



Secretary
FOR THE
ALIEN PRINCE

TAMMY WALSH

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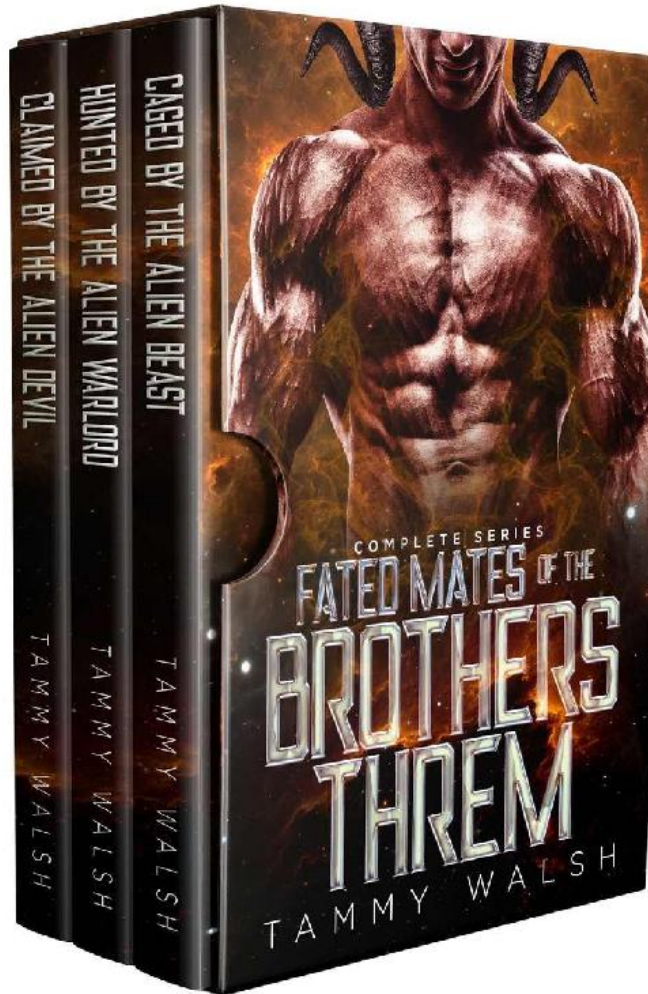
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RIVVAC

If I didn't mate soon, I was going to do something bad.
Really bad.

It seemed that with every passing Steyatt, the urges got stronger, bolder, seizing control of my whole mind and physical body.

There was no hiding place because mating was all you could think about.

Your cock grew stiff and hard and your senses heightened until you could smell a female from across the street.

Some Ulsen were known to lose their minds completely by the end of Steyatt week.

It was our time to mate and it happened once every year.

I had always managed to stave off the worst of the effects and mate with a female—sometimes multiple females, but multiple partners were *never* ideal.

It was always better to have a single mate during that period.

The only trouble was I had the position of the youngest prince of the Ulsen Empire and although I was unlikely to ever inherit the throne—save for some freak accident that wiped out the rest of my family (the Creator forbid!)—I was seen as a lifetime meal ticket.

I'd seen it happen more times than I cared to admit. A disinterested female would turn away from me and make

excuses to leave, only to immediately turn back the moment she heard my name and title. Suddenly, they brought out their best smiles and their natural pheromones clotted my senses.

I couldn't think straight.

Before I knew it, they were in my bed, satisfying my every sexual urge—and during Steyatt week, it could be a very... tumultuous period.

My friends' mates had ended up in the hospital to be treated for injuries. They were never done on purpose but sometimes a male could get carried away.

Especially during Steyatt week.

Steyatt week was the single most important event for all doctors and nurses throughout the empire. They made a killing while we killed ourselves in the bedroom.

I'd had several near-misses in the past, as many of my mates wanted to take the relationship further, or worse yet, after they had satisfied me a handful of times, would begin insisting on some form of payment halfway through or demand I carry out a service for them in exchange for the luscious wetness between her legs.

Often, they wanted me to use the Royal military to off a former lover. Which was *strictly* off-limits and easy to refuse.

Mostly, I managed to rein in my urges and leave my bedchamber, but others... I had been less successful.

Sometimes the craving was too strong and I caved, promising them whatever they wished, and was left with a headache I struggled to resolve the moment I blew my load.

Other times, it was a challenge to prove how much I cared for my mate—asking me to fetch them a rare type of flower that grew only on the upper reaches of the Archiaian Mountains.

I always accepted this request as they were my mother's favorite and all I had to do was pluck one from a bouquet she kept in her rooms!

The mate was always angered because she wanted a *fresh* one. It didn't matter that there was a good chance the pursuit would claim my life!

That was why I always weighed the request carefully. Semantics mattered—especially when my life was on the line.

But that was the way it was for a Royal during Steyatt week. You had to play games to ensure you didn't come out promising things you didn't intend on delivering.

Other Ulsen males hadn't been so fortunate, had been unable to control their innate urges, and ended up getting caught and locked away behind bars.

It wasn't only the doctors and hospitals that were busy during that time.

So was the morgue...

And the police stations and prisons.

And the last thing I wanted was to wind up behind bars with a raging hard-on that wouldn't quit... I'd heard the horror stories and didn't intend on living it myself.

My senses were on overdrive as I caught the scent of one juicy female after another.

In the Royal palace ballroom, the females battered their eyelids at me, their gorgeous scent filling my every pore. Many hadn't washed in a week to ensure their pheromones were powerful enough to be picked up from across the large ballroom where we circulated.

Some even ate specific diets to encourage the production of their scent. Others with deeper pockets bought special fragrances said to drive a male wild. Some were scams, others were real and damn near impossible to avoid.

And avoid was exactly what I intended on doing at the Royal Steyatt Ball. And things were going great...

Until I smelled *her*.

I HAD BEEN MOVING through the crowd of guests in the ballroom, greeting them and making polite conversation, playing the part of the dutiful prince.

There were many beautiful females, all with overpowering scents and wanton expressions in their eyes.

I had managed to smile and ignore the growing lust in my loins...

Until I picked up on a scent I had not encountered before.

Thick and strong, with an alien earthy undertone like playing with dirt in the garden as a child... and the strong presence of unknown flowers underneath that promised seduction and pleasure in ways I could only dream of...

Suddenly panicked, I peered around at where the scent might be coming from, then thought better of it.

I didn't *want* to know where it was coming from!

With my Steyatt suddenly peaking and all the sights and smells of the females surrounding me and their deliberate traps designed to ensnare my senses, I was doomed to drag at least one of them to my rooms and mate with them.

All because of that damn smell!

I needed to get out of there. *Now!*

"Excuse me," I said, sidestepping around a very lovely female Ulsen with red-painted horns. "I have to, uh, do something."

I stepped away and was immediately confronted by a pair of gorgeous Ulsen, their horns carved with intricate patterns in the modern style.

"Prince Rivvac," an older voice from behind them said, shoving her daughters toward me. "Have you met my daughters? They just came of age and are very keen to meet you—"

“Ah. They’re beautiful,” I said through eyes that I rapidly tore away. “I have something important I need to do—”

I moved like that from one female to another, but they didn’t make it easy. One reached up and ran a hand over my cheek, smiling seductively at me.

You could never tell when Steyatt would strike most strongly.

I made it out of the room and breathed a sigh of relief that I had managed to escape.

I hustled down the hallway, where half a dozen other guests raised their arms and voices to greet me, but I kept my eyes down low and hustled past them.

Sure, they might think I was rude, but how rude would they think I would be if I were to suddenly grab *their* Steyatt partners and drag them into a bedroom and use them for my own purposes?

And as a prince of the realm, there was *nothing* they could do to stop me.

Oh, their own senses would be triggered and their innate warrior spirit would compel them to attack... But I was better trained than they could ever hope to be, and if I failed somehow, then the palace guards would be on him before he managed to land many blows... And then I would be free to misuse his mate to my heart’s content...

But I had no such inclination to do something so evil to him or his mate.

I turned a corner but found another female wandering listlessly, lost, through the hallway. She saw me and raised her voice:

“Excuse me. Do you know where the ladies’ room is?”

“No!” I snapped, covering my eyes with one hand while clutching my other over my nostrils to keep her natural scent out of my nose, brain, and senses.

I turned another corner and found the hallway empty.

At last!

Free of any females!

Then a gaggle of them appeared around a corner, their gossiping stopping along with their footsteps for half a heartbeat as they looked up and saw me there.

I didn't look at them, but judging by the redness of their cheeks and the massive twirl of the hair on their heads, they could be only on thing.

Sirens.

The very *last* females you wanted to see during the opening salvo of Steyatt week.

They were known to educate and teach other female Ulsens in the ways of manipulation and their sex skills were legendary and a force of nature.

Once you were in their grasp, they could manipulate you to their heart's content, playing you like some kind of living instrument. And for those seven days, it was said you would know pleasure unlike anything you had ever known...

But by the end of it, they would have drained you of everything you were, took up residence in your home, and sucked your wealth from you until you were penniless and lost all respect.

I knew how they worked because that was what had happened to my father.

My mother, the Empress, was a former Siren, and she had wrapped my father around her horns tighter than the tiara that always sat perched upon her head.

She had taken everything from him, everything but his title as that was given by the Creator and could not be removed.

Then the strangest thing happened.

She ended up falling in love with him!

They turned out to be fated mates, which were the most powerful bonding link in the known galaxy.

Once it was formed, it could never be removed, and you were linked with them for the rest of your lives.

It was a true blessing as you would never know sadness or loneliness as that part of you was always wrapped up in that part of them.

But it was extremely rare and not something most people even hoped for these days.

It was like being struck by lightning.

Still, it was definitely not a risk I was willing to take right at that moment when my senses were glowing and spiraling out of control.

I thought all this in that split second the gaggle of Sirens had become silent and looked up to see me for who I was.

I growled at myself that I hadn't thought to put on a costume or wear a mask or... something!

“Prince Rivvac! Prince Rivvac!” they called, and like a pack of hungry wulvik, they broke formation and tore after me.

They sang songs that ricocheted off the bare marble walls and chased me, nipping at my heels as I raced through the palace's infinite hallways, turning one way and then another, my speed hampered by the fact my hands were clenched over my ears to prevent myself from hearing their ancient and powerful spellbinding seductive song.

Thankfully, their scent—harvested from the amigdala of the rare frogghian reptile on Micus Moon—hadn't yet wafted into my nostrils.

And if it did, I was a dead Ulsen.

All right, not exactly dead, but I would succumb to their advances and be unable to fight it.

I would be *doomed*.

I would become nothing more than a scalp as one—or more—of them drained me of everything I possessed.

Except they didn't know the truth of what they would get and would be very disappointed if they did...

I had panicked and lost track of where I was running.

Was I heading back to the party?

If I was, I would be slowed down and the Sirens would snatch me for sure.

I turned again and slammed hard into a waist-high balcony, almost pitching over the side.

I rubbed at my hip where I had struck it, hissing through my teeth. I heard that rolling tune of the Siren's song behind me, I immediately forgot about the pain.

I limped to one side and pressed my back to the wall.

But it wasn't good enough.

They would find me for sure.

I turned and peered down at the balconies arranged along the western wall of the palace, the city of Ulsen-Jirra spread out before me.

Right now, in those small, squat buildings, the Ulsen would be making love to each other in virtually every room they could find.

Some would even discover their fated mates.

Others wouldn't be quite so lucky, and if I didn't hurry and do something soon, I might very well end up being among them.

The Siren song grew louder and I hastily tore small strips from my shirt, balled it up, and jammed it into my ears to block the worst of it.

Of course, there was no real worst of it as it was known to be among one of the most beautiful melodies in the known galaxy—it was what happened *after* succumbing to it that was the ugly part.

"Prince Rivvac?" a soft voice cooed from behind me. "We know you're here somewhere. Come out and play. What's the

matter? Don't you want to play with us?"

Yes. And that was the problem. *I want it more than anything!*

My Steyatt forced me to let go of the banister and turn me toward the opening so the Sirens could find me.

Here I am, ladies! Come and get me!

But I ground my teeth and hastily climbed over the balcony, taking a moment to do what they always told you *not* to do in the Ulsen military, and looked down.

I was five stories up.

The fall might not kill me, but I risked being incapacitated for life...

And if the Sirens found me before the medics, they would take me to their Sanctuary and treat my wounds themselves, burying their claws deep into me.

It was worth the risk if I could escape.

I hurled myself toward the next balcony and latched onto the railing.

A scream went up from behind the billowing curtains as a couple inside, making mad passionate love, turned to see me.

"Don't mind me!" I yelled. "Just passing through!"

"Get out of here! She's *my* mate!" the male bellowed, raging toward me.

It didn't matter that I was a prince, not when it came to mating during Steyatt week.

I didn't confront him—it was never wise to do so in the midst of mating—and ran and leaped onto the next balcony.

This room was empty and I recognized it as my own suite.

I eased the window open, bolted toward the door, and turned the key in the lock.

I pressed my forehead to it and muttered a prayer to the Creator, thanking him for giving me the strength to resist.

“There you are.”

I stiffened, every muscle in my body becoming on edge, ready to explode and act upon the female in the room with me.

The voice was soft and gentle, caressing and feminine.

Her scent filled my nostrils and I felt myself already beginning to fall into the precipice of uncontrollable heat on the other side.

I turned around slowly, the movement seeming to take a lifetime.

Standing before me, almost regal in her silk dress harvested from the giant silkworms of Philliqua 4, stood the most beautiful Ulsen I had ever laid eyes on.

I took one step toward her after another, and soon, I forgot where I was and what I was doing there and all control just flew out the hatch...

I FELL on my knees before her and sank my face into the soft folds of her dress, so close to her sex that I could practically taste it.

“Rivvac?” she said. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t take it anymore. The Steyatt... how can any male stand it? If I don’t claim one soon, I fear what might happen next.”

Flara chuckled before raising my chin so she could peer into my eyes.

It only made my feelings worse, as my cock now raged harder than I had ever experienced before.

“We go through this every year. You succeeded in controlling yourself. That’s admirable. But there is no fighting against the Steyatt. Not for the entire week.”

“Please,” I growled. “I need to bed you. Now. Here. If I don’t...”

Flara smiled and I already knew what her answer would be—the same as it had been the other years I had asked for her to be my Steyatt mate.

She would refuse.

She placed a hand on my cheek and spoke softly, her voice like that of angel—an angel from hell with the way she toyed so easily with my senses. She said:

“I know you’ll choose another for your Steyatt week. Another mate. It is only for a week and it is your right to bed her. But *I* will not be her. I refuse to be the subject of gossip among friends and family. I can’t allow my reputation to be sullied by gossip. My father would never accept it.”

And there was the real reason, I knew.

She was afraid what her father would say.

“But I want to mate with *you*,” I said, almost a cry. “We’re going to be married anyway, so why wait until the wedding night?”

Her smile tightened. “There are no guarantees in life. And if I were to allow you to bed me during your Steyatt, the husband I end up with might not be too pleased that I was bedded by a prince of the Ulsen Empire.”

“Gah,” I said, making the noise involuntarily.

She was right, I knew.

The higher classes of Ulsen society did not lend themselves or their bodies out for Steyatt week as mates.

But still, it hurt that there was still a chance she would end up mating with someone else, and even worse than that—end up marrying them too.

“Who?” I asked. “Is there another male you might marry?”

Flara blinked in surprise—not that I knew there was another potential suitor, but that I had asked so directly.

She looked away and unnecessarily smoothed her skirts. “My father has been favoring Crer recently.”

“Crer?” I spat.

Of course. He was handsome, from an old and powerful family, and better yet, he was *rich*.

More than rich enough to support Flara and her family.

“But you don’t love him,” I said. “You love *me*.”

Flara shrugged. “Sometimes love is not enough.”

That rubbed me up the wrong way as I felt it wasn’t the truth at all... At least, it could be true among the lower classes, where money was a constant worry. When you had nothing, you really could marry for love.

But when you were royalty or part of the elite classes, when you wore your wealth on your fingers and body... it was an entirely different game altogether.

It seemed so unfair that the poor could marry for love while the rich could not.

“I thought being rich meant we could be free to choose our mates?” I said.

“Not when it comes to marriage,” Flara said with a sigh, no doubt tired of having the same conversation with me each year.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her in close.

The scent of her filled my senses and I could barely control myself.

I planted my lips on her cheek and growled in the back of my throat.

She knew what I wanted. I didn’t make myself difficult to understand.

“We can’t do this,” she said. “You know we can’t.”

“But we *can*. We’re both of consenting age.”

“Yes,” she said, gently pushing me back. “But your family is poor now. And if you want to marry me, you’re going to have to come up with money to do so. My father knows your family has nothing.”

“We have our titles. Our land.”

“And it’s all now controlled by the Empire.”

“My family *is* the Empire,” I countered, parroting the words from the news and propaganda pumped into the minds of the Ulsen every day.

Flara reached up and ran a hand through my hair, gently caressing my horns. “Your family *isn’t* the Empire. You’re just the head of it. And all the titles in the galaxy can’t even buy a single meal. Only money can do that. And right now, you’re poorer than the average merchant in the street.”

I took her hands in mine. “But I will be wealthy. You’ll see.”

She let me kiss her fingertips, then took my face in her dainty hands and kissed me on the cheek.

“It’s not me you have to convince,” she said. “It’s my father.”

We had been betrothed since birth, and although it wasn’t a formal ceremony, it was nonetheless expected.

The thought of losing her now when she was so close, especially when there were other suitors sniffing around her...

It was too much to handle.

“How can I earn the money I need to prove myself to your father?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Flara said honestly. “But you’re going to have to figure out a way. And fast. I’m not sure I can force my father to wait much longer.”

My instincts went on high alert. There had never been a deadline before.

“How serious is he about Crer?” I asked.

She looked up at me through her eyelashes. “Very. But we shouldn’t talk about it now. After Steyatt week, perhaps. You need to focus on finding your mate.”

Flara she was always meant to be mine... and to be so close to her now, now that we had each come of age... it made my stomach churn in a way I had never experienced before.

“But we will be together, won’t we?”

“That depends on whether or not you can convince my father. Now I need to go. He’ll be wondering where I am.”

Now I had the worst of both worlds—the need to mate and without the will to go through with it.

“Choose your mate carefully,” Flara said at the door. “With any luck, this will be the last time you ever need to mate with another Ulsen.”

My cock sprang to attention immediately as she peered at me through her long luscious eyelashes, and the seductive curl of her lips promised everything I had ever dreamed of.

She unlocked the door and slid out, shutting it behind herself, leaving despair in her wake.

How could I have her *without* wealth?

I couldn’t. It was impossible. Her father would never accept me.

Maybe if I spoke with him, made him understand just how much I loved her, he might let me have her...

But I knew what the outcome of that would be.

He wouldn’t back down.

He was the Empire’s treasurer and he believed in reality, figures, fact... not some wishy washy promises of unaccountable emotions.

He would need to see I could provide for his daughter—and not just with titles—but real, hard, cold cash.

I fell onto the edge of my bed and buried my face in my hands.

I was doomed and someone else was going to claim her.

That would leave me alone, with no one...

There was no hope.

And then a knock came at the door.

I DIDN'T SAY "COME" as I didn't want to encourage any females to take advantage of me in my current condition.

The door opened anyway and a figure popped her head around the door frame.

It was a human face and I figured it must have been one of the servants as they made up more than eighty percent of the serving staff.

They were cheap, hardworking, and much smaller than the average Ulsen, so they were easier to feed, clothe, and home.

They had been trained to control their emotions well too, and were often blank-faced and hard to read, although I often wondered what they were really thinking beneath the surface.

Behind her, sawing like some majestic bird, was the sing-song lullaby sung by the Sirens.

Worst still, I thought I caught sight of their bright clothing and high, complex hair designs.

"Shut the door!" I snapped.

The female human did so—after she had stepped into the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" I growled.

The female then turned the key in the lock, turned to face me, her tiny hands balled up into fists, and glared at me.

"I'm not leaving until I get my interview!" she snapped.

"Your what?"

"My job interview!"

I scanned her body language—it was the one thing that I could read when it came to humans—and there was no doubt in my mind that she honestly believed what she was saying.

“I’ve been waiting an hour!” she snapped. “Is this the way the palace runs things around here? Because if it is, I’m not sure I want to work here after all!”

I took an unconscious step back. I had never seen an angry human before, much less had to deal with one.

They were seen and not heard, for the most part.

Only the most senior members of the staff actually spoke to Royal family members.

Had this girl lost her marbles, or was she so new to our culture and way of life that she didn’t know how to address a member of the Family?

Or was she really that angry?

“I’m not sure I understand—” I began but got no further.

The girl handed me a piece of paper with “Resume” written across the top. “I’m here for the assistant position.”

Assistant?

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what—”

And then it hit me.

The scent of her.

Full and earthy and rich, unlike anything I had ever smelled before...

Save *one* time.

She had tried to conceal it beneath some kind of flowery perfume but her own body produced a much stronger, more pungent, and overwhelming scent than anything that could be captured in a bottle.

I unconsciously stumbled back one step and then another, reaching out to brace myself on a side table.

“Are you all right?” she said, her anger for the moment dissipating in favor of concern, although I could see it was still very much being held in reserve.

“I’m... I’m fine...” I stammered, not sure of my own words.

It was the scent—the scent from the ballroom earlier—the scent my nostrils had caught from the sea of writhing masses and shoved me over the edge, threatening to lose control of the Steyatt.

It had been so strong, so powerful and pungent that I could have followed it and sniffed her out at a thousand paces.

In the ballroom, I had been on a mission to escape the effects her scent had on me, and not to pursue its origins.

And now, somehow, it had been delivered to me.

Right here.

In my bedroom.

My cock throbbed so hard against the front of my pants that I thought it might burst free.

I wanted nothing more than to scoop her up in my arms and make sweet love to her, but I knew such soft and romantic gestures would not last long.

They would quickly descend into deep and violent lovemaking that the Ulsen were so well-known for.

“Well?” she snapped, reverting back to her earlier anger.

“Well what?” I said, losing all sense of focus.

“What about my interview?”

“Your interview. Yes. Of course.”

My initial reaction had been to send her away to have her interview with whoever was responsible for such things—I had no idea who that person was as our staff was so large I couldn’t possibly know everyone—but I knew the head of Human Resources and she would doubtless be the one she ought to speak with.

But she was baked into my destiny somehow.

I wasn’t sure how—after all, she was only a human female, what significance could she possibly have in my

future?

The fates had brought her here for me to smell, I had no doubt about that, and you did not ignore what the fates sent you, no matter how much you didn't want to confront it.

“Then let's do it now, shall we?” I said.

She nodded. “Good.”

I led her over to my desk piled high with papers, documents, and pressing business matters.

Having the desk between us also meant I could conceal my throbbing, aching cock from view.

But her scent had no such restrictions and virtually pummeled me into submission, the same way I wished I could pummel her right then and there.

And allowing myself to be led by my own instincts was gave me my idea.

When a human female had so willingly stumbled into my midst during Steyatt week, and as the fates had obviously conspired to bring her to me right here and now, at the lowest and most desperate part of my desire...

There could only be one reason.

Mia (as the top of this flimsy document called a Resume informed me) was destined to be my Steyatt mate.

And I would have her. No matter the cost.

MIA

I had only ever seen the palace in photos and images on holo-TV.

It looked magnificent with its strange (to my eyes, at least) curved outer walls and the mushroom-like towers perched on top of each corner.

But none of the images or videos could have prepared me for the sight of the palace in person.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen before—and I liked to think I'd seen a *lot* in my thirty-two years.

Everything I had been working on, all those years of study and nose to the grindstone, had led to this moment.

I couldn't help but congratulate myself under my breath: "You've finally made it, Mia." I gave myself a pat on the back.

I had come for an interview, but there was no guarantee I would get it.

I had as much chance as anyone else—although my experience was hard to trump.

After my parents died in a freak shuttlecraft accident, I was left all alone in the cosmos.

They had moved away from Earth before the worst of the wars had taken place.

My father had always been into reading the news, but there were always things he couldn't quite understand, or that the

explanations from mass media didn't fully explain, and that made him question the narrative he was being fed.

He took a step back and considered: What if everything we were being told was a lie?

And so he diversified the mainstream news he was consuming (which turned out to be pointless as they seemed to tell the same lies as everyone else) and was at a loss until he explored smaller, independent publications.

Some of it was out there and he wasn't ready to fully believe what he'd seen. After all, why replace one set of lies with another?

It was only after he took *everything* he read with a fistful of salt that he began to see the bigger picture.

After two years, he began to feel that things were getting worse, not better, as some of the news outlets informed him.

And so one day, he told us that he wanted us to leave Earth and begin a new life elsewhere—where the rich and powerful didn't have quite so much control over our lives.

He understood that it was a decision we all needed to make and treated us (even me, who was only eight years old at the time) as adults.

He laid out the facts he'd found and what he thought was the truth—although he admitted it was difficult to ascertain completely what the truth was—but we did the best with what he had.

He predicted that a new world war was going to take place, possibly with newly-developed weapons that, just a few short years earlier, everyone would have considered science-fiction—and he wanted to be as far away from it as possible to get.

I loved my school and friends and didn't like the idea that I wouldn't get to see them ever again.

My mom had the same concern with close family that acted as a safety net, but we all agreed that it looked like something bad was going to happen, and happen soon.

Dad, prepared as always, gave us a trio of newly-colonized planets to choose from that were crying out for fresh blood.

We decided upon Ghizzart 9 because it reminded Mom of the old western shows she used to watch on TV as a kid (although I don't recall them *ever* having purple skies or flowers that sprung into song every day at midday—but I might have missed that episode) and we left to become farmers on the moon.

We made new friends quickly and I enjoyed my studies, which were taught *completely* different from those back on Earth.

I was forced to think critically rather than memorize all the dates and facts from an old textbook.

Less than eleven months after we moved, the most powerful countries on Earth declared war.

The battle lines were drawn between the old colonial powers and those known as the “developing” nations.

It seemed the poorer countries wanted to take their destiny into their own hands, and who could blame them for that?

The war was painful and vicious, and although we tried to reach out to friends and family, we did so quietly, knowing that if we weren't careful, we would be recalled back to Earth to act as reinforcements to a war we no longer had anything to do with.

After all, we weren't official Earthlings anymore!

It took ten years for the war to work itself out, and by that point, every nation on Earth had spent all its natural resources.

No one could fight any longer—even if they wanted to.

The war was over.

Less than a week later, my parents died in a freak shuttlecraft accident that left me without family.

I had just turned eighteen, and so there was no help for me.

I tried to run our farm by myself, but there was simply too much work.

My friends and neighbors tried to pick up the slack, but they had their own farms to take care of.

Finally, less than four months after my parents had died, I lost the farm—the only real home I had known—and accepted a job working as an assistant to an old but surprisingly rich Ulsen heiress.

She was good to me, kind, and taught me everything I needed to know about running her estate.

It was the first time I'd come in contact with the Ulsen on a personal level—although I had seen them from time to time when they made deliveries to our colony moon.

They were big, impressive creatures with well-defined muscles. I had never met one less than six feet in height—and that was a female who had not yet finished growing or coming into her horns yet.

The old lady died soon after training me, and with no other member of the family interested in running the estate, they sold up, and I was forced to move on to another job.

On and on it went, working for one powerful alien species to another, and each time, I learned something valuable about their cultures and traditions.

I saved what I could and used it to make payments on the family farm. It was where I hoped to retire one day, so I might raise and support my own family.

But there was still a lot left to pay down.

I made a lot of friends, many of them not so socially accepted, but once you got under their skin and understood that all living creatures were the same and that all wanted to thrive and protect the ones they loved (even if it meant breaking a law or two) well, life became a lot whole easier.

Some of the most generous people I ever met turned out to be criminals. And some of the *worst* people turned out to be criminals too.

I learned that it was not the vocation you chose (or that chose you, as the case may be) that made you the person you

were. It only enhanced the kind of person you were, to begin with.

Money did not corrupt. It only enhanced your natural instincts as to what you were in the first place.

A bad person with money became even worse.

A good person with money became even better.

Money was only a magnifying glass.

During all that time, I had my eye on what I considered to be the best job in the entire galaxy:

To work as an assistant to the Ulsen Royal Family.

They were rich and powerful, with a ton of influence.

They paid well and I could see myself owning my farm outright with just a few more years of hard graft rather than the ten or more in less prestigious positions.

Someone bumped into my shoulder and almost sent me sprawling.

It wasn't a single person but a group of them, gossiping amongst themselves like the gaggle of wayward hens on our farm.

The one that knocked into my shoulder turned to me.

I smiled up at her in what I hoped was a friendly expression, but she only pursed her lips and sneered at me sourly.

Her face was powdered white, and her lips were blood red, painted on as if she hadn't had a mirror to look into while she was doing it.

Her perfume made me gag.

I recognized them as Sirens, supposedly the most seductive and sexy creatures in the Ulsen Empire.

Judging by the way they made themselves up, I doubted that.

But what did I know about what turned Ulsen males on?

As the gaggle of hens raised their noses and marched away, their hips swaying in crooked movements, I could only assume I was going to see a lot more crazy things like them while I was here.

If I get the job.

I stuck my tongue out at her and pulled a face.

She didn't see it but one of her friends did and she hastily whispered in the queen hen's ear.

She looked me over head to toe and snorted derisively. "She's only human," she said. "Her backward species don't know any better. Come girls, let us find the prize males at the ball. And remember your training. We're not called Sirens for nothing."

Only human.

After being the dominant species on planet Earth, it was strange to be considered at the bottom of the evolutionary food chain in the rest of the galaxy.

I took a deep breath.

I am an executive assistant, I told myself. I am hardworking and professional.

And soon, those bickering hens would be asking *me* for permission to see members of the Royal Family.

I spotted a Ulsen with a holo-tablet and figured he must be the one I needed to speak with about my interview.

I smoothed my jacket and pants, took another deep breath, and ascended the steps to meet him.

I FOLLOWED the interview assistant's wake as he led me into the palace and through the infinite hallways, dodging between hundreds of Ulsen dressed to the nines.

"Is there... some sort of event... today?" I said, slipping between two partygoers heading toward the loud music and

bright lights in the distance.

Whatever party it was, it was already in full swing.

“It’s Steyatt week,” the interview assistant said by explanation. “It’s unfortunate the interviews were arranged at the same time, but hopefully, that will be a mistake the new Royal Assistant will avoid in the future.”

He looked back and ran an eye over me as if that person couldn’t possibly be me.

I ground my teeth, determined to show him I was the best person for the job... and was grateful that *he* wouldn’t be the one making the final decision.

The hallway was packed and then suddenly released like a cork from a champagne bottle as the party guests entered the ballroom and spread out, meeting friends and acquaintances and grabbing drinks from silver platters.

I coughed, choking the cloying stink of the overpowering fragrances they were all wearing.

I should have brought a nose peg! I thought. And a pair of sunglasses while I was at it...

Their dresses—both male and female—caught the overhead light and flashed, making me blink and screw up my eyes.

It was beginning to give me a headache already.

The conversations I heard were nothing of interest but I sensed it wasn’t really the conversations that were important anyway...

Each member of the conversation locked eyes on their partner, some smiles were broad and expansive, while others were small and teasing. Some licked their lips while others gently touched each other on the arms and shoulders. Some were less gentle and ran their fingers through their partner’s hair, or knocked on their ornate horns and listened to the sound that came out.

Others still took a partner by the hand and led them out of the room as if they were going to dance...

Except I could see no dancing taking place anywhere in the ballroom.

A few of the males turned and looked at me, their eyes shining and bright, the females they were talking with stepping in the way, blocking me from view, and glared down at me over their shoulders.

