

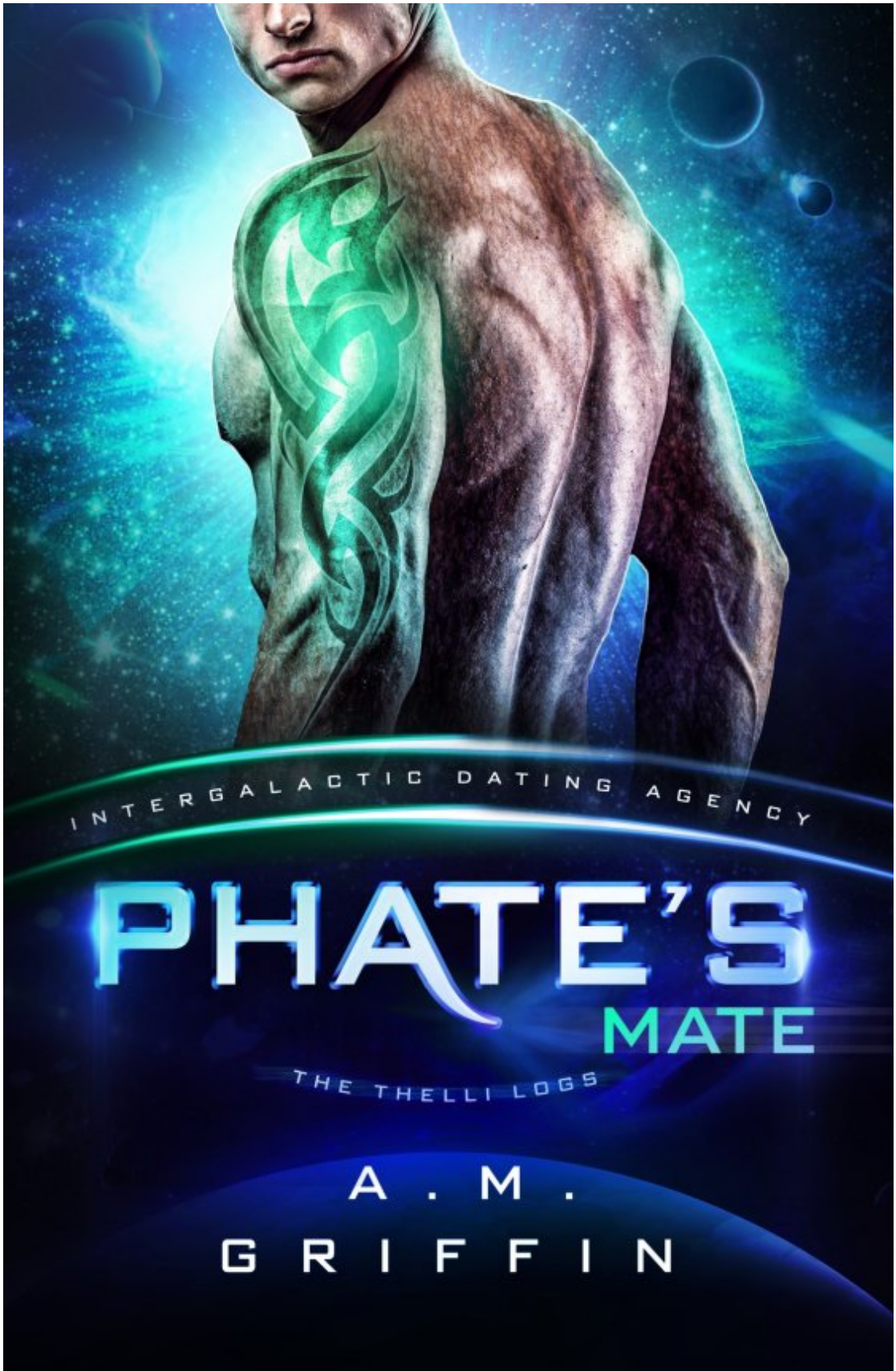


INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY

PHATE'S MATE

THE THELLI LOGS

A . M .
G R I F F I N



INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY

PHATE'S
MATE

THE THELLI LOGS

A . M .
G R I F F I N

Also by A.M. Griffin

Cimmerian Moon

Against The Darkness

The Ashes That Remain

In Danger's Embrace

Cyborg Redemption

Saving The Cyborg

Dark Wolf Enterprises

Shifter Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Lover Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Hunter Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Intergalactic Dating Agency: The Thelli Logs

Phate's Mate: The Thelli Logs (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Kien's Kindred

Solgre's Soulmate

Loving Dangerously

Dangerously Mine

Dangerously Hers

Dangerously Theirs

Dangerously His

Dangerously Forever

Dangerously Yours

The Hunt

Hunted by the Alien Vampire

Hunted By The Alien General

The Game Warden's Mate

Hunted By The Alien Prince

The Teague Bride Experiment

Ramliel: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Conh: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Zephon: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.

Once a Thief, Always a Thief

The God Killer

The Guicai Talisman

The Lycan Job

It's Not Me, It's You

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.: Books 1-2

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.: Books 3-4

Standalone

Yule's Tyd

Leporidae Pack

Mate's Desire

The Alien King's Desire

Watch for more at [A.M. Griffin's site](#).

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Also By A.M. Griffin](#)

[Phate's Mate \(Intergalactic Dating Agency: The Thelli Logs, #1\)](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Sign up for A.M. Griffin's Mailing List](#)

[Also By A.M. Griffin](#)

Phate's Mate

A.M. Griffin

Copyright © 2023 A.M. Griffin

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the copyright owners.

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to others. If you would like to share this eBook with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this eBook and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase a copy.

No part of this book may be distributed in any format, in whole or in part without the express written consent of the author.

Thank you for respecting the author's hard work.

This is a work of fiction and is not a reflection or representation of any person living or dead.

The author respects the copyrights mentioned in this eBook.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my sisters; Margie, Arthella, LaTasha and Tarnisha. Through our many ups and downs, we're still bound to each other in this life. I love you all.

Phate's Mate

The Thelli Logs

The three-person crew of the *Halo One* had one more assignment to complete before taking their much-needed vacation. Go on a surveillance mission to a small planet in a distant part of the galaxy, observe and report back. All was going according to plan until a solar flare sent their spaceship crashing to the surface. Now, Phate, Kien and Solgre have a new mission until rescue arrives.

Find out if Earth females are advanced enough to join the Intergalactic Dating Agency.

The Peacekeeper. When his shy neighbor knocked on his apartment door, Phate's mission to stay off the humans' radar until the rescue team arrived changed in a blink of an eye. He not only wants to tell this delectable human about alien existence, but he also wants to take her back to Thelli with him.

Getting to know her was proving difficult when his new mission involves joining a dating app in an effort to see if humans are compatible enough to join the Intergalactic Dating Agency.

The Workaholic. Tasha worked hard building her small business on Main Street and didn't have time for distractions. With a fire-cracker best friend and three new mysterious neighbors, Tasha was finding herself thinking of something other than her boutique for a change. But fate? Fate has a way of intervening, and she finds out the hard way that she can't run or hide from her feelings, especially when distraction as fine as Phate lives right next door.

These novellas are meant to be read in chronological order.

Book 1: Phate's Mate

Book 2: Kien's Kindred

Book 3: Solgre's Soulmate

Prologue

“So that’s it, huh?”

Phate, *Halo One’s*, pilot, navigator and resident scientist, didn’t turn when Kien came up behind him and spoke. Kien, the systems engineer and his good friend, stood to his left and stared at the little blue planet visible from the port window.

Phate drew a deep breath of the regenerated air cycling through the vents. The lifeless air, although filled with high-grade oxygen and vitamins, was the only air he was used to now. He suspected his two crewmates felt the same since they’d been calling their Class Two spaceship home for the past ten years now.

“That’s it,” Phate offered in response as they stared at the new planet they’d traveled light years to observe.

Phate, like Kien and their Captain, Solgre, had seen the holo-pics of Earth and read the file provided when they’d accepted the assignment. No, not accepted. Accepted implied they’d had a choice. They hadn’t. The order to change course and forgo their much-needed vacation had been just that. An order.

A low, rumbling snort came from Kien’s throat. He stepped closer to the window that was almost as tall and wide as him and glanced from left to right. “Doesn’t look like much. No planetary docking station. No defense system. No crafts coming and going.”

“From the file provided, we know this species is technologically behind us and other advanced worlds.” With his friend’s body now blocking most of his view, Phate stepped to the side to continue staring at the planet. He squinted through the cloud coverage of pollution, hoping to see a hint of the defense system he’d read about. “They do have planetary defense systems. They’re using nuclear power.”

There were large structures on the planet’s surface, but Phate couldn’t make out anything remotely familiar. Not knowing exactly what to look for, he gave up his visual search.

Kien let out another snort as he shifted to widen his stance and fold his massive arms across an equally massive chest. Kien's muscles and girth weren't the product of genetic engineering favored among the younger males who thought a large appearance was a better indicator of prowess than a naturally honed body.

Kien had the traditional appearance of a Thellian that he'd gotten from his mother. But his sharp features and bulk came from his Phessi father. While not as big as the full-blooded Phessi, he exceeded other races in comparison.

"Their nuclear weapons would destroy every single living being on their planet—including their planet itself," Kien grumbled.

"No one said these humans were very smart." Phate tsked under his breath in agreement and inclined his head toward the nothingness to the right of the planet. "Hence why we were able to hyper-jump into their vicinity without so much as an acknowledgement from them. They probably don't know they're being watched."

No scans came from the planet's surface or the outdated space station orbiting Earth. They'd entered Earth's space under stealth mode, uncertain of what to expect, but so far, the reaction or lack of was...anticlimactic. *Halo One's* defense system was quiet.

Phate had thought there'd be some kind of monitoring system in place but there wasn't any indication the humans monitored their planetary space for outsiders.

It was a miracle Earth and its inhabitants hadn't been invaded yet. It was obvious Earth was rich with minerals and precious gems other species would literally kill for. The scans also picked up an abundance of native wildlife, water, sand, coal and trees.

"We're not here to determine how smart these humans are," Solgre said. As he strolled through the doorway and onto the bridge to join Phate and Kien, his boots thumped against the metal floor.

Phate and Kien snapped to attention, giving their Captain the respect due. Solgre had the confidence of someone who'd served his life on a spaceship, and it showed by way of the air of confidence that enveloped him.

Solgre, like most native Thellians, had blond hair and lavender colored eyes. He was the same height as Phate and had a similar build; wide shoulders, toned waist and legs. Although the spaceship's gravity mimicked their home planet, it was imperative they spend two hours each day lifting heavy weights, otherwise their muscle tone would be affected.

Solgre didn't bother making his way to the port window. He went straight to the high-backed chair centrally located on the deck and pulled up the hologram of Earth along with the specs of the blue planet. "We're here on a surveillance mission."

"I know, I know," Kien said, breaking away to take his seat at the engineer's station. "Observe and report back."

Phate turned away from the window as well and crossed the small bridge to take the navigator chair. He pulled up the map of the sector which showed the current star system and the other planets in the area—all uninhabitable. As missions went, this was an easy one.

A few months ago, the Thellian government had intercepted a capsule containing rudimentary communication about this new species. The humans had gone as far as to provide their DNA samples and their coordinates. A very naive and extremely dangerous move for a planet without any formidable allies or Federation protection.

Luckily for the humans, that capsule had reached Thelli, Phate's home planet. Preying on the weak and stupid wasn't what Thellians did. As a planet of explorers and scientists, their interest had been piqued by the rudimentary message.

It wasn't every day a new species and inhabitable planet was discovered. In fact, the last planet to join the Federation had happened well before his birth. Actually, well, before his great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather had been born.

“We must stay focused on why we’re here,” Solgre stated, his fingers flying through the air, accessing the files and scrolling through the data *Halo One* had accumulated thus far.

“Their air is extremely polluted but breathable,” Kien said, eyeing the specs in front of him. “But not for long. Their ozone layer is gone to the Ancients.”

“Not our problem,” Solgre muttered in a dismissive tone. His gaze remained on the information as he read. “Phate, download their radio frequencies so we can transmit the updated data to Thelli. The sooner we give the lead scientists the information they requested, the sooner we can leave this solar system and head to Pesna-9.”

Kien whooped, his features flushed with excitement. “I have two Vulron’s waiting for me already.”

“Why? So, you can disappoint them both?” Phate smirked as he initiated a search on available radio frequencies. The amount coming from multiple places on the planet’s surface stunned him. He created a file and linked them for upload and transmission.

“Yes, but that’s no business of yours,” Kien countered.

Pesna-9 was where they were headed when they’d received the call from home base to alter their course. Instead of heading to a pleasure vessel, they’d had to make a slight detour. That “slight” detour being four deep space hyper-jumps away.

Besides, who else in their lifetime could say they’d not only witnessed this momentous event firsthand, but been a part of it?

“Do you think the humans will be civilized enough to make contact with?” Phate asked.

There was a noncommittal noise from Solgre. “Who’s to say? Maybe if an exchange agreement is formed between our two worlds.”

“Although it appears they haven’t mastered interstellar space travel yet, if the resources discovered on our initial scans

prove viable, it would make them a valued partner to *several* worlds,” Kien added.

As he waited for the download to complete, Phate brought up the specs of the current population. It was one part amazing, and one part comical to think all these humans lived on one planet. He imagined they had to compete for everything from space to food to basic living needs.

This planet didn't look big enough to hold that many people. Why hadn't they at least colonized the little moon orbiting them? Thellians had colonized all three of their moons.

As he read the information regarding the population a sudden thought crossed his mind. IDA.”

“What did you say?” Solgre asked.

“The Intergalactic Dating Agency,” Phate said louder. “The humans' natural resources are plentiful, but they can't stay on this planet without depleting them completely in a few short lifetimes. They'll need to colonize either their moon or find another habitable planet. According to the computer, there are almost four billion females currently on the planet. We haven't had a species join the IDA with that many available females in many years.”

Solgre and Kien let out low whistles.

Thelli wasn't hurting in the area of females, but with any advanced species, they knew the way to longevity was the female population. There was no growing or sustaining life without them.

“We, Thellians, would get the first pick of females, of course.”

“We're compatible with them according to their DNA samples,” Solgre said, a thoughtful look crossed his face.

“The government officials would need to determine if it'll be worth engaging and exchanging, though,” Phate added.

Kien leaned back in his chair, causing it to groan under his weight. He kicked his long legs out in front of him. “Maybe

we should hop down there for a quick visit. You know, just to look around and see what these females look like. Maybe even sample a few?”

Solgre cut his sharp gaze toward Kien. “Not our mission. Keep your dick in your pants and wait until we get to Pesna-9.”

Kien grumbled under his breath then jerked upright in his seat. The smile left his face abruptly. “What’s this?”

Solgre and Phate turned in his direction. Kien’s playful mood had dropped. A sense of foreboding washed over Phate. He too dropped the jovial mood.

“Give it to me,” Solgre commanded.

Phate switched his attention to the planet’s surface. Nothing of concern showed on his holoscreen.

“There’s an energy spike coming from their sun,” Kien noted.

Phate frowned as he switched from monitoring the planet’s surface and focused his attention on the sun. “Could it be a solar flare?”

Kien’s eyebrows pinched together. “That’s what the system is saying, but it’s also larger than any flare we’ve calculated before.”

Solgre waved a hand through the air and the image of Earth disappeared, replaced by *Halo One’s* specs. Phate did the same on his end.

“I’m increasing the shields to one hundred percent,” Phate said as he made the adjustments.

Kien started the count off. “Incoming in three, two, one.”

Nothing.

Phate held his breath for a second longer. On the next exhale, he breathed out, “Crisis averted.”

Solgre stabbed his fingers through his light-colored locks. “Good, now get the—”

The lights flickered and a rough shock rolled through the ship, sending it teetering to the side.

“Brace yourself!” Kien yelled over the noise of groaning metal.

Metal should not groan, Phate realized. Alarm bells blared over the loudspeaker and the bright lights above turned red, indicating the power reserves had been triggered.

“Systems report!” Solgre snapped, his voice almost drowned by the booming sounds around them.

Phate ran a quick scan. It didn't look good. Adrenalin kicked in but he wasn't on high alert yet. They'd been in worst situations before, namely going up against space pirates and asteroid belts. This, this they could handle. He initiated the jump sequence to get them out of range.

The system didn't respond.

Hmm.

“We're holding steady!” Kien yelled over the noise. “Hold tight and ride this wave out.”

“We're only receiving thirty percent of the flare,” Solgre noted. “Shields status?”

“Shields down to fifty percent!” Phate's chest tightened. Indicators revealed a small amount of radiation already leaking through. If the shields didn't hold, radiation would breach the hull and none of them would be visiting Pesna-9. They'd be dead.

He initiated another jump sequence and like before, nothing happened.

“Status?” Solgre asked.

“Radiation in the ship at ten percent,” Phate said, heart sinking. Maybe this *was* worse than going up against space pirates after all.

“We won't be able to withstand another flare at this rate,” Kien said.

Solgre's hands moved frantically over the controls. "I can't get control of the ship's guidance system to jump us out of range."

"I've been trying to jump to the dark side of the planet since this began," Phate told him.

"There's only one option," Kien said.

Phate glanced at his friend, coming to the same realization. "We have to drop to the planet's surface. The flares can't reach us there. Their ozone layer is preventing it."

Solgre didn't hesitate. "Do it."

"Strap up!" Phate yelled as he cut the guidance system. The adjustment would send the ship plummeting to the planet's surface.

"Let's hope these humans are welcoming to newcomers," Solgre said.

Phate strapped the harness across his chest as the "Systems offline," announcement blared over the speakers.

Phate prayed Solgre was right.

Chapter One

Apparently, bored with pressing the side of her face and ear against Tasha's incredibly thin apartment wall, Nisha sighed, turned around and dropped from her knees to her butt on Tasha's equally thin couch cushions. "Have you met your new neighbors yet?"

Sitting in the reclining chair across from Nisha, Tasha didn't look up from the laptop perched on her lap. Although winter was approaching fast, she was already working on the upcoming spring line for her small boutique. She'd started selling her current winter's line two months ago and business was doing well.

And the main reason business was doing so well was because she didn't rest. Rest was a luxury a small business owner couldn't afford.

When Tasha didn't answer right away, her friend cleared her throat. Then, after a few seconds when Tasha still didn't acknowledge her, Nisha cleared her throat louder.

"You've asked me that question, like, twice already," Tasha finally said, not lifting her head from her work.

"Three times today, but who's counting? Me. I'm counting." Nisha grabbed the bag of sour cream and onion potato chips from the coffee table and pulled out an unhealthy amount. "Even though I'm posing it as a question, it's more of a suggestion. Meet your new insanely hot neighbors, chica."

At this, Tasha finally glanced up to stare at her oldest and dearest friend in the world who could make stuffing her face with chips look hot. They were both around the same height, five-foot-four, but that's where their similarities ended. Tasha was lighter skinned, and Nisha was darker. Tasha kept her straight hair cut and styled in layers while Nisha wore her naturally wavy hair free and wild.

Tasha raised her eyebrow. "Then what?"

"Then what, what?" Nisha responded with a mouth full of chips. Her large and expressive brown eyes were lit with

confusion as she stared back.

Tasha lifted a shoulder. “Okay, so I go over there, knock on the door and say—”

Nisha’s perfectly pink lips stretched across her face in a wide grin as she waved a hand. “Hi, I’m your smart and sexy entrepreneur next door neighbor—”

Tasha rolled her eyes. “That statement would never leave my mouth. *Ever.*”

Nisha pointed a chip at her. “We gotta work on that, because it should—often.”

Tasha shook her head, not wanting to take this already ridiculous conversation down another path. Aside from being her best friend—almost like a sister—Nisha was her biggest supporter. She thought Tasha should tell everyone she met that she owned a boutique, was single and ready to mingle.

Only one of those things was true. The other two, *eh*. She didn’t have time for a man and definitely didn’t have time to mingle.

Tasha let out a breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. She’d been staring at her laptop screen for the past three hours and her eyes were on fire. On top of that, she could already feel the headache coming on from engaging in this conversation.

“Nisha, they moved in like two weeks ago and I’ve only seen them a few times in passing. They stay in their apartment and keep to themselves. I don’t think they want to meet any new friends or new neighbors.”

Nisha scooted to the edge of the couch and rested her elbows on her knees. “Didn’t you say they have an accent and speak a different language? Ask them where they’re from.” She shrugged. “That’s a good icebreaker.”

“They haven’t spoken to me directly. I’ve only heard them talking through the vents.” Tasha nodded toward the vent directly above Nisha’s head by the ceiling.

