

PREYING  
FOR HER

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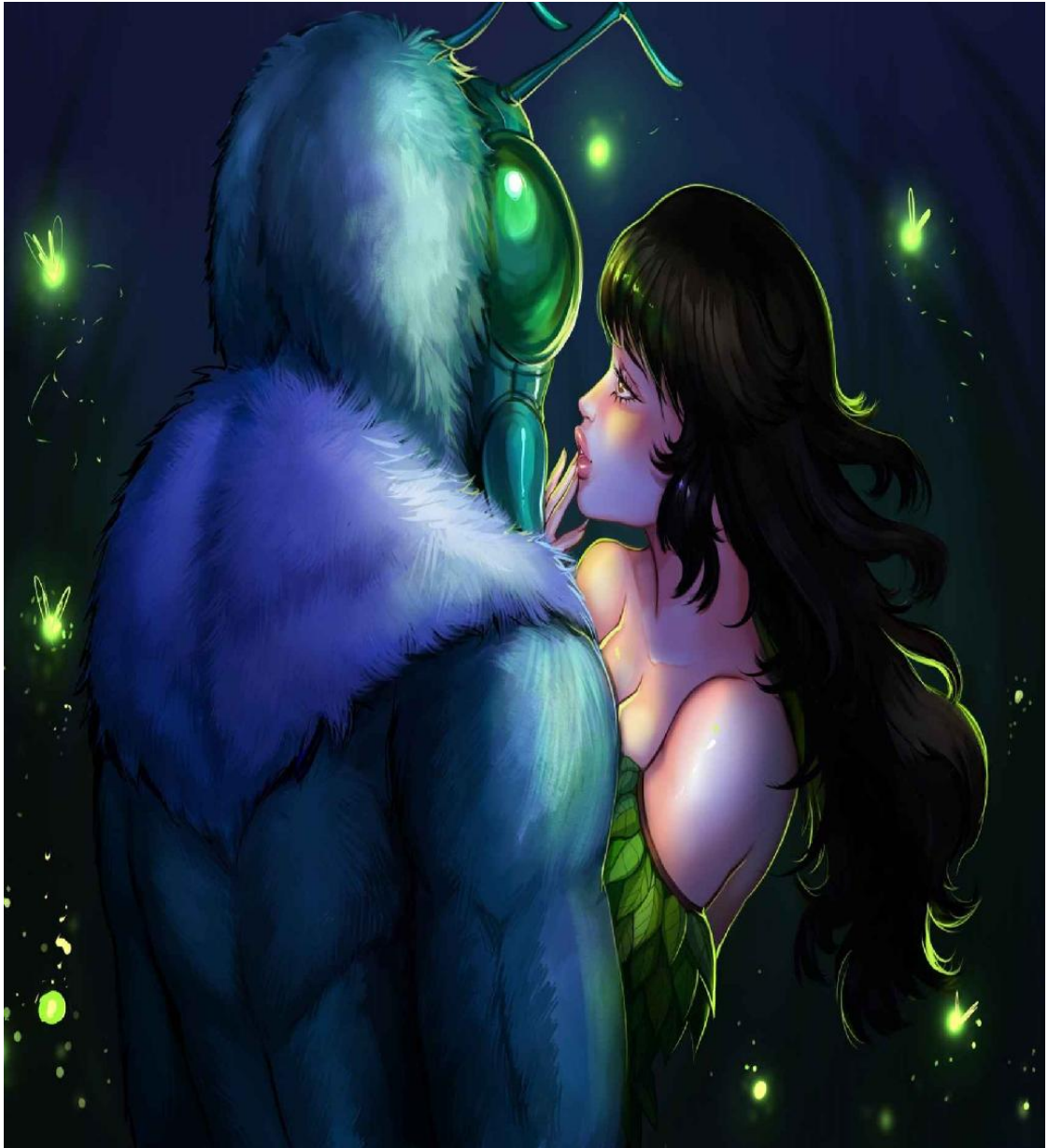
# PREYING FOR HER

## **This Book Contains:**

- Slow Burn Romance
- Past Trauma
- Smut
- Language Barrier
- Blood

There most likely is more, so please let me know if you catch any triggers so I can add it to the list.





*For those who love Ant Bully, Insects, Romance, and wish to get lost in an impossible new world that could exist, if we were shrunk down to their size.*



## **Sidney**

It's said to take a job you enjoy. A job that you can immerse yourself in and simply let go. For that joy to develop into a passion.

*Whoever said that is a freaking genius*, I think as I drop into a crouch. Carefully observing the electric blue Monarch butterfly sitting on a foxglove in front of me. A new species I recently found.

I watch as the beautiful specimen extends its long straw-like tongue, probing the middle of the flower for nectar. Sticky sweet sustenance for the poor little guy.

Using the easier side of my pencil, I gently open its folded wings, counting a smattering set of white spots on each wing.

“So beautiful,” I murmur and write *fourteen spots* on my small notepad. Returning my attention to the creature, I notice one wing is shorter than the other and make a note of it.

As an Entomologist, carrying around a notepad when studying insects to record fascinating discoveries is encouraged. The smattering of spots and shorter wing spans isn't much of a discovery, but it is still interesting to me. Out of all the insects I've learned about and studied, Butterflies are my favorite. Such a beautiful insect with thin wings that help them fly high and stay out of reach from predators. Because they have many natural predators.

A smile curls my lips when the creature crawls from the lavender petal, onto my finger. Curious but also cautious. I chuckle as the fine hairs on its legs tickle my skin.

Staring down into its tiny black eyes, I find myself leaning in. It's as if it is trying to convey something through mere eye contact.

“Sidney!” A deep voice calls out, startling me from a trance.

The butterfly takes off and I huff in irritation.

*Leave it to Chuck to scare off the insects I'm studying.*

The thought drips with disdain. Chuck is the leader of the expedition I'm on. I'm here with four other Entomologists. Chuck being one. Then there's Mandy, Fern, Douglas, and Lindsey.

I received my degree online five years ago and signed up to be part of the Entomology field program shortly afterward. Fifteen long hours later, we arrived in Brazil.

I've been in the Amazon Rainforest for approximately one year studying different species of insects and learned so much.

The program is only two years, but you are allowed to leave whenever you want. At the start, there was twenty people. Now there's only the six of us. I don't mind. I've gotten to know the others a bit. Although, I mainly keep to myself. I'm more of an

introvert when it comes to groups of people. A lone butterfly if you will.

Just talking with another person is hard enough as it is. That's why I prefer the company of insects rather than people.

"Dinner is in the buffet tent in five minutes." Chuck's bored tone shakes me out of the suffocating turmoil in my mind and I glance up into a pair of green eyes. Wearing only black tank tops to show off his swoll arms and tan shorts, Chuck is called a pretty boy by the girls behind his back. He constantly runs his hands through his shaggy blonde hair, always flexes, and usually has a smirk on his face. Yeah, definite pretty boy.

How he passed the online courses and got his degree in Entomology, I'll never know. Maybe he had someone else take it for him? Perhaps he is secretly smart under all that muscle? Who knows and who cares?

A handsome face, chiseled chin, and rippling muscles isn't really that big of a turn on for me. Smart and kind is more my type.

Instead of responding, I merely nod. He shrugs and walks away, leaving me to peer at the handful of foxgloves.

Sighing, I stand and stroll down the trail I and others have made during the year. When you spot a new species, it's advised to wear down a trail into the dry soil. Even though the rainforest is really warm in the day, the soil lacks the same damp qualities as the air.

Glancing up at the cloud covering the tops of the trees, I breathe in deeply.

Warm, secluded, and surrounded by the gentle noises of insects. Perfect for an introvert Entomologist. Perfect for *me*. Now all that's missing is a good book and a cup of steaming coffee. We have coffee here... sometimes. If Mandy hasn't taken it all.

I clutch my field pad close to my chest as I walk, soaking in the peacefulness of nature. This is my happy place. My *sanctuary*.

A sudden flash of blue appears at the corner of my vision and I snap my head to the side to see a stunning insect on the trunk of a tree a few feet away. Feet carrying me forward, the breath catches in my throat. I can't breathe for fear of scaring it away.

Brightly colored fuzz covers every inch of its body. Pinchers are a bright blue and its eyes are a brilliant green. If not for the way it's standing, I would've mistaken it for a spider. No. This dazzling

insect is a praying mantis. A completely new species of mantis in fact. One I've never seen before. The fuzz has many different colors. Bright greens and blues.

I hold out my hand, patiently waiting as it crawls onto my palm. Using a finger, I lightly touch the fuzz over its abdomen, mentally counting every segment I touch. Eight. It's a male.

"Hello little guy." I whisper, my excited tone giving away the giddiness churning my stomach.

Debating whether or not to tell the others of my discovery, I stroke his tiny bobbing head. "What do you think? Should I reveal your species?"

The bobbing stops and the praying mantis stands stock still. Head tilted at an odd angle. Almost as if trying to understand my words.

With a sigh, I shake my head. "No, I suppose not. Not yet at least. I want to study you first before the others horn in."

He bobs his head, as if in agreement.

"You know, I discovered you. So I should name you."

Head bob.

"Hmm. Bobby?"

Stock still.

"Prayer?"

Nothing.

"Don't like that one, huh?" I giggle to myself.

It's absurd to be talking to an insect. To know full well that it can't answer, but I can't help it. I like talking to the insect. In some delusional messed up way, I feel like it's listening. Even though it's not.

"A girl can have her delusions." I bite defensively. Not sure why I'm voicing my thoughts out loud... or why I'm acting so standoffish.

The praying mantis reaches out its front legs and I bring him close to my face. He'll probably pinch me with his pincher's, but I don't care. I made a cute little friend to observe for the next week or two. If that means getting pinched, so be it.

The front legs rest on my cheeks and I marvel at the feel of the them. So soft. Feathery light. I hardly know they are there. Bulbous green eyes gaze intently into mine. There are no words to describe this moment.

Tiny and fragile, this insect is choosing not to pinch or attack. Merely touch the face of an animal a hundred times its size. No fear reflects in those eyes.

An unspoken bond.

Well, to me it's like a bond. The start of a delicate bond between new friends.

*Sidney, you are insane! You're supposed to make friends with people, not bugs!* I scold myself. As the thought crosses my mind, I grimace. Insects are a lot easier to befriend than people. A hell of a lot tolerable too.

I've always been this way. Ever since I was six. Elementary and high school was absolute hell for me. No friends. No play dates. No sleepovers. No boyfriends. *Ziltch*.

I didn't even want to go to prom, but my mom put her foot down. Forced me to go with a boy named Tanner, who I regrettably lost my virginity to that night. I was miserable and he drove me home. Never spoke to each other again. Mom and I grew distant after that. So estranged until the very day I turned eighteen.

Came home to a note pinned to the door telling me to grab the stuff she packed in garbage bags on the front lawn and move out. Haven't spoke to her or my dad since.

It's not all bad though. A close family friend did let me stay with them for awhile as I figured out my next course of action. Then one morning, as if a sign from God himself, an orange butterfly flew in through the open kitchen window, landing on the edge of my oatmeal bowl. I knew then what I wanted to do. Connect with the only creatures that would never judge or leave me. Insects. Many late nights and four years later, I accomplished my goal. I received my entomology degree, signed up for the program I read about while working on courses shortly after passing, and I never looked back.

I feel so at home in this rainforest. So in tune with mother nature. I know I only have one more year here, but I'm going to make the most of it. Starting with naming my newest little friend.

"I'll name you Fluffy," I whisper and brush my finger down its spine. "After your beautiful fluffy coat."



It reaches up again as I pull away and a silly grin splits my face.  
Like a child wanting cuddles, its need is insatiable.

Positively adorable.



## **Ayrin**

Digging my claws into the bark, I watch in fascination as the crusher moves away, each step shaking everything around me. I

broke one of the rules by touching its skin. Brushing my hands against the pale softness. They are the enemy that destroys everything in its path. They capture those in the colony and put them in strange translucent orbs. They strike fear with their very presence.

*Yet...*

This one feels different. I don't know its gender nor the purpose of its arrival twelve moons ago. But, I can't seem to tear my eyes away from the giant being. Since a hoard of them settled in Drotopia, I haven't been able to follow the simplest of rules.

Stay away from the crushers. I broke that rule the moment I laid my eyes on the giant with hair as black as night. Keeping hidden most days just to watch it stare at other species for hours and poke at a flat thing in its hands.

With each passing day, the giant changed the color of the fuzz on its body. Perhaps a defense strategy? Molting? I'm not certain, but I absorb every new bit of information eagerly.

I want to know more about this strange beast. Feed the curiosity that burrows deep inside and raises the fine fuzz on my body.

Allowing my body to slide down the tree - with my claws partially dug into the bark - I attempt to catch a glimpse of the enthralling giant. Hoping that it's near. Nothing. The crusher is gone.

I'm about to climb when the fuzz on my body stands. The slight gust of air has me sensing something close by. *Danger*. Using my arms, I propel myself upward, away from the threat.

As I climb, the tree shudders with the force of something chasing me. Clicking my mandibles in distress, I risk a peek behind me. A *Lorg*. Their kind is brutes that hunt Drotopians. Us. I'm supposed to be on patrol right now. Prevent any from breaching the line and attacking the safety of our home. To which, I am failing miserably.

*Qrysix, you better be watching the opening*, I think sourly, and veer off to the side, leading it away from the Colony. My close friend Qrysix hatched in the nest beside me and we have been inseparable ever since. He always seems to get himself into mischief and I take the fall for it. Every single time.

Qrysix usually guards the South side, but I begged him to switch places with me at dawn. He agreed. Knowing that I take off every day to observe the pale crusher.

I know it's wrong. I'm aware that it's against the rules. To be honest, I'm not sure why I do it. I just feel an indescribable pull toward the giant. Tugging me with such a curious intensity that I'm unable to resist.

Yet, every day, I sit on a branch overlooking the spot the crusher has sat for days on end, and just watch. I keep a lookout for Lorgs as well, but they don't tend to travel this far South. Most of the Drotopian Warriors are placed North, where Lorgs like to congregate.

*Why is it this far South?* The thought bounces around in my head as I frantically leap from branch to branch.

High in the treetops, branches grow close together, making it easy to jump onto trees nearby. That's why our Queen - Onyx - chose to build our home inside a great oak tree. The advantage of height.

We survive because we must. Forging for food, patrolling the perimeter around our home, and protecting our Queen. Should we find a mate, we breed, add to the colony, and allow our female to eat us. Our lives are simple. Dangerous, but simple. Nothing new ever happens.

That is until *they* arrived.

I dart to the side and launch myself high into the air to dig my extending claws into the branch above me. Twisting, I rip my claws from the bark and raise my arms high. As I fall toward the scaly Lorg, a menacing hiss escapes moments before my claws puncture its skull. Stabbing through the brain.

Landing with a jarring thud, I shudder in disgust as I yank my claws from the dead Lorg. Its eyes clouding as the life ebbs from the miserable husk. These beasts may be bigger than us, but what we lack in size, we make up for in swift deadliness. Sharpening our long claws to use as weapons and honing our senses to detect danger. To train our bodies - at a young age - to become a fast and deadly weapon when needed.

I wipe as much of the green blood as I can off the sharp tips, using my fuzz, and extend my wings. As I bound forward, leaping into the air and gliding on warm currents, I find my gaze wandering. Seeking out the crusher that has ensnared my attention for a while.

Not spotting any unusually bright colored fuzz or dark hair, I heave a hissing sigh and bank North, towards home.

*I hope Qrysix stayed put this time.*

Even as the thought crosses my mind, I wince. Most likely not.





Wings fluttering, I lower until my legs touch down on the extending branch that leads up to the wide, open mouth of the entrance and tuck my wings tightly against my back. Qrysix is nowhere in sight. Instead, Zin stands guard.

*Brilliant, just what I need. A brooding and stiff Drotopian that judges every little thing I do.*

“We greet the Morrow.” I bow my head and place a claw on my forehead in the traditional greeting.

“Where have you been?” Comes Zin’s hissing response, brushing off the greeting. “Qrysix ran off to no doubt be with Ursa and leaves the entrance unprotected, and you run off to Luna knows where and are chased by a Lorg? I swear, sometimes I feel like I’m surrounded by hatchlings!”

Antenna twitching, I bite back a snarling hiss that threatens to escape. “I led it away from the Colony.”

“Had you been keeping watch instead of gallivanting around, you wouldn’t have needed to!” He snaps and folds his arms.

“I didn’t give it a chance to escape.” A long vibrating hiss slips past my teeth as I meet his glower with a venomous one of my own. I can’t reveal that I’ve been sneaking off to watch a crusher or it will result in severe punishment for breaking our main rule. I must remain passive. Nonchalant.

“Whether it’s dead or alive is not the concern. The problem is your incompetence! Your duty is to guard the North side - or in this case, the South - from Lorg’s. Keep them from breaching the line of protection and kill any that wander too close!” His condescending tone has me clenching my jaw to refrain from arguing and widening my pinchers in defense. Zin is the Queen’s right hand, and is, therefore, correct in this situation and not to be quarreled with. “Your duty is to the Queen. To protect the tribe. Another slip-up will be punishment in the hole. Do I make myself clear?”

“Transparently.” I seethe and incline my head, pinchers opening in anger.

“Good. I must go with the gathering hunt to scavenge food for the Colony. Stand guard until I send for another to relieve you.” Grunting in answer, I watch Zin spread his wings and leap from the branch, making a beeline for the back of the tree where the gathering group meets before leaving.

Straightening into a stiff posture, I rotate my head in search of the traitor I call friend. Ursa is an aggravating female who always seems to get Qrysix into trouble. But, he doesn't care. He will constantly sneak off to be with her, much like I do with the giant being.

I'm not certain if they intend to mate, but if they do, I ask the great Luna above that Ursa takes Qrysix's head in a quick and painless death.

*At least then, I won't be dragged into his irksome antics.*



## **Sidney**

Golden light filters through the trees, making crisscross patterns on the ground. Dew hangs on leaves and drips from the grass as

birds wake from their slumber to make soft chirps that echo like a beautiful melody. The melody of nature.

Others like loud pop music, I prefer the soothing tones of birds and the gentle hissing of insects. The musical sounds of nature are especially enchanting in the early morning. That's why I wake at the crack of dawn, long before the others.

Getting in some alone time isn't that big of an issue, but the morning light is my light. *Me* time. Kneeling next to a cluster of pink orchids, I watch as a Rhinoceros Beetle crawls at a slow pace to the edge of a petal, leg coming out to feel at the air, looking for another flower to clamber onto that isn't there.

"Hold on little guy, I'll help you." I croon and hold out my finger, letting the insect climb aboard.

I studied this species when I first came to the Amazon. They were the second species I cataloged in my notepad. Armored shells and strong pinchers, they will attack if threatened, but normally are surprisingly gentle. Their ritual of slamming other males to the ground to mate with a female I found really intriguing.

Moving slowly so as to not scare him, I lower my hand to the shady ground just under the flowers. A perfect place for the little guy to hang out. The beetle stays on my finger for a moment before darting forward and disappearing through the stems of the orchids.

Spotting a glint of blue from the corner of my eye, I look over to see my new little friend clinging to the trunk of a tree twenty feet away.

"Fluffy!" I exclaim with giddy glee, refusing to acknowledge that talking to him is silly.

Twigs snap as I draw closer and stop a foot away, holding out my hand. Wings extend from his back and he glides through the air, landing smack dab on my palm. Using one finger, I lightly pet his fuzzy head and my smile widens. Yesterday, before I put him back on the tree he was on, I spent an hour or two teaching Fluffy to come to me. I would place him on the ground, walk a foot or two away, then hold out my hand.

Shockingly, he seemed to grasp what I was trying to teach him relatively quickly and now will fly into my hand without hesitation. There is still so much I don't know about him. About his species. Now, I have the chance to study this praying mantis. Hoard him to myself for a week or two before revealing the new species.

It's *exhilarating*.

Getting to my knees, I gently place him on the cluster of orchids that the beetle was on moments ago and pull my notepad from my shorts pocket. For this little guy, I took out a new notepad from a storage bin in the tent I'm staying in. Since he is a new species, it makes sense to have a fresh notepad handy to record everything I discover about his species.

An hour passes with him standing absolutely still and the peace is welcoming. Cheek resting on my hand, I doodle on a blank page. I start out with a basic outline and erase extra lines until I have a body shape that closely resembles my fuzzy friend. Next, I add his bulbous eyes and shade in fuzz all over his body. When I'm done, I admire my handiwork and jerk in surprise when I glance up to find him missing.

I use the eraser to lift the fragile orchid petal. Nope. I gently poke around the stems. Nothing. Sighing, I'm about to get up when I feel something touching my ear. I crane my neck to see him on my shoulder with one leg out and head cocking to the side, as if confused.

"You silly one." I scold playfully and hold up my hand for him to crawl on. When he is securely on my palm, I return him to the flowers.

A gray moth lands on my arm and in the blink of an eye, Fluffy leaps forward, clamping two legs around it, and with a snap of his pinchers, it's dead.

But instead of eating the moth, he tucks the headless corpse behind him, using his rear to partially hide it from view.

*Fascinating!* I think with excitement as I flip to a new page and scribble in the discovery.

*Kills its prey but doesn't eat it. Maybe saving it for later?*

A small discovery, but an exciting one nevertheless. It proves that this species may have some similar habits to other mantises. Other species of mantis eat moths as well as other insects. It stands to reason that this species may not be so different in that regard.

I lean back against a tree as I study Fluffy and make notes. By the time the rainforest dims, brightening the sky with soft pinks and oranges, I have two pages of notes.



Sure, it's not much, but observing a new species and discovering new things doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and patience. Luckily, I don't mind spending hours on my own.

“Okay, Fluffy. Time for me to head back to the dining tent to rustle up some grub.” My stomach grumbles as I speak, punctuating the fact that I haven't eaten all day. Jaw cracking in a yawn, I pet his head and quickly get to my feet.

I briefly look down and start grinning like an idiot. Fluffy is clutching the corpse of the moth close and stretching his wings, about to take off. As he flies away, I make another note in my notepad.

*Took food with. Perhaps saving for later, but taking it to mate is also a possibility.*



The dining tent is empty when I push back the tan flap to peer in, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I don't want the peace I've

experienced all day to end just yet. I want to grab a few more moments to myself. Really soak it in before someone inevitably comes in looking for food.

A long plastic table sits in the corner and is piled with food. Chili, Cornbread, and pasta salad lay out like a feast. The delicious smell makes my mouth water and I grab a plate to serve myself.

I've met the personal chef once or twice - an older woman named Angelina - and she seems nice. It makes no sense to me as to why we would need a chef on an expedition, but I'm not complaining. Angelina makes amazing food for us and I'm pretty sure Chuck wouldn't be able to live on MRE's - Meal Ready to Eat - because of the way he is. With a snobbish air to him, it makes sense.

Maybe Chuck has tried MREs before and is not all that bad. Who knows? I always try to give others the benefit of the doubt before judging. Shoveling a spoonful of Chili into my mouth, I groan in pleasure as various spices and flavor bursts on my tongue.

*Thank God for Angelina!*

As I chew, I walk over to the long table designated for those in this expedition and take a seat. The chirping of crickets sounds outside and the gentle highs and lows of their melody has the corner of my mouth curling up into a smile. It's almost as if they are putting on dinner music, chirping rhythmically to impress the audience, me.

I'm alone in peaceful contentment. It's perfect. Normally, others would've beaten me to the dining tent, filling their plates and sitting at the table while the humming sound of chatter drowns out the sound of nature. Not this time. Strangely. The entire year I've been here, they've always gotten here before me.

To be honest, I'm not sure whether to be worried or resume eating my cornbread. After a while, I opt for chewing another bite of cornbread while my eyes wander around the tent.

*I'm sure they're fine.*

I freeze, spoon halfway to my mouth, as I spot something on the end of the table I'm sitting at. Something long and silver. Setting my spoon down, I throw my legs around the bench that connects to the table and I shuffle cautiously toward the object. Pausing, I look down at it, not knowing what to do.

There on the table, is a long knife with a black handle and a silver blade. Seeing Chuck carry this knife around with him quite

often, I know this weapon is his. It's not a folding knife and the blade is dull, doesn't shine in the light.