A couple even “shooed” me away with a wave of their jewel-encrusted hands.

I turned to leave but the scent and the bright shining clothes and the rolling music made the room spin.

I stumbled toward one of the archways leading toward the exit and tripped and fell.

Someone caught me and lifted me up onto my feet.

He dusted off my knees and checked my face.

“Be careful, little one,” he said, his tongue lashing his lips and making them drip with saliva. “You might get trampled under foot, and no one wants that...”

There wasn't an ounce of genuine kindness in his features, and I hastily backed away from him.

He was quick to close the gap between us, gasping in a rasp that made his stinky breath cloud around my face, blocking my senses and making it hard to think.

“I... I... I'm here to...” I managed.

“Oh, yes. I'm quite sure what you're here for...” he said. “*Quite* sure. Come. Let us find somewhere quiet we can be together...”

No! I wanted to scream, but opening my mouth would only make him breathe harder on me.

This was *not* how I expected my first day in the palace to go!

Before he could grab my arm, someone else did on the other side.

It was the interview assistant.

My hero!

He paid me no attention and focused instead of the bulging, slobbering male Ulsen that had approached me.

“I’m very sorry, sir,” the interview assistant said, “but she’s here for an interview and has nothing to do with the Steyatt Ball. I’m sure there are *much* better matches for you among the other guests.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heel and marched across the ballroom, his hand clenched tight about my upper arm.

“I told you to stay close!” he snapped.

“I did!” I protested. “But I got lost in the crowd! And the smell and the noise—”

He brought me out into the hallway. The air was clean and refreshing and I felt my senses coming back to me.

“You must take a deep breath and hold it when passing through the ballroom. If not, you’ll get washed beneath all the ___”

“Stink.”

“The fragrance,” the interview assistant said. “If you intend on working at the palace, you’ll have to get used to how things are done in the Ulsen culture.”

“I have no problem learning. But somebody needs to explain to me—”

“Not today,” the interview assistant said, turning on his heel and marching away. “And certainly not by me. Come. And this time, stay close.”

I followed hot on his heels and risked a glance back over my shoulder in the direction of the party.

It was my first failure at the palace, and I was sure there would be many more.

“Learn from your failures and ensure you never make them again,” my father always said. “It’s the fastest way to learn.”

If that was the case, I was going to be the fastest learner of the Ulsen culture in history.

I only hoped I didn't lose the chance to work here before that happened.

I heard a commotion in the ballroom as I passed another arched doorway heaving with stinky bodies.

"Excuse me," a deep male voice said, invisible behind the writhing mass of bodies. "I have to, uh, do something."

"Prince Rivvac," an older voice said. "Have you met my daughters? They just came of age and are very keen to meet you—"

"Ah. They're beautiful," that same deep voice said. "I have something important I need to do—"

At least I wasn't the only one who wanted to escape the party, I thought.

I focused on the interview assistant's back as he led me to the waiting room.

AS I WAS the last person who had turned up in the waiting room, I was also going to be the last one to be interviewed.

Every fifteen minutes, the interview assistant came in, called another interviewee's name and led them out of the room.

I sniffed at my clothes and grimaced.

The stink of the partygoers' perfume and body odor had penetrated my clothes and I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to get it out.

Not that it mattered.

Peeking around at the other applicants in the room, I realized my hopes were already dashed before I even started.

I recognized many of the other applicants' faces.

They were famous and already successful in their own right.

Some were even high-powered lawyers, and I couldn't believe they would be interested in an assistant position until I realized that the palace would attract the biggest, most successful people (as well as the most ambitious) in the entire empire.

My shoulders shrank further, and I caught another whiff of the pungent perfume from the ballroom.

I considered getting up and leaving right then.

After all, what was the point? I had no chance against these guys.

The interview assistant came into the room again, called another impossible to pronounce alien name and led them out.

But it wasn't in my nature to give up, not when there was still a ray of hope to be had.

The next time I looked up, I realized I was alone.

The last to be called...

The last on the list...

I sighed and caught that sickening whiff on my clothes again.

I took my jacket off and set it to one side, kicking up a clod of stink and making my stomach roil.

Oh God. Please, no...

I sat bolt upright and leaned forward so I couldn't spew over myself...

I waited for my stomach to settle and felt relaxed that I wasn't going to throw up after all. I leaned back and—

An explosion erupted in my stomach as I felt the puke coming up.

Oh God...

I hurried out of the room and, unsure which direction the bathroom was in, I opened each door, one after another.

The first room I came to was a bedroom. The Ulsen couple inside were buried within each other's arms. They turned toward me as I stared, wide eyed.

The female's eyes were as wide as mine while the male's eyebrows lowered... and winked at me.

He shifted his weight to wave a hand for me to join them.

I hastily shut the door, feeling even more sick to my stomach.

On the plus side, the shock of the sight had settled my stomach...

Grrrummmm...

Or so I thought.

"Oh, give me a break!" I said desperately as I sped toward another door.

I hurled it open and found another Ulsen couple. The male pressed against the female, a hand wrapped tightly around her throat, holding her off the floor. They didn't even notice me this time and I considered hurrying to the bathroom on the other side of the room. In their current state, I doubted they would even notice me hustling across the room. Then I thought better of it.

The last thing I wanted was to piss these giant creatures off, or worse yet find myself trapped between two of them...

I stifled the thrill of excitement—and yes, I was shocked to find it really was excitement and not terror—that trailed up my spine and hastily turned to the third door.

I was relieved to see it wasn't a bedroom, but it wasn't a bathroom either. It was festooned with items for cleaning. I decided to let myself hurl and aimed directly for the empty bucket.

I fell to my knees. My body performed three more unconscious crunches before my stomach was empty.

I smiled, sighing with relief.

Throwing up over myself would have been the *perfect* end to a disaster of a day.

“Do you mind?”

Oh my God...

My neck turned slowly to peer up at the two blue-skinned figures that I had mistaken for fancy coats buried in a deep embrace among the other items of clothing.

The female was wearing one of the uniforms—at least, she had *attempted* to wear one as the skirt barely reached the top of her thighs. It was split down either side, her larger-than-human size barely able to squeeze into the tiny size. The male’s enormous cock pressed firmly into her pussy, perfectly visible from my position on the floor.

“Um. Sorry.”

I scrambled backward and slammed the door shut.

I just stared at it, shocked at what I had witnessed...

Even the most sedate office parties could boast at least one rucking couple, but to have opened three doors and found each hosting a mating couple?

What had I stumbled into?

A Ulsen orgy party?

Grunts emitted from behind the cleaning closet door, my interruption having apparently had zero impact on their rutting activities.

I got to my feet and unnecessarily clapped off my hands as the floors were spotless.

Was this what the elite lifestyle was like these days?

Sex everywhere?

I thought back to the nasty older Ulsen with his stinky breath and shuddered at what he had wanted with me...

If the prizes behind the mystery doors were any indication, it wasn’t something I much wanted to be part of.

I checked a few more doors before I finally found a bathroom and—even more miraculously—discovered it was not inhabited by a pair of rutting Ulsen.

The water was cool. I washed out my mouth, gurgled, and washed my hands. I pulled paper towels from the dispenser to dry my hands. I wiped my face as best I could without completely ruining my makeup. I touched it up and looked at myself in the mirror.

“You’re here,” I told my reflection. “It’s batshit crazy. It’s insane. But you can do this. You can do *anything*. I believe in you.” My father’s words coming from my lips.

I left the bathroom, feeling a little better about myself, and returned to the waiting room.

I’D EXPECTED to see the interview assistant waiting impatiently for me, but he wasn’t there.

I checked down the hall.

Had he come already? I wondered. Would he think I had gotten cold feet and up and gone?

I returned to my seat and pressed a hand to my stinky jacket.

No, I thought. He would have seen I’d left my jacket behind and known I was still present.

So I sat and I waited.

An hour passed before I finally threw up my hands and gave up.

After the worst day I’d had in a long while—and it said a lot about my life that I it wasn’t even the *worst* day I’d ever had.

And that was saying something.

I put my jacket back on and peered up and down the hallways.

Sure, I might not have made the best impression but surely they would at least give me an interview?

Or had they just forgotten about me?

I'd come a long way for this interview and for them to completely ignore me...

It made me fume.

Fuck this!

I recalled the direction the interview assistant had taken the other interviewees and turned in the opposite direction.

I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of knowing I'd waited all this time.

To hell with them if they couldn't recognize a quality candidate when they saw one.

Their loss.

I paused when I heard a door close somewhere behind me.

A female Ulsen gently shut a door, turned, and left.

Probably just another rucking couple, I thought... then thought better of it.

That female didn't look like she'd just enjoyed a quick one. She looked too put together, with not a single hair out of place. With the way these Ulsens fucked, I didn't think she would come out looking so organized.

She must be part of the interview team, I thought, and ground my teeth so hard my teeth hurt.

Instead of turning a one-eighty and heading for the exit, I performed a complete three-sixty and marched toward the room she'd just come out of.

I'd waited an hour and I was going to let these people know they were assholes!

It might prevent me from working in the palace ever again but there was only one thing worse than being ignored and that was being forgettable. That was one of my father's biggest lessons over the years:

“*Always* make an impression. Even if it’s negative, be memorable. The worst thing in life is to pass through it without having an effect on anyone, to be a ghost.”

Steeling myself with my father’s words, I marched toward the door. I pushed aside all the concerns that kept trying to bubble up and cloud my judgment.

Now wasn’t the time to back down.

I knocked on the door and growled under my breath that I should be so timid.

When no one said “Come” I decided to burst in. I *refused* to be ignored again!

I shoved the heavy door open with my shoulder and peered in to see there was a male Ulsen inside, sitting perched on the corner of a large bed.

I hesitated only a moment. Maybe I had been wrong and they really *had* just finished rucking. Then saw that the bed was perfectly made without a single wrinkle on it, save for the creases caused by the male sitting with his head in his hands.

I guess the interviewees had all been a disappointment, so I marched inside.

I berated him and forced him to give me the interview I was promised. To my surprise, he did so, and we took chairs on opposite sides of his desk.

I was no expert when it came to Ulsen appearances but I didn’t mind admitting he had pleasing features.

He was tall without being overbearing, obviously muscular without making the mistake of swelling his muscles to the point of self-obsession. His gleaming black horns added an extra foot, maybe a foot and a half, to his height. They were straight with a slight kink in the middle, pointing powerfully up at the ceiling.

His eyes were the intense golden orbs of the Ulsen, with purple flecks in his irises that always made me think of black magic or the explosive shine from a starburst.

He crossed his legs, one foot over his knee, and leaned forward, peering at my Resume. He tapped a pen against the palm of his hand, his knee bouncing with nervous energy.

“I see everything is in order,” he said. “The job’s yours.”

I blinked. “Huh? That’s it? No questions?”

“What questions should I ask?”

I was dumbfounded. “I don’t know. How about something about my experience?”

“Okay... Well, do you think you have enough experience for this position?”

“Sure.”

“Great.”

He stared at me and I stared at him.

I was gobsmacked. “That’s it? Seriously? What about the other interviewees?”

Unless I knew better, I would have said he had never hired anyone before... but how was that possible when he was the interviewer?

He shrugged and itched his chin with the pen. “Pretty much. They didn’t have the experience we needed.”

“Okay. Then when do I start?”

“Right now.”

“Now?”

He frowned. “You have somewhere better to be?”

I shook my head. “I can’t believe... Seriously?” Off his nod, I couldn’t help but speak my thoughts out loud: “If I knew it was this easy to get a job at the palace, I would have applied years ago!”

In just a few short years, I would earn the money I needed to fully pay off the family farm. *It was happening... It was really happening!*

The interviewer leaned back in his chair and tucked his folded leg further up his knee. “Yes, well, we do have to discuss... your duties.”

“Of course,” I said, relieved to finally be discussing something that had to do with my new position. “I’ll be assisting the Royal Family in a general capacity—”

“General capacity? No. You’ll be serving one of the princes.”

“Oh. I thought it was more of a general role?”

“It is. I mean, it was. But that position has been taken by someone else. This is a... new position. Newly opened.”

“Oh. Then what will my duties be?”

The interviewer cleared his throat. “Oh. The usual. Fetching the prince his meals, taking charge of his schedule, making calls, pretty much... anything he asks.”

I smiled. “That’s the role. So when will I get to meet him?”

“Soon. Very soon. In fact—”

There was the barest of knocks on the door before they burst open, spilling a trio of giggling Sirens into the room.

“Oh,” they said, looking between the interviewer and me, a sneer curling their lips at seeing me sitting opposite him.

The interviewer immediately leaped to his feet and, if I didn’t know any better, I would have said he had been on the verge of sprinting across the room and hurling himself out the window.

Instead, he caught himself and, hands curled in front of himself in an awkward pose, just peered back at them.

“We were told you were alone,” the Siren with purple lipstick said.

She glared at me as if I was the one at fault.

I raised my chin and glared back. “Well, he’s not. And if you’ve come for an interview, I suggest you wait your turn.”

The Sirens cocked their heads as one and flicked questioning expressions at the interviewer.

“Interview?” Purple Lipstick said.

“Uh, yes. I’m taking a more... professional approach.”

The Sirens scowled. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

And with that, they backed out of the rooming, shutting the doors behind themselves, their glaring red eyes the last thing I saw, promising violent retribution. (And why they dyed their eye color I would never know as their natural honey irises were a thousand times better than the artificial red.)

But that wasn’t what caused me the biggest surprise. I hopped from my chair. “Your Highness? You’re Royalty?”

The “interviewer” spread his hands—a tiny movement as he barely moved his hands.

Taken by surprise and unsure how to react, I performed a half-curtsy, half bow.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “You don’t need to bow to me.”

“But that’s what staff do with Royalty, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But I’m hoping you could be a little... more than a member of the staff with me.”

For some reason, I felt a shiver rush through me. “What does ‘a little more’ mean?”

He glanced toward the closed doors and back to me again. “I need you to keep the Sirens away.”

“So tell your guards. That’s what they’re there for, isn’t it?”

“Yes... and no. And the Sirens will find a way through. They always do in the end.”

“So how would I keep them away?”

Rivvac licked his lips, looked away, and then returned his attention to me again.

He pulled his hands away, revealing the massive bulge in the front of his pants that he’d been hiding up until now. Boy,

did I feel a fool for not noticing it sooner. It was like going to Paris and not seeing the Eiffel Tower (if it hadn't been destroyed during the war).

“I want you to be my Steyatt mate,” he said.

RIVVAC

My offer hung between us like a blade.

Mia stumbled to one side as if losing her balance. My words might have been a sledgehammer for the effect they had.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “A what?”

She hadn’t gone running out of the room screaming at my suggestion, so that was probably a good sign.

“I want you to be my Steyatt mate,” I repeated. “For the week.”

She stumbled to one side again, and this time, I dashed forward to catch her... but she didn’t fall.

She raised a hand to keep me from touching her and shook her head. “I’ve been an executive assistant for ten years and I’ve never had anyone make that part of my duties.”

“These are... exceptional circumstances.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes as if she had a headache coming on. “I can’t believe I fell for this,” she said.

“Fell for what?”

“This is obviously some kind of sick joke. I should have known from when I got caught in the ballroom earlier, and that big dude accosted me.”

“Someone tried to mate with you?” I felt strangely angry, indignant as if she were already mine and no one else had any claim to her. I shook the crazy feelings away.

She wasn't my mate yet, and by the way, this conversation was going, I didn't think she ever would be. And I sensed on some level that would be a great tragedy.

“You're a prince, for Christsakes!” Mia snapped. “There are women literally pounding on your door to mate with you! And you choose a random stranger to mate with? What's wrong with you?”

Nothing is wrong with me, I wanted to tell her. There's a female I wished to mate with but she wouldn't until I had the money to convince her father we could be together...

She didn't need to know that, not yet. But she did need an explanation for my behavior.

“Look, don't overthink this,” I said. “It's a business proposition, that's all.”

“Business?” she said, and I could see the dark clouds already beginning to cloud her face.

“I don't want any trouble,” I said. “And I mean no disrespect. I don't want anything difficult. You ask, why don't I choose one of those breaking down my door to mate with? Because I don't want their claws buried deep in me. And with the Sirens, I can guarantee there will be nothing but trouble.”

I felt sick at the thought of them using their seduction techniques on me, overpowering me, forcing me to perform actions against my will...

And felt more than a little angry that none of this would be necessary if Flara satisfied my Steyatt...

“It's only for a week,” I said.

“A week is a long time.”

With Steyatt, I certainly knew that was true.

Mia shook her head. “No. My answer is no. Now I'm leaving. Your Highness.”

She nodded her head, her anger painted clearly on her face. She turned to the door and gripped the handle.

“You can name whatever price you wish!” I said desperately.

She froze at the door and didn’t turn to face me. “This may be difficult for someone like you to understand, but I’m not for sale.”

She yanked the door open and the wailing warbling of the Sirens soared like a funeral song.

I immediately turned toward the window. If I ran, I could make it... but they would know where I went and had likely already closed off the exits...

There would be no escape this time.

I was doomed.

Mia was my only hope.

“There must be *something* you want!” I said desperately. “Something you dream of? Something you’re desperate for?”

Something as desperate as I am to avoid the Sirens?

I didn’t expect my words to have any effect but Mia came to a stop in the doorway. She stared out at something on the other side but I couldn’t see what.

I would have given anything to see the expression on her face, to see what she was seeing...

Then her head dropped before rising again. Her back straightened and she shut the door.

Rescued from the precipice? I wondered. Clearly, my words had struck a chord with her.

There *was* something she wanted. I felt completely at her mercy and wished she wanted something I could actually give her, knowing I was largely powerless if she asked for a fortune.

She still didn’t step further into the room and simply folded her arms in a lost, confused, and yet strangely confident

expression. “There is something I want. I need guarantees you’ll give it to me before I even... entertain going through with this craziness you’re suggesting.”

“Of course,” I said, my mouth dry. “Whatever you need to feel comfortable.”

“Comfortable?” Mia said, shaking her head. “There are many words I would use to describe this situation, but comfortable is not one of them.”

“Okay,” I said, chastising myself for putting my foot in. “Shall we sit down?”

Mia shook her head. “Not until we reach an agreement.”

“Fine,” I said.

My cock was still throbbing. It had only grown harder at the sight of her turning to face me, taking my offer seriously.

“Can you... do something about that thing?” she said, deliberately not looking at my crotch. “It’s very... distracting like there’s a third party in the negotiations.”

“It’s... not exactly something I have an off-switch for. But if you would like to do something about it, by all means...”

Mia rolled her eyes and couldn’t help but snort. “You’re incorrigible, aren’t you?”

I’m desperate, I wanted to tell her. I had long since learned that showing all your cards in a negotiation was about the dumbest thing you could do.

“So what do you want?” I asked.

She could have asked for all the gold in Valexia and I would have given her it... except I knew I wouldn’t.

I wouldn’t lie to her just to avoid my fate with the Sirens. She had no idea the Crown was bankrupt and poorer than most of the merchants on the streets.

“My family bought a farm,” Mia said. “It’s small and I’ve paid for half of it but it’ll take at least another ten years to pay for completely.”

My hopes sank. “A farm?”

A farm cost money, and money was not something we had a great deal of right now...

“How much more do you need to pay?” I asked.

Mia considered her response carefully, not in an effort to add a surcharge but because the amount would be, to her mind, what she would be “selling” herself for.

She told me the number. It was not a huge amount. Just a few years earlier, I could have given her what she wanted without a second thought. But when your funds had dried up and you had little remaining, you had to be careful about how the funds were allocated.

“I’m... not sure I can pay that much,” I said.

Mia turned on her heel. “Then there’s nothing else we need to discuss.”

She reached for the door and depressed the handle.

“Wait!” I said desperately. “You don’t need to... I mean... It’s not the amount that’s the trouble...”

“Then what?” she snapped.

“Our money... it’s tied up in various... investments.” ‘Investments’ was a bit of a stretch, but it could be argued we had invested in the Empire. “It’s not easy to move money around when it’s already invested.”

“So you want me to take you at your word that you’ll pay me? Is that it? Apologies, but I’ve been around enough ‘elites’ to know they guard their money better than they guard their word.”

She turned back to the door again. The curve of her ass caught my eye and made my cock scream with desperation.

Let me at her! it cried. Let me at her!

My entire body was shaking and I could barely control myself. If we didn’t come to an agreement soon, then when the Sirens came in, I wouldn’t just be fighting them, but the raging Steyatt in my chest.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Where’s what?”

“Your farm.”

“Ghizzart 9.”

I let out a huge sigh of relief. I had to rearrange the front of my pants to loosen the aggression with which my cock attacked the material.

“Then it’s yours,” I said.

Mia looked shocked. “Just like that? I thought you had trouble moving funds around?”

I nodded. “We do. But we own Ghizzart 9. I can assign a small parcel of land to you. That’s a lot easier.”

I would tell the bank to release it to her and, judging by the relatively small amount of capital it cost, the farm couldn’t be too large.

Mia took her hand off the door handle. She folded her arms beneath her surprisingly large breasts.

I turned away, averting my gaze. *I wished she wouldn’t do that!* It was hard enough controlling myself with a succulent female in the room!

Her scent had not only taken control of my senses but had permeated into every pore of my skin, seeping between the scales.

I was virtually drowning with her.

A closer look would have revealed my irises were dilated, my heart rate thundering at four hundred per minute, about ready to burst from my chest. A light slick of sweat had already begun to slide down my face, and if I ground my teeth any harder, I would be grinding my jaw bone.

“Do... Do we have a deal?” I asked, my voice quivering.

Mia pursed her lips, as if she might change her mind last-minute.

“I’ll want proof before we... do anything.”

Gah!

I raised the holo-communicator attached to my arm and called my people.

The broad handsome face of Lorandak appeared after a moment, clearly naked from partaking in his own Steyatt with his chosen mate.

He spoke as respectfully as he was capable of considering the position I'd caught him in. "Yes, my Prince?"

"I need you to release a farm on Ghizzart 9 and sign it over to someone else."

"Does this need to be done right now?" I could hear the strains of desperation in his voice as it was evident in my own but at least he had *partially* satisfied his desires with his mate. I hadn't had so much as a lick!

"Yes!" I snapped. "Right away! It's urgent!"

Lorandak groaned as he shoved himself up onto his knees. "Very well, my Prince. The document will be with you shortly."

"Not shortly," I said. "*Immediately*. As in, ten parsecs ago."

"Understood."

The call ended and I turned to Mia. "Satisfied?"

"Not until I have the deeds in my hand."

Gah!

"You will not have the deeds until the week is over," I growled, some sense filtering through the cloudy mist of my desperation.

"Then I want a contract that details everything we're going to do and what will happen once things are signed over—"

"That will take too much time!" I snapped.

Mia's eyes widened and a curious smile alighted her lips. And just like that, I had revealed my hand.

Mia's eyes flickered down to my crotch and then back up to me. Then her eyes pulled focus and she noticed how my body was quivering, the sweat rolling in rivulets down my face, drenching my clothes.

Please! Be reasonable!

"Give me that letter opener," she said, nodding toward my desk.

It was solid Klingart gold and encrusted with priceless jewels.

"What for?"

"A down payment. Until the contract is complete."

I dabbed at my parched lips with my equally dry tongue. "That was a gift from the Sultan of Shishmere. It's priceless."

"Everything has a price," Mia said. "Us negotiating like this proves that. Give it to me as a down payment for... services rendered."

"What services? You haven't given me anything yet!"

She hesitated before reaching for the door key and turning it in the lock.

I gulped, hoping that meant what I thought it did.

She sashayed over to me, her hips attracting every iota of my attention. She wasted no time and placed her hand on my crotch. My cock turned so hard I thought it would drain the rest of my body of blood.

"Well?" she said. "What do you say?"

"Take it!" I growled. "It's yours!"

I slapped a hand on it and slid it over to her.

She looked it over and nodded with appreciation. She raised it and used it to slice open my shirt and pants.

Ordinarily, I would have complained—the clothes were gifts too and irreplaceable—but she could have set them on fire while I was still wearing them for all I cared at that moment.

The instant my cock was released from its prison, it sprang up to meet her.

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! it cried.

Mia tucked the priceless heirloom blade in the waistband of her pants and dropped to her knees.

The sight of her down here, mouth open and hungry to take me, was worth the price of the heirloom alone.

She wasted no time in running her tongue along my full length, from balls to tip.

I couldn't believe this was really happening. A random stranger had come into my room at the exact moment I needed her. She had no reason to listen to my offer, much less agree with it, and now here she was, pleasuring me.

Then I realized this might not be random at all.

Something had brought us together, and there was something else at work now, something I didn't fully comprehend or fully understand, but with time, I was sure it would play itself out...

At that moment, I couldn't focus on such things. I was fully engrossed on the quivering throbbing mass of my cock as Mia worked it.

She ran her lips the entire length, her tongue following in their wake, making my cock wet. My juices ran from the tip and joined her saliva, making her slurp hungrily at my organ.

I looked down at her. Her eyes were closed as she reached the bulbous head and widened her mouth to take the entirety of it. She slurped on the head and flicked it with her tongue.

I grunted, enjoying the sensation, my cock quivering with over stimulation.

The Sirens' song was still audible outside the door. It faded now, serving as nothing but the backing track to the pleasure Mia was giving me.

"Mm." My voice was a deep rumble I hadn't intended on making.

Mia used both hands to rub my cock, massaging it as her mouth worked the tip. I felt my orgasm fast approaching. It wasn't much of a surprise, considering I had been turned on for so long. With my Steyatt in full throes, it wouldn't take long for her to bring me to orgasm.

My balls tightened. As she lowered her head to lick and suck on them, her hand worked my length, I knew it wouldn't take long before I spurted.

But I wanted more.

I wanted *all* of her.

The desire was so strong, so immeasurable, I wasn't sure I had ever wanted anything else more than I wanted her right then.

But she wouldn't allow it, not until the paperwork was presented to her.

A beep came from my wrist communicator. I raised it to see the documentation had been finalized. I tapped on it, and it became a full-size holograph.

"I... I have the... the contract," I said between violent thrusts at the back of her throat. "Look."

I lowered it so she could see it. Without taking her lips from me, she flicked the head of my cock with the tip of her tongue and ran her eyes over the contract.

I took her head and gently lowered her mouth so she could lick my balls. She did so without argument or resistance, her big beautiful eyes still open and reading.

She raised a hand, glistening with my juices, and signed on the dotted line.

I did the same, noting the date the deeds would pass to her was correct. It was. I shut the holo-image down and allowed her to play with me a little longer, my balls growing so tight I knew I would explode at any moment.

I pulled back. She wiped at her mouth with the back of her arm. I lifted her up off her knees and onto her feet.

“Now you belong to me,” I growled with intensity.

“For seven days,” she reminded me. “What are you going to do with me?”

She batted her eyelids and peered up at me seductively. She didn't need all the expensive high-cost education and teaching the so-called “expert” Sirens had garnered to drive me wild.

It seemed as if she had been built to turn me on, to satisfy my every urge.

When she sucked me, she performed everything I liked, even looking at me while my cock was in her mouth, savoring me and making soft “Mmm” noises, making my scales vibrate.

I undressed her, one item of clothing at a time, and kissed each piece as I placed it on the back of a chair until she was completely naked.

She was all curves—nothing like the sharp angles of the female Ulsen. I felt myself stiffen further at the sight of her.

She reached up and pinned her hair back, the tips a little damp from sucking on me earlier.

I pulled her to me and felt her small body pressed against mine. The warmth of her skin was hot and pleasing against my cool scales.

I buried my lips on hers and slipped my tongue in her mouth. She met it with her own and groaned as I wrapped my arms about her, squeezing her ass, and gently slapping it.

She didn't complain and only groaned louder with pleasure.

I did it again and again, but never too hard. I respected the female form too much to harm her. I grabbed great handfuls of her soft ass.

Her hand found my cock. She rubbed the length of it in long, slow, efficient movements that set my teeth on edge, gasping between breaths.

Unable to keep her distant from me any longer, I lifted her up and slid her onto my cock.

She hissed through her teeth painfully as she took me, one glorious inch at a time.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her lips to mine. I braced her weight and began entering her with long, slow strokes.

She groaned and clutched me closer. I warmed her up, one impale after another.

The Sirens' song was beginning to get on my nerves, so I decided to send them a message...

I carried Mia over to the door, timing each stride to coincide with a viciously deep incision. I reached the door and pressed Mia's back to it. As I increased the speed and severity of each blow, the door rattled and shook.

I was pleased when I heard the Sirens' song catch, hesitate, and then stop altogether.

I grinned as Mia threw her head back as I hammered her mercilessly. She screamed in pleasure, her pussy tightening about my cock, drawing every iota of sensation from me.

Her tongue found mine as an orgasm ripped through her. I heard the grumbling of the Sirens on the other side of the door and rejoiced in hearing their song leave us.

Finally, I was free!

That didn't mean they would give up trying to seduce me, of course. There were still seven days remaining of the Steyatt but for now, at least, I could relax.

A second layer of tension left my body as I realized it was thanks to the hot female I was pummeling that I had been released from the Sirens' claws and their sadistic designs.

I carried her over to the bed and devoted my full attention to her. She deserved a reward.

Her satisfaction was as important to me as my own.

I laid her on the bed and hammered her mercilessly. Without the Sirens or anything else to distract me, I could focus entirely on her.

She screamed and threw her arms out to either side, clutching at the sheets and gripping them tightly.

She attempted to ease herself up onto her elbows but I was working her so hard she could only flop back.

Her breasts bounced and I gripped them in my large hands, her legs spread out wide beneath me. I pinned her down and kicked it up a gear.

“Oh my God!” she cried as I shifted her legs to one side and hammered her from behind.

The extra friction helped me hit her pleasure zones.

She cried once more, a thick layer of sweat forming across her body.

Out of breath but refusing to release myself yet—I was having *far* too much fun to do that already!—I rolled her over onto her front so her ass hung over the edge of the bed, and entered her from behind.

“Oh!” she shrieked and turned to look back at me.

She placed her hand on her ass and spread it.

I held her hips and rode her hard. Her cries were muffled by the bed as I flew the Fhizzard March (which, according to my translating device, was the equivalent of “going to town” in her native Earth language).

I felt my arrival point approaching once more. I knew I could slow down and make the moment last longer but I was exhausted from my earlier escape.

I gripped Mia’s shoulders and used them to leverage myself deeper into her, the sharp slapping my hips building to a frenetic pace. Mia arched her back and peered up at the ceiling as I roared loudly in the victorious cry of the Ulsen after a conquest, spilling my seed inside her with powerful thrusts.

I was exhausted, gasping for air as I fell onto the bed beside her. She lay still, her chest heaving with aching breaths, her hair damp at the tips, her eyes closed, relishing the moment, and entered some kind of meditative state.

I felt the same. I peered over at her, at my Steyatt mate, knowing that things for her, and for me, would never be the same again.

A strange and not entirely welcome thought came to me...

During the entire time we made love, I hadn't once thought about Flara. I felt a little guilty about that. With every other Steyatt mate I'd claimed over the years, I often imagined Flara with me instead of the mate I was with...

But not with Mia.

Strange...

But I didn't read too much into it.

It was probably nothing, I told myself, all the while knowing that it was certainly *not* nothing.

The fates had their plans and we were but pawns in them.

MIA

I had never known sex like it.

My body was still quivering with pleasure, and I wasn't sure it was ever going to stop. I wasn't sure I ever *wanted* it to stop.

Prince Rivvac had his eyes shut, laying on his back, facing the ceiling. I could feel the heat emanating from him in waves.