Nisha waggled her eyebrows. “Girl, why were you letting me waste my time with my ear to the wall?”

“I didn’t—” Tasha stopped speaking when she realized Nisha wasn’t paying attention.

To her shock, her friend stood on the couch in her sock clad feet and stretched her neck toward the vent. “All I hear is a whooshing sound. Turn off the heat so I can hear better.”

“What? Turn off the heat? In November? In Minnesota?” Tasha let out a snort. “Yeah, right.”

Nisha positioned one leg to brace her weight against the back of the couch to give herself extra height.

“What are you doing?” Tasha gasped.

“Just for a few minutes so I can hear.” Then Nisha’s eyes widened. “Wait! I hear them talking.”

Interest piqued, Tasha asked, “What are they saying?”

Nisha angled her ear up toward the vent. “I can’t quite make it out. Besides, I think they’re speaking another language.”

“See? There’s no point in eavesdropping on them.” She knew she shouldn’t entertain Nisha, but she needed to give her eyes a rest anyway.

“This is purely for research purposes. We need to find out where they’re from, if they’re murderers, how often they hit the weights, what’s their hair routine, if they have any girlfriends, what they do for a living—”

“Those are super intrusive questions. If I wanted to know any of that, I would knock on their door.” A look that Tasha recognized all too well splashed across her best friend’s face. “Oh, no. No, no, no.”

Nisha jumped from the couch and dashed toward the front door. “Oh, yes.”

“Nisha, I’m sure they don’t want two strange women bothering them.” Tasha sat her computer aside and scrambled to her feet in pursuit.

“But we do!”

Pausing, Nisha and Tasha swiveled their gazes toward the vent where the deep and *very* masculine voice had come from.

Nisha giggled and slapped her hands together. “See! They want to meet us.”

Tasha could’ve been mistaken, but she was sure that when she groaned, a groan had also come from the vent.

“Come on! Let’s go meet your new neighbors.”

Tasha’s eyes lingered back to her computer. “I still have so much work to—”

Ignoring her protests, Nisha pulled Tasha’s hands to lead her. She was being dragged to the front door before Tasha could finish her sentence.

••••

“TELL ME EXACTLY WHY you did that?” With his arms crossed, Solgre braced himself against the bathroom door, watching Kien as he tried to smooth the curls in his hair back.

Even from his seat on the ridiculously small armchair, Phate could tell that it wasn’t working. The abundance of water in the atmosphere was doing something strange to the texture of their hair. What use to be short and smooth, was now too long and too wavy.

“Why did I do what, exactly?” Kien asked. “Invite human women to our apartment to cure the boredom that’s been plaguing us since crash landing on this awful, backward planet?”

Phate sighed and leaned back in his chair. “He has a point, Solgre. We’ve been stuck on this planet for four of their Earth months and stuck inside this apartment since we acquired it, only leaving for essentials. Since we couldn’t send the distress beacon via a jump, we don’t know how long it will take for it to reach Thelli.

“We might as well make the best of this situation and meet the locals. At least, we’ll be able to tell the others how first

contact went.”

Solgre scrubbed a hand down his stubbled face. “You, too? I thought you would be on my side with this. We should lay low until we get direction from home.”

“Which we won’t receive for a while. The communicator is still down, there’s too much interference in the atmosphere,” Kien pointed out as he squeezed his way through the bathroom doorway and past a disgruntled Solgre. “We’re scientists. We shouldn’t pass up this opportunity to meet the locals and explore their culture firsthand.”

“It’s like neither of you saw that *Area 51* documentary on the television. You know the one where humans found a downed spaceship and proceeded to slice up and dissect the aliens inside,” Solgre protested.

Phate frowned. “Did that actually happen or was it just speculation? The aliens didn’t look real at all.”

Kien raised a finger in the air. “Oh, that happened. What I’ve learned so far from watching the television is that documentaries are real. Reality television shows are real. Sitcoms and movies are fake.”

“And still you invited the neighbors over,” Solgre said with a shake of his head.

Kien’s smile stretched. “*Female* neighbors.”

Solgre slapped a hand over his face. “Great. We’re going to end up in a documentary, dissected for all to see because you’re horny.”

“Captain,” Kien said, all playfulness dropping from his demeanor. “I’ll kill you myself before I let them dissect you alive.”

Solgre’s eyes widened as he turned toward Kien. “Should that make me feel better about the situation?!”

“Listen.” Phate stood. “We have some time here. I know you don’t want us bringing attention to ourselves, and we won’t. But wouldn’t it be nice to tell the others that we at least tried to learn the human ways?”

A look crossed Solgre's face as he mulled over the idea.

"Fine," Solgre finally said. "But no telling them who or *what* we are. I would like to keep my insides firmly *inside*."

A determined knock sounded at the door. Solgre glanced pointedly at Phate then Kien. "Understood?"

Since Phate couldn't think of one reason why he would ever tell a human about himself, he nodded.

"What if they ask why my penis vibrates? I'll have to tell them something," Kien said.

"For the love of the Ancients!" Solgre erupted. "How would they find out your penis vibrates?! You're determined to get us sliced up."

"How about we don't have sex with them?" Phate asked as he made his way toward the door.

A horrified look splashed across Kien's face, and he took a step back. "Don't have sex?"

Phate unlocked and opened the door. "Right. Don't have se ___"

Phate didn't get to finish his sentence because his jaw dropped. Standing on the other side of the threshold was the most beautiful female specimen he'd seen in his entire life.

"Oh wow," Kien muttered from behind him.

"We're going to end up in so many little pieces," Solgre grumbled under his breath.

Chapter Two

Phate was definitely...what was the human word used to describe their situation he'd learned from the television?

Oh, yes.

He was definitely *screwed* because he could only stare, mouth agape, at the female standing in the hallway. There was an overwhelming urge to tell her everything about his life and he wanted to know everything about hers.

Phate wanted to tell the female about Thelli. No. He wanted to *take* her to Thelli. He wanted to introduce her to his parents and siblings. He wanted to take her shopping on one of the many pleasure planets known for their expensive dining, and leisure activities and spend every credit in his account on her.

He would rob, steal or kill to make her happy. Anything she required, he would do.

As overpowering emotions he couldn't identify or control poured over him like warm water, Phate took a shuddering breath. He knew he was done for. He would lay the galaxy at this human's tiny feet just to know her name.

The female next to her waved a hand in the air. "Hey! My name is Nisha."

Nisha was pretty. Both were the same height, the top of their heads barely reaching his shoulders. The one who had his heart pounding was rounder. Voluptuous was the word he would use to describe her.

The unnamed female wore a black, long sleeved, loose shirt with matching pants while Nisha wore jeans needing repair to fix the rips down the front of them and a form fitting shirt that hugged her small frame.

Nisha elbowed the female next to her.

"Oh! Um...I'm Tasha. This is...uh...Nisha."

Phate couldn't take his eyes off Tasha and her beautiful, pink-tinged lips.

Tasha.

He hadn't heard that name before. He liked it and repeated it over and over in his head to make sure his brain could pronounce it correctly.

"I already told them my name," Nisha whispered to Tasha from the side of her mouth.

Tasha's expressive brown eyes widened. "Oh, yeah. Well, um...I'm Tasha and this um...is Nisha."

Nisha groaned and rolled her eyes. "Jesus. Get it together."

A fine sheen of sweat formed on the top of Tasha's brow and Phate had the urge to wipe it off just to feel her skin under his palm.

"My friend. I mean...she's visiting. She doesn't live here."

Kien shouldered his way to stand next to Phate. "I'm Kien. The one at a loss for words is Phate and the one pacing behind us is Solgre."

"Kien, Phate and Solgre," Nisha repeated. Her lips curved into a smile as she bumped Tasha with a slender shoulder.

"It's nice to meet you all. Sorry, for...um...eavesdropping," Tasha said, shifting from one foot to the other and rubbing her hands down the front of her soft looking pants.

Nisha turned her back to Phate and Kien and stepped in front of Tasha, blocking her from view. "What is up with you? Pull it together." Then Nisha stepped back into place and smiled again. "The walls in this apartment building are paper thin, am I right?"

"The walls are made from paper?" Solgre asked. He walked over and knocked on one of the walls. "No wonder tornados cause upheaval on this planet."

Tasha chuckled nervously as her gaze moved from Phate to Solgre. "What did you say?"

Nisha's brows creased in confusion. "What do you mean, 'this planet'?"

“Great Ancients! I thought it would be one of you who wouldn’t be able to keep their mouths shut. But it’s me!” Solgre threw his hands in the air before stomping between Kien and Phate to slam the door shut in the females’ confused faces. “There. No more of that.”

“I never would’ve guessed it would be you who spilled the bananas,” Kien said, turning toward Solgre.

“I think it’s beans, not banana’s,” Phate offered, finally finding his voice.

••••

NISHA AND TASHA STARED at the closed apartment door.

Nisha’s smile dropped. “Well, that was weird. It’s not just me, right? Him saying ‘this planet’ was totally weird.”

Tasha stood in a daze. The entire meeting had been weird. It was weird the way the Phate guy had stared at her like he wanted to lick every inch of her skin from head to toe. Guys did *not* stare at her like that. Ever. Especially not guys like Phate. And since when did she stammer and become flustered when talking to a man?

Apparently when one as hot as Phate focused his attention on her.

With the door closed, she could finally get her thoughts in order. Tasha wiped the sweat away from her forehead. Her hammering heart? Only distance would get that under control and distance she would give it. Tasha turned on her heels, making her way back to her apartment where no hot men were, and she could forget about making a fool of herself.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Nisha yelled at her back.

Tasha opened her door and crossed over the threshold, leaving it ajar for Nisha. “You wanted to meet them. We did. Mission accomplished.”

Entering her apartment made her feel better already. Now, she only needed to avoid her neighbors and maybe they would forget about her stammering and sweaty face. That should be easy enough. Her hours at the boutique were long.

As the sole proprietor, she worked hours before opening to make sure the place was clean, and the inventory was wrinkle free and ready. At night, she usually unpacked any shipments, tagged the items and did more inventory. She was supposed to have one day off—Sundays—but she was never truly off.

Today, she'd spent her day stuck to her computer, handling the administrative end of the business.

Nisha finally came into the apartment but didn't take her favorite seat on the couch. Instead, she leaned a hip against the kitchen countertop, tipped her chin up and drawled, "Tasha Louise Moore."

"Anisha Tabitha Jones," Tasha said, matching Nisha's chastising tone. It was a tone Nisha had gotten from her adoptive Asian mother and thought would make Tasha—or anyone else she used it on—listen to her.

Nisha hiked her thumb toward the wall separating the two apartments. "Are we seriously walking away from all that hotness next door?"

"Yes. It was easy to do. Do you know why?" Tasha plopped down onto her loveseat. The cushions immediately molded comfortably to her bottom, making her feel at home. She glanced at Nisha and raised her eyebrow. When Nisha didn't answer, Tasha continued, "Because they slammed the door in our faces."

Nisha wagged her finger. "Shut the door nicely."

"Slammed," Tasha corrected. "Now, if you don't mind, I have to get back to these new orders because they sure as hell aren't going to order themselves."

Things had been easier when she'd first started. She'd spent the last five years growing it from an internet only operation to a small kiosk that sold scarves and jewelry on the weekends at the local mall. Now, she owned a storefront in a corner suite downtown.

"Oh, what's that noise?" Nisha crossed the apartment to peer out the main window overlooking the parking lot and tree lined street below.

Tasha shook her head. Nisha had the attention span of a squirrel. “What is it?”

“Another moving truck.”

Tasha frowned. “Someone else is moving into the building?”

“Yeah.”

“Two new neighbors in a month? What’s going on in our little town?” Considering her building had thirty-two apartments and as of a month ago, there hadn’t been any new residents over the past two years.

••••

MARGIE SANTANA TOOK a deep breath and tilted her head back to get a good look at the building she would be calling home for the unforeseeable future. It wasn’t one of the newer, fancier places found closer to the downtown area. This apartment building rested in the heart of the West side community comprised mostly of older adults and families.

It had a brown façade with four large front facing windows directly across the street from another apartment building. There was no chipped paint, and the lawn was tastefully manicured with colorful shrubbery.

Not something she normally would pick for herself, but her current assignment called for expediency. It wasn’t all bad though, not like her last assignment, so she was grateful for that at least.

It was the perfect place to stay if someone wanted to blend in with the locals.

Which was probably why aliens would pick this building to live in.

Chapter Three

“We should leave,” Kien declared in their native tongue as he stared out the window.

Voices carried from the parking lot below where men unloaded furniture from the vehicle known as a truck and brought it into their apartment building.

“I pray to the Ancients every day to take us away from this vile primitive world,” Solgre grumbled from his place at the kitchen table where he sat hunched over the pieces of the portable replicator.

They’d been in some questionable predicaments before, but this was by far the most stressful. Never had they been stranded on an isolated planet where the inhabitants were ignorant in the ways of how the rest of the galaxy operated.

They each were afraid of what would happen if humans discovered aliens walked among them, but Kien, like Phate, was beginning to feel like a caged animal. Solgre seemed content to stay in the little apartment day and night while Phate and Kien wanted to go out and explore this new world and breathe the fresh air.

Their ship had crashed to Earth not far from where they were now. Well, it had been more of a strategic landing. Phate had been able to guide them to a body of water deep enough to hide it. They’d stayed hidden underwater for months while they worked to get their systems back online. Even with the shield at twenty percent capacity, there wasn’t any fear of water breaching the hull and damaging the internal systems.

Luckily for them, some of the mechanical bots were still online and worked to fix the outer damage caused by the crash right away. But even so, there was too much damage and the radiation that couldn’t be contained. They estimated the distress signal would most likely reach the nearest ship within six Earth months, with a rescue expected in the same amount of time.

They could’ve waited that time out on the ship but doing so would’ve completely drained the already damaged systems.

They had no choice but to leave, allowing the bots to divert from maintaining life-support to concentrating on fixing the vital areas of the ship and purge the radiation.

Knowing what needed to be done, they'd downloaded information on the language, learned the phonics and practiced. Learning languages wasn't new to any of them. That had been the easy part. It was Phate who'd learned the monetary system. With his tricorder properly re-configured, he'd hacked into the banking system, created an account and with a few touches of the buttons, they had the necessary funds to buy what was needed to start their temporary life on Earth.

Their first days off *Halo One* were rough. They'd bungled shopping. They had a hard time finding a store with clothes to fit their larger than average human forms. They'd searched for a suitable dwelling but without something called credit, a job and references, they'd been turned away, until they'd met the landlord of the apartment building they currently resided.

The landlord had given them an apartment in exchange for a transfer of five hundred thousand dollars directly into his account, which Phate had done expeditiously as it was growing cold and dark outside and they got tired of sleeping in dilapidated structures.

Luckily, the landlord had also been gracious enough to give them the furniture from his apartment for a few hundred thousand dollars more.

It had been a grueling time, leaving their safe-haven, and acclimating as best they could into a strange society. But now they were getting along nicely and fitting in. They'd learned how to order pizza from a flyer left attached to their door and the saleswoman the landlord had sent, provided them a cable subscription package and cellular phones.

While his shipmates talked, or in Solgre's case, grumbled, Phate browsed through television channels, stopping at a station that aired a cartoon. It was his favorite show about an alien stranded on Earth and living with a government official. Although it was clearly fictional, he enjoyed the alien's antics

because it reminded him of the Stod species. They were conceited, only thought of themselves and looked like the fictional character.

“Not again!” Solgre roared, lifting his head to glare at Phate. “We’ve seen this episode so many times before. Turn to something else!”

“I believe this is a very limited cable package. Basic is what the saleswoman called it,” Phate said as he pointed toward the box sitting underneath the television. “Maybe we should look into the premium package. With that, we would have other shows available to us.”

Solgre raked his fingers through his hair, but the overly long length quickly fell back over his forehead. “We don’t need to watch their television. It’s nothing but a distraction.”

“It’s research,” Phate pointed out. “Since you won’t let us spend any amount of time outdoors, it’s the only glimpse we have into their world.” He aimed the remote control toward the television. “We need a better package so we can get additional news channels and reality television programs. How else are we supposed to learn their customs and mimic them?”

Solgre shuddered. “Do you really want to watch more of their news programs? The one time I did, I had nightmares and that’s saying something. I’ve been to Udon and helped them recover from the Turkrar genocide.”

Kien turned away from the window, the goings on outside no longer holding his attention. “The saleswoman mentioned a premium package with more channels. How many humans have this premium cable package? Premium sounds like something only a handful of humans have access to. The elites.” He raised his chin. “I agree. We need the premium package.”

Phate’s eyebrows drew together. “I don’t think it works like that. I think premium is reserved for anyone who can afford it.”

“I’m all for the premium package for the sole purpose of having something different to watch. I agree with Solgre on

this point. Phate is driving me insane watching the same shows over and over again.” Kien stepped away from the window and leaned against the wall beside it. “But when I said, let’s get out of here, I meant leave the apartment and leave this building.

“Let’s face it. We can’t stay trapped in this apartment until a rescue occurs. We’re losing our minds. Also, we’re missing the opportunity to study the humans up close. How best to determine if the humans are worthy of an alliance?”

“How can we determine if we’re compatible with them mating wise if we don’t engage the opposite sex?” Phate added.

Solgre turned from Kien to glare at Phate. “You’re only saying that because of the female next door.”

Phate shrugged because there was nothing to argue about. A few hours had passed, and he still thought about Tasha. Her image was burned in his brain. He wouldn’t mind getting to know her. There was something about her that ignited a curiosity within him and as a scientist, he wasn’t used to letting opportunities to study new species or exploring his curious nature go by him without further investigation.

Solgre closed his tired eyes and let out a long exhale. “Fine. You both want to explore the humans in more detail? Call the cable humans and have them give us the premium package.” He opened his eyes to stare at Phate. “Are you sure we have the credits in our account to cover the additional cost?”

Phate picked up the tricorder and opened the account he’d set up through the local bank. “We have two million, five hundred thousand and forty-three dollars and twenty-one cents. I’ll ask the saleswoman if that’ll be enough to cover the cost.”

Solgre nodded. “Should you add more credits to the account just in case?”

Solgre had a good point. Phate pushed a few buttons and watched as the available funds increased by another five

million credits. No dollars. That's what humans called the monetary system on this part of Earth. "Done."

It was easy to manipulate the human banking system. All he had to do was change the numbers to reflect any number he desired. It was like their monetary system was fake.

Kien nodded toward the window. "We should still go out there."

Solgre leaned back in his chair and flicked a hand at nothing in particular. "We don't need to now. Phate will secure additional television channels and we can observe the humans from the comforts of this apartment."

Kien pushed away from the wall. His face twisted in a grimace as he threw up his arms. "You call this comfortable? It's a small prison and every second we stay trapped in here, the crazier I become."

"You're used to living on a spaceship, Kien. How different is this?" Solgre asked, dismissing Kien and getting back to the replicator.

Kien's eyebrows shot up. "How is this different? Are you seriously asking me how being sequestered in a one-bedroom apartment with no space and no privacy is different than living on our three-level spaceship?"

Phate pointed the remote toward Kien. "He has a point."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sudden disturbance grabbed their attention. Kien crossed to open the door.

"Use the peep-hole—" Solgre didn't get to finish his sentence. Kien opened the door and accepted the pizza from the uniformed man standing on the other side.

Kien dropped the pizza box on the kitchen counter and the aroma of meat, cheese, vegetables and sauce that Phate had become familiar with wafted through the cramped apartment. "Since we've been stranded, we've spent this time learning about humans, their customs and their language." He opened the box and retrieved three slices. "We can venture out,

explore and gather more intelligence on their lives for home base. What could go wrong?"

Solgre gaped. "Uh, we could end up chopped into little pieces."

"That would be very bad," Phate agreed, aiming his remote at the television to turn to another channel.

Kien took a large bite of his pizza. "We are far more advanced than these humans," he said between chews. "We've learned they're self-absorbed. They won't even notice us. They'll keep their heads down in their phones." He grabbed two plates and put slices on each. "We watch them walk by all day long. We'll fit right in."

"Oh, good. Pizza. Again," Solgre said and Kien set one of the plates in front of him.

"Can we venture out?" Kien asked as he dropped the other plate in front of Phate.

Kien and Phate watched Solgre, waiting for his answer.

Solgre sighed. "We stay inconspicuous. Don't make me regret this decision."

Chapter Four

“What about this one in powder blue? Or did you not think someone would like another color besides the drab brown and dull green this dress comes in?”

