



The image is a promotional poster for the TV show 'Seeded by Two'. It features three main characters: a woman in the center and two alien men on either side. The woman, Tammy Walsh, has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a black, sleeveless dress. She is smiling and looking towards the right. The alien on the left has a greenish, scaly skin and is wearing a blue, fishnet-like garment. The alien on the right has a tan, scaly skin with large, curved horns on his head and is wearing a brown, patterned garment. The background is a deep blue space with a large, glowing planet or moon in the center, surrounded by stars and nebulae. The title 'SEEDDED BY TWO' is prominently displayed in the lower half of the image. 'SEEDDED' is in a large, white, blocky font with a metallic sheen. 'BY' is in a smaller, white, blocky font. 'TWO' is in a large, blue, stylized script font. Below the title, the name 'TAMMY WALSH' is written in a white, sans-serif font.

SEEDDED BY *TWO*

TAMMY WALSH

SEDED BY TWO

TAMMY WALSH

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BETH

IT WASN'T MEANT to go down like this.

The females were meant to enter the Claiming Room and the door on the opposite side was supposed to open...

Then the rampaging, horny alien males were meant to knock it down in their rush to reach us...

Then they would grasp, grope, lick, and snort as they fought each other to select their mate...

I had never had a guy back on Earth find me so attractive and impossible to resist that he simply *had* to have me right then and there...

For him to grab me by the arm and drag me into one of the back rooms where he would strip me naked and pummel me into oblivion...

And plant his Seed inside me so I would become pregnant.

There were too many social constructs back home, too many things that stopped a man from carrying through with his deeper, darker, baser instincts.

And that was a shame.

It might have even contributed to the fact that men could no longer impregnate women back on Earth, which was why we had to resort to coming to Seeding Facilities like this one and be treated like lumps of meat...

But *resort* was hardly the right word.

I couldn't think of anything *sexier* and more *seductive* than a powerful muscled alien male Claiming me before all other females.

I had read all the first-hand reports of what it was like to come to a Seeding Facility.

Not one woman had complained about the experience — save for the pain experienced between their legs from the constant hammering they'd received

at the virile alien male's excitement... but I would hardly call that a negative!

But when we entered this Claiming Room, there were no males beating down the door...

No huge monstrous beasts racing to Claim us, to snatch us from the line...

And so, we stood there, waiting, wondering why we weren't being treated the way we expected to be, why we were being left to dry (literally in my case).

I peered at the females lined up on either side of me.

They were bizarre and strange-looking creatures from all four corners of the galaxy; I couldn't put a name to even *half* the species.

Not that it mattered.

They weren't competition.

How could they be when there was an equal number of males?

As part of the deal, we were *all* guaranteed to be Seeded by the end of the week — what was called the *Steyatt* that these male beasts had to go through.

It was an entire week where they mated with a willing female... or else bad things happened.

And when I say bad things, I mean *really* bad things.

They literally lost all control of themselves and resorted to terrible violence.

They fell upon innocent victims and exploded with rage.

They tore everything they came across apart and there was simply no stopping them.

Some civilizations had actually *collapsed* after a particularly bad Steyatt where many of the males had failed to satisfy their urges and been left to their own devices.

They went on murderous rampages from one city to another, looting and raiding their fellow brethren.

It was far better for them to take out their individual frustrations on a hapless alien female who actually *wanted* that aggression and, most of all, their valuable *Seed*.

Back on Earth, viable seed had become one of the most valuable commodities on the planet — outpacing all others at a ratio of ten to one.

The black market was rife with such Seed — much of it fake and not of the advertised quality.

With no other option, many women chose it, and it sometimes led to

disastrous results.

People were desperate.

Few things were as powerful as a female's desire to birth children... and little could stand in their way when they were determined to succeed.

But here, in these Seeding Facilities, we *knew* the Seed was genuine as it was being pumped into us by (very) willing males.

I looked up at the door again and saw that it still had not burst open with males sporting raging organs.

I glanced at the other females again and saw the same look of confusion on their faces.

I looked over at the Assistants standing about the room, tablets clutched under their arms.

They appeared unconcerned with the situation... so I supposed everything was going as it was meant to.

Still, the reviews I had read had insisted the males came to the room soon after the females...

I wondered if something had gone wrong and had not yet filtered down to these workers.

It was well known that the males, driven insane by the scent of willing, fertile females, turned to fighting among themselves, and although no deaths had ever been reported at a Seeding Facility, more than a little *mauling* had.

Of both males *and* females.

But that wasn't going to be an issue for me seeing as the males hadn't even *entered the room* yet.

One of the Assistants — I recognized her as the one in charge as she had earlier explained what was going to happen and what the rules were — took a step forward and pressed a finger to her ear.

She listened intently to whoever was speaking, nodded her head, then turned to us and said:

“Numbers three, five, and eight. Please step forward.”

Numbers three and five did so.

They were gorgeous, sleek creatures with long necks and bright skin — one green, the other yellow — the very *definition* of sexiness.

Everyone appeared to be waiting for the final female — number eight — to step forward to join them.

I peered around, just as all the other females did, and when I looked up and locked eyes with the Chief Assistant, I realized — after quickly counting

along the line — that *I* was number eight!

The blood of embarrassment rushed to my face as I hastily stepped forward. “Sorry,” I said sheepishly, feeling even more self-conscious.

The Assistant rolled her eyes and placed her finger to her ear once more and listened again.

I picked at the skin of my fingers — a bad habit — and glanced shyly and more than a little warily — at the other females, who seemed confident with whatever was going on here.

I had *no idea* what was happening.

The other females in the back row straightened their backs and seemed as confident as ever, if a little put out.

I wasn’t sure if taking a step forward was meant to be a good thing or not.

I licked my dry lips and tried to pretend like I knew what was going on.

The Assistant once again lowered her hand and gave us orders:

“Turn around. Slowly.”

Huh?

None of the reviews I’d read had said anything about this...

I kept my arms by my side, feeling supremely awkward, as I turned in a small circle.

I didn’t want to be in the front line.

I just wanted to be chosen by a male...

What is this?

Completing my turn, the Assistant then nodded after getting another message on her earpiece. “Number three, please step back.”

I glared at number three angrily and with more than a little jealousy.

I wanted to be the one to step back!

Why did *she* get to be the one who joined the others?

It wasn’t fair!

“Number five,” the Assistant said. “Tell us the reason you’re here.”

The reason we were here? I thought. *Isn’t it obvious?*

Number five raised her chin further and spoke in a cool, calm voice:

“To do honor to my species and bear many children so our civilization may grow stronger and more powerful.”

Several of the other females in the back row nodded thoughtfully as if they would have said the same thing.

The Assistant turned to me. “And you, number eight? Why are you here?”

How did I answer? I wondered.

Did I just repeat what the other female had said?

Was it the right answer?

Or did I tell the truth?

I didn't know there was going to be an exam in all of this!

The only test was whether or not I could survive being fucked into oblivion!

“Uh...” I said, once more picking at the skin of my fingers — too deep this time as I thought I'd drawn blood. I hastily tucked it behind my back. “I guess, um, I'm here to... get pregnant?”

The silence that followed seemed as deep as disappointment could possibly be and I hastily added:

“Not for my country though. Or the government. Or the military. Or anything like that. I want to get pregnant to have a child. For me.”

The silence that answered seemed somehow even deeper this time.

I flushed a more vivid shade of red and gnawed at my bottom lip.

The Assistant raised her finger to her ear once more and nodded along to whatever it was she was listening to.

Her eyes flashed in my direction for an instant before she turned her head to one side and mumbled:

“Are you sure? We have many other finer females and—”

Yes, I thought. Many *finer females*.

Most of those lined up behind me, safely tucked away in the back row, were athletically built, with strong powerful muscles that looked capable of breaking multiple human Olympic medals without breaking a sweat.

Whereas me...

Well, I was just *me*.

“Understood,” the Assistant said, straightening up.

She locked eyes on number five and, for a moment, I thought I had been spared whatever outcome was meant to happen from this thing that was happening and said:

“Number five. Please step back.”

Number five's smile faltered.

She peered at the Assistant and frowned as if she'd misspoken and there was some mistake.

The Assistant only shrugged her shoulders.

As number five stepped back into line, she shared confused expressions

with the other females who muttered under their breath before glancing in my direction accusingly.

Don't look at me that way! I wanted to say, shrugging my shoulders. *I had no part in this — whatever this is!*

“Number eight,” the Assistant said, drawing up to me. “Please follow me.”

She turned without waiting and marched toward the door.

I just stared, slack-jawed, and wondered if I had just broken all the records in being the very first female to have been *rejected* by a Seeding Facility!

The Assistant had reached the door before I had even taken a single step toward her.

I looked back amongst the other females and Assistants, imploring them pitifully for someone to stand up, to step forward, to *say* something, to *do* something, to get me out of whatever mess I'd ended up in.

When no one said a word, and instead only seemed to glare at me harder without pity, I hung my head and approached the door where the Assistant stood waiting for me.

The instant I stepped through it, the door slammed shut behind me, cutting short the hushed whispers of the remaining females still standing in line inside the Claiming Room.

It was high school all over again.

Last to be chosen, *first* to be rejected.

And to think I had actually thought my life might change for the *better* in this place.

“This way, please,” the Assistant said.

I missed a step when I heard what I had expected all along:

The howling screams of baying monsters.

They were already beating at the door inside the Claiming Room in their attempt to get at the fertile females.

My stomach fell between my feet.

I wished I was in the room to witness it, to see those gorgeous glistening muscular bodies as they charged down their females, grasping their asses and breasts, and dragging them from the room.

Instead, I was being led down a disinfected hallway toward...

Well, who knew what.

I sunk into a deep well of disappointment that I had been removed from

the lineup.

But I was wrong and needn't have worried.

I had a great deal of excitement still in my future, and I was getting closer to it one step at a time...

FEON

SO HERE I WAS, at a Seeding Facility, waiting for the female I had selected from the Claiming Room to appear.

I let out a deep sigh and wondered why the Prince made me do such things when he could just as easily send someone *else* to do this.

It wasn't like it was a skill that only *I* could do...

Except...

I supposed Prince Aslas and I shared a *much* closer bond than anyone else.

We had grown up together, had experienced life together, understood each other on a deeper level than almost anyone else could ever hope to achieve.

We even *looked* the same.

And that was the whole point, wasn't it?

I was his Decoy.

His "other."

The one sent in his place when he either couldn't be bothered to go or it was simply too dangerous for him to risk his life.

And so, they sent me.

His Decoy.

I had to eat the same things he ate, exercise as he did, take the same lessons growing up so I spoke with the same eloquence and level of understanding.

My mind had been shifted and warped away from that of my working-class parents on Rima 9 and toward those of a member of the Royal Family.

I had never been allowed to visit my parents after I had been taken by the

Royal Guard to serve as the Prince's Decoy.

I had grown up desperate to see them again, to feel a connection with the life I had lost — as a simple farmer, to toil in the fields and grow crops, to live in privacy...

And not be in the public eye for a change — even if, when the public saw me, they thought they saw the Prince and not me for who I truly was.

But it was the gig I had been raised to do, if not born to do.

The original Decoy had died young, killed by the Empire's enemies, and as his existence had been a secret, so too was his death.

He had been wiped from the records as I knew my own would be, should I ever be subjected to such a fate.

Forgotten.

But there was perhaps one place where I might still be remembered as the precocious boy I had once been...

Rima 9.

On my way to the Seeding Facility, I finally took it upon myself to take the trip I had always wanted to take while growing up.

I visited my family's farm.

I grew nervous the closer I drew to it and changed my mind at least a dozen times but never altered the trajectory of my ship.

The only person who knew of my plans was the Prince who had told his security detail that I was to be allowed to leave two days early to scout the Facility in case of danger — it was a ruse and one Security had not fallen for.

Still, he managed to leverage me several hours, for which I was very grateful.

He understood my need to revisit my family.

I was the longest-serving Decoy and the closest to the Prince.

Although I was not the only one, I was chief among them, sent on the most important missions in his stead.

At least, they were *supposed* to be the most important missions.

I wore a disguise in case my parents recognized me as the Prince, duty always coming first.

I landed the shuttle and approached the Krev who leaned on his hoe, pushed up the brim of his hat with his dirty thumb, and peered closer at me.

There was no look of recognition in his eyes, no sign he knew who I really was.

"Well?" he said in an accent I had, until that moment, completely

forgotten about. “What can I do for ye?”

“I, uh...” I began.

What was I going to say?

I had dreamed of this moment a million times and always knew *exactly* what to say.

And yet now, none of it was coming to mind.

“I’m... a government worker,” I found myself saying. “I’m here to inspect the farm.”

I didn’t know where the excuse came from but there it was.

He spat to one side more as a habit than a rebuke. “You lot came only last month. What brings yer ‘ere agin?”

“There was a... discrepancy with our information,” I said. “I just need to double-check a couple of things.”

My father leaned his hoe against the fence. “Well, if we’re goin’ ta do this, we mightn’t as well begin doin’ in now. Folla me.”

He led me around the farm.

I kept running my eyes over him, looking for something I might have inherited from him...

But saw nothing save his broad shoulders, powerful frame, and tall black horns shiny and well-kempt compared to the rest of his ensemble — but those things were common for *all* Krev.

The farm was much smaller than I recalled and the magical secluded spots I had often fallen asleep thinking about weren’t so magical after all.

They were a regular clutch of fhisar trees and the bare wood of the barn.

My father showed me around the farm one spot at a time, waiting for me to appraise them, and seemed taken aback by my lack of interest in doing so.

He opened the barn door, revealing three young male Krev.

“Don’t mind them,” my father said. “They’re just me boys.”

My heart sank.

I had given a lot of thought to the idea of my parents having more children — after all, when I had left them, they were still very much of rearing age and there was always more work for a pair of strong hands.

Even better, you only had to give them food as payment.

They were busy hauling great bales of hay with pitchforks and paused to wipe at their bows and look over at the two of us.

They were handsome creatures with their shiny black horns of the Krev.

The younger one had the tip of his left horn snapped off due to some

accident — an accident that happened dozens of times a day on a farm such as this.

“Don’t worry about us,” my father said to my younger siblings. “He’s just here to check out the farm.”

I’d been forced to receive facial surgery over the years to look more like the Prince, but no matter how similar I might appear to him at a young age, you always ended up growing differently in appearance gradually over time.

My brothers shrugged and turned back to their backbreaking labor.

My brothers.

Did they even know I existed?

My parents might not have wanted them to know the truth of what happened to me and I was several years older than my eldest brother, he could easily have figured me for a neighbor’s kid.

I doubted I would ever get a chance to speak or talk with them again...

I wanted to tell them who I was, where I had been, and what I was now doing...

But to do so was to break the promise I had made all those years ago to the palace...

That I was to *never* reveal who I truly was, to *never* have a life of my own, to *never* appear in public as someone other than Prince Aslas.

Not even to my own parents.

Once we were done looking at the farming equipment, my father shut the barn doors and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“It’s hot out,” he said. “Care for a cold one?”

I nodded, and he led me into the house via the back door that I couldn’t help but pause and run my fingers over.

There.

That was where I had tripped and my horns had impaled the door and made those twin indentations.

At least a part of me remained here... even if it was no longer my heart.

“Phisia,” my father called out. “Do we have any gliax left?”

The female standing at the stove turned around. “A little. The boys came in earlier and—”

Her eyes found mine and she froze.

There was no disguising that she, if no one else, recognized me.

I supposed it should have come as no surprise.

After all, she had carried me for fourteen months (as was the typical

gestation period of a Krev baby) and there would always be some form of link between us.

“Phisia?” my father said, noticing her sudden change in countenance.

She snapped to attention but didn’t look at me again after that.

She hurriedly filled two glasses with an ice-cold drink that I could still recall the sweet tang of from my childhood, and continued cooking whatever she had in the oven.

“Will you be staying for dinner?” my father asked.

I would have loved to but I didn’t have the time to spare, nor they the food to waste. “No, thank you. I need to be on my way soon.”

My father left only once during the conversation and when he did, the silence in the tiny space between Mom and me seemed to engulf the both of us.

I no longer felt like the full-grown Krev I had become but the tiny little boy before the Royal Guard had taken me to train me to be the Prince’s Decoy.

There were so many things to say that we each ended up saying nothing at all.

But we both understood.

There would forever be that bond between us, between mother and son, and even if I had lost everything else — every memory I had of my childhood home — then at the very least, I would always continue to occupy that small corner of my mother’s heart.

When it was time for me to leave, my mother embraced me in a way that no doubt confused my father, but he didn’t say a word.

She squeezed me hard and couldn’t bring herself to look at me as she turned away, wiping at her face.

My father led me to the front gate and shook my arm in the traditional Krev manner.

But he didn’t release it immediately the way he would have with an unwanted government guest and instead held on tight.

Just a moment too long, but it was enough.

He nodded his head and said:

“Feel free to come back on here an’time you please.” *Son.*

He didn’t say the last word but I heard it on his lips all the same.

My thoughts were deep and heavy as I returned to my shuttle and continued my journey to the Seeding Facility.

Thoughts of family and longing, of love and loss, of wishing for a connection I had never truly had before — not even with the Prince.

And it was perhaps for that reason that I acted the way I did when I first met Beth...

Now, I was sitting in a side room in a Seeding Facility, gazing through the monitor at a line of gorgeous female specimens from all four corners of the galaxy.

The Prince liked common females and couldn't stand the fake personalities he had to face at the palace on a daily basis.

And as they came into the room, I ran my eyes over each of them.

The human snatched my attention immediately.

She was shorter and dumpier than the other females, with cream skin that did not shine but instead seemed to absorb the light, and hair that spilled about her shoulders in a haphazard way that had none of the preciseness of the other females.

She had likely only been chosen to make up the numbers.

She was so different in the way she put herself together that she stood out like a sore jilar on buhamah's nizzar.

My hand went unconsciously to my crotch where I found myself hard.

Under any other circumstances — and it was worth mentioning that I was on my Steyatt too and required a female — I would have chosen her as *my* mate.

But these females had been carefully selected for a VVIP member and not for the likes of me.

I could not choose my female until my task in selecting the ideal mate for the Prince was complete.

I had only intended on selecting two females to study further as it was *much* easier to decide on the final choice when you had only two to choose from.

Although the other two were much more of the Prince's style, I couldn't help but to also consider the human female and added her as a wild card.

When she turned — awkwardly, compared to the infinitely more graceful other females — I enjoyed admiring her swollen hips ideal for the purpose of

birthing children.

Her shoulders were narrow and bare, exposed by the negligee they dressed each of the females in.

Her legs were long and thin and very attractive in their alien way.

But it was her answer to my question of why she was there that really attracted me to her.

She was there for *herself*.

Not for her culture or her civilization.

But for *herself*.

As a creature that had spent his entire life devoted to duty and the preservation of his Prince's life, it was a refreshing blast of honesty that blew the other answer from the water.

Duty could produce a seductive female, determined to get what she wanted from the situation... but there was no reality to it, no fiery spirit that the human female possessed in spades.

And so I chose her.

I wasn't sure if she was really the best choice for the Prince but something compelled me to select her nonetheless.

And now, she was on her way here.

To this suite.

I sat on one side of the table while the empty chair sat on the other.

As a member of the Royal Staff, I was given the VVIP treatment and allowed to see the female lineup before any of the other males could.

I could then select the one I wanted so there was no competition.

Now, she was on her way to me, not that she was definitely going to be the mate I would choose for the Prince.

When the knock came at the door, I immediately leapt to my feet, suddenly feeling very nervous, and gave the order for them to enter.

When I first laid eyes on the female, there wasn't a shadow of doubt in my heart that she was indeed *the one*.

BETH

THE WALK to the room was a long one.

The further we got from the Claiming Room, the more I thought there had to be some mistake.

The Assistant hadn't given me any reason as to why I should have been taken from the rest of the lineup, and just kept on marching onward down the corridor.

I kept checking over my shoulders in case one of the Assistants came running up waving a piece of paper (I don't know why it should be a piece of paper — everything with the Facility was ultra modern and I hadn't seen so much as a single sheet since arriving here) and declare that there had indeed been an error and I should return to the Claiming Room right away where my gorgeous alien male was standing, impatiently, waiting for me.

But that never happened.

Instead, we passed several rooms where the females — and males alike — were extremely loud and vocal with their lovemaking.

I grew angry.

It should be *me* making those loud screeching noises!

Not on the outside listening in!

I had some very valuable cargo in my uterus to be filled with cargo and shipped off! (Okay, so it was a poor analogy for getting knocked up but I was hugely annoyed, so give me a break.)

I was about to tap the Assistant on the shoulder when she pulled up and turned on her heel sharply, making me almost run into the back of her.

She frowned at me as if I had done it on purpose.

She wore the same frown as when she'd asked if the voice was *sure* he

meant to pick me and not the other female.

This made me even more annoyed.

“The client is waiting for you,” she said simply.

“Client? Waiting? Where?”

The Assistant curled her lip and motioned to the door behind her.

It was one of the ornate doors that led to the suites that lined either side of the corridor.

I suddenly felt weak and I gulped. “H-He’s in there?”

I didn’t know why I should be so nervous now — surely it was better to have the male waiting for me in a room than for a pack of rampaging brutes to claw at me and my body parts?

And yet, somehow, it wasn’t better.

One-on-one felt a whole lot more intimate, and there was always the chance he would change his mind and decide I wasn’t the right female for him.

Rejection.

The same old story.

At least if we were in the Claiming Room and he decided to move on to another female, I could console myself with the knowledge that there would be another male in the room who *would* want me.

The Assistant leaned in close. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

With her warm words of advice, she marched past me — or almost *through* me — and back down the hallway in the direction we had come.

I gulped, not quite sure how to proceed.

Knock on the door, numbnuts!

I raised a fist that suddenly seemed tiny measured against the vastness of the door before me.

As I knocked, the sound seemed hollow and small, like a nervous child at the door to the principal’s office.

It was not a welcome memory from my troublesome past as a tearaway.

When no response came, I balled up my fist and tried again — this time thumping at it with all the limited strength I could muster.

There was a pause before a voice said:

“Come.”

It was deep and commanding — reminding me even more of my school principal.

I ran my sweaty palms down the negligee I was wearing — and thank

God I hadn't worn this when I'd gone in to see the principal or I would have been in detention for *years!*

I cleared my throat and reached for the door.

It was unsurprisingly heavy and I managed to shoulder it open.

It wasn't an office as I'd expected but a suite.

The bed loomed huge in the background like some giant monster staring down at me, ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

My eyes locked tight on it and my eyes bulged in their sockets. "You, uh, wanted to see me?" I said.

I barely even glanced up at the only other person in the room.

He was tall, with powerful horns that jutted up at the ceiling.

I never thought horns could be sexy before but I suddenly felt hot under the collar.

His shoulders were ludicrously broad — at least, they would have been if they'd rested on the frame of a regular human male.

On his body, they were perfectly — and powerfully — proportioned.

His shoulders drew down into a tapered waist that was narrow but strong.

His sharp suit pants did little to disguise his powerful thighs.

Ideal for pumping.

He was dressed classily and could have fit well in any setting back on Earth, formal or informal, and I supposed that was the whole point.

But more than his powerful physical appearance was his bearing that seemed to loom larger even than the bed, pulling in the eye and the attention, refusing to let go.

There was something alluring about him, something that demanded you pay attention...

Or maybe it was just because my hormones were through the roof and I had no real way of keeping them under control.

His eyes fixed on mine and it was like a physical blow, rocking me back slightly, making my knees suddenly feel like jelly.

They were golden melted with deep oak brown, and swirls of purple that seemed to catch the light and glimmer.

I was glad I didn't have anything to say otherwise I would have stumbled over myself.

His eyes flicked down to my feet and then back up again, taking me in, before resting on my eyes.

"Yes," he said in his deep baritone. "Please sit down."

There was only one chair across from his position on the other side of the table and I staggered over to it.

Already out of breath and all he'd done was look at me!

I fell into the chair as I would have back home before remembering where I was and hastily rearranged myself with my back straight and hands resting in my lap.

Just like at the Principal's office!

"My name is Feon," he said. "According to your documents, yours is Beth, is that correct?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Is that a common name back on your planet?"

"Yes. Pretty common. I guess there must be thousands of Beths around."

He smiled and the light once again shimmered in his eyes. "I doubt that very much."

His eyes drilled into mine as I realized he was paying me a compliment.

The blood rushed to my cheeks and up either side of my neck.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and I hastily wiped it away with the back of my hand.

His eyes dropped to the documents on the desk.

While he was reading, the silence deafening in my ears, I glanced over at the bed, that giant soft monster rearing up into my vision once more.

Big and huge and made for all sorts of sinful things...

"I see you're a nurse," he said.

I snapped back to attention and nodded. "Uh, yes. A nurse. That's right."

"Are you capable of supporting a child when you have one?"

"The government gives a lot of support for mothers who raise kids these days. We have a bit of a... problem with having kids naturally."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Many species are these days. But for what it's worth, I think being a mother is one of the most honorable things any living creature can do."

I don't know why his opinion should mean so much to me... but it did and I beamed back like a happy child at him. "All I can do is my best," I said.

Feon put down the document he was reading and looked at me for a long moment before seeming to come to a decision. "How would you like to be set up for the rest of your life?" he asked.

I just stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"How would you like to have all the money you will ever need in raising

your child? Not with government handouts. Not with the kindness of others. But with your own money, your own funds. Would you like that?"

I didn't know where this was coming from. "The... Seeding Facility just offers the venue for us to meet and... mate, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "That's correct. But what if there was a little sweetener on top? A little... cherry as you say in your language?"

I was flummoxed. "I don't understand."

"I can see I'm doing a poor job of explaining," he said, looking at his hands in his lap, "so let me try again. What if you were to mate with a prince and have his child?"

Of all the questions he could have asked me, of everything he might have said, that was the *very last thing* I ever thought anyone would say to me.

The only thing I could think of as a way to answer was a grunt at the back of my throat:

"Huh?"

FEON

“HUH?”

I tapped the translator in my arm and asked it to repeat the meaning of the word Beth had just used.

It came back by answering with the same choked grunt Beth had uttered:
“Huh?”

There was, according to the translation device, no similar meaning in the Krev language and so I was unsure how I was supposed to continue.

I just waited to see how she would respond next — hopefully with real words instead of meaningless grunts.

But she appeared to be struggling to express whatever thoughts were running through her mind at that moment.

I tried to gauge just what she had been meaning to say by the emotions playing across her face.

It was a fascinating study of emotions.

First, she just stared at me, her mouth hanging open.

She looked at her hands and remained that way for a long time before she looked up at me.

Her eyes focused on my cheeks or my forehead or my horns — never my eyes.

