



SUPRA VELUM

A SPOOKY SCIFI
ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY



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Introducing Our Cause

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

This anthology will be benefitting the Native Justice Coalition.

It strives to support Native peoples in the United States from all Nations, collaborating with tribal governments to fight oppression and create positive spaces for all Native people. Their programs include the Truth & Reconciliation Commission for boarding school survivors (the attempted genocide you might have heard of in Canada), the Healing Stories Program for therapeutic generational community-building, and the Two-Spirit Program, which provides a supportive space for Two-Spirit peoples and those that identify as LGBTQIA+ within the community.

First and foremost, we will be supporting the Two-Spirit Program, to show our support for the Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ community during this time of adversity. If we surpass our expectations, our remaining donation will benefit emergency relief, such as heating Native elder homes or providing safe water. (The US Supreme Court decided in June

2023 that the federal government has no obligation to provide access to water for Native nations, even if their sovereign land has none within its borders.)

If we reach our goal, *we could provide the program up to 20% of their annual donation pool for the entire organization.*

Check out the NJC's most recent annual financial report.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, for helping us do so much good for this community.

And now PLEASE! Enjoy your selection of seasonal scifi shorts and spooky alien tales~

xx Etta Pierce



The veil grows thin, the moons are high

An eerie night is nearly nigh!

In boundless black and cosmic whirls

A mist creeps forth with tendrils curled.

On solar winds come fear and fright,

High in space on Halloween night -

And each haunting tale of Alien lust

Brings thrills and chills 'mid stellar dust.

Vera Valentine

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Synopsis



A HAUNTED INN, A SEXY ALIEN, AND A LOVE STORY THAT'S ALL TREATS AND NO TRICKS (WELL, MAYBE A FEW TRICKS).

Misty

Lucky me. I won an adorable inn on a distant planet. It was a rollercoaster ride from a dream come true to a nightmare. The place is a total wreck, and I'm pretty sure it's haunted.

When I'm ready to give up and return to Earth, Zylus, this ridiculously handsome and charming contractor, agrees to save the day. But there's a catch—Zylus is hiding something, and I'm determined to uncover the truth.

Can our crazy chemistry survive the terrifying revelations within these haunted walls?

Zylus

Keeping my secrets hidden from Misty is no easy task. Sparks fly from the moment we meet.

I can't help but be drawn to her irresistible charm. But I'm keeping something from her, something that might make her run for the hills. Can't blame her, really.

As we discover the mysteries of this spooky inn together, I wonder if our sensual connection can survive the shocking truth I'm hiding.

Content Warnings: *None listed.*

One

MISTY

Sometime in the future when humans can travel to the stars...

I've never been this excited before. Not for senior prom, which is a good thing, because my lack of optimism meant I didn't lose my shit when I got stood up. Not the night before I got the job I'd gone through four interviews to land. Which is lucky, because it was one of those bait-and-switch deals that promised way more money than they delivered.

Today? Right now? My anticipation is so high voltage I feel like there are a dozen live wires flying through my body.

I'm just minutes away from seeing the bed and breakfast I flew all the way across the galaxy for. Just a few months ago I was in my nowhere job with my nowhere boyfriend, who has since ghosted me altogether. I was edging toward depression and eating even more than usual.

Today, I'm hover-taxiing to my bed and breakfast. It's not a bed and breakfast I'm *vacationing at*, but the one I *own*—the

Interstellar Inn. A shiver courses through me at that thought. I still can't believe it's true. One minute I was living my regular life, and the next, I saw this amazing offer land in my inbox as if it was meant to be.

The first thing about the ad that caught my eye was the little mansion itself. Although it's on planet Hallion, it could easily be located on Earth. It has an almost Victorian style with its two turrets, cupola, wraparound porch, and whimsical gazebo out back. It was only after the picture captivated me that I read the ad text. For a thousand credits, I could enter myself into a drawing to win this place.

A thousand credits is a lot of money. It's a month's rent. I thought long and hard about it, but something told me I might get lucky. It's the perfect fit for me, with my background of helping my aunt at her boutique hotel and my current completely unencumbered lifestyle.

I scraped up the money and then spent the next month dreaming about what I'd do if I owned the place.

I read once that people play the lottery hoping to win, but mostly because plunking their money down gives them the right to dream about what they would do if they won the prize.

I must say, my thousand credit entry fee gave me hours of amazing fantasies about owning this dream mansion on the outskirts of the small town of Arixxia Fields. This area of Hallion is known for its myriad celebrations, including its winter Jule Celebration which is heralded all over the galaxy.

People flock here for other holidays too, and from what I read—yeah, I did some research—it's a destination vacation all year long. The B&B has the potential for a seventy-five percent occupancy rate, which the Internet says is almost twice the galactic average.

In high school, I started working at my aunt Cheyenne's boutique hotel. She paid minimum wage, but whenever I found myself between jobs, I'd return to work for her. Sometimes it was the front desk, sometimes accounting, sometimes housekeeping. I usually doubled as concierge and booking agent. I enjoyed all of it, though it never paid as much as other jobs, so I never made it a full-time venture.

The idea of owning my own B&B thrills me. I know I'll do a great job. I even mocked up some ads and brochures on my computer and researched the latest techniques to get traction on social media. Winning this bed and breakfast is a dream come true.

It's only been about fifty years since Earth has known aliens are real. A few species landed, gave us some medical miracles in exchange for what they considered our best natural resources, and skedaddled out of Earth's airspace. Most other species consider us backward and provincial.

I tried very hard to learn Universal in school, but I'm still terrible at it, especially reading. Good thing I have a subdural translator.

Oh my gosh, here we are. I may not be able to read much Universal, but I've memorized what the name of my street

looks like. Zo'rel Place. Soon we'll be pulling up to the Interstellar Inn.

My head whips back and forth as I look at both sides of the street, searching for the gorgeous mansion destined to be my forever home.

Why is the hover stopping in front of this dilapidated, decrepit, wreck of a house?

“You sure you got the address right?” The taxi driver has been silent most of the drive here, which is a good thing, because when he turns around to talk, I see his face, which reminds me of an insect with his bug eyes and chitinous skin.

How could I forget the address of my new home? But I must have, because this certainly isn't what I used the last of my money to fly across the galaxy for.

“72 Zo'rel Place?”

“Yes.”

I may not be able to read much Universal, but I learned numbers. There, over the doorway, with the seven hanging at a funny angle because it's missing a nail, it says 72.

I scoot to that side of the hover and open the window, hoping maybe when it rolls down it will perform a feat of magic and turn my B&B into the picture I saw in my email inbox and not the monstrosity in front of my eyes. No luck.

The picture was a lovely vision of mauves and baby blues. Each column, post, and handrail was painted with care. The fine print in the contract stated, “The seller assumes no

responsibility for any minor differences in the changes that might occur from these recent pictures to the time of possession. The winner agrees to take the property ‘as is’ without legal recourse.”

I guess the definitions of “minor” and “recent” are subject to interpretation. This looks as though it was condemned decades ago: porch steps listing to one side, a few cracked windows, and paint only clinging to pieces of wood hidden under the eaves which have been protected from the weather.

This would be the perfect setting for a spooky movie. Instead of a dream come true, this is a nightmare.

Two

MISTY

I sat, still as a statue in the hover taxi, the driver's irritation rising, as I debated my options. A huge part of me was ready to ask him to hover me back to the spaceport. But I'm nothing if not determined. I'm audacious, or maybe it's stupid, enough to want to see what I'm up against.

After almost crashing through the spongy first step, I made my way into the house. Still in the once-grand foyer, I allow myself a moment to assess the depth and breadth of the challenge.

I am not a crier. I've always prided myself on that fact. I laugh things off, that's who I am. Prom date no shows? Ha ha ha. Fabulous new job doesn't pan out? Oh well, I can always work at Aunt Cheyenne's hotel.

72 Zo'rel Place is a giant eyesore, death trap, and the biggest money-suck I've ever encountered. Nope. I can't laugh this off. This is tragic.

Of course there's no power, although I'd arranged it beforehand with Arixxia Fields' power company. That's okay, even though the windows are so dirty barely any light drifts through, I can see what a giant mess this place is.

The remnants of years of disuse, as well as some familiar brown dots that must be planet Hallion's version of rodent droppings, are in evidence everywhere.

I may not know much about construction, but wherever I look, my brain supplies me with a rolling total of credits for each repair. The sound, *ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching*, echoes in the back of my brain.

"I can't do this. No way."

My body feels heavy, as if there are thousand-pound weights on each of my shoulders. I sigh in defeat. There's no fixing this.

I used most of my disposable income on the entry fee for the drawing and the trip here. Although I have little money, I'd figured I would get a loan from a local bank using the property as collateral. It was a sound plan that allowed for the purchase of any furnishings I might need to get the place up and running. My eyes tear as I realize no fiscally responsible institution would bankroll this fiasco.

Something scuffles under the crumbling mauve monstrosity in the great room that might have been a nice couch... a hundred years ago.

“Shoo!” I shout, even though I assume my scolding tone and stamping foot won’t be effective at making the little alien creature run away.

Now that I’m over my initial shock, the pictures from the brochure still scrolling in the back of my mind, I can see past the debris and imagine what this place would look like if it were reinstated to its former glory.

“It’s too bad really.” I blow an errant lock of hair off my cheek. “If I could get a loan, this place would be amazing when she’s all fixed up.”

I leave my suitcase near the front door and give myself the grand tour. The place has such lovely bones: arched windows, spacious rooms, high ceilings. The rounded areas in the turrets would be lovely places to put cushioned window seats so people could sit and read a book.

The guest rooms are perfectly arranged, each with its own private bathroom. The living room is perfection, its dark paneled walls in surprisingly good shape. It has just enough room to provide several seating areas for couples and families who don’t want to be confined to their rooms. There’s even a sunroom that would be perfect for the breakfast part of the bed-and-breakfast adventure.

It takes a heave of my shoulder to unmoor the French doors off the back of the house from where they’ve been stuck, unmoving, for decades. I know I shouldn’t, but I make my way through thick piles of leaves to the gazebo.

It had been the deciding factor in my decision to buy this place. Call me an idiot, but I couldn't keep my mind from wandering to pictures of spending starry nights here with a beau. Yeah, I used that old-fashioned word when I thought of being courted in this wonderful homage to a bygone era.

I imagined having a child playing in the yard while I watched from a seat in the gazebo. It all seemed so real, so very doable when I was looking at the pictures in the brochure. I can't control the scoff that escapes my lips when I get close enough to see that all the floorboards are so rotted they wouldn't support the weight of a chihuahua.

Noticing it's almost dusk, I return to the house. After the handle to the French doors comes off in my hand, I feel a pang of sadness. I think about what it would be like to run this place, greeting newcomers, and baking muffins so delicious the smell wakes my guests and calls them down for breakfast.

With a last deep breath, reminding me no muffins will ever be baked in the dilapidated kitchen, I return to my suitcase, planning to stay the night in a hotel, book the first vessel back to Earth, and beg my former employer to hire me back at my crappy job.

“What the fuck!” I shout ten minutes later when my wrist-comm continues to tell me there's no signal. “How am I supposed to get out of here?”

I'm not a quitter, but after another half hour of holding my wrist up as I march up and down the street, I tuck my tail between my legs and drag my suitcase back into the house.

Now that it's dark, the house is more spooky but less filthy. I guess that's a good tradeoff. I use my wrist-comm's flashlight function and choose the least gross room at the end of the hall at the top of the stairs. Bigger than the others and in better condition, it must have been the master bedroom before it turned into a haunted house.

I find some sheets in the middle of a stack in the linen closet that must have escaped the ravages of time. They barely smell musty as I shake them out, then make the bed.

Having no intention of unpacking, I grab the first thing that can act as a sleep shirt, then crawl into bed. I'm terrified when I hear scratching from somewhere else in the house. I assume it's whatever varmint pulled the stuffing out of the couch downstairs.

After getting up to shut the bedroom door, I lay down again, but my mind is racing so fast I can't sleep. Between the running total of what this fiasco has cost me and the anticipation of explaining to friends and family that my dreams of running the Interstellar Inn have been dashed to smithereens, I can't get my mind to slow down.

“Whooooo.”

What was that?

“Whooooo.” Oh my god. That sounds exactly like every ghost in every scary vid I've ever seen.

When the bedroom door opens and closes, my blood feels like it's stopped pulsing in my veins. Maybe I hallucinated the

whoo-who, but I did *not* imagine the vibration of the door slamming.

“Wh-who’s there?” Panic slices through me. My fists ball and my eyes widen, as my body flies into terror-mode.

The dim room fills with mist, almost obscuring the scant moonlight filtering in through the filthy windowpanes.

I scramble to a sitting position, my back against the headboard, my knees scrunched to my chest as I tuck the covers to my neck. I’m tempted to close my eyes, but I’m too terrified. If something lunges at me, I want to see it.

There’s a jangling clash of metal coming from the far side of the room. Is that hangers banging together or a ghost honing his knife before he plunges it into me? The bathroom door opens and closes again and again. The strident banging is relentless, interrupted only by one of the windows opening and closing. I can’t think of a single natural explanation for what is happening. This isn’t the effect of drafts. It must be a ghost.

I’ve never been this panicked. My breath is rasping, my eyes are bugging out of my head, and my body is quaking in fear.

“Whooooo, whooooo.” The ghost’s voice is deep and quavery. If ghosts have a sex, this is definitely male. “Get out of my house!” he shouts.

The mist increases in a burst so powerful, for a moment it obliterates the watery light drifting in through the windows, plunging me further into darkness. Slowly, it dissipates as the hangers quit jangling in the closet.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, then hope I don’t hear a response.

Something was in this room with me. And as surely as that was real, I’m certain it’s now gone.

My heart is still racing a hundred miles an hour. I’m shivering so violently I’ve bitten my lip. I clamp my fluttering hands over my mouth, hoping the smell of blood doesn’t call some other devilish being into existence to terrorize me.

