, smoldering gaze gone as quickly as it had come on. “Get real, Hattie. You’re not going to find someone better than me. No one is going to love you like I do. Especially not guys like that.” He pointed with his thumb down the road. “That guy is *way* out of your league. Okay? You need to come back down to Earth. Literally.”

Hattie frowned. He was doing it again. Trying to break her self-esteem. Trying to make her feel unworthy. And recognizing the behavior made it easier to deal with.

“Even if no one mates me, I’m happy with my life there.”

“Bullshit. You want the hubby and the babies. The whole package deal.”

“Yeah, but I don’t need it.”

“But I can give it to you. I’ll give you a baby if you really want one.”

“Wow, what an offer,” she mumbled, shaking her head. “Keith, you and I are not good together. I’m just not willing to put up with you. And you don’t even like me.”

“What are you talking about? We dated for two years. Of course, I like you.”

“No, you don’t. I was convenient to you. I said, yes. And I let you bully me until I was too afraid to leave. *I* let that happen. I let myself believe those things you said about me. But I do deserve someone who loves me for me. Who cares about me. Who wouldn’t change me and actually takes an interest in me as I am, not who he can photoshop me to be.”

“What are you talking about? I care about you. I know you.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then, what’s my favorite color?”

“What?”

“Answer the question,” she snapped, advancing on him. “We dated for two years, Keith. You care about me so much. You should know the answer to that.”

“Really?” He stared incredulously. “You’re going to base your reaction on something so stupid as that? Favorite color doesn’t matter, Hats. That’s like, some basic shit. It doesn’t actually say anything about you as a person.”

“No, but not knowing it says a lot about *you* as a partner. It’s literally one of the easiest things you can learn about someone that’s not biographical information. So, tell me. What’s my favorite color?”

“Well, I’m not telling you now. You’re just going to say it’s something different to try and prove this stupid point of yours.”

Hattie sat down the bag of groceries. She opened her purse and pulled out the receipt she had just been given and a pen. On her hand, held so he couldn’t see it, she wrote down her favorite color. She tossed her pen back in her bag, folded up the receipt, then held it aloft.

“Written down. I can’t change my mind. Tell me what my favorite color is.”

“This is dumb, Hattie.”

“You don’t know it.”

“I’m not playing your little juvenile games, okay? When you want to talk like an actual adult and not kids on a playground telling each other our favorite zoo animal or some shit, then we can talk. Grow up, Hattie. *This*, by the way, is another reason you’re going to die alone.”

Scoffing, he turned on his heel and started walking away.



Hattie let out a long breath and dropped the receipt back into her purse.

Somehow, that had actually been depressing.

She had no intentions of getting back together with Keith, but they *had* dated for two years. She really had been hoping that he would actually care enough to remember that detail about her. Because she had definitely told him at some point. Probably more than once.

But remembering her favorite color wasn't important to him, because she wasn't important to him.

And it hurt to know that two years of life and affection and effort really just boiled down to a receipt with an unanswered question written on the back.

She picked the bag of groceries back up and followed after him. Maintaining some distance, but also keeping him in sight.

She didn't like him, but Tuvo was right that it was better for her to be with someone else. Strength in numbers and all that.

Yet somehow, she still felt completely alone.

# Chapter 10

## *Tuvo*

Hattie was singing.

When she had returned from shopping with Keith, she'd been noticeably dour. He asked what was wrong, but she just smiled and assured him that she was fine. Keith went outside to tan, and Hattie sat down to watch something on the television.

Tuvo joined her and listened as she explained the premise of the show. Something about a peacekeeper female and the male that clearly loved her and followed her around. Tuvo didn't know why the male didn't just claim her. He clearly wanted to. Tuvo couldn't understand the dialogue, but even he could see that.

Tuvo and Hattie talked during the show, and it was comfortable. Mostly. They were still deliberately avoiding the topic of what happened this morning. Neither of them willing to discuss it.

But besides that, it was an easy conversation.

As it got later, she went to the kitchen to begin cooking dinner. Tuvo followed after, eager to continue their easy chat. It wasn't deep or interesting, but it was a sense of closeness that he hadn't been able to enjoy with his mate before.

It wasn't the claiming, but it was some form of intimacy. It was *something*. And while his knot was still hard, some of the pressure was relieved from his mind. Not much, but enough that it was like an encouragement from his own body.

Yes. Get closer to his mate. Gorge her. Mount her. Claim her.

"The Alfredo is from a jar," she said, oblivious to his desires. "I'm going to touch it up a bit, but it's not really going to be

gourmet.”

“I don’t mind,” he said, sniffing at the emptied jar curiously as she stirred the contents in the little pot she had put on the stove. “What’s Alfredo?”

“It’s cheese. The pasta is made from brown rice, not flour, so you should be able to eat it. And for dessert: blueberry cheesecake! You won’t be able to eat the crust, but that’s not the best part of cheesecake, so it’s okay.”

“Can I help with anything?”

“Yeah, can you put that cream cheese in a bowl and beat it with a spoon? There’s no beaters or mixer, so we have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

“I can do that,” he said, looking through the kitchen for what he needed. He wasn’t a professional chef like Hattie, but he could feed himself.

It was comfortable to work together. Easy. Tuvo wished the kitchen were bigger. Maybe with proper, modern appliances. An oblong island. A big window with a fantastic view of the upper canopy of Calvitorum.

His kitchen.

He was imagining Hattie in his kitchen.

Himself, right beside her. Helping her cook. Tasting everything as she worked. Watching as she hummed and danced and smiled.

Pushing her over the counter and fucking her deep whenever he had the chance.

“Try,” she smiled brightly, turning to him with a wooden spoon coated in cheese sauce.

Tuvo swiped his tongue along the wooden body. Keeping his eyes on her the entire time. The sauce was thick and creamy and delicious. Just like Hattie.

Her plump little lips parted, eyes going foggy, as she stared at him licking the spoon again. Slower this time. Savoring the taste of her food as he would her cunt.

No, he wouldn't. He was not doing that.

But he could lick the spoon.

And he did so, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. And Hattie kept holding it up for him, staring at his tongue, her breaths deepening. Her body trembling. Eyes half lidded. Silently begging for his lips and tongue on her instead.

“Ugh!”

The two jumped apart as Keith, wearing a pair of gym shorts, walked back inside. Ocean water dripped off his body, sand coated his feet. He grimaced at them.

He said something, gesturing with a look of disgust.

Hattie, frowning, shook her head, and put the spoon back in the sauce. Keith made that sound again as he stomped to the bathroom.

“What was that about?” Tuvo asked, equal parts annoyed and grateful for the interruption.

“He was getting all sensitive about you licking the communal spoon.”

“Ah. He doesn't want my saliva in his mouth.” Tuvo wasn't exactly looking forward to that either, but Hattie would have it in hers as well. And like the primal beast he was slowly reducing himself to, he liked that thought very much.

“I usually don't do that if I'm cooking for others,” she said softly, face burning with shame. “But I kind of forgot he was here, and it wasn't just me and you.”

Tuvo growled. Low and slow and sexual. Just for her. Pleased because that clearly meant she didn't mind sharing spit with him either.

“C-Can you get the blueberries?” She said quickly, pointing to the fridge. “Fold about half the container into the cream cheese mixture?”

She was deflecting. He let it happen, because he needed some distance. He kept his third eye on her however, as he went to the food preserver and pulled out-

“Are these celti berries?” He asked, shocked by the familiar, round fruit.

Hattie suddenly laughed. “I said the same thing! I mean, the opposite thing when I found celti berries on Turv. Blueberries have a stem though. See? Not the same.”

“I do see.” He plucked one of the fruits from inside. It was tiny between his two fingers. The color, the size, the shape were all exactly the same as celti berries. But the little pucker where a stem would have been was not. Celti berries formed in pods, not on a stem.

“They range from sour to sweet, depending on the berry. But they’re tasty. Try one.”

He obliged, tossing it into his mouth. Visually prepared for the sweetness of a celti berry, he was surprised by the tartness that exploded across his tongue instead.

But it wasn’t an unpleasant taste. He hummed his approval as he ate another.

“Good, huh?” Hattie smiled, stirring the boiling pasta. “I love blueberries. I love celti berries. I don’t know why, but it feels like they’re connected even when they’re not.”

“It must have been strange for you when these came into season on Turv. That was before you knew you could go home, wasn’t it?” Celti berries only ripened at the beginning of the rainy season on Turv, and that had been before they had even discovered Earth’s location. It must have been a very disappointing moment for her.

“It was weird,” she agreed. “But it was also kind of nice. In a painful way? If that makes sense?”

“Sure. Like poking at a healing wound. Not because it feels good, but because it focuses you. Maybe even makes you feel alive.”

He poured the blueberries into the mixture and began to gently fold the berries in.

“Poking a wound, huh? Yeah, that’s exactly what it felt like.”

He knew that feeling. He had experienced it with a few of the wounds that had come a bit too close to ending his life. The pain reminded him that he hadn't, in fact, died. He imagined the pain of seeing the celti berries was a reminder to Hattie of the same. She might have been abducted and stolen from everything she knew, but she was, thankfully, still alive.

Keith emerged from the bathroom, freshly showered, and flopped back on his bed. He scrolled through their limited options on the television as Tuvo and Hattie cooked together. Occasionally, he called out something. Tuvo figured out quite quickly that he was asking for updates on the status of dinner, and each question made him more annoyed.

He was doing nothing but demanding food. He hadn't even carried the groceries back from the store for Hattie. He had taken pictures and videos of himself that day and little else. Yet, he dared to lay there like he was exhausted and useless.

Only not actually wanting him over here, bothering them, kept Tuvo from growling at him for the insult towards his female.

Hattie finished his food first. She topped the pasta with the chicken meat she had burned on the stove and started to take it to him. Tuvo stopped her, claiming the bowl from her hands so he could bring it to the lazy male instead.

He was rewarded with a bright smile as she turned back to prepare their bowls next.

Tuvo brought the food over and Keith had the audacity to hold out his hand without even looking away from the television.

Tuvo grabbed his wrist and yanked up. He cried out in surprise as Tuvo half dragged him off the bed. His legs squirmed as Tuvo held his torso off the ground by one arm. He made sounds of pain and protest as he grabbed at the shoulder he was dangling from.

"I assume your legs must be injured if you can't get up to get your food yourself," Tuvo said, using his grip to bounce the human. "How tragic. It's because you're so weak and frail. You should put more effort into strengthening yourself.

"Hattie!" He yowled.

“Tuvo,” she called to him, sounding somewhere between amused and exasperated. “What are you doing?”

“Helping him strengthen his ligaments.”

“You’re going to break his arm. Or yank his shoulder out of socket.”

“Then, maybe, next time he should get his own food.”

“Is this how discipline is handed out in the domini military?”

“Actually, yes,” he grinned as he tossed Keith back onto his bed. The yellow haired male was up, snarling, only to have Tuvo shove the bowl into his chest. He was forced to grab it or risk having his food spilled.

He returned as Hattie was setting their bowls on the table. Her chicken cooked to, he guessed, perfection, while his were spiced and raw, laid across his pasta in the same manner.

And they smelled delicious.

“Thank you,” he said as he sat.

“I hope you like it,” she beamed, sitting across from him. She immediately began stirring her chicken into her pasta, so he did the same.

Unlike the food they ordered last night, he tasted this. The flavors and texture were unusual, but it was good. Rich and creamy. Well spiced. The chicken was chewy and lent a pleasant, fresh flavor to the dish.

“This is really good,” he said after swallowing his first bite.

Hattie beamed, finally taking a bite for herself. Clearly pleased.

They were exchanging stories of childhood. A very safe topic, since it involved a time before they had known each other.

She told him about how her parents had met late in life and had her purely by accident. They had believed that her mother was too old to have children. To be given Hattie was a surprise, but not an unwelcome one. They had devoted themselves to her completely, and she had flourished under their absolute love and devotion.

Tuvo listened, fascinated by the story of his female. A simple, but joyful one, marred only by an abduction that only added more love and joy to her life.

“What about Keith?” He asked, realizing that the male hadn’t played a role in the story of her life she had been telling.

“What about him?”

“How did you meet him? Why did you leave him?”

“Oh. That.” She shifted in her seat. Their empty bowls forgotten between them. “Keith and I met on a dating app. A, er, program that lets people meet each other for, usually, romantic purposes. Like, we were both there looking for a relationship.”

“What drew you to him?”

She frowned, biting her lip. “You really want to talk about this?”

“He’s part of your past. I want to know.”

She eyed him curiously for a long moment before finally answering. “He was nice initially. He was always interested in making a big social media presence, but that didn’t bother me. I was even kind of proud when he started adding me to it.”

She stopped talking, biting her lip now.

“You don’t want to tell me more?”

She hesitated before smiling. “He’s not worth lingering over. I should clean up.”

Hattie stood, gathering the bowls. Tuvo similarly got to his feet and followed after her, intent on helping.

That was strange. Why would she refuse to talk about the end of their relationship?

Unless it was still hurting her.

What had that male done to his Hattie that had put that look on her face? Cautious. Uneasy. Like she wasn’t even sure she should speak.



Hattie called out to Keith and, with a look at Tuvo, he brought his bowl as well. Tuvo didn't growl this time, but he did bare his teeth, and the little male was quick to rush back to his bed.

Tiny, weak thing.

"There," Hattie said with a satisfied nod after he put away the last dish. "It's not too late. Want to take a trip down to the beach?"

"Sure," he agreed.

"Cool. I'll get my swimsuit. Meet you down there!"

The previous disquiet on her face was gone as she nearly skipped to her luggage, pulled out her swimming outfit, then went to the bathroom to change.

Tuvo did the same, changing in the bedroom, before walking out onto the balcony. Down to the grassy path that led to the beach.

The sun was just starting to set, turning the ocean to fire. The waves beating at the beach were soothing and understated in their power. The sand under his bare feet was rough but not uncomfortable.

Movement from behind made him turn, but it wasn't Hattie. Keith had come out as well and he was taking off his shirt and laying it on a beach chair as he, predictably, reached for his phone. Still very carefully not looking at Tuvo.

Tuvo hadn't even really hurt him, but he had intimidated him. He was not a male worthy enough to have Hattie. Even if Atem allowed his courtship, he would never be able to impress him enough to earn the right to claim her.

No male was worthy of that.

Not even Tuvo.

With that harsh reminder, he waded into the water. Needing to work off some of the excess frustration of being so close to Hattie and not being able to touch her.

His female, so close, and still so far out of reach.

# Chapter 11

## *Hattie*

Maybe the swimsuit was too much.

When the landing party had first come to Earth, before they had been attacked, they had been going around on a world tour. Some of the places they went to had beaches. Hattie and the others had bought swimsuits.

Hattie bought two swimsuits.

A cute pink and orange flower themed one-piece that she adored.

And this.

This swimsuit was technically one-piece as well, but the midriff wasn't a solid strip of color. Instead, it was a band that wrapped around before tying in a knot at her waist, revealing most of her belly. The cleavage dipped low, covered only by intercrossing laces, and her back, aside from the banding around her waist and the straps around her neck, was open. Her thighs were unleashed in all their glory, her curves on shameless display. The electric blue color really brought out the gold in her usually brown eyes and hair.

It wasn't cute. It was sexy.

But maybe she should put the pink and orange one back on instead.

Hattie gnawed her lip nervously as she twisted her body, getting a good look in the small mirror. It was definitely more revealing than the other swimsuit.

Thanks to medical treatments on Turv, she didn't have any stretch marks or scars anymore. Her skin and hair were softer

than ever. She didn't even have body hair. At all. She had it all removed at a beauty treatment place. She looked and felt amazing.

But did she dare go out in this? Let Tuvo see her like this?

Despite their early morning escapades, nothing between them had changed. If anything, it was even more tense now.

She nervously ran her hand down her sides. Straightened the band. Took a deep breath.

Then, she stepped from the bathroom with full, pretend confidence.

She could hear the guys moving around out on the beach and followed after them. Her sandals flopped against her feet as she went down towards the water. She didn't see Tuvo immediately, but she did see Keith. He was typing away on his phone, oblivious to her arrival.

But where was-

Oh.

Like an ancient god emerging from the sea, Tuvo broke the surface of the ocean and stood straight. Water streamed down his tight body, highlighting the lines of his chest and arms. Muscular thighs clenched with each step as he pushed his hand over his face, wiping away the drops that threatened to fall into his eyes. His tail broke free last, lashing at the surface, flicking away the water that clung to it as he strode up through the crashing waves.

Hattie was struck dumb. Standing there, pigeon toed in the sand, barely able to breathe much less blink as she stared in awe at this Adonis come to her shore.

"Oh, geez, Hats," Keith's voice suddenly broke her trance, drawing her eyes to him. He had thrown his legs over the side of the lounge chair as he made to stand and was looking at her with his lip curled up in unveiled disgust. "*That's* what you're wearing?"

"What's wrong with it?" She asked reflexively, hating how needy she sounded, as her hand nervously adjusted the

swimsuit.

“Bikinis are made for skinny chicks, Hats.”

“It’s not a bikini.”

“Might as well be.” He shrugged. “Don’t you have like a wrap or something you can use to cover all that up?”

“I like it though.”

“I mean, that’s fine, but it’s just not made for you. You don’t exactly have a beach body. I mean, right?”

She was hunched over now. Practically trying to sink into herself. Hating how, with just a few words, he was capable of shaking the foundation of the self-esteem she had spent so long trying to repair – recovering from him in the first place.

She was tempted to just turn around. Run inside and pick up that orange and pink swimsuit. It was cute too. And it was more of a skirt style, hiding her thighs as well as her belly.

Before she could do so, Tuvo was growling.

But not an aggressive, threatening growl.

That was a domini sexy growl.

Deeper, throatier, rumbling straight to her belly like the humming of a vibrator.

Her downcast eyes lifted to find he had crossed the beach and was now right in front of her. Tall, imposing. A huge wall of muscle and strength.

Three eyes, gleaming in the setting sun, staring down at her with unconcealed desire. The force of which hit her like a sledgehammer, and she whimpered, thighs rubbing together as heat burst between her legs.

“How dare you come out here wearing that,” he growled.

“Tuvo...” She whimpered, nearly collapsing in on herself. His disapproval would destroy her. She wouldn’t be able to recover if he told her the swimsuit wasn’t suitable for her body type.

“It’s already a strain for me not to destroy him. You’re just begging me to claw his eyes out now.”

Relief rushed through her. Excitement right on its heels. Hattie smiled tentatively. Hands behind her back. Pushing up her breasts. His growl deepened as he watched them strain against the stretchy fabric.

“You like my swimsuit?”

His hands twitched, like he was resisting the urge to rip it off of her.

“Isn’t it a pretty color?” She asked so sweetly, running her hand over the band across her waist. He followed the motion, licking his fangs, rising her confidence without a word.

And she wondered how good it would feel for him to use them against her.

Domini were blood drinkers, but not in a sexy way like vampires. Drinking from people was something you only did to your enemies. As a way to honor their efforts and to increase your own strength. It wasn’t about sex at all. Drinking from a lover or friend was a huge taboo – a deep insult. It was seen as weakening and hurting an ally. Completely frowned upon.

But humans, it had been discovered, had aphrodisiac blood.

Scarlet had discovered it. Havali, apparently, was a biter, and when he drank from her, he went absolutely wild with the effects of her blood. And since blood drinking could be sexy to humans, he kind of got a pass for it. Kind of.

Hattie wondered if Tuvo would ever want to taste her. To lick at her blood and be driven absolutely mindless with need for her.

She would let him.

She would let him do anything to her. She craved his knot. His seed. She wasn’t even protected against pregnancy. If he took her, it would have consequences.

Hattie wanted a domini mate. And domini males wanted pups. She wanted to give that to him.

Or whatever male did eventually claim her.

That was a harsh reminder of what they *weren't* to each other, and she stepped past Tuvo to walk towards the water.

A thrill went down her spine when he turned with her. Keeping his hard gaze pinned firmly on her body.

Keith was still there, rolling his eyes, but why did it matter what he thought? He was one guy, and Hattie didn't even want him.

Tuvo looked at her like he had never seen anything so sexy in his life. He followed like she had him on a leash. Staring at her boobs. Her butt. His hand kept spasming as he continued resisting the urge to grab her. To claim her.

She wished he would. She paused by the water to pull up her hair, giving Tuvo an unimpeded glimpse at her back. His gaze felt like a branding iron. Hot and proprietary.

One of the strands escaped her fingers, but before she could grab it, his hands were there. Looping the curl around his digits. The heat of his chest barely brushing her back.

"Let me," he said, the begging tone barely concealed within his growl.

Hattie obligingly released her hair and let him comb through it. Gentle. Steady. Gathering it all into his hands and pulling it into a knot at the back of her head.

And when he finished, she shivered as the pads of his fingers trailed down her neck. Her spine. Lower and lower. Barely brushing against her. Teasing her with a faint caress.

"So, you *do* like my swimsuit?" She asked, tilting her head back to smile up at him.

"No. It's hideous. You should let me take it off you."

The surprised giggle that burst forth made her body shake, and his growl deepened. He didn't grab her, but she felt the back of his fingers brush against her hips, like he had just barely resisted doing so.

“Swim with me?” She asked, happy at his reaction. Because he wasn’t asleep this time. He was awake and so entranced by her she couldn’t imagine not wearing this swimsuit again. She was gorgeous and sexy and that look in his eyes was proof.

He didn’t answer, but he did follow as she walked into the waves.

It was cold, but not freezing. She chuckled, spreading the water up her arms as she waded in deeper. Fully aware of Tuvo right behind her. Stalking her. Making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Eager for this predator to pounce.

Taking a breath, she dove under the surface and kicked off the sandy bottom, swimming forward against the rushing pressure of the waves.

Muffled through the water, she heard a splash as Tuvo did the same. His dark figure quickly moved past her, swimming so much faster. He streaked ahead then turned back, his dense, muscular body sinking instead of floating with the lack of movement. The depth was such that she was completely submerged, but he was crouched to keep his head below water.

Hattie stared as long as she could before her lungs screamed at her, demanding more oxygen. She broke the surface with a regretful gasp.

Tuvo was really beautiful. The peak of power and masculinity. A work of art painted in brush strokes of scar tissue, with a kink in his long, sensuous tale. Perfectly imperfect

She pushed her sopping hair out of her face and blinked at the dark surface of the water, waiting for him to emerge as well.

He didn’t and she was about to take a deep breath and dive again when she felt something strong and rough grab her around the knees. Steady fingers spread her legs and pushed them up, making room for something to slide between her thighs.

Hattie gasped, grabbing it reflexively. Her fingers spread through slightly coarse, short hair. Tuvo’s head. His head was between her thighs. Was he-

He stood, her legs balanced on his shoulders, lifting her straight up out of the water and into the air, sitting on him like a throne. His hands were on her calves, keeping her balanced as she leaned over his head to avoid falling backwards.

A shoulder ride. He was giving her a shoulder ride. The water only came up to his armpits, so her feet were still submerged. But he lifted her up without issue, holding tight like she was some dainty little thing.

“Shall we play?” He asked, running his thumbs along her calves.

“What game did you have in mind?”

“Catch.”

“Catch? We don’t have a ball?”

“Who said anything about a ball?” He said wickedly. “You have ten seconds.”

With that as her only warning, he jumped, throwing her backward into the water with a squeal of delight. He meant to catch *her*.

She hit the water and turned, splashing wildly as she attempted to swim away. Heart pounding with excitement, a smile across her face, as she fled the beast on the hunt.

Ten seconds went by too fast, and he was suddenly there. Arms wrapped around her middle, pulling her back against his chest and up to the surface. His legs kicked, powerful and strong, to keep his dense body above water.

“Got you,” he whispered, right in her ear, making her tremble. “Try again, *vi kyrya*.”

Her pet name again. It made her warm and fuzzy all over to hear him refer to her like that – so sweet and tender. She longed desperately to ask him what it meant but was also terrified to hear it was just ancient Domtri for ‘friend’ or something.

And she didn’t want to ruin an otherwise perfect day.



From feeling his desire, to orgasming from his touch, then sharing a meal, and now playing like kids in the surf of the night dark sea. She could just pretend *kyrya* meant something special.

She completely lost track of time as they played together. Their single sided game of catch and release ended up with her trying to run on shore and immediately being scooped up in his arms and spun around in a circle like a fairy princess.

When he put her down, dizzy and laughing deliriously, she splashed him with a kick.

Naturally, a virile domini male in the prime of his life couldn't let such a challenge go unmet. He splashed her back. Catch and release then became a game of dodge and evade – with him doing most of the evading as she attempted to hit him with any of the water. He occasionally sent a few, playful splashes her way with a flick of his tail, but mostly he ran circles around her, taunting her into trying harder to hit him.

They did that until, exhausted and defeated, Hattie collapsed into the shallows. Tuvo pounded his chest in victory, making her laugh, before he pounced.

Her laugh turned into a squeal as he scooped her up and took off in a dead sprint down the water's edge, carrying her like a princess as he raced for some docks a short distance away. He jumped the three steps up and tore down the length of it.

She realized what he was about to do and screamed with joy, squeezing his neck as he leapt high into the air. They splashed into the water, and he swam them forward a short distance before breaking the surface again.

Hattie laughed, kicking her legs free of his arms so she could float easier, but keeping her arms around him. He easily adjusted his own grip, taking hold of her waist, as his strong kicks kept them both treading water.

He was actually playing with her.

Tuvo was such a stoic and serious guy, she wouldn't have been surprised if he considered silly things like this beneath him.

Sure, he didn't laugh as uproariously as she did, but he was playing all the same.

And he was smiling.

Gently. Tenderly. Looking at her like she meant something to him.

"It's late," he said softly. "We should probably head back."

She didn't want this to end. She wanted to hold onto him forever.

But how could she say that when he had already rejected her once?

She nodded and let him go. He did the same only reluctantly, allowing her to swim away and set the pace back towards their beach. Keith had already gone inside. Hattie didn't even remember him leaving.

They climbed back up to the house and Hattie wiped the sand off her feet on the mat before going inside – Keith was already snoring on the bed. The house was dark and silent.

Hattie tiptoed past the bed to the bathroom and quickly washed the sand and salt from her body and changed back into her cute little nightgown. The silk of it felt like a caress against her sun kissed skin and she was, once again, hesitant to leave the bathroom.

Not because she was worried about looking good in the nightgown, but because she was nervous about getting into bed with Tuvo again.

What would happen tonight?

Letting out a slow breath, she emerged to find him standing in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, waiting for her to emerge.

"All yours," she whispered, stepping out of the way.

He stared at her, coming in almost too close, as he passed by. The moment the door shut behind him, Hattie bit back a moan of longing.

No cuddling tonight. They couldn't risk a repeat of last night. Just sleep.

She climbed into bed and tried her best to make herself comfortable. Adjusting and moving so much she woke up Keith who snapped at her, in a groggy voice, to hold still and go to sleep already.

She laid out on her back. Blanket pulled up, straight and stiff, to her midriff, hands folded over her belly, fingers tapping restlessly as she listened to the shower run.

She was able to stay still like that until the water cut off. Immediately, nerves burst to life in her stomach, and she rolled over. She hugged the pillow and closed her eyes, trying to pretend that she was asleep.

The muffled sounds of Tuvo's movement ratcheted up her nerves higher with each passing second. There was brief silence, then the door opened.

Hattie struggled not to pant, not to move, as she heard him walk across the room. There was another pause as he stopped beside the bed and she was acutely aware of him standing there,

No cuddling. No touching this time. Just friends.

The bed sank as he laid into it and, immediately, the dip made her roll over onto her back. Right as he was laying on his side. She found herself staring up at him. Panicked. Unable to move.

Tuvo stared back at her. Neither of them said anything for a long second.

Then, slowly, as if he was checking to make sure it was okay, he put his arm around her midriff, resting his hand on her far hip, as he laid his head on the pillow.

Hattie bit her lip but, after a second, cuddled in closer. Watching his face all the while. Making sure that was okay with him too.

He said nothing, just stared at her with impossibly dark eyes. His thumb began to move, stroking along her hip.

“Good night,” she whispered breathlessly.

“Sleep well,” he returned, his powerful voice rumbling right in her ear through his chest.

Neither of them attempted to close their eyes. To look away.

The skirt of her nightgown was riding up because of the movement of his thumb. Slowly, but surely. She shivered when his pinkie finally touched her bare skin.

He paused. Watching her carefully.

Hattie licked her lips before taking hold of his side and pulling against him, almost tilting him over onto her. One of his legs fell between hers as the heat and weight of his body pressed along her side, encasing her in a wall of his warmth.

He spread his fingers. Taking hold of her hip under her skirt with his whole hand. Warm and calloused and eager as he squeezed.

It was everything.

It wasn't enough.

Had he changed his mind?

Maybe he had gotten used to her appearance and it wasn't so reprehensible to him now. Hattie didn't mind being an acquired taste. Domini females were all muscular and statuesque, like Amazons from ancient stories. Maybe, he just wasn't used to someone so round and small.

But the hardness poking into her thigh told her that he might not mind it so much now.

Tuvo leaned over her, resting his head above hers. He hesitated only a second before pressing a kiss to her scalp.

“Sleep,” he ordered.

Like he had control over her, Hattie's eyes drifted closed, and she started to nod off.

Safe and secure and comfortable with Tuvo right beside her.

And she couldn't help but feel that *this* was exactly how it was supposed to be.

# Chapter 12

## *Tuvo*

His cock was between her thighs again.

Warm and soft, the heat from Hattie's cunt pressed right against the shaft. He had woken that way, cradling her against his chest again. This time, however, her front was facing his and her legs were spread as though in welcome.

She was still asleep. Her lips parted slightly, her skin warm, her breathing deep and even. A priceless treasure clasped within his arms.

And all he wanted was to break her.

To see her scream and feel her thrash beneath him.

But in his imagination, her sweet moans turned to agony. He was hurting her. Too big for her. His touch bruising. His thrusts damning.

The very thought sent a wave of ice through his veins, chilling his ardor so effectively, it woke him from his drowsy state.

What had he been thinking yesterday?

To play with her. To flirt with her. To stare without shame at her lush, ripe body, just begging for his hands and his lips and his cock. That little swimming outfit had hidden nothing from him. Her breasts were offered up, barely contained by the elastic fabric, and the curves of her waist and hips were on full display.

But she was so *soft*. Her skin so thin. His hands alone were massive in comparison to her. It would be too easy to bruise that sensitive flesh.

Tuvo didn't think he could live with himself if he hurt her.

But he also couldn't pull his cock free of the warm nest of her thighs. How easy would it be to part her legs completely? To pull her little panties to the side. To stretch her on his fingers. Coat his hand in her juices and lick them clean before-

*R-R-Ring!*

The shrill blast of the phone made him jump as it interrupted his fantasy. Thankfully, before he did something he could regret.

But it did give him an idea.

He couldn't give her his cock, but maybe his fingers wouldn't be too big...

"Wassat?" Hattie mumbled, slowly rousing from deep sleep.

Keith grumbled something from his bed, reminding Tuvo that he existed. Another reason Tuvo couldn't fuck Hattie here, not even with his fingers. He would rather rip Keith's eyes out than allow that male to see Hattie nude ever again.

That was a treat only for himself.

Hattie rolled over, blindly patting around the bed for the phone that had been left plugged into the power supply in the wall with an indistinct murmur.

She snatched it up and rolled back, snuggling once again into Tuvo's warmth. Like that was exactly where she belonged, as she answered it.

Tuvo recognized Roger, their pilot, speaking on the other end, though he didn't know what was being said. Instead of trying to figure it out, he put his arm back around Hattie and squeezed her close, curling around her. So sweet and warm and soft.

Too soft.

And just right.

Her free hand was rubbing along his back as, slowly, her words became clearer as she woke up through the conversation. Keith muttered some complaint or another, but Hattie paid him no mind as she finished the conversation.

She finished with, “Thank you,” one of the few phrases he knew, and ended the comm.

“What did Roger say?” Tuvo asked as she yawned, tossing her phone aside as her eyes closed and she leaned into him like she might go back to sleep.

“The plane is ready,” she said. “We can be wheels up in as early as an hour.”

“That’s great news,” he said, genuinely relieved, clutching her close. The sooner he could get Hattie to her home country, where he knew she had security waiting, the better he would feel. “How soon can you be ready to go?”

“Whenever. I kept all my stuff in my suitcase. Just say the word,” she mumbled, eyes still closed, making no attempts to get up.

His Hattie was not good in the mornings. He already knew that she rose later than the others. She also enjoyed a hot, bitter drink that the humans used to give themselves energy.

In contrast, he was used to waking up very early after a lifetime in the military. The breaking of dawn was already brightening the horizon. Normally, he would be up and training. Exercising, strength building, sparring with Atem.

But why do that when he could enjoy this? When he might never get the chance again...

Keith asked something, interrupting his yearning. He bit back a growl, ready to just abandon this male on the island. If only he wasn’t here...

Tuvo might do something he would regret.

As much as he hated him, at least his presence was protecting Hattie. It was better than letting Tuvo lose to his relentless desire and indulge himself to her detriment.

Hattie answered Keith and then, with a sigh, she opened her eyes. She gave him a smile.

“Guess we should get up,” she said, her voice deep and sleepy and sexy.

“We’ll go whenever you’re ready,” Tuvo said, not wanting to let her go. Or force her out of her nest before she was ready.

No. This was not her nest. This strange bed wasn’t worthy of being her nest. She deserved a big bed with huge cushions. Thick blankets. Soft enough to deserve cradling her body. A big sunroof dome to bathe her in light in the mornings and drape her in moon and starlight at night.

His room. He was imagining her in his room.

Oblivious to his imaginings, Hattie forced herself up, stretching her arms overhead. Showing her body to his appreciative gaze. His hand twitched with the urge to push her over, back into his arms. Her breasts were right there, above his head, heavy and loose. They needed his lips, his tongue, suckling at her nipples and preparing them for their pup’s hungry mouths.

No. Stop!

He was weak – truly weak.

His cock was sticking straight up, tenting the blanket over him. He bent his leg as Hattie sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing the back of her neck and yawning again. So sleepy. So cute. She really was not made for the mornings.

That was okay. That just meant he would be able to finish his morning workout before she was awake and ready to cook them breakfast. Then, he could join her in the kitchen. Help her. Taste her food, hold her body, enjoy her presence.

A perfect morning, every morning.

But no. That wasn’t going to happen.

He was a hopeful fool.

Hattie stood to go to the bathroom, only to get cut off as Keith rushed past her. He laughed, celebrating his victory as he shut the door in her face. Hattie rolled her eyes and instead turned to pack the rest of her suitcase, except for what she would need for the day.

The flight to Hattie’s continent was a long one. It behooved them to leave early. The three packed quickly and Hattie called



the wheeled shuttle driver that had brought them here initially.

She fell asleep in the vehicle on the drive back to the airport. Leaning against his shoulder. Comfortable against him. Right where she belonged.

Once again, the driver took them right onto the tarmac where their private plane was waiting, staircase already pulled up to the door. Rodger was waiting at the top, and he waved at them with a friendly smile as they stepped from the car.

Keith, of course, was immediately up the stairs. No doubt to take more pictures and videos of himself in the fancy aircraft. Hattie was slower to follow, after making sure that Tuvo had both of their luggage and didn't need help – as if he would ever allow her to carry them.

He inclined his head to Rodger as he stepped onto the plane. The human male gave him a harmless smile.

Rodger shut and sealed the door on the plane, then closed himself in his cockpit. Human security protocols meant that no one could enter the cockpit without the pilot's permission. He was locked inside and could not be harmed lest the aircraft be molested by enemies. There could be similar protocols put in place on starships and aircraft out in the universe, so Tuvo understood the purpose.

By now, he was accustomed to the procedure for flight.

He stowed their luggage away as Hattie took a seat. He stopped to grab two bottles of water and brought them back to her. She gave him a grateful smile as he took his seat and fastened his seatbelt in anticipation of takeoff.

It was all very routine and normal at this point.

The flight would be long, but not uncomfortable.

Once they were in the air, Hattie was up, making them breakfast in the little kitchen. They had leftover blueberry cheesecake, which she used to make something she called French toast. He couldn't eat it, but she made him eggs and bacon and allowed him to eat what remained of the cheesecake that she stuffed into the toast.

“I can’t wait to show you around my hometown,” she said as the two of them ate at a small table near the back of the plane – away from Keith.

“I can’t wait to see it,” he said, sitting back, patting his stomach. Nice and full from the meal she had made. He could too easily see himself eating like this for the rest of their lives. She’d make him soft around the middle, but he wasn’t mad about the threat.

He was genuinely looking forward to seeing her home. The place that had raised his Hattie. Meeting her parents on a more personal footing than their brief initial interaction. He had merely been introduced upon the first landing.

Purely as a friend, of course.

An excuse that was getting weaker every time he repeated it to himself.

Hattie shifted a bit in her seat before taking a breath and starting, “Tuvo, do you-”

The beeping of the comm in his pocket cut her off.

“Sorry,” he said, standing. “Hold that question.”

He pulled the small device out and answered the communication. It was time for his weekly check in – a human demarcation of time based on their calendar. They had all switched to using it while in Earth territory for convenience.

Technically, he should have been the one to call them, but he had been so caught up chatting with Hattie this morning, he had forgotten.

In fact, what time was it? It had to have been marks, hours, since they finished eating. The two of them had just been sitting there, talking, the whole time.

How did time go so quickly when he was with her? What had they even talked about? It felt like it was everything and nothing. Their pasts, their hopes for the future. Still trying to keep every topic as carefully neutral as possible but getting more comfortable with each other with each conversation that came and went.

He just couldn't get enough of her. Every word from her lips was a story he was dying to hear. Every glance a caress he needed to feel on his skin. She was a distraction, but one that he was eager to lose himself in.

Even now, as he was going through the standard report with the officers on the ship, his eyes were tracking Hattie as she cleaned up the plane kitchen. A smile on her face.

She was wearing a cute dress today. A white top with a beaded belt leading into a pastel blue skirt that flared around her thighs, teasing him with each step she took. Adorable. Huggable. Completely distracting.

He had to ask the officer on the other end to repeat their questions.

Hattie finished putting away the dirtied dishes then walked to the near window. She looked out with a smile on her face, the incoming sunlight setting her brown hair aglow, bringing life to the amber and gold strands usually hidden within the long locks. A secret delight for his eyes.

He had to ask the officer to repeat themselves again.

She suddenly frowned, tilting her head curiously, her little brow tufts furrowing as though she were confused about something.

Tuvo finished his report as quickly as he could. He barely heard what the others were saying since most of his focus was taken up with studying Hattie as she watched the world outside the window.

He finished the comm and set the device on the counter as he came to join her.

“Something wrong?” He asked, looking out as well.

The Earth below them was stunningly green. Almost intimidatingly so. His mind insisted that he was flying over dark water, because the ocean was green on Turv. But he knew that was wrong. That was a forest, spread out like a massive blanket that stretched all the way to the horizon. Huge and beautiful and untouched.

There were no human settlements out there that he could see. Just endless green.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Hattie said, shaking her head and standing straight. She didn’t sound confident.

“Then, why are you frowning?”

“It’s just... I don’t recognize that forest?”

He cocked his head curiously. “Is that a question?”

“It’s a weird thing to say, I guess.” She shook her head, crossing her arms. “I’m not exactly a forest expert, so it’s probably nothing.”

“But...?”

She shook her head, smiling quickly. “No. I’m just being silly. Forget it.”

“No, tell me.”

She hesitated a bit longer before grimacing. “Okay, so, we’re heading to my home, right?”

“Correct.”

“I live in Virginia. Relatively close to the coast. I mean, not like *on* the coast, but that’s not the point. The airport we’re going to should be like, right there by the coast. We... We shouldn’t be flying over a forest at all.”

Tuvo looked back outside. To the land below them that was nothing *but* forest.

And... was it getting closer?

Tuvo frowned, his nerves getting tighter as he realized that the blanket of trees below *was* getting closer, the horizon getting further away.

“Let’s go talk to Rodger,” he said. “Maybe there was another engine-”

***BOOM!***

Hattie screamed, thrown to the side as the entire aircraft rocked. Tuvo grabbed her with one arm, the other hand

balancing him against the wall as they bounced and tilted too far to the side.

Smoke filled the windows on the opposite side of the plane as the scenery on this side began to spin slowly. Like the plane was now going down in a large spiral.

Keith, who had been seated, napping, was thrown from his chair, nearly hitting the front of the plane – having put as much distance between them as he could. He rolled at the last second, so he ended up sprawled out on the ground instead. He lifted his head, cursing and yelling as he whipped his head around in confusion.

“Tuvo.”

He looked down. Hattie was staring at him with wide, terrified eyes. Her hands were fisted into his shirt as she clung to him.

This plane was smoking, spiraling down.

Hattie was trapped on this plane.

Tuvo cursed, pushing her back into a nearby seat.

“Stay here, I’m going to-”

“Rodger!” She screamed, pointing.

He turned.

The cockpit door was open now and, sure enough, Rodger had emerged.

The older male’s affable smile was gone now. In its place, there was a disgusted sneer and a focused look of determination. His pristine uniform was wrinkled and mussed thanks to the harness buckled onto his chest and around his legs, connected to a pack on his back.

Tuvo growled, standing straight. Looking into the face of hatred as it glared back at him.

The engine trouble didn’t seem so incidental anymore.

## Chapter 13

### *Hattie*

“Is that... a parachute?” Hattie whimpered.

The plane was going down. It was going *down!* And quickly! The world was spinning outside the windows. There was smoke! That bang.

They were going to crash!

Oh, god, they were going to die!

And then Rodger was there, stepping from the cockpit, parachute on his back. And for a second, she felt a flash of relief.

Did they have parachutes? Were they going to be okay?

Then, Rodger lifted a gun and pointed it at Tuvo.

“Tell him not to move,” he snarled, walking to the side. Towards the door of the plane.

“What are you doing?” Hattie asked, breathless and teary eyed. Tuvo hadn’t needed her to translate the warning. He understood enough without words. He snarled, hands clenched tight into fists, moving to keep his body in front of Hattie.

“I’m protecting humanity,” Rodger said, head up and proud. Like he was doing something noble and self-sacrificial.

“Protecting us from what?” Hattie gasped, confused and terrified.

“Creatures like him,” he narrowed his eyes on Tuvo. “Humans don’t need to simper up to aliens. We’re fine on our own. No one asked for their protection. Their patronizing *treaty*. They’re here to steal our women and nothing else!”

“What are you talking about!?”

“Shut up!” He pointed the weapon at her, earning a growl from Tuvo as he covered her completely. “A monster fucker like you doesn’t get to speak. You’re as much of an animal as them! You can die alongside him!”

She still didn’t understand. This hatred, this burning loathing, was so strange to her. She couldn’t imagine his way of thinking to even try to relate.

But she didn’t get a chance to try.

Rodger, face pinched in determination, grabbed the emergency release lever of the door.

“No!” Hattie screamed.

He pushed down the lever.

Keith jumped from where he had been crouching, forgotten.

The door was sucked out into the sky along with the air in the plane.

Hattie screamed as Keith yanked back on the parachute harness, his other hand grabbing onto the edge of the open cockpit.

Rodger’s gun was sucked from his hand. His feet yanked out from under him. His head cracked against the wall and his body went limp.

The pressure equalized and his body dropped. Keith stared at him, eyes wide, as though shocked by his own actions.

Tuvo took off, running to the front of the plane. He threw himself into the cockpit as Hattie, shaking, stepped forward.

“Is he... dead?” She whimpered, hoping she wasn’t staring at a corpse. She wasn’t strong enough to know she had just watched someone die. The roar of the wind was too loud though, and she had to shout the question again.

“I don’t think so,” Keith yelled back. He blinked then seemed to reach some kind of decision. He dropped down beside Rodger and began yanking at his harness.

Tuvo ran from the cockpit, walking right past him to Hattie.

“What is it?” She asked, reaching for him. Needing to touch him. Tuvo was here. It was going to be okay because Tuvo was here. Even if they were still dropping in a spiral. Even if she was still terrified and crying.

“I don’t know how to operate this vehicle,” Tuvo growled, frustrated. “It’s not Standard. And I think he disabled it anyway. We need a plan.”

“He had a parachute. Maybe...”

She looked past him to Keith, who was yanking the harness onto his own body with a grim, determined look on his face.

And her first thought was that he was sweet, but Tuvo should really be doing that. Tuvo would be strong enough to hold her and Keith as they fell. He could get all three of them safely to the ground so long as the parachute held. It wasn’t exactly the right time to worry about weight limits; they would just have to risk it.

But then Keith stood and gave them a look that was part determination, part regret.

“Keith?” She said softly. Almost definitely too soft for him to hear over the rushing of wind in the cabin. “What...”

“I’m sorry!” He yelled through clenched teeth. “I’m not ready to die! And I’m not giving my life up for either of you. It’s every man for himself!”

“Keith, wait!”

Too late.

He took a running jump, like it was a video game, and launched himself out of the plane. Taking the only parachute with him.

Hattie stared at the open door in disbelief. Stunned into silence.

“Come on!” Tuvo grabbed her by the wrist and pulled.

She shook her head but didn’t resist as he took her to the door.



She whimpered to see how close the ground had come. They were nearly right on top of it. A direct fall from this height would kill them. The crash would kill them too. They really were going to die.

“Tuvo,” she looked at him, tears pouring down her face. “I have to tell you-”

“Tell me later,” he ordered, crouching. “Get on my back.”

“But...” She protested, even as she moved to obey. She climbed onto him, putting her arms around his neck, her thighs on his hips.

He stood, jerking her legs up and around so they twisted around him more koala style. He was too broad for her ankles to lock together, but he pulled them tight. He then grabbed her arms and did the same, making her fear she was going to choke him, even knowing that choking a domini was nearly impossible. They were made to carry people, their young specifically, on their back.

But Hattie was hardly the weight of a child. And they were still free falling.

“Whatever you do,” he yelled, standing in the doorway of the plane. Air rushed past them, beating at her until she hid her face in his neck. “Do not let go!”

“Tuvo, please...” She had to tell him. She just couldn’t die with that lie to herself in her heart.

“Hold on, Hattie!”

He jumped.

She screamed.

They fell.

Air rushed past. Her grip tightened reflexively as she cracked her eyes open. And wished she hadn’t.

The Earth was rushing up to greet them. The waving tops of massive trees rustling as though to welcome her home. To her ultimate home.

Tuvo tilted his body. Falling headfirst, almost perpendicular to the ground. Both hands reached out and she saw, for the first time, the flash of his black claws.

And they were huge!

Not just wide but long. Gleaming and deadly in the sunlight.

He wasn't going to...

Was he...

Hattie's grip tightened further until the muscles in all four limbs shook. Her eyes closed and she, again, buried her face against his neck.

"I love you," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear it over the rushing wind, but needing to get the words out before she died.

They hit the canopy with an explosion of leaves. Branches and twigs struck her arms and legs like the sting of a whip – white hot agony that only made her grip tighter.

Tuvo grunted as they hit something. She felt the blow of it ripple through his body, but it was gone in an instant. Then again. This time, his grunt was accompanied by the cracking, shredding of wood as their momentum suddenly slowed.

Hattie opened her eyes again. She didn't know why she tortured herself.

They were under the canopy now, and the sight of the ground rushing up to them was no better than the waving leaves. They were so high up. The tree was so huge.

But they were slowing down.

Tuvo's claws had stabbed into the tree. He did it again, cutting into the bark of the forest giant, sending out a shower of splinters, as their bodies jerked down. He let go quickly, but almost immediately used his other hand to grab the tree again. Then, both hands.

He was shredding the tree, but they weren't free falling. They didn't come to a halt, but their descent was slow enough that, when he finally let go, he landed in an easy crouch with

another grunt, his claws sinking into the damp forest soil this time.

Immediately, he jumped forward, avoiding the shower of branches and twigs and leaves that came crashing down after them.

Still in a crouch, breathing hard, Tuvo looked back allowing Hattie to tilt her head and look straight up. There was actually a hole in the canopy above them. Proof that they really had come down from the sky.

Neither of them moved, just stared upwards. Was he as shocked as she was? What was-

*BOOM!*

Hattie jumped, crying out in fear, at the huge blast that rocked the forest. For an insane minute, she wondered if they were blowing up or something.

But then she remembered they weren't the only things falling from the sky.

That had been the plane. Crashing to the ground. She couldn't see where it landed through the canopy, but she felt it shake the ground. All the bird calls and animal sounds suddenly went silent as the beasts were scared into stillness.

That could have been them. That *was* them.

A sob broke her lips as she began shaking violently.

Because she had just dropped out of the sky. How had she survived leaping from a crashing plane? No, that hadn't just happened. That hadn't happened-

"Hattie!"

She was crying in earnest now. Tuvo had to pry her arms from around his neck, her legs off his waist. She didn't want to let go. He was safety. He was protection. She had nearly died. She had just fallen from the sky!

"Hattie, breathe!"

Tuvo had finally got her off him, back on her own two feet. But he had taken hold of her shoulders and was bending low to

look her in the eyes. She clutched his wrists, desperate to hold onto him because if she let him go, it was certain death.

“You’re okay, Hattie. You’re okay,” Tuvo whispered, gently brushing her hair from her face. She had the completely insane thought that her hair must look crazy after falling like that.

That thought made a single laugh burst past her lips. Quickly followed by another. Then another until she was hysterical, tears falling down her face.

Insane. She had lost her mind. She had died. She had to have died. This wasn’t real-

Tuvo grabbed her, slamming his lips over hers.

She gasped, shocked into silence at the heavy warmth of his kiss.

He was kissing her.

*Tuvo was kissing her.*

She hiccupped once, shuddering. Tuvo growled, approval lacing the sexy sound, as he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted straight up. Clutching her body to him as he deepened the kiss with a hungry desperation, like he was trying to consume her.

A moan passed her lips as she slumped against him, holding tight. Her safety. Her strength. The thing grounding her in this crazy world.

She was alive, and she tasted it in his kiss.

He tried to pull back, but she chased him. Grabbing his head, gripping his hair. Another growl shook her core, her pussy right against his chest. She could feel it vibrating through her.

Yes. Yes! Kiss her. Claim her! Remind her that they were alive!

Tuvo’s hand wound through her hair, and she hummed in approval. A sound that became a needy whine when he instead used that hand to pull her head back, breaking their kiss. She licked her lips, eager for more, giving him a hungry look.

“Tuvo...”

“There you are,” he said, slowly lowering her back to her feet.  
“Stay with me, Hattie.”

“I... I can't...”

“You can.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You can do this. I know it's scary. I know it's a lot. And I promise, you can break down later. I'll hold you through it. I won't let you be alone. But you can't do it now. Okay?”

She sniffed, taking in a shuddering breath as she tried to gather herself. To be strong. A near impossible task when she could feel, physically, in her chest just how fragile she was at this moment.

Looking down, the side of her bright red blood made her pause. Her arms and legs, unshielded by Tuvo's body during the fall, had been whipped raw by the twigs and branches above. Flaying her open completely in some places.

Tuvo took her wrists carefully and looked her arms over.

“I wish I could lick these for you,” he said softly.

But he couldn't. Her blood was an aphrodisiac for him. If he licked her wounds clean, that would only succeed in making him horny.

And it was definitely not the time.

“I'm okay,” she assured him, trying not to think of how likely it was that they would become infected. She had to believe they wouldn't be lost in the forest that long.

“Some of these will scar.”

She chuckled weakly, looking at him. His skin had been whipped as well, but he only had a few dark spots here and there – bruises, no lacerations. He was already covered in scars. There were three right across his face. He was the only domini she knew with scars, especially such extensive ones. No other domini had kinks in their tails from previous fractures. Only Tuvo.

And he was concerned about her scarring? It was kind of funny. Legitimately funny, not hysterically manic. She was back in control. Even if it was fragile.

“I don’t want scars on your skin,” he growled, as though angry.

“You don’t think scars are attractive?”

“Scars on you are marks of failure. *My* failure. Because I didn’t protect you. I will get you back to the *Jutiron Stor*, I swear to you. And I will see these healed.”

“Failure?” She repeated, looking at this scarred body. Surprised he thought that way when it seemed like he collected them for fashion.

“Come on. We need to get to the crash site.”

“Huh?” That was not what she had been expecting him to say. “Why?”

He turned away from her and looked through the trees. Sniffing at the air.

“We need to get to the plane. See if there’s any supplies we can use. If we can find the comm.”

“Oh, crud! The comm!” She joined him in looking around. Not that there was anything to see but trees, ferns, vines, and more trees. “And our phones. They were all... We can’t even call for help!”

“A landing shuttle wouldn’t be able to make it through the canopy anyway. Although, if the plane made a big enough hole, it could land through there. All the more reason to find the plane.”

“Okay, er...” Hattie looked down at herself. At her skirt that barely brushed her knees, at the chunky heeled, nude pumps. Neither of which were good for traversing the jungle.

“It will be relatively close,” Tuvo assured her. “It was falling in a spiral. A wide spiral, sure, but it will still be somewhere nearby.”

“Sure.” Hattie took a fortifying breath and focused only on that immediate goal. Get to the plane. One step at a time. She could do that without freaking out.

Tuvo stared at her a second before offering gently, “I can carry you.”

“No.” She shook her head quickly. “You already carried me out of the falling plane. And down... Did you really rip open a tree on the way down?”

She looked up and, even from here, she could see the deep gouge marks where his claws had torn into the bark as he slowed their fall.

“My claws are made for it,” he assured her.

“Are you injured?” She reached out for his hand—only for him to jerk it away.

Hurt, she flinched back.

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “I didn’t... I’m sorry.”

Holding hands was a very intimate thing for the domini. Their claws were their weapons and trusting someone enough to let their claws that close to you while rendering their own useless was a huge show of trust. It was done only between close couples.

One kiss meant to calm her down did not a couple make. And his humping at her didn’t mean that he trusted her. Of course, he wouldn’t let her take his hand.

“We should get going,” Tuvo said, turning forward. Bringing his hands forward as well, as though he didn’t even want to let her see them. “Tell me if you need me to carry you.”

“Sure. Okay,” she mumbled, stepping after him.

She had no idea why he chose the direction he did, but he quickly outpaced her. Even if she hadn’t been wearing heels, even short ones, his long legs ate up ground faster than her. He quickly realized it though and slowed down so she could remain behind him.

The animals were calling out again. Yelling at each other through the trees, making goosebumps pop up on Hattie’s arms. She rubbed them nervously as she looked around.

Where were they anyway?

This forest was dense, thick, and completely untouched. Were there even any forests like this in North America? It almost looked like...

But no, that was ridiculous.

However, the first time she saw a bright, blue frog, just chilling innocently on a leaf, it brought her up short. She might not be a forest or wildlife expert, but she knew very well that, at least in the frog world, anything bright and not green was bad. Poisonous to the touch bad.

And they definitely didn't have those in North America.

"Hattie? What's wrong?"

She didn't realize she had come to a halt until Tuvo returned to her side. He followed her gaze to the tiny, bright blue frog and cocked his head curiously.

"Is that creature dangerous?"

"It's a, er... Well, it looks like a poisonous frog."

"I shall know better than to bring you such things to eat then."

"No, I mean... No, you can't eat them, but they're poisonous to the *touch*. Their skin secretes a poison that seeps through the skin."

Tuvo looked at her, horrified. "Is that a thing that can happen to humans?"

"What? There's nothing poisonous to the touch on Turv?"

"No! Just how thin is your skin?" He took her by the shoulders and pulled her back.

As he did so, she caught a glimpse of his claws out of the corner of her eye. Huge and black. He hadn't retracted them yet.

He quickly took his hand away.

"There aren't any frogs like that in North America. At least, I don't think there are. Tuvo, I don't think we're even on the right continent. This place... This forest... It looks like the Amazon."



“What is that?”

“It’s a huge rainforest. Massive. Wild. We could be days... *weeks* from civilization. How is anyone even going to find us out here?”

“Maybe that was the point,” Tuvo said, growling. “Roger didn’t *want* anyone finding us out here. We were meant to die in this place. Why did you just smack your arm?”

“A mosquito bit me,” she mumbled, already anticipating the itch that was going to be later.

Tuvo yanked his shirt off of his head and offered it to her. It wasn’t long sleeved, but it was long enough that she could use it as a cape.

“Are you sure?” She asked, taking it from him cautiously.

“I doubt those little bugs are going to be able to penetrate my skin. Take it.”

She nodded thankfully and pulled it around her shoulders. It smelled like him. A warm, comforting scent. The forest was hot and humid, and she was already feeling the effects of both, but it was nice to relax into the fabric for just a second.

“Let’s keep going,” Tuvo said, leading her forward again.

She followed, staring curiously at his back. His skin was brown and beige and green now. His jeans and boots kind of broke the illusion, but both were already becoming stained and ripped, letting him blend in just a bit more.

And the scarring actually helped. The scarred skin still camouflaged, but it gave him a bumpy, irregular appearance that aided in blending him into his surroundings. Nature wasn’t perfect, smooth skin, after all.

It was easy to imagine losing him in the trees if he didn’t want to be found.

“You called this a rainforest?” He asked a short time later as he was pushing his way through the brush. Looking at each leaf as though checking to make sure there weren’t any frogs there for her to touch. “How often does it rain here?”

“Pretty much once a day, I think,” she said, even as distant thunder echoed a few miles off as if to confirm her theory. “At least we won’t lack for water.”

“It’s not wise to count on rain as a water supply. Too inconsistent.”

“Even in a place that rains daily?”

“Admittedly, there is some leeway there, but I would still rather have a river or something.”

Hattie grimaced. “Erm, well, I’m no Amazon expert, if this *is* the Amazon, I think there are things in the water that can eat you.”

“Any big predators? On land or in the water.”

“I’m not sure. I know the frogs. I’m pretty sure piranhas are from the Amazon. Got that from a movie. They’re fish that swarm and eat meat. Which, now that I actually have to face the possibility of that, is a genuinely terrifying statement.”

“Focus, Hattie. Don’t think about that. Tell me everything you know about this forest.”

“That’s pretty much it. It was never in my plans to visit this forest even in the best circumstances. And I’m a chef. We don’t really study the Amazon. I can identify food if you need me to. But that’s about all I’m good for.”

Tuvo gave her a smile over his shoulder. “Don’t downplay how useful a skill like that can be. Would the creatures in this forest be edible? Besides the poisonous frogs?”

“Good rule of thumb on Earth: The more colorful it is, the more likely it is to be deadly. But I don’t know any mammals off top that are poisonous. None that I can think of anyway. Are you any good at hunting?”

“I am one of the best. Between the two of us, we won’t go hungry while we’re here.”

“Well, that’s something. All that’s left is water.”

As though it had been summoned, a drop hit her cheek. And it was like the heavens had been ripped open because it was

followed immediately by a deluge. Within minutes, Hattie was soaked to the bone and shivering despite the warm temperature. Her inappropriate shoes were rubbing blisters into her feet, her legs itched from mosquito bites, and, when she tilted her head back to catch some of the rainwater in her mouth, it left a weird taste in her mouth.

She was lucky, she knew that, but she could already tell that surviving this was going to be an unpleasant ordeal. And it was just the beginning.

How deep in the Amazon were they? Was anyone even going to be able to come get them?

“Rodger had an escape plan.”

“What?” Unprepared for Tuvo to speak, it took Hattie a second to realize what he said.

“That pack he wore. It was one of those old-fashioned fall decelerators, wasn’t it?”

She snickered at the wording. “Yeah. A parachute.”

“Which means he planned to live through this. Which must mean it’s possible to live through this. There’s a way out of here. We just have to figure out what it is.”

He turned back to face her and frowned.

“Why are you walking like that?”

Hattie had changed her gait to try to ease some of the pressure off the sore parts of her feet where the blisters were forming. But there wasn’t anything to be done about it, so she just shook her head and went back to walking normally. It burned like fire, but she smiled at him.

“I’m okay. Any idea where we’re going? Or how close to the crash site we are?”

Tuvo turned back and picked her up about the waist, surprising her. He held her across his chest as he walked over to a nearby rock and sat her on it.

He kneeled and began pulling at the straps on her heels as he spoke, “The boom came from this direction. I was hoping

we'd smell smoke if we walked this way, but that's not likely with this rain. So, we'll have to look for any disturbance in the area. Fresh leaf cover from the shockwave of the crash, any unusual animal behavior, any signs of the trees being disturbed. It can't be... Hattie..."

His voice trailed off as he revealed her feet. The red marks, the blisters, already apparent. They had to have been walking for over an hour now. The terrain was uneven and rough, so she wasn't surprised her feet were bleeding.

Fresh air hitting the wounds just made it worse and she grimaced, already hating the idea of putting those shoes back on.

"Why did you not just ask me to carry you?" Tuvo asked, holding her feet in his hands. Gently glaring at the marks.

"You're hiking too. And you need your hands just in case we get attacked or something. I don't know if there are any predators here."

"Hattie," he fixed her with a glare, "You're begging for an infection from this. I can carry you. I'm *made* to carry you. Let me do so."

Her heart was pounding in her throat. Eager to accept the offer, hating that she couldn't.

"I'm too heavy for you to carry like that, Tuvo."

Something flashed in his eyes. It looked like... anger.

She didn't think she had insulted him until he suddenly swept her up in his arms and began to march forward, grumbling about her lack of faith in his strength all the while. She didn't know why she was surprised. Domini were a very competitive people. Her stating that he couldn't do it was basically a challenge he couldn't refuse.

She wanted to assure him she could walk, but she knew that would only make things worse. So, she held her tongue, and her shoes, and let him carry her as he traversed the wild jungle until the rain finally stopped and he opted to take a break.

He sat her down on the remains of a fallen tree this time and stepped back, stretching his arms overhead as he looked around the forest.

Hattie already missed the rain. Without it, the air got hot again, and so humid the water couldn't even evaporate to cool her properly. She was wet, sticky, and mosquitos were filling the air once more. Added to that, her feet were burning worse now that she had a break from walking.

“Are you hungry?” Tuvo asked, looking her over.

Hattie shook her head. She kind of was, but not enough that she was going to make him go get food for them yet. She would rather wait until they got to the plane. There might be some food that survived that she knew would be safe to eat. There might even be bottled water.

Tuvo could survive drinking the blood of any creatures he found. Their blood and meat together would satisfy all he needed for food and water. Especially if they weren't here for very long. But she wasn't so lucky.

Tuvo gave her a suspicious look, like he didn't believe her. But she just smiled. It hadn't been *that* long since she had eaten. She was fine, he was just worrying too much.

“I'm okay,” she laughed, kicking her feet in the air – the log was taller than her, but it put her head about even with him so she could look him in the eyes without putting a crick in her neck. “Why don't you take a seat? You've earned it.”

“How are your feet?”

“They're fine,” she assured him with a smile.

“I know what that means,” he narrowed his eyes on her. “Human females don't say things are fine unless they're not fine.”

Hattie threw back her head, laughing loudly. She had told one guy, one time, that fine did not mean fine, and it seemed that every domini immediately was warned.

“Okay, yeah. My feet aren't perfect, but they're fine in that I can live with it. How about you? Are you okay?”

“My boots are quite comfortable, actually.”

“I believe that,” she said, giving them an envious look. They were combat boots, and she had a feeling that Tuvo would have offered them to her if they weren’t boots compared to her feet. “But you fell from a plane too. You hit the tree on the way down. Were you hurt at all?”

Tuvo suddenly hid his hands behind his back. “No, I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong with your hands?” She frowned, leaning to the side, trying to look.

He turned, blocking her vision. “Nothing. They’ll be fine.”

“You said ‘would be’ that time.”

“Don’t worry about it, Hattie.”

“Show me your hands.”

“You’re safe, I assure you.”