The smile on Tasha’s face was unwavering. She’d had years perfecting it. It was the smile that said, “You’re a valued customer and I want you to be happy.” While inside her brain, she screamed, “Leave my shop!”

The blonde haired, almost cookie cutter of each other, mother and daughter duo had been in her boutique for over two hours now, which wasn’t uncommon since Tasha’s entire business was built on giving individual attention to clientele. But sometimes customers overstayed their welcome. Which was the case here. Tasha adored the daughter who was only trying to find the right bridal shower dress, but the mother... *ugh*...the mother acted as if *she* were the one getting married.

While Tasha’s smile was unwavering, the daughter wasn’t having much luck hiding her true feelings. That her mother was ruining this day for her was written all over the daughter’s face and Tasha felt her pain. She’d never been married and was certain her mom wouldn’t be as rude and disrespectful as the one in front of her, but she’d seen this situation play out many times before.

“We don’t have this particular style in powder blue, but I have another dress similar in that color.” Tasha outstretched her hand to another rack. “If you’ll follow me.”

The mother breezed past Tasha with head held high, leaving flowery perfume trailing in the air after her. “Let’s see what you have over here.”

Tasha watched as she walked to the rack indicated. If Tasha hadn’t introduced herself as the owner, she was sure the older lady would’ve asked to speak to a manager by now. She had that arrogant and impatient air about her. The way she walked, fast and with intent, like she had pressing business to attend to. The perfectly styled updo, slick and sleek without a hairpin seen. The designer outfit, Ralph Laurent, Fall

Collection. Or the stern scowl on a face that had seen three too many plastic surgeries directed toward Tasha.

“After you,” Tasha said to the daughter while the mother began, “*um, humming*” the dresses on the rack.

Before joining her mother, the daughter mouthed, “Sorry.”

While both mother and daughter were near twins in looks, their dress was different as night and day. The daughter was in a stylish loose fitting sweat outfit and gym shoes. And instead of the perfect hairdo like her mom, the younger woman’s hair was tied back into a messy ponytail.

Wilma, Tasha’s aunt and employee, came to stand next to her and whispered, “I can pull the fire alarm. Just say the word.”

“That’s why you’re my favorite employee,” Tasha whispered back.

Wilma bumped Tasha’s shoulder with her own. “I’m your only employee, lady.”

Tasha rubbed Wilma’s back and chuckled. As the youngest child of nine, Wilma was closer to Tasha’s age than any of her other uncles and aunts. She was also Tasha’s favorite. Their relationship had always been closer to that of siblings.

When Tasha had gotten the building lease, Wilma rolled up her sleeves to help clean and put everything together. Nisha had been there too, but Wilma arrived with Tasha and left just as late.

In the beginning, she’d only been able to pay Wilma minimum wage, but as business grew, so did Wilma’s salary. Wilma had finally been able to quit her job as a secretary and work for Tasha full time. Tasha thanked God for Wilma daily. It was a godsend to have someone she loved and trusted working for her.

The mother held up a dress, a powder blue one, and said, “Do you have this in cream?”

A nerve throbbed and pulsed under Tasha’s right eye.

Wilma patted Tasha's shoulder. "I'm going to pull that alarm."

"Mother!" the daughter gasped.

"Wha—" The mother whipped to face her daughter then her face went slack. "Oh, my!"

They all turned in the direction she faced.

Walking in view of the boutique's large window were three incredibly tall and *incredibly* fine men. Seeing her new neighbors under fluorescent apartment lighting hadn't done them any justice. The men standing in the natural sunlight seemed ethereal, gods, angels, and happiness wrapped up in a human.

The sigh Tasha let out was unintentional. "Oh, my indeed."

"What I wouldn't give to be under one of them. Or maybe all three," the mother said on a breathy sigh.

"Mother!" the bride said, with her eyes locked on the threesome with an expression revealing she had the same carnal thought.

Wilma waved a hand in a fanning motion in front of her face. "It's not every day we see real life gods walking around downtown."

"They're my neighbors," Tasha said, eyes locked on Phate.

God, was he gorgeous. The others were equally as fine, but Phate, he was a different kind of specimen. Corded muscles strained under a long-sleeved shirt that was also a size too small. His pants fit but they didn't do his butt and thighs justice. If it was up to her, she would definitely style him in better fitting clothes.

She also noticed the colors of his outfit didn't match. The pants were teal, and the shirt was a bright orange. She couldn't tell if he was color blind or if the color scheme was by choice. Despite that, the ill-fitting clothes and questionable colors didn't take away his appeal.

Suddenly, Phate turned her way and their eyes locked. The fire in his gaze made her heart skip a beat and her stomach

clench. Silence overtook her for several seconds. And for those seconds, nothing else mattered or existed in the world except for *him*.

Phate broke the connection and her heart sunk. She dropped her gaze. A second later, a feeling of awareness tugged, and she brought her gaze back up. Phate watched her again, and her nerves and stomach reacted.

He stopped abruptly, causing Kien to ram into his back. They toppled into Solgre who let out a string of words she couldn't understand but by the sounds of it, were curse words in their native tongue. There was a brief but intense conversation, then the three men turned to watch her through the window.

The urge to fade into the background overtook her. Heat inflamed her face as she remembered how Phate and his friends had slammed the door on them. Tasha's chest tightened from the pressure and her shoulders rounded toward the front.

"Introduce me to them," the bride stated, gaze still locked onto the trio.

"No, you're about to get married. Introduce them to *me*," the mother countered.

The bride-to-be turned to her mother with mouth agape. "You're married too!"

Her mother waved a hand in the air. "That can easily be undone."

"You're talking about divorcing my father!"

Tasha couldn't pay attention to the squabbling between them because Phate had backtracked and was coming through the door. The alarm chimed as he entered with the other two men on his heels.

The short racks of clothes she'd placed strategically in the room, along with the comfortable seats had appeared cute and cozy when she initially set it up. Now, the space shrunk from the presence of the three large men.

As she watched Phate make his way toward her, blood thundered past her ears, and she couldn't get her breathing under control. His presence wreaked havoc on her internal system and her mind screamed for her to run.

Phate stopped in front of her, enveloping her in his foreign scent. He stared down with a smile and her heart fluttered in response.

"The female called Tasha," he said in his drawling accent. "Hello. Good afternoon. Greetings. How are you doing? Nice to see you again. How are you enjoying the weather?"

Tasha frowned. Why was he spouting a plethora of greetings?

Wilma elbowed her. "When a man as fine as that talks to you, no matter how odd he's being, you respond."

And that's why Wilma was her favorite aunt. Tasha swallowed the lump in her throat. "Hello. Phate, is it?"

Smooth. Real smooth. As if she hadn't been repeating his name in her head and even tested it out on her lips a few times since meeting him.

She would never admit it to Nisha, but she'd put her ear up to the vent last night because there was a lot of talking going on in their apartment. She couldn't understand anything because they spoke in their language. All the while, she'd wished that she'd asked where they were from, so she could've turned on her translator app and eavesdropped.

"Phate," he said, nodding. He motioned toward the other two. "Kien and Solgre."

When Tasha couldn't snap out of her stupor fast enough, Wilma stepped forward with an outstretched hand. "I'm Wilma, her aunt and employee."

Phate took the outstretched hand and shook like he didn't quite understand the up and down movement. "Aunt. You're related by a parent."

They dropped hands and Wilma stepped back with an eyebrow raised. "Um, yes. That's usually how it works."

The mother and bride cleared their voices simultaneously. “*Um*, these are...” Crap, although they’d both given her their names, Tasha couldn’t remember them. The day had been trying to say the lease.

Luckily, the mother stepped forward and instead of an outstretched hand, she went in for a hug. “I’m Joan and any friend of Tasha’s is a friend of mine. We adore her little boutique. We could’ve gone to a much larger shop but as I told my daughter, Jessica here, we needed to support more small African American businesses.”

Jessica groaned and slapped a hand across her face.

The door alarm chimed again as two women breezed through, eyes on the hot trio.

“Oh, this is such a nice store,” one said, gaze hyper-focused on Solgre.

The other pretended to look around but her gaze quickly landed on Kien and stayed there. “Yes, yes. This is a cute place.”

“Excuse me while I see to the new visitors,” Tasha said, happy for the distraction.

When she reached the newcomers, smile on her face and hand extended in greeting, they didn’t pay her any attention. Their paths led directly to where Phate, Kien and Solgre stood.

“Hello. Do you come here often?” the redhead asked Solgre, thrusting her prominent bust up toward his gaze.

“We’re new to town,” Solgre grumbled.

With a lopsided grin on his face, Kien seemed too happy to be the center of attention while Solgre seemed uneasy about it. As if he were afraid of being caught off-guard, Solgre’s gaze darted from the door to the large, picturesque window and back to the door.

The redhead repositioned herself in Solgre’s line of vision. He stepped to the side so she wasn’t blocking him and the exit. The redhead sent a defeated look to her dark-haired friend.

“But we can come here often if this is where we should be spending our time,” Kien offered.

Both women perked up and giggled to each other.

Uh, no. Tasha didn't need these three disrupting her place of business. It would be pure chaos if the five giggling women in her presence were any indication. They acted as if they'd never seen attractive men before. Even Wilma stopped paying attention to Tasha and gazed longingly into Solgre's eyes like a lost puppy.

“Oh! Are you on any of the dating apps?” the redhead asked.

“Dating app?” Solgre asked with a frown.

“Excuse us,” Kien said. “We're not from here. What is an app?”

“It's what single people use to meet, hook up and date each other,” Jessica said. “It's how my husband and I met.”

“I thought we were never going to tell anyone how you two met,” Joan sang to her daughter.

Hearing the description of what a dating app was drew Phate's attention from Tasha. She wouldn't admit it aloud, but the loss of his gaze left her suddenly bereft. Her eyes narrowed on the fawning women. To her surprise, an unexpected spike of jealousy hit her.

She wasn't confident enough to believe she had more to offer than these other women. As far as looks were concerned, she was average at best. Nisha was an avid dating app user and she'd showed Tasha a slew of photos with the most gorgeous women available and searching for men. There was no way she could compete with some of them.

Jessica rolled her eyes. “There's nothing wrong with dating apps, mom. Using technology to determine if two people are compatible takes a lot of the second guessing out and helps to weed out the weirdos.”

“It sounds like what the IDA uses,” Phate said to Solgre.

“Hm, definitely something to consider,” Solgre responded.

She was about to ask them what IDA stood for and if it was a new dating app, but at the moment Kien turned a dazzling smile on the two newcomers, and they immediately broke down into another round of giggles. Tasha rolled her eyes at the display of teenage antics from obviously grown women.

“Are you both on dating apps?” Kien asked the women.

They nodded.

“But we can bypass that and go out on a date,” the redhead offered.

Kien stepped closer to her and angled his head downward to look into her eyes. The intensity was enough to have Tasha fan herself.

“I would like that very much,” he replied.

“This is something we will discuss later, privately in our home.” Solgre pulled Kien back by his shirt. Kien resisted at first and a brief struggle ensued before he grimaced and ended up by Solgre’s side. Solgre grabbed Phate’s elbow with his other hand. “We must be leaving now.”

Everyone in the boutique watched the trio make their way toward the door. Even Tasha couldn’t find the strength to look away from Phate’s perfectly sculpted ass.

Phate glanced over his shoulder and their gazes connected. Her face reddened at being caught staring at his butt. “Tasha, are you on this dating app?”

Tasha choked. Her on a dating app? If she wanted to do that kind of damage to her pride, she would go to her upcoming high school reunion. “Absolutely not.”

Solgre pushed through the exit, dragging Phate with him.

Chapter Five

Pizza in hand, Kien dropped into the seat next to Phate. The couch creaked under his weight. “We should try this dating app thing. It sounds like the database that the Intergalactic Dating Agency uses. If we’re wondering if the humans would be candidates for the IDA, we should research how things are set up here and how well they will fit.”

Phate took a bite of his pizza. He’d told Kien no fourteen times at last count. Ever since Kien found out about the app, he’d become obsessed about it. “I don’t want to join.”

After leaving Tasha, they’d gone into another store. It was larger and seemed to have everything he’d seen on television in it. There’d been aisles and aisles of stuff...just useless human stuff. Solgre had thought they could pick up equipment for the communicator, so they’d scoured the electronics department for anything remotely advanced enough to match their tech.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t had the time needed to conduct a proper search. The human females gravitated toward them, crowding their space, asking them questions and wouldn’t leave them alone.

Not wanting to bring any more attention to them than necessary, Solgre hastily grabbed anything in reach, tossed it into the cart provided and they’d left. The walk back to their apartment had been fast even with the cart. It had taken some effort to push the cart home with its one wobbly wheel, but they’d done it. Even with two men they’d recognized from the store’s entrance chasing after them.

“We know why *you* don’t care to join,” Kien said between bites.

“Because Tasha isn’t on it,” Phate confirmed as he picked up the remote from between the seat cushions.

Phate had done his research on what exactly a dating app was and after hacking into the most popular one and seeing the messages between the males and females, had decided it

wasn't for him. After sharing what he'd found with Solgre and Kien, Kien focused solely on the sexual aspect of it.

Some couples got together for dinner and drinks to test their chemistry, while others "hooked up" for purely physical interactions. The latter obviously appealed to Kien. Solgre hadn't shown interest either way. His interest remained on desperately attempting to repair the portable replicator.

Normally, Solgre would've thrived in an unknown environment, but for some reason, being on Earth had changed him. He wasn't himself.

Phate glanced his way. Solgre sat at the same table where he spent most of his time, eyes downcast, focused on the equipment spread out before him. The cart, with their newly acquired items, was parked beside him.

Concentration made the lines etched into his face pronounced. His eyebrows were pulled together, and a fine sheet of sweat dotted his forehead.

Kien caught Phate staring at Solgre and nudged him. Phate turned to see the questioning look in Kien's eyes. Without exchanging words, Phate knew Kien wondered the same thing as he did. Why was their fearless leader acting so apprehensive about this new world?

Yes, none of them wanted to be dissected for public viewing, but they were taking precautions to hide what they were and so far, none of the government authorities had contacted them.

Phate didn't think that was the answer. Even without the beacon going out, a ship would've been dispatched when Solgre and his crew hadn't checked in at their scheduled interval.

Something else worried Solgre and Phate needed to find out what it was. Solgre was a strong, prideful and independent leader. Phate needed to approach the subject delicately to get to the root of the cause. He would bring it up before bed and after dinner as Solgre seemed calmer after drinking the human wine.

Phate just hoped Solgre would be open to talking to them about whatever was on his mind.

“What in Ancient’s is your problem?” Kien asked Solgre bluntly.

Or Phate could just let Kien bring it up.

Solgre didn’t look up. His face knotted in concentration. “Nothing.”

“*Pft*. Nothing?” Kien asked. “You say that as if we don’t know your personality and can’t see the change in you.”

“I have to fix the portable replicator.”

“I understand the need. We all miss some of the comforts we’re used to,” Phate said. “You’ll get it done. We trust you. So, tell me, what else is bothering you?”

“Maybe I’m tired of being on this planet? Or that I hate breathing this polluted air. Or could it be that the only thing I’ve eaten is pizza since leaving *Halo One*? Pick your choice!”

“You don’t like the pizza?” Kien frowned as he studied the slice in his hand. “It’s delicious.”

“I don’t think it’s meant for everyday consumption.”

“It’s the food substance of every American male,” Phate replied. That’s what the commercial had said anyway. “We have to eat it, so we’ll fit in.”

Solgre squeezed his eyes shut and let out a deep breath. He clenched his hands around the tools in his grip. “Fine.”

Kien and Phate exchanged concerned glances again. This type of emotion coming from Solgre was...unsettling.

Phate stood. “Solgre, talk to us.”

“Fine. I’ll talk.” Even though this was said, Solgre still didn’t lift his head and address Phate directly. “Do any of you get the feeling that we forgot to do something at that store? These humans have funny little ways and antiquated thinking. I feel like we should have logged the goods or something of that matter?” He shook his head wearily. “So many little things to remember.”

“Solgre. Forget about the store,” Phate said. “If it’s something about the mission we should know about it. Is the rescue ship not coming? Should we be concerned?”

“Should you be concerned?” Solgre asked slowly. Solgre raised his head. His eyes were red with strain. “Crash landing on an unvetted planet with billions of backward, blood thirsty hungry aliens should’ve concerned you. But it didn’t. You and Kien only think of the females and your tool between your legs, instead of getting off this miserable rock. Why would *you* be concerned?”

Kien heaved himself from the couch to stand as well. “That’s unfair. Of course, we’re concerned but we’re also trying to make the best of our situation and continue this mission by amending the parameters previously set because of the circumstances we now find ourselves in.”

Solgre pushed his chair back and the legs scraped harshly against the kitchen floor. He flicked a hand nonchalantly through the air. “Fine. Join this dating app, Kien. Mingle with the human females. Get to know them. Have sex, do whatever you want. Is that what you want to hear from me?”

“Yes,” Kien said with a nod.

Phate jabbed Kien in the side. “That’s not what I want. I would rather know why you’re upset.”

Solgre chuckled but it didn’t sound jovial at all. He crossed his arms and widened his legs as he stared both Kien and Phate down, leveling a dark look on them. “No. No. No. As you both keep reminding me, we’re still on a mission—even if it has changed. We’re to find out if these humans are compatible and worthy of joining the IDA.

“So, that’s what we’ll do. Join the dating app and report back after each encounter. Don’t forget to make nightly entries into your logs.”

Phate shook his head. “The only female I want to get to know here—”

“Is the one next door,” Kien said under his breath.

Phate ignored Kien. “I’ll ask Tasha on a date.”

Solgre shook his head. “Dating our neighbor doesn’t sound like a good idea. Besides, focusing on one female isn’t our new mission. This dating app will allow you to focus on an array of females and gather more information in a short amount of time.”

“Yes, finally!” Kien said with a whoop. “You’re seeing things my way.”

“But—” Phate interjected.

“That’s an order, Phate,” Solgre said. Then his gaze bounced between Kien and Phate. “Are we done here? Satisfied?”

Kien grabbed the tricorder from Phate’s hand. “I am.”

“Phate?” Solgre asked him.

No. “Yes.”

Chapter Six

Slam!
Could've been the pizza man or...

Another date?

Her new neighbors seemed to have an unhealthy love for pizza. Maybe they didn't have pizza where they're from?

Coming or going?

Tasha wondered as one of her new neighbors slammed their apartment door. She pulled her bottom lip into her mouth as she chopped the cucumbers for her salad.

Which one is going out this time? Phate or Kien?

For the past week both men had been coming and going at all hours of the night. To be newcomers in town and the country, they seemed to have the dating game down pat. Not only did she have to listen to their door opening and closing constantly, but she'd also seen them frequenting local restaurants.

Theirs was a small town. Talk should already be spreading about the new guys and how they were players. That should've put an end to any swipe rights, but nope. Their dating life appeared to be going strong.

If Tasha went to the window, she could catch a glimpse of which one headed out.

No. She shook her head. Why should she be concerned about what her neighbors did?

She wasn't tracking *all* the neighbors, she admitted to herself. Just Phate.

Tall, incredibly sexy and handsome Phate.

To be honest, her neighbors were unlike any of the men in Point Breeze. And even if word *did* spread about them being players, she doubted that would slow the influx of dates. The six-four, two hundred and fifty pounds, blond men with accents was all everyone seemed to talk about.

Heat flushed her skin with the mere thought of Phate and his beautiful eyes. She fanned herself. She couldn't stop thinking of them...*him* either.

She let out a deep breath. Who was she kidding? Even with their reputations growing, Phate and Kien still probably had dates lined up every night for the next month. Besides, Phate wasn't her type anyway. She preferred her men medium ugly because they were humble and knew how to treat a lady.

One look at Phate and she could tell he was out of her league. It wasn't that she didn't think she could pull a hottie. What concerned her the most was the number of women she would have to compete with. The very thought made her skin prickle.

Her other concern? He didn't belong in Point Breeze. Phate seemed bigger than her and her small town.

So why in the heck was he here? And why were they crammed into a one-bedroom apartment when judging by the amounts of times they'd gone out this week, they could easily afford a larger apartment and in a better building? And why in the heck was there a Walmart Cart parked in front of their apartment door?

"Why am I even thinking about any of this?" Tasha muttered to herself.

Her next-door neighbors' door slammed again. "Not my circus. Not my monkeys," she muttered.

But what harm could one peak do? She put down her knife and tiptoed to the window. She peeked through the blinds and sure enough there was Phate, stuffing his large body into the passenger side of a car she didn't recognize.

Her heart dropped.