I sit as still as I can until my nerves calm enough for me to get out of bed, then get dressed while under the blanket, pack, and hover my suitcase down the stairs and to the front steps. I won’t be getting any sleep tonight, and there’s no way in hell I’ll be waiting inside for whatever that was to return.

Three

MISTY

It's dawn, and I'm sitting on the front steps, my suitcase packed, as I wait for someone, anyone, to drive by. I'll flag them down, play on their sympathy if necessary, and beg, borrow, or steal my way into town since I still have no signal. From there, I'll book a ticket back to Earth, and this little jaunt will be nothing more than a terrifying memory that robbed me of all my savings and convinced me ghosts are real.

Counting myself lucky to be alive, I control my irritation that not a single vehicle has hovered by all night in the long, dark, cold hours I've been waiting out front.

Looking down, I'm surprised my fingers aren't still trembling in fright after last night's visitation. I've been conducting an inner debate for hours, trying to convince myself a ghost wasn't haunting me.

I still believe the noises, clanking, and moans weren't produced by the little teal varmint I saw standing in the kitchen as I left in the middle of the night. Far from being

intimidating, he looked at me with big, hungry eyes as if he were waiting for scraps.

A thousand times last night I tried to convince myself the mist-creature in my bedroom wasn't real. Everything I experienced can be explained away if only one of them had happened, but when you add them all together—the mist, the moans, the door shutting over and over, and the threat to “get out”—I don't think I overreacted.

My thoughts are thankfully pulled from last night's perilous experience when a blue hover-truck turns onto Zo'rel Place. I practically sprain my ankle sprinting to the edge of the sidewalk, waving my arms to catch the driver's attention.

Wow. I know I should keep my mind on job number one, which is to get to town and book a flight out, but I'm literally struck dumb when I lean close to the passenger side window to speak to the driver.

I still can't tell a Frain from a Vucillian, but whatever species this guy is, he has to be the most handsome male in the galaxy. Shimmering green skin, long black hair, sparkling white fangs, sexy retractable claws, and features gorgeous enough to make the statue of David jealous.

When he rolls down the window, I finally untie my tongue and ask if he can take me to town.

“Why didn't you comm for a hover taxi?”

When I look at my comm, there's a signal. Did the ghost's presence somehow block my signal all night? I shake my head

as another shiver runs down my back.

“My comm must be glitching. It wasn’t working until this very minute.”

A look of confusion crosses his face, then he asks why I’m here. One thing leads to another as I tell him my story. Well, not the part about the ghost visitation, but the rest of it.

His face turns to granite. He’s completely inscrutable until I finish talking.

The logo of a hammer and a house on the door I’m leaning against, as well as the lumber in the back of his truck, are dead giveaways the guy is in construction.

I must have lost my mind somewhere between the “whooooo, whooooo” and the “get out of my house,” because I’m seriously trying to convince myself it would be a bad idea to ask him how much it might cost to renovate the inn.

I’m having such a loud argument in my head, I’m surprised he can’t hear it. Finally, I justify my decision by making it all about safety. Instead of just hopping in the truck with a possible serial murderer, I’ll spend a bit more time with him as I show him the inn and get a ballpark of what it would cost to fix up. Not that I’m going to renovate, mind you, just to get a better feel for his character before I hover to town with him.

Who am I kidding? It also gives me time to be within staring distance of a male whose profile is only surpassed by his full-frontal gorgeousness.

We exchange names between the hover and the front door, then Zylus and I begin the quick tour. He does little more than glance into each room and make perfunctory comments along with little tongue clucks when we see something that has aged badly—which is everything.

“So? How much do you think it would take to fix her up?” I ask as we climb into his hover.

“It depends on what materials and finishes you choose,” he hedges.

“Just an estimate so I can see how much I’d need to borrow.” Did I really say that? As if I’m planning on waltzing into a bank and asking for a loan. Before I question my sanity, I add, “Be sure to include remodeling the gazebo. The thing is practically in ruins, but it could be so lovely when it’s returned to its original glory. That was the part of the ad that lured me into raiding my savings to enter the drawing.”

“As we went from one problem to another on the tour, I thought you were giving up on the project.” He spears me with a questioning gaze, one eyebrow hiked high on his forehead.

I shrug. “Well, as long as you inspected it, I’d be interested to know.”

He tosses his head from side to side as he gives it long moments of thought. “It’s a wild estimate, not to be taken seriously,” he hedges. “I’d say 250,000 to 300,000 credits. That’s if you don’t go crazy with materials.”

“Wow!”

I'm silent the rest of the ride into Arixxia Fields. What a letdown to go from thinking I'd won the perfect B&B to realizing I'll need to pump over a quarter of a million credits into it just to make it habitable.

As we drive, I use my now-functioning comm to check into a ticket back to Earth, only to find there's no way out of town until tomorrow.

A thought has been nagging at the back of my mind since my handsome companion said the words 300,000 credits. I'm here. I have at least a day until I can leave town. Why don't I hit up a few banks to see if I qualify for a loan?

The property may be down-at-the-heels, but it's got to be worth *something* as collateral, right? Even if it's just the land itself?

When I ask Zylus to drop me at First Bank of Arixxia Fields, he balks.

"I thought you were giving up on her."

"Yeah." I shrug. "But now that you've given me a ballpark number for renovation, I might as well see if it's doable."

Four

ZYLUS

Why did I give her an estimate? Well, first of all, how was I to know she'd even entertain the idea of renovation? Every room we looked into pulled a moan or "oh my" from her. And second, I was having fun with her. She's a great conversationalist and it would have been rude to stonewall her when she asked a direct question.

The tour gave me plenty of time to get a good look at my pretty companion. The human is... beautiful. Her long, brown hair is pulled into a tail at her nape and her face is full and round, with a pointed little chin. I doubt she'd enjoy hearing it, but her lips pursed in consternation make her look adorable.

Although I didn't really expect to see anyone at this time of day, I drove by the inn in the hopes of getting a look at its new owner.

For some reason, I always thought it would be a wealthy, chittering, insectoid Frain or a bulbous Mulmout who left a trail of slime behind him wherever he slithered. Not a beautiful, young female who came to collect her prize.

My mind flips through many things that led to this point, starting decades ago when I used to visit my grandparents in this house, faded from its original glory but still livable. Even back then, I imagined fixing it up, modernizing, beautifying, and opening it as an inn.

After my grandparents passed, I made it clear I'd like to make 72 Zo'rel Place into the inn of my dreams, but my parents always reminded me of the Astralite law that all goods pass to the oldest son.

Although they were kind but firm in their refusal, somehow I always thought they would change their minds and leave it to me in their wills. This is planet Hallion, after all. The old Astralite ways are no longer binding. Sadly, they stayed firm in their conviction to follow the old ways, leaving everything to Nivar. When he married and gave them a clutch of grandchildren, I knew they would never change their minds.

They couldn't have been more misguided though. The first thing he did after their death was try to sell this place. That's not true. The very first thing he did was divorce his wife and become an absent father.

I watched as the building faded from neglect into ruins even as I retained hope I would eventually inherit it.

Just as I'd feared, after my parents' shocking passing in a hover crash when they were still in their prime, the house was left to my older brother. I was disappointed but shouldn't have been surprised. They'd never wavered from their gentle reminders of the old Astralite ways.

Nivar put the property up for sale soon after the will was read. I tried to scrounge for the credits but couldn't swing his ridiculous asking price. Although I've been socking credits away for renovations since my first after-school job, I didn't have enough to both buy the property and fix it up. Not even if I sold my tiny starter home.

It was only after a year on the market with no offers that Nivar came up with the ridiculous scam of having people across the galaxy ante up one thousand credits to be entered into a drawing to win the place. One night when he was so drunk he was barely able to walk, he bragged that he made five times the worth of the property with this scheme.

Nivar's ads included touched-up photos from the home's heyday. That poor human must have gotten the surprise of her life when she pulled up yesterday.

Now I need to do damage control. I've got to figure out a way to wrangle my way into the banker's office with her.

"I wonder, Zylus, if you would mind talking to the banker with me? With you there to answer a few questions about the renovation, I might be taken more seriously."

What a lucky break! This way, I can steer the conversation in the direction I want, which is to help Misty St. Clair leave town as fast as possible so I can make a reasonable offer on the property now that my brother has already made five times more than the property was worth.

Within half an hour, pretty little Misty and I are sitting in front of Mrs. Slizzax, a reptilian from the Radgon Sector who

makes up for her species' reputation for sloth by being perfectly dressed and sitting with textbook good posture.

She asks all the right questions, looks at the copy of the deed Misty has digitized on her wrist-comm, and researches the paperwork in the city's online databank. She analyzes housing comps as well as recent drone footage, which she observes with a startled intake of breath.

"250,000 to renovate, you say?" she asks, peering down at the Earther who is a good standard foot shorter than her.

"W-well, Zylus said maybe 300?" Misty squeezes out a worried smile. I can practically hear the wheels turning in her mind as she considers how to convince the banker to see the dilapidated property through kinder eyes.

"It's always more than the contractor's estimate." The reptilian gives me a dismissive glance, then returns her attention to Misty. "*Always.*"

"Your deed is free and clear. That's a good thing, Miss St. Clair, but I'm afraid you only qualify for a loan of 145,000. I can go to 150,000 in good faith, but unless you can prove you have the rest of the money, I won't loan you anything."

Mrs. Slizzax folds her hands on her desk and leans forward as if she's letting Misty in on a little secret.

"The only thing worse than having no money for renovations is having less than you need. You'll spend everything you have and walk away with nothing. Not only will you have to

forfeit your property back to First Bank of Arixxia Fields, but you'll still owe us money.”

I've never had a warm space in my heart for reptilians, but I must admit, her reasoning is sound, and she's being kind in her own way.

Misty looks so dejected my stomach clenches in sympathy. I certainly know the feeling. Wasn't this how I felt when my parents gave Zo'rel Place to Nivar instead of me?

Before I can think of a way to help the situation, Misty asks the banker to give us a few minutes to discuss this alone. Certainly she doesn't want me to loan her credits! Why would she suspect I could do such a thing? The hover-truck I drive is so decrepit it can barely accelerate to highway speeds. Besides, we just met!

When we're in the waiting room, before we arrive at our chairs, she turns to me and says, “I want this house, Zylus. I have a proposition for you. What if we use the bank's 150,000 to buy materials and you donate your labor?”

I sputter at the audacity of her request. Does she think I'm insane?

“*Donate?*” I like this Earther, but I can't keep my shocked derision out of my tone.

“On Earth, we call it sweat equity. I come to the table with a free-and-clear deed.” She points to her wrist-comm as if she's pointing to something real instead of a digital record.

“You bring your expertise and muscle. We’ll write this up and see a lawyer. It will be fair and square. At the end of the day, we’ll be fifty-fifty owners.”

This is the worst idea I’ve ever heard. In my life. I want to get rid of her and buy the house myself. Instead of saying this out loud, though, I clap my teeth together and force myself to think it through.

Fact one: I don’t have enough credits to do the renovation even if I owned the property outright. Fact two: I don’t own the property.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and admit the sad truth. The only way I’ll ever own this property is to take Misty up on her proposition, which is, in fact, quite generous.

“One condition,” I say, suddenly realizing that in her mind, I have the upper hand.

Her face brightens for the first time, revealing her splendid smile. “What?” She’s so eager, it’s obvious she never expected me to agree to her ridiculous offer. That means I can increase my ask.

“No. Two conditions,” I amend. “First, I get an equal say in *all* renovation decisions. Everything from which walls to remove, to which rooms to begin with, to what materials to buy.”

“Done.” She smiles up at me, her face beaming with happiness as she awaits my next demand. Is she so naive she thinks my second request will be as reasonable as my first?

“Second, I move into one of the spare rooms to reduce my commute.”

Her pert, pink mouth pops open and she shakes her head as if she’s scandalized. “No way!”

“Less commute means I’ll have more time on the job. More time on the job means it will be finished sooner which means our first guests will be plunking down their deposits in record time.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest even as I wonder why it felt so imperative I move into the inn. “Final offer.”

“Fine, but I pick which room is mine. Ass,” she says as she marches into Mrs. Slizzax’s office to sign the papers.

Five

MISTY

On the drive to lunch, or whatever they call the meal between lunch and dinner–linner, I guess—I kick myself for my impulsive behavior. Did I really just sign a bank loan for 150,000 credits? The thought of it makes me woozy.

Glancing over at Zylus, his profile so perfect it's hard to take my gaze off him, doesn't make me feel better. Did I really just agree to *live with* a male I've known for less than four hours? Someone should put me in a straightjacket.

I didn't agree to his moving in because it was one of his conditions, or because he's so gorgeous he makes my mouth dry. Whatever I witnessed last night has me terrified. Although I was originally scandalized by his presumptuous demand, I soon realized I'll feel much safer knowing Zylus is just down the hall.

My door has a lock. I won't need protection from him. It's the ghost who can move through walls that terrifies me.

As much as I want reassurance, I vow to myself I won't whisper a word to him about last night's visitation. He must already think I'm the most impulsive person he's ever met. Why else would someone offer a perfect stranger such a business deal?

"Here we are, the Heirloom Cafe."

I try to control the huff threatening to escape my mouth. I don't know why it irritates me that in addition to having vid star good looks, Zylus just whizzes up to our destination and finds a parking spot directly in front of the restaurant's door. Some people have all the luck.

He slides into a red leather booth in the corner and orders the *melioncrott*, which he describes as planet Hallion's version of a deep-fried PB&J. I decide to indulge and order one too. It sounds like I'll be earning some sweat equity myself. I'll be burning off a lot of calories as we demo, strip, and reconstruct a ten-thousand-square-foot mansion.

Somewhere between our order and the moment I scrape the last morsel of food off my plate, Zylus and I strike up what could only be called a budding friendship.

