



*Matched
To The
Monster, Too!*

RENA MARKS

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TOO!

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Mail Order Brides for Aliens
Rena Marks

Two choices. Alien monster or human monster?

Unfortunately, I don't get a choice.

When I'm sold to the planet Pimeon by my fiancé, the President of Earth, it's with the duty of uncovering their secrets and weaknesses. It's to infiltrate the familial relationship of the leader and cause a rift during the six-month trial period.

Only then will I be allowed to return home to the freedom I was promised.



The Match Program put together by the Britonian race announces me as the next candidate after my brother's successful match. Unfortunately, the human female it picks is the one cast off by my new sister's father, the one who lost her title of First Lady. Can I win her over? Or is she too far gone?

But neither of us have a choice when she turns up on our planet pregnant.

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Prologue

Planet Earth, after World War III:

“My dear Esther.”

For a moment, I don't realize he's speaking to me. My name isn't Esther, it's never been Esther. But the President of Earth—my fiancé—doesn't really care. He's named me, he's given me a new identity and that's what I'll answer to.

And yet that other part of me—the one who can't stand the cowering, the overpowering, the mocking—flares up.

I'd like to say, “Yes, Father?”

I can only imagine the fury that would twist his face as I mimic *her* because his own daughter—the one he models me after—got away. I imagine anything, even the hideous monsters she was matched to, were better than the President. But in the end, I can't take another beating, not so soon.

So instead, I smile and say, “Yes, dear?”

I fight against cringing at the endearment, but his ego doesn't allow him to notice as he smiles.

“He’s almost here. You know what to do?”

I bow my head demurely. “Yes, sir.”

His spine stiffens and for a second, I’m afraid I’ve gone too far. My breath suddenly whooshes out as I realize he merely preens. He loves the title of respect, as awkward as it is for a fiancée to use it.

He rubs his hands together excitedly. “I’ll leave you to it, then. He’ll be here in a minute. And Esther?”

I turn my head to him, fighting the urge to flinch as he sweeps my long side bangs away.

“I don’t think I need to remind you how to pull this off?”

“No. I think you reminded me enough.”

His face grows cold, and I fear I’ve gone too far. Stupid me, feeling safe because the leader of the Britonians is nearly here. He’s the one who helped get the First Daughter away, crazy as she was, and it gave me a false sense of security.

False because I’m not delicate—not innocent—like she was. The Britonian doesn’t care for me like he does Lilaina.

Very, very softly, my fiancé cruelly presses his fingers against my temple, pleased when I involuntarily wince at the flash of pain. A twisted smile hits his lips as he artfully

arranges my bangs to sweep over my forehead again. Ironic, really. If anyone happened to watch, they'd think this was the picture of a normal, loving couple who couldn't wait to get married.

But then the door chimes ring, eerily echoing ominously throughout the large house, and President Eric Marcus Montgomery makes himself scarce.

I open the door and just outside the stoop, the wind shrieks, kicking up a swirl of leaves like a tiny tornado. For a second, I'm tempted to run outside and let the wind swish my skirts. Pretend that it can lift me up and away on a swirl of leaves. Pretend I can fly, far up and away, where no one can reach me.

But that's nonsense. Wistfully, I turn away from the leaves gusting in the wind and face Mikhail, the leader of the aliens called Britonians who have taken over Earth. In the beginning, they were Earth's saviors, bargaining to clean up our planet after World War III in exchange for a place to live.

But that was before Mikhail spoke to President Montgomery about the Match Program. The First Daughter was the first to be enrolled—and the entire planet was appalled at the monster she was matched to.

Is that my fate? To replace her in every way until I'm as crazy as she was?

His smile isn't warm when he greets me, but that's okay. I'm well used to not being liked.

“Mikhail, you wished to see me?”

It's obvious he isn't human. He stands tall, muscular, and handsome in a strange alien way. His skin is gold, his hair so blond it's nearly white. He looks kind...and fair, but it's a lie. He's the one that introduced the Match Program while working with Lilaina, the First Daughter. He's the one who brought the monsters to us.

“I do.” He bows his head. “Are we alone?”

“We are.” My face is evenly schooled. “Please come in.”

I take a step backward to allow him to enter and close the front door before I lead him to the drawing room.

He starts without preamble. None of that tender, fatherly concern that's shown where Lilaina was concerned. No, I'm on my own.

“I received your message that you wish to break off your engagement to the President. I need to make sure you're aware it will automatically enter you in the Match Program.”

Oh, hell, no.

I suck in a breath. “I don’t want to enter the program. It’s the whole reason why I—” I choke off my words. No one can know I chose to enter a partnership with the President to avoid the program.

Mikhail doesn’t call out my slip.

“I’m sorry, my dear. We did not want to have Earth females drafted. Such an archaic practice, but we didn’t have a choice. It is for that reason we bargained for a trial period instead.”

I have no faith in the trial period. It was during that six-month time frame that the First Daughter went crazy with Stockholm syndrome and decided to stay with her monstrous captors. Of course, now I know how limited her choice was.

But I weigh my options carefully. There are thousands of women on the planet. What are the chances of me getting called?

“There will only be one more drawing this year, correct?”

He nods.

“Okay,” I decide. “There are plenty of women enrolled. I doubt my name will come up first.”

Mikhail smiles comfortingly. “It is a random drawing. When will you be moving out?” he asks.

I shudder. *Not soon enough.* “This weekend.”

“Too bad,” he says. “Lilaina and Juris will be returning to show off their little one. I had hoped you’d be able to see their people.”

“They’re bringing more?” The surprise—the horror—in my voice is genuine.

But he doesn’t notice. “Yes. Many of their guard are coming, hoping to meet Earth women. Hoping it will be more comfortable for the next name drawn if she’s familiar with some of their males. Juris says Lilaina is a unique soul to be open with that, but it’s not fair for it to be expected of every woman.”

“Well, I won’t be here for that.” I shrug dismissively. God only knows I’ll be far away from this place.

“It’s open to the public,” Mikhail says.

“I don’t think so.” My voice is gentle but firm as I decline.

And for the second time today, a man reaches out to finger the bangs sweeping over my face. I freeze, afraid he’ll

lift them and see the swollen lump underneath, the one that Eric cruelly pressed his fingers into.

But he doesn't. He merely tucks a stray piece behind my ear.

What an odd move. He doesn't care for me the way he does Lilaina in that indulgent, fatherly way that seems more paternal than her own father. And he doesn't pretend to. That's not the Britonian way.

When the leader of the new race leaves, the President makes his way back down the winding staircase. The familiar knotted feeling enters my solar plexus as he raises an imperious brow.

“He bought it?”

I nod. “I told him I'd move out this weekend.”

I tense, expecting his anger at my treachery, the fact that I locked in a date that we didn't discuss. A date for me to escape. But it never comes.

Instead, he runs a finger up the length of my bare arm.

“That gives us one night to pledge our love and loyalty.”

Instant panic hits my gut. “But you said we'd be platonic!”

“Not forever. Certainly not tonight.”

His fingers tighten on my arm and the knotting twist of anxiety in my gut morphs into dread.

For the first time in months, I whimper. Then a calm descends over me as the wind howls outside. Hearing the wind, I can pretend to fly. I can pretend I'm free.

I can pretend I still live at home, with my parents, in the Valley of the Winds.

Chapter One

I'M MESMERIZED BY THE swirls of dancers on the dance floor below the second landing and curse myself for watching, because this is my chance to leave. I don't have much time before the drug Eric gave me hits my bloodstream. Instead, I stare, bemused by the beauty down below while I stand in all my party finery. There was once a point where I never thought I'd wear such rich materials in my life, and I was excited at the prospect of becoming First Lady.

There were red flags in my relationship, all of which I ignored. I'm not a spring chicken. At twenty-five, I should have been married off years ago. But my prospect in the small farming town I'm from was Amos Mitchell—a nice enough man, at first. Nice enough to already have five wives, which is a lot for any marriage. Still, out of those wives, only one child thrives. An orphan myself by the age of fourteen, all I want is babies and a husband. Greedy me.

I wanted more and when a chance encounter with the President of Earth happened, I was enthralled. He's a handsome man despite his age, distinguished with silver

threads of hair at his temples. The dimples in his lean cheeks that make you instantly trust him when he unleashes them on an unsuspecting woman.

It was an instant attraction, and it was mutual.

It didn't take him long to court me and it was thrilling and lovely in the beginning, though powerful men have secrets and I expect that.

No one could have expected the secret that burst out the night his daughter made her decision to stay with these tentacle monsters. His first wife—the original First Lady—chained in the basement forever as punishment for some grievous crime she committed. A punishment he'd doled out.

To his first and only wife.

While Amos had told me each and every wife was to be cherished, this man, our President, horrifically punished his. That fateful day, I may have thought it was perhaps a night gone wrong with his wife so long ago and was a horrible, regrettable mistake, but I've learned otherwise. The basement is sealed now but it unleashed the man's cruelty. He's determined to make his daughter pay for her decision to stay with her child on a new planet and a wistfulness comes over me as I think about the gift those monsters have given her.

The plump, precious baby.

Sure, they may control her with the child. Or at least, that's what Eric had led me to believe.

I can't help but think differently now as I watch the party below, the dresses swirling across the dance floor and the tentacles—the tentacles that I found so horrifying once—swirling in even more amazing patterns as if dancing is practiced for them. A magnificent, Olympics-worthy sport.

But this is my chance. With so many distractions, I can cut through the crowd, blending into the various guests with my own floor-length gown—such a frivolous waste of precious resources—and wander out the back patio. The walls barricading the Presidential House that made it a formidable fortress were knocked down by the Britonians months ago for his daughter's wedding, which was to have been mine.

A shudder wracks me as I think of the lucky escape I had. If Lilaina had chosen to stay, I would be First Lady now. I might be the one in the basement today. I have no doubts that's where our relationship was heading, especially now that he's showing his true colors, which is why I have to get away tonight. I can take a train back to Penske, beg for Amos to

marry me, and I'm forever safe. Nothing can touch a married woman.

Not even the President. While I've formally broken the relationship off, he refuses to let me go. Of course, he made me break it off to fool the Britonians, but he has no idea I intend to make that real.

With tonight's change of events, I'll have to amend my plans. Eric forced me to drink the drug to calm me, saying I wasn't believable and seemed agitated. Believable? He wants me to become his personal spy, which makes me nervous as hell. Especially because my real intention is to escape his clutches.

I have just a couple of hours before I can make my escape and hide out on the train before it hits my veins and I'll be out like a light for the entire trip to Penske. I just have to be safely on board that train first.

“Why does such a beautiful female hide in the dark?”

I yelp, spinning around at the thickly accented voice. The creature in the shadows is too dark for me to see plainly, but it's clear it's one of them by the accent alone. Not to mention he refers to a woman as a *female*. I don't need to see him to

know he has horrible tentacles snaking all over the glossy marble floors.

“I—I—” Nothing comes to mind, stark terror gripping me. Because now, ensconced in the President’s grasp, I understand terror for the first time in my life. Real terror.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he soothes, stepping to the curtains over the balcony and peering down, giving me space. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Thankfully, the wider stance of his writhing, snakelike appendages means he has to keep more of a distance away.

I study his profile as he stands partially in the light, peering down at the dancers I was watching. He wears a black silk dress shirt and a strange kilt that’s cut into thick strips, giving the impression that it’s whole, but it allows for movement of his tentacles. On top of his shirt he’s wearing a vest—and it’s laced with gold threads. It almost looks like a uniform. It’s dazzling and expensive, oozing the suggestion of their wealth, but of course, that’s what they do. They show off their wealth to entice females and it’s what we must be wary of.

But isn’t that what I did by getting involved with the President? And look at where that got me.

“I know, I may be single and look like a prince, but I’m not the main attraction.”

A snort escapes me before I can stop it.

He turns to give me a shit-eating grin over his shoulder, bringing his face back into the shadows. Still, I can see he has high cheekbones, sharp cheekbones, actually. They give him a dangerous flair and shadow the hollows of his cheeks underneath, making his face look lean and sexy.

Sexy?

Maybe in a strange alien way, which I’m not into at all.

I focus on everything that’s weird—like the fact that he doesn’t have a nose. Just two slits instead. That his skin color is a weird shade of purple if he were to stand next to gray, and gray if he were to stand next to purple. How horrifying his teeth are, sharp and the color of amber. How the whites of his eyes match his teeth.

I *don’t* notice how broad his shoulders are, how thick his tentacles are—why would that be a turn-on anyway—or how the fabric doesn’t hide the ridges of muscle underneath.

“Still single,” he murmurs.

I snort again and then reply. “Well, it’s probably not *all* your fault.”

To my surprise, he starts laughing.

“Well, maybe they’re not exactly beating down the doors,” he admits.

It forces a smile from me before I even realize I’m doing it. I can’t help it; he has such a genuine laugh.

I remember laughing that way, once. Before Amos took his first wife. I laughed a little less with each subsequent marriage, until I lost it completely with my engagement to the President.

But that’s no one’s fault but my own.

“Someone as beautiful as you should be down there enjoying the fun,” he murmurs. “Not hiding up here in the dark.”

“Sometimes I prefer darkness,” I whisper, and my voice slurs a little. Oh, God. The drug is taking affect early. Maybe I was standing here in the shadows longer than I thought.

His hairless brow quirks.

To fix it, I quickly amend. “I’m not always in a party mood.”

It dawns on me—he referred to himself as a prince. There is a hierarchy of aliens—Lilaina became the queen. There should be two princes, one is a biological brother, and one married the family’s only sister. It appears my destiny—my duty—fell right into my lap.

But I have no intention of being the President’s pawn. No, tonight I have my own plan.

“Dance with me, pretty lady?”

I’ll admit it’s some curiosity on my part. And maybe a little bit of the soothing calm the drug imparts. But when he holds his very human, albeit large, hands out—I glide into his arms.

His tentacles part, moving out of the way so I can step closer. He holds one of my hands in his, up near his chest, and his other hand comes to the small of my back. My heartbeat quickens but I’m not quite sure why.

He makes me feel positively tiny in his arms. I barely notice the slithering of his tentacles and with my eyes closed, I can pretend they’re not there.

But I snap them open immediately when a wave of dizziness hits.

Maybe Eric gave me a different dose. Maybe it was a different formula. But I feel...odd. Not just relaxed, but happy. For the first time in a long time, I feel happy. I can hear his heartbeat and for a creepy alien, he smells so delicious. Familiar. Perhaps a smoky wood? The kind where a campfire carries on the wind.

I can't help but sniff deeply.

"Are you smelling me?" He sounds amused.

"No!" I protest and bury my face in the soft silk of his shirt to hide my embarrassment.

I can almost pretend he's a man. A sexy man who smells so good.

One song leads to another and somehow, one of the staff servers finds his way up to our secluded balcony with a tray of amber-filled glasses. We have dancing and drinks, and one song leads to the next ... I'm having a really good time before I realize I probably shouldn't be drinking with whatever is in my system. So I pass on the next shot and the alien downs it for me.

And there's something so important tugging on the edges of my memory but I can't remember what.

When he leans down—his face near mine—pausing a hair’s breadth above my lips as if to give me a choice, I can’t help but lift my mouth for his kiss.

God, with the alcohol and drugs running through my system, I’ve never felt anything like this. I can taste him—something sexy like cinnamon and man—and I’m shamelessly running my palms up his arms to feel the bulging of his biceps.

He shamelessly flexes for me, and we both laugh like loons.

Then his lips touch mine. His tongue invades my mouth and makes me moan. Tentacles slide up and down my body and instead of weirding me out, it raises my curiosity. They feel like arms. No different than arms holding me, I guess. I shiver with the touch of them, but it’s definitely not fear. It’s something else, something warm and exciting.

The juncture between my legs—still sore from yesterday—suddenly vibrates as if it’s come to life. The area swells and fills with heat. Slickness. Moisture.

And I’m a wanton, wanton woman because I want more. I want to alleviate the need between my thighs, a need I never knew existed. A perverted, wicked side of me that no one

knew about before my virginity was taken yesterday, not even me.

There's a vague recollection of leading him by the hand to one of the unused guest rooms and then I can't remember a thing.

Except for the thought: Is this what it's supposed to be like?

The glow of dawn barely touches when I spring awake, the alcohol in my blood feeling like it gave me a burst of energy. I slip out of the bed despite all the tentacles surrounding me as horror descends my consciousness.

I'm naked.

I slept with him. I slept with an alien. I slept with tentacles.

Panic makes me grab my dress off the floor. I can't find my shoes, but then decide I don't need them. The spindly high heels would surely clack on the floors. I toss the dress over my head, leaving the full petticoat on the floor and I tiptoe barefoot out of the room. In the darkened hallway, I can see a suitcase that belongs to one of the guests. Quiet as a mouse, I unlatch it and find a plain cotton shirt and a pair of jeans. I pull

them on quickly and they're way too long—but I'll make do with rolling up the ankles. I slip down the hallway, dump the dress behind a potted plant, out the back kitchens, and find a pair of my canvas flats used for gardening where I left them near the shed. I pull out the key I left inside and shove it in my pocket.

I can hear people still partying in the pool. I can't go that way.

Heart pounding, I traipse around the wing that houses the President as the sky grows lighter. He's an early riser, usually meeting the dawn. I feel like I hold my breath the whole way around the house—but finally I'm free.

Heart still hammering, but this time with relief. I hurry to the nearest motel, a mere few blocks away, digging the key from my pocket to a room I rented. The room contains a lone suitcase of mine with clothing, money, and a train ticket home. My first instinct is to grab the suitcase and run, but my brain kicks in. I'm in an empty room with a shower.

I should shower the stench of alien from me.

But it doesn't feel like the same disgust I felt when I showered away Eric's touch, scrubbing with a whole bottle of soap and then, with my skin raw and red, switching on the

faucets to the tub. Then I sat in scalding water, ignoring the pain. The feeling wouldn't wash away.

But now, I feel a strange sort of loss that I'm about to wash away his touch.

His.

I can't remember his name. Did I even get his name?

It's more than just loss. It's regret, too, because I should have known better.

Chapter Two

ONCE I'M SAFELY ON the train, my bag stowed under the seat and stuffed with goodies from the hotel breakfast buffet, do I allow myself to stop and think about all the things I need to plan.

First thing to do is send a message to Amos requesting he pick me up from the train station. I flip open the console in front of me, enter my passenger number, and quickly type out a text to him. It's early yet, but by the time he comes home for lunch, the message should be waiting. I should hear back from him then. I can try to woo him first, and if that doesn't work, beg him next. If that still doesn't work, I'll have to bite the bullet and work on the wives. I'm sure they wouldn't mind a slave sixth wife. At least the fifth one will be on my side, as I'll take over her duties. It'll be hell, but it will keep me from the President and from being shipped off-planet.

Now that the adrenaline of escaping has worn off, I can allow myself to think about the events that led me here.

What the hell did I do last night?

I mean, it was obvious what I did. But was it the drug alone or the fact that I mixed it with alcohol? Because I can't remember the details. The entire night is a blackened blur of no memory.

There's a pleasantly warm tingle deep inside my belly—no pain whatsoever. Not like from the night before. In fact, I remember—my mind tries to grasp onto a fleeting memory—his tongue tracing my bruises.

I allow myself to relive the barest touch of a memory. He was tender, so gentle. I can't remember anything else, but if I had any doubts that anything happened, well, I can file those doubts away.

I slept with an alien.

And somehow, even though I don't remember the details, I'm not exactly as horrified, no, as disgusted, as I should be. In fact—shame makes me hang my head—I think I enjoyed it. Not enough to find out by doing it again, of course.

I shake my head. It pounds with lack of sleep and maybe that's why I'm having such odd reactions and feelings. First things first, before trying to sort out my crazy thoughts, I should get some sleep.

But it's mid-morning and the train is bright and noisy. I tug the hat down over my face and turn onto my side.

"Oh, dear Lord," a woman, two rows over and across the aisle, gasps, her hand covering her mouth like a scandalized virgin.

I want to scream in frustration as I startle awake.

"What?" someone else asks from the seat in front of me.

"You're not going to believe this!" Her eyes flit frantically over whichever gossip rag she's reading. "Not only did President Montgomery's fiancée break things off with him —"

I grow still at the sound of his name.

"No freaking way!" Someone else says. "Is she crazy?"

"Apparently as crazy as the First Daughter," the original woman says.

"First Lady," someone else corrects, reminding everyone of Lilaina's change in title by marrying. The title she deprived me from having.

"On top of that," the woman continues, her voice louder so she can be heard over the din of all the murmuring voices,

“her name has been announced for the Match Program! But she can’t be found.”

I can feel the blood drain from my face. I want to snap up and grab the tablet from her grasp to read it myself. How can my name be drawn? Of all the women drafted before me, how was I the one picked?

“What do you mean, she can’t be found?”

A recollection hits me, a memory from the night before.

“We’ll remain here until the drawing. We’ve all submitted to tests to the Britonians to see which of us will be next in compatibility for a female. We brought along sample DNA swabs from other clans on our planet, too. This drawing will be huge, much larger than the last one.”

He seemed excited about it. Without saying so, I’m pretty sure he hoped it would be him.

“Well, she has seventy-two hours to show up,” another voice says. Another woman has opened her own data pad to seek out more information for herself. “After that, she’s AWOL. She’ll be wanted and imprisoned.”

Someone else snorts. “I’d rather be imprisoned than mated to one of the freaks.”

There are uncomfortable snickers—the kind where some agree but know it sounds awful to say. Others who might not be totally against it, but again, wouldn't dare say so in defense of aliens lest the crowd turn on them.

I'd like to snap at her. She's not the most attractive of women with that frizzy orange hair and large spotted freckles and can only hope for the attentions of one of the "freaks" but I'm not dumb enough to call attention to myself. To out myself as the President's fiancée.

Instead, I slink down further in the seat and pull the baseball cap back over my eyes. I listen to their murmurs and continued snickers as the roll of the train lulls me to sleep.

Two days. It'll take two days to reach Penske. I'll have to do some fast talking to get Amos to marry me before my image flashes across every police station as a fugitive.

It's dark when I wake and several of the other women have reclined their chairs, sleeping a bit. I dig into my bag for snacks, check that the credit chips are still in the pocket of my bag where I left them and have a couple of bites to eat.

I check the messages in the console.

Amos hasn't responded to my note. I can only pray he'll pick me up, that he'll listen to me and give me a second chance. If not, God, I don't know what to do at this point. I have a few credits, sure, but it won't be long before my photo is plastered everywhere. And not long after that, rewards will be announced for my capture.

I exit the train, ducking my head to avoid recognition. Not that anyone would. I'm sure I look like I went through the wringer, instead of the polished, political figure people have grown used to.

I scan the waiting crowd of greeters.

My heart lifts when I see his hulking shoulders, the hat on his head, the familiar overalls. He's standing by himself and quite a few females eye him appreciatively. Quickly, I head that way.

"Amos!" I'd like to throw myself in his arms, but his wary stance brings to light it's way too soon. I back off with the exuberance. "Thank you for picking me up."

"Mmm." His answer is noncommittal, but he picks up my suitcase, at least. I follow his lead through the waiting area, away from the crowds to the parking lot.

He finally turns to me when I see his truck parked in the distance. As we get closer, I see his first two wives sitting inside the cab of the truck. A sense of foreboding hits me because this can't be good. Of all the wives—if he had to bring any—he brought the two who hate me most. The two who knew he would have chosen me first if not for my age. But they're still out of hearing when he speaks so maybe that's a good sign.

“Why did you call me?” he asks.

Because we were friends once? Because you said you loved me? But you wouldn't wait for me to come of age, you had to give away my cherished position of first wife to the cow sitting in your truck?

But none of those things are anything I can say.

“You're the only one I could call, Amos. I made a mistake. I should have stayed. I should have married you.” I can't help the churning deep in my stomach at the thought of pulling this off ... or is it the thought of joining his house?

“It's too late. I have five wives. Do you know what a permit for wife number six will cost me?”

I know it's a hefty fine. But one I'm willing to pay.

“I can help with that.”

He sighs. “It’s not a one-time fee. I was willing to have you as a bride once ...”

I can feel where this is headed, so I start to talk faster. “I made a mistake, but so did you. You took other wives before me—”

He holds his hand up to cut me off. “I waited for you to come of age. You couldn’t have expected for me to wait to make you first bride. I have a farm to run.”

And women are needed to run it. But neither of us say that.

“Go back to your fiancé. That’s the best place for you,” he says gently.

“No,” I say honestly. “It’s not—”

“It’s too late.” He cuts me off. “Your name came up as the next for the Match Program.”

That freezes me in place. So the news has made its way even to the farm.

“If I can get married before—”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want any part of that.”

I try again. “Amos, in six months, I’ll be back. We can —”

The look of disgust on his face stops me this time and for a millisecond I wonder what I said that brought it on.

“My dear,” a familiar voice tsks dramatically. “What man will want you after you’ve been touched by one of those things?”

Dread knots my stomach as Eric steps into view. From down at the entrance of the parking lot, his limo pulls in. He must have exited it and walked up to us so we wouldn’t hear him arrive.

I turn back to Amos. “I won’t allow them to—”

“Don’t lie,” Eric snaps, his face hardening. “I know you already allowed one to touch you. You slept with a monster *one day* after claiming you were pure enough to sleep in my bed.”

There’s a swift intake of air from Amos and I know my chances of him saving me are shattered. My face is frozen in horror and I’m sure I look like a deer in the headlights as I wrack my brains for what to say, what to do next.

But there's nothing. I slept with two different males—one a monster—in the same weekend. It doesn't matter that I was as pure as I claimed. My only witness was Eric himself.

And once they see the President, Amos's wives inside the truck let themselves out, hurrying closer to overhear the gossip.

Eric sighs and takes my bag from my shoulder. He reaches inside and pulls out handfuls of credits. He hands them over to Amos. "For your silence."

"Of course," Amos murmurs, his greedy hands reaching out for the gift coming from my purse.

"Blood money," I whisper. "Spend it wisely. We wouldn't want it to taint anything it touches in your happy household."

His wives pale, holding hands as they stand slightly behind the President.

Not answering, Amos shoves it in the front of the pocket on his chest, though his hands shake.

"My dear," Eric says. "Please, get into the car. I don't want to have you jailed for avoiding the draft."

"Hmmpf," Helena says, tossing back her matronly shoulders that round with the weight of carrying her heavy

breasts. “She had everything once. Should have married the President when she had the chance.” She curtsies as she says his title and Eric bestows a polished smile on her.

“Thank you,” he murmurs and the old cow blushes.

“She must be crazy,” Beth, not to be outdone, whispers loudly.

Amos is shaking his head at me like I’m a wayward child.

How the fuck did I think I could belong to this family?

“Rot in hell,” I spit.

Beth gasps and flings herself at Amos, whose beefy arms come around her first, then with his other arm pulls Helena protectively into his embrace also.

“She’s crazy,” Helena murmurs against his chest.

By the way Eric smirks, that reaction’s exactly what he intended. If I don’t play by his rules, I’ll be labeled as crazy as his daughter.

“Now, now,” the President says, and takes my arm. He squeezes it roughly and I’m sure I’ll have bruises.

Without any money or choices left, I follow him to the limo.

He's quiet when the door shuts. I'm exhausted, it was a two day-trip to get here, though it won't be as long driving back. The train tracks take a longer route outside several neighboring towns and the limo can drive straight through.

But where will he take me? I'd already told Mikhail I was moving out. The palms of my hands grow clammy. Did I just seal my fate?

"I'm very disappointed in you, Esther." Eric sighs, long and deep. "Although, I guess I shouldn't be. All women are the same, aren't they, my dear? Jezebels. A traitorous Eve."

Calling me by that name doesn't irritate me half as much as it normally does because the quiet tone of his voice is even more chilling.

"A whore."

I stay quiet, unable to argue.

"Did you think I didn't notice the missing credits? That my generosity was being abused?"

Generosity? I slave for the man all day in the Presidential House for free and he thinks me snatching a few credits from the grocery bill is generous?

But, of course, I bite my tongue.

“And why would you run to that ... farmer?” he asks, brushing a piece of dust from his suit. “It’s obvious his wives hate you. Do you really want to be added to his harem?”

“I grew up with Amos,” I whisper. “It’s always been understood I would marry him.”

“Well, I think he’ll think twice about marrying you when there’s an unfortunate accident on the farm.”

My jaw drops at his horrible implication.

“You give me no choice,” he sighs. “I can’t have you running off to Amos again, can I? So we’ll have to make sure he wants nothing to do with you in the future. The two wives who hate you most will have an accident.”

“But I—I’m not even there.”

“Everyone witnessed you threatening them. There will be a sighting of you on their farm, tampering with the equipment before it explodes. And while I’m sure he’ll refuse to think you might be involved, once I make the statement that you escaped once again, it’ll change their minds.”

He’s setting me up. And there’s nothing—not a single thing—I can do about it.

“After all,” Eric continues, “we need to make sure you don’t run off again when you return to Earth in six months.” He smiles coldly.

“I won’t run,” I promise.

“Of course not,” he agrees. “I’m making sure of that. I can’t believe you were going to leave me hanging with our plan.”

“I don’t want to go to that ... planet.”

“Well, who would?” He snorts. “The only thing good that planet has is gold and diamonds. But I will get my revenge and you will do it for me if you want your freedom. To make sure you realize what’s at stake, you won’t be living in the lap of luxury at the Presidential House.”

Lap of luxury? I can’t help the scoff that escapes me.

“Oh, you scorn my palace?” He grins. “Going to appreciate the alien castle instead? Well, let’s see if you appreciate it after your three-month prison stay.”

I gasp. “Three months?”

“For now. Only I have the power to decide where you’ll be when you return. I’ll give you a taste of the prison life you’ll have before you go, and you can decide if you want to

return to that in six months or if you want to do a good enough job for me.”

No amount of begging or pleading changes his mind. It seems a little ridiculous that a limo pulls up to the prison gates and no one but me finds this incongruous. The warden knows him well, of course.

“Mr. President,” he says. For the first time, I find it strange that the warden is a man while every single worker, every single guard, every grunt worker, is female.

“Warden Deprest,” he says to the man standing at attention.

“Mr. President. What have we here?” For a second, the warden doesn’t recognize me. I must look as bad as I thought. But then his eyes grow wide. “Is this—”

“It is,” Eric growls.

“You found her. Good, good.” He reaches for his tablet.

“Not yet.” Eric turns to me. “She’s escaped, you see. Give it a week before she’s apprehended and checked through the system.”

“What will I do with her until then?”

“She just needs a safe place to sleep.” His voice is mocking, and I suddenly realize an inmate not checked into the prison isn’t very safe at all. Anything can happen to me and I’m completely unaccounted for. Heck, even Amos has been bought into silence.

Eric continues. “Put her to work during the day. I’m sure your females will be glad for the extra relief.”

By the warden’s chuckle, I can’t imagine the work will be easy. He motions for the two guards at the office door—females—to take me away.

Maybe it’s exhaustion setting in, but I’m numb as I head down a long passageway.

“What’s next?” I ask, since they can’t check me in.

“I imagine the consensus will be to put you to the sanitization rooms. Laundry, steam, high heat.” She shrugs.

It makes my self-preservation instinct kick up into high gear.

“I’m the President’s ex-fiancée. And I might be pregnant,” I whisper, for her ears only. “That’s why they don’t want me checked in for a week. By the time I’m checked in and given full exams, it will be too late. No one takes blame

for a pregnancy test that shows up negative because I've been worked to death, right?"

I'm not sure what makes such an insane idea hit. But I can see the effect is immediate. While her face doesn't soften, her eyes narrow and she flicks her gaze to the other guard, who nods in agreement with the decision she's already made.

"Can't hurt," the second one says. "We'll know for sure in a week, right?"

"Change of plans," the first one says. "You'll be on duty at the nearby milking farm."

I almost weep with relief. Milking farm. Slang for the place where it's a female's duty of relieving a man of his sperm. While every woman is required to complete her minimum quota, something tells me the prisoners are more willing to volunteer over the rest of their duties. And while the chances are slim that I'm pregnant from three days ago, at least I know I won't be killed during this week by having some sort of "set up" accident. Because while a prisoner number isn't a requirement, a name is. At least my name will be logged at the milk farm, a branch of The House of Duty.

"Do a good job," the second one murmurs, giving me a piece of valuable advice. "One complaint and a prisoner gets

yanked from the farm.”

I nod. One unspoken law we can always depend on is fertility rules.

Chapter Three

Stratek

Three Earth months later:

“WE HAVE A SUCCESSFUL MATCH!”

My brother’s voice is ecstatic as he reads the long printed scroll from Mikhail and everyone cheers. I’m not above being happy for someone, but I can’t seem to reach the same highs as everyone else. Not when I left a piece of me back on a monstrous planet.

Maybe that’s not fair. It’s not the planet that’s so bad as it is the leader who has corrupted it.

All I remember is waking alone and feeling wretchedly hungover. Earth spirits are no joke. I searched the halls for her, asked the staff where the woman from the balcony was. No one knew her, no one knew where she might be. No one remembered her, not even the one who had brought us drinks. He claimed to have seen a woman, of course, but was so busy he didn’t focus on noticing who it was.

“This is why I don’t open events to the public,” Lilaina’s snake of a father had announced, glaring accusingly at the Brits. Lilaina had told me they’d knocked down the giant walls that protected his home like a fortress, allowing common folk in. He was still angered over that. “You never know who sneaks aboard to wreak havoc.”

As I stomped out, I thought I heard him say, “Or who sneaks out.” But no one else heard, and it didn’t make much sense unless he knew who she might be. In either case, I was screwed because if he did, he’d purposely cover it up.

Without saying anything, I knew my family felt the same way. We returned home and for three months, our people waited for the next drawing to take place. All the males who wished to enter, including the neighboring clans, took DNA swabs but left them there during the trip so it could be anyone on the planet. Before we ever left, the female was selected from Earth, but her name was never revealed. Not until her match would be made.

“Are you excited about the Britonians arriving tomorrow?” Shana asks. “They’ll bring her tonight.”

“I’m excited about the prospect of a new rail system,” I say shortly.

For a second, my twin's eyes blur with tears and I feel like an ass. I can't believe I made her cry. The precious sister I shared a womb with. I grab her suddenly and yank her to me. My tentacles wind around hers, tasting her sorrow, her helplessness at not being able to pull me from this three-lunar cycle perpetual bad mood.

"I'm sorry," I grit, my chin resting on the top of her head. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"I'm sorry you found the one and lost her in the same day."

"What's done is done. I can't keep moping and making everyone's life miserable."

"You might still find her," Lilaina says and both Shana and I look up to see my brother and his mate. Juris has his arms around her possessively, but what else is new? My brother is crazy for the small human female.

"Not sure how," I smile at her hopeful face. "Considering she's on Earth and I'm on Pimeon."

"There are still functions for us to attend," Lilaina says. "We'll just have to make sure you're on the team that heads there."

“She’ll just hide,” I say. And somehow, I know this is true. Whatever the reason, she wasn’t at that party because she was receptive to meeting the new people. No, I sensed her feeling of entrapment, of helplessness. It tasted eerily of Shana’s helplessness, though it was a hundred times worse.

Still, that I brought that on my sister breaks my heart. I plant a kiss on her forehead and taste the flood of her joyful hormones permeating her skin instead.

“There are quite a few humans there to taint her against us,” Lilaina admits. “But she already met you. That’s one step closer to seeing the truth, just like I did.”

My brother’s tentacles reach out for his mate. I almost snort. Like it’s not enough that his arms are wrapped around her, he needs to smother her with his appendages, too.

“I just ask one thing.” She shudders. “Please don’t replace me with my almost-stepmother. That *Esther*. My father tried to do it and I couldn’t stand it if she came barging in here to finish off the job.”

I snort. Like I’d want the old hag who sleeps with Lilaina’s evil father. She’s trying to lighten the mood, but Juris takes it seriously.

“My love, let’s not forget that Mikhail puts a lot of effort into his matches. They’re not just random names drawn. He knows the chemistry that works between the structures of the DNA tested, the compatibility to procreate, and in your case, the one who didn’t even know she needed rescued.”

And that opens it up for what bothers me.

“That’s why I need to find her,” I growl. “She was terrified and ... tainted with something. Something had her so nervous, so trapped. So helpless. What if someone was holding her captive? Forcing her?”