....

WHILE THE OVERHEAD lights were still on, Tasha had closed the store over an hour ago. Jazz music played softly in the background. People walked along Main Street other side

her window. Their coats pulled tightly around their bodies as they fought against the howling wind outside.

She loved these types of nights where summer had given way to fall. She also loved working in her boutique after hours. That was when she really got to appreciate and be grateful that she was blessed in being able to do something she enjoyed and loved.

She hummed as she worked, content and happy with the day's profit. Nisha had come in just after closing to keep her company. She kept her company across the aisle. She'd come in just after closing. She sat in one of the boutique chairs.

Tasha had artfully arranged a few deep cushioned high backs near the dressing rooms where people could rest or take pictures in comfort and style while waiting for a friend or lover to try on clothes. Her main hope had been for those pictures to end up on a social media site with her boutique tagged in them.

It had worked.

Throughout most days there were *ohh's* and *ahh's* coming from that area of the boutique. And hearing those sounds was Tasha's cue to slide the picture taker her business card, so they had her social media handles and hashtags.

It was a favorite spot for customers and one of Nisha's as well. Her legs were draped across one side while studying the cellphone in her hand. "Which dating app do you think they're on?"

Tasha was going through a rack of clothes, inspecting the shirts for any damages or deodorant markings. It'd been busier in the boutique this week. She wasn't stupid. The influx of customers came thinking they would catch a glimpse of the three hunks.

That's all the women talked about when they browsed her clothes. She didn't mind. Especially since this week had been profitable.

Tasha pulled out a red shirt with obvious deodorant stains on the sides and set it aside to take to the cleaners in the

morning. “I’ve no clue if they’re even on a dating app.”

Nisha *humphed*. “Like hell they aren’t. You said yourself they’re going out every day.”

Tasha had tried to push the thoughts of Phate dating far from her mind, but it was hard to do with Nisha grilling her about it. “I can only attest to what happens at night. I’m here during the day.”

Nisha *humphed* again. “There’s no way they aren’t on any apps. How else are they lining up all these dates?”

Tasha lifted a shoulder, trying her best to hide her discomfort with the subject. “They could be meeting women on the streets. You saw the melee they caused in here last week. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’d walked home that day with ten dates lined up.”

A scowl now creased Nisha’s face.

“If you want to go out with one, why don’t you just ask him out?”

Nisha reared her head back. “Ask. Him. Out? What do I look like? Desperate?!”

Desperate wasn’t a word Tasha would use to describe Nisha. Nisha turned heads wherever she went. If being small with a perfect body wasn’t enough, Nisha had been blessed with classic beauty features, perky nose, high cheekbones, full lips, full lashes. If she wasn’t her best friend Tasha would be jealous of her.

Yes, Nisha could be a bit outspoken sometimes, but Tasha loved her, and she knew that Nisha would also lay down her life for Tasha.

“Finally! I had to join like four dating sites to find him.” She chuckled and shimmied in her seat. “Now to swipe right on him so we’re a match and *voila!* Let the games begin!”

Tasha chuckled. “You know where he lives.” When Nisha didn’t answer but kept focused on her phone, Tasha continued, “What’s the difference between asking a guy out face-to-face or asking him out via an app?”

Nisha finally glanced up from her phone to give Tasha a “duh” look. “If it’s done over an app, it’s like it was left up to fate.”

Tasha quirked an eyebrow. “That doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

Nisha waved a hand through the air, rolled her eyes and went back to her phone. “It would make sense if you ever joined an app.” She opened her eyes wide then glanced to Tasha again. “We could sign you up for one of the apps tonight. It’ll be fun!”

Fun wasn’t the word she would use to describe the feeling growing in the pit of her stomach at the thought of putting herself out there like that. Apprehension. Fear. Sick. Yes, those were the feelings she had when she thought about joining a dating app again. “No.”

Nisha pouted and went back to her phone. “You’re such a party pooper.”

“That sums it up.”

“Hot damn!” Nisha yelled so loudly Tasha jumped. “Kien liked me back! We’re officially a match.”

“Yay?”

Nisha pumped a fist in the air.

Tasha went back to inspecting the clothes on her rack. “Now what? Do you wait for him to start the conversation?”

“*Pft.* He’s a foreigner, he might not know he’s supposed to start the conversation. I’ll just...”

While Nisha’s thumbs moved frantically on her phone, Tasha gathered a pile of dirty clothes and set them on the counter near her purse so she wouldn’t forget them.

“And...it’s done.”

Tasha raised her hands high above her head to stretch her aching back. “What’s done?”

“I just set up a date with Kien.”

Tasha straightened. “That quick?”

Nisha rolled from the chair to stand. “I move fast, girl.”

“Wow. I thought there would conversation and a getting to know each other period or something?” She grabbed her jacket she’d flung across the counter and donned it.

“I have to move fast otherwise one of these hussies will try to wife him up before I get a chance to sample him.”

Tasha laughed and grabbed her purse. “Oh my God. You are a hot mess.”

Nisha helped by grabbing the clothes. “Never said I wasn’t.”

Chapter Seven

Would it be too much to ask to slip inside her apartment without having to run smack dab into Phate unfolding his massive body from a cab?

Yes. Because fate seemed to be playing a cruel trick on her. Both versions.

At seeing him exiting the cab, Tasha did what anyone who had a crush on their sexy as hell neighbor would do. She cursed under her breath, put her head down and hurried up the front steps, trying to make it to the apartment building door while frantically hoping he didn't notice her.

“Tasha!” Phate called out just as her hand reached the door.

Again. Fate was cruel. Oh, so very cruel.

Tasha could pretend not to hear him and run inside, but that would make her look...crazy, weird, scared? All of the above. Her heart pounded against her ribs. She closed her eyes and tried to rein in her panic.

One. Two. Three.

Tasha swallowed. There was no need to behave this way.

Get it together.

She took a deep and steadying breath and turned to greet him with a fake smile plastered across her face. “*Heeeyyyy, you.*”

He had on clothes that matched this time—somewhat. She wasn't quite sure if purple and orange normally went together, but on him it looked as if a professional had styled him. He could never walk a runway. His build was too big and bulky, and his gait was more predatory than model-isk. And she loved it. All of it. The entire package.

He walked toward her; brow crinkled. “Phate. My name is Phate.”

Eyes up, don't look at his powerful legs. “I know. I was just...”

What? Was caught off guard by how fine he looked and couldn't get her hormones in check to act sane for two seconds while in his presence?

“Here, let me get this. I'm supposed to open doors for females.”

He stepped around her to open the door, brushing his body slightly against hers and giving her a nose full of his scent. A deep wood smell tickled her nose and sent shivers down her spine, making her knees weak. If she wanted to look at his face, she would have to take a step back and crane her neck to see his eyes. He made her feel small and dainty and she liked it.

She plastered herself against the door, trying to avoid any more touching and went through. “*Um*, thank you. Men don't open doors where you're from?”

He entered behind her and tilted his head. The heat of him was at her back. “There's no need to. All doors are automatic.”

She chuckled nervously as she made her way toward the elevator. “All doors are automatic? That's a blanket statement.”

He stepped in line with her and shrugged. “They are.”

She pressed the “Up” button and willed the elevator to come as soon as possible.

“If there were manual doors, I don't believe the females on my—where I'm from—would appreciate being coddled like they do here.”

The elevator dinged its arrival and opened. She stepped inside and he followed. Her heart thumped as soon as they were enclosed in the space together. His rich scent intensified.

Oh, God.

She pushed the fourth-floor button. “They're progressive, are they?”

He tilted his head to the side, causing the blond curls to sway in movement. Her fingers longed to wrap around a lock

and play with it. The elevator doors shut, and her stomach dipped as it rose.

“They’ve spent many years proving they’re just as capable as the males. They wouldn’t appreciate being treated any differently because of their gender.”

Damn. That sexy voice.

“So, they don’t want or rather, need the door opened for them? Do they like their chairs held out? Or what about the meals and dates? Do they pay for them too?”

Phate shrugged his massive shoulders. “We treat them as equals. Who pays with their credits isn’t really a factor.”

Tasha pulled her eyebrows together. “Credits?”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened.

“Money,” he added quickly.

She breezed through the door and made her way down their hall.

“Credits. Is that what money is called where you’re from?”

“Yes.”

“And exactly *where* are you from?” she pressed.

“Not here.”

She chuckled. “I gathered that much. Your accents gave it away. I can’t put my finger on it though. Maybe Greek?”

“Have you ever been to Greek?”

Tasha stopped at her door and frowned as she turned to face him. “Do you mean, have I ever been to *Greece*?”

His face was serious as he nodded. “Yes, that.”

“No, I’ve never been, but I’ve always wanted to check out the islands.”

He straightened and smiled, revealing the straightest and whitest teeth she’d ever seen in her life. “Then, that’s where I’m from. I would like to take you to see my home one day. I think you would like it.”

Then that's where I'm from.

That sentence didn't sit right with her, but she was too smitten with his last sentence to kick those words around her head and analyze them properly.

She fluttered like a teenager. "I think the many women you're dating might have a problem with that."

And now she wanted to kick herself for sounding like a jealous ninny.

"From my understanding, dating is not the same as going on dates." He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "I'm really confused on that point though."

"What do you mean?"

Even when he frowned, he was a beautiful creature. "I am going out on dates. But I'm not dating anyone. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, that's normal. You're dating, but not anyone in particular. Unless you do have someone you're seeing on a regular basis?"

Ugh! Stop!

"I do have someone I've seen twice. Kien said if I see her again, I'll be able to get to first base with her."

Tasha choked. "I haven't heard that terminology in a long time."

He frowned again. "Is that right? First base is kissing. Second base is touching, and third base is sex."

"Yeah, that's right." Heat made her flush and jealousy made her want to scream.

"I don't know if I want to go to first base though. The idea of exchanging my genetic data with a stranger doesn't sound secure. With the right equipment, she could use it to replicate my biomarkers."

This conversation was getting weirder and weirder. Tasha squinted. "She could do what?"

Phate ran a hand through his curls. “Never mind.”

She could feel a migraine coming on. She placed a hand on the side of her head where the thumping grew. “This conversation has gotten so confusing. You don’t like kissing, or you don’t want to kiss *her*?”

“I’ve never kissed anyone before, so I don’t know if I like it or not.” He replied so quickly and matter-of-factly she knew it had to be true.

Tasha’s jaw dropped. “Wait. What?”

Genuine confusion splashed across his face. “Is that not acceptable?”

“It’s unheard of. Especially someone of your age.” She narrowed her eyes, remembering an important point that was missing. “Wait. How old are you?”

“I’ve done the calculations. In your years, I would be twenty-nine.”

Both sides of her temples now thrummed with pain. Instead of rubbing them, she brought her hands to a pleading motion. “What does that even mean?”

They stopped in front of Tasha’s door and almost immediately the door to his apartment opened and Solgre poked his head out. His eyes were bloodshot, and it appeared as though he’d lost a few pounds since the first time she’d met him.

“Phate.” Then he glanced at Tasha. “Hello, Tasha.”

“Hi, Solgre.” She wiggled her fingers at him. Asking if everything was alright was on the tip of her tongue but he pointed to the Walmart cart.

“You can use this as well. But return it. We might have further use for it.”

Her eyes dipped to the eye sore parked between their respective apartments. They should’ve removed it a long time ago. She’d even thought about writing them a note about it but hadn’t wanted to be a pest.

“No, thank you. You guys can return your stolen goods or at least take it to the street.” She chuckled lightly when their heads tilt and eyes were set in confusion.

“Stolen?” Solgre asked.

Tasha furrowed her brow. “Um, yes? Unless you bought the cart.”

More confusion showed on his face. Then his eyes brightened, and he snapped his fingers. “That’s what we forgot.”

“Forgot?”

Phate smiled, white teeth gleaming. “We forgot to pay for the items that had been in the cart, before leaving the store.”

Tasha’s hand shot up. “Wait. How can you *forget* to pay?”

“Yes, yes, because in Greek—”

“You don’t pay for anything?” Tasha’s head felt like it would split open.

Solgre pulled on Phate’s sleeve. “Come inside and log your date.”

Any questions she had regarding Solgre’s health left her. She swung her attention to Phate. “You’re logging your dates?”

“For research purposes,” they both responded as Solgre pulled Phate into their apartment.

Tasha stood outside of her apartment door with a migraine raging through her brain and even more questions than before.

Chapter Eight

Tasha's front door flew open. She jumped in surprise as it slammed against the opposite wall and Nisha stormed in. Her friend's loud screech warned something bad had happened.

Nisha took one look at her, balled her fists at her sides and stomped a foot. "They aren't worth our time and energy."

"Not worth our time and energy? Who?!"

Behind Nisha's vibrating frame, Kien stood in her doorway glaring.

Three and a half hours ago, Nisha had shown at Tasha's apartment with a slinky red dress flung over one arm, a make-up bag in one hand and curlers in her hair. Tasha had sat on the edge of her tub and kept Nisha company while she'd dressed and listened to her excitedly describe how good their first date would be.

She'd been anticipating their outing at one of the most expensive restaurants in town. Since Kien didn't have a car or a driver's license, Nisha had agreed to pick him up.

Kien's attention left the back of Nisha's head as he glanced over it to focus on Tasha. "What are you doing up there?"

Embarrassment made heat rush up her chest, neck and face. Of course, Nisha and Kien would burst into her apartment while she was trying to eavesdrop on Solgre and Phate's conversation.

Tasha straightened from the wall she'd been pressed against and pushed her hair from her face. "Um...nothing. Just checking the vents for...um..."

Kien looked confused as ever.

Nisha narrowed her eyes and whirled to face Kien. For a split second, Kien looked scared, and took a step back. "Stop badgering her! This is her apartment, she can do whatever she wants in her apartment."

“*Sooooo*, how was the date?” Tasha asked, trying to deflect from her embarrassing situation.

Kien glanced down at Nisha. “This was the worst date I’ve had since I’ve been here.”

She stabbed him in the chest with a finger. “This has been the worst date I’ve *ever* had.”

He squinted, staring down at her. “Exactly how many dates have you been on?”

Nisha gripped the edge of the door frame, holding it so tight her knuckles turned white. “Ha! Wouldn’t you like to know!”

She slammed the door in Kien’s face and turned around to lean her back against it, expelling a deep breath.

Tasha gave her friend a sympathetic look. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out their date hadn’t gone as planned. Tasha gave her friend a pitying look. She really felt bad for her. She’d been so excited to finally be going out with Kien. She’d worn a short dress that accentuated her body and curves. Her hair had so much mouse in it that it would take two washes to get it all out. She’d also worn a full face of makeup. It wasn’t that she’d needed it. Nisha was naturally beautiful, but she’d wanted to look and feel good for tonight.

“*Aw*, hon. I’m sorry it didn’t go well.”

Nisha pushed her curls from her face and glared at Tasha.

“O.M.G. Get down from there. You look ridiculous.”

Right. She was still balancing on her couch arm. Tasha dropped to the floor and grimaced at the amount of noise she’d made and hoped her downstairs neighbor didn’t notice. “Do you want me to make us tea while you tell me all about it?”

Nisha pouted and pushed off the door. “Can we have something a little stronger?”

“That bad?”

She nodded and dragged her feet to her favorite chair. Nisha dropped onto the cushion with a forlorn sigh. “Whiskey

me, please.”

Tasha stopped in her tracks and turned toward her friend. Nisha liked the fruity wines and cocktails. A hard liquor drinker she was not.

“Did he hurt you?” she asked slowly. “Because if he did, I will go over there and take Big Bertha against his head.”

Nisha slumped forward and braced her elbows on her knees. “Nothing like that. Leave Big Bertha behind the door.”

Tasha eyed her aluminum baseball bat she’d had since her high school softball days. It was propped against the door in case someone made their way to her door who wasn’t supposed to be there.

“Nisha, he’s big but I can take him. Then we call the cops and tell them to throw that asshole in jail.”

“You know I would tell you if anything like that happened.” Nisha sighed again and flopped back against the chair while staring at the ceiling. “What’s taking you so long to get me whiskey, girl?”

“Okay, Okay. I’ll pour and you start talking. What happened?” Tasha continued to her small liquor cart where exactly five bottles were. She had two bottles of wine, a bottle of something her mother had picked up from New Orleans, a bottle of Long Island Iced Tea and a bottle of Tennessee Whiskey. She picked up the Tennessee Whiskey and made her way to the kitchen. “Start talking!”

“It started off okay, I guess. He liked the dress, the hair and make-up. He couldn’t keep his eyes off of me.”

Tasha selected two wine glasses. Just because they were drinking whiskey didn’t mean they couldn’t look fancy too. “And?”

Nisha groaned. “It went downhill from there.”

In the living room, she set the wine glasses down and poured them both three fingers worth. Tasha settled onto the couch with wine glass in hand and curled her feet under her

legs. “I’m not a mind reader, Nisha. You have to give it to me straight.”

Nisha picked up her glass and shrugged. “He just... He was looking at me *and* every other woman too.”

Tasha cringed. “*Ew.*”

“Ew is right.” Nisha took a healthy swig then coughed and gasped. She pounded on her chest while choking for air. “Holy shit.”

Tasha chuckled. “You’re the one who wanted to hang with the big girls.”

Nisha patted her chest a few more times then cleared her throat.

“So that’s when you told him about himself and the argument started? You should’ve left his ass there.”

“The argument started when I matched his energy.” Nisha lifted her chin. “I stared openly at men.”

Tasha raised an eyebrow. “I take it he didn’t like that one bit.”

Nisha took another healthy swig and coughed again. “He. Did. Not. He told me to stop. Then I told him to stop. He said he couldn’t because his mission was to observe females of this place.”

She said the last part of the sentence in a deep and gruff voice.

Tasha cocked her head to the side, remembering what Solgre told her about Phate needing to log his dates. “That’s odd.”

“It’s crazy is what it is. He said it like it was his job or something. And he expected me to believe him. Like, really? What was I supposed to say? *Oh, Kien! Yes, please continue ogling every woman in the restaurant while I sit here looking stupid.*”

Tasha laughed and choked on the sip she’d taken. “So, you both were just there looking at other people the entire time?”

“When he looked at me, I looked at him. When he turned to gawk at every woman who entered the restaurant, I checked out their dates. Quid-pro-quo, motherfucker!”

Tasha burst into a laugh then held up her hand. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. But this sounds so ridiculous.”

Nisha’s face softened and she chuckled. “It was. Our poor waitress didn’t know what was going on.”

“You two probably looked like a swinger couple looking for some fun.”

Nisha held up a finger. “Maybe if we were happy about it. But by the time our entrees came we were glaring at each other and glaring at everyone who walked by us.”

“So, I take it there won’t be a second date. I’m sorry. I know you were looking forward to this.”

“I don’t really know what I was expecting. That he would sweep me off my feet or something, I guess.” Nisha shrugged a delicate shoulder and let out a deep sigh. “It’s okay. I think he’s made for the streets. I should’ve guessed by the way he’s dating everyone in town. I can do better.”

“And you deserve better.” Tasha reached over and patted her knee. “You deserve a man who only has eyes for you. Release him back to the streets, honey.”

Nisha flicked her hand in the air. “*Poof*, back to the streets he goes.”

••••

AGENT MARGIE SANTANA sat on her couch, curled up with her own glass of wine and listened to the conversation of her downstairs neighbor. She’d kept quiet out of necessity. While the government listening device picked up on Tasha and Nisha’s conversation, the recorder taped every word said. Which would also mean the tape would pick up on her as well.

It was easy to imagine herself in the conversation between the best friends. There’s was a close and easy-going friendship. If Margie was in the apartment with them, she

would've told Nisha Kien was an ass who didn't know what he was missing.

She would've told Nisha she could do better than a whoremonger and player. She would've also told Nisha, Kien would get what he deserved in due time. Because once Margie confirmed these targets were the aliens she'd been tracking since an unknown spaceship had breached Earth's atmosphere a little over four months ago, she was sounding the alarm and her team would swoop in for the extraction.

And Margie? She would be getting a nice raise for her efforts.

Win. Win. As far as she was concerned.

Chapter Nine

“Something is terribly wrong with Solgre,” Phate said as he watched Solgre hunched over the parts spread across the kitchen table.

Solgre grumbled something under his breath but didn't otherwise say anything or look Kien and Phate's way. After his date with Tasha's friend Nisha, Kien had come home upset, murmuring under his breath about disrespectful human females and plastered his ear to the wall that separated the two apartments.

Phate hadn't asked him about his date. In truth, he'd been jealous that Kien had gotten the chance to date the female he'd desired while Phate was left to date females he'd no interest in. He'd kill to do all the things that Earth women preferred with Tasha.