*It's Damascus steel*, I realize and pick it up, studying it closely. You can only get Damascus steel in India or Syria. I know a few things about knives, thanks to my Dad. When I was twelve, he gave me a pocket knife with a serrated blade. Taught me how to defend myself with it and the different kinds of steel that are used as blades.

*Maybe Chuck is well-traveled and I have been misjudging him.*

Guilt settles like rancid meat in my stomach as the thought crosses my mind. I need to make an effort to open up more and at least *try* to be friendly with him. And that starts by returning his knife to him.

Giving my food one last longing look, I leave the dining tent and make my way toward the tent Chuck sleeps in.

*I'll be right back*, I tell myself, and follow the narrow winding trail that has been flatted by everyone's boots over the past year. Coming to a stop outside of a circular, dark brown tent, I tap my knuckles on the entrance flap.

"Chuck, are you in there?" I ask and wince at the raspy softness of my voice. A freaking cricket sounds louder than me. Clearing my throat, I try again. "Chuck, I just wanted to return your knife."

Only silence greets me.

Uncomfortably grows with every passing second and I begin to fidget. Perhaps he's not there? Signing, I enter his tent. Whether he's here or not, it doesn't matter. I'll just leave his knife and go.

A long white candle is lit and sits in a crystal holder on what looks like a mahogany dresser by a king-sized bed. Four pillows lay on top of a dozen burgundy blankets and a wooden chest sits at the foot of the bed.

As I turn my head to the side, my heart jumps to my throat and I about crap myself. "Holy balls!"

It takes a minute to notice that it's just a floor-length mirror, that it's my reflection, and I press my fist to my chest to calm my frantic heartbeat. Another stupid idea because the knife is clutched in said fist.

Jerking the knife away from me, I shake my head as I observe Chuck's tent. Man, what a pretty boy. Who needs all of this on an expedition? Everyone else - including me - sleeps on a thin cot with

two scratchy blankets. We keep our clothes in a duffel bag and use the clothesline to wash and dry our dirty laundry. Like the freaking old ‘n days.

From what I see in Chuck’s tent, he wouldn’t have survived in the 1830s.

*Not without his fluffy blankets, pillows, and fancy hair products,* I think with a chuckle as I note bottles of name-brand shampoo and conditioner on his dresser.

Chuckle dying on my lips, I try to swallow around the lump of horror in my throat when I see an empty glass jar that is used for jam, sitting beside the conditioner. In it, is a praying mantis. The exact species I’ve been trying to keep secret until I’ve had a chance to study them more.

I rush over, quickly placing his knife on the dresser, and carefully pick up the jar. Releasing a small breath, I struggle to keep my hands from shaking. The mantis is not Fluffy. That brings a tiny amount of relief, but barely.

Why does Chuck have this mantis in a jar with holes poked in the top? He knows that our job is to observe and release. To never capture insects. An Entomologist observes the habits of new species in their natural habitat, not cage them.

This is not right. For all I know, this little guy, or girl, could mean a lot to Fluffy. Maybe it’s his mom or mate, maybe not. Regardless, they do not belong in jars. Holding the jar close, I shiver as the cool glass kisses my skin.

Wearing shorts and a white tank top is great in the daytime but at night? The temperature tends to cool down immeasurably.

*That’s why they are covered in fluff! The cool climate at night!* The excited thought buzzes in my skull like a caffeinated moth on crack and I hum happily at the discovery.

Now all that’s left to do is set this guy free, find Chuck to ask him why he would trap an insect, and jot down my discovery in my notepad.

Leaving, I venture out a ways until I can no longer see his tent, and bend as I unscrew the lid. I poke my finger in to retrieve the mantis and yank my hand away when it leaps forward with a hiss, digging its pinchers into my skin. Biting my tongue to hold in a yell of pain, I stick my throbbing finger into my mouth.



I tilt the jar to the side, wiggling it gently. It's not its fault. The poor thing has every right to attack. It feels cornered and is just defending itself. A few more light shakes and the mantis darts out, taking off into the growing darkness of the rainforest. I smile as it runs off.

*Be safe little buddy.*

A loud noise startles me and I look off to my right. It sounds like an argument coming from the direction of Chuck's tent. Hesitant and a bit cautious, I creep closer.

The dim outline of his tent comes into view and I crouch behind a shrub. Squinting my eyes, I can barely make out two people. Because the sun has set and it's almost dark, I can't see who they are, only hear voices.

"I'm telling you, I don't know what happened to the damn bug." Says a low gruff voice and the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. Chuck.

"How do ya not know what happened ta it?" Deep and growly, the mystery person with Chuck has a slight accent.

"I mean just that. It was in my tent ten minutes ago and now it's not. The fucking jar is gone too." Chuck snaps and I grip the jar so hard, my knuckles turn pale white.

He... *meant* to catch the mantis? But why? Why do something so heinous? We don't catch insects. We *don't*! It violates what we learned in the Entomology courses. There has to be a reason why he's doing this.

"Then find the bug or catch anotha' one. If ya don't, I won't give ya this pretty lil' thang." I slowly peek over the shrub to see the shadowy figure that spoke, holding up something in his hand, and huff in irritation when I can't make it out.

"I *need* that." Chuck replies in desperation. Anger and annoyance gnaw at me as I listen. What is this item Chuck needs so damn badly, that he's willing to trade a helpless insect over?

"We both want the same thang. Ta be rich. Ya from this ray I bought off the black market, and me, with an entirely new species ya discovered that scientists would pay good money to study." The smooth buttery voice of the stranger makes me nauseous, and I sink lower to the ground. So that's the reason. Money.

The fact that Chuck would trade a new species of insect, just to sell whatever ray the stranger mentioned, is sickening. Not only is he a pretty boy on the outside, but he's also a two-faced bastard that would sell his own mother for a quick buck. A self-centered asshole with a disregard for his job. For the insects he's supposed to protect.

"Out of curiosity... what would the scientists do to the insect once they have it?" Chuck asks, a note of concern in his tone.

"Prod it, dissect it, eat it, who the fuck cares? All I know, is that I'm goin' ta be rich!" The stranger boasts and bile burns my throat as it rises.

Dissect? Eat?!?! What kind of scientists is this guy associated with?!?!

*I can't let them do this!*

Even though my mind is screaming at me to stay put, my legs bunch, propelling me up and carrying me forward as if they have a mind of their own.

"Do ya hear that?" The stranger asks with a snarl and both figures turn around. It's now pitch black and the outlines of their bodies are lit up by the lantern that hangs outside of Chuck's tent, bathing the general area in a soft white light.

"You son of a *bitch*." The venomous hiss shoots from my mouth before I can stop it.

"Sidney!" Chuck's expression of surprise becomes clear the closer I get. "There you are. Uh... how much of that did you hear?"

"Every. Single. Word." I seethe and his eyes drop to the jar I hug tight in my arms.

"So, *you're* the one that took my insect." Chuck jokes, attempting to backpedal from the situation.

"It wasn't your insect to keep!" I snarl.

"Sidney, you don't understand..." He trails off and I stomp my foot angrily.

"I understand *plenty*. All you care about is *money*, not these critters. It's not passing the online courses that make you an Entomologist, it's showing kindness and compassion for your job, for the insects you study and record. You Chuck, are *not* an Entomologist. You're just a money-hungry jackass who probably had someone else take the courses for him, just to put this expedition together in hopes to find new insects, and soon, everyone here will

know what you're *really* doing here." I suck in a shaky breath after my long-winded rant and a shiver races up my spine when I hear a sinister chuckle.

The stranger - whom I can now see in the weak light as a tan, muscled, guy with shaggy black hair, a thick curled mustache, and an eye patch over one eye - literally looks like a villain in a fantasy book. Pinching the tip of his mustache between two fingers and everything. It's so bizarre, I almost laugh.

"Such a feisty little thang. I like that. But what ta do with ya?" His question isn't directed at me and I openly gape. With a heavy accent, you'd think he'd look more Western or something. Maybe he wearing a suit? When I picture a villain, I definitely don't imagine them in tan cargo shorts and a gray T-shirt.

He taps his chin with the tip of an object he holds in his hand. Silver and shaped like a gun, I blanch as sudden realization dawns on me. It may look like a gun, but this must be the ray Chuck wants to turn and sell somewhere else. If this thing is worth a lot of money, there must be a reason why.

A terrible reason...

*Can it disintegrate a person with one blast? Can it shoot multiple lasers at once, making a person look like Swiss cheese?*

Hundreds of questions fill my head. Gut-wrenching, awful questions.

"Ah, I see ya fear my ray gun here, and rightfully so," He chuckles, noticing that my eyes are glued to the gun, and lovingly strokes the side of it. "Would ya be a doll and finally let me test this baby out on yer body?"

"N-No." I stammer and force my jelly legs to take a step back.

Smile fading from his face, the stranger's eyes flash dangerously. "I wasn't askin'."

I want to retort that is exactly what he did. To sneer at his grim face and flip him the bird. But, I'm frozen in fear. I can't move a muscle and I watch with dread as he lifts an arm, aiming the weapon at me.

"Wait! What are you doing?!?" Chuck yells, eyes wide.

"She knows too much." His simple reply chills me to the bone.

"So, you're just going to shoot her?!?!"

“Yes. Then the bugs she loves so much can eat her.” I flinch as his finger squeezes the black trigger of the gun. A bright blue beam shoots from the tip and hits me square in the chest. The jar tumbles from my grasp, shattering to the ground as the blast pushes me back a few feet.

Chest constricting from where the beam of light struck, every inch of my skin starts tingling. I can't breathe. Can't suck in enough air to properly scream and sudden searing pain stabs everywhere. Doubling over, an ear-piercing scream finally escapes. It feels like tiny knives are stabbing every fiber of my being repeatedly and my blood has been set on fire.

Through the tears blurring my vision, it seems like the world is growing and lengthening around me. Suddenly, I'm falling. Writhing, twisting, and flailing like a broken doll as I plummet. Everything is dark and I feel numb.

*Is this death?*

The last thing I touch before passing out is something incredibly soft.



### **Ayrin**

The pattering of my legs - other than the racing of my heart - is the only sound in the Burrow I reside in. Glancing once more at the

now small crusher, my mind races. I don't know what made me take action. To jump from the branch I was on and catch the being as it fell.

I can still feel the body in my arms. Its soft, squishy, and strange body. It was a struggle to be hit with its sudden weight, but I managed to pluck the creature from mid-air and swerve to hide in a patch of greenery, the tall blades of grass providing temporary safety as the giants poked around in the dark, speaking their odd garbled words. Finding nothing, they left.

Unable to bring myself to leave the enthralling crusher, I took off towards home and gently laid it in my nest, pacing my Burrow until sunrise. No one saw me, I made sure of it when I arrived. So, the crusher's presence is safe... for now.

The colony can't see it or they'll know I broke the main rule. I must keep the giant hidden until I figure out what to do.

A soft sound shakes me from my thoughts and my head twists around to see the creature shifting slightly.

*Is it injured?*

Worry coils in my gut as I quietly scurry closer, bending my legs until I am level with it. Gaze sweeping over the pale shell, worry melts into curiosity. I tuck in my claws and brush a finger down the crusher's arm. The squishy shell bounces back when I pull away.

How peculiar. Every touch on its shell bounces and jiggles. It's interesting. Oddly satisfying. Another noise spills from the creature's pink mouth when my claws brush against a patch of dark fuzz on the lower stomach. Head dipping to the side, I cautiously prod the patch again. The crusher makes a gentle cooing noise.

It's hypnotic. Such mesmerizing sounds. Not wanting the beautiful cries to cease, I continue to rub at the fuzz. As I stroke, I take in the appearance. Black hair fans around its head. The pincherless mouth is pink and looks soft as well. A pale shell covers the eyes, making me miss the large brown orbs. Squishy things protrude from its chest and has round pink orbs in the middle. Hands clasping the arm near me, I hold it close to my face in inspection, pinchers pressing together in confusion.

This crusher has five clawless fingers. Leaning over its body, I count five on the other as well. Now that the creature is no longer giant, can it not defend itself? Without pinchers and teeth to tear away shells, or claws to rip into carcasses, how does it survive?

Observing two crushers corner this one last night, it didn't seem like it could protect itself. Even with the advantage of size.

So many unanswered questions. I don't even know if it is male or female, and that upsets me for some reason. The pad of my finger digs deeper into the dark fuzz and I jerk back with a startled hiss when I'm met with something warm. The crusher doesn't move and after a moment of hesitation, I use two claws to push the fuzz away, revealing a pink slit with glistening petals.

The slit radiates heat and the scent it emits is intoxicating. I drag a claw gently through the folds of the petals and draw my finger back, opening my pinchers wide to place it in my mouth. A strangled trill of shock escapes as I taste the exquisite nectar.

Sweeter than a Cyin in full bloom and more delicious than honey. An addictive feminine essence. It's a female.

The realization has my stalk twitching behind my slit, and my mind baffled at the reaction. This female is clearly in heat, but why am I reacting to it? Is she releasing pheromones?

The only thing I know for certain is that I'm hungry for the nectar she provides. If this female is secreting, it must be an offering to show gratefulness for saving her life, and I am not one to refuse an offering. I dip my head low, my thin tongue darting out to plunge between the petals. Inside is hot and flutters with each stroke of my tongue. Very strange.

I swirl my tongue, probing for a decent amount of nectar to latch onto. She suddenly jerks and her legs shudder as an endless stream of sounds and garbled words spill from her open mouth. A gush of nectar fills my mouth and I swallow hungrily.

My claws dig into the squishy shell of her legs and she abruptly shoots upright. The shell covering her eyes is gone and I'm able to see those entrancing brown eyes of hers as I pull my tongue from her heat petals and straighten into a standing position.

"We greet the Morrow." I murmur, bowing my head and placing a claw on my forehead in greeting.

Something is wrong. The female doesn't respond or move at all. Merely stares at me with big eyes and an open mouth.

With a low hiss, I try again. "Beautiful creature, I thank you for your offering and beseech your name."

I get a reaction this time, but it's confusing. She screeches something unknown and bolts for the entrance of my Burrow.

*Perhaps this is their way of greeting?*





**Sidney**

I awoke to an insect eating me out. A fucking insect! An insect that towers over me by at least six feet! Something that should be

utterly impossible. Looking over my shoulder to see the big - and strangely familiar insect - tilting its head, I don't watch where I'm going and my next step comes down on air.

With a yelp, I struggle to steady myself by frantically pinwheeling my arms. No luck. Falling forward, a scream rips from my throat. Something soft and warm curls around my wrist, yanking me backward into the dark hole.

My relief is short-lived when my back presses against something hard. I whirl around to come face to face with the praying mantis and I scream again. Blue pinchers click together as the mantis hisses, its head still cocking to the side. Because a praying mantis has no eyelids, it conveys what I assume to be confusion, by just pulling in its pinchers and tilting its head from side to side.

What the hell does it have to be confused about?!?! I'm the one who should be and is very fucking confused!!!

*Azi ywww wl*

One high trill and hissing is all I hear. The hissing comes in rapid succession and some hisses are drawn out slowly. Almost like it's trying to speak. But that's impossible. Insects can't talk.

*I'm standing in a dank hole, shaking like a God damn leaf, and about to piss myself. Yeah, I think we are past impossible.*

The sarcastic thought has me yanking my hand from his clawed one, and backing away until I hit a wall. Only, it's not a wall. It feels like wood is poking and digging into my back. I take a quick second to look around and realize I'm inside a tree. The entrance is a hole that leads into the tree itself.

Except, the tree isn't hollow. Instead, the floor has a spongy surface I'm standing on that looks like moss. The bed I woke up in, is a nest of moss and leaves. It's dark in the hole because of a large leaf covering the entrance, so I can't see much else.

*This must be a dream. It has to be. Wake up!* I scream mentally, shaking my head back and forth. Ignoring the stabs of pain from the bark, I slide down the wall and bring my knees up to my chest, taking in the sight of a fuzzy praying mantis before me.

This doesn't make sense. I'm *not* a believer. There is no such thing as magic. No mystical mojo. There is nothing that defies logical and rational thought. Things are supposed to be what we've been told they are. Nothing about this bizarre sight comes close to normalcy. Not by any means. It's not possible.

But... how can I deny what is in front of me?

I watch in horror as its legs move, getting closer to where I am cowering. When the mantis is a few inches away, I instinctively lift my foot, planting it on the insect's stomach area. The intention is to keep it from coming any closer. To use my leg as an unwavering bar to ward it off.

Another head tilt and sharp click of its pinchers. Staring down at the foot that presses on its hard shell, claws retract until they disappear completely and what looks like a large finger, pokes at my toes. I clamp my mouth shut to stifle a startled giggle at the odd gesture.

Yes, my feet are ticklish, but I won't laugh. I *won't*. Fear making my heart pound like the frantic rhythm of a bongo drum, it doesn't seem appropriate. I need to plan my next course of action. Figure out why this insect is giant.

A deep menacing voice. Shouting. A bright blue flash. Tumbling through the air. It starts coming back to me in pieces. Fuzzy pieces, but slowly fitting together like that of a puzzle.

*Oh my God!*

Yanking my foot away from the fluffy creature, I balk as the last piece slips into place. Chuck attempting to sell a brand new species I discovered, to the guy with a handlebar mustache. A guy who no doubt will take credit for the discovery. *My* discovery.

*All for scientists to pay him and dissect the poor insect.*

The thought sickens me.

Fluffy! Head snapping up to gape at the mantis, I gasp. Blue fluff covers its neck, shoulders, chest, and legs. Hard brown shell showing from its stomach, down. Green bulbous eyes that are studying me closely. Antenna's twitching almost uncomfortably on top of its head.

Yep. It's definitely Fluffy.

I'm not sure how I know for sure, but I do. It's him. The other praying mantis I set free, had a darker blue coloring around the scruff of fluff on its neck and shoulders.

*Bss nt arrd*

The soft hisses almost sound like words and I shrink lower, wishing I could just melt into the bark and disappear.

“Please don’t eat me.” Fluffy leans even closer and stops at the sound of my whimper. Head tilting and several fast clicks of its pinchers, a three-fingered hand reaches out.

Heart threatening to hammer out of my chest, tears sting my eyes and I hide my face in my knees with a sob. This is it. I’m going to die by the very insect I protected.

Praying Mantises eat other insects, so I know they are carnivores. Meaning that a squishy tiny human like me is definitely for lunch.

I squeeze my eyes shut as my body trembles.

*This can’t be real!* I tell myself again, sucking in a ragged breath. The damp smell of wood is suffocating. There’s a tease of another scent, something bitter and sweet at the same time. Like sandalwood with a hint of vanilla.

*This is not real!*

No matter how many times I repeat the frantic mantra in my head, it doesn’t change the facts.

Chuck’s friend shrunk me with some ray - It still sounds impossible to me - Fluffy happened to be around when I fell and grabbed me. And now, I am tiny. Completely at the mercy of any insect that wants to do away with my helpless, fragile, and tiny body.

A strong - and surprisingly soft - hand clasps my shoulder, shaking it gently. I open my eyes, glance up, and flinch at how close he is. Three inches away, my panting breaths intermingle with his and the bittersweet sweet smell engulfs me. The scent is coming from Fluffy.

Too many words to count tumble through her numb brain.

*Impossible.*

*Beast.*

*Horrific.*

To sum it up, this is a *nightmare*.

Fluffy retreats and in the dim light filtering under the leaf covering the door, I’m able to properly take him in. Chest almost looks humanoid, but is covered with a hard brown shell that goes down past his narrow stomach and under his rear. Small blue pinchers spread as I gape at them. The blue fluff on his head - resembling hair - doesn’t match the darker blue color of the fluff

around his neck and shoulders. His face is covered with an aquamarine blue shell and his bulbous eyes are light green. Short antenna's poke up from the head fluff, quivering slightly.

Strangely, instead of bent arms that a praying mantis usually has, and the ones I saw him have when I first observed Fluffy, he has two muscular arms with three fingers, the same color as his face. Each finger is tipped with long, sharp, black claws that I see retract into his fingers.

Is it different when I am big, just like everything else?

What else is different now that I'm tiny?

Despite my terror, I can't help but admire the beauty of this creature. Upright, Fluffy appears to glow in the weak sunlight. The fine blue and green hairs stand on his legs and glimmer. They seem to move as if they've got a mind of their own.

"*Azi ywww wl?*" The sound is low and raspy and sudden realization dawns on me. The hissing and clicks... are *words*.

Fluffy is trying to communicate.

*Not possible. Not fucking possible!*

Hugging myself, I rock back and forth on my heels. This wasn't the first time Fluffy attempted to speak to me. He tried to when I woke up to find his tongue deep inside me.

Maybe he won't eat me?

He did save me, twice.

*I think.*

*Oh, God. I hope he doesn't eat me.*

Fluffy takes a cautious step forward as if trying not to scare me.

*Too fucking late for that!*

His pinchers widen and then press together. Although small, the pinchers look sharp. *Deadly.*

"Please don't eat me."

Why did I say that? Why even bother?

It's clear Fluffy can't understand me.

You've talked with him before. Just pretend you are big again with Fluffy in your palm.

Yes. It's just another day of talking to myself to keep the fear at bay and think of a plan.

*Think Sidney!*

Okay, I was shot with a weird sci-fi-looking ray. Perhaps getting shot again will reverse the effects? Maybe there is a switch to make me big again?

Oh, right. It may as well have a damn switch labeled, *So you were dumb enough to get shrunk, huh?*

I need to think *logically*.

"Ssssk tsy mwss." Fluffy says, his tone rising at the end. As if in question.

He takes another step and I make a downward slashing motion. "Stop!"

Still, he tilts his head for a moment before copying my action. "Ssstawwp."

Eyes wide, I lift a shaky hand, wiggling my fingers. After a second, Fluffy does the same. Wiggling his three fingers looks so preposterous, I almost giggle from the sheer absurdity of it all.

Fascinating.

*No! Turn off your Entomologist brain and make a plan dumbass!*

"Sssz bsssl." Fluffy's rumbling voice is filled with awe.

"I don't know what you're saying." I shake my head and shrug my shoulders in a futile attempt to convey my confusion.

Watching him repeat the shrugging motion, I slowly - and shakily - get to my feet. This entire situation is impossible. Absolutely bonkers. But, I have to do something. Having some sort of communication is the only way to be remotely on the same page. To get a shred of help with my miniature problem.

Nowhere on the online courses, does it say anything about communicating with insects. Just how they live, how to identify their gender, whether or not they are poisonous, how to record their habits, etcetera. But it's worth a shot. I have to *try*.

"Sidney." I say, placing a hand on my chest, voice jumping. This is *crazy!*

Fluffy touches his chest. "Siy."

“No. *My* name is Sidney,” I tap my chest as I say my name and then step forward to touch the fluff on his chest. “You are...”

”*Siy.*” He repeats with a hand to his chest.

*This is going to be harder than I thought.*

“No, no. I’m Sidney. Siii-duh-nee!” I pat my chest, drawing out my name so that he is able to understand. It’s then that I make a horrific discovery myself. An embarrassing and shocking one.

I’m completely *nude*.

With a shriek, I attempt to cover my bare breasts with one arm and hide my bushy bits with the other hand, heat burning my already flustered face. When I shrunk, my clothes didn’t. The memory of the excruciating pain as I shrank makes a shudder zip through me.

*I’ve been nude this whole time...*

Inwardly groaning in mortification at the thought, I shrink back.

Fluffy, absolutely oblivious, reaches out a finger to tap above my arm, copying the movement I made a second ago with a gentle hum. “Nnnnn, nnnn. IIII *Siy.* Ss-iii-yyy.”

I temporarily forget about my naked situation for a second and bring the arm covering my breasts up to place a hand over my mouth, holding in a squeal. For a brief moment, it sounded like Fluffy was trying to repeat what I said back to me. But... how?!?

Incredible!

My inner Entomologist coming out, can’t ignore the fascinating discoveries that I’m slowly unearthing with this species. Fear and humiliation melt into curiosity as I pull my hand from my mouth, reaching out until my fingers hover inches from his face in awe.

“Sss-iiii-yyy.” Fluffy repeats, pinchers opening wide as he speaks. Yanking my hand away from the dangerous weapons, fear begins to trickle back into my awe-muddled brain.

Fluffy tilts his head and gradually raises a hand, holding it up between us. I release a breath I don’t realize I’m holding, and cautiously bring my hand up to place against his.