“To what? For what?” Juris asks. “Forcing her to meet the aliens? To accept the Match Program? What will that accomplish?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. But is it crazy that it felt like that? Like someone had twisted her so badly against us, and then forced her to attend like an offering on a plate?”

“Then I’d say the male that gets her would have a difficult job winning her over. He’d have to be a prince,” Juris says pointedly, looking me up and down.

I roll my eyes at him.

But my sister-in-mate's soft heart is touched. "We'll talk to Mikhail when they arrive, Stratek. We'll have him search harder for her. Maybe with most of the Britonians here helping build our travel system, the cover-up will grow more lax on Earth. She may come out of hiding and we'll find out who she is."

"I'll bet Mikhail's already thought of that," Juris says. "I wouldn't be surprised if he stays back there to search, or at least travels back and forth."

In the meantime, I guess I'll have to be happy for the male who is announced as the winner of this match. Hope he wins over another female so the rest on Earth can grow curious about what it is over here that is keeping their sisters intrigued.

Tessa:

The men prefer the prisoners to work the milking farms because there's no fear of complaint for their inappropriate behavior. Of course, I've worked the milking farms before—every woman has. And every woman dresses in black, from a hood that covers the face to a large, tented drape that covers the body to the toes. It's God's way, for a woman can't help

but to tempt a man. With his manhood in her hand, she holds all the power. It can go to her head. So when we cover her up, men can't be ruined by unholy temptation. Every milkmaid dresses in black.

Except for the prisoners. The milkmaid inmates dress in scarlet and while it can be argued the bright color is to deter escape, there's something about the color red that is lustful and full of sin. I think it's to signify to the men which women have no choice but to take their abuse. Apart from the disgusting aspect of the job, it's easy enough and the sign-up lists are full. Women would rather jerk off assholes than scrub prison floors.

Not me. But I have someone else to look out for.

After I'd been working this job for a full week, the warden came around to check me in to the system. I had a full medical exam.

To my shock—and dismay—Inmate No. 512918-058 is a gestating female.

Pregnant.

Me. I'm ... pregnant. With a baby.

I think.

Because even more horrifying is wondering who the father might be. I've refused genetic testing. It's still done by collecting a small amount of amniotic fluid, but that carries some risk of infection and miscarriage, so my wishes were honored.

My first inclination is to run, the way I always do. But I can't exactly do that now, not while locked up. In fact, I can't even enjoy the calming, whistling wind from where I am. I don't even know when it blows unless it happens to be a day when I'm carted off to the farms.

My mind runs through the gamut of ways I can make a living with a baby at home. Can I find someone to marry me? Perhaps he'll be proud, hoping the little one can be mistaken for his own. That he'll receive kudos for having such "strong swimmers".

But what if it doesn't look human?

My mind refuses to go there.

Maybe I can find a nice older woman who would like to babysit while I work.

God, maybe she'll see the resemblance of my son to President Eric Montgomery and will blackmail me for her

silence. Or maybe the baby will have tentacles and she'll be prejudiced, sure that the monsters will invade Earth.

But none of these scenarios will work because as soon as Eric receives word, he'll do the same thing to me that he tried to do to his daughter.

Sell her baby.

But this time he's learned. He'll sell me along with it. And if the baby is his? I shudder as I think of the body in his basement, appropriately labeled the dungeon.

He gained control of the last child he had easily enough.

So this time I know when Eric comes to make a visit, I'll play his way. I'll do anything he wants. I have no choice.

There's no fight left in me.

"Can you put some effort into it this time?" The man across the wooden slats glares through the slits. The fence reaches six feet and the slats are placed slightly higher than five feet, letting me know he's barely five feet tall since he peers beneath.

"Of course," I murmur.

Despite his short stature, his dick is good-sized. His wife might be happy, but the milkmaid? It's just more work.

Hopefully he won't be one of those who takes forever to come.

I slather on extra oil just in case.

He groans as I take his quivering member between my palms. The sour waft of unwashed, sweaty privates drifts up, mixed with his natural musky odor, and I fight the urge to retch. Thankfully, wearing a clinical face mask helps somewhat. There are washing areas available for use after a milking. A sink, with a sprayer attachment and warm water. I wish more men would avail themselves of the washtubs *beforehand*.

But why should they? They can have their pick of women. It's the women who primp and preen and make sure we smell sweet to catch the attention of any available man. The thought angers me and my hand tightens roughly.

"Oh fuck, yes," he groans. "Like that, baby. Harder."

Just my luck, the freak likes it. With this kind of grip, I'll get carpal tunnel before the kid's ever born. I squeeze harder, hoping it'll hurt, but he grunts and starts thrusting. It takes me a second to realize he likes the pain.

"Fuck, yeah. Show me your tits, bitch."

In the last three months, I've gotten used to the way men talk to prisoners. It's not allowed when we wear our black, but they don't care when it's red.

"I mean it. Show me your fucking nipples," he groans. "Let me suck them and I'll get you out of here."

"No," I snap. "It's against the rules."

Which he knows.

"Then if you don't fucking let me cum on your tits, I'll complain about your ass and send you back to scrubbing toilets," he blusters.

Now that my pregnancy is no longer a secret among the staff, there's no chance of me returning to the manual labor that would normally be expected of a prisoner. No chance of endangering a fetus. I guess since there's a fence separating my uterus from this perv, it's not considered endangerment.

"You know that's against the rules," I say quietly.

"Oh, fuck, harder, dammit, I'm about to come! Show me your fucking tits!"

And then it's too late because he spatters all over my tits before I can grab the cloth on my lap. It sets me to gagging again.

“You fucking ruined it, bitch!” he screams. “I want to talk to the warden! Your dumb ass is going back inside the walls.”

I run from the room, away from his taunting laughs. His laughter echoes behind me but he has no idea I’m running for the toilet instead.

I don’t want any of these pervs to know I’m pregnant. They’ll demand to see the baby bump if they know. He may even demand to come on my belly.

And there’s no way in hell. This is my baby, as weird as the little fella may be. A fierce, maternal protectiveness washes over me before I heave into the toilet.

“Inmate 512918-058! Front and center!” The warden yells.

I stumble out of the stall and the two guards grip my arms, though it’s more to keep me upright than anything. These are the two who believed me when I said I was pregnant, even though it was more a lie than anything else. Maybe I brought it on myself.

“Well, there she is,” Eric says jovially.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Look at you,” he says. “You’re practically glowing.”

He's been told.

Then he grins. "Thank you for enabling her to work as a milkmaid. We want to keep our precious pregnancies viable for everyone," he gushes to the warden.

"Of course, Mr. President," the warden says, his eyes wide. I can tell he's dying to know if Eric fathered my baby. I'd like to know, too.

"Come, my dear. It's time for you to go."

"Go?"

"You've been matched."

I'm not allowed to change. I'm not allowed to brush my teeth. I'm hauled off by the chains that attach the manacles to my hands, and I swear I can see a weird glimmer of excitement in Eric's eyes as he takes the chains from the guards.

But I already know he gets off on that.

Chapter Four

Stratek:

THE DIZZYING WAVES FROM the portal transport make me sway as I stand in the enclosed maze of shrubbery that masks the appearance of the opening on Planet Earth. I shake the feeling away as I stumble down the path toward the entrance, marked by a type of arched structure wrapped by climbing vines.

I hate this planet and I hate the reason why I'm back. My stomach churns, but whether it's from the portal travel or the situation, I have no idea. The image that greets me while I'm already in a bad mood hits like a sock in the gut.

The tight, stressed face of Mikhail, leader of the Britonians. The rest of the Britonians, scattered throughout the courtyard, equally grim-faced.

Lilaina's father, the President, standing with a broad smile that looks incongruous with the rest of the scene of extreme tension. It immediately sets me on edge, a mood I'm not used to feeling.

I'm the happy, go-lucky guy.

Anger and grit is not me.

I'm already pissed that my name was called in the drawing. What are the fucking chances? Everyone, on my planet and on theirs, knew I was searching for the missing female who left nothing behind but her shoes. Delicate shoes, tiny with long spiky heels that I brought home with me and decorated with gold dust, the same way Juris had done with Lilaina's once. I intended to find her and give her the gift, despite whether or not she'd have me. Screw the Match Program. I didn't need it if I could just find *her*.

But no, when Mikhail announced I was next, I left the high-heeled shoes on the beach where the sands of gold settle. I took the portal instead—half hoping the female would choose not to mate. And perhaps I could look for *her*.

I see the President's satisfaction as he takes in my clenched fists. I'd like nothing more than to punch the look right off his face. He knows my frustration because I was looking for her and, in the meantime, got matched to another. I wouldn't be surprised if he knows who the female is and keeps it silent.

And then my attention turns to the horrific creature that stands behind them. Mikhail stands partly in front of her as if protecting her from me.

No wonder.

She's disgusting.

She wears a long, tented shroud with a hood in a stained, filthy garment that reeks of body fluids and sweat. It's impossible to see her face underneath the hood, but I can tell there is a mask disguising her identity.

The female is manacled at the wrists, the large chain long and heavy as it hangs on the ground. Was she dragged here? Of course. She hates the idea of this Match as much as I do. She had been jailed for avoidance.

This will definitely not be a satisfactory match like Juris and Lilaina's was. Instead, we will barely tolerate each other for the required half a turn before she can return to this goddess-forsaken planet.

"What is this?" I growl, meaning the chains. The stains. The filth of the female.

The President's grin grows broader.

“This, good sir, is your matched bride. Sorry about the state of affairs. It wouldn’t have been pleasant to hose her down in the prison and we’ve been taking extreme care with her because of her condition—”

“That’s enough,” Mikhail says.

Everyone freezes because it’s not like Mikhail to cut anyone off.

“I am the speaker of the program,” Mikhail says. “I will handle any questions and the entire procedure as per the original agreement.”

“Agreed,” the President murmurs, but he still wears a smirk.

Despite my palpable rage, I narrow my eyes and nod.

“Stratek, we are sorry for the circumstances. For both of you,” Mikhail says. “I hope that Tessa finds joy on your planet in the next six months.” Then he turns to the awful, hooded figure and says, “If not, please know that you can make the decision to return to Earth. You will not have to return to prison.”

“Unless, of course, there are additional charges that come up,” the President reminds.

There's something underlying here—a threat that makes the small figure straighten.

“We can hardly speak to you with all this garb,” Mikhail says and reaches for the female's hood.

“Technically, she's still a prisoner until the ceremony,” the President says quickly, halting Mikhail's movement.

“She's chained,” Mikhail says. “I doubt she can run anywhere.”

If the female wants to run that badly, I doubt I'd stop her.

The President shrugs and I realize it's all a front. He wants her uncovered. He merely makes a show of protesting. Why?

Mikhail eases the hood off the female's head. Her hair is a reddish brown, with lighter chunks and streaks in it, though it's dirty and hangs loosely. A mask covers her face from underneath her eyes to her chin. Mikhail reaches behind her head for the ties to uncover her face.

When it comes away, she takes a deep breath as if she's starved for fresh air.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's her, the one I've been searching for. The one I lost. Every one of my appendages

stiffens as I fight the urge to reach out for her.

“You!” I gasp.

“It’s you,” she whispers, her eyes wide.

“Stratek, meet Tessa Minak.”

We stare at each other in silence. She is as surprised that I’m the Adroki picked for the program, as I’m equally surprised that she’s the human picked for the program.

My face breaks into a smile of pleasure and her face softens, though it still shows her fear. I must woo her then. She has been frightened by stories of aliens. It doesn’t yet occur to her that she will be the alien in our land.

At least I will not have to deal with the outright lies and manipulations the President wreaks on females around him, such as he did with Lilaina. No, hopefully my sister-in-mate will like my female, will guide her, and speak to her about the rumors she was raised with.

“But we have another complication,” Mikhail says.

The female’s eyes grow wide with terror. She bites her lip with her blunt teeth as her face whitens.

“Your mate is pregnant,” Mikhail says without preamble.

There's a roaring in my ears and I feel as if my tentacles will drop me with the sudden weakness that hits my appendages. My ... mate. She carries my kish from our night of love three cycles ago.

“Because of that, the format for this mating has changed somewhat. Tessa will serve her six-month trial on Pimeon and return to Earth to have her baby. Within two days of the birth, she shall make her decision to remain mated or to stay on Earth. The pathway between worlds will remain open for both peoples to protect the child. After her decision is reached, we will negotiate other matters regarding the child such as rights, visitation, and citizenship, which may all be moot depending on the choice Tessa makes.”

There is a bit of silence as his words sink in.

Mikhail's voice has grown formal. “Prince Stratek of the Adroki clan, do you still wish to mate this woman?”

“Of course,” I growl. How can anyone think otherwise?

“Tessa, do you wish to mate Stratek of the Adroki Clan?”
Mikhail asks.

My breath catches in my throat and stills as if I'm afraid to breathe. Does she remember our connection that night?

Does she know it's my child she carries? Will she agree to give us a try?

I don't miss the way her eyes flick to her President before she answers.

"I do," she whispers.

It is done. I do not care why she agreed or why she ran or why she is involved with this President. All I care about is my time frame to convince her to stay with me.

Tessa:

My life can't get any more miserable. Even I can tell I stink. It's like the stench of that awful man permeated the milking room—and settled in my garments. And then he squirted on me and it dried—and I vomited—and I just want to bathe and cry because the plans I made every single day have fizzled out. No matter what I did, what I planned, what I went through—all pointed me in the same direction.

The Match Program.

Matched to the Monsters.

Eric refused to let me shower, though one of the guards took me back to the bathroom and allowed me to brush my teeth, saying I might get sick and vomit more if I wasn't allowed to do that much.

Then we went straight to his limo, not that he was being a decent guy in providing comfortable transportation. No, more like he wanted me to himself to instruct me on exactly what to do. I was to accept whatever match was brought my way. I was to infiltrate their planet. I was to stuff my pockets with diamonds and insist on jewelry made of gold and bring home luggage filled with gold nuggets, none of which I would keep.

That would keep me out of prison.

There was no mention of the baby, yet.

But for six months, I was to remind Lilaina of how she'd shirked her duties to her planet. To her people. How the women of Earth had needed her and now thought she was insane. If Lilaina didn't agree to return home with me ...

I scrambled from the limo mentally drained and exhausted, dragging the heavy chains. Mikhail took one look at me standing in the gardens with the chains settled into a pile near my feet and glared at Eric. He left my side for a couple of

minutes while they had words and then he returned to open the portal immediately.

I was so nervous, my knees knocked together. I'd only met one of the aliens—I wince mentally—the one I'd slept with. What would this one be like? What if he was as awful as Eric? I would be trapped in two places.

There was a bright flash of light—and I panicked, wanting to run but feeling the heavy weight on my wrists and ankles, blocked in place by Mikhail and Eric. And in just a few seconds, the unknown, unseen alien. I'd only seen them at the darkened party, of course. And I'd been drunk the entire time on the balcony—still half drunk when I woke the next morning and stumbled away. I hadn't looked at one in the light of day.

I'm about to see this one. In daylight. In their full splendor.

I can hear the dragging of his tentacles as he travels along the other side of the hedge. The tension is high as if we are all holding our breath to see who appears.

And then he emerges.

If my heart wasn't pounding before, it definitely feels like it's going to break my breastbone. I have to fight with myself to breathe—just breathe.

From the doorway of the twisting, winding vines, someone appears and I barely have any viewing room between the two men to see him.

He's huge, his tentacles thick and grayish purple, and he seems to have the ability to stand taller with them, much more so than he would with legs. He's so tall, he looks like he would tower over the rest of us. His hands are slightly larger than usual, and human-shaped, though his fingers end in black-tipped, dangerous looking claws. Powerful tendons run the length of the back of his hands and his forearms. Thick veins bulge on his arms.

Following the line of sight up the muscled forearms shows enormous shoulders and a huge, wide chest. His musculature is off the charts, but so was the one I remembered. Maybe they're all incredibly fit? It must take a lot of muscles to maneuver all those tentacles, especially if they swim. Or should that keep them lean instead of bulky?

His face has a broad, strong jaw and full lips, but his nose is strangely flat, two slits where it should be. The top of his

head is smooth, hairless, and a darker purplish gray, almost looking like hair from far away because of the striations of coloring.

His eyes move up to sweep across the courtyard.

The sclera of his eyes is an odd shade of dark yellow instead of white. The long, horizontal pupils are enormous, the black nearly taking over the entire purple iris. His brow is heavy but hairless.

I think he's ... Oh, God. He's familiar. Is he ...?

“Welcome,” Mikhail says. “Prince Stratek of the Adroki clan.”

It is. It's him—the one I know. One of the runner-ups for my baby. The one I slept with is the one they want me to infiltrate.

The creature's voice emanates from within his chest, deep, and rumbling with a heavy accent. “Mikhail.”

His voice is short ... angered. Not at all playful and teasing the way he had been with me. What has happened to him?

His gaze seeks me out immediately and I straighten, even though I'd rather cringe with embarrassment over my filth.

There's men's milk on my chest, for God's sake.

“What is this?” he growls, and I know he's disappointed with the “prize” he's won. How can he not be?

Eric's voice sparkles with mirth. “This, good sir, is your matched bride. Sorry about the state of affairs. It wouldn't have been pleasant to hose her down in the prison and we've been taking extreme care with her because of her condition—”

“That is enough,” Mikhail snaps.

The entire courtyard grows silent and I'm not quite sure what's going on. I'm too tired, I'm sick, I'm gross and ... I'm scared.

“I am the speaker of the program,” Mikhail says. “I will handle any questions and the entire procedure as per the original agreement.”

“Agreed,” the President murmurs, but I can still hear the smirk in his voice.

“Stratek, we are sorry for the circumstances. For both of you,” Mikhail says, and I'm surprised to be included. He steps aside to turn slightly toward me. “I hope that Tessa finds joy on your planet in the next six months. If not, please know that

you can make the decision to return to Earth. You will not have to return to prison.”

For the briefest moment, joy surges inside me.

“Unless, of course, there are other charges that come up,” the President reminds him.

Or perhaps he reminds me of how he’s set me up for murdering Helena and Beth. I straighten my back. I’m not going to cower anymore and it seems to make Mikhail curious.

“We can hardly speak to you with all this garb,” Mikhail says and reaches for the dedicated farm hood that covers my face. Protects my identity, yet that is not the original intent. The actual purpose of the drape is to protect men from the sins of the woman. We cannot tempt them while doing our duty of milking them. Of course, it doesn’t take much to tempt a horny man.

Just knowing it is a prisoner wearing scarlet.

“Technically, she’s still a prisoner until the ceremony,” the President says, protesting the lifting of my punishment garb.

“She’s chained,” Mikhail says. “I doubt she can run anywhere.”

I doubt I could run either. I spent the last six hours milking men. My back is killing me. But Eric shrugs and I realize he wants me seen. God, he set me up. He knows this is the one I slept with. He'd drugged me and had watched me interact with the alien on the balcony.

I'm shocked into silence when Mikhail eases the hood off my head. What will the alien think when he sees it's me? Cool air rushes through my hair, lifting the dirty strands. The air smells sweeter as I'm not breathing in my own recycled stench.

Then he reaches for the mask to uncover my face. His fingers are gentle as he lifts it and like the breeze did with the hood, it cools my skin at the first touch of clean air. Without flinching at my filth, Mikhail brushes aside my bangs and carefully tucks them behind my ear.

Just like he had that day.

I stare at him, searching for the fact that he might have known back then. Unlike last time, he purposely brushes my temple, which had once been bruised and swollen.

He knows.

Then the alien—Prince Stratek—snarls and breaks me out of the trance. “You!”

“It’s you,” I whisper back. With my eyes still wide from uncovering Mikhail’s reaction, I turn my gaze to Stratek. “I remember you,” I say softly, acknowledging that night.

“Stratek of the Adroki Clan, meet Tessa Minak of Earth. Your future mate.”

We stare at each other in silence. I can’t believe it’s him—the one I ran from. The one I shared a night with but can’t recall the details.

His face is hard and his nostrils flare slightly. His wide, vertical pupils dilate, and he clenches his fists. The muscles along his forearms tighten and the veins that twist up his arms thicken.

Is he angry with me?

Then his face transforms. He breaks into a smile, and it lights up his entire face. He looks like the man from that night.

The vaguest memory hits of him saying something, the same smile alight on his face, and me giggling.

Giggling. *Me.*

God, what I wouldn't give to find pleasure in life again. Can this alien possibly be kind? Maybe these six months won't be so bad?

I'm about to smile back when Mikhail turns.

"But we have another complication," he says.

My breath involuntarily clenches. Surely he's not going to reveal my pregnancy without any of us knowing who the father is? My palms dampen and I bite my lip to stop the quivering.

"Your mate is pregnant," Mikhail says without preamble.

The alien's coloring turns ashen as he stares at me. Seconds tick by. He doesn't look happy, not that I blame him.

I didn't mean to trap him.

I don't know if it's his.

I don't know what I'm going to do, but this is serious. I've been exposed as a scarlet woman, right here for all to see.

Mikhail's voice rings out. "Prince Stratek of the Adroki clan, do you still wish to mate this woman? If so, consider this the ceremony."

“Of course,” he growls and a sense of relief washes over me. Why, I’m not sure. The rest of the monsters are killers but maybe it’s just this one who’s friendly. He won’t remain that way, not when I’m done with him.

“Tessa, do you wish to mate Stratek of the Adroki Clan?” Mikhail asks.

My breath catches because I have no choice. I glance quickly at Eric, knowing he’s trapped me.

“I do,” I whisper.

Upon my response, the prince reaches for me. He touches me, which I’m not expecting. He takes my hand in his and I’m aware that his is much larger. His other hand is on the small of my back, helping me even when the chains are so heavy.

Eric whispers something to Mikhail, whose lips thin. “The timing of this trial period will be a bit different. Her due date will coincide with the end of the trial. Whichever comes first, the date or the labor, will signify the end of the trial. She shall return to Earth at that point to birth the child here, as the child was created here. She can then make her decision to stay or return once the baby is born.”

But Stratek doesn't seem to be listening as he leads me through the doorway of vines that houses the portal to his planet. We traipse slowly down the corridor. It feels incongruous that we hold hands like long-lost lovers. I haven't spoken directly to him and he hasn't spoken to me.

But then the light flashes and the last thing I remember is the clanking of the chains when he picks me up like a bride.

Chapter Five

Stratek:

I WAKE BEFORE SHE does and cuddle her to me, her small head against my chest. My mate ... and my kish. A family. I have a family due to the Match Program.

Unlike my brother's return from his own mating ceremony, I have a greeting party waiting on the beach. The plan with Juris was to allow him time to get to know his new bride in private, remaining segregated, but an invasion of Tshiki, our sworn enemies, put a stop to that. Now that we've nearly extinguished their race, the sands of the beach are safe for my mate and me.

But the rest of my village is curious about who she might be. They all know I've pined for over three moon cycles over the unnamed woman I'd left behind. They all knew of my anger over being called first in the mating game, unaware that it was *her* as the other party.

Goddess, I might have lost her if I hadn't trusted in the fates.

So, for now, Juris and my sister-in-mate wait, along with his other captains, Elex, Relion, and Jaire. Maleek is back at the village with my sister, Shana. They're taking care of the two little ones—their own daughter, Beshi, and Mikki, Juris and Lilaina's son.

“Is that her?” Lilaina whispers happily, her hands clasped nervously as if she needs to hide the small scars that crisscross them. Then she rests them across her pregnant belly.

She can't see my mate's face where she still sleeps cuddled against my chest and I smooth the back of her hair, unruly as it is after being trapped in the rough garb that covered her head to toe.

“This is.” I nod. “Her name is Tessa. And she is the one from three months ago,” I blurt out, amazed at my good fortune.

“Are you kidding me? What are the chances?” Lilaina's eyes are wide and I know she thinks the world of Mikhail for getting her and Juris together. This proves that he is magical in her eyes.

“My brother, I am happy for you,” Juris says.

My eyes suddenly blur—it's not like my brother to ever acknowledge our relationship. No, to him I have *earned* the position of one of his five trusted captains, along with Maleek, his best friend. Jaire, who wears a scar across his chest from saving Juris during the last war with the Tshiki. Elex, who has shown his support in more ways than one. Relion, who grew up with him and Maleek. I have been by his side through battles, through explorations, through navigations of our world and theirs. For him to call me his brother—how worried he must have been for me these last few cycles. Worry I expected from our sister. Not our brother, our clan leader.

“There's more,” I say softly. “Mikhail told me she's pregnant.”

Lilaina gasps. “But she's in prison garb!”

“This?” I pick up the hem of her tent-covering with a tentacle distastefully.

“Yes, the scarlet signifies”—Lilaina suddenly blushes—
“Umm, remember I told you about a woman's duties of milking a man? We normally wear standard-issue, black robes and hoods ... unless we're in prison. Then we're marked with scarlet. It's to keep us from mixing with the free population

and walking out of the milk farms. I can't believe they imprisoned a pregnant woman."

"She was in prison for trying to avoid the Match," I say slowly. Suddenly I'm filled with doubt again. My mate was avoiding me—even when she was with our child.

"They probably kept her in the milking farm to be safer than in the prison population?" Lilaina says, but it's not exactly a firm response. More like she's wondering to herself what my mate was imprisoned for.

"For more than three cycles of the moon, she wondered how to keep herself safe along with our kish. No matter what she's done in the past or reason she had for running, I have half a turn of the seasons to convince her to be mine."

"You can do it," Lilaina says. "She'll be lucky to have you."

"Did Mikhail say if the rules were changed because of the pregnancy? For when she returns to Earth in half a turn?" Juris asks.

There's dead silence as everyone waits for my answer.

"Yes. Because she was impregnated on Earth, she is to return to have the kish. Of course, at the time they made the

rules, they had no idea that we met that night and that the kish is mine. So her decision will not be made immediately. That is a discussion Tessa and I must have,” I say. “I am not sure if a kishling will be safe on her planet. If she insists on returning, I must see if I can go, even if it isn’t with her. I cannot let my son or daughter live on that planet without me there.”

“We’ll do all we can to get her to understand her place is here with family,” Jaire says. “We’ll accept her as one of our own.”

Lilaina is staring at the back of my mate. “What did you say her name is?”

“Tessa Minak. Do you know her?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “But then again, I was pretty secluded within the Presidential walls.”

“She looks to be about your age,” I say, and place the back of my fingers on my mate’s clammy forehead. “Shouldn’t she be waking up?”

Juris shakes his head. “Lilaina was out for quite a bit. The return trip is more difficult than arriving, but because you and I took the portal the first time it opened, it seems to have given us some immunity built up for the same return trip. Lilaina did

better the second time she returned home from her choosing. And remember, she was pregnant too.”

I nod, some of the worry relieved.

“Was she shocked to see you?” Relion asks. “I wish I could have seen that.”

“Very. But mostly, she wasn’t feeling well.” I grimace in distaste. “She was ill—probably a combination of being with child and with being imprisoned.”

I use my hand to twist a portion of her robe to show them the crusted material spattered on the front.

Lilaina’s eyes grow wide. “Is that—”

“It is,” I confirm before she can think of a word to call a male’s seed.

“But that can’t be,” she gasps. “Men aren’t allowed to touch us. To interact with us. It’s why we’re covered—”

“Oh, she was covered,” I snort. “Mikhail had to lift her hood and mask. She could barely move.”

I shift my tentacles to show the heavy chains.

“They chained her?” Lilaina’s voice is loud, whereas we had mostly been whispering. “That can’t be. Not a pregnant

woman. Not even for a person who was avoiding the draft. Something isn't right."

"I'll tell you what isn't right," I growl. "Your father is somehow involved. He couldn't wait until I saw her. He knew she was the one from three cycles ago, despite pretending that he had no idea who might have been at the party without an invitation."

"Where would he know her from? And if he was involved, you can be sure he's twisted her, frightened her beyond belief about our world."

"I'll make sure she's all right. Communication with my mate, remember?" I wink at Lilaina, reminding her of when she'd first arrived, and I told her my plan of success for my own matching.

"With the baby in her belly, she'll be hungry when she wakes," Lilaina says. "Let's get something cooking and the tent up for some shade and shelter. If she's feeling well enough to make the trek home, we can start immediately. Otherwise, we'll give her time to rest."

The others get up and whisper, making plans to divide the work among themselves. Normally I would be the one to erect the tents, especially what she and I will use—further out, near

the tree lines. The nights get a bit breezy by the water. But this time I hear Jaire offering. Lilaina goes off with him.

Elex and Juris gather bits of dry wood to create a fire. When it's burning bright, Juris jumps into the sea to catch us something. Still my mate sleeps. Lilaina is puttering inside the tent, rolling out the furs and setting out the lanterns. Relion has gone off to find wild vegetables and roots to supplement our meal.

The longer I wait, the more worried I become about the female in my arms. I know Juris said Lilaina was out for a while, but is this normal? Is our kish all right? Left alone with Tessa, I study her as she softly breathes.

She is a goddess.

I've gotten used to Lilaina's looks—she has an odd appendage called a nose that houses her nostrils. Tessa has one also, shaped a bit differently. There is a small stud pierced near her outer nostril that houses a dim bit of cloudy, cheap glass.

I shall provide her with a diamond chip, I decide. It will sparkle and draw attention to the beauty of her odd little nose.

Her lips were nearly white with exhaustion on Earth, but they have more color now that she rests. They're plump and

full. I can imagine how they will look wrapped around my cock.

I notice with satisfaction that the dangly appendages on the sides of her head are also pierced. With her dark red hair, I shall give her emeralds for them. Large baubles to show off her eclectic differences.

Finally, the beautiful female in my arms stirs.

“Tessa? Shh, mate. Take it easy,” I whisper when she tries to pull away from me.

She blinks open her beautiful green eyes, studies my face, and then looks at the clouds beyond me.

“My God,” she says. “Your sky is yellow.”

I feel the huge grin that cracks my face. She is fine.

“Yours was abnormally blue,” I agree.

She snorts with humor.

But all too soon our moment is over.

“She’s awake?” Lilaina’s voice calls out from down the beach, where she is walking with Juris. Relion joins them and they approach closer. I can’t help but notice as my mate stiffens at the sound of the footsteps and voices behind her.

“Tessa?” Lilaina says softly and she’s so excited. “I’m Lilaina. You probably want to bathe, get the milkmaid uniform off. The prison garb. I hear it’s itchy.”

I’m staring at my mate’s face as her expression grows resigned. Then she seems to reach a decision. All expression washes from her features and in my arms, she twists to face them all.

Lilaina gasps and Juris hisses.

Relion, Jaire, and Elex look confused as they look from them to us. I’m equally confused.

“You!” Lilaina says. Then her eyes turn to me accusingly. “The one thing I asked you. Do not bring home the bloody stepmother.”

I’m beyond confused. “The old hag? I didn’t.” My gaze drops to Tessa, hoping she can clarify but her face is tight, her lips white again.

“We never said she was old,” Juris says, and his cheeks are darker like he’s embarrassed. “She appeared to be Lilaina’s age.”

I can feel my arms involuntarily stiffen around Tessa. This is Lilaina’s stepmother? My mate slept beside the Earth

President? Surely this can't be.

“You were mated to her father?”

I can see the dawning shock on the faces of the three other captains, followed swiftly by pity.

“Not mated,” Tessa says softly. “I was *engaged* to be married but I had my own rooms. The wedding was to take place when Lilaina arrived. She chose to marry Juris during my ceremony. Her mother was discovered in the basement later that evening. I broke off the engagement the next day.”

“Or did you realize you wouldn't be First Lady with me taking my title?” Lilaina jeers.

There is silence at her words, and I snap my head back and forth between Lilaina and Tessa. I did not understand when Juris explained that he and Lilaina had married in the Earth custom and why. I didn't probe, as Lilaina was saddened, carrying home the ashes of her mother.

“Mikhail explained to us that if we did not marry, she could marry my father and get my mother's title of First Lady,” Lilaina further explains. “But if I married first, I'd gain my mother's title. Since she'd died, I was next in line. Normally, men have an average of three or four wives per

household. Not the president. The president is only allowed one. The law was created as a form of self-sacrifice and also served to raise the orphaned first-children with single parent devotion. The highest position doesn't need to procreate like the lower ranks and so the females should be left for those to seed. The difference is that my mother was already titled when I was born. Upon her death, it was held in limbo for me. If I had left without marrying, he could remarry and begin the title again with his new bride. But because I married and took it back within my line, it couldn't be given. He could marry her upon me leaving the Presidential House, but she couldn't be the First Lady."

It doesn't escape my notice that Tessa says nothing in her defense. Does that mean there is nothing she can say?

"Why were you still there recently?" I ask, my voice sounding hard and distrustful. Now it makes sense as to why the bastard President kept smirking widely.

"He wouldn't let me leave," she whispers. "Afraid of the scandal. I knew the party would be a perfect time to go. That's why I was hiding on the balcony. But then I met you and had too much to drink."

"You could have told me," I grit.

I don't trust her. Something is off. Her voice is too placating for her personality, as if she is trying to convince me.

"I didn't know you—"

"Because you snuck off and disappeared," I accuse.

"I had a plan," she snaps back with more grit.

This is more truth. This is her natural personality.

"I had a room rented holding my bag with credits I'd stashed. I had the key hidden outside in a pair of shoes. I had a train ticket pre-purchased, waiting for me."

"How did you end up in prison?" Lilaina asks.

Tessa stiffens and then purposely hunches her shoulders. "I was called for the mating program the next day and didn't know it. It took me two days to travel when I only had twenty-four hours to acknowledge the draft."

"Why would they only give you twenty-four hours?" Lilaina asks suspiciously.

"My last known address was the Presidential House. The amount of time you're allowed to respond depends on your distance from your address to the Presidential House." She shrugs. "Maybe they'll fix that in the future since they don't take recent moves into account." Her voice sounds a little

mocking and I realize the President wanted her caught. He wanted my future mate to have the scorn of being a prisoner.

And with that knowledge, my decision is made. I will take care of my mate.

“No matter what she has done to land her in the Earth prison, we will deal with it. In the meantime, Tessa and I will not travel back to the clan this day,” I say. “We will remain here and arrive later to give us time to acclimate to our new status.”

“Is that safe?” Juris asks. “The Tshiki may be gone, but —”

“I will protect her,” I say.

They may not like my decision right now, but it isn't long before they realize that it is for the best. Dinner is an awkward affair. There's stilted silence and glares between Tessa and Lilaina. Forced conversation with overly loud chewing and squirming. Even the other captains are uneasy. I can tell everyone appears somewhat relieved when Juris suggests they all return before nightfall.

“Let us help get you out of the shackles,” I say to Tessa. While it was easy enough for her to eat, it will not be easy for

her to walk with the added weight.

Jaire takes one of her ankles while Relion takes the other. I can feel her tense up as they study the metal bands within their grasp.

“Shh,” I tell her. “Right here. Focus on me, what I’m doing.” I balance her wrists with a tentacle and study the clasp where the metal locks. I insert my fingers into the area where the manacles band together to test the give and the tightness.

She’s not aware of it, but I use a couple of tentacles behind me to signal Relion and Jaire as to when I’ll snap the bands. They will coordinate their movements to match mine to release the locks at the exact same time so as to lessen the trauma for her.

“That’s metal,” she says, as if I’ve never seen metal before. It reminds me that humans are weak, and I must take care with her.

My delicate little mate.

“Is it?” I ask, as if to engage her in conversation. I believe I’ve given the males behind me enough time to study the bracelets and all weak spots. I glide my tentacle along theirs to

signal them and then with a snap of my limb, all three of us pop off the springs at the same time.

But Tessa gives a distressed shriek.

I turn over her hands to see the reddened, swollen welts underneath where the bands were and by the way the males hiss behind me, I know her ankles have the same damage.

“Tessa,” I growl. “How long were you in the manacles?”

She blinks at me, as if surprised that I’d ask. “Three months.”

I hear Lilaina’s intake of breath, though she says nothing comforting to my mate.

Tessa doesn’t notice. “I can’t believe you can bend metal,” she says, studying the mangled manacles on her lap. “You bent it, Stratek. Like it was clay.”

It pleases me to hear my name on her lips.