“That’s not my concern.” She frowned, hurt. “Do you really trust me so little that you won’t even let me *see* your hands?”

She couldn’t keep the warble from her tone, and he sighed, giving in. “No. That’s not it. I just...”

“Tuvo?”

He lifted his hands, showing them both to her. Immediately, she grabbed them, turning them over, searching for damage. Surely, there had to be some. Huge trees weren’t known for being delicate and he had carried both of their weight down.

But there was nothing.

She looked them over carefully, but there wasn’t a scratch. His claws were still out, still long and sharp with a wicked curve. But aside from that, they were exactly the same as before.

“What...?” She frowned, turning them again.

“Careful,” Tuvo said softly.

“Huh?”

“My claws. Be careful. I don’t want you to cut yourself.”

“Just retract them.”

His jaw tightened. Her head tilted curiously.

“Tuvo? You can’t retract them?”

He shook his head. “They’re, er, swollen. Bruised. The landing was a hard one. I can’t retract them until the swelling goes down.”

“So, you *did* hurt yourself?”

“No. It’s not really a true injury. It’s pretty normal for that kind of landing. It’s a violent thing to come down that way. My claws took all of our weight, and the claw beds were traumatized. The swelling will get better, it just might take a day or two.”

“So... you were just afraid you’d injure me? That’s why you pulled away?”

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” he promised, turning his hands, gently taking hold of her wrists. His huge hands encircled them completely, even without his claws adding extra length. “I... I’m not good with my words. I know that. But trust me, Hattie, it is *never* my intention to hurt you. I don’t think you should take my hands until my claws go down.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “Tuvo, I’m not *that* delicate.”

“Compared to me, you are.”

“I’ll trust you not to hurt me, but you have to trust me too. Trust me to know my limits. To know what’s too dangerous for me.” She turned their hands over.

“Hattie, my claws are not something to be so flippant about. Do you understand how easy it would be for me to cut you with them?” He growled, as though the very idea angered him. “If I use my claws, I can rend my enemies nearly in half. They’re dangerous. *Too* dangerous.”

“Is that why you fight with your fists?” She asked, gently running the tips of her finger in circles over his palms. She had often wondered why Tuvo fought so differently from other domini. It was standard for them to splay their fingers while fighting, putting their claws out to their best advantage, but

Tuvo never did that. He came into fights with his fists clenched, deliberately not using his claws.

“I used to hurt others when I fought them,” he confessed softly, pain in his voice. “I couldn’t spar with other domini normally. My claws are too long, too thick, too sharp, to do so safely. You have no idea how many times I hurt Atem while we were training together. I had to learn to fight with my fists because I didn’t want to seriously injure anyone.”

“Oh, Tuvo,” she breathed, lifting his hands. She pressed a kiss to the backs of his fingers before smiling at him over those wicked claws. “You’re a good male, you know that?”

“Hattie, careful...”

“You’re not going to hurt me. I know you’re not.” She slid her fingers around, entwining them with his as she held them close. “I’ll be careful, but don’t pull away from me just because you’re worried about hurting me. Okay? Trust me too.”

“Hattie...”

She pulled on his hands, and he stepped in closer. Easily controlled. She parted her legs, making space for him as she put his hands on her waist. He was careful to hold her with his claws off her skin, but he kept them there as she ran her hands up his neck to cup his jaw.

The kiss this time was slow. Careful. But no less eager.

She parted her lips and licked at his. Begging for entrance. Which he granted after only a moment’s hesitation. But he was careful there too. Making sure that she couldn’t get near his fangs. Pushing his tongue into her mouth instead to deny her even the chance.

Hattie laughed and gently bit his tongue. He started in surprise, and she used that chance to take over, controlling the kiss. Going right for his fangs. She stroked them gently, being careful of the sharp tips, made specifically for piercing flesh, but stroking them all the same.

Tuvo growled in warning but didn’t attempt to pull away. His steadfastness made her moan in relief as she relaxed against



him.

This wasn't a panic, anti-hysteria kiss either. It was a long, exacting, deliberate kiss that sent tingles all up and down her body as she explored him to her heart's content. That big, muscular body felt so good, so *right*, as she curled her arm around his head and leaned against him, trusting him with her weight, as she tried desperately to deepen the kiss.

The forest, the situation, the potential danger, all faded away. She didn't care if she died right now because she was finally kissing Tuvo, the male she had loved since nearly the first moment she saw him, and there was nothing better than that.

He growled again, and she thought it might be her name this time, but it was so deliciously rumbly she could barely tell. She whimpered, clutching at his clothes. Desperate for more. Because she was greedy and now that she had this, she wanted more.

“Ugh, seriously?”

Tuvo ripped himself free, snarling violently at the interruption.

Keith, who had come upon them, cried out and fell back a step, bringing up his hands to protect himself from the vicious predator he had stumbled onto.

“Keith?” Hattie mumbled, blinking rapidly, trying to come back to herself. “What are...”

He was here? He was alive?

Oh, wow! He was *here*! He was *alive*!

“You made it,” she said, sitting up as Keith skirted around Tuvo who had stopped growling but was now glaring at him with his lower eyes – the upper one remained firmly focused on her. “That's great! Are you hurt?”

“Er, *yeah*,” he looked at her like she was dumb. “I crashed into a fucking *tree*. Parachutes are bullshit, by the way. I was still dropping like a fucking rock. And I think I crushed a nut in that damn harness.” He adjusted himself like he was still feeling it but gave them an odd look. “How the hell are you two even alive?”

“Tuvo jumped and scaled down a tree,” Hattie beamed. “He’s awesome!”

“Huh. Wow,” Keith shook his head. “Whatever. Look, er, sorry about bailing on you, I just-”

He tried to step in closer, but Tuvo began growling again. His claws were digging into the wood on either side of Hattie, making it crack. Keith quickly walked back and Tuvo’s growls died down again, but he remained close like Hattie might be in danger.

“It’s okay,” Hattie smiled around him, running her fingers through his hair. “You were just looking out for yourself. And Tuvo saved me, so it’s fine.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Keith cleared his throat. “Anyway. Started walking. Figured I should get to the plane crash. Maybe see if I can radio for help or something. My phone broke on the way down. Doubt I’d have service all the way out here in the middle of fucking nowhere anyway. Glad I found you guys. Glad you’re okay and all that. Er...”

He hesitated, giving Tuvo a cautious look again. Hattie genuinely didn’t know if Tuvo was angrier that Keith had bailed on them or that he had interrupted them. Either way, Hattie found his grumpy attitude cute and continued to pet him as he curled around her.

“We’re heading to the crash too,” she said brightly. “We just stopped to take a break.”

“Yeah, sure you did.” Keith gave Tuvo a look that earned another growl. He turned his head away, clearing his throat. “Anyway, guess we should get on the move, right? Sooner we get to the wreck, sooner we have a chance of being rescued.”

Hattie nodded before looking at Tuvo – catching his upper eye since the lower two continued to glare at Keith as though he were a threat.

“You ready to get moving again?” She asked Tuvo, feeling remarkably better now. It was amazing the power a single kiss had over her mood.

“Must that male come with us?” He asked, sneering in displeasure.

“Yes, we’re not allowed to leave him behind.”

“He left us behind.”

“You can’t blame him for trying to save his own life.”

“I can when it came at the possible expense of *your* life.”

“Aw, you’re sweet,” she smiled despite herself. “But still yes, he has to come with us. We’re not going to let him die. Humans are too fragile to be lost out here in the Amazon. Most of us are anyway.”

“He certainly is.” Tuvo scoffed. “Fine. But he lives only by your good graces. Make sure he knows that and treats you with the respect that you deserve.”

“All right, let me put my shoes back on and we can go.”

“Why do you need your shoes for that?”

“So, I can walk.”

He gave her a dull look. He didn’t even have to say anything.

“You’re not tired yet?”

“Hattie.”

“Okay, but at least let me ride on your back. So, you can have your hands free if you need them. I don’t want to overburden you.”

“You’re bad for my ego,” he sighed. “You’re not a burden, Hattie. Let me carry you. Let me protect you. Stop fighting against me.”

“If you’re sure-”

“Hattie.”

“Okay, okay,” Hattie chuckled as she reached for her heels that she had set beside her when Tuvo put her on the tree.

The moment she had them in her hands, Tuvo turned, putting his back to her. She smiled as she wrapped her arms around him, locking her legs against his waist, and let him carry her.

Somehow, this was less guilt inducing. Probably because this was how domini would carry their young naturally. He grabbed her thighs and stroked them with his thumbs as he started forward – not even giving Keith a single glance.

Hattie looked back, making sure he was following though. Of course, he was. Tuvo might scare him, but he knew that the alien male was his best hope for survival.

“Are you really riding him like a horse?” Keith asked, snickering. “You’re going to give him back problems.”

Hattie just shook her head, ignoring him in favor of settling against Tuvo.

She was rewarded with a gentle, rumbling growl, almost like a purr, that made her eyes heavy as the gentle rocking of his steps lulled her into a doze.

The adrenaline crash hit her hard and, before she realized what was happening, she was asleep.

# Chapter 14

## *Tuvo*

Hattie was sleeping.

Immediately after a harrowing experience that left her near breakdown, her arms and legs bleeding from the fall, her feet blistered from her shoes, soaking wet and sweating from the weather, in an unknown location with an unknown future, she still felt safe enough to sleep against his back as he trekked through the forest.

That fact alone would have given him the strength to keep moving even if he had broken both his legs in the fall.

He hadn't escaped unscathed. His fingers were throbbing in time with his heartbeat and his legs and spine ached from the force of the landing. But Hattie had survived and that was the only thing that mattered.

Tuvo's tail kept sliding over her legs, swiping away the little biting insects that Keith kept slapping at and who buzzed around them. They occasionally landed on him, but their little noses weren't strong enough to penetrate his skin.

So long as they kept off Hattie, that's all he cared about.

This forest was humid and hot and, strangely, reminiscent of home in the early days of the rainy season on Turv. Before the hot season's lingering heat abated and before the temperature dropped, heralding the cold season.

He was strangely comfortable here. The colors were different, and the trees weren't as big, but this was just like the wilds of the Home Forest – a place he had lived and trained in for many years. And since he was familiar with this place, he could keep Hattie here until rescue came.

And rescue *would* come.

He imagined that the humans already knew their plane had crashed, but even if they didn't, they would realize something was wrong when they never reached Hattie's home country. And even if the humans, somehow, missed their absence, the *Jutiron Stor* would be suspicious if they didn't check in and, eventually, would send out a search team.

Tuvo just had to keep Hattie safe until then. And after that, he would never allow her back on this planet. If she wanted to see her parents again, he would bring them to her. They would be welcome in his family home.

*Krik*, he'd move them there now if it made her happy, but he was not putting her at risk by being on a planet going through the tumultuous days of initial contact anymore.

It wasn't until nearly a quarter mark later that he realized he had mentally moved her parents into *his* home, not the palace where Hattie currently lived as Atem's sister.

*Don't pull away from me because you're afraid of hurting me.*

Was he doing it again? But she didn't really mean it like that, right? She-

Smoke.

Tuvo came up short, sniffing deeper at the air as the familiar, acrid scent of freshly burned plant life hit his nose. There was a fire around here somewhere. Or there had been.

"This way," he called back to the human male, knowing very well he couldn't understand him – though he seemed to get the message regardless as he panted from keeping with Tuvo's renewed speed.

"Mm..."

His hurried movements pulled Hattie from her sleep, and she lifted her head from his shoulder, her arms re-tightening around his neck.

"Wha' is...?"

“I smell the wreck, *vi kyrya*,” Tuvo said, pausing to get his bearings, then continuing forward again as he caught back on the scent trail.

Hattie grumbled. “Ew. I smell it too. Burning jet fuel. Oh! Crud, do you think it’s still on fire? What are we going to do if it’s on fire?”

“After that rainfall? I doubt it’s still on fire.”

Something metallic flashed through the trees as the area brightened considerably. The hole punched through the canopy was large enough to let sunlight bathe the area.

And the shattered remains of what had been their aircraft.

The formerly slick, rounded body had buckled and cracked at its various weak points. The cockpit had snapped off and looked like it had become buried in the dirt from the force of the jet’s body driving it into the wet soil. The body of the plane had broken into three large segments – two of which had their sides peeled away. One of the wings was missing, the other one was broken and dented, driven into the side of one of the trees and now just a lump on the ground. The tail seemed to be the most intact, though it rested at an odd angle at the back of the scene.

Keith made a sound of shocked amazement as Hattie drew in a stuttered breath.

Tuvo could just imagine how traumatic the sight was to them. To know that they had been seconds away from being part of the mangled wreckage.

Tuvo turned and set Hattie on what appeared to be a part of the roof that was resting face down on the forest floor.

“Put on your shoes,” he said. “I’m going to check to make sure nothing dangerous moved in.”

Hattie nodded and proceeded to do just that. He hated to ask her to do it, but he needed her distracted, because if he was right...

And he was.

Just inside the piece closest to the cockpit, little more than a mangled lump of meat, were Rodger's remains. Insects had already landed and were working on consuming his body. He had been bounced around in the crash and left smears of blood and viscera all around the front.

Tuvo growled at the dead male. Dying while unconscious was too good for him.

But he quickly put it out of his mind as he kneeled beside him.

Rodger had been planning to jump. Which meant he had been planning to live. Which meant he had to have some kind of plan for survival in these trees.

Tuvo found what he was looking for on the male's back. A pack that must have been under the parachute that Keith removed. A bag with an assortment of items inside that Tuvo didn't recognize but certainly seemed important. He set it aside and went through his pockets – ignoring the black insects that, angry at his disturbance, tried to bite and sting at his flesh with about as much success as the flying ones.

Tuvo flicked them off his hands and continued his work. He found two more, smaller packs in his pant pockets, as well as his wallet. He added them to the pile then gathered his mangled body.

He left out the other side of the broken plane, making sure to stay out of Hattie's line of sight, and took the corpse into the trees. A decent enough distance away that he didn't have to worry about any potential predators stumbling upon them while enjoying their feast.

After tossing him away, and brushing off the insects, Tuvo returned to the plane. He was grateful he had left because, in the time he had been gone, Hattie had wandered into the plane and was now frowning at the dark, smeared bloodstains on the wall.

She turned as he stepped in and noted the similar stains on him.

"Did you remove his body?" She asked softly.

"You didn't need to see that," Tuvo said in response.



She let out a low breath and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Check out those packs,” Tuvo inclined his head to the things he had pulled off Rodger’s body. “See if we can use anything in there. I’ll check the wreck. Where’s Keith?”

“He found my phone. He’s trying to see if he can get a signal outside. It’s a long shot, but we figured it was worth the attempt.”

Tuvo grunted in agreement and turned to head to the kitchen. The small area was at the back of the plane and, like the tail, had suffered the least damage. Everything was broken, some of the cabinets having been cracked open like eggs, and there were scorch marks where the fire must have been before the storm, but there were still things to be scavenged.

The contents of the refrigerator were banged up, but the cold box itself hadn’t been penetrated and the food inside was still good. Tuvo brought Hattie some and, because he knew she would want him to, he set some aside for Keith before eating the remainder himself. The food would spoil soon, so it was better that they eat it now.

By the time the human male had returned, grumbling a failure that needed no translation, Tuvo had managed to find and set aside ten bottles of water, four cans of the fuzzy, sweet beverage they called soda (there had been twelve, but the others had all busted open), a can of fruit, multiple packets of nuts, and their suitcases which, on the whole, seemed to have survived intact. He couldn’t locate his phone or the comm.

“What did you find?” Tuvo asked, returning to Hattie. She had set up one of the chairs and spread the contents of the packs out before her on the small table they had just been eating at a few hours before.

“This!” She beamed, holding up a tube.

“And this is?” He took it from her, turning it around curiously.

“Worth three times its weight in gold. That’s a drinking straw specifically made to drink untreated water so that, by the time it gets to the other end of the straw, it’s safe for consumption. An absolute must for lost humans in the wilderness.”

Tuvo grinned, pleased. Her species might be weak, but they were clever. His own people would never need to come up with such a thing since they only needed to drink the blood of their prey to get the water they needed.

“Excellent. What else?”

“These are food packets,” she put her hand on a stack of pouches. “Ready to rip open and eat. Also good for hiking humans. But only three of them. We got nylon rope, a multitool, a tent – probably not big enough for more than one person though. That was a satellite phone I think, but it didn’t survive the crash. Er, this card. Not sure what it’s for.” She lifted a plain, white card, about as long as her finger and barely half as wide, with three, golden rings intersecting over each other printed across it, some dried blood, and nothing else. “Er, let’s see. That’s a flashlight – it still works if you press the back of it forward really hard. Bug spray. And this!”

She turned, brandishing more paper. It was bigger than the last one and unfolded revealed what he realized was a map.

“I was right,” she said with a sad smile. “We’re definitely in the Amazon.”

“Can you read it?”

“Kind of? I have no idea what direction is which though. He marked something over here in the corner, but I honestly couldn’t tell you how to get there. I’m, er, not really an ‘outdoorsy’ type of girl, you know.”

Tuvo grunted, folding up the map. He couldn’t read it and he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to go wherever Rodger thought was safe for him. But it was something to consider. For now, he set it aside.

“Your suitcase is there. Do you have more practical clothing?”

“Yup! Thanks a lot, Tuvo!”

She jumped from the chair and rushed over to it. While she was digging through for something more appropriate for their situation, Tuvo was re-packing everything she had removed. The food and water straw were definitely important. The light and tent probably less so. He unfolded the multitool and

figured out what it was before putting that in his pocket. He also kept the rope secured around a belt loop, so he had access to them both if he needed.

A short time later, Hattie reappeared, her arms laden with clothes, and she set the dagger he had given her on the table.

“You carry this,” she said, smiling. “I feel like it will be more useful in your hands than mine.”

He grunted and tied the sheath onto another belt loop. Without a thigh belt, it was the best place he could put it for now.

Hattie walked towards the back of the plane. She struggled for a moment against the door to the little privy before Keith snapped something at her. She flushed, a hurt expression crossing her features that she quickly concealed, and Tuvo growled.

“What did he say?”

“Er, he said that it’s not the time to think about modesty.”

“That is not what he said.” Tuvo narrowed his eyes on the male who was digging through his own belongings. “You wouldn’t get that look on your face for that. Tell me what he said.”

She sighed softly before admitting, “He said to just change because it’s nothing he’s never seen before, and you definitely aren’t interested in my body.”

Tuvo snarled, surprising Keith who stood, his own clothes in hand.

Marching over to him, Keith started to stumble back but he didn’t get far. Tuvo grabbed him by the neck and, holding him up so he was forced to balance on his toes, forced him to look towards the front of the plane.

He looked the same way and called back, “Go ahead and change. We won’t look.”

He heard something that sounded like muffled laughter as Keith struggled against his hold. For all the good it did him. He was like a pup protesting against being led around for being bad.

He was just about tired of this male. If he kept pushing it, Tuvo wasn't going to be able to resist challenging him as a proper domini.

And Keith likely wouldn't survive that encounter.

# Chapter 15

## *Hattie*

She didn't have a long sleeve shirt, only a three-quarter sleeve shirt with a low cut, circular neckline to best show off the girls, but it was better than nothing. After putting it, a pair of jeans, and a comfortable pair of walking shoes on, she felt a lot better already. More prepared to face a wild and untamed jungle and all its inhabitants.

And she tried not to focus on how hot it was to see Tuvo manhandling Keith like that.

By the time the three of them finished getting everything useful they could find out of the wreck, it was late. Tuvo ushered them into the back of the plane, where the kitchen had been, and blocked it off with the piece of roofing she had sat on before.

They slept in there, Hattie curled up against Tuvo's side, Keith pressing against the counters, as far from him, as possible. It wasn't cozy. It was too hot, the jungle was loud and intimidating, and the ground was uncomfortable.

But her head was resting on Tuvo's arm, and she wasn't afraid of any potential predators with him sleeping lightly beside her.

The morning came and Tuvo slid the roofing segment aside, letting them out. Hattie did her business behind one of the trees and rinsed out her mouth with water that she swallowed rather than spit – she didn't have the luxury of wasting any of it.

Tuvo left to scout the area, and Keith spent the morning scaring her with tales of predators that stalked these woods – alligators and anacondas and jaguars. She promptly told Tuvo about them when he returned with, coincidentally, a snake in

hand. Not a big anaconda, but a small one. He asked if it was edible, and she figured it was worth a try.

Hattie knew how to carve a lot of meats, but snake was a new one. She did her best though. Tuvo made a fire, and they had a breakfast of grilled/raw snake meat. The creature had almost no blood as she was skinning it, but it did have fang marks on its back, and she imagined that Tuvo must have killed it by exsanguination before bringing it to her.

Keith complained, but actually the meat wasn't bad. The plane had little packets of salt and pepper that survived just fine and while she could imagine a few different spices to add and it was a bit gamey, it was pretty good for a random Amazon hunt cooked over a fire.

After eating, Tuvo left again to dispose of the uneaten bits and continue scouting while Hattie sat in the shade of the plane wreck.

All told, this actually wasn't horrible. Not ideal, but not bad. When it began raining, she dragged her chair further into the back of the plane which, helpfully, was angled up and sat there watching it while Keith complained and sat on the ground next to her – there was only one chair left. The others were lost to the jungle somewhere.

She set out the empty water bottles they had already drained with makeshift funnels made from fallen leaves as well as the clean bowls and pans to gather as much of the rain as they could. They could drink it with the straw once it was all gathered.

Tuvo returned sometime later, no food this time, but the sight of him struck her dumb.

He walked into the plane soaked, hair plastered down to his head, muscles glistening, tail flicking, jeans dirtied. Sexy and manly and wild. He ran his hand over his head, wringing out his short hair, and she longed to do that for him.

His claws had finally retracted, and he lost some of that caution he had around her. A fact which made her smile as she stood and offered him her chair.

“I’m all right,” he said.

“Take it,” she insisted. “I’ll sit on your lap.”

He paused. Then turned and sat.

Giggling, Hattie perched across his thighs, putting one arm around his neck, and leaned into him with a smile.

“Hi there,” she said, making circles with her longest finger against his chest.

“Hello,” he returned, one hand resting possessively on her thigh, the other on her knee.

“Enjoy your walk through the wilds of the Amazon?”

“Actually, yes. This place is quite nice.”

She threw back her head, laughing. Of course, he would think so. This was a challenge, and he was a domini. This probably felt like a nature hike back on Turv.

“The snake blood was tasty. A bit sweet and a bit spicy.”

She snickered. “Do different creatures taste different?”

“Absolutely. And how they lived and what they ate and what they were feeling at the time you drank from them can change the flavor.”

“So, fear generally tastes..?”

“Spicy.”

“I see. And the sweetness?”

“Probably an inherent trait of Earth creatures, if what Havali says is true.”

Hattie tilted her head curiously. She so dearly wished to ask if he was interested in taking a couple nibbles out of her, but she also didn’t know if this... whatever it was... allowed her those kinds of personal questions. Especially considering the effect of human blood.

Tuvo gave her a long look. As if he knew exactly what she was thinking, and he was just waiting for her to open her mouth and ask. But his expression was so carefully guarded, she had no idea what he would say if she *did* ask and-

“Ugh!” Keith let out an exaggerated grunt as he threw himself back. “How long is this rain going to *last*? Damn.”

“It’s a rainforest,” Hattie snickered. “It rains.”

“What are we even doing here?”

“Waiting for rescue.”

He scoffed, pushing himself up on his elbows. “You’re getting awfully cozy for a girl waiting for rescue in a wrecked plane.”

She shrugged. “I’m alive. I’m fed. I’m safe. What more could I need?”

Keith smirked unpleasantly. “And you’re sitting on a guy’s lap. You know, for once.”

Hattie stiffened. Tuvo stiffened in response to her.

“Keith, not now-”

“I’m just saying, it’s not a treat you get to enjoy often. You’d probably break a bone if you tried to do that to me.”

“Keith...”

“Wait! You did try that with me once!” He threw back his head laughing. “Fuck, it felt like I got punched in the gut. I’m surprised he can breathe.”

“Seriously, stop,” she said, trying to sound hard and determined, but the words came out soft and uneasy as a horrible clawing started in her gut.

“Chill *out*, Hats. It’s just a joke. What? Are you somehow unaware of your size? You know you’re huge. Get a sense of humor about it. Not everything has to be a fight.”

Hattie found herself pulling away from Tuvo. Hating how ashamed Keith could make her feel so quickly, so easily.

Tuvo’s grip tightened, and he brought her back, growling, “What did he just say?”

She shook her head. “Nothing worth repeating.”

“All the more reason to tell me.”

“It’s fine, Tuvo.”



He caught her chin and forced her to look at him. She flinched at the three eyes that narrowed on her suspiciously. It was amazing how simultaneously big and small she felt at that moment.

“Tell. Me.”

She shivered at the command in his voice – not in an unpleasant way.

“You’re snitching on me now, aren’t you?” Keith scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Figures. You’re going to act like the victim and twist everything I say out of context again. You’re always doing things like this, Hats.”

“Hattie.” Tuvo’s hand was clenched into a fist. “Tell me, or I fight him on principle. No one has the right to put that look in your eyes. No one. Over anything.”

She sniffed and forced a smile. “He’s just making jokes, you know.”

“They’re clearly not funny. What is he saying?”

“Just... Making jokes about my weight.”

“Your weight?” He repeated, confused. Because fat jokes weren’t really a thing among the domini people. They didn’t measure beauty in terms of size. It was measured in terms of strength and skill and determination. And sometimes tail length. But other than that, the only difference between Hattie and the other kidnapped girls was how soft they found her to be.

And for them, that was just as much of a turn on as Scarlet’s height or Holly’s willowy frame. The differences were exciting, giving a range of enjoyment for all.

That kind of made explaining what Keith was saying harder. But he was determined and forced her to try.

“He’s just saying how he’s surprised you can breathe. Because I’m so big. And stuff. That’s all. I-It’s not that big of a deal. He’s just...” Her voice trailed off, because she honestly wasn’t sure what he was trying to do. Besides maybe amuse himself at her expense.

Or maybe get some sense of power back in this powerless situation.

That sobering thought drained a lot of the hurt from her chest. Because she realized just how true it was. Keith was feeling helpless. He couldn't hunt and camouflage like Tuvo. He couldn't skin and cook their meals like Hattie. He couldn't make a fire. He couldn't contact help. He was just kind of useless and that was a blow against his masculinity.

So, he had to bring her down to make himself feel better.

It was kind of... sad.

But as Hattie was having that epiphany, Tuvo suddenly understood.

Growling, he stood with her in his arms and gently turned to set her back on the chair. Keith was scrambling to his feet and trying to get away before Tuvo even turned to him.

He didn't get far. He grabbed Keith by the back of the shirt, claws slashing through the fabric, and turned to slam his back against the wall. Keith cried out in fear to find Tuvo's claws pressing against either side of his neck.

It happened so fast, Hattie didn't even have a chance to catch her breath.

She opened her mouth to stop him, to insist that Keith wasn't worth it, when Tuvo spoke.

In English.

"Little male," he growled in a voice so dark and dangerous it made her shiver. "Weak. No make her feel small to feel big. Want feel big? *Be* big! No make her small!"

Keith said nothing. He didn't breathe. He stared, wide eyed and terrified, until Tuvo scoffed in disgust and pulled his claws away, letting him collapse to the floor.

Turning his back on him, dismissing him as nothing, Tuvo once again picked Hattie up out of the chair. He turned with her and walked out of the plane and took her to a nearby tree. There, he transferred her to his back and began to climb.

Just like a domini taking away his claimed female.

Hattie, stunned, just held on, not speaking until he brought them to the lowest branches – still multiple stories off the ground.

He let Hattie off onto the thick branch before climbing behind her. He put his back to the bark and brought her to his chest.

“Stupid male,” he growled into her ear, clutching her close. “He’s lucky he’s so weak or I would beat him into submission.”

Hattie smiled. That was a high insult on domini – accusing an opponent of being too weak to honorably fight.

“Thank you, Tuvo.”

“Don’t thank me for that. He deserved worse.”

“He deserves nothing from me,” she said, surprised by the power of the words. By just how right and strong they felt settling into her chest.

Tuvo grumbled something that could have been an agreement. His anger on her behalf made her smile and warmed her inside.

“Thank you, though. Really. It means a lot that you’d defend me over that. Especially since I know you kind of agree with him.”

“What?!” The word left him like a gunshot, and he stared at her, eyes wide in horror. “Why would you... You think I *agree* with that male?”

“Well, I mean,” she shifted uncomfortably between his legs. “You said as much.”

“*When?!?*”

“It’s okay,” she hastened to assure him, sitting up so she could look back at him. “I know you didn’t mean it the way he did. I mean, it hurt hearing it at first, but I get it now. I really do.”

“Hattie, when did I *ever*...” His voice trailed off as realization came over him. “Wait, you mean... Back on Turv...?”

She smiled, petting his arm. “Hey, it’s okay. I know you were just expressing a preference. It wasn’t an insult like when Keith says it.”

“Hattie, no-”

“It’s fine, Tuvo. Really. You don’t have to justify it to me.”

“Hattie-”

“You don’t have to feel bad-”

“Will you shut up and listen to me, female!” He grabbed her shoulders, shaking her just a bit. “I am trying to tell you that’s *not* what I said!”

Startled, she blinked at him. He had never handled her roughly like that.

She didn’t dislike it, but it was surprising.

“Hattie, what did I say that day? What did you hear?” His voice was strained, his gaze beseeching, trying desperately to communicate something to her.

“You said you wouldn’t touch me because I was too fat. And it’s fine-”

“That is not what I said! I said I could not bring myself to touch you because of your *size*. Because of how *soft* you are.”

“Yeah. Fat.”

“No. Hattie. Look at me!” He released her shoulders to gesture to himself. To his perfect, sculpted, Adonis body.

That was at least twice as big as her – if not more.

Startled, she tried and failed twice to say something. Because, no, he couldn’t seriously have meant she was too *small* for him. There was no way...

Tuvo cocked his head at her silence. Starting at her intently. Impressing on her the true meaning of his words. Because he wasn’t human. He didn’t think like a human.

And he was *huge*.

“You mean... You think I’m too... little?” She repeated in a soft voice. Almost unwilling to believe that’s what he meant.

Because if that's what he meant, then...

Then...

"Hattie, you're tiny compared to me," he said, taking her hand and holding it to demonstrate. Her fingers reached past his palm, just barely. One of his fingers was about the size of two of hers together.

Hattie was so used to being considered big, she forgot to mentally adjust the scale when it came to the much bigger domini. Even the average male was bigger than her, and Tuvo was far bigger than average.

He had said *size*. He hadn't meant her waistline; he had meant *her*. She was the wrong size for him. Too small to fit together correctly.

And the very idea made her laugh as she clutched onto his big hand with both of hers. Bringing it close and beaming at him.

Because he hadn't been dismissing her. He hadn't been rejecting her.

The big lug had been *protecting* her.

It was like a barrier between them suddenly shattered just like that.

She turned so she was sitting side saddle on the branch. He made a noise of protest, grabbing her waist with both hands.

Because he was constantly protecting her.

From the crash, from Keith, from the Amazon, from himself.

Hattie laid herself across his chest, grabbed him by the face, and pulled him down for an eager kiss.

One he returned just as enthusiastically.

The other night in bed hadn't been a fluke. It hadn't been him half asleep and unaware of what he was doing. Well, it had been, but not in *that* way. It was his inhibitions being gone and his desire for her overriding his silly, protective urges.

That realization made her bold. Made her brave. Her hand trailed down his chest, eager to see just how *big* of a boy he

was.

Tuvo caught her wrist, stopping her just as her palm brushed past the hem of his pants, before she could reach her destination.

“Do not,” he said. But it sounded less like a command and more like a plea.

Big, strong, tough Tuvo was putty in her hands.

“Let me see,” she begged, sounding less like a plea and more like a command.

“Hattie, I can’t. You’re too *small*.”

“How do you know? Have you seen me naked?”

“I don’t have to. I know what they say about humans. About how tight your cunts are. I would destroy you, and that would destroy me.”

“You’re so sweet.” She kissed along his stubborn lips, chuckling at how weakly obstinate he was. “I asked you to trust me. Remember?”

He growled, his determination flagging as she rubbed her breasts against his chest. Pressing them against him. Running her tongue along the seam of his lips.

“So, trust me,” she ordered, guiding her hand down further.

He didn’t release his hold on her wrist, but he also didn’t try to stop her.

Beaming into the kiss, Hattie finally ran her hand over the prize she had been seeking since she had laid eyes on her big mountain of a male.

And *oh*...

Shocked, Hattie pulled back, staring down at his lap.

There definitely was an anaconda in the jungle, and it wasn’t a reptile.

Laughing weakly at the insane joke, she stroked him through the rough fabric of his jeans. He growled, head falling back, as his grip tightened on her waist.

He was *huge*.

Not big. Not large.

*Intimidating*.

Hattie's mouth watered as she imagined that thing bruising her cervix. A guy like Tuvo would break her back trying to fit that monster into her. And that wasn't even getting to his knot. Oh, all things sweet and holy, he had a knot too. How big was that?

She wanted it. She wanted *all* of it. Even if it hurt.

*Especially* if it hurt.

Giggling eagerly, Hattie reached for his button-

-only to find both her wrists caught and jerked over her head. Tuvo had her stretched out in front of him and his gaze was threatening. In the best way. She panted, breast heaving, as she licked her lips, longing for more of this.

"No," he growled.

"Please," she begged, giving him her biggest, sultriest pout. "Please let me touch your cock, Tuvo. I promise to treat it good."

"No," he growled again, transferring both wrists into one hand holding her up – almost off of the branch entirely. "You do not touch yet."

"Yet?" She repeated breathlessly, excited.

"You asked if I had seen your body. If I saw how little your cunt was. You're right. I haven't. So, let me see."

Hattie grinned and nodded eagerly.

Tuvo hooked his arm around her waist, twisting her body and jerked her back against his chest. He pulled her arms overhead and around his neck.

"Keep those there," he ordered. "I can't have you distracting me. I need to focus."

Hattie giggled, wiggling her hips down. His cock was nestled in the crack of her ass, and she could feel the huge rod pulsing in time with the three distinct beats of his heart. If she wiggled

down far enough, she could just barely feel the bulb of his knot-

“No.” Tuvo yanked her up by the hips. “Patience, *kyrya*.”

She whined, petulant and unable to hide her amusement.

But she was nothing but obliging as he grabbed her behind the knees and pulled her legs up and apart, resting her feet on his thighs. It left her spread, facing out into the wilds, and trembling eagerly for his touch.

Yes. This. *This* was what she had always wanted.

Tuvo didn't immediately reach between her thighs like she expected. Instead, his hands trailed down her legs, under her shirt, and over her belly. She stiffened for a moment, self-conscious, but before she could follow that feeling further, his mouth was on her ear, sucking and lapping at it, making her pant and tremble. And as that immediate flash of unease faded, she realized how *good* it felt having that pressure on her belly – pushing down, grabbing her securely, holding her tight, all his fingers splayed like he was trying to touch as much of her as possible.

And even then, his big hands still overlapped.

He really was huge compared to her. Hattie had never felt small compared to a man. Knowing that she was in this instance made her moan, head dropping back against his shoulder as tension she hadn't even realized she had been carrying slid away.

Because Tuvo liked her body. She could feel the proof of it against her ass. He had never sought to make her feel lesser. He had never once shamed her or been unable to see her beauty. He liked her just as she was.

And with that knowledge came a freedom to relax she had never experienced before. She wasn't worried about how she looked or anxious about him grabbing her curves, or nervous about crushing him as he lay back underneath her.

Tuvo was a domini. To him, her size was a challenge. If he wasn't able to handle her, then, as he said to Keith, he just had to get bigger until he could, not make her feel smaller.



Tuvo's hand finally moved up. Caressing her skin until he was able to grasp her breasts over her bra – a pleased growl echoed through her body as he appreciated the handfuls.

Because she *wasn't* too small for him. She may be shorter, but in all other ways, they were perfect for each other. She knew that with even more certainty now than she had the first time she had looked at him and fallen for his grumpy stoicism and unflagging loyalty. Her breasts were big, but he had big hands perfect for holding them. Her tummy was big, but she fit against his broad chest just right. Her hips were big, but they cushioned against his like pieces of a puzzle designed to fit.

Tuvo tried to reach under her bra, but the wire proved unyielding. And when he was about to grab it and shred it with his claws, she growled. A sound not nearly as intimidating coming from her mouth as it did from his chest. It made him chuckle, but it got the point across.

“Don't you dare,” she ordered. “That was expensive. And adorable.”

“You don't want me ripping off your clothes, *kyrya*?”

She shivered at the mental image. Tuvo, too wild with desire to care about social niceties such as the removal of clothes and just clawing them away to get to her body.

But...

“I like this bra,” she pouted. “And it's one of only two I brought with me. When we get back to the *Stor* and I have access to my clothes, I'll tell you which ones you're allowed to rip off me.”

“How about I just buy you ones that I can rip off you instead?” He pressed his lips to her neck, sucking and lapping at the flesh.

“Th-That could work,” she panted, thinking about all her pretty clothes. She wanted Tuvo feral, but she also liked her cute dresses. Letting him dress her for the specific purpose of *undressing* her seemed like a fair compromise.

“I will explore these later then,” he said, pinching her nipple – impressive considering he had to do it through thick fabric.

Her bra, now spared its grisly fate, was left in peace as he instead diverted his attention down to where she really wanted it.

Her button and zipper were quickly pulled apart. He kept one hand on her belly, stabilizing her, while the other slid under the hem, under her panties. Down, *down*...

Hattie whimpered as she felt one of his big fingers sliding through the slickness of her slit. His hand was so warm and deliciously rough – like a friction toy to grind against.

“So wet,” Tuvo growled, just rubbing her outer lips. “Is this for me, Hattie?”

She moaned softly, canting her hips up. Eager for more.

“Sweet female. So kind and giving to make all this for me.” He moved, whispering directly into her ear, “You’re going to need it.”

She shivered as he brought his hand up, then down again, pressing past the outer lips, rubbing against her clit as he sought her hole.

She twitched at the contact, moaning softly.

Tuvo made a curious sound as he moved back up again. Experimentally. The steady friction against the sensitive little nub made her whimper, her feet pressing into his thighs as she tried to lift her hips up.

“What is this I’ve found?” He asked, mostly rhetorically as he circled the stiffened flesh with the tip of his longest finger.

Hattie bucked against him, shuddering, “I-It’s my... m-my-Ah!”

Tuvo’s touch was curious, seeking. He played with her. That’s the only way she could describe how he teased and learned her clit. He figured out what she liked through trial and error, watching her expressions and feeling her reactions, his growl deepening every time she moaned or bucked up against his touch.

Her first orgasm was slow to build as he explored her body.

The second one was much faster.

She cried out, voice echoing amongst the trees. She might have bounced right off him, but his hand pressing down on her belly kept her still. And the pressure made it better. She hadn't let anyone touch her belly while making love before. She didn't realize how it would enhance the rippling waves of her orgasm.

Tuvo kept circling around her clit. Just far enough away not to hurt, but still too close considering how sensitive it was after two rapid orgasms.

Hattie wriggled against him, trying to escape his touch. Tuvo kept her still with his arms pressing her down. Growling his pleasure at her reaction. His cock was a bar of solid iron, throbbing in a way that had to be painful, pressing insistently against her ass.

She wanted it.

She was so empty. Aching. Needy.

# Chapter 16

## *Tuvo*

Pride expanded his chest. Tuvo couldn't stop himself from smirking.

Hattie was so pretty when she was thrashing in the throes of pleasure.

Tuvo finally abandoned his exploration of the sweet little bundle that controlled her pleasure like a button and slid his finger down further, through the abundant wetness she had made. He pressed in, past her lips, and up, into the sweet, burning clutch of her cunt.

## *Krik.*

He growled, head dropping back.

She squeezed his finger like a vice. The muscles of her sheath rippled around him, clenching and pulsing. Dripping wet. Searing hot. Tight.

Too tight.

Around one finger.

She was this tight around *one* finger. There was no way he could fit his cock into her. He really would rip her in half.

Hattie whimpered, grinding down against his palm. Seeking friction, movement, *anything*. And though he despaired at ever fitting inside her, he began to move. Pleasuring her. Because if he couldn't experience it directly, this was the next best thing.

Hattie came alive under his hands.

She was absolutely beautiful. Free and uninhibited. Chasing her ecstasy with foggy eyes and desperate, half formed pleas.

Her hands were up and back, around his neck, clenching and digging her little claws into his skin as she clung to him.

To *him*.

Because he was the one giving her this pleasure. He was the one making her feel this way. His mate, coming apart in his arms.

He curled his finger and must have hit something because her cries suddenly broke, like she couldn't even scream anymore, while her eyes went wide and unseeing.

Fascinated, he stroked that spot inside her again. And again. Grin widening the more wild and untamed she became.

So pretty, falling apart for him like this.

And... it almost felt like her cunt was loosening.

Until, suddenly, it wasn't.

She came with a scream like a shot – short, punctuated, and high pitched. Followed by thrashing her body so forcefully he had to grip her tight around the middle to keep her on his lap. Her hands slapped at him, then grabbed onto his thighs and squeezed as her juices soaked his fingers.

And her muscles clenched tight around him.

Tighter than when he first pushed his finger inside. All that looseness he had made was gone the moment she came – like it hadn't existed in the first place.

And it crushed any hopes he might have along with it.

Tuvo kissed the top of her head as he gently stroked her down from her peak. She was panting in his arms, her grip loosening, as she relaxed back against him.

“That was...” She laughed a bit, breathless and happy. “You are amazing, Tuvo.”

And he smiled because, though his cock and knot hurt like he had been punched directly in them, she was pleased. He had finally done something right by his mate.

If this was all he could give her, then at least he had done it well.

Chuckling, she reached up and took hold of the back of his head. She tilted her face and brought him down for a kiss that he returned eagerly.

Because his will was broken, and if he couldn't claim her then he would take every other scrap of affection that he *could* and accept it gratefully.

Hattie broke the kiss first and smiled at him so brightly, so sweetly, it was like she thought that the sun itself shone from him. Like he really was amazing and not the dense *novi* he knew himself to be.

“Your turn,” she said, starting to sit up.

Tuvo tightened his grip, pulling her back.

She tried again with similar results. Frowning, she turned to narrow her eyes at him. She didn't ask, but he could see the question clear on her face.

“This branch isn't very big, *vi kyrya*,” he said by means of explanation.

She blinked then looked around as if just now realizing that they were, indeed, sitting on a branch, backed up against the trunk of a tree, many, many lengths off the ground.

“Sleep,” he ordered, holding her tight. “I'll make sure we don't fall.”

“Er, can you?”

“I am of a tree climbing species, Hattie.”

“Right. Of course,” she laughed. “Are you sure you don't want me to return the favor? Even just with my hands?”

“No. This was about you.” He kissed the top of her head. “Consider it your victory spoils and my apology for the words I spoke that hurt you so.”

“But you didn't even mean it like that.”

“Still, I should have cleared this up with you long before this.” He winced, thinking about all those moments when he could have done so but had been a coward instead. And, yes, he had been trying to protect her first and foremost, but that didn’t lessen the fact that he had hurt her deeply and then done nothing to make it up to her.

A couple orgasms on a single finger didn’t seem adequate enough repayment.

But for right now, until he could make sure that she was safe, it would have to be.

Hattie let out a sigh that could only be contentment as she rested back against him, pants still unbuttoned, hair now mussed from writhing against him. Dirty from their days in the jungle, but still so unspeakably beautiful.

As she fell asleep in his arms, he kissed the top of her head and silently promised that, though he couldn’t claim her, he would do everything else in his power to make her the happiest female on this and every other planet.

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“Hey! Er... Hattie?”

The calls of that obnoxious male made Tuvo’s eyes open. It was too distant and, therefore, too soft to stir Hattie, but it was enough to wake him. He glared, immediately awake, down to the base of the tree where Keith was wandering around, looking lost and uneasy.

It was morning already. It was not the first time Tuvo had needed to sleep in a tree in the field, but it was probably the most restful sleep he’d ever had in such a situation.

Except now Keith was awake and looking for them.

Hattie, who did not wake easily, was completely oblivious to his calls and Tuvo was sorely tempted to let him just be confused and scared. Let him believe, for however long it lasted, that Tuvo had abandoned him for his crimes against Hattie.

But that came with it the risk that the frightened male would do something stupid like go into the forest to look for them instead of staying at the crash site – the first place that rescuers would go. And if he died, Tuvo knew, his kindhearted female would be upset.

So, although Keith was definitely not worth disturbing Hattie's sleep over, he turned his attention to waking her up.

But slowly, because he wasn't startling her for something like this.

He started by kissing along her shoulder, stroking his hands all over her body – her belly, her thighs, her hips, up to her breasts. He nipped at her neck a bit, introducing just a little pain, until she moaned softly, stirring.

He redoubled his attentions, enjoying himself now more than anything, until she shivered and grabbed again at his thighs. Anchoring herself to him.

“Good morning to you too,” she said, chuckling.

He hummed in agreement but didn't lift his mouth from her skin.

Before they could settle into enjoying themselves properly, Keith called her name again. She started in surprise before guilt flashed over her face.

“I completely forgot about Keith!”

“I fail to see the problem.”

“Oh, he's probably freaking out. We should head back down.”

It was the entire reason he had woken her up, but he saw no reason he shouldn't protest leaving the safety of their tree. It was a token argument, however, and soon enough they were descending to the forest floor.

Just in time too because the little *novi* had, indeed, been just about to step away from the crash site and into the trees when Tuvo dropped the last length to the ground, landing in a crouch with Hattie on his back.



The human male made a sound of relief that quickly turned into a rant that only ended when Tuvo showed his fangs, reminding him of the last time he had spoken so disrespectfully to Hattie.

“I’m going to go hunting,” Tuvo said, turning his back on him, as Hattie was washing her face in some of the water they had gathered from the storm yesterday.

“Oh. Okay.” She smiled. “Keith and I will bunker down in the back of the plane. If someone shows up, we’ll shoot off the flare gun.”

“I won’t go far. Be careful. If you need me, scream, and I’ll return immediately.”

“Okay. You be careful too.”

He grunted in agreement before kissing her forehead and turning to walk into the forest. He wasn’t worried about someone showing up this soon. Knowing what he did of human technology and how big this forest was from the air, he imagined it would be quite some time before anyone found them here.

Might as well get comfortable.

With that thought in mind, he left her behind with that despicable male yet again. Fully ready to rip his throat out if he returned to find Hattie sad again.

# Chapter 17

## *Hattie*

Determinedly ignoring Keith's stare, Hattie went about her morning routine – now modified for jungle living!

It started by using the bathroom behind the designated tree, then continued by cleaning her body as best she could without wasting their limited resources. She didn't want to get some kind of infection from having bacteria gathering in the creases of her body, or her scabbed cuts, but she also didn't want to waste water when, already, they were out of the bottles that had survived the crash.

The rainforest was constantly wet, humid, and hot. As a result, she and Keith were sweating all the time – even at night. She was grateful for the packets of salt to keep their electrolytes up, but the rain and purifying drinking straw were their real stroke of luck.

After filling their water bottles and setting out the containers to catch more water when it rained again – she already heard the thunder – she grabbed a large leaf and retreated under the shade of their airplane shelter and fanned herself as she watched Keith walk around being sweaty and mad.

She didn't know what about, but she also found she didn't really care. If he wanted to make himself tired by being out in the heat and humidity, that was his problem.

She relaxed back in their single chair, fanned herself at her leisure, and waited for Tuvo or rescue to come. She wasn't all that chuffed about which one came first, honestly.

Considering they crashed landed in the middle of the Amazon, this really wasn't too bad. She had expected some sort of

harrowing ordeal of slowly approaching death and dismay, but all in all, this was actually kind of...

Boring.

There was no other word for it. There was nothing for them to do but wait. She couldn't cook until Tuvo brought back his hunt. Aside from filling their water bottles and tending to her wounds, she couldn't think of anything that needed doing desperately.

So, she just sat and fanned herself and kind of dozed as she waited for the daily rain.

At least, until Keith came stomping into their shelter.

"Still no fucking signal and now the damn phone is fucking dead," he snapped like that was her fault somehow as he threw her phone onto the counter.

And Hattie probably would have been hurt or unhappy about his tone and actions yesterday but seeing them today in the light of her epiphany, she was numb to it. What did it matter if the phone was busted? Or if he was mad? Their situation wasn't going to change because of it and getting upset would only offer him a target.

"We just have to wait, I guess," she said.

"I'm sick of fucking waiting! Shouldn't we be doing something?!"

"Like what?"

"Like... I don't know!" He threw up his hands in frustration.

"Trying to find our way out of here or something!?"

"We don't know where to go. We don't even know where we are. We'd likely just end up lost in the jungle and maybe in an even worse position than we are now. It's best if we stay near the crash and wait for rescue."

"For how long, huh? Do we just wait here until we die?!"

"No. Just until they find us. Or, I guess, if enough days pass, we can talk about maybe finding our way out on our own. Theoretically, if we pick a direction, we'd end up *somewhere*

eventually. But that comes with a lot of risk. And we know that they're going to be looking for us. I'm sure Tuvo would keep us from walking in a circle or something, but it's best to just stay here until a proper rescue party can find us."

Keith scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Oh, *excuse* me. *Of course*, if sainted Tuvo said it then we simply must obey!"

Hattie frowned, lowering her leaf fan. "What's your problem?"

"Me?!" He looked at her as though shocked she had even asked. "Are you kidding me, Hats? He's a fucking alien!"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"This is our home! Our planet! What right does he have to come down here and start telling us what we're supposed to be doing and how?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were a survivalist expert. Please, Keith, tell me what your grand plan is for getting us out of here safely."

He rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "There you go again, putting it all on me. Twisting my words around."

She sighed. "Keith, please don't start."

"He started it!"

"What are you even trying to accomplish here?"

Keith scoffed, shaking his head and looking away from her as though disappointed she was so stupid as to not understand. But through the lens of her new understanding, she could see that he was just mad because he had no idea what else he could say.

He attacked her because he was feeling attacked. He tried to make her feel stupid because he felt helpless.

All the things he said to her were never about her, it was only ever about him. And knowing that made it so easy to let them roll off her back like the nothing they were.

"Did you let him fuck you?" Keith asked suddenly, surprising her.

She glared at him. “I hardly see how that’s your business.”

“You did, didn’t you?!”

“Keith, I will tell him about this conversation if you don’t stop.”

He smirked like he won something. “Of course, you will. Gonna sick your dog on me, Hats? Do it. I’d love to see the hell you and the others will have to pay if an alien draws human blood on human soil. We’d destroy them!”

“You’re delusional.” Hattie got to her feet, setting her fan aside. “They aren’t afraid of us. You know that, right? Their caution comes from a desire for peace, nothing else.”

“No, they don’t want to lose their honey tap.”

“Excuse me?”

“Honey. Tap.” He repeated the words with heavy enunciation. “You. And the other girls that were taken. They just want to fuck. That’s it.”

“Is that why you’re mad? Because Tuvo is interested in me?”

“Is it wrong for me to want to protect human women from abduction?”

“Now, you’re deliberately twisting your argument.”

“We don’t need aliens and their pity. We never did. We were fine on our own. Don’t you wish you weren’t abducted, Hattie?”

“No, I don’t.”

Her declaration ran gout between them, and she was surprised by how true it was.

She didn’t regret her abduction. It had been harrowing at the time. She had been terrified and there had been a time when she had genuinely been unsure if she would live or die.

But going to Turv was the best thing that ever happened to her. She had a home there. A family of girls she wouldn’t trade for anything. An alien brother who would kill for her – literally. And, finally, a semi-reciprocated crush on a hot alien dude that

fulfilled every size fantasy she'd ever had and a few that had only been born when she got to a different planet.

She did not regret her abduction. She didn't regret a single thing that came from it.

And facing that with confidence and a smile only angered Keith more.

But she could honestly say, for the first time in too long, she did not care what someone else thought about the choices she made.

Hattie was happy. She was fulfilled with her life. She didn't need his approval, or anyone else's. Not even Tuvo's. As much joy as he brought her, she knew that she was capable of being happy on her own without his approval.

But just because she didn't need him didn't mean she didn't want him.

And she fully intended on convincing that big lug to put that big log inside her.

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The next couple of days became rather routine. The boredom of waiting for rescue was ongoing – as unabated as the daily rains that continued to drench them unmercifully.

Hattie spent her days cleaning their little section of the plane – using a broom she made of leaves and a stick tied together to sweep out the insects that were constantly trying to invade their space. In the afternoons, she would cook whatever food Tuvo brought for her. There were edible roots and plantains and some varieties of fruits and mushrooms. Not everything he brought her was edible, but he didn't know the difference, so he deferred to her expertise. And if she wasn't sure, they opted not to eat it at all, just in case.

They had a fire burning just outside the plane all through the day and night. Not just for cooking, warmth, and an attempt to keep away potential predators and bugs, but also for the smoke. They were trying to make enough of it to be seen over the canopy for any potential searchers.

Keith was in charge of the fire. He needed to do something. Being completely helpless kept making him lash out and Tuvo finally set him the task out of frustration. Hattie wasn't sure if he should be trusted with that – not when she knew he had never learned to properly fill a dishwasher despite the multitude of attempts she had made to teach him.

But either Tuvo was a better teacher than her or maintaining a fire was a task much more suitable for a manly man like Keith, because he actually wasn't bad at it.

He now spent his free time searching for things to burn. Smoky things for the majority of the day, and dried wood that wouldn't smoke as badly for when she was cooking.

Bonus: it got him out of the plane for a while so she could actually relax when she was in there with her leaf fan after finishing her chores for the day.

It was boring, but it was stable, and she would much prefer that over constantly fighting for her life in the wild.

Soon, she was sure, they would be found. Tuvo told her that he had spotted an aircraft in the distance one day, no doubt scouring the trees for some sign of them. They had been far off on the horizon, but they were there.

All that was left was to be patient.

It was day five of jungle living and, deciding to work off some of her excess energy and maybe see if she could find anything useful, Hattie went for a walk around the crash site.

She had her flare gun in case something happened, and she knew Tuvo wouldn't be far. She had screamed after seeing a spider one day and he had come sprinting out of the forest in seconds. Keith had called her a coward and him a simp, but Tuvo had shooed the spider away as though she hadn't terrified him with that stunt.

In her defense, she didn't know which spiders were deadly in the Amazon, so it was safest to assume it was all of them and react accordingly.

The next day, she had made her broom and started her daily sweeping.

Armed with the flare gun, the multitool, and a cautious eye, she ventured out past the plane, following the deep, slightly arced landing path. The plane had been spiraling when it fell – a slow, steady circle that translated into a curved crash site.

Already, the trees were growing to cover the hole, blocking off some of the sunlight that had brightened their temporary home. The forest reclaimed its territory quickly. Very soon the search and rescue team wouldn't be able to even see it.

All the more reason to keep their fire strong.

Hattie followed the swath of destruction their falling plane made, unable to hold back a wince when she saw just how extensive the damage really was.

But still how stalwart the forest remained.

Because although branches were ripped down and plant life had been razed short, the trees themselves didn't look any worse for wear. Their trunks had played bumper cars with a jet and maintained their impressive stature with barely a scratch.

And there was the second wing and what remained of the engine. Hattie looked it over, wincing at the amount of damage. The wing looked like crumpled up tissue paper. The engine was just a cylinder-shaped lump on the ground. Both were already being claimed by the jungle.

“Look out.”

She lifted her eyes and took a few steps back, giving Tuvo plenty of room to drop off the tree he had been climbing down and land next to her. He barely made a sound. She was surprised to even see him; she hadn't heard him approach.

“When did you get here?”

He gave her a cocky grin. “I was there the whole time.”

“Huh?” Her eyes darted between the tree and his brown and green body for a moment before understanding dawned and she started laughing. She hadn't even seen him clinging to the tree. His camouflage was impeccable. “What were you doing?”



“One of the mushrooms I have been bringing us grows on that tree. I was collecting them.” He patted his hip pouch where the offerings had been stuffed. “What about you? Why are you out here?”

His question was considerably less curious than hers. It almost sounded like an interrogation. He wasn't happy about her wandering around.

“Just stretching my legs,” she admitted. “Sorry. I'm getting stir crazy stuck inside.”

“Stir crazy. That's a new one. Is that what you call the human need to constantly be roaming outside of the safety of your den?”

She laughed. “First of all, I don't think the broken shell of a crashed jet can be suitably called a 'den'. It might be a bit high maintenance of me, but I require a little more luxury than that in my dens.”

“Noted.”

She hesitated, face heating at the seriousness with which he acknowledged her words, before she continued, now smiling. “Second, yes. That's exactly what we call it. Humans don't like being cramped up in our dens all the time.”

“I noticed that when Peony was pregnant. Even Holly was doing it.”

“Yeah. Getting transplant instincts from carrying alien babies can't fully override our human instincts, and humans like being out and exploring.”

“I see. Find anything interesting?”

“The wing, I guess?” She turned and looked at it, grimacing. “Really drives home just how bad the wreck is somehow. I don't know why. I mean, the body of the plane was cracked like an egg and ripped open like tissue paper in some parts, but it's seeing the ripped off, crumpled wing that's making me weird? Doesn't really add up.”

“Sometimes, during traumatic moments, it's not the big trauma that really sticks with us. You would be surprised how often

it's little things.”

“I thought domini didn't suffer from post-traumatic stress?”

“Not when it comes to battle and bloodshed, no. But we can still see things that horrify us to our core. And in those times, my soldiers would often find themselves fixated on the smallest, most innocuous of things. Sometimes, the traumatic thing is just too *big*. It's easier for you to see the scale of it in a broken wing rather than the whole plane.”

“That makes sense,” she admitted, turning her back on the engine. “So, I guess you've already looked around this area. Didn't find anything useful?”

“I found mushrooms. And a large snake that I believe is too big for us to eat. I moved him away, so he didn't find his way to our de-... camp.”

“Thanks.” She turned and started walking, not at all surprised, or unhappy, when Tuvo fell in step beside her. “Not just for the snake. Thanks for taking care of me. Us. I mean us.”

“Believe me, his care is incidental.”

She chuckled. “I know you don't like him, so thank you for still making sure that he's safe anyway. It means a lot to me.”

“Do you still have feelings for this male?” He looked at her with narrowed eyes, muscles twitching, hands clenching, as if the very idea made him mad.

“Sure, I do.” Hattie nodded. “It would be weird if I didn't have some kind of feelings about him, right?” She smiled reassuringly. “Don't worry. None of the feelings are affectionate or romantic. At times... I kind of pity him.”

“That's because he's pitiful.”

She laughed. He was just so deadpan when he said it, she couldn't help but find it funny. “I don't mean like that. I just mean, I see how he's being self-destructive now. How he attacks others because he's feeling attacked, and I feel bad for him.”

“Yes. Because he's pitiful.” He smiled as she broke out laughing again. “I think I found some plant fibers that I can

twist into a decently sturdy rope. I'm going to try to make a net from it."

"A net? Why?"

"So, I can make you a hammock. I'll feel safer with you up high."

She chuckled. It was kind of funny watching his domini instincts come to the fore. Just like he found it strange that, as a human, she couldn't handle being trapped in one, small spot, she found it strange that he was drawn upwards into the trees.

Their different instincts ruled them and, although there was a clash at times, the fun part was learning to live around each other.

"Did you see any new aircraft today?" She asked, trying not to be too hopeful. She was eager to get back home, but she didn't want to sound like she didn't appreciate his efforts in making this more comfortable for her.

And, honestly, things weren't so bad. If boredom was the worst thing she faced, they were doing very well.

But she missed a proper shower or, even better, a long, bubbly bath. Air conditioning. Variety to her diet. Coffee. All the best things of modern living.

"They're circling out from the area I first saw them. They'll probably fly over us in a couple days. When I think they're getting close, I'll climb up to the top of one of the trees and wave them down to be sure they find us."

Hattie laughed. "Maybe you should wear one of your brightly colored shirts for that so they can actually see you."

Tuvo looked down at his bare chest, grinning. "Not a bad idea."

They were just walking now. Chatting. Meandering around between the trees. Tuvo made sure she didn't touch anything in case there was a biting insect or a poisonous frog on it. Both things he was immune to.

The snakes could probably still bite him despite his thick skin. It was unknown if their venom would affect him or not, so he

wasn't being careless with them. But she knew without even asking that he would prefer a snake to bite him than her.

The care and devotion to her made her steps feel so light and brought a smile to her face. No one besides her parents had ever put her first like this. Certainly, none of her exes would have gone through this much trouble for her.

Tuvo did it without asking. Without making a big deal of it. Without even drawing attention to it. He just *did* it.

Walking through the untamed, uncharted Amazon rainforest, she felt as safe as she would on a well-trodden hiking path in the middle of a peaceful, small town.

She was just explaining her idea of using her broom handle/stick and tying a red shirt to it to make a signal flag to wave down the search and rescue team when something caught her eye.

She came up short, looking back at the tree she had very nearly walked past. In all other ways, it was a tree like any other around her. A pale brown bark with an ashen gray cast over it crawling with little plants that made their homes around and on top of the tree itself. Tiny insects moved up and down through the rough highway of bark. A whole ecosystem contained in a single tree.

And three, oddly familiar overlapping circles, like a Ven diagram, roughly cut into the side, right at her eye level – about chest height on non-short people.

“Hattie?”

Tuvo turned back after she stopped and came to join her at the tree. He didn't ask what she was doing, just stared at the marks on the tree with her.

“That's the symbol on that card you found,” he said.

Oh. Right. That's where she had seen those before. They weren't gold or shiny, and they were, of course, a lot bigger. Rougher – not a perfect circle. She could see the marks in the tree where the carver had messed up.

Because those had been carved there.

Meaning, someone had been there to carve them.

And the marks weren't old. The tree didn't appear to have healed around them yet. They were fresh. A couple days old, if that.

But from here, Hattie could *see* the plane. It was right there. Within shouting distance, easily. Someone had been close enough to see their plane, had carved this symbol, then just... left.

Tuvo reached over her shoulder to run his fingers over the markings. A few pieces of wood that had been broken flaked off and fell to the ground.

"This is new," he said softly. "This wasn't here before."

"You're sure?" She asked softly, hoping he was wrong. Hoping that maybe she just didn't know what a freshly cut tree looked like. That maybe it was a coincidence that their plane had crashed beside a tree that had been randomly cut up in the middle of the Amazon.

"I've been walking around this area for days. I know these trees. I know all the markings on these trees."

"Maybe... it was from the wreck?" Even she knew the suggestion was weak, but she needed to have some kind of innocuous explanation.

Because the alternative was too threatening to be considered.

Tuvo pulled his hand away from the markings, but instead of dropping it back by his side, he wrapped it around her and pulled her back against his chest.

"Do not fear, Hattie. I'm here."

"You're not invincible, Tuvo."

He growled.

"You know I'm not wrong!" She grabbed his arm with both hands. "You're incredible. Amazing. I know that. But even you can get hurt. Even you can be overwhelmed. What if... What if something happens?"

“Nothing will happen to you.” He leaned over her, hunching around her, holding her tight. “And if something does, I *will* avenge you. If you are taken, I *will* find you. You will have the entire might of the Coalition behind you, Hattie. You aren’t an Earthling by their standards. You are a citizen of Turv, a representative of the Coalition, and no one on this planet will ever put their hands on you and not experience my wrath. Understand?”

She nodded, closing her eyes, burrowing into him.

He held her until her heart settled again. Until she was calm.

“Go back to the plane,” he ordered, pushing her away just far enough that he could turn her around to face him – to face away from the marking on the tree. “I’ll check the perimeter. Make sure everything is fine. I’ll be back with my hunt soon, all right?”