“You’re being serious?” she finally said.

I was grateful she hadn’t chosen to turn and run and never come back.

It was how some females had reacted in the past — believing me to be crazy or some kind of scam artist.

“Yes,” I said. “I am being very serious.”

She slowly — *very* slowly — raised her eyes to mine and scanned them

as if ascertaining if I was *really* being serious.

“By being Seeded by a member of the Royal Family, you will be given certain privileges,” I went on. “You will be given a stipend to live out your life. And a home — simply choose which one you desire and it shall be acquired for you — within reasonable limits, of course. Everything you or your child ever wants for the rest of your lives will be taken care of. If you wish to live in peace, every effort will be made to ensure it. If you wish to have more of a role in the running of the Empire, that too shall be catered for. And when your child comes of age, he — or she — will be given the same choice.”

Beth just sat there, stunned, absorbing the information. “Why would you do this?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“Because you will be the mother of a Prince of the Krev. Your child will be in line to the throne.”

“Hold up!” Beth said, raising her hands above her head and getting to her feet. “You’re telling me my child will be the *heir to the throne*?”

“One of them,” I said, nodding. “But they will be one in a long line of potential heirs. The chances of your child ascending to the throne is *extremely* remote.”

Beth shook her head and muttered under her breath:

“And my Principal always said I would never do anything of any value in my life...”

“What was that?” I asked.

Beth shook her head and waved her hands as if to communicate it didn’t matter.

She slowly sat back down. “I came here to get Seeded. I didn’t think it would have anything to do with royalty!”

“Very few are chosen,” I said. “We have to be careful about who we select. It won’t just be Royal Seed in the child but yours too.”

Beth shook her head, stood up, and clenched her tiny fists by her sides. “Look, I came here to sleep with an alien male. And yes, saying it out loud like that does sound nuts... but it’s the fact of the matter and just the way it is. I don’t need these complications. If we’re done playing these games, I will leave now and go find a male to Seed me.”

She turned on her heel and marched toward the door.

Her palm barely touched the sensor and it whooshed open.

She shifted her weight to step outside.

I quickly stood up. “You misunderstand me. This is about Seeding you.”
“It’s about a whole lot more than that, buster.”

Buster?

“You’re asking me to have a kid that will be in the limelight his — or her — whole life!” she said. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone — least of all my own kid!”

I smiled. “I am pleased that is your response. Some accept without a moment’s thought, making me wonder if I made the right decision. I can see I made the right one this time.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the type to just jump into a decision without thinking about it first.”

I nodded, impressed. “I understand. This is not a decision to take lightly. How much more time do you need?”

She ran her eyes over me, her anger giving her the fire she needed to meet my eyes. “Let me get this straight. I get Seeded and receive a stipend to help raise the kid. They will never need for anything. And there are no obligations and they’ll never be taken from me. Did I understand right?”

I understood her desire to ensure the kid would be hers and no others.

Perhaps if my mother had fought a little harder for me when I was a kid, the Royal Guard would never have been able to take me...

But no, that wasn’t a fair comparison.

The life of a poor farmer was not the same as that of a human.

“Yes,” I said. “You understand correctly.”

Beth gnawed at her bottom lip. “Then I don’t need to think about it any longer. If it means security for my baby for the rest of its life... well, I think that’s something I can live with.”

And then she did a very curious thing.

She marched toward me and extended her hand, open-palmed, facing to one side, and looked at me with grim determination.

I stared at the hand, peered at it to see if she had anything in it.

But it was empty.

My eyes flicked up to hers and I cocked my head to one side in confusion.

Beth stepped forward, closing the distance between us, and took my hand — which up until that point had been hanging by my side — and shook it.

It was the most bizarre thing I had ever witnessed.

“This is how we make a deal on Earth,” she said in way of explanation.

“Oh,” I said, thinking there must have been some kind of exchange of bodily fluids or hormones or something as part of the process.

Surely it couldn't *just* be a shake of the hand with these Earthlings?

I shook her hand back, matching the same speed and movement she had with mine. “Then it's a deal.”

Finally, she yanked her hand free, ending the shake.

I wasn't sure what it was meant to prove or what I was meant to get from it or how it bonded me and my word to hers, but it didn't really matter.

I had no intention of breaking my word. “Then for the next seven days, you will mate with the Prince.”

Beth nodded. “For the next seven days.”

I only wished I had explained to her properly who the Prince was, that he was, in fact, *not me*.

At least that way there was a chance we could have avoided this whole sorry business right from the very beginning...

ASLAS

I LOATHE THESE CREATURES.

These Ukmat had been the bane of the Krev Empire since time memorial.

Every time there was a random attack, every time there was an issue, it could *always* be traced back to these Ukmat.

We had fought them intermittently over the years.

They were not truly warriors, and therefore not great fighters, and so avoided hand-to-hand conflict as much as possible, preferring instead to attack from the shadows while our backs were turned.

But recently, after I spoke with my father, the Emperor — may he live forever — I'd succeeded in encouraging him to attack the Ukmat and show no mercy, to make them feel the pain they had inflicted upon our people for so long.

Finally, he had listened to me and we had — predictably — wiped the floor with them.

Their military was geared towards espionage attacks with stealthy assassins and not full frontal war of which we had long since perfected.

We destroyed them, and now here they sat, opposite me at the negotiating table.

They had surrendered virtually *instantly* — what would have been great shame in the Krev culture.

I had pushed our military into the heart of their territory as quickly as I could, knowing that at any moment, my kind and merciful father would give in to their pathetic pleas far sooner than I ever would have.

Our goal was not to take territory, to seize the colonies or other assets, but simply deliver them a message:

If you attack us, be prepared for a swift and unyielding response.

That message was undermined by my father, who did not like to see any more bloodshed than necessary.

And so, I had been called in to handle the negotiations.

I hate looking at these disgusting creatures.

They had opted to remain in their regular appearance and not shift into one that might be more appealing to me.

They were shifters, capable of morphing into any shape, assuming it was of a similar size to their original bodies.

Presenting themselves in this way was supposed to represent their contriteness and how much they respected me at the head of the negotiating table.

They were insect-like creatures, with hard brown casings and tall black spokes on the top of the heads, which was what they used to see with.

They had long powerful arms and thick abdomens where they stored their eggs and seed for when they mated.

Mated.

I couldn't stop thinking about it.

As hard as I tried, I simply could not divert my thoughts from my Steyatt.

Like all Krev, I went through Steyatt and, as it had already started, I was getting antsy and frustrated.

I flew off the handle at the slightest inconvenience and was quick to anger.

Not the ideal mindset to negotiate.

I needed to satisfy my needs, which was why I had dispatched Feon to find me a mate.

Ordinarily, I preferred to head out myself and find mates who could fulfill the much-needed role.

But with how these negotiations were dragging on, I knew I didn't want to waste any more time than I had to.

Already, these creatures were taking up too much of my time.

Each time the document was finalized, they huddled up in a corner and buzzed among themselves in their hideous language, glancing over their shoulders at me and my co-negotiators, before returning to the table and demanding we edit a crucial aspect of the negotiation.

My father had told me to be patient with them, to be open to anything they wanted — but it was at my discretion as to whether or not to give it to

them.

As we were the victors, they the obvious losers, I was not much in the mood to hash out every single tiny item.

Not with my cock burning, throbbing, hurting, pressing against the front of my pants.

My seed was virtually *begging* me to leave this room and agree to everything the Ukmat wished, so that I might then leave and finally satisfy my primal urges.

Now, finally, it looked like they were actually ready to sign off.

Their chief negotiator picked up the traditional Krev pen, lowered it to the dotted line where they were to sign.

I felt excited, knowing that soon I would be free, that I could leave this place, leap onto my waiting shuttle craft and fly at warp speed to the Seeding Facility where Feon would have already located my Steyatt mate.

He hadn't contacted me yet but he would soon.

I hope.

The Ukmat's chief negotiator paused, the tip of the pen perched on the dotted line.

He glanced at his partners on either side before leaning back and looking me in the eye — at least, I *thought* he was looking me in the eye — it was impossible to tell with the tubes that were his eyes.

They could just as easily be looking behind himself as much as they were looking at me.

But by the way he folded his long insect-like arms, I thought it more likely he was glaring at me.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, doing my utmost to control my desire to scream.

“We are not pleased with the assurances you have given us that you will not attack us again,” the creature said.

Even though his words were translated into that of the Krev language, I could still hear his voice on the other side of the table, speaking its harsh cultural tone — as ugly as the creatures themselves were.

I ground my teeth and said in as steady a voice as I could manage:

“Let's not forget *you* were the ones that attacked first. *Many times* over the years. We did not respond and your attacks became more and more flagrant. Finally, we put our foot down and defended ourselves. We will not stop defending ourselves so long as you keep on attacking us.”

My chief of security, who sat on my left-hand side, folded his arms and nodded his head.

I knew he felt the same way I did and that my father — may he live forever — had been *far* too lenient on these creatures.

I would be an *entirely* different ruler when my time to rule had come.

Without missing a beat the creature said, “This was an unprovoked attack. *We* are the victims. *We* are not the attackers.”

How the creature could say that with a serious face and not burst into laughter, I had no idea.

“We will have to... disagree on that point,” I said in my very best imitation of my father. “I can give you my word that we will not attack you unless provoked. Just as we did last time. Now, if you could please sign the document—”

The chief negotiator turned to his cohorts and together, they buzzed, mandibles flapping, making that hideous noise that sent a shiver up my spine.

Once more, my Steyatt begged me to give in, to promise them anything they wished just so long as I could leave right at that moment, find a female, and have my way with her.

I was about to slam my fist on the table when the creatures straightened up.

“We kindly request another few weeks to discuss the peace agreement,” the Ukmat negotiator announced.

“No!” I snapped before collecting myself.

But it was too late.

It was already out of my mouth and even they could hear the frustration in my voice.

I reined in as much of my anger as I could but I’d just about had it with these creatures. “You have already delayed the signing of this document several times. You have asked for assurances and we have given them. You have asked for promises and we made them. Now, our patience has worn thin.”

As has my Steyatt.

I got to my feet to show them I was serious. “If you do not sign this peace agreement within the next minute—” My Steyatt screamed that I would dare to make it wait that long. “—then I will assume you are not serious about peace between our species. The war will continue and this time, I will take your colonies, resources, and anything else I wish.”

The creatures just stared — *I think* — at me.

When I turned to march away, I heard their chairs pushing back beneath their heavy weight.

The chief negotiator said:

“Very well. We shall sign.”

Then the creature reached down, seized the pen, and scribbled its signature.

It did the same on each of the other pages.

Startled that we had actually reached the end of negotiations and sensing a trap, I had my people check each page was signed — and then had their *assistants* check them again — to make sure these creatures could not use it as an excuse later.

Suddenly it dawned on me that these creatures had been waiting for me to give in and declare the negotiations were over.

It was their way of ensuring they got as much out of me and the deal as possible.

I shook my head at myself for being so naïve.

And stupid.

I made a mental note to remember it for next time — and I knew in my gut there would be a next time.

I would put the deal on the table, make the same threat with the one-minute deadline, and then get up and leave.

The hardest part of the entire process was when the creature reached out with its disgusting hard shell arm, which it morphed into that of a Krev arm.

It wished to shake in the traditional Krev manner as a sign of respect between the two of us.

I just stared at that arm, at how alien it looked attached to this alien.

I did not respect these creatures.

I expected them to break the treaty the moment they left the room and attempt to carry on with their pillaging and profiteering at the expense of our people.

But I was not there on my behalf, but my father's.

I would not let him down.

I shut my eyes, turned my head away, and gripped the Ukmat by the arm.

We held on tight and squeezed each other hard.

The creatures were strong even if they were not a real warrior race.

Finally, I managed to raise my eyes to the creature's tube-eyes.

How could anyone trust any beast that did not have eyes you could look into?

Then I realized that even if it morphed into a pair of Krev eyes, I knew any emotion it showed would be just as fake.

The moment we released each other, I turned and marched towards the door.

I subconsciously rubbed my hand over my arm where I had touched the creature.

“Prep my shuttlecraft,” I said. “I’m leaving *immediately*.”

“Already prepared, my Prince,” my chief of security said. “Now that the treaty is signed, do you wish for the military to stand down?”

“No,” I said. “They will break the agreement. When they do, I want us ready. Maybe seeing us ready for war will make them think twice.”

As I neared the launchpad, my communicator buzzed.

I raised my forearm and the hologram of Feon flashed into life.

It was amazing that he could look identical.

I might as well have been looking into a mirror.

Even from a young age, I thought it strange there was another creature in the galaxy that looked so similar to me, and yet, shared no relation at all.

Every senior member of the Royal Family had a decoy — often *many* decoys — to make it more difficult for our enemies to hunt us down and attack us.

Usually, Feons were kept at a distance and not allowed too close to their royal counterparts but I had few friends growing up and the next brother was five years younger than me.

The gap could have been larger considering the differences between us.

When Feon had shown up, he had been a lost, confused little thing, and I had taken pity on him.

We were of a similar age but we couldn’t have been more different.

At least, back then.

I shared my toys with him, shared my secrets, my thoughts and feelings, and each time he was dispatched in my place, I felt a gut-wrenching sensation, knowing he could very well die in my place.

I knew in my heart I would never be able to fully forgive myself if that happened.

I extended to him my very best security in such situations — often to the frustration of my security personnel who would much rather protect me than

my decoy.

But as I always told him:

“It would look strange if you had more security around Feon than the supposed prince, don’t you think?”

The argument never failed to produce a growl in the security officer’s throat.

Still, that wasn’t the real reason I had dispatched my best security members with him.

I thought of him as a brother — more of a brother than even my own flesh and blood at times.

He was not heir to the throne and would never ascend to it, but we shared so much history together, so many similarities that it was hard to think of him as anything other than a part of me.

In the times when he looked different — before he had surgery to alter his appearance to look more like me — I often wondered what he would have looked like if he had been allowed to grow old naturally and take on his own identity.

“Give me some good news,” I told him.

Now, looking back at myself in the holo-image, I heard him say the magic words I had been hoping for ever since these negotiations started:

“I found her. I’ve found your perfect mate.”

My Steyatt relaxed — just a little — knowing that soon, it would have a female all to itself, to use and play with, and I could not be more excited.

“What is her name?” I asked. “Where is she from? What species is she? Is she—” I cut myself off and shook my head. “No. Don’t tell me anything. Let me discover her for myself.”

“As you wish, my Prince,” Feon said before ending the transmission.

He was always quick and to the point — much like I was.

I supposed, in many ways, no matter what we looked like on the outside, on the inside, we were still our own people.

But we hung out so often that my personality traits rubbed off on him just as his must have rubbed off on me.

We each shared the dislike of wasting time.

As I climbed into the shuttlecraft, leaving my security personnel behind, I fell into the pilot seat, took off, and began my journey toward the Seeding Facility to satiate my Steyatt.

If the rock-hard cock in my pants were any indication, the mate Feon had

chosen for me had better be prepared.
She was in for the ride of her life.

BETH

I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE my ears when Feon told me I would be mating with him — a prince!

I supposed I always knew there were princes and princesses, kings and emperors throughout the galaxy, but they had seemed so far from me and my life that they might as well have not existed.

In fact, royalty back on Earth might as well have been aliens for how little interaction I'd had with them.

To think I was now going to meet them in person, to speak with them, to *mate* with them...

I could hardly believe it.

Then when Feon had told me I would also receive a *lifelong stipend* to take care of the child — *a child that would be a prince or princess too!* — I really could *not* believe it.

Initially, I had been taken aback as it was so different from what I had expected at the Seeding Facility.

My initial reaction was “Hell no!”

But as he explained the situation to me, identifying each of my fears and pain points before arguing the countercase to them, I began to realize I was being a fool.

I had come to the Seeding Facility to get alien seed and I had not cared then about where it came from.

Now, the Seed would still come from an alien male... he would just happen to have royal blood running through his veins.

And it came with all these other benefits too!

The only real issue I had was that I did not want the royal family of this

Krev to come along and claim him later if they needed him.

If the child grew up and wanted to have more to do with its heritage, and the royal family was open to that, then I was just as open to it.

But I was pleased to hear the royal family would not stick their noses in and force me to raise the child in the traditional Krev way — however that was!

I knew as little about the Krev species as I did royalty.

Feon had left the room to send a message, leaving me on my own to pace about the suite and think through how I really felt and thought about this whole situation.

I veered between extreme excitement... and extreme concern.

After all, I didn't know these Krev and I didn't know if I could trust them.

But, strangely, I felt like I *could* trust Feon.

It was in his bearing and the confident way he spoke, the way he looked at me...

Somehow, I just *trusted* him...

I shook my head at how naïve I could be.

After all, here I was, in a Seeding Facility, surrounded by aliens, each with different cultures and traditions, and I was ready to *believe* the first alien male I had come across?

And yet, I was excited at the prospect of mating — *finally!* — and thrilled that my expectations were going to be met.

I had expected to lay with a powerful alien male and that was *exactly* what was going to happen.

I bit my bottom lip and glanced back towards the door.

Maybe I could be a little cheeky, a little playful...

I didn't want to waste any time bedding Prince Feon, and thought he might actually enjoy it if I were to play up to his own expectations.

I slipped the *négligée* off over my head, hung it from the back of a chair, and crept into the giant bed.

I supposed it needed to be massive to cater to the huge alien males!

I sunk between the cool sheets and tugged it up to my neck.

My head rested on the luxurious pillow, staring up at the ceiling.

I pictured Feon, his massive shoulders, his powerful frame, and imagined him entering the room, seeing me in the bed, naked, ready for him.

He would remove his clothes and stalk towards the bed.

I would grow a little nervous, but excited at the same time.

When he removed his underwear — assuming these creatures even *wore* underwear! — his huge throbbing member (which I was certain he would have) would swing like a pendulum on a grandfather clock back and forth as he strode toward me.

Then he would pull the sheet back and have his wicked way with me, pumping me with his delicious Seed.

I squealed with excitement and rubbed my legs together, already beginning to feel a little wet.

But my current position was not exactly the most thrilling so I tugged back the blanket and lay with my head resting on my palm, my elbow bent, gazing toward the door.

I raised a leg, pulling the sheet up with it, and checked myself in the mirror on the back wall.

I didn't look half bad.

At least good enough for a huge alien beast!

I sniffed my armpits and was pleased my scent was still there.

I liked to spray different scents on my neck, elbows, and knees, and then sniff them throughout the day.

I had always loved scents and smells and was often complimented on my perfume.

I arranged the blanket so it hung just above my nipples, revealing plenty of breast to help him grow excited, but covering enough for his imagination to do laps.

Oh my God, I thought. This is happening.

This is really happening!

Soon, his Seed would be buried deep in my belly.

He would pump it into me again and again until there was no way I could *not* get pregnant.

Then I would leave the Facility and within days I would test positive on a pregnancy test.

A pregnancy test!

I had heard many older women talking about them over the years but I had never seen one for myself before — except maybe in a museum.

They were like gold dust in the modern world and I look forward to seeing the smiley face on it, knowing I was pregnant, and that in nine months I would have a baby of my very own.

It would likely have Feon's scales, his horns, perhaps even his golden

eyes.

The baby would be gorgeous and I would spoil him with love.

I would—

The lock clunked and the door drew open.

He was back!

And I was off somewhere fantasizing!

I hastily assumed my earlier choreographed position, but my hair fell across my face.

I hastily tugged it out of the way, but as I did, the blanket fell, revealing my bare breasts.

No! That's too much too soon!

I hastily tugged it up over myself before puffing at the strands of hair that still hung over my eyes.

I had completely ruined the moment.

But as I looked over at Feon, I noticed the expression on his face was exactly what I had wished for.

He stood in the doorway, mouth agape and hanging open, staring hungrily at me.

The door was still open and he hastily shut it so no other males could see me.

He didn't remove his clothing as I had expected and instead lowered his eyes and approached the desk where our negotiation had occurred earlier.

He seemed distracted.

I sat up. "Is everything all right? Did the message not go well?"

"No, no. The message went... fine. Everything is... okay."

He smiled but once again, his eyes did not rise to mine.

I wondered if I had disappointed him somehow.

It hadn't occurred to me that perhaps his species preferred shy females, that being excited had actually had the *opposite* effect to the one I'd wanted and stifled his arousal.

I lowered my eyes to his crotch and could see that was definitely *not* the case.

He stood to attention at the front of his pants.

Each time he drew his eyes up to mine, he immediately looked away again.

Unable to bring himself to look at me.

I knew something was wrong but couldn't quite figure out what.

Has he changed his mind about laying with me? I wondered.

I tossed my legs over the side of the bed, grabbed the sheet, wrapped it around myself, and shimmied over to him.

He eased back when I leaned in close as if he detested my very presence.

“If there’s anything I can do...” I said warily. “If there’s anything I’ve done wrong... I’m sorry. I didn’t think our cultures were so different... If there’s any way I can help you...”

He shook his head and looked at me — *really* looked at me — his eyes burning wells of fire, the molten gold melting my heart.

With more confidence than I felt, I reached up and stroked his cheek with my thumb. “Whatever you need,” I said. “Just tell me.”

He didn’t turn away, but shut his eyes, and allowed himself to feel my hand stroking his scales.

They were different to how I thought they would be.

They were not rough as I expected but smooth to the touch, and cool like ice cubes.

I imagined what they would feel like with him beneath me, with me riding him hard, his coolness pressed against my sweaty breasts as I worked him — and myself — hard.

I went up onto my tiptoes and kissed him on the chin.

It was as high as I could reach.

The moment my lips touched his scales, his eyes bolted open, and he flew back, as if I had hit him with a psychic blow.

“I can’t do this...” he said in a tone that suggested it was aimed more at himself than at me.

“I thought you wanted to mate with me?” I said, feeling hurt.

He looked at me before turning away again. “It’s not that... It’s... something else. I can’t... I mean...”

My heart thumped in my chest as my dreams began to slip through my fingers.

How embarrassing to lose the alien male that had Claimed me from all the others.

I wanted alien seed, and it was right there, in the front of his pants, ready to be shot into me...

But I was not about to let it go.

I moved in closer to him.

He backed further into the corner.

I found it strange that such a huge powerful beast could be backed into a corner like someone so small and relatively weak as me.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” I said.

But afraid wasn’t the right word.

I didn’t think a creature such as him was even *capable* of being afraid — what could he ever *possibly* be scared of?

But he was clearly concerned about something.

Maybe it had been a long time since he’d been intimate — just as it had been for me?

But I had since long ago learned that taking action was the best solution to most problems.

Just begin something and the problem often resolved itself.

“I shouldn’t be doing this...” he said softly.

“Of course you should,” I said. “It’s the most natural thing in the world.”

I took his head in my hand and pulled him down toward me.

I went up onto my tiptoes and brought his lips on mine.

Then I reached down and released the knot in the blanket I had tied earlier, and let it fall to the floor.

I stood before him, completely naked and vulnerable.

Now, his eyes moved over my face, then down my neck, to my breasts, my waist, and sex.

He took me in entirely, just as I hoped I would soon take him entirely within me.

FEON

THE MOMENT I had sent the message to Aslas, I had turned and headed back to the suite.

My time with Beth was running short, as Aslas would soon arrive within a few hours.

And for some reason, I felt the drive to return to her as quickly as possible.

It was not that I thought she would get up to any mischief but simply because I enjoyed being in her presence.

The moment I left the room to send my message, I felt like a part of me had been removed, like the sun had set and darkness had swept in.

It wasn't depression or dismay but a kind of coldness I couldn't completely account for.

I knew what it felt like to be in the presence of someone I enjoyed being with.

I enjoyed hanging out with Aslas — I always had done since a very young age as he had been my very first and best real friend — and I drew great warmth from that relationship too.

But this was different.

It was not just a warmth upon setting eyes on her — although that was certainly part of it — but the knowledge that no matter what, she would always be there, would always support me, always push me to try harder, to be better.

It was a ludicrous thought because she was going to be Aslas's Steyatt mate and that had absolutely *nothing* to do with me.

And yet, I felt that pull, yanking me towards Beth's direction.

So, when I opened the door and saw her lying there in the bed naked, I gasped.

My eyes bulged and my cock sprung into action.

It had been a semi ever since I had first seen her — I couldn't understand how every male couldn't with her in that silk *négligée* — but now the desire was so strong and overbearing.

After all, I was also going through my Steyatt but had decided to take care of Aslas's needs before resolving my own.

He was my duty and always had to come first.

There were plenty of other virile females in the Seeding Facility and I could have my pick of any of them — Aslas's VIP membership also extended to me, thankfully.

But seeing Beth in the bed, the blanket barely covering her modesty, I knew I did not wish for anyone else, knew *I* wanted to be with her, and no one else.

There was no other female in the Facility, so far as I was concerned.

My immediate impulse was to rush towards her, to strip off and leap into bed with her...

But then, my cooler head — a.k.a. duty — prevailed.

I stopped myself and immediately turned towards the desk, hoping by putting a barrier between us I could somehow use it as protection.

I should have just turned and left the room, but I so desired being in her presence that it was impossible for me to simply up and leave.

She got out of bed and approached me.

She backed me into the corner and my sense of duty — what had always been a raging river, had shrunken into a trickling stream.

When she pressed her lips to mine, I no longer had any defenses to hold against her.

She dropped the blanket and exposed her naked body, and it was the final straw.

I was lost.

I took a plump breast in my hand and rubbed the nipple with my thumb.

I began to retract my hand but Beth took it and held it to her breast, looking up at me with those big beautiful brown eyes.

My mouth felt dry.

She went up onto her tiptoes again, and this time, I leaned forward so she could kiss me on the cheek before working her way over to my mouth.

As she took my lips, I took hers in return.

My instincts were a jumbled mess — a first in my life of servitude to the Prince.

My Steyatt screamed for me to keep going, to push on, to throw all caution to the wind and not care for the morrow — or even the next few minutes for that matter — and to lose myself in the moment.

My sense of duty hammered at me from the opposite direction, growing weaker now like an old man losing his strength.

I lost myself to that warm feeling, that sense of calm in her presence, and reached down, took her ass in my hands, squeezed hard, before pulling her toward me and grinding my cock against her so she could feel it.

She reached down and gripped my throbbing member and made a surprised little grunt.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I thought you would be big,” he said, “but this is going to be a real challenge. Come on, big boy.”

Holding my cock, she led me towards the bed.

It gave me a moment to think, but the thoughts were unwanted, my desire quickly stifling them.

I should have told Beth the truth, I knew, should have told her I wasn't the Prince.

But to do so was to lose her.

The moment we reached the bed, Beth went down on her knees, pulled down my pants, and immediately took me in her mouth.

She certainly didn't need to excite me — I didn't think I had ever been harder my entire life.