We share a few childhood memories. I tell him about being a tomboy, climbing trees, and spending all my free time lost in books.

It's interesting to hear he's quite the reader too. He used to spend a lot of time at his grandparents' house, reading in their backyard gazebo. When he speaks fondly of those moments in the outdoor structure, I realize we have a lot in common. It

was the Interstellar's gazebo that finally made me pull the trigger and spend a thousand credits on the drawing.

We move on. Other than religion and politics, we cut a wide swath of topics.

"I disagree," I say, licking my finger and swiping the remains of the powdered sugar the cook dusted over the amazing sandwich. "I think Chanpin Bergin's acting in the *Maritime Pirate* series was far superior to Agnon Prednum's in the *Byzantium Witch's Treasure*." I lick my finger with a flourish, then await his response.

Instead of launching into a debate, holding onto his original position come hell or high water, he gives my opinion serious thought.

"I think the difference might not be so much in their acting ability, but the quality of the scripts."

I can't hide my smile at the way he's finessing this argument. Most guys would be steamrolling me by now in their quest to make me wrong and themselves right. I like our give-and-take.

"You might be right," I concede. "The Pirate series was clearly the better concept."

He nods his head, pops the last bite of sandwich between his peach-colored lips, and somehow manages to look handsome even as he chews.

His startling good looks fall to the back of my mind, as we share tidbits of our history. His piercing blue eyes bore into me when I tell him about the job market back on Earth. I feel as if

he's with me every step of the way when I explain how employers can promise everything and deliver nothing. Yet the handsome male, with his long, black hair, square jaw, and sexy white fangs, is an interesting juxtaposition of contradictions.

He's capable of deep, genuine belly laughs, especially when I make my trademark snarky quips. It's endearing to have a male laugh at my jokes.

I haven't survived on my own for so long without having a spidey-sense. Although he's warm and engaging, he dances around certain topics, especially when I ask questions. Enquiring about his immediate family seems to be off-limits. That's okay. We just met.

Now that we've broken the ice and developed an easy camaraderie, he goes to his truck and returns with a computer pad. If I'd had any questions about his construction experience, that he has a pad in a protective cover strong enough to get run over by a truck, as well as being dotted with at least twenty different colors of paint, reassures me he does, in fact, have a history in the trades.

For the next two hours and several cups of strong coffee, we use the blueprints we retrieved from the town database and discuss room-by-room changes we'd like to see.

Some of our tastes are so similar it's shocking. The bedroom I slept in, clearly the master, will be tastefully appointed in sky blue and milk chocolate.

"It will appeal to both sexes," he says, with a nod. "That room will be easy. How do you say it in Earther? A piece of

barnacle.”

I return his pleasant smile, wondering how much it will cost to upgrade my subdural translator which is clearly on the fritz. Piece of barnacle, indeed.

We disagree completely on the kitchen. He wants it to have the latest conveniences, so it will be up to the task of cooking breakfast for a small mob. I have my heart set on the old-fashioned appliances I saw in pictures from the mansion’s bygone days.

He shrugs. “We don’t have to start there. Those are details we can agree on later.”

I like his laid-back attitude as much as I like his face.

When my stomach clenches in anxiety at the thought of sharing the house with him tonight, it’s hard to disregard how eager he was to move in. He’s got to have an ulterior motive, right?

I don’t get a pervy vibe from him, though, and having him just down the hall will be reassuring in case the ghost returns.

Still, I’m sure he’s hiding something. I guess it remains to be seen exactly what that secret is.

Six

ZYLUS

After three hours at the cafe, I couldn't come up with any more excuses to stay away from Zo'rel Place. It's ridiculous, really, that I'm terrified for us to live together under the same roof.

You'd think a male my age would have lived with a female before, but it just never seemed like the right person or the right time. That was no hardship. I stayed busy with my construction business as I socked away credits to eventually buy the place.

Now I'm going to be co-owners with Misty. We'll have to get things finalized with an attorney, but we hammered everything out at the cafe. We'll spend the first year of operation living at the B&B as she calls it, taking tiny salaries, and saving every extra credit.

Hopefully, at the end of the first year, one of us will be able to buy the other out. I doubt she'll like it in our small town. She described living in a large city back on her home planet.

I'm going to expect her to pull her weight with the renovation. After months of swinging a hammer, she'll probably be all too eager to fly off the planet and let me buy her out.

We've structured the deal so that whoever gets bought out will get a small percentage of the profits in perpetuity. It should be equitable. She'll walk away with a decent number of credits, and I'll finally have the old family house, as well as a good income stream. Both of us will win.

"I didn't sleep well last night," Misty says, a shadow of worry crossing her face. She holds up the bag containing clean sheets we collected when we detoured to my apartment to collect my things. Before turning in, we did a quick clean of the two bedrooms we'll be using. "Here are your sheets. I'm going to make my bed and turn in early."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her swerve to the enormous fireplace along the far wall and grab a fireplace poker. Does she think she needs to protect herself from me? I'm hurt she'd think I might be a threat. Then I realize it's smart. Although we're partners in this venture, she barely knows me.

I choose the room farthest from hers, so we're at opposite ends of the second floor. As I make my bed and put my clothes away, I can't keep hiding the truth that is shouting in the back of my mind.

I'm attracted to Misty.

It's been easy to avoid getting close to females in the past. I've always been so focused on my end goals, I never allowed myself to stray off the path I'd set for myself.

Misty, with her short, curvy body and long, brown hair, makes it impossible to do that. She's fun and laughs easily at my jokes. At the cafe, she made several self-deprecating comments I think were designed to put me at ease, though I hadn't thought my discomfort showed.

She has an easy way about her. While I was eating my sandwich, she cocked her head and focused on my mouth so sharply I quit chewing. Then she apologized with a laugh and a toss of her hair.

"I've never known anyone with fangs before. It's interesting to see how you manage without cutting your lips to ribbons."

If I didn't know better, from the way her face flushed and her pink tongue flicked out to lick her plush lips, I would swear she was wondering how I would manage to kiss someone without cutting *their* lips to ribbons. But it's crazy to think that. She couldn't be interested in an Astralite like me. Right?

Seven

MISTY

I guess my angry phone call to the power company worked. The lights flicked on when we returned to the inn.

I take the world's quickest shower while bombarded with mental clips of every scary movie I've ever seen. You're totally vulnerable in a shower. If there are ghosts, who knows what other monsters might be lurking in this house I just agreed to pay a terrifying amount of money for?

Come to think of it, the mortgage is scarier than the possibility of ghosts.

Back in the bedroom, as I towel my hair dry, I flip the switch to the fireplace and breathe a sigh of relief as it flares to life, bathing the room in a warm glow. There's something about the fire that reassures me no ghosts will visit me tonight.

Which allows my thoughts to wander in a much more pleasant direction—Zylus. How many times today did my hands itch to slide through his long, black hair or reach under his shirt to palm the abdominal ripples hidden by the fabric?

Even when we were arguing the merits of antique kitchen appliances versus the latest models, it was all I could do to keep my head in the game. I was much more captivated by the way his white fangs flashed in the bright cafe lighting.

I slip into my nightgown, then slide into the soft sheets and get comfy, still preoccupied with pictures of Zylus, only to remember the fireplace poker I left leaning against the wall in the bathroom.

I don't want to get up to retrieve it, though. It's so snugly under the covers. Besides, ghosts are formless wisps of smoke. What exactly did I think a piece of metal could do against something supernatural?

I must have fallen asleep, but I'm awakened with a start. Shit! The ghost is back. With a vengeance.

Its moan is deep and louder than last night. The spirit is bolder too, lifting the foot of the bed a few inches, then dropping it with a heavy thump. The mist surrounding it is thicker than it was last night, practically obscuring the dim glow of the electric fire.

I'm instantly fully awake, heart pounding, mouth gasping for breath as I look around for something to defend myself with.

Shit! Why did I leave the poker in the bathroom? Although I've already determined it will be useless against the specter, I sure wish it was in my grip right now.

"Get out!" Just like in my recurring night terrors, my attempt at a shout is little more than a whisper. Despite the lack of

effectiveness, I repeat, “Get out!” as I mentally count how many steps it will take to jump off the bed and reach the door.

“*You* get out!” The ghost rasps. “Get out. Get out. Get out. LEAVE!”

Oh my God. This thing wants me gone! I’ll oblige.

I throw back the covers and make a run for the door, which is thankfully in the opposite direction of the writhing fog of vapor. I tear out of the room and pound down the hall, wishing Zylus hadn’t chosen the room farthest from me.

“Zylus!” Thankfully, my voice is fully functional, now capable of booming at the top of my lungs. “Zylus!”

Within seconds, the door at the end of the hall flies open, Zylus’s eyes wild as they connect with mine.

I fly into his arms, unable to say anything other than “ghost.”

Always a down-to-earth person, I’ve never been given to flights of fancy. For a moment, in Zylus’s powerful arms, I wonder if I’ve lost my mind, made everything up. Then I regain my senses and know that whatever accosted me in my bedroom was as real as the male whose naked flesh is beneath my fingers.

Naked flesh!

No longer quite as terrified as I was a moment ago, my brain is capable of latching onto the reality of what I saw when Zylus powered out of his bedroom.

Naked. Green. Alien. Long, black hair and perfect face even when his eyes were wide in fright. And full-frontal nudity. If I hadn't been afraid for my life, I would have made certain to get a better look at his cock.

“Ghost? You saw a ghost?”

What is his tone? Accusing? Fearful? Full of disbelief? Is he wondering what he's gotten into, committing to this project with a female who is obviously insane?

“It was... something.” I can't back down or play the poor, pitiful woman. I know what I saw. Well, I know what I *didn't* see. And I know what I heard. “It told me to get out.”

Eight

ZYLUS

“It told you to get out?” My thoughts are flying between wondering if she’s lost her mind and speculating if something more sinister is afoot.

“It said, and I quote, ‘*You* get out! Get out. Get out. Get out. LEAVE!’”

As soon as I notice the poor female is quaking in my arms, I step into my bedroom, grab the spread, and tuck it around her. It’s only now I realize she’s clad in a thin, filmy gown and I’m wearing nothing.

Now is not the time to worry about moral codes.

It strikes me with the force of a lightning bolt when my thoughts click into place. I think I know exactly what went on in her room, and if I’m not mistaken, I know exactly who’s behind it.

“I’m going to check it out. I’ll leave you in my room—”

“You’re not leaving me alone!” I don’t know how she manages to sound petrified and demanding at the same time.

“Misty, I’m going to leave you in my room and lock the door, then go check your room.”

“Lock me in?” She’s so terrified her voice reaches the highest notes in her register, her eyebrows creeping toward her hairline.

“No. Bad idea. I’m going to shut you in and go check out your room. I’m sure... uh, I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation. Maybe floorboards creaking.”

“F-floorboards don’t *talk*. Floorboards don’t lift the bed and drop it so hard I bounce a foot off the mattress.”

“You’ll be safe here. I’ll be back as quick as I can.” If my hunch is correct, I’m not lying. She’ll be perfectly fine here. I can’t say the same about my brother, Nivar. If he did this, and if he’s still here, I’m going to beat the shit out of him.

After closing the door behind me, I march down the hallway and fling open the door to Misty’s bedroom.

The room is filled with Astralite mist that is swiftly dissipating. One of my species was definitely here. That the mist is almost gone tells me whoever was here is no longer just invisible, but in fact, they are gone. There’s no doubt in my mind it was Nivar.

I shake my head, organizing my thoughts on my way toward my room. Nivar was only ten months older than me. My mother was so fatigued raising us she didn’t always have the time or energy to protect me from him.

He was always an angry child. My grandmother told me he hated me from the moment I was born. He didn't want to share our parents and blamed me for my mother's constant fatigue.

Petulant and spiteful, he took delight in pinching, punching, and tricking me. It didn't help that he came into his ability to perform a spectral shift early and I was a late bloomer, giving him years to terrorize me.

He would take incorporeal form, slip into my room, and pound on me. When he realized the bruises he gave me were dead giveaways, he found other, more insidious ways to torture me.

I would escape to Grandma's house as often as I could. This has always been my place of refuge and unconditional love.

As adults, Nivar and I seldom saw each other before my parents passed. Now we avoid each other completely.

While we were waiting for the banker to complete her paperwork, I looked over the deed to the inn. There was a clause that didn't make sense until right this minute.

It stated that if the owner did not spend a full six months in residence, ownership would revert to Nivar's shell company. That incentivizes him to want Misty gone, so he'll once again be the owner and can pull this scam again. I imagine in his mind, this racket will keep paying dividends years from now as he performs this nefarious fraud over and over again.

I'm going to have to sort this out. Until I speak with Nivar, I'll keep this from Misty. How would I explain that my brother was mentally torturing her? What will it look like when she

realizes how he deceived her? Will she believe I innocently hovered down the street this morning, or will she think I was part of this vicious plan? She's going to order me out of this house, destroying both our chances to restore it to its former glory.

In the meantime, there's a half-naked female in my room.

"Misty? It's me." I pause, waiting for her to acknowledge me before I barge in. She's already terrified. I don't want to scare her further.

"What did you eat for dinner today?" she asks.

Dinner? Is my translator acting up? What is she talking about?

"How do I know it's you?" She's not joking. After what my brother put her through, it's smart that she wants to ensure the male knocking at her door is really me. "What did you eat at the Heirloom Cafe?"

"Oh. I had *melioncrott*. We discussed renovation plans, and you were excited to buy the most modern kitchen appliances in the galaxy." Perhaps my lame attempt at a joke will help calm her.

"But you talked me into getting old-fashioned ones in keeping with the age of the house." Her quip tells me she's no longer quite so terrified.

I enter the room, and my cock, ignorant of the nuances of having a traumatized female in my room, decides this is the perfect moment to become hard as stone.