She nodded and he smiled, pleased.

“That’s my female.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead, making her smile despite the unease crawling in her belly. “Go on now. I’m always within earshot, okay?”

She nodded again, more assuredly this time, and stepped back from him.

Returning to the plane, she looked over her shoulder every so often. Every time, he was still there, blending near seamlessly into the foliage so that only his blue-green eyes seemed out of place, watching to make sure she got back safely.

# Chapter 18

## *Tuvo*

It wasn't a coincidence.

The same symbol on the card Rodger had been carrying appearing on a tree near their crash site where it hadn't been before wasn't an accident. It wasn't some kind of beast either. It had definitely been a metal tool that made that mark.

So, who had been here?

Who had been so close to his mate that they were a threat to her?

And there was no doubt in his mind that this was a threat. The mark meant something, even if he didn't know exactly what yet.

Tuvo went around the crash, checking the trees for more marks, but he didn't see any others in the immediate area. There might be some beyond the crash site, but he wasn't willing to go too far away. Not when it might mean leaving Hattie alone.

He returned to the plane after hunting some random animal. Hattie was giving him a searching, desperate stare. He couldn't tell her anything new so, instead, he offered his kill. She grimaced at the sight of the furry creature.

"What's wrong?" He asked, looking at it.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "I'll, er, make a stew or something."

"Is this thing dangerous to eat?"

"No, I've just... never eaten a monkey before. It feels kind of... wrong."

Despite her misgivings, she took the creature from him and proceeded to dress it. When Keith came over and made a sound of dismay and disgust, she turned up her nose and responded evenly to him as her hands kept working.

Tuvo wasn't sure what taboo he had just broken, but clearly it wasn't so important that she was willing to starve to avoid eating it. Still, he made a mental note to avoid giving her that creature again in the future.

Once Hattie finished skinning and carving the beast, he gathered the inedible remains in the skin to take into the trees to dispose of. Hattie was now cutting up the meat and putting it in a pot to stew. Keith was sitting away from them, still grumbling about what Tuvo had hunted – being lazy and unhelpful as usual.

“Can you bring me back more of those mushrooms?” Hattie asked when he started to walk away. “I think they’ll be good in the soup.”

Tuvo grunted in agreement. “The ones I was picking earlier?”

“Yeah. And some of those roots you brought back the other day?”

“I’ll look around.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. “You’re the best.”

“I can’t promise anything.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to look, and that means a lot to me.”

Tuvo smile, turning away-

-only to find himself on the ground. A heavy weight on his body. Claws digging into his chest. Teeth snapping at his head.

Tuvo reacted reflexively before he even identified what attacked him beyond a flash of orange. He grabbed at loose, furry skin. Hot breath struck his face as his claws gripped through his shoulders and, with a roar, he knocked the weight away.

Turning, he came up, snarling, blood dripping from his chest and neck. He didn't feel it yet, but he would.



The creature that had attacked him snarled back. Its bright orange body was speckled with dark brown, messy circles. It stood on four legs, each paw tipped with wicked claws – the front ones stained as red as its wrinkled, whiskered muzzle pulled back in a deadly snarl. Its ears were back, it was making a rolling growl that threatened death, and it had Tuvo in his sights.

It charged, fangs and claws snapping, slashing. Almost too fast to see.

Tuvo reacted, dropping back, evading the blows. He struck back with his own, driving his fist into the side of the beast's face.

It fell back, shaking its head, as though shocked its prey had dared defend itself. Then, it was on him again, leaping forward.

Tuvo couldn't move. Hattie was behind him. She had cried out when the thing had taken him to the ground. He could just imagine this beast attacking her instead. Sweet, soft Hattie. Those fangs would have decimated her.

Just his luck that the creature had hit his neck. Domini had very tough necks, near impossible to choke and difficult to cut. Though, if he hadn't moved, he imagined that the thing would have hit his head – and that would likely have done more damage.

But its element of surprise was gone.

And with it, its chance of victory.

Tuvo caught the next attack right on his chest. Claws stuck into him like blades, forcing a grunt from him as he fell back a step.

But his own claws found their marks at the same time, cutting into the beast's chest. Through the ribs protecting its heart and lungs. He squeezed, cracking those bones, driving his claws deep. The creature roared, whined, struggled against him.

But Tuvo drove it into the ground, shoving deeper into its body. It shuddered one last time before going still, its bright red blood leaking around his fingers.

Tuvo jerked his hands free with a wet, sucking squelch and stood, turning to check on Hattie. To check the area to make sure that this thing didn't hunt in a pack and there weren't more, even now, approaching his female.

But their camp was empty and quiet. Hattie stood there, not breathing, crying. Keith had vanished – likely into the plane itself.

Cowardly male. Couldn't even take Hattie with him to make sure she-

“Tuvo!” Hattie rushed him, throwing her arms around his middle sobbing. “Oh my god! Are you okay? T-That thing! It attacked you! It just- Oh, god! You're bleeding!”

Tuvo made a low sound, putting his arms around her. “Easy, Hattie. It's all right. I'm fine. Are you alright?”

“You're asking *me* that?” She leaned back, sniffing, staring at him with wide eyes. “It had its jaws around your neck, Tuvo! Your neck!”

Tuvo grunted, reaching up to touch the punctured skin. The thing's teeth were long and its bite was strong, but the marks weren't very deep. The claw marks gouged across his chest were much worse, though not potentially lethal.

Tuvo stroked Hattie's back, holding her close, as she shuddered and cried.

This reaction, it was for him. She was this worried for *him*. And he hated that he made her anxious like this, but he couldn't help the warmth that filled his chest. The strength. Knowing that she cared this much made the little scratches worthless.

When she finally calmed down and, sniffing, took a step back, Keith poked his head from inside the plane and was approaching his kill.

Tuvo growled, warning him off.

That beast was his hunt. And its coat was glorious. If Hattie could skin it, he should like to keep it for himself. Keith wasn't welcome near it.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Hattie asked, touching him to reassure herself.

“I’m fine, *kyrya*,” he assured her. “Just a few scratches. What is that thing? Is it likely to hunt in packs?”

She chuckled weakly, wiping at her eyes as she shook her head no. “It’s a jaguar. They, er, they hunt alone. I’m pretty sure. There won’t likely be another one nearby.”

“A jaguar,” he repeated, looking at it. A fitting name for such a beast. “Can you skin it? Can you cook it?”

She laughed again, a little more genuinely this time. “That’s a new one too. But I might as well. It would be a waste considering you had to kill it. Can you help me? It’s big. I won’t be able to move it on my own.”

Tuvo agreed and, after shooing Keith away with another growl, got to work helping her pull the skin away from its body. He used the rope he had been making out of plant fibers and some long branches to make a rack for her to hang it so she could start cutting off the meat. Some could be cooked now, but the rest she would have to smoke and preserve over their fire.

It was a big kill, a worthy one, and its meat would likely keep them fed for some time if she could keep it from spoiling.

And as Tuvo went about preparing its skin, he had to resist the urge to cook the food himself. To feed Hattie with the proof of his labors. Then drag her into the den so she could make a nest and he could breed her properly.

The rescue better get here soon, because he was starting to become feral, and he wouldn’t be able to control himself around Hattie forever.

# Chapter 19

## *Hattie*

A jaguar. Tuvo had hunted a jaguar.

And now, after cutting away all the fat from the skin, he was using stakes he had carved driven into the ground to stretch it in the sunlight to dry. He was preserving the skin! Of a wild jaguar that he had killed when it tried to eat him!

And Hattie was nearly dizzy with need from having watched it.

She was just a red-blooded woman. She couldn't watch something so primal and brutal and *powerful* and not feel it deep inside. It was a part of her that wasn't made for this modern world, and it had a grip tight on her sex.

Strong male. Strong mate. Make strong babies.

Independent, modern woman who?

She had to somehow cook food on an open fire as she tried not to stare at her bloodied and scarred beast mate as he staked out the jaguar he had killed and skinned while her pussy clenched desperately on nothing.

She needed him so badly right now. Keith was saying something, but she couldn't hear him. Her eyes were zeroed in on Tuvo's ass and flicking tail as he looked over the skin.

Strong mate should be rewarded for defending and feeding her.

“Yo!”

Snapping fingers right in her face made her jump and look over. Keith was crouched down, giving her an incredulous look.

“What?” She asked, thighs shifting together.

“What? What do you mean what? You’ve been moving your knife in the same spot for like five minutes now.”

She looked down at the jaguar flank she had been cutting. The meat was kind of similar to pork or chicken. She had been dicing it for their stew.

Or, rather, she had been moving her knife in a cutting motion between two pieces of meat that she had long ago split apart. Her cutting board was a door from a cupboard resting on a rock dragged near the fire. The knife was the alien one she had brought with her. The one with a super sharp blade that didn’t dull.

And she had cut multiple slashes into the wood while staring at Tuvo.

“Seriously?” Keith gave her a dull look.

“What?” She frowned, readjusting the jaguar meat.

“He killed a wild cat, Hattie, and you’re looking at him like he’s a honey bun.”

She wouldn’t mind taking a bite of those honey buns.

Wow, she had it bad right now. Would he mind climbing another tree with her?

She wanted her male. She could barely take her eyes off him. She couldn’t take her thoughts off him. Keith tried to gripe at her some more, but he had to give up when she just kept staring at Tuvo working to preserve his skin.

He gathered together all the parts she couldn’t use – along with the monkey parts that must have originally attracted the jaguar’s attention – and took them away to dispose of. The space finally allowed her to finish adding the meat to the stew pot she had hanging over the fire.

Tuvo returned with the roots and mushrooms she had requested, and she cleaned and cut them up as he watched.

Well, she tried. But his gaze was making her shaky and needy, and she very nearly cut herself with the knife. It only took two

near accidents for Tuvo to take the blade from her and finish the cutting job himself.

That didn't help because, again, he was looking out for her. And now he was crouched down in front of her improvised cutting board, the muscles in his forearms clenching with each cut. He was confident with the knife, but his cutting skills were rudimentary. He was just cubing them into uneven pieces.

It was unbelievably sexy.

She stayed beside him. Shifting her weight. Staring at him hungrily. He had moved on from the meat and was now slicing the mushrooms. Then, the roots. His big hands scooped them all in one smooth motion and tossed them into the pot.

She didn't realize she had whimpered until he turned to her.

He looked surprised, but it passed quickly. His own gaze darkened before he returned to cutting the last of the mushrooms.

The slices got messier and bigger as he rushed through the chore. She didn't care. The food could burn at this point.

"Tuvo," she whined, shifting her thighs again. Desperate for the friction. "Please."

He didn't even bother to finish. He scooped up the remainder and the uneven pieces and tossed them into the pot – half missing entirely.

Neither of them cared.

Hattie was already reaching for him as he grabbed her by the hand and took her to the same tree they had climbed the other night. He put her on her back and did it again.

She couldn't resist kissing along the slope of his neck. The flexing of his muscles as he carried her up with only stroking her fire further.

At this moment, she didn't care that they were both dirty and had only managed to take quick rag baths in days. She didn't care that he was all cut up from jaguar claws – that actually

made it better. She was eager to feel him under her, to kiss and bite his neck until he growled.

They didn't end up sitting on the lowest branch this time. He stepped onto it, pulled her off him and, in one smooth motion, swung her around until her back was pressed against the tree and he was between her legs, kissing her desperately.

She moaned, rocking her hips against his abs. The hard lines of his muscles were a great grinding toy, but she wanted more.

She wanted him to take her against this tree.

"Please," she begged, sad because their pelvises didn't line up in this position.

Tuvo released one of her legs. Even if she let it drop, she wouldn't be able to balance on the branch herself. Instead, she balanced her foot against his thigh that he pushed forward, offering it to use as a stool.

It allowed her legs to spread, giving him room for his now free hand to grab desperately at her jeans, breaking the button and ripping open the zipper so he could shove his hand under the hem. She whined, sad he wasn't pulling them off of her.

But she couldn't hold that thought in her head when he homed in on her clit like it had a tracking beacon.

She grabbed onto his shoulders, pelvis canted back. Her jeans slipping off her hips, giving him more room for his quickly flicking finger to bring her to a harsh, immediate orgasm that had her voice cracking as her eyes rolled back in her head.

But it wasn't enough. It wasn't a relief. She needed more. She needed him inside her.

"Tuvo," She pleaded, hips shaking.

"I got you," he promised.

His other arm adjusted her leg, hooking it over his elbow, pulling her jeans down a bit further before the spread of her legs stopped them.

Opening her to his finger thrusting inside. She gasped, head falling back. Even just one finger was so thick. Almost big

enough to emulate a cock on its own. He worked it in and out rapidly, grinding his palm against her clit, the wet sucking sounds of her hole making her face burn even as she craved more.

His finger was big, but it wasn't what she wanted.

"Take me, please," she begged, pussy clenching hungrily around that finger. Loving the way it filled her but knowing that it wasn't all she could have. She wanted to be stretched. She wanted to be sore. She wanted his cock inside her now!

But that wasn't what she got. Instead, Tuvo pulled his finger almost all the way out. She cried in dismay, only to have her voice stolen when she felt more pressure at her entrance. Tuvo growled, pressing forward determinedly.

And one finger didn't feel like a stretch, but two certainly did.

Hattie laughed, breathless and relieved, as he pounded her. Curling them up to press along her G-spot. Still hitting her clit with his palm. Playing her body like a fiddle.

His fingers spread apart, and the pressure broke her. She shattered with a cry, the relief of a proper orgasm drowning her in pleasure.

But it still wasn't complete, because it wasn't his cock. It wasn't his knot plugging her entrance. It wasn't his seed filling her up and breeding her properly.

As her breathing evened, Tuvo lowered her legs back to the branch. She let him. Not fighting. Not trying anything. Until he released her, then she grabbed for him.

He made a sound of protest, but her fingers had already pulled the button free on his jeans. Her height was an advantage this time.

"Hattie, wait-"

He took hold of her shoulders. Too late, she had his zipper down and had yanked on them and his boxers just enough for his cock to burst forth. A hammer that nearly smacked her in the chest as it broke free.



Tuvo groaned, hands still on her shoulders, teeth bared, but he didn't push her away.

Hattie bit her lip excitedly as she took hold of the monster that greeted her, making a soft sound of sympathy as her hand stroked up slowly.

"Aw, poor Tuvo," she whimpered. "This looks so painful, sweetie. Let me help you with this."

He growled, hips jerking against her grip. His cock had taken on the dusty, dingy gray-blue of the jeans he wore, but the triangular, slightly pointed head was dark, almost black – angry and throbbing and neglected. Coming off the head were a series of ridges that made a triangular shape pointing back towards his groin. There were a lot of them, almost reaching halfway down the long, thick shaft that was thickest in the middle. All leading to his knot.

The rounded, turgid flesh at the base of his cock, resting right above his taught, heavy sac, was darker than the thick head. She could see the veins popping out around the bulb. They pounded three times with each beat of his heart. Angry and ignored.

It must be painful. Such a shame when she was happy to help.

A shuddered breath left her mouth when she began to stroke. First with one hand, then with both when it became apparent that she needed extra strength. His cock defied gravity, pointing directly at her despite its hefty weight. The slit began leaking thick, creamy pre-cum.

Not just a drop, either. A steady stream. It flowed down the head and began to drip until she tilted the shaft up until it trailed over her fingers.

The sight did something to her she didn't expect. She was simultaneously hungry and horny again. The size of his cock was intimidating, but, she reasoned, he wasn't as thick as a baby. It might take some practice, but she was determined to take this.

For now, however, she used the wetness of his own pre-cum to quickly jerk him off with both hands, pointing the head right at

her tits. Eager. Determined.

It didn't take long.

Tuvo came with a roar, his entire body locking up. The cords in his neck standing out as his abdomen tensed and twitched. His sac lifted and throbbed – her only warning before he came. Giving her just enough time for one of her hands to grab his knot and squeeze. Trying to emulate how it would feel buried inside her.

She was rewarded with a full load. Blasting right against her neck, her chest. Thick, creamy ropes of white seed coated her. The first burst reached up high enough to hit her lower lip and she licked at it reflexively. Moaning. He tasted like hazelnut spread. Rich and creamy and tasty.

He started to collapse forward, catching himself on the tree with one hand as he continued to unload against her. So much. All for her.

Oh, her poor male. He must have been so neglected.

Hattie smiled as she slowly stroked him until he finished coming. Her fingers, her body, were messy and warm and wet, but she loved it.

His knot was softer now, but it still looked angry. He was still hard.

She was quite eager to keep going, to drain him dry, but he stepped back, pulling from her hands with a slick slide of skin on skin.

“Aw,” she pouted.

Tuvo was staring at her. Eyes dark. Fingers twitching.

“Waste,” he growled.

Confused, a bit hurt, she tilted her head.

He reached for her, for the cum splashed over her chest. And began to rub it into her. Spreading him over her skin. Marking her.

Ah. A waste.

Now that she understood, she couldn't help but agree. This belonged inside her. She should be dripping him for days as his seed swam within her womb, waiting for an egg to drop.

Hattie didn't even realize she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch until he pulled his hand away. Her lids opened again, and she watched, regretfully, as he tucked himself back in his pants. She pouted.

"We should get back down so you can... clean off," he said, growling as he finished the sentence reluctantly.

"Er, yeah," she breathed, running her fingers over her chest. It was ridiculous, but she didn't want to wash away his cum. Not when that was the first time she felt like he had claimed her.

But she didn't fight when he turned so she could climb on his back, and he could return her to the plane.

She didn't want to, but she gave herself another rag bath and changed into a new pair of jeans and shirt.

In the time she had been gone, Keith had set up the single person tent – a tiny thing he probably had to curl up inside of since it wasn't long enough to lay in. He was sitting inside it, the flap unzipped, and he gave her a judgmental look that she ignored as she returned to the stew.

She was even more aware of Tuvo now than she had been before. Her entire body cried out for him as he sat nearby, watching as she stirred their dinner.

## Chapter 20

### *Tuvo*

The search party was getting closer. Tuvo could see them circling in the air. Scouring the treetops for some sign of them.

They were moving in the wrong direction. Heading further off, not coming their way. The smoke from the fire wasn't penetrating the thick canopy enough to send a signal, and the mark left by the plane crashing wasn't big enough to be spotted. Especially not with the distance between them and the search team.

Frowning thoughtfully, he climbed back down the tree and returned to their camp. They still had plenty of food, so he had eschewed hunting today in favor of staying nearby. Keeping track of Hattie and pacing around the plane.

Specifically, he circled the segment that she used as a shelter. It took him a while to figure out why the sight of it made him so anxious.

It was, for lack of better options, his den.

And his den was insecure.

How was his mate supposed to be comfortable in this place? It was so low to the ground, near potential predators. It didn't have a place for her to nest. Unacceptable.

It was his instincts acting up. He was closer to his mate now than ever and he needed a safe place for her to nest. His instincts didn't care that he was literally looking at the remains of a crashed plane, he wanted to fuck and breed his female, and, for that, he needed a nest.

All that same aggression he had before, only now it was focused on this.

“Are you okay?” Hattie asked after about his third lap around the plane.

“Fine,” he growled, scratching at his head. “Just... thinking about how we’re going to catch the attention of the search team.” It was a good lie.

And it was actually something he should be doing. Maybe he really should tie his shirt to a stick and wave it in the air like a flag. It might mean being up there for marks waiting for someone to spot that single splash of color amongst all the green, but it was better than their searchers going off in completely the wrong direction.

He checked on Hattie, who was once again cooking over their fire. Then, because he had to, he checked on Keith. Only to find his little tent open and empty

“Where is the male?”

“Hm? Oh. Heading to the little human’s room.”

“What?”

She snickered. “Sorry. Guess that joke didn’t translate well. Er, he’s going to the privy. Downwind, if you get my meaning.”

Tuvo grunted in understanding. Fiercely pleased beyond reason.

Because that was his den, and the other male shouldn’t be near it.

He really needed to get a handle on himself.

Deliberately walking away from the broken plane, he went to join Hattie by the fire. She had taken a seat on the rock she used as a counter, so he sat on the ground beside her. With the rock giving her a boost in height, it put them eye to eye.

She smiled, hands resting in her lap. Just looking at him. The way he was looking at her. Like nothing made her so happy as having him in her sights.

Then, without any warning he could see, she suddenly frowned.

“What is it?” He asked, cocking his head.

“N-Nothing,” she rushed to say, plastering a smile on her face.

“I don’t believe that any more than when I believe you when you say you are ‘fine’. What’s wrong?”

She hesitated just a moment before her shoulders slumped. “It’s just... I had the thought that... maybe I didn’t want to be rescued.”

He frowned. “You *want* to live in this jungle.”

“No! I just don’t want this to end.”

What was she talking about?

She quickly shook her head. Not like she was saying no, but more like she was banishing a thought she didn’t want. “Never mind. That’s stupid. Of course, I want to be rescued.”

“No, tell me what you were going to say.”

She bit her lip before turning on her stone to face him. “Tuvo, when we get back, are things still going to be the same?”

“I imagine so. Might have to take issue with the security team for that pilot. Bertrand was in charge of screening the humans working with us. It’s frustrating that I can’t do it myself, but I am limited by language and connections.”

“No, I don’t mean like that. I mean... you and me. Are we going to be the same?”

“Ah...”

Understanding dawned and he understood what she was asking. She wanted to know if he was going to put that distance between them again.

Or if he would claim her.

But he couldn’t claim her. One finger inside her had been tight. Two had been a vice grip. And he still wasn’t up to the size of his cock. He couldn’t do it.

He also couldn’t ignore her again.

“Hattie, maybe...”

He focused on her face, only to find she wasn’t looking at him. Her gaze was over his shoulder, her head tilted to the side,

forehead furrowed with confusion.

She saw something.

Before Tuvo had a chance to react, a force like a physical punch slammed into his back. He roared, collapsing to the ground as Hattie screamed.

When he tried to stand, something hit him again. And again. Multiple blows slamming against his body with more power than he could stand against.

The roaring in his ears, that pounding, was it his heart? Hattie was screaming. He needed to get to her. To protect his mate.

But when he tried to stand, his body did little more than twitch.

His vision was going gray as pain burned through him. The blows weren't stopping. Hattie was still screaming.

What...

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“Hattie!”

Tuvo woke, terror gripping his heart. Hattie had been screaming. Hattie was in danger. He had to-

“Ugh!” Pain burst through his body as he collapsed back. Head nearly hitting stone. The night darkened canopy was a heavy blanket overhead, the fire crackling at his side.

Their camp was quiet.

But what...?

“Yo.”

There was Keith, coming into his field of view. Frowning. Babbling his language that Tuvo couldn't understand, holding out his hands. Trying to keep him from pushing himself up onto one arm despite the agony that burned through him.

Why was Keith here? Where was Hattie? What had...

His frantic thoughts came to a halt as he looked over his body. He had been bandaged with, it appeared, every spare piece of

cloth inside the plane. His blood had stained the fabric. He was weak and his entire back was throbbing.

He shredded one of the fabrics on his leg, making Keith gripe, but he had to see.

Under the bandage, on the side of his thigh, was a hole. It had already scabbed over, but it was a penetrating injury. And there were more. On the backs of his thighs. All over his back.

Bullets. From the old-fashioned projectile weapons the humans used.

He had been shot. Peppered with bullets until he collapsed.

And Hattie...

“Hattie?” He looked at Keith.

The male opened his mouth then seemed to remember he couldn't be understood. So, he just shook his head. No.

“Hattie!” Tuvo climbed to his feet, snarling with agony. Those bullets had done a lot of damage. He could *feel* them. In his back. Stuck in the muscles, just under his skin. He must have lost a lot of blood very quickly to lose consciousness.

And, there, he could see the dark stain on the grass where he had fallen, and the smeared blood where Keith must have dragged him. There was Hattie's rock, her cutting board, her knife. There was her suitcase, sitting open, most of the clothes inside dragged out and sacrificed for the bandages covering his body.

But there was no Hattie.

“Hattie!” He roared, his voice echoing out into the trees. Calling back to him.

Unanswered.

“Tuvo.” Keith was there, shaking his head and pointing back. Trying to get him to lay down. To rest his wounds.

But he wouldn't. He tore at the bandages, freeing himself from their grasp, ready to charge into the jungle after Hattie. Because she wasn't here, which meant she had been taken.



And someone would pay with their life.

“Tuvo!” Keith jumped in front of him, scowling, speaking rapid English he couldn’t decipher.

“Move!” Tuvo snapped, fists clenching, ready to throw aside the worthless male.

Keith growled, that weak, adorable, human growl, before fixing him with a hard look and using small words – which Tuvo did understand. “Men! Tuvo! Big... Lots men!” He pointed past the trees. “Too many!”

Human males had taken his female. And that direction...

That way lay the tree with the mark on the side.

Not just a mark. A map. A guide. Someone had found them and marked the area before going back and getting a full fighting band. Which meant there had to be more marks because a single mark wouldn’t help them find their way back here.

“We go,” Tuvo said in stilted, accented English.

Keith sighed, shaking his head. “No. Die, Tuvo. Die?”

He did know that word, but it didn’t matter.

“Hattie.” He pointed the same way Keith had gestured. “*Hattie.*”

Keith grumbled, giving up and speaking rapidly again – using more words that Tuvo didn’t know. But it was clear that he was frustrated and not happy about the idea of chasing unknown groups of men into the wild, dark forest.

Not that Tuvo cared.

The forest was his home. Even an alien one was familiar.

And he was getting Hattie back.

# Chapter 21

## *Hattie*

The men around her were speaking Portuguese. She recognized it after her time on the Azores Islands, but she didn't actually know what they were saying. It was close to Spanish, but she had only taken that language in high school, she didn't actually speak it beyond a few, random words.

Not that it mattered. Some things were universal.

A bag over her head, zip ties on her wrists, and the distinct clicking of guns needed no translation.

It was hard to bring herself to care though.

Not when she had seen Tuvo gunned down like a wild animal.

The memory was burned onto the back of her eyelids. The darkness under the bag only made it stand out more. The way his eyes had widened as blood exploded out of his back. How he had reached for her even as he collapsed.

How he hadn't moved, and she could swear he was dead.

But then, when those guys tried to grab him, how he snarled and swiped out with his claws, without even opening his eyes. A reflex. One that had nearly lost one guy his arm. They hadn't been willing to get close to him after that.

Hattie didn't know what happened to him. If he was still alive. If they had just shot him from a distance and killed him right there when he was prone and helpless.

Because by then, the two guys that had grabbed her had forced her hands behind her back and zip tied them and she was being dragged away.

They had walked with her for what had to be miles. The pace had been relentless. Her feet hurt, her mouth was dry, her lips were chapped, and her head was throbbing. They hadn't offered her any water or even a chance to rest.

Just when she had been about to collapse, they had suddenly come upon a road.

Well, not really a '*road*' road. It was two, parallel lines in the dirt made from the passage of cars, but it was still technically a road. And sitting on it, clearly waiting for them, were two jeeps.

That was the point the bag had been put over her head. She had been shoved up into a seat, the others called out to each other in Portuguese, and they were off. Driving through the jungle on a road that was bumpy and uneven. She hadn't been offered a seatbelt and the jeeps had no doors, but she wasn't worried about falling out thanks to the two, big men seated on either side of her.

Where were they taking her? What was going to happen to her?

Was Tuvo okay?

Questions that had no answers swam around inside her head as they drove for what felt like over an hour. It was dark now, the inside of the sack completely black. She could actually *hear* the difference when the engines suddenly stopped echoing off of the surrounding trees.

Something metallic clanged – like the opening of a gate. Then, after they passed, it did it again, only this time it was from behind them.

They had been locked in. Wherever this was.

The two men on either side of her disappeared and she was grabbed on her left arm, hard enough to bruise, before being unceremoniously yanked out and tossed to her knees. She flinched as the bag was suddenly yanked off her head.

Grimacing, she tilted her head up.

It was dark, but she could see the sky overhead. The twinkling lights, the moon. The shadowy silhouettes of the men surrounding her. Speaking in rapid Portuguese, arguing about something. Like she was completely inconsequential.

Something was decided and she was jerked back up to her feet and this time pulled through the door of a big, boxy, concrete building. In the middle of the Amazon. Surrounded on all sides by a big, stone wall with barbed wire and search towers. *Search towers!*

These definitely weren't good guys.

Hattie was taken inside and guided through a series of short hallways until they came upon a door that one of the guys beat against, yelling something, while another unlocked it. The door opened inward, and Hattie was shoved inside without warning.

She fell again, this time onto her side, trying to hunch in on herself to protect her head without her hands. Her shoulder and hip ached from the fall. She groaned, rolling over just in time to see the door slammed shut behind her.

The slide of the lock seemed like a seal on her fate.

Sucking in a stuttered breath, trying not to cry, she tried to sit up. And failed. It was a difficult task with her arms tied behind her back.

Until a soft, gentle pair of hands suddenly took her shoulders and helped her.

She turned, eyes wide, to find herself looking at another woman.

The room had a very dull light buzzing overhead – yellow and flickering. Offering her just enough illumination to make out the hardened, stern features of a pretty girl, probably a bit younger than herself, with long, smooth black hair, and dirty clothes.

She said something and Hattie shook her head.

“I'm sorry. I don't speak Portuguese.”

The girl cocked her head curiously and said, in heavily accented English. “American? What are you doing here?”

“Wasn’t exactly a choice,” Hattie sniffed, tears forming. Just from seeing a semi-friendly face. “The, er, plane I was in crashed. I got stranded in the forest.”

The girl grunted, moving behind her. “I say you were lucky, but maybe fate just wants you to suffer. You crashed here and got caught by these *putas*.”

“Where am I? Who are these guys?”

Hattie couldn’t see what the woman was doing but, after some tugging, the zip ties around her wrists suddenly broke and she could bring them around to her front again. She winced at the pain there and in her shoulders as she turned just in time to see the woman hiding something in the hem of her jeans. A knife?

She remained crouched beside Hattie, giving her a searching look. “They call themselves *Tres Argolas*. Three Rings. They’re, how you say... flesh sellers.”

It took a second for that to translate and Hattie felt her heart lurch. “Traffickers? They’re human traffickers?”

“Yeah. That’s the one. You in their clutches now. No getting away.”

“But... Then you?”

“Yeah.” She sneered, turning her head and spitting. “One of them wanted me. I said no. He didn’t take it for an answer. So, he gonna sell me. Make me pay. I’m waiting. He comes to gloat, and I know he will, I kill him first. Then myself.”

“Woah! And yourself?” Hattie shook her head. “That’s wrong! You can’t-”

“I won’t live like this!” She snapped, getting to her feet. “I’ll end my own body before I give them the pleasure of having it. If you smart, you do the same.”

Hattie hesitated but stood up after her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make it sound like I was judging you. I just...”

The woman seemed to relax a bit and she nodded. “I get it. Takes a second to sink in, yeah? Better get used to it. Pick out one you want to take with you and try to do some damage on your way out. What my *mamãe* always taught me.”

“Er, what’s your name?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and said, with no small amount of pride. “Belmira. I make sure they remember it before I go. What’s your name?”

“Hattie.”

She inclined her head in greeting. “Sorry you’re here, Hattie. But at least we won’t die alone, yeah?”

Hattie shook her head, a strange but warm certainty settling in her gut. “We aren’t going to die. Tuvo will come for us. For me. I know he will.”

If he was still alive.

## Chapter 22

### *Tuvo*

Groaning, Tuvo grabbed hold of a nearby tree trunk, just barely avoiding falling over. His blood splashed against the ground. The multitude of wounds covering his body were breaking open from his reckless speed and Keith's weight upon his back.

The human male said something, almost sounding concerned, but Tuvo could barely hear him over the racing of his own heart.

The hike through the woods hadn't been that taxing. He could only go so fast since he had to keep searching for the marks cut into the trees that were guiding his way. It forced him to go slow as he and Keith worked together to find them. The male had been mostly useless, but he wasn't arguing with Tuvo about chasing after Hattie anymore at least.

Maybe it was because this was a lot more noble and brave of an action than just waiting patiently by the plane for rescue. It made him feel like he was strong and important. He wouldn't be the first young idiot Tuvo had to deal with that felt that way.

Regardless of the reason, he helped spot the marked trees as Tuvo tracked the direct path through the forest. The males who had come and taken Hattie had not bothered to disguise their trail. Either because they didn't know how or they knew there was no point so long as they were dragging Hattie along who *definitely* didn't know how.

Regardless, their tracks were easy to spot and, the rare times he lost them, all they had to do was find the next mark and, soon enough, he could pick it up again.

That was the easy part.

Then, they came upon the road.

Looking at the tracks and the disturbed foliage told him what direction the vehicle they must have had waiting would have taken. The road allowed him to move faster – putting Keith on his back so he didn't slow him down. This was despite Keith's protests. He was doing his best to touch Tuvo as little as possible for some reason.

But Tuvo couldn't leave him here or at the plane, he would doubtlessly die. He was young and foolish and not yet aware of his inadequacies. So, he had to come along. But the way his weight and that of the pack of their belongings he carried was upsetting his balance, forcing his back muscles to work harder, and, as a consequence, making his wounds worse. Keith just refused to lean against him, and he didn't know if it was because of the blood or because he didn't want to lay on another male, but Tuvo was getting tired of it.

Keith patted his shoulder, saying something that Tuvo was pretty sure meant he should stop. He should let him down.

The encouragement only prompted him to break out running again.

Hattie was in danger. Every second he dithered was one second closer to her potential demise. They wouldn't have taken her if they didn't have a reason, but that didn't mean anything. Their reason could be as simple as wanting to take her to a different location before they did something horrendous. The sort of things he didn't want to imagine. But after learning about humans and the depths and sheer commonality of horrors they could visit upon each other, especially, their females, they were things he couldn't stop thinking about.

It didn't matter.

So long as she was alive, he could fix anything that happened to her. So long as she survived, they could weather the aftermath.

Just let her still be alive when he found her.



That desperate thought gave him strength when he nearly collapsed again. It drove him forward even as the sky darkened. Keith mumbled again, but he didn't stop.

The first sign that something was different was the sudden lack of animal noises. The insects were still buzzing, endless and unbothered, but the birds and mammals up in the canopy that usually sang and moved all through the night got quiet.

Tuvo diverted from the path and climbed a tree. Keith let out a sound of surprise, his arms and legs locking around him properly. He apparently wasn't bothered about touching him when the alternative was a long drop to the hard ground.

Tuvo took him to one of the larger, sturdier branches that was well hidden amongst the leaves and then practically dumped him off. Keith grumbled, grabbing the tree and looking down with a mumble of fear.

Tuvo couldn't help but think that Hattie had shown none when he had dragged her up a tree. She trusted him.

And he had betrayed that trust by letting her get taken.

"Stay here," he ordered Keith. "I'm going to scout. If I'm right, the canopy is disturbed up ahead. The canopy animals are quiet, and they're only quiet if they're not there."

Keith shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, not understanding a word.

"You." He pointed at him. "Stay." He pointed at the branch.

Keith frowned and tried to speak-

-but Tuvo was already gone.

Walking through the canopy was something that came naturally to his species. Youths did this kind of thing for fun – tree walking. It had been a while since Tuvo had done it – and he wasn't the type to do it for fun in the wild like those interested in more extreme sports. But it was a skill he had inherently as he ran over interconnecting branches like a path that zigzagged, up and down, through the foliage.

It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. Crouched low on a branch, he stared through the leaves at the

compound dropped right in the middle of the forest. All the trees had been cut away – a brutal and primitive way of building.

The compound could be described similarly. It was plain, boxy concrete surrounded by a square shaped concrete wall. Looped lines of barbed wire encircled the top. Each corner was topped by a watch tower with two males, carrying heavy weapons, standing in each, their eyes scanning the trees constantly. There were no exterior lights, keeping them in full darkness. Either the males on watch had some way of enhancing their vision in the darkness, or they were just patrolling with their weak, human eyesight and accepting the chance that something might approach they couldn't see.

The gates across the road were closed. The walls were high. Tuvo had no idea where Hattie might be inside. He had no weapons besides his claws, and he was an injured, single male against an entire compound with lots of weapons.

The hissing of scales against wood drew Tuvo's attention to a snake lifting its head to face him. Hissing out in warning. Just a threat display, no doubt.

But a timely one.

Tuvo lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers. Taunting it. Threatening it.

The snake struck.

Tuvo caught it in the air, just behind its head. It immediately wriggled and thrashed.

Tuvo brought it to his lips and bit down on its body, just behind the head. The scales parted easily and the rush of hot, sweet and spicy blood, spilled down his throat. He groaned in relief as he drank until the snake stilled and he could draw out nothing else.

He had lost a lot of blood. He needed to replace it. He tossed aside the corpse of the snake as he stood, reaching for his legs. The fabric of his jeans ripped easily under his claws. He cut them into a pair of shorts, bearing his skin to get full effect of

the camouflage without letting his cock dangle in the wind – out and vulnerable.

He tossed the useless fabric aside and walked closer.

The building had taken as much available forest as possible, but still allowed a certain amount of distance so that the branches weren't over the wall. That was too easy a way to break into the compound – even for a non-climbing species.

But the jump wasn't far enough to keep out a climbing species like his.

Tuvo ran around until he became even with a watchtower. He identified the closest branch that could hold his weight and took a few steps back.

The running jump was soft – no different from the shuffling from the normal canopy animals.

He leapt through the air, falling from the high treetops. Claws out. Aiming.

He caught the edge of the tower and swung around and down and inside. The momentum of the fall broke the ribs of the man he struck coming in. The second guy didn't have time to do anything more than look over before Tuvo slammed his fist into his face, hard enough to knock his head to the side, breaking his neck.

Tuvo watched his body drop before looking into the compound. Waiting. But minutes passed without a commotion. His landing hadn't been quiet, but the nearest towers were still far enough that the sounds were lost amongst those of the forest.

Tuvo grabbed the edge of the tower and jumped over. He landed inside the wall, his body completely hidden in the shadows. He gave it another moment, but there was still no reaction.

Following the wall, he headed for the closest door. There was a lot of space between the wall and the compound. Intentional, since it meant he'd have to leave the shadow of the wall to approach.

But there were two vehicles on the road making a 'bridge' to the door. Left on the path where they must have come in from bringing Hattie.

Tuvo put the now empty tower to his back, hiding him from the tower beside it that had a view of the vehicles as well – the other two couldn't see him from their side of the compound.

Tuvo crouched-ran from the wall to the vehicle. Then from that vehicle to the other. Then, from that vehicle to the wall beside the door.

He tested the latch but wasn't surprised to find it locked. A keypad bared his entrance.

Tuvo checked the manned guard tower, but there was still no commotion. He knew without needing to look that they couldn't see him. Humans had issues seeing through his camouflage.

Back to the wall, he lifted his foot and put it against the door.

The bang from slamming it back and breaking the hinge rang out over the compound like a shot. An alarm immediately began shrieking as lights suddenly burst to life in- and outside.

Tuvo was already running, jogging down the unfamiliar hallways.

The first human that ran into the hall was carrying a gun and suffered the same fate as the male in the guard tower. The second male fell to his claws.

He ducked into a room as someone started shooting down the hallway. He killed the two males in there that had still been readying their weapons. As their corpses dropped, Tuvo licked their blood from his claws – intending to strengthen himself.

Only to nearly gag. He spit it out, grimacing, at the bitter, vile taste that lingered on his tongue. It burned like poison. He thought that the humans had aphrodisiac blood.

Or maybe, just the females had aphrodisiac blood.

He didn't have time to think on it more as a male had pushed the muzzle of his weapon around the corner, intending to shoot blind.

Tuvo grabbed it and yanked him inside, wrapping his arm around his head and jerking violently, snapping his neck.

The male dropped and Tuvo examined the weapon. He considered using it for only a moment, until he realized that his hands were too big.

So, he tossed it away and yanked up the body he had just dropped instead. Holding the limp corpse in front of him like a shield, he stepped from the room-

-directly in a volley of gunfire.

It was a big compound, and he wasn't even past the door yet.

This was going to take a while.

## Chapter 23

### *Hattie*

“You hear that?” Belmira asked, distracting Hattie from her hair. Belmira had offered to braid hers up if she did the same, wanting it to be wound into a tight bun so that her hair couldn’t be grabbed when someone came in the door.

It was an easy style to do, something she could have done herself. Hattie suspected she just wanted someone to treat her nicely, to take care of her a bit. A small bit of relief in the midst of this hell she had found herself in.

How long had Belmira been here? What had happened to her in that time?

Hattie had been afraid to ask so, instead, they talked about innocuous things as Belmira braided her hair first.

Belmira told her about her village. About her father and mother. About a guy that she fully intended to marry and give a couple cute, chubby faced babies.

She was harder than Hattie, with a distinct edge that Hattie knew she didn’t possess. But at the end of the day, they both wanted the same thing. A cute guy that they loved, a safe home to cook in and clean, and healthy babies to raise.

Hattie had already trauma bonded to the girls she had been abducted with. She was able to recognize it happening again now. But she didn’t try to fight against it. She eagerly asked questions about Belmira’s life, the guy she liked, her village.

And when it was Hattie’s turn to braid her hair, the conversation similarly switched.

Hattie told her about Tuvo – how he was big and grumpy and kind. She didn’t mention that he was an alien, but she did say

that her friends had all hooked up with his coworkers, so it was like they were one big family themselves. She told her about being a recipe inventor – which was a funny way to put it, though accurate. She told her about her own desire for a safe home with cute, chubby faced babies – leaving out the preference for them having three eyes and tails.

The two of them had been discussing preferred baby genders – Belmira wanted strong sons, Hattie wanted at least one of each – when they heard a distant popping. A cracking. It kind of sounded like fireworks.

Which was weird, because why would there be fireworks in the Amazon? That seemed like it would be a fire hazard. A human trafficker's compound was not a place she'd think would want to launch fireworks either.

But then Belmira, getting to her feet, said, “Those are gunshots,” and the reality of the situation made her blush at her own naivete.

“Gunshots?” She repeated, standing as well.

Belmira was glaring at the door, the small, plexiglass shiv she had made already out of the hem of her pants and back in her hands. Like she might be willing to take on whoever came rushing in that room in the next second.

Which might be a problem.

“Er, Belmira-”

“Sh!” She hissed. “I’m trying to listen. What are they shooting at?”

“It might be... Tuvo?”

It took a second for Belmira to understand what she was saying. She blinked, then her brow furrowed, and then she turned to her.

“Tuvo? Your man?”

Hattie nodded.

“You think that’s him?” She gestured to the door with her plexiglass shiv.

“Pretty sure,” Hattie mumbled, looking at the door herself. Were the gunshots getting closer? It was hard to hear through the metal door.

And then, suddenly, it stopped.

Belmira frowned, reaching out for her shoulder. “I’m sorry. He’s dead.”

“No, he’s not.” Hattie’s voice was completely certain. And, sure enough, the gunfire started up again just a few seconds later.

Belmira shook her head. “If he’s not dead now, he will be.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“What makes *you* so sure?”

Hattie opened her mouth, hesitated, then asked, “Belmira, you said your village has electricity, right?”

“Sometimes. When we run the generator. Why?”

“Do you get news there? Like global news?”

Belmira shrugged. “Sometimes. We get most when we sell our stuff in the city. Hear lot of things there. Why?”

“Did you hear about the aliens?”

Belmira’s gaze sharpened. “Hattie... You’re not *that* Hattie?”

She smiled cautiously. “I... yeah. You heard about me?”

“I heard the names.” She crossed her arms, giving her a dissecting look that made Hattie shift her weight nervously.

“You telling me that your man is an alien?”

“Well, he’s a male, not a man. He’s not human. But yeah. Tuvo is one of the aliens. We were on a private jet when our pilot betrayed us and sent us to the ground. We were waiting for rescue when we were found.”

“Explains it then. Thought you were just unlucky find.”

“Are you saying I’m not?”

Belmira shook her head, arms uncrossing and balancing on her hips instead. “*Tres Argolas* have already made their feelings



known. They don't like the aliens. Warned us that any women trying to fuck an alien would be made an example. That's why you're here. You're going to be an example."

Hattie frowned. Rodger had been carrying a card from the Three Rings. He had sent them to the ground, probably expecting that to kill, if not just seriously injure, them. Then take up sanctuary with these people? Or maybe lead them to the plane? They had crashed relatively close to this place, considering how big the Amazon was.

"Your man... Sorry, your male," Belmira interrupted her musing. "You sure that's him? You sure he can get here?"

Hattie smiled, nodding. "Tuvo is strong. He's incredible. He's a soldier. He'll be alright."

Belmira's eyebrow rose as an enormous bang echoed through the hall outside their door. The gunshots were definitely louder, closer, now. It sounded horrible. Traumatic.

But there was no doubt in Hattie's mind that Tuvo was okay. And, funny enough, the longer the shots rang out, the more desperate they seemed, the more confident she became that he was okay.

Belmira came to stand next to her. Both of them staring at the door. Beyond, someone let out an ear-piercing scream of agony that made her wince. Belmira just cocked that eyebrow again.

"He's a really nice guy," Hattie assured her quickly. Not wanting Belmira to take one look at Tuvo and panic.

Belmira smirked, malicious joy in her expression. "If he's killing these *putas*, he's a friend in my thinking."

Hattie chuckled sheepishly.

The door slamming open made her jump. She was already smiling, expecting Tuvo-

-only to find herself staring at a pale skinned Hispanic man with wild hair, a crazed expression, and sweat pouring down his temple.

And a handgun in his violently shaking fist.

He rushed Hattie, speaking in rapid Portuguese. Hattie screamed, dropping back, not fast enough to avoid having her arm caught. The man jerked her close, shoving the gun into her belly, repeating himself now.

“I-I don’t-”

“He’s telling you to call him off,” Belmira said, stepping back, hand clenched around her plexiglass knife, eyes trained on the gun. “Call him off. You can call him off.”

He kept saying it. Stumbling over the words, his entire body shaking in fear.

Movement past the open door drew Hattie’s eyes. There was nothing there, but just looking over his shoulder was enough to set the man off.

He turned with a scream, shooting wildly into the empty hall. Bullets cracked concrete on the wall across their door. The sharp cracking of the gun made Hattie cry out, slapping her hands over her ears as she fell back.

The painful sound distracted her. She didn’t notice Belmira moving until, screaming, she was jumping on the man. Stabbing him with the plexiglass knife. He tried to fight her, his blood splattering off in arcs each time she jerked the knife free.

With a roar, he shoved her off, turning the gun on her.

Only to gasp, his back suddenly arching, eyes and mouth widening. He choked and blood flecked his lips as the gun tumbled from his suddenly limp hand, clattering to the ground.

His body jerked again, then folded. Dropping forward.

Behind him, almost impossible to see he was so well camouflaged, Tuvo’s long, blood-soaked claws remained in the air, his blue-green eyes flashing with rage.

“Tuvo!” Hattie yelled. She knew she yelled, but her ears were still ringing, she couldn’t hear herself right now.

Or Tuvo, when he rushed to her, his voice distorted in her ears.

“I’m okay,” she promised, speaking in Domtri as she sniffed, tears filling her eyes. Not from fear or the horror of seeing a man clawed to death through the back, but from relief. From the joy of seeing Tuvo here in the dim cell.

He smiled in that soft, understated way of his, taking her face in hand and running his thumbs over her cheeks, brushing away her tears. He seemed to understand that she couldn’t hear well right now because he jerked his head towards the door without another word.

Hattie nodded eagerly before gesturing to Belmira.

## Chapter 24

### *Tuvo*

She was all right. The sound of the gun discharging seemed to linger in her ears, and there were a couple bruises on her arms, but not so many that it appeared she'd been made into any kind of example.

And she was smiling. That light in her eyes was as radiant as always.

But, when he tried to get her to follow him, she gestured to another that clearly had not been similarly spared.

The dark-haired female sharing the empty room with her was breathing fast, her hand trembling on what appeared to be a crudely made knife. It, her hand, and her shirt were all coated in bright red, human blood.

But that wasn't what held his attention. Instead, he was focused on the wild, manic look in her wide, bloodshot eyes. He had seen that look in others before. It was the kind of desperate violence only born from a combination of determination, hopelessness, and pain.

She also had bruises on her body. Darker than Hattie's, all in various stages of healing.

"This is Belmira," Hattie said, her voice unnaturally loud as she tried to speak over the ringing in her ears. "Can we take her with us?"

Tuvo grunted in agreement.

The sound seemed to break Belmira out of her daze. Her eyes snapped onto his as she lifted the little knife and aimed it at him next. Hattie made a sound of dismay, rushing to talk to her in English – no doubt telling her that Tuvo was no threat.

But even before Hattie could rush through her explanation, Belmira was blinking, returning to herself as the battle fever subsided.

She said something back to Hattie that made her nod enthusiastically.

The female glared at him, obviously distrusting. She said something and Tuvo was able to capture the word 'big'. He imagined she was remarking upon his size, and he did his best to appear non-threatening even as his claws were unable to retract. He had used them so much that there was swelling around the beds again.

"Hattie." He gently touched her arm, making sure to keep his claws away from her, catching her attention. "We have to go."

She seemed to be partially listening but also reading his lips. She nodded before grabbing Belmira's hand and tugging.

Tuvo couldn't help himself, he snarled.

Belmira's knife was up again, and she dropped into a crouch. Hattie flinched back, looking at him in surprise.

He tried to stop the growl, but he couldn't silence himself any more than he could look away from Hattie's hand holding Belmira's.

And while he knew that wasn't an intimate act among humans, it didn't change what he felt about it from his own culture. He didn't care if Hattie wasn't attracted to other females, no one should be holding her hand but him.

It seemed to take her a second to understand. She laughed sheepishly, releasing Belmira's hand before rushing to calm her down.

The moment she let go, Tuvo was able to wrangle himself back under control. But he very quickly took hold of her hand instead and pulled her close.

Belmira watched it, her expression fading from wary to amused. Hattie was smiling dreamily as she touched his arm, leaning against him. She enjoyed his proprietary claim, and

her joy over his possessiveness made him squeeze her hand just a bit tighter. So small in his fist

“You two need to stay close to me. I think most of those remaining ran away, but there might still be some hiding.”

Hattie passed the information on, and Belmira nodded even as she lifted her knife – ready to defend herself.

Tuvo, reluctantly, released Hattie’s hand and was the first to step out of the room. Cautiously, in case there were men out there with guns just waiting for him to emerge.

But there was no one. Well, there was a body, but Tuvo had already dealt with him – eviscerated and dead.

When he motioned the females forward, he realized that he should have moved the corpse. Both of them gasped and retreated. Belmira said something that Hattie responded to in a conciliatory tone – though she looked uneasy herself.

Around the next corner, when Tuvo went first to check it out, he saw another body and this time jogged forward to drag it into a nearby room to spare them the sight. When they followed, they grimaced at the trail of blood but didn’t seem so horrified.

Reversing their direction back through his carnage, he was acutely aware of exactly how many males he had killed. He didn’t regret taking their lives, but each time he had to stop the females to hide another eviscerated corpse from their sight, he became more aware of their aversion to violence.

What would Hattie think? She certainly didn’t seem pleased as she tried to step around the blood and viscera his claws had ripped free. His female was sweet and kind – and he adored that about her. How would she tolerate this?

There was only so much he could worry about right now, however. Her safety came first, and he didn’t know if she was safe here.

And he didn’t have much left in him. He was running on pure adrenaline and determination. But the pain, the blood loss, it was starting to overcome even that. But he forced it down. Away. He focused on the task immediately in front of him.

Most of that focus was on searching out other threats. The brightly lit compound was empty but for the dead men – getting more numerous the closer he got to the entrance. Back when their confidence in their superior firepower sent their numbers at him en masse. Before they started fleeing, rather than face an enemy they couldn't see that needed no weapon.

The door to the outside was still wide open; the grounds flooded with light. But when he poked his head out, the tower no longer had anyone in it. Both vehicles that had been parked out front were gone, and the gates were open.

He stepped out cautiously, ready to move, but no shots rang out.

“Is it safe?” Hattie asked from the entrance.

“I think so,” Tuvo said as Belmira walked outside, a dazed expression on her face. The sort of expression someone wore when seeing the sky for the first time in too long.

The female took in a shuddering breath, wavering on her feet. Hattie rushed forward and took hold of her shoulders, steadying her, but Belmira shook her head and reassured her with a smile.

“Is she alright?” Tuvo asked.

Hattie asked and, after Belmira answered, responded, “She says she's okay. It's just been a while since she had fresh air. She can keep going.”

Tuvo grunted and directed them to follow him. He was relatively certain now that the compound had been abandoned, but he was still careful when he approached the gates and stepped out into the dark forest. He immediately guided the females off the road and into the trees, not wanting to risk walking out in the open.

“I need to get Keith,” he said gesturing for the females to walk ahead of him so that he could keep them in his sights.

“You brought Keith with you?”

“I hardly had a choice. I left him up a tree though.”

Hattie started laughing, prompting Belmira to ask what he said. Tuvo didn't pay much attention to their soft chatter as he tracked down the tree Keith was in. The moment the human male spotted them, like a fool, he called out – no doubt demanding to be brought down.

Before Hattie could even translate, he was climbing up to fetch him. He didn't seem grateful that Tuvo had made sure he was safe, though he did appear relieved that Hattie was back and okay.

Tuvo looked over the group of humans as they chatted quietly. Checking on each other, introducing one another, trying to figure out what they should do next.

They could return to the plane, wait for rescue as they had before. But they had already come this far. Keith had most of their supplies in the bag on his back that had once been Rodger's and Hattie's purse that was resting on his hip, and there was a road not far away. A road had to lead somewhere.

"Tuvo," Hattie called his name gently, catching his attention. "Belmira says that we're welcome to come to her village. Her family will offer us a safe place to stay."

"Is it far?"

"She says that if we follow this road, we can find a footpath through the trees that will take us there. She doesn't know how far since she came here in a jeep, but if we walk that way, she'll know the footpath, and she says that can be crossed in about half a day."

"Do they have a comm there?"

Hattie passed on the question then returned with the answer, "No phone, she says. But the nearest town is within a few days walk, and they have phones."

Tuvo grunted in agreement. "Then, we'll go there. Thank you, female."

Belmira couldn't understand his words, but she gave a half smile before nodding once.



After a bit more discussion, they agreed to hike through the darkened woods along the road without being on it before finding a place to stop later. It was dark and traversing the wilds at night was dangerous, but remaining this close to the compound was even more so. Tuvo was convinced no one was left in the building, but he couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't come back, and in greater numbers, so it was better to get away while they had a chance.

Keith took the lead, popping his chest out like he was important for determining their direction – though the road was right there beyond the trees, guiding them. He just had to follow it. Still, if it made him feel important to go first, Tuvo was just glad he was being useful.

Behind him was Belmira, still clutching her handmade knife close.

Behind her was Hattie. She looked tired, but she kept walking forward despite the long, harrowing day she had experienced. Every so often, she would look back over her shoulder, checking to make sure Tuvo was still there.

Because he was bringing up the rear. Keeping track of his little group of humans. Making sure they were safe. That Hattie was safe. He was acutely aware of the dangers of the forest he had come to know well after hunting in it for days, and he was keeping a lookout for a potential spot for them to camp out safely to avoid those dangers.

And his entire body was throbbing with agony as his adrenaline faded and he became fully aware of just how much damage he had sustained.

## Chapter 25

### *Hattie*

Morning came with a yawn and a stretch. Hattie turned over on the ground and stared up at the high canopy, the events of last night slowly coming back to her.

The place they had chosen to sleep was at the base of one of the forest giants, in a little area made by the roots curling around, like the tree was trying to hug them. It provided a sense of safety since, thanks to those tall roots, they couldn't be seen without a person coming all the way around.

Keith had very chivalrously offered their little tent to Belmira. She was a girl that didn't know him, so he was doing his full charming act. Belmira accepted the tent, but she curled up inside it with the zipper open so she could escape in a second if need be.

Tuvo had cut a bunch of fern leaves to make a bed for her, himself, and Keith. Keith, naturally, made his bed near Belmira's tent – going on about keeping a lookout for her. Belmira seemed completely unimpressed.

Tuvo had put his back to the tree, his fern bedding under him, sitting up, so he could look out over the others and make sure nothing approached. Hattie had laid her fern bed beside him, not directly in front so she wouldn't be in the way if he had to jump up, but her head was near the thigh of his crossed legs – close enough to touch if she wanted.

He had still been awake when she fell asleep. Keeping watch. She told him to wake her in a few hours when he wanted to sleep so she could take a turn, but it was morning now and he definitely hadn't done that.

She lifted her eyes and grinned to see Tuvo sleeping. He hadn't even laid down. His chin was resting on his chest. His body so well concealed, if she didn't know he was there, she might think he was just an unusually shaped bump on the tree. The scarring over his body, though it disrupted the smoothness of his camouflage, blended him in. Which, she supposed, once must have been helpful when the domini really had been living wild and free in the trees. Tuvo was just keeping up an ancient tradition that the others had abandoned.

Sitting up, yawning again, she checked on the others. Belmira was still curled up, her hand clenched tight around that blood encrusted knife like a child would their teddy bear. Keith was splayed out in front of her, mouth open, drool trickling out. Deeply asleep, completely unconcerned about any potential dangers around them.

Hattie wasn't used to being the first person to wake up. Usually, she slept later than everyone. But the hard ground wasn't exactly comfortable, and she had fallen asleep with her head on her arm and now her shoulder was sore.

She rotated it as she looked back at Tuvo. She grimaced, imagining the crick he would have in his neck from sleeping that way.

Grinning, she crawled towards him. Going for stealthy. Not exactly succeeding – her fern leaves shuffled noisily under her – but he didn't wake up. Poor guy must be tired. He always woke before her, easy and fast.

Sitting up on her knees, she leaned over her his thigh and kissed his cheek.

She pulled back quickly, grinning. Ready for his head to jerk up and look around, ready for a threat, only to see her and for his face to soften. She was looking forward to it.

But it didn't happen.

Cocking her head, she tried again. Lingering this time. Making an exaggerated kissing sound as she pressed her puckered lips to his heated cheek.

Fear shot through her as she sat back. Her hand grabbed his face this time. With her palm, then the back of her hand. He was burning up.

“Tuvo?” She lifted his head, heart pounding.

He groaned, face pinched in pain. Not asleep. Unconscious.

“Tuvo!” She patted his cheek. Trying to bring him around. His eyes were moving around under his lids, but he wasn’t responding to her.

Her call had woken Belmira who was immediately up and out of the tent, ready to stab anyone with a wild look in her eyes.

Hattie barely even spared her a glance as she pulled at Tuvo, trying to lay him down. She knew he had been shot in the back. She had to check his wounds. Terrified they were infected. They didn’t have medicine. Would human medicine even work on him?

But he was *heavy*. His muscular body outweighed her by at least two times and, even straining, she couldn’t dislodge him from his place.

Then, Belmira was there, on his other side, helping to push him over. The two of them together were just strong enough to lay him out on his stomach. They tried to protect his head but couldn’t stop his body from hitting hard. He grunted, teeth gritted.

His back was *dark*. He wasn’t at all camouflaged there. He was bruised. The multitude of bullet holes were scabbed shut, but dried blood surrounded the closed wounds.

Hattie hadn’t seen the extent of the damage before she had been dragged away from him. And he hadn’t acted like he was hurt at all when he came to get them. Now he was burning up, no doubt suffering from blood loss, and his entire backside was covered in holes.

Belmira mumbled some phrase of amazement in Portuguese before looking at Hattie. “How did he survive this?”

Hattie gave her a shaky smile. “He’s strong. He’ll be okay.”

Belmira's face twisted with disbelief, but Hattie only smiled wider, even though it hurt.

"He *will*. We, er, might have to stay here for a bit though. Give him a chance to heal."

Belmira said nothing for a long moment before nodding. "Okay. I'm going to see if I can collect water or some food. You should make a tarp out of the tent. It's going to rain on him otherwise."

Hattie nodded and the two of them split up.

Belmira vanished into the underbrush, taking her knife and the pot that Keith had brought in his backpack to collect water.

Hattie grabbed her alien knife and got to work breaking down the tent. Tuvo wouldn't fit in it even if they could get him in there. His huge body wouldn't curl up in the single person space. But she could use the fabric and the poles and some fern leaves to make a basic lean-to.

As she was working, Keith woke up. He saw her destroying the tent and made a sound of protest before yelling at her for wasting their supplies.

Tuvo didn't wake up, but he did start growling. Unconscious, but still reflexively ready to defend her against any threat.

That was when Keith finally noticed him laid out beside Hattie. He didn't help her after that, but he at least kept his mouth shut. He went and sat down somewhere, saying he was keeping watch. It seemed more like he was just staring into the abyss. Hattie didn't really care because, at least, he wasn't being detrimental.

Belmira returned later that evening, carrying a variety of scavenged things – roots and mushrooms and a single squash – the pot was still empty. She hadn't found water.

Belmira helped her set up the shelter over Tuvo just in time for the skies to open. Belmira set out the pot and they took turns drinking through the survival straw whenever it got full. Trying to collect as much as possible since it wouldn't rain again until tomorrow.

Hattie used rocks to grind some of mushrooms and a bit of the squash into a paste. She used the alien knife to cut open one of the many, partially sealed wounds on her arm back open and let the blood mix with the mash. She knew it was an aphrodisiac to him, but he needed the nutrition to regain his strength, and, without him, they couldn't hunt anything fresh.

After using the rainwater to clean his back, they rolled him over so she could feed him the mash. It was a long, slow process.

Days passed that way. The first was bad, but the second was the worst. He was shivering and twitching and sweating and Hattie was terrified he wouldn't wake up. They used the dried jaguar skin Keith had rolled up in the backpack as a blanket, but there was nothing they could give him as he fought through the fever on his own.

Hattie didn't sleep at all that night. She kept up a constant vigil on Tuvo. Terrified that he might stop breathing if she turned her eyes away for even a second. Luckily, Belmira was comfortable in the forest. She took care of foraging food and keeping away bugs and snakes. Keith sometimes helped her, sometimes kept watch. It was only Hattie who tended Tuvo.

The dawning of the third day brought with it a break in his fever. He stopped shaking but started sweating and thrashing. Hattie removed the jaguar skin and instead focused on wiping the sweat away from his brow.

She was exhausted. Her vision was blurry, her body was shaking, but he wasn't better yet. She couldn't sleep if he wasn't better.

He kind of came around that night. Not really fully awake, but enough that he could eat the mash and drink some water. Since he was coming around, Hattie didn't give him anymore of her blood. The last thing she needed was *his* blood traveling south and away from his brain if he was awake enough for it to affect him.

She struggled against sleeping that night as well. She sat up so she wasn't tempted to drift away. Every time she tried, her body would slump forward suddenly, waking her up again.

She couldn't sleep. He wasn't awake yet. He had stopped shaking. He looked like he was actually resting, but she couldn't be sure. She didn't want to risk it.

She couldn't sleep.

She couldn't... sleep...

...couldn't...

\*\*\*

It was the slow, weighted stroking of her head that woke her up.

Prying apart her eyes was like trying to lift a hundred pounds. Heavy and tiring. She didn't want to wake up. Just a few more... hours. It was still dark. She should sleep.

Letting out a long breath, she relaxed, curling her legs in tighter to the source of warmth she was leaning against. That sturdy, strong rock. Breathing slowly. Stroking her hair.

She gasped, wide awake all at once. Sitting up quickly, she lifted her head from Tuvo's chest and upset the hand he had on her head. He looked at her with a calm expression. But he was *looking* at her. Not the glassy, sightless eyes of the last few days.

"Tuvo?" She whispered, barely audible under the loud forest at night.

He gave her a very soft smile. "I'm here, *vi kyrya*."