Exchanging genetic data hadn't been something he'd wanted to do with anyone until now. It wasn't that he didn't know the practice. Many other species did so as a form of intimacy. Thellians didn't. Not because they didn't desire the practice or felt it was beneath them. They were a species who valued science more than anything and swapping genetic data was a perfect way to get cloned.

Although it was illegal without permission, it didn't mean if given a chance, a clone could be grown in someone's lab and used for scientific purposes.

But with the idea of clones taken out of the equation on Earth—they didn't have the technology for that—Phate thought he would rather enjoy the practice, but only with Tasha.

He'd seen people kissing on television and learned there were different types. Friends and family kissed each other on the cheeks. Lovers kissed each other on the lips, neck and other places. He wanted that. He wanted a lover's kiss with Tasha.

“What does matching energy mean?” Kien asked, face still pressed against the wall.

“Kien, stop eavesdropping and pay attention to Solgre,” Phate said.

Kien frowned, but still didn't turn toward Solgre. “I told her the truth! I needed to catalogue the different types of females in the vicinity so I could add them to my report.”

Phate sighed, realizing he wasn't getting through to Kien. Not with Nisha on his mind anyway. “We have other pressing concerns,” Phate told Kien.

Phate's gaze went back to Solgre. He was in the same spot he'd been in when Phate left for his date earlier, and the same spot he'd stayed in most days. With each passing day, Solgre's appearance, attitude and demeanor took a downward turn.

Phate had to prompt him to shower and eat. His hair was unruly, his eyes were red and fine lines formed creases in his cheeks.

Kien *humphed*. Attention still on the apartment wall. To make sure Solgre couldn't hear their conversation, Phate walked over to Kien and leaned a shoulder against the wall to face him. “It's rude to listen to their conversation.”

“They do it to us.”

Phate pulled his eyebrows together. “They do?”

“Yes, I saw Tasha listening just now. Were you and Solgre talking about anything that could've given our secrets away?”

Why would Tasha want to listen in on his conversation? Phate shook his head without thought. “When I returned home, I tried talking to Solgre, but he wouldn't engage. He was too preoccupied. Besides, I only spoke in our language.”

“Good. We speak only our language while alone.”

The thought of Tasha eavesdropping perplexed him. Did she find him appealing as well? Did she want to exchange genetic data with him? A grunting sound came from Solgre who'd stopped fiddling with the portable replicator pieces to rub his eyes.

Phate pushed thoughts of Tasha from his mind. He could think of her later, but for now, there was the growing issue

with Solgre. “Kien, look at Solgre. Take a good look at him.”

Kien lifted his head to glance at their friend and leader. As if seeing Solgre’s state for the first time, Kien frowned and straightened. “Captain?”

Solgre didn’t look up. His mouth moved but no words came out. His full concentration was back on the work in front of him.

“He was like this when I left and the same when I came back hours ago.”

Kien started for Solgre and Phate followed.

“Captain,” Kien called again, concern lacing his voice.

When he didn’t respond, Phate moved a piece of the replicator. Solgre’s hand shot out and caught Phate’s.

At feeling how warm and clammy his Captain’s hand was, Phate’s mouth dropped open. “Solgre?”

He jerked his head up to glare his red eyes at Phate. “Don’t touch any of this,” he rasped.

Phate opened his hand, releasing the metal object. “Captain, you aren’t well.”

Solgre nudged the piece back into the pile with the others, then laughed to himself. “And what can we do about it? Take me to a human doctor? They can’t do anything for me here.”

“Maybe it’s the food we eat?” Kien asked. “Without the proper equipment we can’t analyze it, but I know it isn’t good for us. When I consume it, I can feel the chemicals in it.”

Phate rubbed his stomach, noticing the steak he’d had for dinner sat like an uncomfortable rock within. The food on Earth wasn’t fit for consumption but it was all that was available to them. “Maybe we should grow our own until the rescue arrives?”

“It would take Earth months to do without the proper technology,” Kien said.

He was right. Without the equipment needed to grow food quickly it would take more time than they had for anything to

bud.

“It’s the food, the air, the water, everything,” Solgre mumbled. “At least you two get to eat something other than pizza.”

“Should we try to order different food?” Phate asked.

“There’s different food to order?” Kien replied.

Phate thought about that. Pizza was the only thing delivered, per the television. “Solgre, maybe we can take you to one of the restaurants Kien and I have visited.”

“I do not want to go back out there,” Solgre growled. “I have to fix this. Now leave me alone!”

Phate stepped back and pulled Kien with him. “We’ll have to keep a better eye on him,” Phate said.

Kien nodded and gave Solgre a thoughtful look.

“Maybe we should cease with the dating experiment, for now at least,” Phate said.

Kien shook his head. “We’re doing important work here. Even in his state I’m sure he’ll agree that we must continue the mission.”

“Fine. But we take turns leaving the apartment. We can’t leave him alone, Kien. I’m worried about him.”

Kien sighed. “I am too.”

“We’ll have to hope that he can hold on until the rescue comes.”

Chapter Ten

A fine bead of sweat dropped down the back of Tasha's neck, leaving a tickle in its wake. She fought against the urge to wipe it away. She was sweating but she didn't want her date to *know* she was sweating. She also didn't want him to know she was nervous. Both of which he would have to be blind not to notice.

This was the first date she'd been on since...how many months? Who was she kidding? She hadn't been on a date in *years*. Two years and four months to be specific.

That's when Leonard had broken up with her. She didn't hold any ill will towards him. He'd wanted something more than she could give. Her time.

She'd been working long hours, trying to get the boutique together and he'd wanted nights cuddled in front of the television watching re-runs of his favorite shows and ice-skating competitions.

They'd parted ways on good terms, and she still spoke to him every now and again. His mother still invited her to cookouts, but she never went. Leonard had a new girlfriend he seemed to really care for and she didn't want to be the ex who kept coming around.

Now here she was, sitting across from a lawyer she'd matched with on a dating app, desperately trying not to appear scared out of her mind. She didn't know why she'd finally relented and let Nisha talk her into joining an app.

Oh right, because I was obsessed and needed to get my mind off Phate.

She'd thought dating someone would preoccupy her mind and stop her from watching the comings and goings of her next-door neighbor.

She was still the workaholic who cared more about her business than a relationship, but she was also lonely and in need of some company. It had taken Phate moving next door

to make her realize that. And here she was, now thinking about it 24/7.

“I’ve walked past that little shop quite a few times.”

If he calls my boutique a little shop one more time...

Tasha gnashed her teeth together. Her jaw hurt from restraining the retort on her tongue.

Her date was a handsome man. Tall, but not as tall as Phate. He was also skinnier than Phate. He had on a light blue suit and buttoned-down shirt underneath. He didn’t wear a tie and the buttons were open until the third one. His whole look was appealing.

He smiled at her and picked up a spoonful of his dinner salad. “I never went in because I saw all the girl stuff in the windows,” he continued.

She used her tongue to force her teeth apart. “I only carry women’s clothing, so unless you were shopping for one, you wouldn’t have found anything interesting in there.”

He danced in his seat a little, obviously happy with the way the conversation was going. All the while she was cringing in her head.

“My sister’s birthday is coming up.”

She used her fork to push her salad around her plate. “I’m sure you can find something she’ll like in my *boutique*.”

“My sister’s a lawyer like me. She might not like any of the clothes you sell at your little place. But I’ll take a look, if I can get some kind of discount because I know the owner.” He gave her a playful wink. “I like supporting businesses like yours. We should all dream, no matter if it’ll work out or not.”

She couldn’t take it anymore. No, she wasn’t a lawyer but that didn’t mean what she did wasn’t important and shouldn’t be taken seriously.

She dropped her fork and folded her hands, resting them on the table. Then she leaned forward, looking directly into his eyes and smiled sweetly. “If you’re on a budget, I can find something in your price range.”

The playful smile and demeanor changed instantly. His eyes became cold and his features hardened. "I'm not poor. I have money."

....

PHATE WAS IN A SOUR mood. He didn't want to be on this date. He'd tried to cancel but the female had cried and told him she'd gotten her hair and nails done and bought a new dress for the occasion.

Apparently, all of that was important to Earth females. Even so, he was still going to cancel but she'd told him about the hard day at work she'd had and she really needed to get out of the house.

Since he also needed to get out of the apartment, he agreed. He'd stayed home watching over Solgre most of the day while Kien went on breakfast, brunch and late lunch dates. Phate hadn't been jealous. He was already tired of dating. Before it had felt like an adventure and scientific experiment. Now, it felt like a chore, and he would rather be spending time with someone who actually piqued his interest. Like Tasha.

Seated across the table from him, his date rambled about her clothes and hair, while he desperately tried to come up with excuses to cut the evening short. From the corner of his eyes, he caught a flash of color. He froze and turned to see better. Tasha strode in with a confident walk, chin high and breezed by his table.

Phate's breath caught in his throat. She wore a light, pink pants outfit that molded to her frame. The top hugged her ample breasts and skimmed along her small waist. Her pants clung to her hips and butt while the legs flared ever so slightly toward the bottom.

She looked as sophisticated as the females in the magazines he'd seen. She could model and have her pictures splattered on billboards around town. He was sure every female who saw the images would hurry to buy whatever she was selling.

The desire to go to her and leave his date behind had him pushing his chair back slightly. His date cleared her throat then launched into another story he barely heard.

His excitement at seeing the object of his obsession turned to rage when the host led Tasha to a table where a man waited for her.

From where he sat, Phate couldn't see most of Tasha's face. He had a clear view of the male though. He didn't like how the other male held himself. He seemed to be doing most of the talking while Tasha nodded in agreement or added a few words here and there.

“Phate, what are you looking at?”

His date finally had his attention. Without looking in her direction, he answered honestly, “I'm watching my neighbor on a date.”

As soon as he'd spoke the words, he knew it was a mistake.

“You're a bastard! No respect at all for a woman. Ugh, I actually thought you were cute.” She snatched her purse from the table, got up and stormed out.

He tried to feel bad for how the date ended but couldn't focus on anything besides Tasha and her date. The male stiffened and the smile on his face shifted to a snarl of disgust.

At the abrupt change in demeanor, the hairs on the back of Phate's neck stood on end. Tasha scooted her chair back from the table and frantically glanced toward her waiter. The waiter held up a hand to her, indicating he was busy and would get to her soon.

Tasha's date grabbed his wallet from a jacket pocket and began pulling out money, slapping the bills on the table in front of her. With each slap, Tasha jerked back.

Worry and concern for her rose to the surface. Phate paid for his meal with his bank card, stood and strode across the room to Tasha.

The male glanced up and snarled at Phate. “Whatever you’re selling, we don’t want it.”

Anger threatened to bubble to the surface. Next to him, Tasha’s shoulders trembled. She angled her head in his direction, her eyes wild with panic.

Shifting closer to her side, Phate resisted the urge to reach across the table, grab her date and fling him through the painted glass window.

Don’t cause undue attention to myself.

Phate took a deep breath, trying to calm the raging storm of emotions. He placed both hands on Tasha’s shoulders. “Are you ready to go home?”

A sigh escaped her lips. “Yes, please.”

He nodded. “Purse? Keys?”

She patted the purse she clutched in her lap.

Phate pulled her chair out and helped her to stand.

“Wh-where are you going? What’s going on here?” her date demanded. He balled his cloth napkin and threw it on the table.

“Good night, Jonathan.” Tasha wrapped her arm around Phate’s, brushing their bodies together. He couldn’t enjoy the sensation of finally having her touching him because her body continued to shake with tremors. He wasn’t sure if it was fear or anger.

The male pushed his chair back and stood abruptly. “So, you’re just going to leave and stiff me with the bill?”

Phate led Tasha away, determined to get her as far away from the situation as he could before he did something to make both Solgre and Kien upset.

Tasha followed his lead but turned back to say, “You’re not poor, remember?”

They didn’t talk as they left the warm restaurant and stepped out into the cool brisk night air.

“We can go to the bar across the street while we wait for a cab,” he told her.

“I drove here. I didn’t want him knowing where I lived. Good thing too.” She led him down the block. He slowed his steps so she could keep up, and she still had to walk briskly to keep pace with her short legs.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“I’m glad I was there.”

She led him into a public parking lot and chuckled nervously as they made their way to one of the few cars left. “It was my first date in y—a long time. Now I know why I don’t date.”

“Not all males act that way.”

She took her keys from her purse and with a press of a button unlocked the car doors. “I know. I honestly didn’t expect him to act that way either.”

Phate, remembering that females liked to have their door opened, opened Tasha’s. “You’ve known him a long time?”

Tasha thanked him with a nod before climbing inside and settling into the driver’s side. “I met him tonight.”

After shutting her door, he went to the passenger side and after a few seat adjustments, he was comfortable. “He didn’t seem very nice.”

“He did. At first.” She started the car and chuckled lightly as she maneuvered out of the onto the main road going to their apartment building. “I said something that set him off, so it was probably my fault as well.”

Phate shook his head. “No. You will not take the blame for any of that. I don’t know what happened before, but no male should ever look or act toward a female as he did.”

She nodded tightly and pursed her lips. They drove the rest of the way home in silence. He pretended to watch the scenery pass by his window but watched her reflection against the glass.

He loved the way she hummed along to the song playing softly on the radio and the way her fingertips beat in time to the music, thrumming against the steering wheel.

His nerves buzzed at being this close to her. She smelled... simply wonderful. He closed his eyes, allowing her scent to envelope him.

She made a right turn. "Wake up. We're home."

He opened his eyes to see their building ahead. "I wasn't sleep. Just thinking."

"Why do you say, 'males' and 'females' instead of men and women?"

"Am I saying it incorrectly?"

She pulled into a parking space and shut off the car. "Not necessarily. It's just a little..."

"Wrong?"

She turned to watch him. "No. I want to say weird? But I also don't want to offend you."

He frowned. "I don't want to be weird. I want to fit in."

She waved a hand up and down his body. "You're never fitting in here. You stand out like a sore thumb. Well, maybe not like a sore thumb since you look...*um*...great. But your accent, the way you look and some of the things you say make you stand out. Like, how you talked about first, second and third base like you got the info from an old movie or something."

"I did. Is that wrong too? It's hard to tell what is true and what is fake, especially when it comes to things that are broadcast on television."

She snapped her fingers. "Like that, Phate. Saying things like that makes you stand out."

Well, he didn't want to stand out. He pressed his mouth closed and she laughed.

"Don't do that. I didn't mean to embarrass you or anything."

“It’s hard being from a different...place and coming here without proper guidance or being prepared. If we had colleagues here it would’ve been easier as someone would’ve been on hand to answer our questions about these things.”

She smiled. Her lips were perfect. It was an attraction built deeper than a physical one. His heart felt full as he watched her. He wanted to cup her round face in his hands and kiss her perfect nose. He also wanted to touch his forehead to hers, to be that much closer to her.

“Think of me as your friend for saving me tonight. What do you want to know? Ask me anything.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her mouth. Her lips looked so soft and plush. “I want to know what kissing you would be like.”

She blinked rapidly. “Like a kiss on the cheek or...?”

“I want to exchange genetic data with you.”

Chapter Eleven

Shock kept Tasha from speaking right away. Her heart threatened to leap from her chest.

Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!

“Um...okay.”

With his eyes focused on her lips, she waited, hoping not to appear too eager, while her nerves hummed in anticipation. And waited. And waited some more.

A nervous giggle burst through. “You asked. I said yes.”

The look on his face wasn't confident at all. Phate gave her a short nod. “I did and you did.”

They continued to stare at each other in silence. Just when her nerves couldn't take it anymore a thought occurred to her. “Wait. Do you know how to kiss?”

He'd admitted that he'd never done it before, but surely...?

He shook his head. A car horn blared in the background. Fuck it. She leaned forward, closing in the distance between them and claimed his lips. She gave soft kisses at first, then her kisses became lingering.

She captured his plump bottom lip between hers and sucked. He moaned softly. It was enough to do her in. She crushed her mouth over his, devouring the taste of him.

Phate's strong hand found the back of her neck, bringing her closer to him. His fingers gripped her hair. She'd never been into the aggressive man-type, but this? This she liked. She enjoyed. She wanted more of.

With an abrupt groan, he suddenly pulled away. His heated gaze seemed to penetrate her soul.

“Do you...um...know how to have sex?”

One side of his lips lifted. “That, I do know how to do.”

Phate got out of her car, and she followed his lead. He held her hand as they made their way to the third floor of their building. They reached her apartment and he pressed against

her back as she unlocked the door. She loved the feel of him against her, his bulge pressing against her backside.

Once inside, she anticipated the gentle Phate, the innocent Phate who'd never kissed a girl before. She thought he would follow her to her room. They would undress and crawl into her bed.

Yet, when he turned and pushed her against the wall, she knew they would make love in a wild frenzy, and she wanted it.

Phate's lips crashed over hers as he pressed her back against the wall. The distinct sound of his pants being unzipped made butterflies erupt in her stomach. She simultaneously caressed his muscular arms, while her tongue explored his delicious lips. His cock pulsed against the fabric of her outfit.

When he broke the kiss again, she wanted to scream. His chest heaved with heavy breaths. "Are you certain you want to proceed with this?"

She nodded. Hands trembling, she undressed under his unwavering gaze. When she was naked his eyes locked onto her erect, brown nipples.

"Does this answer your question?"

He nodded and wet his lips.

Tasha pulled his face towards her hardened bud. Phate sucked hungrily, sending sparks of electricity undulating throughout her body. His mouth moved in ways that enticed as well as teased. When he bit her nipple softly, she threw her head back, keeping him tightly pressed against her and her fingers scraping against his scalp.

"Oh God, yes!" she groaned.

....

PHATE MOVED HIS LIPS to the other peak of her breast, licking and suckling in a maddeningly slow rhythm. His fingers roamed over her body, gently kneading her butt and

tracing the curve of her hips as Tasha's stifled moans drove him mad.

"Now, Phate, *please*."

With a grunt, he grabbed the back of her legs, lifting them to wrap around his waist. His firm erection against her quivering center sent waves of heat radiating through his body. This was what real desire felt like.

Phate pressed himself into her, breaching her tightness. Tasha inhaled a sharp breath as her arms squeezed around his neck. Her inner walls squeezed his cock, pulling him farther into her depths. Each thrust sent a shockwave through his entire body. He didn't know how he kept his balance and stayed upright.

Tasha was everything he'd wanted and more. He pressed his forehead to hers, inhaling her sweet scent and feeling her body heat rise around him.

His hands moved to her hips, gripping them. She pushed her hips against his. The move was enough to completely undo him. "Tasha, I've wanted this for so long."

"Phate," she pleaded, "I want to feel more of you."

"I want this to last. I want to make love all night long." His voice was raspy and breathless as he spoke.

Tasha dug her nails into his arm, and he liked the sting of them against his skin. "We can make love later. Right now, I want you to fuck me."

Phate groaned and shifted her, angling her hips against him. He withdrew from her slowly. Tasha gasped. Her inner walls quivered and gripped him tightly. He thrust forward and she welcomed him with a moan.

Her skin was slick beneath his hands. He closed his eyes as he savored the tightness of her. He listened to the sounds of her moans in his ears as he filled her completely. She felt like home.

Tasha moved her hips in rhythm with him. "I want to feel every inch of you." The sensual sound of her voice caressed

his ear.

This time Phate didn't stop or hold her back. Instead, he let Tasha move at her own pace. With each thrust, she moved harder and faster. Her breaths came out ragged and deep.

Tiny tremors of pleasure rippled through his body as Tasha ran her nails up and down his back. He strained to maintain control, but it was a losing battle. The heat and wetness of her body enveloped him as she moved against him. Her moans grew louder as their movements increased in intensity.

Tasha arched her back. The muscles in her arms and legs tensed under his grip. She whimpered in his ear. "Fuck me, Phate. Don't you dare hold back."

That was enough to push him over the edge, leaving all his inhibitions aside. Phate raised his hips, pushing into her hard. Her eyes rolled back, her lips parting on a gasp. Her inner walls fluttered as she screamed his name in ecstasy. Withdrawing, only to drive deeper, her grip tightened around his waist, pulling him closer and closer.

Phate brought his lips down on hers hungrily, their tongues tangled together in a desperate dance. Heat radiated off their intertwined bodies and sweat pooled and dripped between them.

His thrusts increased in intensity until the slapping of his hips against her skin were the loudest sounds in the room. Tasha's hands found his head with her nails digging into his scalp, pushing him further into oblivion with each moan escaping her lips.