Misty is in my bed, right in the middle, where I usually sleep. She's sitting with her back to the headboard, her knees pulled up, and the spread wrapped around her. Her eyes are still wide, a remnant of her panic. Despite her emotional turmoil, all I can pay attention to is how pretty she is with her long, unbound hair framing her face.

Is it her presence in my bed that makes her even more beautiful than she was earlier?

Nine

MISTY

I was a tomboy for most of my childhood. It was nothing for me to climb trees, jump off the high dive, and go to the skateboard park all in one day. I never considered myself timid.

I'm feeling that way now. It was one thing for me to chalk last night up to the jitters of being on a foreign planet and sleeping in a creepy house that was falling down around me.

This? Having some spectral being not just talk to me, but use a raspy voice to threaten me to leave? Two nights in a row? I'm not going to lie. I can't shake off my fear.

Zylus must think I've completely lost my mind, but I don't care. I can't hide my terror. Perhaps it's lucky we have yet to speak with an attorney. He hasn't signed a contract with me, so he can just walk away from our verbal deal. Me, on the other hand, I've committed to the bank.

With two worries warring in my head, a ghost on one hand and defaulting on a bank loan on the other, I stayed busy while

Zylus was gone.

When he barges through the door, his expression obviously relieved to see me in one piece, I realize the extent of our precarious situation. Although I want to know what his investigations found, I can't force my brain to focus on anything other than the huge cock swinging at his hips.

As I swallow with difficulty, I notice he's doing the same.

He hurries to his adjoining bathroom and emerges with a white towel slung low on his hips. I think even if a ghost barged into the room right now, I would be hard-pressed to keep my focus from the tent in his terry cloth.

Finally, I force my gaze higher and realize he noticed me peering on him. I'm totally busted. Maybe he'll take pity on me because I've had a hard day.

"So? Do you think I'm crazy?" My shoulders hunch as if to protect myself from a blow.

"Uh, not crazy. I didn't see anything though."

Is he looking at me funny? Assessing my mental competence?

"You never asked me why I was outside on the steps at zero dark thirty this morning."

"I assumed you realized how much work this place needed and thought better of the situation."

"Well, considering it was a giant case of bait and switch and that I thought I won a cute, cozy, *functioning* B&B, that's a reasonable assumption. But that wasn't the entire reason."

He's still standing in the doorway, bathed from behind by the bathroom lights. It's hard to see his expression and even harder to keep my eyes above his waistline. Still, I decide there's no time like the present to come clean.

Since he already suspects I'm looney tunes, I might as well keep talking and remove all doubt.

"This happened last night—"

I wish I could see his face better, but I can't read it clearly. Something's happening, though, because he's at my side in two strides, leaning over me as if he's the one trying to read *me*.

"Something was in your room last night too?"

I can read his facial expression now. If I didn't know better, I'd think he wanted to kill someone. And did he say the word 'too'? Does that mean he believes something was in my room tonight?

"Yeah."

He's on his knees on the mattress at my side. Because he's so heavy, the bed dips dramatically and I slide toward him. Both my hands are in his as he peers at me as if I'm about to spill state secrets.

"Tell me exactly what happened."

My world has definitely turned topsy-turvy. Perhaps I've had one too many shocks in the last day, because instead of focusing on the ghost and the loan I doubt I'll ever be able to pay back, my gaze has homed in on the way that towel has

loosed its moorings and is sliding down the most gorgeous green flesh I've ever feasted my eyes on.

“Wha-what?”

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

He looks so sincere. I should answer his question, but my words are coming slowly. Partially because it's hard to think after my ghostly visitation. Partly because handsome Zylus is so damned close and smells so damned good—like aged leather and cedar. Mostly because the towel has quit slipping, but his cock is now *pulsing* under the terry cloth.

Maybe there's some fancy psychological term for the fact that instead of paying attention to what could be life and death circumstances, I'm totally focused on the rhythm of his pulse as it's revealed by the movement of the monstrous cock hiding under the towel.

Finally, I drag my thoughts together and sketch the details of last night's debacle for him. For the second time tonight, I catch a glimpse of sheer anger cross his handsome face.

“Don't worry.” His tone is smooth, confident, and reassuring.

“Don't ask me how, but I'm going to fix this.”

And... it's quiet in this room. Just me, Zylus, and whatever is lurking under his towel.

“We've got a problem.” I manage to keep my gaze on his face, truly a heroic feat.

“What?”

Be still my heart. There's something amazing about the way he's looking at me. It's as if there's only one thing in the galaxy he desires, and that is to fix whatever problem I might have.

"I'm not going back in that room."

Ten

ZYLUS

“No problem. I can put clean sheets on one of the other beds.”

Did I just offer that with a straight face when what I really want is to tackle her here on this bed and lick every inch of her delectable body?

“Let me clarify. I’m not sleeping alone in *any* room.”

Resisting the urge to shake my head like a character in a cartoon who’s confused about what he thinks he just heard, I edge closer, lower my voice, and enquire, “Where do you want to sleep?”

The flow of time changes from what it has been my entire life. Defying the laws of physics, it crawls so slowly it feels as if I have a twenty-minute internal debate while I await her answer.

While I anticipate her reply, I take a luxurious mental detour and envision her telling me she wants to sleep in this bed with me. Ten thousand filthy images later, after I’ve imagined all the things Misty St. Clair and I could do in this bed, she answers.

“I think the only way I’ll be able to sleep tonight is if we’re in the same room.”

This time I don’t resist the urge to shake my head to make sure I heard her right. She’s looking at me innocently, as if she didn’t just proposition me, so I’d better play back what she just said. When that doesn’t work, I ask, “What?”

“I think we should sleep in the same room. It should be... neutral ground. How about dragging some bedding to the living room floor? We could pretend we’re kids having a sleepover.”

My raging hard-on deflates faster than a flat tire on a youngling’s bicycle. A children’s sleepover? I work hard to erase every vulgar picture I’d just mentally conjured. Just as quickly as I push one to the back of my mind, two spring up in its place.

My brain must be broken. I should be thinking about what to do with my lowlife brother. I should be focused on helping this poor female regain her sense of safety. Why am I fixated on sex when there are other pressing matters at hand?

“Great idea. Sleepover,” I say as I warm to the idea of being her protector.

Five minutes later, I’ve made two pallets on the great room floor. If Misty had been able to look into my brain, she would have seen me doing higher mathematics with tangents and cosines as I calculated the closest distance I could arrange the bedding without her thinking I’m a pervert. After all my computations, though, I nudge the two piles of bedding five

standard inches closer than what seemed the gentlemanly choice.

It's only when I stand up and focus on Misty that I realize she's been calling my name for a few moments. I guess I was too preoccupied with geometry and physics to recall the object of my sexual fantasies was in the room with me.

“Uh, Zylus?”

“Yes?”

The way she's standing, with her palm cupped firmly over her mouth, I can't tell whether she's holding back laughter or trying not to be scandalized. It's only when I realize her other hand is pointing below my waist that I realize what the problem is.

I'm naked. The towel I tucked around my waist is nowhere to be seen. Did it fall off on our walk down the stairs? Have I been bent over the bedcovers for long minutes showing her my *ass*? Or... my *cock*? My *hard-as-steel cock*?

“How long?” I grit, then groan. Will she wonder if I'm talking about time, or the length of my member?

“Certainly the longest I've ever been, um, intimately acquainted with.” She said that through the hand covering her mouth, then groaned as she slapped her second palm on top of the first.

I'm a grown male, so I reject my first thought, which is to run from the room and never see her again. Instead, I grab one of the sheets, drape it over one shoulder and tie it tightly so it

covers most of my body. Then I give her the bold, interested stare I've been holding back all day.

"Longest, huh?" I not only force myself to hold her gaze, I turn up the heat and give her what I hope is a sexy smirk.

"Mm-hmm." She nods, ever-so-slowly, as her gaze rakes over me, brazenly pausing on the tent at my hips.

"You'd say I... measure up?"

"You're the handyman. Got a tape measure?"

So many emotions have passed between us over the course of this day. The awkward first meeting, the stress of the bank, the increased strain of negotiating a partnership with someone we just met, and the sheer enormity of this project, not to mention what she thinks is a *ghost*.

All of that falls away as we wordlessly acknowledge the undercurrent sparking between us since the beginning. Attraction.

We're standing on opposite sides of the two pallets, so it's quite obvious when I inch toward her, our gazes never faltering. I give her plenty of time to back away or tell me to halt.

Instead of stopping me though, she eases toward me, stepping over blankets and pillows as we meet in the middle of the piles of bedding.

The room is soundless except for the crackling wood fire I started when we arrived earlier. The moment is so full of

promise I can almost feel live wires of electricity sparking between us.

I step even closer and slide my palm up the column of her spine, noting the softness of her silken gown over her warm skin. My hand burrows under her curtain of hair as I pull her closer, then lean to kiss her.

She slips her hands to my shoulders, her fingers biting into my flesh in a silent statement that she'll not let me go.

Our lips brush against each other, then seem to melt together as the moment expands. Her flowery scent curls around us, intoxicating me as her hardened nipples graze my chest.

I'm so tall and she's so short, it doesn't even register that I've lifted her to my height to explore this kiss. My cock jerks in appreciation when her thighs surround my waist, tugging me impossibly closer.

Her little pink tongue strokes my lips, requesting permission to enter. Who am I to refuse her? We both moan in pleasure when we catch our first taste of each other. I give a little grunt of approval as I tuck her closer, then explore her mouth.

Her taste, her warmth, her eager kisses. Perhaps this is the antidote to her terror. Perhaps instead of threatening to kill my brother if he ever bothers her again, I should pay him to keep haunting the house. Then I could play the courageous protector and take her mind off her fear.

Her sheer desire and enthusiasm return my thoughts to our kiss, and I dive back into the moment.

When I realize my hips have taken on a life of their own and are thrusting in an insistent rhythm against her wide-split thighs, I rear back and take a breath.

“Should we talk about this?” I ask.

Eleven

MISTY

Words. Zylus just said words. Any minute now, my brain will register them. In the meantime, I'll just bask in the sheer, hot intensity of this, the best kiss I've ever shared.

I'm molded to his rock-hard body. Between my thighs circling his waist, and his hands, now firmly clutching my ass, I'm tucked as tightly against him as possible.

His taste, his scent—aged leather and seasoned wood—are intoxicating. That green tongue of his is deliciously exploring me. My pulse is pounding between my legs and my nipples are begging to be palmed, then plucked.

“Should we talk about this?” His words finally register.

Even though I know there are important words in that sentence, it takes me long moments to sort it out. Talk. I think that's the salient word.

Should we? Should we talk? Ah, yes. I've known him less than a day. We're now partners in this doomed remodeling

endeavor. It's been so long since I've had a bed partner that I'm not up to date on my birth control.

Birth control. That's a pertinent word.

"Yes. Talk." I reluctantly slide down his perfect body, jolting back to reality when my feet touch the cool, wooden floor.

We're caught in each other's gaze, both nodding in agreement that we should talk. Neither of us is saying a word.

"Bad idea?" He ekes out a few syllables, his forehead now pleating with lines usually indicative of physical pain.

"Probably." I return a few syllables of my own.

"We should stop?" Damn him. That wasn't a statement. It was a question.

"Maybe." *Misty, that was far from definitive.*

"Maybe not?" He cocks a very interested eyebrow, then, to be even more eloquent, he tips his head. Clearly a suggestion we *not* stop.

Birth control. My sane alter ego reminds me. You barely know him. You just saw a ghost.

Perhaps it was that last word that sucked me out of my hazy, lusty dream-self and pulled me back to sanity.

"Yeah. Stop." I say firmly but letting him hear the reluctance in my voice.

Now that I've returned to sanity, I have to grin at my handsome green roommate who is wearing nothing but a toga

and a smile. A fanged smile. I can't decide which way he looked more attractive: butt naked, or togafied.

We've kicked the covers around, so he chivalrously pulls the two piles farther apart, then remakes the pallets. As we crawl into our makeshift beds, we both accidentally-on-purpose manage to move them closer together again.

I smile when I see the extra bedsheet is still knotted over his shoulder.

Even though I got almost no sleep last night and today has been emotionally draining, it's not hard to figure out why I'm too ramped up to sleep. My blood is pounding in my veins, not allowing me to forget how amazing that kiss was.

We're both on our sides, gazing at each other until we fall asleep. Despite the shitshow that is my life, I haven't been this optimistic in years.

I wake in the morning with the bright Hallion sun pouring in from the high, arched windows.

Even with the fire in the hearth that takes up half the east wall, it was still a bit chilly when we went to bed last night. It's warm now. My eyes flicker closed as I contemplate falling back asleep. It's only when I realize I'm surrounded by warm bodies that I bolt wide awake.

There's a very large, very warm, very masculine body snuggling me from behind. A hand, fingers spread, is tucked against my belly. When I turn my head, I see Zylus's perfect

features relaxed in sleep, a lock of his long, black hair trailing along my neck and dipping between my breasts.

Later, perhaps I'll do some sleuthing to figure out which of us trespassed across the imaginary boundary we established. In the meantime, I'll just enjoy our position, even the happy morning wood pulsing along my ass crack.

My eyes pop wide when I realize I don't just have a warm body plastered to my back, there's also a body tucked against my front.

"Eek!" I use whatever force is necessary to extricate myself from under Zylus's arm and stand up, wiping myself with both hands as if killer ants were swarming over me.

The offending critter has run to the corner and is staring at me accusingly for waking him up. I'll bet this is the furry little mammal that pulled most of the stuffing from the couch to make a nest on the floor.

Did I really just screech "eek" at that adorable little creature? The shaggy, turquoise-colored animal, the size of a small dog, has humongous, pleading eyes and cute little hands like a raccoon.

It's backed against the far corner and is chittering excitedly.

"*Chitza*," Zylus says, his voice sleep roughened.

Is my translator not working again? "What?"

"It's a *chitza*."