Whereas most of him is a hard blue and brown shell, the pad of his palm is soft as velvet. His claws are fully retracted. I can’t help it. I stare at our joining hands.

Pale white skin against a dark brown pad.

Four fingers press together in a V shape on my hand in an attempt to mold to his. With his three fingers thick and long, and his hands ten times bigger than mine, the attempt fails miserably.

Our palms are together, that's the best I can do.

*Please don't eat me.*

*Please don't eat me.*

*Please, for the love of God, don't eat me.*

I chant in my head as Fluffy lowers his head, carefully lifts our hands, and puts my palm against his forehead.

*"Wwwss grtt ttte mrrww, Siy."*

My name in his language of hisses and clacks, sounds exotic and inhuman. Deep and strangely thrilling. Of course, I have no idea what he said with my name, but at least he knows my name... sort of.

Looking up into his big green eyes, I study every inch of his face, trying to read something, *anything*, that will tell me what Fluffy is feeling. Nothing.

I watch with bated breath as Fluffy brings a finger up to lightly brush over my bottom lip. *"Isss tyss yyss mras?"*

His tone rises a bit, making it clear that it's a question. A question I can't understand.

"I-I'm sorry. I don't understand." I stammer and pull my hand away from his forehead and curl both arms tightly around me.

Not phased in the slightest, he uses the finger stroking my lip, to poke into my mouth, prodding at my teeth.

"Teeth." I pull his finger out of my mouth to reply, using my own to tap at one of my front teeth. "Tuh-ee-th."

*"T-e-tss."* Fluffy points at his own mouth, opening his mouth wide to reveal tiny, long, sharp, teeth that are green in color. He grabs my hand in a crushing grip and guides it to his mouth until my fingers hover inches from the needle-like fangs.

I push away the terror clogging my throat and study his teeth closely. The dim light in the tree glints off each tooth like colored glass, reflecting a small burst of rainbow. It's beautiful and terrifying. Definitely an interesting discovery since praying mantises aren't supposed to have teeth.



“Tetss.” I parrot back what I assume is his word for teeth and pull my hand back. My voice shakes and Fluffy cocks his head to the side, mouth still open wide.

He studies me for a moment before his hand lowers to cup a boob, giving it a gentle squeeze. “*Yss vea sst.*”

Nipple hardening, I wrench myself from his sudden curious grip with a squeak of shock. “No touchie!”

Fluffy’s pinchers snap shut and press tight to his mouth as he takes a step back. Head bent, bulbous green eyes fix on the arms that attempt to cover my swaying breasts.

“This is a *no-touch* square.” I huff, drawing an invisible square around my naked body. I know he won’t understand my meaning, but hopefully, the gesture will be clear enough.

Pinchers widen with the intent of speaking, but Fluffy pauses, head turning at an alarming angle to look at the entrance. I can’t hear anything, but he stares at the leaf covering the hole intently, antennas twitching. After about a minute, he turns to me and lifts both hands, palms out. “*Sssy.*”

Before I can react, Fluffy hurries over to the entrance, pulls the leaf aside, and leaves.

Blinking rapidly to clear the dancing spots in my vision from the sudden harsh sunlight, I curl my arms around my torso. The only protection I have to hold onto my sanity.

It’s not much, but I don’t know what else to do. In order to return to normal size, I need his help. He is all I have at the moment.

*Let’s hope I’m able to communicate the importance of my situation with him.*



### **Ayrin**

“We greet the Morrow.” I press a claw to my forehead, biting back a hiss of displeasure at seeing Qrysix. Partly because of him

abandoning his guard duty, but mostly, it has to do with *Siy*. No one in the colony knows that she is here. If I am to figure out what to do with the crusher, it needs to remain that way.

“Ayrin, I have been sent to remind you of the gathering hunt meeting to scavenge food for the Colony,” Qrysix says, pinchers clicking rapidly - a thing he only does when he’s nervous.

“I shall leave momentarily to meet with the others.” I hiss in answer and observe his skittish behavior carefully. “You know you shouldn’t allow that female to alter your duties.”

Qrysix snaps his head up to glare at me. “What do you mean by that?”

“Ursa. If you are going to spend the day with her, at least get someone else to guard your post. Zin about bit my head off in anger at your careless mistake.” I snap, annoyed at his clueless tone.

“Keep her name *out* of your mouth.” Qrysix’s venomous response startles me and my pinchers snap open with a long hiss of defense.

“What has troubled you so?” Back legs bending, I lower into a guarded crouch.

“Ursa is *dead*.” I jolt backward at his blunt reply.

“What? How?” There are many questions that buzz inside my skull, demanding answers.

“It was a crusher,” Qrysix says softly. “We were lounging under a patch of Dryllis’s in full bloom. A crusher stomped on the patch and Ursa pushed me out of the way...”

His words trail off as he crosses his arms, staring intently over my shoulder, lost in thought. “Just meet up with the gathering group. They leave soon.”

With that, he unfurls his wings and launches into the air, gliding away to his own Burrow.

As soon as he leaves, I quickly enter my Burrow to see *Siy* backing away from the entrance, brown eyes wide.

“I must go, but I shall return.” I slow my words and make open hand gestures to convey that she must stay while I must go.

”*Dun lev mea lne!*” Her tone is shrill, scared, desperate.

Not wanting to see fear cloud those mesmerizing eyes, I take her tiny hands in mine, leaning in to place them on my forehead. The

only action I know to comfort this strange creature.

“Stay here,” I murmur with a gentle hiss.

”*Sty hrrr,*” Siy says, a touch of fear still coating her words. I can smell the rancid fear coming off her in waves.

It’s a harrowing scent.



The heavy weight of the Wiv I carry over my shoulder, sits as a prideful reminder that tonight's gathering was fruitful. Shifting the corpse to sit more comfortably around my shoulders, I follow behind Zin and Qrysix.

The Wiv's thin legs drag on the ground, the spindle hair brushing against the fuzz on my legs. By the light of Luna, we had no run-ins with any Lorg's - none alive that is - and were able to scavenge discarded corpses left behind by other predators. Should the gathering prove not bountiful, we would've taken to hide under Cyin or Suz patches and lay in wait for a few straggling Wiv's.

Smaller than us, these red and black creatures always travel in packs, serving a colony of their own. Three or four will always stray from the pack to search for leaves or discarded remains, leaving them the perfect target.

Tiny heads, six small legs, long antennas, and sharp prickling hairs that cover their body, Wiv's plump chest and rears make the ideal meal. Their heads, when hollowed out, hold a decent amount of water.

Each Drotopian in the gathering group carry their bounty with pride and I puff out my chest, gaze straying briefly down toward the folded leaf in my hand. The Queen always eats before the colony, but this bundle isn't for Onyx. No. This carefully wrapped leaf holds a slab of Freya meat for *Siy*. Freya meat is rare and hard to come by because a Freya's wings are big and powerful. They are incredibly fast and too smart to be trapped. Freya's can make a quick escape when cornered by snapping open their wings, flashing the hypnotic colors that decorate them, momentarily distracting the predator.

Because Freya meat is so rare, it has become a delicacy among Drotopians. While scavenging, I found the carcass of one hidden behind a Cyin patch, dragged there by another predator. There was still a good amount of meat left over, so I foraged some and wrapped it in a torn leaf.

I'm not sure what *Siy*'s species eat, but I know she will be getting hungry soon. I can't have her die without learning more about her.

*She fascinates me.*

The home tree looms ahead and I shift the Wiv corpse again in preparation to climb. When carrying heavy things, we can't fly very well. So, we wrap our prey tight around our necks or chests and climb.

Claws digging into rough bark, I push aside the aching discomfort in my limbs from gathering and begin climbing.

Pale yellows and deep purples bathe the home tree in an enchanting explosion of colors. The soft light brightens the sky while seeming to darken at the same time. The vibrant sounds of creatures that rise in the day, dim into a gentle buzz as night falls, bringing a cool bite with the breeze.

As I pass under the mossy entrance, warmth envelopes me. Unes light flickers on the winding path ahead, making the shadows twist hauntingly. Following the others, I reach back to tuck the wrapped bundle securely behind a wing. It will remain hidden there until I take off towards my Burrow. To present the delicate meat to *Siy*.

The strange crusher that preoccupies every thought.

I move deeper into the tree until I'm standing on the mossy surface of the ground in the Royal Burrow. Shuffling in line, I lay my offering on the large flat meal rock and keep my head down while attempting to flee back to my Burrow.

"Ayrin, a word?" Zin's growling hiss leaves no room for argument and I freeze on the spot, shoulders sagging slightly.

"What troubles you?" I turn to face him and place a claw on my forehead, not feeling the need to voice the greeting.

"I have a bad feeling that burns deep and you want to know when it began?" Hands clasped behind his back, Zin leans to hover close. "When you started taking Qrysix's position over on the South side of Drotopia twelve moons ago. Around the same time, those crushers appeared. Isn't that *odd*?"

The stench of rotting decay from the meal he ate earlier, washes over me and I struggle not to take a step back. "Odd indeed."

"There isn't anything you need to tell me? Nothing to report?" Zin phrases it in a way that doesn't pose a question, but a fact.

"There is *nothing* to report," I reply firmly and curl my fingers into a fist to prevent reaching back and touching the bundle. I can't give away any notion for him not to trust me. If he finds the hidden bundle, I'll have to give reasoning behind why I hid it. To reveal the closely guarded secret that resides in my Burrow.

"You're certain?" Zin asks again, straightening so he looms above me threateningly.

"Yes." Rising to my full height, I glare up at him with a snap of my pinchers. Zin may be taller than me, but I refuse to back down. I won't give my crusher away.

Zin studies me for a moment before nodding and waving his hand in dismissal. “Very well, you may go.”

Overwhelming relief floods me and I hastily retreat, trying my best to keep my posture stiff and the bundle tucked firm under my wing.

Silently thanking the Luna above that no one is around the entrance, I grab the bundle, snap open my wings, and take a darting leap from the extending branch.

I clutch the bundle tight to the fuzz on my chest as I bank towards my Burrow.

To... *Siy*.





**Sidney**

*Where is he?*

The thought repeats in my mind for the hundredth time as I frantically pace back and forth. It was still light out when he left, rumbling something in his language I didn't understand. The only thing I seemed to understand, was the hissed word of "Stay."

At least... I think that's what Fluffy said.

I glance over at the hole, the wide Caco leaf covering fluttering gently as the breeze picks up outside. Soft golden light dims to a blush pink with purple undertones of a sunset.

Sighing, I turn to continue pacing and freeze mid-step when sudden pale green light floods the inside of the tree. My eyes are drawn to mushrooms growing out of the bark that I hadn't noticed before. Curious, I tiptoe forward until I'm standing below one of the mushrooms, looking up.

It looks to be a normal *Psilocybe Cubensis*, but grows out of the rough bark in this tree. And it appears to be *glowing*.

Fascinating.

Jumping from the balls of my feet to my tip toes, I try to get a better look. These types of mushrooms usually only grow in dung, and they absolutely don't glow. What is the source of the light inside them?

I grit my teeth as my nipples brush against the tough bark, sending jolts of pain through me. Ignoring the discomfort, I reach up, my fingertips just grazing the root of the mushroom.

"*Yu ezjs tz unes lys?*" A deep clicking voice sounds behind me.

With a shrill squeal of fright, I stumble, bark digging into the bare flesh of my breasts and legs. My back hits a solid mass and arms snap out to steady me.

"*Azi yww wl, Siy?*" I relax slightly in the firm embrace when I realize it's Fluffy.

"I-I'm sorry. I don't understand." I stammer in fear at having him here and pull out of his arms.

It's both strange and frustrating how terrified I was when he motioned that he had to leave the tree. Now that he's back, I'm *still* terrified.

Fluffy heaves a long hiss and snaps his pinchers together in two sharp clicks. Almost as if upset at not being able to communicate.

One of his fingers taps just below his pincher, like he's deep in thought as he watches me cross my arms over my chest, uncomfortable at having my breasts out.

"*Unes.*" Fluffy says and gestures to the clump of glowing mushrooms.

"Unees." I repeat, trying to sound out the odd word.

"*Un-es.*" He draws out the syllables.

"Unes." I repeat.

His eyes seem to shine as he bobs his head excitedly. "*Unes lys.*"

Fluffy scurries over to the wall, extending a claw and tapping on the mushroom, making it jiggle. "*Unes lys.*"

"Unes lizz?" His language is strange and sounds awkward coming out of my mouth.

"*L-y-ssss.*" He drags out the ending with a hiss, as if punctuating that it's pronounced with an *S*, not a *Z*.

"*L-y-s.*" I repeat.

Another head bob.

"So, this mushroom light, is called a *Unes Lys*?" I ask.

Fluffy tilts his head when I first start speaking but nods frantically when I mention the words he taught me. Taking several steps forward, he gestures at me and goes still.

Now it's my turn to be confused.

Why did he gesture? And why does he stand there, looking at me? As if... waiting for something.

Realization dawns and my eyebrows shoot to my hairline in surprise. Wait, does he want me to teach him something?

The longer I stand there, scuffing my big toe on the mossy ground nervously, the more convinced I become that is *exactly* what he wants.

What to teach him?

*Better start off small potatoes.*

Biting my bottom lip, I raise my hand in the air and point to it. "Hand. Hu-an-duh."

Fluffy's pinchers press together and his antenna's twitch as his gaze trains on my hand. "*Hnn.*"

Fear melting a bit, I giggle at his hard look of concentration. Pinchers tucking against his mouth, antenna's quivering, and eyes glazed over as if lost in thought.

"Try again," I encourage. "*Hu-an-duh.*"

"*Hand.*" He says the word slowly, like it's so awkward to pronounce, that he's embarrassed.

"Yes, you did it!" I exclaim and clap my hands together happily at the tiny victory.

A startled hiss escapes his wide mouth when I clap my hands and he jerks his upper body back, bulbous eyes narrowing in skepticism.

Huh. So, no eyelids, but he *can* somewhat narrow his eyes.

*If only I had my notepad*, I think longingly as I slowly put both hands up, palms facing out.

"It's okay! It's okay! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you." I keep my tone light and soft so I don't frighten him again. "Sidney is *friend*. Understand? Sidney is *friend* to Fluffy."

"*Tzz swd yww mk iz lvy, bt I cst unsd yww.*" His tone - although deep - holds a note of sorrow.

One hand on my hip, I scratch at my head with the other. How do I get him to understand? I need him to teach me more of his language. It's like I can't quite grasp it, but also understand. As if it's simple but difficult at the same time. The language itself moves off the tongue with a little ease but gets lost in the hissing and clacking they exude with every breath. Sure, most of the words lack some hisses or chitters, but they still come out jumbled. Almost garbled.

An idea forms and I close the distance between us quickly. Before I can change my mind, I touch my chest. "Sidney."

Fluffy reaches out and brushes three fingers against my collarbone. "*Siy.*"

Taking his hand in both of mine, I gently press it to his chest and raise an eyebrow in question, waiting silently like he did.

"*Ayrin.*" He responds, gathering that I want his name.

"Ayrin." I repeat, hoping that I'm saying his name right. He nods and I sigh in relief.

*Now we're getting somewhere.*

His leg joints bend until he towers only a foot above me, green eyes seeming to glow in the mushroom light.

"*Siy.*" He says my name again, voice soft.

"*Si-duh-knee.*" I whisper each syllable, gaze never leaving his.

"*Sidkne.*" Ayrin says, pinchers opening as he hisses the word.

"Try again," I murmur. "*Si-duh-knee.*"

"*Sidney.*" Smiling, I nod and reach up to uncurl blue strands of hair that got tangled around his antenna's.

Unable to help myself, I gently stroke a finger down the length of one quivering antenna. Thin and protected with a hard shell, the antenna's flex comfortably and is soft to the touch.

*Interesting.*

I can't tear my eyes from his molten one. Although insect, they hold a certain humanity in them. A kind of intelligence.

"*Ayrin fedz Sidney.*" As Ayrin speaks, he pulls away and reaches a hand behind him for a moment, and holds up something wrapped in a leaf.

Cautiously taking the leaf he offers, I slowly unwrap it to find a big hunk of something bright pink. Something sticky and yellow coats the entirety of it.

Looking up, I shrug a shoulder to portray my confusion at the unknown mash I'm holding.

"*Eet.*" Ayrin says, tapping a finger to his mouth.

"Huh?" I ask.

What does tapping of the mouth mean?

Does he want to show me his teeth again?

"*Eet.*" He repeats, uses a claw to slice off a portion of the mess, and leans his head back to pop it into his mouth.

Wait a minute.

*He wants me to...*

I shove the leaf into his hands and dash to the entrance, pushing the Caco leaf to the side and emptying the contents of my stomach onto the plants below.

“Sidney, *Azi yww wl?*” Ayrin rushes over to where I crouch, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. His hand clutches my shoulder, eyes slightly scrunched and blazing with worry. The antenna’s on his head strain forward, as if intending to comfort me.

“I’m okay,” I reply and give him a weak smile, wincing at the unpleasant sour taste burning my mouth. “I just don’t eat insects.”

Worry switches to confusion and he follows my stare to the fallen mush on the moss. Ayrin walks over, grabs up the leaf, and uses one hand to shove the stuff back onto the leaf before wrapping everything.

I watch him take the leaf of mush over to the opposite side of the tree and gently place it inside a hole carved into the bark itself. With it being so dark inside the tree, I hadn’t been able to explore properly.

I want to ask why cubby holes are carved in the wall. Hell, I want to ask a lot of questions. But it will have to wait. I must learn more so I’m able to gather enough information to ask things in his language. Things that I want to remember if and when I return to normal size.

For instance, is he part of a group or is he solitary? I’m not entirely sure he is a solitary insect. Judging by what I saw when I peeked outside after he told me to stay, there was another of his kind that he seemed to be talking to. I couldn’t get a good look at them because Ayrin stood in front of them, blocking the entrance, but they were speaking the same hissing language.

Ayrin walks back over to me, and I crane my neck to look up at his towering form. He studies me for a second before glancing briefly at the entrance, unsure of something.

Too quick for my eyes to follow, Ayrin hurries to the entrance, pushing the Caco leaf aside to peer out into the darkness, before stepping out.

A fresh wave of panic washes over me and I dart toward the hole and slip outside without thinking, only to slam into a hard wall.

Hands once again snap out to balance me and I fling myself into his embrace, arms curling around his waist. I have no idea why I followed him outside, or why I’m clinging to him like my life depends on it. Perhaps I’m frightened at the thought of him leaving again without knowing if he’ll come back.

*I don’t want to be left alone.*

In all honesty, I don't want to leave Ayrin's side for fear of being stuck like this forever. Of losing the only lead I have of returning to the others. And that scares me.

I usually enjoy being by myself... but not this time.

"*Yww azi ssf*, Sidney." I hear him softly hiss my name along with other words I don't know.

Thick nimble fingers stroke my shoulder and I suck in a deep breath, drawing in the spicy vanilla scent of him into my lungs.

"*Bss nt arrd*." Ayrin's slow whisper is deep and cautious. Kind of like the tone you'd use on a wounded animal you're trying not to startle.

I unlink my arms from around his narrow waist and take a step back to look up sheepishly. "Sorry. I'm not sure why I did that."

"*Yww nnd nt bss arrd*, Sidney." He says and sweeps his arm in a wide gesture around us. "*Luk*."

Turning, my mouth drops open. It's beautiful. Night has fallen, and the Amazon Rainforest is lit up with soft yellow lights that drift lazily about. Upon closer inspection, I realize the floating lights, are fireflies.

At normal size, it's nothing much. But shrunk to the size of an insect? It's breathtaking. I cautiously take two steps to peek over the side of the wide thick branch holding us up.

High up in the tree, everything looks incredibly huge. Especially the fireflies that hover a few feet off the ground and drift high enough to gape at.

*It looks like a scene in a fairytale.*

Something soft tickles my thigh and I glance down to see one of Ayrin's fuzzy legs hooked around mine, almost like he's protecting me from falling over the edge.

Even though I'm smart enough to not lean too close, the gesture itself is... sweet.



### **Ayrin**

Her face is aglow with Gild light and I can't stop staring. As she leans a little more over the side, eyes wide and blunt teeth showing,



I'm taken by the beauty of this crusher. By the sheer, fascinating, and innocence of this creature.

"*Cauen weh gu dohn?*" Her arms go up again to her chest as she shivers in the cool air. It's not to cover the mounds that sway hypnotically with every breath, but to clasp her hands around her arms in a folded position as she once again looks over the side of the branch.

Pinchers clicking, I tilt my head in confusion. I don't know what she just said, but it sounds like a question.

"Such a harmonious voice. Yet, I'm afraid I know not of what you say." I reply, pressing my front leg tighter around her tiny body to prevent her falling and suppress a shudder of heat that surges through me at feeling her against my shell.

She is not of my kind, but a crusher that is feared throughout Drotopia. An enemy among many. She is not my Aya.

*I should not be having these thoughts.*

Yet, her sweet scent and soft body drive all thoughts toward one thing. *Mating.*

*No!*

*Focus.*

Sidney followed me out here for a reason. One I'm not certain of. She appeared terrified moments ago as she clung to me like a fresh hatchling.

*Is she hungry?*

The thought has a low hum of worry rumbling in my chest. From what I saw after presenting her with Freya meat, it stands to reason that perhaps she's not hungry.

*Or does her kind eat something else?*

I know from feeling alone, that her colorless teeth are blunt. No sharpness. Not suited to rip into tough or soft meat.

Plants, maybe?

Qistik berries may be soft enough for her delicate mouth. If not, I shall mash it into paste for her.

"*Dohn. D-o-hnnn.*" I'm so immersed in my thoughts, I jolt at Sidney's soft voice trying to pronounce one of her strange words.

"*Dohn*." I repeat slowly and she nods, pointing at the ground below.

Understanding dawns on me and I mimic the downwards motion. "You want to go down? *Dohn*?"

Her head bobs and she turns to face me, stretching her arms up. I'm confused at the gesture, at what she wants.

*Does she want me to pick her up to take her down?*

After a moment of hesitation, I bend to lower my head and her arms curl around my neck. Securing her legs around my waist, I wrap both arms around the resilient body draping over mine, snap out my wings, and launch myself into the air.

A shrill sound comes from her as we glide down and I release a gentle hiss to comfort her. I assume it's a sound of terror from the way she tightens her arms around me and buries her face in the fuzz covering my neck.

When we land on the ground, I gently prod her arm, watching in fascination as it bounces back.

Seeing that we are safe, Sidney untwines her arms and legs, sliding down my body until her feet touch the dirt. She jostles against my slit and another rush of need wracks my body.

*Focus.*

That is what my mind tells me to do. However, I'm unable to tear my eyes away from the awed look that dance in those brown orbs as Sidney shuffles around, gently touching stalks of greenery and closely observing a few Gilds that pass by overhead.

*So beautiful.*

Such breathtaking beauty.

Vivid, enticing, images begin to form of what that beautiful face would look like frozen in ecstasy. At what my name would sound like, cried out in mating passion, before she ate my head.

I shake my head of the hazy lust that threatens to consume me and hurry to the base of the tree I call home, leaving her to gape at a patch of Cyin's.

I do not know what she eats, so I gather an array of edible food to offer her. Collecting Silt fungi and plucking a few Qistik berries, I gently place them on the ground and give a sharp hiss to get her attention, motioning for her to join me.

”*Aur thoz muzrems?*” Sidney asks and drops to her knees to inspect the light brown, rounded tip of the Sillt.

“Sillt. *Si-ll-t*,” I extend a claw and tap it against the soft mushy texture. “Safe to eat. Safe.”

“Sillt... *sai?*” She asks and points to the Sillt.

“Sillt *sai*,” I repeat, using her word of what I presume to be *safe*. Head tilting back, I open my pinchers and tap two fingers against my mouth. “Eat.”

As soon as I mention the word eat, she hoists the Sillt towards her and bends to nibble at the flat round exterior. She then gives a low throaty sound and my stalk twitches, the rhythmic hiss of mating tries to escape.

“Try, Qistik.” I rasp with a rumble, gesturing to the Qistik berries laid out next to the Sillt’s. “*Sai*.”

She hums, teeth flashing in the dim Gild light, and leans in to wrap those two plump, pink, things on her mouth around the gritty texture of the sweet berry. Pale red nectar drips from her mouth as she pulls away, chewing happily.