Deep, gut-wrenching bolts of pleasure shook his body. Tasha's walls squeezed his cock as she lifted, only to push down with a gasp. Her body twisted and writhed. Her cries and moans of pleasure were like bells in the night, beautiful, pure—so close, so deep and perfect.

Phate's eyelids were heavy with lust, with want. He wanted to clasp her to him, to pull her down onto him and spill into her over and over until they were both spent. Her legs

were wrapped around his waist so tightly he had to pry them open before he could pull out.

He shook, his stomach clenched. The need to look her in her eyes overrode everything else. His cock strained within her. The time for his release was almost near. Her body twisted and she writhed in his grasp as she let out a guttural cry.

He made eye contact with her, and their eyes blazed with a fierce passion that threatened to consume them both. He felt as though time had stopped, and his only thoughts were of her. He beheld her beauty, and he wanted her—forever.

At that very moment, he vowed in his heart that he would do anything to keep her safe, even lay down his life for her. He wanted to spend every waking moment with her, cherishing her, living for her.

The heat of the moment was unbearable as his desire filled her. Tasha threw her head back and she screamed his name. His body burst with pleasure and his legs shook, sending them crashing to the floor. Phate cradled her tightly in his arms and looked into her eyes, promising silently to always protect her from any harm.

••••

THE NEXT MORNING, PHATE opened his apartment door as quietly as possible, hoping to avoid Solgre's censure for not coming home last night. Instead of a lecture about disappearing, Solgre sat hunched at the kitchen table. Kien's snores came from the pullout couch they shared.

Solgre glanced up briefly, as if surprised to see Phate standing in the doorway. He wasn't sure Solgre knew he'd been gone.

"Log your date," he grumbled, returning his attention back to the array of parts in front of him.

"I was with Tasha." Phate closed the apartment door and made his way to the bathroom for a shower and change of clothes.

"It doesn't matter. Log your date."

“We...we had sex or made love, as they call it.”

Solgre waved a hand in the air. “Good for you.”

“I don’t want to add that part.” Phate thrust his hand through his hair. “Adding that doesn’t seem...appropriate. I don’t want anyone to analyze that. It was...personal.”

Kien turned over, sending the metal legs creaking under his weight. “I logged the sex I had. I even made sure to add that I didn’t make my penis vibrate because the males here don’t have that ability.”

Phate shook his head. The idea didn’t sit right with him.

“We aren’t going to read your logs, Phate,” Solgre grumbled. “It’s for research purposes only and part of our mission. You are a scientist first and foremost or have you forgotten that?”

“I haven’t.”

Chapter Twelve

Nisha juggled three grocery bags in her hands as she accepted a fourth from Tasha so she could unlock her apartment door.

“So, how is this new relationship of yours going to work out if you keep up these long work hours?” Nisha asked.

Tasha finally got the key in the door. While also trying to juggle her own bags, she pushed the door open. “I’m hoping he’ll understand. He didn’t seem to mind when I told him that I would be home late tonight.”

It had been two days since they’d made love and their relationship had gone from acquaintances to...to what exactly? Boyfriend and girlfriend? Lovers? Acquaintances with benefits?

Hm. She would need to figure that out.

It was too soon to rush into anything, and he didn’t seem overly concerned about labels either. The attraction between them was strong and the sex had only solidified those feelings.

Work tonight had lasted longer than she expected, but she’d promised him a home cooked meal since he’d mentioned he hadn’t had one in years. Which confused her.

Years?

Maybe he’d meant months. His English wasn’t the best and she could tell he still struggled with the meaning of some of the words.

“He’s understanding. I’m going to cook a late dinner for us tonight.” She held the door open with her back and moved out of the way so Nisha could pass. “Tomorrow is my off day. I figured we could go somewhere nice.”

As Nisha moved to enter through the doorway the elevator chimed its arrival to the floor, and she glanced back. “What about that new Italian place in Rockford—” Nisha’s jaw dropped on the last word.

Tasha propped the door open with a foot, waiting for an unmoving Nisha. “What’s wrong?”

Nisha didn’t answer but squinted as she glared down the hall. “Is this motherfucker really coming back from where I think he’s come back from?”

“Who?” Tasha took a step sideways to peer down the hallway. Her heart skipped a beat as her gaze landed on Phate. The hallway looked too small for his large frame. Anyone passing him would need to press against the wall to get by.

His pants were tight around flexing muscles which were visible with every step he took. The bulge at the apex of his thighs made a delicious tingle slide down her spine as she remembered exactly how big and powerful that bulge could get and how he could make her scream out in ecstasy.

His shirt was unbuttoned down to his chest exposing sparse hair there. His shirt was also fitting, and the dark plum color matched his skin tone perfectly.

Tasha took a gulping breath. Phate was...perfection. That predatory walk, his intense stare, that commanding presence. Wow. And he was hers.

Nisha used an elbow to try to push her back over the threshold. “Get inside.”

Tasha countered Nisha’s pushing by digging her heels in. “What? Why?”

“Tasha.”

The pleading look in Nisha’s eyes gave Tasha pause. “I don’t understand.”

Nisha took a deep breath and briefly closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were full of rage. She swung her gaze back toward Phate and narrowed them. “Are you serious right now?”

The skin between Phate’s eyes wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean? I’m always serious.”

“It’s a language barrier,” Tasha tried to explain for him.

“Stop, Tasha,” Nisha said without taking her eyes off Phate. “Don’t make excuses for him.”

“I don’t need to make excuses for him.” Now it was Tasha’s turn to be confused. Tasha glanced at Phate. “Why does she think I need to make excuses for you?”

Nisha let out a deep breath. “Look at the way he’s dressed, Tash.”

A discomfoting feeling grew in the pit of her stomach as her eyes roamed up and down his body. Her heart wouldn’t let her accept the answer her mind screamed at her.

The world seemed to stop spinning. The walls of the hallway closed in, becoming too small for the three bodies occupying it. Noise, so much noise filled her brain. It felt as though cracks were snaking down the surface of her chest. “You were on a date.”

Guilt flashed across his eyes. “I was.”

Two little words. That’s all it took to make her knees go weak. Two little words felt like a knife in her gut. Two little words had her mind reeling.

Two.

Little.

Words.

The apartment door next to hers opened and Solgre popped his head out. “What’s going on out here?”

Nisha inclined her head toward Phate. “Your boy here is coming back from a date.”

“Yes, as he was supposed to,” Solgre stated simply.

“I guess there’s no decorum where you guys are from?” Nisha snarled.

Tasha wanted to tell her to keep her voice down and not cause attention to an already embarrassing situation, but she couldn’t open her mouth. Her heart was lodged in her throat, and she could barely breathe.

“What are you talking about?” Solgre asked.

Nisha let out a breath and rolled her eyes, refocusing her attention on Phate who took a step back from her glare.

“So, is this how you operate? You fuck my friend, then go out on dates and come waltzing back here in front of her like that’s okay?”

Heat crept over Tasha as embarrassment took hold. “There’s really nothing going on between us,” Tasha whispered. They’d had sex. That’s it, she silently reminded herself.

“We were going to have dinner tonight,” Phate said.

Nisha stabbed a finger at him. “Dinner? After your *other* date?”

Phate nodded and glanced toward Tasha. She wanted to shrink away from all the crazy.

“Phate needs to date different women. I gave him permission to see Tasha after his date.” Solgre glanced toward Phate. “This is why I told you not to get attached to any of the women here. Problems will only arise. This experiment is becoming complicated.”

“*Experiment?*” both Nisha and Tasha spurted at the same time.

“We’re dating different women here so we can tell our people how it is,” Phate said.

Tasha’s stomach twisted in an uncomfortable knot. Her vision slowly dimmed as she asked, “Was I an experiment to you, Phate?”

He didn’t answer.

If a pit opened in front of her, she would gladly jump into it, headfirst, if it meant a chance of escaping the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to her. She’d taken a one-night stand and made up this feeling, this relationship this...everything.

Don't. Do it. She swallowed. She needed to know. She watched Phate through watery eyes. "Was sex with me an experiment too?"

Solgre scoffed. "Of course, it was. We'll need to know how compatible sexually we are so we can provide the data needed to make a conclusion if our...people are compatible or not."

The bags dropped from Nisha's hand and before Tasha could blink, Nisha's fist connected with Phate's jaw. Phate's head snapped back but he didn't stumble. He leveled cool eyes on Nisha.

Tasha threw her bags into her apartment and grabbed Nisha by the arm to pull her inside. She would retrieve the other bags later. For now, she needed to get her friend inside and get away from Phate. There were too many thoughts and too much pain for her to process right now.

....

AGENT MARGIE SANTANA'S ears perked up.

"We're dating different women here so we can tell our people how it is."

That wasn't something said every day. Even if the targets were from a different country, that statement alone was odd. Could be a language barrier or something else...

And also, fuck Phate. She had been rooting for them as a couple.

Sorta.

She'd been listening in that night when their relationship had taken a physical turn. But she wasn't a creep or anything. She'd only listened to the kissing part. When the moaning began, she'd done the right thing, kept the tape recorder going and went to take a shower. A long and cold shower.

This was better than a soap opera.

Chapter Thirteen

““ A nd the plan is...” Nisha’s voice trailed off.

Phate pressed his ear closer to the wall separating his apartment from Tasha’s. Forced to resort to eavesdropping, he should’ve been embarrassed, but he wasn’t. He had to know when Tasha left her apartment.

He wanted, no needed, to explain to her but so far, every time she’d left, she ignored any attempt he made to apologize and ask for forgiveness. He followed her to her car each morning she went to work and waited at the door each night she returned.

Nothing he did made her listen to him. She’d never glanced his way. He talked, trying to give the best explanation he could but her expression remained without a hint of emotion to reveal how she felt.

He wasn’t sure how much more he could take. She hadn’t acknowledged his presence in three days and his soul felt as if it was slowly withering.

“Unball your fist,” Kien mumbled. “We both know putting your hand through the wall isn’t the answer.”

Phate frowned and noticed he’d clenched his hand in reaction to the thought of losing Tasha. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

“Because it’s the same thing I want to do,” Kien replied with a huff. He heaved himself from his chair and made his way to press his ear against the same wall as Phate. “I can’t believe the things they’re saying about us.”

“I can’t believe I fell for a fuck boy,” Tasha was saying.

Phate frowned. “What’s a fuck boy? Have you heard that saying before?”

Kien nodded. “I’ve been called that several times by the human females. I think it’s a good thing.”

Phate frowned. “It doesn’t sound like it’s a good thing.”

“Fuck boy and booty calls are good things to be,” Kien said.

“What’s a booty call?”

“It means you’re available for sex.”

“I want to be a booty call for Tasha.”

“Nisha probably wishes I would be a booty call for her.”

“That’s okay.” Nisha said in muffled tones. “You got some much-needed pipe cleaning and now that’s over. You can move on and leave him to the streets. Right where I left Kien.”

“She did not leave me to the streets,” Kien ground out. “She left me in the hallway.”

“For Ancient’s sake!” Solgre yelled. “You two are acting like children who realized the opposite sex for the very first time! Can you stop whining and complaining just for this evening so I can have some peace and quiet to work?!”

The tone of Solgre’s voice had both Phate and Kien pushing from the wall and standing at attention.

Solgre finally glanced up from the multitude of parts spread on the table in front of him. His red rimmed eyes bored into Phate and Kien. He looked worse than he had before. His irises were darker than normal, and the whites of his eyes had turned light pink.

Phate homed in on Solgre’s shoulders, and for the first time, noticed his shoulder bones poking out from his shirt.

“Solgre?” Phate called, taking a step forward.

Solgre shook his head and his lip curled in disgust. He continued talking in a rapid distracted fashion, “This experiment has been a bad idea. Both of you have gone crazy. Human women are obviously flawed with too many emotions, and they’ve somehow transferred those emotions onto you both.”

“Fine. We’ll stop talking about the females if you start talking about what’s going on with you,” Phate said.

Solgre pushed his fingers through his disheveled hair. Phate was horrified to witness strands caught between his fingers. Solgre glanced down and promptly wiped his hand on his leg. Hair fell to the floor. The realization of what was happening to his Captain finally hit Phate like an asteroid to the head. “Solgre, I know what’s wrong with you.”

Solgre waved his hand in the air, dismissing Phate’s concern. “Never mind. Go back to obsessing over the females. At least then you’ll ignore me.”

Phate couldn’t ignore what was happening in front of him any longer. “You’ve got the ventenax disease.”

Kien pushed away from the wall. “He’s got *what?!?*”

Phate held his breath, waiting for Solgre to correct him. Solgre’s lips pursed and Phate’s heart sank. Maybe the reason he’d ignored all the signs was because he didn’t want it to be true.

“That’s not possible!” Kien asked in disbelief. His gaze jumped from Solgre to Phate then back to Solgre again. “Tell him he’s wrong, Solgre.”

“It’s in the beginning stages,” Phate added. “The coloring in the eyes, the loss of weight, irritability and inability to sleep. Those are all initial signs of the disease.”

Kien’s gaze still bounced between the two men. “Ventenax is curable. There’re hardly any cases of progression. It’s treatable before it gets to this state or the point of death.”

“The cases where death has occurred happened when the victims had been in deep space exploration without a working replicator,” Phate replied, eyes still on Solgre. “That hasn’t happened in a very long time.”

Kien’s mouth dropped open. “You’ve been getting the treatments and didn’t tell us.”

Solgre laughed and pushed his chair back. “There wasn’t a reason to tell either of you or cause alarm. Like you said, it was treatable. It runs in my family. As long as I took the medicine and received regular check-ups from the onboard AI, there wasn’t a need to worry.”

“But then we crash landed on Earth and had to leave the replicator behind,” Phate stated. He was partially mad at himself for this situation.

Solgre nodded tightly. “I thought I could program the portable replicator to meet the same specifications to make the medicine, but I can’t. If I had the formula downloaded from the ship’s main replicator, then maybe...”

“Phate and I will take the portable replicator, return to the ship and download the medicine specification. Problem solved,” Kien said.

Solgre shook his head. It seemed too big for his neck. “No. It’s too dangerous to return.”

“We don’t have a choice. We can’t allow the disease to continue its course. You’ll die,” Phate said.

“As you’ve observed, the symptoms have just started. I still have some time.”

“And you’ll let us know?” Kien asked.

Solgre didn’t answer Kien. He put his head down and went to work on the portable replicator again.

Chapter Fourteen

The handheld communicator device crackled. Phate rolled over from his spot on the pull-out couch and dragged open his heavy eyelids. The incoming yellow light indicated a message was waiting.

Message?

Phate's groggy brain couldn't quite process anything through the sleep haze. When the pieces finally clicked together, he bolted upright with a gasp.

"What? What's going on?" Kien quickly awakened. The mattress they shared dipped as he sat up as well. "What happened? Where's Solgre?"

Phate didn't glance toward the only bedroom in the small living space. The light snoring coming from the other room was rhythmic and deep. Solgre was finally getting some much-needed rest.

One of the side effects of the disease was a disruption in the sleep/wake cycle. Solgre staying up all hours of the night should've been a dead giveaway he was ill, but Phate had assumed it was frustration for being stranded on Earth and determination to get home.

"He's still sleeping," Phate replied.

"That's a good thing, right?" Kien whispered. "This is the first time in weeks he's been sleep for longer than two hours at a time."

Phate grabbed the communicator off the side table. "It is. And I hate to do this, but we'll need to wake him."

Phate held up the communicator before Kien could ask why. Kien's eyes went to the device in Phate's hand and widened when he saw the blinking yellow light.

"A rescue ship is in range to send us an incoming message," Phate said with a broad grin.

••••

A DISTINCT THUMPING sound came from her living room.

Tasha opened her eyes. She hadn't really been asleep. She'd been almost sleep, but thoughts of Phate kept popping into her head. She was exhausted.

Her embarrassment wouldn't let her interact with her neighbors just yet—and possibly never again. And her mind wouldn't stop replaying what had happened in the middle of her hallway repeatedly and the pain each time was like it had just happened.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

She frowned and rolled over to glance at the clock on her nightstand. Three twenty-one in the morning.

Who could be knocking on her door this late?

Nisha had crashed on her couch so it couldn't be her. Besides, Nisha had a key to the apartment. If she'd wanted to come in, she would do so with ease and would've been quiet about it.

Tasha sniffed at the air. No sign of smoke or a fire. That would be a reason for a neighbor to be knocking on her door at this hour.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The knocking also wasn't urgent or hard, indicating an emergency. She could ignore it, or she could answer it. But since she wasn't getting much sleep anyway, she got up and grabbed the robe hanging from the back of her door.

She knew the route to her front door like the back of her hand and walked through her apartment with ease without turning on a light and waking Nisha.

As soon as she opened the door, she realized she hadn't looked through the peep hole first. A no-no for a single woman living alone. "Well, this is how I get murdered tonight," she grumbled as the door swung open.

Standing on the other side was a shirtless and very distraught looking Phate. His blond hair curled in every direction. His pillowcase had made a crease on the side of his

cheek. Without a shirt, his chest and stomach muscles were on full display and her body reacted accordingly.

Her nipples hardened. Tingling erupted at the apex of her thighs as her gaze dipped to the tight cotton briefs hugging his hips. Pleasure fired up and down her spine as her eyes locked on the bulge that outlined a very impressive cock laying against his powerful thigh.

“Tasha.”

Tasha shook her head. She wasn't supposed to still have this reaction toward him. She should've hated the sight of him. But here she was, about to melt into a pool of goo because the man had a body like a Greek God. “What?” Was all she trusted herself to say.

“I received a message from home.”

She waited for him to say more. When he didn't, she waved a hand for him to continue.

“It's...it's...” Phate cursed under his breath and shifted on his feet. “Complicated.”

Tasha raised her eyebrows and shook her head. “Complicated is what you change your Facebook profile to. It's not the reason you use for knocking on your neighbor's door in the middle of the night.”

She took a step back to close the door. Phate smacked a palm against the frame. “Wait. A rescue is on the way. We're leaving sooner than expected.”

She should've said good riddance and slammed the door. Instead, she asked, “When are you leaving?”

Phate dropped his arm to his side. “One Earth month.”

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. She should be happy he was leaving. But that wasn't the emotion cursing through her veins.

Sad.

Sad that she didn't have more time with him.

Upset.

Upset at herself for feeling sad. There were other emotions as well, but those two stood out the strongest.

Wait.

Tasha frowned. “Rescue? Earth month?”

Phate glanced toward the open door of his apartment then thrust his fingers through his curls, leaving them messier than ever.

“You’re the one that came knocking on my door in the middle of the night to tell me that you’re leaving in a month, not today. If you don’t want to tell me, fine. Don’t bother me.” She started to close the door again, but he stiffened the arm still stretched between them bracing the door open with his hand.

“Like I said, it’s complicated.”

Tasha crossed her arms. “Like I said, save it for a Facebook post. So, you’re getting rescued or whatever. You’re leaving. We didn’t share anything special. You’ve made certain of that. Why tell me this?”

Despite her best efforts, her voice cracked toward the end.

“Because we *did* share something special. I know and I think you do too.” Tasha opened her mouth to tell him what she thought about their “special moment”, but he silenced her with a hand. “It was special, Tasha. No matter what happened afterward. The moment itself was special. I, how do you say? Fucked it up. I shouldn’t have gone out with anyone after being with you. I should’ve defied orders.”

“Rescue? An Earth month? And now following orders?” Tasha blew out a heavy breath. “Phate, if you don’t tell me what’s going on right now, I’m shutting this door and putting my back into it. I’m exhausted and I don’t have the energy to deal with you standing on my doorstep talking in code. Either shit or get off the pot.”

He frowned, glancing away then back at her. “I don’t understand what that means. Why do you want me to have a bowel movement?”

Tasha sucked her teeth. “It’s a saying. It means to hurry up or move on. You’ve got two seconds to decide if you want to tell me what’s going on or not.”

Phate glanced toward his apartment once again. Her frustration overruled her need to figure out what his issue was. She moved to shut the door and made good on her promise by leaning her weight against the door.

“I’m not from here,” he said as he wedged a knee between the shrinking gap.

“I know that already. The accents are a dead giveaway.” She grunted as she dug her feet into the carpet, putting more strength into her efforts.

“Ouch!” Phate exclaimed as the heavy wood door slammed on the side of his knee. “I mean, I’m not from Earth. I’m from a different planet.”

Tasha paused. “A different planet? What does that even mean?”

“It means Earth isn’t my home.”

Tasha rolled to press her back against the door and laughed. “If you don’t want to keep in touch after you move out, just say it. Don’t go making up a crazy ass story.”