Her lip trembled and she tried, very hard, to hold back the tears. But she failed almost immediately, collapsing over him, trying to hug his huge chest with her whole body as he wrapped his arm around and up her back and resumed slowly petting her.

"I'm okay, Hattie," he promised. "Don't worry yourself like this."

"I was so scared!"

"I know."

"I thought I was going to lose you."

“I know.”

“Don’t you ever do that again!”

“I’m sorry.”

She hiccupped against his chest, curling even tighter against his side. He held and caressed her as she tried to cry quietly against him. She knew that Keith wasn’t going to wake up, but she didn’t want to bother Belmira who woke up on a hair trigger.

She eventually cried herself out until she was just shuddering and hiccupping against him. But once the tears stopped flowing, he sat up.

“Hey, no,” she tried to gently push him back. For all the good it did. She couldn’t even lower him gently to the ground when pushing him over. She definitely couldn’t move him if he wasn’t willing to move.

Tuvo stood like he was stiff, turning his neck from side to side. He stretched his entire body before crouching and looking at her over his shoulder.

She bit her lip, staring at his back. It was too dark for her to see, but she knew how it looked just a few nights ago. She didn’t want to strain his wounds.

“I’m fine, Hattie,” he promised. “Trust me.”

Sniffing, she cautiously approached and put her arms around his neck. The moment she was secure, he stood and began climbing the tree. Slower than usual, his muscles straining a bit, but his movements were sure and steady as he took them up to the lowest branches.

This tree had something like a hollow at the top, right above one of the branches. It made a secure place for him to sit, putting her in his lap, so he could hold and snuggle her.

“Is your back okay?” Hattie asked, worrying. This high up, she could see him better in the moonlight. But only his eyes. The rest of his body was disappearing into the tree.

“The day I can’t climb is the day you should just lay me to rest with my ancestors,” he said, grumbling at her lack of faith in



him.

She laughed weakly, resting her head down on his shoulder. “You should have told me you were hurt.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. We couldn’t stop any sooner.”

“Still. I could have helped you.”

His lips pressed against her head. A sweet kiss. “The best thing you can ever do to help me is keep yourself safe. How long have I been out?”

“A few days. Belmira has been taking care of us. She lives in this forest.”

He hummed in approval. “She is a strong female. Very capable.”

Hattie stiffened in his arms. “Yeah. She’s great.”

He chuckled. “What is that tone? And don’t tell me you’re fine.”

“Nothing.”

“Ah. Hattie.” He pushed her up so he could look in her stubbornly set face. “I am a dense male. I’m aware of it. But even I’m not dense enough to believe that.”

“I’m fine.” She winced when she realized what she said. His three, gleaming eyes just stared at her through the darkness. Silently demanding a proper answer. She sighed, “It’s really nothing. Just... Belmira really is incredible.”

“Mm-hm.”

She shifted her weight on his lap. “She’s pretty. And strong. So strong. She’s been through so much. I don’t think I could have survived in her place. I don’t think I could have survived the way she did after... everything.”

“Ah. I see.” Tuvo chuckled, bringing her back and kissing the top of her head. “My admiration of her does not diminish my devotion to you. There’s nothing to be jealous of, *vi kyrya*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Hm?”

“*Kiry*a. That’s ancient Domtri. What does it mean?”

He chuckled.

“What?”

“Your pronunciation.”

“I said it just the way you did! *Kiry*a.”

“*Kyry*a.”

“I said it the exact same way,” she pouted, knowing that wasn’t true. He said it with a special growl in his chest that she simply couldn’t replicate. “What’s it mean?”

His hand trailed down her back to cup her bottom. Squeezing with a growl of approval. “It means heart.”

“Aw, you’re calling me your heart?” She giggled, nuzzling into him. Then paused. “Wait. Ancient Domtri isn’t that simple. What else does it mean?”

“Well, I’m not a scholar, so I’m sure it has lots of meanings I don’t know.” He jerked her up, grinding her down against his cock. “But aside from my heart, it means something like vitality. Not the thing that’s your reason for living, but the only reason you *are* alive.”

Hattie sat up, staring at him in shock.

“What?”

“That was just... so romantic. So sweet.” She sniffed again, laughing. “I can’t... No one’s ever said something like that to me before.”

“I would hope not. I don’t want to share you.”

She laughed again, overwhelming relief and boundless joy driving her as she grabbed his face and eagerly kissed him. Happy he was okay again. Astounded by the way he thought of her. That nickname hadn’t come from nowhere. She *meant* something to him.

“Hattie?” He called her name gently through the kiss.

“Mm?”

“Were you feeding me your blood?”

She pulled back, still holding his face, biting her lip nervously. “Was that okay? I know domini don’t like drinking the blood of people who aren’t their enemies, but I figured it was an emergency and I couldn’t get you to swallow one of your pills and you needed your strength, so I thought-”

“Hattie, breathe,” he interjected when her rambling just kept going.

“Sorry,” she shrunk back.

“I’m not upset.” He hesitated, frowning as he took her wrist and pulled her arm back so he could see the cut she kept opening to drain her blood. “Well, that’s not true. I’m upset that you were forced to do it. That you had to cut yourself open. But I’m grateful. Thank you for taking care of me, *vi kyrya*.”

The words washed over her like sinking into a warm, comfortable bath. “No, thank you. Tuvo. You’ve taken much better care of me. A little blood was nothing. But how did you know?”

“I wasn’t really conscious, but I was sort of aware sometimes. And there was something you kept giving me that was... well, I’m not sure how to describe it. But it was definitely blood.”

Grinning, she twisted her wrist in his grip. “Want to get a proper taste?”

His eyes flashed in the moonlight. “Have you missed me that much, *kyrya*?”

She licked her lips. Eager for him to taste her. To see what he was like when he was high off her. But then reality came back, and she slumped.

“We can’t. You just woke up. You need rest.”

She squeaked when he caught her around the waist and yanked her up, splaying her across his chest, balancing her knees on his thighs. His tail wrapped around one of her ankles, as though trying to keep her there.

Tuvo reached between them and pulled at the button of her jeans and, the moment he had it popped, he was yanking her

jeans down.

“The day I can’t please you is also the day you should lay me to rest with my ancestors,” he said, growling as he thrust his fingers between her legs from behind.

“Wait, Tuv-ugh!”

Her back arched as he stroked his finger over her clit. The reaction made him chuckle.

“You really have missed me. Let me see how much this little cunt has been yearning for my attention, hm?”

She bit her lip, groaning as his finger pressed at her entrance. She wasn’t fully wet yet, and she tensed, ready for him to shove the digit in before she was ready.

But that’s not what happened. Instead, he tested her, getting the tip of his finger wet, before pulling it out returning to circling her clit. While he did so, his thumb began testing her opening. Slow stroking in and out of her, going deeper and deeper as his rotating finger drew more wetness from her hole.

Panting, whimpering, trying to stifle her moans, Hattie clenched at his shoulders as her head fell back and she stared up at the moon. Dazzled and unseeing as she focused entirely on his huge thumb curling up and pressing against her G-spot.

She thrashed against him as his fingers pinched, his thumb pressing down as his long finger pressed up, rubbing vigorously against her entire clitoris.

A brief scream was quickly silenced by her slapping her own hand over her mouth. Tuvo didn’t let up, massaging both sides of her clit, from the in- and outside, through her orgasm until she was nearly sobbing and thrashing against him, too sensitive to handle it anymore.

He chuckled as he finally released her, pulling his thumb free.

Panting, she collapsed over him. Smiling again. She started to push herself up, eager to *finally* return the favor-

-until she felt pressure at her entrance.

She hissed, back arching again.

“Easy,” Tuvo said, pressing in further. “Let me stretch you out, *vi kyrya*. Take it.”

Three. That was definitely three fingers he was slowly pressing into her. Tapered together at the tips, they weren't much bigger than just two, but as he got deeper and deeper, her pussy had to stretch further and further.

Just like his thumb before, he worked slowly. Moving in and out. Pushing forward just a bit more every time he thrust them in.

He muttered something under his breath. An exclamation of surprise in ancient Domtri as he pressed in to the knuckle.

“You took it,” he said, rubbing her back. “How do you feel?”

Hattie grimaced, clenching her pelvic muscles. Tightening them around his fingers, relaxing, then doing it again. Trying to open herself around him. Around the second time, she realized that each time she relaxed, he spread his fingers apart. Trying to help stretch her further.

“H-How much more until I can take your cock?” She finally asked.

He chuckled. “I think... you might actually be able to do it.”

“Right now?”

“Easy. Not right now,” he pet her back. “But if you can stretch this far...”

His words trailed off, the unspoken promise making her shiver with anticipation.

But she could only focus on that for a few seconds because, at that moment, he began pounding her with his fingers. Fast and wet and ruthless. Another short cry broke out. She covered her mouth with both hands as he brought her to a quick and merciless climax.

Tensing and shaking over him, he refused to stop. She smacked his shoulders, but he tightened his grip around her waist, keeping her still as he finger blasted her to oblivion.

Her next cry was completely unmuffled. She grabbed onto him, nails digging into his skin, as she thrashed.

He finally yanked his fingers free, and she collapsed, breathing fast, heart pounding, body twitching as her climax kept zapping through her. As merciless as he had been.

Tuvo chuckled, slowly lowering her down so she was laid out on his chest and her legs dangled, weak and trembling.

“Go back to sleep,” he ordered, kissing her temple.

No. She had to reciprocate.

But she didn't have the strength to lift her arms. And after the three mind blowing orgasms, her exhausted body and mind couldn't stay conscious any longer. Too long without sleep, too long worrying, caught up to her, and she passed out right there against him.

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The next morning, when Tuvo climbed them out of the tree, Belmira was already awake, chewing on one of the roots they hadn't eaten last night. Keith was still asleep, his body splayed out like a starfish, mouth all the way open and snoring.

Tuvo set Hattie back on her feet and kissed her head. “I'm going to check around the area. Make sure we're still safe. Hunt something for breakfast.”

“Okay. We'll start a fire.”

“Good, I'll be back.”

“Bye,” she waved him off as he turned and jogged into the jungle.

Doing so, she got her first look at his back. She could still see the half-closed marks peppering his skin, scabs hardened and pulling at their edges. The bruising had faded a bit, allowing his skin to camouflage again, but there was a dark duskiness to them. He moved stiffly, but he had been laying on the hard ground for a few days, so that could be understood.

But she still worried as she watched him disappear into the underbrush.

“So,” Belmira started after he had vanished. “That’s one of the aliens, hm?”

“Yeah.” Hattie smiled, joining her in the shade of the lean-to. Now that Tuvo wasn’t lying in it, there was plenty of room for them to stretch out.

“Bigger than I expected.”

“That’s mostly Tuvo. The others are big, but not as big as him.”

“He has a tail.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Sounds like he knows how to fuck too.”

Hattie’s face flamed as she sat up, stiff and uncertain.

What would Belmira think? Not every human was okay with cross species romance. And what did she even say? Deny it completely? Say that they didn’t actually go all the way? Agree? What if she reacted badly?

“Relax,” Belmira chuckled. “I’m no judge. And not if he’s as good as you made it sound. Kind of jealous.”

“Er, will your village...” She hesitated, uncertain.

“My family is good. They’ll be shocked. But when we heard of aliens, didn’t really care. It wasn’t going to affect us. If they do have a problem, I’ll deal with it. He saved my life. I can offer you a bed. Even if you want to share it.”

Hattie gave her a grateful smile. “He does know how to fuck. And that was just his fingers.”

“All that over only fingers?” Belmira laughed. “I should have my man ask for tips. Mind translating?”

Hattie laughed. “Actually, no. Come on, we need to make a fire. He’s going hunting.”

“Mm, fresh meat sounds delicious. What about him?” Belmira looked at Keith as he scratched his balls in his sleep.

“Let him keep watch,” Hattie said, prompting more laughter as the two of them went about collecting twigs and fallen

branches to burn.



## Chapter 26

### *Tuvo*

Belmira led the way into her village. After a few days walking through the forest – first along the road and then down the small footpath – they finally arrived. He was grateful. Hattie was clearly getting tired. Things had been hard on her since she had been taken and he wanted to give her a proper chance to rest.

But he was concerned about the reaction they would elicit from these people. He kept one hand on Hattie's lower back, ready to grab her and run if necessary.

However, he wasn't even the first one the people noticed.

A woman was walking down a dirt road, carrying a basket in her arms, yawning as though bored, when she caught sight of them. Of Belmira. She screamed, dropping her load and running to her, skirt flying, arms open.

Belmira returned her cry and rushed to hug her in turn while Tuvo, Hattie, and Keith hung back. The initial scream had alerted others in the village. Their heads poked out of doors and windows of wooden, thatched roof homes built up on stilts. More cries rang out. In moments, Belmira was surrounded by people all rushing to hug and touch and kiss her.

As she was being mobbed, someone finally noticed the three of them. Him, more specifically. The young male's eyes widened as he stepped back. He frantically got the attention of the female beside him without looking away.

Slowly, as people had their attention drawn his way, more and more eyes turned to stare – wide and pale and shocked.

Belmira was finally made aware of everyone's surprise. She pulled herself free from the arms of the older female who held her and walked back to them. He heard her saying each of their names, introducing them to her village.

They just continued to stare.

Belmira continued. Speaking fervently.

"She's telling them we mean no harm," Hattie translated for him. "That you saved her life. And that you're one of the aliens and our jet crashed in the woods. And that we saved her."

From the awestruck crowd, two people emerged. Tuvo didn't need to be told that Belmira was related to them – their daughter, if he had to guess by their ages.

The male shared Belmira's dark hair and skin. But his was weathered and leathery with deep set wrinkles from the scowl that was no doubt permanently on his face. His clothes were old and well worn, a hat on his head shielding his eyes from the sun.

The female's hair was also dark, but it was streaked with gray. She shared the same face shape and features with Belmira, but they were older and weathered with a few darkened spots along her cheek that didn't really resemble Hattie's freckles – they were bigger and more irregular. She didn't have the same scowl lines as her mate, but her eyes had lines at the corners that no doubt formed from years of narrowing them like she did towards him now.

Hattie touched his arm, bringing his attention to her, but she wasn't looking at him. Belmira was saying something, pointing to the older couple.

"This is Inacio and Marica," Hattie said, gesturing to the male then the female. "This village is called Brilhar. They're Belmira's parents."

"You saved my daughter?" The male asked through Hattie's translation.

Tuvo inclined his head forward in a brief, human yes.

The couple continued to look at him. As though not quite sure what to believe. Belmira said something, nodding her head.

The female's expression relaxed, and the male's head tilted back, observing him from a new angle that did nothing to soften his features but did open them.

"You're welcome here," Hattie translated for Inacio. "Come and be safe."

Tuvo checked with Hattie. Making sure it was all right with her. She nodded, smiling. He turned back to the couple and nodded once.

That seemed to break some sort of barrier. Immediately, they were swarmed by the people. All of them now smiling, chattering in their lyrical human language. They pushed the three of them forward, guiding them into the village.

From every side, Tuvo felt hands touching him. Males and females, young and old, all of them brushing their hands against him. Like they were fascinated with his skin. He couldn't blame them since it was so different. So long as Hattie was okay with it, they didn't bother him.

And his female certainly didn't seem to mind. She beamed around at all the people, basking in their attention. Glowing in their joy. Keith kept trying to dodge the males, though he did puff his chest out for the females.

They were separated as they reached the first house. Hattie and Belmira went off with the other females as Tuvo and a suddenly dejected looking Keith went along with the males.

It became apparent why very soon after. The two of them were brought to a shallow stream and offered supplies to bathe. Some of the other males got in the water and showed them how to do it. Tuvo nodded his gratitude as he clawed off his jean shorts. They were well and truly useless at this point. Filthy, flimsy, with a hole right in the ass where a bullet had caught him.

He tossed the fabric onto the shore and got to work washing.

He had just crouched with the bucket he had been given to fill and began splashing it over his head and body, trying to get the

majority of the grime off him before he tried to use soap, when he caught sight of Keith.

The male was staring at him. Wide eyed. Disbelieving. His own water bucket in hand.

Tuvo stared back.

Keith's eyes darted up, caught his gaze, then quickly turned away. Mumbling something as he suddenly started standing strangely. Like he was trying to hide. Though why he was suddenly stricken with modesty when none of the other males were was beyond Tuvo.

Ignoring him, he returned to washing.

It took multiple rounds for him to get fully clean. He had some help from Inacio getting the last of the blood off his back and another male took the opportunity to rinse his hair as he was crouched down.

Working together, they got him clean so that when he finally stepped from the stream, he felt less like a wild man and more like a proper person. He was offered a towel that he took gratefully, running it over his body as Keith followed after him. Still standing oddly.

Why was he doing that? What was he doing with his hand?

Tuvo rubbed the towel over his hair, drying off the strands, as he tried to figure it out. It took until someone approached him with clothes to realize what he was doing.

He was hiding his cock. Refusing to look at Tuvo after having been caught staring at him in shocked amazement.

He was feeling *inadequate*.

Tuvo couldn't help but smirk. The size of his cock was a detriment when it came to Hattie, but he couldn't deny a petty amount of pleasure at knowing he made Keith feel lesser. Worthless male didn't deserve Hattie.

The clothing that was brought to him was a simple piece of fabric. The other humans were wearing shirts and jeans and sandals, but he understood without needing the apologetic look

from Inacio as he offered the wrap to know that they had nothing that would fit him.

He took the wrap with a grunt of thanks and fastened it around his waist using a pin Inacio offered.

Keith, on the other hand, was offered proper clothes. They were a bit big on him but, like Tuvo, he just appeared relieved to be clean and not wearing the same rags they had for days.

The two of them were led back into the village proper by the other males, all of them still chatting around him, seemingly unconcerned that he couldn't understand.

Brilhar wasn't the smallest village Tuvo had seen in his career. There were two layers of houses built in a circle around a central area, the dirt clear and beaten down by generations of feet having walked and lived in this place. The homes were simple – wood with tiny netting in the windows instead of glass and a thatch roof. They were built on stilts, keeping them off the ground up to about his waist with a short staircase leading into them.

The central area was already full of people. The older and youngest females had gathered, and they were cooking together out in the circle. One of them had gotten ahold of their bag of supplies and she had pulled out the jaguar skin and everyone was mumbling over it before it disappeared into the crowd.

Tuvo looked over their heads, searching for Hattie or Belmira – the latter more likely to spot since his female was so tiny.

But she wasn't there. He didn't worry, but he did keep a lookout as he and Keith were brought over to a rug laid out over the dirt and offered a seat. Inacio crossed his legs beside them and said something to Tuvo in his deep, gravelly voice.

Tuvo didn't understand his words, but he did understand his meaning.

Hattie was safe. They were going to wait for her here.

## Chapter 27

### *Hattie*

Giggling, laughing, Hattie and the other young women of the village were helping each other get dressed. Not just putting on clothes but dressing up.

“There is going to be a feast,” Belmira explained as she braided beads into Hattie’s hair. “We get too much when there’s a feast.”

“To celebrate you returning?” Hattie asked, stroking the flower Belmira was having her hold as she played with her hair.

“And to thank you.”

“You mean, Tuvo. He did everything. I owe you more than you owe me.” Hattie chuckled, then beamed when one of the other girls brought her a pot of red lip paint. One of the girls already had a red finger and offered it to her.

Hattie nodded and tilted her head as much as she could without disturbing Belmira so the other girl could pat it against her lips. Not everyone in the village spoke English. Only those who frequented the city bothered to learn – which was a minority. But those who could speak English combined with non-verbal communication and they were understanding each other just fine.

Hattie had been given a simple dress – a body sheath that wrapped around her and was kept in place with a brass pin. The other girls had traded their jeans and shirts for similar dresses, or skirts and tube tops. The dresses themselves were plain, but they were accented with beaded jewelry and belts and headbands and sandals.

Hattie had her own pretty sandals and necklaces and bracelets given to her by the others. Belmira took the flower and braided it into the end of her hair as one of the other girls came back in. She made an announcement that made the other girls break out into excited titters.

“What did she say?”

Belmira laughed as she came to sit beside her, flicking her face with the end of her braid. “The men have returned from washing.”

“They’ve still been washing?” Hattie snickered. They had finished a long time ago.

“Tuvo is huge, and he was very dirty. And apparently *very* well endowed.”

More giggles broke out as Hattie grinned. She could only grin as she accepted the various congratulations and remarks from the others. That was her male, big and glorious. She couldn’t help but be proud.

“We’ll have a place ready for you to sleep before it’s time for bed,” Belmira promised with a knowing look that made Hattie grin.

They were freshly cleaned and safe. She was dressed up and felt so pretty. If it was going to happen, she wanted it to happen tonight.

All the girls, looking pretty in their beads and flowers, left the building they had gathered in. Hattie was pretty sure it was a public building just based on how impersonal it was – and made their way to the center of the village.

Immediately, she was on the lookout for Tuvo.

Everyone had gathered. The young women were the only ones who went off to dress up. The guys had dressed up at the stream – though not nearly so elaborately. They were still puffing out their chests and approaching the women as they dissolved into the crowd.

Belmira kept hold of Hattie’s arm and tugged her forward like she knew exactly where she wanted to be.

The crowd parted and, suddenly, Tuvo was there. Seated on a rug on the ground, leaning back on one hand, legs crossed. Wearing what appeared to be a dress, similar to hers, but bound around his waist like a towel. It was probably the only thing that fit him.

He was beside Inacio who was explaining something to him with his hands. Tuvo appeared to be paying close attention, trying to decipher what he was saying without a translator.

Right until he saw her out of the corner of his vision. Immediately, all three eyes snapped onto her as his entire body tensed. She couldn't help but smile, rocking her hips with each step, as she approached and slid onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He smiled at her.

"You're extra pretty tonight," he said by way of greeting, squeezing her hip appreciatively.

She grinned. "You as well. Love your kilt."

"I think it looks rather handsome," he said, no shame at all, making her laugh.

"Very handsome," she agreed, nuzzling her nose along his. "What were you and Inacio talking about?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

Hattie looked at Belmira's father. She knew just from walking into the village that he spoke English, but Belmira's mother did not. His accent was thicker than Belmira's, but she could still understand him.

"What were you trying to tell Tuvo?" She asked as Belmira took a seat beside him. She had managed to find one of the young men and brought him back with her. They were holding hands and Belmira was leaning into his side with the most peaceful expression Hattie had ever seen her wear.

"I was asking him to tell us what happened," Inacio said. "I wanted to hear the story. He does not speak English well."

"Yeah. He's still learning," Hattie smiled at him, running her fingers through Tuvo's hair at the nape of his neck. "I can tell



you what happened, if you like.”

Inacio nodded and gestured for her to do so.

After a moment’s hesitation, she started with Rodger flying them here instead of back to America. How he had crashed the plane, but his escape attempt had been thwarted by Keith.

Mentioning him suddenly brought her ex back to the forefront of Hattie’s mind. She found him bragging to a bunch of the guys, posing for some of the women. None of whom seemed to care overly much for his grandiosity.

Turning away, she continued the story of how they had survived the fall, living in the forest, and being ambushed by the Three Rings.

“It sounds like this Rodger had a deal with them of some kind,” Inacio said solemnly, staring out over his people. “*Tres Argolas* have been a plague upon my people for many years now. They come through and take our women. They threaten us. Demand money we don’t have. All we want is to live a peaceful life, but that is an insult to them.”

“Belmira said they were... human traffickers.”

“Yes,” Inacio’s lip curled in disgust. “Worst type of men. Not men at all. Monsters. When Belmira went missing, it destroyed me. I knew what they did and the thought of my daughter... I cannot repay my debt to you for this.”

“There’s no debt,” Hattie assured him. “Tuvo was happy to help. And she helped me.”

Inacio nodded his head once with a severe expression. “The three of you are welcome to rest and relax here.”

After Hattie translated for Tuvo, he asked, “Can we make it to the city somehow?”

Inacio nodded. “It’s a two-day journey to the city. And it’s on foot. We’ll need some time to prepare. We aren’t ready to go now. But when we are, some of our youth will escort you.”

“Thank you,” Hattie smile. “That means a lot to us.”

“It’s the least we can do. Don’t think about it again tonight. Relax. Enjoy yourself. Feast. We’re happy and honored to have you as our guests.”

As he spoke, Marica was approaching with a huge serving plate in her arms. It was laden with juicy, steaming, freshly cooked meat.

The sight of it made Hattie grimace. She hadn’t told them about Tuvo’s dietary needs.

Marica noticed her expression before she could hide it and asked her husband a question.

“Do you not eat meat?” Inacio translated.

“No, I do. It’s just... Tuvo can’t eat *cooked* meat. Only raw. Or mushrooms, if you have them.”

Inacio translated for his wife who looked distraught.

“It’s okay!” Hattie hastened to say. “I’m sorry I brought it up. He just can’t-”

She spoke quickly, and Inacio translated, “She says, she’s sorry. She didn’t stop to think that he might need to eat differently than us. Just one moment.”

Marica set down the plate before them and rushed back towards the cooking area.

Meanwhile, Tuvo leaned forward and picked up a piece of the meat. Hattie didn’t know what it was just by sight – though judging by the goats around the village, she had a good idea. The meat had been cooked, then sliced, allowing anyone to take some without needing to cut.

Tuvo took the piece he had picked and brought it to Hattie’s mouth. She smiled, delicately biting it from his fingers. Keeping her eyes on him. Enjoying the way she felt his cock jumping under her hip as she licked the juices away.

He brought her another bite, then another, before Marica turned with a large bowl filled with diced and spiced meat. Not all that dissimilar to what would be found on Turv, actually. She offered it to Hattie who accepted it with gratitude.

Marica beamed before returning again. She came back with a plate of fried veggies, then again with fried mushrooms and boiled roots. She placed them all around their rug before sitting by Inacio who offered her a cup of water and a very soft, subtle smile.

The party was interesting. A strange combination of joyful and mournful. There was definite excitement and happiness, but it was tinged with relief and sorrow. Belmira's return was a good thing, and everyone was eager to shower her in love and welcoming, but surrounding it was also the sadness of everyone knowing what she had gone through.

People kept coming to talk to Tuvo, sometimes requiring two different translators to facilitate the conversation. They asked him questions, curious about him and where he came from. No one was mean or nasty, no one judged her sitting on his lap.

It was ridiculous, but this small village that didn't even have power was somehow more accepting and understanding than people from big cities.

Tuvo couldn't understand their words, but he didn't miss their emotions.

"Is Belmira alright?" He asked at one point after someone had come up with a bright smile, but then just hugged her as they silently cried. They weren't the first to do so.

"They're happy she's back, but sad for what she went through," Hattie explained softly. "They're proud she kept herself alive, but they hate how close they came to losing her."

"She was a prisoner, wasn't she? They were keeping her alive for a reason, weren't they?"

Hattie hesitated, not sure she wanted to explain to him what happened to Belmira, what they were doing to her. Instead, she said-

"She was going to kill herself. Kill as many of them as she could and, if she couldn't escape, she was going to take her own life rather than let them keep her against her will."

She turned back, interested in seeing his reaction. She expected anger, dismay, or maybe sorrow. What she wasn't

ready to see was shining pride.

“What a warrior,” he said with approval.

She broke into laughter, relaxing back against him. She should have known that a domini would approve of that kind of plan. Shaking her head, she changed the subject to something less sensitive.

In between conversations, Tuvo fed her various things from the platters in front of her. She took turns feeding him as well, putting pieces of the raw meat against his lip, prompting him to suck her entire finger as he took it.

And no one cared. They might send her looks, but they were all knowing and amused.

She was hardly the only one acting that way. Inacio and Marica weren't being as openly affectionate, but they were still leaning against each other, speaking quietly as they stared at their daughter who, in turn, was sheltered under the arm of her man. Keith was posing and had finally seemed to catch the attention of a young girl who was smiling at him as he spoke. The look on her face made Hattie think she didn't understand a word of English, but she was happy to entertain him as he babbled while she admired his body.

Girls flirted with guys; guys showed off for the girls. Someone, somewhere, had started banging a drum, bringing a thumping, primal sort of energy in the air that prompted people to dance.

It was fun and exciting. Hattie gave herself over to the atmosphere completely, finding herself dancing with the other girls, deliberately moving in a way to excite the boys. And she knew it was working by the way Tuvo was staring at her every time she looked over at him – hungry and dangerous.

Belmira left the party first. Though she went with her man, neither of them appeared amorous. Instead, she just looked tired. Clinging to him like a drowning woman in a storm. She had been through much worse than Hattie. It wasn't surprising that she needed a chance to rest.

Hattie and Tuvo stayed longer. Eating and chatting and dancing.

It was long past sunset when things began winding down. Inacio and Marica showed the two of them to one of the empty houses. It was usually used for storage, but during the day, the men of the village had cleared out most of the crates and set up a bed and a storage box for them. Their supply bag had been placed beside the box, his jaguar pelt folded on top of it. The bed had been made up with a blanket, two pillows, and surrounded completely by netting.

“Make sure to close the netting when you get in bed,” Inacio said. “And again, thank you. Sleep well, you two.”

“Thank you,” Hattie smiled, waving them off before shutting the curtain placed over the door. It, and similar ones over the wide windows along one wall, provided them with some privacy while a candle burning on top of the box illuminated the space.

The moment the others were gone, she turned eagerly to face Tuvo.

He was right there behind her. Looming. Blending into the shadows. Teal eyes flashing.

“Are you ready?” He asked, sending a shiver of delight over her skin.

Grinning, she took his hand and turned, tugging him towards the bed. He didn’t protest, didn’t resist, as he followed her.

She released him as she picked up the jaguar pelt. Her fingers trailed down the bright colors before she gently laid it across the bed. The nights could get cool, and it would help keep them warm. And it looked just right laying there. Like it was exactly where it belonged.

She stroked the pelt flat before turning and sitting on the edge. The bed was low, only a few inches off the ground, making it easy to reach her sandals. Before she could touch them, however, Tuvo kneeled in front of her. His big hands took hold of her feet. He was slow and careful as he pulled apart the ties around her ankle, loosening them before sliding the sandal off.

She shivered as his fingers gently cupped her heel and placed it on his thigh before turning his attention to the other foot.

Her second sandal hit the ground and he put that foot on his opposite thigh. Doing so opened her legs as she leaned back on her elbows. Spreading herself for him.

He slid his hands up her thighs. Big, strong hands squeezed as he pushed her skirt up. She could feel the air, cold against her panties, damp from desire.

Tuvo caught his finger around the crotch and pulled. Obliging, she lifted her hips, and let him tug them off and throw them away.

He hesitated then, frowning.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

“You’re so little,” he muttered, fingers clenching on her thigh. “Can you even take me? Without pain?”

Hattie chuckled. “Tuvo, you’re big. You’re not as big as a baby, and that’s what it’s designed to push out. I can take you.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean it won’t hurt. The last thing I want is to harm you, Hattie.”

She smiled, reaching for his hands. Once again, he didn’t resist as she pulled, leading him onto the bed and laying him out before her. She shut the netting behind him.

“Do you trust me?” She asked, straddling his thighs.

He hesitated, but eventually said, “I do.”

## Chapter 28

### *Tuvo*

This was a sight worth fighting and dying for. His female, pulling up her skirt to make room for herself on his lap. Her face flushed with excitement. Her body eager for his touch.

But he must be paralyzed with fear, because he couldn't touch her in turn. He couldn't move. He just kept thinking about what would happen if he buried himself inside her. If her moans of pleasure turned into screams of pain. If blood coated his cock and he damaged her irreparably.

No. He couldn't do it.

But Hattie had no such fear. She moved over him, completely confident, as she pulled out the pin keeping her dress on and tossed it away. She did the same with his kilt, spreading it out underneath him as she bared his body to her eyes fully for the first time.

Running her nails down his chest, tormenting him with the sensation, she said, "Don't worry about anything. Let me."

"But..."

"If I do it, you can't hurt me, right?"

"That's... true," he mumbled, wondering if that was some kind of excuse to make himself feel better.

But then Hattie tossed aside her loose dress and he got his first look at her body and all rational thought flew from his mind.

His Hattie was all lush curves and rich softness. Decadent and delicious. She grabbed his hands and put them to her breasts and the bountiful flesh spilled over his fingers. Gorgeous. Stunning. And all his, claiming him as she ought. His thumbs

flicked over her nipples and the flesh tightened and hardened under his touch. His tongue itched to run along the textured surface. To taste her skin and feast upon her body.

“That’s nice,” she moaned softly, smiling as he massaged the heavy mounds. “Now, I think it’s about time I paid you back. Don’t you?”

He had no idea what she was talking about. No part of him could divert from the squishy delights filling his palms.

But then she took them away and, devastated, he focused back on her. Just in time to see her crawling down his body and putting her face near his cock.

His eyes widened. Was she...?

He had heard humans did that. Taking their males in their mouths. Domini females couldn’t. Not with their fangs. Was Hattie going to...?

She let her tongue flop out and licked all the way up from his knot, over his shaft, and, with some strain to her jaw, closed her lips around the triangularly shaped head. As much as she was able to reach. And she didn’t just put her mouth on him; she *sucked*.

Tuvo growled, back arching, fisting the fabric of the mattress under his body. Her little tongue rubbed right on the sensitive spot on the underside of his head as she bobbed up and down. Struggling and not quite succeeding to take him fully inside. He was just too big to fit past her teeth.

But that didn’t stop her from trying. Slurping and sucking and stroking his length with one hand while squeezing his knot with the other.

“*Krik...*” He growled. “Your little mouth... hot...”

She laughed and the vibration made him buck up against her. Dislodging her. He snarled, but he couldn’t complain when she instead began sucking on his balls. She rolled one around in the sack with her tongue, then switched to the other, all the while jerking at his cock, using her spit as lube, while her other hand scratched her nails down his thigh leaving streaks of fire in their wake.



“Hattie... please,” he growled, feeling his release rising but fighting it back. He couldn’t. Not yet. It belonged inside her. He needed to be inside her.

She lifted her head, a self-satisfied grin on her face in the low, flickering candlelight.

“I like you begging,” she said, pressing a kiss to the head of his cock. “I like having this power over you.”

“You own me, *vi kyrya*. I am yours.”

“Listen.” Her order was followed by a slick squelching sound. He didn’t have to think to know those were her fingers working in her little cunt. “Hear how ready I am for you?”

He growled. “Three fingers, Hattie. Stretch it for me.”

“You’re so big,” she agreed, nuzzling his cock. “You want to be inside me?”

“Yes-s-s,” he hissed painfully, muscles in his abdomen jumping as the urge to thrust up met his continued worry over harming her.

She saw the twitching and grinned, pressing a kiss against them before trailing her tongue down the line through the center of his muscles, back to his cock. She ran her tongue up the shaft before once again clasp her mouth over the head.

He growled, cock throbbing against her tongue. “Don’t, Hattie... Inside you, please...”

She came off with a wet *pop* that nearly broke him. She looked so happy. Like he had just made all of her dreams come true.

She crawled up his body. Kissing each of his jumping muscles along the way. She flicked one of his nipples with her tongue as she reached between their bodies and took hold of his cock. But she didn’t notch it against her entrance like he expected.

Instead, she rubbed her slit all along his length. Slowly, shivering as his ridges and veins slid against her clit. Making him slick for her.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of teasing her wet flesh against his, she leaned forward, balanced on his chest,

and notched him at her entrance.

But when she tried to sit back, he slid right off and up the crack of her ass. He groaned. The sweet kiss of heat, a promise unfulfilled.

A look of determination crossed her face, and Hattie leaned forward again. She encircled his cock with both hands, just under the head, and put him at her entrance. This time, she kept her grip firm when she tried to rock back.

Tuvo's entire body was clenched and taut as, just barely, his head slowly began to breach her.

"Tight..." He growled, a feeling almost like pain encasing him. But he didn't want her to stop. He needed more of that sweet agony.

Hattie circled her hips, biting her lip, spreading more of her slick, before beginning to rock – up and down. Taking in slightly more and more of him each time she dropped back until, with a pop, his head finally breached her entrance.

She cried out as he jerked and shuddered. Very nearly emptying himself inside her then and there. He didn't know what kept him from moving now, because it certainly wasn't fear. Everything else had burned to nothing now that he had this.

Her little cunt was tight and wet. And hot. So hot. It burned and squeezed him, dancing a very fine line between ecstasy and agony. It was incredible. His fingers twitched, eager to grab her hips and slam her down. To bury himself completely inside her. To feel the embrace of her cunt along his entire length as he planted his head right at her womb. But he couldn't move.

Hattie, however, looked strained. Her eyes were glazed as she took quick shallow breaths. Legs shaking from holding herself up, hands clenching against his chest. She didn't look pleased. She looked like Peony when she had been in the early stages of her labor.

The sight curdled his pleasure in his gut.

“Hattie, stop,” he said. “It’s okay. I can use my fingers. My tongue. I’m eager to taste you, *vi kyrya*. I need nothing more than that.”

Instead of relief or gratitude, a stubborn expression crossed her face, and she adjusted her stance, widening her knees, her gaze focused back on him.

“I can do it,” she said, “Just... Just give me a minute to adjust.”

“You don’t have to-”

“Yes, I do.” She gritted her teeth as she squeezed all the muscles of her sheath, nearly breaking him again, before relaxing them all at once. “I am going to do this. I am going to make love to my big, sexy alien boyfriend.”

“You’re in pain.”

“Like losing my virginity all over again,” she hissed, rolling her hips. Forward and back. Stroking and gripping his cockhead in a vice.

Groaning, Tuvo’s head dropped back. Letting her work. Letting her try to force herself down further and, with each microlength of his cock she took, he fought harder and harder against his climax. Not wanting to come when she was struggling.

But then she licked her fingers and reached between them, trying to get his cock even more slippery so she could take more, and he lost the fight.

This time, when her hips started rotating again, he surrendered. Head falling back, sac drawing up, the orgasm was like sliding into steaming water. A release, smooth and easy, but heated and painful. His knot was ignored, so the pumps of seed that filled her channel weren’t much.

But it was enough to slick her way.

She sank a little further, her eyes widened in surprise. “You... Did you...?”

“Will that help?” He asked, abdominal muscles still jumping from the lingering climax.

“You’re still hard,” she chuckled, resuming her movements.  
“You can keep going?”

“I have more. Can you take more?”

She pulled up, his seed and her juices leaving his cock shiny and wet, the skin there dark red as it tried to camouflage against her sheath. She sank back again, forcing herself down deeper than before. Taking about half of his length in one go. He groaned as she gasped, nails digging into his chest.

She took another break then, to breathe and clench her already impossibly tight cunt around him as she adjusted to his size.

Once her breathing had calmed, she smiled. “Ready?”

“At your pleasure, *vi kyryra*.”

She began to bounce. Her thighs clenching and shaking, grunting and panting with each harsh motion up and down. Tuvo could finally move. He grabbed her thighs, wrapping his fingers around until they rested at the back of her trembling legs. Letting her use them as a board to balance on, making her ride easier.

*Krik*, he could barely breathe. She was so beautiful. Breasts bouncing, body writhing, his cock repeatedly disappearing into the hot grip of her cunt. Again and again. Getting incrementally deeper and deeper.

Until suddenly he hit a barrier at the back, and she winced. The end of her channel. She stopped, both of them breathing fast, as he checked.

Still about a fourth of his cock was outside. Not including his knot.

A knot, he realized with a sinking sense of dismay, she would never be able to take. But it was already more than he ever expected from her. This was enough.

“How much... left?” She gasped.

“You’ve got all you need,” he said, not wanting to lie.

She groaned, head dropping back. “Crud. There’s more. Okay. Hold on. Let me just...”

“Hattie,” he groaned as she started grinding her way down. Trying to force more of him inside. “You don’t... You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I stretch,” she promised. “Just got to... get it going... I need your knot.”

“No, Hattie.”

“Yes,” she groaned, taking in more of him. Forcing her body to accept him. Stuffing herself so full, he felt sure he would hurt herself if she kept going. “Give me more. Come inside me again.”

“You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Come inside me now or I force it all in as is. Fill me up. Give it to me!”

Tuvo groaned, fingers digging into the meat of her thighs. How could a male hear that, his female *pleading* for his cum, and be unaffected? She owned him. She controlled him.

And as her hips rocked and spun, her entire sheath clutching him so tight it hurt, he came. A long groan in his throat, his back arching up, clutching her thighs. His knot was still ignored, so it was still only a few ropes of his seed pumped into her.

But it got her slick again. It made her smile, so happy to be filled. So joyful to feel his seed spreading into her womb. Where it belonged.

Two unknotted orgasms was too much, and not enough. He needed more. He couldn’t stop himself now.

He grabbed her hips and bucked up, sending her sprawling over his chest. But his grip meant her hips stayed right where he wanted them, suspended in the air, hole open and vulnerable. He planted his feet and began thrusting up. Slamming his cock deep until his head struck against that barrier in the back, determined to either break through or force it back.

At that moment, he didn’t care which. Hattie was crying out, fingers clutching his shoulders, entire body rocking as he

stirred up their combined juices.

And when she came, her cunt strangling his cock, he redoubled his efforts. And at first, he could barely move, but as her orgasm faded, he found he could get deeper. His cock was now fully buried. All that was left was his knot.

And his determination.

## Chapter 29

### *Hattie*

He was rearranging her insides.

She was stuffed so full, she could feel him in her belly. Resizing her pussy. Shuffling her guts. Forcing her body into a new shape to fit him. To please him.

And she loved it.

The feeling was overwhelming. Pain and pleasure mixed up together in a cocktail so powerful it emptied her mind of everything except the sensations assaulting her. When she came, it was like being ripped apart. Every molecule of her body shredded into pieces.

But he didn't stop. He redoubled his efforts. And now there was a new sensation. A pressure at her entrance that felt wrong. She was already full. Stuffed. She couldn't take anymore. Her body really might break.

That heavy knot of throbbing flesh pounded her clit. Forcing another climax from her that was just as glorious, just as devastating as the first.

Their bodies sounded so slick and obscene now. The wet slap echoing in the night as he forced sounds from her throat she didn't know she could make.

His arm suddenly tightened around her torso, clutching her to his chest as his other hand grabbed her ass and pushed it down in time with his thrusts. Forcing her to fuck him back.

And that pressure kept beating at her. Relentless. A battering ram at her pussy demanding entrance. It wouldn't take no as an answer.

And she didn't want to give it. Biting her lip, her belly tightened as she put all her focus onto relaxing those muscles, to opening herself.

Tuvo roared, slamming them together.

Hattie screamed, his knot breeching her entrance, his cock stretching her to her absolute limits, her climax destroying her mind.

And finally, *finally*, she could feel him filling her properly. The hot jets of seed pumped against her womb and flowed back. Despite how tightly she was filled, or maybe because of it, his cum began to leak around the seal at her entrance to drip between their bodies.

Hattie, babbling incoherently, shook against him as Tuvo's back crashed back onto the mattress. Her body was going up and down with each quick breath he took. He kept one hand on her back, the other on her butt, trapping her in place. As though there was any danger of her moving.

He was well and truly locked inside her, and that's exactly where she wanted him to be.

"*Vi kyrya*," he mumbled, rubbing her back.

Neither of them moved for a long time. Hattie wasn't sure when she fell asleep, but she woke up when she felt stretching at her entrance. She groaned as Tuvo, gripping her waist, and with some difficulty, pulled her off his knot.

The engorged flesh wouldn't go down until the pressure on it eased. So, though his cock had softened inside her, his knot hadn't. It resisted leaving her channel, making her groan and clench her teeth as she, again, focused on loosening already sore muscles.

His knot popped free, a deluge of wetness flowing over both of them. Hattie panted and moaned, shivering as she felt the cold air on her hole. Sore. Sensitive.

Tuvo rolled her onto her back so he could grab the blanket and pull it over her. She couldn't even close her legs. Her thighs were aching and sore. Her pussy hurt and leaked.



But she didn't really care, because Tuvo was there, wrapping her up in his arms. Holding her close as he kissed the side of her head and whispered sweet praise into her ear until she fell asleep again.

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“Easy. There you go.”

Hattie nearly stumbled as Tuvo helped her stand off the bed. It was hard to keep her balance when she could *feel* how bow legged she was walking. Her entire pelvis was sore. Sitting straight was a difficulty. Balancing was a chore. Standing on her own from the low set bed was an absolute impossibility.

But Tuvo was there, grimacing as he helped her up. Though, ‘help’ was a bit generous towards her considering he did all the work.

“I shouldn't have done that,” he said as she wobbled, legs spread to try to keep her balance.

“Hey.” She poked him in the abdomen – hurting her finger more than him. “I don't regret a single second. It was magical and perfect. Just... give me a day or two to heal before we try again.”

“Again?” He looked surprised. “You'd take me again?”

“I would and I will. I not only stretch, I can maintain that stretch with repetition.” She grinned. “But if you stop for too long, I'll start to un-stretch. So, you know, you can't go too long without dicking me down good or we'll have to start from zero again.”

Tuvo blinked. Startled. But then he smirked. “Well then. I suppose over the next few days, I should keep you stretched with my fingers. Or my tail.”

She gasped. “No way! Tail play? Yes, please. Can we do that now? Or actually, tonight? I don't think I want anything down there right now but an ice pack.”

He grimaced again before picking her up. He brought her to a chair in the corner and gingerly set her down as she hissed, her

weight pressing right against her pelvis. But it wasn't pain so much as the soreness following a really tough workout.

Moving to their supply bag, he opened it and dug around inside. She gasped in surprised delight when he brought out her purse and a spare change of *her* clothes.

"You brought my stuff?" She asked eagerly, taking them from him.

"We didn't know how we would find you, and we wanted to be prepared. We brought clothes for Keith and me as well. And it's not like we had much in the way of supplies to take up space, so we didn't sacrifice anything for it."

"Still, thank you," she beamed, shaking out his offerings. Her only jeans had been taken last night to be cleaned, along with the rest of her clothes, and hadn't been returned yet. In the bag was one of her maxi dresses. Her favorite blue one with the cute little white circles on the hem that made her think of a bubble bath. She thought it was adorable.

And it was easy to change into, even as sore as she was.

She pulled her panties on while seated then stood, gritting her teeth but maintaining her balance. The moment she had them secure on her hips, she pulled the dress over her head. She tugged it down quickly so she could sit, letting out a low breath of relief. And only once she was seated did she put on the bra he brought.

As she was pulling the straps of the dress back over her shoulders, she finally looked up to find Tuvo staring at her. His pants on his hips but unbuttoned. His cock emerged through his zipper. His gaze rapt upon her, enjoying the show.

She grinned, pulling the strap up with exaggerated slowness before letting it snap back onto her shoulder.

Turning, he mumbled something she couldn't hear under his breath as he tried to force his huge cock back into his pants while she giggled behind her hand.

Seeing his reaction to her, so open and honest and needy, was like a straight shot of caffeine making her heart pound and her belly tighten and her mind race. She almost forgot her soreness

and was tempted to ask him to come over here and fill her again.

But she didn't, because she definitely did *not* forget her soreness. Unfortunately.

Sighing, she leaned back, resting her hand over her pelvis. Over where he had left a mess inside her belly. Maybe left something more in her belly...?

That thought was a harsh reminder that Hattie was, by deliberate choice, not on birth control. She hadn't asked Tuvo to pull out. He hadn't brought up the topic either. Did he assume she already was on birth control since the other girls were? Or did he just accept the risk?

It wasn't usually a risk to the domini who didn't reproduce easily though. They hadn't talked about it. They hadn't really mentioned the future or anything that might come after their rescue.

But it was imminent. They had to talk about it now, right?

She focused back on Tuvo as he finished setting his pants on his hips. He even brought a shirt this time – a shame – though his feet remained bare.

“Ready?” He asked as he got his body back under control.

She nodded, grabbed her purse, and started to stand. Doing so made her wince and, the moment she did, he was there at her side, taking her by the elbow, other hand at her back, helping her stay up.

She smiled gratefully before taking his offered arm. She leaned against him as he guided her out of their borrowed house, down the steps, and into the village.

It had to be around noon. They slept for a long time. Considering how much they went through in the last few days, it was hardly surprising. And Hattie had no idea how late they stayed up last night.

They walked through the village, waving and greeting people they passed like they were old friends.

They found Inacio near the town center. He was talking to a group of people while, off to the side, a group of women were cooking for the day. Seeing them, Hattie was immediately hit with a longing to join in. To learn their cooking techniques and recipes.

But she could hardly leave Tuvo alone when he couldn't speak to anyone without her.

Inacio caught sight of them approaching and dismissed the other men so he could turn to face them.

"Morning," Hattie greeted brightly.

He nodded once, silently returning the greeting. "Slept well?"

"We did, yeah. Thank you."

"I'm glad. Food is there if you want."

"Is there anything we can help with?"

"You're our guests. We couldn't ask you to help."

"You're not. We're offering," she beamed. "Tuvo's a great hunter. He's also great at climbing trees. He can be of help in the forest."

Inacio looked intrigued. "Well, if you're offering, there are a few things I could use him for."

Hattie turned and explained the conversation to Tuvo. He grunted in agreement.

"I'm happy to help," he said, looking to Inacio and nodding once.

The older man nodded back and, after imparting a few instructions to him, Hattie stepped back and watched as the two walked off towards the trees. She smiled, staring shamelessly his butt and his tail flicking until she couldn't see him anymore.

"He's gone now," Belmira said suddenly, appearing at her side without warning.

Hattie jumped, grabbing her chest. "You scared me!"

Belmira chuckled, giving her an unrepentant grin. “Want to help cook? You’re a chef, right?”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s go then. If you can walk after last night.”

Hattie started in surprise, following after her – walking bowlegged and swaying a bit, but maintaining her balance on her own. “How did you know?”

“Please,” Belmira laughed. “Entire village knows. If my man can make me scream half as loud, I think I’ll be a very happy woman.”

Hattie’s heart stuttered in shock. No. Surely, she was joking.

But then the women cooking caught sight of her, and she was suddenly surrounded by knowing grins and winks and giggles. The house with the open windows and door was hardly soundproof. She hadn’t even thought about keeping herself quiet.

Belmira laughed, pulling at her arm. “Come on. Tell us everything. You can’t tease us without letting us know what happened.”

Hattie’s face was flushed, but she was smiling as the other women closed around her. The familiar scents and sounds of cooking, even in an unfamiliar environment, surrounded her as assuredly as the age-old embrace of feminine friendship.

# Chapter 30

## *Tuvo*

Tuvo did not speak Portuguese and only understood very basic English. Some of the males spoke English to varying degrees of proficiency with accents that made them difficult to understand at times. But still, they communicated just fine.

Tuvo knew the basic human body language indicators – nodding and head shaking and the finger to the lips for silence and so on – and the rest they could figure out together. It made for some odd, stilted conversation, but they did manage to communicate.

By the time he returned to the village with the males, fresh kill over his shoulders – a four-legged beast he didn't know the name of – they had managed to cobble together a rudimentary, highly bastardized language and he was very quickly adding Portuguese words and phrases to his lexicon.

He passed his bounty, along with the others, to the females in the kitchen. Hattie gave him a bright smile, her hair tied back and fuzzy from the humidity, but didn't stop her work. Tuvo watched her for a moment before following Inacio towards the outskirts of the village. A frown on his face.

One that Tuvo mimicked as he spotted what was undoubtedly men from the village patrolling around the edge. Stern scowls on their faces. Searching the trees as though expecting an attack to come rushing towards them at any minute.

“Inacio,” Tuvo looked to him and pointed at the males, asking in English, “Why?”

Inacio shook his head and said simply, “*Tres Argolas.*”

Tuvo growled. Inacio nodded solemnly.

“*Tres Argolas, Brilhar?*” He asked if they were coming here.

Inacio made an uncertain gesture with his shoulders. Maybe. He couldn't say they wouldn't.

Tuvo grunted, patting his chest, asking if it was because of him. Or, less specifically, because of him and Hattie. They were their original targets after all.

Inacio didn't give him an answer. Which was telling in and of itself.

Tuvo frowned. Some of those that had taken Hattie had escaped. He hadn't been focused on eliminating his targets, just finding his female. And even if he had, there was only so much he could have done alone against many.

He didn't know there was a village so close to their crash, or he would have tried to walk here immediately after. He hadn't considered how attacking the Three Rings might affect anyone nearby. He didn't know how attacking the compound would make them retaliate.

But he was considering it now, and it left a bad taste in his mouth. Even now, Inacio was having a couple of males preparing to take him and Hattie to the nearest town. A place where they could make a call to get rescued.

However, if they left and the Three Rings came after them, would the people of Brilhar be the ones to pay the price?

“*Tres Argolas...*” He searched for a word that would describe what he meant, but couldn't think of one that he knew. Instead, he settled with growling, baring his teeth and claws, like a beast pouncing on their prey.

Would they attack?

Inacio understood and nodded.

“Brilhar...” He repeated the attacking motion.

Inacio shook his head and said, “Small.”

The village was too small, too weak, to fight back against them.

Tuvo crossed his arms over his chest. Thinking. Not because he didn't know what to do, but because he didn't know how Hattie would react.

But he could picture in his head what she would do if she found out any of these people that had been so kind had been hurt because of her. Even tangentially.

"Tuvo, Brilhar," he said, pointing first to himself then to the village. Then, he faced out into the forest and repeated the growling motion again.

He would stay and protect Brilhar.

Inacio looked surprised, then shook his head.

Tuvo nodded more fervently. Decisively. They would stay.

A look of unmistakable relief and gratitude crossed Inacio's face. He gestured into the village and named two of the males Tuvo had come to know during his hunt. He then pointed towards the town that they were supposed to be going to soon.

Tuvo and Hattie would stay, but Inacio would still send the others. Maybe try to find a way to contact the authorities for them.

Tuvo nodded once, and said, in English, "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," Inacio returned.

The two of them turned and walked back into the village together.

Hattie's laughter was the first thing he heard. She was carrying a serving tray of sauteed vegetables and mushrooms. She beamed at him as he took it from her and carried it instead. Keith chose that moment to walk by and mutter that word, "Simp," under his breath.

Tuvo growled, ready to turn on him.

Hattie grabbed his tail and pulled. Leading him towards the rug where they would eat. Belmira was already there, drinking with her mother. She smiled at him, waving like an old friend, as he set the food down and Hattie took a seat.



Tuvo sat beside her and immediately picked her up to put her in his lap, back to chest, her legs hanging over his, his arms around her middle. She snuggled against him, getting comfortable.

“We’re staying,” he said.

“Staying here? Why?” She didn’t look unhappy, merely curious.

“The Three Rings. Inacio is worried that they’ll attack. Searching for us. Trying to get retribution. And it’s a fair concern.”

She frowned, face pinching. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Inacio will still send a couple males ahead to the nearest town. They’ll contact the authorities for us and bring them back here. For now, we’ll stay here. Help them if we can. Defend them if we must. Is that all right?”

“What? Of course, it is! We can’t leave everyone to deal with them alone.”

Tuvo smiled, kissing the top of her head. That was his female. Brave and good.

“Did you enjoy yourself today?” He asked, genuinely curious about how she had spent her time.

She nodded and eagerly launched into an explanation of everything she had done. Cooking and repair work around the village, talking with the women, helping with the goats. There was no end of chores to be completed here and she was excited to do it all.

She had made friends with everyone already. As they passed, she called out to them, waving, getting smiles and calls in return. She would lean over his arms and speak to Belmira. She practiced her Portuguese – and even not speaking it himself, he could tell her accent was atrocious. The others laughed, but it wasn’t malicious, and they corrected her patiently.

Keith had seated himself nearby. The female whose attention he had gained last night clearly moved on because there was

someone else in her place.

Was Keith attractive by human terms? His face was symmetrical, and his body was well cared for. It was hard for Tuvo to tell since human males seemed slightly feminine to his gaze, but he wouldn't be surprised if, physically, Keith was attractive.

But his personality was so unpleasant, he didn't know how anyone could get close to him. Maybe they were just using him for sexual release. That would make sense.

Though, now that he was thinking about it-

"Is Keith going to go or stay?" He asked Hattie, curious.

"Er, I don't know. We should probably ask what he prefers."

She made to stand, like she was going to ask him now, but he tightened his grip, locking her back down to his lap. She giggled, rubbing his arm.

"I suppose I can ask him tomorrow."

"Yeah. Tomorrow seems soon enough." He put his nose in her hair, taking a deep breath of her sweet scent.

Going out to hunt for her was such an immensely satisfying feeling. Especially now that he knew she had a proper den to nest in.

He should bring her there. Put her in her nest. Breed her in her nest.

She was already back to laughing and chatting with others though, and he didn't want to rip her away when she was having a good time.

Inacio stood at one point and made a big announcement. He pointed at Tuvo while he spoke, so he didn't really need a translation to understand that he was telling everyone he was going to stay and help guard against potential attack. An assumption that was confirmed when Tuvo heard that name, *Tres Argolas*.

Belmira was looking down now, hands clutched so tight on her cup that her knuckles blanched white. A few people in the

village hissed or bared their teeth at the very mention. The sight made Tuvo rather proud.

Look how eager they were to protect their homes.

He could work with that.

Inacio finished his speech and people cheered. Tuvo felt their approving stares as Hattie smiled up at him, proud.

Dinner wasn't as big or long as the feast yesterday. The night was still young when Hattie led Tuvo – again, by the tail, though he wasn't carrying anything this time – back to their home. She pulled him up into the house and, the moment the net closed over the entrance, she was throwing herself at him.

He grinned as he picked her up.

He wasn't going to put his cock in her again. Not yet. Not tonight. She still walked funny, and he knew she was still sore.

But he was eager to taste her.

# Chapter 31

## *Hattie*

“Tuvo, please!” Hattie keened, fisting his head as she struggled against his hold.

His hands were unmoving iron bands on her hips, his tongue tracing lazy, determined circles around her clit. He hummed his appreciation, not for the first time, as his tail continued to slowly, tortuously, work in and out of her pussy.

He had to have been down there for nearly an hour now. She already came twice. But each drop he wrung from her tired body only made him determined to drink more.

Tuvo had eaten her out last night for the first time, and he was now addicted. They hadn't finished dinner tonight before he scooped her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and paraded her, shamelessly, in front of everyone as he took her back to their house.

He didn't even give her a chance to get undressed. He just pulled her legs apart and stuck his head under her skirt. Her panties were dangling off a single ankle that bobbed in the air, her thighs pushed up thanks to his broad shoulders. She couldn't even see him. His head was just an obscene lump moving under her skirt.

Her last orgasm had been a long time ago now. She had passed the oversensitivity that immediately followed, the buildup after that, and now was just tense, yearning, *needing* more.

But he was taking his time. Teasing. Tormenting. Making her suffer because licking and sucking was his pleasure, not hers.

“Tuvo!” She begged, nearly sobbing.

“Wait,” he ordered, no small amount of amusement in his voice.

“Please,” she whimpered, curling up, fingers digging into his head. “Tuvo, mercy.”

“I want more.”

“I can’t take it!”

She fell back with a cry, her body shuddering. Trembling right there on the edge. His tail was thick, but it was slow and smooth. It also wasn’t as big as his cock.

And that was a stretching pain she craved now. She had been without it for two days and it was two days too long.

He sighed. Like she was inconveniencing him. He tossed his head back, freeing himself from her skirt, and grinned at her. Lips and face glistening with her release. Growling. Smug.

Hattie could only imagine how much of a mess she looked. Hair wild from thrashing. Dress mussed from being manhandled. Face burning, eyes tearing, sweat dripping at her temples. She knew she had to look crazy.

But his eyes were tender and approving as he lifted himself up to kiss her. She nearly sobbed, eager to taste herself on his lips, but needing more. But their pelvises didn’t match up. She was just too small. If he was kissing her, he wasn’t fucking her.

She humped up against him, rubbing her pussy on his abs. But that was practically nothing compared to the debilitating sensation of him inside her.

He chuckled at her desperation as he sat up on his knees. He grabbed her hips and jerked them up, setting her butt on his thighs as his tail pulled out of her with a slick suctioning sound.

“Put it in,” he ordered.

She smiled in relief, nearly thanking him, as she reached between their bodies. He aligned them as she placed his head at her entrance. She learned from last time and held him there, keeping him from slipping off as he pushed forward.

There was an instant of resistance before he pushed through. She gasped, back arching as her eyes rolled. That incredible pressure was even better than she remembered. She was still stretched but there was less pain this time.

It was incredible.

And it seemed never ending. He pushed her thighs up and out of the way, making space for him to press deeper and deeper. She was certainly wet enough. She could practically feel her guts making room for him. He was the master of her body and he demanded that she make space – and she was helpless to obey.

The bulb of his knot pressed against her entrance just as the pressure against her cervix became too much. She nearly wept because she had done it. In one long, smooth glide, she had taken his entire shaft in one go.

“Look at you,” Tuvo growled, thumb rubbing her clit slowly. “Hattie. Look.”

She could barely breathe. How could she when she was stuffed so full? But she had to obey. Shaking, panting, she lifted her head and peered down as he canted her hips up. Showing her their lewd connection.

And it was startling. She looked like she was being split in half. Her clit and inner lips were exposed, wrapped tight around him – the skin all red and taut.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” He asked, grinning. “You’re so beautiful like this. All stretched out for me. Don’t you think you’re pretty?”

She whimpered.

“Tell me. Tell me how pretty you are.”

“I-I’m... I’m pretty...”

“Yes, you are,” he growled, pulling out and rocking his hips forward. Thrusting, but not pounding too hard. But it was big and ridged and it was him, raw and unyielding inside her.

She laughed breathlessly. Not finding it funny but overwhelmed and needing to release some of her emotions or risk being driven mad from them.

Tuvo moved, slow and strong. Long, deep strokes that reminded her body that it was supposed to be a receptacle for his cock. A sleeve sized only for him. And it was incredible.

She came with a sob. Letting it shatter her as he kept going. Just as relentless with his dick as he had been with his tongue.

She flopped back. Weak and helpless as his thrusts got faster, more erratic.

“Take it,” he growled, forcing his knot against her.

She whimpered but urged her muscles to relax. He didn't pop in this time so much as squeezing, sliding into place and locking at her entrance. Tuvo growled in approval, grinding against her, forcing her thighs to spread so far, she felt the tendons stretching.

But then he came and none of that mattered. The pressure got warm and wet and swimmy inside her, filling her up with his thick seed. She hummed in approval, resting her hands on her belly. She could swear that she felt him there, just under the skin.

With a grunt, he collapsed over her. His huge body encasing her entirely. She wasn't mad about it. She took in a deep breath of his scent as she flicked his nipple once with her tongue.

He chuckled, scooping her up and rolling them over. Keeping them locked together but letting her splay out over his chest so he didn't crush her. She shivered from the night air hitting her exposed skin around the dress that still hadn't come off, and immediately he was there, pulling the blanket over their bodies and fixing the mosquito netting.

She hummed with the echoes of her orgasms as even that slight movement moved him and his abundant seed inside her channel, messing her up further. She could feel him dripping out of her again and she loved it.

“How are you, *vi kyrya?*” He asked, rubbing her back gently. “Did I hurt you?”

She nodded with a delighted moan, kissing his chest. “Yes. You killed me. I'm dead now.”

He chuckled, “Want me to take your bra off? Get you more comfortable?”

“Yes, please,” she beamed. He was so thoughtful. And that bra definitely wasn’t coming off if she had to do it. Not only did she no longer possess the dexterity to move her fingers around the hooks, but all the strength in her body had been burned away and she was left a melted puddle.

Tuvo popped the hooks out one at a time, putting an adorable amount of concentration into the effort – she had removed her bra each time they had been together, and female domini only wore bras when they were nursing. He finally got it loose and helped her limbs through before tossing it away.

“Ready for me to pull you off now?” He asked, hands going to her hips.

She shook her head, burying her face in his pecs. “No way.”

He laughed. “Not that I’m protesting, but you can’t be comfortable up there.”