I watch the red droplet gradually make its way to the mound on her chest and pool over the pink orb in the middle, leaving a tantalizing red trail.

I want to follow that trail with my tongue. Lick up every sticky drop of nectar. Taste her shell.

Without thinking, I lower on my leg joints until I’m eye level with her and lean ever closer. Gaze latching on that tempting red trail.

”*Wut aur yu duohg?*” Sidney has stopped eating and is leaning her body away from me.

But I don’t notice. I can’t think of anything else except the urge to taste. To lap up the sweet nectar.

Pinchers wide, my thin tongue darts out to lightly drag from the tiny pink orb, up her neck, and finally over her mouth.

”*S-Stawp*.” Even though her voice comes out weak, her eyes simmer with hunger. Hunger that if given the chance, I could placate.

A breathless whimper pierces through the insatiable craving muddling my mind and I withdraw to see alarm replacing desire in

her eyes.

*Stawp.*

That is a word I learned from her earlier. A word that means stop. Tongue sliding into my mouth, I take several steps back. “Forgive my brashness. I do not know what came over me.”

Bowing my head slightly, I hasten to a patch of Cyin’s and pluck a few leaves to wrap the soft food for Sidney.

I may have turned away several females in the colony, but this one has been the closest to having me act on instinct. To almost giving in without thinking of the consequences.

*This female will be undoing*



**Sidney**

“Are you sure?” I holler over my shoulder at Ayrin while studying the orange fruit hanging on the branch I’m standing on.

During online courses, there were several warnings as to which fruits and plants are poisonous. This being one of them. *Manzanilla de la muerte*, it's called.

Translation?

"*Little apple of death.*"

*I do not want to break out in blisters and die.*

"*Sai to Eat. Sai for Sidney.*" Ayrin rumbles as he walks out onto the narrow branch I crouch on.

Other than slight trembling of wood beneath my hands, the branch holds. Releasing a sigh of relief, I lean closer to inspect the smooth texture of the big round apple, as high in the air as I touch the apple under the branch. My stomach gurgles as a delicious citrus scent wafts from the fruit and my mouth waters.

Eating mushrooms and berries are okay and filling, but I want to sample more of what the rainforest has to offer. Just... not the poisonous parts.

It's been two weeks since the awkward moment of Ayrin licking up the berry juice I got on myself and feeling strange heat pooling in my stomach. To keep my sanity, I pushed that odd feeling down deep, convincing myself that it was merely a fluke. A lapse of judgment.

Ayrin's way of keeping busy after what happened is teaching me things in his language.

Like how a *Cyin*, is a Rose. *Qistik*, is a Rumberry. *Sillt*, is a mushroom. And *ssf* is his word for safe. I've grasped most of his words in his language, but there are still some that my mouth can't quite form because of the hisses, snaps, and clicks.

Surprisingly, Ayrin started to catch on quickly to what I was saying. He can even say a few words in a sort of broken English.

Although, I suspect that there are some English words that he can't say. Since he doesn't have lips, it makes sense. It took two days, to learn that *sll* in his language, means *shell*. And another to teach him that instead of a shell, I have *skin*.

Small purple bruises stood out starkly against the pale skin on my arms for days after much poking and pinching from Ayrin's curiosity.

On the sixth day, I fashioned some leaves and wet mud into bracelets, a top, and skirt. Crude clothing, but it works for now and

I'd rather not tromp around completely naked.

A warm breeze drifts through the trees and brushes against my bare sex. I shiver and sigh as I sit up, heels digging into my ass cheeks.

I can't exactly make underwear, so it's best not to think about everything hanging out.

"This is safe? *Sai*?" I point again to the orange apple swaying in the wind. "You are certain?"

"*Sai* to eat. I... *crinnn*." Ayrin attempts to repeat the word and I hold back a giggle.

It's clear that he's trying hard to learn and repeat the English I speak by slightly narrowing his eyes, gnashing his teeth in frustration, and snapping his pinchers while deep in thought. Figuring out how to form the words.

It's adorable.

"I'm not so sure it's safe, Ayrin." I reply hesitantly, glancing down at the fruit with worry.

"*Sai. Sai* for Sidney." He huffs in broken English and scurries over to me. Hooking the claws on his feet into the bark, he leans over the edge and uses a sharp claw to swipe at the apple, cutting off a small chunk.

Sitting upright, Ayrin's pinchers widen and he shoves the fruit into his mouth with a crunch. Clear juice drips from the corners of his mouth and glistens on his green teeth as he chews.

"*Drig sai. Sidney eat Drig.*"

"But they are poisonous," I argue, thinking back to my knowledge of this fruit. "App- I mean, *Drig bad. Drig not sai.*"

"*Drig sai.*" He insists, bending to cut off another piece and shoving it into my hands.

"No," I reply firmly and slap it back into his hand. "No *Drig.*"

He looks from the dripping fruit and back to me a few times before shrugging and popping it into his mouth.

*Not safe for humans, but apparently edible for insects. Good to know.*

I definitely need to be more careful of what I eat. Just because it's safe for him, doesn't bode true for me.

Good thing I know which plants and fruits are safe from those courses. *Thank God.*

Sitting back on my hands, I wince from the sharp pain as bark digs into my cheeks, but ignore it and tilt my head back. My muscles relax as warm humid air washes over my skin and lifts my hair to dance lazily around my head.

The humming sounds of nature mixed with the sweet aroma of the Amazon is soothing.

"*Aszzly bssl.*" Ayrin's deep inhuman voice rasps in my ear and I jerk my head to see him awfully close, pinchers hovering inches from my face.

"Not so close!" I yelp, leaning away from the deadly sharp things.

His hand lifts to brush a finger over my bottom lip. "*Lips.*"

He speaks the body part I taught him, perfectly. It's surprising that he got the hang of that word so fast, but then again, all of this is surprising.

I'm still getting used to the grass, trees, and bushes being twenty times taller than me now. In the eyes of someone in my group, I am but an ant. Small in size. Fighting each day to survive. To not become another insect's meal.

In the two weeks I've come to know Ayrin better, he's taught me a Basilisk - an enemy they watch closely every day - is what they call a *Lorg*.

I only came to understand that they are their enemies from a close encounter a few days ago. I was gathering some *Qistik* berries to bring back with us up to the tree, when a soft leather hand covered my mouth and yanked me into the bush.

Ayrin's sharp warning hiss had the scream on the tip of my tongue, die on my lips.

"*Lorg* bad." His breath warmed my back as he pressed me against his chest and I peered out between the brambles to see a green scaly lizard wandering about.

We waited for hours for the lizard to leave, and when it did, Ayrin was closed off for two days. It almost looked as if he was angry. Furiously pacing back and forth while I watched nervously.

Every day at dawn, I watch Ayrin leave the *Burrow* - what he calls the hole he resides in - for hours and come back at dusk. After



a few days of this, I tried to ask him about it but got a garbled hiss in response.

*There is still so much I don't know about his species.*

Buzzing thrums in the air and my eyes snap open to look around nervously. This sound, it's like hundreds of flies.

“Sidney, *hide!*” Ayrin tone is thick with worry.

I jump up and dart towards the hole I've called home for two weeks, only to stumble to a stop when another mantis drops down in front of me.

“Oh, shit,” I mutter, taking a step back as the other advances.

Back hitting something solid, my eyes snap up to see Ayrin hovering close.

Glancing down, I notice I'm shaking. So bad in fact, that Ayrin reaches down to gently press me against his side, eyes never straying from the darker blue fuzzy mantis in front of him.

*It's the one I saved from the jar!*

The realization has a small sliver of hope daring to make an appearance. Maybe Ayrin's mate will remember and spare me. Sharp clacking of its pinchers and an angry sounding hiss has my heart sinking like a stone.

*That doesn't sound good.*

“You *brgt hrrsss!*” I can't understand what it's saying, but the hissing tone is deep. Venomous. Male.

It's not his mate. Possibly his friend?

The male attempts to reach around Ayrin towards me, and a high, uneven titter comes from Ayrin, laced with barely contained fury.

A squeak of fear escapes as I scramble to hide behind him and pray I'm not on the menu as more appear and land on the branch.

Praying Mantis are carnivorous. They eat other insects to defend themselves and because of hunger. I'm not entirely certain if they'll eat me. I know Ayrin won't. But the others that gather around us, looming threateningly... not so sure.

Every one of them vibrates and buzzes with hisses and chitters as they speak to each other, giving the air a tense electrical charge.

I can tell they are talking about me from the sharp gestures in my direction. All of them seem upset for some reason. One thing I know

for sure, is that they are furious at Ayrin.

*Oh no. Is it because he saved me?*

I don't want to be the reason his own kind turns on him. It would be unbearable to watch them chase him away... or worse.

Ayrin's shoulders slump and I watch him nod, antenna's twitching nervously.

What did he just agree to? Am I lunch?

*Oh God, no!*

Ayrin's friend launches himself off the branch, wings snapping open to catch a current and veering to the left. One by one, the others do the same and fly off until there are two left standing behind us, arms crossed and waiting.

Ayrin turns and lowers so we are eye level. He opens his arms wide and waits. Not sure what he wants, my eyebrows pinch together in confusion.

"You *nd* to *cmesss mss* me." He says, his tone urgent.

Silence.

I don't know how to respond to the strange hissing language. I can only understand some of it. Not enough to fully understand.

"*Cmessss*." He tries again.

"I'm sorry. I... I don't understand what you're saying." I shake my head and lift my hands in an '*I don't know what the fuck you just said*' gesture.

A mantis behind us stomps one of its legs. "*Grbb ttt if you mst!*"

Ayrin scoops me into his arms and jumps from the branch before I have time to react. Burying my face into the fluff on his neck, a muffled scream rips from my mouth and terror has my heart leaping to my throat.

"*Mmmm hre. You arrrss sai.*" I barely hear Ayrin over the wind roaring in my ears, but I can feel his chest rumble as he speaks.

Peeking over his shoulder to see the other two following, translucent wings distract me from the crippling fear that threatens to choke me. Ayrin's wings hum as they flutter. Almost like that of a hummingbird. Flapping so fast, the wings are a blur. Hardly able to see the wings.

I can see that, even with the fast-fluttering wings, they are transparent. Easily seen through.

*Fascinating.*

Ayrin dips and weaves in the air, taking us to a large oak tree that sits in the middle of a clearing. A familiar clearing that I was a few feet away from not that long ago while observing Ayrin – Fluffy. We draw closer and start to lower towards a group of Mantis that seem to be awaiting our arrival.

Landing with a thud, Ayrin pulls in his wings, pressing them tight to his back, and sets me gently on my feet. He gestures to the large open mouth of the oak tree with a trill and snap of his pinchers.

A wordless signal to follow.

I nod and grab his arm with both of mine as we move forward. A chill sweeps over me as the cool shade of the tree, blocks out the sun entirely.

Darkness. I can't see a thing.

Squinting, I clutch Ayrin with one hand and reach out with the other, cautiously stepping down.

“Sidney. I *mm hrr.*” Ayrin rumbles, taking the hand I use to fumble around and clasping it in his.

Anxious, I allow him to guide me deeper into the tree. After a minute, my eyes begin to adjust and a startled gasp echoes loudly in the enclosed space.

It's not completely dark in the tree as I first thought. Small mushrooms grow out of the walls every few feet, seeming to glow a soft pale green and giving off a fairytale appearance. Mouth dropping open, I take in the long winding path of wood that leads down, further into the belly of the tree. The deeper we go, the lighter it gets.

I can't help but admire the handiwork of the descending path. It's like someone hollowed out the tree, carving and smoothing a platform down into the tree. The glowing mushrooms go from appearing every few feet, to showing in clusters, providing excessive light to see more of what should be impossible.

*A colony.*

Bioluminescent light settles on a sea of bright blues and greens. Mantis's moving about, carrying bodies of dead insects, what look like eggs and other various shiny things I can't quite make out. All

mill around and travel down passageways that branch off to the sides, making me wonder just how big this tree is and where the passages lead.

A faint scent of something sweet and damp hangs in the air and I gawk like a dying fish gasping for air.

I once saw the inside of an anthill in a documentary, with twisting passages and a spiral path leading into the hill itself. This reminds me of that. So much so, that it's almost like they are living like ants themselves.

*That's impossible. Praying Mantis are solitary insects. They don't serve a Queen or thrive in a colony.*

Two weeks ago, that thought would've crossed my mind. I wouldn't have believed the proof in front of me. But after being shrunk, caught by a Mantis I've been studying for a day or so, spending two weeks living with said Mantis - at first being terrified and then trying to understand his odd language - this doesn't come as that big of a shock. It's still surprising though. And a *huge* discovery.

The assumption that they do indeed serve a Queen is confirmed when we reach the bottom of the path and the crowd parts to reveal a Mantis that towers above all of them. Easily at least twelve feet.

Arm hovering protectively around me, the tips of Fluffy's claws ghost against my lower back as we proceed toward the Queen. The fluff around her neck and head is bright red. Sapphire blue patterns swirl around her body on dark green fluff. Her antenna's are longer than Ayrin's as well and her bulbous eyes are golden in color.

Eyes darting around, I notice a few others in the crowd with similar coloring as the Queen. Not as big, but still tower a bit over the males.

*So, that's how you can tell they are female. Different colors, longer antenna's, yellow eyes, and are taller than the males, I think, filing that tidbit of information away.*

We come to a stop before the Queen, and fear returns tenfold under her burning glare.

*I am so dead.*



### **Ayrin**

A hush falls over the colony as Sidney and I stand before the Queen. The flick of an antenna and tightening of her pinchers, give

away just how furious she is. My own antenna's flatten in distress as I shove the crusher behind me, attempting to shield her from curious and prying eyes.

She presses her face against my back, cowering in fear. I can feel the tremors wrack her body as she presses closer still.

"Be not afraid, little one," I murmur, not taking my eyes off the Queen I'm sworn to protect. Onyx.

I know the crusher can't fully understand me, but I say it anyways, to comfort her. To console her into not saying or doing anything. To allow me to speak for both of us. Fuzz tugging with each frantic pull, I look down to see her wide gaze directed at me. Panic and terror fill those beautiful brown pools that reflect in the dim Unes light and make my heart squeeze.

I don't want fear in her eyes. No. I want them glazed over like they were before. Dark with need, with desire. Desire for lapping up the nectar that gathers at her core. Nectar that she secretes just for me. Stalk twitching at the memory of her flushed face on the first day, I pull in my pinchers to suppress a hiss of want.

Oh, do I want her. Badly. But I shouldn't want the pale crusher. I shouldn't. I should want to mate with a female in the colony. A female I should feel honored to take my head. But... I know every female in this colony - excluding the new females that are hatched every full moon. None of these females excite me. None of them make me feel the way Sidney does.

This concerns me.

"I don't ask for much," Onyx says with a dark vibrating hiss. "All I ask, is for my Warriors to protect the colony and follow the rules. The main one being to stay *away* from the crushers. And what do I find out?"

Swallowing a hiss of shame, I hang my head as I endure the venomous scolding. "That not only did you disregard our main rule, but you also brought one into our home!"

"My Queen, I beg of you, just-" I'm cut off by the furious roar that shakes the wooden walls.

"You shall not speak unless I deem it necessary!!!" Onyx's eyes flash, seeming to glow golden in the dimness.

With a sharp nod, I avert my gaze to stare downward.

“These rules are put in place for a reason, Ayrin. These monstrous beings have captured and killed many of us. They show no compassion for us or our way of life. All they know how to do, is *destroy*. Does their actions not merit a watchful eye? Do they deserve to find any kind of shelter with us? Why the revolting fascination with these crushers? Do you not care for the colony you took an oath to protect?”

“Not all of them are as monstrous as you say!” I wilt under the weight of her questions and the words fly out angrily as if to protect the crusher clutching onto my fuzz.

“Oh?” I instinctively take a step back at the one uttered word that drips with deadly malice. “Tell me how you know this.”

Puffing out my chest, I unflinchingly meet Onyx’s stern gaze. “This crusher is *different*. From the moment she arrived, I have studied her. Witnessed her caring nature with other species, even dangerous ones. I know those in her colony have crushed and captured us, but she is different. I observed two of her own kind turn on her. Hit her with an odd light that somehow made her... small.”

Tips of my claws tangling in Sidney’s dark hair, I glimpse down into her confused eyes. The flickering of Unes light dances across her face. Remembering the unusual and horrifying scene, I shudder. It’s as if I can still hear her piercing screams.

She’s small now. No claws, fangs, wings, or shell. Sidney *needs* a protector. I will be that protector from dangerous creatures *and* from the Queen’s wrath.

“So much skill, such little vision. Ayrin, you lack understanding of the dire situation before us. There is no *guarantee* that this crusher can be trusted. No verification that this creature has done anything to be spared.” Onyx replies.

Overwhelming dread tightens my chest and fear sizzles hot in my gut at her statement. I must protect Sidney. I *must*.

“As much as I disagree with having her here, I’m afraid I must interject, my Queen,” Tone full of resentment, Qrysix pushes his way through the colony to step in front of Onyx. “This crusher, for reasons unknown, released me from an unbreakable orb when I was captured not long ago.”

“And why wasn’t this brought to my attention?” She asks, her eyes softening. The Queen, ever since Qrysix was but a hatchling, has had a soft spot for him. His mother and the Queen were really

close friends before we lost her and my mother to a Lorg. Qrysix has never been the same since.

“In honesty, I was ashamed. I still am, my Queen.” Qrysix rumbles, arms crossing tightly as if to shield himself from the colony’s shocked gaze.

I understand the shock that fills the chamber. I did not know of the courageous act this crusher did. Qrysix missing from guarding the entrance days ago, now make sense.

Pride warms my chest, replacing the fear, and I look down at Sidney with renewed respect. She did not have to save Qrysix from her own kind, yet she did anyway. That alone deserves praise.

“I see,” Onyx says, a hint of admiration in her gravely and demanding voice. “But does it merit a pardon?”

“I think it does, my Queen.” I interrupt what Qrysix is about to say and he shoots me a venomous glare.

“How can we be sure that this crusher, this *female*, won’t endanger the colony?” Onyx asks, either not caring that the question wasn’t for me to answer, or simply not noticing.

I release a long trill and I’m aware of hundreds of eyes on me - eyes of every Drotopian in Drotopia. The great Luna above could be watching right now and I could care less. My sight is only on Onyx. “I shall take this crusher into my care and assume responsibility for her.”

Surprised whispers ripple through the colony and Onyx leans forward, fingers steepling. “Are you certain of this, Ayrin? Should this crusher endanger the colony in any way, you must face the consequences.”

Piercing and unwavering, her glare bores into mine.

Back legs curling, I gently push Sidney to the side and bow, my shell scraping the ground and my eyes never leaving hers. “I am certain, my Queen.”

My heart thunders wildly as I stare into Onyx’s, her gaze thoughtful.

*Luna above, please grant my crusher this pardon, I beg to the Goddess, hoping that she hears my plea.*

“Very well. I hereby grant this creature a pardon and place it in your care with the task of teaching it our ways. To contribute to our way of life. Should anything happen to deem the crusher unworthy



of staying among us, you shall suffer the consequences,” Heaving a shaky hiss of relief, I straighten to place a claw on my forehead. “You are dismissed.”



It's difficult to bring myself to leave Sidney alone in my Burrow while going on a gathering hunt the next day. She had pleaded for

me not to go, along with other words I couldn't quite understand.

Fourteen days.

It has been fourteen days since catching her in my arms, saving her from the other crushers. During that time, I have learned a lot about her kind. That she is known as a creature called a *human*, and instead of a shell, she has pale, squishy, *skin* that does little to nothing to protect her from the many dangers in Drotopia.

No claws. No fangs. No outer protective layer.

She is completely helpless. Crippling fear has me hiding her from the world outside. For her safety.

It has taken much patience and tries to form half the words she utters because of what she calls *lips*. Two tiny pieces of flesh that help Sidney speak her language easily. Effective and yet... so tempting.

Never before has such small pink pieces of flesh made me envision appalling things. This crusher. This *human*. Since the moment I laid eyes on her, I haven't been myself. She took up every inch of space in my mind, laying waste to important information that is supposed to motivate me every day.

Rise with the dawn. Fly down to the Royal Burrow for food. Be on lookout in designated spot until close to sunset. Go with a gathering group to scavenge and hunt fresh food to add to the food pile.

That is what is *supposed* to be going through my head. Not *her*. Not the tiny human crusher that has managed to dig her way under my shell. Wiggling deep until every waking moment is spent thinking of ways to provide for her. To protect her.

To *worship* her.

I knew my infatuation with the human female started to affect my daily schedule when I woke up in the nest this morning, curled around her small fragile body, well after sunrise. What stuns me, is that I didn't care. I wanted to laze the day away with my human, holding her close and feeding her leftover Qistik berries that are currently wrapped in Cyin leaves and sitting in dug-out hollow in the wall of my Burrow.

I begrudgingly left her side when Qrysix hissed outside my Burrow.

I don't like leaving her, but I must tend to my duties and provide for the colony. For my Queen.

After cupping Sidney's delicate face in my hands and bending to press my forehead to hers with a calming hiss, I hold up my hands, palms out, to motion for her to stay and leave with Qrysix.



Hunching down, a low trill of worry manages to escape as I wait with the others for a passerby Wiv or any unsuspecting creature

that moronically wanders this way. The gathering group is small this evening. Most of the males that make up the group, have all recently found their mates - their *Aya's* - and have beseeched the Queen for time with their mates, and to say their respective goodbye's.

For once you mate with your Aya, she eats your head for sustenance after the primal act. I haven't seen any of them for days. It only makes sense that they have successfully mated with their Aya's and have moved on to live with the great Luna above.

Many females have attempted to catch my eye. Releasing pheromones. Ruffling the fuzz all over their bodies. Some even tried to do the mating dance. The dance that males are supposed to initiate.

A twitch of my stalk behind my slit and a pleasant odor is all that was achieved.

*"You can't afford to be picky. We are hatched for a reason. To fight, Serve our Queen, Mate, and Die. Then repeat the cycle over again. Ayrin, you can't be alone forever."*

Qrysix's impatient words echo irritatingly loud in my head and my pinchers pull tight in thought. He's right. It's my duty as a Drotopian warrior to provide and add to the colony. I mean, who am I saving myself for anyways?

*Sidney.*

The one word rises softly. Reverently. Almost in awe. Her name is like the sweetest of nectar on my tongue when spoken. She is a breath of fresh air and as refreshing as the dew that gathers on the edge of a leaf in the early golden light of the sunrise. There is but one word to describe her. *Perfect.*

I shouldn't be having these thoughts. Shouldn't be thinking of the pale human during a gathering hunt. But to force away any thought of the crusher in my Burrow feels... wrong.

The longer my thoughts dwell on Sidney, the fouler my mood becomes until my pinchers snap in agitation.

I'm not with her.

Everything in me, screams that I abandon this meaningless gathering, and hurry back to Sidney. To care and provide for *her*.

But, I can't.

I swore an oath to also provide for the colony and my Queen. Besides keeping a lookout and guarding our home from Lorgs, it is

my duty to go with the gathering group and place whatever is scavenged onto the offering pile.

But great Luna above, this evening has been fruitless in supplying any bounty, and my patience thins as the sunlight wanes.

“We’ve waited long enough. Spread out and scavenge what you can find.” Zin says with dark hiss and click of his pinchers.

Allowing a small chittering sigh to escape, I break off from the group to scour the ground for anything that can be taken back to the Royal Burrow, and rustle up something to bring my human.



### **Sidney**

Humming to myself, I tie the ends of the thin flexible vine I'm holding and reach over to grab a Caco leaf. Shortly after Ayrin left, I



gathered a few leaves and placed them in a pile to tear apart and add to my skirt. The vine serves as a sort of belt that I can untie to take off and on when needed. My top doesn't need any more leaves and the small vines on my wrists are holding up nicely.

I'm able to hold everything together with wet mud. After making sure the skirt is long enough, I take it out of the Burrow and gingerly place it on a branch in a patch of dying sunlight to dry. It may be sunset, but the air still holds a bit of humidity. Just warm enough to dry the mud.

Once the mud dries, it will be good enough for clothes. For now.

*At least until I'm big again.*

Strangely, the thought makes me sad. I'm making great progress in communicating with Ayrin and soon I'll be able to convey my message of distress. To plead for his aid in helping me with my mission to return to my size.

So... why does the very thought of leaving make my heart squeeze painfully and my stomach knot?