She licked me and cupped my balls in her hands, gently stroking them.

Her tongue found the head of my cock and massaged it.

I gasped and let out a hot breath, rocking back on my heels as she took me in the back of her throat.

She tasted me, seeming to enjoy savoring every last drop.

She stood up and laid back on the bed.

“Seed me,” she commanded.

Just looking down on her, her swollen breasts spread out, her legs wide, one hand on her nipple, squeezing gently, the other rubbing her sex...

It was too much to take.

And yet, I hesitated...

The lingering fragments of duty still clawed at me.

It's not too late, I told myself. I can still turn back and leave her untouched for when the Prince comes.

All we had done was kiss.

I had only rubbed her nipple.

And what was a nipple between brothers?

He could still enjoy her, could still savor her, and by telling her the truth, I was certain she would have respect for me.

But what respect did I have for myself, turning down such a creature?

When I had this chance to be with someone that I sensed on some level was more than just a female, more than just a mate.

I might have sensed it then but I didn't know for certain that she would turn out to be something far more important than that...

Beth must have seen the hesitation on my face as she next said breathily: "Please."

And that was it.

Such a gorgeous specimen of feminine beauty, splayed out before me, offering herself up to me, desperate for the Seed to have a child, and that imploring and vulnerable look in her eye...

It pushed me over the edge and into the darkness of the abyss below.

It didn't matter what happened next.

I was going to follow through as only a Krev in Steyatt could.

It was unstoppable now.

This is going to happen and it is going to happen right now.

I placed myself at her entrance and slowly slid inside her.

I could feel her tighten around me, causing her to gasp.

With her hand, she gently waved and said:

"Give me a second."

She repositioned herself, widening her legs, and placing a pillow underneath her ass.

The angle was better and allowed me to leverage myself more easily inside her.

Her head fell back on the mattress, her eyes fluttered, and her eyelids shivered.

As I began my slow gentle strokes inside her, I felt her juices lubricate my cock.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips against hers.

She moaned softly under her breath:

“Yes.”

I drilled her harder and she moaned loudly, wrapping her hands around my forearms, pinning me in place on top of her.

I filled her completely and there was no give.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, challenging me, imploring me to dive deeper, to go in harder.

And so, I did.

I loved the way her breasts bounced, and pinched the nipples as I rammed her hard.

The wet meaty slap of my thighs striking her reverberated through the room.

She screamed with delight and raked her nails over the scales of my chest.

I felt her tighten around me, exploding with her first orgasm.

I sped up, hammering her harder, sensing that I had only just gotten the ball rolling and to not slow down and lose momentum.

I rode her harder and felt her tighten again.

I altered the position of her legs, taking her from the side now.

She wailed, her fists gripping the bed sheet, and screamed as I pummeled her into submission.

She rolled onto her front so I could take her from behind.

I was careful not to insert my full length at the delicate angle for fear of hurting her.

She looked back at me over her shoulder, equal parts shock and awe.

She rocked back, her hips pressing against mine, as I raced toward that horizon fast approaching.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head too as I felt the ejaculation coming and...

I growled as I pumped my Seed into her, thick and deep and hot.

My legs shivered and my body ached deliciously.

I stood there for a moment, squeezing my cock so she perceived every last drop.

She flopped back on the bed and used the pillow to raise her hips slightly, presumably to help the Seed inside her.

I wasn't sure if it helped or not but I supposed it didn't hurt.

“That was incredible,” she said. “And the best part is, we still have the

rest of the week to go!”

I lay down beside her, chuckling.

She squeezed me tight and kissed me on the cheek.

I moved to the bathroom to wash.

I splashed some water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror.

The broad grin on my face faltered just a moment... before giving way to the shame I felt.

“What are you doing?” I asked myself. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

The elation of the moment sank, leaving me with the knowledge I had betrayed Aslas — my brother in all but blood.

And now, I wasn’t sure how to proceed.

If I could go back, would I have refused to sleep with Beth?

Would I have refused her?

I knew the answer was no.

I could have been given the choice a million times and each time, the response would have been the same.

I would have gone through with it.

Nothing had ever felt so right, nor so satisfying.

And for the first time in my life, I suddenly wanted something else, something other than what I was *supposed* to want.

I wanted this female.

I wanted her more than life itself.

But it was still a problem, and one I was going to have to face soon.

I had to either tell the Prince the truth or Beth.

Either way, I was going to be a liar to one or both of them.

But which would I choose?

I shook my head and decided to face the question later.

As I turned toward the shower, something caught my eye in the mirror.

Something at the base of my spine.

I peered closer at it, turning myself at an angle to see it more clearly.

Dirt? I wondered.

I rubbed a hand over it and found it didn’t come off.

I ran the tap and filled my palm with water and scrubbed at it again.

And still, it wouldn’t come off.

Then, slowly, the realization dawned on me.

I recognized it for what it was.

It was the Joisa.
Beth wasn't just a mate.
She was my *fated* mate!
And that changed everything.

FEON

BETH HAD GONE to get some food in the cafeteria.

After the past few hours of solid lovemaking, the poor thing had exhausted herself.

I had bent her body into so many positions that she complained every muscle hurt.

But it was a complaint she seemed *very* willing to overcome and that only made me want her even more.

As I began to kiss her, pressing my lips against hers and reaching down to grab great handfuls of her gorgeous body, she chuckled and gently pushed me away, shaking her head.

“Oh no,” she said, waving a finger at me. “Not again! Not until I get some food in my belly! Don’t you guys need to recharge? Even for just a little while?”

“Usually, yes,” I admitted before placing my hands on her bare shoulders. “But what kind of male Krev would I be if I did not take full advantage of you with every minute that passed?”

I leaned forward to press my lips against hers again and she laughed, escaping and pulling on her *négligée*. “Well, female humans *do need* a little time to recover!”

I crept up behind her and ground my hard cock against her back.

She groaned and her head flopped back onto my shoulder.

I reached up under her *négligée* and grabbed a handful of her large swollen breasts.

It was now no surprise why she was so attractive to me.

Having the Joisa signify her as my fated mate just made my blood bubble

with desire even greater than it naturally would have.

As I gently eased her *négligée* up and saw that she sported the same tattoo as mine at the base of her spine, it only further stoked my passion.

She hadn't seen it yet, or if she had, she hadn't mentioned it — and that didn't seem very likely.

It wasn't every day you woke up with a mysterious tattoo having grown on your skin.

She was fated to me, just as I was fated to her.

We were a pair.

She moaned as I slipped inside her once more, grinding hard inside her.

We stood there, our hips riding against each other.

She placed her hands on the tabletop as I slowly drove myself into her deeper.

She was so tight I could hardly stand it.

I rested my chin on the top of her head, peering into the mirror across one wall, and reached up to pop her breasts free from her skimpy *negligee*.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she moaned joyfully.

We were both grateful for the quick ejaculation as I spilled my seed inside her.

She eased forward and slid my cock out from her, which thudded on the desk.

She shook her head at me, a big grin on her face. "If we're not careful, you're going to wind up dehydrated before too long."

I chuckled. "I hope so."

She leaned forward and pecked me on the lips, taking her time to rearrange her *negligee* before skipping toward the door. "Are you sure you don't want to come? You must be running pretty close to empty too."

I shook my head. "It's all right. I'll wait here. Don't be too long."

Beth gave me a wink. "You just try and keep me away, Buster."

Buster?

There was that term again and I still had not asked her what it meant.

She blew me a kiss, eased the door open, and left.

The suite felt empty without her in it.

I peered over at the bed, the sheets haphazard and messy.

I wished we could be elsewhere, in another bed, somewhere far, far away from here.

During the few downtime moments we had between lovemaking sessions,

I thought about the Prince and how I was supposed to break the news to him.

The appearance of the Joisa solved one problem — by revealing it to him, it was unreasonable to expect I could control my desire for my mate.

Although I had betrayed his trust and tossed aside my duty in exchange for heated passion, at least there was a good excuse for it.

He would, I believed, forgive me.

I hadn't yet revealed the truth to Beth either.

It was simply too much for an alien species not used to the concept of fated mates to understand, never mind accept.

She had come to the Seeding Facility to get Seeded and become pregnant.

She had not wished to give birth to a Royal Prince — and now that I was her fated mate, that was *never* going to happen — so now I had to break that to her too.

I had to come clean and reveal I was nothing but a decoy, a reflection of the real Royal Prince.

Then I would have to see the beaten expression on her face when she realized I had lied to her, had pretended to be the Prince even though it was initially an honest case of mistaken identity.

I hadn't done it on purpose, but it would not come across that way.

She would take it badly but I was confident that, eventually, she would accept the truth.

We were fated mates and there was nothing we could do but for her to forgive me.

And I would promise to spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

It was a sacrifice I was very willing to make.

There was only one thing that could trump the duty to a member of the Royal Family and that was the duty to forever have faith in your fated mate.

I was not about to let her go — not even to my Prince.

I looked over at the messy bed once more.

It was obvious much lovemaking had taken place there.

I set to tidying it up, remaking it with all the precision of a military soldier.

No sooner had I finished making it than a knock came at the door.

My stomach fell between my feet and through the floor.

I suddenly felt extremely nervous.

It could only be one person.

The Prince.

He would have raced here the very instant he'd finished with the negotiations.

Although I would have preferred to meet him at the dock upon his arrival, it was too risky.

Someone might see the two of us and know one of us was a decoy, the other the real Prince, and that would immediately put him in danger.

I approached the door and took a moment to check the monitor on the wall.

It was, indeed, the Prince.

Although he wore a hood over his head to hide his features, I could recognize his natural body movements anywhere.

I took a deep breath and tried to bury the deep well of disgust at myself for having broken my duty to him.

I had to remind myself that fated mates were *an even greater* duty... but that did not make it any easier.

I opened the door.

Prince Aslas's broad grin froze for a moment before he frowned and said: "Feon? What are you doing here?"

I was meant to find his mate and then make myself scarce.

My presence could only mean one thing:

Something hadn't gone to plan.

The Prince turned his head toward a noise farther down the corridor — perhaps one of the other couples had come out of their suite — and quickly hustled inside, shutting the door behind himself.

He removed his hood and ran an eye around the room.

It was nothing like the luxury he was used to being surrounded by, but he appeared to take no notice of it.

"Well, where is she?" he asked. "I've got a hard-on the size of a small country—"

I raised a hand, not needing to hear his next few words — especially not when they were in connection with Beth.

"She just went for something to eat," I said.

The Prince nodded. "Good idea. Better for her to be full of energy for when we mate. I *guarantee* she's going to need it."

He gave me a wink but his grin fell when I failed to join in with his raucous jokes. "Is something wrong, my friend?" he asked, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

Despite all his wealth and immense power, he had never lost touch with the common Krev.

He always showed deep appreciation and care toward me and his other servants when he sensed something was wrong.

More than once he had stepped in to help a worker with an issue — whether it was financial or otherwise, he always took it upon himself to take care of matters personally.

And that just made it worse.

The knowledge I had betrayed my honor and duty to him by taking his Steyatt mate.

It might have been for a good reason but it still went against everything I had pledged my life to.

I couldn't meet his eyes. "There's something I need to tell you."

He followed me toward the desk.

I moved towards the chair on the other side, which would have given me a more senior position in the conversation, before reminding myself I was the junior member in this partnership.

Instead, I fell into the seat Beth had taken during our earlier negotiations.

The Prince didn't take the chair opposite and instead perched on the edge of the desk.

"I'm afraid I have... failed you," I said, looking at my hands and wringing them.

"Failed me how? You informed me you already found my Steyatt mate. Has she pulled out?"

I shook my head.

She never pulled out — except to jam her tight pussy back onto my hard cock.

I shook my head of the image and the various positions we had adopted in this very suite only a few short moments ago.

I needed to focus.

The words needed to come out right.

I ordered them carefully in my mind and prepared my numb lips to speak them. "I did find your mate..." I began. "And... I..."

"What is it, Feon? Spit it out."

I looked up and met his eyes.

I tried to ignore the concern in them.

I shut my eyes to block him out and said:

“I mated with her.”

I let the words hang between us, my eyes still shut.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants before slowly opening my eyes once more.

He just stared at me, unblinking, his expression blank and impossible to read.

His brow drew down and his lips hardened into a flat line.

He pushed himself up off the edge of the desk and towered over me. “You *betrayed* me?”

Each word was a dagger in my heart. “No!” I said reactively.

But the truth was I had and there was no escaping that.

I *had* betrayed him, but in my haste to just get the words out, I had left out an important piece of information.

“But there’s more to it than you think—”

“Oh, I think I understand it perfectly.” He jabbed a finger in my face. “You wanted a taste of the Royal life! You’ve been so close to it all your life but you never got to experience it for yourself! Now, during my Steyatt, you saw your chance and you took it!”

He ran his eyes over me as if seeing me for the first time. “In fact, I bet this isn’t even the first time you’ve done it! I bet you’ve taken my females before! Haven’t you?”

He drew closer to me threateningly. “Haven’t you!”

“Never!” I said.

“Liar!”

The Prince hurled a fist at me, but I was ready and blocked it, standing up from the chair and knocking it over.

I would never raise a fist to him and he must have known that, as he pressed forward with his attack.

“All this time, your sense of honor and duty has been an act, hasn’t it?” he growled. “Yes, I see the truth of you now! You were *never* my brother, never my dutiful servant! You were always out to get everything you ever wanted!”

I shook my head. “No. No. Never! You’ve always been good to me. I never meant—”

He swung at me again.

I leaned back, managing to avoid the blow.

As well as studying together in classrooms, we had also been self-defense

practice partners since we were old enough to form a fist.

I knew his style every bit as much as he knew mine.

But I had always been the superior fighter.

I had my own style and, as part of my training, had to learn to mimic his too.

It taught me some valuable lessons he never received — how to properly read your opponent, how to analyze their style and anticipate their next move.

As he launched himself at me, I knocked aside each blow, defending, never attacking, always keeping one step ahead.

“This isn’t you!” I yelled at him. “This is not the real Prince Aslas! This is your Steyatt talking! You need to calm down! Get a grip or things will end badly!”

His nostrils flared and he repositioned his feet.

He pulled back his leg and stepped forward with a powerful kick. “It’s *you* that should have been more careful!”

I blocked the blow and rolled to one side, but he anticipated it and fell on top of me.

He wrapped an arm around my neck and squeezed hard.

I kicked and flailed.

I could have elbowed him in the gut, could have thrown back my head to get him to release me, but I refused to harm him.

It was my job to protect him — even if it cost my life.

I yanked on his arm wrapped about my throat to get a little leverage so I could speak.

I said the words I should have spoken earlier:

“She’s... not just... a mate!” I snorted.

“Then what is she?” the Prince snarled in my ear. “A bit of fun? You used *my* mate for your own needs?”

He squeezed harder, choking me in earnest.

I struggled to breathe and black spots danced in my vision.

I would soon pass unconscious and then I would be doomed.

Whatever I did next would decide whether or not I saw another day...

Or Beth’s face...

Suddenly, the full sense of my duty to her struck me hard.

It was to her that my heart and duty now belonged, not the Prince.

I had spent my entire life protecting him, mimicking him...

But now I had to be myself.

It was the only way I could see Beth again.

I could not die here.

I roared, spittle flying from my parched lips, as I lashed out with my elbows, slamming hard into the Prince wrapped around my body like a fopiz serpent.

He grunted, hard, and his grip loosened — a little.

I threw my head back and caught him, and this time he lost his strength, but I still could not slip free.

But I took a lungful of oxygen and it was (hopefully) all I would need to deliver the crushing blow I required:

“She’s my fated mate!”

ASLAS

THE JOURNEY to the Seeding Facility had been a harried one.

My cock pressed so hard against my pants that I had to release the buttons so that it could sit comfortably in my lap.

Even then, it grew harder — so hard I could barely keep myself from taking it in hand and knocking one out.

I decided to wait and bury it inside the willing female Feon had found at the Seeding Facility.

I kept trying to distract myself with thoughts of the negotiation, how it had taken longer than expected, but now that they were over, I was extremely happy.

I didn't expect the Ukmat to stick to their promises — they never did — but at least it was a problem for later.

Right now, I needed to satisfy my Steyatt and I simply could not get to the Seeding Facility fast enough.

I brought the ship down hard, landing with all the precision I could manage at such a speed, before immediately racing to the exit hatch.

I barely remembered to grab the hood and cloak and quickly wrapped it around my head and shoulders.

The moment the hatch door opened, a member of the Seeding Facility staff was there to greet me.

I groaned, seeing it was an attractive female, her eyes perky and bright, her body slim and supple.

Management made the workers wear dull unflattering uniforms but did nothing to stop me from wanting to take this female right where she stood.

Why don't they make the staff ugly males? I wondered.

It was a suggestion I would give to Management later, I decided.

I kept my eyes on the floor and didn't stop moving.

The Assistant hurried to keep up with me. "Your suite is fully prepared," she said, not using the honorific titles I was accustomed to hearing.

She did not know I was a Prince, only a wealthy patron, otherwise she would already be on her hands and knees before me, bowing with respect...

Just the thought of her bending over, powerless to stop me as a Prince of the most powerful Empire in the galaxy, only made me hurry faster.

"Good," I said. "Good. Excellent. There's no need for you to join me. Just tell me the room number and I'll find it myself."

And have you removed from my line of sight.

She told me and I immediately hurried into the facility, racing down the infinitely long hallways.

I got lost only once and made up for the lost time by jogging once I found the right direction.

The place was a maze, but each room was numbered in sequential order, so once you began heading in the right direction, it was much easier to identify where you needed to go.

I found the right room, knocked on it, and was surprised to see Feon standing there once he answered it.

I had expected the female to be waiting for me.

I was going to rip my clothes off, and hers, then take her right there and then on the floor.

My arousal died somewhat at seeing my friend.

It meant something was wrong.

I inquired into his state of mind about what the issue might be.

What he (eventually) told me came as a total shock.

My caring nature toward my friend immediately gave way to a sudden swollen tsunami of hatred and disgust.

Out the window went all the countless hours we had spent together, along with the respect I had for him not as a servant — I never thought in terms of servants except when I was extremely angry — but as friends and colleagues.

After all, every creature that worked in the palace had their own life, their own way of thinking, their own dreams and wishes and desires, and I would never trample on them.

So long as they did not trample on mine.

With the revelation that he had taken what was rightfully mine, I

immediately saw red.

I lashed at him with fist and foot, unable to restrain myself.

He had defended well, aided by all our countless hours of practice, but when he refused to retaliate, it was only a matter of time before I had him.

Then came the second shock.

The revelation the mate he had selected for me had turned out to be his very own *fated mate!*

I couldn't believe it.

Even with my irrational anger drifting over my eyes like a red mist, I knew he was not lying.

It was too easy to disprove.

But I had to see it for myself.

With him trapped in my death hold, I grabbed his knee and twisted it to one side so he lay flat on his front.

I immediately grabbed at his pants and shirt, ripping them open to see the tattoo at the base of his spine.

I gasped and fell back, kicking away from the floor as if I had just seen him infected with some terrible disease.

But it was not a disease.

It was the exact opposite.

It was a blessing bestowed by Fate herself to unsuspecting creatures within the cosmos.

With the billions and trillions of conscious creatures in the universe, it was virtually *impossible* to discover your fated mate.

That wasn't to say it didn't happen — it did, on occasion — but it was so rare that it was often the subject of fables and fairytales, something to live up to and aspire to, not something that you could ever hope to see with your own eyes.

Especially not on someone you knew personally.

Especially not Feon that had been assigned to you since birth.

Not your closest friend.

In the past, I recalled fated mates having come to visit my Royal parents, displaying their Joisa for us to see.

It was an event always followed by the best celebrations, on the joys and beauty of nature and how even the rarest things could happen and witnessed and enjoyed.

To see it now on Feon's body...

My anger flooded from me.

Once again, I was in control of my thoughts and emotions.

The Steyatt was still there, battering at me from within, but now it had been numbed — *my entire body* had been numbed.

I just sat on the floor, looking over at him, shocked beyond words.

He slowly sat up but did not move closer to me.

He was still unsure about how I might react.

“You should have told me this before,” I said in a hollow voice.

“I didn’t know before,” he said, mimicking my own voice.

“What does it feel like to find your fated mate?” I asked him.

Even with my wealth and power, it was not something I was likely to ever experience myself.

Feon looked over at me and smiled, although it was distracted and restrained, no doubt from the fact he’d had to steal my Steyatt mate in order to achieve it. “It feels... good.”

“Good?” I said flatly. “Taking a long piss after a long journey feels *good*. Eating food after you’ve been starving for the past few hours feels *good*. The coolness of bedsheets on your scales after a hard day fighting in battle feels *good*. I would wager mating with your fated mate feels *a whole lot better* than good.”

He knew I had heard the stories and witnessed real-life fated mates in the past and the way their skin and scales seemed to shimmer with some unknown internal light.

I supposed it was the knowledge they were totally at ease in each other’s presence, that they were always going to be there for each other.

Forever.

And I was *certain* it felt a whole lot better than “good.”

“Come on,” I said. “Don’t hold back. How does it feel?”

He looked over at me and grinned that same cheeky smile I had growing up with — identical to mine and yet different at the same time.

We were perhaps the only two in the galaxy that could tell each other apart.

“It’s... incredible,” he said. “Imagine mating with someone and then having them connect with you on the deepest level possible. A level you never knew existed before. The level of something that makes you realize there really *is* something deeper and more mystical in this universe. And that you have a small piece of it, a shard of it, that fits you perfectly, like a piece

in a puzzle clicking into place. It's... difficult to describe."

I smiled over at him. "I think you did a very admirable job of describing it."

I got to my feet, dusted off my clothes, approached him, and extended him a hand.

He took it but before I helped him up I waved a finger under his nose. "Just don't get used to taking my things."

Feon snorted and joined me on his feet.

He dusted off his own clothes. "So... does that mean you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," I told him. "Fated mates are one of the ancient wonders of the universe. I would not come between you. So, where is she? Was the story about her going to get food true or just a ruse so you could confront me?"

"If I had wanted to do that," Feon said, rubbing his chin where I had choked him. "I would have her here so you wouldn't fly off the handle and attack me."

I chuckled. "You never did learn to escape my death hold."

"I guess I'll just have to try a little harder next time."

I fixed him with a look. "Next time?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "I'm glad you understand." He was silent a moment before adding: "I never planned on betraying your trust. After visiting my family on the way here, I realized just how important the bond between us is."

I reached forward and embraced him, knowing he would never instigate the hug otherwise.

He came from the rare stoic stock of his home planet and, despite all the years of training, never managed to be as open as I was.

"So, when am I going to meet her?" I asked.

Feon's expression brightened. "You want to meet her?"

"Of course. I want to meet the poor unfortunate soul who has no choice but to spend the rest of her life with you."

He let out a raucous laugh before turning serious. "I haven't told her about the fated mate stuff yet. I figured I would do it later. Or maybe she'll figure it out herself. It's a lot to drop on someone you've only known for a few hours."

"Still, I'd like to meet her."

Feon grinned. "All right. I'll find her and bring her to you."

He turned to leave but hesitated at the door. “I feel really bad about taking your mate from you. How about I find a new one for you?”

I gripped my cock through my pants. “You’d better hurry. If we wrestled any longer, it might have been you who became my Steyatt mate.”

Feon laughed again. “I’ll find one fast. It shouldn’t be hard. We are in a Seeding Facility, after all.”

As a fellow male Krev, he knew just how overpowering Steyatt could be.

He pulled the door open and stopped on the threshold.

He turned to look back at me. “Thank you for understanding. This was not easy for me. I was *not* looking forward to this meeting.”

I snorted. “If the roles were reversed, I wouldn’t want to face me either.”

Feon left.

I stood there for a moment, alone in that room, shaking my head in disbelief at what I had just witnessed.

From broken promises to the promise of a lifetime.

I wondered what it would mean for the future, if I would lose my friend.

He was the best friend I’d ever had.

It would depend on what his fated mate wanted.

If she wished to start a family elsewhere, as far from the palace as possible — something I could fully understand as it had been something I had dreamt about while growing up — then I would wish them the best.

But that was a future that could never be mine.

I was destined to inherit the throne.

Perhaps I could live that life, at least indirectly, via Feon.

I would see him grow and flourish, have his own family, perhaps even his own farm.

I would support him in every way I possibly could.

I bent down to right the chair that had been knocked over during our earlier skirmish.

When the door opened, I grinned, preparing to be my most hospitable and friendly self.

It was the second time I was to be surprised when that door opened.

The female that stood in the doorway was small, curvaceous, with the right swells in all the right places.

Feon wasn’t with her, so she couldn’t be his fated mate.

Boy, Feon worked fast! I thought. *He’d found me a replacement mate already!*

But, knowing him, he had planned this contingency plan after discovering the Joisa, and knew how desperate I would be to mate the moment I arrived at the Facility.

I ran my eyes over the female and knew instinctively that Feon had chosen well.

Being amorous with this female was not going to be a hard endeavor.

My Steyatt sprung into action immediately, stronger even than it had been on the ride over.

I just looked at the female, taking her in, as she entered the room and shut the door behind herself.

She crossed the room, went up onto his tiptoes, and pressed her lips to mine.

Steyatt could be a real curse, but when you had a willing female to play with, it could become a real blessing.

And so, finally, I unleashed my desire upon her.

And she met it with her own passion... and then some.

It was a shame it would not end well...

BETH

THE FOOD in the cafeteria was delicious.

It was a huge food court-type place with hundreds of chairs in the middle and small kiosks selling all manner of food from cultures throughout the galaxy.

Some of the chefs wrestled with their ingredients.

Clearly some of the animals did not want to be put in the bubbling pot of hot green liquid.

Others reached out to me with long tentacles as the chef apologized and hastily brought it back to its small basket.

I was relieved to find not all the animals were for eating.

The escaping tentacled creature was actually helping *cook* the food!

Small holes had been cut into the basket so the creature's twelve legs could stick out.

It gripped knives, spoons, and other implements and helped prepare a dozen different ingredients at the same time.

Bizarre.

I moved along the line, not sure if there was actually anything I was going to be able to eat.

Some of the best-smelling food looked inedible, while the most foul-smelling stuff looked like dishes from back home!

Finally, about three kiosks before the end, I came to a store that sold human-like food.

It was not very popular and many of the customers shook their heads, labeling it as "bland."

But bland was a whole lot more preferable than still-wriggling, living

creatures!

I filled up on pasta (that wasn't quite pasta) and bread (that wasn't quite bread) ensuring not to overstuff myself, which was not an easy thing to do considering how starving I was.

Once I had refueled, I was about to leave when I had the idea to take some dishes back to the room for the Prince.

I hesitated, not knowing what his species liked to eat — and even less what a *Royal Krev* liked to eat!