As the coolness of the breeze fluttered the curtains and brought a chill with it, I moved closer to him and tentatively wrapped my arm around his body.

When he didn't respond with anger, I added the rest of me to the mix until I was pressing my whole body against him.

The sex was, in a word, incredible.

I knew he was desperate—any guy with a hard-on like the one he was sporting couldn't be anything but—and I had assumed he wouldn't have the stamina to last as long as he had.

“Thank you for that,” he said, blinking his eyes slowly awake.

“Thank me?” I said. “You did all the hard work.”

“Yes. But you let me do what I needed with your body.”

I snorted. “Could I have stopped you?”

He looked over at me curiously. “Yes, of course.”

Okay, so that was a surprise. He'd seemed like a possessed animal and I'd assumed he couldn't control himself in the moment. "You seem to know your way around the female form."

He snorted. "Not as well as you might think."

His humility surprised me and made me smile. "Most guys think they're God's gift to women."

He frowned at that. "The Creator's gift? But we are, aren't we? Aren't we all gifts to each other?"

Huh. I'd never thought about it like that before. "I mean, sex is sometimes a little... disappointing. It can be great, don't get me wrong. But it's never felt—"

"Life-changing," Rivvac completed.

I looked him over, the same sense of surprise I felt registered on his face.

There had been something somehow *special* about our sex. I just couldn't quite put my finger on why though.

His cock was far larger than I was used to with human lovers. I supposed that must have played a role but I couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't the whole story.

His technique, then?

Possibly.

I wasn't ready to admit it to him yet but I loved the way he used me for his own purposes, how he contorted my body into positions that he either thought would work best—either for him or me, I wasn't sure—and how he got on with it, not asking pointless questions or spoiling the mood by talking all the way through.

Incredible wasn't the right word. Exquisite was.

And yet, that still wasn't the full reason why it had felt so good. Was it knowing the Sirens were outside, jealousy running deep like a river between them?

Again, that was another piece of the reason.

Or the fact he was a rich and powerful prince of an alien species what made it different? That he had chosen—of all females available to him—me?

Yep. Add those to the ingredients list.

But that was all they were—ingredients.

The recipe had some kind of secret ingredient that I couldn't put my finger on, but I sensed it was right there, just beyond view over the horizon...

“What made you change your mind about accepting my offer?” he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I shrugged. “Many reasons. First, a week of work—no matter how hard it is—is better than years of grinding. Although, I suppose I'll be doing a lot of grinding this week too...” I blushed despite my best efforts to prevent it. “Anyway. An opportunity like this doesn't come along often in a normal person's life.”

“You didn't think I was taking advantage?”

“I get my parents' farm back for having sex with you for a week... Who's using who?”

The alien prince smiled at that. “Yes, I suppose it could be looked at that way. But you turned to leave at one point. At the beginning. You opened the door and looked out and saw something... and it changed your mind.”

I recalled it clearly and was surprised he was astute enough to have noticed.

I nodded. “I did.”

“What was it?”

“It was the Sirens.”

He frowned. “The Sirens? Why should seeing them change your mind?”

“My whole life, I've been the executive assistant to many elites. Most of the top ones, the ones that I worked for, were nice. I think that's how they got to their positions in the first place. They like helping other people, and later, when the time

is right, those they helped responded in kind. So they become friends with all these people... and pretty soon, they have a network that means they can never fail—with anything they do.

“But some of their employees—and usually, it’s the more senior ones who have worked hard their whole lives to scale that power ladder—become bitter and twisted and they’re not nice people.” I turned to lock eyes on Rivvac. “They are not nice people. They’re bad mannered, liars, and deceitful. They steal from the boss, take advantage, and... well, that’s just the way it is.”

“But what does that have to do with the Sirens?”

“They’re exactly that type of person. They think they’re better than everyone else. I love my job, but if there’s one thing I wish I could live without, it would be them. And by agreeing to your offer, I would only have to put up with their sort for another seven days. Then I will never have to deal with them ever again.”

The prince leaned forward and kissed me on my shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Not your fault. And there’s another reason I chose to think about your offer...”

“What’s that?”

“The look on their faces when they realized *I’m* your Steyatt mate and not them, the fact I took that from them, the thing they want most in the world, and shoved it right down their throats!”

I couldn’t help but giggle and clap my hands.

Rivvac rubbed my back and tugged me closer. “And there was me thinking the reason was that you couldn’t resist my animal magnetism.”

We shared a look and burst out laughing.

“Well,” I said. “There’s that too. If you were that old Ulsen from the ballroom earlier, there’s no way I would accept his

offer. I sense you're a good person. There's only so much trauma I'm willing to put myself through to get the farm."

Rivvac nodded thoughtfully, all joviality gone. I realized I'd put my foot in it. As usual.

"Not that you're going to cause me much trauma," I added hastily. "But I don't know you. And when you came to me with this kind of offer... I wasn't sure what to think."

"I suppose these kinds of situations aren't common in your culture."

"You can say that again," I said.

The alien prince hesitated. "Alright... I suppose these kinds of situations aren't common in your culture."

I burst out laughing. "No, it's an expression. It doesn't mean you literally have to say it again."

"Oh," he said, confused.

He was cute, I decided.

With how frantic he'd been earlier during our negotiations, his expression smothered with lines of concern, his movements quick and jittery, I wasn't sure if he was really handsome or not.

But now, after he had spilled himself inside me and all that tension was gone, I decided he was handsome.

Very handsome.

Better yet, he had the kind of body females of all species could only dream of getting to play with. He was not bulky and large as I had seen some of the other Ulsen males but lean and hard.

It was an intoxicating mix.

There was nothing at all artificial about his appearance, nothing bloated beyond what nature had intended, preferring to do exercises that improved his overall fitness rather than a single muscle.

He was also fit. There was no way he could have carried out his earlier attack on me if he wasn't. (And I thought 'attack' was an apt description for the way he had gone after me.)

When he smiled, his cheek curled about his lips, leaving dimples in their wake. His eyes had small but noticeable wrinkles that curled upward in a pleasing way, as if his whole body enjoyed getting involved with smiling rather than just letting his lips have all the fun.

"I'm still surprised you don't have a mate among your people for the Steyatt," I said.

"I do," he said.

I sat up. "You do?"

"Sure. Her name is Flara, and she's my betrothed."

"Betrothed?" I sat up and pressed the sheet to my chest, frowning hard. This was not something I had expected him to say. "Then why don't you mate with her?"

"Because Flara... She's from a rich and powerful family."

"So? You said there's honor and respect in being a Steyatt mate, right?"

"Yes. But her father... well, he's a very... old-fashioned type."

I sensed the anxiety he felt in this topic as his body had become tense as it had earlier when I first arrived.

"How do you know she isn't a mate to some other male right now?" I said.

He shook his head as if batting away the image my comment conjured. "She isn't like that. She's more... traditional."

I screwed my face up. "She sounds confused to me."

"Confused how?"

I looked him over, then looked away. I shrugged. "I don't know a lot about your culture, so my opinion doesn't really

mean much.”

Rivvac sat up on his elbows. “But you are a female. You might understand females of my culture better than any male of mine does.”

I searched his face before responding. “Well... she’s keeping herself pure. And that means she’s waiting until she gets married before she gives herself to someone. And if she’s from a rich and wealthy family... Maybe that someone won’t be you.”

“It *definitely* won’t be me if I can’t get enough money to prove I can take care of her.”

Rivvac blinked as if surprised he’d let the information slip.

“But you’re a prince. The Royal Family is always rich.”

His honeyed orbs flickered between my eyes as if deciding how much to tell me. He released and laid back down.

“We are rich. At least on paper. Our resources now belong to the Empire. As for Flara, we’ve known each other since we were very small. It was understood we were always meant to be together, that we were unofficially betrothed to marry.”

“Then what changed?”

“Politics, war, and caring for the poorest in society isn’t cheap and costs a fortune. When there wasn’t enough in the royal account to pay for those things, my father, the Emperor, took the decision to dip into the family’s personal wealth and use it to plug holes in the Empire’s accounts.”

“Your family did that?” I said, shocked at the revelation. “Our elites *never* do anything like that.”

“We’ll get our money back one day. But only if the Empire’s economy picks up, and there’s no guarantee of that happening. The Royal Family is no longer rich. We are poor. We survive on the interest payments of the money we used to help maintain the Empire.”

I gasped, and wrapped my hand around my mouth. “No.”

He nodded.

“We are still powerful. Rich... not anymore. But not many people know what happened. Very few people, in fact.”

“But your betrothed’s father is one of them?”

He shrugged. “He’s the Empire’s treasurer. He keeps track of every credit that goes in and out. There’s nothing he doesn’t know about when it comes to the finances of the Empire.”

It didn’t seem right that her father was willing to stop them from being together for the sole reason that his family was having some financial problems. It left a sour taste in my mouth.

“She’s also my fated mate.”

“A what?”

“Fated mate.”

“Fated mate...” I said, rolling the word around my lips. “It’s a big deal?”

“It’s the biggest deal.”

The alien prince pressed his arm to his forehead and stared at the ceiling. I got the impression that this problem had been keeping him awake at night.

Strange, I thought, that someone in his position—privileged, with a whole palace to live in and the adoration of the masses—should suffer from the same problems as the everyday Ulsen subjects.

“Is there anything you *wouldn’t* do for your fated mate?” I asked pointedly not looking him in the eye.

“Wouldn’t do? No. I would do anything for her.”

I nodded, unsure if I wanted to share my idea with him. “And... if there was a way for you to get the money you needed, would you do it?”

He raised my chin with a finger. I melted into his smile. “Does my mate have an idea?”

Have an idea? Have an idea? It was more than an idea...

I shrugged my shoulders. “Maybe.”

“Then let’s hear it. It can’t be any worse than anything else I’ve attempted recently.”

I hesitated, still unsure whether or not to share it with him... but he had asked me, so why not?

I cleared my throat. “I once worked for a kind old Galaxian lady. She wasn’t rich but she had more than enough to keep herself comfortable for the rest of her life. Her only daughter died five years earlier after contracting a rare disease on the outer rim. The old lady never quite recovered from that, I think, as she kept her daughter’s rooms exactly as she had left them, treating them like some kind of museum or mausoleum.

“She never went into those rooms, except on important dates like the day her daughter had been born, the first day she went to school, the day she graduated... and she would always go into her daughter’s rooms alone, with no food, no water, nothing... I always asked her if she wanted me to go in with her but she always refused.

“And, the next day, at some point in the middle of the night, she would come out. I could hear her creeping through the house, returning to her bedroom. It was always heartbreaking. She seemed refreshed the next day, even though it was clear from her bloodshot eyes that she’d been crying all night, but she seemed happier. She never mentioned what happened to her daughter, and I never found out... not until much later.

“When he came.”

I shut my eyes and shook my head, wishing I could dispel the memory of him, the way he stood with his crooked gait and twisted eyes. He always had the look to me as if God had finished making him from clay and then decided to give him one last twist, contorting his spine, as if He wanted to warn others to be wary of him.

“I knew right away he was dangerous,” I said. “Something about him set off my survival instincts, but I couldn’t get through to the old lady. She invited him in. He told her he was a medium and had received messages from her daughter.

“You could have heard a pin drop when he said that. The old lady cried when he said her daughter never blamed her for what happened. She was beside herself. The old man apologized, saying he didn’t mean to upset her, and quickly left.

“It took the old lady three days to recover from that initial shock. Although, to be honest, I doubted she ever really got over it. She would stand at the window for hours, looking out. About a month after the first visit, the old medium returned.

“I didn’t want to let him in, but he raised his voice loud enough for the old lady to hear him. She came to the door and once again invited him in. That was when the real scam began.

“I don’t know how he got his hands on the information he shared with the old lady. I suppose he was a master at research or had someone in the records offices, but he revealed more about the daughter’s fate than the old woman had told me after two years of my working for her.

“The mother wanted her daughter to live and work on the Outer Rim the way her doctor husband had. Her daughter didn’t want to live so far from her mother, but her mother insisted. She would only continue to pay for her education if she got the experience she required to become a top surgeon as her husband had been. Her daughter wasn’t even sure she *wanted* to be a doctor, but it was the pure force of her mother’s will that compelled her to continue with her studies.

“That was the story the old medium revealed during his session with the old lady. He told her he could pass messages on to her daughter... for a price.

“The old lady was not stupid. She was very clever. But anyone is capable of desperation, and when you reveal someone’s personal emotions and history like that...” I shook my head. “She agreed to pay him whatever he wished. Over time, each message became more and more expensive for him to pass on. The old lady didn’t care. When I warned her she risked losing everything, she didn’t listen. Conversing with her dead daughter was all that mattered.

“Then one day, she made the largest payment, asking her daughter to return to her, to send her a message that she was in the house. Every night, the house creaked and groaned—the way all old houses do—and she was convinced it was her daughter trying to contact her. She stopped sleeping, stopped eating... I watched her waste away, powerless to stop what I knew what was inevitable...”

“Unable to watch her make the same mistake any longer, I handed in my notice. The old lady barely even noticed. She wasn’t even really alive any longer and had become some kind of zombie.

“I learned what happened to her later in the papers, how she had died penniless, that an unknown benefactor had acquired her house and investments... But I knew who the ‘unknown benefactor’ was.”

I looked Rivvac in the eye. “The old medium’s name was Rizorback Wyre.”

Rivvac hissed through his teeth.

“You’ve heard of him?” I said, a little surprised.

“He was one of the most notorious loan sharks in the Empire. He was blacklisted by the authorities and disappeared for a long time. No one knew what happened to him. I suppose he must have gone underground and decided to scam old ladies.”

The contempt on Rivvac’s face was matched only by the angry heat in the pit of my stomach, roiling like a black tempest.

“Later, I learned that he hadn’t only scammed the old lady out of her wealth, but countless others all over the galaxy,” I said, “preying on those desperate for their loved ones to return, for some kind of closure they knew would never come.”

The pain from that period of my life remained inside me like dirty flotsam on a stagnant pool.

“Why are you telling me this?” the alien prince asked.

I snapped myself from those bitter memories and rejoined Rivvac in the present. “Because my interactions with the old medium didn’t end there. Some time later, I was working for another client, a mining magnate. I was in town one day when I saw him. That same twisted spine, the same skinny arms, the swollen knuckles clutching the same crooked walking stick, barking at children to get out of his way as he marched down the street.

“My blood froze in my veins. I could hardly believe it was him. I dropped my duties and followed him. He stopped at a bunch of businesses before he returned to his home—a drafty old shack on the outskirts of town amidst a small brook and a copse of trees.

His guard d’in almost tore me to pieces. I ran away but returned the next day, and the next... and each time, I gave those vicious d’in food. Old Wyre liked to starve them, thinking that made them more vicious. I always knew when he was going to leave because that was when the d’in were most pleased to see me. Soon, they were licking my hands and face, more like puppies than vicious guards. I crept into the old medium’s house and found what I was looking for.”

The alien prince leaned forward. “What?”

“The money he had amassed from decades of scams. I knew someone like him wouldn’t trust financial institutions and would keep his money locked away somewhere close to hand. I found it beneath the crooked floorboards of his old shack. It was a fortune. With that kind of money, he could have lived in a palace but I suppose habits die hard. He was too used to living in squalor.”

“Then why did he keep on ripping off old ladies and other desperate people?”

I shrugged. “Why does a cat toy with a mouse when it’s not hungry?”

Rivvac cocked his head to one side. He might not know what cats were but he could understand the analogy because next he said:

“Because it’s in his nature.”

I nodded. “He does it because he’s good at it. He does it because he can. And he makes a *lot* of money from it. Who knows, maybe he even enjoys the power it gives him over others. I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“Why not go to the authorities? Tell them what he did to those poor people?”

“Based on what? They would look into his accounts and find he had acted legally. If people want to hand over all their possessions to someone providing a spiritual service... So what? It didn’t matter to them that he was ripping off innocent people. And I didn’t have any evidence of him breaking the law.”

Finally, I had come to the crux of what I wanted to tell him:

“I thought about taking the money and jewels and other items... but what if he noticed? Picking at the fortune might make him suspicious. He would set a trap and the next time I showed up, he could catch me with my hand in his stash... and knowing him, he wouldn’t let me off easy. If he was willing to treat poor innocent people the way he had, what would he do with someone caught stealing from him?”

I shivered at the idea.

Rivvac rubbed his hands over my arms to help me relax. “Then why not take as much as you could on your final day with your employer?”

“Because I couldn’t take enough to make sure I would be set up for the rest of my life. And he would know who had taken it from him. Wyre is a master conman and knew how to find the deepest, darkest secrets of anyone he set eyes on. How long would it really take for him to know an executive assistant recently left her post and had bought a farm and estate far exceeding her previous income?”

“Then why not keep it spend it later?”

“And live on what? And for how long? People like him have long memories. He could have me watched. I would end

up looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life... still unable to use the money I had stolen.” I shook my head. “It was no good.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry at the thought of telling him the reason why I told him this story. I began tentatively:

“What I need is for someone, big and strong to help me carry the treasure out. Someone with access to projects and businesses to funnel the money into so it comes out clean the other side...”

The alien prince was silent and still.

I’d taken his silence for paying intense attention to me but when I looked up into his face, I saw the cold hostility in his features.

“You take me for a common thief?” he snarled.

The blood drained from my face. “No! I didn’t mean that. I didn’t mean—”

“Why are you suggesting this?” he said, pulling away from me. “Did someone put you up to this? Are you working with the Sirens?”

“The Sirens? What? No.”

His lips curled as if he had discovered the meal he’d enjoyed was made from dog shit. “I should have known this wasn’t real. You’re a plant, aren’t you? What have they promised you? I hope it was worth it.”

“I’m not working with the Sirens!” I snapped. “I don’t know them! I came here for an interview. Really. You can check with your HR department.”

He growled at me and said, “Aren’t you getting enough from this week already?”

I hated the way he spoke to me. “Says the pauper prince of the Ulsen Empire.”

He opened his mouth to speak but I beat him to the punch and stabbed a finger in his stupid blue face:

“Don’t you dare accuse me of being greedy! *You’re* the one living in a damn palace!”

He blinked in shock that I had snapped at him. It shocked me more that I had lost my cool with him. What had happened to the reserve I’d fostered over a long career of service?

I growled and threw the blankets aside. I tossed my legs over the side of the bed. I didn’t get out as something wrapped around my waist and yanked me back into bed.

I struggled but I might as well have been a child for all the effect it had.

Unable to win physically, I decided I would win morally, and let my body go limp.

Having give up all resistance, the Prince eased his grip to make sure he hadn’t squeezed all the air from my lungs and inadvertently hurt me. “Mia? Are you all right? I didn’t mean to hurt you—”

I swung my arm around and my elbow found his chin. He made a soft “Duh!” sound as I scrambled from him. I climbed from the bed and found myself buck naked. I grabbed the sheet and swept it around myself to at least feel a little less vulnerable.

Only Rivvac had hold of the other end of the blanket and wouldn’t release it.

I tugged hard while he held it between his thumb and index finger as if toying with a child.

“Let go!” I snapped. “Let go!”

I yanked hard at the same moment he released it. I won the sheet... and immediately fell, sprawling across the floor.

He leaped from the bed and strode toward me, his height and physical power dominating the entire room.

He rubbed his chin with his fingers. “You know, the penalty for striking a member of the Royal Family is death...”

“Go ahead!” I snapped. “At least I’ll be free of you!”

His smile faltered, realizing I didn't find his behavior funny. He crouched, his enormous member swinging like a pendulum before me. Despite my anger, I couldn't help looking at it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to insinuate you were greedy. I've met greedy people. I'm surrounded by them. They're like birds coming back for more, more, more... and it's never enough. I'm sorry I confused you with them. You're nothing like them. Forgive me."

I had been ready to argue, to bite and spit, but with his apology, he had completely defused me. I might not be angry anymore, but I still didn't have to be happy with it.

I gathered up the blanket and got to my feet. I shoved his proffered hand and moved to my clothes. I began putting them on.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Nowhere. You've seen to that!"

"If you want to break our deal then—"

"I don't want to break our damn deal!" I snapped.

I had lost my cool completely now. How was I meant to regain any respect now? I buried my face in my hands.

He sat beside me, making the bed sink beneath his weight. I automatically slipped into him.

He wrapped an arm around me. And God help me, it felt nice to have him so close and caring.

I sniffed.

"I'm sorry for the difficulties you've faced, the terrible things you've gone through, but I'm not a thief," he said. "Thank you for your suggestion. But I'm sure it won't have to come to that. Something will come up. It always does in the end."

Sure, I thought, and what if the idea I shared with him *was* the something?

RIVVAC

I took Mia once more before I showered and dressed to leave the room with her.

Mia was softer and more demanding than I had expected. It was just about all I could do to hold myself back from taking out my aggression on the poor little thing.

She was brave and strong and never blinked when I took everything I wanted from her. In fact, unless I missed my guess, I would have said she *wanted* me to challenge her, to dig deeper, and force more pleasure from her...

But it must be my imagination at play. No female could take the full passion of a Ulsen male, much less a female human. Still, I was intrigued to see just how far I could push the tasty little morsel.

I was massively relieved when she took me up on my offer and even more grateful that I didn't have to pledge something I, nor my family, couldn't afford.

As desperate as I was to have her, as well as to avoid the Sirens lurking outside my chambers and whatever devious plans they had in store for me, I would not lie to Mia just to get her into my bed. I would ensure I could pay her what we agreed before I even touched her.

I shivered at the memory of her soft supple flesh beneath my fingertips, the soft red lines my nails made as I trailed my nails up her back, around her full figure, and her broad hips, and luxuriated in the satisfied "Mm" she gave every time I gently slapped her on the ass.

Knowing she was enjoying it as much as I was made me lose control and almost fully lose myself to the Steyatt.

Almost.

She was in the shower now, washing the sweat of both me and her off her body. The thought of her naked in the shower booth made my cock twitch...

Seriously? I thought. Males were supposed to need a little time to recover before blowing again. *Apparently it depended on your partner.*

I shook my head.

I had promised Mia we would head out of the room for a walk. It was so late it was early morning the following day.

I cracked the suite door open and pressed my ear to the gap, not wanting to take the risk the Sirens had camped outside my room (I would put nothing past them). I was pleased to find nothing but shadowy curtains over the recesses that the fiery sconces on the walls didn't reach.

The music had been silenced, the raucous conversations of partiers passing down the hallways long since disappeared.

Still, we needed to be careful as the other rooms, and not just the bedrooms and suites for such purposes, would be full of bodies happy and relieved after having satiated themselves.

And there would be the other males, still unsated, dangerous, on the edge, desperate to empty their seed into the first female they came to.

The guards would be on high alert, bolstering their numbers until the danger passed and the guests had finally left and got home.

I shook my head.

Why did the Royal Family always host the Steyatt Ceremony? It might be tradition, but there were plenty of traditions we didn't adhere to anymore.

Confident the worst of the party was over, I shut the door and turned back to the suite.

Mia was singing a happy tune in her native tongue, an upbeat melody that brought a smile to my lips. I chuckled to myself at the thought of the idea she'd shared with me.

Stealing money hidden in Wyre's shack!

How could she think it was appropriate for a prince and heir—however unlikely I was ever to be crowned—to go through with such an undertaking?

The shame I would bring to my House if it was ever discovered, and then the aftermath of the media discovering it afterward, and then releasing all the information about how we were destitute with barely a credit to our names...

It was only through my father's force of will that kept us on the throne. We were also fortunate that the other families were so reviled by the people. They would rebel if they ever attempted to take our place.

Ironically, the reason we stood to lose the throne—for being so kind and good in attempting to support the everyday people—was the very same reason no other powerful family could hope to take the position from us.

You just couldn't make this stuff up!

Still, if I wanted to marry Flara, I was going to have to come up with a way to raise money to appease her father, to show him I could keep her happy and in the kind of lifestyle she had become used to.

It was very unfortunate that he was one of the few people outside the Royal Family who knew the truth about our financial problems, otherwise, she would have leapt at the chance of being married into the Royal Family.

Oh well.

Something would come along, I knew, the way it always did.

Eventually.

The fates would weave their plans with the threads of our lives, and things would be what they would be.

But I was absolutely certain of one thing, and that was that there was no way I could ever bring myself to steal funds from a con—no matter how evil and corrupt his method at attaining it had been.

I would simply never be that desperate.

Ever.

Or so I thought...

MIA PULLED on the same sexy suit she'd worn the day before. With the palace still suffering the after-effects of the party from the night before, I thought it was a good opportunity to give her a tour of the palace.

Mia's stomach growled, and she hastily tugged her blouse over her belly. If her purpose was to stop me from hearing it, then her stomach clearly didn't get the memo as it growled even louder the second time.

"Sorry," she said.

"Sorry?" I said, grinning. "In the Ulsen culture, it's a compliment—especially after a night of lovemaking."

Mia's cheeks colored red—a strange and alien hue, as the Ulsen only ever turned red when blood sprayed across our faces during a battle and victory was met.

Mia seemed embarrassed by the noises her body made and checked over her shoulders, making sure that no one could hear our conversation topic.

"I'll take us to the kitchens first," I said, turning to lead the way before thinking better of it and taking her hand in mine first.

She looked at my hand with a look of confusion.

"It helps with the bond," I informed her.

"The bond?"

“The bond between us as mates during Steyatt.”

“Oh. I didn’t know a bond would form between us.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “You mean to tell me you can’t feel it?”

“Can’t feel what?”

I drew to a stop and faced her. She was tall for a human—that is, if the servants at the palace were anything to go by. Still, the top of her head only reached up to my chin.

“The flow between us,” I said.

She cocked her head to one side. “Flow?”

“Yes. It’s like... a river, a big, powerful river that connects us. It waxes and wanes, sometimes big and strong and powerful, other times slowing to a trickle. It isn’t always felt, but it’s always there, always between us, linking us. For this week, at least.”

Mia shook her head. “No. I don’t feel anything like that.”

My shoulders fell with disappointment. “Well, we are alternate species. I suppose it could affect us differently.”

“What does it feel like?”

I was going to repeat my description of a river but decided that as it had failed to register for her the first time, I would try another way. “It’s like when I look into your eyes.... I’m not just looking into your eyes. I’m looking into you, into your depths, as if you are a part of me, and I’m a part of you. And when I ejaculate inside you—”

“Okay, okay!” Mia said. Now not just her cheeks turned a bright red but her entire face as well. “I understand. And if that’s the river, then yes, I feel it too. In fact, I’ve felt it ever since I first met you.”

Since I first met you.

It was a throwaway comment, and one she didn’t seem to notice she had made, but to me, it spoke volumes. My mind began to make connections, a thought process that I never thought I would have, not when I had Flara as my betrothed...

But no, it's impossible.

Flara was my fated mate.

I hadn't mated with her—and that was the only real way to know if we were destined to be together—but I was certain of it as I was my skin was blue, my scales shiny and hard as iron.

Mia was just sensitive, that was all. She didn't come across as the type of girl to jump from one mate to another. I could tell that from her initial refusal to mate with me.

If mating meant nothing to her, she would have accepted my offer right away, with no reservations at all, but the fact she hadn't...

She smiled, raising her arms out to either side, her smooth cheek curling around the pointed corner of her lips, eyes peering one way and then another. Then, as if I needed another clue as to what she was thinking, her stomach growled noisily for a third time.

“Kitchens,” I said. “Food. This way.”

I took her hand once more, and this time, she didn't think anything of it.

I couldn't help but run my index finger across her palm, feeling at the delicate lines on her skin, and loved when she curled her fist around my finger and squeezed it.

It lasted for but a fraction of an instant. It was so soft and delicate that I perhaps shouldn't have been able to feel it through my hard scales. But I did and it sent a shiver through me. Once again, my cock perked up.

Not now, I informed it. Later.

It growled and lay back down, nestled in the smooth embrace of my thighs.

I would refuel Mia, give her a quick tour and then return to my suite for more lovemaking. I didn't want to squander what time we still had together.

The kitchens were a hive of activity. The majority of the kitchen staff were human, but their overall commander—as

the Chef liked to refer to himself—was a very large male Ulsen, a former warrior with a missing eye and a vicious-looking scar that ran from his left eye and across his cheek.

He barked an order at one of his underlings before turning to see our approach. He beamed at me and held his arms wide.

“Prince Rivvac!” he said, drawing me in close and wrapping his arms about my shoulders. “What a night, huh? I swear, the Steyatt Event gets wilder every year! Did you manage to find a mate to—”

Then his eyes lowered, locking onto Mia who stepped out from behind me.

He dropped down low, performing an overly respectful bow—the one he usually only reserved for the most senior Royal Family members. When he came up, he had somehow managed to cover the two yards between them.

Mia looked down and was astonished to find her hand clutched firmly in Chef’s massive scarred hands.

He kissed her palm and then each individual fingertip in the traditional Ulsen manner before drawing up and placing her hand on his chest, just above his heart, and placed his own on her chest. He shut his eyes and muttered a prayer under his breath.

Mia looked over at me, confused about what was happening.

“It’s the traditional Ulsen greeting,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “Then why didn’t you do it when we first met?”

“I seem to recall you were too busy trying to tear me a new ghizzar.”

Mia smiled despite herself. “I wasn’t that bad.”

“Weren’t you?” I said, arching my eyebrow.

“Ignore him,” Chef said. “He’s never had the best manners—despite all the endless lessons his tutors gave him, myself included.” He sighed. “Sometimes you just can’t teach a stone

to bleed. Besides, you can't blame him. Look at you. It is Steyatt, and he was too busy getting into your pants—"

"All right!" I interrupted.

"What?" Chef said, turning his attention to Mia. "She's gorgeous. There isn't a male in the Empire who wouldn't want to tear her clothes off and—"

"Enough!" I said, cutting him off again. Imagining other males with Mia wasn't exactly the kind of thing I wanted in my head right then.

Chef shrugged his muscular shoulders. "I calls it hows I sees it. Now, after your night of lovemaking, I assume you must be hungry. Here. Take this tray and take whatever you wish."

"Thanks," Mia said, walking along the long rows of pastries.

When Chef had first come to the palace to work for us, he knew nothing of human food, but as his servants were mostly of that race, he had been quick to learn how to bake their favorites so he could more easily score points with them so they would like him and do what he said.

Chef checked Mia was engrossed in making her choices before turning me and lowering his voice. "The word is the Sirens aren't too happy with you," he said.

The blood drained from my face. "They aren't?"

"They had you earmarked on their silly list. Can you believe you were on it,- but my name was nowhere to be found?"

"That is a mystery," I said. "I'll let them know you were disappointed to discover your name wasn't on their target list and—"

"You'll do no such thing!" Chef snapped, waving a wooden spoon in my face. "I have enough trouble as it is keeping the females in order during the Steyatt."

His expression was serious. With anyone else, I would have known they were joking, but Chef was such a kind-

hearted gentleman that females seemed to pick up on his honesty the moment they came into his presence.

He gave them a friendly smile or compliment, and they became like putty—or, as he was a chef, like dough—in his hands.

He never lost his cool and was one of the few Ulsen that I thought actually could control his Steyatt. *If pushed.*

I'd seen him do it in the past, losing himself in his kitchen, working around the clock, not bothering to concern himself with sleep, turning out one delicious pastry dish after another. When he began to run out of ingredients for his creations, he got creative and invented whole new ones.

He insisted on working by himself during the Steyatt, to prevent any females from coming within smelling distance.

The scent of the food smothered his senses, preventing him from catching a passing female's overpowering perfume. His ears focused on the rushing of the frying pan, the oven, and the squawking fellixix fire-breathing mewnark that aided him with baking. Likewise, all males were kept at a discreet distance, ordered not to come anywhere near him or to lift a finger to help him with any of his creations in the event he would snap at them and lose his flow.