Hands splaying out on the thick branch as I sit, I tilt my head back, eyes fluttering shut to soak in the warm breeze and peaceful sounds of the rainforest.

I can do this. All I need is to continue teaching Ayrin more English until he is able to fully grasp what I'm saying. Then I can request his help. Other than disappearing most days and returning to the Burrow to check on me, before taking off again, Ayrin seems more mellow. He is more relaxed than the two weeks we spent together before speaking to the Queen. In those weeks, Ayrin was more agitated. Jumpy. As if trouble would descend at any given moment.

*And oh boy, did it.*

Most of what was said between Ayrin and the Queen was too fast to catch. But I did understand a few words.

*"Pardon."*

*"Crusher."*

*"Contribute."*

and

*"Consequences."*

Even as I caught a few of these words being exchanged, Ayrin hovered protectively the entire time.

*Crusher? Is that how his people see me?*

Since becoming tiny, I haven't seen any of my group come by the place I usually was to study insects. The area is untouched, as if preserved.

The group has one more year before leaving the rainforest and it has been eerily quiet the past two weeks. Too quiet.

*Where is everyone, and what are they up to?*

I want to be big again, but something just isn't sitting right with me.

The deafening calm. The hauntingly beautiful scene of the Amazon at night. It's like the quiet before the storm. Tension radiates throughout my whole body, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

*So much for relaxing.*

The branch I'm on, vibrates under my fingers as something drops onto it and I peel open my eyes to glance behind me. Breath catching in my throat, I sit rooted to the spot, too terrified to do anything.

A Basilisk lizard - A Lorg in Ayrin's language - sits hunched at the base of the tree, yellow eyes gleaming hungrily. Unlike Ayrin, it doesn't appear to have any intelligence and looks like a normal green scaly lizard one would usually see in the outdoors. Green flaps on its head raises as it releases a low menacing hiss.

*Don't eat me. Don't eat me. Don't eat me.*

I just got in the clear of not being eaten by Ayrin and his people, and this happens?

I am the *unluckiest* woman alive.

Wood shudders and digs into my palms as it bears down on me. I can't move as I watch it advance in horror. The one time I need to move and I'm bottomless, about to piss myself out of fear, and ass glued to the branch.

Oh God, I can see my stick cross headstone now.

*Here lies Sidney, she died because she was too fucking stupid to get out of the way.*

The Lorg opens its mouth wide, the soft golden light of the sunset glints off sharp white fangs and I can see my life flashing before my eyes like an old movie.

Born to less-than-loving parents. Hardly having any friends. Going to high school. Never dated. Graduated. Coming home to a note on the door and my stuff in garbage bags.

*This is it. Oh God, this is it.*

A sudden loud hiss fills the air and Ayrin's friend with the darker blue fluff, lands on the branch in front of me, facing the lizard. Black claws emerge from the tips of his three fingers, stopping when the tips nearly touch the branch.

The Lorg charges and the mantis jumps forward, swiping his deadly dagger-like claws. A snap of its head and the mantis goes flying, hitting the trunk of the tree with a sickening *crunch*.

"Are you okay?" I call out, shrieking when the Lorg pounces at me.

"MOVE!" The male roars, eyes narrowing a bit.

He drags himself upright, hand clamping over a bleeding wound on his bicep that I didn't notice before.

Scrambling to my feet, I dart in the opposite direction.

"Not that way!" The mantis yells. "*Aizin stipz* crusher!"

I skid to a stop, realizing my mistake too late. I ran further out on the branch and now face the edge. More than a few hundred-foot drop.

*I'm totally boned.*

I have to drop to my knees and hug the branch as hard as I can from the quaking approach of the Lorg. Splinters stab and dig into my skin, but I don't let go. Tightening my crushing grip for dear life. On two legs to propel itself forward, the Lorg runs at me, and a scream tears from my throat.

*I can't look.*

Once again dropping down in front of me, the mantis intercepts the beast with a swift stab to its face and leaps over it. Taunting it with a sharp hiss to make it give chase. To draw it away from me.

When the branch no longer shakes from the force of the Lorg's steps, I jump up and glance around frantically. I want to help, but I can't. I have no weapons. I'm totally useless.

Swerving to the side, my mouth drops open in surprise when he jumps up, plants four feet on the trunk, and backflips over the Lorg so that it hits the tree with brutal force.

*What are these insects?!?!*

Hurrying over to me, the male looks over the edge of the branch, to me, then over at the Lorg that is now preparing to attack again.

“Relax *odi*.” Is the unclear warning I get before he places his hand between my breasts and shoves with all his might.

Arms pinwheeling, my heart leaps to my throat as I stumble over the edge.

Free falling through the air with a piercing scream, an unpleasant memory of having exactly this happen not too long ago, rises in the back of my mind. Here I am. Falling. *Again*.

*Only this time, I'm going to go splat!*

The ground rushes up to meet me and I squeeze my eyes shut, throwing up my arms, as if they will somehow magically save me.

I brace for impact, but it doesn't come.

There's no pain, no splat, nothing.

Daring to peek, I jerk in shock to see that I'm hovering, face inches from the ground.

Feeling a firm squeeze on my ankle, I crane my neck to look up. The male has my ankle in a bruising grip, wings fluttering to keep us airborne. His slightly darker green eyes glint with anger and contempt.

He releases a growling hiss and lets go of my ankle, slamming me to the ground with a grunt.

“Ouch,” I grumble and rub the back of my head where he carelessly dropped me.

“Lorg is *dssid*. Life debt *rssid*.” The mantis gives me a sharp nod and turns, flying away quickly.

*Life debt?*

What does he mean?

I mean, I remember seeing him speaking to the Queen, but almost like he was angry. And just now, when he saved me. He seemed... furious.

Getting to my feet, my legs tremble as the events of what just occurred, catch up to me. I was almost lizard chow because I was defenseless. Weak. I *hated* it.

I had to be physically pushed from a tree so I was out of the way and was caught because of some sort of life debt. Does he mean when I freed him from the jar?

God damnit!

I hate this!

I hate being so weak and pathetic.

I curl my arms around myself, tears blurring the firefly light into bright yellow blobs around me. Covering my mouth to stifle a sob, I try to stop the tremors wracking my body, but fail.

My whole life, I've felt helpless. Alone.

No one truly understood me or even cared.

*I'm hopelessly and utterly alone.*

A gentle trill sounds behind me and strong arms wrap around my waist, pulling me close to a hard chest. "Sidney, *mm hrr.*"

Turning in Ayrin's embrace, I bury my face in his neck fluff when he lowers closer to comfort me.

*I'm not completely alone. I have Ayrin.*

It's crazy, but I'm glad I have him here with me. Ayrin didn't have to save me. He had no obligation to shelter me, feed me, or teach me his language so that we can talk to each other. Yet, he did all of that.

Ayrin could've decided when we first met, to eat me – other than the way I first woke up in his Burrow – but he didn't. He cares for me. Helps me.

He teaches me still, and learns new things from me. At the moment, we co-exist, naturally and harmoniously together.

*Until he has enough of your weak bullshit and eats you.*

No. He won't hurt me. That much I'm certain of. But I do need to do something about being defenseless. Maybe Ayrin can teach me to fight?

Fear and sorrow melt away into contentment as Ayrin holds me close, trilling softly.

“Thanks.” I pull away to peer up at him with a big smile.

Antenna’s twitching, Ayrin leans the upper half of his body away from me while studying me with slightly narrow eyes.

With sudden swiftness, he grabs my hands and presses them to his neck.

“Allow me to *esss* your *fsrr*. *Tossh* me.”

Placing his hands on top of mine, Ayrin slowly drags them down, over his chest and stomach. Every bump and raised ridge of his shell feels leathery and surprisingly soft. Almost... alive.

Ayrin’s chest and stomach are made up of a sort of exterior that is both soft and hard at the same time. I marvel at the leathery feel of the brown shell, confusion at the sudden touching lesson drifting away like smoke from a dying campfire, and silently counting each ridge until I feel something different that has me pausing.

Just beneath my fingertips, thumps the steady beat of a heart. Praying mantises are not supposed to have hearts. Especially not in their stomach region.

*Incredible.*

Lost in thought, I brush my fingers lower.

“Ssss Sidney.” Ayrin’s sudden raspy hiss cuts through the fascination at studying him, and he grabs my hand. “Stop, please.”

His voice sounds strained, as if in pain.

Oh, shit!

Yanking my hand away, I glance up at him worriedly. “I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Bulbous green eyes appear to glow with a sheen of molten desire as Ayrin bends low to take the hand in his and press my palm to his forehead. “Never *agsse* for *tosshng* me, Sidney.”

“Did I hurt you?” I murmur, unable to tear my eyes from his.

“No, little one. *Jsss* the opposite. But if you continue, I *fsrr* the resulting action may frighten you.”

*I’m starting to understand him better. Score one for me!*

Eyebrows knitting in confusion, I open my mouth to ask what he means by his statement, and snap my jaw shut when the shell on the lower part of his stomach moves to reveal a six-inch slit. The slit opens and something purple emerges.

Strangely, it looks like lavender. Light purple buds decorate the thick black stem, giving it a flower appearance.

Curious, I pull my hand from his and crouch to inspect the small, delicate, buds.

How odd...

Why would he have a flower here?

Is it a secret pouch to store stuff?

A strange rhythmic hissing - like that of a maraca - erupts from Ayrin's slightly open mouth when I brush a finger over the soft membranes of the flower protruding from his shell.

"Sidney, *hss* your *fsrr* gone?" Even though Ayrin's body trembles from the force of his hissing, and the sound rings in my ears, I'm able to hear his question.

"What is this?" Curiosity gets the best of me and I answer his question with one of my own.

"*Hss* your *fsrr* gone?" He repeats, hissing intensifying with each curious brush of my fingers.

"Yes," I reply, guessing that *fsrr* translates to *fear* in his language and that maybe *hss* is *has*. He steps back, confirming my assumption and leaving several feet between us.

"Ayrim... what is that?" I ask again, gesturing to the flower thing jutting from his lower belly.

"It is my *stalk*." I go to move toward him to investigate, but he slams a leg down, halting me in my tracks.

"Stalk?"

"Yes, little human. My stalk in which to mate a female." Ayrim takes another backward step, rear touching the petal of a red rose in a bush behind him. "If you continue *thss*... exploration, I won't be able to *ctssl* myself."

It blows over my head that he is speaking almost perfect English with a combination of drawn-out hisses, clacks, and clever use of hums in his throat as heat burns my face. Realization dawns.

*Oh my God, that's his...*

"Oh." Is all that comes out of my mouth. One embarrassed word is all I can think of to say.

*Jesus Christ Sidney, it's not like you can say, Gee... sorry for fondling your purple flower bits!*

All of this is utterly absurd. Mantises supposedly mate using the rear end of their bodies, not have their manhood where a human man would!

Minus the slit and flower cock.

*Fucking hell, stop thinking about his dick!*

Crazy as it sounds, some morbid part of me can't stop analyzing every new bit of information, including this part. None of what I'm currently learning of this species was in the courses.

*Of course, it wouldn't be, no one has ever been bloody shrunk to the size of an insect before!*

Heat pools in my stomach as I watch in awed mortification at the flower stalk as clear fluid begins to drip from every individual bud.

Ayrin doesn't say a word. Just holds up both hands, palms out, for me to stay and hastens into a thick patch of tall grass.





### **Ayrin**

It's well into the night before I'm ready to face Sidney again. Taking some time to clear the raging turmoil in my head, the battle

within myself causes my stalk to retreat back into my slit and I chitter a sigh of relief.

A Drotopian warrior isn't supposed to have these thoughts of a different creature. Especially not of a crusher.

No matter what I do, sweet Sidney refuses to leave my thoughts. I attempt to think about the gathering hunt tomorrow and somehow, silky black hair and brown orbs muddle the strategic route I plan in my head.

Even the odd motion of baring her colorless blunt teeth at me earlier in fear, is beautiful on her.

I'm able to collect my thoughts without worrying too much, because I know Qrysix stands guard, close by Sidney. Keeping her safe.

He wasn't happy when I ran into him while leaving and asked for the favor of watching over her.

*"I protected the insolent Aizin whelp from certain demise by killing that Lorg. The life debt I owe that female has been repaid."*

My heart felt like it had stopped at that moment from his uttered words. That's why she was afraid when I found her.

*I should've been here.*

Instead, I had to waste time scouring the ground for food. I found nothing, the group found nothing, and everyone went to their Burrows in a foul mood.

*I should've been here!*

With the promise of taking his morning shift, along with my evening shift, he reluctantly agreed to keep watch on her.

On top of crushing guilt at not being there to protect her, my mind still wars with itself. Tempting thoughts of her won't cease and for some reason, that upsets and intrigues me.

I can't stop asking myself... what if she's meant to be mine?

To be my Aya.

That's absurd.

*Isn't it?*

There's no denying the bond I share with my Sidney. It's not just interest. It's *want*. It's a burning *need*. It's suffocating protectiveness.

All things that are only felt with a Drotopian warrior and his Aya.

Pushing past the thicket of tall greenery, I stop for a moment to peek through an open gap in the shrub to admire the female that invades my mind every day.

Sidney stands, staring up at a Gild passing by with wide eyes, her teeth shining in the soft light. She turns to face away from me and my gaze lowers to her supple backside. No shell and pale - what she calls *skin* - bounces enticingly with every step she takes.

What I found to be disgusting upon glancing at it the first time, I now find her plump backside to be entrancing.

*What would it feel like in my hands?*

*Is it soft like the rest of her?*

Sidney's hair covers the swaying orbs on her chest as she turns again and I stare at the dark fuzz covering her heated petals. I want to taste her addictive nectar again. Feel her clench on my tongue as she produces more for me.

I could dine on her every day and never go hungry. I'll never want to leave her side, until the fateful day she agrees to mate with me after performing the dance. *If* she says yes.

But even then, I'd be hesitant to leave her behind once she eats my head.

*What the Aizin have I gotten myself into?*



**Sidney**

“Come on,” I beg with a slight whine and shift my gaze to look up at Ayrin. “Why won’t you teach me?”

For the past two weeks, I've learned more of his language and he has fully grasped English. Well... ninety-eight percent anyways. There are still some words he's still trying to understand and there are a few I can't quite say because I don't have pinchers that click together that help make up most of the words.

On this sunny, humid, and peaceful day in the Amazon, Ayrin is currently laying on a few blades of grass - his version of laying down being his rear end flat on the ground and leg joints jutting upward - He took upon himself to rip up from the dirt and trample into a kind of nest that is both soft and comfortable.

With my upper body laying across two bent leg joints he brought forward so I lay comfortably, my hair spread out and dangling over his fuzzy legs, and my bottom half stretching out on the grass, I laugh at the tilt of his head and tightening of his pinchers as he stares down at me in confusion.

When I first laughed at him a week ago for mispronouncing the word *clothes* while adding leaves to another skirt, Ayrin jerked in surprise and hissed menacingly, thinking that the sound was some kind of battle cry.

It took a bit to calm him down and assure him that it's a normal sound humans make. After tying a knot on a new skirt I was forced to make in the terrible aftermath with the Lorg - to which Ayrin and I found in a dead heap by the Burrow opening with its head cut clean off - my fluffy companion asked if I could teach him more *human words*.

And for the days that followed when he had spare time, I've been doing just that. Most of the words I learned from him, had me wishing I had my field pad to write these discoveries down. Like, how the fireflies that float around lazily after the sun sets, are *Gilds* to what Ayrin has told me are *Drotopians*. His people are *Drotopians*.

And the world they live in that surrounds them?

*Drotopia*.

So much information to process, and yet, still more to learn. *Much* more.

Excitement at learning all of this, has me almost forgetting the mission. My true objective.

*Almost*.

I must return to normal size.

*What's waiting for you?*

Harsh truth rings with the sudden thought. *Nothing*. Nothing awaits me in one year. I have no loved ones to go home to. Once my group leaves the rainforest, they will go on living their lives. I haven't made friends with them so I'm certain they didn't think twice about the lie Chuck most likely told them.

In the span of a few weeks, this praying mantis has shown me kindness. Caring devotion to keeping me safe and fed. And has taught me more about his language and people. In a couple of days, he says I will need to start contributing to the colony.

This means I will need to start by collecting dew in the early morning with the females. Do what I can to help.

I'm torn.

Part of me wants to stay, learn the Drotopian way of living and contribute. The other part wants to beg for Ayrin's help to regain my normal size and warn everyone of Chuck and his evil ways.

*Who am I kidding?*

No one will care that he's been capturing insects and selling them to shady dealers.

A true Entomologist would. *I do*.

But with the connections that accented guy and Chuck has, it will be hard to prove it. It's not like I can show hard evidence. I didn't bring a cell phone with me on this trip and no one I know in the group has a camera.

I can't do anything the size of an insect and I'm basically useless my regular size too. Either way, I'm screwed.

Hence why I'm laying on Ayrin, ignoring the giant pink elephant in the room, and preoccupying my thoughts by pleading with him to teach me to fight.

"No." He responds simply, holding a slab of red Qistik berry up to my lips.

"Please. I want to learn to defend myself properly without needing to rely on anyone." I pout, bottom lip sticking out in an effort to persuade him.

Ayrin stops playing with a lock of my hair and sets the berry off to the side with a sigh when I persist. "You are a small, helpless,

and fragile creature. I can keep you safe. Let me be your protector. Your Warrior. Allow me to protect you with my life.”

“I’m not completely helpless.” I huff and his pinchers widen with a rumbling hiss. A noise I quickly came to learn as laughter.

“Is that so, little Starlight? Then where is your claws to aid in attacking your enemies? Show me your fangs that help tear into the carcasses of your prey. You can’t Sidney, because you are helpless. Your teeth are as flat as rock, and the nails on your fingers can’t pierce through anything. You need to be protected. Cared for. Let me be the one to do that, I beg of you.”

Cheeks blazing from the new sudden nickname, I shove away the strange warmth spreading in my chest and heave a huffing sigh. “I’m not going to stop asking until you say yes.”

“The answer is *no*,” Ayrin says firmly, once again picking up the piece of fruit and dangling it above my mouth to entice me to eat.

Grumbling to myself, I lift my head to nibble around the dirt coating the other half of the berry as an idea begins to form.

*Fine. If he won't teach me, I'll find a mantis that will.*



Pain explodes in the back of my head and something sweeps my legs out from under me, causing me to land unceremoniously on my



back. The breath leaves my lungs in a *whoosh* and I lay there, gaping like a fish out of water, struggling to suck in air.

“Again.” A rough voice hisses and dark green eyes appear above me, glinting with disdain.

“Give... me... a... second.” I wheeze.

Slight narrowing of his eyes and a sharp snap of pinchers give away his frustration. “*Again.*”

Grumbling to myself, I get to my feet and bend my knees, eyes trained on the mantis circling me with practiced ease.

After Ayrin left this morning, I hurried out of the Burrow to calculate a way down the tree when, as luck would have it, Ayrin’s friend stopped by looking for him. Just the guy - er, mantis - I was looking for.

It took an hour or two, but I was finally able to convey what I wanted. For him to teach me to fight. The graceful way he moved while fighting that Lorg, showed patience and a lot of practice. Practice that suggests learning to fight at a young age.

*At least, that’s my assumption.*

Understanding him and not being understood back, was challenging and I had to speak most of his language - what I could remember - back for him to grasp what I was asking. It took about half an hour for him to even say his name. To which, I learned is Qrysix.

At first, he didn’t want to help and was about to leave, but I grabbed his arm and wouldn’t let go until he agreed. He did after a while... reluctantly.

Qrysix flew me to a wide space a few feet away from their home tree and landed. The area is a large patch of dirt - about twenty feet wide and thirty feet long - with a ring of white mushrooms around it.

Qrysix calls it the *Runic Ellipse* where those at a young age, learn to fight. To become a Drotopian Warrior and protect the colony.

*Such an incredible community that thrives on order and balance.*

I barely see him move. Just a blur and I’m once again flat on my back. Gasping, I sit up slowly and shoot him a glare.

“You’re distracted. *Unfocused*. In a fight against an enemy, they will not hesitate to bury a fang or claw into your weak body. What you lack in some places, you *must* make up for in others. Swift. Agility. Intelligence. Use their strength against them.” Qrysix instructs, holding out his hand to help me up.

Nodding, I reach up to take his offered hand. Without missing a beat, he yanks me up, hauling me through the air, and slams me face-first on the ground.

A sickening *crunch* echoes loud in my ears and I plant both hands on the ground, shakily pushing myself up to spit gritty dirt from my mouth.

“What the fuck was that for, *Qrysix?!?*” *God, I hope I’m saying that right.*

“Have you learned *nothing*? Your enemy will *not* help you up and they will not stop until you are *dead*.”

I wince when I bring a finger up to gently prod my nose and searing pain radiates from my face, throughout my entire body. Something warm trickles over my lips and I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth, blanching when I pull away to see bright crimson. *Blood*.

“Christ, I think you broke my nose!” I exclaim.

“Thank the Luna above that is all you have broken this day. Some in the *Runic Ellipse* have lost limbs.” Qrysix says with a rattling trill of anger. “Broken body parts mean you are learning.”

“Learning what? To get my ass kicked?” I snap.

“Before one can succeed, they must know of failure. Failure is the one thing that drives you to do better. To push yourself to your limits. Success must be earned. Once you earn it, then, and *only* then, are you ready to guard those you are sworn to protect.”

I don’t have the words to answer his insightful reply. Shock renders me mute.

*How can one praying mantis be so wise?*

Whoever teaches them must be Judicious indeed.

Scrambling to my feet, I ignore the throbbing pulse of my nose and resume the position he instructed when we first started. Knees bent, legs spread, and arms up.

I remain stock still as he begins to circle again, eyes never leaving his.

”*Focus*, crusher. Anticipate where I’ll be. What I’ll do.”

A throaty call of a bird echoes and I breathe in deeply, holding that breath as I drown out the sounds of the rainforest. Tune out the noise around me while focusing on Qrysix. Honing in on the soft scuffle of his steps. The clicks of his pinchers.

“There you are, Sidney. What is going on?” Ayrin’s voice breaks through my concentration and I jolt. Seizing his opportunity, Qrysix darts forward, slamming a leg into my back.

Stumbling, I drop to the ground, throwing out my arms to cushion my fall.

“Fucking hell!” I yell, sitting up and brushing my mud-covered hands on my skirt. Dirt coats my skin and digs under my fingernails, giving them a black grubby appearance, but I don’t care. I need to learn. I *have* to.

Both in normal size and shrunk, I wasn’t able to defend myself. I felt weak. Useless.

*That needs to change.*

“Are you well?” Ayrin stands over me, holding out a hand.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, pushing aside his offer of help and getting to my feet.

“Why are with Qrysix in the *Runic Ellipse*? Is that *blood*? What did he do!?” Pinchers snapping and green eyes flashing, Ayrin looks like he’s about to kill his friend, so I quickly jump in.

“Isn’t it obvious? You refused to teach me to fight, so I found someone else who would.” I gesture to Qrysix standing off to the side with crossed arms, narrow eyes, and wide pinchers. A sour look I’ve learned is a Drotopian way to show anger.

“Sidney, you are not Drotopian. You can’t defend yourself the way we can. Allow me to keep you safe. Contribute by going with the dew gatherers in the morning.” Ayrin argues, rage at his friend forgotten.

“No, I’m not Drotopian. I’m a *human*, Ayrin. And humans don’t give up. We adapt. We fight. We *survive*. I don’t just want to gather dew and food for the colony, I want to help guard it too.”

Heaving a chattering sigh, he gently drags a finger down my cheek, gaze searching mine. “Alright, little Starlight. But if you are to learn, I will teach you.”

A delicious shiver races up my spine and heat pools between my thighs at the nickname and I bite my lip to stop a moan that wants to escape.

*What in the actual hell is wrong with me?*

Am I seriously getting turned on by an insect?

*No. Absolutely not!*

It’s just been a while since I indulged in self-pleasure. Just my body reacting naturally.

*There is nothing natural about any of this!*

“Sidney, help me forage Sillt’s and Qistik berries for later. Qrysix, inform Zin that I won’t be attending the gathering hunt tonight.”

“He won’t be happy about that,” Qrysix mutters with a sharp click of his pinchers.