"Is it poisonous? Deadly?"

“A *chitza*? If you put enough time into them, they can be domesticated. I’m not surprised to find him here. They often invade abandoned houses and bring their hoards inside.”

“Hoard?” I ask as I bend to a crouch and reach my hand out while I give the little fur ball smacking kisses.

“They collect shiny objects in the wild. When they have a safe place to store their junk, they bring it all inside.”

It’s not surprising that when Zylus rises, he treats me to a view of his naked ass. It would have been folly to think that knotted sheet could withstand a night of tossing and turning.

As cute as the *chitza* is, I totally lose my focus and find my attention drawn to the perfect man-buns gallivanting around the room.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Looking for his hoard.” His voice is matter-of-fact as he looks behind large pieces of furniture.

“Here. I found it.”

He moves a large, burlled-wood buffet away from the wall to expose the *chitza*’s hoard. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t the wide assortment of shiny objects, broken jewelry, dropped coins, and candy wrappers that spill out when not contained by the gorgeous antique.

Zylus strides to our messy pile of blankets and sheets, paws through it, and ties a white sheet into another toga.

“We’ve got a lot to do: food, attorney, and a trip to the quarry to choose replacement tile.”

Despite his scolding to get a move on, we both freeze, our gazes locked. “And pajamas,” he adds. “We’ll both need thick, flannel pajamas.”

Twelve

ZYLUS

Today has been more fun than I've had in years. Despite our busy schedule, we managed to laugh and have fun in between errands.

There were some tense moments in the attorney's office as we hashed out the specifics of our partnership. Perhaps I wasn't totally forthcoming about how much I want to buy her out at the end of the one-year contract.

The arrangement we worked out was fair. I certainly won't be taking advantage of her. It's just that she thinks I'm eager for her to eventually buy me out. I didn't have the heart to tell her I have no intention of renovating this place and then walking away.

I feel good about the terms we agreed upon. She'll be handsomely reimbursed when she returns to Earth after the B&B is up and running.

Although we were starving, we avoided restaurants and ate on the go so we could get more done. We even found a moment to

slip into the Paws and Claws Pet Store to get some food for the creature she calls Vortex.

“Because everything he finds gets sucked into his vortex,” she’d explained.

Even though she’s low on funds, she insisted on buying the critter a soft bed. I tried to convince her he’ll just tear out the stuffing like he did the couch, but she refused to budge on the issue.

It’s late afternoon by the time we return to the Interstellar Inn, the truck bed filled with materials for our first three projects.

As we ease to the ground in front of the inn, our gazes meet. All our kidding fades away as she looks at me with fresh eyes.

“I have to admit, you even made a trip to the hardware store fun today.” This is the tenth time this afternoon I’ve caught her gaze dipping to my mouth.

“Yes. I know how to make things fun.” My tone dips on that last word so it’s clear we’re no longer speaking about home improvements.

“I’m beginning to believe you, Zylus. Uh.” Her eyes widen as if she’s just remembering something important. “I need the hover. There’s an errand I need to run.”

Despite a few follow-up questions, Misty is tight-lipped about what she needs. I don’t argue too vigorously. I need to find my brother and, if there’s time, I’m going to beat the shit out of him for scaring my female. Wait. My female? How can I think that?

Ten minutes later, Misty is on her way. The more she evaded my questions, the more curious I became. I didn't push it too far because I'm going on my own secret excursion.

Once I'm certain she won't return to the house because she forgot something, I perform my spectral shift and pay a visit to Nivar. It's only when I arrive at his house and see it's empty that I realize he probably used his newfound ill-gotten gains to upgrade to something even more impressive.

After checking Arixxia Fields' address directory on my wrist-comm, I shift again and navigate to his new house in the trendy Avalon section of town. Because of our ability to become formless as we spectral shift, Astralites have a strong code of social expectations about privacy. It would be considered polite to regain our form at the front door and use our hands to knock or ring a bell.

I feel no compunction to be polite to the male who terrorized Misty and took such joy out of denying me the inn, so I take form directly in his living room. Why am I not surprised to hear the sounds of vigorous sex drifting down from the upper floors?

I call loudly, "Nivar! I hate to interrupt! We need to talk."

The sounds of the bed thumping against the wall are replaced by an irate female voice and Nivar's attempt at a soothing response.

After two minutes of my agitation increasing exponentially, Nivar glides down the stairs while belting his ostentatious red velvet bathrobe. There's no mistaking we're brothers, though

my hair is long and his is cut tight to his head to hide his receding hairline.

“Zylus, what a surprise.” Funny, he doesn’t sound at all surprised. “Did you come to make an offer on the Interstellar Inn again? Too late. It’s been given away in the raffle.”

He’s making a show of looking bored and disdainful, an interesting combination one expects would be hard to pull off.

I ease forward and grab both his lapels in one hand. Pulling him so close our breath mingles, I tell him, “You will cease and desist terrorizing the poor female who was unlucky enough to win that disaster you called a charming inn. Do. You. Understand?” On each of those last three words I give him a good yank.

He spends his days getting manicures and looking over spreadsheets. I lift heavy things by trade. We both know who will win if he escalates this into a physical fight. I’m not the helpless younger brother anymore.

“Terrorizing?” He cocks an innocent eyebrow, then lifts his palms to underscore his complete lack of guilt.

I release him with enough force to send him scrambling back a few steps.

“You have a hundred other money-making projects, Nivar. You’ve already made a small fortune on the Interstellar Inn. How many poor suckers did you manage to scam into giving you a thousand credits each?”

I almost pull back a fist to punch him, but for some reason, I want to hear the answer.

He shrugs and mumbles, “Over a thousand.”

“So you made over a million credits on a house you paid nothing for. Isn’t that enough? Leave it alone, Nivar.” I stab him with a threatening stare, then back away.

Now that I’m out of striking distance, he gives me his trademark sneer. “There’s more to this story, Zylus. I can smell it. Do you know this female? Do you *want* her? You’ve just increased my interest.”

Something about his threat and the tone of his voice awakened the part of me Nivar terrorized as a child. Instead of cowering me though, it emboldens me.

“I’m onto your tricks and am fully capable of contacting the authorities about your criminal trespass into the Interstellar Inn the last few nights. I wonder what they would think about your illegal misrepresentation of facts about the property you put up for the drawing. I imagine you broke a dozen laws in a hundred different jurisdictions. Do the smart thing, *brother*; just walk away.”

His whole demeanor slowly sags as he realizes I’m not backing down with my threat to ruin him. He reluctantly nods his agreement.

I spectral shift and leave, hoping to put this ugly chapter behind me.

Thirteen

MISTY

It was only by accident I noticed the medical kiosk in the grocery store when we stopped there earlier today. A shallow dive on my wrist-comm informed me the self-contained metallic stall was fully equipped with the medication and knowledge to provide me with birth control.

I slipped into the vertical pod, the curved metal door whooshed closed behind me, and a friendly computerized voice asked what I needed. Because of my subdural translator, we communicated easily. The computer took less than a minute to research Earth women's specific needs, and two minutes later, I was painlessly injected with what I was informed was a shot that would last until I requested the antidote.

When the door slid open no more than five minutes later, I walked out and grabbed a rotisserie something or other for dinner. It was already cut into parts, so I didn't have to ask too many questions about what type of animal I was going to eat.

And yeah, no matter what it looks like, it smells too good to throw away.

As I hover back to the inn, I conduct a swift internal debate about whether I'm going to have sex with Zylus, or if I want to keep things at the "just friends" level. Well, I think we passed "just friends" with that amazing kiss last night.

Although we basically just met and I am not now, nor have I ever been, a one-night stand kind of girl, I'm considering letting my passions be my guide. The still, small voice in the back of my head is on warning mode though.

You own a B&B together. You're going to be living in the same house for the next few months, working elbow to elbow, breathing the same air! What if things go south? What if you have a falling out?

What is it they say about romance in the workplace? Oh, yeah, it's a one-word answer—don't. What would we argue about though? What type of kitchen appliances to buy? Truth be told, he's probably right about having state-of-the-art ovens and a large-capacity fridge. When we're at one hundred percent occupancy, we'll need it.

I'm still conducting my internal argument when I walk through the door to a house that sounds eerily quiet. Vortex greets me, a shaggy comet of flying turquoise fur. For a wild animal, someone must not have told him he's supposed to be standoffish.

My voice lifts an entire octave as I coo to him, waggle the bag of *smelka* snaps we bought for him earlier, and then tease him

with what's in the bigger bag.

“See this, Vortex? I got this for you. You're going to love it.” After a moment more of increasing the suspense, I pull his gorgeous scarlet bed out of the bag as if I'm a magician producing something enchanted from her hat.

Seeing Vortex running in wild, little circles, you'd think I had supernatural powers.

I make a beeline to the hearth and set the bed down in the perfect spot. Although Zylus said the little *chitza* would immediately tear it apart, he does nothing of the sort, choosing instead to sit regally on it, then look up at me with the most beautiful, dark, puppy-dog eyes.

It's only now I realize the shower is running upstairs. Since there is no dining room table or chairs, I set up dinner on the coffee table and put the few pillows Vortex hasn't ravaged nearby so we can comfortably sit on the floor for dinner.

My breath catches when Zylus descends the ornate wooden staircase wearing only loose-fitting pants as he towels his hair.

“I smell food.” His gaze sweeps over the little feast I've set out on the coffee table, then settles affectionately on me.

It's as if a lightning strike sizzles through my body, touching everything from top to bottom, but giving an extra zap to the tips of my breasts and between my legs.

I'm a weak, weak woman. Did I really spend the last half-hour debating whether I was going to have sex with Zylus tonight?

Who was I fooling? It will be a miracle if we make it through dinner before one of us attacks the other.

Fourteen

ZYLUS

I landed in my bedroom, then shifted into my corporeal form. It was a good thing too, because Misty had already returned. I needed a shower anyway, to decompress and get Nivar's smell off me.

Look at Misty, so beautiful. She can't tear her gaze from me as I join her. It's a good thing she's attracted to me. I can't wait to take our relationship to the next level.

Although I was the one to suggest we put the brakes on last night, I was hoping she would want to press forward. It took all our self-control to go to sleep on separate pallets.

I really enjoy her company. We have so much in common. She's smart and funny, and if the way she treats little Vortex is any indication, she has a lot of affection to give.

Working with her on this project is going to be a treat.

I join her on the floor and eat the roast *vermack* and sides she bought from the grocery. I have no intention of mentioning what *vermacks* look like. If she knew, she wouldn't eat it, and

I want her to save her energy for what I hope will come later tonight—her.

We're laughing and joking, telling stories about our youth. In between talking and eating, Misty manages to stuff our new pet full of not only the veterinarian-approved *smelka* snaps we bought at the pet shop, but little bites of *vermack*.

I've never before seen a wild animal so eager to become domesticated. Perhaps it's the ridiculous pet bed Misty bought him that has a little crown embroidered on it, maybe it's the table scraps, or maybe it's the way Misty's fingers comb through his blue hair. I can't wait until those fingers get busy stroking me.

Perhaps she catches my glance or the heated look in my eyes.

"Tired?" Her question sounds innocent enough, but as that one word echoes around the wood-paneled room, its meaning becomes deeper and more filled with sexual innuendo with each moment that passes.

"That meal energized me." I keep my response neutral but pierce her with a meaningful stare, then wait to see if she takes the bait.

"Maybe you could... add a few logs to the fire and we could... watch the flames."

I knew I liked this female. "Watch the flames. Great idea."

I'm in such a hurry, I have to order myself not to shift to my spectral form to shave a few seconds off the task. Instead, I

saunter to the fireplace, kneel, and perform the task in slow motion, allowing her to see my muscles flex in the dim light.

“Will I have muscles like yours when we’re done with this project?”

Good to see my little performance wasn’t lost on her.

“It depends on how much you *watch* and how much you *do*,” I say over my shoulder, cramming my words with as much blatant sexuality as possible.

“I’ve always liked to dive into the deep end.” Her gaze dips first to my mouth, then my cock which is straining against my thin pants. If things were different between us, I might regret my choice to come downstairs like this. Luckily, there’s nothing about my display that repulses her.

“You’re a brave one.” I return to our makeshift dining table. This time I don’t sit across from her, but settle close, my hip brushing hers. “What kind of brave thing might you want to try tonight?”

I’ve never been clever at flirting, a fact my brother never failed to tease me about in our teen years. It seems I’m suddenly a master at it because, by the look of raw sensuality on Misty’s face, she’s going to give me a very sexy answer.

“All those years behind a desk at the hotel, I never did much with my hands. Maybe tonight you might help give me some *hands-on experience*.”

Oh, Misty. That was good, especially the way her gaze flew to my pulsing cock.

“Very astute. It might be quite beneficial to give you some direct experience with something *hard as wood* before we attack the baseboards tomorrow. Anything else you want to *attack*?”

“Well, the plumbing hasn’t been used in a while. Perhaps we should make an attempt to unclog the *pipes*?”

“Excellent idea.” I lean close, letting my warm breath graze her ear, then I sit up, waiting to hear what she suggests next. When she pauses, I add, “Are you prepared for that? Sometimes these things spurt and gush. They tend to make things wet. Are you okay with getting wet, Misty? Very, very wet?”

Her mouth must be dry because her only response is to nod as that pretty pink tongue flicks out to lick her lips.

“Sometimes, pipes of this age need extra attention. I’ve heard it said that, occasionally, the best formula for success is to insert something inside and give them a gentle thrusting action.”

Misty swallows. I have to give her credit. Her gaze doesn’t flinch from mine as she asks, “And if... gentle doesn’t do it?”

“I’ve heard tell that sometimes only vigorous ramming, pounding, and deep, deep penetration will do.”

I’m sure her scent has been swirling around me for long minutes, but I was so engaged in our verbal foreplay I didn’t notice until this moment. Now that I’m aware of it, the scent

of her arousal is so thick I could taste it if I thrust my tongue into the air. That would scandalize her though, right?