I asked various chefs what they thought and they each suggested a pair of kiosks next to the human one I had eaten from earlier.

Unable to choose between the dishes, I asked them to select what a male Krev during his Steyatt liked to eat most.

The chef was a Krev himself, no doubt going through the same Steyatt as his brethren.

He grinned at me and said:

“Blorak. Definitely Blorak.”

He poured the strange gelatinous soup into a bowl before I asked him to put it in a container so I could take it back to the room.

He did as I asked and handed it to me. “Enjoy. And a word of warning: After he eats this,” He leaned forward and directed a sly grin at me. “Hold on to the headboard. *Nothing* stokes a Krev's desire greater than Blorak.”

The next customer made their order, so I couldn't ask him what was in it.

Some kind of Krev Viagra?

If that was the case, it certainly wasn't something the Prince needed!

I headed back to my room.

The moment I turned the corner leading to our suite, I caught sight of someone disappearing around the next junction.

I marveled at his broad, muscular back, reminding me of the Prince.

But it couldn't be him... Unless he had shot off to send another quick message?

It didn't matter.

If he wasn't in the room, I would just prepare myself for him the way I had before.

I grinned at the memory of our lovemaking, my cheeks burning red with hot flushes — this time not out of embarrassment but pure excitement.

Already, my body ached like a good yoga session, having been contorted into a variety of different positions — many of which were new to me.

It was all I could do to hang on for dear life.

I considered dumping the mysterious Viagra food in the hallway, unsure if I could take what the chef had promised it would deliver, but decided to take it anyway.

I would leave it up to the Prince whether he would consume it or not.

I opened the door and saw the huge hulking figure that was the Prince standing in the middle of the room.

I looked him over and noticed he must have changed his clothes at some point.

They looked more... regal somehow.

I wondered where he'd gotten them, considering there hadn't been any clothes in the wardrobes when we'd arrived.

I filed it away for later discussion and shut the door behind myself.

His eyes were wide and bulging, his cock already pressing hard against the front of his pants — *Why am I not surprised?* — and immediately put down the package of food beside the door.

He certainly isn't going to need that anytime soon!

And neither did I.

Just *looking* at him made me quiver with excitement.

To have him there, in this room, alone, for me to use however I wished, and for him to use me however *he* wished...

It was the stuff dreams were made of.

Wet dreams, at least.

I thought we had wasted enough time already, so I crossed the room without uttering a single word and went up onto my tiptoes to kiss him on the lips.

He wasn't even pressing himself against me and already I felt his cock.

His eyes were wide and bulging.

If the object in the front of his pants was any harder, it was going to burst open.

I loved the look on his face, as if he were looking at me for the first time.

I locked my eyes firmly on his, letting him know he could have me any which way he wished.

"Are you..." he gulped, "my mate?"

"I would have thought *that* was pretty obvious," I said.

I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair, touching the smooth surface of his smooth and shiny horns.

I looked into his gorgeous eyes and, after a moment, blinked in surprise.

Peering into them more closely, I noticed they were the same melted gold with swirls of oak brown and coils of magical purple veins, but after I had already spent several hours gazing into them earlier, I thought they were somehow different...

Somehow they had morphed a little, changing shape.

Where there had been a root of purple earlier, there was now nothing.

Was it a common trait among the Krev? I wondered.

Wouldn't that be some trick?

How was I to know?

After all, I knew next to *nothing* about these creatures.

They were big and powerful with freaking horns on the top of their heads, so why *couldn't* their eyes shift and form patterns like that?

There were some creatures that could shift *their entire bodies*, making them look like any other living creatures of a similar size.

So why couldn't a creature's eyes change the same way?

I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to his once more.

I felt his entire body relax beneath my soft caress.

His hands went up to my waist, gently stroking the skin with the tips of his fingers, before more firmly grasping my ass.

He pulled me onto him and now I felt the full thick girth against me.

He must have put on some fresh perfume too, I thought, sniffing him at the nape of his neck.

He had more of an earthy musky scent before, and now, it was more flowery and reminded me of spring back on Earth.

Neither was better, only different.

It made me realize just how much there was to learn about him.

He kept a hand over my breast, gently rubbing my nipple.

It sprung into action obediently.

He lowered his lips to it, licking and slurping and salivating all over it.

He moved onto my other nipple and sucked it hard — almost painfully — making me gasp.

But let him do it as it felt so damn good.

He gripped my other breast and pinched the nipple between his fingers.

I groaned loudly and it only made him suck harder.

He was harder, firmer than he had been before.

He slid his tongue into my mouth and cupped the back of my head in his

hand, running his fingers through my hair, pulling me toward him, deeper and more hungrily.

Before, he had begun more gently, working slowly up to hammering me into oblivion.

This time, he had turned all the safety valves off and would attack me with everything he had right up front.

And I was his willing victim.

I reached into the front of his pants and felt the hard throbbing solid mass of his member.

I tugged on it as he ran his hand down the front of my stomach to my moistening mound and slid his finger inside me.

His fingers were the size of sausages and he only needed — likely could only fit — one inside me.

It was already enough to stimulate my every erogenous zone.

My pussy made squelching noises as he rubbed me harder, tilting my head back and to one side to sniff at the nape of my neck, before kissing at it, gently lapping at the sensitive skin with his tongue.

I moaned with delight and, breaking away from me, he immediately stripped off, picked me up, and carried me over to the bed.

He tossed me onto it rather than placing me on it as he had previously, and immediately slammed his hard cock inside me.

“Oh!” I growled as he leveraged my legs up.

He gently kissed each of my toes, licking them gently.

That's new!

Then he twisted my leg around and held me firmly in place, pinning me down, and slammed his cock inside me, filling me to the brim.

He hit me hard with each unwavering thrust, filling me unlike I'd ever been consumed before.

He jammed his dick into me, grinding at the end, hitting me as deeply and hard as possible.

It was a powerful mixture of both pain and pleasure, a potent mix that sent my emotions soaring.

I reached back, waving my hand for him to slow down, for him not to fuck me so hard... but it was no use.

I wanted this.

I needed this.

I shifted my position so I lay flat on my front, bent over the edge of the

bed, my ass fully at his mercy.

Even as I moved, he never stopped slamming into me, attacking me from every angle.

I slammed my hand on the mattress, what would have been a signal of supplication if we had been wrestling partners, but he didn't stop, *wouldn't* stop, no matter how much I begged.

And I was not going to give an inch.

I felt the first orgasm reach my lips before it even registered in my brain.

I screamed as he hammered at me, diving deep — *so deep*.

Men would have slowed down at that point, but the Prince maintained the same heady speed and didn't let up, not even for a moment.

My face was pressed into the mattress.

He couldn't see my expression but I was grinning like a madwoman as I screamed:

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

I laughed out loud as he drew another magnificent, powerful orgasm from me.

No doubt my pussy was already sopping wet and dripping with cum.

I laughed because otherwise I would have cried — cried through the sheer ecstasy of the moment.

He grunted loudly in the back of his throat with each penetration.

And, as he eased back, his cock thudding on the mattress, I looked over at it, and saw it was soaking wet with my juices.

The Prince was panting, gasping through his broad nostrils, sucking in as much air as possible.

He bent down to enter me once more, but instead, I pulled him onto the mattress and immediately climbed on top.

Now, it was *my turn* to ride the storm.

I turned my back to him and lowered myself onto his huge cock.

I pulled the negligee off over my head and tossed it to one side.

I began to ride him and couldn't help but look back over my shoulder at him.

His muscles were firm and hard and bulging.

Gorgeous.

But when I looked up into his face, I witnessed the very *last* expression I thought I would see.

Horror.

Purely, unadulterated horror.

He was staring at my lower back, his eyes wide and full of fear.

“No...” he gasped. “By the Creator, please forgive me...”

“What?” I said. “What is it?”

He hardly had a fraction of a second to respond before the door flew open.

The figure standing in the doorway, powerfully built and massive, stood a figure I recognized immediately.

It was the Prince.

*** CONGRATULATIONS! ***

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Have you signed up yet...? Good! Now let's get back to the spellbinding story...

FEON

TO SAY I was relieved that the Prince had taken my news in stride was a gross understatement.

Of course, he only accepted it after our little scuffle had played out — which I could only blame myself for as I could have given him the key piece of information much earlier than I had.

I knew he would understand.

It was a grievous and often *deadly* mistake to steal the mate of a Krev from the one who had already Claimed her.

Although technically he had not been the one to Claim her and, in fact, *I* had been the one to choose her *for* him, it amounted to the same difference.

Suddenly, my heart felt light and bouncy.

All I could see was forward — into the future — where Beth and I might be together, happy, forever.

Although it will take some time for her to adjust to that reality — *I knew it was going to take me some time too!* — it was only a matter of time before my dream future became reality.

The only obstacle was time.

And time was something we had in abacna's.

Eventually Beth would come to realize the truth of the fated mate prophecy.

She would come to understand it just as she would come to realize how much she truly loved me.

With the Prince on our side and me no longer needing to worry about him becoming angry and putting obstacles in our way to being together, things could only go up from here.

As I turned the corner, racing toward the cafeteria, I vowed to reward the Prince with the very best mate I could find.

No doubt his Steyatt was driving him crazy and the sooner I introduced him to Beth, the sooner I could find a replacement mate for him.

Of course, the mate wouldn't be anywhere near as perfect for him as Beth was for me, but I would do my best!

I chuckled to myself as an idea floated into my consciousness:

I could even find him *two mates* to help quell his Steyatt!

Then he really *would* forgive me!

I wondered what my future was going to be like now that I had Beth in it.

My fated mate.

Even repeating it to myself now, I could hardly believe it!

My fated mate.

I let the words and the associated thoughts drift through my mind, powerful and strong like a river.

Locating your perfect mate was something every Krev dreamt of but few ever achieved.

Being a decoy was hard and dangerous work and I belonged to the Royal Family.

Only a member of the Royal Family could release me from servitude.

I was, in effect, *owned* by them.

With the friendship I shared with the Prince, I thought it was virtually *impossible* for him *not* to grant me my freedom — and likely, very soon.

I suddenly felt sad at the thought I might not see him as often as I used to.

He was the only real family I had.

Any hopes I'd been fostering at bringing back the relationship I had with my parents and siblings (that I didn't even know I had!) had drifted by the wayside.

The way I had imagined greeting them, with their eyes lighting up, somehow *sensing* who I was, and then welcoming me in with warm hugs, so we could begin rekindling the relationship that had been cut short... had failed to materialize.

My mother might have carried me to term, might have given birth to me, and I might have spent my first few years among them, but they were no more my parents than random strangers in the street.

My real parents were now the Emperor and Empress, although they had always ensured to keep a discreet distance from me so as not to make the

Prince jealous.

They needn't have worried.

It was always the Prince that had suggested I join them for their state visits.

I was always treated as part of the family — even if I was anything but.

I supposed my striking similarity in appearance with their son won me at least a little affection.

And now, soon, I would have to leave their charge — Prince Aslas willing — to start my own family with Beth.

My heart raced at the thought of it.

I had long since given up all hope I might have my own home and family one day.

My duty was to the Prince and the Royal Family, no one else.

I had not envisioned a time when my sworn duty to them would come to an end.

After all, the Prince would grow up and inherit the throne.

And even in the unlikely event that he did not, he would still have need of a reliable Decoy, and who was more reliable than the one he had grown up with?

But now things had changed.

With the arrival of Beth, nothing would *ever* be the same again.

I turned into the cafeteria.

It was quite busy, with most of the tables having been taken up by diners.

I glanced at the clock on the wall and realized it was lunchtime.

Cutlery clinked and plates clanged as species swallowed delicious native meals.

Others struggled, working up an appetite by fighting with their meals.

I cast an eye over those seated near me but didn't spot Beth at any of the tables.

I figured she would be eating alone, so I focused on those first.

Each of them had a solitary female or male eating at them.

None were Beth.

Perhaps she had opted to join one of the other tables, I thought, taking the opportunity to make conversation with her fellow females.

I knew little about humans but understood them to be very sociable creatures.

I walked amongst the tables, glancing at each face, my heart skipping

each time I noticed the curved feminine frame of a gorgeous female... but as they turned around, revealing their faces, I realized they weren't my One And Only.

I moved through the tables one section at a time, ensuring I did not miss any.

When I came to the far corner and saw she wasn't there, my heart thundered.

Then I noticed some of the tables were empty of diners but still sported empty plates and dirty cutlery.

Staff hurriedly gathered everything up and added them to a trolley which they wheeled back into the kitchens.

Another worker blasted the tabletops with a disinfectant blaster pistol.

It occurred to me that maybe Beth had simply gotten up to get more food.

I cast my eyes over each of those now standing at the kiosks.

As I moved through them — ensuring to check anyone who broke from the lines after receiving their meals and heading back to their seats — I saw that these diners were not Beth either.

Confused, I stood at the top of the large room and thought I must have made a mistake.

She could have bent down just when my eyes passed over her.

That way, I would have missed her.

An innocent mistake.

And so I moved around the room, working my way inward toward the center.

And met the same result.

Could she have taken a break and gone to the bathroom? I wondered.

I hastened toward them, once again eyeing each of the females that came out.

I stood waiting...

Waiting...

Waiting...

Finally, the line of females cycled through.

So if Beth was in the restroom, she must have been in there much longer than the others.

I approached one of the females — a tall Mooruk with yellow flames that lined her arms, back, and head.

“Excuse me. I'm looking for someone. A female human. She goes by the

name of Beth. Have any of the stalls been occupied for a long time?"

I realized what I sounded like.

An overbearing, over-concerned male who kept his female on a tight leash.

The female looked me over, smiled, and said:

"I don't think so. Would you like me to check?"

"Please," he said. "Thank you."

She entered the bathroom.

I took a deep breath, calming down my heart.

Being apart from Beth was bad enough but the idea might have just up and disappeared like that, without even a warning...

It was too painful to bear.

I paced back and forth, wondering if the Mooruk had forgotten I was still waiting outside.

Each time the door swung open, I snapped my neck towards it, but it was only another female.

Finally, she emerged and I approached her.

She shook her head before I could ask my question. "All the stalls are empty. Wherever she is, she's not in there."

Brows drawing down into a frown, I nodded. "Okay. Thank you."

I drifted back into the dining room, my head bowed low.

I needed to head back to our suite and wait for her to return.

Eventually, she would.

I hoped.

Has she just disappeared off the face of the planet?

That seemed unlikely.

Was she somehow unhappy with me?

Had I failed to satisfy her somehow?

I thought back over our time together, how exciting and thrilling the sex had been, but could see no reason for her to suddenly take off like that.

Perhaps she had discovered another male...

My body tensed and I quivered with rage at the very *suggestion* she would go with another male.

No, she wouldn't do that.

I took some relief in the knowledge she was my fated mate.

And what kind of fated mate would run off with another male?

One who didn't know she was a fated mate...

No!

That was an impossibility.

I came to a stop, an even worse idea coming to me:

What if another male *forced* her?

What if another male, disheartened by his own female mate, had grabbed her, dragged her into his suite, and had his way with her?

The blood drained from my face.

Suddenly, every other male in the Facility became a threat.

I had assumed they would all be as obsessed with their mate the same way I was...

But maybe not.

They weren't all fated mates, after all.

I peered up at the security devices in each corner of the cafeteria.

I would check with security, I decided.

They would have recordings of what had happened to her.

They were holographic recordings, capable of projecting scenes and playing back in full 3D.

You could walk amongst the holographic images and get a good view of the scene.

I began to march towards the security room when I overheard a conversation at a nearby table:

"I'm stuffed!" a deep-voiced male Jiilar said.

"Not too full, I hope," his mate said, leaning over and pressing her hand to his belly. "I'm not finished with you yet."

She buried her lips on his and kissed him deeply.

The scene reminded me of Beth and I missed her deeply already.

As the couple got up and moved back toward their suite, another thought occurred to me:

After Beth finished her meal, she would, naturally, head back to our suite.

She would wind her way through the hallways...

But I would have seen her, I thought.

I would have bumped into her along the way.

Except the facility was like a maze.

There were as many ways to get somewhere as there were corridors to take you there.

No doubt I was worrying for nothing.

She would cycle back to our suite.

In fact, she was likely there now.

I shook my head at myself.

All this worrying... for nothing!

Confident in my deductive reasoning, I turned on my heel and marched back the way I had come.

She would return and meet the Prince.

There was no harm in that, I thought.

After all, I was going to introduce her to him anyway.

What difference did it make whether or not I was with her when she did?

He would be kind and courteous, the way he had been raised and—

I slowed to a stop.

The thuds between beats of my heart stretched and stretched, becoming so long it might have been frozen.

Except...

Except... the Prince and I looked *identical*.

Beth couldn't tell us apart.

She would mistake him for me and...

One terrible vision played through my mind after another.

I became terrified — *horrified* — of what might have happened.

I marched back towards our room but as the images kept flowing through, becoming more and more explicit, I began to jog, then run, then all-out *sprint*.

No...

No...

By the Creator, please no!

I sped down the hallway leading to our suite and, without even knocking, slammed into it with my shoulder, hurling it open.

And there, spread before me, were my greatest nightmares made real.

ASLAS

THE SEX WAS *INCREDIBLE*.

I'd have had my fair share of partners in the past, each one varying with their ability.

Some enjoyed it, treating it more like a physical challenge than pleasure, while others were shy and coy, with little experience to speak of.

I had enjoyed them all in their own unique way but this mate...

This mate Feon had discovered for me was simply *incredible*.

Somehow, she *felt* right.

Each time I slammed hard into her, she didn't utter a single word of complaint.

She was tight, squeezing me like the greatest masseuse in the galaxy was working solely on my cock.

Her pussy was tight and dripping wet.

Her body was soft and supple, nothing like the hard pebble-like scales of the Krev.

Her breasts were pert and highly reactive.

I loved running my hands over her skin — skin that was so soft it should have been a crime — and watched as tiny little bumps popped across its surface, the tiny barely-visible hair rising to meet my touch.

I hammered her, as how could any green-blooded male Krev not?

She took my attack like a champion, meeting my every thrust with her own.

When she finally climbed on top of me and peered over her shoulder at me, I saw what true beauty looked like.

Her gorgeous big brown eyes shone deeply, her hair flowing over her

shoulders, grinning and truly enjoying herself.

I didn't know what it felt like to mate with a fated mate the way Feon did but surely it couldn't feel better than this!

I loved her every line, every smooth and graceful curve, loved the look in her eyes and the curve of her lips upward into a beaming grin of satisfaction.

I loved the sound of her voice, deep and hoarse and grunting with pleasure.

I loved the way she allowed me to play with her, to bend her into any shape I wished, never once uttering the word "no," or "I can't."

She was, in a word, *magnificent*.

No doubt due to Feon's recent revelation that he had found his fated mate, I began to wonder if *this* female might be mine.

I was not prone to flights of fantasy but it was at least possible, wasn't it?

After all, if Feon had found his perfect mate, why couldn't I find mine?

I pictured the two of us with our fated mates, going to dinner together.

What better combination was there than the trusted decoy with his fated mate, and my own, working together as my left and right hands?

And our children!

Our gorgeous children would be allowed to have their own appearance and identities, not forced to bend to mine the way Feon had been with me.

In fact, even *Feon* would not have to be my decoy any longer!

I could make him a Royal advisor!

My most *trusted* advisor.

There was no one else I trusted more in the entire Empire or even the *galaxy*.

What better person was there to share key information and trust duties to?

That is, if he wished to have such an honor.

Perhaps he would decide to live a smaller, easier life.

Either way, I wished to be a part of it.

Our children grow up together and experience all the benefits of being both Royal — or as close to it as to make no difference — and the everyday normal life Feon's family might have.

Beth slipped her *négligée* off over her head and peered back at me.

I could not think of anywhere I would rather be right at that moment.

And then, of course, I saw the Joisa tattoo.

The removal of the *négligée* was like a curtain rising on the final act of a tragic play.

There, at the base of her spine, was the Mark of the Fated Mate.

For a moment, I thought maybe I had been right and she was in fact *my* fated mate, that it had appeared during our lovemaking...

It seemed unlikely, as it was said to take some time for it to appear after making love.

As fated mates were such a rare occurrence, perhaps no one had managed to study it properly and that some really could appear instantly...

But I knew in my heart I was grasping at straaaak.

I just stared at the tattoo, its dark shape bent into the silhouette of a male Krev, horns thick and tall, arms extended toward her spine.

And I knew, by the Creator, I *knew*.

I had just committed the greatest sin it was possible to make as a Krev.

I had mated with another's fated mate.

I had taken her from Feon.

"No..." I gasped. "By the Creator, please forgive me..."

Beth just looked down at me, a wrinkle of worry on her brow. "What? What is it?"

That, of course, was when the door burst open.

Feon.

If I hadn't been certain of what had just transpired, then the expression on his face upon seeing us was the perfect confirmation.

My cock buried deep inside her...

Her crouched on top of me, bracing her weight on my shins...

Our bodies slick with sweat...

The blood had fallen from his face, turning his blue skin pale and his eyes gaunt.

He stumbled to one side, no doubt wishing he could pull his eyes from the scene, but could not.

He couldn't help staring, just as I couldn't help but feel heartbroken for him at what I had done.

"Feon..." I whispered pitifully.

Beth's reaction trumped both of us.

She stared at Feon, then her mouth fell open, her body froze stiff, and then, slowly, she turned her head back toward me, peering over her shoulder at me once more, only this time, with a very different expression than the one of pure ecstasy from earlier.

The blood fell from her face too.

Her mouth was a square black hole of total shock and horror.

She shivered, hands clutched over her face, and immediately fell to one side, curling up into a ball.

She burst into tears as my cock slid from her like an unwanted creature, and thudded on the bedspread.

I ran my hand through my hair, gripping it tight, wishing to tear it out by the roots.

We each reacted in our own unique way, each stunned beyond belief at what had just taken place.

I wanted to speak, to explain, to tell Feon what had happened, why this wasn't my fault, how I thought she was a mate he had sent to the room for me...

But the words did not come.

I couldn't voice them, couldn't give them life.

My brain and tongue were numbed into silence by the knowledge of what I had done.

Feon, now leaning against the doorframe, body limp, was the first to recover.

Although, perhaps "recover" wasn't the right word.

He reached for the door and slammed it shut so no one else might see his shame.

Then, turning to me, I saw the blood had returned to his face, painting it a deep shade of purple.

His nostrils flared and his shoulders were hunched, his arms held out to either side, hands curled into enormous fists.

They depicted a sense of rage I had never seen on Feon's face before.

He'd always been the calm one, the one to soothe *my* anger, which was much more prone to flare-ups.

His expression was a mirror reflection of the one I had worn earlier when he had told me *he* had claimed *my* mate.

I watched with grim horror as he glared at me in what was a truly terrifying march.

Especially when *I* was the reason for his terrifying anger.

He drew up to the bed, less than a yard from me.

I shook my head, eyes shimmering with shocked tears. "Feon..." I said, barely managing to croak out his name. "I..."

He snatched me by the throat and yanked me off the bed with a single

movement of his arm.

His strength was incredible.

I clutched at his arm, flailing weakly beneath his impenetrable grip.

The scene was a mirror reflection of the one from earlier.

Now *he* was the one with the upper hand, the one choking *me*, and *I* was the one gasping words I could barely speak.

“You claimed my fated mate,” he said in a dead voice. “Now you will die.”

It was a declaration, not a threat.

His grip tightened further around my throat and I heard something creaking, cracking, beneath his hold.

I shook my head, my vision already turning black.

And yet, I did not attack him, did not attempt to stop him from squeezing the life from me, even if, to my mind, I was innocent of the charge he aimed at me.

All these years, he had been my first line of defense, my Decoy, keeping all threats at a safe distance by attracting them to himself in my place.

Now, he would be the one to take it.

It was poetic justice.

He had saved my life countless times and if anyone deserved to take it, it was him.

A tiny voice spoke:

“Stop it. Stop it!”

The hatred on Feon’s face flickered as his eyes blinked.

Although his disgust remained clear, as did his unflinching grip around my throat, his ears flickered as he turned his head slightly to see Beth.

She must have slipped her *négligée* back on over her head.

Tears danced in her eyes, threatening to spill down the well-worn tracks already carved down her cheeks.

“Stop it!” she cried. “You’re hurting him! Stop it!”

Feon blinked as if coming awake and, a moment later — and not a moment too soon — his grip loosened and he released me.

I fell to the mattress and tumbled to the floor.

I clutched my throat and gasped for air.

A few more seconds and he *would* have claimed my life.

And I would have deserved it.

I knew that.

“Beth...” Feon said, drifting towards her.

Despite his slow, careful movement, she flinched back from him.

With his muscles and veins bulging, he was still a terrifying sight.

“I don’t know what’s going on!” Beth screamed. “I don’t know how there are two of you! I don’t know which one of you is the real you. But I don’t know... I don’t know anything!”

She peered between him and I, a lost and broken expression on her face.

“Beth... It’s me...” Feon said, but before he could get another word out, she had turned and run toward the door, throwing it open so hard it bounced off the wall and slammed shut behind herself.

The silence that encroached afterwards was deafening.

Feon hung his head, shoulders slumped, and his muscles, previously pumped with blood, relaxed, but he was still big enough to permanently silence me.

I needed to tell him the truth, about what had truly happened — the same way he had earlier — but ultimately, it would be up to him as to how he would deal with me.

Feon fell onto the bed’s edge, back curled, head hanging low.

He shook his head and gazed at his hands.

Then, without looking at me — in fact, I thought he had his eyes closed — he said in a haunted voice:

“How could you do it to me?”

He wasn’t going to kill me, I realized.

At least, not right now.

I remained on the floor but pushed myself up onto my ass.

My body was still in shock, recovering from the shock.

“I didn’t know...” I croaked through my crushed throat. “I didn’t know it was her. I thought she was... a mate you had sent to... me. You said you were going to... send me one. And I thought... I didn’t know... If I knew...”

I let out a deep sigh of regret before turning my head to one side, feeling truly disgusted with myself.

“This never should... have happened,” I gasped. “And it wouldn’t have... if I knew... she was your fated mate.”

Feon was quiet for a long moment and his gaze hardened. “I took your mate, so you took mine.”

“No. That was not... my intention.”

“You took from me what I took from you. You did this on purpose.”

He turned his head and massive body toward me, his eyes stony and glaring.

The blood had rushed to his eyes, turning the purple veins bright.

Very often, those branches of purple were the very last thing a creature saw before it met its maker.

Maybe it would be for me too.

“I would never do... that,” I rasped. “I came to this facility... for a mate. *Not* your mate. And certainly not your... fated mate. I would never... do that to you. Never.”