Relion and Jaire stand behind us. “We’ll take these back to the village.” The heavy chains clank in their hands. Juris reaches for the one between Tessa and me. A look hardens his features as he lifts the heavy weight to drape around his shoulders. I remember when he told me Lilaina’s mother was chained and manacled in the dungeon, even through childbirth.

But I'm busy soothing my mate, running my fingers lightly over the ruined bands of skin on her wrists. "We have Tiiblets who live in the castle, little people who know of healing herbs. They'll mix you up a salve that will take the pain away," I assure her.

Juris turns to me. "The command chain will be activated, although at a greater distance."

I nod. Even though our greatest enemy has been defeated, the warrior chain is still utilized as our own defense and communication mechanism. Each captain is in charge of two dozen males spread out at strategic points, sometimes a quarter of a mile from each other, other times half a mile. One will run with a communication to be relayed to the next in line, who will then take charge and relay the communication to the one behind him. If there is danger, the top males of the chain will break off to help the one in need. I don't expect danger, not with the Tshiki gone.

With nods all around, my family leaves us.

Chapter Six

Stratek:

“COME,” I SAY TO her, extending a hand to help her up, then frowning because it is difficult for her to walk in her robes that drag through the sand of the beach. Our gold comes from the oceans, the larger chunks at the bottom of the water and the lighter dust flecks float up and coat the beaches in a deep layer. I know other planets value the pureness of the metal, especially when untouched, but to us it is mere dirt.

I reach down and tear off the bottom portion of her robe, leaving her legs bare. Inwardly, I snort. These humans are so backward with their thinking. Lilaina had been clothed in fabric so sheer it hardly covered the color of her skin, yet these drapes of Tessa’s that hide the feminine wiles from their own males are thick and coarse.

“I am showing leg,” Tessa says, with a scandalized hitch to her breath.

As if that is somehow appalling? Perhaps she wishes some flattery.

“They are quite lovely,” I say gallantly, knowing that sometimes gestating females need a bit of an ego booster.

Or that may have been just my own sister who hinted around and fished daily for compliments.

I carefully hold onto Tessa’s arm as I lead her down the beach and through the first layer of trees to where our tupik is erected. I hold the flap open for her to enter like the princess she shall be.

Like the princess she is.

As if she reads my mind, she says shyly, “Are you really a prince?”

Something about the way she asks raises my hackles. I do not think it is in Tessa’s nature to be coy or shy and yet she pretends.

“I am,” I say, and even I can hear how short my response is. I move to the center of the room to build a small fire. It is not cool yet, but it will get there later.

She presses the matter. “There are three of you, right?” she asks. “Your brother’s king, you are a prince, and your sister is a princess. She married and now her husband is an additional prince.”

I certainly notice the hierarchy she leaves out. “And Lilaina is now queen,” I say, looking up from the smoking sticks.

There is utter silence and then I sigh because it is against my nature to be suspicious. Instead, I wish to communicate with my mate. I wish to know if she feels the same attraction to me that I do to her.

“Why did you dance with me? That night at the party?”

“Honestly,” she whispers, “I’m not sure. I was terrified of your people. I was sure that Lilaina had been driven insane, especially with the fact that she chose to stay on a strange planet away from her own people, but there was something about you that attracted me.”

My tentacle slips out to touch her leg. I can taste the sweetness of her skin. What she utters is truth.

“You made me laugh,” she continues. “I used to laugh. A long time ago. And being with you, well, it reminded me of how I used to be. I miss those days.” She smiles, though it is a bit sad.

Slowly, we make our way to the bed of furs and sit down together ... as a couple.

“You didn’t have any other ... mates?” I’m hesitant with the word because I have forgotten their cultural equivalent of an interest before Lilaina’s father. Tessa looks hesitant and with the tips of my front two tentacles touching her skin, I can taste a variation in the chemicals of her body. She wonders whether or not to be truthful. It makes me sad that my mate considers lying to me. And then it saddens me that I test her with the feelers on the tips of my tentacles.

Finally, her taste turns sweet again.

“I did,” she admits. “His name was Amos, however, I wasn’t of legal age to marry, and he was, so the honor of becoming his first wife didn’t fall to me. Instead, he took Helena Hastings. After he married Helena, he quickly married Beth—who had been my babysitter when my parents were alive. It made me a little bit bitter.” She shrugs her shoulders. “I should have looked at it differently, “she says, as her eyes stare off at the wall of the tupik as if lost in thought. “I should have been more of a sister wife, I guess. It might have changed my plan. It might have made me more endearing to the others, and perhaps Amos might have waited to make me third. But his first wife didn’t like me, and that’s my fault. She was older, and knowing that, I flaunted my youthful beauty, wearing my

skirts short enough to show ankle. My pants, too tight. I had great hair also, and often released it from its bun to flow free. Or I wore it in a flirty ponytail, which I swished around shamelessly whenever he was present. I ignored her frowns, her harsh whispers. Then she encouraged him to take a third wife and I hated her more. I made excuses to see him in the fields, bringing his favorite baked goods, sure I would be the fourth wife and the marriages would stop. He would never do me the dishonor of making me fifth.” She snorts. “It never dawned on me that I was already dishonored.”

“He was a fool,” I say, and I mean it. She is a beautiful female.

“Wife Number Four is Loretta Williams-Mitchell. Helena’s best friend. He never even told me he married her. When I found out, he blithely said one day he’d have money and room for one more, but I knew it was mostly talk. Most families have three to four wives, depending on their income. That was when I met Eric. Um, Lilaina’s father.”

“So you said to hell with Amos.”

“Hmmp. No, I kept things cordial. And while I was off dating Eric, Amos married Wife Number Five.”

“A fifth?” I’m sure my eyes are huge. Here I am, struggling to get matched to one, and this male juggles five.

“That was the only one that didn’t hurt,” she says softly. “I didn’t care anymore. I was enthralled with Eric ... so enthralled I ignored the red fl—”

She stops in mid-sentence.

I don’t want the story to end.

“Is it difficult to be the last wife?” I prod.

“Oh, yes,” she exclaims. “The last wife is the one responsible for cleaning—for the duties that no one else wants to do. The others get their pick of chores and leave the fifth all the miserable jobs. In fact, his first wife gets the honor of sharing his bed. When it is time for him to perform with his other wives, he will take a night in their bed, leaving the master bed for his first wife. For Helena.”

Her voice drops off but starts up again. “I couldn’t imagine being in a household and seeing the man I loved sharing his bed with the woman who I hated”—Tessa makes a strange crossing symbol over her shoulders and forehead—“and who hated me back with as much passion, though she hid it better, so when Lilaina’s father came to town,

campaigning for the start of the Match Program, he caught my eye. He was interested in me, I could tell. We started a brief flirtation, and everything was fine for a while. I didn't see him regularly, of course. He explained to me that he couldn't marry with the First Daughter still in the house. Not until she married."

"So you didn't know about the First Lady title not being free?"

"No. Not yet. We all assumed she would enter the Match Program. He and I would marry during the six-month trial period when she was away, and then she would return home. No one expected her to get pregnant. It's too difficult for our people. Then when she returned home and chose to stay on your planet, we were shocked. Rumors swirled that she had been driven insane by your people. We call it Stockholm Syndrome where a person is so abused by their tormentor, they develop a sort of sick love toward them and don't want to leave even when they can get free."

"Why didn't you marry while she was here on Pimeon?"

"I expected to. But Eric put it off, saying we couldn't marry until she returned, and he wouldn't tell me why. I know now that he wasn't allowed to marry until either she married

or was matched. It took six months of studying our laws to determine he could marry if she stayed on another planet. It wasn't phrased that way, of course, because at the time the laws were written, we had no idea other planets existed or that traveling to other planets was allowed."

"How did you learn all this?" I ask.

Her eyes turn vacant and glassy. "I found all the law books in the Presidential House."

Tessa:

What I leave out of the conversation was that Eric had me doing the research for him, slowly tightening the imaginary shackles before I even knew I was bound. Like a fly caught in a web that allows movement but snaps back if it wanders too far.

Stratek seems to sense my mood.

"Enough of that subject," he announces. "Let's talk about us."

“Us?” I’m genuinely confused. Maybe he doesn’t understand that I’ll adapt to his needs? I’ll be whatever he wants me to be? Or ... am I the one who doesn’t understand?

Sheer terror races across my abdomen, tightening it. I’ve been talking about my unhappiness with Amos and then Eric. Maybe he’s expecting me to grow unhappy with him, also. Maybe he thinks I’m miserable and churlish and ...

“This might be awkward for you and if it is, you just let me know,” he says. “But I always said I’d like to discuss matters fully with my mate, no matter what.” He takes a deep breath. “No matter how uncomfortable, honesty should be best. How will we know what the other is thinking unless we discuss things? So, with that being said ... I’d like to undress you. Not sexual,” he says quickly, holding up a hand. It’s larger than a human hand—it might cover my whole breast. My entire belly. I force myself to look away, wondering why I’d think of such a ridiculous thought.

He continues on. “My people don’t think as much of nudity as yours. Obviously, since our tentacles hang loose and free.” He gives me a grin that lets me know he meant it as testicles and I can’t even gasp at his audacity, he’s so funny. “I’d like to undress you and see you. Get to know you.” His

cheeks are tinged a darker purple and it dawns on me that as much as he'd like to keep things open, this is uncomfortable for him. This is an awkward situation, a new mate of a different species that you barely know and yet already slept with.

“I'd like to study you too,” I whisper. “I don't remember much of that night.”

“Me either. I just remember it was the best night of my life.” His voice is completely serious, and it takes my breath away.

He stares into my eyes and though the light grows dimmer with the falling sun, I study our differences. His vertical pupils, the odd yellow color of his sclera that should be white. Even his teeth are a strange shade of clear amber. They don't look like teeth at all.

He's not handsome. But he's kind.

Eric is handsome. And he's evil.

Suddenly, I feel guilty for thinking negative things about my mate; even for comparing him to the President of Earth. I search for the positives, instead, mentally numbering them like a list. Stratek is striking—masculine and exotic. His

musculature can curl a girl's toes, but even more important than that, his personality is adorable. He tries so hard to be a good mate and he's funny without trying and ...

Oh, my God. Why do I ramble so about him? Do I have a strange little crush on the possible father of my baby?

I catch my breath when, very slowly, he reaches out with his claws extended. He starts at my neckline and slices through, clear down the middle of my body to the already torn edge mid-thigh.

I gasp, partly at the dangerous sharpness of his claws, partly because I'll have nothing to wear. Partly because something down below is liquefying inside me. It must be pregnancy-related.

"Lilaina brought you an outfit," he says. "She remembers what it was like when she arrived, and we were baffled by her clinging to clothing."

Thank God. However, had she known it was me, I have no idea what clothing she might have brought. Still, I'm eager to get rid of the filthy prison milkmaid garment. It parts and easily falls from my shoulders, but then I realize it's his tentacles. They're everywhere and he pushes the fabric away with two of them.

His pupils dilate as he studies my breasts, clad in the thin fabric of my bra. I can feel my areolas pucker with his perusal, pressing stiffly against the white cotton. Goosebumps break out on my skin, but then he changes tactic. As slowly as he undressed me, he unbuttons the front of his own shirt. My breath catches as he shrugs out of the fabric, exposing ridges of muscled, purple flesh. I'm completely silent, waiting for more, and subconsciously lick my lips. The movement makes me wonder if I traced the dips and ridges with my tongue that drunken night. I'd like to, even though I'm still freaked out about his people. Not him, though. He's different, somehow.

I've never seen so many muscles. His neck is thick, his biceps are huge, his shoulders are massive, his chest is broad. He tosses the shirt aside and focuses back on me.

I raise my hands and his gaze follows them. Carefully I take the clasp of my bra and click it to separate the cups between my breasts. Before they fall away, I hold them covering me, dragging out the moment, watching as his breath catches the same way mine had done with him.

Then I shrug the bra off and straighten my shoulders, letting him look his fill. He stares at my nipples. Oh, God, he's a boob man, I can tell. I wonder if anything will distract him

from staring at my rack? With his eyes still on the dusky pink tips, I slide my fingers under the elastic of my panties and slowly inch them down, watching as his eyes follow the line of skin exposed. It almost feels like I'm taunting him, deliberately stripping leisurely, but I'm not. It's taking every bit of strength to pretend it doesn't mean anything. To not feel embarrassment.

I kick off the underwear and there's complete, utter silence as Stratek stares at me. Takes in every inch of me. He looks uncomfortable and then I see why.

Between two tentacles, something hard, swollen, and purple emerges. He has a hard-on from studying me.

He drops to his knees—tentacles bending and spreading as if he has knees—and his gaze lines up with my swollen belly. There's a look of reverence in his eyes and the familiar guilt washes over me, drowning out the excitement I might have felt.

God, what if it isn't his? What if it comes out with human legs?

“May I?” he utters, gesturing with his hands toward my belly.

Shakily, I nod.

His large hands move slowly toward me as he cups my baby bump. His body temperature is cooler than mine, but I can feel a connection—an energy—that wafts from his palms. He smooths the skin, and his touch makes me shiver.

“Hello, my son,” he says. “Welcome to the world.”

The look of utter joy on his face makes me suck in a breath. It makes him—beautiful. I cup my smaller hands over his, holding him to me for long moments. When the air starts to chill and rove over my bare skin, he finally pulls away. I shiver, and he moves to the fire to add more wood.

“Would you like to wash up a bit before bed? It’s okay if you’re too cold. I don’t mind.”

I wrinkle my nose, aware of my prison-state despite the shredding of my uniform. “I’d like a quick wash.”

“May I?” he asks.

I nod, but I’m not quite sure what I’m agreeing to.

He moves to an area where a gold carafe sits and pours some water into a bowl. “It’s warm still. Lilaina boiled it when they were setting up the tupik.”

He grabs a small, furry kind of washcloth and a larger, thicker hand towel. He dips the small fur into the water and rubs a bar of soap across it.

He starts at my neck. The fur of the washcloth has a soft friction, and his touch is light where it rubs it across my shoulders and down my breastbone, then over my breasts. His touch is non-sexual, and he washes to the top of my waist before he rinses the washcloth and wipes again to rid me of the soap. It has a pleasant smell—mild and clean with just a hint of crisp sweetness. Maybe apple?

He takes the larger towel and dries me, then leaves it draped over my breasts while he washes each arm. Each leg.

I keep my legs tightly clenched, so he skips that area, and I'm glad. I know I'll have my mateship duties soon enough, but I'd hoped I wouldn't have to perform my first night. I appreciate his kindness because I think any other of his people, had I been matched to someone else, would have me flat on my back, pregnancy or not.

When I'm completely dry, he leaves me to toss the bowl of water outside.

“Let's tuck you into the furs,” he says.

He does just that and then crawls in next to me. This time he doesn't ask, but his strong, muscular arms wrap around me from behind. His hands cup the swell of my belly and his chin rests on top of my head. I'm tense, expecting something. Anything. But he doesn't try anything.

His body simply relaxes and eventually, he softly snores.

I cover his hands—and our son—with mine, amazed at this alien.

This man.

Chapter Seven

I WAKE UP TO the softest kiss pressed onto my bare shoulder. Warm arms still encircle my thickening waist, tentacles cover my legs. I'm warm and snug as a bug. But I hold perfectly still.

I imagine today my wifely duties begin. The perversion I can't remember. And he'll expect it because I already did it, as Eric mentioned. I remember the sex with Eric. It wasn't pleasant.

But there's a tingling warmth in my nether regions when I think of it with Stratek. Perhaps I'm perverted? Perhaps I enjoyed the strangeness of it?

"Greetings of the dawn," he rumbles.

"Good morning," I whisper, in the Earth way.

"I thought I'd show you our hot springs where you can take a real bath," he says.

God, the thought of a real bath—my first in months. In fact, I think the last one I took was the day I got ready for the

party when I'd met him. He slips from the makeshift bed, and I stay facing the wall, giving him privacy even though I'm naked except for a functional pair of prison-issued underwear.

“You can wear this.”

He holds out a garment. It's an open dress that sort of wraps around and ties at the waist to close. I slide into it, ignoring his eyes on my breasts and burgeoning belly, and then tie it slowly once I'm covered up.

And I'm kind of sad that I'm covered up. While we were naked, it seemed to connect us with an intimacy that was just ... us.

“Mate,” he whispers and holds out a hand.

His gray palm is hard with calluses, his hand so much larger than mine, sharp, black claws tipping his long fingers. I wonder if they're retractable.

It almost seems more intimate to touch him now because something has changed. There's a subtle request for trust. I have to willingly place mine in his. And should I want to? What is this strange feeling that makes me want to hold hands with a scary alien?

Will it further develop this strange crush I have?

His hand remains outstretched.

“Trust me.” His voice is soft. “I’ll take care of you forevermore.”

But I can’t. And I can’t tell him why. Yet I have to pretend to be a proper wife—mate—for the sake of me and my baby, when all I want to do is get home.

A new home, away from the political life and to the island I was promised.

“I don’t bite.” His fingers twitch, urging me to take his hand.

“I know, but I can get myself up,” I snap, twisting to push myself from the furs. To ignore the silent request for trust between us.

His hand remains steady, held out as if my refusal doesn’t deter him.

I’m an awful mate. I’m sure the wonderful Lilaina never hesitated to reach for her mate’s hand. But this signifies so much more.

I take a deep breath and slide my hand into his, gasping a little when it quickly closes over mine like he’s afraid I’ll

change my mind and snatch it away. He tugs me up from the bed and doesn't give me an inch of space between us.

I stare at him warily, wondering what else he can possibly want.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me against the hard lines of his muscular body. His scent envelops my senses and he smells so good. I breathe in deeply as he lifts me up and cradles me in his arms. Lord, it almost makes me cringe to think of how I must smell, even though he gave me a washing last night.

But not once does he complain. He tucks my head onto his chest using his chin and I can hear the slithering sound of his tentacles moving along this strange land. Sighing, I close my eyes rather than study anything more than I have to. I don't need to see it. I only have to endure this strange planet for six months. The sky is yellow instead of blue, the water's purple, and the beach wasn't even sand but a gold dust.

At least real dirt covers the rest of the planet.

The sun is purple like the water. A purple sun. Who ever heard of a purple sun? I haven't even yet seen the wind, which should calm me as soon as I do.

Nervous tension skitters up my spine. What if there is no wind here? What if I forget to imagine I can fly? Of course, there's wind. There has to be wind. There's wind everywhere, it's our saving grace. Even on strange, alien planets.

If I wasn't so nervous, so exhausted, so ... terrified of this land, I might not have allowed myself to open up to Stratek as much as I did last night. To allow myself to sleep peacefully in his arms, practically naked. I have to remember he's the enemy, not a true lover. Not a friend.

After all, I left him once before. He should be prepared that I'll leave again. But even at that, when I'd expect a man to strike me or at the very least, lock me up, the most he'd done in return was press his forehead to mine and breathe in my scent deeply, as if he could permeate himself with me, despite my prison-stink.

One of his strong arms supports under my knees, the other is at my back, holding me firmly with unimaginable strength against his hard body.

It's not right. He must be holding his anger back. Yet I can't help but burrow into his embrace, turning my face to the crook of his neck where he won't notice that I delicately sniff him to memorize his comforting scent.

And then it gets harder to smell him when we're surrounded by the springs. The water has its own distinct smell—somewhat salty and briny. It's warmer here, the air moist.

“This is the one,” he says and sets me on my feet.

It's an odd little hole, about fourteen feet wide, the ends shallow like the beginning of a beach. Steam rises from the water.

“Is it ... safe?” I wonder.

“Of course.”

There's only curiosity in his voice, but how can I share that after the wars, half the planet's water was tainted from the chemicals used in the bombs? That steaming water signified the acid rain? That we had to run for cover before it fell from the sky? I was just a girl then and when the Britonians arrived, they made the acid rains a distant memory.

He stands at the edge of the water, getting his tentacles wet as if to show me the safety. Pure bliss makes him sigh.

“The temperature's perfect,” he moans.

Gah. Despite my resolve to keep my distance, I can't help the twitching of my lips at his dramatic antics.

“Come on, Tess,” he begs. “Get over your water fear. You’re mated to an Adroki. I have tentacles and gills!”

“You can breathe underwater, can you?” My voice is teasing, but he answers with a bragging lilt.

“Smoothly. My gills are bigger than most,” he continues to boast.

“Big gills do give you bragging rights.” Hiding my grin, I dip my toes into the water. It’s simply hot, not poisonous. The heat permeates my entire foot and all at once I wonder what it’ll feel like all over my tired, aching muscles.

“Okay,” I say. I take a deep breath and untie the dress. I let it drop from my shoulders before I shimmy from my panties and then stand naked for a moment, trying not to imagine his eyes taking me in. Then I toss away the clothing from the water’s edge before wading in.

As soon as I sink in, I moan softly. He’s right. It’s pure bliss.

“Come here.” His voice is deeper. Husky.

He picks me up in his arms and his tentacles are busy swirling in the water, keeping us afloat as he goes deeper.

“You don’t have to swim to stay afloat,” I say, amazed.
“Your tentacles just swish around.”

He laughs. “It takes so little to impress my mate,” he teases.

If only he knew. I’d be tempted to keep him if he didn’t insist on living among his people. If I lived on my island, humans would know he was there. They’d make life difficult.

“What are you thinking so hard about?”

I shrug. “It’s just all so new. Here. This land.” I wave my arm behind us and then sink deeper when his eyes fall to my chest, breasts bobbing just underneath the surface.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Can’t blame a male for looking.” His grin stretches from ear to ear, showing his sharp teeth. I might have been terrified before knowing him, but now? He’s just an attractive male—for his species. Will their women be jealous that I snagged him? The prince of their clan?

“Hey, my mate,” he says, rolling his hips up to give me a gentle bumping movement. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable when I look. But I want you. And you know

we're compatible. We were drawn to each other that night, three lunar cycles ago."

"Yes, I know," I say softly.

I am attracted to him. Apparently, it was when my inhibitions were down three months ago.

"Let's make a deal," he says suddenly. "Let's start over. Pretend it was that party night we met, okay? There's just you and me—and none of those earth spirits that made me sure I was going to die."

I snort.

"We got along great, Tessa," he continues. "I've never met a female I instantly connected to. You find me funny." He grins again and I can't help the bubble of laughter that escapes me. "Not many do."

"I doubt that. You have such a dry wit it probably takes a minute for everyone else to catch up."

"But in the meantime, you and I are dying laughing over it," he says. "I used to pull fast ones on Lilaina all the time." He scowls. "Until the others wised her up to it. Now she's no fun."

I'd like to say I'm paying attention, but somehow, I got a little focused on the shape of his lips. They're generous and full; Eric's were a bit on the thin side. Amos's were fuller, but they had a stranger shape to the top lip. It made him look like he continually smirked.

"If you want to kiss me, do it," he says, and his voice has a husky growl. "Take what you want, my sweet mate."

Something tantalizing squirms low in my belly at his words, but I hesitate. I'd like to kiss him, for sure. But—will he want more? Will he expect more? I'm not sure about going there, even though I've obviously done it once.

"No pressure, Tess," he says, and I love the way my name casually rolls off his lips. "It's just a kiss. Nothing else. If you want it, grab it. It's yours."

And then I lean forward.

My mouth crashes down on his. For a second, I don't think about what I'm doing, I just let wants and needs take over. Yet one thought permeates my instinct-ridden brain; Stratek is beyond patient, he's like a volcano ready to explode. There's no sipping or exploring of his mouth; instead, I'm greedy, taking and demanding. Then the tables turn, and my

lust is overcome by his because then he's kissing me and he's really, really good at kissing.

I hang onto his broad shoulders. The sheer breadth of them makes me feel dainty and feminine. I curl my fingers over his muscles. His skin is a bit different, a little thicker than mine. It proves our differences and also makes him so very interesting.

He takes advantage of my exploration to slip his tongue into my mouth, his lips sliding over mine and someone is panting. I'm pretty sure it's me.

An alien's kissing me.

It's primal and sexy and somehow fun. I'm trying to get closer even though there's nothing between us but skin and water and somehow, it's still not close enough.

Stratek's kissing me.

With another soft moan, I wrap my arms around his neck and trace the patterns of color along his skull. There are tiny ridges along the striations of color that I explore with the tips of my fingers.

His tortured groan fills my mouth. His big hand slides down my spine to cup my bottom. My thighs clamp around his

sides.

My mate's kissing me.

I'm wet and achy inside, and my sex is rhythmically pulsating as we kiss. Then with another groan, he tears his mouth away and pushes me so there is a slight distance between us.

"I'm sorry," he gasps. "I didn't mean to take over like that."

"You didn't?" I'm still somewhat dazed but I can't say I mind.

"No," he whispers, and his voice is deep and raspy and ... sexy. "I just want you to know—to be sure—that we're mates in every way. I want you to be comfortable with me, to reach for me when you need to. To hold my hand, to caress my brow, to hug me when you reach out. To be the one, to be my person."

I understand what he wants.

I reach above the water to softly caress his brow.

"I promise."

"What are you promising?"

“To reach for you when I want. To kiss you. To hug you. To hold you.”

I’m rewarded with the most beautiful smile I could ever have imagined. It doesn’t matter that his teeth are sharp. It doesn’t matter that the whites of his eyes are yellow.

All that matters is I have permission to touch him whenever I want. To quench this feeling inside, this ache. To give myself up to the wicked pleasure.

And so, I lean in to do that. He meets my lips again and we kiss softly and sweetly for long moments, but a rumble in my belly signals our time is done.

“Hungry?” he asks with a grin.

“Starved,” I admit.

“Then let’s get you dressed,” he says and scoots us back over to the edge of the spring.

There’s a new tension in the air as we get dressed. We watch each other unabashedly now, satisfying our mutual curiosity. A tingling awareness makes me slow my movements as his eyes linger on my form.

“Come,” he says and holds a hand out. I slip mine into his and we walk back—together, my hand warm and tingling

where it touches his.

The air is much warmer—not that it was cold before. I’m about to ask him if it’s the sun warming us or the heat of the water still affecting my temperature when my nose twitches. There’s a faint smell of smoke in the air. It makes me think food is roasting. I look over at Stratek, and he’s grinning broadly, his sharp amber teeth showing.

“Did you leave something cooking?” I ask.

We turn the corner. Two octopus-men are near our teepee, crouched near an outdoor pit, roasting food.

“That’s Henyon and Jaze,” he says. “The first two of the chain under my command. My first commanders. They caught breakfast and are eating with us. They wish to get to know you.”

Oh, God, is this how it starts? Is this where he starts passing me to his friends? Surely not this soon. We just talked about getting to know each other. I fight down my rising panic.

“Are you okay?” Stratek asks, peering into my face.

I nod, trying to gulp the rise of saliva. I put on a smile, though I’m sure it doesn’t look natural.

We trudge down through the trees and every step feels as heavy as if I still wear the chains on my ankles. I'd like to think of a way out, but my thoughts are jumping around, trying to think up scenarios quickly, growing more and more panicked as we approach them.

"Capt'n," one drawls out as we approach. Then he looks at me. "My lady."

"Jaze and Henyon, this is my mate Tessa," Stratek says.

Both men study me as if I'm the strangest thing they've ever seen. There's complete silence as they stare from my head to my feet. Does one's gaze linger on my breasts? Oh, God, the other is checking out the curve of my hips. This is it. They're going to make a proposal to Stratek to share me. To pass me around. I'm to be a brood mare, a wanton woman, making multiple babies for their tribe. It doesn't matter that it's hard for women to get pregnant, they'll use me as a birthing vessel—just like Eric said.

"Is she supposed to be that color?" Jaze—I think—asks.

Sweat breaks out along the back of my neck and tiny pinpricks of darkness spot my vision.

“Hey, rude!” Stratek says. “Just because she’s pigmentally challenged—”

Wait—are they refusing me? They don’t find me attractive?

Like, at all?

“I’m pretty,” I blurt out, even though my voice sounds far away, like I’m in a tunnel.

Three shocked faces turn my way.

“Uh ... I’m sure you are?” Henyon says, but he poses it as a question. It’s a little insulting.

I don’t want to be traded, but I don’t want to be thought of as ugly, either. It’s important to me but I’m not sure why. Actually, I think I do know why.

I don’t want Stratek to have an ugly mate.

A worthless mate.

A mate pregnant with another man’s baby.

“Well, she’s a little thin. Needs some curves,” Jaze says.

Oh, right. They’re bargaining for me. And this one prefers thicker girls? So did Amos. How dare he?

“It’s not like prison offered much more than bologna sandwiches,” I snap. Am I going crazy? What the hell is wrong with me? Is it pregnancy hormones? And why does every man—male—want to change me?

“I’m staying thin,” I announce and then my legs give out.

Chapter Eight

Tessa:

I COME TO IN Stratek's arms, Jaze fanning a branch of rustling leaves over my head, Henyon flicking water droplets from his fingertips at me.

"What—what are you doing?" I ask, and I'm not sure which one I'm asking.

"Shh, you passed out," Stratek says. "Don't talk. I have to get you and our baby fed."

They think I fainted because of hunger? Just then my stomach growls.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I gasp, struggling to sit up.

"Relax, mate," he says. "I like holding you."

"You do?"

The others fade away as I search his eyes like I can find the truth somewhere in there.

"Yes, I do," he says.

Then why does he want to share me?

“Because I’m pregnant?” I bite my quivering lip, afraid of what he’ll say and afraid of what he won’t.

“No, because I found you finally. A kishling is a plus but I wanted to find you for three cycles of the moon. I had so much to ask you that next morning.”

But we can’t finish the conversation because Jaze is shoving a plate of food at us, placing it on my lap without touching me. Stratek picks up a chunk of meat and brings it to my lips. The smell of it, smoky and decadent, wafts up my nose. A curl of steam floats upward.

I open my mouth and he pops it inside. A burst of flavor explodes on my tongue and I chew it quickly, while somewhat opening my mouth and huffing on it, making him grin.

“Ohmigod, it’s so good,” I say.

“Are you sure it’s not because you’ve been a jailbird for three months on faloney sandwiches?” Stratek asks, reminding me I announced that I’ve been to prison.

“Baa-lo-ney.”

Jaze harrumphs like that can’t possibly be the reason.

Henryon rolls his eyes. “*Some* people think he’s a great cook and now he needs constant attention.”

“It is my cooking,” Jaze assures me. “Females flock to me for my cooking.”

My mouth drops. Is he propositioning me? Or telling me he has women lined up like puppets on a string?

“My mate is badass,” Stratek says to them, slipping another piece of the melt-in-your mouth meat between my lips. “Took twenty officers to take her down and drag her to a high security prison.”

I snort and open my mouth when he offers me a piece of fruit. I wouldn’t have said badass.

“What’d she go in for?” Jaze asks, a twinkle in his eye as if he’s reminding Stratek I was avoiding the mating program. Maybe they talked while I was unconscious?

“Murder, technically,” he says.

I gasp, thinking the news about Helena and Beth is out, but then I see the smile twisting his lips because he’s just making it the worst possible crime to be committed.

“Probably killed her family cook,” Henryon agrees.

A wet blob of fish fat lands smack dab on his forehead and sticks.

“No one kills the cook,” Jaze snaps. “We’re well-respected.”

“Are your men—your soldiers—your team under your command,” I say, when Stratek looks confused at my question. “Are they always this ... well, unstructured?”

“Yup,” he says proudly as if that’s a compliment. “But we’ve been together for six years now and we’ve never had a single loss.”

“Many battles,” Henyon agrees. “The latest being when we wiped out the Tshiki just last rotation.”

“You wiped out an entire species?”

Stratek turns serious. “Oh, yes. They kidnapped Lilaina. We had a jealous female named Kym who was interested in Juris. She made a deal with the Tshiki to pretend to kidnap her as a distraction and she would allow them inside the village to decimate it. In the meantime, she led Lilaina and her companions outside of the walls so they could be taken. It’s possible one or two Tshiki survived and will procreate, though.

We'll find out in eight or nine rotations when they reach full adulthood and if necessary, we'll take on another battle."

He spears me another piece of meat.

"She sold out her own people?"

He nods, grim. "After we took her in. Her family was all gone and she wanted a change from the Third Wing clan where she was from."

I chew it hungrily. "What happened to her?"

"Juris sentenced her to death."

I can't imagine him having to do that. But then, I can't imagine letting the enemy into your village to decimate the people who took you in, either.

I'd like to ask more, but I moan again as the bite of meat melts in my mouth. "What is that? Steak? Do you have cows here?"

"What is a cow?"

"A horned animal. You know, where you get beef from."

"Horned?"

"Yes. It says moo and has a tail. We milk them, they're black and white ..."

“Do they roam the land?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well this isn’t from a cow. We get this from a laniki, a creature that swims in the depths. Henryon went fishing.”

“This is fish?” My eyes are huge. How can they have fish that tastes like steak?

Henryon nods toward Jaze. “He may be an okay cook, but I’m an expert fisher.”

I’m silent but it feels like I pale. I really do think they are pointing out their attributes because they want Stratek to trade me.

Concerned, Stratek continues to feed me until the food is gone.

“More?” he asks.

“No, I’m full.”

Another plate is handed to Stratek to eat and suddenly I feel guilty. He didn’t eat so he could feed me. I squirm, trying to get free so he can enjoy his own food, but he refuses to let me out of his lap. Instead, he places his plate over my empty one and eats with one hand.

Down the beach, another male approaches.

“Taloek, come eat,” Stratek says, even as Henyon prepares an additional plate for the newcomer.

“Thanks, capt’n,” the new man says, nodding at me as he accepts and sits next to us. “Juris says you’ll wait here today, and he’ll send out a carriage.”

“Good,” Stratek booms.

He grins broadly but I’m wary. Lilaina’s mate didn’t send out a carriage out of the goodness of his heart. They’re all protecting this baby, but what will they do if it’s not his?

“Hey, you okay?” Stratek whispers into my ear.

I smile at him, though it’s a bit weak.

“I just ... I don’t want to be left alone. Without you, I mean. Is that okay if you stay with me?”

He looks surprised, but he nods. “Of course, my mate. I shall remain at your side.”

He eats quickly and then pulls me up to my feet gently, his hands carefully avoiding my chafed wrists. The others look up.

“We’re taking a walk,” he says to them.

He twines my fingers with his as we move down the beach, leaving them in the background.

After a few minutes, he speaks. “Remember last night when I said I wanted to discuss things with my mate to avoid confusion?”

I nod.

“Spill it, love. What’s wrong? You’re wary around my team.”

“I—I don’t know what you mean,” I hedge.

“I need you to know that they’ll protect you with their lives. You’re my mate. But you’re uncomfortable.”

“I—I, well, uh—”

“Tessa, I saw this with Lilaina,” he says, and his voice is so very gentle. “She thought we were monsters.”

“I don’t—”

He holds up a hand. “It’s okay. I understand.”

“I just—I don’t want to be traded, okay?” I blurt out. “I don’t want to be shared.”

To say his mouth drops is putting it lightly.

“Traded? Where would you get an idea like that?” he asks.

“I’m already pregnant,” I whisper. “I don’t want you to trade me to others so they can get me pregnant too.”

“You’re not breeding stock,” he growls. “Who told you we do that?”

I’m confused. “Don’t you?”

His eyes are gentle. “You’re *my* mate, Tessa. While some of our people share, and it’s okay among the parties, I don’t. You’re all mine, beautiful.”

It’s okay among the parties? “You would ask your mate to have a third person in the relationship?”

“Isn’t that what your males do? Your ex ... that Amos? He had five others, correct?”

I blink and it takes me a minute to search my memory. “No, actually. They don’t ask. It’s just accepted.”

“I would never do that to you,” he says. “I would never spring another person on you, nor would I pass you to others. You’re mine, Tessa. I’m selfish when it comes to you.”

The wind kicks up a lock of hair that blows across my forehead. Stratek raises his fingers to capture the hair before

delicately tucking it behind my ear.

Wind. Oh, God, they have wind here. My mood lifts ten degrees.

Suddenly, I'm aware of how close we are and how delicious he smells. I lick my lips, all the time staring at his. Is he going to kiss me? Will his sharp teeth nick my lips? Would he use tongue? I think I remember he did that night. Or was that just me being sloppy and drunk and licking his chin?

"I'd like to kiss you too," he says, his voice deep and rumbling, his accent thicker than usual, and he sounds so very sexy. He's focused on my lips, and I realize he understood what I wanted when I licked them.