My tongue must have a mind of its own because it slides between my lips to test the air. Damned if I can't taste her pungent feminine desire.

It's all been fun and games, but I can't move from words to action. I need her to be the one to pull the trigger.

“So, Zylus, would you be willing to give me some hands-on experience?” She arches her back, thrusting her pointed nipples at me in case I somehow missed how firm and needy they are. “Now?”

“That can be arranged.”

Fifteen

MISTY

I'm drenched. This sexy game we're playing has made me desperately aroused. He knows it too. If the cock jerking against his pants didn't give it away, the way his nostrils flared and he acted as though he could taste me on the air was a sure tell.

He breaches the distance between us, reaches under the curtain of my hair to capture me—as if I have any intention of running away—and bends to kiss my lips.

He bestows one sweet brush of lip on lip, perhaps to ensure I'm a completely willing partner, then he switches gears and attacks me. Before I know it, I'm on his lap, straddling him as his tongue plunders inside me, demanding ownership of my body, inside and out.

I'm dripping wet and imagine I've soaked through not only my pants, but his. It doesn't matter. This feels so divine. The soft grunting noises from the back of my throat are met by his own answering growls of desire.

He's not shy as he grips one of my ass cheeks in each hand and lifts me up and down to ride the hard ridge of his cock.

Little Vortex interrupts my thoughts for a moment with a plaintive whine. When I glance over, I see him circle in his little bed, then lie down with his head pointing away. Good. I won't have to worry about scandalizing the little critter.

I slide my nipples against Zylus's naked, green chest, jacking up my own arousal as I happily bounce on the rocklike, thick shaft riding between my lower lips.

He releases a stream of filth into my ear as he slides his palms under my shirt and up my midriff. Yanking my bra up to expose my breasts, he plucks my hardened nipples as he moans his excitement.

“You're so fucking hot, Misty. Hot and beautiful and oh—”

I was grinding myself on him so hard it must have short-circuited his brain.

“I'm going to fuck you until you beg me to stop. I'm going to vigorously ram.”

He slides against me, making certain to drag that long cock along my eager clit.

“And pound.”

He slips his thumbs in my waistband and somehow has me fully naked below the waist before I know what's happening.

“And provide deep, deep penetration to clean your pipes.”

With that, instead of pulling off his own pants and following the very detailed instructions he just graphically described, he positions me on my back on the living room rug, spreads me wide, and lunges between my legs, face first.

Although I wasn't expecting this deviation from the blueprint, I do not protest.

"Zylus." Is all I can eke out through lips already parched from panting.

His species' tongues are longer than humans. I don't need a ruler. There are other ways to measure these things.

His first plan of attack is to penetrate me. No half-measures for Zylus. He goes all the way to the hilt. Leaving me no time to wonder whether he likes it, his groan—long and deep and low as if he just took a trip to heaven—tells me all I need to know about how he feels about cleaning my pipe.

Once he's gotten his fill of my taste, his facile tongue slides out, then takes a leisurely trip through my slick folds on a seek-and-destroy mission of my clit.

Flicks intersperse with sucks and somehow he manages to wrap his tongue around it to pluck it.

"Fuck!" I sputter, when I find myself on the edge of release.

Good man, he doesn't make me wait, doesn't torture me. He simply goes for the gold, flicking, plucking, sucking the clit and surrounding area into his mouth, and then driving home with one, then two, then three long, thick fingers delving into me in quick succession.

I briefly wonder if his claws will prick me but when I feel the glorious stretch deep inside, the thought flies out of my mind like the cry from my lips.

Light bursts behind my eyes as every muscle in my body spasms in an explosion of pleasure. My channel grips his fingers, pulsing around him. His moan of enjoyment vibrates into my flesh as he doesn't deviate from his rhythm until he has milked every ounce of bliss from my release and I'm lying here, muscles limp as noodles, legs splayed open to him.

"Plumbers do it better," I mumble, lips numb, brain having difficulty creating even that stupid sentence.

He chuckles and eases to lie by my side. His expression is soft and affectionate as he says, "Just wait until I show you my *tunneling* equipment."

Sixteen

ZYLUS

My Misty is so responsive. Did I just call her mine? That's impossible. I've known her for only a day. In one day it is possible to feel affection, to feel lust, to know her intimate taste, to even go so far as to make terrible innuendos about tunneling equipment. It is *not* long enough to decide she's mine.

I sure do like her though.

After leaving her side long enough to make a pallet with the sheets and blankets we'd folded and placed on the couch this morning, we're now snuggled together and have even managed to keep Vortex from wiggling his way between us.

I swipe a lock of her brown hair off her sweat-dampened cheek with the dull edge of my claw, and she palms my cheek, not even bothering to hide her goofy, appreciative smile.

Have I ever felt this level of affection for anyone before? Although it's improbable, it's easy to answer—no. What I have with Misty is special.

“So? The tunneling?” She wings her eyebrow up in a suggestive pose. “The deep, deep—”

“Penetration? Coming right up.” I try to imbue the word “coming” with all the naughty innuendo it deserves.

“Just one thing...”

Perhaps it’s in every male’s DNA, but I instinctively know that whatever is coming after those few words has the power to change my world. And with statistical probability, I doubt it will be in a positive way.

“Before the tunneling excursion, I just wanted to check.” She actually winces, her small shoulders shrugging to show her discomfort. “You don’t think I’m... crazy, do you?”

“Crazy? Why would I think that? Just because you’ve already bonded with our furry little *chitza* isn’t proof you’re crazy.”

“But maybe... seeing a ghost two nights in a row does?”

Her voice is so quiet and small. First, she was terrified of my asshole brother, now she’s worried I think worse of her?

I wasn’t going to tell her about Nivar for many reasons. First, I wasn’t ready to discuss my species’ ability to spectral shift. She’s from Earth, which is well-known for being provincial and judgmental. I thought perhaps I should wait until, I don’t know... we’ve known each other two full days before I tell her I can morph into what she would consider a ghostly form.

Second, I don’t want her to know Nivar and I are related. She might assume I’m in on the scam.

How, exactly, do I explain how I just happened to be hovering by her house the morning after her first haunting? Or why I didn't mention my suspicions about Nivar before we bedded down together for the night?

But looking at her now, limply lying in my arms, tracing my abdominal muscles with her finger, gazing at me as if she's worried I think she's crazy? Well, I need to come clean.

"I absolutely don't think you're crazy, Misty. As a matter of fact, I know exactly what happened the last two nights."

After convincing myself she'll certainly understand and will hold me harmless, I explain in a calm, organized fashion how everything fell into place.

Well, let's just say I try to explain in a calm, organized fashion. The moment I tell her I'm an Astralite and explain what that is, her limp body turns closer to stone. When I mention my brother orchestrated the drawing, then tried to terrify her to get her to leave so the property would revert back to him so he could use it as bait again, she sits up, clutching the bedding around the beautiful breasts she wasn't afraid to flash me a moment ago.

I feel hopeful as I excitedly assure her that my brother will leave us alone, which I hope is true. As I keep speaking, my mouth writing checks I can't cash, her face flushes and her fist clenches. She realizes I love this place and want to buy out her half when the project is complete. It's not my imagination that her cheeks are as red as Vortex's bed.

"Get. Out." She points dramatically at the front door.

I almost rise to leave, then realize I used the Intergalactic Database to put my apartment out to sublet the moment the paperwork was signed in the attorney's office. A nice off-world couple from Anthen already signed the lease.

I sit up straight, square my shoulders, and protest, "I'm half-owner of the Interstellar Inn now, Misty. You can't kick me out. We own it fifty-fifty."

She sputters, so mad she's unable to form words.

She stands, making a show of wrapping the bedding around her perfect little human body.

"I'm going to my room. Where I am assuming no Astralites will be shifting from their spectral forms into my private space. From this moment on, we will only speak when necessary, and only about the Interstellar Inn. Any more funny business, and you'll be hearing from my lawyer."

My cock deflated the moment she snarled at me to get out. The rest of my emotions took an extra moment to catch up. Doing the right thing never felt so terrible.

Seventeen

MISTY

It's been a week since Zylus and I exchanged a word. We point, mime, and use our wrist-comms. We do not speak, share meals, or have direct eye contact.

We wordlessly fight over Vortex's affections, vying to be the most generous with his little *smelka* snaps. Although he was underweight when we found him, he's already getting a bit plump. He's smarter than I originally realized. The little blue beggar plays us against each other. Our open competition for his affection is going to make him unhealthy.

It quickly became apparent that due to my total lack of construction experience, it would take a year to complete this project. Zylus brought in his crew, who agreed to work at reduced salaries to help us out. We promised bonuses once the inn was bringing in more money.

It's fairly easy to argue when we're at a store. Zylus will pick something, I'll pick something else, and we pitch our arguments to the poor clerks, as if they care about our petty squabbles. Miraculously, after he's had his say and I have

mine, we've always come to an agreement about what to buy —without bloodshed.

Even with help, this remodel is going to take at least three months. I'm not sure this will *remain* a bloodless endeavor.

There have been no more spectral visitations, nor have we spent any sexy nights in front of the fire.

I don't know if Zylus has always worked without a shirt, or if it's something he's adopted to tempt me into speaking to him. All I know is, whatever the temperature, every ripple and bulge of his gorgeous green skin is on display. I'm not sure if he does it to turn me on or to irritate me.

Whatever the reason, his presence has me in an almost constant state of desire. His promise to ram, pound, and provide deep, deep penetration rings in my ears as loudly as if he were still saying it.

For a culture that administers contraceptive shots at the grocery store, this planet has a scarcity of vibrators. I had to order one from the Intergalactic Database and am still waiting for the machine's arrival. I made certain to order one that was described as quiet. Zylus, damn him, has superior hearing.

I'm already developing callouses on my palms from wielding a hammer and have lost all but two fingernails. Not that Zylus seems to notice.

Well, that's not true. I catch him sneaking glances at me all the time. It's not anything to brag about. If I catch him staring at me, it means I'm also staring at him.

I'm horny, grumpy, and butt-hurt about the whole situation. I'm still trying to figure out if he's in on the scheme with his brother, or if he's telling the truth about being innocent.

Sometimes I'm convinced he knew all about it. In fact, I wonder if he's the mastermind. At other times, I tell myself the warm affection in his gaze couldn't have been faked. I think he was developing feelings for me. Which is crushing, because I *know* I was developing feelings for him.

It doesn't help me keep my emotional distance when he's so freaking adorable with Vortex, who follows him around like a puppy. Or that he's friendly and fair with his crew, who talk about what a great boss he is.

All the worry and confusion have sent me into a spiral.

If that wasn't bad enough, even after all this work, I might not even wind up living here after the remodel is complete. I would have never signed the contract if I'd known how badly Zylus wanted to buy me out and own this place.

Now, with every nail I hammer and every fixture I install, I wonder if all this work will be for naught. Will I fly home in a few months with a fat check in my wallet and an empty space in my heart?

Eighteen

MISTY

Three months later...

Never before have I experienced so many warring emotions at the same time. Uppermost is pride. We're having an open house for the townspeople before our first guests arrive to check in. I can't wait to see the appreciative looks on the locals' faces when they see what we've done with a place that had been in ruins a few short months ago.

I've got four different kinds of muffins, still warm from the oven, in baskets on the counter. Planet Hallion's version of coffee, *drassah*, sits in a silver urn.

I baked the muffins in my state-of-the-art oven. Yeah, the one that three months ago I insisted I didn't want. I woke up one morning, and on the still-to-be-repaired counter was Zylus's computer pad, open to an ad for the best oven money could buy in an old-fashioned carcass. The perfect compromise. All made possible by Zylus's deep dive into catalogs from every planet in the sector, so he could find an appliance that pleased

me. I must admit, after all this time, it's become harder to hate him.

The wood paneling has been oiled and is shining in the sunlight drifting in from clean windows. The old furniture has been repaired or replaced. The front steps are no longer a hazard. Even Vortex has been groomed to within an inch of his hairy little life.

For once, Zylus is wearing a shirt. As much as I swore at him under my breath about walking around like that just to make me crazy, now I regret he's covered up.

Mayor Azari Alderon is the first to mount our front steps. He and his mate, Phaedra, are both smiling as they hand us a framed plaque with an honorary membership in the Chamber of Commerce.

My lips unconsciously pinch together when I see it emblazoned with both Zylus's name and my own. Within a couple of weeks, we're going to have the big talk to discuss who will buy the other out. Neither of us has changed our minds. We each still want to own the inn. I've fallen in love with it more deeply with every nail I hammered and every board I cut.

A few hours later, a steady stream of customers arrives. No one would know the owners have a grudge match going on. Instead, we work seamlessly, never failing to smile and say please and thank you to each other as we check in our guests and ensure their rooms are to their liking.

During a quiet moment, I sneak to the sunny breakfast room to sit and have a cup of *drassah* and a warm muffin. Of course, it's just my luck that Zylus is already here. By the three muffin wrappers sitting in front of him on the glass tabletop, it becomes obvious where most of the previous goodies wound up. Not that you'd know it by his trim, rippling abs.

Vortex runs in, his hair whirling around him, and jumps on Zylus's lap. Zylus pierces me with a stare for one of the first times in months.

With just that glance, my pulse speeds up, my nipples harden to points, and a little twinge zings between my legs. But I feel a surge of disappointment when the big, green male simply tips his head toward his wrist-comm.

I spin on my heel, trying to leave before he knows my feelings are hurt, and am nearly at the doorway when my comm pings.

The place looks spectacular. You did an amazing job from day one. The muffins are truly a crowning achievement. I hope you're feeling as proud as I am.

Hot tears gather behind my eyes at the extravagant praise, even as I scold myself for letting his words touch me like that. They're probably lies like everything else he's ever told me. I bite back a retort though. We have over twenty people milling about. Instead, I respond via text.