I leaned forward and, taking one of the greatest risks of my life, placed my hand on his knee. “I would *never* do that to you. You know that.”

I met his glare with my own.

His was of anger, mine of honesty and understanding.

Harming him was the very *last thing* I would ever do.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have known that.

He wouldn't have doubted it for a moment.

I needed him to peer through the red mist of his Steyatt and see reason.

The same way I had earlier.

Slowly, his jaw grew unclenched and his eyes lost their murderous rage.

Most tellingly of all, he had not moved his knee from my touch nor denied my apology.

But I was still not out of the woods.

He could still destroy me in an instant.

“Everything is ruined,” Feon declared. “Beth will never love me after this. After she learns I lied to her. And that led to... what happened.”

I shook my head. “No. This changes nothing. You had to tell her the truth about who you are. Yes, she could have discovered it better than she did. But there's still so much she needs to know. And I will be there to help you do it.”

There was a flicker of anger in his eyes. “Help me? I think you ‘helped me’ enough already.”

He yanked his knee from me.

I raised my hands in surrender. “Yes. Yes, you're right. But let me make it up to you. Let me help you get her back. She's still your fated mate, no matter what happened between us. I'm a mistake. An error. I'm something that we will all forget about one day. This doesn't need to end this way.”

He clenched his fists and his brow drew down into what I thought was

another approaching round of rage.

When he got to his feet, I raised my arms to protect myself against his unyielding blows.

And this time, there was no Beth to stop him.

I wouldn't last long.

He surprised me by not turning his fists on me.

Instead, he marched toward the door. "Then get up. Help me find her and make her understand what happened before it's too late."

I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I climbed to my feet. "Yes. Yes, of course. Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. She will return to you. I swear."

He turned those hard eyes on me again. "This isn't over. I haven't forgiven you."

But he *was* talking to me and that was a start.

I marched toward the door but he stopped me with a raised hand. "Before we go, you might want to put some clothes on. You've done quite enough damage without them already today."

BETH

I RAN through the hallways and corridors, turning one way and then another, not sure exactly where I was heading, and not caring.

I nearly ran into several pairs of mates, who stiffened at my approach, but I darted around them at the last minute, before sprinting down another hallway, never stopping.

I never want to stop.

I wanted to keep on running and running and running until I was as far from this place as it was possible to get, far from that room, far from *them*.

Eventually, my legs gave out and I tumbled to the floor.

I wept, gasping around each sobbing breath.

I had run so hard I could no longer bear my own weight.

I just lay there on the floor, weeping.

I had no idea what had happened.

One moment, I was making love with the Prince, and the next, the door opened and...

And...

Another Prince came in!

Two Princes!

How were the two of them?

Were they twins?

And if they were twins, what did they think they were doing?

Were they playing with me?

Sharing me between them?

I might not have minded if they'd only been honest with me.

After all, two times the males meant two times the Seed, and there was no

better way of becoming pregnant than being pumped with virile Seed.

But it was my decision to make.

Not theirs.

Were they toying with me?

Was this some kind of game?

Was I just something for them to entertain themselves with?

What hurt the most was I thought I had made a connection with them — or at least one of them.

I shook my head in frustration.

Oh, I don't know what I meant!

I wrapped my arms around my knees and buried my face in my forearms.

I rocked gently back and forth as my rational mind began to filter into my consciousness.

Had I *really* seen what I thought I had? I wondered.

Had they *really* been two of them?

Perhaps it was a figment of my imagination.

Maybe it was really just a reflection in a mirror?

But that was grasping at straws.

There was no denying what I had seen.

He was not a reflection or burst of light or anything else.

He was exactly what I thought he was.

Two Princes!

A bright light shone over me, moving from one side to another as if someone were waving a torch at me.

When I looked up, I made out a huge set of windows that looked out on a gorgeous night sky.

The light was a falling star.

It illuminated both me and the large room I was sitting on the floor of.

An observation deck.

Designed for couples to come and admire the view, I supposed.

And it *was* a gorgeous view.

The sky was as dark as velvet, thick and rich, the bright twinkling lights of the stars shimmering like lost souls.

The Seeding Facility was located on the top of a mountain — one of the largest in this solar system — and had been one of the reasons I had chosen this Facility over all the others.

The gorgeous view.

It was a welcome reminder there were bigger, more important things than the events that happened in my life, events that would prove to be minuscule in scope compared to the vastness of the cosmos.

With a sigh, I pushed myself onto my feet.

My legs wobbled, aching not only from the run but the exertions of the morning.

With two freaking Princes!

I stumbled over to the railing and held on.

My eyes stung, but the tears, for now at least, had run dry.

I shut my eyes and let my mind go blank.

In it, a pair of faces kept flashing before me.

It was the same face — identical save for tiny details in the eyes — and they both wore the same shocked expression.

The same haunted and horrified look that had been on my face.

And I realized the two Princes hadn't known about each other, or at least were equally shocked as I had been at discovering them in the room together.

So, I guess that meant it *couldn't* have been a game, some kind of cruel pursuit to entertain themselves with.

For some reason, that made me feel at her — a little at least — although how this whole situation could have ended up the way it had, I had no idea.

Why hadn't they simply *told* me?

Why hadn't they been *honest and open* with me?

I sensed movement behind me and turned to see the two hulking Princes approaching.

They wore different clothes, but their bodies were otherwise identical.

One wore a hood and cloak over his head, casting shadows over his features.

Not that I needed to see them.

I only had to duplicate the other face that was open and exposed.

I shook my head, unable to tell them apart.

Seeing them together, approaching me like this, produced a shiver that ran the length of my spine.

I couldn't console myself with the comforting thought it had all been in my mind.

It was real and there was no avoiding it.

I turned and focused on peering out the window at the gorgeous night sky as another flare of a falling star illuminated us.

The first Prince stood beside me, hands on the railing.

He stood staring at the stars alongside me.

The other Prince hung back, the hood concealing his face.

“I’m sorry for what happened earlier,” the first Prince said. “It never should have happened that way.”

“*That way?*” I snapped.

I had intended on blanking the two of them but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. “It shouldn’t have happened *at all!*”

I stabbed a finger at the Prince. “What did you think you were doing anyway? Playing with me? Am I some kind of pawn in your sick and twisted game?”

I tried to remain calm but it was no use.

My anger was getting the better of me.

“No,” the first Prince said, turning to me. “You are not a game. You are the opposite of a game. You are the most important creature in the entire galaxy.”

He moved his hand toward mine but I pulled it back.

He took the hint and rested his hand on the metal railing instead. “I should have told you the truth from the beginning but the truth was... I was afraid. I was afraid you wouldn’t wish to be with me any longer. So, let me be forthright and honest with you now, the way I should have been from the very beginning.”

He took a moment to calm himself. “My name is Feon. I am not the Prince. I am the Prince’s Decoy. I do things when they’re too dangerous for him to do. It was I who selected you from the lineup, who interviewed you, who mated with you... the first time.”

His mouth curled like he’d swallowed a lemon. “The last time we saw each other was when you left to go eat. When you returned to the room, the Krev you met was the true Prince. Prince Aslas.”

At the mention of his name, the hooded figure stepped forward.

But he didn’t say a word.

“He... mistook you for his own mate,” Feon said. “He didn’t know you were my mate.”

I shook my head, confused. “But I thought I was meant to mate with the Prince? Wasn’t that the deal?”

Feon nodded. “You were meant to be his. I was sent to Claim you so you would be his mate for Steyatt. I was never meant to touch you, much less

mate with you. But when I met you... I knew there was something special about you. I knew I couldn't allow him to have you. Although it broke every vow I ever made to him and the Royal Family, I simply could *not* give you up. When we mated, you changed my life."

His words were clearly deep and heartfelt, and despite my reservations, my heart went out to him. "Why weren't you honest with me from the start? Why did you tell me you worked for the Prince and that you were not the Prince himself?"

"That had been my intention, but clearly, I did not communicate effectively. For that, you have my apologies. But if you're asking me if I would change it, for us to have not mated, I must tell you the answer is no. Because, you see, you are not merely a mate. You are my fated mate."

There was a pause as he let the term sink in.

Fated mate?

What on Earth — or off-Earth as the case may be — was a fated mate?

He must have seen the question on my face because next he said:

"A fated mate means we are destined to be together. Forever. It means we will *always* be with each other. It means we will never be alone, that there will never be any need for us to seek the love of another. It is the deepest, most meaningful bond two creatures can have."

Okay, so that's a lot to take in. "How can you be so sure? I mean, the sex was great — better than great — but how do you know we're supposed to be fated mates?"

"Because of this."

He turned around and lifted his shirt and pulled down his pants, revealing the top of his perfectly-formed ass.

At the base of his spine was a tattoo — one I was certain had *not* been there when we first made love.

It showed a naked human female in silhouette, arms reaching towards his spine.

I reached out and hesitated before putting my fingertips to it. "This just... appeared?"

It was the (real) Prince that answered. "Yes. It appears on each fated mate. It marks them, displaying how they're meant to be together."

"Marks the *both* of them?" I questioned. "Then that means..."

I reached back and touched my lower back but could not feel the tattoo through the *négligée's* fabric.

“Yes,” Feon said, straightening up and tucking his shirt back in. “You have one too. In the same place but with a different image. It shows a male Krev.”

I rushed over to a reflective metal-paneled wall.

If what they were saying was true, I needed to see it with my own eyes.

I lifted the *négligée* up and was shocked to see there, in the imperfect warped metal sheet, the tattoo they had described.

My mom’s going to have a fit!

She had *always* forbidden me from getting any type of piercings or tattoos!

To have one grow on my body...

But her opinion was likely the least of my concerns right at that moment.

I frowned. “No. The design is different. It’s not like yours.”

“It will depict a male Krev,” the Prince repeated, crossing over to me.

“No. Not like that. There’s two of them. Look. On either side of my spine, reaching towards each other.”

The Krevs looked closely at the tattoo in the reflection.

They gasped in shock and took a step back.

“No...” Feon said. “That’s... That’s impossible...”

“What?” I said. “What’s impossible?”

This *whole thing* seemed impossible to me!

I turned so they could see the tattoo directly with their own eyes and without the aid of the reflective wall.

The Prince reached toward me, his hand shaking.

He pressed his fingers to the right-hand tattoo.

“It means...” he said, his voice rasping. “It means you have *two* fated mates... And that means...”

Feon reacted first and tore the Prince’s shirt up.

What he saw on his back made him gasp.

He too bore the fated mate tattoo.

And, judging by the two Krevs’ expressions, it was not something they had expected to see.

It was hard enough coming to terms with the idea I had *one* fated mate... never mind two!

FEON

THE TWIN JOISA.

I gazed at it and fell into its inky black depths, the force stronger than if it were a black hole sucking me in.

Fated mates were rare enough, but *Twin Fated Mates?*

Virtually unheard of.

Virtually.

There had been cases — myths and legends, really — about Krevs who had claimed a female and shared her between them.

Books had been written about it, stories told, passed down through the ages...

But no one living had *ever* seen it for themselves and so history had passed into mythology.

And now, the truth had resurfaced once again.

The moment I had seen Beth's Joisa, I had at first assumed my eyes were deceiving me.

Perhaps she already had a birthmark there that I had not noticed before or it was some kind of cruel joke someone was playing on us or some other reason I couldn't yet quite fathom now but would later turn out to be true

I had no idea what the reason could be but any explanation was more likely to be true than what my eyes were telling me.

That the Twin Joisa at the base of Beth's spine was, in fact, real.

Initially, my brain turned to mush, unable to mutter a single word out loud.

Aslas had likewise become silent — very unlike him — dumbfounded into numbness.

We both continued to stare at Beth's beautiful smooth skin and that tattoo.

That tattoo.

The full ramifications of the situation began to hit me.

We would become instant celebrities in the Krev culture and Emperors and Kings and Queens throughout the galaxy would wish to meet us.

If we did not travel to them, then they would happily travel to us, just to *glimpse* the miracle that was the Twin Joisa.

And miracle was the correct word.

What else did you call something that had only ever been whispered among schoolchildren and pondered by academics as to whether or not it was real or even possible?

Suddenly, all my thoughts of enjoying a quiet life went up in smoke.

There could be *no quiet life* after this, no way to keep out of the spotlight.

We would become the most famous personalities in the entire Empire — perhaps even greater than the Emperor himself!

I placed my hands to my forehead, my head suddenly feeling light and dizzy, my horns drawing my head down, suddenly extremely heavy.

Beth just looked between me and Aslas, confused, shocked, lost in our reaction.

But she was about to be even more surprised when we each fell to our knees before her.

It was partly because keeping our feet after witnessing the miracle was tough already but the fact that she was the one that sported it meant *she* would become a goddess-like figure in our culture.

She had to get used to the bowing and scraping of lowly mortals — even us, her Twin Fated Mates.

“What are you doing?” she said. “Get up! Get up!”

My legs lacked the strength to do so but Aslas — perhaps because he was much less used to bowing and kneeling before others — placed his hand on my shoulder to help himself up onto his feet.

“Forgive me,” Aslas said, head bowed. “It's just... we've never seen... In fact, *no one living* has ever seen...”

Beth turned back to the mirrored wall and gazed at the Twin Joisa. “I don't understand what all the fuss is about. It's more shocking that *anything* just appeared like this. How is it any weirder to have two tattoos of male Krev than one?”

“Oh,” Aslas said, voice dripping with obvious awe. “It makes a very big difference. In fact, it makes *all* the difference in the galaxy.”

Beth lowered her *négligée*, and suddenly the garment seemed entirely unsuitable for what she truly was.

A goddess in human form.

Of course, she had been a goddess to me ever since I first laid eyes on her.

I had sensed straight away that there was something special about her, something unique.

But I never thought — never in a million years — that it would present itself quite in the way that it had.

Her eyes lowered to mine and they were filled with fear and concern. “Get up. Please. I don’t want you on your knees.”

I slowly did as she asked.

Aslas reached down to help me up but I pulled away from him, not wanting his touch.

I could still feel the river of anger flowing through me at his betrayal and although it had largely dissipated to a trickle at the sight of the Twin Joisa, I still could not forgive him for what he had done.

It might have been an accident, might have been something he had not intended on doing, but it was still an unspeakable act in the Krev culture.

Except...

He was now also her fated mate...

That meant he could no more stop himself from being attracted to Beth than I could when I first met her.

And if my excuse was good enough for him — as it had been when I explained that we were fated mates — then the same excuse had to be good enough for me.

But it wasn’t.

I had seen her first.

She was *mine*.

I felt sick to the pit of my stomach at the thought of sharing her with anyone — even a second fated mate.

I shoved the thought from my mind and tried to focus on the here and now but each time I did so, my thoughts took me back to the moment we had left the room to find Beth.

We had marched through the hallways and corridors, peering one way

and then another, but she had already disappeared from view.

I picked up on a set of footprints in the carpet, roughly about the right shape and size as Beth's feet, although they were already vanishing before our eyes.

We followed them and were dismayed to discover they had already become diluted.

They mixed with other footprints in the carpet and her trail was lost.

Aslas, who possessed none of the tracking skills I did, gave up almost instantly, pressed his fists to his hips and peered down one corridor after another at the junction we were standing at. "So, where do you think she went? The dock?"

I shook my head.

She had been shocked and angry when she left us and I suspected she wouldn't have a destination in mind.

"She would have just run," I said. "She wouldn't think. She just needed to get somewhere safe."

It was a lot for her to take in...

Seeing there were *two* princes when she had been led to believe there was only one.

"Are you looking for a female human?"

I turned to find a Limapza male clutching his female mate close, his arm wrapped about her shoulders.

I nodded. "Yes. Have you seen her?"

"She went that way. She almost ran into us. Perhaps you should keep a closer eye on your mate in the future."

Aslas growled at the back of his throat and took a step forward to eviscerate the male but I held out an arm to block him.

Distracted by my intervention, he calmed down.

"Thank you," I said. "We will in the future."

The male led his female away, staring warily at Aslas's face, although I doubt he could see much through the shadow cast by the hood he was wearing.

Once he was out of sight, Aslas turned on me. "Don't you dare get in my way again!"

I slapped his hand aside and drew up close to him.

As we were virtually identical in scale, we were eye to eye, nostril to flaring nostril. "You will *not* tell me what to do after what you've done!"

Aslas, his fiery temper once again getting the better of him, blinked, before finally managing to get control of himself.

He took a step back and raised his hands. “Fine. Fine. Just don’t get in my way next time.”

I ground my teeth.

Despite having slept with my fated mate, despite everything he had done, he *still* thought he could tell me what to do?

“Stop acting like a fool and I won’t have to,” I spat as I marched in the direction the male Limapza had pointed.

Aslas hustled up alongside me, grabbed my shoulder, and turned me around to face him. “I’m sorry for what I did. Truly, I am. It was an accident. I did not do it on purpose. But you must treat me with the dignity my position deserves. I am, after all, still your prince.”

“She is my fated mate,” I told him. “And I’m looking for her. Don’t get in my way and I’ll have no reason to stop you.”

I shouldered past him, accidentally — okay, on purpose — smacking his shoulder with mine, making him shunt to one side.

He growled again, but this time did not draw up alongside me.

He trailed behind me as I rushed down one hallway after another.

Then, picking up on her tracks in the soft carpet once more, I followed her trail to the observation deck.

And that was where Beth’s little Twin Joisa secret had just been exposed to us.

Now, the Prince had as much right to Beth as I did.

I might hate it and wish it wasn’t true, but we were now, more than ever, brothers.

I should have killed him when I had the chance!

Beth was still dumbfounded by the expressions in our eyes. “So what’s so special about a Twin Joisa? Isn’t it the same as having just one?”

I shook my head. “It means we are *both* your fated mate. It means we are now all bound together, all three of us. And will be for all time.”

Beth’s expression turned ashen, the blood rushing from her face to her toes. “For... all time?”

Aslas nodded and it was his turn to take a step forward. “For many years, it was believed to just be a myth, a legend passed down from one generation to another. But now that we can see it’s real, that you *are* the Twin Joisa female. It changes everything.”

Yes, I thought. *And I wished it didn't.*

I wanted her for myself, for my own, not to have to share her.

I had served the Royal Family and risked my life to protect Aslas countless times.

Now, the one time when I thought I had something that belonged to me — and only me — something that he could not take from me, *this* happened.

Suddenly, I was bound to him once more, and all thoughts of freedom and getting to live my life however I wished were suddenly gone without a trace.

“And if the Twin Joisa is true,” Aslas said, “then maybe some of the *other prophecies* are true too...”

My ears perked up.

It was a line of reasoning I had not considered before.

“Prophecies?” Beth said in a small, weak voice. “What prophecies?”

“It is said that after the Twin Joisa appears, the female and her males must mate... as soon as possible.”

Beth just peered between us, looking for any sign this was a joke. “*Two of you?*”

I picked up where Aslas had left off. “Yes. Both of us. At the same time. It's the only way to protect the bond between us and lock it in, or else, if too much time passes, we all stand to lose the bond that unites us.”

We didn't know if it was true or not but it was what the myth foretold.

The idea of losing her, of losing the bond we had between us...

It was simply too painful to imagine.

“How... How long?” she managed.

“One kop'zat,” Aslas said. “That translates into about fifteen of your Earth hours. The countdown begins from the moment the Twin Joisa appeared. As we don't know exactly when that was, we can only assume it happened sometime after we made love and this moment right now.”

My stomach churned at the term “made love” but it was something I would now have to get used to.

Beth being intimate with someone else.

“Fifteen hours?” Beth gasped.

“More like fourteen now,” Aslas added unhelpfully.

He reached for her arm and gently wrapped his fingers around it. “Come. The sooner we complete the prophecy, the better.”

He began to lead her away but she froze, her entire body turning rigid.

She yanked her arm free and glared between Aslas and me. “I won't go

with you! I won't have sex with both of you at the same time! Are you crazy?"

"It is written—" Aslas began, but Beth shut him down:

"I'm *not* going to fuck you both! Not again! Not either of you! You lied to me, you took advantage of me, and now you're saying I *have* to sleep with you both because some story says so?"

"It's not a story. It's a prophecy—" Aslas said.

I raised a hand to silence him but the damage had already been done.

"No!" Beth snapped. "No! I refuse! If the bond fades after fifteen hours, then so be it. I *cannot* be in this relationship. If that is even what this is!"

With tears in her eyes, she turned and ran from us once more.

"Beth—" Aslas said, shifting his weight to begin chasing after her.

I blocked him with my body.

As he pivoted to dart around me, I altered my position and brought him to a stop once more.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. "We have to follow her! We only have a few hours—"

"Let her go," I told him. "It's all a massive shock to her. Give her some time. I'm sure she'll come around."

Aslas watched Beth's back as it disappeared around the corner before glaring at me. "And if she doesn't come around? What then?"

"Then we'll know her decision."

I had full faith in the Twin Joisa.

It was destiny we were meant to be together.

And what kind of Goddess of Fate would bring us together only to let us drift apart like this?

Still, my stomach churned with the uncertainty.

Had I just ensured our success?

Or had I just sentenced us to doom to live forever without our fated mate?

ASLAS

FOUR HOURS.

Four *freaking* hours!

Beth had been gone for four hours and I had paced so aggressively back and forth in the suite that there was a very real chance I would wear a hole in the carpet.

Each time I came to the decision I would leave, that I would knock Feon aside and take off and find her on my own, he was there, sitting in front of the door in a chair, watching me, ready for me to act.

He knew I could not beat him in a one-on-one battle.

Not a *fair* one, at least, and it was foolish to even try.

But maybe if I took him by surprise or managed to get my hands on a weapon of some sort to beat him over his thick stupid head, I could overcome him.

It seemed idiotic to me to let Beth go, to take the risk that she might not come back.

For her to decide she would be better off without us.

Beth was human, not a Krev.

She had a lot to think about, a lot to process, and it was hard enough for a Krev to come to terms with the fact they were a fated mate, never mind the female Twin Joisa!

I stopped my pacing, turned toward Feon, and jammed a finger accusingly at him.

I was cold with rage.

I opened my mouth to berate him... before clamping it shut, grinding my teeth, shaking my head, and then returning to my frantic pacing.

Every so often, I threw myself into a chair, almost knocking it back, but I could not sit still for long.

I couldn't even begin to understand how Feon could do it!

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, I said to him politely — although it came out more of a yell than I had intended:

“How long are we supposed to sit here and wait?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “As long as she needs.”

I threw up my hands. “As long as she needs? So what if she needs longer than fifteen hours?”

He shrugged that annoying little shrug of his. “Then she takes longer than fifteen hours.”

I scratched my head in confusion. “I thought she was your fated mate?”

“She is,” he said flatly, calmly.

“And you care about whether or not she will remain your fated mate?”

I knew the answer, of course.

I had seen it the moment I had opened the door to the suite expecting to see my mate waiting for me... and instead saw him.

It had been in his face.

I saw the eyes of a male very much in love.

He had fallen hard, had betrayed his sworn duty to me for her.

I was under no illusion he would not risk losing her for *any* reason.

Least of all if it meant giving her a little time to think through the situation.

But I did not have the same faith he did.

She was a rational creature.

She might decide she didn't want the difficulties and confusion that came with the Joisa.

I tried to think from Feon's point of view but I could not fathom it.

“When your fated mate is on the line, you must do *everything in your power* to protect her,” I said, coming at him from a different tack.

“That's what I'm doing,” he said, giving me a meaningful look.

What he thought: He had to protect her *from me!*

“She's out there!” I said. “And we're in here!”

He raised his half-lidded eyes. “Your powers of observation are truly something wondrous to behold.”

That's it!

I leapt to my feet and jabbed my finger at him, the bile gathering in my

stomach already beginning to sear. “I told you before! You will show me proper respect! I already apologized for sleeping with your fated mate. But guess what? She’s now *my fated mate too!* I couldn’t deny my feelings for her even if I had known she was your fated mate! You know how it feels! We’re powerless before them. We share the same feelings for her. Now, we have followed your strategy by waiting. Four hours is enough. Now we should follow mine! We should go look for her!”

“Nope,” he said calmly, folding his arms, unperturbed my finger was stabbing less than a foot from his face.

“But what if she’s gone to the docks?” I cried. “What if she’s already on a ship heading home? What if some other male got hold of her? What if...”

I couldn’t think of any other terrible outcomes, but any *one* of those was bad enough!

“The last thing we should be doing is just sitting here waiting!”

“She’ll come around,” he said, calmly, passively. “As for the subject of respect, I don’t need to give you any more than what one fated mate would give another.”

“I’m still your Prince! And you’re still my Decoy!”

He once again — irritatingly — nodded his head. “I will not deny that is true.”

Finally!

Some common sense!

“Then I *order* you to step aside and let me through this instant!”

He checked his nails, ignoring me as if I were invisible.

I waited a moment to see if he was really going to just sit there, and when I realized he was, I reached my breaking point.

I grabbed his chair and began to slide it to one side, removing him from the door.

I was insulted he didn’t at least *flinch*, didn’t raise his arms to defend himself when I descended upon him — he no doubt thought I would be an easy opponent to defeat!

Feon was heavy and I grunted as I shifted the legs out from under him.

The chair screeched as it tore up the carpet and made white marks across the concrete below.

As I began to win and the chair tipped over, he lost his balance.

He leapt to his feet and I yelled in success:

“Haha!”

The chair gave way rapidly now that it was relieved of his weight. I sailed backward and slammed into the desk, snapping it in half. I shook my head and got to my feet, still clasping the chair legs in my hands, the rest of it in pieces beside me.

I bolted to my feet and began to hurry toward the door...

Only to find Feon placing the *second* chair — the one I had been sitting on just a moment earlier — in front of the door, falling into it, folding his arms, and leering at me.

He had never been passive-aggressive before and I began to wonder if this was what he was *really* like underneath all his years of training.

Was *this* how he would normally resolve his problems?

Was *this* the DNA he had inherited?

If it was, it was the most annoying, frustrating treatment I had ever received at his hands.

I yelled at the top of my voice, letting out a deep throaty roar.

This fool really isn't going to get out of the way!

Then I'll find another way out, damn it!

I had no chance of beating him, so I ran towards the balcony, peered over the side, and immediately felt a flush of vertigo.

My head spun and I stepped back, taking a moment to calm myself.

I had always had a problem with heights — something Feon (irritatingly, again) never suffered with over the years.

I checked the balcony on the other side but it was too far away.

Even if I could have leapt the distance, my legs would have locked up with fear and I would fall to a grisly death far below.

When I peered at the balcony below, the wind suddenly picked up, flapping the hood of my cloak, almost tearing it from my shoulders.

I turned back to the suite where Feon remained staring into space as if he had no problems or concerns at all.

Disparaged, I fell onto the corner of the bed and buried my face in my hands.

“Doesn't *any* of this mean *anything* to you?” I asked softly.