“I’m not making it up. We crashed here over four months ago.”

Tasha, still pressed on the door, studied Phate. He didn’t appear to have a few screws missing. In fact, he looked very sincere. He also didn’t look like he was joking. There wasn’t a hint of a smile on his face.

She narrowed her eyes on him. “What angle are you getting at? I wasn’t going to try to keep in touch with you after you left. You made it quite apparent that us...we...we’re nothing. Why come here and lie to me? What are you gaining from this, Phate?”

He shrugged massive shoulders. “What I hope to gain? I want to right the wrong I caused.”

Her hands were balled into fists. She wanted to pop him in his face. “By giving me some cockamamie lie?!”

He raised his hands into a pleading motion. “Tasha, it’s not a lie. If you stop trying to close the door, I’ll give you the full truth.”

Tasha thought about putting her back into it and slamming the door, his knee be damned. But in the end, she relented, wanting to hear what he had to say instead. She opened the door but blocked entry into her apartment. With arms crossed over her chest, she said, “Spill it.”

Phate breathed a sigh of relief. “Some time ago, we... meaning some watchers on our home planet, received a transmission from Earth. It was unlike anything that anyone living had ever received before. There was a description of what humans looked like, where your planet was located in the galaxy and about basic life here on Earth. It was decided that we needed to investigate.

“Although we have allies on different planets, we, like Earth, live in a secluded part of the galaxy. Actually, we thought we were the farthest planet in this part of the galaxy. The transmission was a big discovery. Aside from being the only intelligent species for lightyears in any direction, we also don’t have any compatible species near us. That all changed after we received your transmission.

“We could now have close neighbors to share technology, become allies and possibly intermingle with. But first we needed to send a recognizance mission to get updated information on this new species.”

Tasha tried to wrap her head around what Phate was saying but none of it made a lick of sense. “Wait. So, you’re telling me you’re from another planet and you’re here because of some transmission?”

Phate nodded. “We weren’t supposed to come down here. We should’ve been in our spaceship, cloaked in space, gathering information. If your sun’s solar flare hadn’t happened, which caused our systems to malfunction, we would’ve still been up there.”

“Well, actually.” Kien suddenly stepped into the hallway and Tasha jumped. “We wouldn’t still be here. We would’ve gotten the information a long time ago, downloaded it to the home base and been on Pesna-9 having our much-needed vacation.”

Tasha placed a hand on her head and shook it. “You can’t possibly be in on this stupid lie too.”

“Yes!” Solgre stepped out next. “This is all a lie.” Then he turned to Phate and pulled him close. “What are you doing?” he whispered urgently.

Phate kept his gaze on her. “I’m telling Tasha how I feel about her.”

Solgre *humphed*. “It looks like you’re telling her everything *but* how you feel about her.”

“I was getting to that part,” Phate grumbled.

Solgre shook his head. “How you feel doesn’t matter. We’ll be leaving this place soon, we’ll give the home world the information we’ve gathered, and we can leave this behind us.”

The pieces were starting to fall in place now. Their accents, their speech patterns, the serial dating for “research”, how they didn’t quite understand human customs, and their fashion sense. “This is true?” Tasha asked, stunned.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Phate said.

Tasha raised her chin. “I need some proof.”

Phate didn’t hesitate to grab something from Solgre’s hand, ignoring Solgre when he bit out Phate’s name. “This is proof,” he said holding up what looked like a nondescript item that was the size of a remote control but bulkier.

Tasha raised her eyebrows. “And what exactly is that?”

Phate turned a knob and pressed a few buttons then handed it to her. Tasha accepted the item and glanced at the screen. It was full of green numbers, or were they words or pictures? She didn’t know what any of it meant.

“That’s the message from the rescue ship,” Phate said.

“I can’t read your language.”

Phate leaned over and pressed a series of other buttons. A planet showed, she recognized it as Earth. Then Phate swiped left and she saw the other planets in the solar system and after Pluto, Phate kept swiping and swiping past other planets, so many planets.

“Wh-what is this?”

“These are all the planets in this sector.” Then he finally stopped at a planet that looked almost like Earth. “This is Thelli. Our planet.”

“Where you’re from?”

“Correct.”

Instead of having to be embarrassed that Nisha, Kien and Solgre knew she’d been played, she was even more embarrassed an entire, fucking, alien planet would know.

Her skin prickled with heat. Anger she’d never felt before raged within her chest. “This. Us. Our night together. It was part of an experiment and now you’re going to tell your people about how easy it was to fuck a stupid human woman.”

She gripped her doorframe ready to slam it in their faces.

“That’s not true!” Phate protested.

“It really is,” Kien added dryly.

“They’ll want that information,” Solgre said with a nod.

“Oh my God!” Tasha screamed, stepping back to give herself room to slam the door.

Phate held his hands to his friends. “Tasha, you weren’t a part of some experiment. Dating the other women was, but not you. Never you. What I feel for you is real. Being with you was real. It wasn’t a game or a lie.”

She glared at him through the slits of her eyes that were now watering. “That doesn’t matter, Phate. You’re some alien and you’ll be leaving.”

Phate took a step toward her and surprisingly she didn't step back. Her pulse pounded and not because he professed to being an alien another world. "That's true. I don't want to spend what little time I have left here apart from you. I want to experience this world and all it has to offer with you by my side."

"We have a mission, Phate," Solgre said, pointing a finger in his direction. "You'll spend the rest of your time here seeing to that and collecting data for the others."

Phate turned toward Solgre and squared his shoulders. "I quit."

Solgre sputtered. "Y-you can't quit!"

Phate raised a defiant chin. "I can and I did."

"Wait was that an option?" Kien asked. "Because if it is, I want to quit too. I want to travel and see this world before we leave. I'm tired of the endless dates."

"It looks like you were having fun from where I'm sitting!" Nisha yelled from inside the apartment.

"Great Ancients!" Solgre said, rounding on Phate. "How many people are you planning on telling? Is the goal to have us sliced up on television for these humans' viewing pleasure?"

"If only," Nisha grumbled as she made her way to stand next to Tasha.

Nisha was dressed in her oversized pajamas and had a brightly colored bonnet protecting her hair.

Solgre pointed at them both. "You must keep this a secret. Our lives are in jeopardy."

Nisha raised her chin in the air. "I can't stand Kien but that doesn't mean I want to be watching his autopsy on the dark web."

"How gracious of you," Kien grumbled.

Tasha looped her arm with Nisha's. "She'll keep quiet about this. We both will."

Nisha *humphed*.

“Tasha, I don’t know what the future holds for me or for us, but these past few days have been a living nightmare, knowing I hurt you and I broke your trust. If you’ll let me, I’ll spend my remaining days on Earth making it up to you.”

This was going to hurt. It surely was. But it would be good.

“Okay.”

••••

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU can’t fix it remotely?” Agent Margie Santana said into her satellite cellphone. She’d been on the phone with IT for almost an hour trying to get some help in fixing the listening device. Nothing they’d suggested worked.

“You’ll have to fix it yourself,” the IT lady said.

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Margie pinched the bridge of her nose. Her eyes hurt. Her head hurt. Everything hurt.

“Do you still have the manual provided with it?”

Margie thought about it. She remembered the tattered directions in the case. “Yes.”

“There you go!”

Margie erupted from her seat at the kitchen table. “What do you mean? I don’t know how to fix this thing. I’ll need tools and...and...other stuff.”

“I guess you better head on over to the Walmart.”

Margie. Seethed.

She would be spending her evening fixing outdated equipment. Hopefully, she wasn’t missing anything important going on downstairs.

Chapter Fifteen

Margie sat at her kitchen table, well, the table that'd come with the furnished apartment she rented for the unforeseeable future. The morning was peaceful. The only noises came from the vent. A soft whirring from the heating unit and the occasional car horn from an irate early morning commuter.

The heat was cranked high, so she could lounge around the one-bedroom apartment in a t-shirt and short pajama set. One leg was curled under her butt. The oversized fluffy socks protected her foot against the unforgiving wood of the tacky dining chair. She had no say in the apartment or the furnishings inside. Everything had been handled by Homeland Security, or rather the secret government Agency that employed her.

As the Minnesota morning sun filtered through the off-white blinds, she blew on her morning coffee and adjusted the volume on her listening device. The black box's speakers crackled, the sound grated on her ears. Margie yawned and set the coffee cup down, deciding to give it a few more minutes to cool before attempting a sip.

Grogginess pulled at her. She hated sleeping in new places and since she'd only been in town a few short weeks, she considered Point Breeze still new to her. Since joining the Agency, she'd spent more times in the field than at her high-rise apartment in Washington, D.C.

There were voices under the speaker's loud crackling. She didn't want to miss the conversation discussed in the apartment below hers. She'd already lost yesterday because the antiquated government device had been on the fritz all day. She'd spent hours on the phone with technical support, who in the end, couldn't help her. By five in the morning, and after a late-night visit to the local superstore for tools, she'd finally fixed it herself.

Frustrated with the device, the missed day and the early morning frost on her window (side note: she would never move to Minnesota), Margie slapped the side of the device so

hard her palm stung. The crackling finally stopped and the distinctive voices of the occupants in the apartment below hers came through once again.

She'd grown to recognize those voices. The women, Nisha and Tasha, seemed nice and fun. They were the type of women she would've befriended in different circumstances. Since surveilling them, she'd often caught herself talking out loud in response to their conversations.

Tasha, the woman who actually lived in the apartment, owned an upscale boutique downtown on Main Street. Margie had gone inside when she'd known Tasha wasn't working to look around.

Nisha didn't live in the building but was a staple at Tasha's house. With her own key, she came and went as she pleased. A quick search through an official government database, available at Margie's disposal, showed that Nisha worked as an executive secretary at her adoptive father's law firm.

Her father, now deceased, had been one of those television lawyers specializing in medical malpractice. With offices set up all over the country, he'd been mega-rich. According to news outlets, his death, two years ago, had been unexpected. Fortunately, for Nisha and her adoptive mother, he'd left an ironclad will and a lot of money.

Why Nisha still worked was a mystery to Margie. If her dad had left her enough money to ensure she'd never had to work again, she wouldn't. But Margie didn't know her father and she'd had to scrape and scratch to pull herself out of poverty and make something of herself.

Once the static finally ceased, she could hear the conversation easily. Tasha and Nisha chatted with Phate, one of Margie's targets. Margie instantly recognized the cadence of his voice. His accent clearly wasn't American but she had no idea of the origin. She'd run his voice through the database, and came up empty. The closest accent she could find that matched his accent was Iranian.

Hm, had Tasha and Phate made up? When had this happened? Margie tilted her head in thought. Yesterday, while

her listening device was down?

Crap. She'd missed his groveling.

Before her listening device had stopped working, Tasha and Phate had been on the outs. They'd gone on a date, had sex—which Margie wasn't happy to admit had been caught on her tape recorder—then Phate had gone on another date, with someone else. There'd been a big argument right in the middle of the downstairs hallway. It had been the most excitement Margie had experienced since moving to this slow town. If she'd had popcorn, she would've been popping it. That had been some good drama.

Margie pushed the button on the tape recorder and nudged it closer to the listening device. She'd been recording their conversations since moving in and so far, she had hours and hours of their chattering. She'd given up trying to listen to her three targets separately. Whenever the men were alone, they talked in that strange language of theirs. But even so, she had hours of them talking as well. When the guys back at the Agency got a hold of the tapes, she was sure they would be giddy trying to learn their language.

Mostly, everything she found out about the men, was from Tasha and Nisha. So far, nothing of importance was learned. Tasha liked Phate but he'd done her wrong. Nisha liked Kien but their date had been a dud. The only target she had virtually no information on yet was Solgre.

Brrriiiiing.

Margie picked up her government issued satellite cellphone. Displayed across the front of the bulky phone was *Team Leader*. She accepted the call.

“Agent Santana speaking.”

“Agent. Advise on our alien situation.” The voice on the other end was curt and gruff. Her Team Leader was a man of few words.

She'd been assigned to his team since joining the Agency. All she knew of him was that he was a Caucasian man in his late sixties. Medium height and build. His gray hair was cut

low and there was bald spot in the middle of his head. His small eyes made his nose seem bulbous, but it was probably of normal size. His lips were thin and always seemed cracked. When he spoke, spit gathered at the corners of them. His face was marred with deep wrinkles. She'd never seen him in anything other than a suit, even in summer months.

Her Team Leader had a presence about him that screamed, "I know how to make you disappear."

She feared him. And she also wanted to be him when she grew up.

"Nothing to report of importance yet. Just observing and gathering evidence on the target's habits."

"And?"

"They have a very active dating life."

"*Hm.*"

"*Hm, indeed.*"

"Are you certain these three are our targets? Why would an alien come to Earth to...date?"

Margie paused, but only for a few seconds to think about her answer. The surveillance footage from the area where the unidentified foreign object would have landed had shown these three men bumbling their way through town. Which had definitely made them stand out, and their actions had also given the local townspeople something to talk about. Through closed caption television footage, she'd been able to follow the trio to Point Breeze. She was sure these were the aliens the government sought. Her gut told her so.

Her gut also told her there also might be another probable cause for three unknowns to end up in a small Minnesota town—sightseeing, touring America, visiting family, etc. All of which she needed to investigate first. Because if she were to sound the whistle before a full investigation and these three *weren't* the targets, she could kiss any promotion in the foreseeable future goodbye. She'd made that mistake before and a repeat of it would be career ending for her.

“I’m not,” she finally said on an exhale. She hated to admit that, but she would rather be definitive in her answer than to make another mistake. “My targets might be illegal aliens trying to navigate middle America. I’ll continue to monitor the situation.”

“Very well, then. Keep me updated.”

Before he could hang up, she said, “Have any of the other agents made confirmation?”

She wasn’t the only agent on the ground scouring surveillance footage and chatter for alien presence.

“No.”

Her heart thrummed knowing that information. These three might be the aliens and if they were, they were hers to bring in. *Get the information. Secure the targets.* “Understood.”

Her Team Leader disconnected the line.

••••

TASHA LAY SPRAWLED on her couch. Phate draped comfortably between her legs with head resting on her chest. He was heavy, almost crushing her, but she wouldn’t move him for the world. After his admission the night before, they’d spent the night in her bed, not making love, but just holding each other. He told her about space travel, his planet, Thelli, and about the different species he’d encountered throughout the galaxy.

By the time the sun had come up, her mind was blown. There were honest to goodness aliens out there and she was running her fingers through his hair as they watched television together. It was odd to think with the things he’d seen in the universe, that reality tv was a new experience for him.

“I don’t understand why she’s famous,” Phate said.

“She’s famous because her famous ex-boyfriend released a sex tape. Then, for some strange reason, that catapulted her into a fashion icon.” Tasha lifted her shoulder. “Honestly, none of us really knows why she’s famous.”

“And like a trillionaire,” Nisha said from her spot curled on the lounge chair. Nisha pointed a spoon topped off with chocolate chip mint ice cream at the screen. “I think she must’ve sold her soul to the devil or something.”

Tasha tilted her head to the side in thought. “Wait. Since aliens exist—”

“A lot of them according to this guy,” Nisha interrupted with a head tip toward Phate.

“Then, is there such a thing as heaven and hell or an afterlife?” Tasha continued.

Phate stretched and held Tasha’s waist tighter. “A lot of species believes in an afterlife where their soul goes to either repent for wrongs they’ve done in this life or rest in paradise for the good they’ve done.”

“And yours?” Tasha asked.

“We don’t believe in an afterlife. We’re a species of scientists and thinkers. We believe that when we die, that’s it. There’s no other place.”

“Lights out,” Nisha added.

Phate pulled his eyebrows together. “What do lights have to do with anything?”

Nisha shook her head. “I mean, done. Like, dead, no afterlife, no nothing.”

“Ah, correct,” Phate confirmed.

The front door opened so hard it slammed against the opposite wall and sent one of the pictures of her family crashing to the floor. Tasha, Phate and Nisha startled as they turned toward the noise.

Solgre crossed over the threshold with the same device Phate had shown her last night clutched in his hand. His gaze instantly found Phate. “We’ve got an issue.”

Kien sauntered in behind Solgre. His gaze searched the small area until he spotted Nisha. Tasha noticed while they both had eyes only for the other, neither exchanged a greeting.

Nisha then narrowed her gaze on Kien before making a show of rolling them, then turning away from him. For Kien's part, he smirked.

Phate sat up, repositioning himself and Tasha. Her legs were now draped across his lap. "What's the issue? Is the rescue team going to take longer to reach us?"

"Although I think you would like that, no," Solgre said. He dropped the device on the coffee table. It clanged and bounced before finally settling.

"The thing from yesterday. What exactly does it do besides show text messages and planet alignments?" Tasha asked Phate.

Phate rubbed her shins and knees absentmindedly. "It's our hand-held communication device. If we were closer to home, we would be able to communicate with our world."

"Up until last night, it was useless on this planet," Kien chimed in.

"Something in this atmosphere probably prevented it from working properly," Solgre said.

"If it was still down, you wouldn't have received information about the rescue?" Tasha asked.

Phate nodded.

Tasha glanced up at Solgre. "I don't understand the issue. It works now and your rescue is coming."

"While playing with the frequencies this morning, to see if I could pick up on anything else, I heard two people, male and female discussing us," Solgre said.

Everyone in the room stilled except for Kien and Solgre. Kien picked up the device and turned a knob. The crackle of static filled the room.

"Are you sure?" Phate asked. He reached out for the device and Kien handed it to him.

"We're sure." As Phate played with the knobs, Kien continued, "Solgre heard them first then brought it to me to

listen. They were discussing targets and aliens. I'll admit that's not really definitive of us being found out, but I didn't like the way any of it sounded."

"There was a lot of interference, as if there was a security block on the line, but the pieces I could make out weren't good." Solgre turned in a tight circle and scrubbed his hand down his face.

"On top of everything else, we now have to worry about being found out," Kien grumbled.

"Hold on," Tasha said. "The odds you picked up on some kind of government conversation talking about space aliens is small and even smaller they would be discussing you guys in particular.

"We have a lot of immigrants coming into Minnesota, and if they overstay their Visa, they're deemed as illegal aliens. ICE, a government agency, tracks them down and deports them back to their country. My guess would be that you might've overheard a conversation about that."

"Or those people might be from some government agency looking for the aliens who'd crashed landed on Earth," Nisha said. "I'm assuming you guys probably entered the atmosphere in a blaze of glory."

"Nisha!" Tasha yelled.

Nisha rolled her eyes and listed her shoulders. She was mad at Kien, but that wasn't a reason to freak out Solgre and Phate, who now were caught up in her crossfire.

Solgre turned on his heels to Kien. "We have to leave town immediately," he said with a head nod.

"Wait. Let's think about it further." Phate scooted to the end of the couch. Tasha reached to hold his hand. She knew her time with him was short. She'd been mentally preparing herself to tell him bye, but to tell it to him now? She fought against the tears threatening to overtake her eyes.

"Even if the government was looking for aliens, how would the government know you're in Point Breeze?" Tasha asked Phate. "Was the crash nearby?"

Phate squeezed her hand. “We crashed some distance away. We were only able to cloak our spaceship for a short amount of time before landing. I’m sure our ship wasn’t tracked after entering the atmosphere. Your human technology doesn’t seem that advanced.”

Tasha pinned her gaze on Solgre. “Do you know where the transmission came from? You could’ve picked it up from two towns over or Canada for that matter.”

“No.” Solgre shook his head. “But I still think we need to leave town as a precaution. Our spaceship is the safest place to go and hide out.”

Phate scrubbed a hand down his face. “There’s too much damage to the shields. The radiation wouldn’t be cleared yet. Life support systems might still be off. We can’t stay there, those are the reasons we left.”

Kien folded his arms and leaned against one of the walls. “The mechanical bots should be back online by now. With the power diverted from the life support systems, they’ll be able to fix the shields, clear the radiation and work to get the engineering systems back online.”

“I agree, but it still might not be habitable,” Phate said.

Tasha couldn’t take it anymore. They were discussing leaving when this might be some misunderstanding. She threw up her hands. Everyone turned to watch her. “Wait. Wait. Wait. This is a whole lot of discussion for what is probably information about an ICE raid.”

“Give me a sec.” Nisha picked up her phone and started tapping at the screen. “Let me check something.”

Tasha laid against Phate, not wanting this to be the last time she touched him.

“Major ICE raids happen a few times a year and according to the first article pulled up from an internet search, we’re due for another one,” Nisha said.

Tasha let out a relieved breath and turned toward Solgre. “See? You’ve probably hacked into an illegal alien raid.”