~~*I don't know whether I can believe a word you say.*~~ Then immediately erase it because maybe he's extending an olive branch.

~~*Too bad you're trying to steal it out from under me.*~~Nope. Got to erase that too.

Finally, I settle on, *You were a great teacher.* I said it grudgingly, but damn it, it's true.

Almost immediately, I receive, *You were an excellent pupil.*

And there go the unwarranted swirly, swoopy feelings in my tummy that simply highlight what an idiot I am for believing a word he says.

Nineteen

ZYLUS

I've waited three months for her anger to fade. After our little interlude in the breakfast room, it's clear that's not going to happen. What did I expect? My brother traumatized her, I lied to her, and we both know we're going to have a galactic grudge match over who buys the other out.

I've spoken to an attorney who said it might work in my favor that the property has been in my family's possession for generations. She also said it might work against me, seeing as how my brother not only chose to get rid of it, but did so by breaking the law.

I have no doubt we're going to wind up in court. We both love this place too much to voluntarily let it go.

It's well after dark and all our guests are tucked into their well-appointed suites. Even though the upcoming battle with Misty is hanging over my head, I allow myself a moment to bask in how good it feels to have restored this beautiful mansion.

Most of the remodeling decisions were just as I'd imagined them over the years. Funny, the battles I lost to Misty wound up being improvements over my own ideas. She's got a good head for design. The place is magnificent, which is as much due to her as it is to me.

As I exit the shower, I see my wrist-comm is about to vibrate off the counter. Just as I pick it up to see what's so urgent, I'm interrupted by insistent pounding at my door.

After wrapping a towel around my hips, I make my way to the door and open it. Who other than Misty would be knocking?

"We have guests," she accuses.

"Yes, twenty-four of them."

"No. Twenty-six."

Her explanation tumbles out of her mouth, each staccato word making our predicament clear. Neither of us knows how it happened, but a couple just showed up, although their reservation was canceled in the system.

We could spend long moments parsing through the facts so we could find a way to blame each other, but we both know the situation is too serious to waste time on.

About a month ago, we ran out of funds for the remodel. The bank wasn't willing to give us a single credit more in an unsecured loan, so after agonizing about it, I put my little house up as collateral.

The bank made it clear the loan needed to be repaid within sixty days. We ran the numbers and realized that if we could

open for business today, and run at close to one hundred percent occupancy, we could pay off the loan—my loan.

Misty even broke her self-imposed silence to thank me. We both knew how much was riding on it.

We can't afford to send these people away. After the briefest discussion of how to proceed, I pull on clothes while she hurries to her room to clean it. She told me to give her ten minutes, and after talking to this Vucillian couple for half a minute, I realize that's all they're going to give me. They're tired from traveling and are grumpy, bordering on rude.

Misty moved into the room across the hall from me yesterday because her room, the master, would fetch a higher daily rate. It hopefully won't be too hard for her to neaten it and drag her things into my room. Her room was perfect yesterday, so it should still be clean.

Two minutes later, she texts me to bring them up, and two minutes after that, we're both standing awkwardly in my room. Her arms are folded across her chest and we're avoiding eye contact. Vortex, who has taken to sleeping with me every night, is backed into a corner, looking at us with concern. Even he is wondering what's going to come next.

Twenty

MISTY

I want to stomp my foot and blame Zylus for everything. Of course I won't. Not only am I too mature for that, it's not his fault. Who knows how this happened? For all I know, it was a slip of my fingers.

Either way, here we are. We can't afford to have a loud argument. I don't want our guests to hear. We just stand here, me tapping my foot, a scowl on my face, him glancing toward Vortex, probably hoping the cute *chitza* will distract us from the verbal brawl we both know is coming.

"For how many days are we overbooked?" The look on his face is priceless. His eyes are closed and his shoulders are lifted as if he's expecting a blow.

"The next vacancy is in five days," I deliver the news, defeat in my voice. Five days sharing this room with him might as well be a year.

"I'll sleep on the floor in front of the fireplace. Don't worry. You don't need a locked door between us to keep me from

touching you.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Is he insinuating he’s not interested? I’d feel crushed if I didn’t see the tent growing in his pants. Dammit, why am I even looking at his crotch?

But I am. Desire I’ve tried to repress for months floods through my system, bombarding me with pictures of him naked in the firelight. I’m blasted with memories of the kisses we shared, more passionate than anything I’ve felt before.

Though I’ve wrapped myself in anger these last three months, it no longer protects me from the emotions I’ve been hiding. Arousal, hot and deep, surges through me.

Shaking my head, I remind myself of my end goal. I didn’t fly across the galaxy with high hopes of owning this place, only to wind up in a failed partnership. I need to keep my eye on the prize. The Interstellar Inn.

“No problem. I never did change my lock, and you’ve obviously never barged in.” I don’t know why, but I feel compelled to get in a jab. “Nor has your alleged brother.”

“Misty.” He says my name slowly, taking care to enunciate every letter. He swallows once before forcing out his next words, “Let me apologize again. I should have come clean about my brother’s and my... abilities immediately.”

“There’s one way to apologize. Let me buy you out.” For the first time in days, I give him a long stare, complete with bolts of fire shooting from my eyes. This is what I need to do. Force

my attraction back to where I've kept it and keep nursing my anger.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath that expands his chest and lifts those wide shoulders, and then sags into the wooden rocker in the corner, his huge frame dwarfing it. It's silent in the room for so long, I wonder if he's fallen asleep.

Is he considering my offer? This should make me happy, right?

After leaning forward, elbows on his thighs, then sitting up and scratching his head, he spears me with his blue gaze and nods. "Okay, Misty. You win. I'll sign the paperwork."

Although this is what I wanted, I never expected it would be this easy.

"I regret how I treated you. It obviously hurt you deeply. We've shared a house for three months and you haven't spoken a word to me. Perhaps I don't understand the depths to which I've wronged you, but I'm a male of my word. You want the Interstellar Inn? I'll make it happen."

"Really?"

Somehow, all the barriers I've erected over the last three months crumble. *Has* he hurt me deeply? Am I still smarting over those two nights of hauntings? Absolutely. Was he responsible?

I pause, but then admit to myself he's not the one to blame. If I ever meet his shitty brother, I won't spare the tongue-lashing I want to give him.

But it wasn't Zylus's fault. It's indisputable and strikes me with finality.

"Yes. I'll sell you the inn," he repeats, "and perhaps you don't want it, but I've made you a present."

We've been working brutal fourteen-hour days. Where did he find the time to do anything extra?

He strides to his closet and pulls out a mailbox.

"It's an exact replica of the gazebo." His tone is defeated, as if he believes the work of art in his hands is a pitiful peace offering.

This isn't something he threw together in an hour. When he says it's an exact replica, he's not kidding. Every turned banister, every scalloped shingle, and every plank of wood are there, just tiny-fied. It's perfect and stunning and he made it for me. He knew how important the gazebo was to me.

"You made this for me," I say hollowly.

"In my spare time."

"We've been working practically around the clock. You didn't have any spare time."

"I *made* the time, Misty. When I wanted to tell you about my day or ask you how you were holding up under this ridiculous mountain of work we bit off for ourselves, I worked on this. When I wanted to talk to you, to put my arms around you, to comb my fingers through your hair, I threw myself into making this for you."

His voice is raw with emotion. This isn't the male who I've thought was callously using me. This is a male who's been pining for me in the same ways I've been yearning for him.

And he offered to let me buy him out.

It strikes me that when he told me in wistful tones about his time as a child reading in his grandparents' gazebo, he was talking about *this* gazebo. The one in the backyard. The one he just agreed to part with in order to make me happy.

Just to make sure I heard him right, I ask again, even at the risk of pushing him away more than I already have.

"You're going to let me buy you out?"

His hand flies to his chest as if I just struck him with a spear to the heart. He quickly recovers, making a fist and thumping his chest as if he has a bad case of heartburn. It's not heartburn. I just gutted him. His only response?

"Yes. Buy me out at the agreed-upon price as soon as we can pay off the loan I took out on my house."

Right. He risked his house, just about the full extent of his worldly goods, for this project. Now he's going to let the inn go—to me.

I sink onto the bed as all the air seems to seep out of me. This isn't fair. I'm not the one who grew up spending weekends here. I'm not the one who spent my entire life saving up to buy it. I *want* this place, but he *loves* it.

"No. *You* buy *me* out, Zylus. It's been in your family for generations. You played with your toys on the floorboards

downstairs. You should stay here.”

We should hash this out. I know we should, but somehow our magnetic attraction sparks to life, exploding into overdrive. I don't know who spans the distance between us first, him or me. All I know is I'm in his arms, where I should have been for the last three months.

Our kiss is cataclysmic.

Twenty-one

ZYLUS

I've envisioned this a thousand times over the last three months, but it's never been like this. Like fire and ice. Like a tsunami, a wall of water so high and powerful it threatens to consume me.

Misty's curvy body is pressed to me, warm and silken. Her arms are tight around my neck, wordlessly urging me to lift her into my embrace. My breath gusts out of me in bursts between the loud, smacking kisses I bestow on every inch of her cheeks before focusing on her lips.

I worried the intervening months had made me forget the sweet, magical taste of her, but I didn't. She tastes just as I remember.

"Misty," I husk, then return to plying her soft lips with mine until she opens to me.

I'm breathless and need to come up for air, but the very air I breathe is less important than garnering more kisses.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been stubborn,” she manages to say before she spears her tongue into my mouth as if she can’t get enough of me, my taste. “I’ll let you buy me out. Get out of your hair after...”

I lift her and we wordlessly work together so she straddles me, our bodies desperate to pick up where they left off.

“After...?”

“Have sex with me, Zylus.”

I don’t say it, don’t want to spoil the moment, but I don’t want to have sex with the little human who, despite her willfulness, has burrowed into my heart. I want to make love.

But I’ll take sex.

I set her down and am in such a hurry, I rip her top apart. Her little pearl buttons pinging across the room wake Vortex, who thinks this is a new game as he chases them.

In five seconds flat, we’re both standing naked in the firelight.

“Fuck.” The word explodes from me as I get a look at her beautiful body.

She erases the distance between us and slides to her knees between my feet.

“I’ve owed you this for three months.”

“I don’t want you to feel you owe me—”

“Shut up. I can’t wait to taste you.”

She grips me by the root, slicks her tongue between her lips, and slides onto my shaft as far as physics will allow.

Her moan vibrates up my cock and tells me all I need to know about how enthusiastic she is to have her lips around me. There's something magnificent about standing over her, her on her knees looking up at me as she works my green cock in and out of her pink lips.

Sliding my clawed fingers through her silken hair, I hang on as she bobs as far down as she can manage, all while swirling her talented tongue around the head of my cock on every upstroke. I widen my stance to keep from getting weak in the knees as her deft strokes quicken and tighten. My balls tingle, telling me how close I am.

I try to pull out, not knowing if she'll want to taste my essence, but her hands on my ass cheeks clutch harder, a clear message I don't need to hold back.

Somehow, she manages to take me impossibly deeper, and I release into her with a grunt and a hip thrust, my fingers tightening in her long hair.

She glances up at me, eagerly taking my seed. Her cheeks hollow as she swallows everything I give her.

This changes things between us. Not just the intimacy, but the contrition and apology in her actions, wipes the slate clean between us.

If that wasn't enough, she's licking me clean, gathering every stray drop, accepting me and who I am in a new way.

Twenty-two

MISTY

I'm dripping wet. Vibrating with need.

We've had three months of being together all day every day. For three months, I've watched him strut around half-naked in that perfect, green body of his. Every day the timbre of his deep voice rumbled through me as he talked to his crew. How I kept from jumping his bones months ago is beyond me.

He smells clean and masculine, and his taste is salty and sweet.

"I could make a steady diet of that." I stand, my gaze never leaving his, knowing I should apologize more directly, but not wanting to wreck the moment.

"But? Your pipes?" he says with a straight face.

I don't know how we manage it, but the moment changes from serious horn-dog sex to humor. No. More than humor. I think he just accepted my apology.

"I don't know how, despite all the remodeling we've done, we managed to neglect the pipes." I pose with my sexiest pout.

“I’ve been remiss.”

He lifts me into his arms, carries me to the bed, and gently sets me down. The male has a one-minute recovery period, because he’s stiff as steel and it’s pointing directly at me. Like a lithe, green jungle cat, he crawls up my naked body with a hungry gleam in his eye. My bent knees on either side of his narrow hips look pale against his green skin.

There’s no way we can go slowly—we’ve waited too long for this. He bites my earlobe, letting his fangs in on the action in a move designed to provide a lot of pleasure and a sliver of pain. He nibbles down the column of my neck, biting the tendons as he eases downward.

Was he trying to distract me with that maneuver? Because as I was writhing under his attention, he lodged his magnificent cock between my lower lips. Now he’s riding the slick highway with the hard flesh of his cock.

Going down on him was a dream come true. Thick and dark emerald-green, his masculine staff took a moment to get used to because of the tiny nubs near the base and under the crown. They made the blow job more fun. I can’t wait to see how they feel inside me—which had better happen soon.

Gripping my shoulder with his fangs, his shaft makes one last, long slide through my lower lips, slicking us both, readying us.

There’s something about the threat of his bite that ratchets my arousal through the roof. I thrust against him, managing to get the head of his cock inside my desperate channel.

“Mmm.” My moan is deep and low as I’m treated to the sensation of him breaching me.

Gripping my hips, Zylus takes over, doing just what I’ve imagined a thousand times since our big fight. He fills me with that deep, deep penetration he promised months ago.

He keeps me pinned on my back on the bed, those fangs threatening but not piercing, his cock impaling me in increments.

That beautiful green shaft is so thick, so long, and those nubs are driving me crazy from the inside out.

Although I lost most of my nails long ago from the nature of the remodel, I have enough to grip his shoulders to hang on for the ride, possibly piercing him in my passion.