I nod. "I'd like that."

He doesn't hesitate, as if afraid I'll take back my permission, if I think about it. He pushes his lips against mine and all my senses flare as I feel how warm his are. A tingling begins low in my belly. I remain completely still, my hands pressing on his chest. The now-familiar heat tingles inside my sheath and I feel slippery and wet inside.

Slowly, his mouth opens a bit wider and his tongue brushes against mine. He's kissing me softly, sweetly. My

breath hitches with every caress of his lips against mine. Oh, God. I didn't expect this ... these feelings. My arms slide around his neck, and I moan into his mouth.

My lips tingle and feel plump when he pulls away.

"I want to have that every day of my life," he mutters thickly in his accented voice.

I don't think I would exactly mind it. And we are mates. It's accepted to kiss. Is it okay to do it whenever we feel like it?

Chapter Nine

Stratek:

SHE MAY NOT FEEL the same way about me that I do her, but it isn't far off. She's unsure of my people, maybe even a little afraid, but I'm her salvation. Her rock. She doesn't view me as a monster. She turns to me when she's scared—even when she's blustery and pretends she's tough. She has managed to keep herself and our kish safe even while imprisoned in her savage world full of fear and lies, doing whatever is necessary for the well-being of our kish.

The thought makes my cock hard.

I'm obsessed with this small human female. Her scent, her smile, the ripe fullness of her lips. Even the curve of her belly carrying my kish makes me hard. She is everything I could have wanted and more. I knew it that night, more than three lunar moons ago.

Of course, I know it will take time to get to know each other—and that we only have six or so moons to go—but I will use each and every one of them at my disposal to woo her. To love her the way she deserves to be loved.

If she's anything like my sister-in-mate Lilaina was—she doesn't feel she's worthy. It's up to me to teach her.

“I love how strange your flat teeth are,” I murmur against her lips.

My heart lifts when I hear her giggle.

“Um ... I love how sharp yours are?”

“The better to nip you in plump places,” I say, and watch her shiver with pleasure as I use a claw to circle her nipple. It hardens and pokes through the thin silk of her dress. But then I notice something rove across her face—confusion—and I know I must back away and give her time.

“Too soon?” I ask her.

Her expression clears. “No! No, it's not you. Don't feel like you're doing something wrong. I was confused because, well, because I don't understand these strange feelings for you. They came on so sudden and I'm—I'm just trying to work through it.”

I can't help the grin that stretches across my face. I knew I wanted an open communication relationship with my female. There should never be secrets between us. That is the key to a lifelong mateship.

“What are these feelings?” I ask her. “Please share with me.”

Her cheeks have the barest touch of pink, and it reminds me of the Earth strawberries that Lilaina planted in planters outside the windows.

“A tingle in my belly. I thought it was the baby at first, but I don’t think so. And, well”—the color deepens—“I just want to spend more time with you. To explore this.”

“We have a whole day, mate,” I tell her. “May I show you the wonders of my planet?”

I hold out my hand for her to take, pleased when she trustingly places hers in mine. I can’t help but notice she seems to enjoy holding hands. I love it too. Her hand is small, soft, and delicate. Totally female.

“We are going to a unique spot.” I know which path to take, and I walk her down the beach, through some trees to where the land clears. “We have to climb higher up, but the others will meet us here later with the carriage. But be warned, it’s a little windy.”

To my surprise, Tessa brightens as we walk. “I love wind.”

“You do?” What an odd thing.

She nods eagerly. “When I was a child, we lived in an area called Valley of the Winds. It was unusual because of the high barometric pressure. Winds whistled through the town—all the time. Most people hated it, but I loved it. It made me feel free. There was an area with natural caves cut into the mountainside. My father and I used to sit up there, on the mountain edge, and let the wind howl through our hair. We couldn’t speak, couldn’t hear, but we learned to communicate through touch. A tap from him on my chest meant to take care. A squeeze on my thigh meant it was time to go.”

“Your parents have passed on?”

“Yes, they died together when I was fourteen. I’m grateful one didn’t have to go on without the other. Now I always feel comforted by the wind and I’m so thankful they allowed me to enjoy it. Many would have made their children come indoors, afraid of the dangers.”

I know I would bring the wind to my mate if I could.

“It’s probably not that windy where we are going,” I say.

“I’ll take anything.” Her sensuous lips curve upward.

I definitely would bring the wind to her if I could.

I pause at a huge stone that marks the area. “This is it, though we’ll have to move out to the path to meet my men later.”

Taking her hand, I lead her to the area that houses the most unusual beings. The tiny creatures cannot be seen easily with the naked eye; they flit about in the shadows, their movements speeded as if they live in another dimension.

But it is their land that is amazing.

“Somehow, the creatures who live here manage to section off their land from the rest of the planet as if it lives separately within invisible force fields. Yet we are able to come and go at will, as long as we do not harm anything within the boundaries. And if others are present, you will not know. You cannot see or hear them, it feels as if you are alone in the vast space, which isn’t vast at all. I’m not sure if wild beasts are able to enter, as most walk around the boundaries of the area instinctively. When I was a youngster, Shana and I decided—and shared with our older brother, Juris—that the creatures who created this were far more advanced and liked to watch us, thereby encouraging us to wander into their land. At the time, Juris and his best friend Maleek had laughed. Now that we are adults, Shana and I understand the innocent

implications that we thought the creatures were voyeurs. It seems every young couple explored their sexuality together in the mirrored forest, a place of safety, silence, and solitude. We would come to find out when we were older.”

As I walk her into the boundary of the land, making sure to hold her hand continuously so we do not lose each other, she gasps.

“It’s so beautiful. It’s ... so green.”

The plants are succulent and rich, the greenery seems to come alive with plumpness and warmth. The thatch feels spongy, like a bed. The trees are canopies of leaves, and the rich green foliage shows the barest hint of yellow sky.

“Feel them,” I encourage, tugging her down to her knees.

“It’s ... so soft,” she says, wonder rich in her voice. “It almost feels ... I don’t know. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Like any young, horny male, we’ve all come to the same conclusion. It feels like a woman. Like a rich, warm, welcoming woman, the plump green foliage feels like the petals of a cunt.

Tessa lies out across the soft ground, and I release her hand since I have contact to her with my tentacles. I have not

explained that we cannot break touch, afraid to frighten her.

“I do not want to offend you, but this is known as a naughty place for youngsters,” I confide.

“What?”

“Smell the air, Tessa. Does it not smell sensual to you?”

She inhales deeply, her breasts rising and ever so slowly falling as she takes her time to release. “Maybe I don’t have quite the same senses as you. I don’t smell it exactly, but I ... feel it. Everything feels bolder. Better. No inhibitions. I can’t explain it.”

“Imagine young males coming here. Alone.”

She giggles. “Oh, my. Earth would make a killing off this. They’d do away with the House of Duty.”

“Your milking farms have one difference, mate.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“They are there for the males’ pleasure, not the female. Here, all reap the benefits of this place.”

“It’s so quiet,” she says, after a minute of thinking about my words.

“Because no one is around. They cannot be. You can enter with fifty males but as soon as you step through the boundary, you can no longer see, hear, or feel each other unless you were touching the way we still are.”

She turns to me. “What? So even if your men brought the carriage here—”

“Which they will not because we are meeting them just up the hill from here. But yes, even if they entered to look for us, they would not find us. Not unless we left.”

“Well, no wonder your horny teens made their way here,” she says, and I grin.

My grin falls away as she studies me. Her breath quickens and I know it is partly this place, but I also think that my mate coming to accept me. Then she reaches out with a finger to caress my cheek. She trails it down my neck, my collarbone, and drags her hand down my chest.

“You have so many muscles,” she whispers. “I love to touch you.”

“I want to kiss you.”

“Will we stop at a kiss?” she asks.

“We can if you choose. Or we can take it further if you’re not afraid of me.”

“I’m—I’m not afraid. I’m just not sure—I don’t remember that night.”

“You found it most pleasurable.”

“I did?”

“Immensely. Over and over.”

“I’d like to explore. Just a little bit.”

“Then Tessa, let me please you,” I say. “I will stop whenever you wish.”

She takes a moment before she nods. “Okay, Stratek,” she says. “I need this. I need to remember what that night was like.”

Alarm weaves through me that she doesn’t remember that magical night we shared—the blessed night we created our kish. But she is being honest and that is what I always wanted with a mate so I tell myself I can’t get upset. I must take this slow and woo her as if we are a new couple, instead of as a male who has loved and wanted his female from the first time that he saw her. A male who recognized her determination, her resilience, her strength, and yet tasted the fear and desperation

on her skin almost like she was trapped in that hellish world. I long to free her.

So, while I cannot completely have her—not until she is truly ready for the act—I can relieve her needs. Mine don't matter, not when it comes to the maman of my kish.

“What would you like me to do, little Tessa?” I growl, dragging my gaze down her body enclosed in the borrowed dress. I have already sent her approximate measurements for the Tiiblets to begin making a few things. Once we arrive tomorrow, we will have her fitted properly for garments befitting my princess.

A little gasp escapes her lips as I stare at her full bosom, pushed up and together by the dress she wears to show off her cleavage. Goddess, she is delicious. I wonder what color her nipples will be in the light of day. The color of strawberries? Or darker like her hair? Or perhaps a lighter pink. Will her nipples be large or tiny like the fingers of her hands? Will the delightful pucker of her areolas be large circles? Goddess, I hope so. I am a sucker for large areolas. A pervert with my obsession.

“Touch me here.” Her voice is breathy.

“If you will reveal them to me,” I bargain, “I will do more than touch them. I will kiss them.”

Though she gasps, her eyes dilate with desire. She reaches up and tugs on the drawstring at the front of her gown and it parts, spilling away from her full breasts. The globes are pale, and her nipples are hard, standing at attention at the center of each breast. And thank the everlasting Goddess—her areolas are huge, crowning her breasts like the royalty she is.

My cock hardens and threatens to exude from its nevrā, the slit in my body that houses it. My mouth waters at the size of her breasts, the softness of her skin, the way they quiver with her heaving breaths.

I cup them possessively, past the point where I can pretend that she’s not mine. I can’t deny myself a lick of each bud, my desire heightening at the shuddering arch of her back. I suck her nipples, lavishing the areolas with a swirl of my tongue, and then concentrate on one, smoothing my thumb over the dampened peak of the other. She shivers when I drag a claw lightly over her taut skin.

“God, Stratek, God. That’s amazing. It feels—you’re amazing.”

“Do you need me to relieve you, mate?” I growl, aware of the huskiness in her voice.

She looks a little bit confused.

“My goal as your mate is to take care of your needs, Tessa. Do you wish to show me another area that needs attention?”

Her cheeks blush and her hand extends hesitantly to her waist, then slides over the curve of her hip in a broad gesture. But I need my mate to get over her shyness with me, to be the female without inhibition or reservation, who enjoyed herself in my arms that night.

“Reveal it to me,” I remind her. “And I will kiss it.”

Her hand pulls her skirt up, revealing her sleekly muscled walking appendages. They are sexy and fascinating, and I imagine the way they will wrap around me, holding me possessively against her as I pound into her.

But for now, I watch as her hand dips into the strange garment they call panties, outlining the shape of her hand as it cups her cunt.

“Show me,” I beg.

Her eyes dilate. She is turned on by this. Turned on by me seeing her intimate area. Her hand pulls the thin material aside and shows me the tender, pink folds of her pussy.

It glistens with arousal dew.

My mouth waters and I growl, giving each breast another long lick, a quick suck, and then I slide down her body to where I want to taste her. Her cunt is spread wide, her breasts jiggle with each breath and I slowly lave my tongue down the center of her body.

“Oh, God,” she cries out.

And then I’m kissing it, as promised.

Her taste—so sweet, delicious, utterly Tessa. Her lips slide against my tongue as I suck each one into my mouth, suckling gently. I spear my tongue into her body and her hips buck against me. She’s chanting and moaning my name and I can feel her body tightening, earlier embarrassment forgotten as she lustily thrusts her nipples up into the air.

I move upward to kiss her clit like it’s a tongue, pressing mine against her, making her gasp and cry out, feeling it harden like the tips of her breasts. Two of my tentacles slide up and latch onto her nipples, sucking gently. The suckers on

the tips can taste her lust, spreading it like a contagion through me, and there's no way I can keep my cock wedged inside my body.

My nevro parts as my erection bursts out, my balls hanging low and heavy, like enormous sacks. I know I'm going to come right here, thrusting my hips into the soft, fleshy ground that almost feels like the warmth of a female's cunt.

"Stratek, Stratek, Stratek," she moans.

"Tell me, love," I grit. "Do you want me to fill your sheath? Kiss your glistening clit? Pinch those ruby nipples?"

"Yes, yes, yes," she cries.

And I give her all of it. I tighten my tentacles on her nipples almost to the point of pain, I draw her clit between my teeth on a suck and I slide a fat tentacle into her sex, giving myself an extra treat as I watch it thrust into her sex, twisting in and out, the contrast between the colors of our bodies apparent. My gorgeous, sexy mate screams her lust as her orgasm breaks and her entire body convulses, desperately clenching all around me, her heart pounding nearly through her chest. She writhes and twists and I hold everything still as I let her come and then, with her taste in my mouth as I press it

over her cunt, I give a muffled shout as my come begins to flow, shooting spurts into the grass as I hump and hump, pretending I am plowing into her swollen cunt and not the plump, moist foliage that teenage males use, lost in my own fantasy. My balls are finally depleted, and she stills.

When I finally lift my head, she's watching me. Her lips curl and she smiles at me, bright-eyed with satisfaction.

I let my tentacle slide from her cunt with a wet slurp and she shivers at the sensation.

“Did you come?” she asks.

I raise myself, showing her my wet cock and I'm rewarded by another dazzling smile.

“That's so ... sexy,” she utters.

I can't help but stare at her. It's love. It's endless passion. Now if only Tessa would remember how she felt toward me that night—and let hers happen.

Tessa:

There's a delicate change in our relationship when his men arrive with the carriage, which has wheels, but long poles at the front and back for his men to push. I would be worried about the strain on them, except it seems to roll quite easily on the paved pathway just beyond the trees.

Stratek climbs into the carriage, and then holds out his hand to help me in. He seats me on the same side as him so we can view the world together. Our conversation flows easily, and he makes me laugh, and sometimes his men will tell stories about him also. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard.

This land has brought laughter back into my life. Laughter like I used to have when my parents were alive. Even then when I grew up with Amos, before his first wife. I'm a bit nervous about what life will be like at the village still, but at this moment, things are perfect. I can almost imagine staying mated to him.

If only I could.

Chapter Ten

Stratek:

BY THE TIME WE reach the village, the others come running. I'm glad they make an effort to greet my Tessa.

Lilaina's companions, nosy creatures that they are, are first in line.

"What is this? What's this?" Driki asks in his overly loud voice, poking my mate in the fleshy part of her arm.

"It's a human," Bantu shrieks.

"Another one? How many are there?" Driki's eyes are huge.

"More than one," Bantu says in a worldly voice.

"Oh," Driki says, then whispers loudly out of the side of his mouth. He focuses on Tessa like she can't tell his mouth is moving and talking about her. "This is the one Lilaina can't stand. The evil stepmother."

Tessa gasps.

“Um, nooo,” Bantu drawls, his eyes looking up at the sky as he tries to lie without looking us in the eye. “It’s that *other* stepmother she doesn’t like.”

Driki elbows him. “She only has one.”

Bantu elbows him right back. “She’s here for six whole Earth months. Do you really want to make this awkward?”

“Oh, yeah, the other stepmom,” Driki agrees.

I can’t help the twitching of my lips. Tessa looks from them to me, sees me trying to control my grin, and then starts laughing, tears streaming from her eyes. “I’m not her stepmom,” she gasps out finally. “I never married her father.”

“Oh, wow,” Driki says, his mouth wide. It’s clear by his exaggerated movements that he doesn’t believe her, but I don’t share that with my mate. Instead, I steer her toward my wing of the castle.

“Bantu,” I call out over my shoulder. “Will you bring your healing salve for Tessa’s wrists and ankles?”

The Tiiblets scuffle away, muttering about being born-again doctors and knowing all about “the human injuries,” then nodding quickly as they aim to please. Since Lilaina had

similar wounds, they've been carrying the salves they brag about.

“We're on the south side,” I explain to her. “My sister Shana is in the west wing, Juris and Lilaina take the north. The center of the castle is used as a community center. Behind the castle, there's a building which the Tiiblets have taken over. Except for Driki and Bantu, who live inside also.”

“Great. So I'll get to hear them singing Lilaina's praises each day?”

“They love Lilaina,” I say to her gently. “She saved their lives at the risk of her own. They have an undying affection for her.”

“I didn't mean it like that,” she says, but her eyes are shuttered and without touching her, I can't tell if she's lying.

“We're having a celebration dinner tonight with everyone in the grand room. It opens to the outside and usually anyone can pop in, bring a dish, and eat.”

She takes a deep breath. “Should we bring something?”

“Of course not, mate. You are sickly.”

She blinks adorably. “Sickly? I throw up and faint. I still work. I'm not sick, I'm just pregnant.”

“This dinner is a celebration of our union. Of a cherished match and hope for success. An introduction of the princesses of our clan. It would be an oddity for you to prepare anything as a guest of honor.”

She nods. “But I would rather eat foods prepared myself.”

How odd. I can’t imagine why.

“Perhaps tomorrow,” I say.

“Are you afraid we might poison you?” Lilaina asks from the doorway. Behind her skirts, the Tiiblets scuttle around and tut.

The meaning of Tessa’s refusal dawns on me. She thinks someone here in the castle might poison her.

“No,” my mate scowls. But my tentacle is touching her, and the sweetness of her skin lessens.

She was afraid, then.

“Do you work with poisons?” Driki asks. “Are you a poisons expert?”

“No.” Her voice wobbles a tiny bit.

I feel as if my little mate is being singled out.

“To be fair,” I remind them. “Lilaina was more trusting than Tessa is and look at where it got her with Kym.”

The Tiiblets’ eyes go round, making it appear as if their eyes swallow their entire face.

“That’s a good point,” Bantu mutters.

“Very good point,” Driki mumbles. “Wanted us eaten, she did. Nasty woman.”

Lilaina cuts in. “Juris wishes to see you. Several of the other tribe leaders are arriving for the party and he would like you there to greet them. I’ll stay with Tessa. Shana is getting ready.”

I have no doubts that Lilaina will be kind to her, but I know by the sudden tang of Tessa’s hormones that she is worried. I sweep her into my arms and press a kiss to her sweet lips. Her arms go around me and I love this. I love that she’s not wary of me like she is with the others.

“You’ll be all right with Lilaina and the Tiiblets,” I whisper into her ear. “You’ll be fine.”

Those words always seemed to comfort Lilaina.

But Tessa’s stress hormones don’t change. I lean back and look into her eyes, confused. Why does the human phrase not

comfort my own mate?

“Tess?” I ask. “Would you like me to stay? I can ask my brother to greet the others on his own.”

Her taste sweetens again, and a smile touches her lips. Her cheeks grow to the shade of the strawberries again.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

There it is, the phrase. I can’t help the beaming smile that cuts across my face. My mate loves when I smile. It’s contagious and a matching one breaks across her face too. I lean down and sip from her sweet lips.

“Later,” I whisper against the supple flesh. I nip it gently and then swipe my tongue across the sting.

She moans softly and then her tongue comes out to meet mine. Drawing her tongue to mine with a coaxing lick, then possessing that delicious mouth with a thorough, sweeping taste.

Forgetting the others, we let our tongues play for a moment before a Tiiblet clears his throat.

“Lilaina was quite horny during her first gestation too,” Bantu says, matter-of-factly. “And this one.”

Lilaina and Tessa both make a strangled sound.

“No. Lilaina was horny for her male before she ever conceived,” Driki argues.

“T’was the mating fever,” Bantu insists.

“They’re still horny. That’s why we get Mikki sometimes for an hour here and there.”

Everyone notices Lilaina’s lack of protest.

Bantu scratches his head. “Do you trade your offspring even when they’re different ages?”

“No,” I growl. “Adroki don’t trade offspring.”

“But humans might,” Bantu says, quite knowledgeably.

“Yes,” Driki says and sounds quite excited. “We should be going into the mating heat soon. Perhaps we can trade bablets—”

“No.”

“Just think about it,” Bantu says. “No need to answer yet.”

“I already did.”

“We didn’t hear it,” Driki says. “So just think about it. There’s several cycles yet.”

Tessa looks confused.

“I’ll leave it to Lilaina to explain, my love.” And I almost wish I were present to hear it. With one more sweet kiss pressed against her lips, I leave my mate.

Tessa:

As soon as Stratek leaves, I know I should work to befriend Lilaina. It’s my job to gain her trust and let her know how she violated the rules of home.

I hate the thought as soon as it crosses my mind. I hate doing anything Eric commanded. But how else will I gain entry back to Earth? And I need to keep my options open. If my baby is born on Earth and is his, I’ll have no choice but to stay. I can’t leave my child in his grasp.

Not like Lilaina was.

“Tiiblets all go into heat at the same time,” Lilaina explains, gesturing for me to sit. “When their young are birthed, they trade babies so there’s no siblings raised in the

same household. That way they can develop life-long mate bonds.”

My mouth drops. They think to trade my baby with theirs? The two funny little creatures eye me warily. This is a make-or-break moment. I can't insult them by refusing like Stratek did. He has a different relationship with them, one with trust and mutual respect. I don't have any of that with anyone here.

Except maybe Stratek, and it worries me that I may lose that.

“Thank you for the offer,” I say hesitantly to the one named Bantu. “But I'm afraid I'll have to birth my infant on Earth. Those were the conditions set for me with the program.”

The little being is only about three feet tall with a thick, lizard-like tail sweeping the floor in agitation. His face is a mass of fat, puffy folds. Instead of hair, he has flesh-like, finger-looking things that sprout all over his bald head in spiky mock-dreads. His eyes are deep and gray, much too large in proportion to the rest of his face. He's skinnier than the other one, whose strange hair protrusions form in a row down his head like a Mohawk.

The smaller Tiiblet nods as if it's completely feasible that it was ever on the table for us to trade infants. "Just as well. It would be hard for us to teach a little human/Adroki hybrid how to swim anyway."

"We float, you see," the other Tiiblet says, his face a mass of folds and wrinkles that only a mother could love. But they smooth as he smiles. His eyes are beautiful. A stunning blue-gray.

Lilaina has a tender smile on her face as she regards the little people. For the first time, I wonder if she's not as insane as she's made out to be.

But how can she be sane? She's lived with a maniac her entire life, and no one knows what happens behind closed doors.

No one but me because I had a taste of it during the six-month stint she was away. Six months that felt like an entire lifetime.

But he promised I'd be free when I return. I'll be allowed to leave his clutches and live out my life on the island of Kauai, away from others. A part of me knows it depends on the genetics of my child. That's all I can think of right now. Whose will it be?

The skinnier Tiiblet positions himself at my ankles and pulls a pot of salve from his apron, rubbing it between his palms to warm it.

“This will feel warm,” he says. “But you can bathe and it won’t wash off.”

“When did you meet my father?” Lilaina blurts out.

I decide to be truthful. “The first time? A few years ago. He came to town to talk about your new Match Program. It was in negotiations, and nothing was concrete, but he wanted transparency. It wasn’t an open push for the program but more of a way to introduce it.”

“What do you mean mine?” Lilaina’s voice is confused. “Just because I was the first to enter it—”

“You pushed for it.” I can’t help the bitterness in my voice. As much as I mean to win her over, it’s her fault I’m in this predicament. She was the one to establish it for women everywhere.

“I didn’t push for it,” she says. “My name was the first one to be drawn as the test subject.”

“You went first because it was your program. Your sacrifice.” We all remember the details the President gave out.

She narrows her eyes and I know I have to let it go.

“I never thought to be the second name drawn. Not with the entire planet already in the pot. I can’t help but wonder if the name generation is set to start from addresses around the Presidential House rather than a random selection. But my name must have been entered as soon as I broke off my engagement.”

“Stratek was beside himself when you disappeared. All you left behind were your shoes. He searched the entire Presidential House up and down. He spoke to the Britonians. He even spoke to my father. And for three months he suffered, wondering why you disappeared.”

I can’t tell her how dangerous the aliens are. How the tentacle-people trade women for payment among themselves. Her mate has all the money he needs but eventually, when his relationship with her grows old, he’ll trade her off to some of the other tribes for favors because by then, crazy Lilaina will believe it’s proper to be prostituted out. That’s why all the others are arriving for a celebration.

They’re just getting us used to seeing the monsters we’ll be serviced to.

But not me. I'm getting the hell out of here. I'm getting to Kauai. I feel a little sad to leave Stratek behind, but I'll keep fond memories of him.

The Tiiblet smears the salve into the ruined skin of my ankles as I give her a version of the story. "I had to get away from the Presidential House."

"You said you and my father weren't intimate?"

Her candor makes me flinch. She hasn't been away from Earth that long as to lose all self-respect and modesty to discuss the marital act with a virtual stranger.

"No," I whisper. "He understood my need to wait to get to know each other in that sense until our wedding night. I'd never been with, uh, that is, I'd never before lain with—"

She relaxes and a strange sense of guilt strikes me.

"Good. The thing is ... Stratek likes you. Really likes you. He's half in love with you. He lost his heart three months ago on Earth with a person he didn't even know. When Juris had heard about me, he prepared. He sought out my favorite colors, my foods, my books. Stratek wanted to do the same for you, but he couldn't. He didn't even know your name."

I'm not sure how to respond. I didn't feel the same way he did. I was horrified at what I'd done and then I focused on running, on protecting my baby.

"You see," she says pleasantly. "Stratek's my brother-in-law. I want to see him happy. Fact is, he wants you. So, you and I will have to learn to get along, despite our previous relationship."

"Mistress," Driki says.

"Yes?" Lilaina answers.

"Bantu kind of likes her," Driki says.

The skinnier Tiiblet—Bantu—smiles shyly at me. "She's pretty."

Lilaina sighs dramatically. "As I was saying, Stratek didn't have time to prepare a wardrobe for you. In the meantime, I'll loan you a few things to wear. Rules are different here. Things are open. The Adroki find it puzzling that we are tempted to hide our flesh. You see how they wear clothing as decoration? I imagine that's how it used to be once, on Earth. You'll have to adjust your thinking. At least for the six months you're here."

Her tone leaves no doubt that she thinks I'll leave. At least there's no pretense there.

She and her Tiiblets wait while I take a quick shower and style my hair. When I emerge from the bathroom with Stratek's robe around me—which is quite awkward since the bottom falls in strips from the hips down, but thankfully he's taller than me, so it hits from the thighs down and drags along the floor—Lilaina has a loose-fitting dress laying on the bed.

It's a deep emerald green and so shiny—it looks silky. I finger the fabric and it slides smoothly beneath my touch. It is silk. It's the fanciest silk I've ever seen. There's also some underwear and I'm grateful that she's not going to carry a grudge and make me commit a sin by going commando.

I pause for a brief moment, wondering if I should confess that I'm only allowed to wear scarlet. But then I swallow and decide against it. No one here knows of my reputation.

I slide on the dress and avoid looking in the mirror before heading into the main room.

I find her sitting with another woman instead of the Tiiblets.

Chapter Eleven

“TESSA, THIS IS SHANA,” Lilaina says. “Juris and Stratek’s sister.”

Shana beams at me from a face that looks just like Stratek’s. Her features are smaller and daintier, but her coloring is exactly the same. It’s obvious they’re twins.

“I’m so glad to finally meet you,” she says, before sweeping me up into her arms. I’m frozen for a second, stunned when her tentacles wrap around my legs at the same time her arms wrap around my torso.

I feel—locked.

But then she unwinds and smooths my bangs, sweeping them behind an ear in a move that reminds me of the Britonian, Mikhail.

“My mate’s Maleek,” she says. “He’s one of the captains—like Stratek—and we have a kishling, Beshi. She’s off with her cousin Mikki in daycare in the upper rooms. If you’re ever in the turrets, you’ll probably hear the giggles that travel down the stairwells. Don’t think it’s ghostly whisperings!”

I laugh because she does, and she's so happy and bubbly and ... such a breath of fresh air from the tension that rides Lilaina.

Without breaking breath, Shana looks to Lilaina. "You gave her the green one? It looks fabulous with her reddish hair."

And then I take a look at the gowns they wear. Lilaina is in blue, and the color makes the light streaks in her hair look even blonder than they had been back on Earth. Or maybe that's because they were always braided and covered up.

Her father preferred braids. They were easier to drag you with.

I can still remember how my screams echoed in the high-ceilinged rooms as I was hauled across the floor, passing where the dungeon had been and was now sealed ...

"Tessa?" Lilaina asks and I tear myself from my dark thoughts to find her and Shana watching me.

"I'm sorry?"

"Stratek's running a little late, but he'll be pleasantly surprised if we just bring you along with us."

"Oh, sure. Of course."

Lilaina continues. “He has a surprise for you—one that would have been wonderful if he had given it to you himself, but again, he got called away. And we know where the surprise is.”

“Please tell me you don’t mind if we reveal it instead of your mate,” Shana exclaims, and her grin would be terrifying with all the sharp teeth it exposes. But I can’t help but smile at her exuberance.

“I’d like to see it,” I say.

Shana somehow *floats* gracefully to a cabinet, the skirt flowing around her tentacles where it hangs in strips. She flings open the door.

“Ta-da!” She announces.

Inside is a pair of gorgeous, studded pumps that sparkle. A glittery vein of gold winds up the spiky heel like it’s been melted and re-hardened and as she brings them closer, I see the sparkliness is due to the tiny chips of embedded glass.

Oh, my God. Glass doesn’t shine like that. They’re diamonds. Hundreds of embedded diamonds.

Lilaina is watching me carefully.

“I can’t wear those,” I gasp.

“Why not?” Shana looks puzzled. “He made them himself. I know they fit, he brought them from Earth. They’re your shoes from the party that night.”

“They are?” I whisper and run my finger along the front. If anything, they gleam even more.

“Quite the artist, isn’t he?” Lilaina asks.

“They’re magnificent,” I breathe, and they are. They’re utterly gorgeous.

Her lips tighten like I’m a greedy whore.

“Put them on,” she snaps, grabbing them from the pillow Shana holds. “They’ll fit. It’ll make Stratek happy.”

She tosses them onto the floor where they land topsy-turvy.

Shana picks them up with a couple of tentacles—so she doesn’t have to bend—and guides me with a hand on the small of my back to a chair. “You gestating females,” she chides with a smile at Lilaina. “When are you going to learn neither of you can bend over?”

I’d like to protest that I’m not quite the whale Lilaina is, but I don’t think that’ll go over well.

Shana places the shoes upright, side by side, in front of the chair and I sit, sliding my feet into them.

“Perfect!” she exclaims, and Lilaina rolls her eyes.

“We knew they would be. They’re her own shoes.”

I don’t care about her churlishness. I feel like Cinderella going to the ball.

A ball I face with trepidation because I wonder if the males from the other clans might make Stratek an offer he can’t refuse. He says they don’t trade but ... where else would Eric have gotten the information?

It doesn’t matter that the other two women are decked out in jewelry with precious stones. Thick gold chains grace Shana’s waist, linking her straps of silk skirt together. Large diamonds shine from Lilaina’s earlobes.

For a brief second, I’m tempted to run to the bathroom to remove my cheap nose ring. The glass has dulled to the point it looks fogged. It must look awful compared to their large stones. When I see Lilaina’s eyes study it, I raise my chin a bit.

No, I won’t take it off.

“She has her makeup done in the Earth way,” Lilaina announces. “Shana does mine.”

Their makeup is a show—gaudy and extreme.

“Oh, let me, Tessa,” Shana begs. “You’ll look Adroki. The proper mate for a prince.”

I find myself nodding. And I sit perfectly still while Lilaina runs for a small cosmetic box and Shana takes out what looks like a paint brush. I feel like a clown as she draws shapes up the sides of my cheekbones, and presses dots over my eyebrows. She has me close my eyes while she paints some more and then Lilaina holds out a lipstick in gold.

Gold.

Not red. Not pink. No natural colors here. I’m going to look like an unnatural painting. And while I don’t doubt Lilaina would set me up to look a fool, somehow, I don’t think Shana would. Besides, their own makeup is extreme and they’re going out in public like that.

When Shana finally pulls away to admire her work, Lilaina goes and gets a mirror and holds it out.

For a brief second another memory hits—*his* hand, holding a mirror, making me sin as he forces me to look into it. Making me repeat penance a hundred times over.

“Look into it, Tessa,” Lilaina commands, and I jump. She sounds like her father.

I don’t hesitate. My eyes flick to the mirror and before I can think too much about the situation, I gasp.

I’m—*beautiful*. As beautiful—as glittery—as gold—as the shoes.

A trail of tiny jewels lines the top of my eyebrows and rises majestically into my hairline, growing larger in size as it leads up, the entire design peeking through my sleek curtain of bangs that sweep sideways across my head. My hair is shiny and smooth from the cleansers they use here and feels so soft—in fact, it looks redder than it appears back home. Not that I’ve seen it often, but it seems brighter here.

The gold lipstick isn’t hideous at all. It ties in the colors of the gold sweep of eyeshadow across my lids and even makes the jewels appear magical. Gemstones line my eyelids.

To top it off, there are black markings on the side of my face, swirling from my cheekbones and disappearing into my hair.

“They’re Stratek’s team markings,” Shana says. “His command. You’ll see the same markings tonight on his head.

On the skulls of all his armed males.”

“The marks show you’re his,” Lilaina adds.

I think I like that. I smile to myself. And she looks surprised, like that’s not the reaction she was expecting.

“Are we ready, sisters?” Standing in the middle, Shana loops an arm through mine and one through Lilaina’s.

Her enthusiasm makes even the dour Lilaina smile.
“Ready.”

“Ready,” I echo.

They lead me away, up a flight of stairs, and to a large room with heavy curtains. Shana babbles the entire time.

“You look beautiful,” she says to me. “Stratek’s going to flip.”

“But don’t be too easy,” Lilaina says, eyeballing the swell of my belly. “Make him work for it.”

My heartbeat flutters, wondering if she knows I’ve been registered a scarlet woman. Shana giggles, missing the thinly veiled insult.

I bare my teeth at Lilaina.

But then the curtains part and light fills the balcony we stand on. Up further across the way is another set of stairs that spiral down into the room.

“Introducing Queen Lilaina of the Adroki Clan.”

With a quick squeeze of her fingers, Shana releases Lilaina and she heads down the stairs. From where we are, I can't see the people down below, but I can hear their murmurings and some clapping.

“Princess Shana of the Adroki Clan.”

“You'll come when you hear your name,” she whispers. “Your mate will meet you halfway down the stairs and walk you the rest of the way.”

Then Shana leaves me to make her way down.

Despite Stratek's assurances that I won't be traded, I can't help the quiver of unease in my belly. Softly, I cup the small mound.

“It's okay, baby. I won't let anything happen to us,” I whisper.

“Last but not least, our newest addition. Prince Stratek's new mate, Princess Tessa of the Adroki Clan.” My name rolls off the accented tongue and it sounds foreign and exotic.

Refusing to cower to my trepidation, I step toward the stairs ... and pause.

There's a sea of strange faces looking up at me, various colors of tentacled people wearing obviously different clothing. There's a warrior clan, half naked and looking scary with black circles painted around their nose slits and their eyes. There's a clan made up so incongruously and holding so still they look like wax dolls.

Dear God. Can I do this? Can I live among these strange beings for six long months?

But that's all I have time to notice before I take a deep breath, hold my chin high, and then hear a slithering, rustling sound. Two of Stratek's men from the beach, I can see their uniforms but not their faces, are making their way up the winding staircase. They're breaking protocol for their captain's mate.

When they're closer, I see it's Henyon and Jaze who walk side by side up the stairs, their uniforms crisp and neat in colorful gold and purple fabric. Their eyes never break eye contact with me. This time I'm not afraid of Stratek's men. I'm not wary of their intentions. I'm so very grateful that they

thought of me and my insecurities and came up top to escort me. Because of that, I give them a tumultuous smile.