I often thought about finding something I could lose myself in for Steyatt week... but then I remembered how much I enjoyed mating and knew it was a non-starter.

But if I ever had no choice other than to mate with a Siren, I knew I would find a passion pretty quickly to lose myself to.

“What do the Sirens plan on doing?” I said.

“I daren't think. You know how vicious they can be when they feel they've been betrayed.”

Yes, I thought. Their acts of retaliation were as famous as their seduction abilities.

They had been known to bury their hooks so deeply into a male, making him so obsessed with them that they lost all interest in eating or sleeping. They became like wandering

undead and nothing could break them out of it. If they wanted from their victim, all they had to do was ask and he would be powerless to prevent himself from carrying out their wishes.

If they ordered him to hand over all his worldly possessions, he would do so, and amiably go live on the streets. If that was his fate, then he considered himself very, very lucky.

As I had nothing to give them of material wealth, I suspected that wasn't what they would demand from me.

Not initially, at least.

Other times, they had commanded their charges to murder someone, a pebble in their shoe, so they could more easily carry out their other complex plans.

Or they would turn their lovers into unwilling spies, turning on even their beloved Emperor for their own purposes.

It was more likely they would wish to assassinate me than use me to kill others... but who knows? I met many rich and powerful people from all over the galaxy, and the Sirens had such deep and complex webs of plans and influence that it was impossible to fully understand what they were up to and why.

My skin crawled at what plans they might have for me.

So long as I kept Mia close to me during the Steyatt, I would be safe. But if they got their claws into me *before* the week was over...

I would be as helpless as a newborn babe.

“What do they want with me?” I asked, not really expecting Chef to know. He picked up on a lot of rumors, but it was almost always only that—pieces of gossip he or his army of workers had heard as they circulated among the rich and powerful guests.

It was too easy for them to mishear or misunderstand what they had overheard. Chef operated as a kind of filter (or Bullshit Filter as he described it) before passing on anything he thought might be of importance.

“Just keep your mate close all week,” Chef said. “And between you and me...” He looked Mia over as she finished piling half a dozen pastries onto her plate. “I don’t think you could have picked a better mate to keep you company during the Steyatt.”

From another male, I might have taken it for a challenge, but from Chef, it was a warm compliment.

He wiped the saliva from his lips at gazing at her body before affixing a warm smile to his lips. As controlled as he was, even he wasn’t immune to the presence of a gorgeous female. He quickly grabbed a second plate and added a bunch more pastries and handed it to Mia.

“You forgot these!” he said.

When she began to protest that she couldn’t possibly eat it all, he said: “Just try them and give me your feedback. I always want good honest opinions. Between you and me...” He leaned forward and whispered behind his scarred hand. “I think my little workers are too scared of me and don’t tell me the Creator’s honest truth.”

Mia beamed and nodded, struggling beneath the weight of her trays. “Okay.”

Chef winked at me. “Keep this one close,” he said, “she’s a keeper.”

He turned back to his ovens and continued with his magical skill.

I’d always liked to watch him cook. He always reminded me of a powerful wizard at home in his own skin and his field of special skill and ability.

“Come on,” I said, taking the trays she was struggling under. “We can eat in the gardens. They’re beautiful.”

But no matter how beautiful they were, I knew they would never distract me from the girl at my side.

MIA LEANED BACK and flopped her head on the bench's seat behind us.

Initially, we'd sat and eaten on it, but Chef had given us so much to try out that there just wasn't enough space, so we descended onto the ground at the bench's feet and enjoyed a kind of impromptu early-morning picnic.

I barely ate much more than Mia, who ate a lot considering her smaller size. When she saw how little I was eating, she cocked her head to one side and looked over at me.

"You don't like it?" she said.

"No," I said. "It's delicious. I'm just not... very hungry."

"Good," she said. "Because if you didn't think these were the most delicious pastries you've ever had, I want you to take me where they *are* the most delicious. Although that might not be such a good idea as I'll end up ballooning to the size of the Hindenburg... and then suffer the same fate."

Sometimes she said things I couldn't relate to—Hindenburg? We had a special kind of bloated frog that could expand its size and then, when threatened by a predator, would let out the air and fly away to safety... but I didn't think that was what she meant. Did humans really have that kind of miraculous expanding stomach? Looking at Mia, I found that hard to believe.

"After last night," Mia pressed on, "you should be ravenous."

My stomach grumbled in agreement with Mia, but the growling wasn't only due to hunger, but because of the news that the Sirens were angry at me. I feared what their response would be for scuppering the plans they had laid.

Whatever they were, I was pleased I had avoided them.

Would they let me go? I wondered. Forget about whatever unscrupulous design they might have for me? Or would they look for a chink in the mating relationship I shared with Mia? With six days remaining, it meant they would need to work fast.

By the fates and the Creator, I prayed, please let them give up their pursuit of me.

I didn't need to worry about this whole problem, not when I had other issues to deal with—namely, how I was going to find the money to convince Flara's father I could marry his daughter.

There had to be *something* I could do, *some* way I could attain that kind of wealth fast...

There just had to be...

“Oh, wow,” Mia said. “That's beautiful.”

I followed her line of sight and saw the rising of the twin suns, generally accepted to be the most beautiful sunrise in the known galaxy—or at least this quadrant—with its whispering purple haze and orange clouds and the earthy tones of the native fazzakia trees that absorbed the colors of the plants and flowers around them, forming a constantly morphing blanket of color that changed with every blink of the eye, like a roving sea dipped in dye.

I had seen it so many times it no longer had a mesmerizing effect on me, but seeing the wonder on Mia's face made me smile. The worries that had been as dense as the clouds over our heads began to dissipate as if letting the warmth of the twin suns of hope burst through.

Mia's smile was beaming and bright, a trickle of wayward breadcrumbs and cream forgotten on her lips.

I knew I couldn't stay apart from her—not even the few feet with the cakes between us.

I slowly got up and walked around our little picnic spot. I lay down behind her, tucking her into my arms in what she had earlier referred to as spooning. I felt the kind warmth of her in my arms. She turned her head to one side so her cheek was within easy distance of my lips. I kissed her over and over again.

My cock was raging hard by now. As Mia felt it—how could she not?—she curled her hips, making slow rolling

movements, grinding against me and gasping softly out the corner of her mouth.

I buried my lips on hers and ground on her harder, raising her leg slightly so I could get at the folds between her legs. I placed my hand on her bare stomach that had become exposed as she raised her arm and wrapped her arm about my head. I slipped my hand beneath her underwear and felt her warm, soft, moist mound, and began to gently rub at her.

“Mmmm,” she said in that distractingly sexy groan.

I slipped a finger inside her and gently rocked back and forth. She raised her leg a little higher to allow me better entry. I did nothing to contain the growl birthed on my lips, fed by the knowledge that she was completely open to me, that she *wanted* me.

Some mates had been mechanical, robotic in their lovemaking, and it always left me feeling empty of emotion. If they couldn't enjoy themselves, how could I?

Mia was nothing if not honest and real and true.

She reached back and gripped my cock in her hands. She looked me in the eye as she stroked me and began to shimmy her pants down and placed me at her entrance and—

“Cut, cut, cut!”

The voice of a third person shook us both from the moment. I must have fallen very deep for someone to be able to creep up on me so easily.

We hastily set to tucking ourselves in.

“Don't stop on my account.”

The creature standing over us with a self-gratifying smile on his lips was none other than Crer.

With a thick thatch of black hair, his unusually delicate horns like the twisted limbs of the Earth willow tree, he had always been a favorite among female Ulsen.

I hastened to my feet and helped Mia up. She dusted off her knees.

“Have you found him?” a voice called out from behind Crer. I could have recognized the voice anywhere. As Flara pulled up alongside Crer, my shock at her appearance turned to anger and disappointment—disappointment at me allowing myself to be caught in the open like this, and anger at Crer standing at her side.

No doubt he would make wise cracks about the condition he had found Mia and I in, and would tell her every sordid detail—anything to force a wedge between us.

Flara told me Crer didn’t know about the Royal Family’s financial situation but I could never shake the sense that he knew *something* he wasn’t letting on.

“So, this must be your Steyatt mate?” Flara said, running her eyes over Mia, a tight smile curling one corner of her lips.

Mia, taken by surprise, hadn’t noticed the cold expression on Flara’s face. She extended a hand toward her.

Flara peered at the dirt under Mia’s fingernails and the red grass stains on the knees of her pants. “Charmed,” she said, not extending her hand back.

Mia’s smile faltered.

“Mia is an executive assistant,” I said. “The way we met is pretty funny—”

Flara saw our picnic, some of the cakes having been squashed beneath us. Her lips curled. “Eating on the dirty ground? Really, Rivvac? And you’ve ruined your clothes.”

“You’re right,” Mia said, and there was a heated edge to her voice now. “It’s a major tragedy. How can we ever hope to survive with slightly wrinkled clothes?”

Crer snorted but the joke was lost on Flara. She sniffed and raised her nose even higher into the air than usual. “I suppose when you dress in rags, it doesn’t make much difference, does it?”

Mia clenched her jaw, the muscles so visibly tight that I was surprised I couldn’t hear her teeth crunching.

“I’m glad you managed to find someone to be your mate,” Flara said. “The rumor going around is that the Sirens were baying for you.”

“They were,” I said. “Luckily, I managed to escape.”

Flara pursed her lips and didn’t look at Mia when she next said, “Are you sure about that?”

Mia moved to step forward but I blocked her.

“How about you?” I said. “Did you sate any males?”

Flara slid her arm through Crer’s arm and beamed happily. “We spent the night together and had lots of fun. Didn’t we, Crer?”

“That we did,” Crer said and, no doubt having seen the look of murder on my face, he hastily added: “We didn’t mate. We just... hung out. That’s all.”

I wasn’t sure whether or not to believe him. Was he one of the rare few Ulsen males like Chef who could control his urges?

Flara glanced at the rising sun. “Is that the time already? We’d better hurry if we’re going to catch the opera, Crer.”

Like all Ulsen, she could glance at the sky and know the exact time without needing to consult a clock.

Crer nodded at me before bowing to Mia and taking her hand, kissing it gently. “It was a pleasure to meet you too, Mia.”

He smiled at her, his hand lingering on hers. And that, for some reason, seemed to make me more angry than anything else.

“I hope to see you again sometime,” he added.

With that, they strode arm in arm, back toward the palace.

The opera.

He was taking her to the damn opera.

The Royal Family could get tickets for free and offered the best seats in the house out of respect... but if I had been forced

to pay for them, I never would have had the money to do so.

Crer was going to take her, take Flara, from me, all because I couldn't afford to buy her damn opera tickets!

I needed a way to make money, and make money... fast!

With no other ideas, Mia's from the previous night sprung to the forefront of my mind and all my previous concerns were swept aside.

It was the only idea that had any merit. It would also deliver the fastest return.

By this time tomorrow, I could be swimming in cash and all my concerns about Flara would be over.

"How much did you say Wyre has buried beneath his house?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly. But a lot. Why?"

There would be no question of going through with it now. My future with my fated mate depended on it.

MIA

It was amazing what the right motivation would do toward achieving a goal.

I was convinced Prince Rivvac was *never* going to take me up on my Wyre idea. Convinced one hundred percent. And he still wouldn't have if the sharply-dressed Ulsen that came with Flara hadn't worn that grin. No doubt Crer had thought it was winning. Instead, it came across as superior, as if he knew better than everyone else and could get away with anything he wanted.

It would have rubbed me up the wrong way too.

I knew Flara was the girl Rivvac was betrothed to the moment I laid eyes on her. There was something somehow... classy about her—on the surface as least.

Underneath the superficial layer, I thought she was a nasty piece of work with her constantly looking down her nose at everything and everyone all the time.

But she was a true beauty, a pearl of femininity in a culture that could often come across as hostile and aggressive—mostly due to their large size. Even with Chef, who was honest, kind, and caring, you couldn't help but feel conflicted with him as you knew he could tear you apart at any time of his choosing.

Flara didn't come across as physically dangerous but *emotionally* aggressive. Her viciousness was contained within her sudden flashes of anger, her spiteful and pointed—and frankly, ugly—facial expressions. But I could see why Rivvac

had lost his heart to her, especially since they had been betrothed from a young age.

I could only imagine what it must feel like to be consumed with jealousy when your fated mate was linked arm-in-arm with another handsome male.

Rivvac's jealousy must have been through the roof as he had hardly said a word to me as we walked to the palace garage.

The Royal palace had, unsurprisingly, a huge selection of vehicles to choose from. Rivvac's instinct was to go for the best, most plush one closest to the entrance. It had a Royal "R" etched onto its side and bonnet.

When he climbed into the pilot's seat and began to go through the launching sequence, he looked back at me distractedly and said, "Well? Are you coming or aren't you? I doubt I'll find this guy's house if you don't come with me."

"I don't think we should take this shuttle," I told him.

"Why not? It's the best in the fleet."

"That's the problem. What are the chances someone won't notice us?"

Prince Rivvac paused and turned the engines off. "Good point."

He hopped down and pressed his fists on his hips and turned to look at the numerous other ships in the Royal garage. "Then which one do you suggest?"

I walked amongst the endless selection until I came to one that I walked past without even noticing it. I had to back up to look back at it before realizing it was perfect. "This one."

"This one?" Rivvac said, looking it over. "It's an old piece of crap."

"Just like most other ships. It *has* to be this one."

Prince Rivvac sighed. "As you wish. There goes traveling in comfort."

We climbed on board and the difference between the cutting edge ship and this one was immediately apparent.

“I’m not even sure it will fly...” the alien prince said, flicking the various switches.

The engine coughed and chugged before rattling noisily. The prince increased the revs (they weren’t really revs but having grown up surrounded by old combustion engine vehicles, I couldn’t think of what the most accurate term was) until the engines rumbled less and became smoother, almost humming.

“Huh,” Prince Rivvac said. “It works. Strap in. We could fall from the sky at any moment. Here we go.”

He hit a large red button on the dash. Lights flashed as a back hatch opened up in the garage ceiling.

We took off into the morning light. We scaled higher into the sky, the palace shrinking, revealing itself to be a pearl at the center of a medium-sized city nestled on either side by sharp cliffs and sprawling open seas.

It looked like something from a fairytale—picture postcard perfect to what I had seen on various holo-TV shows.

Rivvac took us higher and higher, grinding his teeth as the shuttle shuddered hard, making me clench my eyes shut tight. He turned dials and flicked yet more switches, reducing the shuddering.

I still felt like I was going to be sick.

Then, all of a sudden, as the sky in the wide front window faded from light to dark blue, then to pitch black, I felt the pull of the planet leave us. I floated for a moment in my chair, my restraints holding me in place.

“Turning on the grav generator now,” he said, turning a dial.

The gravity returned to normal.

“That’s a relief,” I said. “Any longer, and you’d have vomit floating around in your lovely cockpit.”

“It’s not lovely.”

“Would it be lovelier with orange chunks floating around it?”

“I suppose not.”

“If your family is so poor now, how is it that you have so many shuttles to choose from?” I asked.

“They don’t belong to us,” he informed me. “They belong to the state. We just use them for formal visits and the like. In fact, if it wasn’t for the state subsidizing us, we would have been removed from the palace months ago.”

“That’s... that’s terrible,” I said.

Prince Rivvac shrugged his massive shoulders. “It is what it is. Right. So we’re heading for Wyre’s planet. When we get closer, you’ll have to tell me the old guy’s address. I’ll take us there manually in case someone looks to check the onboard computer system.”

I blinked in surprise. “They can do that?”

“Of course.”

“Then how will we make sure they don’t know we took one of the ships to go to break into Wyre’s house?”

“I’ll erase the console’s history but experts will be able to find evidence of where the ship went anyway. There’s no way to prevent them from discovering where this ship went. The good news is that all royal shuttles aren’t hooked up to the same mainframe tracking system as every other shuttle in the empire.”

“Why’s that?”

“It would make assassinating the emperor too easy. Track the shuttle he’s on and then throw everything you have at it. The hulls are reinforced but fire enough ion cannons or lasers and eventually, you’ll get through. Nothing is impregnable.”

“Then what if someone thinks to check this shuttle manually?”

He looked over at me, a glimmer in his eyes. “We have to make sure not to get anyone’s interest, so they won’t think we’re responsible.”

I couldn’t say that made me feel very confident. But what else could we do?

“How long will it take to get there?” I asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

“What’ll we do until then?”

He shrugged and looked away, his thoughts no doubt drifting to the earlier scene with his fated mate and Crer.

I released my restraints and extended my hand toward him. He looked at it, then at me, and for a flicker of a moment, I thought he wasn’t going to take it. Then his primal Steyatt urges thought better of it and took my hand.

He got up out of the pilot chair. I pulled him into the same empty space behind us. I placed his hands on my hips.

“Back on Earth, this is called dancing,” I said.

He smiled. “We have dancing.”

“Our dancing is nothing like yours. It’s not about learning the Death Dance or how to defend yourself.”

“Then what’s the purpose of it?”

I shrugged. “For fun. Exercise.”

“I don’t see how such dancing could be fun—”

I told the computer system to play a sultry song from back on Earth and began to cock my hips from one side to the other.

His mouth flopped open and his eyes grew wide, his hands remaining on my hips as I looked up at him. I turned and ground against him, pressing my ass onto his cock.

He grunted under his breath. I timed the music so his hands rubbed over my breasts and down my body. Then I held his hand on the crotch of my pants and encouraged him to rub me.

“Is this how all Earth girls dance?” he said under his breath, already growing heavy with desire.

“Some,” I said. “How does it compare to your Death Dance?”

He licked his lips. “If our females danced this way, I don’t think we would have so many soldiers on the battlefield. Or wars for that matter. Did you learn this from the Sirens?”

I missed a beat of the music but covered it as well as I could. My intention had been to distract him from the concerns he had pressing on him.

“No,” I said. “This is part of Earth culture.”

“Hm. Maybe I should learn more about it...”

I turned to face him. “Then let me be your teacher.”

I pressed my lips to his and he responded with heat. That’s when I knew I had been successful in my attempt to distract him.

And this time, I intended on being the one in the driving seat... at least partially.

Each time we’d made love up to this point, he had always been in control while I was relegated as follower. As it was his Steyatt, so I figured he ought to take what he needed from me—what we had agreed I would provide for him—but this time, I was determined to be the driving force.

Who knows, maybe he had never experienced that either.

I let him undress me and I removed his clothes too.

Thirty minutes wasn’t a lot of time, but it was enough for my purposes.

I liked watching him undress, revealing himself to me one layer at a time, his muscular lean frame and obvious strength.

I bent down and licked his nipples. The first touch made him stiffen and back away—physically take a step back—but he relaxed with each subsequent flick of my tongue.

Then he did the same for me, taking my nipples in his hands and sucking on them gently. I didn't expect him to be so gentle with them, but more like the uncontrollable animal I had always known him to be. I was pleased when he caressed them with his tongue, savoring them and drawing shallow breaths from my throat.

"Mm," I said. The noise was out of my mouth before I knew what I was saying.

Then he scooped me up into his arms, his lips still sucking on my nipples that had grown larger and swollen and hard.

He unzipped his pants and his cock searched for my entrance. I helped him in, then leaned forward, knocking him off balance. He fell back against his pilot chair. He began to get up but I writhed on top of him, riding him before he could gather himself.

His eyes were wide and hungry with lust at seeing me on top, grinding and drawing him deep inside me. I rubbed myself back and forth, pinching my nipples between my hands as I brought him deeper and deeper into me. He didn't press his hands to my hips or attempt to control me in any way and just let me ride him how I wanted.

I bounced hard on his cock, building up a sweat. I loved how he looked up at me as I arched back so he could see me in my full majesty.

I felt his cock grow harder, thicker, stronger, and I bounced higher, harder on him, feeling the soft slap of his balls on my ass. I wrapped my arms around my head as I screamed, my legs burning as I came hard, and felt the immediate hard thrust of his hips driving his own seed deeper inside me.

I flopped forward and lay on top of him for a moment, panting and out of breath as I recovered from the immense thrill of riding him into oblivion.

"That... That was amazing," he said between harsh breaths.

"I... I don't know why... you're... panting... I did all... all the work," I gasped.

“It’s pure excitement,” he said. “How can I not be thrilled when you’re riding on top of me like that?”

I grinned. What girl didn’t like hearing those words?

A beep sounded before the computer system said, “We have arrived at Nocturus 7.”

We didn’t move a muscle and just laid there a moment, luxuriating in each other’s company.

Then Rivvac groaned. “I suppose we ought to get on with it.”

I sat up, sad at losing the feel of him between my legs, and scooped up my clothes to put them back on again. The majority of my time with him seemed to be spent getting undressed!

Would I want it any other way?

Not when the sex was this good!

“All right then,” Prince Rivvac said. “What’s Wyre’s address?”

I fell into the co-pilot seat and told him.

“Are we in for a bumpy ride?” I asked, strapping myself in.

“Are you kidding?” Rivvac said. “Every minute with you is a bumpy ride!”

I burst into laughter as we descended into the planet’s atmosphere.

And yes, it was a very bumpy ride indeed.

THE DESCENT SMOOTHED after the initial twenty minutes or so, but let me tell you, those twenty minutes were some of the worst of my life.

I could ride Rivvac until he cried out for mercy—not that he ever had or would—and he could pummel me into oblivion

with so much energy that I figured I must have angered him in a past life somehow and now he finally got the chance to get some payback, and yet after all that, I didn't feel even remotely sick.

But that hideous descent in the tiny little shuttle—the shuttle with the lack of stabilizers, Rivvac helpfully pointed out was missing—had been my idea. Right then, I thought careening down to the surface in an easily-recognizable Royal shuttle might have been worth the risk after all.

The moment we leveled off, Rivvac looked over at me and asked if I was okay.

I nodded but kept my eyes and mouth firmly shut. I had dry-hurled five times on the way down and could smell the acrid stink whispering up against my tonsils. But I hadn't thrown up and for that, at least, I could be proud.

It was another ten minutes before we came across the large open fields of the surrounding farmlands. They reminded me of home and the farm I had grown up on with my parents, but I didn't have any desire to go down and help the alien farmers cultivate their lands.

It was backbreaking labor and I wasn't so homesick that I would want to undergo the trial.

“Wyre's house is up on the left, so we want to stay on this line,” I said. “There's a thick copse of trees behind his house. We can land there before we cross over onto his property on foot. That's if he's not in, of course. Otherwise, we might be in for a long wait.”

“A long wait, I can handle,” Rivvac said, “especially if the entertainment is anything like that I saw earlier...”

He grinned over at me but I daren't reflect it back at him in case I breathed acrid stink breath all over him.

We sat down in the woods, the powerful thrusters of the shuttle's underside blasting the local wildlife from its hiding places in the hedges and bushes.

Prince Rivvac powered down the shuttle's engine. It seemed eerily quiet after our journey there.

“Well, let’s get to it,” I said, releasing my restraints.

“Wait,” he said, catching my arm. “Are you sure you want to do this? It’s not too late to turn around and forget about the whole thing.”

“And give up the chance to make it up to his victims? I don’t think so. Assholes like Wyre shouldn’t get away with the things they do.”

“Should *we* get away with what we’re about to do?”

“Yes. Because we want to *help* people, not steal from them.”

“We’re not helping Wyre, that’s for sure.”

I hardened my jaw. “Look, I’m going in whether you’re coming or not. I’ll need to make more trips than if you’d help me but I can do it on my own.”

His grin broadened as if that was exactly what he was hoping to hear. “And give up my share of the booty? I don’t think so.”

I didn’t like his response as I didn’t want him doing this just for me. I wanted him to do it for himself, for his own reasons.

“Why do you like her so much?” I asked baldly.

“Who?”

I rolled my eyes. “Flara.”

“She’s beautiful. She’s the most gorgeous Ulsen in the Empire.”

I waited for more but when none was forthcoming, I asked, “Is that all? Isn’t there something else that holds you together?”

“Like what?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Conversation. Humor. Shared interests. Something.”

“I like... her laugh. I like how she never gives up on the things she wants. I like how she never accepts no as an

answer.”

That’s because she’s selfish and greedy, I thought, but I didn’t say it.

I had only met Flara once, so what did I know about her? Maybe she had depths I hadn’t seen yet...

But I didn’t think so.

I’d learned through long experience what “elites” could be like. I’d worked for them, observed them. It seemed to me that the drive and ambition of the parents, the first generation to make their wealth, was almost always lost on the generation that followed.

It seemed that giving them better schools, education, friends, gifts etc than they had growing up *didn’t* result in a better upbringing. They were often rotten to the core and Flara was a prime example of that.

I tried to ignore the aching in my neck and back when I thought of her. She made my whole body hurt, right down to the individual hair follicles.

Why I should care so much about her, I wasn’t sure. Maybe it was just the moony-eyed expression the Prince Rivvac adopted whenever he talked about her, as if she were some kind of unapproachable idol upon a plinth.

Well, she shat the same way as everyone else, and it wouldn’t smell like roses.

“Why do you want to do this?” Rivvac asked. “Really. Why?”

“I owe him.”

“Sure. But it’s not just the revenge, right? What will you do with your half of the take?”

I fixed him with a look. “It’s one thing to own a farm. It’s another to live free.”

Rivvac nodded as if he understood.

“Before we go, I have one condition,” I added.

He rolled his eyes. “If you want to renegotiate, you should have done that before we came here.”

“I don’t want to renegotiate.” I narrowed my eyes. “Do you want to hear it or not?”

He waved his hands as if to say, *Go ahead.*

“The people Wyre stole from, they have to be paid back first. Everybody.”

“How will we know who he stole from?”

“He has a little black book he writes everything in. He doesn’t have it on him all the time. He keeps it with the money.”

“How much are we talking?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea of the depths of his depravity.”

“What if it’s *all* the money?”

“It won’t be all of it. He’s been collecting payments and interest for decades.”

“All right. We return what he stole first. Anything else?”

“We split what remains sixty-forty.”

He blinked in surprise. “I didn’t think you’d let me have more than half.”

“I’m not.”

The meaning hit him full force. “You want the *sixty* percent?”

“Without me, you wouldn’t get anything.”

“Without me, neither would you! Fifty-fifty is fair.”

I scowled at him. “Fifty-five, forty-five. Final offer.”

“Fifty-fifty. Final offer.”

I glowered at him. His eyes became misty and distant. The fool couldn’t help himself but be turned on by this!

“Hey, wake up and focus!” I said, snapping my fingers in front of his eyes to get his attention.

“I am focused!”

“Sure. And I know what on too. Eyes up here, if you please.”

He growled. “So maybe you shouldn’t have such a hot body. It’s not my fault.”

I grinned despite herself. “Behind every fortune is a great crime. And beneath Wyre’s floors are a *lot* of crimes. Are you ready?”

He nodded and followed me out of the shuttle.

THE WALK through the woods would have been pleasant if it wasn’t for what we would do when we emerged on the other side.

I motioned for Rivvac to slow down and crouch a dozen yards before we even saw the house. It was concealed behind a small hill that you had to climb first.

I dropped down onto my hands and knees and crawled up the shallow hillside. As I drew closer to the top, I lowered further onto my front and pulled myself up to the hill’s crest.

I was surprised at just how little the house had changed in the past two years since I’d been away. It was a small single-storey structure with enough space for three rooms not much bigger than the shuttle we had ridden to get there.

A pile of chopped wood lay stacked on one side of the wall and a thin rivulet of smoke seeped from the chimney.

It was a warning signal. The cranky old man never used resources unless he absolutely needed to. It meant he was at home. But as I peered down at the property, I could see his shuttle wasn’t there.

But with the smoke coming from the chimney... Did it mean he had only just left and would be back soon? Or did it mean something else?

I wasn't sure.

I ran an eye around the fence that surrounded the property's perimeter. The D'in ought to have been there too but I couldn't make them out either.

Rivvac pulled up beside me and peered down at the small property. "So? How do things look?"

"I'm pretty sure he's not in."

He must have picked up on my trepidation. "But...?"

"But there's smoke coming from his chimney."

"And is that significant?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "He never came across as the kind of person to waste money."

"So if he started the fire, you're saying he must be here somewhere, or will be back soon."

"Yes."

"And you're wondering if it's worth heading down there now or waiting until a better time?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Am I that easy to read?"

"It's a good line of reasoning. For what it's worth, I think we should go now. He doesn't need to be away long. It won't take long for us to empty his fortune."

"No," I said. "It's just... I was hoping we would see him leave and then we would be in the best position to have as much time as we needed."

"That's the problem with making plans," Rivvac said. "So often, things come up that we never thought of."

"So what do you do in those situations?"

Rivvac pushed himself up onto his feet. "You adapt."

He descended the hillside on the other side, heading toward the shack.

I scrambled to keep up with him. By the time I got to the bottom of the hill, the D'in were out—all three of them.

They looked much bigger than when I had known them and realized that perhaps when I had given them food and they acted like puppies, the reason was because they really *were* puppies.

They growled, a high pitched shriek at the back of their throats that sent a shiver through me from the tip of my head to the tips of my toes. Thankfully, we were separated by the fence.

Rivvac seemed unaffected but kept his eyes fixed firmly on them and reached back to me with a hand. “Do you have the treats?”

I took them from a bag and drew up beside Rivvac, ignoring his proffered hand. “It’s better if an alien scent isn’t on the food. They’re famously picky about who they let come near them.”

Rivvac turned his nose up at the mushy purple meat in my hands. “You could have used the replicator to produce anything. Why not give them something tastier than this? It smells rancid.”

“It’s their favorite. Trust me, they love it.”

I pulled my arm back and hurled the meat over the fence. It arched and hit the deck with a solid smack. One D’in looked back at it but then turned his head to look back at us. Four pairs of ears and six eyes on each D’in focused firmly on us.

My insides felt like water. I threw more of the meat over the fence and each time, the D’in didn’t respond.

“Is that what is supposed to happen?” Rivvac said.

“No,” I said. “They usually demolish the food like it was the elixir of life.”

“Then what are they doing?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they got new training? Maybe Wyre realized that someone had come into his house and he wanted to make sure they never came again? I don’t know.”

Well, this is a pretty pickle all right.

The D'in had no restraints that prevented them from going anywhere in the yard. They could tear us apart as easily as their favorite mushy purple goo...

Then I had an idea.

I drifted forward, toward the fence and held out a hand.

“Mia?” Rivvac said, his voice forceful and full of concern. “Be careful.”

“The wind,” I said. “It’s blowing away from us. Maybe they can’t smell me.”

I drifted a little closer and, with my fingertips less than an inch from the lead D'in’s nostrils, I lowered my mouth to them and blew on my fingers, dusting the D'in’s nose with my scent.

The lead D'in snorted. It cocked its head to one side and its long tongue lolled from its broad mouth. It shrieked happily, calling the others over and leaping at the fence.

I peered back at Rivvac. “I knew they would recognize me!”

But they sure did have me concerned for a while there...

I began to climb the fence. Rivvac joined me but I told him to hang back until I let the D'in warm up to me. They will smell him on me and he should be able to move freely among them too.

Rivvac, his face doing nothing to conceal the concern that I might be putting my life on the line, watched as I scaled the fence and dropped down on the other side.

I was swamped with huge D'in bodies in less than the time it takes to blink, pressing and rubbing against me like cats. They sniffed every inch of my clothing, looking for any morsel of food that might still be located in the bag I carried. I took it out and handed it to them. They slurped it happily off my palm, dousing my skin with their sticky saliva.

They sniffed and snorted at my body scent and must have picked up on Rivvac—after all, he had not only been close to me, but *inside* me. The big D'in male couldn't help himself

but to sniff at my crotch and growl in Rivvac's direction. No doubt he now considered him a rival.