“I’m dead. Dead women are comfortable wherever you leave them.”

“I’ll happily keep you plugged through the night when we’re back on the *Stor*, but we don’t know if something might happen, and I don’t want to yank you off suddenly or be caught in a vulnerable position if something happens. So, up you go.”

The *Stor*? It was the first time he had mentioned them being together beyond the bounds of whatever this adventure was. Which meant he saw them together going forward. That had to mean something, right?

She made a prolonged sound of protest in the back of her throat as he carefully pulled her off. The rush of fluid made her shiver. And she realized the same must have happened last night. She had to clean this mattress.

Tuvo pulled her up, laying her across his chest again, but now with her head resting on his shoulder, face in his neck. She hummed in approval. She could clean up tomorrow.



“We made a mess,” he laughed, holding her close.

She grinned, kissing his neck. “Yeah, a nice,” kiss, “big,” kiss, “gooey,” kiss, “mess.”

“It’s a good thing you’ve got your ovulation turned off.”

Her eyes, that had been drifting shut, snapped open. Just in time to see his close as he relaxed back into the bed. Happy to sleep now.

But what did that mean? Did he not want to risk getting her pregnant? Was he not serious about her? Did he think she’d be a bad mother? That was one of the only reasons a male domini would refuse to give a female his seed – or, in this case, be glad it couldn’t take root.

And now that she was thinking about it, he had never called her his mate.

No longer quite so relaxed and sleepy, Hattie stayed up late, questions and worries beating at her mind as Tuvo slept beneath her.

# Chapter 32

## *Tuvo*

They were going to have to return to the compound.

Tuvo stood with Inacio, watching the males – and a couple of the females – of the village train. They were practicing a basic fighting drill that he used to put new recruits through back when he had still been involved in training in the military. It was a long time ago, but the skills were still there, and the humans were eager to learn.

But their eagerness did not make up for a fundamental lack of claws, or fangs, or *time*.

Humans were a clever species. Despite all the disadvantages against them, despite how soft they were, how defenseless, they still thrived. And in such astounding numbers. He knew of no other sapient species that was so prolific. There was no reason for such a delicate species to survive, much less thrive, in any sort of environment.

But they did so because they were clever and inventive. Where they lacked natural defenses, they made armor to cover themselves. Where they lacked natural weapons, they made tools to supplement their weakness. They could certainly learn to fight, but it meant nothing when he considered the weapons that would be brought to bear upon them.

Tuvo could still feel the bullets under his skin. Sitting in his body. His wounds were healing, and they were doing so over the fragments of metal that had peppered him from their guns. A lesser species would have died. Any of these humans would die.

The only solution, then, was to arm them in a way that would put them on more even footing with their enemy. And the only

way to get those arms was at the compound.

Of course, that came with the possibility that the Three Rings might have returned, but it was a risk he felt was worth taking. It might be the only way that these people would be able to defend themselves if the group came here.

He told Inacio, through Hattie, his plan that night, and the older human male looked unhappy but not unwilling to go through with it.

“It’s not a bad idea,” he said, “but none of my people know how to use those weapons.”

“I do,” Tuvo assured him. “I can’t. My hands are too big. But I can teach you how to shoot. How to defend yourselves. I just need a couple males to come with me. We’ll be able to move quicker than when I came here before. We’ll gather as many weapons and as much ammo as possible, then return and start training.”

Inacio looked thoughtful, but before he could say anything, a commotion near the front of the village caught their attention. They turned as two males – both carrying large sacks on their backs – walked into view. They were males Tuvo hadn’t seen before and they were smiling and chatting with everyone right up until they saw him. They stopped dead, shocked.

“They are your people?” Tuvo asked Inacio.

He grunted and nodded. “We take turns going to the nearby town. The two who were preparing to go leave tomorrow, just in time for these two to get back. Then, they’ll switch when they return. They’ll have brought news. One moment.”

Inacio stood and walked towards the males who were clearly being told what Tuvo and Hattie and Keith – who was chatting with a few other males – were doing here.

“You really want to go back?” Hattie asked, looking up and back at him. She was in his lap again, because he refused to allow her to sit anywhere else.

He had denied himself his mate for far too long. He didn’t want to spend a single moment separated from her anymore.

Which was what made this decision difficult. But these people had been good to him and protecting them had to be a priority.

“I’ll be fast,” he promised her. “The males move very quickly through the trees. By my estimate, if we stay off the road and take the direct path, we can get there and return in only a couple days. We’ll be back before you can forget how to take me here.”

He patted her lower belly with a possessive squeeze.

She laughed, covering his hand. “That’s not even what I’m thinking about. I’m more worried about you. What if something happens? What if you get shot again?”

“I won’t. I know what I’m running into this time. I know to keep watch for them. I’m not First Warrior for no reason, Hattie. Trust in me, hm?”

She sighed, shoulders slumping. “I do trust you. I just...”

“What is it?”

She shook her head quickly. “Never mind.”

“No, what did you-”

“Tuvo!” Inacio was jogging their way, a worried look on his face.

Tuvo stood and set Hattie on her feet.

“What is it?” He asked, looking between him and her, waiting for the translation.

“He says, the others, the ones who came with us were...” She suddenly stopped, eyes widening.

“What? Hattie, what is it?”

She looked at him, tears forming. “He said, everyone was attacked!”

“What?”

“H-He said... He said everyone, while we were separated, that they were all attacked. That they’re probably hurt or dead or-” Her voice broke with a sob as she covered her mouth, shaking. Tuvo took her in his arms, sharing a grim look with Inacio.

The male was already speaking, giving her details that only made her shake harder.

He pet her back, hating that she was hurting, but needing her to focus. This was the kind of thing that couldn't be communicated through simple words and hand gestures.

“Hattie, *kyrya*, tell me what he said.”

She sniffed, clutching onto his arms as her head fell back. “He doesn't know exactly what happened. The guys, they weren't trying to get information. They just heard about it in rumors. Everyone was talking about it. That our plane was missing, that the others were all separated and hurt. And... Oh, god, Tuvo, I didn't even consider the others. I didn't even think that they might have been attacked too. What if someone was hurt? What if they were *killed*?!” Her voice broke and he clutched her tight as she broke down.

“Hattie, listen to me. Okay? Are you listening?”

She sniffed but nodded.

“Romival is the smartest domini in the universe. Havali leads the peacekeepers on Turv. And Atem? You know Atem. Do you think there is any person or group on this planet that could be a threat to our *Dominani*?”

She shuddered and shook her head, but her heart wasn't in it.

Tuvo took her by the chin and forced her to look at him. “They're fine, *kyrya*. I promise you. We can do nothing for them, but we don't need to. They took care of themselves, I know it. We can only focus on this moment. On these people. They *do* need us, and we *can* help them. Okay?”

She nodded, but her lip was still trembling as she tried to hold back her sobs.

He looked up and inclined his head gratefully to Inacio. The older male nodded back before stepping away, giving them a moment so Hattie could gather herself.

Tuvo held her until she stopped crying and only then did he release her. He brought her to the females that were cooking so

she could lose herself in the task. He found it even more important to protect this village now.

Rodger's actions weren't the result of just him and the Three Rings. If everyone had been attacked at the same time, the moment they were separated, then the betrayal ran much deeper than that. And it had to come from their security team.

The very idea that Bertrand, a male he had thought was something of a friend, had sent them all to their deaths struck him directly in the chest.

And if it were true, the male would die.

## Chapter 33

### *Hattie*

The flickering of the cooking fire was soothing. The scents, the sounds, the laughter of the women around her was comforting. Hattie was sitting on the ground, unable to immerse herself in the activities, but still wanting to surround herself with it.

Rumor had already spread about the news brought from the town. Some of the women had offered her hugs while others had offered food or drink. On the whole, however, they seemed to understand that she just needed a moment.

She honestly hadn't considered that the others had been attacked too. She had been so focused on herself and her circumstances, she hadn't spared a thought for them. And that was so selfish. The guilt of it soured her belly.

All the girls had their mates with them. They were as safe as they could be.

But Hattie couldn't help worrying. Had the others had their planes sabotaged too? Holly was visibly pregnant. Could she have survived a fall like that? If Romival had even been able to handle the fall like Tuvo had. Were Alanna and Survii trapped on the island? Had Peony and Atem been gunned down at the hotel?

So many different scenarios ran through her head, each of them ending badly. It made her curl into a ball as she leaned against the support pole that held the roof over the kitchen area.

Her worries for them were compounded by her worry for Tuvo. She could see him from here, getting ready to go back to that compound. He was taking two of the fastest men with

him. Hattie trusted his decision to go get the weapons, but she wished it didn't involve him leaving. She wasn't worried for herself, the ladies told her that they knew how to run and where to hide. They had plenty of practice doing so after years dealing with the Three Rings.

But was he going to be okay? Were the others going to be okay?

What if she was pregnant and Tuvo didn't want it? Or her? Would *she* be okay?

It was too much for her to deal with, so she just curled into a ball.

"You're doing that stupid pouty thing again."

Keith's voice interrupting her pity party was like sandpaper on raw skin. She glared at him as he stepped up beside her, looking down with a disgusted sneer.

"Leave me alone," she said, unfolding her legs.

"What's got you feeling all sorry for yourself?"

She chose not to answer as she got to her feet and dusted off her butt.

"Let me guess, trouble in rainforest paradise?"

She turned to walk away. For all the good it did. He kept pace with her.

She let out a frustrated sigh, "Did you need something, Keith?"

"Yeah, a proper fucking bath, food not cooked over a fire like a hobo, and wifi. But apparently, I'm not getting any of that because I hear we're not even leaving this backwoods ass village anytime soon because your boy toy has a hero complex."

Turning with a glare, Hattie did her best to stand as tall as her height would allow. "No one is forcing you to stay, Keith. If you want to go, then go."

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, sure, so everyone can call me a coward and say that I tucked tail and ran leaving the



*alien* in charge.”

“Is that what this is about? Your ego is sore?”

“It’s not an *ego thing*,” he quoted, mocking her voice in a way that set her teeth to grinding. “Grow up, Hattie. It’s a *human* thing. Humans should be taking care of other humans.”

“Oh, please.”

“What, you think I’m wrong?” He sneered at her. “What am I saying? Of course, you do. You’ve turned into a whore since the last time I saw you.”

She gasped, stepping back in shock. She wasn’t ready, not just for such hateful words, but for the sheer disgust in his tone when he said them.

“Excuse me?” She finally managed to say.

“You’re a traitor to your own species,” he continued, eyes flashing. “Is it his dick? Huh? You got that stupid ass *size* kink. Hard for a fat ass like you to find a big human, so you have to settle for him and a dick that probably wrecked you.”

“What are you-”

“Probably big as a fucking train tunnel down there now.”

“What is wrong with you?!” She snapped, eyes swimming.

“Me?” He had the nerve to look shocked. “Are you serious? I’m a good guy! You had a chance to be with a good guy, one of your own people, and you traded that for a big dick. Don’t deny it! What else could that troglodyte possibly have that interests you?”

“Tuvo is a great male!” Hattie yelled, angry crying and hating it but unable to stop the tears from burning down her face. “He actually cares about me. He *likes* me. He doesn’t want to make me into something I’m not. He doesn’t take pictures of me and constantly doctor them so I look ‘prettier’ to fit in with his image!”

“He doesn’t care about you. You’re convenient. You’re a pushover, Hattie! You just roll over and do whatever he wants. You never argue with him. You never contradict him. You’re

easy. You've always been easy. Fucking you isn't a challenge, that's why guys settle for you."

Appalled, her mouth hanging open, unable to think of anything to say because she was just so shocked, all she could do was stare. Too dumbfounded to be insulted yet.

Before she could recover, a growl split the air. Animalistic and dangerous.

And comforting.

Tuvo came in from the side, looming over Keith, glaring at him with both fists clenched. And Keith suddenly didn't look quite so angry and smug anymore.

"Hattie, what did he say to you?" Tuvo asked, his upper eye on her, but his lower eyes fixated on him, flashing dangerously.

She sniffed, swiping angrily at her cheeks. "Apparently, he doesn't approve of our relationship. He's one of those anti-alien haters."

"I think that's not *exactly* what he said to you."

"No, it's not, but I don't want you to kill him, so let's leave it at that."

Tuvo snarled, fangs flashing.

Keith glared, but he took a step back. Like that would be enough to get him out of danger. When he spoke, he was addressing Hattie but didn't take his eyes off Tuvo.

"You're tattling on me again, aren't you?" He asked, sneering.

"If you don't want to be responsible for saying terrible things, don't say them," she countered. "And you should be grateful I'm *not* telling him what you said. The domini solve problems with violence. He would destroy you."

"And that's the kind of guy you want? You're trading a nice guy for a violent meathead?"

"No. I traded you for my own peace of mind and personal happiness. And I picked him for the same. There's no comparing you to him because you were already long gone in my heart."

“Personal happiness?” He laughed. “Is that what we’re calling a big dick nowadays?”

“You’re a little obsessed with his dick, Keith. Feeling inadequate?”

“You’re not denying it though, are you? That’s the only reason you’re with him, isn’t it? Does *he* know what your favorite color is? Huh? Does he?”

“Seriously?” She scoffed.

“You’re not going to ask him? Are you? Because you know I’m right. You made such a big deal about it before. So, big guy?” Keith smirked at Tuvo, deliberately speaking slowly. “What is Hattie’s favorite color? *Co-lor*? You know color, you oaf?”

Hattie’s jaw was clenched so hard her teeth were hurting. She hated the way he was speaking to him. She hated that she couldn’t ask Tuvo the question without being accused of giving him the answer. She hated that this conversation was even happening. She hated-

“Blue.”

Startled, the tension drained out of her in a snap as she stared at Tuvo. Surprised not just that he had understood the question, but that he had gotten it *right*.

She had never told him her favorite color. They had only just started talking to each other and nothing about their situation really presented the opportunity for small talk like that.

But Tuvo had answered completely confidently. Glaring Keith down as if daring him to ask another question about her.

“Is it Hattie?” Keith looked at her, then scoffed. “Actually, you know what, never mind. Of course, you’re going to say it is.”

Hattie shoved her hand into her purse, the one she had been carrying around because the cross-body bag was useful doing chores about the village, and, with only a little searching, found that receipt she had received from that small store in the Azores Islands. Smirking triumphantly, she unfolded it and

held it up where, written across the back, in slightly messy letters, was the solid black, indisputable-

*'blue'*

“And I didn’t even tell him,” she said, shoving it against Keith’s chest. “He actually cares about me. And he’s a good male. Not that you would know anything about that.”

She grabbed Tuvo’s hand and, before Keith could pop off again and actually risk getting Tuvo’s fist to the face, she walked off, tugging him along.

It was only then that she noticed that an audience had gathered. Men and women of the village staring unapologetically at the show taking place before them. Those that could speak English were surrounded by those that couldn’t who were whispering what was going on like they were divulging the hottest gossip at the water cooler.

Hattie’s face heated, embarrassed at having that scene witnessed by everyone. It made her walk faster as she dragged Tuvo back to their house and inside where she could hide. Not that it would make the whispering die down.

Her only consolation was that at least she knew she was right in this scenario. Keith had embarrassed her, but he had made himself out to be the jerk in the process.

“Want me to challenge him?” Tuvo asked softly. “I’ll go easy. I’ll only hurt him enough to humble him.”

Hattie turned, throwing her arms around his torso. “No. He’d just feel morally superior afterwards because he wasn’t the one who resorted to violence.”

Tuvo chuckled, rubbing her back. “Your species is so adorable. *Not* fighting is considered the honorable action?”

She smiled, thinking it was just as funny to her that he thought the opposite. She leaned back, looking up at his face without leaving his arms.

“How did you know my favorite color?”

His head cocked curiously. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I never told you. So, how did you know?”

He laughed. “How could I not know? You wear it more than any other. You favor it in the things you buy. It wasn’t a hard guess. Why was he even asking me that?”

Hattie chuckled and explained the conversation they had in the Azores. How Keith couldn’t answer the question.

“He was your lover for years and he didn’t even know that much? Hattie, at the risk of making myself angry, why were you even with him?”

“He acted nice once upon a time.” She shook her head with a sigh. “And once he had me, he kept me down. Made me think I didn’t deserve any better.”

Tuvo’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“You’re still not allowed to fight him.”

“*Krik.*”

She laughed. “Leaving him was hard. Not because I loved him, but because I was terrified about who I would be without him. But you know, I *like* who I am. I like my hobbies and my body and my interests.”

“I rather like you as well,” Tuvo said, kissing the top of her head. “As much as I want to stay here and prove how much, I actually came over to you for a reason. Before I saw you crying and had to fight back the urge to beat him bloody.”

“Oh. Are you leaving?” She guessed with a frown.

He grunted in confirmation. “We can cover a lot of ground before it gets dark. Tomorrow, the group heading to the town are going to leave. They’ll try to get help as quickly as possible, but we should still be back before them.”

“Okay.” She frowned. “I’ll miss you.”

He smiled, hugging her close. “As I will you. I’ll be back soon though. Stay here. Stay safe. Listen to whatever Belmira says. She’s a strong female, she’ll protect you.”

Hattie nodded. “You be safe too, okay? Don’t get shot at again or I’ll be really mad at you.”

“Can’t have that.” He leaned over, kissing her. “And if Keith does anything, tell him that I’ll take the price of it in blood when I return.”

Hattie threw back her head, laughing. “Don’t worry. I’m done shedding tears over him.”

# Chapter 34

## *Tuvo*

Human weapons were very old fashioned. They still used projectiles to deal damage, propelled by tiny explosions in the barrel of the gun. It was like holding ancient technology as Tuvo worked with the other males to pick through the compound.

They were gathering everything they could. Guns taken from the bloated corpses of dead bodies, ammo from various places throughout the rooms, medical and food supplies that were still good. It appeared that no one had tried to return here yet and there were only some signs of predation as the wildlife very slowly, cautiously, ventured closer.

It was only as they were going through the building that Inacio was able to explain to him what they did here. It took some time using his limited vocabulary and hand signs, but he eventually understood.

They stole and sold females through this building.

The Three Rings were a group of criminals, and they made their funds through running drugs and stealing and selling females. They sold them for despicable males to fuck at their leisure, with no concern for the females themselves. They often weren't even sold to a single person, but instead to many people for one fuck at a time.

Tuvo nearly lost the contents of his stomach.

Not just for the horror of what was happening here – though that was certainly part of it. He had seen many things during his years as a soldier and bad people existed in every species. He wasn't naïve to the terrors of monsters.

No, it was the idea that Hattie had been here that made him ill.

They found a room near where she had been imprisoned in which there was a single, dirty mattress, chains, and a camera pointing towards it. He pictured what they would have done to her on that bed, the 'example' they would have made of her for turning against her own kind, and he began gathering everything flammable he could find.

After he and the other males took away everything useful, he burned the rest to the ground. Taking pleasure in the purifying flames as they tore through the rooms, knowing that, thanks to the constant rains and the large clearing between the building and the wall, and the wall and the forest, the flames wouldn't spread.

This disgusting planet with its disgusting males. Criminals that sold females like chattel. Security teams that betrayed their duty and honor. Pathetic little males like Keith that had no power but still managed to hurt those near them.

This planet didn't deserve to be part of the Coalition. It didn't deserve to be protected.

Tuvo rather thought it deserved to be occupied.

They couldn't take care of themselves. They couldn't protect their own females. They should have the chance to do more damage taken from them.

Those dark thoughts haunted him the rest of the trip back to the village. He moved quickly, pushing the others hard, in his haste to return. No longer wasting time chatting or getting to know them. He was tempted to destroy these guns before he put them in their hands. Clearly, none of the humans could be trusted with even ancient weapons like these.

The only thing that kept him from reacting rashly, stupidly, was the mental image he had of how sad Hattie would look if he did something like that.

He had to get to her. He had to talk to her. She would calm him down.

Hopefully.



Or he would pick her up, forget Keith and Brilhar and the Three Rings, and just take her to town himself. Let them all suffer and die so long as she was all right.

Then, he stepped into the village.

And there was Hattie, sitting on a rug next to Belmira. She was teaching Hattie a game that appeared to be played with cards. Hattie had a frown on her face as Belmira slowly talked her through what she should do. Concentrated. Focused.

Then, as understanding dawned, a smile broke. She beamed, so bright and beautiful, it cracked that darkness that had settled in his heart.

Belmira noticed them first. When she looked their way, Hattie turned as well, and when she did, her smile got brighter. His little sunlight. The spark in his heart that made it beat.

“You’re back!” She said, getting to her feet.

Tuvo dropped the bag he carried onto the ground. He didn’t care if he damaged anything inside. The only thing that mattered right then was Hattie.

He grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder without even breaking his stride. The village, already used to him, laughed good-naturedly as they passed. None of them judged. A few of them waved and called out what sounded like encouragement.

Good people.

Right. There were good people too.

Hattie, hung over his shoulder, scratched his back. “Miss me?”

In response, he slid his hand up the back of her thigh, making her shiver.

It had only been a few days that he had been gone, but Hattie had made herself at home in their little, borrowed house. She had added a new pillow to the bed, a rug for the ground, her clothes were tossed over the chair, and she had a basin of water.

Nesting. She was nesting.

As an *adassi* should.

Tuvo couldn't stop the growl in his chest as he flipped her over, off his back and into his arms so he could gently lay her on the bed.

Laughing, she put her arms around his neck and brought him in for a kiss.

He sank into the warmth, the taste, of it. His female. Sweet and kind. Everything wonderful about this planet. Something easy to forget when he had been surrounded on all sides by the very worst. Just the memory made him shudder as he sank into her.

"Hattie, I need you," he very nearly begged.

"I'm yours," she promised, running her fingers through his hair.

And he felt the certainty of that vow deep in his bones. In his heart.

She *was* his.

He had to remind himself that it had been days since they'd been together. He had to make sure she was ready for him, fighting against his impatience as he yanked her jeans down her hips. Just far enough that he could thrust his hand between her legs.

The warm softness of her thighs closed around his fingers. Then, the slickness of her weeping cunt. He speared her with two fingers, thrusting deep, making her gasp as she canted her hips up. She had indeed started to tighten up again.

Well, he would fix that for her soon.

He worked his fingers in and out of her channel until she slickened and loosened enough to fit a third finger into her. It was a task considering her legs couldn't separate.

But as she tried to shimmy out of her pants, he yanked his hand free. He grabbed her, tossed her onto her belly, clutched her hips, and yanked her up.

She was trying to properly get up on all fours in the time it took to free his aching cock. He didn't let her adjust herself.

He put a hand to her back and pushed her down again, arching her ass up, offering her hole up to him.

She whimpered, dripping.

A pretty little cunt. His to own. His to fuck. His to breed.

And no one would ever take her from him again.

He notched his head at her entrance and thrust forward. Slamming halfway into her, making her cry out as her fingers clutched at the bed.

He pulled back, then thrust again. Just as hard. Just as merciless. Gaining more ground. It took three more such attempts before he was finally buried to his knot. Hattie bit the mattress and was whimpering, shaking, as he claimed her.

Lowering himself, pressing her down into the bed, he let his weight cover her before pulling his hips back. He started pounding. Hard and uncompromising. With each slap of their skin, he heard-

*Mine. Mine. Mine! MINE!*

-roaring in his head.

His mate had been so close to danger. So close to death. It didn't matter that it was over a tenday ago now. It didn't matter that she was here, safe, with him now. Because they had taken her from him once, and they might be coming back for her again.

She came with a cry. So suddenly. He wasn't ready for the way her muscles all clenched around his cock – desperately milking him for his seed.

It ripped his own climax from him. Unwillingly. His sac drew up as white-hot pleasure raced up his spine even as his knot ached from being neglected. He wasn't buried in her. His shaft didn't even start to go soft. His hips never stopped moving. He kept pounding, stirring up their combined juices, as she cried and moaned under him.

What little seed he had leaked with that unknotted orgasm was dripping out of her. It was smeared against their thighs.

A waste. He needed to replace it. He had to breed his female. Put his pup in her belly so she would stay safe in her nest.

That very thought, his beautiful female round and glowing, drove him into a frenzy.

He grabbed her hips and yanked them up. He drove his knot into her, making her scream. Then yanked it out. Again. And again. Fucking her with it. Owning her body. Breaking it. Reforming it into the shape of his cock.

Claiming her.

When she came again, now buried deep, her muscles all clenched so tight that he couldn't pull himself free. Like a true knot, he was locked inside her. The rippling of her muscles coaxed his own orgasm forth as he roared from deep in his chest.

And filled her little womb.

Breeding his mate.

He collapsed back over her, fingers digging into her hips, keeping her close. Not that there was any chance of his knot breaking free so long as she clutched him so tightly.

His knot, by Standard definition, was technically a pseudoknot. He shouldn't lock inside her. That was not something his anatomy was supposed to do.

But Hattie clung to him so tightly, refusing to let him go.

Once again, as the frenzy faded, he found himself grateful that human females had the foresight of turning off their ovulation. Just by watching the other females with their mates, he knew how easy it was to plant a pup in their womb.

Sighing with relief, he nuzzled the top of her head.

"You all right, *vi kyryra*?" He asked, his grip loosening, but his knot remaining stuck. She hadn't released him yet. He didn't think he'd mind if she kept him there for the rest of their lives. It might be a bit impractical, but he thought he could make it work.

Hattie moaned, head turning, unburied from the mattress. “Wow... That was...” Her voice broke off and turned into a deep, rolling giggle that rocked her body against his.

Tuvo groaned as his knot throbbed. “Don’t move, *kyrya*. You’re going to make me hard, and I don’t want to take you again so soon. Are you sore?”

“I’m full,” she grinned, eyes shut. Blissed out. Absolutely beautiful.

“Full?”

“Of you,” she wiggled her hips back making him groan again. “You filled me up so full, honey.”

“Honey?”

“You don’t like that one? How about sweetie?”

He grimaced and she laughed, making their bodies move again.

“You get to give me a pet name, but I can’t give you one?”

“You can. But nothing so... cute.”

She snickered. “What pet names am I allowed then?”

“Hm... How about *virkan*?”

“Does that mean pumpkin? Honeybun? Sweetie-pie?”

“Vigor,” he ground his pelvis against hers, making her moan. “Or *nivii*. Sturdy.”

“How about Tuvy-Bear?”

“Bear? What does bear mean?”

“It’s a big, fierce, mighty predator on Earth,” she smiled back at him. “The kind that makes full grown men run in fear.”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. She looked entirely too satisfied with that suggestion. “Are you lying to me?”

“Not at all. You can ask any human. Bears are big and sturdy. Vigorous. I can show you pictures when we get internet service back.”

There seemed to be something suspicious about this, but she also didn't seem to be lying. And it could be easily disproved.

"Very well. I don't mind being called bear. But Tuvy?"

"It's called compromise. Cutesy and tough. We both win."

Once again, he rather thought she was not telling him something, but if bears really were such fearsome predators, he couldn't imagine what it was. He would make sure she showed him this beast later so he could be sure it really was all she claimed, but he couldn't deny her now.

"Very well," he agreed, reaching between them.

He took hold of her hips and, slowly, being careful not to hurt her, pulled his knot free. She gasped and closed her legs as his seed began to leak. A waste.

Sighing, he collapsed down beside her. She grinned, grabbing his arm and bringing it down so she could use his bicep as a pillow. He had said it before, but it beared repeating-

"I am *so* lucky you turned off your ovulation," he said, rolling onto his side without disturbing her so he could rub her back.

# Chapter 35

## *Hattie*

There were times that Tuvo being so dense was unfortunate. But there were also times when it was something of a blessing. He didn't even seem to notice when she suddenly stiffened. Or the tension in her voice when she asked-

“Why do you say that?”

Maybe he had a good reason to not want to get her pregnant. Maybe it was something as basic as it being bad timing. Or him wanting to spend more time with her first. It didn't have to necessarily be a bad thing.

It didn't have to be related to the fact that he hadn't once mentioned her being his mate. It didn't have to be that he thought she'd be a bad mother and so didn't want her to get pregnant. It didn't have to be that he didn't want kids.

This was probably fine. He would have a good explanation. She waited, unable to breathe, knowing she was going to hear something reassuring.

Then, he broke her heart-

“Because I can't even imagine you having my pups.” He laughed, letting out a long breath like it was relief just to admit that.

Hattie's mouth was dry. Her heart was pounding. Belly churning.

“You can't?” She asked, unable to hide the breathless way she whispered it.

“No, not at all. It's good it can't happen.” He rubbed her back so tenderly while he ripped out her heart and stomped it into

the ground.

She tried to open her mouth, to say something. Maybe something flippant to ease any tension. Maybe something playful to show him that it didn't hurt.

But nothing came out but a soft breath that caught on the thick lump forming in her throat.

No. She couldn't cry here. He would know something was wrong. She should pull up her pants that were still caught on her thighs. Pull up her panties and stop his cum from leaking out of her. She could fake a smile and run and...

And...

And be easy. Not try to confront him. Because that's what she did. She took it when the men in her life hurt her because she couldn't argue. If she argued, if she fought, they'd leave her. Because she wasn't good enough.

It was another bomb Keith had left in her psyche. One she hadn't noticed. One she hadn't been able to deal with on her own because she would never have found it without someone else unburying it.

And for a few minutes, she just sat with that bomb. Nursed it. Let it sit heavy in her belly. Let it terrify her with the choice now set out in front of her.

She could bury that bomb. Pull up her panties, her pants, smile at Tuvo and leave. Accept things the way they were. Not rock the boat at the expense of her own happiness. But at least that bomb, those consequences, wouldn't fall on her head.

Or she could say something. She could confront him. Confront her hurt. Trigger that bomb. It was scary. And it might hurt.

But it was the only way she could move this relationship forward. If what they had was worth fighting for, she had to break that bomb.

It took a couple tries, a few preparatory breaths, before she finally gathered the courage to start.

“Er, Tuvo?”



“Tired of Tuvy-Bear already?” He asked, grinning with his eyes shut.

She swallowed. Everything in her rebelling at the idea of speaking up. She almost felt sick.

But she steeled her nerves and let out a low breath before trying again.

“Tuvo, can you explain yourself?”

His eyes snapped open, and horror crossed his face. She was crying already. Even just that small confrontation was too much. Already she wanted to yank the words back, but she bit her tongue and trembled and kept her eyes on him.

“Hattie,” he sat up quickly, reaching for her. “I *did* hurt you. Where? What’s wrong?”

He hadn’t even given her a chance to answer. He was already searching her over for wounds. Pulling up her shirt, checking her hips for bruising. He yanked her jeans down, past her calves, and pushed her legs open so he could check her pussy.

The air hitting her was cold. The stretching of her thighs made her wince. More of his cum came rushing out when he spread her legs. He spread her lips, checking for blood and damage and making her shiver.

She didn’t understand. How could he say such hurtful things but at the same time be so sweet? He obviously cared for her. So, then why...?

“Tuvo.” She took his jaw in hand and forced him to look at her face. “Do you not want babies?”

“Not from you, no.”

She winced. That hurt, no matter how tender his touch. But she couldn’t believe, for even a moment, that Tuvo – who cared for her so deeply – would hurt her deliberately. Not even her feelings.

But she did know that he often said dumb things without meaning to. That he spoke without really thinking about the meaning of his words.

So, she took in another breath and steadied herself on his broad shoulders.

“Why don’t you want me to have your babies?”

He frowned. “Hattie, look at you! You’re tiny!”

“Wha...?”

That was definitely not what she had expected him to say. But he looked so serious. As if whatever he was thinking should have been obvious to her.

“What does my size have to do with it?” She asked, surprised and now more determined than before to get to the bottom of this.

He pushed himself up on his hands, looming over her. Huge and sexy. He opened his mouth, then hesitated and shook his head.

“Hattie, I... I was there when Peony gave birth.”

“Huh?” Also not what she expected him to say.

Before the alien delegation could come to Earth, they had to get permission to make it a protectorate from the Coalition, seeing as Earth did not qualify for membership. Hattie had been invited to go, but she had chosen not to. Peony and the others spoke on behalf of Earth. She had told them that she was happy to remain on Tury, but the truth was that, at the time, she had been avoiding Tuvo who had needed to go for security purposes.

While they were there, Peony had given birth to the first hybrid baby. And the entire thing had been recorded – though not with her permission. A series of circumstances had led to her needing to give birth the natural way, with no help aside from Scarlet being there to guide her. The others had been present as well, but they weren’t trained nurses and healers.

Tuvo was among them. He had seen the entire thing. But Hattie had no idea what that had to do with this.

Unless the sight of childbirth had been enough to turn him off the whole concept. That wasn’t unheard of right? Didn’t make her feel any better though.

“I watched Peony struggle through her labor,” Tuvo said, his eyes far away. Lost in the memory. “I saw her agony. I saw Scarlet have to cut into her in order to let the pup free. It took *marks*, Hattie. Over an entire day! She screamed. She bled. It was horrific. You think I would ever risk putting you through torture like that?”

She frowned, confused. “I thought Peony’s birth went fine. Scarlet said it was basically textbook – aside from the whole hybrid thing.”

“Exactly!” His eyes were wide, horrified. “That’s *normal*. I’m bigger than Atem, and you’re smaller than Peony. My pup would rip its way out of you!”

“Oh.”

Everything suddenly clicked into place at once. And made so much sense. All the hurt faded as she smiled in relief and joy.

He was *worried* about her. He had seen Peony giving birth and it hadn’t disgusted him, it had *scared* him. For *her*. He didn’t want her to have his babies because he didn’t want her to hurt. He didn’t want her to suffer in the same way.

Never mind that it wouldn’t happen that way again. Peony was supposed to have given birth inside a birthing chamber. A device that would have hastened the process and eased her pain. It was only bad luck and circumstance that forced her to give birth the natural way. Holly and Scarlet, both of whom were pregnant, weren’t worried because they both knew they would have advanced alien technology to help them through.

But poor Tuvo had been traumatized. He had seen Peony going through the trials of labor and it had terrified him. Domini females didn’t give birth in the same way. Their labor lasted only two hours and the birth itself wasn’t pure agony. Of course, seeing how human females did it would terrify him. It was sweet, in a weirdly overprotective way.

“Tuvo,” she gently stroked his cheeks with her thumbs. “Tell me something. Do you think I’d be a good mother?”

He looked confused. “What? Of course, you would. Why-”

“Do you want pups?”

“Not at the cost of you!”

“But do you?”

He hesitated before his jaw tightened under her hands and nodded. “I... I do.”

“Really?” She beamed.

“But no! You’re so little. My pups would... My pups...” His voice trailed off, breaking with wanting so keen it made her chest hurt with empathetic longing.

“Is that your only concern?” She asked softly. “The pain?”

“Only? Like it’s such a meaningless thing?”

He wrapped himself around her. Holding her tight, resting his head down on her chest. Hattie smiled as she embraced him, running her fingers through his hair.

“You know that kind of childbirth is normal for my species, right? Millions of women go through it every single day.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.” His grip tightened around her. “Your males must be sadists to want to ever risk putting their females through that.”

“No, they just believe the same thing we do.”

“Which is?”

“That babies are worth it.” She pushed his head up, forcing his three eyes to meet hers. “Yes, women of my species are more cautious about having babies, and yes, the trials of pregnancy and childbirth are a big part of that. But when we do make that choice, we do it knowing what awaits us. What we’ll likely have to go through. And we’ve made our peace with it.”

“I don’t see how you could,” he growled. “That kind of labor would be a death sentence for a domini female without advanced medical care.”

She frowned, thinking. “Well, you know how you saved me from the jet? How you just jumped out of the sky and used the tree to break our fall?”

He frowned, clearly confused about the seemingly random change in topic. “Yes. Why?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, obviously.”

She laughed. “I don’t just mean me personally. My *species* can’t do that. Any human that tried that would have died on impact.”

“What is your meaning, *kyrya*?”

“*You* can do it because your species is designed to live through something like that. Even though it hurts. Even though it made your clawbeds swell. It injured you, but you were designed to live through it. Right?”

His face softened. “Your argument is that your body is designed to labor that way, even if a domini female’s is not.”

She smiled. “Exactly. I appreciate your fear though. It means a lot to me that you’d be concerned about the trials of pregnancy.”

Tuvo looked thoughtful for a moment. She stayed quiet, petting his hair, letting him work through whatever was going on in his head.

He rested his head back down on her breast. “All the same, it remains true that I am large to your small. Scarlet was constantly checking Viktor’s size to make sure he could fit through Peony’s body. They were concerned about it since my species is huge compared to yours. I will not put a pup in your belly and risk both of your lives by it being too big for you to carry safely.”

Hattie bit her tongue. For a second, just a second, she met that bomb again. The argument of keeping her mouth shut to keep him happy versus speaking for the sake of truth and openness.

But having faced and overcome it once, it was easier to do it again.

“Tuvo?”

“Yes, *vi kyrya*?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“What is that?”

“I never turned off my ovulation.”

## Chapter 36

### *Tuvo*

Hattie hadn't turned off her ovulation.

He had planted his seed inside her.

Multiple times.

Tuvo was losing his mind. He had no idea if she was pregnant yet, and he was filled with equally powerful but absolutely conflicting feelings.

The painful, desperate yearning for his pup to grow in her belly. He wanted to watch her figure get curvier, to change. He wanted to put his hands on her belly and feel their pup moving. He wanted to see her building a nest and feeding her in it while she nursed their youngling.

But as much as he wanted that, he was terrified of having to watch her go through childbirth.

While intellectually he knew that Hattie wouldn't face the same, specific circumstances that forced Peony to give natural birth, he couldn't banish those memories from his mind.

How small Peony was. Gripping Atem so hard, she bruised his hand. Screaming. Roaring. Letting out guttural battle cries as her body worked to expand down to the bone in order to expel the pup she had spent so long growing. Her blood when Scarlet was forced to cut into her to free him. The way she had just flopped back, sweaty and pale and exhausted, once he was pulled out.

He couldn't imagine being there, watching Hattie suffer the same. For marks on end. It would destroy him to hear her screaming in agony.

And no amount of logic telling him that she would not go through her labor the same way could allay those fears.

They itched under his skin, making his stomach churn. Terrifying him with the possibilities. Because if Peony's labor and birth were textbook and completely normal, then what were all the things that could go *wrong*?

He didn't know if it would be worse to know or not. He did know that not knowing was torture.

And yet, despite those terrors clawing at his mind and heart, he still couldn't stop this wondrous, beautiful, aching hope from rising in his belly. Like a hard stone, impossible to break, weathering the storm of emotions without chipping or cracking.

His eyes kept traveling to her. Keeping track of her as she moved about the village, chatting with Belmira and the other friends she had made. He kept looking at her belly, as though he might be able to see something.

What if she was pregnant? How could he survive her labor?

What if she wasn't? How could he fuck her again and risk getting her pregnant?

After she told him yesterday, he had been unable to speak. Barely able to think. She seemed to understand because she had just smiled and told him to take his time as she continued to stroke back his hair and hold onto him. Even laying down, his body almost completely covering hers, she still gave the best hugs.

The next day, he had to start training the males in weapon use. Inacio didn't like the guns, but he agreed that they needed something to deal with the Three Rings. But Tuvo could already see him planning to get rid of them the first moment it was safe.

Basic weapon care and knowledge were the most important part of learning. Tuvo was going through rules of weapon use, using the strange language they had developed that was part Portuguese, part English, and part non-verbal. But it was hard



to focus on that when those thoughts and feelings and fears kept coming back and he *had* to check on Hattie again.

She looked so happy. So sweet. Laughing and chatting and moving.

In between teaching them and tracking her, Tuvo tried to calm his turbulent emotions. He knew it was a pointless endeavor. Until he had Hattie somewhere he *knew* was safe, he was not going to be able to calm down and face the future.

For now, it was enough to try to figure out what he was going to do next.

He was standing over the males, watching them taking apart and putting their weapons back together and then loading them. Only occasionally checking on Hattie. She seemed to realize what he needed because she made sure to stay in his sight.

Or maybe, she was keeping him in hers.

He liked that thought. That she was so eager to rely on him. To keep him near.

Precious *adassi*. She needed a better den to nest in.

“Tuvo.”

Inacio’s voice drew his attention back onto the males. They had finished their task and were looking up at him expectantly.

He couldn’t help but train them in the military style. A weapon was a weapon, even if it was super old fashioned. He would teach them how to use a sharpened stick if that was what he had. They were doing a great job of going along with him though. Eager to protect their home.

He quickly inspected their weapons then ordered them to break them down again. He wanted them to be comfortable with the tools. To know them well.

As they were doing that, he looked at the older male also watching them.

“Inacio?”

“Hm?” His little human brow tuft went up curiously.

“What bear?”

“Bear?” Inacio looked confused about the seemingly sudden question. “Bear is beast. Big. Gr!” He curled his hands like they were claws. Seeming to confirm Hattie’s explanation.

Tuvo still felt suspicious somehow.

But that thought quickly fell to the wayside when, with a cry, two males came running out of the trees, rushing their way. They were two of the males Inacio had set to scout the surrounding area to keep watch for the Three Rings.

They ran right up to them. One folded, hands to his knees, breathing fast. The other panted as he rushed through an explanation. He spoke only in Portuguese and too quickly for Tuvo to understand, so he just waited until Inacio turned to translate.

“*Tres Argolas*. On tree.” He pointed.

Three rings carved on a tree. Just like at the crash site. A directional sign for the group to follow to their target. No doubt, it was a death sentence around here. The bloodless cheeks of the males that had come running spoke to their terror of seeing such a thing.

But Tuvo knew that sign now. It was certainly evocative. A calling card.

Dramatic.

“It time,” he declared, looking at his little army. It wasn’t much, but they were good males with a great deal of motivation. Sometimes, that was all it took. “Go!”

Roaring, they jumped to their feet. They beat their fists to their chests in the domini salute before turning to run off. They all had jobs to complete. They had practiced this, drilled it, and they rushed to their positions like a well-trained military.

Tuvo smirked, proud as he walked towards Hattie.

She and the other females hadn’t missed the way the males had suddenly roared and moved. They knew what it must mean. Even if they didn’t, it was the job of two of the males to make sure that those not fighting were put into hiding safely.

Hattie set aside the knife she had been using to chop vegetables and approached him, brow already drawn in worry.

“Be easy, *kyrya*,” he said, putting his arms around her. “I’ll be okay.”

“You’re going up against a gang of armed human traffickers with a dagger.” She touched the hilt of the alien knife at his waist.

Tuvo couldn’t use the guns. He had tried. Now that he had a chance to investigate them without being shot at, he had attempted to fit one into his hand. His smallest finger could fit through the protective ring covering the trigger, but it was tight and too easy for him to accidentally pull it. And doing it that way meant holding the gun awkwardly anyway.

Those weapons would be less than useless in his hands – they would be actively detrimental. So, he had surrendered the one he tried to one of the males and taken the dagger instead. But he offered it back to her now.

“Take it,” he ordered, holding it out for her. “Use it to protect yourself.”

She frowned, staring at the dagger, but didn’t reach for it. “But you don’t have any other weapons. I can’t.”

“I have ten other weapons. Twelve if you count my fangs. Take it.” He pressed it on her until she finally gave in and clutched it close. “I’ll feel better knowing you have this. Keep it close. Don’t hesitate to use it if you have to.”

Hattie was going to be hiding with the others. Where he knew she would be safe. But he would rather her have the dagger, just in case.

“Are they coming now?” She asked, shivering with fear. And he hated those males for it. Even if they hadn’t tried to hurt her, he would have made them pay for making her feel unsafe. No one had the right to make his female feel unsafe.

“They found the marks on the trees,” he explained. “I’m not going to wait until they come to us. I’m hunting them down first.”

“How very domini of you,” she said, smiling weakly. “You’ll be careful though, right? You won’t do anything too dangerous?”

Be careful? In battle? She was asking for the impossible from him. But even knowing that, he couldn’t deny her anything.

“I’ll be cautious,” he said, figuring that was as close as he could get to careful. “Don’t worry about me. These males are not military trained.”

“But they’re, like, uber bad guys! The kind of guys that trade in human flesh. Guys like that don’t have a heart. They don’t understand fair play or basic morality. Who knows what they’ll do?”

Tuvo smirked. “I could tell you stories of my time in service, but I would rather not. I don’t want to burden you with those stories. Not when I know you won’t enjoy them.”

“I want to know about your entire past,” she protested. “Even the bad parts. That’s what it means to be...”

Her voice trailed off and he cocked his head curiously. “To be what?”

She bit her lip, hesitating, before softly saying, “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“What are we?”

His head cocked curiously. “In what context?” The question made no sense to him.

Her brows furrowed and his gut clenched. He had something wrong again.

“I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be sorry.”

“Tell me what I said. I... I know I’m stupid. I don’t mean to be. Just tell me what I said wrong.”

“You’re not stupid! That’s not it. I just... It’s not fair for me to judge you based on what I’m used to with others. You’re not

avoiding answering me. You genuinely don't know what I'm asking for. Right?"

"*Kyrya*, I would give you anything. I would do anything for you. I'm sorry that I need direction to know what that is sometimes, but please know that my actions are genuine."

"That's nothing to apologize for. I need to be clearer. I need to learn to speak my mind. To make demands. That I have the right to make certain demands and that's not me being unreasonable or needy. It's me setting expectations for what I want and that's okay."

Tuvo just stared at her. Unsure what to say. It didn't even seem like she was talking to him.

He wished she would make more demands of him. He didn't want to guess or misstep with her. She was too important. If she told him exactly what she wanted, he would do everything in his power to make sure it was done exactly right. It was better than him fumbling around and making even more mistakes with her.

She took a breath and lifted her head. Facing him with determination that filled him with pride. "I'm asking you what label you would put on our relationship."

Oh? Was that all?

He laughed, relieved it wasn't something more serious.

Her face fell.

"No, Hattie," he rushed to say. "I'm not laughing at you. I-"

"Tuvo!" Inacio yelled at him. "Ready!"

He turned and nodded at the male before looking back at Hattie. She was smiling.

"You should go," she said. "I'll go find Belmira and stay with her."

She stepped forward and came up on her toes, leaning her head back for a kiss. She couldn't reach him if he didn't bend over. He wanted to continue this conversation, but he couldn't deny her.

He covered her lips. Bidding her farewell. Making her a promise of his feelings even if he didn't return from this battle.

He lingered over the kiss. Enjoying it. Enjoying her. For as long as he dared.

They broke apart slowly. With a few more, lingering kisses at the corner of her lips before they separated.

“You are my heart, beating outside of my chest,” he said, holding her arms, resting his forehead against hers, trying to explain what she was to him. “The only thing that keeps me alive. That which drives and powers me. *Vi kyrya*. Nothing but death will keep me from you, and death will have to fight to take me away.”

Her hand stroked his cheek as she stared at him through watery eyes, smiling despite them. “You are the greatest warrior on Turv. I expect great things from you. I demand them. I know you will make me proud.”

Nothing she could have said would have filled him with as much determination and strength as her belief in his abilities. He stood tall and proud. Determined to live up to his own name and prove his worth to her. As a proper warrior and domini should.

She took a step back. Then another. Keeping hold of his hand for as long as possible until distance forced their fingers to separate.

Still, she walked backwards, keeping her eyes on him, as long as she could, until Belmira touched her shoulder, forcing her to look forward.

Tuvo watched her walk away until the trees swallowed her up. Only when she was gone did he turn to face the males – and two females – waiting for him. Waiting for instruction. Ready to protect their home and families.

He grinned, fangs flashing, the excitement of the coming battle rising in his blood.

He was a domini, a warrior, and this was exactly what he was designed to do.

## Chapter 37

### *Hattie*

The hiding place Hattie and the others were going to could best be described as an unfinished treehouse. An uneven platform was built between three different trees a fair distance away from the village. It was old, at least a generation or two, and Belmira explained that they had built it when the Three Rings initially started terrorizing their people.

One of the younger men – who had come for this purpose alone – climbed the tree using a knife and his bare feet. When he got to the top, he dropped a simple rope ladder down then stayed to help bring everyone up. He was going to return when he was done, but seeing that all the women, children, elderly, and infirm were safely hidden away was his job and he took it seriously.

Hattie stayed near the back with Belmira, waiting for their turn. They were sending the children up first. Then the elderly, then the infirm. Only once all of them were up would the able bodied, stronger women without children climb.

Hattie put herself firmly at the back. She was not only able bodied and without dependents – for now – but she was the outsider. And probably the reason this was happening. She felt like she didn't have the right to climb up first.

But Belmira stayed with her. At the back of the small crowd, waiting with her arms crossed as she kept looking back. Both her father and her lover had stayed. Her mother was waiting with the rest of the elders for her turn to climb – though she had protested.

Belmira had also protested. She wanted to stay. To fight. But her loved ones all ganged up on her and told her that she was

going to hide. They had just gotten her back. They would not risk her being taken again. Belmira had eventually given in, but she had been unhappy about it.

“Hey,” Hattie smiled at her. “They’ll be okay. Promise.”

“Yours might be. I’m a bit more worried about mine.” Belmira returned the smile, but it was a pale imitation. “And my father. He’s not a young man anymore.”

There was nothing Hattie could say to that. For as confident as she was in Tuvo, it only took a split second of bad luck for the irreversible to happen. He had survived a volley of bullets, which made her feel a bit more secure, but not completely assured. None of those shots had hit him in the head. He told her that he still felt pains from the various metal fragments still trapped in his body. And those had been shot at from a distance. What if they were closer? What if they were armor piercing?

There were so many things that could go wrong, Hattie’s nerves were roiling in her belly. But she kept a smile on her face. Tried to act strong. There was enough worry going around. She couldn’t add to it for the sake of the others.

But she kept checking over her shoulder. Thinking about Tuvo. Worrying about him.

Slowly, the line in front of them got smaller and smaller. There was only one way up, but the three different platforms were connected. They weren’t perfectly camouflaged from below, but if you didn’t look closely, you likely wouldn’t see them.

Hattie was only about five people from the ladder when a rushing through the trees made all of them turn. Hattie’s hand was on the hilt of her knife, ready to yank it free. But she stopped when she saw-

“Keith?”

Breathing hard, his jog came to a halt. He gave her a quick smile. “Oh, good. I was hoping you all hadn’t pulled up the ladder yet.”

“What are you doing here?” Hattie asked, confused. Keith had told her that he was going to be with the other men to help



defend the village.

She had actually been impressed. She hadn't thought Keith would be the type to put himself on the line for something like this. He went to the gym but wasn't the type to get into a bar fight. In fact, she was pretty sure she he was the guy telling people to hold him back while not actually being a threat to anyone.

Keith gave her a smile. "Tuvo asked me to come back and guard you all. Just in case."

"He did?" Hattie wasn't surprised that Tuvo would give someone that responsibility, but she was surprised that he would give *Keith* that role. Especially when there was already someone with them that he could have just asked to stay.

"Anything I can do to help," he said, winking at one of the women.

"Oh, well. Okay. Thanks," she said slowly before turning around.

Belmira rolled her eyes, doing the same. She mumbled something under her breath in Portuguese.

Hattie insisted that Belmira climb up ahead of her, then followed her up. Keith climbed last, trading places with the guy that came with him. That guy looked confused but said nothing as he climbed down. Keith brought the ladder back up as Hattie sat cross-legged next to Belmira right there on the edge. There wasn't room for them anywhere else, so though there were no rails or anything, they just had to be careful.

"Nice and safe," Keith said, dropping the last of the rope ladder into a heap with a grin like he had accomplished something.

"What are the others doing?" She asked since he would have been the last to see them.

Keith shrugged. "Think Tuvo was going into the forest or something."

He didn't seem to care. Which wasn't at all surprising. She shared a look with Belmira, and though neither of them said

anything, a silent agreement passed between them. There was no way Tuvo had sent Keith back here. He was running from the fight.

Hattie wouldn't judge his cowardice. She couldn't say he was wrong, exactly, for not fighting in a battle that wasn't his. But just the fact that he had lied about fighting, and now was lying about being on guard duty, was annoying.

But she decided not to care. Whatever Keith did was his own choice to live with.

Looking past him, she stared into the trees. As if there was a chance she might see Tuvo. Not that it would matter even if she could. There wasn't anything she could do to help, but she felt like if she could just keep her eyes on him, he would be okay.

Please, be okay.

# Chapter 38

## *Tuvo*

Mostly nude – except for a cloth tied around his waist to hide his cock – Tuvo ran along the lower branches of the canopy. The rings carved into the trees weren't particularly easy to spot from this height, but the clear path cut through by the person who carved them was.

Behind him, the humans of Brillhar were disappearing into the trees. Hiding. Doing their best to camouflage and lay in wait. For a species that had only a single color per person, they were surprisingly good at blending with their surroundings. Not as adept as him, of course, but they disappeared into the underbrush with ease.

They stayed back, letting him go first. Not just because he could blend in, but because he could walk the trees in a way they could not. He was going to find where the Three Rings were and start the attack. The others would follow after.

Their goal was to prevent them from ever getting to the village. Or let them close to the females and younglings.

His female and their potential pup.

The thought nearly made him trip. He had to come to a stop, breath caught in his throat. How could that thought be so wonderful and terrible at the same time?

He shook his head, forcing it away. This was not the time. He couldn't allow his worry for her to interfere with his mission.

And right now, it was more important that he protect her from this threat.

He started jogging and jumping again. Following the trail of broken vegetation below.

His target was easy to find. They weren't at all trying to be quiet.

The Three Rings were traveling in a group. Cutting their way through the underbrush with huge, thick blades. All of them had guns. They were staring forward with harsh determination. He counted ten... fifteen... eighteen males.

Tuvo stopped on a high branch, near the trunk of a tree, hiding in the shadows as he watched them continue their slow march. They weren't even trying to hide. They were following the path marked out on their calling card with the full confidence of a group that knew no one was going to stop them. The sheer audacity of it told him just how long they must have been doing this with no powerful authority trying to stop them.

It was infuriating. Burrowing under his skin. They had no fear. No concern at all. They were ready to slaughter a village of innocent people that had no way of defending themselves. And they knew there would be no consequences.

Tuvo's anger only grew as they moved around his tree, splitting like water flowing around a stone, not even looking up. A mistake a domini would never make, because his species knew to keep watch for threats from above.

He waited. Patient. Quiet. The excitement of the coming fight rising in his gut.

They moved past his tree, and he scaled down. Moving quickly. Silently. He dropped the last few lengths to the ground. He didn't even have to worry about trying to be silent. Not with how loud they were being.

Brazen. Accustomed to being untouchable. Sloppy.

The first male fell without a sound.

He was bringing up the rear, chewing and spitting something foul every so often. He looked bored. Like he only came along because he had to. He wasn't even paying attention. The idea of mass death was so boring, he completely checked out.

Tuvo came up behind him, covered his mouth with one hand and slashed his claws across his throat with the other. Hot blood soaked his palm as he blocked the powerful, pulsatile

bleeding from gushing forward and hitting anyone else. The male struggled, but not for long.

And the others, loud and unconcerned, kept going forward. No one even looked back when Tuvo tossed the male's body into the underbrush and crept forward again.

The second and third males fell exactly the same way. One of them looked uncertain, like he may not want to be here, but he didn't stop moving forward and his grip on his gun was secure. The other one stumbled on a rock and fell back by a step. Just a step, but it was enough to separate him from the pack and into Tuvo's grasp.

After that, there were no more stragglers. And without an easy target, he changed his strategy.

The fourth male wasn't a straggler, but he was near the edge. Chatting with one of the others, laughing and making obscene gestures. He looked entirely too happy to be here.

Tuvo came around, crouched in the brush, and waited. When he came by, Tuvo struck. He slashed his claws across his heels, cutting the tendon there. He cried out, but before he could fall, Tuvo grabbed his ankle and yanked him into the underbrush as he screamed in horror.

His throat was cut and Tuvo disappeared back into the shadows. The male's blood hadn't even stopped flowing before the others rushed onto the scene. He was choking on the red fluid, trying and failing to speak, as he slowly got weaker and weaker.

It was so fast, no one had time to react. They just stared at him, stupefied.

Tuvo used their moment of shock to go around and grab another guy near the edge. He yanked him into the underbrush, gutted him, then disappeared before the hail of gunfire shredded the area as the males all cried out in fear.

He only took out one more male before someone called out to circle up, backs to the center, aiming their guns outward. All of them frantically sweeping their gaze across the underbrush, searching for some sign of him.

Tuvo had climbed up and now crouched in the trees overhead. He looked down at the remaining males as they continued to panic but still didn't look up.

He waited. Patient. They would have to move at some point, and unless they could somehow cross this uneven terrain in a perfect defensive circle, they would need to make themselves vulnerable once again.

They called out to each other in a panic. He only understood a few of the Portuguese words. Just enough to recognize that they were trying to figure out what had attacked them and what they were going to do about it.

One of the males, the one that had ordered them into the defensive circle in the first place, barked out orders. It took him a moment, but he eventually managed to get the others to calm down. He forced them into a line, every other male looking off in a different direction. The male at the end faced backwards, weapon at the ready.

They walked like that, trying to keep going while maintaining their defensive posture.

Tuvo climbed down again. He hid in the underbrush until they crossed his path.

He leapt out this time. Tackling the lagging male into the brush, knocking his gun free and ripping his claws up through his guts. He continued running forward, leaving him there, once again escaping before the barrage of gunfire could cut through. They only succeeded in putting the male out of his misery.

That was when the second volley of gunshots began.

Tuvo, already halfway up another tree, climbed around and looked over in time to see the men from the village charging forward. They must have heard the shooting and decided to close the last of the distance themselves.

Tuvo smirked, proud when he saw them moving in formation. Strong. Steady. They weren't a polished, well trained fighting force yet, but they had learned, and they looked impressive.

He came down out of the tree again and crept around to the back of the fighting, trying to avoid getting shot at again.

It was over in moments.

The Three Rings were overrun by more than twenty villagers carrying their own guns. Tuvo stepped out of the underbrush, looking around at the carnage as the villagers stared in disbelief, as if they couldn't believe what they had just done.

The shock only lasted a short time. Someone let out a whoop of excitement and he was immediately joined by the others as they hollered and roared their victory. Tuvo smiled, adding his voice to the cacophony, amplifying and encouraging them.

Someone said something about the females before running off and Tuvo imagined him going to get them out of the tree.

He walked over towards Inacio and asked simply, "Hurt?"

Inacio grunted, holding up three fingers. "Not bad."

Three minor injuries. That wasn't bad at all. Though, considering how unprepared and careless this group had been, maybe that wasn't a surprise.

He turned and looked over the bodies with a snarl of disgust. One that Inacio mimicked, spitting on the corpse of one in particular. The leader that had actually managed to keep them in order – for however short a time that lasted.

Tuvo pointed at him, grunting a wordless question.

"Afonso," he said, lip curling. "Son of..." He pointed up.

Ah. Afonso was his name, and he was the son of someone highly ranked in the Three Rings. And apparently, he was not liked as Inacio wasn't the only one to spit on him.

While they figured out what to do, Tuvo looked around, checking on everyone. Just to be sure they were all there and that he hadn't somehow miscommunicated with Inacio. Aside from the male that just ran to get the females, the only one missing was Keith.

Tuvo was not shocked or disappointed that the tiny male had fled in cowardice, even after he had promised to stay and fight.

Ignoring that, he focused back on the task at hand.

After some discussion, it was decided that the bodies would be dragged back to the village and burned. An action that Tuvo quite heartily agreed with. Though, it took until he was helping pick them up and dump them on a wooden stretcher that he remembered that, to humans, burning a body and scattering their ashes wasn't seen as an insult.

These people were actually going to give these males some kind of honorable send off. He rather felt it was a waste, but they were determined.

When he gave Inacio a curious look, he saluted him in the domini way, fist over heart, and said, "Not them. Better."

Tuvo chuckled, thinking it odd, but didn't hesitate to help them drag the bodies back. They were left on the edge of the village until a pyre could be made. Tuvo was glad to see the last of them as he stepped out of the tree line.

"Tuvo!"

There was Hattie. Running towards him, relief in her face. Tuvo opened his arms, catching and lifting her up as she threw herself at him. Her sweet, warm kisses rained down on his face as she babbled at him in English and Domtri and Standard – exclaiming again and again how happy she was that he was okay and that she had been so worried when she heard the gunshots.

"I'm here, *vi kyrya*," he promised, holding her tight. "I'll always be here."



## Chapter 39

### *Hattie*

The funeral pyre burned, acrid smoke filling. Hattie had spent the better part of ten minutes trying to explain to Tuvo that, to humans, desecrating the dead was a horrible affront – even to enemies – because he hadn't understood why they weren't just left for the forest to reclaim. Even after explaining it to him, she didn't think he fully understood.

But he helped set the bodies in place and stood back respectfully as the village watched, for just a minute, as the wood around them burned.

Before it had even finished, they turned and began walking away. They gave them the respect of a proper funeral, but that didn't mean they were grieving them.

Hattie and Tuvo were among the first to leave. They followed a few of the others as they returned to the village.

And to the party that they were having tonight.

The only ones that died were members of the Three Rings. Of the villagers, there were only four injuries. Two men that had grazes from bullets, one guy who got shot in the thigh, and one older woman that slipped coming off the rope ladder on the way down and twisted her ankle when she landed.

All told, they were lucky. And they were relieved.

The Three Rings were a plague on this village. Knowing that they were capable of fighting back, that they had dealt a blow, meant a lot. A party to celebrate coming through this was practically a given.

And Tuvo was the star of the show. People kept coming up to talk to him. And, to her surprise, he was talking back! His

English was as terrible as his Portuguese, but when those were combined with gestures, he managed to get his point across just fine.

He really was amazing. The best.

And they still hadn't finished their conversation yet.

Tuvo hadn't had time to mentally work through the idea of her maybe being pregnant. The fact that she could get pregnant was probably something she should have mentioned to him before they ever slept together. But she honestly hadn't thought he would mind.

And while she couldn't say he was exactly *happy* with the idea, his internal confusion didn't stop him from being affectionate.

That had to mean something, right? She wanted to give him the space he needed to come to terms with what they had done on his own.

But the waiting was shredding her nerves!

She returned to the kitchen area with the other women. Tuvo lingered around them, watching her from a distance as they worked. Every so often, Hattie would look up, smile and wave, before returning to her task.

He was always there. Always looking over her. It made her all warm and fuzzy inside. She couldn't stop herself from smiling as she helped cook.

The last of the villagers returned from the burning pyre and they were welcomed with bright cheers. Some of the men were strutting around like peacocks, obviously proud at having protected their home. Hattie thought it was kind of cute.

Less so coming from Keith. He seemed to think he had done something by guarding them in their tree – despite the fact that nothing happened. But no one was paying him any attention anymore. Everyone had him figured out, and no one was impressed. The best he got was polite smiles. Honestly, seeing it, Hattie felt pity for him. This was the life he was destined to lead because of his own choices. Seeing it play out here in this

village just made her realize how sad and lonely he would always be. But there was nothing to do for him.

She pushed him out of her mind as she instead focused on making the best meal possible for everyone. A thank you for protecting them so well. Appreciation. Love. Cooking brought people together. It made a statement. It was everything. And for moments like this, it was practically the most important thing.

As darkness started to fall and people broke out the instruments, she and the others began taking the platters of food to everyone. Tuvo was there, beside Inacio, in pride of place. He had been called away a short time ago, and she hadn't seen where he had gone.

But she wasn't disappointed by his absence, because now her wild male looked like the jungle king he was.

The jaguar pelt he had brought back from the crash site had been treated and preserved and now hung down one arm, a half cape kept in place with beaded leather straps hooking around his chest, under his opposite arm, leaving his torso bare, shining gold and brown like the skin of the pelt. He had leather sandals and sat with one leg bent, offering a place for his arm to rest, making him look like a beast, sitting at his ease in his den. He still wore a kilt, but it was a shorter one, made for him, of the same dark brown as the jaguar spots with a beaded belt that held the alien dagger alongside a pouch hanging off his hip. Beaded jewelry decorated his wrists, ankles, and neck. His hair had gotten longer, almost shaggy, and was pushed up and out of his face on one side, highlighting the harsh scars across his face.