When exasperation was your only means of coping left remaining to you, and your anger had flooded from your system, you were left with a meek and sorrowful voice.

“She means everything to me,” he said.

“Then what about me? Do *I* still mean anything to you?”

Feon's eyes rose to mine before he pulled them away again.
He rubbed at the skin of his arm, in deep thought.

It was the first time he had appeared uncomfortable since we had returned to the suite.

I realized that perhaps *this* was the way forward, that *this* was how I could get him to move and let me through so we could go find Beth.

"Of course you do," he said. "You are my Prince. We were raised together, more like brothers than friends."

"Then why won't you listen to me? Why won't you let me go look for her? You can stay here if you want. I'll look for her myself. Then you can stay here. When I find her and she gets angry at me, but not at you, you can be in her good books. That's what you want to be, right? In her good books?"

It was a simple ploy but I wasn't sure if it would really work.

"I am aware of your... limitations," he said carefully. "Your inability to control your temper. I don't think you'll lose it with Beth but you would at the situation. You would make her feel bad and that would reflect badly on me. Plus, there's always the risk you might pretend to be me, which you would do if confronting her goes badly."

"I wouldn't..." I began before catching the flat look on his face.

The truth was, I already *had* — many times over the years.

When I was going to get in trouble, I would sometimes pretend to be Feon...

"And we look similar," he said.

"So?" I snapped.

"So, anything she feels for you will be reflected on me. And I don't want to take that risk."

I blinked at his revelations.

I had thought he was being controlling without any real thought or conviction but now that he had told me his thought process and the way he considered me, I understood where he was coming from.

I *still* didn't think he was right but I at least understood.

I opened my mouth to argue from another direction when a soft knock came at the door.

Feon's eyes snapped up at me, the question clearly printed on his face:
Did you hear that?

With our superior hearing, we could have heard a muxap fart two rooms over.

There was no doubt in my mind there had been a knock.

I immediately bolted up from my position on the bed and angled toward the monitor where I could see it was indeed Beth on the other side of the door.

“It’s her!” I said. “Hurry up! Open the door!”

Feon didn’t move as fast as I liked and took his sweet time.

I didn’t for a *moment* think it was because he didn’t want it to look like he was following my commands.

In the past — in fact, less than a *day* ago — he would have snapped to attention and done whatever I told him.

The difference a simple Joisa could make...

He placed the chair to one side, ran his hands through his hair, reminding me to do the same with mine, and reached for the door.

I drew up alongside him.

Feon hesitated and I realized he was nervous.

What was there to be nervous about? I wondered.

Oh yeah.

Beth might decide to dump us.

He gathered up his inner strength and opened the door.

There Beth stood, hands clenched in front of herself, looking so small and vulnerable.

But really, she was the most powerful being between the three of us.

With a look or a word, she could break our hearts and destroy us.

I gulped, my throat dry. “Would you... like to come in?” I said before Feon raised a hand and, with glaring eyes, pushed me aside.

I tended to speak more when I was nervous.

Hell, I tended to speak *all the time* no matter how I was feeling!

Feon held the door open and Beth entered.

She frowned at the torn carpet where I had attempted to shift Feon off his chair, and let it pass without asking about it.

Feon shut the door and we both turned to her.

“I’ve come to a decision,” she announced.

This was it, I thought, my throat even drier than it had been a moment ago.

I wanted to speak but decided doing so would only delay hearing whatever decision she had made.

She took a deep breath and looked up at each of us. “I’ve decided to mate

with you. Both of you.”

I hated to admit it but Feon had been right.

She really did just need a little time to think things through and come to terms with what needed to happen.

Then she added:

“And, if you don’t mind, I would like to begin right now.”

BETH

THEY STOOD with their mouths hanging open, just staring at me.

No doubt they had not expected me to have accepted their challenge — and it *was* a challenge.

Mating with just *one* of them had been hard.

Two would be nigh-on impossible.

But I had a secret weapon to handle it...

Aslas was the first to recover from his shock. “Would you like a drink? Something to eat maybe?”

I nodded. “Water. Please.”

He turned and hurried over to the drinks cabinet, hastily filling a small glass for me.

Feon continued looking at me, his eyes focused on mine, burying deep inside me.

“We were worried about you,” he said softly.

“I was worried about you!” Aslas said. “*He* wanted to wait for you *forever!*”

Feon didn’t respond to Aslas’s jibe and instead ran his eyes over my face, attempting to ascertain my emotions. “Are you feeling all right? Do you need to ask us any questions? We’re at your command.”

I shook my head. “I had long enough to think. And it occurred to me that we’re fated mates. So... what is there to think about?”

Feon nodded but he seemed distracted.

His deep thoughts were interrupted as Aslas hustled over and handed me the glass of water.

He’d made himself some kind of alcoholic drink and threw it back.

I noticed he hadn't made Feon anything — not that he looked bothered.

"I'm sorry it took so long to decide," I said. "There was just... so much to process."

Aslas snorted. "Of course that was! It must have come as quite a shock! But you're here now. That's all that matters."

He downed the last of his drink and moved to place it on the desk before recalling it was smashed to pieces.

Another mystery, I thought, harking back to the torn carpet at the foot of the door.

Clearly *something* had taken place but neither of them were forthcoming with the explanation.

Aslas bent down and placed his empty glass on a shard of the desk on the floor. "Well, I suppose we ought to get started," he said, clapping his hands and approaching me.

Feon raised an arm, stopping him a full yard from me. "Cool your jets. We won't be the ones to orchestrate this. She will. She'll let us know when she's ready, what she wants to do, and when. We are at her mercy."

I couldn't deny the shiver that ran through me at the word "mercy."

It was strange, the effect a single word could have on a person.

But he was right.

I *did* want to have full control over the situation. "First," I said, "I'm going to shower and then I want you both to do so too."

"Up and clean before we get down and dirty," Aslas said with a grin.

When neither of us reflected it back to him, he lowered his head and kicked his feet.

Feon's eyes were still drilling into me and I worried for a moment he had picked up on something I had not wished him to see.

I thought over what I had said up until now but couldn't identify any hint of what I was truly thinking.

"Of course," he said. "We'll do everything you command."

Command.

Another shiver.

I nodded. "Good. I'll be... right back."

I moved into the bathroom and locked the door behind myself — not that I expected them to try anything — before stripping off the *négligée* and turning to face myself in the mirror.

I let out a deep breath.

It came out a shivering shudder.

I opened my hand and peered at the tiny items in my sweaty palm.

Two tiny balls, no bigger than marbles.

Both were black, one had a red line running through it and the other a blue one.

They were tracking and listening devices, the spies had told me.

They were the reason I had returned to the suite, the reason I had come back.

The reason I had come back at all.

I placed them on the side table, moved into one of the two showers, and let the hot spray wash over me.

I lathered up and scrubbed myself clean.

I thought back to the moment I had learned of the Twin Joisa “prophecy” the Krev males had told me about.

I was to mate with them, both at the same time.

My emotions were immediately shunted back into confusion where they had been right before the Krev males’ earlier appearance.

The first shock had been at seeing there were *two* princes, learning they had lied to me.

Then the revelation about the Joisa and the fact I had *two* fated mates and not just one.

One shocking discovery after another.

When I couldn’t deal with it, when I needed time alone, I had turned and run away.

And before the night is out, there will be a third time too.

I had turned down four hallways before I ran into the figure.

“Excuse me!” I said, turning in another direction and peering back over my shoulder at him.

When I saw it was a human male wearing a kind and curious expression, I began to slow.

I turned back to him, wondering what a human *male* was doing here of all places.

After all, males could not get pregnant, could not be Seeded, but it didn’t matter.

It was the sight of a fellow human being that really caught my attention.

He was a stranger I did not know, but yet, we both found ourselves in this same alien place.

And it was perhaps for that reason I had approached him.

My thoughts of being a fated mate were still swirling around my head like a whirlwind but for the moment, I was reminded of my origins, of Earth.

Of home.

Of friends and family.

“Are you all right?” the human male asked.

I almost broke down in tears.

No, I thought. *I was not all right.*

I was destined for a future I had no choice in, destined to love not one but *two* alien males of a species I knew precisely dick about.

What was there to be all right about?

When he reached out and touched my arm, I felt a shiver run through me.

I was embarrassed to admit I fell into his arms.

He held me close before making soft shushing noises and gently brushing my hair.

There was nothing romantic about the situation, nothing threatening to the bond I felt with the two Krev males, but it was a warm and comforting touch — one I needed at that moment.

“It’s all right,” he said. “It’s going to be all right.”

I just bawled my eyes out, crying as hard as I could.

I wasn’t in pain, or even particularly angry, just in a full state of absolute and total shock — shock this had happened to me, in *this* place.

I had come to be mated and Seated, for nothing else complicated to happen in my life.

Instead, the most confusing situation had taken place.

He handed me a handkerchief so I could wipe my eyes and blow my nose.

“I’m sorry,” I said between honks. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to attack you like that.”

I finally managed to control myself.

He shook his head softly. “It’s all right, Beth. I realize what you’ve gone through could not have been easy.”

I had shoved one corner of the handkerchief up my nose and immediately froze upon hearing my name.

I ran my eyes over him, but he was not wearing the gray uniform of Facility employees.

In fact, he didn’t strike me as an employee at all.

“How do you know my name?” I asked.

“Oh, we know much more about you than your name, Beth.”

Two figures stepped from a doorway and my senses went on high alert.

They were human too and I suddenly felt things were not all right in Kansas.

I sensed something much deeper was afoot here than I realized.

The human male I had slobbered over motioned towards the doorway.

“Will you please come with us? We have much to tell you and not a great deal of time.”

I hadn't moved a muscle and neither had they.

If they had, I would've taken off like a shot, racing to some safer space, but the fact they hadn't accosted me at least gave me *some* confidence they meant me no harm.

“Who are you?” I said.

“My name is Jeffrey. These are my colleagues. Jeremy and James. We're with the ISA. Can you come with us, please?”

The ISA?

The intergalactic spy agency had informants everywhere, keeping tabs on every person of importance throughout the galaxy.

What would they want with me?

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But you may be in great danger if you do not learn the truth.”

Curious but wary, I let him usher me toward the doorway.

The other two figures filtered in behind us, keeping watch.

It was a regular suite, but empty.

Jeffrey approached the drinks cabinet and poured me a strong whiskey — he must have brought the human alcohol himself as I had not seen any of it in the suite earlier.

He went on to tell me a fantastic story.

One that I was skeptical of at first but as he revealed more details, I came to believe it was the truth.

“Aslas and Feon are not who they claim to be,” he began. “They are undercover agents, experts at covert warcraft. They have not come here to infiltrate the facility or even infiltrate you but to satisfy their Steyatt just as every other Krev must do. They are not linked to the Royal Family, except in service of their space agency. But they are deceiving you.

“They are currently in the middle of an operation to relay important

information to their superiors. After they're finished here, they will pass it on verbally. It involves a conspiracy at several of our human colonies and will put millions of lives at risk."

To say I was shocked was an understatement.

I wasn't sure I could take much more sudden twists and turns during my time at the Seeding Facility.

So much for laying back and taking it easy!

I knew things couldn't have been what they appeared to be.

After all, what were the chances *I* would find my fated mate, never mind two?

The chances had to be astronomical.

Virtually impossible.

And yet, I was ashamed to admit, I *had* believed them hook, line, and sinker.

Now, it turned out they were lying to me *all along*?

But they had lied to me once, so why not again?

"What information do they have?" I asked.

Jeffrey shook his head. "Unfortunately, we're not at liberty to discuss it due to its confidential nature. But you should know it's *very* sensitive. We managed to track them here to this Facility and it's the best chance we have at extracting the information from them."

"They're here, so why not just arrest them?"

He shook his head again. "If it were that simple, we would have done it already. Attempting to break the will of a Krev is nigh-on impossible. They would rather die than give up their secrets, which is why we must resort to more covert means."

He extended his hand to me and opened it, revealing the two black orbs, one with a red stripe, the other with the blue.

"These are tracking and listening devices," he informed me. "Place one in a pocket of each of their garments. They will allow us to listen in on their conversations, track their location, and know where they are at all times. With any luck, they will reveal the truth of their plans. We need you to plant these on them in *any* way possible."

I didn't take the proffered devices. "You want me to spy on them?"

"We want you to place these devices on them, not spy on them. That's our job. Once you've done so, we'll personally escort you back to Earth so you can continue with your life. We only need your assistance with this.

After that, you are free.”

Return to them? I thought. *But returning to them meant one thing...*

Mating.

With *both* of them.

I shook my head, refusing to entertain such an idea. “You’re going to have to find someone else.”

“There is no one else. You’re our only hope. Please. Do it for humanity. Millions of lives are depending on you.”

Millions of lives?

Why couldn’t the stakes be lower these days?

It had taken some time to convince me to undertake the mission, but finally, I had accepted.

All I could think about was what if it were my parents’ lives that hung in the balance?

Wouldn’t I want someone to help them?

I came up with a plan, a way to distract the Krev males by getting them to shower in the bathroom, giving me the chance I needed to plant the devices and leave.

I had to admit it felt good to get some revenge on them.

They might have used me but they would not come away unscathed.

I finished my shower, dried myself off, put my *négligée* back on, rearranged my hair, and tucked the devices back in my hand.

I would only need a moment, just long enough to plant the devices, I told myself.

I looked at myself in the mirror, took a deep breath, and slowly let it out again.

I gave myself a nod, telling myself I could do this, then exited the bathroom.

The moment I did, Aslas leapt to his feet, having been perched on the corner of the bed.

Feon remained standing, arms folded, waiting patiently.

Their eyes were hungry — hungry for me — and I don’t mind admitting I felt more than a little excited at the proposition of being with them both.

But not if they were lying to me.

I beamed at them and they smiled back. “Thank you for waiting. I know I can take a while in the shower sometimes.”

“It’s no problem,” Aslas said, approaching and rubbing my arms with his

hands.

Feon bristled before heading towards the bathroom. “Come on. Let’s shower.”

Aslas kissed me on the cheek and smiled warmly before following after Feon.

He shut the door but did not initiate the lock.

This is it, I thought. The moment I’d been waiting for.

I hurried over to Feon’s jacket hanging from the back of the one remaining chair — the other lay in pieces beside the desk for some reason.

I dropped one of the devices in a pocket, and then cast around for Aslas’s hood and cloak.

I found it hanging in the wardrobe.

I dropped it in a pocket on its sleeve.

I hurried to the door and reached for it...

But did not open it.

“This... This isn’t right,” I said out loud to myself.

The thought had come from my heart as opposed to my head.

It isn’t right to do this...

But yet, I could not go through with sleeping with them.

Not right here.

Not right now.

With the way I felt about their lies and my emotions a jumbled mix.

I hurried over to the desk and rifled through the broken shards until I came out with a notepad and pen.

I hurriedly scribbled a note and placed it on the bed.

I checked the bathroom door and heard the shower running.

I need to hurry.

I hurried over to the wardrobe, pulled it open, and retrieved the listening and tracking device from the pocket, then did the same with the jacket hanging on the back of the chair.

I couldn’t do this to them.

I had some lingering emotions, having slept with them, and even if we had made love under a terrible situation, I still felt close to them — closer than I perhaps ought to have done.

But there was a difference between them betraying me and me doing the same to them.

Lowering myself to their level would only make me feel worse about

myself.

I tucked the devices into the lining of my negligee and threw the door open.

This marked the third time I had left them, and it would be the last.

I hurried down the corridor and raced towards the dock.

I would board a ship and leave this place forever.

Leave my lying so-called “fated mates” and the human spies that had attempted to embroil me in their plans.

I would leave them all behind and not look back.

Perhaps they had already Seeded me — I hoped so — but even if they hadn’t, I would enroll in another Seeding Facility somewhere, some other time.

I knew next time, my experience could not *possibly* be more complicated than this one had turned out to be.

Still, my heart felt heavy.

I would miss them, even if they were liars.

FEON

AS THE WATER ran down my body, I lathered myself up with the body wash the Facility had provided and lost myself in my train of thought.

I would never admit it to Aslas, but the truth was I had not been entirely certain Beth would return to us.

In fact, I had put the odds fairly low — even though I had a great deal of trust in the Joisa and its prophecy.

Was the prophecy true? I wondered.

It was impossible to know.

Perhaps the bond we shared was *already* permanent.

Maybe the truth was lost long ago.

Perhaps the bond naturally faded over time, although I doubted it, as regular fated mates remained lifelong partners throughout their lifetimes.

So why should the bond change just because there were three members in a fated pairing?

But my guess was as good as anyone else's.

I only knew I didn't want to take that chance, and prayed Beth *would* return to us.

And when she did, my heart leapt... but I was also very nervous.

What if she had decided she *didn't* want to mate with us?

What if she was not ready?

What if she wanted to take things slow and not mate for at least a few days, if not weeks?

Then the bond would be broken and the relationship we had enjoyed up until that moment would fizzle and fade away to nothing.

And that was a tragedy I would avoid at all costs.

But there was another reason for my nervousness:

I could tell from the expression on her face she was not sure about the decision she had made in returning to the suite.

Uncertain about Aslas and me?

Uncertain about the situation?

Uncertain about *something else...*?

I wasn't sure, but in her voice, there was a quiver that had not been there before.

In her face, she bore doubt and uncertainty.

She had returned but it wasn't the same girl.

I rinsed off the soap suds and stepped from the shower stall.

Aslas — always one to enjoy the finer things in life — had barely even *begun* to lather himself up.

He sang at the top of his voice and, spying me through the plate glass, said:

“You know, I've been thinking. When we mate with Beth, we should put down some ground rules to make sure there's a clear dividing line between us. Here's a big one for me: I don't want you touching or kissing me or anything like that. I want this *strictly* to be about Beth and her enjoyment. So don't go looking at me adoringly. In fact, we should probably take turns, right? We should take it easy on her — at least, the first time.”

I faded his voice out, rolling my eyes, and dried myself with a towel from the rack.

Same old Aslas.

They had done surgery on my face and body to give me the exact appearance of the Prince but they could never do a personality transplant — not that I would have allowed them to!

He talked too much, was too flippant about serious subjects, and didn't seem aware of his surroundings at all.

These were traits I possessed and considered extremely valuable.

“...after that, maybe we can just go all out and give her everything we've got,” the Prince continued, “but I just want you to know I'm taking your feelings into account, and you're not to feel disappointed with your performance as you watch me make her scream and orgasm. I don't want you to feel insecure...”

Sigh.

I let Aslas continue to witter on to himself — something he seemed only

too happy to do.

I was about to step from the bathroom wearing just the towel when I wondered if that was really the best idea.

I didn't want Beth to be intimidated before we even began.

But before too long, we were going to be naked anyway, so what was the difference?

Besides, Aslas was likely to come out not wearing a single stitch, so at least wearing a towel might make Beth feel a *little* more comfortable.

I stepped into the room and immediately noticed she wasn't there.

The room looked half-demolished with the attack Aslas had launched upon me earlier, and I wondered if Beth had accidentally cut herself or caught a splinter from the refuse dotted about the room.

I hissed at Aslas that he could be so stupid.

And at myself for not tidying up before jumping in the shower.

Beth *deserved* to be in *much* better surroundings than a dilapidated suite such as this.

But she wasn't even here.

I approached the balcony, pulled the net to one side, and saw she was not there either.

I drifted towards the door, opened it, peered down one long empty corridor, and then turned in the opposite direction where a pair of alien lovers strolled arm in arm.

For some reason, my appearance was hilarious to them.

They burst out laughing and continued on down the corridor.

Beth wasn't within sight on that side either.

I shut the door and turned back to the room.

She had gone.

Again.

Beth *really* needed to learn how to deal with her issues in a much healthier way than just running from them, I thought.

I approached the bathroom to get dressed again and inform Aslas of Beth's disappearance when something fluttered on the bed from a fresh breath of wind expelled by the open balcony window.

It was a notebook, laid flat, the top few sheets of paper flapping lazily.

I approached it and spotted the pen lying to one side, hastily dropped.

I picked the pad up and read the few words scribbled across it:

I know who you truly are. But I cannot do to you what you did to me.

Goodbye.

It wasn't signed, not that it needed to be.

The words chilled me to the bone.

I know who you truly are.

Who we truly were?

But we had been open and honest with her.

She wasn't close to us yet but she would be if she gave us time...

But I cannot do to you what you did to me.

I felt a thick wad form in the back of my throat at that comment.

It wasn't what Aslas had done to her — it was what *I* had done.

I had been the one to keep the truth from her, who had laid with her and made her believe I was the Prince and not a lowly Decoy.

For all my grouching about Aslas's temperament and behavior, *I* had been the one to harm her.

And finally, the most painful word of them all:

Goodbye.

There was a dead finality to it, a sense that this truly was the end as far as she was concerned.

She hadn't merely turned us down...

She never intended on coming back.

I dropped the pad and ran back into the bathroom.

I *knew* my senses had picked up on something, some subtext underneath Beth's words and emotions.

Something was wrong, some thought process that did not make sense.

I yelled at Aslas, who was still in the process of rinsing off his soapsuds, gibbering nonsense to himself.

I yanked the door open and Aslas, taken by surprise, screamed in a high-pitched female-like bellow and spun around, pressing himself to the tiles.

"Hurry up!" I yelled. "We have to leave. *Now!*"

"Haven't you been listening to a word I said?" Aslas snapped in response. "I don't want you looking at me naked! Or touching me!"

"We don't have time for this!" I growled, reaching into the shower stall and yanking him out.

I grabbed a towel and threw it at him. "Get dried!"

"All right! All right!" the Prince hissed. "I know it's Steyatt but there is such a thing as patience, you know."

"It's Beth, you dolt! She's gone!"

“What do you mean, she’s gone?”

“What do you think it means? It means she’s not here! Hurry up!”

I didn’t tell him about the note as he would only want to keep on talking.

Without waiting for him, I grabbed my clothes from the drying rack, turned on my heel and marched back out into the room where I immediately pulled them on.

Something was going on here, something I did not have the full information of.

Something Beth had told me, *something* she had said.

Something—

There was a loud *bang* as Aslas hurried to get dressed.

When he came out, his scales were still slick with water, no doubt from the fear it would waste too much time.

He finished pulling on his shirt.

“We have to find her,” I said. “Beth. We have to talk to her.”

Aslas looked at me with triumph on his face. “What did I say? Huh? I *told* you we should have chased her! And now she’s got cold feet and run off again!”

“No,” I snapped. “Waiting was the right decision last time. This time... I don’t know. It feels *different* somehow. We need to find her. *Now*.”

“There’s only one place she might have gone,” Aslas said.

And I knew it without him even having to say it but, being the Prince, he did so anyway:

“The dock!”

WE RACED DOWN THE HALLWAYS, this time not needing to guess which direction she might have gone.

Even if we were proven wrong and she hadn’t headed for the dock, it was still the place that possessed the greatest threat.

Her leaving.

Ships departed from the Facility every few hours, and Beth could jump on any one of them and return to the depot, and then on to her home planet.

If we turned out to be wrong and she had actually gone to a *different* part of the Facility, then all the better.

But we needed to check the dock first and ensure she wasn't waiting — or worse, *already* departed — before we could even *think* about searching the rest of the building.

We reached the dock in what must have been record time.

Aslas's clothes were still damp but his scales were already blasted dry from the wind that pressed against him as we sprinted down the infinite hallways.

I was already beginning to perspire from the exertion.

We skidded to a halt and peered at the females waiting at the next platform.

They were organized in small groups — no doubt from each Claiming.

Many wore the same distant expression; a small distracted smile on their lips, thinking over the past few days' memories, their hands perched on their bellies, knowing (some alien species impregnated the females almost instantly) or at least *confident* they had been Seeded and would come down with child.

But among them, I did not spot Beth.

We raced along the platform and saw a single ship at the far end, its cooling jets firing in preparation to launch.

It was a standard chunky transporter, bold and round in design, sleek and relatively new.

We ran towards it and bolted down the fairway and onto the ship.

"Stay in the dock!" I yelled at Aslas. "One of us should stay behind in case she's not on board the ship!"

"To hell with that!" Aslas snapped. "If someone should stay behind, it's *you!*"

The hood covering the Prince's face was dark with shadow but I could have read his expression as clearly as if it were open to the elements.

He would wear that stubborn, irritating expression, the one I had known since we were young boys, where he refused to quit or give up on the decision he had already made.

Trying to change his mind would be like swimming through space without a suit.

Impossible.

I growled as I turned and hurried onto the ship. "Fine!" I snapped. "But make yourself useful and check another aisle. Shout her name and don't stop until we find her."

The ship was surprisingly full.

As I raced down the aisle, I yelled Beth's name:

"Beth! Beth!"

I tried to peer at each female face I passed but there were just too many.

After seeing a few hundred, they became a blur and I wouldn't have recognized Beth even if I was staring her right in the face.

I glanced over at Aslas and saw he was still moving down his aisle too.

He was further back than I was, as befitting his usual slower pace.

Then I heard a sweet, sweet voice—

"Feon?"

I spun around and saw Beth sitting there, alone, in an open sea of empty seats.

The other females, taken by surprise, awoke from their daydream fantasies and turned to watch the scene unfold.

"Beth," I said, relieved we had found her. "Why did you leave like that?"

Beth didn't look at the other female faces and focused her attention on me. "Because I had to."

I fell to one knee before her, not as a sign of respect or bowing but so I would appear less threatening than I otherwise might.

I took her hand in mine and gently kissed it. "Please. Tell me. What's wrong?"

Beth's eyes shimmered with tears and she placed her hand over her mouth before looking away from me.

"You found her?" Aslas said, jogging over. "Why didn't you tell me? I caught the security staff's attention and they're threatening to have me thrown off the ship!"

"Good," I said.

Aslas blinked and frowned with confusion.

Despite appearances, that was good.

It meant they wouldn't take off anytime soon, not with a crazed alien male running about the place.

And that meant we had a chance of getting Beth off the ship before she went through with what I thought could turn out to be a terrible, terrible mistake.

I reached up and gently stroked her cheek, turning her face towards me. "Whatever the problem is, I promise you we will resolve it. I know we haven't treated you well. At least, *I* haven't. None of it was done on purpose,

I can assure you. We would *never* harm you. We could never bring ourselves to do that. We *love* you. It's an undying love that can never be torn away or replaced. So if you can bring yourself to trust us — even just a little — I'm sure we can make it up to you. You don't need to mate with us, not if you don't want to. In fact, you never need to do *anything* you don't want. Ever. Even if the bond between us should fade, the love I feel for you never will."

Tears spilled down Beth's smooth cheeks.

Aslas, lost in thought at coming up with something more heartfelt than I had said, but failing to, mumbled:

"Ditto."