I gripped hold of his studded collar and held on tight just in case he decided to launch an attack on Rivvac.

"All right!" I said to Rivvac. "You can come over now."

He scaled with two powerful thrusts of his feet, once on the ground outside and the other halfway up the fence, and sailed high, landing powerfully on the plain concrete of the compound yard.

As he stood, I couldn't help but shiver at his sheer strength and magnificence.

"I'll go inside," he said.

"And unlock the door so you can let me in," I said.

He walked once around the shack before noticing the hatch on the roof. He launched himself at the building, scaling it the same way he had the fence, and crouched down, creeping carefully toward the skylight. He easily leveraged it open and slipped inside.

Within ten seconds, the front door opened and Rivvac beamed over at me.

I shushed the D'in and left them with the remainder of the purple mush that they loved (for the life of me I couldn't figure out why) and entered the house. I shut the door behind myself.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Well," I said. "That's the hard part over."

"Lead the way," Rivvac said, motioning to the sparse and unkempt shack's interior.

I walked directly to the loose slat I'd found all those years ago—as if I'd been there only yesterday. It was funny how the mind could remember such things so easily.

I pulled the loose floorboard up. It was the keystone for the entire floor. It allowed me to pull up the other slats too. Seeing the pattern, Rivvac leaned down and helped me pull them up.

By the time we were done, half the floor had been removed. Beneath it were burley sacks of indiscriminate value.

I bent down and grabbed one at random. I pulled the drawstring open and peered inside and marveled at how old man Wyre was trapped in a time and place lacking any technology at all. I showed Rivvac the piles of tightly-bound cash, jewels, and rare artifacts.

He snorted. “With this kind of wealth, you’d have thought he could afford better security systems.”

“Systems like that cost money, and he’s not in the habit of spending it. And think about all the attention it would bring. The better the security system, the more valuable the treasure... and that only creates more headaches.”

Rivvac nodded. “Well, his system has worked this long.”

“But no longer,” I said firmly. “Every credit and item here is covered with blood of the innocent. I dread to think how many people he’s ripped off over the years and the terrible stories attached to them.”

I noticed the little black book. It was the only item not hidden inside a sack and was fastened shut with a piece of red elastic. Inside were names and addresses with numbers written beside them.

Pages and pages of them...

I felt sick to my stomach.

I tucked it in my pocket. It might have weighed a literal ton.

Rivvac put his hand on my shoulder and said, “They’ll get what they lost. We’ll make sure of it.”

“They’ll never get back what they lost,” I said sadly. “The money, yes, but not the promises and dark memories.”

We got to work carting the sacks out of the shack. Rivvac tossed the bags over the fence, forming a huge pile on the other side.

It was hard work but it was quick, and within thirty minutes, we had all of it out.

“Do you want to leave him any?” Rivvac asked. “Enough for him to survive on?”

“Did he leave his victims anything?” I asked coldly. “No. Leave him nothing.”

I turned to head back to the shack.

“Where are you going?” Rivvac asked.

“I need to replace the floor tiles. It might buy us some time.”

Rivvac shook his head. “Judging by what you’ve told me about Wyre, I imagine he counts it every day. And we don’t know how much longer he will be gone.”

I scratched the D’in and realized that if we didn’t do something with them too, they were going to suffer at the hand of Wyre’s cruelty for failing to defend his stash.

I explained my concerns to Rivvac. He just smiled at me and carried each of the monsters over the fence.

“We’ll drop them off somewhere on the way back to the palace,” I said.

“We’ll drop them off,” Rivvac said with a nod, “but not on the way back. It might lead back to us. We’ll drop them off on a colonized moon in the opposite direction.”

The D’in weren’t useless though, as we lashed sacks of stash to their backs with rough ropes and led them back to the shuttle.

We moved fast. I kept my eyes peeled on the sky, looking, listening for any sign Wyre was returning.

By the time we picked up the final few sacks, I was exhausted. As we turned to head back to the forest, I heard it, the sound I had been dreading ever since we started the heist.

A low-pitched wailing of a shuttle’s engine.

“He’s coming back!” I screeched.

“Get beneath the tree cover,” Rivvac said.

We ran into it. I slowed to peer up at the sky. Rivvac didn't stop and took off like a shot.

“Come on!” he yelled, sprinting through the undergrowth.

We scaled our shuttle's open hatch door. The D'in stood to attention, ears perked up. They emitted low whines of fear at the sound of their master returning home. They lowered their ears and searched for any small hiding places they could find to conceal themselves... hiding places they could never find in the concrete yard.

“Don't worry,” I told them. “He'll never hurt you again.” I turned to Rivvac. “Get us out of here.”

“Yes, sir,” Rivvac said with affection.

I strapped myself in. Rivvac surprised me by not taking off into the sky right away and instead elected to wind through the trees. I supposed he was afraid Wyre would see us making our escape and give chase.

But we couldn't continue horizontally forever, and after ten minutes, Rivvac pulled on the controls and took us up, higher into the atmosphere.

This time, the turbulence didn't make me feel sick. It was the fear that we might be discovered that made my stomach gurgle with trepidation.

I was relieved only once we were free from the planet's gravitational pull and took off into the endless expanse of space.

I smiled over at Rivvac and took his hand. He massaged my fingers with his own.

“We did it,” I said. “We really did it.”

I sent a silent prayer to Wyre's victims. This might not be the release Wyre had promised them, but no one could do that save the Creator. But at least their families would no longer have to struggle with destitution.

I looked over at Rivvac and squeezed his hand. We did it.
And it was all thanks to him.

RIVVAC

We dropped the D'in off at a small farm on a speck of a moon orbiting an unremarkable planet.

I doubted anyone would come to this moon and look for the D'in, and it was even less likely that a poor farmer would tell the authorities about finding these three D'in on his property—especially since Mia had taken it upon herself to write a quick note to explain she was incapable of taking care of the D'in any longer. She also left them with enough money to pay to raise the beasts for a year so they would not be out of pocket before the D'in earned their keep.

The creatures were certainly big enough to lash machinery to, and after they got used to my scent—trusting me only because of my relationship with Mia—they were very affectionate creatures, very different from their vicious and dangerous-looking appearances.

I suddenly realized that perhaps Mia had thought the same way about me when we had first met too. Not that you would ever guess that from the way she spat her orders at me to demand an interview!

But that was the Ulsen reputation—one of the most fearsome species in the galaxy, harvested from a millennia of our ancestors refusing to give up and let our enemies take advantage of us.

It was a trait we hadn't had to use much in recent years as we'd lived in relevant peace, but it would always be there,

built into our DNA. There was simply no way to run away from that part of yourself when push really came to shove.

As we took off and left the farm, Mia reached over and squeezed my hand. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“For what?”

“For indulging me.”

“With the D’in?” I said. “Of course. They don’t deserve to be treated badly by their master. If we can relieve their pain and suffering, we should do it.”

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek that was long-lasting. I felt her warmth in it.

We’d kissed many times over the past couple of days and they had always been steamy and hot and full of passion, but this kiss was different, like she’d seen something in me that she hadn’t before.

I couldn’t figure out what that was but I liked that she thought that way about me.

“Now we head back to the palace?” she asked in a way that made me unsure of whether it was a statement or a question.

I shook my head. “No. We need to find somewhere to hide this stash,” I said, nodding to the mountain of treasure in the shuttle’s hold.

I had been surprised by how much was hidden beneath the shack. Initially, I thought Mia had been overestimating just how much old Wyre had managed to con others but once I set eyes on it, I chastised myself for ever doubting Mia’s word.

Even if we had to hand half of it to Wyre’s unfortunate victims, it would be more than enough for me to present to Flara and her father.

“Hide the stash?” Mia said. “I thought you were going to put it through your accounts so it comes out clean?”

“We will. But how do you think it will look if I just turn up with it like this without any explanation of where it came

from?" I shook my head. "Someone will smell something rotten for sure and start to investigate."

"But Wyre isn't likely to file a complaint. Then he would have to explain how he came into possession of all of that money."

I nodded. "He might not file a complaint with the authorities but he might take action with the black market."

Mia's eyes drifted away, deep in thought. "Yes. You're right. So what do you think we should do?"

"We'll bury it somewhere on land the Royal Family owns. Then I'll tell our people it was discovered. It automatically becomes our property. I'll say it was thanks to an anonymous tipoff. Usually, we would share the wealth with those who found the treasure but I'll say they're already wealthy and wanted to donate it to the state. That will keep anyone from looking too closely at how it was discovered."

"What about the amount? Wyre will be suspicious if it turns out to be the same amount that we lifted from him."

I nodded. "Then we'll bury it in various places all over the cosmos. I'll reveal its location one part at a time over time so there will be no suspicions."

Mia gnawed on her bottom lip before saying, "Then how about we bury the sacks of money first? The antiques will be too easy to trace. In a few years, old Wyre will be dead by then. He has no close friends or family that I know of. No one will come looking for it."

I couldn't help but grin at her. "Good thinking." Then I gave her a mocking look of suspicion. "Have you done something like this before?"

She laughed. "Of course not. But working for rich people, you can't help but think a little like them."

"Hopefully, not too many of their other habits rubbed off on you."

"I'm out here in a shuttle with a hull packed with treasure... What do you think?"

I grinned back at her. “Every fortune began with an epic crime.”

Mia released her restraints. She leaned over to lean against my arm and traced a finger over the smooth pebble-like scales that quivered beneath her touch.

She fell into a shallow sleep. I loved the feel of her clutching onto me like that. We could have been heading somewhere to enjoy our free time rather than rushing to bury illicit treasure we had just lifted.

I didn’t care what we would be doing, just so long as we were together.

I blinked, my heart racing, panicked that I was thinking that way about Mia and not Flara.

They couldn’t be any more different, one born into incredible wealth and power, betrothed to a prince of the Ulsen Royal Family, the other born poor, like countless other families out in the cosmos, working long hours to survive, bearing a name that the history books would never remember.

History was a great deal poorer for it.

IT WAS late evening by the fourth day of Steyatt when we finally returned to the palace.

We’d visit over half a dozen planets and moons where the Royal Family possessed land. Finding good places to bury the stash was not difficult as I had spent countless hours as a youth visiting the various communities.

I was always amazed by how diverse the empire was, how every solar system and planet was unique, with its own native plant species, creatures, and cultures.

Heading to all four corners of the empire came with another benefit. I got to show Mia the empire we reigned over and shared my memories of each locale.

Some were good memories, others not so much.

But that was life.

A life well lived was always full of excitement and disappointment.

Even more surprising was learning that on two separate occasions, Mia recognized the planets and moons we headed to and that she had worked nearby!

She told me about the people she worked for, the duties she was responsible for, how hard she worked, and the various friends and enemies she'd made.

She wanted to introduce me to her favorite patrons but it wasn't wise to garner attention to us or our little shuttle in case someone looked into where we had traveled to and for what reason.

Besides, journalists and rumor mills always followed in a prince's wake, and anonymity among the people with Mia at my side was far more preferable than being received by all the pomp of a royal procession.

We buried the treasure in shallow holes so they would be easily discovered once I informed our people of their locations.

Digging was hard work—especially with nothing but a shovel to help me do it. Mia worked hard but her little hands and muscles couldn't move the soil the way I could. It was hard but surprisingly rewarding work.

I wiped my sweaty forehead with the back of my forearm, smearing mud over myself. Mia was there to wash my face and I couldn't help but steal a kiss each time she did so.

We used the replicator to furnish us with food that we often consumed as a picnic—a reflection of the one we had had outside the palace gardens that felt like a lifetime ago.

And, just like last time, I couldn't keep my hands off her. I loved that we shared a deep secret that would forever exist only between the two of us, and not once did thoughts of palace life—or even Flara—pop into my mind.

We kissed and touched and hugged in an open field of blue moss that lit up like neon signs every time we accidentally crushed a small piece of it.

As we made love beneath the glowing orb of the magnificent Giyawwa Mountain Moon, I couldn't recall a time I had ever been happier, so content and at peace in my entire life. And it was right here, beside Mia.

We were lost among the stars, forgotten and invisible to everyone but each other. We had no servants, no duties, no fancy dresses or parties to go to...

Just us.

I'd always been happy in the palace, always looking forward to rejoining my family, staff, and friends after long journies... but this time was different.

I felt sad as we buried the last of our stash. I looked over at Mia in the co-pilot chair and wanted to ask if she wanted to disappear again, to head somewhere else, to get lost among the stars and never look back...

Not until we were ready to, anyway.

But we had a job to do. Stealing the money was only part of it. We had to distribute it to those who had been robbed, and that should not be delayed any longer than necessary.

And so I input the palace's coordinates and we flew home.

MY PARENTS WERE DISTRAUGHT that I had up and disappeared without leaving a note of where I would be heading. They had sent search parties out to find me.

I was only glad no one thought to check the rust buckets in the garage to see I had taken one. They knew me well enough to know I liked to travel in luxury... and garnered more than a few looks when they realized I had actually taken the worst rust bucket in the entire fleet.

“I wanted to spend time alone with my mate during Steyatt,” I said without apology.

They ran an eye over Mia. She looked a little bedraggled and worn out by our traveling. They shook her hand informally in the Earthern tradition while Mia performed a strange bow where she crossed her legs and bent herself nearly in half. If my parents were as surprised as me, they did well not to show it.

They embraced me and told me to inform them the next time I took off. I told them I would and intended on keeping the promise... so long as I wasn't committing another heist.

I had considered letting them know earlier but that would hardly help me disappear among the stars and keep our activities hidden.

“The Steyatt mid-week dinner party is taking place tonight,” my mother informed me. “It's important you show up. Many of our friends and families have been invited, including Flara.”

I smiled at the thought of seeing her again but couldn't shake the sense that I would have preferred a nice picnic with Mia much more. I wasn't in the mood for all the expectations and pomp of a dinner party.

But it was duty. There was nothing for it but for me to nod respectfully to my parents and extend my elbow to Mia. I escorted her out of the throne room and back to our suite.

Our adventure was over.

The palace staff brought a collection of dresses for Mia to choose from. She asked for my opinion, and I pointed to the ornate gold one with wave-like petals around the edges.

She showered and returned to the bedroom wearing a single towel. I growled and had to bite my tongue to keep myself from attacking her. I disappeared into the shower to cool down.

When I came out, I found her wearing the gold dress and sparkling gold earrings and matching gold necklace that our wardrobe people must have given her.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked, turning so I could get a good view of her whole body.

She looked completely different to how she had before. I had only ever seen her in her sharp suit that she'd worn for the interview and dirty and muddied up to her elbows as she helped me dig the holes we needed to conceal our secret stash. I had no idea she could look so classy too.

I opened my mouth to share a compliment but the words came out as a muffled grunt.

Mia frowned. “That bad, huh?”

She returned to looking at herself in the mirror. Her hair was pinned up in a simple style that exposed the smooth skin of her shoulders and long neck.

I gulped.

“I can change into something else if you want?” she said.

I moved up behind her and wrapped my arms around her. I pressed my lips to her exposed shoulders and locked my eyes on her in the mirror.

“You will not change a thing,” I informed her. “You're stunning.”

She beamed at me with her big, childish grin. It completely changed her expression. I was pleased to see that despite the change of setting and dress, she herself remained exactly the same.

“I'm glad you like it,” she said, turning her head to one side so my chin could rest on the top of her head. “I want to be a good mate.”

“You could never be anything but,” I told her.

We stood there a moment in silence, just looking at each other, her hand running over the soft bubbles of my scales. I shut my eyes and was surprised when my imagination took me to that broad expanse of bluegrass on Fhuzick Delta.

I wondered what Mia was thinking if she was picturing the same thing I was, if it meant as much to her as it did to me. I

was about to ask when a knock came at the door. The servants announced the dinner party had started.

Mia and I didn't move. I kept my hand in hers and she massaged it as I gently stroked the back of hers.

Neither of us wanted to move, wanted to leave the suite, and I for one was perfectly happy right where I was. Another knock came at the door and I let out a sigh.

"All right," I said gently. "We'll be right out."

I looked at Mia in the mirror. She smiled up at me as I took her hand and kissed it.

"I suppose we'd best show our faces," I said.

We left the suite, where an entourage of servants stood waiting, bowing gracefully before leading the way—as if I didn't know the way toward the Summer Ball Room. But I supposed traditions needed to be followed, even if there was really no point for them.

We floated down the hallways, my arm held out, my elbow crooked for her to hold. Her touch was gentle and soft. She might have been raised in the palace herself with how well she held herself.

Finally, we came to the Summer Ball Room. Thankfully, it wouldn't be a wild party like that of the Opening Ceremony that Mia had stumbled into and found herself confronted by a crooked old Ulsen.

I spotted Flara on the other side of the opulent room, Crer on her arm.

Crer on her arm.

They seemed comfortable with each other—*very* comfortable—and unless I knew better, I would have said they were a couple.

They didn't look deep into each other's eyes the way fated mates did, but there was a familiarity between them I couldn't properly account for. Although they had always been friends, they had never been romantically involved... at least, not so far as I knew.

Had that changed at some point during the past few days I'd been away? I wondered.

I automatically affixed the smile I had long since perfected—friendly, aloof, a little distant. The old Royal standby.

Flara broke away from Crer. “There You are!” she said, going up onto her tiptoes to give me a kiss on the cheek.

It was the most affectionate she'd been with me in... well, ever.

She couldn't help but shoot a glance at Mia, who maintained her mask of impassivity.

“Everyone was so worried when you disappeared,” Flara said. “But I knew you would be all right. I know how much you like to go on your little adventures.”

She pointedly didn't look at Mia. Still, it was this refusal to look at her that made it very clear that she was perfectly aware she was there.

“Excuse me,” Mia said, losing patience with Flara already, choosing to head to the refreshment table rather than take one from a passing waiter's tray as that would mean having no excuse to leave.

“I really don't know why you like taking in strays, Rivvac,” Flara said, gulping down her wine like it was the elixir of youth.

“Mia isn't a stray,” I said.

“Sure she is. Look at the way she's dressed.”

“She looks amazing.”

Flara, despite herself, nodded. “But it doesn't suit her. She wears it with disdain, not classy like the rest of us.”

She slipped her hand through my arm. “The Sirens have been as quiet. Some think they have given up their pursuit of you, but do you know what I think?”

“What?” I said, unsure I really wanted to know.

“I think they’ve got something special planned for you. What, I don’t know, but you know how creative they can be.”

Creative was one word for it. Cruel was another.

My stomach churned at the thought. I couldn’t help but check the faces of the other guests and felt relieved when I didn’t see the bright red powdered cheeks or flamboyant feathers the Sirens often wore in their hair.

They would have been invited, I knew. It was a gift that they had decided not to attend.

“I hear you had a lucky break,” Flara said, her eyes shiny and bright.

“Lucky? In what way?”

“A discovery was made on your family’s land, some kind of cache of treasure.”

I was surprised the news had spread so fast, but then again, her father would be the first to be informed. So, she would be the first person he would inform...

Except...

It was company business. Why inform Flara at all?

Unless... he’d been looking for a reason to accept or turn me down in marrying Flara...

Suddenly, it all made sense. He was going to base his decision on what happened this week. Flara was now of mating age herself and it wouldn’t be long before she chose to pair up and marry a Ulsen male.

I couldn’t help but look over at Crer, mixing among the other guests, casting glances over his glass each time he took a sip of his drink.

Flara said, “Daddy says it’s a good start—”

“Wait, what?” I said.

“The discovery. It puts your family in a much better position. Financially, I mean.” She said the latter quietly. After

all, it wouldn't do to have the news spread of the Royal Family's predicament.

I said, "But you said it's a good start?"

Flara nodded and took a big gulp of her wine. She let it slide down her throat while she kept her eyes fixed firmly on me. "It's enough for the dowry but it's not going to last forever when we get married."

"Dowry?" I said. "In five hundred years, no dowry has ever been paid by the Royal Family. The honor was always sufficient."

"That was when the Royal Family's wealth was immeasurable. Now, it's very measurable. Come on, Rivvac, you can't expect me to live like a peasant all my life?"

"A peasant?" I said. "You'll live in a palace!"

She waved a hand. "I already live in a palace. I want to live like a princess."

"You'll *be* a princess. Isn't that enough?"

"A pauper princess?" Flara said with a smile on her lips. "No. I will be a *rich* princess, or I'll be... someone else's princess."

When she said this, her eyes darted minutely—a hair's width so fractional that I thought for a moment I had only imagined it. There was only one direction she had micro-glanced in, and that was toward Crer.

The threat was obvious. She had done it purposefully so it *would* be obvious.

Crer was not a member of the Royal Family—at least, not officially. But there were many families with large corporate interests that could afford to *live* the life of a Royal, although they did so without all the pomp and ceremony attached. It was that officialdom that bothered many of the wealthy and always looked for opportunities to get for themselves, or for their children, a royal title.

"Excuse me," Flara said. "I appear to be out of wine."

She turned and marched with deliberate concentration or else might end up falling flat on her face.

It is good... for a start?

All that risk, all that digging, all that stash...—even the first installment, which was large enough for most families to survive on for the rest of their natural lives—was only enough for a *start* for Flara?

I considered releasing the locations of the other stashes sooner, faster... but it would garner too much attention, and we couldn't afford to do that. I didn't want to bring shame on the family name, not any more than I already had, at least.

It was while I was in deep thought that I caught a servant passing by and snatched a wine glass from the tray he carried. I took a big swig from it. No doubt it was expensive and meant to be savored, but right then, I needed it for the hit.

As it met my stomach and entered my system, I looked up and saw Crer...

And he wasn't alone.

In fact, judging by the angle and direction he'd been glancing at earlier each time he took a sip of his drink, I thought it had almost certainly been this way...

In *Mia's* direction.

He was speaking with her, separate from the other groupings, his back facing the other guests, his shoulders hunched, eyes glaring at Mia, who looked wide-eyed and lost at whatever it was he was telling her.

The muscles bunched in my shoulders, forming tight wads of pain that couldn't have been relaxed if a shuttle had been placed on them.

My shoulders curled in around my chest, which expanded, my head pointing down, my eyes glaring and angry. If I ground my teeth any harder, I wouldn't end up having to chew food with my jaw bones.

I held out my half-empty wine glass for the servant's tray and released it, without even checking if the tray was

underneath it. If it dropped and mashed on the floor, so be it.

The servants were nothing if not professional and caught it before it fell.

I marched—or perhaps *stalked* would have been a better word—over toward the couple chatting amiably between themselves.

I didn't know how I was going to react, how I was going to speak, or even what I was going to do, but I knew I needed to come between them and stop their conversation.

She was *my* mate and *no one* would speak with her if I did not wish it. Crer should have known better than to approach another Ulsen's mate like this...

A red mist filtered across my vision and I could barely control my emotions.

“Ah, Prince Rivvac, I was hoping I would get a moment alone with you—”

It was the voice of a stranger, someone I didn't know particularly well, and certainly not someone I was remotely interested in speaking with right at that moment.

Not when I had more pressing matters on my mind.

“Excuse me,” I said, not taking my eyes off my targets. “I have something I need to take care of—”

“I hear congratulations are in order for your family's recent discovery,” the Ulsen said. “It's not everyday fortunes are discovered on land that has been in a family's possession for so long.”

“Yes,” I said, still not paying attention to him, “I just need to—”

“But you know, there's one thing better than finding riches, and that is by making it happen for yourself every day of the year,” he said. “And with connections like yours, I dare say it would be riches, unlike anything you could ever imagine...”

He knocked the mist from my vision. Although I continued to edge away from him, my body wanting to rumble with Crer,

my brain had disengaged and wanted to know more.

“Every day?” I said.

“Oh, yes,” the stranger said. “I have a business proposition for you, if you’ll spend just a few minutes listening to me.”

I looked the smiling face over and realized he was not a stranger at all but a friend from my earliest school days.

His name was Abrev, and he came from a family that, although successful, could hardly be said to be powerful like the others in the Summer Ball Room.

Then I recalled distantly that they’d had some luck recently in business, discovering talent in their youngest male, who had turned a small business into a huge enterprise that was fast approaching the wealth of the other, older families.

I looked over at Crer and Mia where they had been just a moment ago.

They had disappeared. And when I peered around at the other guests, I saw they were no longer present.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Abrev said.

I wanted to hear about it, but how could I with Mia and Crer having suddenly disappeared?

Together.

I shook my head and thought with my brain instead of the organ between my legs. Mia belonged to *me* this week, we had a *deal*. I knew she wouldn’t break it, not with the risk of losing everything we had agreed.

No, I thought. Everything would be all right.

I turned back to Abrev and his business opportunity.

“What is it?” I asked him in a sharper tone than I expected.

He smiled and didn’t flicker for a moment. He still wore that same oily smile and glanced around us before lowering his voice. He spoke so softly I almost couldn’t hear him:

“How about we go somewhere... less populated, and I’ll explain everything to you.”

As we left the ballroom, I looked back over my shoulder, hoping to see Mia somewhere, but she was nowhere to be seen.

My imagination was working overtime and I felt a churning sensation in the pit of my stomach.

I didn't like it.

I didn't like it at all.

MIA

We returned to our suite sometime after midnight. It had been a nice night... apart from the moment, I returned to Rivvac after Crer had taken me aside to speak in my ear.

Rivvac had hardly said a single word to me and no matter how much I smiled in his direction, how often I took his hand in mine, he turned away, his expression cold and distant.

Had he somehow overheard what Crer had said to me? Or maybe the servant who'd come out to bring us refreshments?

There was no doubt in my mind the worker must have overheard something... and who knows how long he'd been standing there, taking in the information. And if he was loyal to the Royal Family—which I was certain the majority of the servants must be whether they were human or not—there was no way he *wouldn't* pass the information on.

I'd tried reading the servant's expression, but there was nothing I could learn from it. His face might as well have been that of a mannequin. I wondered angrily where they got these people. And how did they teach them not to show any emotions at all?

I considered confronting the servant. After all, we were both human, so surely there would be *some* kind of loyalty between us? But I decided against it.

If I confronted him, it would make him think something really *had* happened between Crer and I, and seeing as nothing

had, I might end up creating rumors where there otherwise wouldn't be any!

The only other person who knew what was said was Crer himself and I didn't think he would be so stupid to report what he'd said to me!

I wanted to tell Rivvac that whatever Crer said didn't matter. I liked spending time with the alien prince, couldn't he see that? But nowhere along the journey back to our suite did I find the courage to confront him.

It wasn't even my fault! I hadn't done anything wrong! But I couldn't muster up sufficient quantities of anger either. If I was going to speak with him, the last thing I wanted was to create a scene in the palace's hallways.

And so, we returned to our suite.

The silence was deafening.

Prince Rivvac began to strip off his things, tossing them in a laundry basket in the wardrobe.

"I'll... take a shower," I said.

He didn't respond, not even with a grunt.

"Okay then," I said, crossing to the bathroom and taking off the dress.

It was difficult to reach the bows on the back but I would be damned if I was going to ask Rivvac for his help! If he wanted to act like a child, then so be it, but I wouldn't encourage him.

Free of the dress, I realized just how heavy it had been and took the necklace and earrings off too, dropping them on a side table.

I didn't want to be reminded of the evening and washed my face clean of the makeup that caked my face. I stepped into the shower and rinsed myself off, the hot water doing a great deal to help ease my muscles that had become tense.

It always felt good to be surrounded by water, to let it wash over you. I supposed it had something to do with being

in the womb, a part of our instinct, always finding it soothing.

I lost myself to it and let my thoughts wander into the ethereal darkness of my unconscious.

Everything had been going fine until Crer came up to me, taking me aside. Instinctively, I didn't want to speak with him, but when I looked over at Rivvac for help, he was speaking with Flara, lost to her, smothered by her affections.

She was the reason I was alone in the first place, as I couldn't face being with her while she spouted her nonsense and looked down on me.

If we'd been alone and my conduct wasn't so important, I would have smacked the bitch upside the face without hesitation. I suspected that was the only way to get through such a dense head as hers.

Instead, I'd made an excuse and gotten out of there.

Few of the other high-class guests were interested in speaking to me. I guess they considered me part of the "help" and not worthy of conversation. I had been debating with myself whether or not to return to join Rivvac and the bitch when Crer had come over.

He was kind and asked if I wanted another drink.

"No thanks," I'd said, raising my wine glass and finding it was already empty.

I looked over at him in shock. I'd been so nervous and uncomfortable in the ball room that I hadn't noticed I'd downed an entire glass without noticing.

"I... should cut down," I told him. If I wasn't even aware of how much I was drinking, I really would end up smacking the bitch upside the face! And that would really improve things—

There was a knock on the bathroom door, interrupting my thoughts. Rivvac said, "Are you all right in there?"

I must have been in the shower for some time for him to come and check on me. The good news: it had broken the

uncomfortable silence between us and better yet, it had been in concern.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “I’m fine. Just... relaxing. Coming out now.”

I stepped from the shower and wrapped the towel about myself. I was about to head out looking like something the cat had dragged in when I thought better of it.

I wrapped a second towel around my head and opened the door. The steam was sucked out into the bedroom.

Rivvac stood towering over the doorway, blocking me from coming out. “Well? What did he say?” he growled.

I ducked under his arm and slipped into the bedroom.

“What did who say?” I said, dodging his question. Already I could feel the tension returning to my shoulders.

Rivvac was having none of it. “Did he touch you?” he asked, his voice strangely soft. But I could sense the fury edging his words.

“Touch me? No.”

“I suppose he just wanted to whisper sweet nothings in your ear then?” he snapped, turning on me with all the fury of a raging bull.

As angry as I was, I wasn’t afraid he would hurt me.

I straightened up and raised my chin. “He didn’t touch me. He was a gentleman. And he didn’t whisper anything in my ear either. Not the kind of things you’re thinking of anyway.”

“Oh?” Rivvac said, bearing down on me. “Tell me, what does a *gentleman* say to the Steyatt mate of another male?”

So that was what this was all about. He was afraid I had shifted allegiance and mated with Crer.

I smiled and shook my head. Rivvac snorted, his nostrils flaring. He even lowered his head the way a rampaging bull might.

“I’m not laughing at you,” I said. “Really. I’m just... surprised you would react this way.”

“We had a deal. You are to be *mine* for Steyatt and in exchange, you get your parents’ farm.”

I bristled at him bringing up our deal so baldly and rubbed at my arms. “The farm, I’ll have you know, is *already* mine. I just need to pay off the remainder of the mortgage.”

His bloodshot eyes faltered. He could see his mistake even through his temper. “Yes. Yes, you’re right. It’s yours. But I need you by my side this week. I’m vulnerable and can’t allow the Sirens to get close to me. With their skills, they can wrap me around their fizar and make me do their bidding.”

“You silly Ulsen,” I said, reaching up to place my hand on his cheek. I was relieved when he let me. “I’m not leaving your side. Especially not to those demons. I will always be here at your side to keep you safe.”

Rivvac shut his eyes and pressed his hand into the palm of mine.

“As for Crer,” I said, clearing my throat, “he took me into the garden and made me an offer.”

Rivvac’s eyes snapped open. “An offer? What offer?”

“After Steyatt, not during it.”

“What offer?” he said, his gaze so intense it made me uncomfortable.

I tugged the towel closer so it wouldn’t unravel. “He said... He said he likes me.”

It took a moment for the comment to process and when it showed on Rivvac’s face, it presented itself as in a series of deep creases on his brow. “Like you? But I thought he liked Flara?”

I sniffed. “Not everyone likes prissy stuck-up bitches with a stick lodged firmly up their ass.”

It couldn’t have come as a surprise that I disliked his betrothed but my words had the effect of a hard slap.