Wild and sexy and *hers*.

Hattie brought him the bowl of bloody, spiced meat made especially for him and set it at his side. But when she tried to turn to go back for more, she found her ankle caught in the surprisingly strong grip of his tail.

He pulled, barely exerting any pressure, and guided her back to him. He took her hand and brought her down into his lap,

resting on his thigh, against his chest. He held her close, one hand possessively resting on her belly, as he spoke into her ear.

“Rest, *kyrya*. You’ve been up and moving for marks.”

“So has everyone else,” she laughed, snuggling back against him.

“They are not my female. I don’t care what they do.”

She grinned. It was probably selfish to be pleased by such a declaration, but she had no desire to stand from her new throne. She relaxed against him, petting his jaguar pelt with one hand, and watched the people talking and dancing and laughing.

“Enjoying yourself, *vi kyrya*?”

“I really am,” she said, smiling. “This place is so nice.”

“Better than Turv?”

“Well, nothing beats home. I’m already missing it.”

His thumb was rubbing on her belly now. Was that a good sign? “I think I like this place best of what I’ve seen of Earth so far.”

“This? You know we’ve seen monuments that are a thousand years old and toured the most incredible architecture and met the most amazing people. This village is your favorite?”

“This village is real. These people are real. This,” he smiled out at them as children ran around, laughing and squealing, “is humanity without the filters of conceit or embellishment. These are ordinary people just living their lives. This is what’s worth protecting.”

Grinning, she snuggled into him. “Yeah. I think so too.”

The feast was even better than the one that welcomed them. The energy in the air was so different, so much brighter. The sense of victory floating through the air along with the beat of the music made everything better.

“Will you dance with me?” She asked, looking back at Tuvo eagerly.

He didn't hesitate. He stood, picking her up and gently setting her down on her feet before letting her lead him over to the other dancers.

Dancing, for the domini, wasn't the same as it was for humans. It looked more like a game of tag wherein you weren't allowed to run, just dodge. Hattie wouldn't have minded dancing with him like that.

So, she was surprised when, after turning to face him, he slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, rocking his body alongside hers. Moving in the way the other young couples were doing.

Surprised, but not unhappy. Her hips immediately began to roll, her body undulating, as they moved along with the exciting beat. She loved dancing. She loved having fun with Tuvo.

He was always willing to do things like this too. Indulge her request to cross the ocean just to visit her family. Play with her in the ocean. Dance with her in the rainforest. Her love for him deepened the longer they were together.

They moved until she was breathless. Until she was dizzy. She nearly fell across him, and he caught her up, lifting her against his chest as her feet kicked in the air, her arms around his neck, giggling as he brought her back to their rug.

Everyone was eating and laughing, speaking their weird amalgamation language, Hattie only translating here or there as necessary, when a commotion turned their heads.

They looked into the crowd as they suddenly parted. The music ceased and the chatter quieted as a group of people she didn't recognize walked through the village.

For a few seconds, Hattie was confused about what she was seeing. She was so unprepared for the sight of official looking men in hiking gear, she had no idea what she was looking at. A large group – maybe ten or so – all in hiking boots, geared up, with stern expressions on their faces following behind the two men from the village that had gone to town.

Oh. The town. Right. These must be people from the search and rescue crew following the lead that had suddenly fallen in their laps.

She knew the instant that they saw Tuvo. Their reaction was surprise and a hesitation in their steps as they gazed upon the wild beast wearing a jaguar pelt.

“It looks like your people are here,” Inacio said, looking at her.

“I guess so,” Hattie chuckled breathlessly, turning to Tuvo.

He got to his feet, pulling her up and keeping hold of her hand as he stepped towards them. The group came to a halt, only one man moving forward. The leader wasn't a man she recognized. He appeared to be middle aged, his dark skin minorly lined, only a few gray hairs in his short beard. He looked at them with something like relief.

“Miss Sweet,” he greeted her first. “Mr. Tuvo. We're relieved to see you both... doing so well.”

Hattie looked down at herself. At her pretty dress. Then at Tuvo's cape. Her hair was pulled back and braided with flowers. He was draped in beads and leather. They looked like they had come here on vacation, and not like they had survived a plane falling out of the sky.

“Yeah,” she smiled back at their attempted rescuers. “We have Tuvo to thank for that.”

“What's happened here?” He asked, looking around. “We found your plane. It crashed and it looked like you had been there until recently.”

“Oh, we had been. Why don't you come over here? We'll tell you what happened. Let me just ask Inacio if it's okay.”

She gave Tuvo a smile before turning to make sure that these guys could stay here for the night. And they would at least need to do that. It was too dark to safely hike out of here. They must have been determined if they had kept going even once the sun set.

# Chapter 40

## *Tuvo*

They had been found by the human search team. The villagers tried to offer them food as they came to sit around the village center, but they politely declined. They had all brought their own food and didn't want to unnecessarily burden them.

While they ate, they talked, exchanging stories. Though, they didn't know exactly why Roger had done what he did, the men had something of an answer for them.

After their plane had vanished from its flight path, an investigation began immediately. They knew they had an emergency landing in the Azores Islands, but it wasn't, as Rodger said, because of a malfunction. It was so that, without guards watching him, he could sabotage the plane so he could blow up the engine and force it down without any chance of recovery. The secondary pilot that should have been with him for safety purposes was completely fabricated for those who would check, and none among the party thought to ask why a single pilot had been flying the plane.

It took some time to locate exactly where their plane had been when it disappeared, and then even more time to locate the plane itself.

While the search was ongoing, the others had all been attacked as well. Their security team turned against them, holding them hostage in some cases. Before Hattie could panic, however, he assured them that everyone was all right. They had rescued each other and taken a shuttle back to the *Jutiron Stor* which remained in orbit beyond the moon.

And they were looking for them.

Tuvo couldn't help but smirk when he saw the unease on the males' faces when they described how Survii had threatened to refuse Earth their protectorate agreement so long as Tuvo and Hattie remained missing. Apparently, he had been fiery and righteous in his declaration.

Tuvo was rather sure he wouldn't have meant it. Not considering how hard his mate had fought to bring Earth to this point, but it was a scary threat to humanity when they thought about all they had to lose if he really went through with it.

But they had been found. As had the male behind the attack.

"Phillip Morrison?" Hattie repeated, surprised when they told her.

"You know him?" Tuvo asked, not recognizing the name.

"Er, yeah. I met him at Alanna's wedding reception. He was one of the high-profile guests invited to the second party. He seemed so nice."

"He's one of the founding members of PHAL," the leader of the search party explained as she translated. "The Pro-Human Advocates League. They're an anti-alien terrorist group that have been behind the attacks on your people since you've been here. He was well-connected enough to get close to you and wealthy enough to buy multiple mercenary squads to place in your security team."

"How many of our security team were traitors?" Tuvo asked, snarling.

The man hesitated before answering, "Most."

"Bertrand?"

He nodded once.

Tuvo growled, furious. Their own head of security. A man he thought to nearly be a friend. At least, the two of them had friendly conversations. But he had been responsible for putting Hattie and the others in danger.

"How did this happen?" He asked, glaring at the human male. "Were our guards not vetted? Were they not tested for negative



feelings towards us?”

The man cleared his throat, looking away awkwardly. “I’m just with search and rescue, I don’t know these things.”

“Then get me in contact with someone who knows.”

“I don’t know if he can,” Hattie said, putting her hand on his arm, obviously trying to calm him down. “We’ll probably have to follow them to town.”

But before he could start the plans necessary to start that trip, the man turned and accepted something from one of the others. What he brought back around was a square, black, fabric case that he unzipped, revealing a big, clunky device.

“Oh,” Hattie perked up as he worked. “It’s a satellite phone.”

Their human phones didn’t have service all the way out here, but this one, apparently, would be capable of reaching out to the search organizers. The man assured them that their entire security team had been suspended, and more than a few of them arrested, as an investigation was underway. The search was being headed by Alanna’s uncle, President Townsend.

His love for his niece was well known, and something that Tuvo did trust.

The man called someone on the phone, and was then put through to someone else, and then transferred once more before John Townsend’s familiar voice came through the speaker.

*“Thank goodness you’re both okay,”* the man said, his voice overlaid with static thanks to the satellite connection. *“Is Keith Willard there as well?”*

Hattie confirmed that he was, and that he was also unharmed, and the president let out a long breath of relief. Tuvo was willing to grant that he probably was concerned for their welfare, as he seemed to be a good man, but there was also no doubt that he was relieved that their treaty could still be salvaged. He *was* a politician, after all.

*“We’ll have you back soon. Do you mind waiting on the phone? It’s nearly the time that the Jutiron Stor calls us, and I*

*know they've been worried about you and will want to hear from you as soon as possible. If you're on the line, I can patch you through immediately."*

Tuvo agreed, thinking it to be the best idea. The others needed to know where they were, that they were safe. And if they knew where they were, he could get Hattie to safety sooner.

It wasn't an easy task. There wasn't a direct line of communication from Earth to the *Stor*. Earth technology couldn't connect with theirs; it was too different, and Earth didn't have access to the Standard yet. So, contact involved just waiting until the *Stor* commed first. The president explained everything that happened in detail while they waited.

Eventually, from the other end, the comm suddenly connected to a different comm, and Tuvo heard Romival's calm but harsh voice.

*"What is so important, President?"* Hattie translated, whispering softly so that her voice didn't interfere with the comm.

There was no forgiveness or softness in his tone. It was telling that Romival was answering the comm and not one of the other females. He spoke English flawlessly – having learned it the old-fashioned way since there was not yet an imprint of the language made – but the females were ones that usually spoke for them. Specifically, Alanna acted as the go-between.

But it was Romival that answered. A barrier between the humans and their females that meant a great deal without saying anything.

*"First Scholar,"* President Townsend started immediately, almost rushing. *"I have Tuvo and Hattie here on the line."*

There was a moment of silence. Then-

*"You found their bodies?"*

*"No. We found them. They're here now. Hattie? Are you still there?"*

Tuvo was the one who answered. Not in English, but in Domtri. “Romival. It’s me. Can you hear me?”

He could practically feel the tension loosening on the other end of the line. “*Tuvo. We hear you.*”

“*Tuvo?*” That was Atem’s voice, cutting in on the line. “*Are you all right, brother? Is Hattie? Are both of you okay?*”

“We’re fine. A bit of a mishap with the airplane. Our security team-”

“*We know. They betrayed us.*”

“*How did you survive the plane blowing up?*” That was Havali’s voice. Were the females there? Were they just not speaking? Were they okay?

“Blowing up is a bit of an exaggeration,” he said, scoffing. “Only one engine blew up, and it was just to make sure we couldn’t rescue the plane. It came down in a slow spiral. I jumped out with Hattie before we hit the ground.”

Laughter. That was Atem. Tuvo could practically see him throwing his head back.

“*Lucky ecter,*” he said. “*But I’m glad you’re both okay. Where are you?*”

“A place called the Amazon Rainforest. Far south of where we were meant to go. We believe Rodger was trying to give me and Hattie to a group called the Three Rings. I don’t know why. But I don’t imagine it was good. Atem... they sell females.”

Strained silence.

“*They what?*”

“This group. They steal females from their homes. From their families. They beat and abuse and rape them and sell them to other males!”

Three growls rolled through the static heavy speaker. Tuvo felt one building in his own chest that he had to force down.

“*You lie,*” Atem said. Not like he didn’t believe him, but like he didn’t want to.

“They had a mattress and a camera. They had Hattie! They were going to-” He couldn’t stop the growl this time, fists clenched so tight they began to shake.

Hattie put her hand over his, giving him a sad look. “Hey, I’m okay. Right?”

“But you might not have been! What they had planned for you...”

“We don’t even know exactly what that was.”

“It doesn’t matter! It was nothing good. It was vile. They had Belmira. They’ve had countless others. How is this allowed?!”

“It’s not,” Hattie said quickly, stroking his jaw. “Tuvo, I’m okay. We’re okay. What they’re doing is illegal. Like, super illegal.”

“And yet, they were able to do it. They were *allowed* to do it.”

“No.”

“If your people wanted, they could have stopped it! They could have gone in there with an army and razed that compound to ashes. I shouldn’t have had to do it.”

“That’s not how it works,” she said, lowering her eyes. “That’s not how our justice system works. There are laws in place that we have to follow.”

“Laws that allow things like this to happen? That allow females like you, like Belmira, to be treated in such a way? No, Hattie. You cannot defend your species for this.”

“Tuvo...” She tried and failed to say something, but no words came to her tongue.

How could she explain that there *were* people who dedicated their lives to destroying groups like the Three Rings? That there were attempts made every day to stop them? But that it wasn’t as easy as just walking through the door and telling them to stop? That compound probably wasn’t even known about before they stumbled upon it.

But everything she thought to defend her people just sounded like a weak excuse, even in her head, and no words slipped

past her lips.

Tuvo turned from her, looking back at the phone speaker. “There’s a village. Not far from the Three Ring’s building. That’s where we are, but we can make our way back. The tree cover should be light enough that a shuttle can land there.”

“*Actually,*” Romival interjected, “*the tree cover might be light enough where you are that we can fit a shuttle right into that gap there.*”

Hattie lifted her eyes, looking up at the night sky that stretched overhead. The village was in the forest, but there was enough of a clearing that, with some good piloting, someone would be able to fit in through the gap over the center.

They could go back to the *Stor*.

Back to reality.

She still didn’t have an answer from Tuvo about what they were. About what he thought about her maybe carrying his pup. She was regular and she hadn’t had her period since they left Geneva. It could just be stress delaying it, true. That wasn’t out of the realm of possibility considering everything she had gone through.

They would know the moment they got back to the *Stor*. There was no doubt that the two of them would both be put in a medscanner as soon as they arrived. The many cuts she had all over her body from the fall through the canopy were healing but not completely closed. He still had all those bullets to dig out of his skin. They had to be healed. They would know soon enough if she was pregnant.

At this moment, she honestly didn’t know if she wanted to be or not. If she had been asked a month ago, she would have been ecstatic to be carrying Tuvo’s pup. But knowing he was so completely against it put a severe damper on her excitement.

She was so lost in her thoughts, she almost didn’t hear Tuvo asking-

“How long until we can be on our way back?”

*“Wait right there,” Atem said, sounding relieved. “We’ve got your location. We’ve got a shuttle ready for departure. It will be there soon.”*

“We’re safe here, *vi Dominani*,” Tuvo assured him, not wanting him to think that there was any need to rush recklessly.

*“Both of you? You’re both safe?”*

That was when Hattie realized she hadn’t actually said anything to them. When she had been speaking to Tuvo, her voice had been too soft to pick up. She leaned forward, happy to speak to her alien brother. “Hey guys!”

*“Hattie.”* She heard him let out a long sigh of relief. *“How are you?”*

She smiled at Tuvo, but he didn’t smile back. He still looked angry about the human trafficking conversation they had been having.

“Oh, we’re fine.” She hesitated before adding, “Don’t listen to anything Tuvo says.”

He gave her a dull look that she pretended not to notice. On the other end, she heard someone chuckling. That was Survii.

*“What did he say?”*

She hadn’t heard him before. Had he not heard Tuvo?

Before she could assure him that it was nothing, that he was just being angry and overprotective, Tuvo growled angrily-

“I hate this disgusting planet. Every male here is a worthless *ecter* and I want to kill them all.”

“It’s not that bad!” She yelled quickly, both to him and to the others on the other end. They had all gone silent and she was worried they agreed with him.

She touched Tuvo’s arm, giving him a sad look. A pleading one. He relented slightly.

“I’ll debrief you when we return,” he said, his voice tense but at least not snapping again.

“We’re fine,” she called out to the others before they could worry. “I promise.”

“Hattie...” Tuvo turned his hand, closing his fingers around hers. That sweet, tender tone was back in his voice. Relenting to her.

He was still mad about what he saw in the compound, and she couldn’t blame him for that. She didn’t want him to be okay with it. She was happy he was so angry. But she didn’t want that to mean he turned against her entire species.

She leaned back towards the phone. “We’ll tell you when we get back. It was crazy. Tuvo is so awesome. He said I can be the one to tell the story.”

“*Can’t wait to hear it,*” Survii said, sounding amused.

Hattie held onto Tuvo’s hand, keeping him calm, as he discussed some logistics with the others.

Though they wanted to return immediately, the simple fact was that it was going to be hard to land in the canopy in the middle of the night. They were only a few hours away from dawn. The shuttle could land first thing in the morning, and they would leave then. That small delay would also give them plenty of time to get their things together and say goodbye.

Hattie asked Inacio if it was okay. This was his village after all. He agreed.

“I’ll be sad to see you go,” he said, smiling at the two of them. Just the barest upturn of his harshly cut lips. But in his lined, weathered face, it was a big change. “But you’ll always be welcome to return here, whenever you like.”

“Thank you for having us,” she said, beaming. “You’ve been wonderful.”

They ended the comm with the promise to be ready at first light. The search team was offered lodging and accepted it gratefully. They would stay until Hattie and Tuvo left.

And thus, the victory feast became a goodbye party.

# Chapter 41

## *Tuvo*

The flash of the shuttle coming out of the sky sparkled like a falling star in the morning light. Tuvo stood in his jaguar cape, arms crossed, watching it come closer.

Behind him, Hattie and Belmira were chatting and making promises to keep in contact. A difficult task considering Belmira lived in a village without modern amenities and Hattie was going to be in a completely different galaxy. But they were talking about letter exchanges and maybe getting Belmira a satellite phone Hattie would pay for and all kinds of things.

They weren't leaving Earth immediately – just the surface of the planet – so they had plenty of time to work out a way of communication. His mate was a friendly type of female. She didn't want to lose contact with anyone.

Their belongings, as few as they were, sat in their bag at his feet. It included some gifts from the village, including a lot of the beaded jewelry Hattie had been wearing. Tuvo had already said goodbye to Inacio and a few other males he had gotten close to, but Hattie and the females were lingering over their farewells as long as possible.

It was cute. His female was so sweet.

As he was enjoying that thought, movement to his side made him turn. He was surprised to see Keith standing there. He was looking up at the shuttle like he was waiting for it. Though Tuvo didn't know why. He wasn't coming with them.

The search and rescue party had prepared as well. The moment that Hattie and Tuvo were gone, they would be leaving too. And taking Keith with them. He assumed. He didn't



particularly care what the human male did. As far as he was concerned, Keith ceased being his problem the moment they stepped foot in this village.

“Tuvo.”

He turned at Belmira’s call. She had stepped around Hattie to smile at him and offered her hand in what he recognized as a human greeting.

“Thank you,” she said.

He had no idea why she was greeting him, but he shook her hand regardless, shaking his head. “No thanks.”

She laughed, releasing his hand and smiling at Hattie. The two of them hugged again as the soft hum of the shuttle’s engine moved overhead.

Tuvo turned as it came around the canopy into the opening over the village. They had all cleared a space for it to land. It wasn’t a super tight fit, but the pilot was careful as he brought the shuttle down and landed it on the hard packed dirt.

“Time to go, Hattie,” Tuvo said, picking up their bag.

“Just one more minute, Tuvy-bear,” she smiled. “I have to hug everyone.”

“You already did.”

“I have to hug them again!”

He chuckled and left her to it as he approached the shuttle. The door opened and he wasn’t at all surprised to see Atem standing there.

The male that was like a brother to him looked immediately relieved. He saluted his *Dominani* formally but wasn’t surprised when he found himself brought in for a hug instead. It was rare that he exchanged such displays of affection with Atem. Since they were young, they had always been more focused on training and studying to get where they were today.

But the pain in Atem’s voice when he said, “I thought I lost you,” told him just how badly he had been hurting since they disappeared.

“As if I would ever be so weak as to let a falling aircraft kill me,” he said, making Atem laugh as he stepped back.

“You’re hardheaded enough you probably would have survived the impact anyway.”

“Exactly. No idea why you were worried.”

Tuvo stepped around him to toss their bag inside. Landing shuttles weren’t particularly complex or intricate. It was just a small ship with seating inside the cabin meant only to take people between a planet and a larger ship.

He turned back as Atem was admiring his cape.

“What is that beast? Was it fearsome?”

“It was a jaguar.” Tuvo pet the pelt. “And it died honorably on the hunt.”

Atem inclined his head as the two of them looked over at his female. She was once again hugging everybody she had met here. Crying but smiling. She really could make friends, a home, wherever she went.

“Thank you,” Atem said, surprising him. “For protecting my sister.”

Atem and Tuvo had been raised together. They were like brothers, but they were not. Atem had never been officially adopted by Tuvo’s parents as Atem refused to surrender his clan name or his mission to exact revenge against their killer.

Hattie, however, had been officially adopted. She was Atem’s family, as true as if she was a pup from the same womb. As much as Atem had worried over him, he would have worried over her.

“It was my honor, *vi Dominani*,” Tuvo assured him, claws twitching. The sudden urge to fight Atem built in his throat seemingly out of nowhere.

But it was not out of nowhere. Atem was Hattie’s guardian. Her closest, strongest family member. And though Tuvo had claimed her every night, including last night, he had not yet gone through with *the* claiming.

That involved fighting Atem and taking her for himself.

And he was suddenly quite eager to get it done.

But then Keith stepped forward. Calm and confident and completely sure of himself, he walked towards the shuttle entrance.

Only to immediately find himself blocked by Atem and Tuvo stepping together, creating a barrier to prevent him from coming closer.

And he had the nerve to look affronted.

He said something that Tuvo recognized as a question about what they were doing. Neither male responded, only glared. Atem already hadn't liked Keith, and Tuvo was officially at the end of his patience dealing with him.

Turning, like a pup whining for his mother, he yelled out, "Hattie!"

She turned from her prolonged goodbye with Belmira and looked at him.

"What?"

He didn't even bother to answer her verbally, just gestured at Tuvo and Atem with an annoyed, and annoying, flip of his hand and bobbing of his head that made Tuvo's hand itch to smack that look off his face.

Hattie walked over, clearly still confused. So, Tuvo answered for her. Lowering himself so that he could more directly look at the male, he said simply-

"No."

"What?" Keith gasped in shock. "You can't... You're just going to leave me here?!"

"Yes."

"No."

Tuvo and Hattie spoke at the same time. She gave him a look that he shrugged at as he stood up straight, crossing his arms, staring down the little male.

He understood the general gist as Hattie explained that Keith had to hike back with the search team. He was solely a citizen of Earth, unlike her, and the treaty wasn't signed yet. He wasn't allowed on the shuttle or near any advanced technology until then, and probably not even after.

His mouth hung open. "Seriously?!" He looked between them.

Hattie shrugged like the matter was out of her hands. Which, it was. But even if it hadn't been illegal, Tuvo still wasn't letting him on their ship. As far as he was concerned, Keith wasn't going to die for having to be forced to hike a few more days. He could leave the male here, guilt free, and convince Hattie that there was no harm done.

He hoped Keith got blisters on the walk back.

Petty, maybe, but he was done with this male and his snide and hurtful comments.

Comments he was no doubt making now as Hattie continued to deny him the opportunity to travel in the shuttle. It didn't take long for Keith to raise his voice and snap at her, and that was the last of his patience. And Atem's.

They moved at the same time. Tuvo grabbed Hattie and pulled her against his chest as he moved back while Atem stepped forward, snarling, claws on display. Ready to rip into the delicate human male for the insult.

"No, guys, it's okay!" Hattie said quickly, fumbling over her words as she very nearly almost spoke in English in her rush to get them out.

"Let's get you in the shuttle," Tuvo said, turning and placing her inside.

"Wait," she chuckled, putting a hand on his chest.

## Chapter 42

### *Hattie*

Keith was glaring. Atem was growling. Tuvo was snarling. The sheer force of aggression all around her should have made Hattie uneasy.

But it didn't. Because Atem was her brother and only wanted to protect her. And Tuvo was her sweet lover boy and wouldn't let anyone disrespect her.

And Keith? Well, Keith was... irrelevant.

Stepping away from Tuvo, she pushed Atem back. Giving her ex space so that he could turn his glare on her. No doubt, he felt that was the safer option – though it definitely was not.

But the hard look didn't make her uneasy or afraid. It didn't hurt to see. He was just Keith being Keith – like a fly buzzing around shit.

“You're really going to make me walk back? After everything?” He asked, tone incredulous with just a hint of mockery. An edge he couldn't help but add because cutting her was part of the way he tried to gain back his power.

“You'll be fine, Keith,” Hattie said, not a trace of fawning or flattery in her voice. It was steel as much as her nerves. “And since this is likely the last time I'll ever see you, I have something to say-”

“Hats, this is ridicu-”

“Stop talking,” she cut him off, no hint of compromise in her tone. She had never done it before, and it surprised him so much, he actually obeyed. “You've spent our entire relationship saying whatever you want, however you want, and I've let you. So, you're going to let me speak this time.”

“You-”

“I hate being called Hats. I hate the way you treated me. I deserved better. You hurt me. You do it deliberately. You’re intentionally cruel and manipulative about it. You brought me in with pretty eyes and a charming act that you let fall away as you chipped at my self esteem until you had me so destroyed, I didn’t even think I could leave.”

He rolled his eyes. “Dramatic, as usual. Always blaming me for your problems.”

She continued like he hadn’t spoken. “You gaslighted me. You insulted me. You took out all your anger and insecurity on me and had me convinced I deserved all of it. I gave you everything I had, I did everything I could for you, and you not only took advantage of that, you didn’t even appreciate it. I have every reason to hate you. I’m going to enjoy never having to see you again, and I hope you stub your toe on every coffee table you pass for the rest of your life.

“But more than anything though, Keith... I forgive you.”

He started in surprise, his anger and annoyance vanishing to be replaced with confusion. Then consternation when she smiled weakly.

“I forgive you,” she repeated, the certainty of it settling in her bones. “I feel bad for you, and I genuinely hope one day that you can work through all the issues that you’re taking out on the people who care about you, because it hurts too much to confront them yourself. Every second of our relationship wasn’t bad, you know. And I know there’s good in you. I wish the best for you. Thank you for our good times, and I forgive you for the bad. Goodbye, Keith. Good luck.”

Turning from him, she walked past the two, hulking domini that had been flanking her from behind, glaring at Keith with unfiltered disdain and disgust. Even when she walked past them, they didn’t immediately back down.

She shook her head, laughing as Tuvo snarled. He didn’t even get a chance to do anything because she grabbed his tail and pulled him back.

“Come on. Let’s go,” she said.

He growled at Keith, who was stepping back, confusion and a strange hurt on his face. However, her strong alien lover didn’t fight as he let her drag him into the shuttle. Atem let out one last snarl before turning and stepping in as well.

He hit the button beside the door to raise the steps and seal it closed. Hattie waved at everyone through the gradually closing crack until the last second.

“Aw, I’m going to miss them,” she said as Atem made his way to the pilot seat. He had been the one to drive it down here.

Tuvo wasn’t surprised. Atem wouldn’t have let anyone else be responsible for picking up two people who meant so much to him.

“You’ll see them again,” Tuvo promised as she moved to the window and waved again. They couldn’t see her through the window tinting this time, but she kept up her vigil, smiling sadly, as Atem lifted the shuttle off the ground and slowly brought them up.

Tuvo came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. He watched with her as everyone dropped away.

And with each length gained, he felt some of his tension ease.

Finally, she was in the safety of the shuttle. The armor on this ship would be enough to handle most blasts that this planet was capable of producing. And the higher they got, the more out of range she was of all of them.

No more beasts. No more wild, unprotected nests. No more males that posed as much of a threat to her, if not more, than both.

Finally, his mate was safe.

# Chapter 43

## *Hattie*

The shuttle ride was quiet. Peaceful.

This time, she got to enjoy the majestic sight of the Amazon in all its glory as it spread out below her while their shuttle climbed. It was an ocean of green, undulating under the breeze, as the daily storm began to open up across the land.

The shuttle dipped into the clouds and the window was swallowed in a haze of white.

A long, shuttered breath flew past her lips.

“Are you alright?” Tuvo asked softly.

She nodded. “Yeah. I hate saying goodbye.”

“It won’t be forever, *kyrya*. You’ll see them again.”

She smiled, turning in his arms to look up at him. “I know I will.”

“And think of all the good things to look forward to.”

“It will be nice to get a long, hot bath.”

He chuckled, pushing back her hair. “Yeah. And we can finally get your wounds seen properly.”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one who got infected.”

“Indeed.” He rolled his shoulder. “Can’t wait to get these bullets out of my back.”

“How many do you think are back there?”

“Enough,” he said dully, making her laugh. “I think I’ll melt them down into a necklace for you.”

“Huh? A necklace?”



“No? Maybe a bracelet instead. I would have said a tail band, but, well, you need a tail for that.”

She smiled. “You’re going to make me jewelry out of the bullets you got shot with?”

“What else would I do with them?”

“Throw them away?” She laughed. “Aren’t those made of lead?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Isn’t lead toxic?”

“I’ll have it coated so it doesn’t affect you.” He grabbed her wrist, closing his whole hand around it. “I got these bullets for you. It’s only right I give them to you.”

Oh. It was a domini thing. And kind of sweet? In a very odd way. And as long as she couldn’t get lead poisoning or something from them, she wasn’t unhappy about accepting.

Bright sunlight burst through the window as they came out of the clouds and she turned, this time watching as the Earth got further and further away.

The shuttle moved fast, piercing through the atmosphere so quickly and smoothly, she didn’t even feel it. She just slowly became aware of the distant horizon appearing in her field of view as it bled into the darkness of space. The continents formed under her gaze. Swirling masses of clouds became streaks of white lazily swirling through the air.

Getting smaller and smaller. Further away.

And, strangely, she wasn’t sad to see it going.

She still wanted to visit her parents before they left. She had to call them. While she was sure that someone had notified them that she was okay, she needed to let them know herself. That would be one of the first things she did when they got back to the starship.

But aside from that, she didn’t really feel like she was leaving home.

Earth just didn’t hold that place in her heart anymore.

“Preparing to dock,” Atem said from the front of the shuttle.

Tuvo released her, stepping towards the door.

Hattie turned as well, frowning at his back.

Atem hadn't looked behind him while flying, so he hadn't seen the way Tuvo held her. And now Tuvo was releasing her. Did that mean something? Or was it just him watching as they came into the shuttle docking bay – little indentations near the bottom of the ship where the shuttle slid and locked into place. The door would lock onto the wall of the ship as a gate closed below them, sealing the shuttle inside without needing to depressurize the entire docking bay.

And through the window, she could see the others.

They all gathered around, eager to see her. The girls were up front, and tears filled Hattie's eyes. Joy and relief.

The moment the door opened, she was off, running towards them. She found herself immediately closed in on all sides by eager, hugging arms. All the girls were talking at once, saying how glad they were that they were okay.

Everyone, finally back together again. It felt good to see them. To know they were alright. She even got to see Atem and Peony's baby boy, Viktor. The sight of the three eyed infant curled up against his mother's chest, staring at her with huge, red eyes, his skin the same green as Peony's shirt, made her belly clench with longing.

She wanted one.

“Let her breathe,” Atem chuckled, coming over to them. “Let's get them both to the med bay. Tuvo, I'll want a debrief after.”

He grunted in understanding as Scarlet led the way into the ship.

The *Jutiron Stor* was a massive structure. Basically, a city in its own right. It had everything it needed for all the passengers and crew to stay aboard long term. Recreational areas, its own shopping center, and more rooms than a high-rise apartment complex.

It was also luxurious. Huge and comfortable. Especially the wing that Hattie and the others were staying in. The colors were bright – white and cream ivory marble with golden accents. Even rooms that didn't have windows had simulated windows that offered views of whatever the person setting them wanted – including an outside view from cameras on the outer hull.

The med bay was one of those. The bright, open space had a long window that Scarlet – as the healer in charge of this room – had set to be a view of Earth's horizon, live. She had three med scanners in the room. Beds set up against a massive computer that took up an entire wall. The beds weren't anything fancy, they didn't even really have a cushion, but they were made of a semi-solid material that conformed to the body when one laid down.

Since Scarlet was working by herself – the others having left them alone so they could have some privacy – Tuvo insisted that Hattie lay down first. She fought briefly, stating that he had been shot multiple times, but he wouldn't hear of it.

From its base on the computer at her head, a large ring separated and began to slowly spin around her – a cream colored, pulsing glow emanating from it as it moved down her body. Scanning her as Scarlet worked on the control panel set to the side, her eyes moving quickly across a read out of information as a 3D holo recreation of Hattie's body built in the air.

“How's it looking?” She asked, trying not to sound impatient as Tuvo came to stand at her side.

The two of them shared a look. Silent but knowing. They hadn't said a word to each other, but she knew they were both thinking the same thing.

The ring was almost at her lower belly.

“A lot of well healing lacerations,” Scarlet said, her eyes fixed on her holo body. “They're scarring up nicely. Want me to fix that?”

“Yes,” Tuvo said before she had a chance.

Scarlet lifted her gaze as she paused in her work. Giving him a dull look.

Hattie giggled. “You’re worried about me having scars?”

“Yes,” he said again. No hesitation.

“You’re more scar than skin. Why can’t I have some nice scars? We could match.” She wasn’t actually fighting for the scars, she was just curious about his reaction.

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want you to have scars.”

Silent, Scarlet raised a single brow.

He reached up, his longest finger tracing down one of the marks on her leg. “I’m a warrior. I’m meant to be scarred. I carry these to remind myself of my battles, and to honor the foes that fell while I fought them. They deserve that much. You are not a warrior, *kyrya*.”

There went Scarlet’s other eyebrow.

“I hate that these marks mar you,” he continued. “It is dishonorable to me.”

“Wait, how are scars honorable on you but dishonorable on me?”

“Because these are the marks of combat I survived. But these,” he touched her scar again, the ring having reached her feet now, “are marks of my failure in protecting you.”

“Aw,” Hattie couldn’t help but smile. “You’re so cute, Tuvy-bear.”

Scarlet’s eyebrows somehow, impossibly, went higher. Hattie had to fight back the urge to laugh.

“Get the scars removed,” he said, stepping back, making room for the ring to move. “Allow me that, *vi kyrya*.”

“Of course. Scarlet?”

It took a second for her red-headed friend to snap out of her surprise at seeing Tuvo being affectionate and focus back on

her task.

“One scar removal, coming up,” she said, programming the ring. “You’ve also got an intestinal infection. Probably from contaminated water or food or something.”

“Ew. Gross. Could have lived without knowing that.” Hattie made a face. It wasn’t surprising after surviving in the wilds of the Amazon, but it still wasn’t easy to hear.

“All in all, you don’t look too bad,” Scarlet said, manipulating the holo model of her body. “Some bumps, some bruises... If that’s all you get from falling out of a plane, I’d say that you’re not doing too... hm?”

Scarlet’s head cocked curiously as she stared at the light recreation. Hattie’s heart skipped as she and Tuvo both stilled, looking at her.

A couple holo screens appeared over the console, more information blazing across them as Scarlet made some adjustments or pressed some buttons or something. Hattie honestly had no idea what she was doing – it was too complex for her.

But she was after something.

“Anything wrong, doc?” Hattie asked, smiling around her heart thumping in her throat. Beside her, Tuvo’s hands tightened nervously into fists. “What do you see?”

Scarlet’s eyes focused on her through the long screen of text she was staring at. Her dull expression made Hattie giggle uneasily.

“I think you know very well what I’m looking at,” she said, twisting Hattie’s holo around and up then zooming in until only her lower belly was visible.

Hattie still had no idea what it was. Those were her intestines? Right? And then that had to be... her bladder? She should have paid more attention to high school biology.

“Is it healthy?” Tuvo asked, his voice soft. He didn’t need to specify further.

“Initial DNA scans are... Well, as ordinary as something like this can be. There’s only three other data points to draw from at this point.”

“Can you tell me what it is?” Hattie asked, breathless.

“It’s a girl. That makes two of each between the four of us.”

“A girl.” Hattie laughed. “I’m pregnant with a girl?”

“A girl...” Tuvo breathed, shuddering.

“You’re early. Super early,” Scarlet said, tilting her head as she looked at something that Hattie couldn’t identify. “I’ll have to do a thorough study, but the initial scan shows a steady genome and normal blastocyst implantation along the uterine wall.”

“I’m just going to assume that’s a good thing. Tuvo! It’s a girl!”

He let out a long breath. But he didn’t seem relieved.

Hattie’s smile faded and Scarlet went quiet as she set the ring to begin healing Hattie’s wounds and clearing her – gross – intestinal infection. While it was doing that, she had Tuvo lay out on one of the other beds and, without leaving her console, she started scanning him as well.

Both her brows went up again at the bullets inside him, as well as the abundance of scar tissue and damage from being shot. It involved having Tuvo roll over onto his belly so she could push the bullets up through and past his skin. It was a weird process to watch – kind of nasty in a weird way. Like a pimple filled with lead. But the process was, at least, bloodless and painless.

It took much longer for his healing to finish compared to her. Even considering that Scarlet took the time to add her growing fetus to their very small database of hybrids, Hattie was still done before all the residual damage to his body was fully fixed.

The bullets were pulled out and collected – put in a bag like he really intended to make her jewelry with them. Scarlet healed

all the internal scarring and muscle damage done by the bullets, but she left the scars on his skin.

While that process was ongoing, Scarlet was looking at Hattie's pregnancy. Hattie came to peer over her shoulder at it. She didn't know why she bothered. Even zoomed in to the microscopic level, it was just a circle. With some other circles. It was nothing. And it was everything.

"That's mine?" She asked as Scarlet's eyes ran down lines of data that made no sense to her.

"That's yours," Scarlet smiled. "This here is the endometrium. This circle here is the blastocyst. The trophoblast, the syncytiotrophoblast-"

"I have no idea what you're saying."

She laughed. "This is baby. This is where baby is implanting."

"Aw, she's so cute!" Hattie declared, practically feeling the hearts in her eyes as she stared at the unrecognizable blob. "You're sure it's a girl. How can you tell?"

"DNA doesn't lie. I'm a bit surprised though."

"Oh?" Hattie twisted nervously. Was this when the questioning about Tuvo would begin? She didn't mind, but she would rather Tuvo have some time to get used to the pregnancy news before they revisited the relationship question with others. "Why?"

"I *just* scanned you. I know you weren't pregnant before we went to Earth. And I'm rather certain this didn't happen before you left Geneva."

Scarlet's gaze cut to her as though waiting for Hattie to correct her. She only smiled softly. Scarlet continued.

"And judging by the growth pattern compared to the other hybrids, this *just* happened. Like, within a few weeks."

"Is there a question?"

"An observation." Scarlet looked over the embryo curiously. "You had to have gotten pregnant immediately. All of us got pregnant immediately. Like, on the very first try. Just

statistically, that's highly unusual. For the domini? It's ridiculously unlikely, but even for humans to that easily get pregnant is strange."

"Is it bad?"

Scarlet shook her head, giving her an encouraging smile. "Just an interesting thing to note. I can't wait for the research experiments from the treaty to begin. When we have a proper sample size and the proper equipment, we can answer all these questions."

"I didn't even hear a question."

"It's all right." Scarlet swiped her scan away and re-checked Tuvo's ongoing healing.

Hattie looked over at him and shared a look. It was impossible to read his blank face and, even when she offered him a soft smile, his expression didn't change. She had no idea what he was thinking but his silence was making her uneasy.

As Scarlet was finishing, Hattie took up her offer to go to the clinic shower and finally wash off the last few weeks. Domini soap was amazing. It made her skin and hair silky and smooth. Scarlet had one of her outfits fetched from her room and, by the time she was stepping out, her hair and body dried from the technology in the shower, one of her dresses was waiting. The shallow ocean blue gown was short, pinched at the hips, and held up her boobs like they were on display. She eagerly put it on, excited for Tuvo to see her in it.

But when she stepped out, he was already in the second shower. Scarlet was putting the medscanner back on idle mode.

"Atem messaged," Scarlet said, pointing to a near table where Hattie and Tuvo's combot were waiting, on standby.

Hattie summoned hers and smiled as it came to flit around her head. She was sure she had a lot of messages from her friends back on Turv, but she could get to them later.

"What did he say?"

"He's waiting for you and Tuvo's debrief. Are you too tired?"



“No. We can still talk.”

“Okay. I’ll go on ahead. The room location is included in the message. Later.”

Hattie waved her off. She wasn’t concerned about Scarlet telling anyone about the baby. Unlike domini healers, Scarlet still kept with human medical privacy laws. No one was going to find out through her until Hattie and Tuvo were ready to talk.

She waited for him to come out, answering her messages and trying not to pace nervously.

It didn’t take long for Tuvo to emerge. She nearly swallowed her tongue.

He was still wearing the jaguar pelt, but the kilt had been traded for a pair of dark brown pants that were wonderfully tight around his muscular legs, leading to thick, golden bangles around his ankles just over a pair of sturdy sandals. His chest was still bare, but he now had a leather necklace around his neck.

And on that necklace, there was a gleaming gold ring.

Was that...?

“Where did Scarlet go?” He asked, running his hand over his head. He had shaved it back into his military style haircut, highlighting the strong lines of his face and the harsh scars on his cheek. It made him look even better.

He stared at her, and she realized he asked a question and she had no idea what it was.

“Huh?”

“Scarlet. Where did she go?”

“Oh. Yeah. Atem is ready to hear what happened. He’s waiting for us.”

“Shall we go then?”

She nodded, distracted by that ring again. Where did he get that? He hadn’t had that with him, so it had to have been

brought with his clothes. It sparkled. Were those diamonds? Why did he have a gold and diamond ring?

Before she could think of a way to ask, he grabbed her hand and led her out. Her hand! That was something only close domini couples did. And they were among domini again who would know what that meant.

Hattie was biting her lip, smiling, as she clung to his arm. He slowed his pace to accommodate her much shorter stride, but he didn't seem upset about it. His steps were big, calm, and confident as he took her to the room the others were waiting in.

Hattie would have called it a living room if it were in a house. The primary purpose seemed to be to relax, listen to music, watch some vids, or read. It was big enough to allow a group to gather, but the seating – low, soft cushions – could be spread out to allow those inside to have a semblance of solitude if they liked. The simulated window in this room currently showed a moving image of the green ocean shore from somewhere on Turv.

The moment they stepped in, everyone's eyes immediately locked onto the way Hattie was clinging to Tuvo.

Atem started growling.

He wasn't really angry. He couldn't help it. As far as he was concerned, Hattie was unclaimed. Tuvo had yet to prove his worthiness to protect her to Atem, and therefore he didn't have the right to hold her hand. Or knock her up. It was an instinctive reaction.

One that Tuvo ignored as he looked over the others who were staring, shocked. Peony, sitting there with baby Viktor asleep on her chest, his little tail curled around her wrist, had the biggest, knowing grin on her face.

"I'm glad to see everyone is safe," Tuvo said, breaking the silence as though he didn't notice Atem's claws digging into the cushion he and Peony were sharing. "I've already got in contact with my security team here on the ship and they debriefed me on what happened. Everyone did good work."

“Tuvo,” Atem snarled, his eyes locked on the way Hattie’s hand was lost in his grip.

She smiled and started to pull away – not wanting to push him.

But Tuvo’s grip tightened, keeping her there. A small interaction that Atem didn’t miss as he leaned forward as though ready to leap at them and attack.

Again, Tuvo ignored him as he launched into a quick summary of everything that happened once they left Geneva. He spoke in the clear, precise way of a military man giving report with no embellishment or fluff.

All the while, Hattie just stood there beside him. Holding his arm. Enjoying the strength of his grip and the clench of his bicep under her head.

“Thank goodness you’re both all right,” Holly said when he finished his explanation. She had her hand resting nervously on her pregnant belly as she listened. She was also having a girl. Which made Hattie excited.

They got to be friends and their daughters would get to be friends! It was going to be the best.

She was just missing a big, rough, and tough girl dad to complete the picture.

And she was honestly terrified. Because if she wasn’t Tuvo’s mate, he wouldn’t consider their daughter to actually be his child. He would take care of her, he would provide for her, but he wouldn’t actually be her father. And the moment Hattie was mated, that assistance would stop since her baby’s ‘real’ father was now caring for her.

That was just the domini way. And she wasn’t sure what she was going to do if she had to raise her child like that.

But that ring around his neck...

“Any questions?” Tuvo asked once he finished.

“I can think of a couple,” Peony snickered, grinning wickedly.

“Peony, don’t tease,” Alanna said, her own knowing smile stretched wide across her face.

If Hattie wasn't so happy standing right where she was, she might be rankled by their obvious, practically smug gratification at her closeness with Tuvo.

But how could she be mad when it was everything she wanted?

Atem wasn't grinning though. The other males were all looking at him expectantly. The tension was heavy as they waited to see how he reacted.

Tuvo stared back. Calm and steady.

"No questions?" He asked, specifically to him.

Atem's eyes narrowed.

Tuvo pulled his arm from Hattie's grasp. The second he moved, Atem was up, a deep, threatening growl building in his chest.

"Then, I challenge you."

That was his only warning. Tuvo jumped forward, striking forward with his fist, aiming right for the side of Atem's head.

Instead of moving, Atem caught it. Allowing him to knock him aside and away from Peony. Tuvo followed him, pushing Atem out of the way, deeper into the room. The moment they were clear of the others, Atem threw a hard punch. It landed with a deep, painful thud against Tuvo's chest. It was followed by a second immediately after.

Tuvo caught the third and twisted, throwing Atem. He stumbled against the wall, back colliding with a grunt. He moved immediately, avoiding the fist that Tuvo drove up towards his gut.

Atem was up and around, stepping on his thigh like a stool to swing onto his back, one arm locking around his neck, the other punching down against his face. Tuvo turned, slamming Atem against the wall. Once. Twice.

The second time, Atem's grip loosened. Just enough that Tuvo could reach back, grab him by the hair, then yank him up and over. He threw Atem bodily into the room. He landed with a

crunch against a small table, breaking the wood and upsetting a plate of food.

He landed close enough to Holly that Romival scooped her into his arms and took a few quick steps to the side, getting her out of range of the fight.

Hattie frowned, but she didn't try to stop them. The domini fought all the time – over literally anything – she was used to seeing it. The aim wasn't to kill or even seriously injure their opponent, it was just to determine who was stronger.

And it wasn't traditional, but she kept hoping that when Tuvo challenged Atem, he meant it as a mating challenge. Usually there was a little more ceremony to it than this, but the mating challenge was instinctual, not ritual. Tuvo didn't need to go through with all the preparations and the traditional words for it to work. He just had to defeat Atem, her guardian, then defeat her, feed her, and fuck her. So long as he did that, Tuvo would be her mate.

The domini males had started offering rings to their females as well. Thanks to Hattie. Because she always dreamed of the ring and the proposal. So that ring he was wearing...

The others, also used to domini fighting, just made room for them as the two exchanged shockingly hard-hitting blows.

Both males were punching. Throwing their entire bodies into each blow. Hard enough that the sound of fist pounding flesh made such a deep, aching thud it made her wince.

They were the greatest warriors on Turv. And they weren't holding back. Their only concession to safety was the fact that they used their fists, not their claws. But that didn't mean there was no injury, just that it was blunt damage instead.

Watching, anxious but hopeful, Hattie remained quiet as they fought it out.

# Chapter 44

## *Tuvo*

Since they were children, Tuvo and Atem had been fighting.

They had been friends practically since the moment they emerged from the den for the first time. They played together and, as they got older, they trained together. After Atem escaped the male who murdered his parents, the two of them spent all of their days doing everything in their power to prepare him to be *dominani*. They sparred. Challenged each other. Made each other stronger than anyone else.

When they fought, it was devastating.

Tuvo's body ached. Both from the strikes against him and from those he landed himself. But he didn't relent as their blows got faster. Almost desperate.

He hadn't explained why he declared the challenge. He didn't need to. Both of them knew what was going to happen the moment he walked in holding Hattie's hand.

It was the first time since Atem's *Hortii Kristivar*, his final challenge to solidify his role as *Dominani*, that they had gone at each other completely.

And it felt *good*.

Tuvo wasn't fighting his oldest friend to secure his powerful position. It wasn't the culmination of their entire life's work. This time, Tuvo had something he was fighting for, and he was giving Atem absolutely no quarter.

He had no idea how long they were exchanging blows. Both of them giving as good as they got. It seemed to take nearly a full mark, though he knew that wasn't right. Neither of them were giving up, slowing down.

Atem drove his fist into Tuvo's back, right over his kidney. Tuvo slammed his fist against his head. Atem thrust the heel of his boot into his gut. Tuvo folded from the blow, but used that opportunity and opening to grab Atem, lift him up, then slam him bodily back down. He tried to stomp on his chest. Atem rolled away and came up swinging his foot around, striking it into the side of his knee, nearly dropping him.

And so it went. Again and again. Beating on each other until there was no part of Tuvo's body that wasn't aching.

Breathing hard, shaking from exertion, they stepped away from each other. Tuvo wiped a trickle of blood from his lip. Atem snapped his knuckles back into place.

Atem grinned. "Been too long since we fought, brother."

Tuvo rolled his shoulder. "Got too distracted by our responsibilities, I guess. You want more?"

Atem laughed, pushing his hair from his face. "No. I know you'll take care of my sister."

Tuvo smirked, nodding at him once, before turning.

Hattie was standing there. Hands clenched over her heart. Biting her lip. Staring at him with so many emotions in her eyes, it made his heart clench.

"Are you ready?" He asked. Her only warning.

"Oh! Erm, I think-Ah!"

He didn't give her a chance. He wasn't even going to pretend she could fight him. He yanked her off her feet and tossed her over his shoulder. When she squealed, he smacked his hand against her plush little ass. Except for a squeak of surprise, she went silent.

The same couldn't be said for the other females who were all tittering and joking as he walked his female out of the room.

Her feet bobbed in the air. She had one hand clutching his pelt cape and the other balanced against his back, helping to hold her head up.

A few people they passed gave them curious looks, but no one attempted to stop him as he made his way to his room. It wasn't ready for her. He would prepare a proper den later, but he had waited far too long for this.

Tuvo's room on the *Jutiron Stor* was plain – undecorated and simple. He didn't need much. The bed was a pod – standard on big ships like this as it could seal in the event of a hull breach, protecting the ones sleeping inside. He had a desk, but its surface was clear. All of his belongings were packed away, leaving the space without personality or even proof that anyone stayed here.

But he knew without needing to be told that Hattie would change that. She had started to make their broken airplane cabin comfortable. She had done the same in their borrowed house in the village. She would make herself comfortable here.

Especially now that she was pregnant. Gravid females nested. That had already been proven by Peony and the others. She would make this place her home until he could get her back to Turv and to his proper den in his house.

Putting a hand on her back so she didn't flop over, he leaned forward and set her back on her feet. She laughed, tossing her hair back as she smiled at him. So bright. So beautiful.

“Sit, *kyrya*,” he ordered, kissing the tip of her nose.

She giggled as she moved to the low table in the corner of the room. He would eat there if he didn't feel like eating in the communal halls. But there was no food waiting now.

That was wrong. He needed to feed his mate. She needed to eat. He had to fill her belly as he had filled her womb. Keep her full. Always full.

He summoned his combot and pulled up the menu from the galley for the day. It wasn't a freshly hunted kill, but he had gotten her a lot of that recently. He had already proven he could hunt for her. Right now, it was just important that she *eat*.

He put in an order for everything being served today. Way too much even if both of them were eating – only she mattered



right now though.

The moment he closed out the display, he looked over to find Hattie smiling at him, sitting on her hands, leaning forward with an eager expression on her face.

“Are you mating me?” She asked, breathless.

Was it not obvious?

“I already mated you.” He stalked back her way, reaching out to grasp her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “You’re already mine.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. The sight struck him right in the chest. But before he could ask what he said wrong, she smiled. Radiant and glowing.

“I am?”

“Of course, you are. I’ve been claiming you since we crashed in the Amazon. And you’ve accepted me every step of the way.”

“You never said...”

“I told you every day, *kyrya*,” he said, holding her face in both hands. “*Vi kyrya*. You are the one for whom I would kill, live, and die. *Krititori vask seerin ka dinira*.”

Tears slid down her face as she laughed at hearing his declaration of love and intent.

“I love you too,” she said, breathless and joyful.

“I know that.”

“You do?”

“You already told me.”

Her head tilted, surprised. “I did? When?”

“When we jumped from the plane. You told me on the way down.”

Her pretty brown eyes went wide. “You... You heard that?”

“You said it right in my ear. How could I not have heard?”

“But you didn’t say anything!”

“Of course not.” He shook his head, banishing the very idea. “I couldn’t believe then that you could take me. What would acknowledging those words do but make it harder for us?”

“B-But that’s not... You didn’t...” She blew out a long breath through her lips, slumping down as though losing all her strength.

He frowned. “Was that wrong? Should I have said something?”

She stared up at him. Blinking. Then, surprising him, a laugh bubbled up in her throat. He wasn’t sure how to react to that. Nor when she jumped up and threw her arms around his waist, hugging him close and filling him with her warmth.

“No. You just be you. That’s all I want. Be you and tell me how much I mean to you by jumping out of planes and bare claw fighting jaguars and dismantling a human trafficking ring to rescue me. No one has ever loved me that deeply.”

“I would do so much more for you, my heart. Do you know that?”

“I do,” she said, savoring the words and their meaning for a moment before focusing on him. “Do you know I’d do the same? I mean, I don’t know if I can do all those things as well as you can, but I would try.”

“Absolutely not,” he growled, grabbing her suddenly and yanking her up. Her legs immediately wrapped around his waist, where they belonged. “You are never to fight battles for me. You want to prove your love to me?”

“Yes,” she whispered, clinging to his words.

“Don’t protect me. Protect yourself. Look after your own safety. Keep yourself happy. That is all I need from you.”

“But that’s so selfish. I want to take care of you too.”

“You do. You hold my entire life in your little hands. *Vi adassi kyrya*. What would I do if something were to happen to you? I wouldn’t survive it. You are my heart. The only thing keeping me alive. You protect me by protecting yourself.”

She threw her arms around his neck, clinging on. She didn't even stir when a beep alerted him to the delivery of their food. He didn't try to dislodge her either as he walked over and opened the door, allowing the cart to roll in.

The scent of food under their protective domes finally lifted Hattie's head. However, when she patted his shoulder to convince him to put her down, he ignored her and instead pushed a button on the cart, having it follow him back to the little seating area.

He sat down there, keeping her on his lap. Grasping her ass in one hand, squeezing it, as he began moving the various platters to the table.

“Good gracious,” Hattie laughed, trying to grab one. “Were you that hungry?”

Tuvo took her hand and put it back on his chest, refusing to let her help. “These aren't for me, *kyrya*. These are for you.”

She gave him a hooded look and he immediately sensed danger in it. “How much do you think I eat, Tuvo?”

He grabbed her hips with both hands, jerking her right over his cock. “However much you want, Hattie. I love your figure. Whatever it takes to maintain it, I approve.”

She threw back her head laughing, and that sense of danger faded. “Wait, are you gorging me?”

“If you know, then stop talking and eat.”

He grabbed something. He didn't even look, he just plucked it off the nearest plate. The sugar glass cup was filled with a rich custard cream topped with celti berries. Small enough for him to push between her lips, growling when he felt her little tongue sliding against his finger.

The sugar crunched as she chewed, moaning with delight. He grabbed for something else, still not looking, unable to tear his eyes from her.

But before he had the chance to bring whatever he grabbed – felt like a piece of meat, burned the way humans preferred –

she picked up something off the tray – a stuffed mushroom cap – and brought it to his lips.

“I’m supposed to be gorging you,” he said.

“I promise, Tuvy-bear, I’ll never fight a battle for you. But you have to let me care for you. I feed people. That’s how I show love. Now eat.”

He chuckled but opened his mouth. He didn’t taste the delicacy. He was focused only on the way Hattie’s lips closed over the next bite he offered her.

She was eating, but she seemed much more interested in his skin than any food. It seemed she took a little more of his finger into her mouth with each bite until she was blatantly sucking it and didn’t stop until he slid it free with a slick pop.

“More,” she begged, scraping her nails down his chest.

He grabbed the next bite, accidentally smearing most of whatever it was on his fingers.

But Hattie wasn’t even paying attention to him. She pushed herself free of his grasp. But she didn’t go far. She went down onto her knees between his thighs.

“Hattie,” he reached for her.

She opened her mouth, sucking the smeared food from his fingers even as she was pressing the seal keeping his pants on. The fabric broke apart, allowing her to reach inside and pull his cock free, both of her hands stroking down his length.

He automatically reached for something else. Needing to gorge her. He had to feed his *adassi* or he couldn’t bring her to her nest – his bed.

But she wasn’t interested in the bite of food he picked up. Instead, without ceremony or hesitation, she closed her mouth over the head of his cock and began to suck.

His head barely fit past her lips. He could see her straining to part her jaw wide enough so that her teeth weren’t cutting into his skin. She couldn’t really bob up and down either, but she sucked and slurped and licked as she worked her hands up and down, spreading her own spit.

“Hattie, you... need...”

It was fantastic. The slickness of her lips and tongue focusing on his ridges and his slit made his eyes roll back as his hips twitched with the urge to bury himself into that heated cavern. Only knowing he would likely hurt both of them if he tried kept him still.

It wasn't without effort.

But as good as it felt, it couldn't distract from his need to feed her. It was a deep and instinctual urge as irresistible as the need to breathe.

Gorge his female. Fill her belly. He must.

“Eat,” he begged her, his nerves stretched to the breaking point.

“Feed me,” she moaned, slurping on his cockhead.

He tried to press whatever he had grabbed on her. He couldn't even tell what it was anymore, it was unrecognizable after crushing it in his grip.

She popped her mouth off his cock and slurped the food off his fingers. Then immediately returned to sucking.

“Feed me,” she begged, stroking hard and fast with one hand and squeezing his knot with the other. She was trying to make him come in her mouth.

That shouldn't count. Should it?

But his female had decided what she wanted to eat, and he couldn't deny her.

He put his hand on the back of her head, helping her bob up and down as she tried to force her mouth further apart. Her lips had been stretched into such a tight ring they were blanched white. It must be making her sore, but she was so determined. So *kriking* sexy.

He growled, his release tightening his sac. It drew up close to his body as his knot throbbed and the pressure built in his spine.

“Hattie...” His entire body tensed as he tried to warn her.

She reared back then shoved herself forward, taking as much as she could and sucking. His head swelled beyond her teeth, her lips shielding them from his cock. She whimpered from the suddenness of her own action but didn't ease in her stroking.

Tuvo roared, head falling back as the heated jets of cum shot up through his cock. Hattie made a sound of surprise, eyes going wide.

Too late. His head was lodged in her mouth and with her squeezing on his knot she got the full force of his release. It flooded her mouth, and she had no choice but to swallow rapidly, drinking him down with deep gulps that moved her entire throat.

She didn't give up. She kept stroking, kept squeezing, draining his balls until his cock softened enough that his head could finally slip from between her teeth.

Gasping, she collapsed against his thigh, still slowly stroking his shaft. She licked her lips, before gingerly touching the corners of her mouth where he must have stretched her to the point of pain. Not that she looked upset.

She smiled, nuzzling his cock like he had just done something wonderful for her.

"Thank you, Tuvy-bear," she smiled, patting her belly. "I'm so full."

Something broke in his mind. He didn't even remember standing. He was just suddenly up, Hattie in his arms. He took her to his pod bed and set her on her feet. Pulling her back to his chest, he mauled her breasts as he growled-

"Make your nest, *kyrya*, so I can fuck you in it."

"Aren't I supposed to be the one fucking you?"

He pinched her nipples, punishment for her cheek. She moaned, head falling back. "I told you. You're already my mate. Make your nest before I defile you beside it."

She shivered like that threat might not be a deterrent. But she still pulled away from him so she could adjust the blankets and

pillows that made up the bed. It was a pathetic nest. There was nothing in it personalized for her. Not much for her to work with since he wasn't *adassi* material – he kept his bed spartan.

But she worked with what she had.

The moment she stood straight, he took her by the hair and pulled her head back, opening her neck to him. He leaned over and kissed her there, running his tongue along her sweet skin.

“Tomorrow, you're going to redecorate,” he ordered, making her shiver.

“You're thinking about interior design right now?” Her voice was so sweetly breathless.

“Thinking about you. Claim my den, *adassi*. I need it.”

“I'm going to make it pink and fluffy,” she snickered.

“Good.” She loved pink. She loved fluffy. He had a feeling she was teasing him, but he honestly did not care. His job as her *domin* was to provide a safe den. She could do whatever she wanted with it – her job as an *adassi*.

She laughed, her body shaking against him. The muscles in her neck jumped. He could see that artery, so terrifyingly close to the surface of her delicate skin, throbbing. Tempting him. His mouth watered as need cramped his belly.

He didn't know why he did it. He would never have done it before.

He struck.

His fangs barely pierced her skin. He didn't want to hurt her or puncture that artery. He had already tasted her blood, but that was when he had been sick and delirious.

And his mind must have been off, because those foggy memories were nothing compared to the sweetness that burst over his tongue as he lapped at the blood he drew. It didn't take long. The moment those few drops hit his stomach, he felt the warmth spreading throughout his body.

Hattie moaned, reaching back to grab his waist. He didn't need to tell her to walk them forward so he could push her over her

belly on her nest.

*Their* nest now.

His mate in his nest, where she belonged. Her belly full of him. Her blood on his tongue, heating his body, making his cock ache painfully with need.

He shoved her skirt up over her hips and ripped away her panties. She made such a cute little sound of surprise, but she didn't fight as he put the head of his cock at her entrance. The slickness there made him growl.

"You get this wet from tasting me?" He asked, teasing her by barely pushing against her but not thrusting forward.

"Tuvo, please..."

"Tell me."

She whimpered.

"You want me? You want me to fuck you? Tell me."

She shuddered, fingers clenching against the blanket. "I'm so wet from sucking you, Tuvo. Please. I need you. Give it to-ah!"

She screamed when he slammed forward, burying himself to the hilt.

And she took him. All of him, right to the top of his knot. Her little body was resized just for him. His mate, a perfect grip on his cock. Still so tight, but no longer a fight to fit inside.

He allowed her only a moment to adjust before he pulled out and began to pound her. Fast and hard and merciless. Her knees collapsed under the onslaught, almost upsetting his rhythm. He grabbed her hips and yanked them up, jerking her back against him as he thrust forward making her scream and soak his cock as she came.

He didn't stop. Even when she came again, bringing her with him. He didn't submerge his knot. He didn't stop thrusting even as his seed spurted inside her.

"Tuvo, please," she yelled, thrashing against him.



He hunched over her and reached between her legs. The fast, slick flicking of his fingers over her clit made her scream again. She was fighting against a third orgasm. Challenging him. Her blood heating his body kept him from stopping.

He had to fuck her. He had to fill her. Just a taste of her blood and his mind was gone.

Her third orgasm was less an explosion and more a slow breaking that made her shake as her cunt massaged him.

He yanked out, their combined slick splattering against her thighs. He grabbed her and threw her onto the bed, on her back. Without giving her time to even realize what had happened, he covered her, slamming back into her open hole. Grunting, growling, he rode her hard. Enjoying the way her nails dug into his back and her voice echoed in his ears.

With a snarl, he pushed her thighs back, forcing her hips up, and drove his knot deep. Plugging her up as his release boiled in his balls. Her mouth opened, her eyes rolled back, but no scream escaped her throat as her entire body went tense and twitched. Her cunt closed around his knot, locking him in, as his release burned up his shaft and pumped into her.