“I have given my fair share of food to the offering pile. I can take tonight to fill my Burrow and rest for tomorrow’s watch.”

“Very well. It will be done.” Snapping open his wings, Qrysix jumps into the air and flies off in the direction of the home tree.

Doing as I’m told, I wander outside of the mushroom ring and sift through patches of greenery until I find the edible mushrooms Ayrin fed me before. *Lentinus scleropus*.

Crouching, I pull a few small ones up by the roots and make my way over to Ayrin, who is closely observing a deep blue berry growing on an overhanging leaf.

He plucks one and holds it up to my mouth. Round and the size of a marble, I take in the sapphire blue texture. It looks like a blueberry... but is it?

I haven’t read of any blueberries growing in the Amazon rainforest, nor have I seen them on the list of poisonous fruits that had images attached to each name.

Leaning in, I cautiously nibble at the smooth skin. Sweetness bursts on my tongue, dancing across my taste buds. It tastes like a blueberry... but doesn’t. Like it holds a hint of vanilla. It’s hard to describe the addictive flavor.

I take the berry from his hand and pop it into my mouth, chewing with an ecstatic moan. A sharp, rattling, hiss leaves Ayrin's mouth and I raise my eyebrow questioningly as he stands there, staring at me. "Are you okay?"

My question has him jolting and lowering his head, eyes on the ground. "Yes, I am well."

Sunlight dims suddenly and a soft breeze sweeps through the clearing. The air holds a bitter chill to it and the distant sound of thunder can be heard.

I crane my neck back to look up at the towering treetops above and take in the dark gray clouds rolling in, blocking out the blue sky and soft golden rays of the sunset.

"Grab hold, little one. We must take shelter in my Burrow before the downpour!" Ayrin yells over the sudden wind raging through the trees.

Wincing at the stinging frigid air pressing against my broken nose, I reach up and he lowers so I can wrap my arms around his neck. Holding my legs tight around his waist, Ayrin unfurls his wings and launches high in the air.

Struggling against the harsh unforgiving wind, he places a hand on the back of my head to press me against the fluff on his neck so my face is protected.

Squeezing my eyes shut as we are jerked this way and that, I fist my hands in his fluff and silently pray that we make it to the Burrow safely.

It's not until I feel the air warm on my skin and the howling of the wind die down a little, that I release the breath I'm holding.

"You are safe now, Sidney." Ayrin murmurs, his voice sounding loud in the space around us.

Pulling my face from the deep blue fluff, I notice that we're back in his Burrow.

He sets me gently on my feet and I grimace when I glance down to see my skirt is nothing but a few scraps of torn leaves. My ass and no-no square is in full view for anyone to see.

Strangely, I'm not that bothered by it.

I've grown comfortable enough with Ayrin, that I don't mind being nude around him. We both are different species that don't

know the extension of one another's bodies. Therefore, there's no need to feel self-conscious. At least... that's how I rationalize it.

Goosebumps raise all over my body and I shiver as cold settles over me like ice in my bones.

"Come, Sidney. Allow me to keep you warm." Ayrin's tone holds a hint of raspiness to it as he opens his arms. An invitation to join him in the moss nest he's hunkered down in.

Heat pulses at my core and I suppress a different kind of shiver.

*Stop it! He's only offering because you are his responsibility at the moment.*

Shoving away perverse images that begin to form in my mind of other ways Ayrin could keep me warm, I shuffle over and climb into the big nest, laying down so my back is pressing to his chest and resting my head against his toned arm. The warmth from his body heat encases me, and I release a sigh of relief.

*Tomorrow I will ask for his help.*

Because the longer I put it off, the harder it will be to leave this slice of Utopia behind. To leave Ayrin.



A raw cry of anguish jolts me awake and I shoot upright, heart pounding in terror. My eyes frantically search the dark space for

what woke me as I try to remember where I am.

“I apologize if I woke you, little one.” A deep velvet tone cuts through my fear and I sag in relief.

*Relax, Sidney. You are safe with Ayrin.*

It’s then that I notice the chest I’m pressing against, is trembling. Almost as if in fear. I look over my shoulder to see Ayrin gazing across the Burrow at the leaf covering the entrance. I watch the Caco leaf billow frantically from the jarring wind outside for a moment before turning to face him. “I heard you cry out, are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be well.” Ayrin whispers and I barely hear it over the pelting rain outside the Burrow.

“It’s me, Ayrin. We go back *weeks*. You can tell me anything.” I try to inject some humor into my voice and smile when I see him look down at me, eyes narrowing a bit and pinchers pulling tight together.

His version of a smile.

But it doesn’t last long and his pinchers widen and click nervously, gaze straying back over towards the entrance, lost in thought.

”*Talk to me.*” I plead, gut twisting from his sorrowful silence.

“When I think about her - my Mother - and how she passed, it feels like I’m dying.” Ayrin’s low broken hiss has me scooting closer to wrap my arms around him. Cheek pressing to the hard shell of his stomach, I feel a steady heartbeat and soft rumbling.

“You’re not dying,” I whisper. “It’s a broken heart.”

“Then why does it hurt so much? Why does it feel like something sharp is stabbing me?” His arms curl around my shoulders, pulling me closer still.

“Believe it or not, it means that even though you’re a mant- a *Drotopian*, you still feel emotions. Intense emotions mean you’re human.” I try my best to explain it in a way that he’ll understand.

“How can you be certain this pain, is that of what you call a *broken heart*?” Head shifting to the side, he stares blankly at the woven wood wall of the Burrow.

“Because, I’ve been through the same thing. I’ve gone through the aching devastation of losing a mother and a father.” Tears blur



my vision, distorting everything around me into a dark swirling mass.

“They died?” Ayrin asks, hand going up to thread through my hair in comfort.

“Yes.” I murmur. In a way, they *are* dead. Maybe not physically, but emotionally. To me, they died the moment they bagged up my stuff and taped that note to the front door.

“I am remorseful for your loss.” He says and I draw back, unsticking my wet cheek and biting my lip to hold in a sob.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” I finally reply, using a hand to scrub my eyes.

“What were their names?”

His question startles me and I crane my neck to look up at him in surprise. “Why?”

“Just answer, little one.” He gives a small vibrating trill. One I’ve come to know as laughter in his species.

“Rebecca and Dorrian.”

Ayrin takes a moment to cup my face with both hands and wipe away a stray tear on my cheek with a finger, before gazing up to the dark ceiling of the Burrow. “Thank you, *Rebica* and *Dorin*, for hatching such a courageous, beautiful, and smart *human* into this world. She flourishes among the Drotopians and is truly a vision to behold. Rest well and know that she remains safe with me. As we have greeted the Morrow, we also embrace what was.”

I giggle at the mispronunciation of their names at first, and press a shaky hand to my mouth as his words end, seeming to echo reverently in the small space.

He thanked my parents for basically bringing me into the world. My *not* dead parents. They may be dead to me, but for now, he doesn’t need to know that.

Ignoring the traitorous way my heart skips a beat at his sweet words and soothing touch, I keep my eyes down to avoid his gaze.

I can’t let my heart get in the way of what must be done. I must return to normal size.

Ayrin will understand.

*Right?*



**Ayrin**

I don't want to leave.

It's getting harder to leave Sidney each morning to relieve one of the guards watching over the colony and take his place. Every day, as I guard our home tree - sometimes having to take two shifts because of those we have lost recently due to mating - she slips into my thoughts.

Penetrating my mind and leaving behind a deep imprint. An imprint that I don't want to ever lose. This human has done what no female has. She has woven herself around my heart and soul. I can no longer deny how I feel.

Sidney... is my mate. My *Aya*.

The Luna above blessed me with a mate I don't deserve. She is a soft, squishy, and odd little creature... but she is *mine*.

Now that I've allowed myself to accept that surprising fact, I must find a Starlight to present to her and preform the mating dance.

*That's why I've been calling her that.*

The sudden thought has me going stock still on the branch I'm on, overlooking the vast area.

*Starlight.*

I've been calling her that, unable to keep the term to myself. It's a term of *endearment*. The powerful urge to exclaim it jumps from my mouth whenever I'm around her, and now I know why.

My subconscious knew she was meant to be mine, before I knew myself. The name was a way for me to hear my heart's plea. A plea of what I truly want.

I want *her*.

Sidney.

Taking a few steps to peer over the edge, I watch as a group of females stand at the edge of the clearing, holding wood hollows in one hand, while using the other to carefully cup a bead of dew hanging on the edge of a leaf or Cyin.

Dew Collectors.

Every morning, they will fly to the edge of the clearing, and go around collecting droplets of dew in Hollows. Taking what they collected to the Royal Burrow to Sirthim. An Observer who makes sure each Drotopian in the colony gets their rations for the day.

Leaning a shoulder against the trunk, I admire Sidney from afar. Awake before me, she asked if I could fly her down so she could

begin contributing to the colony. Unable to say no to those pleading brown eyes and quivering mouth, I flew her to the clearing where the collectors meet every morning.

Edin was already there and promised to teach her how to gather dew properly. It was a surprise to hear her agree to teach the crusher so easily and without a fight, that all I could do was nod and fly off to the section I would be guarding for the day.

Anxious, I still kept watch over my human while guarding as the day trudged on, but Sidney seemed to catch on quickly.

Black hair billowing gently in the warm breeze, she brings both hands up to gently cusp a drop of dew above her on a Cyin, and the breath stutters in my throat as she turns to face me, dew shimmering in her cupped hands.

The bright sunlight bounces off the water and reflects on her pale skin, forming a mesmerizing pattern that dances as she slowly crouches and places the water in the Hollow she was given.

Such intoxicating beauty that puts me on a path I can't escape. A path that leads directly to her, and has since the very beginning. If I'm honest, I don't mind being ensnared by this beautiful Wild Starlight.

To be tangled in her web of deadly beauty, is pure *bliss*.

As she wanders along the edge of the clearing collecting dew, my gaze lowers to her rear and the entrancing sway of her waist. Her tiny waist.

I can't see the two supple mounds of flesh that jiggles when she walks because of the long leafs that cover them, but my stalk twitches at the tantalizing memory.

After the downpour of water stopped earlier, Sidney immediately went outside and began scooping up wet mud at the base of the tree, ripping up new leafs to add to the ones around her waist, and smearing them with mud.

Something she calls a *skirt*.

I'm not entirely sure why she wants to cover herself, but I don't question it. If it's what she wants, so be it.



Sunlight dims and pale hues of pink, purple, and gold covers the blue of the sky.

“We greet the Morrow,” Says a deep unemotional voice and I turn to see Qrysix dropping onto the branch with a thud. “I have come to relieve you and take over the night shift.”

“You don’t normally take the night shift,” I state and he drops a shoulder in a small shrug.

“I am here now. Go find Zin, he is looking for you.”

“Qrysix-”

”Go, Ayrin.” He cuts me off with an exasperated snap of his pinchers.

“I’ll check in with Zin and go with them on the gathering hunt after I return Sidney to my Burrow,” I reply, speaking more to myself than my friend.

“She *doesn’t* belong here.” Qrysix crosses his arms, jaw clicking in a drawn-out hiss while he glares at me.

“Watch yourself.” A growl rumbles in my chest, fuzz brisling all over my body at his harsh words. “You are my friend and I respect your opinion, but I won’t hesitate to toss you over the side should you utter any more unsavory things about her.”

“You know I’m right, Ayrin. She isn’t Drotopian. The female is too weak, soft, and a *nuisance*. She’ll never belong here. She’ll never be one of us.”

Head spinning around to glare at Qrysix, I release a warning hiss. With a shake of his head, he wanders over to the other side of the branch, giving me his back.

The discussion is done.

Refraining from swiping my retracted claws at him, I heave a chittering sigh and launch into the air, wings snapping out to catch a current.

I know my human doesn’t have the means to protect herself and others may not agree to having her here, but I don’t want to be apart from the female.

Light settles on something white off in the distance and catches my eye. A long point of one of the foreign objects I often saw Sidney disappear in.

Veering to the right towards home, I can’t stop from looking over my shoulder at the strange point and wonder.

Would Sidney ever want to go back to her people?

And if so, would I be able to let my Aya go?



**Sidney**

“This is *impossible!*” I yell in frustration and scowl at the sky.



Four days. It's been *four* freaking days and I still can't grasp the basic functions of fighting like a Drotopian. I'm once again on my back from my legs being swept out from under me. Drawing in deep breaths and drenched in sweat, I sit up. Every inch of my body aches in protest.

"It takes time to learn to fight." Ayrin says softly, extending his hand to me.

Grumbling, I take his hand and shakily stand up. "I know that, but I feel like I'm not getting anywhere. Like I'm stuck and unable to move forward."

"I'll help you get there." He murmurs, bending to stroke a thumb down my cheek, leaving a tingling trail in its wake.

Heat burns my face and I stare down at the ground while struggling to calm my fluttering heart.

*Calm down. He's just helping you defend yourself.*

You are *not* attracted to a praying mantis. You are *not* aroused by his sultry tone and gentle touch.

"Such a *beautiful* color upon that soft skin." Ayrin's tone is a bare whisper. His pinchers widen as he nears, hovering inches from my face.

But I don't see them as dangerous anymore, merely fascinating.

Taking one finger, I drag it over them and up towards his face. Stopping when I reach the tip of a quivering antenna.

"Senses." He rasps suddenly, pulling back until my hand falls to my side. "I've been watching the way you fight and noticed that you rely heavily on what little strength you possess. What you need to focus on, is heightening your other senses."

"Oh... okay," I reply, giving a small uneasy smile.

*What the fuck was that Sidney?*

*Now you've gone and made him uncomfortable!*

This is why I never dated.

I can never find the right thing to say or do.

Eyes widening, I cough to cover up the sharp gasp that escapes.

*Dating?!?!*

Am I seriously thinking about dating right now?

Watching Ayrin walk quickly over to a bush and pluck a long, thin leaf, I mull over what's going on inside my head.

What is it about Ayrin that makes me feel so safe? So... *cherished*?

Obviously, he's not like the guys I've talked to, being a mantis and all, but there's a certain... charm about him. A sweet kindness wrapped up in a husky allure that I can't explain.

"Here." Ayrin steps behind me and ties the leaf around my head, covering my eyes like a blindfold.

"What are you doing?" I ask nervously, body automatically tensing.

"To heighten your senses, you need to take away one. I am removing your sight temporarily, so that you may give smell, hearing, and touch, your full attention."

*Oh, I'm feeling those senses all right.*

I can smell his earthy musk. Feel his fingers whispering over my arms and hips as he positions me into a fighting stance. Hear his raspy breaths.

Goosebumps raise on my flesh as everything that is Ayrin, surrounds me.

"I am going to attack, and I want you to *listen* for me. Listen to the slightest shift in the dirt. Feel the earth beneath your feet for any vibrations." He goes quiet and I try my best to hear around the thundering of my heart.

Something slams into my stomach and I'm thrown back a few feet, pin-wheeling through the air and hitting the ground hard.

I try to breathe, but can't. Everything in my body is in sheer agony. After what feels like hours, but only a few seconds, I'm finally able to suck air greedily into my lungs.

"Are you well?" Ayrin appears in my line of sight from the crooked blindfold and I nod. "I apologize. I forgot my own strength."

"It's okay." I wheeze, taking the hand he offers. "Let's go again."

"Are you certain?"

I fix the blindfold, assuming the stance in answer, and hear a gentle hissing sigh before I'm hit again with brutal force.



“I need to return you to my Burrow. I must join Zin and the others in the gathering hunt.” Ayrin stands over me, silhouette lit up by the golden light of the setting sun.

“Take me with you.” I eagerly jump to my feet, brushing off dirt that coats my skin.

For hours, I’ve been fighting with Ayrin and trying to hone my other senses. Other than dodging one of his attacks by what I assume is sheer luck, I’ve only been good at scuffing up the ground with my bruised body.

“Not until you are able to defend yourself.”

“But-”

”*No.*” He cuts me off firmly, pinchers clicking together in rapid succession.

“Fine.” I grouch, crossing my arms with a scowl.

Without another word, he picks me up bridal style, snaps his wings out, and jumps into the air in one smooth motion.

Once my feet touch the branch outside of the Burrow, he holds up a hand for me to stay and takes off. Sighing, I shuffle to the ledge of the branch and sit, legs dangling over the side as I take in the scene below.

Ribbits, chirping, and soft buzzing start as the rainforest comes alive with the last rays of sunlight fading away.

Fireflies begin to stir and drift lazily into the air, bathing everything in a beautiful glow. No matter how many times I see it, it still takes my breath away. *Exactly* like a scene taken straight out of a fairytale book.

“Dazzling, isn’t it?” A low feminine voice says behind me and I about fall out of the tree with a yelp.

A hand clasps my shoulder, balancing me, and I look over my shoulder to see the last mantis I’d ever expect to be on this branch.

*The Queen.*

“Y-Your Highness.” I stammer and jump to my feet, giving an awkward bow.

“There’s no need for such formalities, little crusher.” She replies with a sharp rumbling hiss.

Laughter.

“Right.” Feeling foolish, I rub the back of my neck. Something clicks and my mortification melts into shock. “Wait... you can understand me?”

”*Qrysix* taught me a bit of your language during our morning and evening stroll. I do hope that’s well.” A firefly drifts over us, sharpening the Queen’s features and lighting up her towering form. Ruby red and hypnotic blue fuzz swims in my vision as I stare up at her.

Bigger than the rest and almost taking up the length of the branch we’re on, she holds herself with poise and grace. The Queen truly is a marvel to behold.

“That’s fine. I’m just glad you understand me.” I mutter with a weak laugh.

“I understood... *most* of what you just said. Although, I suspect you understand me better than I understand you. Am I correct?”

Nodding, I pick at the hem of my leaf skirt.

“Ah, I see *Ayrin* has been doing well in teaching you our language and ways.” She shuffles over to the edge, upper body leaning a bit to peer over the side.

“Yes. He... He told me of what happened that day. I just want to say, thank you so much for giving me a chance.” The words burst out of me without a second thought.

Thank you isn’t enough to express my gratitude to the Queen for sparing my life. I didn’t know just how close I came to death until *Ayrin* spoke to me about it after badgering him a while ago.

“Don’t make me regret my decision, little one. I have seen you bring dew in with the others and learn our ways quickly. You are doing very well. Remain vigilant and loyal and you may become a warrior yet.” Eyes snapping up in shock, I catch her pinchers widening and eyes narrow.

“You know about that, huh?” I ask, nervously scuffing my foot against the bark.

“As I’ve mentioned before, *Qrysix* speaks to me about everything. Including the short time spent in the Runic Ellipse,” Tone holding a note of amusement, she gives me a knowing look. “I know how you feel. I’ve gone through something similar.”

“I just didn’t want to feel so... defenseless. It feels like I’m powerless. Ineffective. Like I’m...”

*”Trapped.”* We both reply in unison and I balk up at her in shock.

“Female Drotopians aren’t allowed to fight or hunt. We are meant to gather and mate. And when a Queen passes on, another takes her place. She must rule with fair justice and watch over the Drotopians. To protect her Colony. Even if we wish for something different, it is not our fate to decide.” Legs bending and rear brushing the branch, she settles down, gaze returning to the enthralling scene of nature below.

“You’re the Queen. Can’t you decide to become a warrior if you so wish or pass the crown to someone else?” I ask mostly in Drotopian, eyes traveling up to the thin leaf crown she wears that I didn’t notice before. Like my skirt, the crown has many thin green vines twining together to make one, big, woven, mass. What appears to be red petals of a rose is trapped between the delicate strands.

*Simple yet Elegant.*

“If only it were that simple. When chosen to be Queen, the female is hidden away with the current Queen in the Royal Burrow for protection. Even the process of choosing a potential Queen is started shortly after the current Queen is crowned,” My head spins with every word she speaks. So much information to remember. “Even the Queen must hatch a certain amount of hatchlings to add to the colony. So yes, I know the struggles when faced with being a female.”

“I am so sorry, your Highness,” I whisper, taking a seat next to her and swinging my legs over the side.

The way she spoke. It wasn’t harsh or reprimanding. Merely sad. As if coming to terms with how things are done.

“Onyx.” She says, jolting me from my thoughts.

“What?” I glance up at her and a low rumbling hiss shakes her body.

“Most in the colony, call me Onyx. Since you are now part of this colony, you may call me Onyx as well if you wish.”

“My name is Sidney.” I hold out my hand, warmth spreading in my chest at her kind words.

“It is nice to meet you... *Siy.*” Onyx replies, head tilting in confusion at my offered hand.

*Oh boy. Here we go again.*

Although, I don't mind if Onyx gets my name wrong. She's the freaking Queen after all.

I only really wanted Ayrin to say my name correctly.

*Why though?*

Smile slipping, I withdraw my hand and let my gaze wander, taking in the sounds and sights of the Amazon.

"What troubles you?"

"How did you know?" I murmur, avoiding her piercing gold gaze.

"While you hold yourself with an air of confidence, the aura that surrounds you is also full of Sorrow. Confusion. Longing. As a Queen, you are taught to read the aura of your colony. So that you are able to be a beacon of hope for them. To listen. To be there when they need you."

I stare down at my hands, pulling the flesh of my bottom lip between my teeth, debating on how to put the way I feel into words. "Have you ever felt at home somewhere, but know deep down, that it can't last? That your mind is telling you to go, but your heart begs you to stay?"

"You wish to return to your kind," Onyx states it as a fact, not a question, and I nod.

"I want to return, but find it difficult to leave. Like something is holding me back. Holding me *here*." My voice is barely audible, but she answers anyway.

"Perhaps not something, but *someone*."

Shoulders sagging, I reach up and rub my suddenly stinging eyes, blinking until my vision returns. "I don't know what to do. Ayrin makes me feel... *wanted*. Like I'm the most important girl in the world to him. In my life before, I *never* had that. Earlier today, I was going to ask him for his help in returning to my normal size, but chickened out. I bit back the question that has been buzzing around in my head since I first shrunk. I don't know, Onyx. It's like, the more time I spend with him... the less urgent my need to return to my kind becomes. I'm... I'm *scared*."

A hand pats my back in comfort and I hear Onyx release a gentle trill. "It's natural to be scared. But in the end, all we can ask ourselves is this. Do we want to be happy, or do we want to chase the idea of finding happiness again once we let it go?"

“I don’t know.”

“If Ayrin makes you happy, allow fate to decide for you. Observing the way he takes care of you. The way he stood up for you in the Royal Burrow... it’s clear that you are his *Aya*.”

“His what?” I ask, wracking my brain to remember if Ayrin ever mentioned that strange word, but come up empty.

”*Aya*. His mate chosen for him by the great Luna above.” Onyx replies, pinchers clicking.

*It’s strange that they worship a moon goddess.*

The thought pales in comparison to the heat suffusing my body and flushing my face at the Queen’s words.

*I’m his mate?*

That’s why he’s so overprotective.

So sweet. So caring.

Why he always hovers and brings me food.

The realization should sicken me. It should frighten me that I feel this way for an insect. It doesn’t.

Instead, I feel immense relief that he feels the same.

“Question is... do you accept him as your mate?” Onyx stands, straightening to her full height.

“I’m not sure.”

“Yes, you are. You just haven’t admitted it to yourself yet,” Turning, she unfurls her wings. “If you happen see Qrysix, please send him my way. I *must* speak with him.”

With that, she jumps.

Leaving me to figure out what the hell I’m going to do.







## **Ayrin**

Soft hissing of conversation ripples through the Royal Burrow as I hold up a wooden hallow to my mouth. Pinchers wide to guzzle the

cool, refreshing, water within.

“I haven’t seen you gather your ration of food today. Choose a leaf of sustenance and move for the next Drotopian.” I nod at the new Observer and pick up a random leaf with two decaying hindquarters of unknown prey.

Sirthim passed not long ago after finding his Aya. A surge of jealousy ripped through me when I found out from a fellow gatherer.

Everyone is finding their Aya’s and are mating. Having the honor of giving their head to the female they mate. Dying the way most only dream of.

Not every Drotopian is lucky enough to find their Aya. Some go throughout life never finding their mate.

*I’ve found my Aya.*

The only problem is... I don’t think she wants me.

Biting down on the decaying ration, my gaze strays over to Sidney, who is standing next to Edin and nibbling at a slab of Qistik berry. Unes light settles across her delicate features as she bares her teeth in what she calls a smile, and I place the meat on the leaf in my hand, food forgotten.