I raised my chin. “He said that ever since he saw me in the garden with you, he felt drawn to me. I told him that as he’d come across us with your hands on me, and *in* me, it wasn’t hard to imagine what he wanted from me. I said I wasn’t interested in being anyone else’s Steyatt mate. Especially him.”

Rivvac wore a half-smile on his lips and said, “How did he take that?”

“Okay,” I said honestly. “He said he can’t stop thinking about me and that he wanted more than physical intimacy. He wanted to be my... fated mate.”

The alien prince blinked in surprise. “Your fated mate? What makes him think you could be his fated mate?”

“He said that your species, the Ulsen, have many tribes and that they have different ways to sense their fated mates. Some, like you, can *feel* the bond between themselves and their fated mate. Others can *see* it, as if it were a physical manifestation of the bond, like light between them. Others, like Crer’s tribe, can *hear* it.”

Rivvac glanced at me and then looked away. From that look alone, I could tell what Crer had told me was true.

I went on. “He said it sounds like a symphony... but softer, gentler, so quiet you had to be careful in case you miss it. He said the song is different from one person to another, somehow mimicking their personality. The song never sounds the same. He told me some of his tribe’s musicians have tried to recreate the music that they hear. It’s beautiful, but they are always dismayed because it’s but a poor manifestation of what they truly hear with their fated mates.”

I looked up into Rivvac’s face. I didn’t want to say this but I didn’t want there to be any secrets between us either. “He said... that when he gets close to me, me can hear that music.”

Rivvac stepped back as if I had dealt him a blow. “He hears the music with you?”

I shrugged. “Apparently. But I don’t feel or hear anything with him. I don’t even know him!”

“That matters little when it comes to the bond.” He looked over me over with a questioning expression, torn. “How are you thinking of responding to him?”

I could have lied to him but I refused. I said, “I’m not sure yet.”

Rivvac nodded. “I see.”

But he didn’t see—at least, not the whole picture. The truth was, I didn’t want to be with Crer. I didn’t care what he heard when he looked at me. My heart already belonged to Rivvac, and I wanted to be with him.

Our trip, the heist, digging holes, making love on every new planet we came to... I had never been so happy in my entire life, and I never wanted it to end.

It made me sad to think we only had two days left together. Then he would no longer have any need for me.

I had to remind myself he was betrothed to Flara. How could I confess my love for him, knowing he would immediately refuse me and embrace his own fated mate?

His *real* fated mate?

Especially when he had gone through all this trouble just to satisfy her lifestyle requirements and those of her father?

I was nothing but a temporary solution to a short-term problem.

Nothing more.

And I would never be anything more to him.

He didn’t need me. But I wasn’t a fool. Maybe Crer really was just saying his “hearing music fated mate” spiel out of some cruel joke concocted between him and Flara. I wouldn’t put it past her. But Crer had seemed honest when he was telling me about it.

“I’m... going to take a shower,” Rivvac said.

I nodded and said, “Okay.”

He disappeared into the bathroom and spent so long in there that this time it was *me* that knocked and asked if everything was all right.

When we climbed into bed that night, we were as naked as the day we were born. I cuddled up close to him. He embraced me in his powerful arms and I felt like I was home. There was nowhere else I would rather be but there.

We made slow, gentle love, and it only drew us closer together, so tight I thought I could never let go. And I wouldn't. But by tomorrow night, it wouldn't be up to me. It would be up to Rivvac whether or not to let me go...

RIVVAC WAS in deep thought as we went downstairs to eat breakfast. Sometimes he laughed, but the smile never touched his eyes.

He was still thinking about what I had told him about Crer last night. I felt sure I'd made the right decision in not telling him how I truly felt about him.

If he wanted to be with me, he could. It was strange, how differently you thought depending on the time of day. Last night, I had worried endlessly about what to say, what to do, and now that the sun had risen, it was as if the light had shone on my mind and made the decision clear.

From the breakfast buffet, I selected my favorite pastries that Chef had made before. I hardly touched them. It was such a waste as they were real works of art with their curled cream whips and melted butter oozing from between the croissants' lips.

We were halfway through our breakfast when a figure I didn't recognize approached and nodded good morning to Rivvac. Then he turned and smiled at me.

"I trust you slept well?" he said.

He was tall even for a Ulsen, but did not possess the same muscular frame and was instead wiry. Still, he was still far

more muscular than any male human back on Earth.

He approached Rivvac and tapped him on the shoulder before whispering something in his ear, to which Rivvac nodded back. The tall Ulsen smiled again, nodded farewell to me, and left.

It was all very strange.

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“Just some business,” Rivvac said cryptically.

“What business?”

Rivvac looked over at me. Initially, it was a semi-cool gaze. Then it melted, becoming warmer. For the first time that morning, his eyes glinted when he smiled at me.

“Abrev introduced a way for me to earn the money I’ll need to support Flara,” he said.

If I thought my revelation that Crer had declared his interest in me would have an effect on Rivvac and make him second guess his decision to be with Flara, it appeared I was to be sorely mistaken.

I cleared my throat. “I thought...”

A servant approached a nearby table. I picked at my food until he left and picked up right where I had left off.

I lowered my voice further. “I thought we already had the funds for that?”

“I now have the funds for Flara’s dowry—”

“Dowry? You still have those here?”

The prince nodded. “If one family demands it, yes.”

I could tell from the sharpness of his tone that it wasn’t something he was altogether excited about paying.

“And now I need to find the funds necessary to fund our lifestyle.”

I was frustrated. Couldn’t he see Flara was no good? That she was a leech? That she just didn’t deserve him?

And that I did deserve him?

I couldn't answer that, but I thought I was definitely a much better match for him than that tart!

Then with terrible certainty I realized that telling Rivvac about Crer's interest in me had produced the exact *opposite* effect I had hoped for...

Because someone else had shown interest in me, he believed *I* didn't share the same feelings that he might have for me... So why bother trying to get closer to me?

Now the aloof distance that he had spoken with me since this morning made sense. He had returned to his single-minded focus on marrying Flara, no matter whether it made sense or would later make him miserable or not...

"Rivvac..." I said softly.

He placed his hand on mine and said softly, "It's all right. You don't have to come with me on this expedition. Abrev will be taking point."

I blinked at his, mistaking the cause of my concern. "Expedition?"

"It's... something that's best if you don't know too much about."

Oh no...

After my introduction to the underworld, it appeared Rivvac had enjoyed getting a great deal in return for very little work. I wondered how much trouble he could find himself in if it all went wrong... and how much of it would be my fault.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's better you don't know—"

"You said that before. But we're already partners in crime, so why not partners in this 'expedition' too?"

He looked me over.

I really wasn't interested in getting more money. With the farm signed over to me and my share of the stash we'd lifted

from old Wyre, I didn't think I would ever have to worry about money ever again.

But I didn't want to let Rivvac have to do the same thing again by himself.

I leaned forward. "Tell me what it is. Maybe I can help in some way."

He considered my suggestion before shaking his head. "You don't need to get involved."

"I decide what I want to get involved in," I said sharply. "You do not decide my fate."

When he again appraised me, he seemed surprised by my outburst, before turning back to his meal. If he didn't tell me, there was no way I could help protect him, and that above all things, was what I desired most.

I placed my hand on his and gently rubbed the hard scales there. "Please. Tell me."

He took a deep breath. "Smuggling. It's smuggling."

I blinked. "Smuggling?"

"One of the other houses has made a fortune importing goods. Nothing illegal. But he has reached the scale of his operations that he can't do it by himself and needs someone higher up to help him grow. As a prince, I have that influence."

This was a whole lot different from stealing money that had already been taken from the poor and needy. In his eyes, I saw an alien species male convinced of what he must do.

"You could get into serious trouble smuggling," I said.

He shrugged. "No more serious than stealing from Wyre."

Except that wasn't true. It wasn't likely that Wyre was going to alert the authorities as he himself had already broken the law in attaining it.

This was wrong.

But before I could voice another word, the male Ulsen from earlier (I guessed his name was Abrev) approached our table and nodded to Rivvac. “Are you ready, my Prince?”

Rivvac looked over at me. Whether or not he could read my fear at what might happen to him, I couldn’t tell, but he dabbed his lips and asked me, “I don’t know. Are we?”

Was I?

Was I ready to break the law—*again*—this time to keep Rivvac safe? Even when it was in his pursuit of marrying Flara and knowing that he would leave me behind once he secured her?

“Yes,” I said, putting down my fork. “Yes, I’m ready.”

THE JOURNEY TO FLORIZZ, Grade 2, was uneventful.

The one thing I enjoyed about the whole trip was the view from the command deck. From this vantage point, space was so dark and the shining pinpricks of stars in the distance so bright and clear that I could make out the thick center of the Milky Way and the spiral arms that wound out to either side, like a flat disk of shining light.

It was amazing to me that such a view was possible in my lifetime.

An even greater surprise was the contact the human race had made with various alien races. Many extended the hand of friendship and exchanged technology that allowed us to begin—slowly—to wind our way out of our tiny solar system and toward the heavens.

But a World War had to happen first before the human race finally came together and worked toward dominating the heavens, or at least our part of it. Such things were impossible if we were not of a single mind and fractured the way he had always been throughout history.

It had been an even greater shock to me that I had found a place I truly felt at home—and that was on my parents' farm, a million light-years from Earth. I couldn't help but smile at the thought that soon, it would belong to me and be back in my hands.

I would hire locals to work the farm as there was no way I could hope to do all the work by myself. With the stash we'd lifted from Wyre, I was certain funding the farm would never be a problem. And if this smuggling operation that Rivvac was so intent on setting up was even *slightly* successful, I would never have to worry about money ever again.

I had forced myself to work with clients who, more often than not, treated me like shit, but knew that without me, they would lose a great deal more than if they didn't.

I was a necessity, just as they were a necessity for me to achieve my dream and finally have my parents' farm back in my possession. But now that it was close... with less than twenty-four hours until Steyatt would end, I felt strangely conflicted.

I saw the farm for what it was—a piece of property on the outskirts of the cosmos. Quiet, out of the way, easily forgotten...

A place to retire and avoid all the stresses of the cosmos behind.

I couldn't help but see the farm for what it really was, what I had been working so hard to achieve...

A way for me to *hide* from the galaxy, to consume myself with the frantic running of a farm so I could be forgotten.

I looked over at Rivvac, who was making calls on his communicator to the various organizations his family looked after, redirecting the empire's defenses so they wouldn't pick up our ship with their sensors. We would pass through, unimpeded, to dock and unload the resources Abrev had arranged for us to pick up.

I never saw what we had on board but Rivvac had been assured it was nothing that would harm the populace.

Looking at Rivvac now, I realized I didn't *want* to be on my own forever.

I wanted Rivvac beside me.

But he was a prince... What interest would he have in running a farm?

None, I was sure. And then there was the little detail of his being betrothed to Flara. That's why he was doing all this, after all, to be with her, and who was I to get in his way?

I felt helpless as our time together whittled down one hour after another... and would soon be in the single digits.

Then I would be released from my contract and he would no longer have any interest in me.

I would become yet another of his subjects, a face in the immense crowd, and drift into the back of his mind, becoming barely even a memory. Eventually, I would become someone he wouldn't recognize if he passed me on the street.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, and for the first time since taking him up on his offer to be his mate, I regretted accepting it.

I would get all my hopes and dreams, the farm I had prized above all other things... but in giving him my body, I had also given him a great deal more than that.

I had given him my heart.

It belonged to him and he would dismiss it, not even noticing what I offered him as his attention was taken entirely with Flara and the future he would have with her.

Rivvac ended his call and joined me at the railing.

"All done?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, letting out a sigh.

"What's the matter? You're not happy that you're going to have all the money you need to give Flara the kind of life she wants?"

He leaned against the railing as if he had no energy to stand beneath his own strength. “It’s not that. It’s just how I’ve gone about it. Tell me a week ago that I would be abusing my position as a prince of the realm and involved with smuggling...” He shook his head. “I never would have believed you.”

“I *couldn’t* have told you that,” I teased. “We didn’t know each other then.”

“No,” he said with a distracted smile. He wrapped his arm around me and kissed me on the top of the head. “At least there’s one thing in this past week I’m pleased about.”

It was a thought that I echoed. I couldn’t imagine my life without him now.

“And you’re going to return to your farm,” he said. “The paperwork has already been prepared and sent to you digitally. I’ve already signed it. From tomorrow, you’ll be able to sign it and everything I promised you will be yours.”

And what about the things that you didn’t promise me? I wanted to ask him. What about your heart?

I smiled and sensed it was as distracted as his. “Good,” I said.

I shut my eyes and felt his strength and warmth behind me, clutching me close. *This* was what I wanted to remember. *This* was my true prize for spending time with him.

I asked him, “During all this, I never asked you how your family ended up losing all its money in the first place.”

“There was an accounting error.”

“Someone stole your money?”

He glanced at something in the distance before turning back to me. “Hm? Oh, no. Not with our funds. With the empire’s funds.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “I thought Flara’s father was the treasurer?”

“He is,” he said with a nod.

I frowned, trying to puzzle together what he was telling me. “You’re saying it’s *his* fault the empire lost all their money?”

“We’d over invested and left a huge black hole that needed paying back.”

“And that’s where your family’s money comes into the picture?”

He nodded.

“Then... it wasn’t your family’s fault.”

“The Emperor appointed Flara’s father as the treasurer, so my father took responsibility for the mistake.”

“Wait. So, Flara’s father expects you to be financially responsible when he himself is the one responsible for making this huge financial error in the first place?”

“Yes.”

I laughed despite myself. “Sorry. I’m not laughing at you or your family. I’m laughing at the whole ridiculous situation.”

Rivvac straightened up as a figure joined us at the railing. He sighed and let it out slowly. “Thank you for removing the obstacles,” Abrev said.

“It’s what I’m here for,” Rivvac said, though he didn’t sound happy about it.

“And I thank you. From here on out, with your help, our smuggling operation will run without any hitches. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to have a Ulsen of your caliber as a business partner.”

“As am I,” Rivvac said, but I knew him well enough now to know he didn’t really mean what he said.

“We’re on time and should be drawing home any time now.”

Rivvac waved him off and turned back to me.

He glanced outside and said, “Just a few hours left. Then the Steyatt will be over. You must be excited to return to your

old life.”

Excited? No. Depressed.

“I... wanted to thank you for choosing me,” I said. “And I wish you all the best for the future.” I couldn’t bring myself to wish him happiness with Flara as even I couldn’t fake that, but I genuinely did wish he would be happy.

“I’ll arrange for a ship to take you wherever you want once this is all over,” he said.

I thanked him.

There was so much to say and I didn’t know how to convey any of it.

Then he looked me deep in the eyes and I felt something, a spark between us. He wet his lips with his tongue and leaned forward and somehow I knew deep in my bones that it was going to be something that changed everything...

“There’s something I need to tell you,” he said. “Through all this—”

Waaarrgh!

Waaarrgh!

The white lights dimmed and red ones replaced them, flashing in time with the alarm that blared as loud as thunder.

I clamped my hands over my ears and yelled, “What’s going on?”

My words were lost to the screaming cries over the alarm system.

Rivvac peered around but there was no one to ask. Then his eyes scanned the heavens outside and the blood drained from his face. Even in the darkness of the flashing red light, I could see the shock on his face.

There was a ship outside. And it was heading directly for us.

Rivvac grabbed me by the arm and dragged me toward a door that led into a small room with twin bunks. The stink of

male living quarters hit me full in the face.

He activated his communicator. Within two minutes, he lowered it, his face as shocked as it had been when the alarm had first gone off.

“What is it?” I bellowed into his ear.

“It’s the Royal Global Defense Force. We’re being boarded.”

“I thought you told them not to come anywhere near us? You were supposed to clear the way?”

“I did. Someone has overridden my orders...” He shook his head. “I’ll worry about that later. First, we need to get out of here. Come on.”

He pulled me out of the room, up the steps, and to a long room with a series of oval doorways cut into the side. I knew escape pods when I saw them. None of the crew had yet abandoned ship but I suspected it was only a matter of time before they did.

“I can’t be found here,” Rivvac said. “We have to get out of here!”

He pulled me into one of the evacuation pods and shut the door behind us. He deactivated the alarm system in our pod. My ears rang noisy and high-pitched with the silence.

“Thank God for that,” I said.

“Don’t thank God yet,” Rivvac said. “We haven’t gotten out of here yet.”

He pressed a series of buttons and a countdown began.

5...

4...

Rivvac tugged me onto a seat and lashed me down with the restraints.

3...

2...

On “1” it launched and we flew from the ship’s underside and flew into space. It wasn’t the high-speed escape I expected but was instead slow and we gradually increased in acceleration as we rushed away from the huge smuggling ship.

“What happens now?” I said.

“Abrev is going to be pissed, that’s for sure,” he said. “I don’t understand what could have happened... but I’m going to have to get in touch with the authorities and get them to stand down and tell them the ship is critical for national security. It’s a mess. An absolute and total mess.”

The pod shuddered and we came to a halt.

“What’s happening now?” I said.

Rivvac rushed to the terminal and flicked switches and pressed buttons... but nothing happened.

“We’re caught in a tractor beam.”

“The same ship we saw earlier?” I asked.

“No. Another one.”

The underside of the ship rose into view. Rivvac peered at it, trying to identify it.

“Do you know who it is?” I asked.

“No. Its identification marks have been removed. I think it’s an old military vessel.”

“Whose military?”

“Ours.”

We entered the ship’s underside. The hatch door thumped shut and we were doused with bright white light.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen next,” the prince said, “but I’ve been trained for such scenarios. I think I’m being kidnapped. No matter what happens, you should remain calm. They don’t want you.”

He ran his finger down my cheek but he couldn’t know how terrified I was.

“Hey,” he said softly. “I’ll never let anything bad happen to you. You know that, right?”

Despite the situation and my terror at what *might* happen next, I reined my panic in, believing him. He would never let anything happen to me. I smiled up at him.

He said, “Whatever happens, we’re going to be okay.”

Which meant *anything* might happen next... and that meant I had to tell him the one thing I had been hesitant to say this whole time...

“Rivvac,” I said. “I love—”

Rivvac bent over double and pressed his hands to either side of his head. He screamed, loud and bellowing, dropping to his knees. His whole body shook.

“What is it?” I said, bending down to embrace him. “What is it?”

His eyes were clenched shut, his teeth grating so hard I was surprised they didn’t split beneath the pressure.

Finally, unable to cope with the noise that he could hear that I couldn’t, his body flopped forward onto his front.

“Rivvac?” I screamed. “Rivvac?”

I tried to turn him over and put him in the recovery position but he was too heavy.

The hatch door opened at the back of the pod and a figure stepped inside, a gnarled old figure with a glare in his eye that I recognized the moment I saw it.

Wyre.

A million questions formed on my lips. Even if I had managed to form one, it would have come out as a scream.

“Evening, girly,” he said. “I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

RIVVAC

My head felt like it'd been cleaved in half with a draggi ax.

I forced myself up onto my knees and felt the world turn on its axis. I refused to lower myself back down as it would only require me to do it all over again. And if there was one absolutely rule among the Ulsen, it was that we *never* backed down.

It was forward or it was death.

Although my head hurt worse than I'd ever known, I maintained my position and distracted myself by thinking back over what had happened right before I'd gotten knocked unconscious.

Mia. She was screaming... No, not in pain, at least not physical pain, but terror. She was dragged away by... who? I wasn't sure. A figure curled and hunched over. Then my memory cut out like I'd fallen asleep.

And I woke up here.

Okay, go back, further.

What had made me feel sick to my stomach before I passed unconscious? What had threatened to spill my contents over the pod's floor?

Pod.

Escape pod.

That was right, I thought, pushing back the thick misty shroud clouding my memories. We'd been in an escape pod careening through space until...

Until...

The tractor beam.

And we'd been abducted.

"Rest, Prince Rivvac," a deep, sultry voice said from behind me. "There's no need for you to push yourself any harder than you already have. It's over. There's nowhere you need to go, nothing you need to do. Rest."

I felt a small feminine hand on my lower back, flesh against flesh, and it was only then that I realized I was naked, stripped bare.

I would have whipped around but my head was still swimming. I knew I would only succeed in making the room curl more.

"You're safely back in the palace."

The palace.

My father's palace.

But before that we'd been on a ship...

The Empress.

The Sirens' ship.

I *knew* I recognized the ship from somewhere. It was difficult to identify by appearance alone as its exterior was altered as often as the Sirens' faces.

"You'll recover quickly now that you're awake," the sultry voice said, and suddenly this too, I recognized. It belonged to the Siren Scepter. "Until then, I suspect you'll react aggressively, so let me explain why that would be a very unwise thing to do."

"Mia..." I managed to say through numb lips.

"Mia has been removed," the Siren Scepter said.

"Removed?"

“Taken from this place. We’re not in the business of murder.”

No, I thought, but your minions and those you manipulate are.

“Then she’s... she’s still... alive?”

“Yes. At the moment.”

My heart thundered hard in my chest, so hard I thought it would leap out. I hated losing control and being at the mercy of others. It was the worst feeling in the world.

I shuffled to one side, crawling toward the edge of the bed. “I need to... to find her...”

“You won’t find anyone any time soon,” the Siren Scepter said, shoving me to one side, so I fell onto my side. “You have the strength of a newborn criatch. I suggest you not make any sudden movements. Just listen. You are integral to our plans, and we cannot allow another female—a *human* female—to get in the way. You should have known this was going to happen. You could have avoided all of this if you had chosen us during your Steyatt.”

“I didn’t want you.”

“Since when has what the male wanted, been important? Your wants are secondary to what *we* require. There is a far bigger game going on here than you can possibly imagine. We require you to play your part.”

“I don’t want any part of your political games.”

“You don’t get to choose what you are and aren’t part of either.”

I shook my head. None of this mattered. It wasn’t getting me anywhere. “Where’s Mia?”

“Forget her. She’s not important.”

A thought floated up to the surface of my consciousness and popped:

Mia was the most important thing.

Without the mist of regular thought, my mind was crystal clear and unencumbered.

I have to find her... I have to rescue her...

“We’ll tell you where she is,” the Siren Scepter said, “but first you must give yourself to us.”

“Give myself?”

“Marry one of our Sisters, become one with the Sirens. Give yourself and you will know a freedom unlike any you have ever experienced before...”

I shook my head. “No.”

“You have no say in the matter.” She turned her head to one side. “Girls?”

Soft footsteps approached from each corner. There were four Sirens, each with their makeup curled into Floricix, the Goddess of Seduction, their horns burning bright with the pulp of the jamisarr tree. They wore no clothes. They danced hypnotically, luscious bodies curled about me, breasts in my face, asses thrusting...

I turned my head to one side to avoid the worst of their overwhelming scent, each a different form of the Irresistible Flowers from all four corners of the Empire. Even if I could resist one, another would cloy my senses and force me to obey them without reservation.

“No...” I said, feeling my cock grow hard. “No... Please...”

Once they took me, I would become like a zombie, obsessed with them. They could demand me to do whatever they bid.

One pressed her lips to me as another ran her tongue along my dick. The other two shared a nipple each.

Mia, I’m sorry, I thought, shaking my head.

I attempted to force them off me but they caught my weak arms and forced them back down on the bed, slipping a perfectly formed breast in each of my hands.

Their perfume was so strong I could hardly think. Even when the mist of my earlier injury gave way, that powerful scent took its place until I was aware of nothing but them and their incredible bodies, the very meaning of satisfaction.

“Relax,” the Siren Scepter said. “It will soon be over. You’ll know a satisfaction only the Chosen had ever felt. Give yourself to it, give yourself to us.”

“No...” I cried. It might as well have come from a baby for its lack of conviction.

“Give yourself...” one of the females working me over said.

“Become a part of us...” another said.

They switched places, stimulating me all over at the same time. The pleasure was rich, powerful, strong.

I gasped as electricity traveled like a lightning bolt from each of my nipples, stoking my brain and sending flashes of pure ecstasy through my system. The one between my legs took my cock in her mouth, soft, gentle...

Superb.

When I gasped and grunted, the fourth member of the circle caught it and sucked it from my lips, silencing me with a tongue across my lips, reaching inside my mouth and massaging my tongue with hers.

It felt good, *really* good, as only experts trained in the ways of pleasure and ecstasy could deliver.

I felt myself tipping over the edge, already balancing precariously on the edge of a knife as the infinite pull of sexual pleasure yawned open on the other side of the blade.

And for some reason, perhaps because she was my most recent lover, I thought of Mia.

I recalled her lips on mine, how soft they were, how rich and soft, how she felt with her body pressed against me, marveling at the peaceful pleasure we shared every moment we were together.

A wild cacophony of memories flew at me so thick and fast I could barely keep up...

When she would slip back under the bed covers and pressing her smooth mouth against my cool scales. Even then, floating someplace between sleep and wakefulness, I had been aware the whole time, aware of her scent, her feelings and how happy I was. My heart swelled so big it encompassed the two of us in that moment, and always would, forever.

And when we were in the gardens when she would look up at me and smile, the sun rise but a flicker of a flame beside her beauty. I knew that every time I looked at her, I would see that same peace and happiness, a thousand sun rises in a single day, a vacation every time I fell into her eyes and lost myself to her.

Those deep chestnut orbs of endless deep pools in the island of nowhere, and the soft gentle gasp on her lips every time I entered her, pulling the extreme intensity from her with every thrust of my hips, and bucking her own body as she suckled me with the lips between her legs, joining her in her ultimate ecstasy.

The look of her sitting in the co-pilot seat, her head turned to one side, her face away from mine, and the infinite happiness of knowing she was right there beside me, the knowledge that she would be there forever and always... except no, that wasn't right. She would one day be gone from my side, my own selfish short-sighted desires forcing her from me.

And the angry look on her face when she demanded an interview with me, not knowing the whole time she was the one in charge and interviewing *me*, knowing the fates had arranged this meeting in mind all along, relaxed in the knowledge that this was what they had planned all along, and the helplessness of knowing that I had little control over what happened next.

Except that I *always* had a choice, the same was true of these demons taking their turn sucking on me right now. They had made their choices, and there was no way I was going to

let them dictate what I was going to do with my life or who I was going to love...

I felt a change come over me then as the mist of my earlier injury gave way to the sunlight of Mia's love and that I had for her. I pushed harder, forcing that warmth deeper into the bloodred mist curtain the Sirens had brought down over my consciousness.

And then I pushed harder...

"Something... Something's wrong!" one of the females said, her voice full of fear.

"He's... He's resisting us!" a second female demon said, outrage tainting her words.

"This is impossible!" the deep Siren Specter said from the foot of the bed.

"It's... it's too much!" the third girl cried. "I... I can't take it...!"

"It's something else... something powerful... I can't... I need to... No!"

The Siren Scepter descended on me, adding her own skills to the mix.

The golden light I had been holding as a halo, forcing back on the Sisters began to fall away, the effect of the Siren Scepter more powerful than the other girls put together.

I felt real fear as she forced me back on that knife's edge. I began to teeter over the side once more... until I realized that I was never going to fall over it.

The blade was a figment of my imagination created by the Sirens. The blade and its edge were me. Just as the darkness spilling over on either side were me too.

I looked up and saw that the strings attached to my arms and legs were being guided by a figure high in the darkness above us. The one who *really* controlled my emotions and feelings... the one I *wanted* to direct my emotions.

I grinned inwardly despite myself as I pictured the warm loving smile of Mia and the soft, simple touch of her hand as we reached out and shook hands, agreeing our deal that was to last for a week.

I let the golden halo of light envelop me, wrap around me tightly like the cocoon around a baby's body, always and forever a part of it. I let it overtake me and it exploded out from me in a single powerful bolt like an explosion at the center of my heart.

“No!” the Siren Scepter cried as the tsunami of love—and that was what it was, I knew—washed over the Sirens and washed their red misty madness aside like tiny puddles.

My eyes bolted open, and I found myself as I had before, laying stark naked on a bed with four gorgeous female bodies on each side. Only now they were trapped in some sleeping state, writhing and touching themselves unconsciously, glowing from the golden halo of love I had forced upon them.

They rubbed their nipples and slipped their fingers inside themselves, hungry to savor what I had shown them, give them a simple taste of what *true love* feel like.

They wanted more, for the first time in their lives suffering from the obsessions that they had forced upon countless males over the years.

Only one managed to peel back the curtain and flutter her eyes open, looking up at me as I zipped up my pants.

“How...?” the Siren Scepter said.

“You really don't know?” I said, beaming down at her.

“How did you... do this?”

“There's only one thing that can defeat powerful seduction and obsession... and that's true love. She is my fated mate.”

The sultry Siren's eyes widened, then her eyes shimmered with tears before she blinked and they peeled down her cheeks.

“Fated mate...” she said with desperate longing in her voice.

I sensed she had either experienced the emotion before or had always secretly been desperate to feel it. Her life had been pledged to nothing but a sham, a grim caricature of what *real* love felt like—that obsession and sex could only ever be a poor second-rate cousin.

“Where is she?” I said softly. “Mia. Where is she?”

She told me amidst a flurry of “Sorrays” and apologies. I knew she would never be the same ever again.

Franky, neither would I.

MIA

I'd expected I could overpower old Wyre but within his wiry frame, he concealed a stronger physique than I imagined.

He handled me like a babe and was quick to tie my hands behind my back and my ankles together to ensure my chances of escape were essentially zero.

When he hustled me into the back of his shuttle, he dumped me unceremoniously on the dirty floor more rust than metal. It stabbed the soft flesh of my hands and bit into my bare ankles. He hopped into the pilot's chair and prepped for dust off. He didn't bother to look back to check I hadn't managed to shuffle out of the hatch.

I turned toward the hatch door. It was already slipping shut. I looked through it to the larger ship that had incapacitated our escape pod.

I doubted there was much of a reward open for me as we'd stolen whatever Wyre might have used for such purposes.

It begged the question: just what had he offered to those in charge of the large ship with the tractor beam that had waylaid us?

And who were "they" anyway?

I spotted a figure standing at the blast door leading into the larger ship's loading docks. Although I wasn't intimately knowledgeable of them or the Ulsen culture in general, I thought I recognized which group the figure belonged to. I

knew how dangerous they were based on the sporadic information Rivvac had shared with me about them.

They were the reason we were together, after all, why Rivvac had been willing to give me almost anything I asked in his suite just one week earlier at the beginning of his Steyatt. I also recalled just how pleased I was that I could finally get my own back on the “elite” class...

And now I saw the same Siren staring back at me through the hatch’s window, her expression calm and serene, distant, paying as much attention to me being taken away as she would if the garbage men had come to take out the trash...

And perhaps that was a fitting metaphor as she had appraised me with the same look of disgust when I’d taken Rivvac from her and her precious “Sirens,” along with whatever opportunity it was they thought they could use him for.

But she was revealing more about my importance to her plans than she likely wished.

Because she was paying attention to my withdrawal. She had torn herself from whatever important things she had on her plate just to watch me being taken away.

It seemed my original feelings of getting revenge on them were founded. If I was worth taking up this much of her time, I must have been a successful fly in her ointment.

Until now, at least.

And now I was zipping through space at the speed of sound—or was that light? (science had never been my strongest subject)—toward some unknown location.

I felt the tears stinging my eyes before they had even really begun to form. They ran down my cheeks in twin tracks of disappointment.

I knew our time had been coming to an end but I could still hope there was a chance we might see each other one more time...

And now that was never going to be.

I didn't weep for the loss of never seeing my parents' farm again, didn't weep for finally getting the time off I so desperately needed...

Instead, I wept for him.

And the likelihood of never seeing him again.