When they reach the top of the steps, each man holds his hand out for me to take. I place my fingertips in theirs, and like when I hold Stratek's hand, I'm aware of how much bigger their hands are than mine. Very slowly, they hold my hands up in the air and walk me down the winding staircase. Halfway down, a man waits on a small landing and my heart jumps when I'm close enough to see who it is. He looks so handsome and regal with black markings lacing up the side of his face and clear onto his head—markings that match mine.

“Stratek,” I breathe.

He's standing so still, his eyes focused on every step I take. I falter, pausing on the landing across from him. Something indefinable roves across his face.

“Goddess, you're so beautiful,” he mutters thickly, his accent more pronounced than usual. “You take my breath away.” Right there, for all to see, he drops to what could be considered his knees, his tentacles spreading out around us. Somewhere behind me, Henyon and Jaze disappear as they head up the steps.

He's close, so close, but not quite touching me. I rectify it immediately, skimming my fingertips across his head, sweeping the fingers of my other hand across his square jaw. His nostrils flare with my touch.

He's so strong and handsome. Sexual magnetism oozes from him. I can see why I slept with him that night, three months ago. I can see why I was labeled scarlet over him.

He opens the inner flap of his vest and pulls out a box.

"Nothing can make you more beautiful, my love," he says. "These are my mother's, and I know she'd want you to have them. You deserve to shine."

Nestled inside is a necklace, an emerald pendant with matching earrings. I look at him, confused, and then glance at his lack of earlobes.

He smiles, then kisses my baby bump sweetly and slowly rises to his full height.

"They've been modified for your head-appendages." He tugs my ear lobe.

I snort. "Ears."

"Put them on," he says, and takes the necklace, draping it around my neck until it rests in the swell of my cleavage.

I gather the earrings and slip them into my lobes. They have tiny, dainty, gold chains that link smaller emeralds into a cuff that fits the shell of my ear. It's custom-made, a sweet, thoughtful gift from a man who doesn't even have ears.

Right there on the landing, I forget about the party below. I forget about the people waiting for us. It seems like only he and I exist at this moment.

Then my eyes close as he drops his forehead to mine and our breaths mingle. "My mother would love you."

It makes me strangely choked up. "I'm honored to wear her jewels."

He pulls away and kisses my lips lightly. "I'll have you dripping in so many jewels you'll barely be able to walk underneath the weight."

Speaking of walking...

"Thank you for my shoes," I say.

His face lights up. "Do you like them?"

"I love them. They're beautiful."

And there on the landing, he turns to align himself with me and offers me his arm. Together we slowly descend the rest

of the stairs and before we even get to the bottom, clapping begins across the room.

I'm not sure of the protocol here. On Earth, women are seen, not heard. So, I raise my chin a little higher and smile demurely, my practiced political greeting.

But Stratek must see the tension in my face.

“Why don't you show the others your shoes?”

“Wha—what?”

“Stick out your walking appendage. Show off the shoes I made for you.”

We're on the last step and the thought of it makes me grin—a real one, not the practiced, teeth-baring move I've been taught. No, the grin comes because it's such a ... Stratek-move. He doesn't care about protocol or rules. He does what he wants when he wants. How he wants.

And right there, on the bottom step of the landing, I hike up my skirt and flaunt my bejeweled and bedazzled high heels.

Chapter Twelve

Tessa:

THE UPROAR OF CHUCKLES makes spontaneous laughter burst out of me as I steer my ankle side to side, showing all the glittery angles of the beautiful shoes. The people cheer rambunctiously and several of the males clap Stratek on the shoulder. His eyes are totally on me, though, as he laughs at my outburst of laughter.

That's all it takes to make this man happy. Laughter. Real laughter. And then he pulls me close to him and we're waltzing across the room.

I remember this. I remember dancing with him on the balcony, laughing as he spun me round and round, showing me the dances from his land. I remember the fun, I remember laughing, I remember wishing the night would never end. But silly me did end it—because I wanted him. I took him by the hand and led him to unused guest quarters.

Stratek deposits me in the center of the dance floor and bows, and I follow with a curtsy—which isn't exactly the way

they do it, considering they don't have legs—but it basically lowers the female. He'd explained that with their females, her tentacles would flare out to lower her.

His smile is practically glowing.

He takes my hand in his and we come together, cheek to cheek but not touching, then quickly do the other side. He drops my hand so he can move behind me, neither of us turning our heads as we move back-to-back. And then he turns so he's facing me again, and now he can take me in his arms to move slowly across the room.

"You remember the moves," he whispers in my ear.

"I do."

"It must have seemed important at the time."

"Or we danced it fifty or sixty times, along with downing shots."

His chuckle spurs an answering giggle from me.

"It's called the Mating Dance, Tessa," he whispers and suddenly tugs me so close to him, it's sensual. The lights dim in the room and other dancers finally tear their eyes from us, joining the dance floor in their own dance, taking the focus from us.

“Mating Dance?”

He prepared me for this night, even before he knew we'd be mated. Or that I'd end up pregnant.

“When a male wants his female, he shows her.”

Wants? Is he talking about sex? I can't seem to mind; instead, the thought sends a spark of excitement through my core.

“You look so beautiful,” he says. “The perfect princess. Dressed to the nines and decorated in my colors. My marks.”

“Your markings are gorgeous,” I tell him, tracing the side of his face where they roll up over his head.

“Thank you for wearing them,” he says, dropping his forehead to mine.

When he's there, I can focus on other things. The feel of his strong arms wrapped around me. The press of his muscled chest to mine. How large his hand is where it tenderly clasps mine. How one of his tentacles slides up my bare back, pressing the tip of the triangular placed suction cups against me like a delicate kiss. Then I'm aware of the bulge between us.

I know from our passion in the bright daylight that a sort of pocket houses his cock and it extrudes, hot and glistening. I don't remember exactly how it looks, other than it was a darker gray with a purple head. It's thicker, too, and seems to have two or three spots that are rounder and thicker like the head, but on the shaft. He's completely hairless and while his skin seems thicker everywhere on his body, on his cock it seems much more delicate and sensitive.

I willingly press my body against his bulge, and he hisses.

"Tessa," he whispers.

"Mmm?" I ask, but I'm not sure what I'm asking. My nipples have hardened and jut out from my dress, and it feels like everything inside me has tightened and become hypersensitive.

He swirls me out and then curls me back to him and this time his tentacles wrap around my hips, capturing me to him. He looks down into my eyes and his pupils flutter as they dilate, the purple irises growing and receding. He's focused on my lips so I turn my face up, eager with anticipation.

His mouth is on mine, my arms are around his neck and his arms are around my waist. I open my mouth, giving him

full access, licking him in return when his tongue snakes inside. I can taste him and it's sexy and alluring—like the ale they drink flavored with the essence of Stratek. I thrust my tongue to explore the texture inside his mouth, finding the sharp points of his teeth deliciously tantalizing. So much power and strength in him. And all for me. No one tastes like Stratek. No one curls my insides like this and makes me *need*.

He pulls away. "I wish we had the privacy of the balcony from the last party."

I'm panting, but my vision clears, and I look around. People are trying not to stare, but eyes keep flicking to us. We're putting on a show.

"It'll be just you and me later, right?" I whisper.

"Oh, yes, my mate," he says, and dips me low.

I can't help the quiver of anticipation that hits me deep inside.

But then there's a tap on my shoulder and Stratek and I both pause to see Jaze.

"Lady Tessa, may I have a dance?"

Huh, that's different. Instead of asking Stratek, their culture asks the female. Jaze smiles at me, Stratek is smiling at

me, and after Jaze and Henyon greeting me up on the balcony, I don't have any fear left. My smile grows wider, and I hold my arms out to welcome him.

Jaze pulls me in with a spin which makes me giggle and makes Stratek laugh. The music subtly changes, growing into a faster tempo, and the Adroki tap their tentacles to the beat as they move.

“Thank you for making our captain happy,” Jaze murmurs in my ear.

“Thank you for making me feel accepted,” I say.

Jaze frowns. “We will always be here for you, Mistress.”

“Call me Tessa.”

He grins, showing teeth. “Tessa.”

For some odd reason, I notice the faces of the other Adroki are more relaxed, smiling more all because I'm dancing with Jaze. But it doesn't stop with Jaze. Soon Henyon cuts in, and after that it's Taloek, the third man from the beach that was only there for a minute or two. The beat of the music grows slow as if giving me a break as more and more of Stratek's team cut in to dance and introduce themselves.

And like attracts like, because his men are happy and chatty, just like him. They don't seem at all serious, but they're obviously structured when it's important.

Like when they realized it was my first time to be introduced and they walked me to my mate. I really, really hope my baby is Stratek's. He deserves his own child. And the baby deserves to stay here on this planet.

Henryon comes back for a second dance. "Milady." He bows. "You look pretty today."

I snort. "Just today."

He chuckles. "I just thought I should tell you before you tell me."

The statement might have made me blush before. Now I just smile widely. "You needed to know."

He dances me across the room to my waiting mate. But right before we get there, one of the males from the half-naked clan steps in our path.

"I am Kiartrok. Surely the new Princess would share a dance with one from the Third Wing clan."

There isn't a smile on the new man's face, not at all. With the black streaks painted over his eyes, he looks vicious and

mean. But I don't want to break my stride of their people accepting me, so I'm not going to turn him down. Besides, everyone has been friendly so far, even when I misunderstand things.

“Princess Tessa respectfully declines,” Henryon snaps, and his voice has lost all of its playful tone. “She is with kish and cannot be worn out. She is to return to her mate.”

Instead of looking upset, the man's mouth twists in a sardonic smile. “Of course. Best wishes to you, Princess.” He doesn't sound like he means it. Instead, he sounds somewhat sarcastic.

My gaze flits from him to Henryon and from the corner of my eye, I see the rest of the guys I'd danced with—Stratek's team—move in quickly and quietly, forming two lines on either side of me. One by one, they stretch out a hand and take mine loosely, then pass it to the next, moving me right to left along the chain until the last hand I reach for is Stratek's. And when we touch, it's like a zing runs through me. I could be blind but would know which hand is his.

His smile is full and sure as he greets me. “My mate,” he rumbles, enclosing me in his arms. And I really want to be here.

Suddenly, the line of males that got me here is gone, and the scary new male is gone and it's just me and Stratek together again.

His eyes are soft as he looks down to me at my height.
“Let's go to the next room for dinner, my love.”

I can't help the little glimmer of hope that hits my belly at the endearment.

Chapter Thirteen

THERE IS A FAINT, odd smell that thickens the air. A little musky. As I sniff and try to decipher what it is, it dissipates suddenly. But then it doesn't matter as Stratek lifts me into his arms and carries me to our quarters.

Dinner was wonderful, loud and boisterous, full of fun when couples took a break from dancing to come together to eat. We had another slow dance afterward and when I pressed my body against his suggestively, he growled and picked me up, carrying me from the room.

He's so handsome in his uniform, his tribal markings etched on his face and up over his head. I keep tracing them and he tells me the ink is permanent enough to last a few weeks without smearing.

"Is there anything I'm forgetting?" he asks, nuzzling my hair. "I've fed my mate and kish. I've danced with you; I was careful not to get you too tuckered out—"

"There might be something you missed," I say and slide my hand inside his shirt. His skin is hot—fevered—and I can

feel him shudder as I run my palm over him. It makes me melt inside and I can't help the surge of hormones that make me so needy for him. Maybe it's the pregnancy. Maybe it's the land. But I can't seem to control myself around him.

“Then I need to get that need taken care of,” he says.

“Yes,” I agree. “Let's get that taken care of.”

“You're sure?”

“Never more sure,” I assure him. “I want you.”

“I've waited forever to hear you say those words.” But there's still longing in his voice.

And then we're inside and he's banging the door shut. I press my upper half to him, my nipples poking against his chest, before I slide down his body.

He grunts, a short sound of deep pleasure, and grips his shirt from the hem to whip it over his head. Quickly he pulls his shirt off and doesn't even care that the buttons on his fancy uniform go flying. His chest is gorgeous, full of ridges and taut muscles and warm skin. His skin glistens with moisture. I skim a fingertip in the deep ridges of his abs. He has a bellybutton, which is strangely human.

Somehow, I remember that.

“Your touch is amazing,” he grits.

“Not sure why we waited so long. It’s not like we haven’t made love,” I pant.

“I wanted you to get to know me before you were hopelessly enthralled over my cock.”

I can’t help the sudden laughter that bursts out of me.

“Too late,” I assure him. “I’m under your cock-spell.”

I love the proud look he gives me. Then his eyes grow sultry and heavy lidded. He carefully picks me up and lays me on the bed.

“Can I study you again? This time without your panties?”

The shimmery glow of excitement in his eyes encourages me as I bend my legs up and gather the skirt at my waist. Then I inch my panties over my hips, aware of his gritty gaze, the clench of his teeth, the solid line of his jaw where a tic works. I should be embarrassed. I should be hesitant. But I’m not. It’s so very sexy to undress in front of him. It fills me with power to know he wants me this badly. And if I admit it to myself, I want him, too.

When the panties are down to my ankles, I kick them off and allow my knees to drop to the bed, opening me wide for

him.

Then he just studies me like he's memorizing every fold of my pussy. And still, instead of being embarrassed like I should be, I'm horribly aroused, eager for his touch. Wondering when he will reach out and stroke me.

“Something you need, my mate?” he rumbles. “Tell me. Take what you need, remember?” His eyes never leave the intimacy of my body.

With him, I feel perfect. I feel sexy. I feel whole.

“I need your touch,” I admit.

“Where?”

My body involuntarily clenches, imagining where I want him to touch, and I can tell by the instant lust that roves over his face that he just witnessed my pussy clench.

“There,” I whisper.

There's no hesitation. One big finger slides up the slick lips of my pussy and plunges inside.

I whimper, then moan at the exquisite sensation as he curls his finger inside me.

“Feel good?”

“So perfect,” I gasp. This feeling between us is magical.

“I want to see all of you,” he rumbles.

I sit up and he helps me unfasten the gown before lifting it over my head. I can feel when my breasts bob free. Then it slithers to the ground, and I swear I’ve never seen such lust in a man’s eyes as I do when he stares at me.

“You’re luscious,” he says. “Perfect breasts. Perfect cunt.”

It makes me arch my back a tiny bit, aware that my boobs have grown since pregnancy. I’m sure my pussy looks somewhat demure with the way I sit, my thighs together, both legs bent to the side. But maybe not as demure as I think considering I shaved off the hair this morning, and it’s not a tiny trail of reddish brown that he sees, but the actual indentation of my slit.

And then, modesty be damned. I deliberately open my legs again so I’m sitting more cross-legged.

“You shaved. I can see everything now. You’ll drive me insane,” he murmurs. “Perfect clit. Hard and poking out from your folds.”

That shouldn't turn me on as much as it does. But it's different here. I can be as wanton as I want. For the remainder of the six months, I'm this man's mate.

And that gives me a satisfied feeling deep inside.

“Touch it,” I demand.

His large index finger slides up my cleft, gathering my slickness, and circles my clit. Round and round. It feels so good, my breathing grows erratic, and I whimper.

Then he presses firmly onto the stiff bud with his hot, wet finger and I moan. I can feel the heat emanating from the spot, sparking the nerves to flutter delicious sensations throughout the rest of my body.

His large frame covers mine as he pushes me back to lay down on the bed and his tentacles wind up my legs, forcing them impossibly wider, strong on my thighs where they hold me spread open. I shiver at the lovely feeling of him owning me.

“How many times did we come that night?” I ask, caressing my baby bump so he knows what night I'm referring to. Or else, I want to believe this baby is from that night and not the horrifying one before.

“Countless,” he says as I slide my hand down his muscled chest to his abs. I love the way his flesh darkens and narrows like a happy trail leading into his nest of tentacles, which easily part for my hand.

I trace the slit that covers his bulge, and a tortured groan erupts from his throat. The sensitive flesh parts and his gorgeous erection juts out, spilling into my hand. His heavy balls fall out of the pouch, and I caress them once before going back to his cock. I stroke downward, feeling the heavy bulges inside, two or three of them, if you include the last one that could be considered his cockhead. It’s huge and swollen, his girth wide. Where the round bulges are, the skin is darker. His cock is slippery with self-lubrication and as I finger the slit on the spongy head, more oozes out.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

I rub his frenulum back and forth, a constant motion until he emits a growl of pleasure deep in his throat. Then I change it up, using both hands to rove over him in a corkscrew movement, increasing the pressure until he gives a deep, pained-sounding groan.

“I need to eat you,” he gasps, pulling my hands away with two tentacles that wind around my wrists. “You love it.”

“Do I?” The thought of something so filthy curls me up inside.

“Fuck, yeah,” he says. “You go crazy and come in my mouth when I nibble on that delectable little clit.”

The idea of my tender flesh between his teeth almost sends ripples of completion throughout me. I clench my thighs to control the erotic image my mind has conjured.

“Later,” I hiss. “Right now, I want you to fill me.”

I watch his pupils darken and I’m not even sure what I want him to fill me with. His cock? Yes. His come? God, yes. I want his seed to fill me up, overflow, and dribble down my legs. I want to smell him on me. I want the bedsheets filthy and wet, slick with us.

Us.

I’m going to be honest with myself and admit my feelings. I have a few months to live like I’ve never lived, and this is the only time in my life when I’ll ever be able to do this.

His tentacles spread out as he covers me. Two draw my arms up over my head, locking me in place. I slide my legs around his hips, opening my pussy up as he aligns his slippery

cock, sliding it up my slit and nudging my clit. I moan with the intense sensation.

His cock slides down again, and now I know why his cockhead is so large. He's so slippery and wet he needs a large head to lock inside.

He pushes inside me and pauses, and we groan simultaneously. I can feel every inch of him, a huge bulge stretching my lips around his flesh, and it feels so wicked, so delicious.

"You feel so fucking good," he grits, eyes clenched closed.

"I know," I pant. "Deeper, my mate, please."

His eyes fly open in surprise. I've referred to him as my mate for the first time.

He plunges inside all the way, and I swear it feels like my pussy closes a bit around his cockhead, stretches wide again for the next bulge, closes firmly around the smooth shaft, and then opens again for the last bit. It feels like I'm swallowing him. Like my pussy is ... deep-throating him.

I open my mouth and take a huge bite of his neck when he's seated in me completely, his heavy balls slapping against

my ass. I'm stuffed so full. It's the only way I can keep myself from telling him how I feel, from begging him to fuck me, to ask him to keep me. And I know that in the light of day, that may not feel like the best course of action.

He hisses with satisfaction and then starts plunging in and out. I release my teeth and suck on his neck instead, wondering if a hickey will show up. But then all thoughts leave my head as pleasure overtakes me.

I'm squeezing his cock as he pulls out and grinding myself against him, my legs pulling him into me. My pussy is clenching him so tight, I don't think there's any room between us at all, but then two tentacles slide between our sweaty bodies and attach to my hard nipples, which are thrusting into the air like they need to be sucked, pinched, anything. And another slides up along the pucker of my ass, around the area where we're combined, and clamps onto my swollen clit.

God.

It's way, way too much sensation and I scream as lust overtakes me, spirals of orgasm breaking through my midsection. My pussy is squeezing his cock in time with the waves of pleasure, and I scream out his name.

His mouth locks to mine and he groans as he comes and floods me with hot seed, his entire body shaking with explosions.

Then he's softly, sweetly kissing me, pulling away from me to press his forehead to mine. His tentacles release my hands, but he's holding his body off me with his forearms locked onto the bed.

“You're mine,” he says. “I'll never let you go.”

I have to acknowledge that I never want to go. Instead of saying the words, I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight.

Chapter Fourteen

“WHAT? WHAT IS GOING ON?” The horror in my voice sends Shana and Lilaina into a fit of giggles.

Stratek left our warm bed in the early hours to go train. How he isn't worn out is beyond me, considering how many times we reached for each other during the night. It's like we're making up for lost time, admitting to ourselves how much we want each other. How much we've always wanted each other. To be fair, he always knew. It was me that was holding back.

He seemed energized and ready for the day when he kissed me goodbye, telling me to meet with Shana and Lilaina after breakfast in the courtyard. They would show me the Tiiblet hut.

But we'd barely gotten outside when I froze.

I'm not sure of what I'm seeing. Everywhere in the courtyard, Tiiblets are positioned on top of one another. Some are blatantly humping. Others are moaning. Most are naked. Some have some articles of clothing on like a random pair of

socks. Nothing else. A scarf. Nothing else. Just pink, pink skin. And wrinkles. Puffy folds.

And I see a large, glistening cock. Then two. It's a great big orgy-fest.

My mouth drops open, and then closes, then opens again. For such little people, they have the biggest cocks I've ever seen.

Lilaina starts giggling and then Shana joins in, but I can't. I'm shocked.

"Is this—are they—"

"Fucking," Lilaina says. "They are fucking."

"What?"

"Try the word. Say it. It's rather exhilarating."

I gasp. "I couldn't."

"We say it all the time," Shana says, and her eyes sparkle with mirth. "Didn't we mention the Tiiblets go into heat? Surely you smelled it in the air?"

I'd smelled something ... odd. Musky and heavy. It wasn't unpleasant but now I'm horrified that I didn't think it

was offensive. Surely it wasn't the ... musk of their balls? Their ball-sac musk? Was I sniffing Tiiblet balls?

"Mistress!" Driki calls out to Lilaina, waving at her. She wiggles her fingers back at him.

"Why don't they move somewhere more private?" I ask, aware that my voice sounds somewhat harsh. Judgmental. But how can I not be? I've never seen anything like people fucking in public.

It's live porn, which is only for men.

Bantu looks up from where he's crouched on top of Driki. I cringe, knowing by the widening of his eyes he's noticed me too.

"Hi, Princess," Bantu calls to me, then utters a long, keening groan. It's drawn out and breathy and I think he's shuddering as he says my name.

"Is he—is he—" I can't quite get the words out.

"He's coming," Lilaina says harshly. "It's an *orgasm*. Let go of the virgin cloak. You're pregnant yourself and not exactly pure and untouched."

If only she knew my son might be her brother. I imagine the look of shock on her shrewish face should I blurt it out.

Shana's voice sounds somewhat gentle in contrast, as if she feels sorry for me. "They congregate together when they go into heat because it encourages their pheromones to excrete more, to build off each other. Each one's musk tries to top the others. The higher their levels, the greater chances of breeding during this heat. They've struggled to have young for so long, you know."

"Princess," Bantu calls again, sure I didn't hear him the first time. But he's milking his own cock as he calls me and I'm not sure he isn't masturbating to me, so I don't answer.

"He thinks you're beautiful," Lilaina says in her snide way.

"You told me," I snap.

"Then give him a smile. A wave. An acknowledgement. Anything," she snaps back. "He likes you."

It's a challenge because I think all three of us know why he wants me to acknowledge him, and I'm not some alien version of a spank bank to get their rocks off.

"Princess! Princess!" The Tiiblet's voice is quavering now, begging, and I'm sure he's close to another orgasm.

And then, just to shut her up, I raise my hand in a half-wave at Bantu and he gives a huge smile that takes over his entire face, then a long, drawn-out sigh as he comes deeply into Driki's bent over, shuddering body, obviously in the throes of his own orgasm.

Gross. Just like I expected. And I utter the one word I'm truly feeling. "Disgusting."

The other Tiiblets positioned around us frown at me and whisper, some even point my way.

"Stratek's mate?" Someone says.

"What does the good prince see in her?" Another one mutters.

Lilaina positively gloats over the fact that all the little people hate me. My heart sinks, realizing this was her plan all along. It's my own failure; I should have known better than to snub them.

She's determined to turn me into the evil stepmother.

I turn to her and whisper, "You bitch."

"Tut, tut, mommy dearest," she whispers back. "Show some respect. Don't forget I'm queen to your princess in this land."

She turns to walk away, then looks back over her shoulder.

“Oh, and on Earth, also.”

She walks away, leaving me to clench my hands into fists as I glare at her retreating back.

Shana looks at me sadly. “I’m sorry. Give it time,” she says. “You and Lilaina will overcome your differences and become true sisters. All three of us shall be. I feel it.”

“I can’t ever see that,” I hiss. She truly is a bitch, even if she isn’t insane like I first thought.

“She’s moody,” Shana says. “Just pregnancy hormones.”

I blink. That’s no excuse. I have just as many hormones as she does.

She nods as if I agree with her. “Each pregnancy is different. She’s carrying twins. Twins.” She smiles. “Our babies will all be cousins, Tessa! Mikki, Beshi, yours and Stratek’s, and the twins.” She entwines her arm in mine and squeezes me.

She’s right. My baby—whoever the father is—will definitely be cousins to Lilaina’s children, whether related on her side or on the Adroki side. Through Stratek.

Good Lord above.

“Sometimes,” Shana continues, “when we don’t like something about someone else, it’s because it reminds us of something we don’t like about ourselves. Lilaina remembers being thrust into a different world and having to view it in an entirely new way. She thought everything females did was sinful, including loving my brother. I think you remind her of how she used to be—naïve and shocked at our world.”

“More like brainwashed,” I mutter, and Shana doesn’t disagree. She simply looks at me expectantly and I stare back, wondering what she wants from me. It’s like she wants me to have some kind of light bulb moment, but I’m not seeing it. Surely, she doesn’t think I am as brainwashed as Lilaina?

She sighs.

“The Tiiblets used to live in the forests. They hid from the Tshiki, our enemies. One day, and I’m ashamed to admit we took way too long to figure it out, we noticed they were missing. We hadn’t seen Tiiblets in the forests in years. They’d all been captured by the Tshiki, forced to breed in captivity, and were being kept as cattle. Why chase them down as snacks when they were corralled in your own village? We confronted the Tshiki. You know what they said? The Tiiblets weren’t

people. They were just animals. They refused to see reason and refused to let them go. We went to war with them over it. You see, after the Tiiblets, who would be next? Our children? Our elderly? Our weak? The war took out many on both sides, but we defeated them. Turns out, luck was on our side. They were going into their own mating heat; it happens once every decade for them. They had to protect their queen, so they surrendered all the Tiiblets who were left and agreed to peace treaties. The Tiiblets were unable to return to the forests to live. They were traumatized and afraid of every rustle of leaves, every gust of wind. They needed the safety of walls, protection of others. We brought them into the villages, not just ours but those of the other clans as well and built them their own space. They love to make things, fabric especially. Except for Driki and Bantu. They didn't want to live with the others. They wanted to serve in the castle, so we let them. Juris allowed them to become Lilaina's companions."

"Forced to breed?" I ask, horrified.

She nods. "It's hard for them to conceive. It's a gift for them to allow others to watch them ... for so long, they didn't have a choice. They go into heat every three years and conditions have to be right. They need to be happy. They were

horribly unhappy in captivity, of course, but a couple of pregnancies slipped through. Those babies were taken from their parents.”

I don't want to know. I don't want to know. But like witnessing the horror of a train wreck, I can't help but ask. “Whose?”

“Bantu's.”

“Oh, my God.” My vision blurs and only the pounding of my heart keeps me from passing out.

“It's why he's a bit more delicate than Driki. Why Driki is so protective of him. It took him years and years to recover to the point of where he is now.” She motions with her hand to the two little guys, still squealing with delight. “Ready to breed again. Fingers crossed that it takes.”

“Maman!” A little voice calls out.

Her mate, Maleek, approaches with their child, Beshi, on his shoulders.

“Oh, my baby,” Shana coos.

I find myself smiling. I have to admit, Beshi is a doll.

Maleek, the huge man that he is, has to bend to kiss delicate Shana. “Lunch, my love?”

“Yes!” She turns my way. “Tessa?”

I’m not sure what she’s asking, but I wave her away. “I’m fine. I’ll make my way back home, or Stratek will come later. Go enjoy.” I smile, because it’s easy to like her, unlike Lilaina.

And then I settle down to watch more mating.

Stratek:

“Tessa?”

My mate barely turns my way. “They’re almost done,” she whispers, her face glued to the mating of the Tiiblets ahead.

“How long have you been here, sweet?” I ask. It’s past dinnertime and she and our kishling must be starving.

“Since lunch.”

They are almost done then. Lilaina had popped in from time to time, and I know my sister had been in until she left for lunch. For the first time, I glance around. Sure enough, the

mating heat of the Tiiblets is definitely slowing from this morning's showing. They're not as frantic, their movements slower and more languid now. I know when it stops, their elder will be able to tell who has conceived.

"You must be exhausted," I say, and pull her to me.

She slumps against me. "No, not yet."

I chuckle because her motions belie her words. But she refuses to admit it. To acknowledge it, as if it is a sign of weakness to leave before the Tiiblets finish. I press my lips to the top of her head, knowing this is important to her. I breathe deeply, inhaling the fresh flowery essence of her hair.

"It won't be long now," I whisper. "And then they will gather in a circle and the chanting begins. As they chant their ancient mantras, their elder goes around to each one in the circle and touches a little belly to see if they gestate. When one has conceived, that person's chant changes to song."

"Song?" she whispers.

"It's amazing to see. Magical."

"Is it?"

"Definitely. We wait three years for this. But it's been hard. Barely any pregnancies in the last few rounds. They're

still recovering, you know. They spent so long as captives. That's hard to get over."

Finally, the Tiiblets start to pull their loincloths on. Their trousers. A panting Driki and Bantu stumble our way.

"Did you see us, Princess?" Bantu asks.

I expect my mate's face to twist in disgust. To giggle in embarrassment or to deny that she watched. I don't expect her to understand what a gift it is for the Tiiblets to want us to observe, but her face softens when she answers. "I saw."

And Bantu blushes, the pink of his skin turning even pinker at the cheeks and forehead. The others begin to gather in a ring and the chanting starts.

"Bantu, come," Driki says and pulls the Tiiblet to take their place in the circle. All along the way, Bantu waves at Tessa before taking his place with his people, and next to his mate.

The chanting in the room grows louder, frenzied as everyone in the room, Adroki included, takes it up on their behalf for the ceremony.

The elderly Tiiblet makes his way around the circle, touching each little rounded belly. Sometimes a person nods

their head, sighs, and continues chanting and we know the breeding didn't take. But every now and then, the Tiiblet being rubbed breaks into an ancient Tiiblet song, harmonizing with the hum of chanting.

“That one is positive,” I whisper to Tessa. “A child forms.”

By the time the elder reaches Bantu, Tessa has nearly chewed her fingernails off. And when the elder rubs his little belly, he screeches out loud with excitement and starts to cry.

“Oh, my love,” Driki says, holding him tight. But Bantu is blubbering too hard to sing the traditional song along with the others.

“Well, I'll be damned,” I whisper. “He's positive. Finally.”

The elder moves and rubs Driki's larger belly, and then he breaks into song and Bantu, still crying, uses a quavering voice to sing along with him. The chanting of the non-pregnant people grows louder, keeping the beat of the song for their brethren who sing, happy and joyous for them even though their own pregnancy didn't take. Soon the entire room is singing and chanting because this is how Tiiblets are. Joyous for each other and inspirational for others.

I turn to Tessa to find tears running down her cheeks.

“He did it,” she whispers. “He’s pregnant.”

I clear my throat. “Yes. He did it.”

The chanting and singing comes to a crescendo and then abruptly stops, leaving our ears ringing in the sudden silence. All the Tiiblets congratulate the newly pregnant people as I pull Tessa into my arms.

I wipe the tears from her cheeks, and she smiles up at me tremulously. “Pregnancy hormones,” she excuses, but I know differently. I know her heart is touched by the little Tiiblets.

Then the two come running, hand in hand.

“Princess! Bantu is pregnant,” Bantu shrieks and throws himself into her arms.

“So is Driki,” Driki says and throws himself into mine.

“Oomph,” I say, and rub his little belly. “You already have the weight behind you.”

“I can’t wait to grow fat,” he declares.

I open my mouth to tell him he’s already there, but my sweet mate elbows me in the side. I snap my mouth closed and smile tenderly at her. She will make a new male of me.

“I have a carriage waiting for you outside,” I tell her. “We shall take a ride around the village.”

“Oh, good,” she frets. “Bantu and Driki can’t walk home in their delicate condition. We’ll have to carry them to the carriage.”

I snort. The carrying will come upon me. As small as Bantu is, I can’t imagine my pregnant mate carrying him.

“We shall be carried throughout our pregnancy?!” Bantu shrieks, and hugs Driki.

I groan at Tessa’s wide-eyed, shocked look. I’m about to protest when she elbows me again.

“It’s only nine months,” she says.

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. Does she think to tease that she’ll go home in six cycles and leave me carrying the two chubby creatures everywhere?

“Oh, no, Princess,” Bantu says. “A Tiiblet is only pregnant for a moon cycle.”

Her mouth drops open. “That’s it?”

“Yes,” Bantu gushes. “We shall have bablets soon!”

“So soon,” Driki agrees, smoothing the little hair protrusions on Bantu’s head.

From the doorway, Henryon pokes his head in. I wave him over.

“My Lady,” he says and bows respectfully to Tessa.

She snorts. “Knock it off.”

A grin breaks out on his face and he holds out his arms to take Bantu from her.

“Careful,” she warns. “He’s pregnant.”

Henryon widens his eyes. “Congratulations,” he says to Bantu, who blushes and then starts sobbing some more.

“I am, too,” Driki announces as I get up, still holding him. “Our bablets will grow up together. I hope they mate. But if not, I am sure they will still be dear to each other.”

Henryon raises a brow as I continue to hold Driki in my arms. “Tessa declared the Tiiblets must be carried for the duration of their pregnancy,” I explain.

“And pampered.” She frowns, quite seriously and unaware of the power her words wield. “But I meant—”

“We’re special to her,” Bantu interrupts.

Tessa cannot explain that she only meant to carry them to the carriage for the ride home, but she shrugs it off.

Henryon and I both extend a hand to her and pull her gently to her feet. I notice the other Tiiblets watching my mate carefully as we leave. I smile at them, and they skitter away.

Once outside, Jaze takes Driki from me so I can help Tessa into the carriage. Henryon sets Bantu back onto her lap where he curls against her breast, and I sit before Jaze deposits Driki into mine.

This was not quite the romantic ride I'd planned, but that's okay. I'll roll with it. My males join the others at the poles that extend from the carriage. They softly push and the vehicle rolls across the yard, lit up by torches and fires that flame in the clay-baked ovens that house them.

"It's beautiful," Tessa gasps, and I smile to think of how my plans to seduce my mate went awry.

"So lovely," Bantu blubbers.

We take two turns around the entire village before my men stop at the giant steps of the castle. Again, two of them step forward to gather the Tiiblets while Tessa and I are helped

from the carriage and then the clingy little Bantu is deposited back into her arms.

I understand he crushes on her, and I understand her heart has softened toward him after my sister explained his lack of kishren.

As we enter the castle, Juris and a waddling Lilaina are in the great room, along with Shana and Maleek. Mikki and Beshi are coloring at a small table.

“Mistress!” Bantu gushes, and then breaks into tears yet again.

“Oh, Bantu, what’s wrong?” Lilaina gasps, jumping up.

“Bantu is so happy,” he sobs. “I’m with child.”

Pregnancy seems to have made him refer to himself in the third person.

Lilaina coos at him.

“Tessa has declared the Tiiblets pampered throughout their pregnancy,” I explain to Juris.

My brother actually smiles.

“We can do that,” Juris says and rises. He pushes two chairs together to make an elongated bed. I deposit Driki into

one and then take Bantu from the females to sit next to his nest-mate.

“Let’s get you four fed,” Juris says gently, as Driki and Bantu throw their arms around each other.

And continue to sob.

Chapter Fifteen

Tessa:

ONE MONTH.

I can't believe Tiiblets give birth in a month or a lunar cycle, as they say here.

It's been exhausting, but Stratek's been a trooper. I didn't realize when I wanted Bantu carried to the carriage that it would extend to doting on them the entire pregnancy, but my mate just laughed at my mistake and picked up the slack. He's an amazing man.

And yet, though they're now at the end of their term, the Tiiblets look exactly the same. Though they moan about pregnancy woes and gaining weight, they don't look any different, save for walking with a hand supporting their back. They waddle side to side the way Lilaina does, but in an exaggerated state. Dramatic little creatures. To be fair, even Lilaina has done her part. Everyone has, really. Everyone wants to see them happy and healthy with wee ones of their own.