Edin was quick in liking Sidney. Although, she’s always been that way. The rest of the colony appears nervous around her. Fuzz bristling when she walks down into the Royal Burrow. Hushed whispers. Venomous hissing. It will take some time for others to come around.

*If she decides to stay that long.*

Sidney turns, her smile widening when she sees me, and waves her hand in a strange motion. I learned this from her recently.

*What was it again?*

Ah, right. A human greeting.

Raising my hand, I flap it wildly back with a snap of my pinchers. I can hear the tinkling sound of her laughter from across the Burrow and I release a chattering sigh.

It is odd. Strange even, that the Luna above chose a human to be my Aya. Deemed me worthy to bestow such a precious gift by setting Sidney on my path. It’s meant to be. Fate willed it so.

But I can’t stop the uncomfortable feeling of guilt churning in my gut. Guilt for keeping her here. My sweet Sidney hasn’t

mentioned her kind to me - at least, not that I know of - but I still feel guilt choking me daily.

I want to keep her all to myself.

I want to give in to my selfish wish to keep my human.

In the end, it's her decision.

*I shall not hold her here if she wishes to return.*

Doing my best to show a calm appearance, I pull in my pinchers and open my arms as Sidney hurries up to me.

Her arms tighten around my waist and she looks up, face glowing with excitement. "Edin said she watched the males fight enough that she's willing to teach me when you are gone in the mornings for guard duty."

"Is that what you want, little Starlight?" Her face turns a beautiful shade of red at my question and she nods.

"My nose may be broken, but I won't let that stop me from fighting."

Staring down into her determined gaze, I shift my focus to the deep blotches in the middle of her face. Like the hues in the sky before night falls, the purple blotches stand out starkly against her pale skin.

"This... is a *noss*?" I gently probe the squishy, raised flesh on her face and draw back with a hiss when she gives a sharp yelp.

"Yes. And it's *broken*. So refrain from poking at it."

"I apologize. My curiosity got the best of me and I momentarily forgot you are hurt." A low hiss of anger slips through my teeth.

*How could I be so Aizin forgetful?*

My Aya is hurt and all I can seem to do, is make things worse. I can't even protect the mate given to me by fate itself. Each failure hardens the fact that I don't deserve her.

"Hey," Sidney stands a bit higher on her feet, reaching up to place a hand on my face. "Don't worry about it. It looks worse than it is. It aches, yes. But I'll be okay."

"You are more than I deserve," I murmur and red darkens her face once again.

"I'm nothing special."

I take her hand in both of mine, bending so I'm at her eye level. "You are to me, Sidney."

Everything seems to fade away as we lean towards each other. I'm losing myself in those deep brown eyes, opening my pinchers to allow her face even closer.

I can't move at all when she presses those tiny, pink, pieces of flesh against the closed shell of my mouth. I don't know what she's doing, nor do I care. It feels odd. Foreign.

It feels *right*.

I watch Sidney's eyes flutter shut, skin covering her molten gaze, and cup her fragile head with both hands. Keeping what she calls her *lips*, firmly against my shell.

*This must be what paradise is.*

Warmth cocooning us in blissful contentment. True happiness. *Perfection.*

All too soon, our orb of bliss pops, and she pulls away with wide eyes. She gently touches her lips with a finger before taking a step back.

"What was that?" I rasp.

Sidney glances around us and I notice that it's deathly silent. Every Drotopian stares at us. Not a hiss to be heard.

"A-A kiss." She stammers, taking another backward step.

"What is this... *kiss*?" *And can we do it again?*

"It's what humans do when they lo-" Lowering her gaze, she makes an odd noise. "when they *like* someone."

My heart quickens from her explanation.

*She likes me?*

"Starlight..." I trail off, not knowing how to give the overwhelming swelling of my heart voice.

Eyes cast downward, she turns and quickly heads for the winding path.

Ignoring the sinking pit in my stomach at her sudden departure, I remain where I am, thinking it best to leave her be.



“Good gathering hunt.” Zin clasps a hand on my shoulder as he utters the words of praise.

Shifting the Wiv over my shoulder, I nod with a snap of my pinchers, pride filling me at a successful hunt. The Wiv may be small, but it is enough meat to last for a day or two.

I battle the urge to reach back and brush a hand over the tiny leaf wrapped bundle tucked behind a wing.

*Esquir.*

Esquir is rare in Drotopia. So, when I found some in the clutches of the Wiv I killed with my claws so the colony could have food, I immediately wrapped it for Sidney. My Aya.

Since my human likes sweet food more than any rotting meat I bring back to the Burrow, I know she will like the Esquir.

It is not permitted to keep rare food such as this to yourself. Anything bountiful, rare, or hearty is supposed to be given straight to the Observer. To be placed with the offering leaf for the colony.

And since the past few days hasn't bore any success in hunting or salvaging, every morsel must be given away.

*Not this one.*

No. This slab of Esquir is for my Aya only.

As we emerge from the tall grass and into the clearing, I pause with the rest of the group to watch Edin and Sidney in the Runic Ellipse. Both circle the other with fluent, poised, movements. Edin eating up more ground with longer strides and Sidney circling in slow determined steps, water glistening on her skin.

Days after Sidney walked away from me after we shared a *kiss* in front of the colony, she poured all her attention into fighting. Learning to hone her senses and reflexes.

Whenever we are alone, I open my mouth to bring up her being my Aya, but falter. For some reason, I can't find the right words to express how she makes me feel. What she means to me.

Edin darts at Sidney with blinding speed, her legs nothing but a blur. Staying still, Sidney waits until the last moment to move to the side, dodging her attack. Every well-aimed slash of Edin's claws comes down on air as Sidney ducks and weaves.

"She's not bad... for a crusher," Zin says, pinchers tightening, eyes flashing warily as he watches the two fight.

As Edin attacks again, Sidney attempts to grasp her arm with both hands and use the momentum of Edin's weight against her as I

taught her. It's a clever attack.

Unfortunately, because she is so small, weighs barely more than a small Wiv, and lacks any true threat, Edin easily tosses her across the Runic Ellipse into a thick patch of Cyin beyond the Ellipse.

Edin leaves the fighting ring and disappears into the patch, coming out moments later with an arm around Sidney's waist so she can carry a little of her weight.

"A noble attempt crusher, but you must not rely only on blocking me if you wish to stay alive." I hear Edin tell Sidney as I absentmindedly draw closer.

"Easy for you to say. I don't have any way to protect myself." Sidney replies with an odd sharp noise.

"Edin is right, you must find a way." Taking a damp strand of black hair sticking to her face, I tuck it behind the odd flesh that juts out on both sides of her small head. Flesh I've been told is called *ears*.

In the time I've been spending with my human, she has been teaching me what other parts of her body are called.

*Ears. Knees. Nose.*

All strange but *fascinating*.

I want nothing more than to explore my Aya's entire body. Learn what each part is called.

*I yearn to know what my name sounds like, called out in passion as I claim my mate.*

Just once, I wish to hear it. I could die happy with my seed fertilizing her eggs and the sound of my name on those tantalizing lips.

Even now, the heady scent of her need hangs thick in the air as her petals secrete sweet nectar. Red darkens her face, eyes never leaving mine.

"I have *no* fangs. *No* claws. I'm *useless*. Even you guys have those little... things." Pulling away from Edin, Sidney curls her fingers on either side of her face, wiggling them. "You know... your *pinchers*."

Pinchers clicking together, a rumbling hiss escapes.

*So unintimidating, and yet, so beautiful.*



“Then we must find something for you to use to protect yourself.” Sidney’s mouth thins at my statement and the already red of her skin gets impossibly darker.

“Oh, *sure*. Why don’t I just go traipsing around calling out, “*Here knifey knifey*.”

“I do not know of the words you speak. What is a *knifey*?” I ask, eager to learn something new from my little human.

“Unbelievable!” She exclaims, tossing her hands up in the air in an odd motion.

I watch in confusion as she marches into the thick, tall, grass, Edin trailing behind her to make sure she stays safe.

*I can be your protector, my Aya.*

*If only you’d let me...*



### **Sidney**

Eyes narrowing, I try to quiet my gasping breaths as I peek through a gap in the patch of grass I'm currently hiding in.

I may be getting the hang of blocking attacks by feeling vibrations in the ground before my attacker moves, but that still doesn't hide the obvious fact glaring me in the face.

I'm not strong enough to bodily throw a Drotopian or anything else in this puny size.

I needed an advantage. *A weapon.*

Hands squeezing a wooden stick I picked up tight, I study the gathering hunt walking down the trail they've worn down in the dirt, shifting leaves, disappearing in bushes, and reappearing empty-handed as they search for anything they can call food.

Heart lodging in my throat, I crouch lower to avoid being seen. Danger from any one of them discovering me, hanging over my head like the blade of a knife.

Before Ayrin and the others left for the gathering hunt, I found a small but sturdy stick and used a rock to sharpen the end into a fine point. Basically useless, but I have a weapon I can hold in my hands so I can at least fend off attackers if need be.

*Me and my useless spear.*

I had Edin fly me down from Ayrin's Burrow so I could follow the group and hide whenever they stop to scavenge for food, adding to the corpses around their shoulders.

Some carry only one around their shoulders, and some three. Qrysix - who joined the hunt last minute - carries three around his broad shoulders. Ayrin carries two.

Both carry the bodies of slim red ants.

To which I overheard them call them, *Wiv's*.

*Strange.*

Crouching to hover on the tips of my feet, I take in my surroundings. Sunlight fades and the same glowing mushrooms that decorate Ayrin's Burrow and the Drotopian home tree, give off a soft glow. Encasing the area in much-needed light for the others to scour for food.

Normally, I would stay in the Burrow and wait for Ayrin to return. But the unbearable feeling of helplessness grew until I felt like I had to act. To follow the group and somehow prove that I can handle myself.

I've already disappointed my parents. I won't disappoint Ayrin.

*“You are more than I deserve.”*

His words echo in my mind as I watch Ayrin’s arms bulge and flex while adding yet another ant corpse around his shoulders, their limp legs dragging in the dirt. A grunting hiss escapes him.

I want to be deserving of him.

*That’s crazy! He’s a Praying Mantis!*

No, he’s a *Drotopian*.

And him being an insect didn’t stop me from kissing the lipless shell of his mouth.

Fingers ghost across my lips at the memory, and a smile curls my mouth.

*I’m his Aya. Ayrin feels the same for me as I do him.*

It took kissing him and going for a walk on the connecting branches outside the home tree to clear my head, to come to that realization. To finally admit it to myself.

*I love him.*

It’s not even a surprise, but a truth that hovered at the edge of my conscience, growing over the time I’ve gotten to know Ayrin and his people.

I love my big, fluffy, stubborn, sweet, overprotective, Mantis.

All this time learning from him, getting to know him better, and opening up... he’s grown on me in a way that no one else has.

*What about the mission?*

As quickly as it came, my smile fell at the thought. No matter how many times I’ve tried, I just can’t tell Ayrin about my mission. I can’t ask for his help because... the mission surprisingly no longer seems that important to me anymore.

Maybe I can be happy... as a *Drotopian*.

Whenever Ayrin flies me up to his Burrow, I’ve always kept my sights on the tops of the tents just barely visible through the trees in the distance. The tents I can usually see from the top of the tree that I call home. The expedition camp.

But now, I don’t see them anymore. The tents are gone and the loud sounds that usually came from that direction in the daytime have ceased.

I don't know whether to feel relieved or terrified.

*Where did everyone go?*

"I can't carry any more." Qrysix snaps his pinchers at another Drotopian - Zin, if I remember correctly – shaking me from my inner turmoil.

"The Luna above blessed us with a bountiful gathering this night." Ayrin agrees, turning to face them.

"Then let us bring our bounty back for the colony. Onyx will be pleased." Zin replies and tilts his head back, releasing a long shrill hiss.

The group gathers together at the sound and begins to walk back the way they came. I suppress a sigh of disappointment.

*I really wanted to prove myself.*

Edin is nice and helped me this time because I fed her an excuse that I wanted to collect more dew for my contribution. She studied me suspiciously but didn't argue. I'm not sure I can get away with the same excuse again.

*What am I going to-*

The thought is cut off by jarring vibrations in the ground and my eyes widen as the sudden tremors shake my body.

*It feels like a raging earthquake!*

Two green snouts emerge from behind a nearby tree and I can feel the color drain from my face. *Lorgs*. I suddenly feel cold and hollow, like ice traveling agonizingly slow in my veins. Numbing fear chasing away the crushing disappointment I felt moments before.

I can only watch in horror as they charge at the unsuspecting group.

*They are warriors, how have they not noticed yet?!?!*

The frantic words scream in my mind as I watch the nearest one close in on Qrysix.

*Move, damn it!*

He doesn't. Merely grunts as he carries the bodies of the ants around his shoulders while listening to Ayrin and Zin speak to one another.

*They are too far away to notice.*

The realization jolts me into action and I burst from the bush, running as fast as I can towards the closest Lorg. I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do when I get to it, but I have to do something.

"*MOVE!*" One bellowed word is all that seems to be able to fly from my dry mouth.

Qrysix turns, muscles freezing in shock at the charging lizard. Skidding to a stop, I push off the ground with all my might, sharp stick raised. As if jumping off of a trampoline, I'm launched too high in the air, and a squeak of terror escapes.

*Do I have super jumping I don't know about?*

I tumble in a perfect arch at the Lorg, green scaly skin more defined the closer I get. I grit my teeth and squeeze my stick tight when I'm a foot away. Missing the head by mere inches, the sharp end of my stick sinks deep into its neck.

A wide spray of something warm, sticky, and green splatters every inch of my body, coating my skin. Not quite dead, the Lorg bucks wildly as I struggle to hold on to my makeshift stick spear. But being wet and covered in an unknown slippery substance, I can't hold it for long and am thrown through the air.

Back slamming into the trunk of a tree, searing pain radiates throughout every fiber of my being as I fall helplessly toward the ground.

Something warm and soft envelops me, and the spinning stops. My fingers fist dark blue fuzz and I blink spots from my vision to see Ayrin's face above me, green eyes gleaming with worry.

"Did... Did I get it?" I mumble, still feeling disoriented.

"Yes, my Starlight. It is dead. The others took care of the other one while you battled its mate."

*Its mate?*

I want to feel bad, but can't seem to focus long enough to summon a shred of compassion. Everything hurts. White hot pain batters my body.

"Everyone... safe?" I whisper, voice scratchy.

"Thanks to you. Your battle cry alerted us of the danger."

*Battle cry?*

That's a good one.

If I were to have such a cry, it wouldn't be such a high-pitched terrified yell.

*Maybe deepen my voice to sound like Thor just before lifting his mighty hammer. Oooh! Or have a catchy phrase like Spiderman.*

A choked giggle falls from my lips at the thought as my head falls back. Have I lost it? I must have if my pain-muddled mind is trying to come up with a future battle cry.

"Sidney, stay with me!" I hear Ayrin's frantic voice, but it sounds like it's coming from a long tunnel. Faint. Echoing.

"Such pretty colors," I murmur, staring up at the sky and taking in the deep hues of purples and pinks as the sun sinks lower behind the mountains.

*Is this what dying feels like?*

It's oddly peaceful... aside from the agony.

I'm delirious, mumbling nonsense, and in so much pain, that I can't move my body.

*Did I break something when I hit that tree?*

"Aya, stay with me. Don't you dare leave me! It is not time for the Luna to take you yet!"

My eyes are heavy. So *very* heavy.

I can't keep them open anymore.

*He called me Aya...*

Is my last thought before succumbing to the cold, empty void.



**Ayrin**

*No!*



Sidney is unresponsive to my touch and limp in my arms. Pressing her tighter to my chest, I fly North, pushing my sore body to its limits.

*Get her to the clearing.*

I can clean the Lorg blood from her skin with the dew that hangs from the grass, and assess her wounds properly.

Trees flit by in a mass blend of green, yellow, and black as the last of the sunlight fades away and Gild's begin to flutter about.

I gaze down at her slack, pale, face. She's too quiet. Too still.

*Stay with me, Aya.*

My heart pounds in panic as I tuck in my wings, dropping to land on my legs in the soft mud around the edge of the clearing. Bending so my leg joints jut up and rear brushes the ground, I gently place her in the soft dirt.

Standing, I hurry over to a cluster of grass, cup a bead of dew in both hands and rush back to her side. I shift the water to one hand and clasp the other around her neck, tilting her head back.

The clear liquid skims the pink flesh of her lips, trickling from both sides of her open mouth.

“Drink, my Aya.” I demand, raspy tone giving away my panic.

Throat bobbing to sip the water, her eyes flutter behind the flesh covering them, and I sag in relief.

*She's alive.*

I tenderly set her head down, pulling away to retrieve more water and freeze when bright red liquid coats my palm. *Blood.*

Sidney's Blood.

*Great Luna above, please let her live. Don't take away the precious gift you bestowed upon me. I'm not ready.*

Gathering another droplet of water, I lift her top half, leaning her head on my shoulder while cautiously cleaning blood from her hair and face. Laying her down once again, I pluck several leaves off a Cyin patch and mash them together in a makeshift cushion for her head.

Gild's drift by, encasing Sidney in otherworldly light and making the dewdrops gleam on the grass around her.

Brown smudges cover her soft skin from dirt. Black hair flows around her like liquid silk, a few strands billow across her face. The pink flesh of her mouth glistens with dew.

Even with dirt covering her skin, she still glows with such elegant beauty. My gaze lowers to the mounds of flesh that have burst free from the leaf covering she made. Mounds that she taught me is called *breasts*. It's unclear what the pink, tiny, orbs in the center are called. She hasn't taught me that yet.

Sidney is an alluring and delicate creature. Unlike any female Drotopian.

Staring down at the tiny crusher, my pinchers draw in and tighten as warmth spreads in my chest.

It's strange. At first, I never wanted a mate. Now... I can't imagine living without her.

What started out as sheer fascination, has changed into something more. Something warm and passionate. Something that makes me feel truly *alive*.

Something that like the thin strands of a Iserthic weaver, they entwine, binding our souls together for eternity.

Another strange thing that has been happening when I spend time with her, is noticing her scent.

It's impossibly sweeter, stronger, more *potent*.

It's the same scent of her pheromones... but not. As if she's secreting nectar every day. The scent shoots straight to my stalk, testing my self-control. Spreading thin cracks within my fragile resolve.

The longer I remain in my Burrow with her intoxicating aroma teasing every sense, the more challenging it becomes, until I feel like I'm close to breaking.

Holding Sidney close each night in my nest, rises in my mind's eye. Imagining my fingers brushing over her squishy skin as her plump rear presses against my slit. Daring to whisper those fingers over her petals, collecting her sweet nectar between two fingers and bringing it up to savor the exquisite taste.

*When the time comes - if she should have me - It will be an honor to die by her hand.*



Pulling moss up to cover her vulnerable soft body, I stare at my human. Once clean of blood, I flew her to my Burrow and laid her

down in my nest to rest. There isn't anything more I can do, and it's frustrating.

All I can do now, is pray to the Luna above to spare my mate. Sharp and sorrowful, a hiss sounds outside my Burrow. I know who it is before stepping out into the warm night air.

Qrysix stands a few paces away from the entrance, hands clasped in front of him and antenna's twitching with worry. "How is she?"

"She will be well."

"But... when she hit the tree-"

"She *will* be well," I interrupt with a furious snap of my pinchers. "She will. I must believe that."

"And if she isn't?" Qrysix's tone gives away hissing notes of sorrow and shame.

"I have to believe that she *will* be well or I fear I may lose myself. Give in to the crippling and maddening anguish that has begun to numb me since carrying her limp body to the clearing."

"She saved me." It isn't said as a question, merely a fact. Qrysix doesn't look at me. Instead, his gaze looks over my shoulder at my Burrow to where Sidney rests.

"Studying her for twelve moons, I knew of her compassion. When I saved Sidney from her own kind, I knew of her kind heart. It was mere fascination at first. But... it grew into want. It blossomed into *need*. Need that transcends physical desire. Her soul cried out to mine the moment I saw her, and mine responded. Qrysix... I *need* her. I need her more than the very air I breathe." I glance over my shoulder at the leaf hanging still over my Burrow.

"She's your Aya." He says, realization making his pinchers quiver in shock.

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

Wandering to peer over the side of the branch, I mull over my options. "There isn't much I can do until I know she'll be well from the attack earlier."

"There is one thing you can do this very moment," I turn to Qrysix and give him a low hiss of confusion. "Seek out Onyx and beseech her for time to find a Starlight to present to her and do the mating dance."

“Qrysix...”

“I shall keep an eye on your crusher. It’s the least I can do for her saving my life... again. But you need to take this chance. I had the chance to ask her, but was afraid Ursa didn’t feel the same. That day, I gathered the courage to tell her and found she wanted to be my Aya. We were getting ready to go to the home tree before...” He trails off, pinchers clicking and antenna’s drooping.

*Before a crusher trudged through the patch they were under. Destroying my friend’s happiness.*

“I am remorseful for your loss, my friend.” I trill sadly.

“Find Onyx and ask her. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Don’t wait. If you’re sure, ask her.”

“What if Sidney wishes to go back to her own kind? What if she doesn’t wake? Then my asking will have been for nothing.”

Closing the distance between us, Qrysix puts a hand on my shoulder. “Go. I shall stay with your female and send for you if anything happens. I will protect her with my life... as she has done for me.”

With a nod and one last lingering look at my Burrow, I launch myself into the air and snap open my wings to glide across the clearing.



**Sidney**

*“Mom. I don’t know what I did. Please, call me back. I’m... I’m scared.” Tears stream down my face, phone clutched in my hand as*

*if it's a life preserve.*

*I know the small, metal, thing is just an object, but in this moment, it's what's keeping me from going completely insane.*

*Crinkling of paper sounds obnoxiously loud in my ears as I squeeze the balled up note in my other hand. It's a simple note. One that merely states that she had enough of my shit and to take my bags of stuff and find someplace else to live. The note wasn't even signed, but I knew it was from Mom because of her cursive handwriting. I'm not sure if Dad agreed to this or not.*

*To be honest, I don't care.*

*They packed my stuff. They put the note on the door. They made sure they weren't home so I wouldn't pester them with questions as to why they'd do this.*

*"This voicemail box is full and is unable to receive new voicemails. We are sorry. If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try again." The automated monotone voice says in my ear as I press my back to the front door, sliding down it with a whimper.*

*"Mom, please." I sob, uncertain why I'm pleading with the empty air in front of me.*

*Phone slipping from my hand and clattering to the wood of our porch, I draw my knees up to my chest, bury my face in my knees, and cry out all the anguish and regret festering inside.*

*What did I do?*

Jolting upright with a scream, I blink rapidly to clear my blurry vision. A bright patch of sunlight streams into the Burrow from the opening, and a gentle breeze flows in, brushing against my wet face.

Wait... wet?

I reach up to wipe at my damp cheek, pulling away my hand to see tears smeared across my fingers.

*The nightmare... it felt so real.*

It felt real because it *was* real. What I dreamt, wasn't a nightmare, but a memory. Since leaving to come on this expedition, I haven't had such nightmares for a long time.

Until now...

Scrubbing at my puffy, wet eyes, I wince as sudden pain stabs at my skull.

*The fight! I must've passed out from a concussion.*

I shove away the moss covering me and jump to my feet at the thought, groaning in pain as the searing throb in my head, worsens.

A menacing hiss fills the air, shattering the peacefulness as Ayrin darts into the Burrow. Long deadly claws raised, pinchers snapping, and taking a defensive pose. "Sidney, I heard you shout. Are you well?"

Unable to stop the sob building in my throat at the awful memory, I break down when Ayrin emerges to protect me from a nonexistent danger. My arms hug his waist tightly as I slam bodily into him.

All the fear, the heartache, the gut-wrenching guilt for being such a problem child to my parents, melt away as strong, safe, arms wrap around me. Sheltering me from the awful truths of the world.

"You are safe, my Aya." He murmurs.

And I am.

I feel surprisingly safe in the arms of a Praying Mantis. Safe with an insect I befriended just weeks before. For a shy, isolating, introvert... he is the anchor grounding me to this world so I don't float away into an endless void of nothingness and despair. He is my safe haven.

Not the Amazon. Not the outdoors. *Ayrin.*

I have interacted with this male, longer than anyone else. Even longer than my own camp travelers for the expedition.