Solgre rubbed his chin and stared off in deep concentration.

Please, please let him say they'll stay. Please.

"I agree with Tasha," Phate said. "The odds of them finding us aren't high. My vote is to stay here and await rescue."

"I agree, as well," Kien said.

"Fine," Solgre grumbled.

Tasha wanted to jump for joy. She settled for laying her head against Phate.

"I'll continue to monitor," Solgre said. "But if I hear anything else about aliens, we're packing up and leaving immediately and it won't be up for discussion, it will be an order."

"Now, that's settled," Kien said, turning toward Solgre. "We still have the matter of Solgre's declining health to discuss."

"What?!" Solgre reared back. He stood abruptly and snatched their device from the table. "We are *not* discussing my health."

Kien blocked his path to the front door and palmed Solgre's shoulder "Solgre, one of us needs to take the portable replicator back to *Halo One* and add the medicine compound necessary to slow your progression."

"Don't worry about me," Solgre said through gritted teeth. "The rescue is coming."

"And we need you *alive* when they arrive," Phate said.

"He's sick?" Tasha asked Phate.

She'd be the first to admit, she didn't see Solgre often, maybe four or five times since they'd moved in. By his gaunt appearance and strange tint to his skin, she could guess he was sick but without seeing him well, she didn't have an idea of what he should appear. If he used to be the same size as Kien and Phate, he was now half the man they are.

“He’s got a disease common for our people,” Phate said. “It’s not contagious, but it’s deadly if left untreated. With a proper diet and the right medicine, it’s a non-issue. When we crashed, we had to leave our ship’s main replicator behind and were only able to bring the portable replicator with us.”

“The portable replicator doesn’t have my medicine compound pre-programed in it. I’ve been trying to do it manually, but the formulations are off,” Solgre grumbled.

“One of us will need to take the portable replicator to the ship, download the correct formulation and bring it back,” Kien said.

Solgre shook his head. “No. Splitting up is too dangerous. We stick together.”

“But we need your medicine,” Kien pointed out.

Solgre was quiet, then, “Two of you should go.”

“And leave you here alone?” Kien asked, turning a hard frown on Solgre. “No.”

“He means two people should go,” Phate said. “As a couple. It would look inconspicuous. Like a lover’s vacation. That shouldn’t raise any red flags *if* we were being watched.”

They were all silent as they pondered the idea.

“Do you feel like taking a road trip?” Phate asked, turning to Tasha.

She would love to show him around. Just seeing a little slice of the world through his eyes made her giddy. She could step away for a few days. Wilma would be able to handle things until she returned.

“How far is the ship?”

“Driving? Probably four hours,” Phate said.

Tasha nodded thoughtfully. “A day, maybe two-day trip? I can do that.”

“Although you all have easily written off the communication I overheard, I don’t have the luxury of not being cautious,” Solgre said.

“The odds—”

“I know the odds,” Solgre said, cutting off Tasha. “I’ll only agree to this if precautions are taken. You won’t take a direct route. In fact, take as long as possible.”

Kien stared down at Solgre. “You don’t have that type of time.”

“How much longer do you think you have until the disease progresses to the last stage,” Phate asked Solgre.

Solgre closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes, making a point to catch Kien and Phate’s gaze. “Three weeks.”

Kien and Phate instantly began yelling in their language. Phate was off the couch, pointed at Solgre, saying things Tasha couldn’t understand. Kien turned his back and slammed an open palm on Tasha’s wall. The picture hanging there crashed to the floor.

Phate put up his hands and took some steadying breaths. “We’ll take three days.”

Solgre lifted his chin. Despite being sick, he was still in charge. Tasha recognized defiance. “A week.”

“But—” Phate started.

“That’s a precaution I’m not bending on,” Solgre said. “You can’t lead anyone back to *Halo One*.”

Tasha’s heart dropped. Two days she could do, but a week?

“My boutique. It-it would be hard leaving that long.” She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, hating to disappoint them. “Maybe I could bring my laptop with me. It wouldn’t be the same. I would be working most of the time, getting my inventory together. I guess if Nisha helped Wilma?”

A quick glance at Nisha and Tasha knew her best friend wasn’t really taking any of this too seriously. Nisha looked like the only thing she was missing was a bowl of popcorn in her hand.

“Tasha has responsibilities. I wouldn’t want to put any more stress on her than we already have.” Solgre turned Kien’s way. “Kien, you and Nisha will go.”

“Wait just a God damn minute!” Nisha sprung from her chair. She stabbed a finger in Solgre’s direction. “This is *not* my problem. This sounds more like an alien’s people problem.”

“Nisha,” Tasha begged. “I know you can take the time off from work. Your boss is your God father. *Please.*”

Nisha shook her head vehemently. “Oh, hell no. I’m not going anywhere with him.” Then she glared at Kien. “Why are you smirking? You don’t want to spend a week alone with me either.”

Kien widened his stance, placing his hands behind his back. “I don’t have a choice. Solgre is my captain. He’s given me a direct order and I must do what he says.”

Solgre and Phate exchanged a look Tasha couldn’t quite understand.

“Yes, as his captain, he has to obey me,” Solgre added.

Nisha *humphed* and shook her head again. “Well, he’s no captain of mine, so the answer is still no. Ask one of the girls you’ve gone on a date with. I’m sure one of them would jump at the chance to be alone with you.” She pat her chest. “Not I!”

“Nisha,” Tasha said, trying to bring some reason into the conversation.

Nisha crossed her arms and leaned heavily on one leg. “Tasha.”

Tasha knew she needed to beg. “Please help them out. You know I would go if I could, but Solgre’s right. Me leaving right now would only stress me out even more than I already am. I have ordering to do and shipments coming in.”

Nisha closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. “Tasha, you know I can’t stand him.”

Kien unfolded from his military style stance and leaned a brood shoulder against the wall. “And the feeling is mutual,

but we need you to cooperate.”

Nisha let out a soft scream then buried her face in her hands. “A whole entire week? Really? Can we shorten it to like four or five days or something?”

“We can most certainly try. The quicker the better,” Kien said.

“No,” Solgre replied with that authoritative voice.

Nisha lifted her head and grumbled under her breath. “I was saving my vacation time to go to the Mikonos Islands.”

“We’re sorry for disrupting your plans. If there was another option, we would gladly investigate it, but there’s not,” Phate said.

Nisha groaned and let her head fall back to watch the ceiling. “When do we leave?”

“Today as soon as possible,” Kien replied.

Crash!

Tasha jumped and looked up, expecting the ceiling to cave in.

Everyone’s head angled up, probably expecting the same as her.

“I wonder what that’s about,” she said to herself. She didn’t know who lived in the apartment above hers and had never wondered since they’d been quiet up until now.

“By doing this you would be doing us a big favor,” Solgre told Nisha. “We’ll be indebted to you.”

Nisha straightened and stopped pouting long enough to focus on Solgre. “Are we talking about indebted money wise or a favor I could call on...”

“Whatever is in our means, we’ll accommodate,” Solgre promised.

“Or you could just do it out of the goodness of your heart,” Tasha said.

Nisha waved her off. “Goodness. Heart. Whatever. Whatever. I’m slowly coming around to the idea of calling in a favor from aliens.”

“Nisha.”

“Tasha.”

Tasha sighed. “Go pack a bag, Kien. But be prepared for Nisha to call in her favor.”

“Damn skippy!”

“What will you do for a week to occupy your time now?” Phate asked Solgre.

Solgre blinked as if he hadn’t understood the question.

“Since Kien is taking the replicator back to the ship,” Phate continued. “You won’t have it to fix anymore.”

There was no mistaking the panicked look in Solgre’s eyes. He lowered his gaze to his hands. He twitched them as if already missing the tedious action he was used to doing.

“I have a puzzle you can work on,” Tasha offered. “I’m pretty sure it’s not as complicated as what you’re used to working on, but it’ll give you something to do.”

Solgre gave her a tight nod. “I would appreciate that.”

Just as Tasha handed Solgre the one-thousand-piece puzzle she had no intention of finishing they were interrupted.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The room stilled and everyone glanced to the door at the same time.

Nisha turned toward Tasha with questioning in her eyes. “Were you expecting company?”

Tasha shook her head and stood, making her way toward the door. She didn’t get many visitors who popped up without warning. The only person who did was Nisha and Phate. She went to her tippytoes to peer through the peephole. There was a woman on the opposite end, around her age.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Tasha opened the door to find an African American woman, maybe a few years older than her and Nisha standing on the other side. She was darker, with skin so vibrant and smooth that Tasha would've killed for. She had a plethora of long and thick eyelashes and equally as thick eyebrows. Her lips were full and tinged pink. Her hair was styled in microbraids that fell to the middle of her back. And on top of looking like an artesian crafted porcelain doll, the woman had the nerve to be tall, leggy and curvy.

“Hello? May I help you?” Tasha asked her.

The woman smiled and held up a plate of cookies. “Sorry to bother you. I live in the apartment directly above yours and thought I would come and say hi and apologize for the racket this morning. I was rearranging my living room furniture.”

She tilted to the side to glance around Tasha's body then her eyes opened wide. “I'm so sorry! I didn't know you had company.” She chuckled. “I hope I brought enough for everyone.”

Tasha took the plate offered and returned her smile. “Thank you for bringing them by. My name's Tasha and this is my best friend Nisha and my neighbors, Phate, Solgre and Kien.”

There was a chorus of hellos' and nice to meet you.

Margie stretched her smile and waved at them. “My name is Margie. I just moved in and I'm new to town. You own the boutique on Main Street, right?”

Tasha nodded. “Have you been in?”

“Just once, but I didn't spend the time I'd wanted to. I've been so busy unpacking and working, but I would love to stop by.”

Tasha's face brightened. “That sounds good. I would love to style you.”

“That. Sounds. Awesome.” Margie glanced down at her body. “I really need a stylist.”

“Well, you've come to the right place.” Tasha chuckled.

“Hey, do you mind if I set this down inside. I know it looks like I have muscles, but I’m weak. I haven’t been to the gym in months.”

There was a lot going on in her apartment at the moment, but what she wasn’t, was rude. So, after a brief hesitation, Tasha stepped to the side. “Yeah, sure. Come in.” She could spare fifteen minutes of niceties, then send her upstairs neighbor on her way and they could get back to discussing the travel details.

Margie’s smile stretched across her face as she breezed through the front door. “Thanks! It sure is nice to finally meet the neighbors.”

Chapter Sixteen

They were nestled comfortably in her bed, and she couldn't see herself doing anything else or wanting to be anywhere else than where she was currently. Tasha laid against Phate's chest, listening contently to the heartbeat that sounded much different than hers. Instead of a lub-dub like a human's heart, Phate's had a third sound to it.

Alien.

That thought should've had her reeling. But it didn't.

Phate's rhythmic breathing hitched, and he grumbled incoherent in his sleep then tightened an arm around her, pulling her closer against him. She smiled to herself at his possessiveness even in his sleep.

"Bad dream?" she asked softly. She didn't want to wake him if he wasn't already. But since he was already work, she used her fingernails to play in the blond, sparse, curly hair on his chest.

"I dreamt that we were on *Halo One*, on our way to a new assignment." His voice was groggy and deep and filled with sleep.

Tasha didn't want to think about Phate on his spaceship, going about his life while she was stuck on Earth pining for him, but the thought wouldn't leave her head. And just like those times, sadness immediately came over her. "So not a bad dream? Just a regular dream of you out and about exploring the universe?" She kept her voice light and joking, trying her best not to show her sadness.

"Any future without you in it is bad," he grumbled.

Her chest tightened at the thought of their future—or lack thereof. Phate's time on Earth was limited and so was their affair. "What am I getting myself into?" she mumbled to herself.

"What would you like to get yourself into?"

“I-I didn’t mean...” Tasha let out a deep breath. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud. To Phate, she was just another assignment. While meeting and hooking up with an alien would probably be the highlight of her life. “Never mind.”

Phate squeezed her arm gently. “You’re frustrated with me because I still don’t understand your Earth speak.”

Tasha raised to her elbow to look at him. Phate’s beautiful eyes were half-lidded with a sleepy look to them. His swollen lips, from all their kissing, looked delectable. Tasha was sure her lips were equally swollen, as were other parts of her body that he’d stretched and pounded into. With his curls in disarray, he looked more like a teenager and not a fully grown man, *er* alien.

She couldn’t help but to smile down at him. “I would never get frustrated about that.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing...this...us.” She laid back down, reclaiming her spot curled against his side, shoulder wedged in the crook of his arm pit and head resting against his chest. She liked it here. It felt comfortable, right and safe.

“You don’t want to spend time with me?”

“Of course, I do. And that’s the problem, Phate. You’re leaving in a month and although I can delude myself into thinking we’ll make plans to see each other again, there’s only so much lying I can do. I dated a guy from Chicago once and the long-distance thing only lasted six months, *and* that was with us visiting each other once a month. This...” she waved a hand through the air.

“How far away is *She-ca-go*?”

Tasha chuckled at his pronunciation of the State. “Very close considering the distance that’ll be between us when you go back into space.”

“Fair.”

“And even knowing there isn’t a future for us, I’m cuddled next to you in my bed wishing for a different outcome.”

“We can’t stay here. Set aside the fact that your government would surely dissect us on television if caught—”

“Wait. What exactly is your obsession with being dissected on television? Between you and Solgre it’s been mentioned a few times.”

“We viewed a documentary that aired on your television of aliens being dissected in someplace called Area 51.”

A laugh burst from Tasha’s mouth. “Area 51? You do know that’s one of those alien conspiracies hoax’s, right?”

“A hoax? But it was a documentary.”

“A fake one,” Tasha pointed out.

“Hm. I thought all documentaries were real.” He seemed to think for a minute. “We also watched ones about mer-people in your seas. A skeleton was found.”

Tasha chuckled. “Fake.”

“I was wondering why the Pycanka species would inhabit this planet and not claim it as their own. They’re merciless in toppling foreign governments. They would’ve assumed governance within the first ten years of arrival.”

“Wait. Are you telling me that mermaids really do exist?”

“Yes, but apparently not on Earth since you say the documentary was fake.”

Tasha let out a heavy sigh as her heart sank. Phate would never stay here. Why would he when there were so many wonders out there?

“Well, anyway, besides us not wanting to be caught by your government, our being here also goes against our accords on discovering new intelligent lifeforms.”

“You’re not supposed to interact with the natives because it could throw our society into a state of chaos and panic might ensue because of the inevitable collapse of all religions and governments.”

“You know of our accords?”

Tasha chuckled lightly. “I watch Star Trek. They don’t call their rule about meeting new species, ‘accords’. They call it the Prime Directive.”

“Star Trek,” he repeated slowly.

“It’s a sci-fi television show. It’s about how aliens came to Earth when they inadvertently spotted our rudimentary warp drive technology and they let us join their Federation. We ended up with alien technology and advancements and we joined them in exploring the galaxy, solving problems and conducting scientific experiments.”

“*Hm.*”

“Is that what you do? Go around the galaxy solving problems and conducting experiments.”

“No.”

“Oh, because that would’ve been cool. I would’ve joined your crew.”

“We explore the universe, not the galaxy.”

Tasha almost choked on her spit. “Wait. You travel the universe?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Why would we limit ourselves to this galaxy?”

“*Um,* because traveling the universe is...how is that even possible?”

“*Halo One* is equipped with a jump drive. It would take us some time to leave our galaxy and travel to the next, but if we want to travel faster, we would need only to travel to the nearest Gate.”

“Gate?”

“Star Gate.”

Tasha shook her head and lifted to her elbow to watch him again. “Hold up. Hold up. Hold up. Star Gates actually exist?”

Phate frowned. “How do you know about Star Gates?”

“From a movie and also a television show.” She shook her head, overwhelmed with their conversation. “Now, I really must ask myself, what am I getting myself into? When you leave, you’re never coming back, are you?”

“If you’re here, I would make it a point to come back for you.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but you don’t have to pretend, Phate. There’s no future for us. You’ll be out there with an alien girlfriend, and I’ll be stuck here taking care of my boutique and buried in work.”

“The thought makes me want to rip his spine from his body.”

“Spine from who’s body?”

“Your alien boyfriend.”

Tasha chuckled and shook her head. “Spoiler alert, Phate. If you leave, I won’t have an alien boyfriend.”

“When the rescue arrives, they’re coming with another team of scientist who’ll conduct research on humans and Earth. If they deem humans are evolved enough for contact, they’ll begin the process of first contact and with that, they’ll propose humans enter the Intergalactic Dating Agency or IDA.”

“Intergalactic Dating Agency. IDA. You mentioned this before at my boutique when we were discussing dating apps.”

“Correct.”

“So, you guys are doing all this in order to have us join a dating app?”

“It’s not like the dating apps we’ve seen here. The IDA is used to connect different species together who normally wouldn’t cross paths with each other. Many species use it to form alliances as well as help with fertility issues.”

“Huh. You’re saying that in a year or two we might have aliens walking around here or humans might be walking around different planets for dates?”

“Yes, depending on what the scientists decides.”

She looked off dreamily. “Just think, I could have another alien boyfriend in no time at all.”

Phate growled. “You would join the IDA?”

Tasha lifted a shoulder playfully. She couldn’t see herself joining another app anytime soon and not one where there was no chance of meeting Phate again. But to hide her pain, she stretched a smile across her face. “Well, since you’re going to be out there galivanting across the universe, I might as well test my luck with someone else.”

Phate pulled her onto his chest and held her there. “I won’t allow it.”

She nipped at his chin playfully. “You won’t allow what exactly? You’ll be far far away and won’t know what I’m doing or who I’m dating.”

“I won’t have to worry about that, Tasha.”

“And why is that?”

“Because anywhere I go, you go.”

She took a deep breath, unable to decide if he joked or not. Could she leave everything that she’d worked so hard for behind to go exploring with an alien she’d just met?

“Tell me more about this Star Trek,” he said. “Do you think we could watch it?”

Yes. She could. “Of course.”

Tasha rolled off Phate to reach for the remote on her bedside table. “We’re not going to start with the original episodes. They suck anyway. We’re going to start with Star Trek: The Next Generation.”



Looking for love that's out of this world? These strong, smart, sexy aliens are seeking mates from the Milky Way. Just hop onboard with your local Intergalactic Dating Agency and become an Alien Mail Order Bride! Join our group of authors as we explore the friendly skies and beyond with trilogies of cosmic craving, astral adventure and otherworldly lovers.

Warning: abductions may or may not be included!

Grab more hunky alien action here:

<http://romancingthealien.com>

Feel free to also join our FaceBook Group!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1656987277900229>

About A.M. Griffin

A. M. GRIFFIN IS A mother of three, dog owner (and sometimes dog owned), a daughter, sister, aunt and friend. She a hard worker whose two favorite outlets are reading and writing. She enjoys reading everything from mystery novels to historical romances and of course fantasy romance. She is a believer in the unbelievable, open to all possibilities from mermaids in our oceans and seas, angels in the skies and intelligent life forms in distant galaxies.

I love hearing from my readers. Like one of my books? Drop me and line! amgriffinbooks@gmail.com

Visit <http://www.amgriffinbooks.com/> to find more titles by A.M. Griffin.

Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever A.M. Griffin publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

[https://books2read.com/
r/B-P-OMZB-UBQNC](https://books2read.com/r/B-P-OMZB-UBQNC)

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-P-OMZB-UBQNC>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Also by A.M. Griffin

Cimmerian Moon

Against The Darkness

The Ashes That Remain

In Danger's Embrace

Cyborg Redemption

Saving The Cyborg

Dark Wolf Enterprises

Shifter Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Lover Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Hunter Claimed: A Fated Mates Shifter Romance

Intergalactic Dating Agency: The Thelli Logs

Phate's Mate: The Thelli Logs (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Kien's Kindred

Solgre's Soulmate

Loving Dangerously

Dangerously Mine

Dangerously Hers

Dangerously Theirs

Dangerously His

Dangerously Forever

Dangerously Yours

The Hunt

Hunted by the Alien Vampire

Hunted By The Alien General

The Game Warden's Mate

Hunted By The Alien Prince

The Teague Bride Experiment

Ramliel: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Conh: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

Zephon: The Teague Bride Experiment (Intergalactic Dating Agency)

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.

Once a Thief, Always a Thief

The God Killer

The Guicai Talisman

The Lycan Job

It's Not Me, It's You

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.: Books 1-2

The Undercity Chronicles of Babylonia Jones, P.I.: Books 3-4

Standalone

Yule's Tyd

Leporidae Pack

Mate's Desire

The Alien King's Desire

Watch for more at [A.M. Griffin's site](#).