WYRE WAS KNOWN AS AN ARGOPORC—A kind of lizard creature with extended finger-like claws and a long tail—although Wyre's appeared to have been cut off or removed at some point leaving an ugly stub—likely as punishment for his earlier exploits leading to him being expelled from his own culture.

He mumbled words heavy on the “s” every few seconds. I couldn't tell if he was hissing or laughing privately at a joke he made. Either way, the sound never failed to travel the length of my spine, all the way down to the soles of my feet.

When he finally brought his shuttle down, it was to land as softly as anything Rivvac had been capable of.

Rivvac.

I wondered what state he was in, especially now that the Sirens had their claws buried deeply in him... and I wondered even harder at just what diabolical plans they had in store for him now.

There were still a few hours before the Steyatt passed, so they could still use him for their own purposes.

The thought of them with their disgusting (to me) faces with their bizarre makeup arrangements seducing him, pressing their lips to him and his body, taking him in their mouths and worse yet, sliding him inside their hideously voluptuous bodies... writhing and tossing their heads back and screaming in ecstasy, their stinky perfume stuffing his nose and forcing his senses to succumb to their own desires and infecting his mind so they could use him for their own purposes...

I felt sick to my stomach. Even when I tried to console myself with the fact that he wouldn't have been in control of himself, that he would become nothing more than a puppet for their own sadistic sexual pleasure and wouldn't be acting of his own volition... I felt sick.

The sight of his naked form, always so exciting to me, now broke me out in hives. To think he would be sharing his incredible body with them...

Wyre stepped from the cockpit's console and braced a railing that ran the length of the shuttle. He used the leverage to force a deep (and disgusting) series of cracks that erupted up the entire length of his spine.

He shook his head and stamped his scaly feet toward me. He bent down and picked me up, hurling me over his shoulder like a bag of spuds and carried me down the hatch steps.

"What... What are you going to do with me?" I cried.

He didn't respond and simply shut the hatch door behind himself.

Wherever we were, it was now the dead of night. Lumps of something I couldn't identify emerged from the darkness but only remained shadowy forms. Only when Wyre threw open a door, emitting a flash of light, were the lumps illuminated. It allowed me to see them for what they were. And I realized with dawning horror where we were:

We were back in old Wyre's shack.

The floor tiles had been put back in place. Without the added padding of the sacks of money and items underfoot, the wood creaked loudly as Wyre moved over it.

He threw one shoulder forward. He caught me in his surprisingly powerful arms and placed me on the floor.

His thick tongue sipped from between his lips and came within inches of my face. I noticed one of the forks was missing. I hastily flinched away from it.

He considered me for a moment before turning away and fixing something to eat in his kitchen.

“W-What do you w-want with me?” I asked.

“You? Nothing.”

“Then what do you want?”

He slammed his fist on the kitchen counter. “I want what is mine.”

“The money? But it’s not yours!”

“You ought to learn to not take things that don’t belong to you!” Wyre hissed.

I would have burst out into laughter at the ridiculousness of his statement if it wasn’t for the fact he held me tied up as a captive.

Who knew what a merciless creature like him was capable of when he saw red. I already knew he was capable of kidnapping me. What other horrors was he capable of?

Anything, a terrified voice said from deep within me.

I really had no idea. But I had seen the kind of psychological trauma he was capable of inflicting on the innocent. It wasn’t too hard to imagine the physical harm he might also be able to inflict too if left to his own devices. And who was going to stop him from doing what he wanted right here in his own home?

In his eyes I saw the red glint of madness that had not been present when he came to the poor old woman’s house all those years ago.

Then, he’d been all smiles and warm touches of affection and understanding.

As I had been nothing but a lowly human servant, he hadn’t bothered to maintain his persona when the old lady was out of ear and eyeshot. I had seen the truth of what he truly was in those quiet moments in the house’s entrance hallway, or when the old woman had turned to focus on something else, or reached for her bag to send him another payment, his long forked tongue licking his broad wide lips and sharp teeth in excited expectation like a shark.

Not once had he noticed me. Perhaps that's why he didn't recognize me now.

"What would you know what is mine and what is not?" he snapped at me. "What is under my home is *mine!*"

"What about the contents of the bank accounts of those you scammed?" I said, glaring back at him. "That was never yours."

Wyre squinted at me, his liquid yellow eyes curling, as if trying to place me.

He tossed a butcher's knife to one side and marched toward me. I shuffled back, fearing I'd gone too far in stoking his anger.

He dropped at the last minute, making disgusting snake-like slithering movements along the floor as he drew up to me.

"Have we met before, child?" he hissed, his tongue making indecent slurping movements across his lips. "I have seen many over the years but I cannot place you among them. And a delicious little thing like you... I should be able to remember..."

He ran his claw over my face, drawing my hair away from my face.

"No!" I screamed, pulling back from his touch. "I don't know you! We've never met!"

He'd always seemed old and decrepit and I had assumed he wouldn't have any sexual interest in a human like me... But I had felt his strength and there was no reason to suggest he couldn't mate with me if he wanted.

My entire body quivered at the thought.

He chuckled. "Fear not, little one. You are not my type. I do not pleasure myself with the help."

He paused a moment, his attention shifting to one side as his mind accessed his memories. A thick-lipped smile curled his mouth.

“Ah, yes. The help. Now I remember. The *assistant*.” He fell back on his haunches and used the stub of his tail to hold himself up in a sitting position. “And what would a morsel like you want with my riches?”

He remembered me. I couldn’t believe it. Not only was he stronger than he looked but he was sharper too. Perhaps that was how he had been so successful all those years. He had a knack of making others underestimate him.

I shrugged. “I knew it was here... so I took it.”

He scratched his chin. “But that isn’t the whole of it, is it? That was some years ago and you could have taken my treasure at any time. So why now?”

He gazed into some imagined distance and shrugged his green-scaled shoulders. “It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that you are here now and you will help me get it back.”

“I don’t know where it is,” I pleaded. “It was stolen from me.”

“Amusing,” Wyre sniggered. “I hope that isn’t the case or it may turn out to be the greatest misfortune you’ve ever experienced.”

“W-What are you going t-to do with me?”

Wyre returned to the kitchen and picked up the butcher’s knife he’d tossed aside. He wasn’t preparing something to eat after all, I realized, and instead took out a whetstone and began sharpening the blade’s edge.

“Because your business partner—I do not believe you could have done this alone—will have one chance to give me every part I lost in exchange for every part of you.”

I gulped. “And if he can’t give it all back to you?”

Wyre raised the butcher’s knife and hissed triumphantly. “Then you must decide which part of your nubile young body you no longer wish to keep. A piece for a piece.”

RIVVAC

I stumbled out of the room where the Sirens had held me hostage and leaned against the wall. I couldn't believe they had brought me to my parent's home and were doing what they had to me.

Didn't my parents know what was happening? Why hadn't they come to my aid? And why would they leave me to my fate with those female demons?

The answer was as obvious as it was unsurprising:

My *mother* used to be one of those creatures. And when I say she *used to be* one of them, it only meant she wasn't one *right now*. It was said that no Siren ever truly stopped being a Sister. When the call came, they all responded, their allegiance belonging to their Sisters before even their own blood.

I leaned against the wall and shook my head of the powerful emotions that had coursed through me, as if I had been channeling the universe itself.

It had been love, I knew, pure and untempered love. The kind of truth few of the Ulsen ever experienced. Now I knew what it truly meant to be a fated mate.

I could see it so clearly it formed into a single person.

Mia.

And she was in danger, having been kidnapped by Wyre in the hopes of getting his stolen treasure back.

I didn't know just how deeply the Sirens' tendrils had been buried into his heart and soul but I could depend on it being deep enough.

Although with someone like Wyre, it was always tough to break through the thick skull of greed that creatures of his ilk had always sported over the years.

I shoved myself off the wall, stumbled, gathered my strength, and then turned and headed down the hallway that I thought—even with my senses off-kilter—was the way toward the garage.

“There you are!” Flara said, grasping my hand and tugging me to a stop. “We have to go to my father so you can ask him for permission to marry me!”

“Marry you?” I said, perplexed.

“Of course. Now that you have plenty of money coming in—and will have even more coming now that the smuggling route has opened up, there's no reason we can't be together!”

I frowned, trying to think through the fog. “You know about the smuggling?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I do! Who do you think suggested for Abrev to offer you the deal in the first place?”

“You?”

“Of course me! I saw how hard you were working to earn money and figured you needed a little help. So, I dispatched him to you!”

“You don't have any problem with me smuggling goods into the Empire?”

She shrugged her slender shoulders. “Why would I? So long as it means you're rich and we can be together, that's all that matters, isn't it? Now come on! We need to hurry—”

“Woah, woah,” I said, holding up a hand. “I tried to make as much money as I could, even though it wasn't always the... best method.”

“Who cares?” Flara said. “You’re going to be rich!” She wove her arm through mine. “And that means we can be together!”

I pulled her off me. She didn’t have crazy makeup or wear feathers in her hair but she was every bit a Siren as those I had just defeated in the suite.

“No matter how much I earn, it’s never going to be enough for you is it?” I said.

Flara twirled her hair around her finger. “A girl should never settle, Rivvac. Don’t you know that by now? If you want me, you’re going to have to work for me.”

And there it was.

I might have offered Mia a deal—one she had accepted to become my mating partner for the week, but that was in exchange for a farm—a farm, really, that she already owned.

She didn’t ask for monthly payments, ongoing into the future without end, didn’t ask for anything... except the thing that would bring her the most happiness in all the galaxy.

She didn’t need a dowry to marry, didn’t need a fortune and jewels. She just needed a home.

And me.

She needed me.

Just as I needed her.

Flara’s expression brightened as if she had just thought of something and reached over to take me by the hand.

“Come on,” she said. “Your Steyatt is almost over. If we hurry, I can settle your cravings one last time in case you’re afraid of losing control. We wouldn’t want that to happen at our wedding now, would we?”

She moved forward to lead me away but I remained standing where I was. “Marry?”

“Yes, silly,” she said. “That’s what all this has been about, hasn’t it? Earning money, so you’re rich enough to have me? Well,” she said, drawing up close to me and running a finger

along my jawline, “you’ve well and truly earned me. Come with me, and I’ll show you what you’ve been dreaming of for the past thirty years...”

She yanked on my hand once more but I again didn’t budge an inch.

She ran her eyes over me, sensing something amiss. The fact that even she could sense it meant it must have been pretty clear on my face.

“No,” I said.

She blinked rapidly as if I had spat in her face. “No?”

“No,” I said, grinning like a fool. “No!”

I burst out laughing, and Flara released my hand and took a step back. “You’ve lost your mind!” she said.

“Maybe. But not before I lost my heart. All this time, I’ve been trying to earn the money to be rich enough for you, and the whole time, I should have been asking if *you* were rich enough for me.”

Flara raised her chin into the air and sniffed. “I’m from one of the wealthiest families in the empire—”

“Not that kind of rich, you dolt! Don’t you even know that there are riches *beyond* money and jewels and palaces?”

She looked at me like I was insane.

“The real riches are in here,” I said, pressing my hand to my chest. “In how we think and feel... and love.”

“Love? But you love *me*. Don’t you?” She searched my eyes but she would never find what she wanted to see there.

“I thought I did,” I admitted. “I’ve been dreaming of being with you my entire life. You always held me back, making me believe I was never good enough for you. But there was one person who accepted me for who I am, for what I am, and no, not as a prince.”

Flara just looked at me, her expression lost. “But... we’re fated mates.”

I snorted and kept myself from chuckling at the thought that Flara could ever be anything other than a momentary distraction. Despite the years I had spent pursuing her, it really was a momentary blip in time compared to the infinite scale of love and destiny I felt for Mia. And now that I thought about it, I always had.

I shook my head and placed my hand on her shoulder. A touch that in the past would have garnered a distinct shiver of pleasure throughout my scales but now produced nothing.

“Flara,” I said, “what we had was not what fated mates feel. It is a pinprick in the vastness of the oceans of love and longing. You will always occupy a corner of my heart as a close and valued friend... but I realize now that you will never be anything more than that.”

I pulled my hand away and Flara’s hand lashed out, snapping around my arm. “Don’t go!” For the first time in my entire life of knowing her, I saw just how desperate she was to maintain whatever emotions I once had for her. “We can go to your suite now! Right now! I’ll give you everything you’ve ever wanted, everything you’ve ever desired. Please. Just love me.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I cannot. I love another, and she needs me. I wish you happiness with whomever you choose to be with in the future, but it will not be me.”

I turned and marched down the hall, leaving her in my wake. I didn’t look back. I would do her the honor of not giving her hope that I might change my mind.

I was, and always would be, lost to her.

I had spoken with no anger, no hostility. It was not her fault how I now felt, how she had never declared her love for me the same way I had for her.

But now it was over.

I had a fuzzy golden light of love shining brightly in my heart illuminating the shadows and dark recesses, knowing that nothing in those shadows could ever harm me so long as I had Mia beside me.

I strode with stronger strides and wouldn't stop until I found my Mia. And I would have no mercy for any creature that came between her, my fated mate, and I.

I CONSIDERED TAKING the same nondescript ship Mia had suggested before and decided against it. For one, it was slower than the souped-up powerhouses that the newer models could boast, and the faster I could get to Mia, the better.

Second, there was no reason for me to conceal the fact I was a Royal any longer. I didn't need to hide the fact I carried the Royal Family's seal and power with me. Anyone who challenged me would not only be facing me but the full honor and power of the throne itself.

Wyre would know what he was dealing with when I met him, and would have to accept responsibility for the fall-out that ensued.

What deal he had worked out with the Sirens, I didn't know, but whatever advantage I could put on my side, I wouldn't hesitate to use.

I descended into the atmosphere at breakneck speed, far faster than anything the old hunk of junk I had used to get here could ever have handled.

The shuttle screamed as I descended, its outer hull rapidly heating up and then cooling down a moment later. I knew what the ship was capable of and intended on pushing it to its absolute limit.

I came to the thick copse of trees fast and blasted past them. I wouldn't creep into old Wyre's home this time.

I brought the ship down onto his broad flat outer yard. I scanned the shack and saw the figures inside in the thermal imaging displays.

The large, dark-skinned lizard stood at the window, peering out at me. All my attention was on the smaller figure

curled up on the floor, her heat signature hot and glowing almost bright red on the monitor.

I growled and slapped my hand on the hatch door release valve. The door hissed and opened. I ducked down to get outside as fast as I could.

I had no plan, no idea of how I should approach the shack, and I didn't need one. With the way I was feeling, nothing could stop me.

I marched toward the front door and slammed my fist against it. "Open up! Now!"

MIA

Wyre peered through the window at the ship as it came down to land. He tossed the butcher's knife up in the air, spinning around, and caught it before it moved more than an inch from his palm. He handled it like he really knew how to use it.

For the first time since I heard the shuttle approach, I began to hope. Judging by Wyre's reaction to seeing whatever ship was outside had clearly put him on high alert. It wasn't an ally but an enemy.

Maybe even—dare I even think it—Rivvac?

And when he pounded his fist on the door and yelled at the top of his voice to open up, I couldn't help but whimper with glee.

It was him! I'd never been so overwhelmed with relief my entire life.

“Rivvac!” I cried.

The lizard snapped around to glare at me, licking his lips as if he wanted to say something... then hesitated.

“Has he hurt you?” Rivvac bellowed on the other side of the door.

“No. But he's armed! He's got a knife and—”

Wyre hissed as he slithered toward me, his bright yellow eyes shining bright. He hauled me up onto my feet, his claw wrapped tightly around my mouth.

I couldn't speak, fearing that if I made another sound he wouldn't have hesitated to bring his blade across my throat.

He turned me toward the door and placed the knife's razor-sharp edge to my throat. And waited.

RIVVAC

“Mia?” I bellowed at the sudden silencing of her sweet voice. “Mia?”

It was no use shouting through the door. I could no more ascertain what was happening behind it than I could peer through it.

“I’m coming in!” I announced.

I stepped back, planted my back foot, and snapped at the door. It shuddered hard, the wood splintering beneath the first blow. The door buckled around the latch. Seeing it, I aimed my next strike at it square. It flew open, the hinges giving way along with it, and sailed through the air.

I was prepared for an immediate attack the moment the door was off its hinges. I would be at my most vulnerable at that moment... but none came.

I peered through the doorway but made out only the damp confines. I edged around, using what little view the doorway provided.

I cared nothing for my own safety but knew that if I were to lose my life, it wouldn’t only be mine that was forfeit.

“Don’t hurt Mia,” I said, edging closer to the door. “She’s done nothing wrong. Your problem is with me, not her.”

I’d exhausted the angles the doorway offered and decided to step into it. My eyes automatically adjusted to the darkness. My breath hitched in my throat at the sight of Wyre with Mia

in his arms, his blade pressed to her throat. A single pearl of blood peeled down her neck.

I couldn't look at her. I didn't want that expression of sheer terror to be the last thing I would remember of her.

I focused on the creature holding her in place, his liquid yellow slitted eyes unblinking, full of rage and yes, more than a little fear.

"Weapons," he hissed. "Down. Now."

"I don't have any weapons."

He looked me over. "Turn around."

I did as he asked, holding my arms out to either side, and turned slowly on the spot. My senses were on high alert, muscles so tense they were ready to fly and lash out in case he attacked me from behind.

But no attack came.

When I came full circle, I was rewarded with Wyre loosening his hold on Mia and lowering her feet back down to the ground. His blade remained pressed at her throat.

"You came here in a Royal shuttle," he hissed. "You stole it?"

"I am Prince Rivvac," I told him.

Wyre snorted. "And what would a prince be interested in this female human for?"

"She's my Steyatt mate," I said evenly. "If you release her now to me, unharmed, I will let you go. No harm, no danger, left in peace."

"Peace?" Wyre snorted. "She *stole* from me!" he snarled. "No one steals from me!" His grip tightened on Mia's throat once more.

Mia's eyes shimmered with tears of terror that then rolled down her cheeks. She gulped and the blade was so sharp that it made another small incision on her neck.

“She has nothing to do with this!” I growled. “I stole your money. I did it alone. Just me.”

“A prince stealing? Why? You have all the riches you could ever need for a lifetime. Hell, for a thousand lifetimes.”

I considered telling him the truth, that the Royal Family’s wealth was no longer what it once was, but I didn’t think he would believe me.

“Sometimes it’s nice to have a little extra on the side that no one knows about, don’t you think?” I said.

He licked his lips. I thought he believed me.

“I just opened up a little smuggling sideline operation,” I said. “If you give her to me, I can cut you in.”

He pursed his lips, considering.

“Or tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you, no questions asked,” I said. “Just let Mia go. You know I can grant you anything you want.”

“Anything?” he said, his eyes glinting bright.

I nodded. “Anything that is in my power to give.”

He thought for a moment before a sinister grin bent his lips upward. “Pick up that blade.” He nodded toward the kitchen table where a smaller, narrower blade glinted off the moonlight.

“Why?” I asked.

His slitted eyes gleamed. “I’ll tell you. Pick it up.”

I did as he asked.

“Come back over here,” he commanded.

I didn’t like where this was going but I did as he asked.

“Put it to your throat,” Wyre said.

Mia stiffened. She struggled as much as she was capable of without accidentally slitting her own throat.

I shook my head at Mia and she quietened down. I raised the cold bite of the metal’s edge to my neck.

“Now slice it open,” Wyre said.

Mia whimpered, causing another droplet to stain her skin.

“*Now,*” he commanded.

“I’m worth more alive,” I told him. “You can hold me hostage and ask for any reward you wish. I’ll go willingly.”

“And risk you escaping and slitting my throat open? I think not. I’ll tell them a nice little story about how space pirates took you hostage. I managed to rescue you... but not quite in time. I’ll be hailed a hero and showered with gifts that will make my previous treasure pale in comparison.”

“And Mia?” I asked.

“I’ll release her. But only once your body is drained of its life force.”

I couldn’t trust him, not with his history and the blade at Mia’s throat. I had to do something.

“Very well,” I said.

I pressed the blade to my throat. My blood seeped from the wound and splattered across my throat.

MIA

What did he think he was doing?

Didn't he know that me surviving without him by my side was the same as me dying?

His green blood peeled down his neck in a thick globule mass.

My eyes grew to the size of dishes. I couldn't believe he was decapitating himself just to save me. I struggled but Wyre had a death-like vice grip on my neck.

My eyes were fixed firmly on Rivvac. I didn't want to watch but was unable to look away. I hated that this was the final expression I would ever see on his face.

If Wyre really did keep his word and let me go, I'd end up living a shell of life. Not that he could let me live. I would have countered his false story of being some kind of have-a-go hero.

There was nothing but love in Rivvac's eyes, nothing but intense passion that he'd always fostered toward me.

I whimpered what internally was a shrieking howling cry that I couldn't allow to be birthed or else risk decapitating myself and wasting the sacrifice Rivvac was making, even with the smile on his face.

Huh?

I almost didn't notice it.

But knowing Rivvac intimately the way I did, I couldn't ignore the spark of amusement curling one corner of his lips in a smile that I recognized every time he teased me.

His attention shifted away from me and up to Wyre, glaring at him a stronger intensity than I had ever seen before.

And I knew something was up.

RIVVAC

I pulled the blade across my throat but it didn't slice it open. Instead, I opened my hand that held the blade and let it splatter over my neck.

Wyre's eyes widened with shock that I was doing what he asked. His grip on Mia released and his blade slackened—only for a moment, and only a fraction, but it was enough.

I *hoped* it was enough.

I dragged the blade all the way across and then pulled it back, hurling it at the creature's head.

His sadistic grin of triumph faltered just a moment as the blade entered his eye and sunk itself two inches into his skull. His limbs flew back and out.

I was already rushing forward and caught his powerful death throes to my ribs. I was there to block his arms. His blade nicked my shoulder but I didn't even blink.

My focus was on knocking Mia aside so she fell harmlessly to the floor.

While I fell on Wyre.

His legs kicked and flailed and his arms swung, his blade making sharp hissing noises as loud as that issuing from his throat.

I pinned his limbs down with my own and was surprised at the strength of his blows, pummeling me from below. I hissed

through my teeth but refused to be moved—not when Mia was so close.

It might cost my life, but it would be worth it.

MIA

I fell hard on my knees and was kicked hard in the ass by Wyre's powerful legs. I sailed forward, my face sliding across the hard wooden floor, the splinters snapping off and burying themselves in the soft flesh of my cheeks.

I rolled to one side, instinctively putting myself out of range of any further attacks.

I hastily got to my feet and turned to look at Rivvac perched on the creature's limbs, grunting at the struggle of holding him down and pinning him in place. Sweat dripped down his face after just a few moments, dousing Wyre's dirty vest.

One vicious blow landed on Rivvac's unprotected body after another, each one enough to put me permanently in the hospital. Rivvac grunted but absorbed them.

The life slowly left Wyre's body, but Rivvac didn't release him until long after Wyre had made his final death struggle.

"Blade," Rivvac grunted. "Hand me... the blade."

I didn't know which blade he was referring to and I doubted it mattered very much. I reached for the one Rivvac had forced Wyre to release just a moment earlier.

As soon as it was within his grip, he snatched it from me. He immediately hacked at Wyre's body, not with vicious uncontrolled animal outbursts, but with calculated slices at the dead man's limbs. He severed key tendons and muscles,

preventing him from launching further attacks in case he was only *playing* dead.

Once Rivvac was done, he threw himself back, the blade still clutched in his hand. He stared at the dead creature on the floor, its blood reaching only the nearest floorboards. It slipped between the cracks of the removable floor and filled the hiding space beneath his shack where his fortune should have been.

Rivvac panted, out of breath, and slowly looked over at me.

I scurried over to him before I even knew what I was doing.

He wrapped his powerful arms around me, clutching me close. I couldn't help but weep.

"You came back for me," I cried. "You came back!"

"Of course, I came back." I could hear the smile in his voice.

The tears stung when they reached the nicks at my throat but I took no notice of them. I only clutched Rivvac closer, as if I pulled him any harder into me, I would have consumed him.

RIVVAC

My lips found hers and I tasted the flavor that I had been afraid I would never experience again.

She was sweeter than ever, rich and fragrant and powerful, consuming me as no other perfume had, not from any of the Sirens' magical concoctions—natural or otherwise.

“I love you,” I said between kisses to her luscious lips. “I love you more than anything, my fated mate.”

MIA

They were the words I had dreamed he would say to me, and now that he had said them, I understood completely that words were far too weak to describe the emotions I felt for him. But they were the best we had, so I repeated them back to him over and over again:

“I love you too! I love you, I love you, I love you!”

He got to his feet and was so strong he could pick me up at the same time. He kept his eyes focused on mine as he carried me over the threshold in reverse to what I knew we would soon be experiencing after our own wedding that I knew would be soon to follow.

I ran a finger over the injury he'd sustained to himself at his neck. I saw that he had sliced the soft skin between his scales, almost severing one and dislodging it from his neck completely. Most of the blood had come from that single scale.

It had already stopped bleeding and I doubted it would be long before it had completely healed.

I didn't even notice my own neck but the fact he hadn't mentioned it meant it couldn't have looked too bad.

He carried me onto the shuttle, placed me in the co-pilot seat and took off. He reached over and took my hand as we ascended into the sky, leaving that demonic shack of evil far behind.

“What happened to Flara being your fated mate?” I asked playfully.

“Flara?” he said. “Who’s that?”

I smiled and he added:

“I was mistaken with her. Very mistaken. I realize that now.”

“How do you know you’re not mistaken now?”

He grinned at me. “Because I finally know what love is and you taught it to me. If there’s a force greater than what I feel right now it would destroy me.”

He kissed my fingers.

“You fill me with so much love that it makes me glow like a newborn sun. So close to death that it’s right next door. You are my fated mate and always will be. And that changes everything.”

In that, we were in agreement and no contract was necessary.

I HOPE you enjoyed the ALIEN RECRUITMENT AGENCY SERIES. If you are, why not check out the complete series [FATED MATES OF THE SEED.](#)

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ALIEN PRINCE'S MATE | SNEAK PEEK

EZAL

The females filtered into the room and formed a long line.

They were dressed in short, revealing silk garments that left little to the imagination.

And that was the point.

They were here to be Claimed by a mate.

Females from every corner of the galaxy, here to be seeded by a virile male.

And few were as virile as me.

I ran my eye over them one by one.

They came in every color imaginable.

Blue, red, green, pink, white, brown... and some shimmered with colors that shifted when they moved.

They also came in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Big, short, slim, athletic...

Anything any male could ever want or desire...

I moved on to the next female... and the next... and the next.

So many options...

Except for what *I* wanted.

None met my requirements, so I turned to leave...

And that's when something caught my eye.

She was tall — for a human — with plain brown hair that reached her shoulder blades, and stood with her wide hips cocked to one side, a confrontational look in her eye.

Was she looking directly at me?

The insolence...

My eyes narrowed and I ran my forked tongue over my fangs.

I felt myself stir beneath my robes and immediately tamped it down.

She was not the first human I had seen.

Since they began having the same fertility problems as other alien civilizations, I had seen more and more of them.

Not the first... and yet, there was something about her...

Something that drew the eye...

I couldn't put my claw on it.

But she was the one, I knew.

She would be my mate.

But was she *the* one, my fated mate?

She would have to prove herself to me.

The next seven days would be her test.

I would push her to the limit, take her places no other male had even attempted to visit.

I licked my fangs once more.

I was going to enjoy this.

ROXY

T *HREE DAYS EARLIER*

Holly just gaped at me, her mouth hanging open in a cartoon expression of someone who'd just learned two plus two *didn't* equal four.

I waited for her to say something, but nothing came.

I decided to hasten her response.

“So, what do you think?” I repeated.

The shocked expression remained in place for another few seconds before her eyelids began to move and she managed to form words.

“The Alien Impregnation Program?”

I admit, they could have chosen a better name for it than that.

Nothing filled you with more dread than the thought of being *impregnated* by an *alien*.

But that was what it was, wasn't it?

“How else am I going to have a baby?” I said.

Holly was still perplexed by my suggestion, as if I'd spoken in a foreign language.

“But... they're aliens!”

“I know,” I said. “That's not even the best part of it. Some of these aliens are *gorgeous!*”

Holly, still unconvinced, shook her head.

“I can’t believe we’re talking about this. Haven’t you seen the news? Some of them have diseases...”

I waved a hand, dismissing her concerns.

“They run checks on the males to make sure they’re clean. They do the same with the females too.”

Holly screwed up her face.

“Males? Females? Since when did you learn the lingo?”

“Since I got this in the mail,” I said, taking the brochure from my bag.

I spread it open so she could see the center pages.

Across the top in a bold font was the heading:

CLAIM. MATE. LOVE.

And beneath it, the company’s name:

The Odi Fertilization Company — Seeding Your Galaxy.

“How can you know they’ll treat you well?” Holly said.

“I’m hoping they won’t,” I said with a wink.

“But... they’re *aliens!*”

“You said that already,” I said flatly.

I turned the brochure around so I could describe the whole process.

“They have the whole thing sorted out,” I said. “They’ve impregnated thousands of women already and they give birth without any problems. They know what they’re doing.”

“I’ve read about a lot of problems...”

“That’s because you’re reading the wrong news.”

“News *is* news!”

I shook my head.

Despite all that’d happened to people over the years, it still amazed me that some people could be so short-sighted.

“Your news is biased.”

“It is *not!*”

“It *is*. Look at who runs ads on your favorite news networks. It’s the artificial insemination companies.”

“So?”

“So, they fund the news, so the news people aren’t going to share information that doesn’t reflect well on their advertisers, are they?”

Holly pouted.

“They wouldn’t do that.”

“For money?” I said. “Sure. Everyone’s *always* innocent when it comes to money and power...”

The sarcasm dripped from my lips.

Holly knew I was right, I was sure, she just didn’t want to *admit* I was right.

“You know, having a baby is good and all—”

“It’s the *best!*” I informed her.

I’d wanted a baby my entire life and was angry when I learned I wasn’t able to have one.

It didn’t seem fair that I had to live with the mistakes of my ancestors.

They lived unhealthy lifestyles that reduced their fertility, not me.

So why should I have to suffer for it?

The only commiseration was that I wasn’t the only one with this issue.

Everyone suffered from the same affliction.

“Having a baby isn’t everything,” Holly said.

I frowned at her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, having a baby is only *half* the battle. The rest depends on the relationship you have with your partner.”

I rolled my eyes.

“The Acceptance Philosophy principles again,” I said. “Really?”

“You might scoff—”

“Often.”

“But they work for me.”

Ever since women lost the ability to get pregnant and have babies, a new school of philosophy developed that helped women accept the affliction.

‘Accepting’ wasn’t my strong suit.

I naturally liked to fight, to irritate, to annoy.

“You need to feel more grateful for what you have,” Holly said. “Your health... Your job... Your home... It’s the partner you’re with, the emotional support you give each other, that’s the most important thing.”

I leaned forward and glanced at the other nearby tables.

I didn’t want anyone to overhear what I had to say.

“Don’t you have that feeling, deep inside?” I asked.

“What feeling?” Holly said.

I checked over my shoulders again.

“That feeling that there’s something missing. That we were *meant* to have children. That our bodies are supposed to birth children? And if we can’t do what we were meant to do... then what is the point?”

Holly just stared at me.

Her eyes shifted subtly to one side and then back again.

She *did* have that feeling, I realized.

It was probably why she devoted herself to that nonsense philosophy.

Over my shoulder, I heard an unfamiliar gurgling sound.

I thought someone might be choking but was thrilled to see a baby bouncing happily on his mother's lap.

"Look at that," I said. "Don't you want that?"

Holly stared at the mother with her baby, just as the rest of the coffee shop was doing, secretly, quietly.