"I worried that you would never wake-"

"I lied about my parents-"

We speak at the same time and deafening silence surrounds the Burrow.

"They are not dead?" Ayrin asks, head tilting to the side, pinchers twitching in confusion.

"No." I say, feeling smaller than I do at the moment.

"Why did you speak false?" Low and barely above a whisper, his tone portrays hurt.

"Because they are dead to me," I bite out, unsticking my cheek from his stomach, as the bitter words settle. "Ayrin. I've been alone all my life. Never gave love a chance. Never been loved in return.



Even my parents had enough of me and kicked me to the curb. They left me. How do I know you won't do the same?"

"Anyone that leaves you is a Aizin fool. I do not ever want to leave your side. You make me feel strange. Warm. Happy. Placid. Content. Is this what you mentioned? *Love?*"

"We've only known each other for a few weeks," I mumble, heat burning my cheeks.

"When I first heard your voice, even though I couldn't understand what you were saying, it felt like I found some part of me that was lost. It felt like the Luna above wanted us to meet. That she wanted us together. Sidney, you are my *Aya*. My mate." Ayrin's head dips to press his mouth to my hair and nuzzle the frizzy strands.

"I want to believe that you'll never leave. That what we share... is *real*. But I've learned to believe that if something is too good to be true, it usually is."

"To defy the bond woven tightly around us by the Luna herself, is a travesty that should never be spoken. My Starlight, you deserve to be praised. To be taken care of every second of every day, no matter the consequences. To have my tongue explore every inch of your skin, and hands feeding you, because my Aya shall never want for anything. You Sidney, are my heartbeat. You are my spirit. You are my breath. You are the reason, my purpose, to go on living. You little crusher, have become my *everything*."

"What is your point?" Voice shaking, I cross my arms and try to shove down the growing excitement at his honeyed words.

"The *point*, as you so call it, is that you are a compelling problem. From the first moment I saw you, my interest peaked. Then, as I came to understand your language and learn more about you, my curiosity turned into something shocking. Something I never thought I'd feel for an enemy of my people. *Desire*. Your alluring scent. Your sweet nectar. Your beautiful voice. All of it. You, little Starlight, are to be my undoing. For I choose *you* to be my Aya. I beseeched Onyx last night to set out and find a *Starlight* to present to you, but I can't wait. It pains me to see you this way and if it will prove my devotion to you..."

Trailing off, Ayrin takes my hands in his, guiding me out of the Burrow to stand on the branch. "Sidney, I *choose* you to be my Aya. With this dance, I ask you to be mine."

Ayrin's translucent wings fan out behind him, holding open as he lifts both arms, moving them and his upper body in a swaying motion. Legs shuffle as a cooing hiss slips from his open mouth. His antenna's twitch and head tilts back, hiss growing in volume. I watch in awe at the gracefulness of his limbs.

A dance. He's doing a mating dance... for *me*.

There is no music, no rhythm. Yet, as his dancing becomes more frenzied, spinning and moving with deadly precision, wings lifting higher above him, it's as if the Amazon is providing a gentle upbeat sound.

Chirping of birds, whistling of the wind through the trees, hisses and other animal noises all blend together in a combined effort to give Ayrin's dance wonder. A *wow* factor.

I can't tear my eyes from his dancing form. Every dip and twist. Every graceful spin is elegant. His body may be oddly shaped, and Ayrin may not be handsome by any human standards. But in this moment, as the soft sunlight settles on us, casting dark crisscrossing patterns across his moving body through woven branches, it causes him to look striking. Giving the blues and greens of his fluff, a glowing shine.

The dance is so beautiful, so *mesmerizing*, that tears sting my eyes.

It may be the concussion, or me being alone most of my life, but I do know one thing with absolute clarity.

*I want to stay in Drotopia.*

My expedition is gone. Either back home out of the rainforest, or moved to a different spot, I don't care. No matter what I do, I won't be able to prove the wrongdoings of Chuck and his shady sidekick with no camera or cellphone. They most likely are long gone by now and fed the group a lie about why I left or some bullshit excuse. And with no evidence, I doubt the group would believe me anyways.

I came to the Amazon to get away from it all. Immerse myself in my passions. Spend every minute I can with the insects I find comfort in.

*And oh boy, did I find it.*

I not only found comfort, but a community as well. One that may have seen me as the enemy at first, but is starting to come around. A

community that works together to keep each other safe, including the queen.

I made one friend so far. Edin. She's kind and patient when I'm still learning their ways. Gathering dew each morning to store in deep, carved, hollow, wood bowls. Having a mantis there to keep track of everyone's rations for the day. Having guards spread out, watching out for Lorgs and protecting the home tree twenty-four-seven, changing shifts every few hours. It's sufficient. It's *genius*.

*It's a hell of a lot more complex than any Entomologist book I've read or online course I've taken.*

It exceeds anything ever recorded. Transcends any discovery ever made.

The more I learn of this incredible new world I was dropped into, my hunger for knowledge only grows. And because I have Ayrin, I don't feel so alone. With him in Drotopia, I never have to feel alone again.

Maybe... Maybe I can give in to what I want for a change. To lay my soul bare, instead of throwing up walls to protect myself.

I want to give myself to the Drotopian that saved me. Fed me. Taught me. Protected me. I just want *Ayrin*.



### **Ayrin**

Finishing the dance, I lower my rear, bending to brush my chest against the rough bark of the branch. “Do you accept me, little

human?”

Sidney gazes at me with wide watery eyes, bottom lip quivering. Heart sinking at her sorrowful expression, I straighten and pull my pinchers in, only to widen them in worry.

*Did I upset her?*

Many expressions cross Sidney’s face, making my heart ache as it sinks even further.

Awe. Shock. Determination. Doubt. Yearning. Uncertainty.

With each emotion flashing in those brown orbs, her uncertainty seems to grow until she catches her bottom lip between those blunt, colorless teeth.

*No.*

I refuse to give up so easily.

I won’t have her closing herself off from me after everything we’ve been through. After almost losing her, I know without doubt, that she is meant to be mine.

The Luna bestowed her to me for a reason, and I won’t squander that blessing.

I won’t fight it. Only welcome the burning desire spearing my core that demands I finally claim my female.

Closing the distance between us, I grip her chin with two fingers and lift her uncertain gaze to mine, determination hardening my resolve. “Say that you accept me, Sidney. It is still your choice, but know this. Even if you reject me, I won’t rest in my efforts to claim you. To show you that I am worthy of a beautiful, entrancing, creature such as yourself. Whether you want it or not, you are *mine*.”

“And if I never accept you?” Pinchers clicking, a rumble of amusement vibrates in my chest at her challenge.

I lower my face to hers, my next words spoken barely above a hissing murmur. “Then I shall try even harder to prove my worth and make you mine. Even the Luna herself can’t take me from your side.”

*Not until you devour my head.*

My other hand whispers up her arm and a finger brushes along the underside of her jaw. Heady sweetness thickens in the fresh crisp air and it takes all my willpower to remain focused on her. The

softness of her pale skin, stunning beauty, and intoxicating scent, makes it difficult to form a coherent thought.

“I-” Sidney cuts off with a sharp gasp as my claws ever so slowly extend, the tips trailing down her neck and stopping at the top of the leaves covering her breasts.

“Say it, Starlight,” I demand with a raspy hiss.

In one swift motion, my claws cut through the vine around her, and I watch with growing desperation as it flutters to her feet, baring those tempting mounds and pink orbs to me.

Moving to stand behind her, I cup a breast in one hand, feeling the heavy softness. The squishy resilience of it.

Her skin warms under my touch and the fragrance of my Sidney grows stronger, fuller.

My fingers slip under the vine around her waist, easily severing the covering shielding her pink petals from me.

Now nothing separates me from my female. Not any rules. Not a *skirt*. Nothing.

Breathing the sweet undeniable scent that is Sidney, my stalk twitches and emerges from the slit, jabbing against her lower back. Unable to hold back the urge to cup her mesmerizing and jiggly rear, I retract my claws and grasp it. Like the rest of her body, it's warm and so very soft.

“I accept you.” Sidney breathes, back arching to press her rear against my throbbing stalk. My heart lurches excitedly at her submission.

Hand going up to tangle in her silky black hair, I wrap an arm around her middle, rubbing my stalk against the dent above her rear.

The pressure building in my stalk is so intense, I'm unsure if I'll be able to last long. I want our mating to last. I want to wring every ounce of pleasure from her before succumbing to the overpowering frenzy.

I sweep the waves of her hair to the side, trailing a finger from the back of her neck, down her surprisingly outward spine, and over her rear. Desire intensifies with every shaky inward breath. Every soft moan. Every tremble.

”*Touch* me.” She moans.

“Show me where my Aya. So that I may bring you pleasure.” I bend close to her ear to murmur, pinchers whispering against the soft outer flesh.

Reaching behind her to grab my hand, she brings it forward and uses a finger to move dark hair aside and press against a hooded bundle hidden under raised pink flesh. She makes a round motion with my finger and her head falls back against my chest as she uses me to chase her pleasure.

I continue the motion and pull her hand away from her petals to touch me. Sidney jerks in surprise when she feels my stalk in her hand and twists her neck to look down between us at it.

“So, how does this work? Why does liquid come out of everywhere?”

“Attached to the stalk, are the buds that transfer my seed,” I explain with a strained trill and gently move her hand over the sensitive purple buds. “When a male Drotopian releases his seed during mating, the buds open, spurting it deep within the female to fertilize her eggs.”

“Why the fluid beforehand?” She asks, pulling a hand away to show the glistening clear liquid in her palm.

“It’s called *emollient*. It helps aid in the process of entering the female.”

“So, you have built-in lube?” Sidney chuckles, brushing her fingers teasingly over each bud.

“I know not of what you speak of. What is this *lube*?”

“Forget about it. Just take me, my fluffy, brave, Drotopian.” Low and husky, her tone triggers instinct buried deep within. Instinct to bury my stalk inside my mate and claim her viciously. But I hold back. *Barely*.

She is not yet ready. I must get her to secrete more to accommodate my stalk. Small and petite, I do not think my emollient will be enough to ease into her.

Suddenly, her body tenses and she cries out, warm fresh nectar coating my finger. Rubbing my swollen stalk on her soft skin, I lose myself in the heavy scent of her pheromones, a rhythmic mating hiss bursts free from my mouth.

My blood blazes hotter than the sun. My nerves hum. And the green fuzz covering my body stands to attention from the torrent of

pleasure ripping through me. I can't bear it.

Sidney, this female, has a chokehold on me. She has since the moment I saw her. If this is to be the outcome for saving her life twelve moons ago, I would do it again in a heartbeat.

She may be small and defenseless, but I am the one at her mercy. Happily caught in her deadly trap of beauty and sweet softness.

My Aya could ask for the world, and I'd do everything I can to give it to her.

With one arm secure around her, I lift her leg and press the tip of my stalk against her slit. "Little Starlight, a mere taste of you isn't enough. I must have you. *Mate* you. Drink of the water that drips down those supple soft curves when I watch you fight and dine on the nectar that gathers between what you call... *thighs*. And once I have claimed you, I will offer my head. For it shall be an honor to spend my final moments providing nourishment for my Aya."

"Wait... what?" Skin flushed and panting, Sidney's expression switches to one of confusion.

Without a word, I thrust forward, forcing my way into her tight entrance. There is no resistance as I slide inside her with ease.

To mate with a female Drotopian, there is at least some resistance and can only be entered at a very awkward angle. But this is Sidney. And she is no Drotopian. She is a human. *My* human.

A sharp cry of pain has me pausing with worry as her body tenses, heat squeezing me tight.

*Great Luna above, even the inside of her heat is soft!*

Just like the rest of her.

Releasing a savage hiss, my hand goes down to sweep her other leg, picking her up and supporting her weight. I bounce her up and down repeatedly, working her silken heat on my stalk.

Although soft, her heat grips me with strength I didn't know it had. Seeming to suck my stalk in deeper. Never have I known such mind-numbing pleasure. Nothing compares to this moment with my Aya. Nothing can even come close to this ecstasy.

"Ayrin..." Sidney moans and my fingers dig into her soft plush thighs in an effort to hold her in place as emollient coats the inner walls of her heat and gush warm down her legs.



She whimpers when I slow my thrusts, pulling back before slamming back inside, deepening each stroke. Pinchers widening, I curl my tongue out to lap up the water suddenly dripping from her neck. The bitter taste mixes with the sweetness of her skin and I feel heat rushing up my stalk.

I can no longer hold back.

“Yes, Ayrin...” Sidney says with a throaty moan, arm going up to curl around my neck, fingers tugging at my hair, and heat fluttering.

That undoes me.

A piercing hiss escapes as my seed erupts from each individual bud, filling her soft heat with my essence.

Clamping down hard on me, I hear a distinct pop as Sidney throws her head back and arches. Warmth floods over my twitching stalk and an raging inferno of need washes over me. A need to push my seed deeper inside her.

Pressing my face to her hair, I inhale her scent and shudder at another wave of pleasure as I thrust deeper still, ensuring that my seed will take root to fertilize her eggs when I’m gone.

Sorrow stabs at my heart through the immense heat, aroma, and softness.

I don’t want to leave my previous Sidney alone after this mating. I want to hold her close for many moons and soak in the presence that is my Aya. But... it must be done.

*It is an honor to give my head to my mate.*

Why doesn’t it feel like such an honor at the moment?

Pushing aside the painful feeling eating away at me, I gently set Sidney down on the branch, slick and seed running down her legs.

Placing a hand to my forehead and bowing low, I release a hiss of content. I will be gone, but I know Qrysix will watch over her after my demise. The colony is starting to come to terms with a human living among us... should she continue to stay. “My seed shall fertilize your eggs and my head will be your food. So, my Aya, I offer my head to you as nourishment. It has been an honor to be your mate.”





**Sidney**

“Say what now?”

I just had phenomenal sex with a praying mantis out in the open - cum still dripping down my legs and everything - and that mantis is bowing to me like I'm the Queen instead of Onyx. Like I'm some precious treasure that is going to devour his head.

*Like I have the strength to tear off his head.*

Bile burns my throat as it rises. I don't want to eat his head. That's disgusting.

I should've remembered my studies that a female mantis will eat the male's head after mating. But, being too preoccupied in the throes of pure bliss, I forgot.

It stands to reason that he's expecting me to eat him. Even though intelligent, he's still a praying mantis. Instinct demands that he lay down his life to feed me.

Walking over to him, I tenderly place both hands on either side of his face, moving his head until he focuses on me. "Ayrin, I love you and I think you are amazing... but I'm not going to eat you. I don't have eggs for you to fertilize... in a manner of speaking."

"I do not understand..."

"Humans don't require eating their mates head after mating," I explain, hoping to word it in a way that won't be confusing.

"I...I don't have to leave you and we can mate more than once?" His antenna's quiver and pinchers widen in shock.

"Yes." The moment the confirmation leaves my mouth, Ayrin releases a shrill hiss and snaps his arms out to crush me against his chest as he does a surprisingly graceful twirl.

His chest rumbles and wings flutter. Four legs stampedes in place, crushing my top and skirt into pieces.

*My hard work!*

It's hard to stay mad at him while he's dancing around like a giddy child who has just been told they're getting another slice of cake.

"My insides feel strange. Like larva digging around, trying to find a way out." Ayrin says, tone gleeful.

Blocking out that very disturbing image, I chuckle and press my cheek to his chest. "What you're feeling is called *love*."

"Is this... a *Human* thing?"

“In a way.”

“Then I feel this human love for you, my Aya.” He bends to press his mouth to my hair, trilling affectionately. And as he holds me close, my body relaxes in stupefied bliss. I’ve never had anyone care for me this much before. It’s... nice. Amazing.

In his embrace, the dark, empty void I retreat to be alone, doesn’t seem so... cold. Less unwelcoming. In time, I can leave it behind for good with Ayrin to help me face the despairing pit of loneliness that threatens to consume me.

In Drotopia, I can leave behind my old life and blossom into a new me. Start anew in a community that doesn’t totally hate my presence and a mantis man that loves me.

*I’m home.*



Ayrin's soft fluff tickles my cheek and I heave a sigh of contentment. The sun warms my back as we lay lazily in the patch

of sunlight that settles on the ground next to the tree I've come to call home.

As an introvert, I never liked being around others. Found it to be too overwhelming. But, with Ayrin, it's different. Sure, he's an insect that surpasses me in size and weight, and yes I'm still learning a few words I don't understand in his language, but words aren't needed between us right now. In this stolen moment, I am perfectly happy to just lay on his chest, staring at him in fascination as he plays with my hair.

With my makeshift clothes in tatters on the branch outside his Burrow, I decided to just go nude for the rest of the day. Ayrin doesn't seem to mind, and the rest of the Drotopian's don't understand why I'm so insistent on covering my bits. It's just him and I around anyways.

Because he asked for time off to find a kind of flower to basically court me, Ayrin doesn't have to report back to Onyx until tomorrow.

Today is our day.

A deep gurgling sounds and Ayrin snaps his head down to look at me, eyes bright with worry. "What is it? Are you well?"

"I'm fine, just hungry." I laugh, wiggling into an upright position to rub a hand over my growling stomach.

"Allow me to-"

"I got it." I get to my feet, trotting over to the patch closest to us that usually holds the blood red berries I've grown so fond of.

Plucking one from a twig overhead, my gaze wanders off into the distance. I may have decided to stay, but that doesn't explain where the others went. Where my group went.

The tents are gone. Everything is just *gone*. As if they packed up everything and left in a hurry.

According to Ayrin - who has taken several guard shifts high up in the tree tops within the past few days - he claims that the white points, which are the tents, were there one day and gone the next.

He asked the other guards and they all say the same thing. There isn't anything for miles in all directions.

Everyone left.

The question is, where?

It makes no sense. We had a year left in the expedition. Maybe they left after Chuck's friend shrunk me to avoid suspicion of their shady deal? Did everyone else just leave because they didn't want to stay the rest of the year?

Both of those assumptions are possible.

Am I just overanalyzing it because they left without me and I'm the only one left in the Amazon?

Sighing, I rub at my temple to stem the growing headache. I don't regret my decision. Not one bit. But I can't help it. I can't help but wonder what happened after I shrunk.

*Guess I'll never know.*

A sharp hiss echoes and I glance over at Ayrin. He straightens his legs and stands with alarming smoothness. Even at a distance, I can see the fine hairs on his legs rise, count each one in vivid detail. Too quick to follow, he is suddenly standing in front of me, leg hooking around my waist. "You have that look."

"What look?" I giggle as the hairs on his leg brush against my thigh, tickling my skin. Reaching up, I watch him bend at the waist, lowering until I'm able to tangle my hands in his neck fluff, fingers petting the softness.

"The furrow between your eyes," Ayrin gently taps a claw on my forehead. "I've come to understand it as distress. What troubles you?"

"Nothing." I lie, not wanting to voice my worries.

Bright green eyes study me for a minute before strong arms pull me close. Cheek resting on fluff, I close my eyes and release a deep breath, willing my heart to stop fluttering.

A sudden gust of wind tears through my hair and the arms holding me, turn into a punishing grip as Ayrin hugs me tightly to him so I'm not blown away by the warm air. Through a narrow gaze as to not get dirt in my eyes, I watch Ayrin unfurl his wings, stretching them to block out the stinging wind.

I risk a peek upward and the roaring wind around us, drowns out my gasp. A butterfly. A beautiful yellow butterfly is flying past us. Its magnificent wings shimmering with every powerful beat.

As the air calms, a dreamy smile curls my lips. Because I'm shrunk, the butterfly is taller than Ayrin. It also has lots of fluff. To



be able to study a butterfly, close up, would be a dream. And because of my size, my dream is possible.

“Sidney?” Deep and gentle, Ayrin’s voice brings me back to the shade we are standing in under a bush.

“Hmm?” I ask, returning my gaze to his. Pinchers pulling together, a look of concern fills those unblinking eyes.

“Are you well?” He asks, his tone thick and buzzing, confirming that he is worried.

“Yeah. I’m just in my head.” I reply.

“In your... head?” Head tilt and pinchers clicking. His way of showing confusion.

“It means that I was lost in thought.”

“Speak of what is on your mind.” Ayrin says, pulling back and folding his legs to settle comfortably on the ground. Using his hands to drag me down, onto the curve of his bent leg.

“When I was young-” I begin and he gives a sharp trill, cutting me off.

“As a hatchling?” His question has a laugh bubbling up my throat. I keep forgetting that they use words with different meanings. Cyin meaning rose, and hatchling meaning baby or child.

“Yes. When I was a... hatchling, I loved butterflies. Growing up, I lived on a farm and helped my mom with our rose garden. I used to watch them flutter from rose - er - Cyin to Cyin, for hours. I still find them so fascinating and beautiful...” As I explain, a memory of standing out in the hot sun, holding a watering can, and laughing with my mom, causes me to trail off with a sad sigh. There was a time my parents and I were close. Especially mom.

But the older I got, the less attention she gave until I read that note on the door so many years ago.

Eyes burning, I turn my head, avoiding his curious gaze. It was years ago. I shouldn’t be so worked up about it... but I am. I’m still hurt she would do something like that. To her own daughter.

“Little Starlight,” Ayrin murmurs, curling a claw under my chin, turning my head to face him, and cupping my cheek in his big hand. A thrilling shiver goes down my spine at the nickname he gave me and I lean into his touch. “I do not know what a *btrly* is. Are you meaning a *Freya*?”

Assuming that is the word for butterfly in his language, I nod and he strokes a thumb over my cheek, wiping away tears I'm unaware that escaped. "Freya's are beautiful, but dangerous when cornered. It would be unwise to observe them up close."

Deflating at his words of caution, I nod again, not trusting myself to speak for fear of bursting out in more blubbering tears.

"However..." I peer up at him eagerly at his relenting tone and his shoulder sag in defeat. "If it would make you happy, my Aya, I shall take you to a *Bryis* patch they frequent. But we will observe them high up and remain silent, understood?"

"Yes!" I shout, wiping my eyes as I jump up and bouncing on the balls of my feet in excitement.

Ayrin takes my hand and presses it to his forehead with narrow eyes and a low hiss. "The glow that brightens your eyes is enthralling when you are happy. I want to savor that beautiful light by doing all I can to keep it there."

My fingertips ghost over the top of his head and my stomach does a somersault. Drotopian's press a hand to their foreheads in greeting. But putting my hand on him... it feels personal. *Intimate*.

A calming and loving notion reserved just for me.

"Be there for me, my Drotopian. Stay with me and my happiness will grow." I whisper, pouring every ounce of love and fear into those words.

I'm *finally* happy.

*I beg to whatever God or Goddess is listening, to keep Ayrin safe and by my side. That he won't leave me.*

"By your side I shall remain, until my last breath." Ayrin's eyes gleam with intense emotion and his pinchers open.

Standing on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his mouth, sealing what he promises in a simple, sweet, kiss.

As Ayrin picks me up and flies due North, I glance over his shoulder in the direction of where the expedition camp was, unease churning my stomach.

*Why can't I shake the feeling that something bad is about to happen?*

### *Author's Note*

Thank you so much for reading *Preying for Her*! It means the world to me that you trusted me with my Praying Mantis romance. As you've probably guessed while reading it, the *Ant Bully* was a big inspiration in writing this. I remember watching it with my daughter one day and thinking, "Why not write about my favorite insect and mash it into a slow burn romance?"

So, here I am. With shrink rays, language barriers, and a fascinating and terrifying new world through the eyes of Drotopians.

If you could spare one moment to leave a review for *Preying for Her*, it would mean a lot.

Come also join my facebook reader group: *Melissa's Broodlings*. Where we share memes, bookish stuff, fanarts, commissioned art, sneak peeks, and more!

Turn the page for the blurb of *Craving Her*. (Book 2 for *Preying for Her*)

**Craving Her**  
**(Book Cover Coming Soon!)**

**She is a soft, squishy, and odd creature, but she is his.**

Ayrin never imagined the Luna would give him an Aya.

Yet, here Sidney is in his Burrow.

But their happiness doesn't last long.

When danger strikes in the form of bright flashes and big hulking creatures, Drotopian Warriors start disappearing.

For the safety of the colony, Ayrin must venture out into the dark reaches of the unknown to find his missing comrades.

He refuses to put Sidney in danger and will do what he must to protect his human. His Starlight. His Aya.

**Preorder Coming Soon!**