He gathered her up and rolled them over, keeping himself inside. They were safe. He didn't have to worry about lingering. And he wasn't going to let her go until he had to.

# Chapter 45

## *Hattie*

Humming softly, Hattie lazily ran her fingers over Tuvo's newly shortened hair. She was using his jaguar pelt as a blanket, but really only from the pelvis down. She was naked. He was naked, laid out on top of her. The fur between them felt positively sinful.

He was positioned between her legs, resting his arms on her thighs, his face nuzzling against her belly as he spoke to their pup in ancient Domtri.

She was barely pregnant. Her embryo wasn't even tadpole shaped yet, much less capable of hearing, but he was still talking to it. Saying words and phrases she didn't understand.

She had woken up that way. She didn't remember falling asleep, or him pulling out of her at some point in the night. She just opened her eyes, and he was already there, talking to their baby. And he had to know she was awake, but neither of them spoke to each other yet.

"What are you saying?" She finally asked when he laid his head down as though listening.

He didn't answer right away. He turned and pressed a kiss to her belly before looking up at her.

"I'm telling her to fight me."

Surprised, she burst into laughter. "Fight you? She doesn't even have limbs yet!"

"I fail to see how that matters. You can fight without limbs."

"Or a heartbeat. Or a proper shape. She's a circle. I don't even think she's like a solid circle. She was just the outline of a

circle. Very hard for circles to fight.”

Tuvo wasn't laughing along with her. His face was pinched, surprisingly serious. Her mirth faded as she continued stroking his head.

“Why are you telling our daughter to fight you?”

“I...” He hesitated as though trying to gather his thoughts. “I want her to be strong.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“But I'm still not comfortable with her.” He winced. “I don't want her there.”

Hattie tilted her head curiously. She was a little too comfortable with Tuvo now to be hurt when he said something. She knew he rarely meant it in a bad way, he just had difficulties explaining himself.

“Do you not want pups?”

“I do.” He didn't even hesitate.

“Do you not want me to have your pups?”

“No. I don't.”

Her heart tensed, but she kept going. “Because you don't want her to hurt me?”

“Yes.” His hand clenched against her hips as that tension eased as quickly as it came. “I want her. More than anything – except you – I want her. But I'm terrified that she's going to hurt you when she comes out.”

“That's just part of labor, Tuvo.”

He shook his head. Rejecting the very idea. It was so sweet that he cared about her that much. And that was the problem. He cared so much, he couldn't be happy she was pregnant, despite how much he wanted their baby.

“So, you want to fight her because you don't want her to hurt me?”

“No. I want to fight her to make her strong. Because I don't want her to be hurt either.”

“You want to train her,” she said, understanding.

The domini were a violence loving species. She had seen Atem playing with Viktor and it was usually him tempting Viktor into hitting his hand – like a tiny boxer in training. Aggressive without any aggression. He would snarl and growl at him while he was doing it – and Viktor would respond with a purr since he was still too young to growl.

It was like a mama cat training her kittens to hunt. And Tuvo was doing the same. He was already taunting their pup, urging her to fight.

In a way, it was kind of cute. And meaningful.

“She’ll be strong,” Tuvo said, as though the declaration was a prediction of the future. “I’ll train her. Like I did Atem. I’ll make her a powerful warrior. But the most important part of being a fighter is knowing when not to fight. So, I have to teach her properly. I need her to fight me, not you. She has to know she can’t hurt you. So, I’m telling her to fight me. To leave you alone. To not cause you pain.”

Hattie’s heart melted. “Tuvo, that’s not really how it works.”

“I know, but...”

But he had to do something. She could read the rest of the sentence on his face. He was happy to have a pup, but he was scared for her, so he was doing the only thing he could.

“Maybe wait until she’s vaguely person shaped,” Hattie said, stroking his head, not trying to take this small comfort from him.

“No. She needs to learn to fight even at a disadvantage.”

Hattie laughed. He sounded so serious, glaring at her belly as though their tiny embryo daughter had been sassing him.

“Maybe she’ll want to be a chef like me. Hm?”

“In that case, she can learn to stab people. That’s a very respectable way of fighting.”

Hattie threw her head back, guffawing loudly as he kissed her belly. The affectionate kisses were in such direct contrast to

his challenging tone.

“I’m also promising to protect you,” he continued, softer this time. “The idea of her is still... uncomfortable. But I can protect you. I can make sure she’s safe by keeping you safe. I’ll get used to her, Hattie. But for now, it’s enough that I have you.”

“It’s okay,” she assured him. “It’s a big deal. Take your time, alright?”

He grunted in agreement and returned to whispering things at their baby. Now that she knew what he was saying, she could hear the tiny, almost imperceptible growls he made as he baited her. He already sounded exactly like Atem playing with Viktor.

And Hattie found it telling that he hadn’t actually mentioned a fear of being a father. He was just uneasy about their baby because he was afraid of the labor process. She couldn’t be mad at him when he was only concerned about her welfare.

The flashing of his combot alerted them of an incoming voice call and he answered it without lifting his head from her belly.

*“Tuvo, Survii and Alanna are heading down to Earth to sign the treaty,”* Atem said without bothering with niceties.

“Do they need me to come with them?”

*“No. It’s just going to be the two of them. They’re only staying long enough to get the human written signature and our biosignature, then they’re coming back.”*

“Are we leaving Earth?” Hattie interjected, frowning. She still hadn’t had the chance to see her parents – though she had placed a call with them late last night between rounds.

“No,” he said again, prompting a sigh of relief. *“That’s why I need Tuvo.”*

“What is it?” He asked, turning to rest the side of his head on her belly, looking at the combot like it might be a holo vid call.

*“While you were gone, Survii added a slight amendment to our deal. The treaty is staying the same, but now we have opened*

*the door to negotiations about using our resources as its protectorate in order to police Earth ourselves.”*

“What?” Hattie said, shocked. “You... How did you manage that?” She couldn’t imagine any governing body on Earth willingly giving up power that way. Or allowing themselves to be beholden to aliens dispensing justice.

*“It’s just open to negotiation for now. And I imagine it will predominantly involve alien affairs taking place on Earth. I need Tuvo down here so we can start working on a plan for how we’re going to do this. I’m sure the humans will have opinions as well, but we’ll deal with that later.”*

“Do you need me down there now?”

*“You can linger if you like,”* he said, all traces of aggression gone. Tuvo had claimed her, Atem didn’t need to be protective and aggressive anymore. *“I just want to get a head start on it before Survii comes back so we can begin the negotiations immediately.”*

“I’ll message you when I’m leaving.”

Atem thanked him and ended the comm. Tuvo focused right back on her belly.

“So, does that mean I have time to visit my parents?” She asked, smiling.

“Why don’t we just have your parents visit you?”

Startled, she stared down at him. “You mean... like, bring my parents to the *Stor*?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Well, because... I mean, I thought no one was allowed.”

“They’re not allowed to bring advanced technology down to Earth. They’re allowed up here as long as we agree to host them. Besides, the treaty is being signed. Immigration is allowed. Why not just invite them to come to Turv with us?”

Hattie shot up, disturbing him. “You... You want my parents to move in with us?”

“Well, the tree my clan lives on is certainly big enough.” He pushed himself up, looking her over curiously. “It’s where my parents stay when they aren’t off touring the universe. My uncle and cousins live there. It’s what a clan does. They live near each other.”

She just stared, shocked.

He frowned. “I’m not saying they’d stay in our den. They’d have their own home on the tree. I just figured if you’d prefer them close... I mean, they’d have to agree of course. I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong again?”

“What? No!” She raced to assure him, beaming. “I just didn’t think... You really don’t mind bringing my parents with us?”

“If they don’t mind going. Romival invited Holly’s family.”

“What?! Really? Are they coming?”

“They said no. Her brothers all have lives and females, and a male, they don’t want to leave. Her parents don’t want to be that separated from them and their friends. But they did demand a visit at least once an Earth year.”

“So, my parents can really come?” She beamed, throwing her arms around his neck. “Tuvo, you’re the best!”

He hesitated a moment, as though making sure that she really was happy about this, but after a second relaxed and put his arms around her.

She honestly didn’t know what her parents would say to an invitation like that, but it meant everything that Tuvo was willing to make it. And if they did come, she could have the best of both worlds on Turv.

“I love you so much,” she said, face buried in his neck.

It was a while before he managed to escape the room to find Atem.

# Chapter 46

## *Tuvo*

As it ever was, cleaning up after a battle was harder than the battle itself. Less bloody, but more laborious and frustrating.

Tuvo spoke through Alanna, their official ambassador, to give the humans an official debrief of everything that had happened in the Amazon. He expected some guff about the humans he killed, but there was none.

Apparently, the Three Rings were known, infamous, and a problem that the humans didn't mind someone solving for them. Flesh sellers weren't killed on sight as he would have expected, but they didn't really care when someone did it outside of official channels.

The humans then took the story and presented it to their own planet as proof of the love and devotion that the aliens could and would hold for those important to them. Just like Alanna and Survii, Hattie and Tuvo's relationship was presented as something beautiful and admirable. Part of their attempt to sway those who might remain uneasy about the treaty.

Alanna and Survii might not mind being used in such a way, but he found himself annoyed by it when, a couple days later, the human leaders explained what they were doing. Objectively, he knew it was a good thing. Earning more supporters for the treaty among the humans would only be good for all of them in the long run. But he didn't like their mating being manipulated like this.

However, at Alanna's request – and with Hattie's permission – he kept his silence while the humans looked pleased about their efforts. Like they had done something.



It was annoying, but it was mostly harmless. He'd rather save his anger for the people that put them all in their bad situations to begin with.

Part of the treaty included expanding all known human laws so that any language that referred to a human person also included any sapient creature that visited their planet. However, the crimes committed against Tuvo and the other males were committed before the treaty, and therefore before that alteration went into effect. So, technically, what they did wasn't a crime in human courts.

However, their rules *did* still apply to the females, and their actions were still numerous and terrible enough that they didn't need the extra charges.

Bertrand and the other members of their security team had all been taken into custody. It took some time to get them all. Not every member of their security personnel was involved, but until they could determine exactly who was and to what degree, all of them were being treated equally.

Tuvo wanted to look into the eyes of the man that would dare to treat him as a friend then betray him so egregiously, but the human governments said no.

Apparently, they didn't mind him killing their criminals for them, but they refused to let him be part of the justice for those that wronged them.

It was infuriating, but there was nothing that he could do to demand more.

He put that frustrated energy into negotiations.

With the addition of aliens, outer solar immigration, and the possibility of mate tourism, Earth needed to be ready for all the potential hazards that might befall them. While Tuvo firmly believed that the greater universe wasn't nearly as bad as Earth when it came to flesh selling, that didn't mean they were completely innocent. And the simple fact was that not all aliens visiting Earth – for business or holiday or mate searching – were going to follow the law. And that brought with it the terrifying prospect of Earth trying to punish a force

they had no way of fighting. Because if visitors to the planet weren't going to follow their laws anyway, what would stop them from bringing advanced weapons to Earth and causing destruction?

As much as the Earthlings clearly hated the idea, they *needed* a peacekeeping force to help manage those potential problems. And as sponsors of their protectorate, it was up to the domini and the ratchi to provide that force.

Tuvo and Survii worked together during those negotiations, outlining what they needed, the scope of their jurisdiction, the laws they could enforce, and how criminals would be punished for *days*. It never seemed to end. The humans always had some kind of complaint about something they wanted to do and refused to give up any semblance of control without a fight.

Tuvo sincerely did not know how Survii found enjoyment in this process. He had to spar with Atem every day after the closing of negotiations because they left them so annoyed and frustrated he couldn't keep it inside any longer.

Luckily, Tuvo wouldn't have to stay around to handle it forever. He had put out a summons to both Turv and the ratchi homeworld of Hr'ssri to have volunteers for these new positions sent over. He imagined that other races would opt to join them for the chance to get close to Earth, but this was a starting point.

Soon enough, this headache would be their problem.

And as that was happening, Survii was putting together a team of his own. However, his team was much smaller. It could only be run by domini or ratchi since it was going to be the official Coalition embassy team stationed on Earth. Their entire purpose would be to handle the day-to-day minutia of maintaining Earth trade.

There was also a third team being formed. The scientific team that would be in charge of conducting the human experiments. *That* had been agreed upon already in the treaty and so work had already commenced on building the facility where the experiments would take place. A lunar base that would be out

of reach of humanity, so the technology would not risk being taken into their hands, but still technically in Earth territory.

That was a whole operation on its own. Construction crews and scientists and engineers were being summoned and hired to begin work on the base and the experiments. And that was being handled by multiple species. After all, it was being funded by the vir – a species that had agreed to front the costs as recompense for crimes against the humans, Scarlet specifically.

But it wasn't Tuvo's problem – thank goodness. He would sometimes overhear Elder Haviss, representative of the ratchi, discussing details with them and it sounded like an even bigger headache than everything he was already dealing with.

Diplomacy was definitely not his strength.

Instead, between arguing with the humans – for *their* own, ungrateful good – he was convincing Hattie's parents to come with them to Turv. That wasn't a difficult task.

Candace and Larry Sweet were considered elders by human standards. They were ready to retire from their careers and settle into a quiet life. Losing their daughter had been detrimental to them and they had spent all of their savings on a fruitless search for her.

When Tuvo and Hattie called them over vid, they had been surprised but delighted to receive the invitation. They were quite eager to go, especially when Hattie told them that she was pregnant with his daughter. They certainly weren't going to miss their grandpup's life, and they were relieved that they wouldn't need to worry about finding money to take care of themselves going forward since Tuvo had more than enough to look after them. Even if he hadn't, taking care of his mate's aging parents would have been a task of the clan they were joining anyway.

They needed some time to get their affairs in order. They could pack whatever they liked, but they still needed to put their home up for sale and sell or give away the things they didn't want. They also wanted to say goodbye to their friends.

They had time. The *Stor* wasn't going to be leaving Earth until the permanent ambassador and their team arrived. Before they left, however, they would send the shuttle down and pick up her parents and anything they wanted to bring.

Atem hardily approved of the plan. Hattie was his sister, after all. That made her parents family of his family – not related to him, but close enough that it almost didn't matter. He was happy to welcome them to Turv.

What really mattered, of course, was Hattie herself. She was absolutely ecstatic that her parents would be coming with her. She told him all the things she couldn't wait to show them and how her mother would help her with her cooking project and her father would enjoy trying to learn how to garden alien plants. Tuvo began placing orders for everything they needed and sent orders ahead to have a place prepared for them to live.

And she showed her appreciation for his efforts by using those luscious breasts and hot tongue to stroke his cock until he burst in her mouth.

All things told, it was wonderful.

Except for that ever present fear lingering in his mind of his pup growing in her belly.

Holly and Scarlet were both carrying pups of their own. And while Scarlet was just starting to show, Holly had begun rapidly expanding as of late. And her frame was so slender, the bulge of her belly was even more obvious. She looked uncomfortable. The weight on her belly was forcing her to walk leaned back, and it was putting a strain on her. Romival was *not* a large male, but already his pup had grown too far for Holly to carry in comfort.

And Hattie was so much smaller than her!

Tuvo's fears were eating at him, near destroying him, getting bigger and bigger every day. Yet Hattie didn't seem to care at all!

She and the other females had formed something of a communal nest in one of the common rooms of their wing of

the ship. They made a comfortable space to gather and talk and play with Viktor and compare pregnancy notes. It was such a human thing to do. Domini females sought the privacy of their nests while carrying and were highly reluctant to leave or allow anyone save their mate to enter that space.

Not the human females. They flourished together. Holly had no nest anxiety at all in that room. Alanna wasn't even carrying, but she found joy in that space as well.

They talked about how they would raise their pups together. How they would be able to take turns watching them for each other so that they could still be romantic with their mates. It was a communal form of child rearing he was not accustomed to seeing, but they looked so happy.

Hattie looked so happy.

She did not bring up his unease with her carrying again, but she also didn't try to hide her own enthusiasm for it. She talked about how she was excited to see his house and how eager she was to change it to suit her needs – something he absolutely loved hearing as it meant she, as an *adassi*, was comfortable enough in his space to claim it as her own. She already started with his room on the ship and the changes were actually soothing to him. She expressed her desire for a girl, then a boy, then back again before eventually deciding she'd love one of each.

Which meant she wanted to do it *again!* He was already shocked that she had witnessed Peony's birthing experience and would be willing to do it once, much less twice.

He didn't understand. He almost couldn't take it. But he couldn't change it either.

"How do you two do it?" He asked Romival and Havali one day.

They had all gathered in the communal nest again – since the females loved having them there. The males were as much their clan as each other, and the presence of males who weren't their mate wasn't disturbing to them at all.

Atem was with the females in their circle in the center of the room. He was playing with Viktor, using his hands to tempt the pup into striking at him. The little male had no claws yet, and wouldn't for some time, but the practice was essential for normal development.

Survii had stepped out for a moment, duty calling him from the ambassador team en route. That left Tuvo and the other two males with pregnant females.

Atem had once been very excited to have another pup as soon as Peony was healed from the first, but that was before the birth. He used to talk about it all the time. But after being forced to witness it, he hadn't said a word on the subject. He focused his attention on his son and never made a single attempt to persuade Peony to have another. He understood Tuvo's fears.

But Romival and Havali's mates were gravid now. Romival had impregnated Holly before Peony's birth and so hadn't known, but he was seeing his female's growing size and knowing how it would affect her. Meanwhile, Havali had impregnated his female knowing full well what would happen. How could either of them stand this?!

"Do what?" Havali asked, clearly unaware of the direction Tuvo's thoughts had taken as he sipped at a warmed glass of intak.

"How are you not going out of your minds with worry? Knowing that your mates are pregnant? Knowing that they're going to go through what Peony did?"

The change that came over both of them was immediate. Romival's jaw tightened like Havali's grip on his glass. Both of their casual grins faded as they stared at females. Scarlet was pressing her shirt down against her body, highlighting the small rounding that was her growing pup, while Holly smiled and rubbed her hand over her distended belly.

Beautiful.

And terrifying.

“I try not to think about it,” Havali said. “This was Scarlet’s decision. I can’t force her to choose it any more than I can forbid her.”

“Their deliveries won’t be like Peony’s,” Romival said firmly, the voice of reason. “I will not let Holly be out of reach from a birthing chamber. From this moment on, I’m not letting her out of our den. Or the immediate area. I won’t watch her go through with that.”

Havali grunted in agreement. “Scarlet is unafraid. So, I will respect her wishes and do all I can to support her.”

“I wish I could be as confident as the two of you,” Tuvo said, grinding his teeth as he looked over his soft, little mate. She wasn’t showing at all, but she was laughing as she and Alanna perused a selection of pup toys on her combot.

“I’m not confident,” Havali laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. “But I trust her. And I have the benefit of seeing how much easier it will be for Holly.”

“It *will* be easier for Holly,” Romival assured them, and at least *he* sounded confident. “I will make certain of it.”

They didn’t understand. How could they? Romival was the smallest domini. Scarlet was the tallest human. Their matches were more compatible than himself and Hattie.

He was still worrying over it when he realized that Havali was staring at his chest, an odd look on his face.

He looked back at him. “What?”

“That ring,” Havali lowered his finger. “Is that the mating ring you were supposed to give Hattie?”

Tuvo looked down and frowned. The leather cord around his neck with the ring dangling from it was still there. He cursed, grabbing and very nearly ripping it off so he could bring it to her now.

But he had already neglected to give it to her after her claiming. Throwing it at her now, so many marks later, with no ceremony or romance, would make the oversight even worse.

“You forgot to give it to her, didn’t you?” Romival guessed.

“I didn’t think about it,” he growled, angry at himself.

The offering of rings was a human thing. A male would give a female a ring as a formal request for her to be his mate, and her acceptance of it began the ceremony that eventually ended with both of them wearing rings that alerted all others that they were mated.

Tuvo had remembered to obtain a ring for his female.

However, in his excitement to finish claiming her, he had forgotten to give it to her. It wasn’t part of his culture, so it wasn’t something that he immediately thought of when he imagined mating his female.

Which was no excuse, he knew. It wasn’t his culture, but it was *hers*. And this little ring was important to her. The other females always wore their rings. They were never seen without them. It was that much of an important thing.

And like a total *novi*, he had forgotten.

“Probably just as well,” Havali said, surprising him.

Tuvo growled at him. “Just as well? This is meaningful for her!”

“*Very* meaningful,” Havali agreed.

“Probably more than anything,” Romival added.

Both statements landed like blows against him. Ones he couldn’t even fight against because this was his mistake. He had done this; he deserved their mockery.

“Hattie told me about the rings,” Romival continued. “I know she told Atem, a long time ago. But I never asked when I saw them wearing matching rings. Hattie told me what it was and how important the tradition could be to humans.”

“Everything I learned about wooing a human, I learned from Hattie,” Havali agreed. “She’s a sweet female. Always willing to help if you have questions.”

“Are you two trying to make me feel worse?” Tuvo asked, hating that they were succeeding. But he deserved it.



He knew about the rings. He had seen the other males offer rings to their females. He saw the females wear their rings every day. He knew what it meant. He had even bought a ring the moment he returned to the *Stor*. He had placed the order for it into his combot when she had gone off to shower while they were in the med bay.

But after it was brought to him and he put it on, his excitement over finally fighting Atem for her, going completely out of order for his claiming but finally finishing it, had eclipsed his intention. He had fought for her and then thought of nothing but claiming her.

He hadn't wanted to think about his responsibilities. Or the fear of her carrying his pup. The ring around his neck had been completely forgotten.

And he had done her a disservice by denying her this thing.

"Not make you feel worse," Havali grinned. "Pointing out an opportunity."

Tuvo frowned, confused.

Romival explained, in his dry, educator tone, "Hattie has always had visions of the moment that her male would ask her to mate him. It's something she considered the height of romance and devotion. I saw the way she looked when she described it to me."

Havali was nodding. The human gesture of agreement coming easily to him in a way that it never had to Tuvo. "I don't think she wouldn't enjoy you simply offering the ring up on your knee after besting her in combat, but I do think she'd want more."

"A lot more." Romival continued. "She told me that the ring offering ceremony can take many forms. Public, private, grand, intimate. I don't think she particularly cares exactly how you choose to do it, only that you put a lot of thought into it."

"And that's why I say it's just as well." Havali looked at the rough cut crystal ring on his own finger, admiring it with a grin. Like it had come to mean as much to him as it did to the

females. “It gives you an opportunity to do that for her. You’ve claimed her as your mate. Now, you have the chance to create a perfect proposal for her. Just like she wants.”

“No,” Tuvo growled.

Both males looked at him, surprised.

He smirked. “Not just a proposal. My Hattie will have it all. I’m going to give her the proposal and wedding of her dreams.”

Havali grinned. “Allow me to help.”

“Hm? You want to help?”

“You’ll find that I’m known for my organizational skills.”

“I’ll assist you as well,” Romival added.

“You too?” Tuvo turned to him next, just as surprised.

“Hattie has been an invaluable source of information to me. To us all. She’s helped all of us with our females, in one way or another.”

Havali grunted in agreement. “It would be our honor to help fulfill this dream for her. We owe her that at the very least.”

Tuvo looked between the two of them. They were both so determined. Decisive. This wasn’t an offer made out of politeness or a sense of duty. They were doing this for Hattie, no other reason.

He grunted then, nodded stiffly. “Thank you. Both of you. I’ll gladly accept your help.”

Havali chuckled, opening his mouth to speak-  
-only for Survii to yell out.

“Tuvo!”

The three of them looked back. They had been so focused on their conversation, they hadn’t noticed Survii returning. But they couldn’t miss the hard expression on his face.

Something was wrong.

# Chapter 47

## *Hattie*

Breathing quickly, Hattie ran to try to catch up with the guys. She was really feeling the disadvantage of her shorter limbs as she struggled to close the gap. They weren't running, but their long strides were eating up ground much faster than she could.

Brilhar village was under attack.

Survii's team was keeping up communication with the Earth – helping to iron out details about the coming ambassador and the changes to accommodate them – when someone told them what was happening.

After Tuvo and Hattie left, the villagers returned to their normal lives. They were still riding high on their victory over the Three Rings.

Now, the Three Rings were back.

Hattie didn't know exactly what happened, but she did know that after everyone left Brilhar, they had taken the chance for revenge.

Now the guys were going back down to Earth.

And she was going with them.

Though she knew it was wrong, she couldn't help but feel *guilty*. This all felt like her fault. Like she might have been the one who brought the Three Rings to Brilhar.

She wasn't. They already knew the village and tormented them on their own. She also hadn't gotten involved with them by choice. *They* attacked her, the village, Tuvo. That was their choice. None of them could be faulted for defending themselves.

But despite knowing all that, she couldn't help but feel responsible. And she wouldn't be able to rest until she knew all her friends were okay.

Hence why she was running after the guys as they made their way down to the shuttle bay. They had ordered her and the others to stay. While the other girls listened, she had not. They didn't even notice her trying to chase them down, focused as they were.

Survii, through Romival, was arguing with the secretary general of the United Nations, telling – not asking – him that they were going down to deal with this problem themselves. They hadn't yet worked out an agreement for how the aliens could be involved with criminal activity, but Earth's government stated that it definitely wasn't going to be about anything besides alien related matters. This was a hard line they were crossing.

But the domini had their own honor system. Tuvo had befriended those people down in Brilhar. They had helped them, protected them. And Atem considered that a debt to be paid since Hattie was his sister and Tuvo his best friend. Survii, ever the diplomat, was going to smooth the way, while Romival was needed as the only alien to speak fluent English. Havali wasn't going to be left behind either and was no slouch in a fight himself.

The five of them moved like a well-oiled machine, practically in step, following behind Atem as they took the steps down to the shuttle loading docks.

Hattie jumped the last few steps and sprinted. Pushing herself hard. Still, she almost wasn't fast enough to throw herself through the closing door of the landing shuttle. It beeped at her, detecting an obstruction, and immediately slid back up. She turned and smacked the button to close it again.

“Hattie?” Tuvo said, the others all staring in surprise. “What are you doing here? I told you to-”

“I'm going with you.”

“No, you're not.”

“You don’t get to make that choice.”

“There wasn’t a choice involved. You’re staying here.” He pressed the button to raise the door.

She pressed it again, shutting it back. “You can’t keep me here.”

He didn’t even respond, just gave her a look. Both of them knew he very well could.

She returned it with one of her own. Assuring her in the same way that doing so would turn out very badly for him.

“It is dangerous.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You’re most careful by staying here.”

“They’re my friends. I’m not going to sit idly by when I can help!”

“You can’t help! It’s a fight. We’re going down to kill those *ectors* and fix this mess. You cannot help with that, nor would I let you if you could.”

“That’s exactly why I have to be there! Do you know how much trouble this is going to cause? Aliens coming down to Earth and killing humans is not a good look! You’re going to be putting our treaty at risk.”

“*They’re* the ones attacking and killing innocents, but *we’re* the ones that are wrong?”

“I never said it was logical, but it is true. If you have me there, at least it won’t be aliens killing humans with no buffer between. I can soften that blow.”

“Alanna can do that!”

Survii growled, immediately angered by Tuvo putting his mate at risk instead. And while it was true that Alanna was acting as the official go-between for Earth and the Coalition, these people were closer to Hattie. They were her friends. They had history.

If she was there, then they could at least play it off as her coming to the rescue of those who had helped her. It wouldn't be quite as bad, even if the result was the same.

"I'll be careful," she promised again, softening her voice. "I'll do whatever you say. But I'm going down there, Tuvo. I won't let you stop me."

"It's fine," Havali said, stepping behind her, putting a hand to her shoulder. "I'll look after her. She's not wrong. Appearances are important, Tuvo. I would rather the humans see this as her ordering us to help her friends than us invading their planet and enacting our justice upon them."

Tuvo snarled, looking back to Atem. The *Dominani* let out a short, frustrated breath before sitting in the pilot's seat without a word.

Hattie's shoulders relaxed and she touched Tuvo's arm with a smile. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me for bringing you into danger," he growled, grabbing her wrist and yanking her into his arms, whispering in her ear. "You carry my pup, yet you want to run into battle? Your bravery is beautiful, Hattie, but I wish you would not worry me so."

She smiled, running her hand down his chest. "I trust you all to protect me. And maybe I want to protect you as well."

He said nothing, but his grip tightened as he pulled her up, closer to him, her feet dangling towards the ground. Worried for her but loving her all the same.

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The village was empty.

And smoking.

Hattie stepped off the shuttle, following the guys after they made sure the area was clear of danger. She had seen the destruction from inside, but walking into it, smelling the rotted, spilled food, the ashy remains of the burned homes, and hearing the eerie silence of a place quickly evacuated was a completely different experience.

“Where is everyone?” She asked, looking around. Uneasy.

“No investigation has been done yet,” Survii said as he and Romival spread out, looking around with a careful eye. “Someone from the village ran to the nearest town and asked for help. We were informed as a courtesy. Human officials are still on their way here.”

Hattie frowned. She knew that Brilhar was far from aid, but she hadn't really appreciated how dangerous that truly could be. The village had long been abandoned. It had been days since the initial attack.

Heart hurting at the sight of the careless destruction around her, she followed Havali as he started looking for clues. She wanted to follow Tuvo, but he and Atem had ordered her to stay away from the two of them. As First Warrior and *Dominani* respectfully, if something happened, those two were going to be the ones running *towards* danger. They didn't want her near that.

Hattie had no clue what they were looking for amongst the remains of the village. All she could see were some houses that had been burned down completely, others that had just been scorched, destruction like someone had gone through deliberately breaking things, and the general chaos of the remains of a place quickly abandoned.

The kitchen hurt her the most. As she passed through the place she had worked in, laughed in, made friends in, the sight of the wasted food tossed around, the cold cooking fires, and the trampled cooking tools made her tear up.

It took a surprisingly short time for the guys to find what they were looking for. Tracks led into the trees. As Hattie followed them – sandwiched between Havali at her back and Survii and Romival at her front – she realized that she knew this path. This was the direction that led to the safety platforms up in the tree.

Of course. If they were under attack, it would make sense that everyone would go there.

The hope that rose in her chest at the thought made the ruined sight of the platforms hit that much harder.

The platforms that she had taken shelter on just days ago were ruined now. It looked like someone had tried to rip them down and shot through them. Fragments of wood littered the ground, while only a few broken pieces remained in the tree. The rope ladder was in a pile on the ground and, as Hattie walked towards the tree, Tuvo was lifting it in his hands.

“Ripped,” he said, showing the frayed end to Atem. “Yanked down.”

“There’s dried blood,” Havali added, pointing to dark marks splattered against the tree and along some of the wood pieces. It had already rained today and most of the blood on the leaves or ground had been washed away, but some still remained.

The sight made her shiver. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying not to think of exactly who that blood belonged to.

“The trail continues this way,” Atem said, looking at something amongst the wilds. Hattie really had no idea what she was supposed to be seeing, but she trusted them as she walked along.

And she just hoped, beyond hope, that her friends had survived.



## Chapter 48

### *Tuvo*

Instead of following the trail through the forest, Atem and Tuvo led their way through the trees back to the village. The shuttle remained there, locked and idling. Hattie looked confused when they opened it and insisted she go inside first.

“We’re not leaving, are we?” She asked, turning back as the others climbed in after her. She frowned at Tuvo, heartbreak on her face.

“No, *kyrya*,” he assured her, leaning his hands on the frame of the door, looking up at her from his position on the ground. “Atem and I are going to keep going on foot. You will follow us in the shuttle. We can move faster that way.”

He hated to tell her that, but she nodded once, though she looked sad. “Okay. Be careful, all right?”

“I will,” he promised, stepping back.

She gave him a weak smile just before the door slid shut behind her.

The moment she was out of sight, he looked to Atem. His *Dominani* grunted before turning and taking off at a sprint into the trees. Tuvo followed after, allowing him the lead as was his right.

From behind, he heard the shuttle lifting up. They didn’t attempt to wait for it. The shuttle would be able to track and keep up with them. It was more important that they move fast.

Tuvo jumped, grabbing a tree and scaling up. Ahead of him, Atem did the same on a different tree, jumping from one to another halfway up as Tuvo reached the top and began running over the trees.

He was following Atem, but not step for step. The two headed in the same direction, keeping track of the trail below as they found their own path across the trees.

It didn't take him long to realize he knew this path.

The Three Ring's compound hidden in the trees was made of hard stone. The fire he set hadn't done much more than cosmetic damage. He could see the dark scorch marks as he and Atem crouched in the trees, both wearing camocloth, completely hidden amongst the green leaves.

The Three Rings had returned to their compound and reclaimed it. The watch towers had four males now, each looking in a different direction, including inside the compound. The gates were closed, and two males now stood in front of the door, guns in hand. They weren't taking any chances.

"They're going to see the shuttle," Tuvo said.

"Not like we could sneak in anyway," Atem smirked, clearly pleased at the show of force. "They're clearly ready for you this time."

Neither of them were worried about those guns being turned on the shuttle. They had prepared for potential attack as part of the standard precautions in contacting an uncontacted species. The shuttle had no weapons, as it was meant to be a harbinger of peace, but its shielding was highly advanced and could take an explosion without denting. Those guns would do nothing.

"What if we use the shuttle as a distraction?" He suggested.

Atem chuckled. "I'll go right, you go left?"

"No enemies left alive."

"They don't deserve to live. Oh, by the way, don't drink their blood."

"Hm?"

"Female blood is an aphrodisiac; male blood is a poison. Apparently. At least, the ones that Romival and I were fighting were. Or maybe just our mates are an aphrodisiac to us. Not really certain. Best not to drink from them, just in case."

Ah, so that's why their blood tasted foul before.

"They don't deserve us drinking from them anyway," he said, growling as the sound of the shuttle engine rumbled over the trees.

"Precisely my thought." Atem sent him a wicked grin before turning and running into the trees to make his way to one of the other guard towers.

Tuvo kept his eyes on the males below as they called out, pointing over the canopy. They couldn't see the shuttle, but they could certainly hear it. Their guns all turned, training overhead. Distracting them from the trees.

More prepared, but still short sighted. Still not thinking to look up.

He stepped back, claws itching to fight.

The shuttle appeared and, immediately, they opened fire. The sharp cracks of their guns echoed impossibly loud through the trees. Silencing the local fauna. The screaming of weak males desperately trying to prove their superiority.

He ran and jumped.

It went almost exactly as it had before. Except there were more of them, and it was light now, and they were ready. All of them were focused on the shuttle, peppering it with bullets that did nothing but ping off the hard body. They didn't even see him take a running jump into the air. He landed directly inside the tower this time, boots first onto the back of a male. His chest collapsed under his weight as Tuvo struck out, cutting down the three remaining males before they even had time to turn.

It wasn't a secret this time. Immediately, the entire compound began screeching. An alarm shattering the air with a warning that would mean nothing.

The shuttle had slowed down. It was flying over the walls now. Presenting itself as a target without even trying to get away. Giving Tuvo plenty of time to jump into the compound and run for the males at the door while they were distracted.

He cut them down without mercy. Atem had taken down the other tower within sight of this side of the wall, and Tuvo trusted him to take down the other two.

For now, he focused on the door in front of him.

Turning, putting his back to it, just as he had before, he put his foot flat against the face then kicked back, slamming it open. Even before it had bounced off the wall, he jumped out of the way.

Only one bullet from the barrage that suddenly burst through struck him. A streak of fire along his arm that only made him growl in eager anticipation.

The gunshots rang out for a short time before yelling inside made them cease. Tuvo knew better than to think that they had given up though. He stood there beside the open door, waiting. He just barely detected a frantic whispering down the echoing, concrete hall.

“You! Alien!” Came the heavily accented, English voice.

He didn't respond. Just waited.

Ahead of him, the shuttle started lowering. Right on the road in front of the door. The moment it was visible, gunshots rang out again.

Tuvo grinned before turning and running from the entrance.

The other two watchtowers were empty. The torso of a male hung over the edge of one, his bright red, human blood dripping down from his dangling arm.

Atem was nowhere to be seen.

Tuvo found another entrance. He grinned at seeing the door hanging off a single hinge, the latch completely shattered. Proof his *Dominani* had been through here. He wasn't surprised that he had already gained entrance.

He took off after him, running into the halls. There were only two bodies here. Meaning they were either unprepared for them to take a different entrance or everyone had been drawn to the door he had burst open as a distraction.

Having been through here twice already, he knew his way around. He went straight to the holding cell that Hattie and Belmira had been kept in.

He didn't manage to get there, however. Right before the last turn, fervent whispering in Portuguese brought him up short.

Atem had not come this way, and judging by how many people he heard talking, there were at least three in the hallway. Probably more.

Panicked gunfire from elsewhere in the compound told Tuvo that Atem must be far from here. So, it was just him.

As he was trying to think of a plan, the unmistakable snarling of a female human caught his ear.

“Let go of me!”

Belmira!

He resisted the urge to growl as he heard her thrashing. Two different males barked orders at her, which only made her struggle harder. She was a fierce little fighter. Were she a domini female, he had no doubt that she would have slit all their throats by now.

But she was a fragile, soft human female and the males that held her had no honor.

Their voices were getting closer. They were coming this way!

Melting back into the shadows, Tuvo disappeared into the darkness of an open room. His body blended into the pale gray stone with ease. Not too soon as, the moment he became still, three males holding Belmira by her legs and both arms were walking around. He didn't need to speak Portuguese to know she was cursing colorfully as her body twisted in the air while she tried to resist their hold.

The sight made a deep, burning fury rise in his gut.

How could anyone treat someone so fragile like this? And for it to be their own females? Absolutely disgraceful.

Tuvo was a statue as they crossed in front of his door, completely unaware that he hid inside. Three more males

followed on their heels, each carrying a large gun. The one in the rear was facing backwards, gun sweeping side to side as he kept watch for someone coming up behind. They weren't completely foolish.

But still not skilled enough for him.

As the last male was crossing his doorway, he stabbed his hand forward, claws piercing through his throat from the side. His eyes widened in shocked horror as blood flecked his lips.

Curling his fingers into the meat of his throat, Tuvo yanked him into the room. Only a few drops of blood fell, but the clatter of his body put the other males on alert.

They called out in warning, their steps coming up short. They couldn't miss that their rear male had gone missing.

"Alien," came the harsh, human voice. Angry. "I know you're there."

Tuvo said nothing as he stood beside the open door, waiting for them to move. One way or the other, he would react as appropriate, but he had no doubts that their weapons were trained on the door. Waiting for even a part of his body to emerge.

"Can you understand me?" That same voice asked, deliberately speaking slowly and carefully. Not the way Keith used to do, as if he thought him stupid, but as though he understood Tuvo needed his speech to be precise.

For just a brief moment, he considered not answering. The only reason he did so was because he figured they wouldn't be trying to talk to him if they didn't have something to say.

"Small words," he finally said, figuring that he didn't need them to know exactly how much English and Portuguese he could speak. He didn't know if he'd call himself fluent, but he did well enough to understand even if he didn't know all the terms used.

"Good," came the angry retort.

And there was Belmira again, snapping and snarling and fighting. Until, abruptly, she wasn't, and Tuvo heard the

metallic click of a gun. He didn't need to see to know it was being pointed at her, demanding her silence and cooperation.

And his.

"You know what that is?" Came the harsh question. "You know gun?!"

"Yes," he replied, giving no indication of his feelings in the matter.

"Alien fuck!" The male spat. "You know what you did? You know who you killed?!"

A lot of people. But he figured that wasn't the answer this male was looking for. There was nothing he could say that would improve this situation, so he said nothing.

"My son! My boy! You know son?!"

Son... Ah, his pup. Tuvo hadn't killed any younglings, so he imagined that this male was referring to an adult son.

Was he one of those that had attacked the village? Was he one of those that he had killed in the compound? Was he one of those he had killed today?

This male's son, he clearly loved him a lot. Tuvo had no idea who he was.

Once again, he gave no answer. And that was enough.

"You fucking freak," came the furious growl. Deep and angry. "I was just going to kill that girl. That little cunt. Make an example out of her. Don't want your kind here. But then you killed my son! Now, they all die because of you!"

"Don't listen to him, Tuvo!" Belmira shouted.

The crack of a slap made his fingers twitch with the urge to bury them in their bodies. But he kept still as the hallway went quiet again.

"I kill son," Tuvo stated. Not a question. He accepted he must have done that. "Son earn death. Hurt my female."

"She's just some pussy! She's nothing!"

"She is all things."

“Pussy whipped mother *fucker!*”

Tuvo frowned, confused. He knew at least three of those words, but he had no idea what they were supposed to mean together. It sounded like nonsense. But he apparently wasn't required to respond because the male continued regardless.

“Come out! Slowly! Hands up. Or this bitch dies!”

“Don't do-umph!” Belmira's angry demand was cut off again, though this time it sounded like someone had covered her mouth.

“Now!” The male snapped.

Slowly, calmly, Tuvo retracted his claws as he raised his hands and stepped into the hall.

Belmira was there, glaring at the male at her side, on her feet again but her hands held behind her by one male while another kept a hand on her arm and a gun at her belly.

The older male was rather nondescript. Much smaller than Tuvo, his head shaved bald except for his dark, bushy brows that were drawn in fury.

Looking at him, Tuvo felt not even a bit of recognition. The male's son either looked nothing like him, or, more likely, Tuvo simply didn't remember him well enough to compare and know who he was speaking about.

There was no guilt for that, however. If the male wanted to be remembered, he should have done something worth remembering.

“Good,” the father smiled, as though he had won something. “Now, you're both coming with me. We're going to make an example out of *you*.”

The shadows moved behind the group. They were all so focused on him, no one saw Atem grab the man at the back and rip out his throat as he dragged him away.

“Okay,” Tuvo said, playing along. “No hurt Belmira.”

The despicable male only laughed. Amused that Tuvo dared make demands. There was no doubt in his mind that the male



would hurt Belmira anyway, no matter what he did.

Atem took down two at the same time. As their bodies clattered to the ground, the last two turned.

Tuvo and Atem leapt forward at the same time. Atem ripped away the male holding Belmira. Tuvo's claws dug into the older male's gun arm and ripped, severing the tendons. The gun clattered uselessly to the ground as Tuvo used his claws in the meat of his arm to yank him away from her. He slammed his back against the wall, pinning him there by the neck.

"Why?" He asked.

The male tried to punch him with his other hand. Tuvo barely felt the weak blows as they landed against his face, not even moving him. Weak little male.

"Why?" He demanded to know again, claws cutting into his neck.

The man grunted, now scratching at his hand, trying and failing to pull at his grip.

"Tell me," Tuvo snarled. "Or die slowly."

"Paid," he grunted, still trying to kick him. His blows landed with all the strength of a pup before they came into their adult hormones. "Was paid!"

"Why?"

"Want you gone. All aliens gone," he sputtered, only barely able to breathe around Tuvo's choking grasp. "Was supposed to kill the girl. To scare you off by making you realize what would happen if you dared claim our women."

"You punish them for us?" Tuvo snarled, furious. His grip tightened further, leaving no opportunity for the male to answer. "Disgusting."

With a single, hard jerk, he snapped the male's neck. His entire body crumbled into a heap on the ground. A quicker death than he deserved, but Tuvo kept his word.

He stepped back and looked at Belmira. She had a fierce expression on her face.

“This way,” she said, gesturing with her head. “The others are still in the cell.”

Still there because they were only intending to use Belmira to force his compliance. Because they would force their own females to suffer to prove their points.

He swallowed back his anger as he and Atem followed her back into the compound.

## Chapter 49

### *Hattie*

Hattie hadn't really been thinking of the purpose she had volunteered herself to serve when she insisted on following Tuvo down. She had only been interested in making sure that her friends were okay. She trusted Tuvo, absolutely and completely, to keep her safe. She wouldn't fear the Three Rings with him alone. With all five males? It was a cake walk.

Tuvo and Atem emerged from inside the compound leading Belmira and an injured Inacio and everyone else from the village. She cried out in relief as she ran out of the shuttle to hug her friend, beyond happy that she was okay.

There were tears and laughter and joy and sorrow for those that had been lost. A total of five people had been killed during the initial attack and the trek to the compound.

Not everyone could fit in the shuttle, but they could, and did, take a few trips bringing everyone back to the village in style. Belmira and Hattie were the last to go over, holding onto each other and chatting like it had been years rather than days since they had seen each other.

Hattie and Tuvo introduced the other guys to the village, and they were welcomed eagerly. Especially Romival, who immediately began picking up Portuguese. The genius wasn't fluent by the time the sun set, but he was exchanging some basic communication.

There were more than a few families that were now completely without homes. There was a lot of chaos and destruction. Hattie and the guys got to work helping set things right. They did a lot of heavy work while she helped dispose of the spoiled food.

They were planning to leave in the morning. After they made sure that everyone was safe and they were going to be okay.

Hattie was fine with all that. But then, the next morning, the proper Earth rescue teams – a military contingent from Brazil – arrived.

And it was bad.

The people of Brilhar were, of course, happy to be alive. But the government of Brazil was less happy with aliens coming into their country and wiping out the last of the Three Rings. It didn't matter that they were bad guys, that they had kidnapped and destroyed an entire village. The domini were a foreign power operating on their soil and that was unacceptable.

The Brazilian government got in contact with the United Nations. The United Nations contacted Survii. Hattie had to step up and speak for the sake of the aliens.

Or, rather, she had to stand in the middle of Brilhar as she was chewed out over satellite phone by Secretary General Lie as he accused her – and thus them – of being careless and intervening where they weren't welcome and giving the general advice of staying in their lane.

She didn't get a word in edgewise. She also found herself bullied into agreeing to bring the guys back to Geneva where they could be dressed down there.

It was stressful and embarrassing and she found herself near tears by the time he hung up without even letting her try to explain herself.

And her being upset, in turn, made Tuvo upset.

“Don't worry about him,” Belmira said, hugging her as they prepared to leave again. “You all did the right thing. You saved us. Don't let them tell you other.”

“Thanks, Belmira,” she said, sniffing gently as they separated. “I'm sorry we brought all this to you. I never wanted any of this.”

Belmira shook her head. “No. I'm glad to have met you. They can burn their politics and power struggles.”

Hattie bid her farewell and climbed back into the shuttle. The guys followed after and, just like that, they were leaving Brillhar behind again as they took off.

She was so focused on her friend disappearing below, she didn't realize immediately that they weren't flying across the forest towards Geneva. They were going up, heading right back to space so they could return to the *Stor*.

Confused, she turned back to find Tuvo already standing behind her, arms crossed over his large chest, leaning against the wall, watching her.

“We're not going to meet with the secretary general?”

“Why would we do that?”

The careless way he responded to the question gave her pause.

“Because... he's the secretary general of the United Nations? We can't just... ignore him.”

“We're not ignoring him. We're not people that he can summon and banish at his whim.”

“But he's the secretary general. He's humanity's representative for the Coalition.”

“Does Atem have the power to summon or dismiss any of the other representatives?”

Hattie opened her mouth, but hesitated, closing it again. Because no, he did not. Atem was equal to the other representatives. And Earth wasn't a member of the Coalition anyway. They were just a protectorate.

Tuvo smirked as he saw the realization come over her face.

“But that's not...” She cast her mind for something to say. To explain why it felt so wrong to ignore him and fly away.

Tuvo didn't give her a chance. He put his arms around her from behind and held her close.

“Do you regret coming to save Belmira and the others?”

“What? No! Of course not!”

“Neither do I. And whatever fallout we face from this, it will be worth it to know that we kept our friends safe. If the Earth powers are offended because we flaunted their power, then they will just have to get over that.”

Hattie bit her lip. Unsure what to say. She was aware of the egos of powerful men and knew that none of them would be happy about any of this. Bad enough they had completely upstaged them by taking out the compound with just two males. They were now flagrantly ignoring their demands to answer for that crime.

“Don’t worry,” Tuvo said, kissing the side of her face. “We’ll deal with it.”

She wanted to believe him, but she couldn’t help worrying.

Hattie wasn’t surprised when, immediately upon leaving the landing shuttle, they were informed that the UN representative was on the line, and he was angry that they had dared leave Earth without permission.

“We really angered them, haven’t we?” Survii chuckled, like it was nothing. “Come on. Let’s indulge them for the moment, shall we?”

None of the others seemed concerned as they moved to the comm room together. The large chamber was round, with an elevated dais in the center, built in such a way that the acoustics were focused on that dais. When a comm was ongoing, only those standing there could be heard and those standing there could only hear the comm.

Survii, Tuvo, and Hattie climbed together onto the platform as Third Voice Navine connected the comm with Earth.

Immediately, the screen was filled by Secretary General Halvdan Lie’s angry face. He was an older man, with deep wrinkles in his age softened face. Though his hard gaze had not dulled with age and Hattie found herself wilting under the sharpness of his glare.

*“How dare you?”* He asked immediately, without preamble. *“You not only come onto Earth soil and kill humans indiscriminately, you do so against our express wishes. And*

*then, you turn tail and flee rather than accept punishment for your actions. Woman! Why are you not translating my words? These actions are unacceptable and we, as humanity, will not abide by them!"*

Hattie, a bit surprised and overwhelmed by the sheer anger being directed at her, lost her words for a moment and couldn't bring herself to translate. Her silence only earned a glaring rebuke from the secretary general as she failed in her role.

As she shrank back under the onslaught of his disapproval, Tuvo was suddenly there, putting a hand to her back. Keeping her upright as he growled at the older man. The blatant aggression directed at her too much for him to ignore.

Secretary General Lie reeled backwards, obviously unprepared for having anyone *growl* at him. He was a powerful, wealthy man. People did not threaten him.

"Be nice," Tuvo snarled while Survii smothered a chuckle.

Seeing him sticking up for her made Hattie smile. She touched his stomach gently, trying to calm him down, as she faced the imposing man with a little more confidence. Because she wasn't alone. And, dang it, they hadn't done anything wrong!

"Mr. Secretary," she started, squaring her shoulders. "If I may-"

*"You may not,"* he cut her off harshly. *"You are just the translator. I am speaking to the delegation. They must answer for their actions."*

This time, it wasn't just Tuvo who began growling. None of the males were happy that he had just interrupted her, and even if they didn't understand his words, the tone of his voice was unmistakable, and they did not appreciate it.

Their combined strength at her back kept her head up. Her determination strong.

"What actions, Mr. Secretary? The one that saved an entire, innocent village? The one that dealt with the human traffickers that no one else had? The one where they were helping to rebuild that village before we left?"

*“The one where they overstepped boundaries and took action on Earth soil without permission. This is our planet. They do not get to come here and decide who lives and dies.”*

“Mr. Secretary-”

*“Secretary General,”* he corrected with a harsh bark. *“My titles are either Secretary General or Your Excellency.”*

“Wait. Seriously?” Hattie was completely derailed by that one. “Er, okay. Secretary General, then. Those people were our friends. They took care of us. They thanked us for what we did for them.”

*“They do not get to make that decision.”*

“We saved their lives!”

*“Those aliens killed dozens of humans!”*

“And they deserved it!” She shouted back, completely certain of herself. “Those were bad men. They brought their fate upon themselves.”

*“That is something to be determined by human courts and human laws. If we allow any alien that likes to come to our planet and enact their idea of justice-”*

“You’re already discussing an alien police force!”

“For *other* aliens on Earth. We have never, and would never, give them permission to punish humans. That is absolutely inappropriate. We look after our own.”

“No.”

Hattie turned, surprised to hear Tuvo speak up. She and the secretary general had been speaking so fast, sometimes over each other, that she was surprised that he was able to understand what they were talking about.

His hand slid around from her back to her waist, clutching her close, but his harsh glare was on Secretary General Lie.

*“What did you say to me?”* Lie asked, his voice calm and dangerous.



“Said no.” Tuvo wasn’t afraid of him at all. “You are protectorate now. Sovereign, yes, but not full. We look after as well.”

His *Excellency* didn’t look at all pleased to be told that. It took him a moment to force his tightened jaw apart to speak.

*“We agreed to accept your protection from outside threats. In exchange for trade and mates. We said nothing about you telling us how to police our people.”*

“Would have to police to be told how,” he sneered.

Secretary General Lie’s face turned purple from anger. A change that made Romival make a curious sound. Hattie had to bite back a laugh.

“No sorry from us,” Tuvo continued. “Did right. Would do again. Will do again.”

*“If you come onto our planet threatening the lives of humans on human soil, we will dissolve this treaty and consider it grounds for war.”*

“Are you stupid?” Hattie’s incredulous question surprised everyone – including her. She rolled her lips inward, biting them as her words echoed in the empty room.

*“What did you just say to me?”*

Tuvo’s hand tightened on her hips, squeezing encouragingly. She took a breath before lifting her head and trying to explain her thoughts a bit more politely.

“You’re just talking,” she said, realizing as she said it that it was true. “You don’t mean what you say. You’re feeling weak and helpless and you’re lashing out in response, trying to get back some sense of power in any small way you can.”

Just like Keith. Only worse, because Halvdan Lie was a powerful male accustomed to getting his way and people doing as *he* said. The idea of aliens doing anything he didn’t approve of was terrifying because it meant that he wasn’t as in control as he wanted to be.

And so, he lashed out the only way he could.

By threatening war with an intergalactic superpower that could destroy them without ever putting boots on the ground.

And he had to know that.

“These people are our allies,” Hattie said, speaking gently to try to calm him down. “The only thing they want is to protect us. To help us. The Three Rings were the worst scum imaginable. I don’t have to tell you that, and I’m sure you would agree.”

“*Of course,*” he admitted, growling through his teeth like he hated the fact that she was easing his temper. “*But they were still human. Their punishment should be from humans.*”

“But humans aren’t just humans anymore. We’re not the only people now. These are people too, and they care about us as fellow sapient creatures. You can’t think about this as ‘us’ and ‘them’. We’re all people. And they’re not trying to flaunt your authority over Earth. They were only trying to help friends, fellow people, any way they could. Could any of us say that we wouldn’t do something bad to protect those important to us?”

The Secretary General was still glaring at her, but there was a wall in his gaze. An annoyance that came from knowing she was right and hating it.

“Wouldn’t it be better, Secretary General, if we worked *with* them? If we banded together to change our world? Make it a better place?”

“*Naturally,*” he agreed, something coming back into his gaze. She didn’t have to hint at anything more than that, he already understood.

He could take back power by threatening war against a species he had no way of fighting.

Or he could take it back by working with them.

After all, the easiest way to lose control of something was to surrender it. If he maintained that control, however, he would have some say in how things were run. How they were regulated and operated.

“We can find a way to work together, can’t we?” She asked, smiling sweetly, trying to give him her biggest doe eyes. “Just think how good that will look. Human lead alien special forces dedicated to helping remove the scum of the Earth, thanks to the efforts of his Excellency, Secretary General of the United Nations.”

Was she laying it on too thick?

Keith hadn’t just taught her about the lengths that a helpless man would go to in order to not feel helpless. He had also taught her exactly how to cater to those fragile egos. How to phrase things so that it sounded best to *them*.

But maybe she was being a little too obvious?

Before she could reel it in a bit, Lie’s tension began to fade as a grin pulled at his lips. She could practically see the press releases in his head. It wouldn’t take much to spin it so that Tuvo and the others moved on the Three Rings with Earth’s full permission. And now a whole human trafficking ring was dismantled, and he could take credit for that. If he played his cards right and got this pride flare under control.

“*Yes, that could...*” His approving, almost dreamy look sharpened on her again. “*But this can’t happen without permission again. We’re willing to work with the aliens. For the good of humanity. But Earth is still its own, sovereign planet.*”

“Of course,” Hattie beamed, unconcerned. He had already agreed. She had him.

Survii, not the kind to let that kind of opportunity slip by, stepped forward to press his advantage to get a formal agreement immediately. Hattie happily faded into the background as she acted as a translator. Tuvo didn’t let her go. He remained stalwart by her side as they worked out a deal with his Excellency, finally putting the alien police force into motion.

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Bouncing eagerly on the balls of her feet, Hattie waited in the landing shuttle loading bay. She gnawed on her lower lip,

trying and failing to keep her excitement under control.

How could she possibly be calm when her parents would be here soon?

“Calm yourself, *kyrya*. You’re getting too worked up.”

Tuvo’s hand was there, spanning across the entirety of her back as he gently rubbed.

“I can’t help it! I’m so happy!” She turned to him, practically vibrating with joy.

Her parents had finally got all their affairs in order. They bought and packed everything they wanted to bring with them and sold or gave away the rest. Now, a member of the new embassy team was going to get them.

Technically, her parents were the first legal human immigrants of Earth. They were kind of the guinea pigs going through the bare bones process being put in place. Part of that involved embassy workers going to get them.

The new domini ambassador to Earth had arrived just two days ago, and she was personally overseeing their immigration datawork. Partially to learn their own process, partially to make sure the process worked, and partially for the sake of history.

Hattie and the girls might be the first humans to be made citizens of the Coalition, but her parents were the first ones to make that choice. To do it properly.

So now, she was just waiting for the landing shuttle to return. Tuvo had prepared a room for them in their wing of the *Stor*. They were going to have a family dinner tonight so she could, finally, introduce them to her mate. They knew that Tuvo had claimed her, she had told them over comm when she asked them to come with her, but they hadn’t actually met him.

Today was going to be wonderful!

This morning, the girls had surprised her with a spa day. They had spent hours being primped and polished and dressed up for the sheer fun of it. Since she was going to be having a

proper family dinner later, she thought it was a good chance to make herself look good.

As a result, her skin was now glowing, sparkling, with health and care. Her hair had been set into neat, perfect ringlets and the top pulled back into elaborate hair roses decorated with shining gems and a pretty, silver ribbon.

The dress was new – a gift from Tuvo. He was making good on his promise to give her lots of clothes, with the understanding that anything he bought her, he could rip off her. She was excited for him to shred this dress, though it would be a shame. The off shoulder design had an empire waistline with a long, trailing silver ribbon tied around her waist while the skirt swirled around her thighs. The deep, dark blue brought out the new tan in her skin after so long in the Amazon. Sparkling silver heels had straps all the way up her calves, ending with cute bows at her knees, with more trailing ribbons.

She felt like a princess. Tuvo had great taste for a guy. Then again, this dress seemed to serve up her breasts like a feast for the eyes, so maybe that was really all he cared about. Regardless, she looked and felt great, and she couldn't wait for dinner with her parents.

To her surprise, Tuvo had dressed up as well. He was wearing his formal military uniform – a hard lined camocloth that matched him perfectly to his surroundings. It squared his shoulders and clung tight to his trim waist. He looked delicious. She wanted to cover him in chocolate sauce and lick him clean all over again.

Soon, she promised herself. Dinner before dessert.

“I know you're excited,” Tuvo said, looking at her carefully. “I'm just worried about the pup.”

Hattie stilled.

It was the first time he had mentioned their daughter like this. In a hopeful, happy tone. Like he might really be more excited for the baby than afraid for Hattie.

In a way, their daughter almost didn't feel real to Hattie either. She was so early in her pregnancy, none of the transplanted domini gestational instincts had even hit yet. If she was relying on human pregnancy tests, she might not even know she was pregnant.

They had nothing but time. She hadn't even planned on bringing up the topic again until they were back on Turv.

But here he was, addressing it now. She fumbled a bit, but quickly reacted like this was normal.

"She's your daughter. She's strong enough to handle a little excitement."

"Scarlet said we need to keep you calm."

"I'm pretty sure Scarlet would have said we have to keep me from stressing out. But side question: When did you talk to Scarlet about this?"

"Yesterday."

She started in surprise. "Really? Like, you went to her to specifically ask about... our pup."

He hesitated just a moment before turning and lifting her up. He clutched her to his chest, her legs bending in the air, as he cupped her ass in one huge hand.

"I wanted to know what you would need," he said, his voice deep and deliciously rumbly, vibrating through her entire body. "What I should do for you. She said to keep you calm."

Hattie giggled, running her fingers along the back of his neck. "She meant stress. Stress isn't good for the baby. Happiness is just fine for the baby."

"We need to be careful," he insisted, looking her over carefully. "You're so delicate. So soft. I have to make sure that your pregnancy goes perfectly so you... so both of you can be safe. If I can't take away the pain, I can at least make everything else easier."

"Aw, Tuvo," she breathed softly, looking in each of his three eyes. "So, you're okay with... this?"

“With you? With our pup?”

She nodded meekly.

He looked surprised before his face softened, and he rested his forehead down against hers. “Oh, *vi adassi kyrya*. Forgive me.”

“For what?”

“This is never something you should have to ask if I’m happy about. Of course, I’m overjoyed that my mate is going to be bearing my pup. It is a priceless gift and treasure, *kyrya*. My fear cannot eclipse the love I have for you. Both of you.”

“Oh, Tuvy-bear,” she melted against him, encircling her arms around his neck. “I love you, too.”

“I am eager to get you to my home. To your new nest. I’m going to hover. I’m going to worry. I might panic when I think about all the things that could go wrong. But never doubt, *kyrya*, that I’m eager to hold our daughter in my hands.”

She sniffed, joy bringing tears to her eyes.

They stood there, holding each other, until they heard the distinct metallic thuds of the landing shuttle coming into dock.

Gasping, she lifted her head. Heart pounding as Tuvo set her gently back on her feet. She beamed as she stared at the lights over the door the shuttle connected with. It was red right now – indicating it was locked. She stared, bouncing on the balls of her feet again.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the light turned purple. Only a second later, the doors were whooshing open.

And there were her parents.

They had her late in life. Hattie liked to joke that she was the very last of her mom’s eggs. As a result, the two were quite old now. Their hair was snowy white. Her father had a moderately lined face, but her mother had been fighting against the ravages of time for decades and, as a result, her skin barely sagged and bore few wrinkles.

They were both beautiful. Smiling. They rushed forward, arms outstretched. Hattie yelled in delight, running into their embrace.

It was the first time she had seen them since originally landing on Earth. Since she had gone missing in the Amazon. Her mother was already crying and, after a second, Hattie was joining her. Sobbing against her parents as she laughed – the relief bringing out conflicting, powerful reactions.

Her dad's arms came around both of them. He smelled like leather and bourbon and all things comforting. He said something about loving her, but she barely heard him over her sobs. He kissed the top of her head, and she beamed up at him.

Around them, Tuvo was directing a few workers in unloading her parents' luggage. They hadn't just brought suitcases with their clothes. They had boxes. Not storage boxes. They were items bought in bulk – chocolate, dried pasta, her father's favorite cigars-

"Is that coffee?!" She asked, staring in wide-eyed wonder at one of the boxes being offloaded.

"We know you like your coffee," her father chuckled. "Figured, we'd bring a bunch of it back for you to enjoy. Supposed to be a two-year supply."

"Psh. I bet I can cut that time to six months," Hattie laughed, wiping at her tears. "Thank you, daddy."

A weight on her shoulder had her turning. Tuvo was behind her now, giving her parents soft smiles.

"Take to room now, yes?"

Her parents gave him curious looks, from his hand to his face then back again.

"Mom, dad," Hattie smiled at them before putting a hand on Tuvo's chest. "I'd like to introduce you to First Warrior Tuvo. My mate."

"Your mate," her mother repeated, surprised. "Oh, my. He's so much bigger than I remember."



“Nothing wrong with a strapping young man,” her father added, though he was looking at Tuvo curiously. They hadn’t really paid him much attention before.

Hattie smiled, face warm with joy. “Tuvo, these are my parents. Larry Sweet, and my mom, Candace Sweet.”

He saluted them gently, fist over his heart. “Family of *vi kyrya*. Honor to meet.”

“Oh, hello,” her mother waved with a quick smile, always friendly and polite. Hattie had inherited her short genes from both of them, and she could tell that Tuvo was trying very hard not to loom over the three tiny people in front of him.

“What happened to that Keith boy?” Her father asked, confused. “He was saying that you two would be together now that you were back.”