Part of me can't imagine trading a baby off with another family, though. My brain can't wrap around it, and no one has made any mention of it at all. I'll just keep quiet and see what happens.

At least, being around the constantly crying Bantu has Lilaina and me tiptoeing around and being polite. We don't have time to snip and snark at each other, and I'm kind of relieved. Because I've been ecstatically happy, spending as much time with Stratek as possible. The nights, when the two of us come together, are even more incredible and I can't help but feel like ... I'm in love.

I wish there was a way out of this mess. I wish there was a way I could bring him to the island with me. I wish this baby was his and I never had to leave.

But that's not my luck. With my luck, it will be Eric's and I have to prepare myself for the inevitable. I just can't figure out how.

"Tessa! Tessa!" A frantic knocking at the door rouses me.

Stratek has left with his brother this morning to welcome the first wave of Britonians here to build the electrical grid for the travel system. In addition, the Third Wing clan is coming

to our village. It seems to bring tension but I'm not sure why. I'll have to find Shana to ask.

I fling open the door. "What?"

"Come quick! The Tiiblets aren't in their room!" Lilaina says.

I race down the hallways after her—easier for me, since she's wider. And due way before me.

"I found a bed full of bloody sheets and nothing else!" she says, her face white as the sheets had once been.

Despite my racing heart, I'm determined to remain calm since Lilaina looks like she's about to pass out.

"The sheets are bloody, but the blankets are missing," I note carefully.

My eyes fall upon a trail of a few bloody drops on the floor leading to the closet. Her eyes widen as she notices the trail, too. In just a few steps, we're at the closet and I fling open the door.

The sudden light has two sleepy Tiiblets blinking large eyes at us. They've made a nest of the blankets and cuddle naked, Bantu's head on Driki's shoulder. And nestled in their

laps are two of the most darling, chubby, wrinkly balls of squirmy love.

“Oooh,” Lilaina and I say in unison as we drop down to our knees.

The babies are adorable, hand-sized, round, and cuddly. Their heads are too big for their bodies, their tiny arms and legs are curled up against their torsos and their tails are still non-existent.

“You had babies!” Lilaina whispers and Bantu smiles sleepily.

“Nesting when it’s cold,” he mumbles.

“We’ll warm the room up,” I say.

For such an ungainly beast, Lilaina scrambles up too. “We’ll change the sheets. Start a fire. Get it all comfy for you and the babies.”

We close the closet door to ward off the chill and silently strip the bed. There is a pad on the bed that we pull off also, Lilaina mentioning that we can toss it and grab a new one from the supplies room. She heads that way while I take the bloodied sheets to the laundry room. The Tiiblets working in the laundry cluck their tongues knowingly as they eye the

sheets. The one in charge mutters, “Nesting, eh?” and gives me a fresh set of sheets and blankets, mentioning something about an Aboula coming to seek the babies.

I gulp, wondering if this is the trading. I’m curious—and dread it—and curious, but not enough to ask the know-it-all Lilaina what she thinks about it.

By the time I head back to the bedroom, Lilaina has put two new mattress pads on the bed, which makes it seem softer and higher than before. I settle the sheets in place while she closes the window after airing out the room. Then she builds a fire while I finish making the bed.

There’s a soft knock at the door and my stomach clenches. Lilaina gets up to answer and comes back with a small cart of food and a basin of warm water. Relief makes me exhale.

Then I turn down the bed and we crack open the closet door.

“What would you like us to do to help?” Lilaina asks the Tiiblets.

Driki answers. “Can you wash the bablets? We’ll just head to the bathroom across the hall and clean up.”

“Of course,” she says, her hands reaching out for the baby on his lap.

I scramble for Bantu’s sleeping little bundle of joy. It reminds me of a puppy, all curled up and sleeping and making little cooing noises in his sleep. I want to giggle because the baby has an enormous cock that juts out and pees, spraying the wall.

Driki and Bantu help each other up and waddle naked to the bathroom while Lilaina grabs one of the blankets and spreads it out. She tests the warmth of the water, then dips a corner in and washes Driki’s little baby.

I take another corner, wet the blanket and wipe tiny feet. Gently I swipe the tiny abdomen, the wet making the little guy squirm and open his mouth as if to cry, but then changes his mind and merely yawns.

I chuckle.

“What a beastly yawn for such a beauty,” I tell him.

I swear he smiles.

“Isn’t that right, beauty?” I coo at him.

Lilaina has rummaged through a drawer for some diaper-looking things, and we figure out how to wrap their little

bottoms. And then we wrap them in adorable little baby blankets just as Bantu and Driki come back in, shivering but wearing little robes.

“Come crawl in bed, mamas,” Lilaina tuts. “There’s hot soup for you both. Tessa and I will hold the babies so you can eat.”

I snort. What a hardship it is.

When Driki and Bantu are all cuddled up in the covers, Lilaina hands me the baby she’s holding, so I cradle two, a baby in each arm. They’re so light, barely a pound or two. Then she pulls the cart over and gets the tray out. Once Driki and Bantu are eating, she sits back on the bed with me and takes the larger bablet back.

All too soon, they finish eating and it’s time to give them their adorable babies back. I hug my knees when the bundle is out of my arms, and I see Lilaina hugging her own huge belly. At least she has Mikki to cuddle later.

A soft knock at the door has me whip my head around.

“Come in,” Driki says.

The door opens and two little Tiiblets poke their way in, each carrying a wrapped baby.

“Aboula! Fenlik! Welcome!” Bantu is positively beaming. “Look at what we have!”

Aboula is a person? I thought it was a title for the person in charge of adoptions.

“We heard,” Aboula says and the two make their way in. They sit on the bed, too, and unwrap their babies to show Bantu and Driki.

“Mine was born two turns of the sun ago. Fenlik’s was only four.”

“And you’re already up and around? You almost have your figure back,” Bantu says, while Aboula blushes.

I squint, trying to figure out what figure Bantu refers to. And I cover my mouth to hide a smile when I imagine what outlandish thing Stratek would say. Lilaina catches me and to my surprise, smiles.

The four Tiiblets are laughing and joking and seem to be really good friends, relaying the stories of labor pains and nesting instincts. Lilaina catches my eye and motions her head toward the door. We’re about to leave when it gets serious.

“Mistress. Princess. Please stay,” Bantu says. His voice is a bit deeper than it normally is and both Lilaina and I whip our

heads around.

“My people, my family,” Aboula says in a deep voice also. Fenlik joins in. “I bless you with the greatest love of my life. My heart and my soul.”

“My people, my family,” Bantu and Driki repeat. “I bless you with the greatest love of my life. My heart and my soul.”

“I promise to love your gift like my own. I promise to cherish your gift with my life. No harm shall come to your heart with my love to protect it,” Aboula says and kisses the baby’s forehead.

Driki repeats the words, kisses his baby on the forehead, then lays it in the middle of the bed. Is he going to sacrifice his so Bantu may keep his own child?

Aboula trades the wrapped babies, first kissing one baby on the forehead and placing it in Driki’s arms, then takes his from the bed and lovingly cradles it before kissing it in the same spot.

Driki kisses the baby in his arms on the forehead, the same spot where he’d kissed the one he’d given away.

“Love of my life, I hope you find your mate in the offspring of my mate. If not, I am blessed to be your support in

your search for your own.”

“You honor me with your presence,” Aboula whispers.

Then all three other Tiiblets repeat the same phrase.

“I promise to keep my love pure,” Driki says. “To love your babet as my own. And to let you love my babet as your own, for the good of our young. Always for the good of the young.”

Aboula repeats the phrase, then Fenlik, followed by Bantu, and then all four of them say it together. With that, there’s utter silence in the room and then Aboula kisses Driki’s forehead and Driki kisses Aboula’s. Without another word, or a look back, Aboula and Fenlik bundle up their babies and leave.

I expect Driki to be sad ... or Bantu to feel guilty that his mate gave up his baby ... but there’s none of that. Instead, they look lovingly into each other’s eyes and trade babies back and forth, changing their diapers, dressing them in matching outfits, and nursing them at their breast. The babies are now both of their children ... which makes sense. It dawns on me that they are both parents to two kids, not a single parent to one. They are not possessive as to which babet they gave birth

to. Earth rules have me all mixed up, as the man assumes the parental role.

My God.

Earth treats women like breeders, not Pimeon.

“We love you,” Lilaina whispers when the bablets start to fall asleep. “We’ll check on you soon.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” Bantu says and curls his head onto Driki’s shoulder.

It’s touching and beautiful and poignant, if only for us. It’s a lesson in true love, in pure love. Lilaina and I take the back way out of their room, the staircase near the winding turrets.

We walk down the darkened hallways silently, tears streaming down my face. A quick peek at Lilaina shows her wet cheeks also.

“That wasn’t what I expected,” she says.

I gulp. “Me neither.”

“It was beautiful.”

And then I can’t help it. I break into tears. Not just any tears but huge, gulping racks of sobs. Ugly crying, a flood of

emotions forever held in check, like a dam broke.

“Tessa?” Lilaina says warily.

“I can’t—I can’t,” I sob. “I can’t imagine.”

“You can’t imagine what?”

“On Earth—our children—we’re treated like possessions. We get up in arms if we hear of abuse, or a pregnancy termination, but none of us have the love and the strength that it takes to do what these people do.”

Somewhere in my mind, they went from being creatures to being people.

And somewhere else in my mind, I have to let all this reasoning out. All the mind clutter that’s stressing me out.

“Your father ... doesn’t love you. He owns you. He wants me to let you know what a disappointment you are to your people not because he cares about the people, but because you are his possession and should do as he says. But the greatest love should be a parent putting a child’s needs before their own. Those Tiiblets want a child to have the benefit or even the possibility of being raised with their future mate and they are willing to sacrifice for that to happen. For the child! Not for themselves.”

“Earth has been through so much—I can understand why we want the best for our children. What we didn’t have.”

“But that’s the key, don’t you see? We were tortured and abused by war and famine and raised children who should never know the term suffer. Instead of teaching them how to love and work together, we just kept handing them whatever they thought they wanted. They’re children! How do they know what they want? We should have been giving them the gift of love and adoration, teaching them how to love each other. Instead we raised a world of narcissists”—I take a deep breath— “beginning with your father.”

“I know,” Lilaina says gently. “But I can’t change the past. That’s what the Adroki taught me. I can only learn from the past and change the future. Not everyone’s future, but my own.”

My sobs are quieting. “I know the hell you were raised in.”

“What happened to you, Tessa?” she asks, and her voice has a new quality I’ve never heard before.

“People wonder how you make it through hell—and then they justify that you haven’t. You just deal with it by being kind of crazy. I thought you were. It never dawned on me that

you made it through that childhood because you had no choice. Because for the longest time, you didn't know you were abused."

She smiles ruefully. "No, when that is your norm, there is really nothing to compare it to, is there?"

"But I had normal," I tell her. "And I still slipped into it. I never realized how far."

I'd like to tell her that I only broke up with her father because it was *his plan*. That all along he knew he could get me onto this planet. After all, if one female was yanked from his clutches, he'd replace her with another to see if that one would get yanked, too. It worked.

But will she believe me? I'm afraid she won't. No one will.

"And for the longest time, I thought you were crazy, too. I thought it was my mission to make you realize this and come back to Earth. But I couldn't have you come back to your father's clutches. And yet I couldn't come back unless I did this."

"Why would you want to go back?" she whispers. "Now that you see what normal life is? How the Adroki people are

different. How they treat their mates reverently. With respect.”

“Because I can’t stay.”

“You have the power to make the decision.”

“And if I choose it and Stratek decides he doesn’t want me?”

“He loves you! Why would he ever choose for you to leave?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Make me understand.”

I’d like to scream the truth at her. That I don’t know if this child is her brother or her nephew. That once Stratek sees my betrayal, he’ll have nothing to do with me. That the only place I can return to is Earth, and now I can’t have my island without pulling off my plan.

Instead, I run.

Chapter Sixteen

Tessa:

THE WINDING TURRETS of the castle seem to hold the fury of the wind with the placement of the windows up so high. It whips around my head, growing louder as I move quickly up the steps. I hear Lilaina call out to me, but she can't catch up, not being as heavily pregnant as she is.

Finally, when I reach the top room, I can breathe. The wind is loud, reverberating through the round room from dual, open windows.

But it's not enough. I want to feel the wind, taste it on my tongue. Large ladders are propped near the windows. I climb one and stick my head out. My hair swings across my face, loosening the bangs tucked behind my ear.

God, there's a ledge outside between the windows of the turret. It looks safe enough, made of brick to blend with the outer walls. It's wide, and filled with soil, like a planter. I can sit outside with the warm wind whipping through my hair.

There's nothing else to make me feel so alive. Where I don't have to think or worry. I can just simply be. Before I become too unbalanced from pregnancy weight.

I carefully climb onto the ledge. Like I suspected, it's sturdy and well-made, heavy enough to support a larger Adroki male. The sun is dropping down over the horizon and it's spectacular. While the sky is still yellow, the sun glows red and streaks of reddish orange cut through the sky and intersperse through the yellow clouds.

It's stunning.

With the wind blowing, I can smell the smoke that rises from the fires in the village. The smells of cooking meat. Even the torches that lit the stairwell of castle beyond the turret. With the familiar gusts of wind—wind that never changes, no matter where you are—I can feel at peace.

Down below, the people look like ants as they scuttle down various pathways. I can't make out features or limbs, mostly movement. From up here, it doesn't matter that they have tentacles or legs.

But with my baby, it does.

I rub my baby bump. A small movement runs across my belly, as if meeting my hand. It makes me catch my breath and I chase the progress with my fingertips. I'm rewarded with a stronger kick. All at once I wonder—is it a tentacle or a leg? If only I knew.

“Don't worry, baby,” I whisper. “Never worry. No matter what, I'll watch over you. I'll take care of you. You just run and jump and learn and explore and do all the things kishren—children—love to do. I promise.”

“Tessa!” A deep male voice is bloodcurdling in its fury.

Stratek.

Heavy footsteps race up the stairs and it takes a while. I can hear exactly when he reaches the top of the stairs and searches for which turret I've entered. I can almost sense when his gaze falls on the ladder leading to the window.

“Tessa!”

His hands grip the sill and his head pokes outside. He tries to reach for me, and I scurry down the ledge, away from his reach.

“Tessa, come here!” he thunders.

“No. Go away!” I move further down and then his brother’s face appears next to him. From the window on the opposite side, I see Maleek and Henyon poke their heads out the window, pressed together as they share the ladder. I ignore them. “Go away, Stratek. Go away.” I rock my body back and forth, slowly. Rhythmically. The rocking calms me, like the wind calms me. But I’ve lost the momentum of the wind and I need something else to bring it back.

Juris places a large hand on Stratek’s shoulder, which he simply shrugs off.

“Tessa,” he pleads, but I hold my hands up over my ears, so I don’t have to hear that note in his voice. I don’t want him begging—not a prince. He should never lower himself to someone like me.

For some reason, Juris’s eyes widen when I take my hands off the ledge to cover my ears to block the sound and then he’s dragging Stratek from the window. There’s a commotion and the other two disappear and I’m sure it’s taking all four of them to yank him back.

Good. At least he’s safe.

One male—Jaze—shows up in the other window, watching me. That’s okay, as long as he doesn’t speak. As long

as he doesn't climb out. As long as he's quiet.

After a while, I drop my hands from my ears and hold onto the ledge again. I continue to rock in case Jaze does more than watch. But he nods at someone else, and then Lilaina reaches the top step of the window to my left.

Where Stratek had been.

"It's only me," she says, and her voice is soft and soothing. I kind of like it.

"He's okay?"

"They've forced him into the hall," she says. "Until he calms. Or until you're ready to talk."

I wait a minute before responding. "Good. It's safer for him out there."

"He's worried about you."

"He doesn't need to worry about me. Never me. I can take care of myself."

"You're outside on a ledge in the wind. I'm not sure that's the best call."

I don't say anything because she'll never understand how wind calms me. How I love the outdoors. How I'd live in a

turret if I could.

“Talk to me, Tessa.”

These people aren't going to leave me alone.

“I don't deserve him.”

“Of course, you do. What makes you think that?”

Jaze is still in the other window, but he simply watches so I'm okay with that. He's probably making sure Lilaina doesn't come to any harm.

“He's a prince. He can have any woman he wants. Why would he want me? I'm used goods, the leftovers of your father.”

“That doesn't matter. I'm the leftovers of my father, too. Juris still loves me.”

I wish it were that simple. I rock myself harder as I try to think of what to say that will make her go away without asking the parentage of my child.

“Why are you rocking?”

I stop abruptly, but my body sways like it wants to continue the rock. Or perhaps it's my mind, my brain that needs the comfort of the rocking motion.

“You’re trying to think of how to avoid telling us something,” Lilaina says.

“What—”

“I can tell, Tessa. I can also tell that no one gets away from my father unscathed. I know this and everyone here knows it.”

“That’s not what you thought when I arrived here,” I mutter.

“I didn’t know you then,” she says. “But I know him. That’s how I know there’s more than you’re letting on.”

Oh, there is. There definitely is. And it makes me start rocking again. God, I’m having a breakdown. A meltdown. Whatever.

“And it’ll just keep eating you alive. Right now, you can’t even see how Stratek loves you because you’re so twisted up inside. I was the same way. I didn’t know Juris loved me—but he loved me for years, Tessa. For three years—long before I ever met him. And I was ready to return to Earth if I couldn’t get pregnant so he could have kids with someone else. It didn’t even dawn on me that he wanted me, not just babies.”

That’s not the case with us. It pauses my movements.

“You don’t have that issue with Stratek. You’ve already gotten pregnant. So I’m not sure why you can’t see that you’re everything to him.”

“It’s not that,” I say, and start rocking again.

“Why are you rocking?” She keeps asking, over and over.

“Because I don’t know what to do!” I scream at Lilaina. “I have to have my baby on that planet! I have to make my decision and I don’t know what to do.”

Her voice remains calm. “Do you love Stratek? That’s the only question you have to answer right now.”

“I do,” I sniff, and it feels so natural. God, why have I never said that out loud? Why haven’t I told him?

“Then the answer is clear, Tessa. We’ll go with you. You’ll have the baby. Mikhail will be there for protection also. You make your choice, and you return home.”

“It’s not that clear,” I admit.

“Talk to me,” Lilaina says. “I’ve been through it. No matter what the history is between you and I, I’ll help you.”

Her voice is so soothing, and I want so desperately to believe her. Can I?

“Come on back from that ledge before the wind picks up again.” Her voice is well modulated and calm, but there’s an underlying sense of urgency there. What is she worried about? The wind? Most people fear wind, but not me. Years of being exposed to it have taught me to recognize what speed the gusts fly, and how high the speed should be to overpower my body weight. Being in the wind soothes me, blows away the ugliness deep inside me.

Instead, I cup my belly. “If this child is born on Earth, he’ll be a citizen. They’ll have the right to keep him there.”

“Tessa,” she whispers. “He’ll have an Earth citizenship, sure. But he’ll be a citizen of Pimeon through his parentage. It’s a dual citizenship. No one has rights to him. He’ll go where you go.”

“What if he’s born with legs?” I snap. “Yours got lucky and was born with tentacles.”

“Just because a baby is born with legs doesn’t mean anything,” she says. “He may have his father’s eyes. He may have the purple skin. Mikki is growing hair, though he was bald like the Adroki when he was born—”

She’s not getting it.

“I’ve been registered a scarlet woman! It might not be Stratek’s!” I blurt out.

“What?” she whispers. Then it suddenly dawns on her. “Oh, my God. My father?”

The tears start flowing hard now that my secret’s out. “He—he knew I was leaving. He told me we were going to prove our love first. It was only once but ... I didn’t want to. I couldn’t stop him. I couldn’t.” I’m trying so hard to explain to her that I didn’t willingly sleep with both men that same weekend. That I’m not a wanton woman, deserving of the ancient rituals of stoning for having different men within the same time frame. “And I didn’t mean to sleep with Stratek the next night. I was drugged and trying to get away before the effects hit—but it was stronger than normal, and it hit fast. And then I drank some shots with Stratek, which didn’t help. I don’t remember sleeping with him, but I woke up the next morning before dawn and snuck away. I wanted to get on the train back home and beg Amos to marry me. But by the time I arrived, my name had been called for the program and Eric was there to haul me to prison.”

“You were in prison the whole time from the party until you arrived?”

“Yes,” I hiccup. “But the records won’t show the proper time frame. I wasn’t checked in right away because—” I stop suddenly because it’s still so horrifying.

“Tessa?” Lilaina asks. “Please continue. Tell me what’s going on.”

Will she believe me?

“He killed them,” I whisper. “The first two of Amos’s wives. We’d had some words in the parking lot and I said something ugly to them. Eric said he would claim I’d broken away from him and got checked into the prison a week late. During that week, there was a farm accident”—I make air quotes with my fingers— “and if I step out of line, Eric is going to reveal that I was seen hiding out on the farm where the accident occurred.” I hiccup. “That the investigation should be reopened.”

“He set you up,” Lilaina says.

“Of course. But there’s not a thing I can do about it.”

“You can talk to Stratek. He’ll understand.”

“He’ll understand that the child he thought was his might be that of his enemy instead?” I snap, my voice a harsh whisper.

“Yes.” The deeper voice makes us both whip our heads in the direction of the door.

One by one, Juris, Maleek, Henyon, and Stratek filter into the room.

Lilaina climbs down the ladder, leaving the view open for me to see him. But she could have stayed because I only have eyes for Stratek. I’m shivering now, though it’s probably the reaction of the horrible secret being revealed, the secret that I kept for so long. And now it’s up to him.

“I don’t care if it’s his,” Stratek says and his voice is somber, his face a little sad. It breaks my heart.

He continues on. “The baby will be half of you. How can I not love him?”

I break into a fresh torrent of tears.

“Stop,” he says, holding out his hands helplessly. Suddenly he’s there, on the ladder, where Lilaina had been. “Please, come inside. It’s making me nervous for you to sit out here.”

I look around the room behind him. Jaze is tense and somber, poised on the ladder at the other window as if he’d reach for me if I start to fall, Lilaina is sobbing softly into

Juris's neck as his arms rub up and down her back. Maleek has his fists clenched as if he'd like to break something. Henyon has his eyes wide and he's breathing heavily.

Oh, God. They all thought—they think—I'm on the ledge to jump. It's only Stratek who understands how much I love the wind. But maybe Stratek's worried about me falling. From his view, he doesn't see how wide the ledge is for a smaller human female, how much room I have, how safe it is.

I've worried them all with my mental breakdown.

I hold my arms out and in an instant he's there, pulling me in.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't know how to tell you," I chant. I don't want people to think less of him for this, especially that nasty man from the Third Wing clan, but there's only our own people here—

"Shh," he says, moving to sit down with me in his arms, cradling me against him, smoothing my hair with his big palm. "I can't believe you've been living with this for so long, making yourself sick. All you had to do was talk to me." He's rocking in place—rocking me, the same rhythm I had on the ledge—and my head fits perfectly into the cradle of his neck.

It feels perfect. “Silly female. I love you. I love our baby. You’re my life.”

“If I have to have this baby on Earth and it has legs,” I sob. “He’ll try to keep it. It’ll be a citizen of Earth.”

“Then we’ll move to Earth. But don’t stress yourself. Everything can be fixed. It has the same chance of being mine.” He grips my hair in his hand and tugs my head up to look at him. His expression is intense. “That night we were together, you were covered in bruises. Were those from him?”

I nod. “I had told him no.”

“Then it wasn’t consensual?”

“No. Never. Not like with you.” I want him to understand, I need him to understand that I enjoy his touches. But he only holds me close.

“Tessa,” he says. “I love you. Do you love me back?”

“Yes. Forevermore,” I gulp out. “But how will you believe me now? How will you not wonder if I’m just trying to get someone to take on my baby?”

“Because no matter what anyone says about you, I know the real you. I always have. I knew there was something you were keeping from me, and I knew it was huge. It had to be. I

know you're hard when you have to be. I also know you love hard. You'll do anything you need to do to protect our kish."

"I love him. And I love you," I say between kisses because he's zoomed in to claim my lips. And I love this, I love kissing his lips, tasting his flavor, holding him close like he's my life. He's everything to me. He makes me smile; he makes me laugh. He's protective and silly. He's handsome and sexy, thoughtful, and kind.

I'd give my life for him.

When he pulls away, he lifts me easily in his arms. My hand lands on his bicep, feeling the hard bulging of his muscle. The power, the strength of him.

"I'm taking you home," he says. "And I'm not letting you go."

"I wish I never had to leave," I admit, fear making my voice hitch.

I barely notice anyone else as he carries me down the steps of the turret and back to our quarters.

Until I hear Lilaina's quiet sobs.

Chapter Seventeen

Tessa:

“WE NAMED OUR BABLETS,” Driki announces.

Stratek groans as he turns over in bed and buries his face in my neck. “Does anyone knock?” he mutters. But it’s halfhearted because it’s past noon and the Tiiblets have been up for hours.

“Yes. Human names,” Bantu agrees, following him in and pushing a tiny baby carriage. Inside, the babies are curled up together, wrapped in one blanket. “Actually, it was Princess Tessa’s idea. She called mine Beastly and I thought it sounded like such a fine, strong name—”

My head pokes up at the mention of my name. “Oh, but —”

“You’re calling yours Beastly?” Stratek sounds a little aghast.

“Yes,” Bantu says proudly. “Do you like it?”

“What will the other be called?” Stratek asks, avoiding the question.

“Beauty,” he says.

“Beauty and Beastly,” I murmur. “They go well together.”

“Don’t they?” Bantu says, beaming. “Earth names! They will be so proud when they grow and see how unique their names are. I can’t wait to tell Mistress! Come, Driki! Let’s go find her.”

They scramble from the room before Stratek can even call out, “Wait until Lilaina and Juris get out of bed!”

A giggle pops out of me, and he glares at me before a smile cracks the corner of his mouth. “What?”

“They’re out of bed. Half the morning’s gone by.” We were lazy, waking and cuddling, making love, falling back to sleep.

He smiles easily at me. “I guess we can get our day going then.”

But getting our day going takes a bit more time than expected when I do my favorite thing. I walk by the bathroom door to watch Stratek showering. He always leaves the door open, and I can’t help but admire the view.

“Tessa?” he asks, seeing me standing in the doorway.
“Did you want to join me, love?”

Poor man doesn't have a clue that I just love to look. Or maybe he does, because when I slowly strip, he arches his brow. When I enter the walk-in shower, he lifts me to wrap my legs around his waist, leans me up against the shower wall, and enters me.

“Goddess, you're soaked,” he mutters.

I guess that's what watching does to me. And when he takes me like this, standing up against the shower wall, staring into my eyes, I can concentrate on the exquisite sensation of his erection entering and pulling out before he thrusts in again. Each feeling, each movement, each nerve ending that's triggered. And when I come and sob his name out into his neck, he finally releases his seed into me.

By the time we really shower and dress, Lilaina and Juris are having lunch in the dining area at one of the smaller round tables that she likes to use for her brunches. Stratek seats me next to her and takes the seat between me and Juris.

“Juris needs some help with the new transport system,” Lilaina says. “He's meeting a couple of Britonians at the portal site along with the leaders of the other clans.” Her smile is

easy, though her eyes are a little reddened. “I thought if Stratek goes to help him, you and I could do some exploring. We’ll have Beshi tomorrow so that leaves me free for today.”

“And you want to spend it with me?”

“Well, my companions are busy with their bablets,” she teases. “So I guess you’re second best.” She leans in. “Besides, I really want to share something with you. It’s going to be so much fun, Tessa. But don’t tell the guys, they won’t allow us to walk the short distance being pregnant and all.”

“How far is it?” I whisper. I certainly don’t want to worry Stratek unnecessarily, not after scaring him yesterday with the ledge.

“It’s a five-minute walk. We’ll be back in no time. Elex has Mikki and I’d ask Shana to come but ... I really want this to be you and me. Two Earth women who will totally ... get it. Get the importance of what I’m going to share with you.” She inserts her hand in mine and squeezes.

“Okay,” I nod. Because despite our rough start, I totally trust Lilaina. I don’t think she’s crazy and I don’t think she’d steer me wrong.

“What are you two whispering about?” Juris asks Lilaina indulgently.

“We’re making plans for the day.” She winks at me.

“Do you mind if I take a couple of hours to help Juris, love?” Stratek asks.

“Not at all,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

Lilaina beams.

He nods and pulls me toward him. “Okay, then. If you need anything, call out for Jaze or Henryon.”

“I will.”

He leans forward and touches his forehead to mine before he kisses me deep. I’m barely aware of Juris kissing Lilaina before they leave together. From the steps of the castle, we watch the two brothers head toward the front gates.

Lilaina sighs as we watch their silhouettes become smaller and smaller.

“He’s so perfect, isn’t he?” she asks.

“God, yes.” I sigh deeply, too, but my eyes are on Stratek. That man stirs my loins, for sure.

She giggles. “It’s Goddess, here. And you’re gonna stay so get used to it. Just imagine the look of shock on human faces when we utter it.”

“They’ll cross themselves,” I say.

And then we both giggle atrociously. It’s naughty and indecent to make fun of our fellow humans but somehow the shared horrific experience of our mutual race also bonds us.

“The weather’s great,” Lilaina says. “But the Tiiblets brought us a couple of hooded cloaks to wear. They’re both in white because we can choose the colors that we’d like them dyed but”—she leans in— “I can’t help but wonder if the white makes us look angelic.”

I snicker. “Of course it does.”

She hands me one and I drape it across my shoulders, fastening it at the chest. The Tiiblets custom made each cloak because with Lilaina’s much shorter stature, hers doesn’t drag the ground at all.

As we leave the gates, one of the men standing guard narrows his eyes at us. “Where are you two going?”

Lilaina sighs loudly and drops the hood from her head. “Honestly, Relion. We’re incognito for a reason.”

“Probably shouldn’t wear white,” he states easily. “You stand out.”

He eyes her belly, and it seems like she’s huge suddenly. Like she sprouted from heavy to burgeoning overnight.

“How close are you?” I ask, eyeing her belly warily.

“Ending my seventh month,” she says cheerfully. “Or thereabouts. It’s a little tricky with the Adroki counting, but I got time. Mikhail’s sending his medic along with the men arriving today to help with the transport system. He’ll stay until the birth.”

“And you are going where?” Relion presses.

Lilaina sighs and then gets close to whisper in his ear. Her voice is low enough that I can’t hear, even though her belly is so huge she can’t really get close.

“I’ll walk you,” he says, and his tone leaves no room for argument. “And you’ll both stay there until I find someone to relieve my post or can send someone out to walk you back.”

“It’s just five minutes—”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“You’re leaving the post empty for five minutes,” Lilaina points out.

“Your mates would prefer that to their females being unescorted. Besides, it’s five minutes for a full-grown Adroki male traveling quickly. Not for stumpy walking appendages carrying bellies full of kishlings.”

Lilaina harrumphs and pulls me along. Relion hangs back, giving us space, as she shares the story of her first trip out this way with me. Tells me about how Stratek set her up by not telling her how the Tiiblets are so open sexually and decided to stop mid-trip for a quickie among the trees.

I can’t help but laugh. It sounds like something Stratek would do. And the thought of the poor appalled Lilaina watching the sex act—with everyone else watching her—I can only imagine how I’d react. But what makes me laugh harder is the image in my mind of my mate’s deep laughter. Goddess, I love that man.

Once we’re outside a cave, she turns to me. “This is it,” she says, her voice shimmering with excitement.

“Remember, don’t leave until someone comes to get you. And don’t head into the work area. It’s not safe,” Relion calls out.

Lilaina nods and waves him away. “Ready, Tessa? You’re going to die. Just die,” she says and pulls me in.

The inside of the cave is dark, but Lilaina calmly lights a torch on the wall. She takes it and lights the next one, and the next. I'm watching her as she hangs the last torch back in place. Then she reaches for my shoulders and slowly turns me around.

I can't help the gasp that leaves my lips.

The entire room is sparkling with the shimmering light from the flames dancing on the walls. It glitters from the pile in the center.

"What's this?"

"Diamonds!" she shrieks. "You can see them better at a certain time of day when the sunlight enters the cave. Juris's team worked in here for weeks, mining the diamonds, cutting and polishing them. There are so many different sizes!"

She reaches down for a handful and there's a huge one the size of an eyeball, but the others vary from tiny pieces to one the size of a knuckle. She tosses them into the pile and grabs another handful.

"Holy shit," I say, and cover my mouth in horror at the cursing that falls easier from my lips now that I'm away from anyone who'll remind me of the sin.

Lilaina giggles.

I reach for a handful myself. The diamonds drip from my palms and run through my fingers like cool water.

“Fun, isn’t it?” Lilaina says. “Find the perfect size for your nose ring. Stratek is going to replace it.”

“He is?”

She nods. “He told me so.”

“There’s so many to choose from.”

“Then be greedy, Tessa!” she laughs, tossing a handful up to rain over my head as she sits in the mountainous pile. “You’ll have hundreds of nose rings. We’ll pierce all around our ‘head appendages’ so we can glitter diamonds everywhere!”

I laugh, too, and take a seat with her. She may be crazy, but so am I.

“Imagine my father’s face when we show up for your labor and delivery,” she says. “Dripping in the diamonds and gold that he wants. And you’re going to look him in the eye and say, ‘I’m not afraid of you.’”

Our laughter dies out. After a minute, I say “I’m still kind of afraid of him.”

She drops onto her back in the diamond pile, and I join her. Her hand makes its way into mine. “So am I. But you’ll be fine when you see our guys protect us, here or there. Neither of them will let any harm come to either of us.”

I hold onto her hand tightly as I study the shadows dancing across the ceiling because of all the people in this world, she gets it. She gets me.

“Ladies,” a smooth voice says.

Lilaina jumps and shrieks, sitting up abruptly.

The man holds his hands out. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I’m just here to escort you back.”

He looks vaguely familiar; then I realize he’s the male from the dance who Henyon blocked from dancing with me. The scary man from the Third Wing clan.

Lilaina doesn’t seem worried. “We expected a bit more time.”

“It appears we’re out of time.” His smile is hard and reveals the sharp points of his teeth.

She narrows her eyes. “Do I know you?”

He bows. “Kiartrok of the Third Wing Clan.”

Lilaina's face pales. "Then you know Kym Shertak from the Third Wing."

"She changed her name when she left for your clan. It was Kim Shertrok."

To her credit, Lilaina holds her head high. "So what is she to you?"

"Kym was my mate."

"And she left you for another clan?"

"She always intended to return. But she didn't get that chance. Now, if neither of you mind, let's take this discussion elsewhere."

I yelp when his tentacles whip out and grab our arms, winding around and around tightly. I try to yank back, but he's strong, stronger than human men. He drags Lilaina and me through the darkened back tunnels of the cave. He must have better night vision because he moves quickly where we stumble.

The depths of the cave go on and on, led by the tunnels into larger rooms, broken by dim areas that aren't quite as dark as others. There has to be an opening in the vast caverns if

certain areas have a little light. I wonder if there's a way to escape from this area if we distract him.

“Slow down,” I snap. “Lilaina's off balance.”

“You think I care about your half-breed whelps?”

“You should care! Stratek and Juris will have your head on a platter.” I look around. This wasn't a good spot to stop. The edges of the cave where we're walking are narrow pathways because there's a huge pit dug in the middle of the room. It's covered by boards and safety straps—but it's still a huge pit. It must be where the Adroki settle into the mining area.

“Here's the thing about living with pain,” the male says, “it makes you careless. Once they find you two dead, they'll know pain. They'll know the pain I live with every day, waiting for my mate to return to me.”

“You're an idiot if you think she was going to return,” Lilaina pants, hunching over as she catches her breath. “Kym had her own agenda, and it was to be queen.”

“Of course, you fool,” he snaps. “And once she was queen, who do you think was going to move to this clan to be the future king?”

“Well, that’s a stupid plan,” I say, mostly to distract him. If Relion comes to escort us back and finds us gone, he’ll come looking for us. “Juris is already king.”

“I said future.” His eyes blaze color, even in the dimness of the cave.

“So what? You were waiting for Juris to die? Because you knew you couldn’t take him on?”

“I’m taking him on now, aren’t I? Both him and his brother.”