"Excuse me," a thickly set Krev wearing a security uniform and bushy mustache said, "this ship is for *females only*. And I may be wrong but you sure don't look like females to me."

Aslas turned to him and lowered his voice.

Although I couldn't hear his words, he spoke in a soft and soothing — and even more surprising, mature — tone of voice.

I turned back to Beth and focused my attention on her.

She is all that matters.

Beth looked deep into my eyes. "How can I when I don't know if I can trust you?"

"I know the mistake I made in letting you believe I was the Prince will take time for you to get over, but one day you will. It's just a question of time. And time is something we have. If it's about money or not knowing how you might survive, then you should know the Krev Royal Family is one of the wealthiest in the entire galaxy. Aslas has access to more money than you could ever spend in a *million* lifetimes."

Aslas, for once, just nodded and didn't spout some idiotic comment.

I kissed her hand once more and placed my hand over it. "We love you more than there are particles in the universe. Please give us a chance. Tell us what the problem is, tell us what you're worried about and I'm sure we can resolve it."

Beth blinked and the tears that had been gathering in her eyes ran down her cheeks.

She wiped them away and, somehow summoning strength from a well deep inside, nodded her head. "Okay. But I *must* know the truth. You must *both* be honest with me."

"You have my word," I said.

I stood up and Beth joined me.

The other females watched in wonder.

Those close enough to hear the words I had spoken to her had tears in their eyes, their bottom lips trembling.

Everyone loves a good romance story.

But it was not to last.

The light blinked out and turned red.

The serene silence was replaced by a loud siren that wailed over the speaker system:

“All passages, please return to your seats. I repeat: please return to your seats.”

“What the hell is going on?” Aslas growled, turning to the security officer. “This isn’t for us, right? We’re not dangerous!”

The security officer’s eyes, wide with fear, peered up at the ceiling as if his response was written there. “No,” he said, barely a whisper. “We’re under attack. And I need... I need to get to my station...”

Face pale and ashen, he turned and lumbered back the way he had come.

I turned to Aslas. “We have to get out of here. *Now.*”

For once, Aslas didn’t argue and we took off, Beth in tow, back towards the exit.

ASLAS

THE FEMALES ON BOARD SCREAMED, wailed, and clasped their bellies in both hands, remaining staunchly in their seats.

No doubt their male mates would have gone berserk if they knew their Seeded females were under attack.

But they had already left in their private shuttles back to wherever they had come from.

These females were left to defend themselves.

My heart went out to them but I had my own female to protect.

Our own female.

Beth kept drifting behind, unable to keep up with our long strides.

Feon dragged her by the arm and I could see she could end up getting injured if he wasn't careful.

I bent down and scooped her up in my arms.

Feon looked back at me, his glare hard, but I was not the target of his anger.

But the *attackers*.

He nodded and allowed me to carry her.

If I fell back or became too slow, I would simply hand her over to him, and we would relay between each other, keeping up the same incredible speed we were currently hurtling at.

“Why are they attacking us?” I bellowed between each siren wail. “Why now?”

“It might not involve us at all,” Feon said. “It could just be pirates.”

But he must have known better than that.

The ship hadn't left the dock yet and pirates weren't so well-armed that

they could risk taking on a Seeding Facility with all its defenses.

No, this was something else.

Something worse.

We reached the exit and turned to peel down the fairway... when we realized it had already been retracted.

We must have been the last passengers to board.

The ship had been preparing to launch, and when the captain had gotten word of two troublesome passengers, he wouldn't have launched.

Us.

We were the reason the ship had not already launched.

But there was nothing we could do about it now.

After all, without boarding the ship, we would not have found Beth, and being unable to reach her meant failing in our mission to bring her off the ship.

It was unfortunate but necessary.

"Is there another way out of here?" I said.

Feon shook his head. "No."

Before coming here, he would have researched every possible exit from the Seeding Facility and pored over the plans for hours.

Why? Because the Prince of the Krev Empire would be coming here and it was his responsibility to keep me safe.

"So, where do we go? What do we do?"

"We should get to the escape pods. They might not be active as we haven't yet launched but maybe I can bypass the security system and launch us anyway using an emergency protocol."

I didn't understand a single word he said but it didn't matter.

We had a plan and it was the only one we had.

I followed behind Feon as he sprinted down one shiny white hallway after another.

Someone screamed, and another yelled, and later still, someone opened fire and I sensed the fuzzy frazzled electronic burst of plasma fire as it soared through the air.

Whoever was attacking the ship was already on board and heading deeper into the ship's innards.

Feon changed direction, backed up down another passageway, and led us down it.

Our boots thudded on the hard metal grating floor, loud enough for the

entire ship to hear us.

We came out onto a narrow slit of the ship running around one edge.

Oval-shaped doorways were built into the wall.

Through each doorway was a small capsule.

The control desk inside the escape pods were all dead.

There was no power.

But that didn't stop Feon.

He hurried into the nearest pod, threw himself into the pilot's chair, and began tapping at the controls.

I remained just outside the escape pod's door, peering around a narrow ledge that gave me a little protection as I scoured the corridors for any sign of hostility.

The lights on the escape pod's console blinked into life, the software powering up.

"Whatever you're doing, do it fast," I said.

"Do you think I'm going as *slow* as I can?" Feon snapped back at me.

His fingers danced quickly across the controls.

I peered at Beth in my arms, clutching her so close I could feel her heartbeat.

I kissed her on the forehead.

She must have been terrified but managed a small smile of appreciation.

"Don't worry," I said. "Nothing will happen to you. If they try to take us, my father will launch the full might of the Krev military at them. No one is *that* stupid."

And then I saw them:

A huge pair of hulking figures moving through the corridor in our direction.

They were called the Jizzik, with hairy faces and ugly tusks.

A true warrior race.

They carried heavy plasma rifles, and when they saw me, immediately picked up their pace.

One raised the communicator attached to his forearm and snorted a command.

No doubt for reinforcements.

"They're Jizzik!" I yelled back at Feon. "And they're coming this way!"

"How long?" Feon asked, fingers still dancing at the controls.

"How long is what?"

“How long till they arrive, idiot!”

Feon had never shown me such disrespect before but now was not the time to take offense. “A minute. Two, max.”

Feon looked over his shoulder at me. “I need you to delay them for as long as you can.”

Me delay them.

It had always been Feon who undertook such missions.

It had *always* been his duty to protect *me*.

And now, with us being brothers in fate, the situation had drastically changed.

I was now as responsible for him as he was for me.

The difference didn't go unnoticed by Feon, and it was painted clearly on his face.

I gave him a nod and, without another word, put Beth down.

I kissed her softly on the lips — for all I knew, this might very well be the last time I ever got to see and touch her.

I grabbed the armrest of another chair and snapped it off.

It wasn't much of a weapon but it was something.

I stepped outside the capsule, my back to the wall, and listened as the creatures' heavy thunderous footsteps raced toward us.

I peered around the corner and saw that they were less than two yards away.

I swung the snapped armrest across the first creature's face.

Purple blood erupted and fell in a cascade down his ugly features.

I grabbed his plasma rifle and jammed it to one side, aiming towards his crewmate.

He pulled the trigger and fired off a pair of blasts, neither striking his crewmates.

Damn!

I slammed my elbow onto his arm that held his rifle and although it wasn't a strong enough blow to snap his arm, it *did* dislocate it, and I felt the crunch.

I immediately twisted his arm, bringing him around and hurling him across the floor.

His crewmates leveled their plasma rifles at me and returned fire.

I quickly dove back behind the wall where a glob of pure plasma screamed past me.

It struck the wall and melted it.

“Done yet?” I yelled back toward Feon.

“Negative,” Feon said, not looking up. “The security system is more sophisticated than I thought. I just need a little more time.”

A little more time meant putting my life on the line again.

I took a deep breath and dropped to the floor.

I rolled out from around it, aiming upward roughly at the height and angle I thought the creatures might be standing.

I was rewarded with a creature that had stepped out from the corner at the same moment I had to close in on my position.

I opened fire into his wide, startled face.

His expression disintegrated, leaving a smoldering crevice where his head had been just a moment earlier.

His body fell to its knees and then slumped forward.

I immediately rolled back behind the wall again.

The creature’s blood was so thick it didn’t fall between the tiny holes in the floor’s latticework beneath our feet.

I shifted position and wiped the sweat from my eyes.

I glanced around the corner again, looking to take on the third and final aggressor — except I knew he would not be so rash as the last one.

No doubt he would do the smart thing and wait for reinforcements to join him.

Something shimmered at the corner of my eye.

The purple blood that spilled across the grating floor shone with some internal light as if someone were waving a torch over it.

Gradually, peeling back a sheet of paper, the blood turned from purple to *green*.

My stomach fell between my feet as I realized the significance of this.

I risked glancing around the corner at the headless corpse on the floor.

The creature I had shot, the creature that I had destroyed, was not a Jizzik at all...

It morphed into its *original body*.

That of a *Ukmat*.

The blood fell from my face as if I had been the one who had lost his head.

The creatures hadn’t randomly attacked this transport ship...

Their targets were not the females or anything else on this ship...

And these things were not pirates...
I was their target.
I was putting Feon and Beth in harm's way.

BETH

THE AIR BUZZED with energy from the globule masses of plasma that seared the air and smashed into the walls opposite.

It was like hurling a water balloon in slow motion, except when it struck the wall, it didn't just make it wet but smothered it in a bright turquoise-blue energy, melting it, the material dripping down the wall like hot wax.

Except it wasn't wax but plasma...

One of the most dangerous substances known in the galaxy.

I held my hands over my ears — not to block out the high-pitched electronic hiss of plasma that reminded me of a dance track — but because of how *terrifying* the situation was.

With Feon hastily working at the escape pod's controls and Aslas fighting the attackers, I was left in the middle of the war zone.

Just a few moments earlier, I had been sitting on the ship, numb, wondering what I was going to do once I returned home.

I was glad my fated mates had come for me and considered me important enough to track down and convince me to give them a second chance.

In my mind, I was unsure of what the truth really was.

If I only knew the truth, knew I could trust them, I never would have left in the first place.

Their story about being a Prince and his decoy was a highly unlikely one...

But knowing them as I did — admittedly, as *little* as I did — made the spy story seem *more* likely to be true.

All of the evidence lined up, but I still could not fully bring myself to believe it.

I had agreed to plant the tracking devices on them but had not gone through with it.

I had listened to some deep internal instinct that told me *not* to betray them, that there was *much* more going on here than I realized.

I listened to that voice and now knew it to be the right decision.

After all, there was no reason real spies would want to convince me to join them.

What would they have to gain?

Then we were attacked.

I watched as Aslas rolled and shot a creature that slumped to the floor.

Then the Prince peered around the corner and then saw something that made him sit up and the blood drain from his face.

I wondered what it could be.

The fighting spirit inside him seemed to fade before my very eyes and a new resolution took hold of him.

He noticed me looking at him.

His violent aggression broke and he just smiled at me.

It was warm and full of love and unless I missed my guess, I thought he had tears in his eyes.

He was so happy... just looking at me.

His eyes shifted to Feon, who was still busy hacking into the escape pod.

A resolve seemed to come over him.

He looked back at me, and in his expression, I knew somehow that what he was going to do next was not something I wanted.

That it wasn't something *he* wanted to do either.

I wanted to tell him to not do it — whatever it was — that we would find another way out, that he didn't *have* to do this.

I strained to understand what it would be, to somehow peek into his mind and see his plans for myself...

But it was no use.

I had to see it for myself.

And when I did, I could hardly believe it...

He put his plasma rifle down, raised his hands in surrender over his head, and slowly walked around the corner.

The plasma fire on the other side stopped.

He stepped forward and disappeared from view.

I blinked, disbelieving that what I had just witnessed had *actually*

happened.

He had handed himself over to these creatures...

I just stared, open-mouthed and awestruck.

Why would he do that? I wondered.

What had he seen that had changed his decision to fight?

He didn't look happy about doing it, so I doubted it was for *his* benefit.

In which case... for whose benefit was it?

Ours?

But what did we have to gain from losing him?

Nothing, so far as I could see.

Feon hadn't noticed what had happened and remained glaring at the console, fingers dancing impossibly fast.

I rushed over to him and placed my hand on his shoulder.

He was so focused on his task that he didn't feel me there.

"Feon," I said softly.

"Hm?" he said, still hammering at the keys.

"It's Aslas..."

That got his attention.

His head snapped toward the oval opening where he expected to see him.

No doubt he feared he had lost his Prince, and his friend.

But there was no dead body there, no sign of Aslas at all.

"He's gone," I said in answer to his unasked question.

He just stared, confused, before leaping to his feet, and hurried over to the escape pod exit.

He peered around the corner, mouth falling open.

"Why would he do that?" I said. "Why would he hand himself over to them like that?"

He seemed as confused as I did...

Until his eyes drifted down to a dead body on the floor.

He bent down and placed the tips of his fingers in the drying blood and when he extracted them, the blood was so sticky, it came up with them.

"Because they're Ukmat. He handed himself over because he thought it would save us. Because they're looking for him."

"Why would they be looking for him?"

"Because we had a war with them recently. We won and the negotiations were wrapped up right before the Prince came to the Seeding Facility. The terms weren't good for them — better than they deserved, in fact — but I

guess they decided they could improve them by kidnapping the Prince. They're fools. They're going to kick off another war."

I didn't understand. "Why didn't you recognize them before? Why did you only recognize them when you saw one of their dead bodies?"

"Because they're Ukmat. They can take on the form of any creature of a similar size."

And then it dawned on me. "Oh God..."

What have I done?

Feon looked up at me, eyes searching for my meaning.

"Earlier, when I ran away from you, I was approached by humans. Human males. I thought it was strange they would be here. Then they told me they were part of the ISA, that you and Aslas aren't who you say you are. That you were spies carrying information that they needed to discover to save millions of people's lives. They gave me tracking devices..."

I reached for the hem of my *négligée* and worked the two tiny balls loose.

He peered at them as if they were the devil.

"I didn't do it!" I cried. "I didn't plant them on you. I changed my mind at the last minute and decided to leave instead. If something bad was going to happen to you, I didn't want to be a part of it."

I couldn't help but cry, and hoped he wouldn't hate me.

He took me in his arms. "It's all right. It's not your fault. This is *my* fault. This is *all* my fault."

"What are we going to do?" I said. "They've got Aslas!"

He thought for a moment before shaking his head. "The Prince gave himself up to you — for us. We should not let his sacrifice be wasted."

He fell back into the pilot chair and continued hacking the system. "We'll get out of here and tell the Emperor about what happened. He's wise and powerful. He'll know what to do."

Heavy footsteps thundered down the heavy grating floor as more of the huge lumbering beasts descended upon us.

Feon growled and accessed different controls and a moment later, the pod door slid shut.

"What are you doing?" I said. "If we're trapped in here, it's only going to make it easier for them to get us!"

"We've been trapped since we stepped on board this ship," Feon said.

The speaker system emitted a high-pitched whine before an ugly snarl came over it. "We know you're in there, Aslas. Hand yourself over and we

will allow your female to go free.”

“What do they mean hand yourself over?” I said. “They already have the prince!”

“Yes, but they don’t know that. For all they know, the Prince could be me, a decoy. They will want us *both*. It’s the only way for them to be sure they have the Prince of the Krev.”

“Take it easy on yourself,” the voice snarled. “There’s no other way out of this. Hand yourself over. Remove the pod’s security and your fated female will be allowed to go free and unharmed.”

Feon shook his head.

I didn’t want him to hand himself over, didn’t want Aslas to do it either...
Not for me.

Feon dragged his eyes over my face and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “Listen to me...”

He took a deep breath.

“Look, they’re going to take me—”

I whimpered pathetically.

“Listen,” he said firmly. “They’re going to take me so you can go free. But I do not trust these creatures to keep their word. The moment I leave this pod, the doors will shut and the automatic launch procedure will begin. A distress signal will be launched. You will wait to be rescued. Do you understand? You will be safe.”

I shook my head and wrapped my arms around him. “I don’t want to be safe! I want to be with you!”

“I’m sorry,” Feon said, forcing an emotional stone wall between us. “I wish for that, too. For us all to be together and happy forever... but we have to deal with the situation before us. We cannot hope for one we do not have.”

I wanted to argue further but he jammed his lips on mine, making me melt.

It was a wet, hot kiss, distracted, with me pulling back and trying to fight. I couldn’t enjoy it.

Not with the taste of my tears on my lips and the knowledge he was soon going to leave me.

“They shall have us,” he announced. “But they shall not have you.”

Before I could stop him, he grabbed me and placed me on one of the chairs.

He strapped me in and, to ensure I did not try to escape, tied a knot in the

fabric so I couldn't get out.

"Don't do this!" I screamed. "Please! Don't leave me here!"

"*You are all that matters,*" he repeated.

His face was as hard and unreadable as a statue's.

It was his way to protect himself, I realized.

But I had no such shield.

I felt every last whisper of pain at being separated from him and Aslas.

"So long as you survive, nothing else matters," he repeated to himself.

He tapped a few more keys on the control desk and a big red button appeared from somewhere in the console.

He placed his fist over it and turned to me.

"Please..." I said.

I didn't want to make it any harder than it already was for him... but I didn't want to lose him — I didn't want to lose them both!

"No matter what happens, remember always that we love you more than life itself and would do *anything* to keep you safe."

He slammed his fist on the big red button.

He bent down to kiss me on the forehead one last time before he strode through the door and the huge, hulking, ugly tusked creatures snorted excitedly and snatched him outside.

He turned to look back at me over his shoulder for the last time as the creatures dragged him away.

His glaring determined eyes were the last thing I saw of him before the door slammed shut and a red light blinked.

"Launch in T-Minus five seconds," a computerized voice said. "Five..."

"No!" I bellowed.

If my fated mates were going to be under these evil creatures' control, then I would be too!

"Four..."

I struggled at the harness and it popped free.

The knot Feon had tied was a different matter entirely.

"Three..."

I yanked at it but it wouldn't come loose.

I looked over at the console.

The lights blinked in time with the countdown.

"Two..."

There was a tiny loop in the knot.

It was the key to working the knot free.

I grabbed it...

“One...”

...and yanked on it.

And to my horror, it made the knot even *tighter*, pulling it into my chest in a way only the harness had done earlier.

“No!” I screamed.

And the capsule launched.

FEON

IT HAD BEEN an easy decision to make.

By not handing myself over, there was a risk Beth might have gotten hurt.

They could have opened fire in their attempt to snatch me or while I made an attempt to sneak out of the room.

Either way, the result was not going to be a good one.

Not when Beth could have gotten caught up in the crossfire.

She was innocent in all of this.

In fact, I doubted she had much contact with the Krev or the Ukmat her *entire life* up until we had inserted ourselves into it.

She had *nothing* to do with this and I would not allow her to become injured by *our* mistakes.

No doubt that was what had gone through Aslas's mind too as he handed himself over to the Ukmat.

The Ukmat guard jammed the barrel of his plasma rifle into my back, making me stumble forward.

"Faster!" he snarled.

They were leading me through the interior of the transport ship, towards what I thought would ultimately lead to the Captain's quarters.

It had been a shock when Beth had informed me Aslas had handed himself over, that he had willingly given up his *freedom* in exchange for protecting ours.

After all, it had always been *my* duty to protect *him*, no matter the cost.

His life had always taken precedence over mine.

But in that moment when he realized we were not facing a marauding crew of Jizziks after all but the Ukmat who had merely adopted their

appearance, he must have realized they had come for him—not for me, his decoy, and certainly not for Beth.

And so he had done what I never thought he would have the courage to do—and that wasn't to say he didn't have any courage at all, only that the courage he possessed existed in negotiations and in a more intellectual nature rather than physical—and handed himself over.

When Beth told me about how a team of human males had approached her when she had run away from us, I knew right away they were very unlikely to have been genuine humans—especially in a Seeding Facility such as this.

I was pleased she had changed her mind at the last moment and decided *not* to betray us.

Although she had to have been very angry at us, desperate to take revenge on us, she had seen through it and decided otherwise.

I was proud of her.

Much prouder of her than I was of my own performance when we had first met.

My armed guards shifted left rather than right as I had expected, taking us at a right angle to the Captain's quarters.

I glanced over my shoulder and peeked through the hole formed by my arms placed on the top of my head in the universal sign of surrender.

There were other guards standing to attention outside the Captain's quarters, so I knew someone important was in there.

Clearly, they had *other* plans for me.

By now, Beth would already be hurtling away in the transport ship to a place of safety.

With any luck, the Ukmat would not give chase and she could escape and enjoy the rest of her life.

Without us.

Without her fated mates.

It seemed all but inevitable now that the fifteen-hour mark for the bonding deadline would almost certainly *not be* hit.

Perhaps the bond would fade between us, or perhaps it would remain in place forever, a beacon of my failure toward her and my Prince.

The armed guard finally came to a stop in front of another door with a pair of guards standing outside it.

The door hissed open and the guard unnecessarily shoved me forward.

I was expecting it and so did not lose my balance or collapse on the floor as they had perhaps hoped.

I looked back at them impassively, not sharing a single shred of the anger bubbling inside me.

I didn't want them to know they were having *any kind* of effect on me.

I lowered my arms, the magnetic cuffs tight on my wrists.

My ankles were unbound but that was about to change.

The guard that shoved me earlier tossed a set of ankle cuffs to the floor. "Put them on!" he snapped. "Now!"

You didn't say please, I wanted to retort but knew that would only needle him, make him come into the room, and beat at me with his rifle.

With his guard buddies watching, he couldn't let a chance like that go so easily.

I wasn't afraid to be attacked or incur injuries but why do it when it might affect my chances of an effective escape?

I got down on the floor and snapped the ankle cuffs on.

There was a hiss as the magnets engaged and the light blinked from red to green, matching the color of my wrist restraints.

The guard snorted, backed out of the room, and the door hissed shut.

I shuffled back on my elbows until my back rested against the wall.

I was in what appeared to be regular quarters for one of the transport ship's employees.

It must have belonged to a member of the permanent staff as many of the items were things you would not bring with you if you were there on a short-term contractual basis.

There was exercise gear and a wardrobe full of clothes.

The door hung open, exposing the items as belonging to a female.

Holo-photos dotted the room, showcasing a past life that led up to this moment.

For all I knew, the occupant of this room was already dead.

It was only as I peered around the room that I noticed there was another figure sitting in the corner, arms resting on his tucked-in knees.

He looked almost comfortable.

I hadn't noticed him because he hadn't moved a single muscle.

But I could recognize him anywhere.

"Aslas?" I said.

He didn't respond and just sat staring at his fingers.

I wriggled my shoulders and arms, working myself up into a standing position, and then shuffled forward.

Because it was too easy to fall over, I elected to hop toward him instead.

I hopped twice and bumped into the wall.

I immediately squatted down and turned so I could face him.

He didn't appear to be injured.

My heart leapt at the sight of him, happy he appeared to be unharmed.

He was clearly distracted and lost in his own thoughts.

"You gave yourself up for us," I said.

"Fat lot of good it did," Aslas said, voice hollow with distance. "They don't believe I'm the real prince."

My instincts rang like an alarm bell.

There could only be *one reason* they would allow us to be put in a single room like this.

They were watching us.

They would have set up listening and watching equipment, spying on us every moment.

I peered about the room but couldn't make out any of the devices.

But the technology was so advanced I likely wouldn't be able to see it even if it was there.

They were hoping we might reveal information to them.

And what was the only piece of information they cared about knowing?

Which of us is the real Prince.

They still did not know.

They hoped they could discover it by listening to our conversation now.

But we would not give them that chance.

Once they knew which of us was the genuine prince, they would separate us, likely kill me, and then use the Prince for their own purposes.

Even if they didn't kill me, they would put me in far worse conditions than this room.

I fixed Aslas with a look and tapped his hand. "That's because you're *not* the real prince," I said meaningfully.

His eyes rose to mine and an understanding passed through them.

"No," he said, catching on. "Or am I? Sometimes it's hard to know the truth."

"Yes," I said. "It can be confusing sometimes."

I decided to change the topic.

Best to keep the Ukmat guessing.

“How’s Beth?” Aslas asked.

“Safe,” I told him. “She has no part in this, so there’s no reason to get her involved. There’s nothing she knows that can help these creatures.”

I planted the seed, hoping the Ukmat listening in would believe me.

The truth was, Beth was the *only way* they were going to get us to reveal our true identities.

We would take any punishment they dished out to us—although, come to think of it, that was probably the reason they had done little more than pushing and shoving up until now—because they didn’t know which of us was the real prince and did not want to anger the Emperor when they finally handed the real Prince over.

They simply couldn’t take the risk they might injure him.

Once again, I marveled at Aslas’s self-sacrifice in forswearing his own safety in exchange for ours.

“What do you think they’re going to do with us?” Aslas asked.

“Exchange us for better negotiation terms, I guess,” I said.

Aslas nodded. “I thought as much. Can you believe the Emperor actually wanted to give them the best terms possible? And we were foolish enough to give it to them? And now they want *more*?”

He shook his head.

“Sore losers *always* want more,” I said. “But by kidnapping us, they’re only going to make the situation worse for themselves.”

“They’ll get what’s coming to them,” Aslas said, a stony coldness coming over his face. “You can’t expect to kidnap the Krev Prince without there being some *very dire* consequences.”

The lock on the door snapped open and the pushy Ukmat guard with the bad attitude marched inside.

“Get up,” he snarled. “You’re wanted.”

We rose to our feet, shimmying up the wall with the method I had used earlier.

We shuffled forward before the guard reached into his pocket, dialed in a code, and pressed a button.

The restraints on our ankles popped open and we were allowed to walk freely.

The cuffs on our wrists remained locked.

“He wants to see you!” the guard howled. “Now! Hurry up!”

He bent down to scoop up the restraints and followed in our wake.

We could have launched an attack and attempted an escape... but the timing was not right.

We needed weapons and although we might manage to get the rifles from the guards, I was not confident we could fight for very long—especially not with so many guards surrounding us in the hallways.

But if and when the time came, when the element of surprise was on our side, tilting the scales of favor just enough in our favor, we would take full advantage.

A Krev warrior was worth ten of these creatures.

And so we shuffled down the hallway and back towards where I thought they had intended on taking me in the first place.

The Captain's quarters.

ASLAS

NO MATTER how hard I screamed at the creatures, telling them I was the real Krev prince, they simply *refused* to believe me.

In fact, the harder I argued, the more convinced they became that I couldn't *possibly* be the Prince!

If I had known how they would react, I never would have handed myself over to them in the first place!

I had honestly thought that by giving myself to them they would accept their mission was complete and take me away, leaving Feon and Beth in peace.

Instead, I had only succeeded in weakening our tiny band, reducing our chances of escape, and giving the Ukmat the leverage they needed to manipulate Feon into handing himself over too!