Tuvo’s eye twitched as Hattie rolled hers.

“Dad, don’t even start. It’s like a whole thing,” she said, taking his arm.

Tuvo led them through the *Stor* as Hattie explained her relationship with Keith – specifying that it ended before she had even been abducted. Something that surprised both of them since Keith had sworn otherwise.

“Never did like him,” her father said as Tuvo opened the door to their room. “Always thought you could do better, sweetie.”

“Yeah. I agree,” she said, smiling wide as her parents walked into their room and looked around in delighted surprise. It was luxurious and comfortable inside. Their luggage had already been brought up – except for the bulk boxes that had likely been put in storage. Hattie would deal with those later, after she got everyone settled.

For now, she focused on showing her parents how to work everything. The doors, the lights, the pod bed. She gave them their new combots that Tuvo had bought for them, because he was a good male who was happy to take care of her parents. There was probably nothing sweeter he could have done. If she hadn’t already loved him, she would have fallen then.

“Oh, goodness,” her father grimaced, breaking out his comically tiny reading glasses as she showed him how to use the holodisplay off the combot. “Barely understood them newfangled smart phones. Now this fancy little thing.”

“It’s super easy to use, dad,” Hattie laughed. “And the more you use it, the more it will learn your preferences and be able to work better. Let me just program it to you. And then we can probably take you to the med bay.”

“I’m not sick,” her father grimaced, leaning back and squinting even through the glasses.

“I meant to fix your vision, but that’s not true anyway. It can fix your cholesterol too, though. And mom, your arthritis. And anything else you might not realize you have.”

Her mother chuckled, putting an arm around her shoulder, stopping her excited chatter. “Calm down, sweetie. We’ll get to all that, but we’re old. We’re not good at all this abrupt change. Let us get comfortable first.”

Hattie chuckled sheepishly. She had gotten excited about them being here and just realized that, with advanced alien technology, she could fix all her parents’ pains and problems. She wouldn’t have to worry about her mom hurting or her dad having a heart attack. They were elderly, but simply by being here amongst alien technology, they would live for years more.

After giving them the basics, and showing them how to use the privy facilities, she and Tuvo left to let them rest for a bit before dinner.

As they walked down the hall, Hattie let out a sigh, her head coming to rest against his arm.

“Something wrong?” Tuvo asked, stopping them before a long window which offered them a fantastic view of the silvery-white moon.

“No. Why?”

“You sighed.”

She smiled. “That was a happy smile, Tuvy-bear. I’m just... so happy.”

He looked at her carefully for a second, as though making sure that she was telling the truth, before relaxing with a small smile.

“I’m glad. Your parents seem nice.”

“Oh, they’re the best! Thank you, thank you, *thank you* for bringing them.”

He chuckled, turning and picking her up. He set her down on the windowsill, which was just a bit too narrow for her butt to comfortably rest. But he stepped between her legs, offering his chest for her to lean against so she wouldn’t slide off.

“You know I would do anything to make you happy, don’t you?” He asked, running his hands up her thighs, to her hips, around to her butt.

“I know,” she smiled, straightening the lines of his uniform.

“I may not always say things right. And I know I can be dense when it comes to feelings. I’m sorry for that. For all the times I’ve done it in the past, and all the times I know I’ll do it again in the future. Please, *kyrya*, know that I don’t ever intend to hurt you.”

“Oh, Tuvo...”

“I’m better at doing things. I’m good at taking direction. If you ever doubt my feelings for you, Hattie, ask anything of me. Tell me to do something. Let me prove myself. I’ll do anything for you. And if I say something stupid, just tell me. Let me know so I can fix it.”

“I will,” she promised. Not just to him, but herself. “But it goes both ways, you know. You need to talk to me too. Especially if I do something you don’t like or if I hurt you.”

He chuckled. “*Kyrya*, you could stab me, and I wouldn’t be mad.”

“No, I would never,” she laughed, kissing his shoulder.

She was still smiling when he tilted her chin up to claim a proper kiss. The warmth of his lips moving against hers, his tongue sliding into her mouth, made her sigh again. He was so perfect. And he was all hers.

# Chapter 50

## *Tuvo*

Tuvo was nervous as he went to dinner with Hattie's family. Not about meeting the couple that had birthed and raised his female. He was happy to do that.

The older couple dressed up a bit after being given time to rest. Tuvo and Hattie went to fetch them and bring them to a smaller relaxation room that he had reserved for them to eat in. It gave them privacy for the dinner that Hattie had planned – a human themed menu with domini ingredients. Which she showcased to them, brimming with pride.

The couple were advanced in age – for humans. Their hair had turned white, which Hattie explained was common for aged humans. Both of them were soft and delicate, even more so than Hattie, but they smiled and greeted him warmly when he came to get them. Candace was wearing a shapeless pink and white striped dress with a cute little cape around the shoulders, while Larry had put on a mismatched human suit with patches on the elbows, his glasses on a chain that hung around his neck.

They were so clearly out of place, gawking and staring at everything, especially at the moon that Hattie had chosen to display through the simulated window.

“Where will we be staying on your planet?” Larry asked as Hattie served them. He kept trying to make himself comfortable on the lounge cushion – such a big change from the human style, rigid chairs that he was used to.

“My clan has many buildings on large tree near palace,” he said. “A gift from Atem as reward for deeds. There's home

there that's unused. I sent word ahead to have prepared for you."

"Oh, how lovely," Candace smiled. "Are we near you?"

"Can walk. You always welcome in our den, of course."

"Den," Larry chuckled. "How quaint. I'm excited to see it."

"You'll love it, daddy," Hattie promised, beaming. "Calvitorum is beautiful."

"Can't wait, kiddo," Larry smiled, taking an appreciative sniff of the food. "Well, now, that's a sweet smell. What's this sauce?"

"Sweet and spicy celti berry sauce. My own recipe," she held her head up high. "Mom, I can't wait to show you everything I've been learning to cook. It's so great."

"It's good, sweetie," her mother said, chewing thoughtfully. "A bit harsh on the pepper though. Have you thought about adding some brown sugar?"

"They don't have brown sugar. But they do have this natural sugar syrup..."

Tuvo smiled as Hattie and her mother started talking about her cooking. She took the small criticism of her sauce – that Tuvo rather loved – with eager excitement. Her mother had been the one who originally taught her to cook. Her opinion was clearly important.

"Sounds like we're going to be eating good, huh Tuvo?" Larry said, sharing a grin with him.

"The best," he agreed, rubbing the small of Hattie's back.

"I'm glad to see she's doing well," he said, smiling fondly as the girls continued speaking, too involved with their discussion of the various spices available on Turv to pay attention to them. "Look at my girl. She's glowing."

She was. Tuvo wasn't sure if it was happiness, her pregnancy, or the beauty treatments she and the other females had undergone this morning, but she was even more radiant than

usual. The sight made him smile, the tension that usually sat heavy in his chest easing completely.

His female was happy and healthy and strong. How could he be fearful when she was so obviously okay? If there was hardship to come, then it was his job to carry her through it. Jump out of planes for her, carry her if she got too tired to walk, give her everything through this pregnancy so that she experienced not even a twinge of discomfort.

“Will always glow,” he promised her father. “Always happy. Promise this.”

Larry smiled, clapping him on the shoulder – needing to reach up to do so, even seated. “You saved her life. You brought her back to us. You’ve taken such good care of her. I know I can trust you to keep that promise, son.”

They had just finished the main course when Hattie took his hand and gave him a smile.

“Mom. Dad,” she looked at them in turn. “Tuvo and I have something to tell you.”

The couple gave her curious looks.

“So, I know I told you that I’m pregnant,” she brought up her hand and placed it over her belly. “But we also found out the gender. We’re having a girl!”

There was a beat of silence then-

“Oh, baby!” Her mother yelled, jumping up and running around to hug her. “A baby girl! I’m so excited! Will she look like Viktor? He was just absolutely adorable. If that’s what we have to look forward to, I can’t wait!”

“Well, we don’t know for sure yet,” Hattie laughed, sinking into her mother’s embrace. “But Holly’s baby is already looking more domini than human, so we’re thinking that the physical characteristics tend to skew that way. Want to see pics?”

“Yes! Of course!”

“A girl grandpa, huh?” Larry sniffed, his eyes glistening. “Didn’t think I’d live long enough to see this day.”

“You’re not that old yet,” Candace teased, smacking at his shoulder. “Oh, Tuvo! You’ve made me such a happy mom!”

Tuvo was somehow surprised to find himself being swept up in a hug as well. The moment her arms closed around him, he immediately knew where Hattie got her famous hugs from. Candace hugged with all the warmth and joy in her heart.

“Look at the little bean,” her father said as Hattie showed him stills of the circle that was their pup off her combot. “Got my eyes.” He threw his head back, laughing like he told a great joke.

One that Tuvo did not get, since their pup was little more than a clump of cells. And even when she did develop eyes, judging by Holly’s daughter and Viktor, she would have three of them that likely looked like his. But he said nothing as Candace cooed over the image.

The two asked a hundred questions, trying to learn what they could expect from a hybrid grandpup. Neither of them seemed at all concerned about the size difference between the two of them, they were only looking forward to Hattie giving birth.

“This is so exciting,” Candace clapped. “Our little girl disappears for a year, then shows up with an alien husband in tow and a baby all ready for us to love.”

“It’s much better than anything else,” Larry agreed. “Now, explain this mating thing to me Tuvo. I don’t think I’m getting it.”

“Mating most important bond,” he said, giving Hattie a long, burning look. “Forever. Hattie *vi kyrya*. Mine. As I hers.”

“I know that feeling,” Larry smiled at Candace who tittered, her lined face turning cutely pink, just like the other females.

And that small interaction, in that instant, softened something in Tuvo’s chest. He had only been seeing the worst of human males. Even Inacio, for as much as he was loyal to his family, had not been openly affectionate with them. Some part of Tuvo wondered if maybe human males couldn’t be affectionate at all and maybe that’s how so many could be terrible.

But seeing the way Larry smiled at Candace, like she was the sun in his sky, bright and brilliant and life giving, eased that fear. They might be humans and mating might not work the same for them as it did for the domini, but that didn't lessen the love they had for each other. The love that these two had for each other.

There was something redeemable in human males, and it was this right here.

“So, Hattie is your family now? Like we are? Does it work like marriage?” Larry asked, oblivious to Tuvo's epiphany.

“Not really,” Hattie answered for him. “I'm adopted into his clan via mating. But you two don't automatically get to be family the same way. I mean, you are *now*. Because Tuvo adopted you into his clan, but it's not an automatic in-law thing like marriage would be.”

“But we're still grandparents, right?” Candace frowned, as though there was even a slight chance she might be denied that because mating did not mean they were his clan.

“Yes,” Tuvo said, firmly and without hesitation. “You clan. I make so. And you family always. Does not change. Never.”

“Well, that's a relief,” Larry smiled. “I'd hate to be imposing on someone who wasn't family.”

“It's all so confusing,” Candace agreed. “But we'll get used to it. Might need to explain it a few times though. But you know, there's all kinds of new relationships and stuff since we were young. Remember the first time you met an openly gay couple, Larry? I thought your eyes were going to pop out of your head.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Feel bad about that now. Poor boys probably thought I was judging them. Couldn't help but stare, you know. I remember when that kind of thing was illegal. Now we got same genders and switched genders and them, er, what are they called? Prollies?”

“Poly,” Hattie corrected, snickering.



“Yeah. All that. A bit much for an old man like me. But it’s fine. We’ll adjust. Won’t we, Candace?”

“More love in this world is never a bad thing,” she agreed wisely.

“Can I ask?” Tuvo started.

“Hm?” Candace tilted her head at him. “What did you want to ask, baby?”

The nerves flared again as he looked into their sweet, open faces. There wasn’t even a hint of malice or dishonesty in these two. It was no wonder that Hattie was as sweet and kind as she was if these were the people that raised her.

And that made this almost harder to ask. He wanted to do this right.

No, he *needed* to do this right.

Sitting upright, he looked Larry right in his eyes. That had been specified to him.

“Sir,” he started solemnly, using the human honorific. “I come to you, humble and honest.”

His tone must have alerted them that something was up. Hattie gave him a curious look as Candace’s head cocked. Larry, however, had an unreadable expression on his face. Though there was something in his eyes that made Tuvo think he knew exactly what he was going to say.

“Love Hattie,” he said, taking her hand, squeezing it. “From first moment I saw, I love her. Want to spend rest of my life to love her. Beg you, sir, for permission to claim your daughter.”

“Tuvo...” Hattie’s voice was weak, wavering. His upper eye couldn’t stray from her, and he didn’t miss the way her eyes glistened as she stared at him.

Only for a moment, however, before her head whipped over to look at her dad. Checking to see what his response would be.

Larry wasn’t in any hurry to give him one. He stared at Tuvo, shorter than him but still somehow managing to look down his nose. Giving nothing away in his expression. Measuring him

on some internal scale that Tuvo faced with squared shoulders, head high.

“You think you’re worthy of my daughter?” He finally asked, nothing in his tone.

“Strive to always be. Do anything for her. Honor and prize always.”

“What do you plan to do with her? What plan do you have for your future?”

Ah. Tuvo had been warned there might be questions, though they said that they couldn’t tell him what they might be, since they didn’t know. It differed from father to father what questions he might ask, if he even asked any questions.

The only rule, they said, was to answer honestly.

“Take home. Give proper den and nest. Expand kitchen for to cook. Love forever. Protect her and young.”

“Protect them, hm? You think you can?”

“Know I can,” he growled, tightening his grip on her hand. “Vow it. Forever.”

“You’re a strong guy, Tuvo,” Larry said, leaning back on his lounge. “And I’m not as young as I used to be. But if you ever hurt my baby, I’m sure I can find some way to take my revenge out of your flesh.”

“Daddy,” Hattie mumbled, shifting and lowering her head as though uncomfortable, but a smile on her pink face regardless.

“I fail, I give flesh willingly,” Tuvo responded honestly.

Larry’s face softened and he gave him a smile. “My baby girl deserves only the best. And I know she’s chosen well. I’ve seen and heard all the things you’ve done for her. I can’t imagine turning her over to anyone less worthy.”

Tuvo felt a grin pulling up on one corner of his mouth.

Larry saluted him in the domini style, a bit sloppy but earnest. “I’m happy to welcome you into our family. I give you my full permission to claim my daughter.”

A gentle sniff turned Tuvo's attention back to Hattie. She was quickly wiping her eyes even as she was reaching for him, intending to give him a hug. One he was happy to accept, rubbing her back as her parents smiled indulgently.

"You asked my father for me?" She asked, breathless. "I can't... Who even taught you that?"

"Alanna," he said honestly, using his free hand to send a message over his combot while her face was buried in his chest. In Domtri, he said, "She told me that it's a very old-fashioned tradition among your people, completely dead in some places, but she thought you'd appreciate it. Do you?"

"Yes! Of course. Thank you, Tuvo." She beamed, sitting up straight. "I can't believe you'd go through that trouble for me."

"You deserve even more," he assured her, smiling. If this was enough to bring her to tears, then the rest of his plans might be too much.

But no. This was what his female wanted. And he would give her anything.

Hattie was thanking her dad and expressing her love for both of them as her combot went off. She looked surprised, before answering it. Scarlet's voice came through the floating device.

"*Hey, Hattie,*" she said in English, breathless with excitement. "*You have to come to the portside viewing platform.*"

"Huh, why?"

"*Okay, so you know how they're building a moon base to do the human experiments that they agreed on in the treaty, right?*"

"Yeah. And we're leaving the base for humanity once we're done with it."

"*Exactly, that one. Well, the construction ship just dropped out of their subspace swing and they're about to launch the first probes to scan the moon to determine the best place to start building. You're not going to want to miss this! It's going to be so cool!*"

Before Hattie could ask anything further, Scarlet ended the comm.

“The construction ship?” Hattie looked at Tuvo.

“They want to start building base as soon as possible,” he told her in Domtri. “Shall we watch?”

“Oh,” she looked at the table and her family. Clearly reticent about finishing the family dinner.

But her mom smiled at Tuvo before standing. “Sounds like quite a show! Come on, Hattie. You don’t want to miss history like the first building on the moon, right?”

“Well, that’s true,” she said, getting to her feet. “We can finish this later.”

Tuvo smiled as he took her hand and pulled her along. Her parents followed behind as he led the way into the hall and down to the portside viewing platform.

The *Stor* was turned in such a way that one of the long sides was facing the moon. They were orbiting just behind it, outside of human territory – which only extended as far as human technology had managed to put humans. That was why the Coalition refused to offer membership to species that hadn’t breached their solar system. It was a matter of safety, so that no one could claim territory inside someone else’s solar system.

The building being built on the moon was going to be engineered, constructed, and maintained by alien forces. It was there for the express purpose of studying how humans could mate and breed with the domini, and if they could do it with other species. It was being built in human territory so the humans being experimented on wouldn’t be forced to leave their space, and in return for permission to build on their moon, they had promised the base to the humans once they were done.

It was just going to be a shell by then, all the advanced technology would be removed, but even just having a construction like that on the moon would be more than

humanity could do on their own for now. And having a base might be beneficial to them.

And since the Coalition species had a vested interest in figuring out just how fertile humans really were, they were eager to start building immediately.

The portside viewing platform was a large room, long and tall, with a massive window facing out over the moon taking up the entire side. There were low tables and lounge cushions, but they had all been pushed out of the way.

When they walked in, the others were already there. The abducted human females with their mates, paired up and smiling. They waved at Hattie and Tuvo but made no attempt to come in closer as he escorted her to the window.

Gasping, amazed, she released his arm to walk forward, entranced.

The human moon was very simple, as moons went. A large, dusty, white rock. It wasn't particularly impressive, but it was a sight that humans had been gazing at and dreaming of since they had eyes to see and a brain to think.

It held Hattie's attention as she put her hands on the glass.

It couldn't be seen from here, but there was definitely a construction ship orbiting the same distance from the moon as the *Jutiron Stor*.

Tuvo opened his combot and sent out another message, telling them they were ready.

# Chapter 51

## *Hattie*

The moon was truly stunning.

The glowing silver rock stole her breath as she stared out across its windless surface. A place that few had ever tread, but all had imagined with awe. And sure, it wasn't as beautiful as Earth from space, or Turv, or Jupiter. But this was Earth's moon. Their nearest celestial neighbor. It was special because of proximity and history.

“So, where's the-”

The question died before she could finish asking it. From around the side of the ship, without warning, dozens upon dozens of bright, twinkling blue lights – like combots but *huge* – were suddenly rushing through space. They sparkled and twinkled as they wrapped around the moon, twisting and encircling it like the rings of Saturn. They split into two rings, then three, then four. All of them spinning in different directions, moving around the moon like the electrons orbiting a massive atom.

“Woah!” She breathed, stunned by the beautiful light show. And this was just them getting initial topographic scans to determine where they wanted to build.

Four rings consolidated down into two. Then into one. They continued to spin around the moon for a minute before peeling away. Rushing out into space. Where were they going? The ship they came from was the other way, wasn't it? Did they have something else to scan?

Oh, they were moving in specific patterns. Creating... a galaxy?

Hattie's head tilted curiously, watching as the blinking lights created the spiral limbs of what was, unmistakably, her home galaxy. It spun slowly in the sky, sparkling, for a few seconds before they broke apart again.

This time, they came together into two rings, overlapping each other, with a group of them sparkling at the top of one of the rings. They looked a bit like wedding rings. But that...

Hypnotized by the glittering light show, Hattie stared in wonder as the rings fractured into multiple clusters that all began dancing around each other. She held her breath, staring. Waiting. Stunned by the impromptu show.

The first clump of lights suddenly began to take shape. An H. Then the next. An A.

On and on it went, spelling out with glittering lights amongst the backdrop of sparkling space-

### **HATTIE SWEET, WILL YOU MARRY ME?**

Gasping, she fell back a step. Then whipped around, heart pounding in her throat.

She was both shocked and amazed and overjoyed to see Tuvo there. Down on one knee. That golden ring from around his neck now lifted in the air.

"Hattie," he started as she struggled to breathe. "I love you. You are my heart. My only reason to live. My reason to kill and die. The only thing I want is to see you happy. To give you everything you desire."

"Tuvo," she gasped, covering her mouth, shaking as tears poured down her cheeks.

"I have defeated your guardian in combat. I have earned the permission of your father. I have destroyed all your enemies. I would lay their bodies at your feet so their blood would reach your toes. There is nothing I would not do for you.

"And now, I ask you for the only thing I ever want from you in return. Hattie Sweet, will you marry me, take me as your mate, and make me the happiest male in all the universe?"

“Tuvo,” she moaned, nearly collapsing against him. Words failed her and, for a second, it was all she could do to gasp and nod fervently. Then, like a damn breaking, the words finally burst forth. “Yes! Yes! So many times yes!”

Hattie’s heart was pounding so hard in her ears, she almost didn’t hear the others cheering and clapping as she offered Tuvo her hand.

Slowly, reverently, he slid the ring over her finger. The sparkling, blue gemstone winked at her in the light as he kissed it reverently.

“*Vi adassi. Vi kyrya. Always.*”

Sobbing, she collapsed against him. And he was so tall, her knees barely even bent as she threw her arms around him, burying her face in his neck, as she clung tight. Sobbing and laughing and kissing every inch of his skin she could reach.

He got to his feet, cradling her close.

Then, the others were there, surrounding her. Laughing and talking and smiling. She patted Tuvo’s shoulder and, reluctantly, he put her down. She turned as the girls enveloped her in their arms. All of them demanding to see the ring, congratulating her, laughing with her.

She turned from them, back to Tuvo, to find the other males around him. Clapping him on the back, congratulating him just as enthusiastically, though these weren’t their traditions.

Sniffing, she ran and threw her arms around his torso.

“How did you know?” She asked, beaming and crying.

“The others told me,” he said, looking over her head. “Thank you, females, for your instruction in this. Your help was invaluable.”

“You guys,” she turned in his arms, looking at them. “You did this? Wait, the whole thing? The spa this morning?”

“That was my idea,” Peony said, raising her hand with a smile, Viktor nestled in the crook of her elbow as Atem put his arm around her and their son. “Not only did it get you out of the



way so Tuvo could set everything up, but we got to dress you up for the moment without you knowing.”

“We all helped, actually,” Holly smiled. “Romi did the math so the construction ship could complete the subspace swing on time and this close. Survii coordinated with them to use the scan bots to make the lightshow.”

“You give me too much credit,” Survii said, stroking Alanna’s side as he spoke. “The idea was all Tuvo’s. All I did was reach out to a few of my contacts.”

“You all helped?” Hattie looked around at all of them. At their self-satisfied smiles. “But why? I mean, thank you! But why would you go through all this for me?”

“Because you’re worth it, my sister,” Atem said, smiling at her with no small amount of pride.

“I made a vow to you,” Survii said, beaming at her. “Late I am in keeping it, but I have kept it.”

“And for everything you’ve done to help us,” Havali added, gently rubbing Scarlet’s slightly rounded belly from behind.

“And because we love you,” Alanna said, beaming at her.

“Guys!” She cried, covering her face. Unable to withstand the onslaught of love and joy that washed over her. Crushing her with the power of a tsunami.

Tuvo was there, holding her from behind. Kissing the top of her head. “Was it everything you dreamed, *kyrya*?”

She shook her head quickly, turning and throwing herself at him again. “It was better, Tuvo! It was absolutely perfect. You’re perfect!”

He chuckled, stroking her back. “I love you, *kyrya*.”

“I love you more.”

She kissed him eagerly. Showering him in love. Eager now to get him back to their room so she could show him her appreciation in the best way she knew possible.

He had done all this for her. He had gone through the trouble of talking to all these people, setting all this up, coordinating

all of this, just for her.

She would have been happy just to be claimed. To be his mate. She was carrying his pup, she slept in his nest, she occupied a place in his heart no one else would ever fill.

But this?

This made it all perfect.

Family dinner continued right there in the viewing room. Everyone in her family, human and domini, gathered to eat at one table – together.

Her mother picked up Viktor and played with him, giving advice to Holly and Scarlet about their pregnancies. Assuring them that she was happy to babysit if needed. Alanna introduced the concept of arm wrestling to the guys, and they absolutely loved it. It was a form of physical competition that didn't traumatize the humans.

She sat with Tuvo – him on a lounge, her on his lap – watching over everyone as they chatted and laughed and celebrated.

“Thank you,” she said, nuzzling back into him.

He chuckled. “Don't thank me.”

“No, you're definitely getting thanked for this. I couldn't imagine anything better, Tuvo. It's all my dreams come true.”

“*All* of them?”

“Well, when I figure out how to make a coffee pot at your house, life will be perfect,” she laughed, reaching back to stroke his head.

“But Hattie,” he leaned down, licking and nibbling at her ear. “I haven't even married you yet.”

“Huh?”

She went still as he reached for her hand that now bore her mating ring. He didn't have a matching one, though the other guys had made sure to bring one for themselves when they asked the other girls to marry them.

“Wait, do you mean...?”

He brought her hand up and kissed the ring again. “I’m not nearly done making your dreams come true.”

# Chapter 52

## *Tuvo*

The central dome of the moon base was the first, and currently only, part of the structure that was complete. It still needed to be furnished and outfitted, but the doors and walls were all sealed. Air had been pumped inside to prove it was airtight, and now it could provide a place for workers to go to relax or plan while building.

It was also, for today, the place where he and Hattie were going to become the first couple ever married on the human moon.

The females had sent him and the other males here early, with strict instructions on how they wanted the space decorated. Unlike Alanna's wedding, which had been predominantly floral in style, Hattie had opted to fully lean into the space theme.

Overhead, a light display of the human galaxy was swirling and twinkling. Tuvo stood beneath the glimmering lights of a tall arch, while the white draped chairs trailed their own lights. The aisle that the females were walking down in their black bridesmaid dresses was lined the entire way with flickering combots.

Tuvo and the other males were wearing suits of a deep, galactic blue, trimmed in glittering gems and sparkling silver. Human style suits, since the females seemed to appreciate what the tight, slick lines did for their figure.

However, the females were all wearing domini style dresses. They were black, with similar sparkling silver and gem décor, but they all wore them differently. Peony had a two-piece dress, bearing her belly fully, while Holly's covered her from

the neck down with billowing, sheer bell sleeves. Scarlet's was a flowing romper pantsuit with a sheer cape, while Alanna wore a short dress, tight around her body, with a fluttering, longer, sheer skirt.

They were all beautiful. Each female smiling at her mate as she took her place on the other side of the arch carrying crystal flowers in the shape of Earth roses.

None of them could compare to Hattie.

The screen that had been hiding her from him pulled away, revealing his female in all her glory. She had chosen a domini style dress as well.

White, as was traditional for human mating dresses. It shimmered and shined with each step she took towards him, evoking the sense of crystal and fractals, along with the blue crystal roses that sparkled in her hands. The deep, wide neckline gave him an unencumbered view of her glorious breasts, while sheer, sparkling sleeves hung wide and loose from the straps that came off her shoulders. The bodice of the dress was tight, but the skirt flared around her legs. A long slit up the front gave him flashes of her thick, scrumptious thigh with each step. She wasn't wearing proper shoes, but glittering stones on a silver chain wrapped from her ankle to her cute little toes.

She was beautiful. Untouchable.

All his.

He was so focused on her, he barely even noticed her father guiding her down the aisle – another ancient human tradition.

The two of them reached the arch and her father kissed her cheek before taking Tuvo's hand and placing hers inside it. Just as he had sought his permission to claim Hattie, he was now giving her over to him.

Tuvo pulled her in close and kissed her. Prompting laughter from the human guests. Hattie smiled when he pulled back.

“You're supposed to wait until we're actually married.”

“I’m never going to deny myself the chance to kiss you,” he assured her. He knew he said the right thing when she smiled, her face pink.

First Healer Donivi – who was acting as their officiant – smiled between them before starting in on his speech.

Tuvo tried to pay attention. He really did. But how could a boring male’s words hold his attention when he compared them to his female? To the sweep of her dark lashes over her wide, sparkling eyes. The curve of her plump lips as she smiled at him. The sparkle and shine of her dress, enhancing the glow of her skin.

His stunning female, leaving him struck dumb just with just a look. She held him trapped in her eyes so completely he didn’t hear Donivi ask him to swear by his human vows. Not until Atem cleared his throat, jabbing him in the back, returning him to the present.

“I do!” He announced, sincerely hoping that was the right time.

Hattie giggled, squeezing his hands reassuringly as Donivi repeated the lines to her.

“I do,” she agreed, her voice much softer, dreamier than his.

Happy. A feeling that he had brought her by giving her a meaningful, one-of-a-kind wedding. No other human would ever get to say they were the first to wed on the moon. His Hattie was the only one, and that was a gift he had given her.

Donivi declared them domini and wife and, before he had even finished and given him permission to do so, Tuvo was gathering her up and kissing her deeply.

Everyone cheered. They yelled. Hattie melted in his arms. When he lowered her back to her feet, she was looking at him, eyes sparkling, like he hung the stars in the sky.

From the dome of the Lunar Base, they climbed into the shuttle that would bring them back up to the *Stor*, everyone talking and laughing and celebrating around them. Alanna and Survii were already locking lips while Romival lovingly stroked Holly’s belly.

On the *Stor*, in one of the recreation rooms, they had everything prepared for a large party. A reception to celebrate their mating.

It had human traditions.

Tuvo and Hattie danced. They cut into a cake made with nut flour of Hattie's own creation that tasted delicious. He retrieved her garter from under her skirt, but all the other females were already mated. So, when they tossed it, they declared that the person who caught it would be having the next pup – they couldn't throw her bouquet on account of it being made of crystal.

Peony caught the garter. Atem asked if it was okay. He clearly wanted more pups, but he had been scared of asking for them after watching her give birth. She laughed and assured him that she didn't want it to happen tomorrow, but she did want it to happen.

They also had domini traditions.

Tuvo and Atem shed their suit coats and had another fight. Not exactly the claiming fight, but it served to simulate it. The girls whooped and hollered, cheering them on in turn. Hattie and Peony unashamedly admired their bodies as they battled.

When the food came out, Tuvo gorged Hattie. He had her sitting on his lap, and they took turns feeding each other from the hand. They weren't the only ones either. The other pairs were doing the same. All of them smiling, lost in their own world.

Tomorrow, the *Jutiron Stor* would be returning to Turv. The construction ship would be left alone to continue building the base. The ambassador team was going to be working on building their own orbital station, but they had their own ship to stay in while they did so.

But for them? Their job here was done.

It was time for their return to their usual duties. Take their females home where they could nest properly. Alanna and Survii were already talking about the places they were going

to go. Scarlet and Havali had decided that they wanted to move, so they were going to be looking for new a home.

Tuvo was eager to bring Hattie to his own home. She had already given him a list of things that she wanted for their kitchen – including items she said that she was going to use to make her coffee. A drink that she already started making for him.

When it was black and straight from the beans, it was bitter. But when she played with it, adding creams and sugars and sometimes various spices, it actually wasn't bad. He didn't want to become addicted to it like his female, but the sheer joy on her face when she enjoyed the small cup that Scarlet allowed her while pregnant couldn't be denied.

He could easily imagine enjoying a couple sips from her daily cup while eating the morning meal that she made for him before going off to complete his duties for the day. Their pup would be sleeping, but she would be up and ready to play when he returned later.

And it was the most perfect thing he could imagine.

He was genuinely looking forward to the future. Eager for those days.

Dancing with her in the human style, he kissed her gently.

“I love you, *kyrya*,” he said, holding her close.

She smiled. “I love you, Tuvy-bear.”

“You know, it's strange.”

“What is?”

“How much the other females giggle when you call me that. Are you sure you aren't lying to me about what a bear is?”

“Not at all,” she assured him, eyes wide and innocent.

He yanked her up against his chest while she laughed. “I don't believe you. But I also love you too much to care.”

She giggled, clinging to him.



## Chapter 53

### *Hattie*

Hattie was never again going to wear anything but gowns. She was going full princess and she did not care if it was slightly impractical. Domini fashion certainly supported it – their outfits tended to be on the extremes of either nothing or everything. Holly wore long dresses all the time. Hattie was going to do the same, but to the Nth degree.

She felt like a princess. She felt *incredible*. This was her style! Beautiful, untouchable, powerful. She was sexy and pretty and confident, and she never wanted to let that feeling go.

She especially loved the fire in Tuvo's eyes whenever he looked at her. Which was practically the entire day. At least one of his three eyes had been on her constantly since she stepped from behind the screen and into his view.

The reception continued long into the night. Hattie laughed until her belly hurt, danced until her feet were sore, and ate until she was stuffed. It was the best night of her life, and it ended with Tuvo lifting her in his arms, like a princess, and carrying her away.

They were the last to leave, having waved off everyone else first. Her parents left the earliest – but they were old and staying up late wasn't really their thing. Even considering the fact that Scarlet had healed their ailments, she couldn't undo old age. She could smooth wrinkles, but not prevent them from reforming. She couldn't undo graying or the ravages of time, only extending how much time they had. She now had decades more with her parents, which was fantastic, but they were still old and staying up all night partying wasn't a skill they had anymore.

Still humming, glowing with happiness, Hattie hung off Tuvo as he returned them to their room. The *Stor* was already beginning its journey back to Turv. They'd be there within days. Until then, she and Tuvo weren't going to be leaving this room.

She could think of worse things.

"Did you enjoy today, *kyrya*?" Tuvo asked, putting her down so that she was standing on the edge of the bed – finally taller than him.

"I really did," she sighed, unable to properly explain just how perfectly happy she was at that instant. It was like everything she had ever wanted had been given to her.

A strong, domini male to love and protect her always. His baby safely in her belly, growing exactly the way it was supposed to. An unmatched proposal that announced Tuvo's love for everyone to see. A wedding made of starlight and dreams.

Life couldn't get any better.

Then, Tuvo proved her wrong by pressing the seal on the back of her dress, causing it to loosen and fall. He worshiped her exposed skin, kissing down her shoulder to her breasts that he offered up to himself, teasing and sucking at her nipples.

A strong, domini male who truly, honestly, and deeply desired her.

Hattie stroked his head, holding him close to her breast. One of her hands sneaked down to the high neck of his formal military uniform and pressed the seal there at the front. The entire thing parted, falling open to reveal his massive, beautifully scarred chest.

She purred with pleasure, sweeping her hands down under it, along his shoulders. He released her long enough for it to fall it down his arms, but his mouth never left hers.

Hattie kicked out of her dress, leaving her in just her white wedding lingerie. The crystal style lace hugged her body in all the right ways and she shivered at the combination of the

delicate fabric and his rough hands stroking up her back and down her hips.

He continued kissing down, one knee on the bed, until he got to her belly. He kissed her there, right above her pelvis, and lingered for a moment, eyes looking up at her. Hattie smiled, stroking his hair as butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

“She’s going to be beautiful like you,” he said. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Yeah?” Hattie breathed, something tight within her chest loosening.

“Yeah,” he confirmed, kissing her belly again. “I love you, *vi* Hattie. I’m eager for our pup. I’ll never stop worrying for you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be excited for our daughter.”

“Tuvo!” She beamed, tears welling up again. Just when she thought that the day couldn’t get more perfect, he said something like that.

Pulling on him by the back of his neck, she lowered herself onto their bed. He followed, helpless to her soft touch, as she drew him over her body and up to her lips so she could kiss him properly. She tried to pour all her love and desire into the kiss, to show him just how much he meant to her without words.

“Make love to me, Tuvo,” she begged, all four of her limbs locking around him.

“Forever, *vi adassi*,” he promised, claws catching on the delicate lace of her lingerie.

It shredded with barely any effort on his part. Feeling it fall apart around her body made her sigh with relief as she reached for the seal on his pants.

They undressed each other slowly. Carefully. Tuvo kissed each new part of her body that was exposed as he cut and tossed away the lace. He followed the delicate fabric down, pulling away her panties, kissing along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh.

Hattie moaned softly when his rough, thick tongue swept up her slit then began rotating around her clit. A second later, two of his fingers pressed at her entrance.

Taking him was easier now than it had been, but she always had to be stretched just a bit before he could comfortably fit. The squeeze was a tight one, but not impossible if she was properly aroused and prepared.

A task that Tuvo took to each time like a man being given his favorite meal. His fingers pumped inside her, making a wet mess, as his tongue drove her mad on her clit.

She focused only on her orgasm, on chasing it down as fast as possible. Tuvo wouldn't enter her if she hadn't come first, and what she really wanted was him inside her. To feel his massive cock splitting her apart as he claimed his own pleasure.

Her thighs began trembling and he redoubled his efforts. Pushing her just as quickly towards her climax. The moment she felt the stirrings of it in her belly, she bore down on his fingers, clenching all of her muscles, fingers digging into his scalp, desperately grabbing for that release.

It struck her like a hammer to the chest. She cried out, falling back on the bed again. His fingers moved faster, squelching now as her juices soaked him. He moaned, sucking on her clit until she began smacking at his head, too sensitive to handle it.

He finally lifted himself up, grinning at her as he licked his lips.

“Now. Please,” she begged, that orgasm doing nothing more than whetting her appetite. She needed that pressure immediately. That incredible feeling of being stuffed to her absolute limits. She needed him inside her.

He gave her one last, lingering kiss before moving up to notch his head at her entrance. She entertained herself by licking his nipple and running her nails down his back, making him growl in approval as his hips jerked, pushing her open.

She hadn't stayed with him last night – following the human tradition of him not being allowed to see her a day before the wedding. Even just one day without him was enough to make

her start shrinking again. She hissed as his cock pushed through.

Stretching her.

Filling her.

She canted her hips up, begging for more, as he growled his pleasure.

He wasn't all the way in yet, but he began fucking her. Pumping his hips, pushing just a bit deeper each time. She cried out, eyes rolling back.

One good thing about her obligatory pre-sex orgasm was that it made the second one slower to build. She could luxuriate in each sensation as he fucked her stupid. Each stroke of his long, fat cock stealing a bit more of her sanity until she was nothing but a wailing, thrashing body underneath him, babbling for more. Harder. Deeper.

Because there was always more of him. That long, ridged shaft reshaping her body. That thick knot pressing at the sensitive skin at her entrance, beating against it until, with a snarl of relief, he finally shoved it inside.

Hattie squealed, coming again. This time, around the heated, hard flesh that filled her so perfectly. Her body was made for this. For taking him and feeling the ripples of his own pleasure in the way his muscles tensed and shook as he ground against her.

And then that moment when he came. Roaring, back bending, legs shaking, the rush of hot seed filling her up. And up. And up. Until the pressure was so great that it made her cry out with another climax as he began leaking out of her, around his knot.

Tuvo groaned, falling onto his back, bringing her with him, refusing to pull out. Though she was already bred, he still wanted to keep her full. And she absolutely loved the closeness and sense of comfort that came from these post sex cuddles.

"You are a wonder to me, *vi kyrya*," he said, stroking her back. He didn't sound tired at all. This was just round one, she knew.

The moment she caught her breath, he would take her again. Making a huge, sloppy mess between her legs from their combined juices.

And she didn't even care. She shivered, looking forward to it.

"I love you," she said, kissing his chest. "So much, Tuvo."

"I only regret that I waited this long to try to claim you."

She shook her head, resting her chin down on his chest to smile up at him. "I don't regret any of it. Not even a single second."

"Including the moment you thought I said I didn't want you because you were too *big*?" He snickered, like he couldn't even stop himself from being amused at the very idea.

"Yes. Even then." She folded her hands under her chin, circling her hips, making him groan. "As terrible as it was to hear, it made me realize I had a lot to work through. If I hadn't taken the time to be by myself and undo all that psychological damage Keith did, I don't know that I would have been able to give my all to this relationship like I should."

Tuvo growled and swatted her butt, making her cry in shock. It hadn't hurt, but it was a surprise.

"Don't you ever speak his name when I'm inside you. Actually, don't ever mention his name again. He doesn't deserve your thoughts or attention, even in passing."

Hattie laughed. "Who's name?"

"Exactly." He grabbed her hips and began bouncing her up and down. Jerking his cock with her body like she was a toy for his pleasure.

And it was amazing how she could feel like a toy and also a beloved partner at the same time.

"My Hattie," he growled, eyes glued to the way her tits shook and jiggled with each bounce. She grabbed them, playing with her own nipples for his enjoyment. Sighing when the touch did something for her as well.

She wasn't thinking about how she looked, only that Tuvo's gaze darkened in appreciation for her. She didn't worry that he didn't love her or that he would stop loving her if she wasn't good enough. She was beautiful and confident, and this was her mate below her, looking at her with such burning desire, she could never doubt the truth of that.

Two rounds, and some number of orgasms later, Tuvo was finally satisfied. She was nothing but a boneless heap on their nest, arms splayed out, as he laid between her legs, head resting against her belly, stroking her hip, as his seed leaked from her.

This was it. Her happily ever after. It had been a long time coming, and there had been some rough patches along the way, but she wouldn't change a single step of the journey.

Content, well loved, and unspeakably happy, she fell asleep with her mate in her arms, excited to begin living the rest of her life.

End.

## 5 Standard Years Later

### Epilogue 1 – Peony

“You two are in so much trouble!” Peony shouted, dragging her sons by their ears down the hall as they yelled out in pain, begging for mercy. “Just wait until your father hears about this!”

“Don’t tell dad!” Viktor yelled.

“It wasn’t even that bad!” Temnavi added.

Peony glared over her shoulder, making him wince back.

Temnavi had hit his first hormone surge, and immediately shot up taller than her – though his muscles had yet to fill out his gangly frame. He had to bend over now for her to take him by the ear. Viktor was still her little boy, adorable and small enough for her to pick up. Or, at least, he had been before her belly got big with her newest pup.

But regardless of how big her pups were, they were never too big for her to grab them by the ear and drag them to their father for punishment. Especially for being fools.

“Tree running in the wilds. I cannot believe you two,” she said, shaking her head. “There’s no safety nets out there. You two could have fallen to your death! You, Temnavi, should have known better! Viktor doesn’t even have his claws yet!”

“I was watching him,” he assured her. “We were fine!”

“You two are grounded for a year! Two years!”

“Mom!” Viktor whined plaintively.

She dragged both of them to their father’s office. Atem was hard at work. Peony had been there with him until she had to leave to go to the bathroom – Atem’s newest son apparently



enjoyed sitting right on top of her bladder and she had to pee every quarter mark it seemed.

On her way back, she had received a message from Tuvo telling her that her wayward sons had decided to spend their morning tree running through the wilds outside the city. A place that had no safety nets and no one watching to make sure they were okay. Neither of them were old or strong enough for that and she had nearly choked on her fear when she heard what they had done.

Atem lifted his head as Peony marched to his desk and pushed them at him.

“Atem, get your sons! They’re going to give me an aneurysm!”

“What did you two do now?” He asked, very obviously hiding his amusement.

Peony glared at him as Temnavi tried to explain that it wasn’t even that bad, that he had everything under control, and Viktor was completely safe.

Peony interjected to tell him the truth and Atem frowned. He was a bit calmer as he began lecturing them on the dangers of what they had done. Peony came around his desk, rubbing her bulging belly, feeling their unborn son swimming and twisting around inside her.

No more after this, she decided. Two sons was bad enough. They were constantly getting into fights and getting into danger. And while she knew that they were domini and Temnavi had to get out his aggression, she refused to allow them to do it unsafely.

“Viktor, go finish your lessons for the day,” Atem said. “And Temnavi, go find the palace steward. Ask him what chores you can finish for him. I’ll come get you when I’m done.”

Peony frowned at her wayward sons as they left the room. She didn’t hear Atem stand, but she felt his arms come around her. He circled her belly, lifting it and taking some of the weight off her back, pulling a sigh of relief from her.

“Tree running, huh?” She could hear the grin in his voice when he said it.

“I know you’re not proud of those heathens for this.”

“No, of course not,” he said far too innocently.

“I’m going to pretend to believe you. For the sake of our mating.”

He chuckled, kissing the side of her head. “You worry too much, *vi Seerin*. They are growing, curious boys. They’re going to get into trouble. You can’t protect them from that. Nor should you. Adversity is the soil that nourishes growth.”

“Don’t you quote the Omini Otorsi at me,” she grumbled, not at all willing to be placated. “And now you’re getting another son. I don’t have three hands. I’m not going to be able to drag all of them by the ear at once.”

“Well, just message me, and I’ll come lend you a hand.”

“Kind of ruins the point of dragging them to you if you have to come get one of them.”

He chuckled, turning her in his arms, holding her with a smile. “You’re so sweet.”

She sighed, relenting. “I’m a cranky mess with this pregnancy. And Temnavi is pushing boundaries. And Viktor is... my baby is growing up so fast! How are they both so big already?!”

Atem kissed her forehead. “You can ask me for another pup whenever you want. I’ll be more than happy to oblige you.”

“Wow, what a sacrifice.”

“Really, I do everything to please you.”

She couldn’t help it, she started snickering. Atem had been beside himself with excitement when she told him she was ready for another pup. If she wanted to be like Holly and never stop being pregnant, she was sure he would be overjoyed.

Peony had many years ahead of her. Over a hundred, with advanced technology. And she would be fertile that entire time if she liked. Who was to say she wouldn’t want another baby in ten or twenty years when this group had grown up?

At the end of the day, she might gripe and complain and be worried for them, but she loved her sons more than anything.

Life with Atem was perfect.

## Epilogue 2 – Holly

This moment never failed to excite her.

Holly waited, eager with anticipation, staring at Romival's serious face as his hands worked quickly over the controls for their medscanner. Their private scanner couldn't perform any medical procedures, but it could tell her every time she was pregnant.

And she was pretty sure she was pregnant again.

Their youngest pup, a boy, was sleeping peacefully in his crib near their bed. The other five were playing in their room down the hall. They were still little enough that they needed constant supervision, but the doors were open, and they could hear them playing their cute little pouncing game. Romival could be there in a second if they needed him.

Holly liked being pregnant. She liked surrounding herself with her babies. She stayed at home with them, raising them as their father worked. Domini pups were a lot less demanding than human infants – even considering these were hybrids. They slept a lot more, for one thing, and weren't inclined to go exploring far from their parents.

She honestly wondered exactly how many pups Romival would let her have before putting his foot down and demanding they take a break. Her own father had reached six, and, if she was pregnant again, this would be their seventh.

Domini females were pregnant for a full Turv year. Humans were pregnant with domini hybrids for slightly less than that. Holly had barely spent more than a single turn of the lesser moon not pregnant since getting together with Romival.

The other girls called her crazy.

She was living her absolute best life and she cared nothing for what they said.

Biting her lip, she watched Romival's face. She knew the exact moment he saw something. His entire expression

softened into a sweet smile.

“Ah, *vi Vakara*,” he focused back on her. “Seven pups. You’ve officially reached the record.”

“I think that record only counts for pure blooded domini.”

“You hold the record for hybrid domini.”

“Woo! Go me!” She beamed, putting a fist in the air.

He chuckled as he offered her a hand, helping her up.

He gathered her into his arms, kissing her excitedly.

“Another girl,” he said between kisses. “You amaze me, *vi Vakara*.”

“A girl?” Holly beamed, putting a hand over her belly.

So far, of their six kids, they had four boys and two girls. Another girl would start to even them out again.

“You are a wonder to me,” Romival said, helping her stand. “I am truly the luckiest male.”

She chuckled. “There’s not many that would be happy having so many kids at once. You sure you’re still okay? We can take a break if you need one.”

“A break? From my young? What could I possibly need a break from?” He looked genuinely confused at the very concept, filling her with warmth and love. “Unless you’d like a break. You’re the one that has to do all the work of carrying them.”

“I’m great,” she assured him, smiling brightly.

It really seemed that Holly was made to carry domini pups. She loved being safe, at home, secure in her nest even when she wasn’t actively carrying. She didn’t have to worry about morning sickness or being overly fatigued, and Romival was such a loving and attentive partner, she never had to worry about or want for anything.

The hardest part was all the blood drinking she had to do while pregnant, but after five years and six kids, she had gotten used to it. She couldn’t even say that she was disturbed by it

anymore. It was like taking vitamins or any other medicine. It tasted really good so long as she was carrying – though it definitely did not when she wasn't.

Separating, Romival picked up their youngest and put him up to his neck. The pup didn't even wake up, just instinctively curled around him.

They walked across the house to the kid's playroom, holding each other's hands. Enjoying each other's company.

After their fourth kid, they had realized they couldn't stay in Romival's previous home. It simply wasn't big enough for the family she wanted, having only two rooms besides' theirs

So, they moved to a larger house that spanned from within to above the canopy. It had enough rooms for all their kids to have their own, a playroom, and space to continue growing as they had even more.

The two of them stepped into the doorway of the playroom, smiling at their little pack. They were busy hunting one of their stuffed toys. Well, the three oldest were. The youngest were playing with their dangling toys, not yet capable of coordinated walking in order to hunt.

Holly sighed, a long, joyful sound as she rested her head down against Romival's shoulder. He put his arm around her, holding her close as they stared out over their family.

## Epilogue 3 – Scarlet

Humming to herself, Scarlet powered down her medscanner for the day. Time for her to time out and go home. Back to her mate and their young son.

Ever since Torvin had been allowed out of the nest, he had been following his father to work. Havali took care of him during the day while Scarlet was at the medical center. When she got off, she would take over his care until bedtime.

She was therefore surprised when she went to the top of the tree where her hover was parked to find Havali already there, waiting for her.

She paused, staring as Havali chased their son around the branches of the medical center tree. There were plenty of safety nets around here, so she wasn't too worried about him falling, and Havali was never so far away that he couldn't catch him. Torvin hadn't grown his adult claws yet, but he could still climb so long as he had foot- and handholds.

Their boy was shy, the sort that preferred to fade into the background. It was impossible, looking at him now, to know what kind of male he would grow into, but for now, he kept his circle of friends small and really only bloomed when he was around people he was close to.

Havali obsessed over their son. Which was not surprising in the least. There was never a moment where he didn't know where he was or what he was doing.

But Torvin seemed to flourish under that kind of care. He knew that his father was always around if he needed him. It seemed to give him a courage boost whenever he was uncertain or uneasy.

And when he was strong and confident? Their son did great things. He climbed higher, ran further, learned more than any of his peers.

The moment he caught sight of her, he let out a holler of excitement and evaded his father, jumping out of the tree and

running towards her. Scarlet beamed, holding out her arms and scooping him up – grunting when she did so.

“How are you this small and yet this heavy?” She asked, laughing with the strain of holding him. She knew the answer, of course. Domini had thicker muscle and bone mass than humans, but it was a question she seemed to ask every time.

Torvin just laughed, hugging her, asking how her day was. Scarlet answered, but her eyes were on Havali as he, more slowly, walked over to join them.

“I thought I was picking him up at your office,” she said, setting her dense son back down.

“I finished early. We figured we’d come get you instead and we could have a family outing this afternoon.”

“Right!” Torvin yelled, excitedly. “Mama, come play! Come on!”

Scarlet laughed as he tugged on her hand. “Okay, okay. I have to change first though. We’ll have to go home to get me some clothes.”

“No, we don’t,” Havali assured her. “I brought you something. You can change right now.”

Scarlet smiled, not sure why she believed otherwise. Havali was always prepared – even when he was being spontaneous.

Torvin was sent running to the hover to get the bag with her clothes. While he was gone, Havali grabbed and kissed her eagerly.

“Can’t wait to get you alone tonight,” he said. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you at all today.”

“Oh. Is it a special occasion I don’t know about?”

“Every day with you is a special occasion.”

“That charm of yours should be registered as a deadly weapon,” she said, playing with his long hair. “I don’t think it’s fair to just be whipping it out whenever you like.”

“Anything to put a smile on my mate’s face.” He nuzzled her nose. “And it has been a full two days since I got to fuck you,



Healer. Can you blame me for being pent up?”

Scarlet chuckled, a thrill of danger twisting in her belly.

Torvin had been having nightmares for the last couple nights – thanks to Peony’s bad children telling him scary stories. Their sensitive boy was traumatized and now he had dreams about monsters hunting him down while he was still helpless and clawless.

As a result, he had been staying with them in their bed at night – sleeping beside them like he was still a newborn pup.

Which, in turn, meant that she and Havali hadn’t had a chance to have sex in two days. Judging by the heavy bar of flesh pressed into her belly, Scarlet imagined that time was seriously taking its toll on her poor, long suffering mate.

“I say we give him medicine to sleep tonight,” Havali said, squeezing her butt as they watched Torvin rush back towards them – struggling with the large bag held awkwardly in his hands. “Make him sleep in his own bed so I can make you scream in ours.”

Scarlet chuckled. “Sounds like a threat.”

“A very dangerous one,” he promised, nipping at the side of her neck. A tease of what was to come. Before stepping back and meeting their son with his usual, charming grin that did nothing to betray his wicked thoughts just a second prior.

Scarlet smiled at her boys, taking the bag and promising to be back soon. They both urged her to hurry up or they’d come get her. Torvin said it so innocently, but the look Havali gave her over his head promised a sweet punishment if she took her time.

Scarlet grinned as she walked slowly into the building, thinking that there happened to be wonderful, all-day childcare for employees that would happily watch Torvin for a half mark.

You know, if she just happened to take too long.

## Epilogue 4 – Alanna

“I think it’s time.”

Alanna’s announcement, randomly in the otherwise quiet room she and Survii were working in, seemed much louder than she intended it to be.

They were on their way back to Turv after a lovely time spent on Kree – home planet of the kreecharma. Appropriately, translated literally as People of Kree. It had been a wonderful trip, there had been so much to learn and see.

But as much fun as Survii and Alanna had going out and visiting the various worlds, there was always a special kind of joy in returning home.

They were both in their combined office. Combined because Alanna elected to work on her hobbies in here while Survii saw to his duties. He was finalizing plans for their trip to the next planet, while she was having fun putting together jewelry.

Jewelry making – using crystals from the various worlds she visited – was her new passion. Just one in a long line of them. She tended to jump between them every six months or so. Sometimes coming back to old ones but just as often moving onto something else.

The jewelry she was making now was going to be gifts for the girls when she got back. The sparkling, opalescent earrings in her hands were going to Holly.

Alanna and Survii hadn’t even been talking. They were simply enjoying being in the same spot at the same time. Not unusual for them.

She had been thinking a little about nothing and everything. How excited she was to go home. Reliving some memories from Kree. Wondering about whether or not she should just make a full matching jewelry set for everyone instead of individual pieces.

If she was ready to have a pup.

The moment that thought entered her head, the words had flown from her mouth.

Survii, who obviously had no way of knowing what she was thinking, looked up from his datawork and said, “Time for what, *vi Vitralai?*”

“I want a baby.” The moment Alanna said the words, she realized how true they were. Like speaking them had flipped some kind of on switch in her head.

It was time for her to switch projects, and apparently she had landed on baby.

Survii blinked at her once. Twice. Then-

“You said you want what now?”

“A baby,” she repeated, nodding her head as she smiled, loving the idea more and more. “A pup. I think it’s time we had one.”

Slowly, Survii closed out what he had been working on then turned in his seat to face her.

“Now, what brought this on, *vi Vitralai?*”

“Well, I was just sitting here thinking of the others.”

“Right.”

“And how cute their babies are.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And just... now I want one.”

“I see.” There was still no change in his expression as he looked her over. “Is this going to be like when you wanted to adopt that svarai pup we found?”

“I still think we should have done that. It was a missed opportunity.”

“That species is cannibalistic. If it thought you were its mother, it would have eaten you once it finished growing.”

“But it was so cute!”

“Bad decision.”

“Okay, fine. But this isn’t anything like that! I know our baby isn’t going to try to eat me. And just think of all the cute baby clothes we could dress it up in. You know you’d love that.”

Something flashed in his eyes making Alanna grin. Survii loved collecting clothes for the two of them wherever they went. She imagined he would absolutely love doing it for any pup they had as well. And she couldn’t wait to join.

Though, to be honest, she was surprised it was taking this long to convince him. She thought he would have mounted her the minute she said something.

“Do you not want to have pups?” She asked, some of her enthusiasm falling. She knew he had said he didn’t want them before he mated her, but they had talked a couple times in the years since. The topic had always been a ‘someday...’ kind of discussion, but she had thought he was definitely open to the idea.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, I just want to make sure it’s what *you* want,” he pressed, leaning forward and giving her a searching look. “This isn’t a project you can start and stop at your leisure. A pup requires constant attention.”

“I know that. I’m not treating the baby like one of my hobbies. I’m probably still going to do my hobbies when they’re here. I just think I’m ready and I’m looking forward to having babies with you, Survii.”

“You’re sure then?”

“Yes.”

“Really, *really* sure?”

“Yes,” she laughed.

A laugh that turned into a squeal when he pounced, lifting her over his shoulder to walk to their nestroom on the ship.

“Then let’s go turn your ovulation back on,” he said, patting her ass happily.

Alanna grabbed his tail, pulling on it to make him go faster.

Life with Survii was always fun and exciting. And she looked forward to this new chapter and what laughs it would bring.

## Epilogue 5 – Hattie

“Look at her. She’s perfect.”

Tuvo’s growling voice, right in Hattie’s ear, making her shiver. Their daughter was cradled in her arms, suckling at her breast, while she reclined back against Tuvo. He held them both with one hand, while the other was wrapped around their firstborn, holding her against his other side.

Her entire family, safe and secure in her nest. As it should be.

Giving birth on Turv was so easy. Hattie’s entire nest was packed up and taken to a birthing facility near the medical center. She was given her own, private room with its own private hallway. The former for her sense of peace, the latter for Tuvo’s – so her *domin* could patrol outside of her nest and feel secure that she was safe within it without bothering anyone else.

When labor began, a giant device – similar to the medscanner, appropriately called a birthing chamber – activated that allowed the midwives and birthing healers to control her pain and labor progress and monitor the baby. It was a very smooth, easy process for her and, all told, it took only three marks.

Which, for the domini who only labored for a single mark, was still a lot, but for humans, it was a drastic reduction in birthing time. And most of those were just dilating her cervix to the proper size – something that was done slowly to not overtax either her body or the machine.

And after their pup was born, she remained in the chamber while her body was slowly healed over the course of a few more marks.

Hattie had already been through that process and taken a post-labor nap – because even accelerated and painless as it had been, it was still exhausting.

And now, she was watching her newborn daughter feed, enjoying the slow breathing of her first daughter at her side, and snuggling back against her mate’s chest.

Every day, Hattie couldn't believe she could be happier, and every day, Tuvo proved her wrong.

"They're both perfect," Tuvo continued, gently stroking the back of both of their heads.

Canti – their elder daughter – was an excitable, upbeat child. She had completely worn herself out by running around, playing in the daycare at the facility, as Hattie labored. She barely met her new sister before she passed out, snug against both of her parents.

Hattie's dad would be coming to get her later. She was going to stay with her grandparents for the next day or two while Hattie healed and Tuvo was at the height of his own, anxious instincts that didn't want anyone besides his pups near his mate and nest. Once Hattie was cleared to return home, they would bring Canti back and start adjusting to their new normal.

Which now included Silvit, their youngest daughter.

Hattie had gone into labor rather unexpectedly, so Tuvo's parents weren't back yet. They had made sure to return to Turv for Canti's birth, but Silvit had been a bit early. They were going to be here in another day, and they would help Hattie's parents with everything.

Between her incredible parents, in-laws, and mate, Hattie was never overly stressed or burdened while caring for her daughters.

She had started a restaurant – right here in Calvitorum. It served human style cooking. Kind of a niche food style, but like anything new and exotic, it was popular. And she was skilled enough to keep people coming back.

Humans were, after all, the newest and coolest thing in the galaxy. Getting to enjoy cuisine human style was a big deal.

But Hattie would be taking some time off now that she had just given birth. Which was just fine, since she trusted her staff to run the restaurant for her. Tuvo had worked with Hattie to make sure she only hired the finest people as cooks and

managers so that she didn't have to be overly burdened. Especially when she was pregnant.

Tuvo had big babies, and she carried every single ounce of them. Hattie had blown up each time. Towards the end of Canti's pregnancy, she hadn't even been able to walk very far anymore.

Being too tired to do so the other day was probably a clue that Silvit was due. She would know to look for that if they decided to have another in the future.

Now that she had two girls, she was thinking about sons.

But that was for later. For now, she was perfectly happy to rest back against Tuvo as Sivlit finished eating, already falling asleep in her arms.

Sleepy, sweet girls.

"How are you feeling, *Kyrya*?" Tuvo asked, petting her now.

"I'm fine," she promised. And she was.

Medically assisted births were *much* easier. None of them had needed to suffer since Peony's first. A fact that was obviously a huge relief to the guys. After Holly proved how much easier it would be when she had her first, the others relaxed a great deal.

Not that Tuvo hovered any less, but he had been free to feel more excited about his impending daughter's birth without guilt.

And here they were now, five years later, holding their second child, wrapped up in his arms, safe and happy and healthy.

How could she ask for anything more?

"I love you, Tuvo," she said, snuggling back into him.

"As I love you, Hattie," he returned, kissing her temple.

She felt the heaviness of sleep pulling at her lids and didn't try to fight it.

Holding her daughters, resting against her mate, she fell into a deep sleep.



Her happily ever after.

END

## Author's note

Hello, my loves!

Well, this is it! The series finale of my Domini Mates series. I can't believe I'm here! I still remember starting Savior literally years ago, thinking that my goal was to publish it, but not sure I could go through with it. But I did, and now I'm here. And I learned so much! Formatting and editing and that my story length is LONG. Like, way longer than I actually thought it was. And, honestly, this is actually cut back from the length I used to write. I just kept making my stories longer, thinking that my books just weren't good enough to be books for a variety of reasons, including their length. And, as a consequence, they're actually drastically longer than typical.

Heart of the Domini wasn't always intended to be my last story in this series. It was actually the third. But as I kept writing, I realized that if I delayed her, I could add Keith. A fact my readers despise since all of them hate him. So, mission accomplished on my end? Lol. I just had the thought that there's lots of bad exes in these stories, but the MMC never gets to confront him unless he's cartoonishly evil, so I thought I'd see what happens if he gets to. Keith is the end result of an emotionally abusive relationship. He used to be sweet and charming, but he knows he has Hattie beaten down, so he doesn't have to be anymore.

Hattie and Tuvo are such a cute couple. In my mind, their vibes are teddy bears. But two very different teddy bears. Tuvo is an old, beaten up, stained, eye missing teddy bear that has fought one too many monsters under the bed and so is ragged and worn, while Hattie is a plush and fluffy, bright and pink, brand new teddy in a cute tutu ready for a tea party. Weird? Maybe, but that's what they feel like in my head. I hope you liked them!

So, my series is over. Is that it? NO! I haven't spent this long building my universe just to be done with it. Domini Mates is just the wooden frame. The sand for my sandbox is going to be my next series. A trilogy this time! If you want a series summary and the summary for the first book, they're up now! I'm happy to present Case Study: Interspecies Mating the first in the Lunar Base Experiments Trilogy! And here's your hints for what's to come:

Revenge. Lies. Scaley.

I'm going to take what I learned writing my Domini Mates series and hopefully improve in my Lunar Base Trilogy. Thank you for sticking with me through this, and I hope you continue to support me going forward! And, of course, I would be nothing without my reading team. Kat, Stefanie, Keiahna, and Penelope. Thanks, girls! For all your edits and your notes! You're the best!

Love, Talia

I'm on [Facebook](#) where I post updates and sneak peaks and I have a private group with exclusive short stories if you want to join!

Hit me up on email at [taliarhea01@gmail.com](mailto:taliarhea01@gmail.com) if you want to chat or you have questions or concerns. I'm nice, I promise!

Or click [here](#) to check out Case Study: Interspecies Mating. It's got a sexy, strong willed, leading lady and a scaley boi who is trying to figure himself out.