“Kym was tricking you,” Lilaina pants. Should she be panting? It’s a bit warm and a bead of sweat trickles down my back. “She knew if something happened to Juris, Stratek was next. And after Stratek, Shana. She’s already mated to Juris’s best friend Maleek, so while she rules as the next queen, her mate becomes the next order king.”

“Shut up,” he says, giving away that he suspected this once he arrived to this clan and saw how the hierarchy runs here. It must be different from their clan.

“Why?” Lilaina says. “Can’t handle the truth? Can’t take that your mate was lying to you?”

“She wasn’t lying. We had this planned for *years*.”

“So, she informed you there was a change of plans when she couldn’t get Juris?” Lilaina says.

We can both tell by the stillness of his face that he hadn’t heard from her.

“She informed you that Juris was interested in a human from another planet?” I ask softly. “Three years. It took him three years to get Lilaina here. Another six months to court her.”

“And during that time, Kym betrayed our people by allowing the Tshiki into the village to overtake it.”

“No,” he says. “She wouldn’t have done that. They tricked her.”

“They didn’t trick her. She promised them the village if they would take me away. She was obsessed with Juris. She hoped to comfort him in my absence. There would have been no more villagers to rule over, not once the Tshiki invaded.” Lilaina’s voice gentles, though it seems somewhat gritty. “She wasn’t planning on sending for you to become king. Don’t you see? She had her own agenda and it only included Juris.”

“You lie!”

“Then how do you account for it?” Lilaina asks. “Her death sentence stated that she betrayed her people and allowed the Tshiki to invade the village. Do you really think they agreed to just sample a Tiiblet here and there?”

There’s no way he can’t face the truth. It’s on his face—but there’s also a trapped look and his eyes seem to dart back toward the front of the cave.

“Move!” he snarls and reaches out for Lilaina.

But two things happen at once and I’m ashamed to admit I stare in frozen silence. When he grips Lilaina’s arm to pull her, she throws him off balance by forcefully pushing him backward instead and at the same time slips from her cloak, somehow leaving him teetering for a split second holding an unlit torch covered by the white cloak like a false arm. He wavers unbalanced before he blanches and slides into the pit behind him at the same time Lilaina drops to the ground, pulling me with her to the safety of solid ground.

“Holy fuck.” I swear like a farmer, and right now in the dire straits we’re in, it doesn’t even seem sinful. “Holy shit-fuck. He fell without screaming.”

“Tessa,” Lilaina breathes. “Light a torch.”

I'd like to tell her he took the torch with him into the pit, but then I see her handing me a lighter from a necklace she wears, and she points to the wall. I scramble for one and light it quickly, flooding the room with light. Then I light the torch next to it and suddenly the scene looks a lot more gruesome.

Lilaina's face is twisted in pain and her entire lower half is wet.

Chapter Eighteen

“LILAINA,” I SAY. “What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“My water broke as we were being dragged through the cave,” she gasps. “I didn’t want him to know. But the pains—they’re hitting hard and fast, Tessa.”

“Okay, okay,” I breathe. “Let me just look over the edge to see if he’s possibly climbing back up.”

I take one of the torches and prop it into one of the boards that is still whole and in place, instead of crashing through the pit with him. Then I peer down. His twisted body lies at the bottom. He’s not going anywhere, though I see several ladders at the edge of the pit, so if he had survived, it was wise to check to see if he was there. He might have been able to pull himself out at any point.

“He’s dead,” I announce. “I’m not even sure what happened.”

“Still have a few tricks up my sleeve,” she grits. “Even though I’m huge. When you were arguing with him, I picked up a torch and held it under my cloak where my arm might

have been. And when he grabbed it thinking it was me, I pushed him.” She breathes through another pain. “Element of surprise. Thank Relion for that one. Taught me that when someone is going to drag you, push them instead. Throws them off balance because they expect the opposite. Exactly what we needed with a pit behind him.”

“You’re a beast,” I say. “Let’s see if we can make our way back—”

“Can’t,” she gasps. “I can feel—Goddess, I feel things sliding from my body.” Her voice breaks.

Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit. But instead of saying it, I take a deep breath and I’m surprised at how calm I sound. “Okay, let me take a look, okay?”

There’s much more wetness than the broken waters should be, and it terrifies me that it might be blood. But I school my features as I help her bend her legs up and out.

“Good thing for you, I birthed babies before,” I say, to give her some assurance.

“Oh, God, Tessa, you’re perfect,” she breathes.

“Goddess,” I correct with a smile.

My hands are shaking, but she can't see that as I push up her skirts.

"They're a little early," she says, and her voice holds a note of hysteria.

I think I need to keep her calm. I think more pain is associated with nervousness.

"Not necessarily. It's twins, remember? Maybe this is normal for another species," I soothe.

"Mikki was a nine-month gestation."

I shrug it off and use Shana's words. "Each pregnancy is different."

The calmness of my tone, despite the fact I don't know what I'm doing, seems to relax her. Another pain shoots through her and she tenses her limbs, then gives a blood-curdling scream.

"Push, Laina." I'm peering between her legs and I'm pretty sure she's already crowning, though it's a little dim. I know she won't mind me shortening her name; I've heard others do it. And since I have my hands on her vagina, I think we're past that point. We're practically besties now.

She grunts when the wave of pain has passed and in the dim light, I see a bald head and shoulders push through, but so does a tentacle and I'm not quite sure what to do about that, so I ignore it. Tentacles don't really have bones inside their limbs, do they? If so, I imagine a baby's bones are flexible enough to bend? God, I hope so.

"Everything okay?" she gasps, a note of panic in her voice.

"Perfect. You have one little guy halfway out. The next pain ought to do it so just push on it." I give her a huge smile, not even caring it's the practiced teeth-baring smile for pictures. I have to tell myself everything is fine just to keep from throwing up. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm all she's got.

Then I remember the way Lilaina beams every time someone says the word *fine*. How Stratek said that everything was fine to me a couple of times and waited for me to have the same reaction she does. It's her thing. Like rocking is for me.

"Everything looks fine, Lilaina," I whisper. "Everything is going to be fine."

Her smile is so bright and contagious, I can't help but give a real smile, too. And then a wave of pain crosses her

face, and she pushes, gives another raw shriek, and a squirmy baby drops into my hands. He's kind of pink and kind of purple, but I can't tell if that's a cross between human and Adroki genetics or what. Maybe it's just the lack of light in the room but I'm not going to worry about it because he opens his tiny mouth and emits a cry. Doesn't that mean he's healthy? Everything's got to be good, right?

Short, chubby tentacles twist around and around, reaching and retracting, and through the squirming mass, I notice he's not a little guy at all. *He's a girl.*

I whip the cloak off me and wrap her in it and hand her off to her mother.

“A girl-child. Your first one is a girl.”

I feel somewhat relieved and for the first time—though I'm a little ashamed to admit it, because how could I have missed it—I see Lilaina has a knife strapped to her thigh. I quickly unbuckle it and slice off the hem of the cloak to make a strip of fabric to tie off the umbilical. I think I need to cut it. Eventually. I gulp. I'm not sure exactly when one cuts that, but I'll worry about it after the second baby is born, I guess. Though, I do have the knife to run through the umbilical. Maybe that'll ease the next birth? I have no idea. It was only

the one puppy birth that I witnessed, and I didn't exactly *birth* babies before. Not like I told her.

It's just a minute or two later, as Lilaina is cooing and kissing on her baby, that I hear her breath clench again.

"Do you have the urge to push?" I ask.

"Unhh! Yes!" Her voice is a little throaty from the screaming.

"Then do it."

She does and the sac rolls out of her body, her vaginal lips stretching around it as it releases. I swallow down a wave of nausea.

Okay, that's a good sign, right? And maybe we're done. Maybe there's not another baby up there at all. God, I wish we were done. Of course, she won't be able to walk back. And I can't leave her open and bloody like this. To think, I might have been a farm wife about now. Delivering for cats and cows and dogs, instead of lying about it.

Then she gasps and I see a couple of tentacles dart out, then slide back in, then out as if testing the air, and then back as if it's too cold.

Oh, shit. Shit. Shit. A breech. There's no way I can do this. No way in hell.

"Everything okay, Tess?" Lilaina asks and her voice isn't as strong anymore. She's tiring. I have to be strong for her because there's no way I can let her know how scared I am. How unsanitary this birth is on a damp cave floor, how there's no light, barely any warmth, and a dead body in the room.

"*Everything* is just fine. You just released the sac. Let me see that cutie before her brother or sister comes." Goddess, I ought to talk more often. My calm, collected voice sounds like I know what I'm doing, and it soothes even me.

Lilaina holds her up proudly and I move to rub her little belly, then pretend to wipe her off with the cloak she's wrapped in. Instead, I count her tentacles. I'm guessing a twin would have the same number. Quickly, I count eight. Just like an octopus. That's good. I also make a mental note of how thick they are and how long they are. They're definitely not as long as a full-grown Adroki's. They're stumpy, sort of like a baby's arms and legs are compared to an adult human. Okay, though, now I know how many to grab as they come from her body. Maybe I should tie them together, so none get lost on the way out?

“Another pain’s coming,” she gasps hoarsely, and I jerk my gaze back between her legs.

This time when I see little tentacles shoot out, I grab them. Before they can dart back in, I tie them together where the knees should be.

“Okay, give another push,” I say, and I pray I’m doing the right thing.

She gives a scream and another tentacle pokes through. Quickly, I grab it. That makes four. I use the long tail end of the strip of cloth to tie it to the next one that shows up.

I almost have them all. I have five and three to go.

One is bent in the birth canal, but Lilaina is screaming bloody murder as she pushes, and more tentacles slide out. I quickly tie those two to the others but I’m not sure about the trapped bulging tentacle that reminds me of a hernia.

But before I can figure it out, Lilaina pushes one last time and the last tentacle folds out, flopping weakly. I don’t need to tie it because the poor thing has earned movement and it looks a bit swollen from its fight.

Suddenly the rest of the baby’s body shoots out. I catch her and her little arms are curled up on her chest, protecting

her limbs and her eight tentacles look fine even if one is swollen and seven are tied, and oh—it's another girl.

She's smaller than the first one and that's probably a good thing since she was breech, and the birth canal was already stretched out from her sister. Lucky, lucky break. I take a deep breath and try not to let Lilaina know how freaked out I am.

“Got her. Beautiful baby girls. Twin sisters. Probably going to be a handful,” I say, using the bottom of the cloak to wrap her and bring her up to Lilaina's belly to join her sister.

The baby cries softly and the adrenaline quickly leaves me. A wave of dizziness passes, and I hate that I'm such a fainter with this pregnancy.

I manage to bring my legs up and tuck my head down. Lilaina's spread legs are blocking the view of me. “I'm just down here waiting for the sac. You mind your babies,” I tell her, and I'm surprised at how natural my voice sounds. Even though it's beginning to sound a little far away, a tell-tale sign of one of my faints. The fainting spells I thought were long over.

“Tessa!” Stratek yells, his voice echoing down the cave.

“Lilaina!” Juris screams.

“Oh, God, they’re here. They found us.” I’ve never felt so relieved. My head bounces up from between her legs just as I notice the second sac leave her body.

Stratek:

The scene that awaits us is beyond gruesome. I know humans don’t have good night vision, so a couple of torches are lit, but they only serve to cast shadows across the vast cave.

Blood is everywhere.

Tessa looks up, her eyes wild in her white face, her red hair escaping its confines like she’s been through the wringer. Worse still is a bloody knife she holds in her hand as she bends over Lilaina’s prone body.

Next to me, my brother gives way to his instincts and growls.

Behind us, Relion, Elex, Jaire, Maleek, and the Britonian medic that just arrived clamor through the cave. More are

behind them, led by my males, Henyon and Jaze.

Tessa's face pales even further, as if she can't hold it together any longer. "Two baby girls," she babbles. "And be careful. Watch your step. There's a pit with a body down there."

Of course we know there's a pit, we've worked in this mine for hours. The body can only be that of the male from the Third Wing clan. When Relion returned to his post at the village, Elex noticed the male leave during those few minutes Relion was gone. Males were dispatched to the portal where Juris and I were greeting the Britonians arriving for construction on the transport system. The heads of other clans were there, including V'cer, the leader of the Third Wing.

V'cer found it curious that Kiartrok claimed to be ill this morning when it was time to head to the beach—yet left the village right after we did. Since the Third Wing clan was where Kym had come from, we were taking no chances. Our captains headed to the diamond mine to collect Lilaina and Tessa, but they were gone. Relion knew they would not leave on their own. The grounds were searched between the cave and the village, but we could find no trace of them. By the time we made our way there, we decided to head deeper into

the mine, knowing that the mates would not enter by themselves unless they were forced.

Immediately after making her announcement, Tessa swoons and pitches to the side. Juris reaches her first and plucks the knife from her loose fingers as I catch her. I'm distracted by her pale color, but I can hear Lilaina speaking to Juris and the soft cries of kishlings.

The medic, Calbin, runs his scanner over Tessa and says she is fine and then he turns to Lilaina and the little ones.

"She's bleeding. Let me get it stopped," Calbin says, and I realize Lilaina's case is much more dire.

"Has she lost a lot of blood?" Juris asks, and I can hear the worry in his voice.

"A bit. She'll be fine. I just injected her with something that will reproduce her red blood cells in the next few minutes, along with another agent to prevent infections from the conditions in here. Let me take care of these two little ones now."

Lilaina's already feeling better because she starts telling Juris about the dead male in the pit while Calbin takes care of the umbilical cords.

“Why does this one have her tentacles tied?” Calbin asks Lilaina.

“I’m not sure? That’s how Tessa handed her to me. She delivered our babies, Juris!” Lilaina says. “I wasn’t worried at all. She’d told me she’d birthed before.”

“I believe this one was breech,” Calbin says to Juris, studying one of the tentacles. “She looks fine. Healthy. Very ingenious of Tessa to track her tentacles.”

I’m so proud of my precious mate.

“Well, the afterbirth is whole. Bleeding has stopped. Babies are stable. Let’s get your family loaded onto the stretcher and get them back to the village,” Calbin says.

Tessa begins to stir as Calbin loads Lilaina and her kishlings onto a stretcher, and they’re carried out by the rest of Juris’s captains.

“Stratek,” Tessa murmurs.

Calbin makes his way back to us.

“My love, are you hurt?”

“No. Lilaina? And the babies?”

“They’re healthy,” the Britonian medic says, shining a blue light into her eyes to check her pupils. “One was breech?”

“Yes, is her little tentacle okay? I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“You did just fine. It’s a little swollen, but nothing to worry about. I understand you’ve birthed babies before?”

“Oh, well, about that—I, uh, might have lied.”

The Britonian raises his brows.

“It wasn’t exactly a baby. More like a ... baby *dog*. A puppy.”

His face goes expressionless.

“And maybe I didn’t exactly ‘birth’ him. More like someone else delivered him and I watched.” There’s a pause. “After the fact. When the puppy was being licked clean by his *momma*.”

There’s utter silence in the cave and then my men lose it. Snickers start, followed by full out laughing.

I can’t help but chuckle too.

“Maybe we’ll just keep this to ourselves and let Lilaina and Juris assume you delivered a human baby, eh?” I say.

She nods, her head jerking up and down quickly. “I didn’t know what else to do. I was terrified.”

I cuddle her in my arms. “I am so proud of you. I would have been terrified too. Especially with taking down Kiartrok.”

“We killed him.”

“We came as soon as we heard he left the village. He must have watched you and Lilaina and heard you talking to Relion. I imagine he tracked where you went, knowing Relion told you to stay put. When we realized he was from the Third Wing clan, we rushed over.”

“He was her mate. He thought she’d mate Juris, become queen, and then Juris would die, and she’d mate him, making him the new king.”

“Our hierarchy doesn’t work like that.”

“I think he found out when he came here. But he couldn’t let go, even when Lilaina told him that Kym had no intentions of bringing him in.” She shivers. “Even hugely pregnant, she took him on. She argued with him and pushed him into the pit; the entire time she was in labor, and I didn’t even know it.”

“And do you know what you did? You kept Lilaina safe, and you kept our two newest princesses safe, even when you’ve never birthed a kishling before. You delivered a breech, Tessa! That’s a huge accomplishment. You are a strong, strong female. I have never been more proud of the love of my life. I am honored that you carry our kish and future kishren. They can learn so much about perseverance and strength and honesty from you.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I’m so honored to have you love me, Stratek. I love you with all my heart.”

“Come, my little mate. Let’s get you home so my men can dispose of that corpse before it rots.”

I smile tenderly as she turns green and dry heaves. She is adorable while gestating. I see my men look around for something similar to a branch of leaves to fan over her. They care for their new princess almost as much as I love her.

“Here, my dear,” Calbin says, waving a vial under her nose. Her color normalizes and she stops retching.

“Wow, you’re a wonder to have around,” she says, after a few deep gulps of air.

“Glad to hear it,” he says with a gentle smile. “I came early to deliver Lilaina’s young. But I’ll head back to Earth. I’ll be the one who will deliver yours.”

Tessa’s lip quivers as she’s reminded of the parentage of our kish.

Calbin reaches out and caresses her cheek, and at that moment, I know he is aware of the quandary of the parentage.

Chapter Nineteen

WHEN STRATEK AND I enter the dining room for brunch, it's already a full house and the long table is being used. Maleek and Shana are sitting with Beshi. Juris and Lilaina are there with Mikki. Driki and Bantu are there, and Bantu smiles shyly at me. Relion and Elex are already eating, and so are Jaze and Henyon. Along the wall there are two bassinets.

With a shared look between us, Stratek takes my hand, and we move over to the babies to peer inside before we join the others. In the first bassinet, Lilaina's twins cuddle together. In the other are the Tiiblet bablets, who mewl softly as they yawn. They're much smaller than the bassinet, or the human/Adroki babies. They're still little wrinkly balls of love.

"They're the size of my testicles," Stratek murmurs in my ear.

I accidentally whoop out a cough before I elbow him in the ribs.

“Dr. Calbin!” Driki shrills and I glance over my shoulder to see the medic enter with Jaire.

The Britonian smiles at the Tiiblets. “It’s Medic Calbin. But you don’t have to call me that. Just Calbin is fine.”

“Calbin!” Driki continues to shriek. “Would you be so kind as to look at our bablets?”

“Of course, I will,” he says, and takes his bag over to where I stand with Stratek.

“Good morning,” I say.

“Greetings of the new day’s dawn,” Stratek says, tugging me toward him with a tentacle that winds around my waist under my baby belly.

“Blessings,” Calbin says. “Let me take a look at all these little guys while I’m here.”

He unwraps Beastly and chuckles when the bablet stretches his arms and legs out, then curls them back in. He gives him a quick exam and then runs the scanner over him.

“Perfectly healthy,” he says to Driki and Bantu, who have scampered over. “This little one will grow to be about thirty-three inches. Weight will hover around fifty-one pounds. Now

this one,” he uncovers Beauty, “we’re running a little low on vitamin C. Are you nursing?”

Bantu nods.

“Make sure you get a little more fruit in for the next couple months. There’s not a problem, we’re just going to up the levels. Beauty will be about twenty-nine inches and the weight will fluctuate around forty-five pounds.”

“Thank you, doctor!” Bantu breathes, already forgetting to call the medic by his given name.

Calbin quickly looks over Lilaina’s twin baby girls, and now in the light of day, I can see they are a mixture of purplish pink. It’s a beautiful lavender. A combination of human skin color and Adroki. The smaller twin doesn’t have any issues with her swollen tentacle; I can’t even tell which one it was that had been trapped in the birth canal.

“They’re beautiful,” I murmur.

They have ears, which Mikki doesn’t have. Mikki looks pure Adroki, even though his skin color is human. And the twins both have the barest amount of light hair on the tops of their heads. Ten fingers, no toes, and that’s okay. At some

point I stopped thinking of them as tentacles and just think of them as appendages.

“Come sit,” Lilaina calls out to us.

We make our way to the table and Calbin grins to see Bantu reach for a helping of fruit.

“Mikhail sent me a name plaque for my mother’s urn,” Lilaina says, nodding at Calbin who must have brought it to her. “Previously, the urn said First Lady Montgomery. But he researched her name for me, including her maiden name. I think you’ll find this interesting.”

She hands me the small, silver engraved plate which sits on a dainty chain that will be placed around the neck of the urn. It will make a striking statement against the solid gold, which had been her bride price, but she insisted on having it melted and made into the urn. But that’s not what I’m looking at. My breath catches when I notice her mother’s name.

Esther Grace Minaya.

Beloved mother at twenty years of age.

“Esther,” I whisper, my eyes huge. God, the bastard was modeling me after the wife he killed. How did Lilaina ever survive his lunacy? My heart breaks for her poor mother, long gone now and her fate held secret for so long.

She nods. “She had just come of legal age to marry and was impregnated with me.”

Juris clears his throat as his tentacles wind around Lilaina, bringing her chair closer to him. “We’d like to thank you for delivering our twin daughters,” Juris says to me. “Little Essie and Grace Juris.”

Aww. She named her girls after her mother. But then everyone at the table starts to clap and it makes my cheeks heat. “Of course,” I assure him. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for my family.”

Juris nods solemnly and then Stratek high-fives Mikki, whose sticky fingers rise in the air toward his uncle. “How do you feel about your new sisters, little male?”

Mikki grins, showing tiny teeth. “Yah!”

I can’t help the huge smile on my face. I love to watch Stratek with his nephew. There’s pure love between the two.

“Do you think it looks odd if we eat with you sitting on my lap?” Stratek whispers to me, nuzzling my neck. He pulls out a chair and sits, gesturing for me to join him.

I laugh. “Probably a little.”

He looks crestfallen. “Aww. I can’t quite let you out of my sight. When I think of Kiartrok alone with you and Lilaina —”

I stop him with a hand over his mouth. “Don’t think about that. We’re fine. Everything’s all right.”

And because we don’t really care about anyone finding it odd, I slide onto his lap. I giggle when Lilaina rolls her eyes and loads a plate full of food, then slides it down the table to us.

Stratek and I both catch it with opposite hands when it comes racing down the way.

“We’re a royal family with only the best manners,” Stratek says proudly.

“Mmm,” I say, forking a piece of meat and holding it to his mouth for a bite.

And then he takes the same fork from me and spears a piece for me to eat.

“So gross,” I hear Lilaina snicker, but it’s with a laugh.

“Calbin,” Juris asks. “How long will we have the pleasure of your company?”

“Just another day,” he says. “I’ll look over the other bablets in the Tiiblet hut, give Tessa a check-up, keep an eye on Lilaina—”

“I’ll give you a check-up,” Stratek whispers in my ear. “Take your temperature the old-fashioned way.”

“Which way is that?” I whisper back, because I can tell he’s up to no good and the rest of the table doesn’t need to hear it.

“Under your tongue. Over your tongue. Back of your throat.”

“Wait a minute. Are you using a thermometer?” I ask suspiciously.

“Not exactly,” he says, and sucks my earlobe. Using his tentacles, he pulls me tighter to him so I can feel the bulge of the pocket that houses his cock. It’s growing underneath my ass as I wriggle against it.

His cock. Oh, God, he means to take my temperature with his cock. And I can’t help the shudder that wracks my body

because it's so tempting to explore all these new things with him.

“Are you sure we can leave?” I ask, turning in his arms to press kisses against the square jaw that I love so much. “Don't you have to go train today? Go work? Go do something for Juris?”

“You're interested?” he asks and there's suddenly a serious tone to his voice. It's like he expects me to behave in the Earth way and cast aside anything that brings pleasure. But I'm not wasting another precious minute of my life.

“Always, my love.”

“Goddess, you're so perfect.”

And then he sweeps me up in his arms, presses a “sucker-kiss” to Mikki's forehead with the tip of his tentacle, and we ignore the snickers and giggles as we head out of the room.

“We're perverts,” I say, not even caring that everyone knows what we're leaving to do.

“Yes, we are,” he agrees.

As soon as we close the door to our suite, his mouth is on mine and his tentacles slide up and down my legs, my back,

one even snakes between my thighs where I can rub myself on the thick girth like it's a muscled thigh.

“You know when you would shower, I'd peek?”

“What?” The shock on his face is somewhat comical.

“Yup. The first time you rose in the early dawn before me, I got up for a drink as I heard the shower run. Then I discovered you always leave the door open and every time I walked by, I'd see the outline of your rock-hard body, fogged somewhat with the steam of the shower, but still so deliciously tantalizing when you're sudsy.”

“That's not all I'd do in there,” he admits.

“I know,” I whisper. “I couldn't help but watch. I didn't think you'd mind.”

“Oh, my love, I don't. You may watch me any time.”

Tessa peeks at me from beneath her lashes, nibbling her bottom lip, looking decidedly gorgeous in her borrowed gown that showcases every delectable curve, her shoulders, her breasts. Including the curve of her rounded belly. Nothing is more beautiful. While I have ordered a wardrobe to be made

for my mate, I'm glad she's in borrowed clothes. Something tells me Tessa wouldn't pick form-fitting skirts and lower cut tops on her own and at this moment, I offer a blessing to my sister and Lilaina who have taken to dressing like trollops, according to Lilaina. I believe it broke Tessa in, and she won't balk at the new clothing that should be delivered later this day. Clothing in bright colors and cut to reveal the deep cleavage between her breasts, even skirts with slits to show off her sexy *thigh* appendages.

“Do you ... want me?” The vulnerability in her voice hits low in my stomach, making me want to growl in a primitive way.

“What?” I choke out. How could any male not want her? “I want you more than air to breathe.”

She grins and it's mischievous. “I hear you can breathe underwater.” She's such a tease, getting me riled up.

“Well, there's that,” I agree. “But I still want you more than anything in this world.”

With that, I kiss her.

She barely notices as I lift her up and take her to our bedroom, where I intend to have my mouth on every inch of

her body. I intend to wake her with my tongue between her legs every day of our lives.

With the way she was rubbing her swollen cunt on my tentacle between her legs, I know she's already wet and ready for me, her arousal sweet like honey. Heat kicks me low in the gut because I want to taste it. Taste her.

She spreads herself onto the bed and I grip her hips, yanking her closer with a growl. I slide my hands down to cup the sweet cheeks and lift her to my mouth.

But what's this?

"Surprise," my mate says with a giggle. Her cunt is smooth and bare, and it must be courtesy of the extra-long shower she took this morning.

She is puffy and fresh and pink there, glistening between her lips that are closed right now. And a male only has so much strength because I lean down abruptly and give a long lick up her slit. Her flavor bursts on my tongue and I groan at the taste of her essence. My mate. All mine.

She takes nearly no time at all to come on my tongue, her pretty cunt fluttering with orgasmic spasms. With a growl of triumph, I flip her around to her knees. I find I like taking my

mate this way, our differences apparent with her lower half bared to me as it points up. I find the entrance to her cunt and slide my cock in up to the first notch, listen to her hitch of breath and almost lose control when she thrusts herself backward as if to force more of me inside.

“Deeper,” she begs.

I give her the second notch, the lips of her cunt stretching around the bulbous shape.

“One more, baby,” she begs again. “I know you got it in you. All the way.”

Fuck. I pound my cock into her soft flesh, making the taut white cheeks jiggle, and my balls slap against the front of her cunt. We both grunt like animals as the sound of slapping flesh mingles with Tessa’s whimpers, as she begs for release, and then ... she begs for a tentacle.

I am only too happy to comply, letting one slide between her wet thighs to latch onto her stiff little clit. Two more reach for the perfect nipples that I love, tugging all three areas at once. And when my mate comes for a second time, I grunt with pleasure when my orgasm releases, shooting seed deep inside her.

We collapse onto our sides, me spooning her from behind, our bodies still connected.

“You didn’t take my temperature,” she complains.

I snort with laughter at the ruse I used to get her into my bed. But my laughter is quickly silenced when Tessa crawls down my body and takes her own temperature with my still-hard cock.

I grow hard as a rock at the warm feel of her mouth on me and I know we’re going to be in bed all day yet again. I don’t mind. It’s where I want to be the most.

Chapter Twenty

Stratek:

LIFE CAN'T GET ANY more perfect. Tessa and I are completely, utterly in love. The way I have always been with her, my mate now reciprocates with me. I am the luckiest male on the planet.

The only turbulence left is when she thinks about the dreaded *six-month* deadline in which she is to return to Earth. She gets a little anxious and I have fun distracting her tension by making sweet love to her. By reminding her how much she enjoys my head between her legs. Our kish has grown large in her belly and we've taken our lovemaking to new levels—softer and slower.

But then her time rolls near. With less than a few rotations left, we wake up, enjoy breakfast, and her labor begins.

“Stratek!” Her eyes are wild and the empty plate she is carrying clatters to the floor.

I am at her side in an instant, reaching for her hands to lead her to a chair. To calm her, to be her rock. “My love. Breathe. Is it our kish?”

Her voice is small, frantic. “It means we have to go early. I have to have the baby there.”

We know this. We have talked of this many times, but in her panicked state, she stresses because she does not want to go back and face *him* and the lies he accused her of.

The bastard who gets off on terrorizing females.

But I swallow the snarl and paste on a placid smile.

“It is all right, my love. I will notify our team to get ready to leave—”

“Are you sure they won’t mind? That they’ll want to accompany us to go back to that goddessforsaken planet?”

I laugh as she uses the term Juris utters frequently.

“My mate, they relish it. Our family, our guard, volunteered to join us, remember? Shana volunteered to stay behind with the children so even Lilaina wouldn’t worry and could come.”

“Okay,” she says. “Are you sure she really wants to come?”

“Yes, my love. She really wishes to come. She wishes to strut around on her home planet with her sullen mate at her side as if he is something to show off.” I shake my head. “Poor gullible Lilaina.”

“I heard that,” Lilaina says, coming into the dining room. She kneels before Tessa. “How are you doing, honey?”

“I’m—I’m okay. I guess I just panicked.”

“No need to panic. We got this. I’ll go notify everyone to get the portal ready. You and Stratek just take your time and we’re going to go have my nephew. Or niece.”

“Probably male,” I say. “I have great cock genes to pass on.”

I say it so seriously that Tessa forgets her tension and snorts with laughter. But it works because my mate is more relaxed.

“Everything’s fine, Tess,” Lilaina says, patting her knee before she stands. “Even if this nephew is my brother, we’re bringing him home, remember?” She winks. “*He* may have all the power on Earth, but he no longer has power over you and me.”

My males have readied the carriage, but Tessa says she wants to walk off her nervous energy. I'm not worried. If her labor worsens, I can carry her. She thinks she is heavy so far along in her gestation, but she is still a wisp of a thing. We leave the carriage right there in the yard and walk as a procession to the beach.

“Princess! Good luck, Princess!” Bantu screams from an upper window. Next to him, Driki waves. Then both Bantu and Driki hold up their bablets to their chests and lift a tiny arm to make the little ones wave.

Tessa smiles and waves back at the Tiiblets.

The walking procession takes their time to get to the beach, aware that Tessa's contractions grow stronger and come faster with the exercise.

“Stratek,” she groans, and stops midstride, looking down at her feet. Her waters just broke. I'm aware that her labor is progressing rather quickly and might be because she's stressing about having to see her ex.

“No problem,” I tell her and sweep her up into my arms.

“I'm getting you wet,” she moans.

“I’ve gotten you wet,” I remind her, and even with her cheeks pink, she giggles.

By the time we reach the beach, the portal is open. Juris gives me a nod to step through. The portal will remain open for a few brief seconds and the others will try to piggyback in without opening another, since new additional portals take time.

“Come, my love,” I whisper to her. “Let me see if I can create your precious wind for you.”

I tuck Tessa’s head beneath my chin as we step into the swirl of light. For a few painful seconds, the light brightens until it is almost unbearable, and then the world begins to change in a flash and the air swirls around us, lifting her loose hair, which she and Lilaina have chosen to wear down, probably to spite the President. Greenery replaces the gold of the beach as we morph into the hidden shrubbery passageway that disguises the portal on her planet.

My mate groans with another labor pain, and her spine stiffens. I carry her quickly down the long pathway and out the doorway.

As soon as I see Mikhail’s face, I tell him Tessa is in labor. Other Britonians stand by, arriving to greet us because

they were all notified of the portal's opening. They protect the gateway from others entering and leaving between the worlds.

It doesn't escape my notice that the President rubs his hands with glee. "Shouldn't she be relegated to wearing scarlet?"

In my arms, Tessa tenses. Everyone else ignores his words.

Mikhail motions to the medic, Calbin. The Britonian male greets us softly, and then runs his hands over Tessa's swollen belly.

"Labor is in full swing. You have some time, but there's no need to suffer. Let me give you something to help you relax."

"She shouldn't take anything that may cross the placental barrier," the President calls out, as if he has a say in the matter. "She will want to deliver naturally without pain relievers. After all, women have been giving birth since the beginning of time and pain is given by God for a reason. It is a rite of passage. You want to do right by your child, Esther."

We all ignore him.

“There’s no reason why a mother should suffer.” Calbin looks at Tessa questioningly. She nods and he pulls a glass vial from his medical bag. He removes the stopper and waves the contents under her nose which she breathes in. Immediately she relaxes.

“We’ll take her into the medic unit for privacy,” Mikhail announces. I’m barely aware of more of my people emerging from the shrubbery behind me.

“As she is my former fiancée,” the President says, “I insist on being present during the birth.” He looks at me slyly. “After all, I may be the father.”

I allow no expression to cross my face, aware that he’s baiting me. Instead, I imagine the time when I will smash my fist into his nose.

Tessa squirms in my arms. “No. I want only Stratek present. My mate.”

The President turns to Mikhail. “Would you cheat me out of my one chance of witnessing my child’s birth?”

“It could very well be my child,” I say.

“It is Tessa’s choice as to who is present during her labor and delivery,” Mikhail says.

“Think about it carefully,” the President says in a mild voice.

“Don’t you threaten my mate,” I snarl.

Tessa doesn’t hesitate. “Stratek,” she says. “I choose Stratek.”

“So it is,” Mikhail nods.

“Are you sure, Esther?” The President says taking a step forward, and even I can tell his voice sounds threatening toward her. The growl rumbles in my throat, warning him to stay back. Around me, my first commanders step up, fists clenched.

Then my sister-in-mate is there, approaching her father fearlessly. “Her name isn’t Esther. It’s Tessa. Use it,” she says. “Now step out of the way.”

“If that child’s mine—” he threatens.

“Then as the First Lady, I won’t hesitate to have a news conference and share with the world how my planet will love and welcome any child, even one born of rape,” she snaps. “How a child is brought to us won’t matter. We don’t care whose genetics are involved.”

Her father's face whitens, and he steps back. "That can't be proven," he says. "We were in love. Engaged to be married."

"Until she discovered what you do to your wives," Lilaina says, mentioning her mother who was shackled for life in his basement. "And knew her future fate."

"No one will believe you," he says. "They all know you're not right in the head."

"And soon they'll be aware you're not right either," she says. "If the rumors swirl about us, they'll swirl about you, too. After all, Father," she mocks, "you introduced her to the world as Esther when her legal name was Tessa. That won't be overlooked by the people."

"She wanted to change it—"

"And I think it's time to reveal who my mother was. Her legal name."

The President says no more.

We march past him into a waiting medic unit, a pod. After several hours, Calbin delivers a healthy male kishling into the world and brings him to Tessa's arms. She weeps at the sight of his purple skin color, caressing his fat little arms.

His tentacles are too stubby and uncoordinated to move properly yet, but they still find their way to their mother, wrapping around her as best they can as he learns to taste with his suckers, flooding himself with her joyous hormones.

“Hello, my son,” I whisper, letting him lock his fist around my finger. I have never been prouder. “Welcome to the world.”

“Tessa?” Mikhail asks from the doorway. “We would love a statement as to your decision. And there are quite a few people wondering if it will be televised.”

She nods. “We can do that.”

Mikhail beams. “That is good. Because Lilaina is also prepared. Do you think an hour will be good?”

Tessa nods. “Can you send Lilaina? I’d like to know if she’d paint our clan markings.”

I lean over her, disengaging my son’s fist from my finger and kissing the top of her head. “I will get her.”