Some tactician I turned out to be!

They dumped me in that room to dwell on my mistake.

It wasn't twenty minutes later when the door popped open and another figure was dumped alongside me.

I figured Feon would give himself up after it became apparent the Ukmat weren't convinced I was who I claimed.

I watched, irritated and lost in my own little world as he shuffled over to me.

Initially, I hadn't picked up on his plan—not to reveal which one of us was the real prince - until he looked at me pointedly.

I thought if the Ukmat had a native Krev member among their crew, he could easily have read our body language and the words we'd chosen, analyze the pointed looks, and understood *immediately* which of us was the

true prince...

But the Ukmat were an arrogant lot and did not pursue friendships with species they considered beneath them.

And so, they remained ignorant of the truth.

They seemed to believe that just because they could adopt the *appearance* of an alien species, they could also *think* the same way too.

And perhaps they could—if they had enough education on the history and culture of each species.

But they would never lower themselves to learning the specifics of an alien culture.

If you were a superior species, why would you want to know the inner workings of insects?

Instead, they preferred their superficial level of understanding.

Still, they were industrious and they would not hesitate to take advantage of whatever leverage they could uncover.

And that was perhaps the reason they were taking us to the Captain's quarters.

The moment we entered the larger quarters, the ankle restraints were placed back on us once more.

The guards dragged over two chairs, placed them back-to-back, and dumped us into them.

They did not lash us down.

There was really no point as there was no way we could launch an effective attack with our wrists and ankles restrained the way they were.

To one side, there was some commotion as the lead guard berated a Ukmat member who did not wear the same disguise as the others.

The only Ukmat that hadn't morphed into the visage of a Jizzik was their captain—or leader—as these creatures did not follow the same hierarchy system as the Krev.

His hard outer brown shell was marked with tiny dimples that allowed them to alter their shape, size, and color, and was what gave them their unique ability to morph into the appearance of any alien species of a similar size to themselves.

He was busy making plans and issuing orders in his ugly clicking, screeching language.

Despite their best attempts at resisting their language becoming part of the translator's library, we had managed to ascertain enough to be able to

understand it.

They were a secretive lot and did not wish for other species to be able to converse with them.

And for good reason.

Few wanted to deal with an unreliable species that did not follow through with its promises.

And so, with the discovery of the logic of their language, we had unearthed the truth of their insidious nature and exposed it to the rest of the galaxy.

It had been a powerful and decisive blow and made other aliens as distrusting of them as we were.

It was one of the reasons they hated us so much.

Our honesty.

Finishing up with his business, which served as a way to show he was not particularly bothered about discovering who the true prince between us really was, he peered closely at us, his large black rod-like eyes running over our features.

Although, it was impossible to really tell *what* he was looking at as there was no pupil or iris to speak of.

“It’s nice to see you again, Aslas,” he said. “I had hoped it would be under... friendlier circumstances, but alas, we are where we are.”

He addressed the two of us, never favoring one or the other, and walked around us in a circle, two pairs of his six arms tucked behind his back.

It’s nice to see you again, Aslas.

I couldn’t tell the Ukmat apart so I supposed he must have been one of the participants from our earlier negotiations.

As neither Feon nor I responded, the creature was at a loss as to which of us it was supposed to speak with.

Finally, he came to a stop. “I think what you’re doing is commendable.”

These creatures had *zero* understanding of what “commendable” really meant.

“That you should risk your life to protect your decoy,” he said. “But your loyalty is misplaced. It should reside with your *people*, not a single servant.”

My stomach churned and my jaw tightened at referring to Feon as a slave.

He was anything but a slave to me, but I remained calm, knowing the Ukmat was only trying to rile me up, and by giving in to my anger reveal who I truly was.

“And so, I will make you an offer,” the creature said. “Tell me which of you is the true prince and I will let Feon go. Of course, he will remain with us until our business is complete but once it is over, he shall be released back to you.”

He waited, but neither of us spoke.

The word of a Ukmat was worth precisely *dick*.

“No?” the creature said, before returning to its dizzying march around us. “Then perhaps you require a little more... convincing?”

He nodded to the guard sitting at a computer terminal set up at the front of the room.

He tapped at the holo-keyboard and an image flashed up on a large screen.

It took a moment for me to recognize what I was looking at.

And suddenly, my heart was in my throat.

Feon’s chair lurched against mine as he reacted the same way I was.

On the hollow-image projection, we saw the escape pod that, until a short while ago, Feon and I had inhabited.

Before we gave ourselves up.

To protect Beth.

Now, these creatures were chasing it down.

I pulled against my restraints and Feon did likewise.

I didn’t know if he was doing it as a way to mimic my actions, thus making it more difficult for them to spot the true Prince between us, or if he truly felt the same blistering anger I did.

“Leave her out of this!” Feon growled, beating me to it.

The creature marched toward him, leaned forward, and appraised his face. “Are *you* the real prince, I wonder?”

“Let her go!” I snapped. “She’s nothing but a human female.”

The Ukmat straightened up, crossed to me, and placed his ugly and sinister face in mine. “That is what you *wish* us to believe, no doubt. But we all know better, don’t we?”

He turned his head slightly to one side, addressing one of the other guards. “Tell me, how rare is it for a Krev to find their fated mate?”

The guard he was referring to was the one with the remote restraint device in his pocket. “Extremely rare, so far as I am aware.”

“In all the galaxy,” the creature said, “I believe there are but a *handful* of fated mates. So, I can only imagine how rare it must be for the Krev to

discover a female with *two* Krev mates.”

I attempted to stand but the guard was on me and smashed me in the face with the butt of his rifle.

The creature hissed—a disgusting slithering sound, almost electronic and buzzing through his mandibles—that sent a shiver up my spine.

“We *must not* harm the Prince!” he admonished. “Nor his decoy, whichever this may be.”

Then he turned back to us. “Which of you is the true Prince is not important. If you both wish to receive the same treatment at our hands, then so be it. But do not think for a moment your fated mate will escape the same fate. We have some very... special plans lined up especially for her. And once she’s in our control, we have no doubts you will reveal to us decisively which of you is the *true* Prince.”

I spat on the floor, struggling against the restraints.

Even in my prime, I was not strong enough to break them, and neither was Feon.

But by the rattling sound behind me, I thought he was still attempting it.

These creatures, devious and disgusting though they were, were not wrong.

The capture of our fated mate would loosen *both* our tongues.

Feon would give himself up the same way *I* would if Beth’s life hung in the balance.

There were few ways that could force either of us to admit the truth, but this was certainly one of them.

The hollow image of the escape pod grew larger as drones attached themselves to it, bringing it slowly down to the ground.

They approached the hatch door and began blasting it open with powerful lasers.

It was only a matter of time before they got inside at Beth, locked away like a pearl in a hzis shell.

I growled, spat, and shook, my chair groaning beneath me, unable to take the onslaught.

Feon did likewise.

We both knew what was going to happen next.

These creatures had won, despite our best efforts.

Finally, I gave up and hung my head.

But once again, Feon beat me to it. “Okay...” he said in a sorrowful tone

of voice. “We’ll tell you... Just... leave Beth alone.”

The creature’s mandibles quivered with excitement but gave no order for the drones to stop blasting at the pod door.

“The Prince is...” I said, my eyes fixed on the holographic image of the pod doors.

They were torn open like tissue paper and the drones rushed in, metallic arms reaching to grab at its occupant.

I felt my lips begin to form the first sound that would say the word “me”...

And the word died on my lips.

My mouth fell open, staring at the image.

The drones’ metallic hands remained empty.

There was nothing for them to grasp.

Because Beth was not on board.

And that’s when things went crazy.

BETH

UNDER THE RIGHT CONDITIONS—WHAT many would refer to as actually the *worst* conditions—an instant could stretch to the infinite.

A blink of time that would normally pass unnoticed, could suddenly stretch out into the far distance, the horizon so deep that you were unsure if you would ever reach it.

As Feon handed himself over and left me, and the door hissed shut and the countdown began, and I struggled pathetically at my restraints, such a moment occurred.

In a single flicker of time, I had seen the future with a clarity I had rarely experienced in my life—the kind of clarity that sometimes comes after a hard workout session when all thoughts and concerns of the day had been forgotten and your mind was free to drift and explore.

Or that delicious moment of the most powerful sexual release, when likewise, your mind found true serenity, in a perfect instant of total and absolute clarity.

Or right now in a hypnotic, computerized countdown when you saw the incredible future you would have with your twin fated mates, one a Prince, the other a pauper, each beloved and loving alike.

And you would see the children that would issue forth, gorgeous horned little beasts with scaly blue skin, combining the strengths of both sets of parents.

Of living a wonderful and meaningful existence helping others and improving their lot in life.

And the knowledge that they had forfeited their lives to protect you from any harm whatsoever.

And so, in that infinite stretch of time, *anything* becomes possible.
That future was only possible if I was a different person.
In such a life, problems occurred on a daily basis.
They came up and you could not simply take off and run.
You had to *face them head-on*, not run away, not escape, but confront them the way an adult would.

I saw my path clearly; winding through all the various alternate realities, leading to *the one* I wanted and sought after the most.

The one where I was with my fated mates, happy in a universe where we could be together and never have to struggle alone.

Where we would struggle *together* and meet every obstacle head-on.

I had already managed to release my harness but now found myself locked in by Feon's masterful alien knot.

Pulling on the thread that I thought would loosen it had only tightened it.

But not enough.

I had loosened my grip on it just in time to leave a little wiggle room.

My shoulders popped free, unimpeded by the straps.

I wriggled my body until I was crouched on my knees and coiled up the energy to thrust myself from the chair.

I crashed to the floor just as the computerized voice spoke another deadening number.

And yet another burst of perfect clarity stretched infinitely before me.

I raced for the door but it refused to open.

And so I yelled at the computer system:

“Computer! Emergency escape! Open the hatch door now!”

Even now, I don't know where the knowledge for that command had come from—perhaps an old episode of Star Trek or something in Star Wars or maybe a completely unnoticed and forgotten piece of information mentioned by a transport ship safety operation announcement—but the lock clicked and the door opened.

I squeezed through before it was even *halfway* open and it immediately snapped back shut.

The countdown continued for its remaining few seconds, now speeding up at warp speed.

I watched through the tiny oval window in the door as the pod released itself from the transport's underside, the thrusters engaged, and it took off.

It shrunk, moving impossibly fast.

But it wasn't alone, as a trio of tiny drones launched from *another* ship—what I could only assume was the mothership of whoever these Ukmat creatures were.

At first, I thought they were going to destroy the pod, and I would heave a huge sigh of relief that I had taken the initiative and worked my way free, but instead, they just chased the pod as it raced faster and faster away.

Now, I found myself on this ship, invaded by all these alien creatures.

I was there without a plan.

I peered around the nearest corner and spied a pair of guards leading Feon, marching away.

I scurried across the hallway and listened to those heavy footsteps.

I hurried after them, hopping from one hallway to another, each one growing busier as we drew closer and closer to what had to be the hub of operations.

Finally coming to a junction alive with these Ukmat, I opened a door, dove inside, and hastily shut the door behind myself.

I was relieved to find it was empty.

It appeared to be a room where crewmates would come to rest.

There were a pair of bunk beds on opposite-facing walls.

I began searching the chests and the items packed inside, not really knowing what I was looking for, but knowing I would recognize it once I saw it.

Not finding it—whatever it was—inside the drawers, I hastened over to the wardrobes and continued my search there.

I peeled back each item of clothing, each costume, each uniform...

None of it seemed to meet whatever instinctual goal I had set for myself.

Then I stopped.

It was a suit—a kind of futuristic space suit.

I suddenly realized what I had been looking for this entire time:

A disguise.

I take on the appearance of a Jizzik, those ugly snouted creatures the Ukmat seemed to favor, but I *could* take up another disguise.

After all, if these things could shift and take on any shape, then why wouldn't some of them *not* adopt this one?

I hastily put it on and snapped the helmet into place, pulling down the visor so my face was hidden.

If they saw me, they would assume I was one of the alien females that

had been Seeded.

Then, discovering me out of my seat, would either punish me, or take me back there—which was far from here, and I would have to make the journey all over again.

There was *no chance* of that happening, so I approached the door, took a deep breath, and hoped things would, somehow, work out.

The door hissed open, I stepped out, and immediately bumped into a guard.

He scowled at me and growled at the back of his throat. “Watch it!” he snapped.

Then he tore his eyes from me and continued marching down the hallway. I released the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding, and took refuge in the knowledge that my plan—up until now at least—was working.

But now what?

My instincts screamed at me to turn and run, to leave, to get away from here as fast as my legs could carry me...

But my heart said otherwise.

And heart *always* trumped head.

I walked down the hallway, leaned forward, and swung my arms as if I had a purpose.

The other guards, similarly marching somewhere, took little notice of me.

One ran his eyes over me before morphing into my shape, adopting it for whatever purpose—perhaps just to add to his own repertoire.

There were only two cell doors that had guards standing outside them.

I had no idea which one would contain my fated mates or even if *either* of them did—but my instincts told me one would.

Not knowing which, and unable to come up with an idea of a way to get inside, I marched in a circle—or more accurately, a square—down one hallway, before turning right, then another right, and back down towards the original starting point.

By doing this and working around a second circle, I formed a figure of eight that brought me always to the same spot:

That hallway with the guards standing to attention outside the two doors.

I made three loops before, finally, one of the doors shifted open and my fated mates stepped out.

My heart froze at the sight of them and I almost burst into tears.

I didn’t realize I was so overcome with fear for their safety.

I wanted to run to them, to scream out their names, but thought better of it.

Instead, I continued my march forward, passing them in the hallway as they looked dead ahead, their wrists lashed together with powerful-looking sets of restraints.

They had to be powerful to keep my mates from smashing them to pieces. I reached the end of the hall and immediately circled back.

I followed the guards, joining their ranks, and paused outside the only-remaining guarded door.

It hissed open and my fated mates were ushered inside, followed by the small troop of guards.

I joined in right behind them, straightened my back, head held high as if I truly believed I belonged there.

My fated mates were dumped into small chairs back-to-back.

I kept my helmet facing forward but inside, my heart was racing, and I shifted my eyes one way and then the other.

There were six guards in this room, plus the hideous giant alien insect-like creature busy carrying out whatever business he was doing.

My mouth felt dry and I could hardly breathe.

Okay, Beth, you got yourself into this mess, so how are you going to get yourself out?

I had absolutely no idea!

I eyed the weapons the guards held and wondered how I could get my hands on one.

They were unlikely to hand it over to me with a friendly smile and politely asking—

“Where is your weapon, soldier?” a tall guard snorted around his yellowed tusks.

His beady eyes glared into me and might have been black holes for all the gravity they emitted.

I opened my mouth to speak but thought better of it.

If I spoke in my real voice, they would *know* I was female and not one of them.

Then I would adopt a deeper voice, I decided.

Before I could get a word out, the guard jabbed me in the arm with a thick finger. “And what sort of form is *this*?”

He believed I was a member of the Ukmat and wondered why I hadn’t

adopted the same appearance as all the others.

Finally, I found my nerve.

I deepened my voice and growled:

“I am... optimizing... sir.”

The creature cocked his head to one side. “Optimizing? For what purpose?”

“To see if... if the Jizzik form is really the best warrior form in our arsenal... sir.”

The creature just glared at me.

I wondered if I had put all our lives in danger.

Then the guard did a surprising thing and morphed into a perfect replica of my spacesuit.

The moment he did, he moved his arms around, extended them.

Staring into the visor of his helmet, I couldn't read his expression.

“Hm. Not bad. It's quicker, smaller, certainly less strong... but it could have its uses...”

Then he gave an appreciating nod and handed me a small plasma pistol. “Do *not* lose it. I expect it back once your shift ends. Understood?”

“Uh, yes,” I said. “Yes, sir.”

The creature marched away to berate another member of the team.

I just stared, wide-eyed, at the blaster pistol in my gloved hand.

I had wanted a weapon... and now I had one.

How was *that* for manifesting?

It wasn't the same caliber as the larger plasma rifles but it was *something*.

I peered at the restraints around Feon's wrists—and I was certain it was him as I felt I could already distinguish between my two mates already having spent some time in their company—I could blast them open...

Or else risk putting a hole in Feon instead.

I had a weapon and a goal—to spring my fated mates loose so we could escape—but I had no means to reach it.

Then the situation forced my hand.

I watched, open-mouthed, as the pod I had been inside just a few short minutes ago appeared as a holo-image.

The team of drones chased after it and began blasting at it with their lasers.

Of course, I was one step ahead of everyone else and knew they would discover *nothing* inside.

I lifted my visor and gently waved my hand to get Feon's attention.

As he looked over, his eyes rising to mine, it took a painfully long moment for him to recognize it was me.

A smile curled the corners of his lips but he did not dare allow it to spread across his face.

It was another infinite stretch of time as he realized what was about to happen.

His eyes dropped to the blaster pistol in my hands before flicking back up to mine.

Without him having to mouth anything at all, I knew what I had to do.

I lowered the visor back down, covering my features.

Feon waited, hands open, palms facing up.

As the drones in the holo-image forced the pod door open, I rushed forward and thrust the blaster pistol into Feon's open hands.

As everyone's attention was on the holo-screen projection, Feon twisted the pistol around, holding it backwards so he could pull at the trigger with his thumb, aiming downward at a precise spot on the restraints.

The plasma shot through the cuffs and burrowed a small hole in the floor.

The green light blinked red and then went off completely as Feon twisted his arm, snapping what remained of the restraints, and launched himself at the guard.

I had never seen anything so fast, so vicious, so *incredible* in my entire life.

None of his movements were wasted.

As big and powerful as these guards were, they were *nothing* compared to Feon, who shot a hole through one of the guard's heads, while wrapping his arm around another in the same instant, gripping his chin and yanking it viciously to one side, where I heard a horrifying series of pop sounds.

The other guards launched themselves at him, but he was a spinning whirlwind of fury.

The guards, seeming to consider me still among their number, rushed past me to get at him.

I hurled myself at their feet, tripping one of them up.

There was *no way* I was going to face them in hand-to-hand combat, but as an obstacle for them to trip over?

I was *perfectly* tailored for that!

The creature tripped on me, fell, and slammed into the floor.

He got to his feet, turned, and aimed his rifle at me.

A powerful double kick from Aslas—his only option as his feet were still lashed together—knocked him unconscious.

Feon fired a bolt into the restraints about his ankles so now he was totally free.

Aslas did likewise with his own restraints and his own commandeered rifle.

Soon, the guards' lifeless bodies dotted the floor.

My fated mates drew up to one of the dead bodies and yanked it up, slamming it against the wall.

It morphed instantly into the hideous creature I had seen earlier.

It was only *pretending* to be dead!

It raised all six of its arms in surrender, shuddering as some kind of green fluid seeped from its abdomen in absolute total fear.

“In answer to your question,” Aslas said. “I am the true Krev prince.”

“Then p-perhaps we c-could n-negotiate—” the creature said before a bolt from Feon's blaster pistol slammed into the middle of its head.

We shared a look with each other, beaming grins all around, but there was no time to hug and kiss, as the door hissed open and more guards filtered into the room.

The Ukmat creatures were no match for Aslas, never mind Feon, who dispatched them with ease.

They formed strange movements with their bodies that reminded me of karate forms, almost as if they were dancing, moving from one position to another, opening fire, not wasting a single shot as each found its target.

Soon, no more guards hurried through the doorway laden with bodies, and instead turned and ran in the opposite direction.

My fated mates each picked up a dead Ukmat body and used them as shields as they stepped out of the room and into the corridor, returning fire on the creatures that shot at us.

They yelled at me to keep behind them as we backed down the hall until, finally, we were free.

They dumped their lifeless shields now strewn with holes and sprinted back in the direction of the escape pods.

This time, the power was already initiated.

We climbed inside as Feon inputted coordinates and launched the pod.

Only once Feon announced we were far enough away from danger did we

finally relax.

We fell into each other's arms, hugging and kissing with big broad grins on our faces.

Tears streamed down my cheeks in pure happiness.

"I thought we were meant to be the ones protecting her," Aslas said, "when all along, she was the one taking care of *us!*"

We burst into laughter and they squeezed me tight between them.

I never wanted them to stop.

"I love you," I said, looking from one gorgeous face to the other. "I love you both. And I never want to be apart from you ever again."

They beamed with joy and kissed me—Aslas taking my right cheek, Feon taking the left.

My joy swiftly gave way to something more primal as I became excited by the powerful press of their bodies against mine.

They took turns kissing my lips, peeling the spacesuit from me and rubbing at my legs and breasts.

Suddenly, the fear I had once harbored at the idea of making love to them both at once dissolved into an excited frantic desire to have them right here, right now.

But they managed to control themselves as Aslas declared:

"Let's get somewhere safe first. Then we can mate and ensure our bond is protected forever."

"And what if the prophecy turns out not to be true?" Feon asked. "That the bond is going to be with us no matter if we mate or not?"

The alien prince shrugged his shoulders. "Then the Creator bless ignorance!"

Feon let out a boisterous laugh.

I joined them in their laughter and realized ignorance truly *could* be bliss!

Hard. Callous. Cruel.

That's how the crew describe their captain.

After their attempted mutiny, he comes to me for aid.

Help him recover from their poison and he'll return me to Earth.

There's just one catch.

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If I give him what he needs, will he keep his word?

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OWNED BY THE ALIEN SNEAK PEEK

ALICE

A FUNNY THING happens when you smash through a barrier and descend into a ravine two hundred feet below.

Gravity ceases to exist. You float up out of your seat, held in place only by a flimsy seatbelt. Time slows and you have eons to think, knowing your end is approaching, and you can't do a damn thing to prevent it.

Death waits patiently below, skeletal arms outstretched, ready to catch you the moment the minivan's whining engine explodes and what had been your innards suddenly become your outards.

Even sound slows. In the passenger seats, your friends' screams could be the mating call of distant whales.

What they told you about your life flashing before your eyes? It's true. The only part they got wrong was it's not the past that catches up to you but the life you *could* have had.

Believe me, that's a good thing. My life had been flaccid and dull up til now. Getting chased over the edge of a cliff by a UFO is easily the most interesting thing to have ever happened to me.

I see all the things I could have done, all the things that might have happened.

That hot guy I spoke to at that bar that time who gave me the cold shoulder? He could leave me a message on my cellphone that I'll read the moment I get home.

Oh, and that job I applied for last month? They could want me to start next Monday at a salary ten times what I currently earn writing.

And that upper-class private school I dreamed of sending my as-yet-unborn children to if only I had the money? Now, I can afford it.

A million avenues of possibility I could have taken, none of which can ever happen. Because in less than thirty seconds of real time, I'm going to be dead.

I find myself wondering if my girlfriends in the other seats are thinking the same thing.

Hazel in the front passenger seat beside me, whose wedding tomorrow we've been celebrating all weekend, will no doubt be thinking about her fiancé and the future she'll now miss out on.

Sirena and Bianca, immediately behind us. They'll be thinking about boys and—

Oh dear. The huge black rocks in the front windshield have grown so large they're all I can see. I send my best wishes to all four girls in the back, held my breath, and stupidly raised my arms over my head—as if that's going to help cushion the blow.

Out of nowhere, a bright light filled every inch of the minivan and I jerked forward in my seat, hanging suspended, my arms and legs and hair hanging down as if God pushed the Pause button.

We're no more than a few yards from the rocks and certain death. I wonder if this was what happened the instant you died. Heaven—*God, I sure hope it's heaven!*—sends a spotlight to vacuum up your soul. I've seen the movie, *Ghost*. Why couldn't that happen?

Any second now, we'll sail up into that light, zooming up faster and faster until we're standing on fluffy cloud shores and basking in warm sunlight. I hope they serve alcohol up there.

Then the moment stretched a little too long, and I turned my head to peer at Hazel...

Except, I can't. My head is frozen, trapped in place. I peered out the corner of my eyes at her, floating like a fat gob of oil in a lava lamp. Her fingers gripped the dashboard so tight they'd embedded themselves in the plastic.

Good luck getting the deposit back, I thought idly before recalling our situation.

A stray tube of lipstick hit me in the face. I tried to speak but my lips won't move either. I can only grunt at the back of my throat:

"Id... ederybody... okay?"

"No..." Hazel and the girls in the back said.

"Why... are... ve... flotting... here?" Hazel said.

“I... don’t... know,” I said. “Why... can’t... ve... talk... properly?”

The doors creaked, groaning loudly, then snapped open, the bolts pinging outside. We squealed in terror and struggled against our invisible bonds, but it was no use. We couldn’t move a muscle.

Hazel’s head bumped on the ceiling and she turned toward me. Her eyes were wide with fear. Even in her frozen state, I could tell she was terrified. I wanted to reach for her, wanted to grab her by the hand and keep her safe. But it was okay, I thought. The seatbelts would hold us firmly in place.

Click.

Our seatbelts unfastened and the metal lock slipped free.

Oh, shit.

Hazel screamed dully in the back of her throat as something grabbed her and pulled her out the door and up into the light, disappearing in an instant. Sirena went next, then Victoria, as they were closest to the doors on that side.

Sensing it would be our turn next, I focused all my effort into looping my arm around my seatbelt. It was already halfway there. I just needed to tense my finger a fraction, and I would hold on.

If I could hold on long enough, maybe these people, these things, whatever had grabbed us, would let us go...

It made no logical sense but when you were desperate you grasped at whatever straws you could find.

I felt the same tug that’d taken Hazel, pulling me back. The seatbelt tightened around my arm, locking it tight.

Yes!

The force pulled on me, like gravity on overdrive, and my legs floated out behind me, but I still wouldn’t let go. Bianca squealed as she was tugged out of the minivan, with Maddy on her heels.

It was just me now, floating there like an ice cube in a forgotten drink. The pressure grew stronger as the force pulled harder, working to get me free. It felt like a giant had wrapped its hand around me and was growing irritated that I wouldn’t let go.

I had to hold on. The guys were counting on me!

Of course, they weren’t really. I had no idea where they went or what they were doing. But the mission became the goal. Achieving it became the only thing that mattered.

The force shifted, banging me against the ceiling and then forcing me down. My head thudded against the steering wheel. And still, I kept my

finger cocked, holding the seatbelt in place.

But it was slipping. One inch, and then another...

The force swung me left to right and then twisted me around.

And that's when I lost my grip.

No!

The instant I left the safe confines of the minivan, it immediately dropped and exploded, and the yellow flames chased me up, licking my boots, almost as fast as I was traveling, a million miles an hour, into the sky.

The light grew brighter and more intense until it burned my vision and I couldn't see anything but white.

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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.

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SEEDED BY TWO

by Tammy Walsh

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