The atmosphere was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

The baby was half-alien, gurgling happily with bubbles popping on its lips.

When the sunlight caught its skin, there was a distinctive blue tint to it.

Its ears were pointed like something from Star Trek.

It was impossible not to stare and beam at the small child.

"It's... unnatural," Holly said, repeating the lines she'd picked up from the media she consumed. "A woman and a male alien aren't supposed to have babies..."

"Pfft," I said. "They said the same thing about blacks and whites in the past."

"This is different."

"Is it?"

Holly sighed and shook her head.

"It's all right for you," she said. "You're not married."

The idea of the wife going off to sleep with an alien male to get married didn't sit right with many married partners, and I could understand why.

Who needed that kind of pressure?

The men felt emasculated, the women like hussies.

But there was another way to think about it...

"Think of it as a... break," I said. "Go away for a week, get pregnant, and come back. I know some couples do that."

“And some break up because of it,” Holly said. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“Having a baby isn’t worth it?” I said, half in jest. “Having a baby is *everything*. It’s what we as women were made for.”

Holly sniffed.

“That’s your opinion. I find a lot of meaning in my work.”

“The same as bringing a human into the world? I don’t think so.”

“The problem isn’t with our bodies,” Holly said. “It’s up here. In our heads.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Tell me, how many followers are there of the Acceptance Philosophy?” I said.

“I don’t know. Millions probably—”

“Millions!” I said. “And they all think the same way you do. If millions of you are trying to change the situation by changing the way you think, why haven’t any of you gotten pregnant naturally yet?”

Holly shifted uncomfortably.

“They have.”

I sighed.

“The newspaper stories again? The media on TV? When are you going to stop believing that rubbish? None of it is true. Where is the data from the pregnant women? I want to see how their thoughts physically changed their reproductive organs, that made the sperm enter the egg and the child grow in her belly. Show me that and I’ll believe it.”

Holly shook her head.

“The media gives us hope. They make us know that we’re not alone.”

I nodded.

“We’re not alone. We’re all afflicted with this problem. But believing mumbo jumbo isn’t going to save us.”

No one knew why we could no longer have babies.

Women still produced eggs and men still produced sperm, and when scientists put them under the microscope, they couldn't see anything wrong with either one.

The sperm still entered the egg but the cells refused to divide, refused to enter the beginning stages of that miracle known as life.

Then the world turned to shit and chaos.

After all, what was a species or civilization without a future?

Children were the future.

There was talk of developing technology so we could upload our consciousness into computers, into androids... but it was all wishful thinking.

It was a way to control the population, to keep us from tearing each other apart.

When that failed, they developed the Philosophy of Acceptance.

We were doomed... until one day the Krev contacted us.

It was the first time any alien civilization had made their presence known to us... and it was for an intergalactic booty call.

It turned out they were suffering from similar afflictions.

Maybe all civilizations developed fertility problems after a while, I didn't know.

Others had periods of heat where they needed to mate or they would literally explode — true fact!

I imagined Holly with a baby in her lap and the huge, beautiful smile on her lips that she would have if she just took the chance.

I reached over and took her by the hand.

“Come with me,” I said. “Come with me and get pregnant. Maybe there's something you can take that will make you fall

asleep, make you forget everything that happens. If you can't remember that it happened, then it's like it didn't really happen at all, right?"

Holly looked up at me with tears shimmering in her eyes.

"I... can't," she said. "Not without the husband's agreement."

I smiled warmly and brushed the tear from her cheek.

"Well, maybe you'll change your mind after I have my baby."

Holly laughed, though it was a sad and pitiful thing.

"Maybe," she said.

I filled out the form and held my finger over the Submit button.

"You're really serious about this?" Holly said.

"As serious as I am about anything."

I hesitated about pressing the button.

My stomach suddenly developed a flock of butterflies...

Then I let my finger fall and pressed the button.

APPLICATION SENT SUCCESSFULLY!

"Now what?" Holly said.

"Now I wait, I guess," I said.

BING! YOU HAVE A NEW MESSAGE.

"Well, that was fast," Holly said.

"I can't be approved already," I said.

I clicked the message and read it.

"What is it?" Holly said.

"They've accepted me," I said, my voice hollow and distant, sounding like it was coming from someone else.

"Already?" Holly said, leaning over to check the details.
"Well, that was fast."

“They want me to go for a checkup tomorrow.”

Holly reached over and placed her hand on mine.

“You’ll sail through it,” she said. “I *know* it.”

I overrode the sudden nerves poking at me from the inside.

I had decided to do this, after all.

There was no going back now...

And still, those butterflies battered at me, like a tornado in a howling storm.

THE EXAM HAD BEEN AS I expected.

Prodding and probing at my feminine parts with no thought to my personal comfort.

“Your results will be messaged to your cell,” the doctor said before taking his leave.

I nodded and he left before I could ask any questions.

The doctor had been cold and expressionless, barely even raising his eyes to look at me.

Sterile room, sterile doctor.

I was already beginning to regret my decision to take part in the Alien Impregnation Program.

“Don’t worry about the doctor,” the nurse, whose name was Daisy, as she’d cheerfully told me when I first entered the examination room, said. “He’s on a new fasting regimen and it always puts him in a bad mood before lunch.”

I smiled, distracted.

Daisy was placing the medical equipment into some kind of device that doused them with bright light, before taking the tools out and placing them on another table.

“This is your first time?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Excited?”

“Nervous.”

“That’s normal. You’ll be fine once your mate selects you.”

“Selects me?” I said.

It suddenly dawned on me that the brochure I’d read had only shared vague details of what to expect with this whole process.

“You’ll be placed in a room with the other females in a long line,” Daisy said, “and then the alien males will come in. They will inspect you and pick which of you they want to mate with.”

Inspect?

My face curdled at the word and it must have shown on my face as Daisy chuckled.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “They look you over, run their fingers through your hair, sniff you, things like that.”

Sniff?

I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of being treated like a pedigree at a dog show...

“Many of the alien races come from cultures that don’t treat women the same as men. It’s not that they don’t respect us — they actually revere females. But they feel a woman has certain duties, the same way a man has his duties. Only, the duties aren’t the same. Women are revered in their cultures for the miracle of childbirth. Men are revered for their strength. So, they will treat you with the utmost respect... even if it doesn’t seem like respect to our eyes.”

“And... are they gentle?”

I’d tried not to think about the whole sexual experience in case it put me off going... but now that I had Daisy here to answer my questions... why not ask?

“They’re as gentle as they can be,” Daisy said.

“As they can be? What does that mean?”

“It means many of them are in heat. They *need* to mate. Whether you get pregnant or not is no concern to them. Only that they mate.”

“Oh.”

I’d expected there to be a little more... emotion involved, but now that I thought about it, perhaps that was a good thing.

For them to plant their seed and move on.

“But the process lasts a week, right?”

“That’s right. Very often, only a single session is required but a week ensures you become pregnant.”

“My friend...”

I knew I shouldn’t bring the topic up with her but I couldn’t help it.

Although I had zero trust in the news media organizations of the world, I still was basing my opinions on that of hearsay and what others reported, blogs, and other forms of media.

It might be more reliable... or maybe not.

After all, it was human nature to want to manipulate others into thinking and believing what we wanted them to, wasn’t it?

How did I know they weren’t lying to me too?

But how did I know Daisy would tell me the truth?

Would she go against her employers?

Still, I caught Daisy’s eyes and hesitated but decided to go ahead and ask.

“My friend told me about a bunch of issues that have happened to women who have sex with aliens to get pregnant... that it’s dirty and can negatively affect the baby...”

Daisy shook her head.

“Hogwash, the lot of it.”

“You’re sure?” I said. “There’s been no cases of aggression or harm to come to the women?”

“No. And if there were, protocols would be put in place. This service is beneficial not only to us but to the aliens too and neither side will take the risk of allowing it to come to an end. The only aggression you might face is the... nice kind, if I could put it that way.”

Images flashed in the front of my mind... big, powerful alien males' bodies entwined with the soft, supple, gentle curves of human women... in positions I'd never even seen before...

“You know, most people are too nervous to ask me that,” she said. “They assume I'll back whatever the company that hires me says.”

“Do you?” I said.

Daisy chuckled.

“Yes. But not because they're paying me. Trust me, I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in what we're doing.”

“Then, if you don't mind me asking, why don't you go through this process yourself?”

She beamed at me.

“I have.”

My eyes immediately dropped to her stomach.

If she was pregnant, she wasn't showing yet.

Her hand dropped to her belly and she beamed happily.

“Want to feel him?”

I nodded.

Daisy took my hand and placed it on her belly.

She moved it around like a doctor with his stethoscope.

“There,” she said. “Feel the kick?”

“Yeah.”

“You wouldn't be able to feel a human baby kicking so early, but Zath, they're strong.”

Her eyes became misty as she stared into the distance, and I realized she was no longer with me, but somewhere in the past.

“He was a Zath. Have you ever seen them before?”

I shook my head.

There were so many alien species now that I couldn't place them all.

“He was gorgeous. A true gentleman. We didn't do anything but kiss the whole first day. He knew I was nervous and he really took his time with me. And that turned me on even more.”

“I'll bet,” I said dreamily, hoping my mate could be just as gentle with me.

“And when he finally took me...”

The smile that spread across her lips was warm and her cheeks flushed red.

“Let's just say, I've never been taken like that before.”

Wow.

I thought I'd only be going to have sex for a week and then get pregnant... I didn't expect I would get to enjoy it so much too...

“I'll leave the rest up to your imagination,” Roxy said. “I wouldn't want to spoil anything.”

She smiled contentedly and got back to cleaning the tools.

“Do you know the sex of the baby?” I asked.

“Oh yes. He's a boy. Do you know what that means?”

I frowned with thought.

What could it mean other than he would run around naked and enjoy poking his little pinky in places it shouldn't go?

“It means,” Daisy said, “that he will be half-human and half-Zath... which means he might not be affected by either of our species' afflictions. He might be able to impregnate women right here, on Earth.”

My eyes bulged.

“Is that possible?”

“It is,” Daisy beamed. “There are no guarantees, of course. But life, no matter how difficult things are, finds a way to survive and thrive. This could be the solution humanity needs.”

If that were true — even the *possibility* of it being true — then why were the news organizations working so hard to prevent it from happening?

Surely the big corporations couldn’t be so selfish as to put the world at risk for profits?

I snorted.

Of *course* they could!

What a fool I was to even consider it.

Daisy tapped at a computer terminal.

“I’m not supposed to share the results with you but... would you like to know if you’re going to get pregnant or not?”

Her tone was upbeat and chipper and I doubted she would have asked me that if the answer was a categorical No.

Still, it would be nice to hear it from her lips, so I nodded my head.

She checked over her shoulders conspiratorially and leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

“Yes!” she said. “You’re going to be a mommy!”

Boy, did it feel good to hear that from another person’s lips.

I’m going to be a mommy.

The tears of happiness leaped into my eyes and I felt their keen sting.

“Aw,” Daisy said, leaning forward to wrap an arm around me and tugging my head into her shoulder.

It was nice but there was an element of rote about it, as if she did this with *every* woman who came in here.

“You’re going to be a mommy,” she said softly, as if afraid that saying it any louder, it might break the spell.

A mommy! Me!

I wiped the tears from my eyes and blew my nose on the tissue Daisy handed me.

I noticed the box was already half empty.

Now all I needed to worry about was getting ready.

I would exercise and get into better shape...

I’d be *mortified* if an alien dude couldn’t get it up because of how I looked...

How embarrassing would that be?

Then I would take all the proper supplements so my body was fully ready.

I still couldn’t believe it...

I was gonna be a mommy!

“When will I be leaving?” I asked.

“At three o’clock.”

“Great. Which day?”

“Why, today of course. The perfect window for you to get pregnant begins tonight.”

The blood drained from my face.

“Tonight?”

So much for exercising.

So much for prepping.

The alien beasts were going to have to take me as I was.

THE SHUTTLECRAFT WAS PACKED with species of aliens from all over the galaxy.

Every stop brought more and more wild and crazy species.

The first thing the conductor did when we stepped on board was pin a translator device to our shirts.

With the gabbing from the other females on the shuttlecraft, I almost wished they *didn't*.

The other females released their safety harnesses the moment the shuttlecraft left the station.

They mingled, talking with each other, turning their backs to me.

I folded my arms over my chest and felt self-conscious.

It was like the first day of school all over again.

The shuttlecraft shuddered and I gripped my harness, my knuckles turning white.

I never traveled well and could only hope the journey wasn't too long.

“First time?”

I looked up to find a female specimen of some unknown species standing before me, hands on her hips, long tubes like an octopus's legs where her hair should be, delicately arranged and curled around her neck.

She was *stunning*.

A firm, athletic body with jewels I'd never seen before adorned her slender fingers.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “How could you tell?”

“The terrified eyes, the nervous glances, the look of someone who can't believe they're actually here... You know, the usual.”

The female fell into the seat beside me, completely unaffected by the shuttlecraft's shuddering movements.

“The name's Thaw.”

“Roxy.”

“You’re human, right?”

She extended her hand for me to shake before I could answer.

“Yes. What are you?”

“I’m a Chel-A.”

“Oh,” I said, having no idea what that meant or how to respond.

“Don’t worry. I know what it’s like to be the new species on the block. We Chel-A were the new species before humans were extended the hand of friendship... Or should I say, impregnation.”

I chuckled and grasped my harness again after another round of turbulence.

“How about you?” I said. “You’re not nervous?”

“No. This isn’t my first time.”

“How many times have you been here?”

“Seven.”

“Seven?” I said, shocked. “But I thought we were virtually *guaranteed* to get knocked up?”

“Yes, that’s usually the case.”

Jees... I thought.

I wasn’t sure I could go through with being hammered by alien males that many times... even if I was desperate for a baby.

Thaw was in terrific shape, with large bulbous breasts and hips that swayed when she walked.

She had a narrow chin and an impossibly thin waist.

She looked like she could take the punishment... and clearly *had* if she’d been accepted into the program seven times already.

She was a drop-dead knockout.

I suddenly felt sick.

My chances of being chosen just dropped significantly.

How could any girl hope to compete with such a stunner?

“How does your husband feel about you finding it so difficult to get pregnant?” I said, desperate to change the subject.

“He understands that sometimes things take time.”

“He sounds very kind.”

“Oh, he is. He’s soft and sweet, a fantastic provider. He gives me everything I need in life... well, almost everything.”

I considered asking her what that ‘almost’ was but thought better of it.

I was making a new friend and it was never good to pry too deeply.

Still, I was intrigued.

“So, what’s it like?” I asked. “The whole impregnation week thing?”

Thaw’s eyes rolled into the back of her head and stretched out her body as if her bones had been replaced with jelly.

“Heaven. For the first day or so, you just lay back and let them jackhammer you into submission. Then you submit. And trust me, you *will* submit. Then you start taking the initiative and climb on top for a while. These males *love* it when a female takes command. And these dudes have the confidence to let you do it. They know they could destroy you any time they wanted.”

I gulped.

I’d come to get pregnant... I didn’t realize it would be so enjoyable!

“Is there anything I should know?” I said. “Anything to improve my chances of getting pregnant?”

Thaw ran her eyes over me.

“I think you’ll do good enough. Just give them what they want and don’t get in their way. You want one in heat. You haven’t experienced anything like it and never will again. These guys *ruin* a good girl.”

My mouth turned dry.

I’d had sex before, obviously, but I couldn’t say I was very experienced...

Would my mate get bored of me?

Still, I wondered if Thaw was really the best person to be getting advice from — after all, she hadn’t gotten pregnant yet.

Even after *seven* attempts!

Was there a possibility that certain positions or making love at certain times of the day made a difference?

BOOM!

The entire shuttlecraft shook, knocking it off balance.

The lights flickered and the occupants exchanged nervous glances.

If my fingers gripped the armrests any harder, I’d become part of the upholstery.

The thrusters re-engaged and the transporter leveled up again.

Thaw turned around in her seat and peered out the window at the vista below.

“I swear, if they hit us one of these days... It’s going to bring a real shit storm down on O’htale and cause an intergalactic shit storm of epic proportions,” she said.

“I’d sooner *not* get hit,” I said. “And to hell with shit storms. Just keep me alive.”

“Are you kidding? We would go down in history! They’ll write history books about us! Sing songs in our honor! Our names will be on the lips of every creature from here to

eternity! We should be so lucky to die a gruesome and grisly death!”

The talk of gruesome and grisly made me sick to my stomach.

“Come take a look,” Thaw said, motioning toward the window.

“No, thanks. I’m okay.”

“All right,” Thaw said with girlish glee. “But you’re missing out.”

She straightened up and it was a while before I was able to arrange my thoughts into something cohesive.

“Just what caused the explosion anyway?” I asked.

“Oh, just some dumb ass rebels. They don’t like that the fertility center is on their planet. They have the same fertility problem we do but they aren’t allowed to take part in it. They should be happy — it brings in a shit load of money for their backward culture.”

“Money? But I didn’t pay anything.”

“The money is exchanged higher up the echelons at the government level. You’re lucky you got in when you did. This deal won’t last forever.”

“So why don’t they build the center somewhere else?”

“Because this planet is in the perfect location, right at the heart of the spiral. It’s best for everyone. Hey, look! We’re almost at the center! Come see!”

“I’m okay,” I said with a wave of my hand.

If I moved any more than I had to, I thought I would throw up.

“Prepare for arrival,” the conductor said calmly. “Please return to your seats and fasten your harnesses.”

The other females did as ordered.

My stomach lurched and it had nothing to do with the shuttlecraft this time.

I felt sick to my stomach.

Was this a mistake?

Was I going to return what happened to me over the next seven days?

Was there a get-out clause?

Could I tap out like a wrestling match?

I doubt the male would take kindly to that... I thought.

“Hey. Take this.”

Thaw leaned over and pressed something into the palm of my hand.

It was a small vial with some kind of a dark root inside.

“To help me get pregnant?” I said, unsure if I wanted to take an unknown substance from a stranger.

Thaw threw back her head and laughed.

It was a soft tickling sound like wind chimes on a warm afternoon.

“No,” she said. “This is in case you decide to come here again.”

“Again?” I said, perplexed. “I’m not even pregnant yet.”

“Precisely,” Thaw said. “The alien males here are genuine hot studs. They really know how to please a female. *Much* better than anything you’ll get in a marriage bed.”

She leaned in close to whisper in my ear.

“So, if you want to... prolong the time it takes to get pregnant, take one of these. You’ll get to relive the experience over... and over... and over again!”

She gave me a wink and settled down as the shuttlecraft banked hard.

I was in a madhouse.

WE WERE MET by someone called P'tika.

Despite her age, there was no denying her beauty — a true 11 on the gorgeousness scale if there ever was one.

I could only imagine how hot she was in her prime.

Her skin glinted with tiny diamonds in the bright sunlight and her dark hair seemed to somehow *absorb* the light.

She was breathtaking.

She carried a clipboard and some kind of device with holographic images dancing above it.

Her tone was clipped and fast, brokering no nonsense.

“Welcome to O'htale,” she said. “My assistants will be on hand to help you with whatever you require. Please follow me.”

I would have said the building was cast from marble but it was so pure, so white, that I couldn't make out any veins at all.

I had no idea how much Earth was contributing to this place but it must have cost a hefty chunk of our global GDP.

The room we were taken to was laid out like a high school changing room, with long benches down either side and lockers behind it.

“On the bench, you will find your name and your dress for the evening,” P'tika's assistant said. “Please place all your belongings in the lockers provided and hand your key to me or one of the other assistants. We'll keep them safe until the week is up.”

Thaw had already stripped off her clothes — somehow managing to look even more gorgeous naked than she did with clothes on — and slipped on her silk negligee.

Her firm ass was bare and there was no underwear.

I supposed it made sense.

We were meant to be a turn-on for the males after all, and what turned them on more than having what they wanted right in front of them?

I slipped my comfortable Earth clothes off, folded them, and placed them in the locker.

I slipped on the negligee and, feeling somewhat self-conscious, glanced at the other females.

They appeared not to suffer from the lack of confidence I was.

Thaw looked stunning in the lingerie.

I'd never really been attracted to women before but if I was, Thaw would be *exactly* my type.

She might have been the model on the cover of a fashion magazine... if the magazine was set in a Star Trek movie.

Her heaving chest almost broke from the front of her silk negligee, her nipples already hard and pressing at the fabric, forming nubs like hard fingers pointing, judging, in my direction.

I glanced down at my own body and couldn't help but feel the disappointment the males would surely share by comparing me with her.

Thaw beamed at me with her purple teeth — weird, but it seemed to make her stand out even more against the backdrop of mediocrities like me.

“Excited yet?” she said.

She didn't seem to be aware of the effect she had on me or any of the other females.

“A little,” I said, although I didn't really feel it.

“Trust me, that'll change the minute the males start turning up.”

I doubted any of them would even notice me, not with Thaw at my side.

I hoped they would put us in a random order so the comparison wouldn't be so obvious and was relieved when that turned out to be the case.

P'tika's assistant called us forward one at a time until we stood in one long line.

Thaw was near the front, performing stretching exercises and warming up for the workout ahead.

I was dismayed to find myself instead sandwiched between two *equally striking* females — one big and muscular and strong, perhaps not the prettiest in the face but I could imagine many males would find her strength an attractive feature.

The other was smaller, cuter, her horns curled around each other, and reminded me of a cute Japanese girl in a cosplay costume.

I could hear my eggs crying in despair.

We're never going to be impregnated!

I took deep breaths and tried to remain calm.

P'tika's assistant moved to the front of the line and spoke in a loud, clear voice.

“You will enter the room in single file and stand to attention. Then the males will enter from the opposite side of the room. They will approach you. They are under strict orders to be gentle if they touch you, but many of them are in heat. Restraint can be difficult. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, alert me or one of the other assistants and we'll intercede immediately.”

This was doing nothing to make me feel confident about what was coming next.

“I must repeat: many of the males are in heat. You do not need to stimulate them further but if you feel the need, flaunt what you got.”

Some of the women — led by Thaw — whooped and whistled, accepting the challenge.

I gulped.

And what if some of us had no game?

At least I could console myself that I had tried...

SHOW TIME.

I strutted into the room with all the swagger I could muster.

I needn't have bothered as there was no one else in the room besides us females.

The room was long and narrow like a catwalk, only there were no spectators, save the assistants arranged at regular intervals around the edges.

Cameras perched in the corners and along the walls, and I wondered what their purpose was.

A scientific study?

A way to improve their mating system?

“Enter the males,” P'tika said.

The door opposite opened and the males began to walk inside.

No, *walk* was too plain a word for it.

More like *stalk*.

They *stalked* into the room.

They were each heavily muscled, powerful, and yet as graceful as cats.

As tigers or lions.

Some had green skin and sported tufts of hair on the top of their heads and tusks that jutted from either side of their mouths, reminding me of orcs in movies back home.

Others had scars crisscrossing their bodies and the thousand-yard stare that belonged on the face of a creature who'd seen far too much horror in his life.

There was one with feathered wings like an angel, only his skin was charred black like he'd been burned... a fallen angel, then?

I shifted my weight, suddenly feeling very exposed and vulnerable.

If they were the predators, then we were the prey.

The *willing* prey.

Dressed up in “fuck me hard” lingerie designed to excite and stimulate.

Like lambs to the slaughter...

I thought back to the conversation I’d had with Holly.

How right she’d been.

Panic suddenly struck me.

I didn’t know who these alien males were.

I didn’t know where they came from or what their reason for being here was.

If I was back on Earth, would I have made the same decision?

Would I have entertained the idea of letting *human* males stare at me the way these men were now?

No.

So why was it okay to do with these strange — although extremely gorgeous — alien males?

But I wouldn’t back out.

I knew it was my irrational mind speaking.

I’d made my decision when I was thinking rationally, logically.

And I had to stick to it.

Besides, I wasn’t even sure I *could* back out.

I had signed the contract.

I would have to go along with this.

I affected a mask of confidence that I did not feel and met each of the males’ eyes.

They approached us and touched our skin, softly at first, and then more aggressively.

A couple of the females made pained groaning noises as a nipple was squeezed.

The assistants arranged around the room leaned over to get a better view but made no attempt to stop what was happening.

I felt reassured it was normal.

I hope.

The first female to be led away was Thaw — of course.

I smiled over at her, wishing her well, but she had eyes only for her mate — the fallen angel — and she took him by the hand and led him out of the room.

Two males approached me and jostled each other with their elbows as they prodded and pressed at my breasts and ass.

One lost interest and moved away.

The one that remained was a striking, tall red-skinned behemoth with a dominating presence... like Lucifer reincarnated.

I dreaded him choosing me.

But when he smiled, I was surprised at how warm and forgiving it was.

I saw kindness in it and hoped it wasn't in vain.

Yes, I thought. I could get on board with this fellow.

He ran his tongue over his lips, turned his head to one side, and shaped his mouth to say something...

When an alarm sounded.

Well, not really an alarm.

More of a *beep*.

It came from the speaker in the corner of the room.

I wasn't the only one intrigued by it.

The others were looking too — including the assistants, who looked most shocked of all.

P'tika recovered first and gave the nod.

The assistants came over and removed me from the lineup.

The red alien male was furious, yelling about how he had already chosen me...

Except he hadn't.

But I *wished* he had.

I was *so close* to being impregnated!

“What's... What's going on?” I stammered.

Would I be forced to return to Earth?

Forced to live a lonely and pointless life without a child?

Why had things suddenly gone so wrong?

P'TIKA INITIALLY SAID nothing as her assistant brought me to her.

She consulted her clipboard and device, tapping away at the keys like a high-powered executive.

Cold, sterile, distant.

“Is everything... all right?” I said.

“Hm?” P'tika said, hastily adding the finishing touches to a message.

“My application,” I said. “Was there something wrong with it?”

I felt split down the middle — partly disappointed that I wouldn't get pregnant after all, and partly relieved that I wouldn't have to go through with this after all.

P'tika lowered her device and handed it to her assistant.

“Hm? Oh, no. Nothing like that. Your application, so far as I’m aware, is perfectly adequate.”

Adequate.

She sure knows how to make a girl feel special.

I folded my arms in an effort to cover myself, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

“So why was I taken out of the lineup?” I asked.

“You’ve been Claimed,” P’tika said simply.

She left it like that, letting my eyes flit between hers, as if the term ‘Claimed’ was enough.

It wasn’t.

“Claimed?” I said. “What does that mean?”

She walked down the hallway at a pace that required me to jog to keep up.

“We have a patron... a very *special* patron who has Claimed you from the other females. He sees something in you...”

She ran an eye over me and her lip curled with what I could only describe as disgust.

“Although for the life of me, I can’t see what,” she said.

Stop with all the flattery, please.

She turned a corner and led me down the long red carpet that stretched like a tongue before us.

“To be Claimed means to be owned,” she said.

“Owned?” I said, my throat suddenly dry. “What does that mean?”

“The patron has a... unique proposal.”

“What proposal?”

“That is something you must discuss with him.”

Her tone was clipped and short and I knew there would be no discussing it further with her.

“Our patron is wealthy and wishes to meet you. He’s very picky about who he meets.”

P’tika drew to a stop in front of a large door inlaid with gold curls.

“We’re here,” she said.

“Great,” I said, panting for breath. “But you haven’t answered any of my questions.”

“You have been given a great honor,” P’tika said simply, her eyes so tight I thought they might pop out of her head.

“I don’t understand—”

Then, seemingly unable to hold back any longer, P’tika’s mask broke and she leaped forward and wrapped her arms around me.

My arms were crushed at my sides and I had no one to look at but P’tika’s assistant, who looked at me with the most pressing look of concern I had ever seen on anyone’s face.

Like a prisoner sent to a penal colony for a crime they hadn’t committed.

Well, Jees, that *really* fills me with confidence.

Seriously, what the fuck is going on?

P’tika pulled back and stared me in the eye.

“Don’t let him do anything to you that you wouldn’t do to your very worst enemy,” she said.

“Okay...”

She pressed her lips against mine, thrusting so hard that her teeth touched mine.

She flicked her tongue over my lips in small circles that seemed to mean something... to her at least.

Then she pulled back, gave me one last lingering look, turned on her heel, and marched back down the hallway, barking orders at her assistant.

The assistant struggled with opening a heavy door and it slammed shut with an almighty thud behind them.

P'tika and her berating orders receded down another long and ponderous hallway within the maze-like crypt of the fertilization center.

Well, that was... weird.

No, not just weird... *fucking* weird.

And terrifying.

I turned to the large ornate door before me.

A door this big *had* to have a monster behind it.

Why else would they make it so big and heavy?

What did they have behind it?

King Kong?

King Dong?

My pussy felt sore at just the *thought* of a primal alien male swaggering toward me, his junk swinging like a gorilla's arm.

Holy moly.

Did I really want to do this?

Hell, after signing the contract, was it even possible for me to wriggle out of it?

Could I just leave right here and now?

But that posed another problem: How could I even get out of here?

The place was like a maze and negotiating my way out of it was easier said than done.

Think of your baby, I told myself. Think of all the amazing things that will happen after you give birth.

The image of a cute little baby in my arms, playing with them for days and weeks and months and years and decades was certainly worth *anything* that might happen to me behind this heavy door.

Wasn't it?

The alien male *couldn't* hurt me.

Even if he wanted to.

I pulled myself up short.

And *why*, exactly, would he want to?

I shook my head at my own scurrilous fear.

I was worrying for nothing.

I just needed to get this over with.

I just needed to get the alien's seed pumped into me a few times and then I could leave and I would never have to think about his place ever, ever again.

I turned to the heavy door.

I patted down my hair and smoothed down my silk negligee — pointless, considering it was silk.

But I needed to keep my hands busy, to try to make myself relax a little.

I curled my hand into a fist — and my, how tiny it looked compared to the *massive* door! — and knocked softly.

My tap was minuscule, tiny.

Barely audible even to my ears.

I came up with a plan:

No response would come and then I would be free — perfectly understandable, really — that I could turn around and leave and no one would judge me for it.

“Hey,” I would say, “I knocked and he didn't answer. What was I supposed to do? Stand around in slutty lingerie all day?”

But they would send me back...

Back to this door...

To this 'patron'...

Only this time, the beast would be angry that I'd made him wait.

Maybe there was a clause somewhere in the contract that he was allowed to punish me for making him wait...

And if the earlier specimens were any indication, he would be big, strong, *and capable of pummeling me into submission for an entire month, never mind a week.*

Suddenly, the fear rose in me like a tsunami.

I was in *way* over my head.

What was I even doing here?

Holly was right.

Who knew what kind of scum they had recruited in these alien males?

They could be infected with who knows what kind of diseases!

My breaths came in panicked bursts and I felt myself begin to turn away.

There *had* to be another way to get pregnant other than this.

There just *had* to be.

And that, of course, was when I heard a deep voice from behind the door:

“Come.”

The male had heard my pitiful knock.

And now he wanted me to enter.

Shit.

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ABOUT TAMMY

In space, no one can hear you scream...

And where's the fun in that?

I've been reading romance and science fiction my whole life. I always wondered why those genres hadn't been a mash-up years ago and now I'm super excited I get to combine them into a single steamy encounter!

Come with me as we journey through space and time... and the most gorgeous set of hunks this side of the galaxy!

I wrote the #1 bestselling FATED MATES OF THE TITAN EMPIRE and FATED MATES OF BREEDER PRISON series. I write science fiction romances set on far-flung planets and ships traveling at the speed of light.

[Learn more about my books here.](#) Find me on [Bookbub](#), [Facebook](#), and [my website](#).

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SECRETARY FOR THE ALIEN PRINCE

by Tammy Walsh

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