Because I have a detour to make. My brother wasn’t able to obtain his satisfaction on Lilaina’s behalf because of the treaty. However, I am willing to lose my title for it. I am willing to make the sacrifice for all of us. Juris, Lilaina, and

my sweet Tessa. My fists clench as I think of what she has endured at the President's hand—her innocence stolen, imprisonment, even enslavement. But I take a deep breath and let the anger loosen from my face because I can't let him have any warning.

I find Lilaina in the courtyard with Juris. The area is scuttling with activity. The Britonians are present, and Juris's captains surround him as protection. My males head toward me, but I signal that they are to protect Juris. Though they look puzzled, they obey without question.

They are good males. I don't want them penalized in any way for what I am about to do.

"Laina," I say, and try to give her my trademark easygoing smile, though it feels a bit forced. "Tessa would like to know if you can paint our tribal markings on yours and her face before her televised announcement."

Lilaina's face brightens. "I'd love to! What a great idea."

She heads the way I came and instead of joining my people on their side of the courtyard, I stroll over to where the President stands, surrounded by his Secret Service. This ... this is when the male is his cockiest, with his protection surrounding him. Drones buzz around the yard, filming events

for the news media, though I am sure they are edited by his team before release.

“President Montgomery.” My voice is light and jovial, and I’m proud of the way it comes out when such white-hot rage swirls inside me. “I’m sure you will want to wait for the DNA match, but surely you’ve been told my son resembles me.”

The older male shrugs. “It was a fifty/fifty chance that I’d sire her whelp. I’d like to say the best man won, but ... well, you got the shorter end of the stick. Used goods. A tainted whore—”

My fist collides with his face before he can finish. I hear a satisfying crunch of bone and a spurt of blood gushes before he falls backward to the ground.

His Secret Service stare, mouths open, stunned for a moment. I am sure they have never seen the speed of an Adroki attack performed live. When they realize what happened, they draw their weapons, but they can’t shoot because the Britonians have raised a peace shield in the courtyard.

Mikhail hurries to the groaning President’s side. “Someone get Calbin here—if he is finished with Tessa and

her baby,” he says mildly.

Even in his pain, the President tries to speak. “I demand retribution.”

“You shall have it,” Mikhail says. “King Juris, it is your responsibility to hold trial against Captain Stratek and release the decision of that trial.”

“It will be done,” my brother says, his voice grim.

I am still staring at the male who mistreated my mate and my brother’s.

“I will gladly accept my punishment,” I say, aware that the higher pitch of the drones means this drama is being recorded. “Losing my position in the King’s army is worth it to defend the honor of Earth females.” I look into the direction of the drones.

“Honor?” the President sneers. “Your *mate* is registered as a scarlet woman in our land! Do you know what that means? Her virtue was not intact, and she admitted to having two men in one weekend. She is nothing more than a whore,” he scoffs.

“My mate was forced that weekend by you.” In contrast to his, my voice is calm. “The next night, she was drugged by

you when I met her. I am witness to the bruises covering her body and should the people of Earth require proof, I have those pictures, though I will not release them without her permission. You then blackmailed her and terrified her beyond belief before falsely imprisoning her. You told her you set her up for the murder of two innocent women by not registering her into the security prison. However, I am sure the Britonians are able to uncover the records of Tessa working in the milking farm next to the prison even though she was not a registered prisoner. So your false accusation, should you make it, already has holes in the story.”

It is not my imagination that the President has paled beneath the scarlet blood that covers his face and still flows from the broken face appendage known as a nose.

“That’s a lie. She has a mental illness. I never once said I would accuse her in the accident that occurred on a farm. I simply wanted to know if her unborn child—a child created from our love—was mine. The woman was jailed for not showing up when she was called for the Match Program.”

“How could she show up when she was on the run from an abusive man’s love?” I narrow my eyes. “When she found out that the First Daughter was enslaved by her father and

locked in a basement with the corpse of her mother? A mother whose name she didn't even know was Esther Grace Montgomery? A name she was forced to answer to when you used the same shackles on her that night you expressed your *love?*”

“It is untrue,” the President babbles. “I demand this man be locked up.”

“Juris.” Mikhail just has to utter one word.

Maleek comes behind me and shackles my wrists together. However, on our planet, my tentacles would have been weighted down and a male's face would be covered to avoid the poisonous barbs he can spit from his mouth.

From behind us, Calbin makes his way across the courtyard. He doesn't appear to be in a hurry, and I've seen him rush to emergencies, like when we searched for Lilaina and Tessa in the diamond caves.

He leans over the President and waves his medical tools.

“You'll have to take human drugs for the pain,” he says. “I'd give you something created by our Britonian technology, but we specifically research things that won't cross a placental barrier for women. There is no evidence that our technology is

safe for human male sperm, and we certainly don't want to inhibit your procreation efforts on this planet.”

Mikhail looks slightly surprised by Calbin's statement.

“Broken nose,” Calbin declares, waving his scanner over him. “The bleeding has been staunched. Your eyes are darkening also. Unfortunately, I didn't arrive in time to stop the bruises from forming. You'll have to let nature take its course. You'll probably have black eyes for a week to ten days.”

The medic stands and gestures for the Secret Service to pull him to his feet. But I can't see anything else as I'm led away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tessa:

“WHERE CAN YOUR DADDY BE?” I ask my son, changing his diaper again. Not that he needs it, but because I can’t stop playing with him. I’ve put three different little shirts on him and swapped out the color of his little hat twice. His eyes barely open before they sweetly flutter closed again. He loves to cuddle close to me, his baby tentacles touching my skin. I know his front tentacles have tiny suckers in the shape of a triangle on the tips, which allow them to taste. Stratek says at this age, they flood themselves with their mother’s pheromones until they start producing their own. Because of that, we wrap them in blankets like little open-ended burritos so the ends of their tentacles can reach out. The Adroki use blankets with a cord tied across the middle like a little robe. Lilaina and I tie our baby blanket sashes in huge bows like a birthday present.

Lilaina has already painted the designs on the side of my face and because I have no artistic ability to return the favor, a

laughing Mikhail paints hers, right here in my room, as I nurse the baby, who falls asleep on the nipple for the umpteenth time. It won't be long before I make my statement choosing to leave—pray that Eric won't find some way to saddle me with additional charges like not wearing my signature scarlet here on the planet—and then head home. Knowing Stratek, he'll probably respond that I wore a scarlet sheet covering me in the labor room. Of course, with my goofy mate, he'll probably also swear it was the sexiest sheet he'd ever seen, wink, and thank the President for declaring I should wear red.

I smile at the thought. And then I frown. Where is Stratek?

I just want to go home with my son, my mate, and my family. I'm ready to face the music. Make my choice. It's much easier now that the baby's parentage is clear.

“Are we ready?” I hear Lilaina ask.

“Everything is complete. Tessa, this is a gift from Calbin. He is present in the courtyard, waiting near the portal where everyone else is.”

Mikhail brings me a rolled-up package. He unravels it to reveal a beautiful fabric in mint green, etched with yellow flowers and fluttering white mingae birds, introduced by the

Britonians to replace our bees. I understand the design symbolizes Stratek's colors, the bright green adapted more softly for a baby, the yellow is a muted color of the gold, a valuable resource of their planet, and the birds—a precious gift brought to Earth by the Britonians when we were in such dire straits.

“It is to carry your infant attached to your chest,” Mikhail says softly. “Shall I help you put it on?”

“Yes, please,” I breathe.

He shows me how to tie the straps on, and then Lilaina picks up my yet un-named son. “Hello, precious nephew,” she coos, and kisses his sweet baby head. “You smell so good, like fresh baby. Makes me miss mine so much! But they're safe back home with family and you'll meet them so soon.”

It may be gas, but I swear he smiles.

She slips him into the blanket carrier tied at my neck and waist, and he snuggles comfortably against my bosom.

“All right.” Mikhail claps his hands together. “Ladies, let me escort you to the portal where your mates await. Tessa, just so you won't be surprised, Stratek is in custody.”

“In custody? Why?”

Lilaina looks just as stunned as I feel.

“He violated the peace treaty.” But the smile across Mikhail’s face isn’t at all bothered. “I’ll send the news feeds home with you.” He winks.

Lilaina and I share puzzled looks.

We walk the short distance to the courtyard and again, I’m amazed at the medical technology of the Britonians. Whatever Calbin did to me—it doesn’t even feel like I just birthed a baby. If I didn’t have the proof in the baby blanket attached to my neck, I wouldn’t have believed it. I don’t feel tired, I don’t feel sore, I don’t feel swollen. It’s amazing.

All of our people are gathered in the center of the yard, where Mikhail had stood with me six months ago. Stratek has two guards surrounding him, and his hands are behind him like he’s handcuffed.

“Baby!” I immediately go to him and wrap my arms around him, our son between us. He drops his head to kiss the top of my head, the only cuddle he can give me with his arms handcuffed behind him.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

His smile is brilliant. “I am more than okay. It was worth it.”

I wonder what he did. I look across the courtyard. Eric stands ramrod straight, his nose swollen, his face splotchy. My mouth drops. Stratek must have struck him? Eric glares at me and the hatred is apparent.

But I don’t cower. Not with my precious baby nestled between me and my strong, handsome mate. While his arms can’t be around me as they normally are, his tentacles are. And mine are around him. And our people are all here to protect us.

Mikhail signals for the drone to be brought to us. When it hovers nearby, I stare directly into it.

“Tessa Minak, is your choice to return home to Earth, or to return to Pimeon?” Mikhail asks.

“My choice is to return home”—I pause and there’s deadly silence across the courtyard, the only sound is the buzzing of the drones— “to Pimeon, with my mate and newborn baby. If it’s okay, I’d like to add a couple more words for the women of Earth who might be afraid that their name will be drawn next.”

Mikhail nods.

“Sisters of Earth.” I pause. “I’ve never felt comfortable referring to anyone in that sense, but the Adroki have taught me the meaning of that word. When I lived here on Earth, I was terrified of the Match Program. I was told the Adroki would woo me with their wealth and then trade me among their clans to be used as a breeder. But here, I was man’s pawn, and I had no idea. Because I was so terrified, I didn’t think it through. Once I did, you know what dawned on me? For years we were told our birthrate was low because it was the female’s fault. To make up for it, the House of Duty was established, and every woman was required to work one day a month, milking a man’s seed to encourage fresh production. Again, it was our fault our birthrates were low. Yet here I stand with my newborn. The First Lady, Lilaina? She has three children. So, my sisters, is it really our fault? Are we the ones who are barren? Or is it ... our men?”

“Are we committed to being slaves forever because the majority of our men died in the wars? There were women who died, also. But not as many because back then, not a lot of women were even accepted into the military. Sometimes we’re oppressed without even knowing it. If you’re terrified to be a breeder and fear being traded among men ... I suggest you give the Matched Program a try instead. If any of my old

friends would like to see what the planet is like, please come visit me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to go home with my family.”

And then one more thing dawns on me.

“Oh, by the way, no means no. There was no one to defend me nine months ago. But there is now.”

I look directly at Eric and even with his mottled, swollen skin, he pales. I can almost hear the wheels turning inside his head of how he's going to squirm out of this once I leave.

Mikhail signals for the cameras to turn off so the portal can open. The drones dock, because when the portal activates, their ability to fly stops and they crash to the ground.

“Are we ready, my love?” Stratek asks.

“So ready.”

“Tessa!”

I turn when I hear my name called. Amos stands at the edge of the courtyard, flanked by the Britonian guard.

“Please. Can I have a word?” he calls out.

“That's Amos,” I whisper to Stratek. “Will you give me a second?”

“Of course, sweet. But you call out if you need me.”

I smile at his sweetness, though I’m sure I won’t need to since the Britonians are lined up around Amos.

Calbin locks eyes with Stratek and makes his way to us. He places a hand at the small of my back. “I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“Thank you,” Stratek says.

I don’t mind. I have a baby nestled in my arms who must be protected at all costs. Escorted by Calbin, I nestle my son with my hand on his rump over the carrier and walk toward the edge of the yard.

Amos’s dark eyes never lift from me as I approach. Goddess, I’d forgotten how handsome he is. His shoulders are wide, his neck thick. His dark hair is casually arranged, and his face is healthy and tanned. None of his wives are present this time.

It makes me stop a few feet away from him as I wonder why. From that distance, we stare at each other awkwardly.

“Wow, you look so different,” he says finally. I study him. Attractive as he is, as muscular, he doesn’t hold a candle to Stratek, whose glorious body puts Amos’s to shame.

Amos's gaze follows my painted tribal markings up to where my hair flutters in the breeze, following the length of it. Does he think I look different because my hair is loose? Sure, it's grown some, but I'm still me. Maybe he just feels uncomfortable to say his piece with everyone watching.

"Amos, how are you?" I ask gently. "I'm sorry about Helen and Beth."

He nods and suddenly looks broken. "Thank you. I'm sorry, too. About everything."

I nod. But there's one thing I notice—whenever I stand next to anyone, they try to peer into the blanket carrier around my chest to catch a glimpse of the baby. Not Amos. Amos stands straight and looks into my eyes like my son doesn't exist.

"Is that all?" I ask and while it might be a tad bit rude—which Amos isn't used to by the way his eyes widen—I just don't have time for this bullshit. I'm ready to take my place next to my man.

"No, I"—he takes a deep breath—"I want to say I'm really sorry, Tessa. And I'd like you to know, I have room for a fourth wife now. I'm sorry, I know you should have been first, but—well, can we put the past behind us and start over?"

Holy smokes. Is this man for real? I'm not even sure what to say. Is he really so sure I'll say yes that he'll proposition me while my mate stands across the yard? While my newborn son is strapped to my chest?

"No, Amos. It's too late. I have a son."

I caress my son's curved bottom through the soft blanket. A son he's avoided looking at.

He swallows. "I know. If you want to keep him, I'll be good to him, Tessa."

Holy shit. His comment just made me curse mentally, and I'm not apologizing for it.

"Based on that answer alone, my choice is hell no, Amos. Because you should have already assumed I'd keep my son. But in any case, I love Stratek. I love my home. I love my family. I wouldn't trade them for anything." I turn to walk away, Calbin following me. Then I look back over my shoulder. "Best of luck to you."

I mean it. I'm in love with my perfect mate, my prince, and I want everyone else to be as happy as me.

"Everything okay?" Stratek asks, his eyes following our every move, even as I caress our baby through the blanket.

“Everything’s perfect, handsome. Can we finally go home and live happily ever after?”

His smile is everything.

As we follow the procession walking down the long pathway hidden by shrubbery, Maleek pauses us with a hand on Stratek’s shoulder. We stop for a brief minute while he unsnaps the cuffs locking Stratek’s hands. After rubbing his wrists briefly, Stratek wraps an arm around my shoulders just as the light snaps and encompasses our entire team.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tessa:

THE FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS to take care of is Stratek's trial. No matter what anyone thinks of him breaking the President of Earth's nose, he violated the treaty put in place by the Britonians. Unfortunately, it set a bad example for our people, who are already labeled as violent and uncivilized animals. It doesn't bode well for women who are drafted for the Match.

We are all gathered in the courtyard, dressed in our formal attire. Like Lilaina and the weeping Shana, I'm wearing the jewels Stratek gave me that belonged to his mother's. They're emeralds and the green symbolizes his team. Shana even insists I wear a small tiara in my hair, one that glitters gold. The entire King's Guard is present, the Tiiblets are present, even Britonians are here, the ones who are working on our travel system. But this time, in a rare occurrence, Mikhail is present. Eric insisted that he attend the

trial to report on the results of Stratek's punishment. Churlish bastard.

The dozen males of Stratek's team are the grimmest, exacerbated by the fact that this is the most serious they've ever been. Because losing a captain has never been done. It's a huge demotion and to happen to Juris's own brother?

Stratek is kneeling, head bowed. His hands are once again manacled but this time in front of him. He's tense, muscles bulging as they show the massive breadth of his biceps and shoulders. I can't help the shiver that courses through me as I take in his gorgeousness.

"Uncle Tek," Mikki squirms in Lilaina's arms. He doesn't like that his uncle is chained and unable to come to him. He and Beshi are both in attendance, while the younger babies are in the nursery of the castle where the elderly Tiiblets watch them.

"No, Mikki, you can't go to Uncle Stratek," Lilaina whispers as he continues to wriggle.

But Mikki isn't having any of that. He fusses in her arms and eventually, a grim-faced Juris signals for a Tiiblet to take Mikki back to the castle. Hearing his howls for Stratek are heartbreaking as they grow fainter when he's taken away.

My heart breaks when I see a tear trail down my love's cheek.

I can't take this. This man—this hero—shouldn't be alone.

I rise and walk slowly across the patch of yard to where he kneels and as his tentacles part to let me near, I kneel with him and drop my head the same way his is.

“Princess Tessa?” Juris asks softly.

I lift my head and look directly at him and Mikhail, who stands with him.

“I support my mate and will remain at his side no matter what punishment he's doled out.”

“And if he's whipped instead of demoted?” Juris asks mildly.

Stratek growls. “No!”

I raise my chin. “I was engaged to the man whose nose Stratek broke. Do you think I haven't been whipped?”

The courtyard is silent, except for the Earth drone that Mikhail brought to record the events for the humans.

I continue, mostly to break the uncomfortable silence. “I will take whatever punishment is given to my mate.”

“Tessa,” Stratek grits. “It would kill me.”

I smile at him. “We’re in this together, you and me.”

“And us.” There is some movement behind us, noises of rustling grass as tentacles slither. I look over my shoulder to see Stratek’s men, one by one, stooping to kneel in orderly rows behind us.

Only Henyon and Jaze remain standing.

“Commanders?” Juris asks, his voice just as mild as when he spoke to me.

“We support our captain also,” Henyon says. “Our patrol accepts the same punishment of our captain and our lady.”

Then he and Jaze kneel, bowing their heads.

As Stratek turns back around and lowers his head, one of his tentacles slides across the back of my legs and around my waist. In turn, I loop an arm through his, feeling his muscles clench as if they want to pull me back, but of course he can’t.

Then I drop my head and wait for our sentence.

“Captain Stratek Elear Benedi of the Adroki Clan. I will allow you to tell everyone why a Captain of the King’s Guard broke the Britonian treaty.”

“I took an oath to protect females, and I honor that oath. When I first made it upon my coronation, I thought it was to protect Adroki females. I had no idea Earth females even existed. But when I met my sister-in-mate, Queen Lilaina, and saw her suffer atrocities at the hand of her own father, it broke something inside me. Lilaina still bears scarred hands to this day, not only from enforced slavery, but from beating her hands raw on a wooden door while being locked in a cold, damp dungeon with her mother’s dead body. Lilaina is unable to remain in dark places to this day. I watched my brother as he had to stand by and not protect his mate from her father’s verbal daggers. Had to watch as his lovely mate was slandered by humans and called crazy for not wanting to return. And then I met the love of my life. To find my mate was engaged to this monster—I already knew she’d been subjected to the same treatment as my sister-in-mate. But with one difference. My mate’s choice as to giving a male the most sacred gift—the act of intimacy—was forcibly taken from her. In addition to her innocence being stolen, she was then imprisoned for it, labeled a whore, and forced to answer to the name of a wife he

murdered. This male bragged about it and even insisted on being present during my child's birth, in case the whelp was his, as he phrased it. So, at that moment, I made a conscious decision. I would protect Lilaina. I would protect and avenge the love of my life, Tessa, with everything I have. And in addition, I will protect future human females who will continue to fall under this man's rule through ignorance or through no choice of their own. Because if a male from Earth is able to sell his child like the President sold the First Daughter, I don't doubt that other Earth parents will sell their daughters to a monster such as him. For that reason, I will take any punishment doled to me as long as this video is shared with Earth so future females who suffer can see that their suffering is not silent. Someone cared enough to protect them. To lose everything to call attention to their plight. I'd like to acknowledge those Earth women who band together to become stronger and protect their sisters. The way Lilaina protected Tessa and the way Tessa protected Lilaina. The way the guards at the female prison protected my mate from miscarriage by allowing her to work the milking farms when she wasn't even checked in as an inmate. I am thankful for these brave females, and I make this sacrifice willingly."

I'm barely aware of the tears burning hot trails of fire as they run down my cheeks. Every word that falls from his mouth is beautiful, inside and out, just like he is.

Juris steps forward, his sword in his hand. Surely, he can't think to slay his own brother?

“Stratek Elear Benedi of the Adroki Clan, you are hereby stripped of your title of Captain. You will never again answer to the highest honor once bestowed upon you. To be stripped of one's military title is a punishment never before doled out to one of the King's Guard.”

With the tip of the sword, he reaches out and rips a ribbon from Stratek's shoulder. Stratek holds still, his gaze firmly fixed ahead.

The gold and green ribbon flutters in the breeze before falling softly near my knee.

“Henyon and Jaze, rise.”

I hear the rustling of the two men behind me.

“What do I do with a fully trained sleeve of my guard without a leader?” Juris asks, but it's obvious it's not really a question. “A branch that has made me so goddamn proud with their determination to stand by their leader and his brave mate,

the Lady Tessa. A branch who is willing to accept punishment even though I know my brother protected them by ordering them to serve me in that courtyard on Earth.” He taps his tentacles on the ground as if he’s thinking, but the yard is completely silent as they wait to see how this will go.

“Everyone rise,” Juris commands.

Behind us, Jaze and Henyon step forward to help me and Stratek to our feet.

“I can’t let my own guard fall through the cracks. I will assign a new leader to replace the fallen captain—”

Some of Stratek’s men protest.

“Silence!” Juris barks.

The unruly team quiets.

Then his voice gentles. “I know following a captain is an intimate act of trust and loyalty. My brother recruited you, he trained you, and he saw something in each and every one of you that no one else did. He polished that spark until it shined, and he taught you to be all that you can be. He made you a team. And I’m too proud of him to lose that.”

It’s such a bittersweet moment. To be praised in the midst of such sadness. To have your leader cut down while you’re

built up—and knowing they’ve gotten there because of him. Because of my loyal, brave, wonderful mate. I want to weep for him and all that he’s going through, but I know he wouldn’t change a thing. If he could do it all over again, he’d still break Eric’s nose.

“This team doesn’t deserve to be broken up and absorbed into the other teams. And honestly, I don’t think it will be fully effective for my guard as a whole to have your individual positions integrated and retrained. Instead, I’ll keep your team whole and assign a new leader. The only person with the expertise, loyalty, training, and bravery ... and a title high enough to command, would be my own brother. *Prince* Stratek of the Adroki Clan, welcome the team to your guard.” He unlocks the chain at Stratek’s wrists.

He can do that? He can assign a prince to an already trained guard? There are stunned faces all the way around, and then a cheer erupts in the yard. Stratek sweeps me up into his arms and his guard descends about us in a mass of hugs and tentacles, which I’m squished in the middle of.

I’d have it no other way.

Epilogue

Tessa:

SOLEIH LIEK STRATEK, pronounced Saul, a combination of Paul and Sarah, my parents' names, met his family formally that same night. His middle name is Stratek's father's name, pronounced Lee-yek. Apparently, babies on Pimeon take their father's first name as a surname, hence the last name Stratek.

But I fell in love with the name Soleih, especially when I heard it pronounced. I'd mentioned my parents' names to Juris, and he quickly pointed out the name.

Mikki is enthralled with his baby cousin and always needs to be touching him. His chubby tentacles have lengthened slightly and he's always near Sol, babbling to him in baby talk with a tentacle entwined with his so they have a connection. Sol loves it and stares up at his cousin with large, seemingly impressed eyes.

Beshi has bestowed kisses on Sol from time to time, but she's more taken with Grace and Essie, probably because

they're moving and more active than my newborn.

Mikki was determined to not be separated from his Uncle Stratek after the trial. It took two whole days before he finally returned home to his own parents and that was only with the promise that we'd all meet for dinner in the main quarters that evening where he'd see his uncle again. He's a loyal little man and is encouraged by his father. I can see the paternal instinct that must have reared when Juris, Stratek, and Shana were growing up, especially with the twelve-year age difference between Juris and his twin siblings.

Stratek and Shana are as close as twins should be. Even the big, gruff Maleek had a shimmer in his eyes when he hugged Stratek to him and said he was so proud of him for his defense of females. Even the males from the other clans were subdued to hear that Stratek made the ultimate sacrifice of losing the highest title earned in a clan and did so willingly, never having a clue that he would be able to rule as Prince, thanks to his brother's foresight.

The Britonians finished the transport system and we're having a huge party to celebrate. Several of their women have come out to visit for the first time ever. To my and Lilaina's surprise, Mikhail and Calbin are part of a threesome with a

petite, delicate woman named Minerva. She stands between the two men proudly, a small hand in each of theirs. I understand why they stay out of sight on Earth. Despite our men averaging three and four wives, our planet would be in an uproar over the audacity of a woman sharing men. There are no other words.

But none are necessary. Because of my mate's sacrifice, women have come to the realization that things aren't always as they seem. Change comes slowly, but I can see there's hope. Especially when Mikhail tells us that I have hundreds of letters from women all over the planet telling me how brave I am and expressing an interest in visiting our planet.

But there are changes coming. Lilaina, finding her power as First Lady, has decided to send males to the planet to help out with abolishing the milk farms. Instead, we're turning the buildings into training centers for midwifery. The prisons will especially make good use of the training centers, since most prisoners are in prison for avoiding the rules set by our male-dominated society and focusing on healing women will be good for them. Her father, Eric, continues to try to smooth people over, spewing excuses like cultural misunderstandings and a brainwashed daughter who corrupted his ex-fiancée who

he was hoping to reunite with before I chose to enter the bride program. He is tragically upset that I had been imprisoned for so long.

Lilaina tells me that Stratek didn't hold back when he punched her father. Eric's nose is permanently disfigured. He needs surgery, but a cosmetic procedure is not an option for the President since surgeries carry some risk and it's completely off-limits for the leader of the country to put himself in unnecessary harm's way. I hope that's a reminder every time he looks into the mirror.

But for now, I watch Stratek as he cuddles our son on his chest. The two of them stare into each other's eyes. They match perfectly; Sol has Stratek's exact same shade of skin in purple. His eyes are his father's, vertical pupils with one difference; the irises are my shade of green. Seeing the two of them together melts my heart.

"This is Pimeon, your planet," Stratek whispers to him. "Though you were born on your mother's planet, Earth. Welcome to the world, my kish. I love you more than words can say, and I thank the Goddess every day for bringing your mother to me. For giving me two cherished gifts."

Sol gurgles softly like he understands. I make a small noise, overcome with sweetness overload.

Stratek looks up from our son, his eyes full of love as they land on me.

“Are you happy, my sweet?” Stratek asks, his voice low and sexy as he stands and brings our son to me.

Considering I can't stop smiling, I'm not sure how to answer. So, I lift my face for his kiss and swing my baby, my precious Sol, to my other arm.

“So happy,” I murmur between kisses. “I love you so very much.”

The End~



Thank you for reading!

I hope everyone enjoyed book two of Matched to the Monster. I loved writing the story of Stratek and his misunderstood mate, Tessa. Poor Tessa was labeled the evil stepmother when she was just a replacement for Cinderella. I loved that Stratek was determined to love Tessa, no matter what, and I love that her strength shines through. If you have a moment, I'd appreciate if you would leave a review. It doesn't have to be long, and it doesn't have to be fancy! Anything will do. Reviews encourage me to keep writing. For example, one reviewer mentioned wanting to know more about the Britonian race—well, Mikhail's story is breaking through. The only reason why I haven't started it is because I can't decide if that series will be a spinoff, or a stand-alone, or just a book in this same series. In the meantime, I'm working on book 3, Jaire's story.

Feel free to follow on Facebook or Instagram, or even Bookbub, and sign up for my newsletter on my website to get news about upcoming book release dates and free bonus material exclusive for you. No spamming, ever. Just an effort to keep you in the loop. And please read on to see if you'd be interested in any of my other books. Thank you again!

Rena

Marks

newsletter:

<https://renamarks.com/newsletter/>

My Alien Baby

Book 1 of the Lost & Found Series

Rena Marks, A. Blake

♪♪ **Ivory Bellows fell down a well. Ivory Bellows woke up in hell. Better listen to the big blue giant, zip your lip, and hush. Better not stare at his son who makes you blush.** ♪♪

Imagine if you were a giant, fifteen-foot alien from another planet and found a strange being unconscious in a foreign object...a flying pod. The creature is tiny enough to be a child and you'd have such a big heart, you'd want to adopt this poor orphaned child, right?

Only...what if the full-grown human you found didn't know she was your child? What if she thought she was your dinner instead?

The Raza are a people full of honor, faith, and family. Especially Havak of the Jaha clan. His first yun is of his heart, not his blood. But when his mate dies and his beloved yun goes off into the world to study other people and languages, the Creators give him a second chance at life. He happens upon a strange little yun of a species unlike anything he's ever seen.

A strange, five-fingered species.

When the yun wakes and screams, he gives her a bub-bub, wraps her in a pu-pu, and packs her in his sket to bring home.

His huge heart is filled with love for his second adopted yun.

Ivory Bellows wakes up in a strange land filled with blue giants. They threaten her in their strange language, shove a plug in her mouth to keep her quiet and take her home to fatten her up. And marinate her. They must marinate her when she sleeps, because she's swollen and always needs to pee.

Oh, God. She's dinner. It's only a matter of time until they decide when.

But when a hot new alien arrives, the only way she can keep sane is to pretend he's her husband and she's his wife and everything is hunky-dory fine.

Thank God this new arrival, Iik, doesn't know her language.
Yet.

Space Babies

Book 1 of the Purple People Series

Rena Marks

An antiquated ship, rotating through the galaxy of a deserted planet, bears immediate investigation.

Helian Six boards the abandoned vessel to find the long-lost inhabitants in a state of stasis. But the systems are failing, and half a dozen have woken up. The planet below shows long dead bodies, poisoned by the scum of space, a species known as Gorgians.

Strangely, the few who have awakened are much smaller than their planetary predecessors. And not very intelligent. Determined to believe the cute, tiny beings are not pets, the crew of Helian Six decide to train the small warriors to defend the planet. They become the laughingstock of patrol, however, after they commit and realize it will take twenty-two cycles to “rear” the inhabitants.

So they do what any intelligent males would do. Kidnap teachers. And if the females can’t manage to avert their eyes from their buff physiques, well, score!

Book 1—Space Babies

Book 2—Baby Soldiers In Space

Book 3—Baby Butterfly Kisses

Book 4—Titi

Book 5—Rock-A-Bye Babies In Space

Xeno Sapiens

Catch up with the first novel in the series! The original Xeno Sapiens story.

Futuristic earth finds alien DNA and creates a new species of hybrids in hidden labs. It's up to two small females to teach these beings they're worthy, and beautiful, and loved ... and to save them from mankind.

My name is Dr. Robyn Saraven. Earth has changed greatly in recent years, the governments of the world merging into one united front, the Global Government. Disease, starvation, and prejudice have been eradicated from our existence, and it appears our growth as spiritual beings is finally on track.

But the discovery of alien DNA pairs a prestigious research facility with our government to create new beings. Suddenly our spiritual growth is halted when mankind plays God. Like old Earth, our modern-day world has to deal with prejudice, corruption, and greed.

Or was it always there, lurking beneath the surface?

Book 1—Xeno Sapiens

Book 2—Earth-Ground

Book 3—Siren

Book 4—Beast's Beauty

Book 5—Almost Human

Book 6—Forbidden Touches

Book 7—Coveting Ava

Book 8—For Everly

Book 9—Assassin's Mate

Book 10—Sextet

Book 11—Tempting Tempest

Book 12—Falling For Trance

Book 13—Damaged Goods

Book 14—Alien's Bride

Book 15—Dual Lives

Book 16—Reson's Lesson

Book 17—A Mate For Max

Book 18—Dragon's Mate

Book 19—Fated

Alien Stolen

Rena Marks

Our world is different from anything we've ever known. Years ago, aliens came to live among us. They claim to be the good guys, and yet every day, humans go missing—never to be heard from again.

Sian and her family resist the leadership of the new regime, along with dozens of other factions across the world. However, without electricity, they're at a loss as to how to communicate with each other to band together for strength in numbers. For that reason, they fight alone. When her father and best friend are captured by the military, she pretends to be a pleasure worker to infiltrate the base. Unbeknownst to her, a pleasure worker *has* been summoned to service a new breed of alien—one with a known weakness. Sex drains his strength.

None of the militia realizes that when a Nisibian comes across his mate, he doesn't lose his power ... but instead transfers it to her.

Drunk on the power of being a female Rambo, Sian decides to steal the massive alien for herself. This much power at her fingertips could tip the scales in the resistance fight for humans.

Abducted

Book 1 in the Blue Barbarian series.

Alien abductions are real.

I was the third female awakened aboard the spacecraft that specialized in kidnapping females. Their mission? To sell us to other galaxies.

Human female Numbers One and Two didn't make it, but I was lucky. I was able to comprehend the instruction from Drakar, a caged abductee from the planet Blaedonia. I live only because of his warning to me not to fight the aliens who have me on the table. Together, we formulate a plan for escape for both us and the ten other unawakened Earthlings.

Lucky for Drakar, the spaceship crash-lands back on his planet. Unlucky for the Earthlings, we'll never be able to travel back home.

We'll have to learn to adapt.

Book 1—Abducted

Book 2—Stranded

Book 3—Taken

Book 4—Captive

Book 5—Stolen

Book 6—Betrayed

Artificial Intelligence

Rena Marks

The Sirian galaxy has blown itself up during a war that mimicked that of the destruction of her own planet, Terra. No stranger to slavery, Arian has escaped from the planet Zeta where she's been raised to breed royalty.

The Artificial Intelligence is a collective unit from the Sirian Planet B. They'd warned the leaders that a civil war would destroy the galaxy to no avail. In order to escape being destroyed along with the rest, they inserted their intelligence into the computer system.

Imagine Arian's surprise when she encounters a huge piece of chipped planet, which her computer claims to have ancient Sirian artifacts buried in its hollowed core.

Nothing can possibly be alive. The contamination gases from the nuclear war have destroyed everything in sight. But Arian is a scavenger, and these are ancient artifacts ...

Unfortunately, her hacked computer never tells her the artifacts are actually metal skeletons whose bodies need to be grown into dangerously hot men.

Stargazer Series

In 1692, a starship carrying volunteers arrived on planet Earth near a small town called Salem, Massachusetts. The long journey across many light years caused the female inhabitants aboard drastic memory loss. It was already known when they would arrive on Earth, they would have no memories of who and what they really were. They would be as helpless as newborn lambs.

The goal was to breed with Earthlings, to prevent their own race from dying out. If it was successful, years later more Stargazers would be sent to co-exist with the humans on Planet Earth.

But alas—the females were slaughtered.

Book 1—**The Hunter**

Dante and Kele

Book 2 —**The Enforcer**

Diamond and Felicia

Book 3 —**The Defender**

Hayze and Cassio

Book 4 —**The Protector**

Neo and Jessie

Book 5 —**The Guardian**

Vesta and Bay

Book 6 —**The Destroyer**

Jace and Mia

Matched to the Monster, TOO

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Editing by OWL EYES PROOFS & EDITS.

Also by Rena Marks

Genetically Altered Humans Series: Xeno Sapiens, Earth-Ground, Siren, Beast's Beauty, Almost Human, Forbidden Touches, Coveting Ava, For Everly, Assassin's Mate, Sextet, Tempting Tempest, Falling For Trance, Damaged Goods, Alien's Bride, Dual Lives, Reson's Lesson, A Mate For Max, Dragon's Mate, Fated

My Alien Baby

The Matched Program: Matched to the Monster, Matched to the Monster, Too!, Wanted by the Monster

Alien Stolen

Born Again

Magic Gems

Wanton Sins Series: Demonic Passions, Demonic Pleasures, Demonic Power

Shared By Wolves

Enticing Fate

SuperNatural Sharing Series: Forgotten Kisses, Remembered Kisses, Whispered Kisses

Kiss Me Before I Die

Stargazer Series: The Hunter, The Enforcer, The Defender, The Protector, The Guardian, The Destroyer

Blue Barbarian Series: Abducted, Stranded, Taken, Captive, Stolen, Betrayed

The AI Series: Artificial Intelligence, Serepto's Story

Purple People Series: Space Babies, Baby Soldiers In Space,
Baby Butterfly Kisses, Titi, Baby Butterfly Kisses

Chasing Violet—written with C.L. Scholey