With every thrust my breasts jiggle, rubbing my sensitive nipples against his ripped chest. Sometimes I keep my eyes shut tight as I spiral deeper into my hazy bliss. At other times, I force them open to admire just how handsome this male is when in the throes of lust.

His head tipped back, his Adam’s apple prominent, his long black hair swirling with every stroke. He’s a Greek god come to life—if Greek gods were green.

His hips batter faster as he plunges impossibly deeper. I close my eyes as my passion gathers. It rises and blooms, growing as I slide closer to the edge.

Right before my first spasm, I open my eyes to gaze at him one more time, only to see no one there.

For a moment, my orgasm eludes me as I sputter with surprise, my nails digging deeper into... flesh. He's shifted, gone invisible, filling the room in a shroud of mist.

After my initial shock, I allow myself to dive into the moment. I'm fucking a ghost. A flesh and blood ghost who is riding me like a banshee. He wasn't kidding when he promised to ram, pound, and penetrate. But it's more than that. Zylus surrounds me, engulfs me with his ethereal silver essence, and sinks into my skin.

My orgasm doesn't start slow and build. It hits with the force of a thunderbolt. Every muscle in my body tightens in bliss, flickering with pleasure as it courses through me from head to toe and back again.

All I can do is hang on for the ride as all the passion I've saved up for months strikes and bursts inside my body. I'm moaning and thrashing my head against the pillow as my fingers grip his invisible shoulders impossibly tighter.

The oddness of the moment morphs into something even sexier as invisible hips plow into me harder until he stutters my name and comes inside me. His essence bathes my inner walls as he continues to pump into me, riding the tail of my bliss until my muscles relax and I melt into the mattress.

He flickers back into his visible form, that beautiful, green face first, then his shoulders, which are indeed bloody, then that perfect ass and his powerful legs.

He opens his eyes and looks down at himself as his body fully materializes, then looks back at me in wonder. "I went

invisible and you didn't freak out?" He laughs and holds me closer as all I can do is give him a full smile and shrug my shoulders, still too blissed-out to speak.

"I've never before experienced passion so powerful it made me lose control of my shift. That was amazing, Misty."

He tips us to the side, his semi-hard cock still piercing me.

I bite back a joke about my pipes, wanting instead to bask in what we have with each other. His blue eyes are filled with affection as he wipes hair off my forehead with his blunt claw.

For a moment, I can't recall why I was so angry at him. When I remember, I shake my tired head, unsure why I can be so damned stubborn.

"I have an offer," I whisper as I nip his jaw.

Twenty-three

ZYLUS

Sex with Misty was one of the best moments of my life. Even if she didn't call it making love, it felt like that to me.

"I have an offer."

Although I feel boneless, my muscles stiffen at her words. Would she really ruin this moment with a conversation about buying each other out? Was what we just shared just a... transaction to her? It didn't feel that way.

"Did you happen to notice how well we worked together? We made a thousand decisions about everything from paint color to kitchen appliances without bloodshed."

"Yes."

"And we accomplished it without speaking. Just imagine how well we would do if we *talked*."

I'm not sure where she's going, but I like her playful tone.

"Mmm."

"So I was thinking... what if we continue our partnership?"

She's suddenly shy. She asked to fuck me and shouted her pleasure with abandon. Why is she avoiding my gaze now?

"What are you suggesting?" I'm not trying to make it hard for her, I just want her to clarify.

"Maybe we could stay in this room together. It's big enough for both of us."

"And Vortex?" I nuzzle her cheek with my nose.

"Yes. The three of us. We could stay here. Run the inn together. Maybe build a little cottage in the backyard. You know, so we could rent out this room."

"With its own gazebo?"

"Naturally. I don't like to share."

She nips my shoulder. I like her possessiveness. I don't want to share her either. Ever.

"There's nothing more satisfying than a new project." I nudge her with my already-hard cock, causing her eyes to flare wide.

"Really three in a row? You're a hidden treasure, you know that?"

"I already found the hidden treasure, Misty. It's you."

Her warm hands cup my cheeks so sweetly my heart clenches.

"You forgive me?"

"I think it's time we forgive each other."

Vortex takes this moment to leap his chubby little self onto the bed and manages to wriggle in between us, the little rascal.

“So, the contract?” she asks.

“Let’s replace it with another contract. A mating contract. We’ll have joint property. Even Vortex.”

I’ve seen my female in many moods, but I’ve never seen her face bloom with such a wide smile.

“I need one thing first, Zylus.”

Her smile evaporates as she turns serious. “I need to apologize one last time, but more importantly, I have to tell you how much I love you. I’ve watched you treat everyone you encounter with respect, and never behave badly despite my stubborn behavior and all the stress we were under. I know you better than anyone I’ve ever met, and I love everything about you.”

My chest bursts with heat at her loving words.

Somehow I manage to dislodge the *chitza* and hear him jump back onto the floor as I cradle my female in my arms.

“I love you, Misty. More even than the Interstellar Inn. Let’s spend a lifetime together.”

The End

Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Zylus and Misty's story. I had a blast writing it as well as being part of this amazing anthology!

Want even more of Misty and Zylus's story. **Click here for their BONUS EPILOGUE.** Not only will you get a peek into their happy future, but I've illustrated it with pics of Vortex and the Inn. Adorable!

Want to take my free mate-match quiz to see which hunky alien species is right for you? Click here.

Want a free coloring book with over 50 alien-themed pictures to color? Click here.

Want to check out my backlist (70 books and counting) including four other Arixxia Fields holiday books? [Click here.](#)

Hugs,

Alana

Halloween at the Imperial Palace

by Alma Nilsson

MF ♥♥☠

Synopsis



SAVED FROM BEING SACRIFICED TO AN ALIEN GOD...

In an effort to blend human and Alliance cultures, the Imperial Palace is hosting a Halloween Ball. After a careful study of the holiday, horror holos have been created by a team of telepathic Alliance doctors so that humans may enjoy their worst fears at the ball. Will Tulia ever forgive Kal for proposing she become a virgin sacrifice in her Halloween?

Content Warning: *dubious consent, restraints, forced marriage*

Note to Reader

Although this story continues in the timeline after the tenth book in the Renaissance Alliance Series (Earth date, October 2642, Imperial date: 65 week of the year 18909), *Halloween at the Imperial Palace* is standalone.

Furthermore, please note that the Alliance Empire is a matriarchy ruled by women, and therefore, women always come first, both literally and figuratively. Phrases you may find awkward, like ‘women and men,’ ‘goddesses and gods,’ and ‘Empress and emperor,’ are purposely placed to show the dominance of women in Alliance society.

In addition, anatomically correct vocabulary is used, which may alarm some readers. I believe the words vagina, vulva, and clitoris should be just as neutral and intoxicating by context as fingertips, lips, and tongue.

Abbreviation and New Words:

Alliance Empire: A group of five planets occupied by a species almost genetically identical to humans but with grey skin tones.

Contracts: A continuing list of legislative compromises between men and women in the Alliance Empire. The first of which gave men the right to learn to read, and the second gave men the right to their own language.

GC: Galactic Court: A galactic governing body that tries to implement common galactic laws for the benefit of all its members.

GR: The Gods' Resistance or Goddesses' Resistance (depending on the speaker) is a rebel faction who do not believe humans are the Lost People.

IC: Instant Communicator

Known Jewelry: Jewelry bought and displayed by maximum class Alliance men to show what kind of men they are and what kind of husbands they could be.

Loyalty days: Contracted days in which maximum class wives have agreed to do certain things for their husbands,

usually of a sexual manner.

RVM: Message in Real Time

VM: Video Message

Von: Four-legged animals with horns

Watching: A time in the middle of the night when all Alliance people are awake, either working, talking, praying, or having sex.

Zota: A clear, highly alcoholic beverage often drunk by Alliance men from puzzle jugs for entertainment.

One

TULIA

I take one last look at Kal's impressive nude image, standing in what I suppose is the common rooms of the Guards of the Temple, before closing my IC. *Will he ever be mine?*

"Are you looking at Kal's social media page *again?*" my friend Lara asks rhetorically as we fall into step, headed toward the House Human reception room.

"I hope I get an invitation for the Halloween Ball, but if there are only seven invitations for the entire House..." I trail off as we sit in our assigned seats, measured out by rank, just like everything in the Empire.

"Oh, Tulia," Lara replies. "You never know. They're going to use the lottery system to decide who gets to go to the Imperial Palace."

"But there are so many of us, and I don't know anyone who wouldn't want to go. And, you know two of those invitations are going to Mara and Jade."

“You don’t think they’d have separate invitations? Mara being Head of House Human and Jade being married to the Captain of the Imperial Guards, not to mention her restaurant is probably catering the event.”

“I hope so,” I say. “I really want to go. I know Kal will be there. All the Guards of the Temple are going, and I’m hoping he’ll finally ask me to begin courting officially. I don’t like all the sneaking around we’re doing. Whenever I see or talk to him, I think about the fines. And I can’t help but think, if he really liked me, wouldn’t we be official by now?”

Lara puts her hand on my arm and gives me a sympathetic smile. “Maybe he spent his allotment of UCs on the ban?”

I want to remind her that he’s not even admitted to whether or not it was him who put the ban on me. This is another reason I’m worried he hasn’t asked me to make our relationship official, but before I can reply, Mara, the Head of House Human, comes in with an air of authority for her small form. She’s wearing the classic black Alliance maxi dress with a number of silver necklaces, and her blonde hair is elaborately braided. She’s the perfect mixture of an Alliance and human citizen. The room falls silent while she walks to the podium.

“May we walk in the gods’ light,” she begins in her even tone, slightly accented with German. My Alliance translator switches off when someone is speaking to me in my native language, and I’m always pleasantly reminded that on Earth, we actually learn other languages. Although I never became fluent in any other languages myself, I always appreciate that

others did, and I also give a lot of credit to Mara that she doesn't just speak in her native tongue. We'd all hear her then without an accent, but she says that, since most of us speak English, she'd rather speak to us without the interference of a translator. We don't vote on who's Head of a House in the Empire, but if we did, I couldn't think of a better woman for the job than Mara.

But tonight I'm impatient and have a one-track mind. "Why is she starting with this?" I whisper to Lara, who shrugs. Mara is painfully going through all House matters, which frankly don't interest me right now. I'm 28 years old. One year ago, I came to the Empire to seek romance on this side of the galaxy, against my family and friends' better judgment. They all thought I was foolish to believe the story the Empire is giving us about our origins, which is simply that humans are Alliance people separated by a couple of million years of evolution. But the truth of human origins doesn't matter to me. I had nothing to lose by leaving Earth. I didn't love my job, and I certainly didn't have a boyfriend. I saw a better future, no, a more exciting future, for myself across the galaxy in the Empire. Of course I miss my family and friends, but as soon as I marry an Alliance man and have one child, I can return to Earth for holidays, so my choice wasn't even a 'goodbye' forever.

And as fate would have it, I met a wonderful man at the first Assembly I attended after arriving in the Capital City. He's older than me, thirty-nine Imperial years, which makes him about fifty-two Earth years, but Alliance people live a lot longer, so the age gap isn't an issue. And he's in impeccable

physical shape, so he certainly doesn't look like an older man. He's a brother in the Guards of the Temple, a group that the first human empress commissioned to protect humans living in the Empire. And maybe that's what first drew me to him. I knew that I'd always be safe with this particular Alliance man.

During my first days in the Capital City, I was in a group of newly arrived humans, and as we were touring our new city, we were attacked by members of the God's Resistance. They say humans should stay on Earth and not intermix our genes with pure Alliance ones. Thankfully, members of the Guards of the Temple were there and we received medical attention immediately, but that violent attack left a lasting impression. Now I'm always vigilant when I'm out because members of the GR would rather see a human dead than married to one of their own.

Since meeting Kal, I've only seen him in person seven times. A few times at government-organized Assemblies, where we have had some stolen intimate moments alone, and other times when we have secretly planned to meet on the Promenade *accidentally* and walked through the park, but we've never actually been on a date where we shared a meal or anything like that. But he does message me a lot, and we often RVM. This is what makes me hope, and Lara believe he put a ban on me. But what worries me is that he only has one year to marry legally. In the Empire, couples usually enter into a formal courtship for a year before marrying. So, if he wants to marry me, his time is running out.

If I could ask him to begin an official courtship, I would have weeks ago, but this is the one part of life women have very little control over in the Empire. I've learned through *Madame Bai's Handbook for Humans* that this has to do with the Contracts between men and women. I find many of the Contracts frustrating and one of the most difficult parts of living in the Empire. I naively thought it was going to be easy moving from a patriarchy to a matriarchy, but it turns out I struggle to maneuver, especially in the romantic sense, with a man who is from a matriarchal society. I often think, *I bet an Alliance woman would've been married already if she were in my position.*

As it is, I'm living like a nun in the House Human compound. I've read *Madame Bai's Handbook* cover to cover, trying to figure out a way to change my situation. I've even consulted Mara, who isn't the most romantic woman, but even she managed to marry an Alliance man. Still, I've had no luck pushing Kal to do what I want.

Breaking my thoughts, Mara announces, "And now what most of you have been waiting for, invitations to the Halloween Ball. This is the first of its kind and hopefully not the last. Empress Drusilla wants to blend more of Alliance and human holidays." I sit up in my seat attentively. "As you all know, I decided to use the lottery system to make it as fair as possible because I know all of you want to go. And before we begin, I want to say in advance that I am sorry for those of you who will not receive an invitation this year, but I hope you can

make do with the small celebration we have organized at House Human.”

My hands are sweaty as I watch Mara open a holographic computer and a large display opens over the podium. Holographically, all our names are swirling around in an AI-generated tornado in the front of the room. My heart is beating so fast that I can hardly watch as the names of the lucky ones being given invitations begin to form. Lara squeezes my hand hard. Then, in a few seconds, all seven names come into focus. I read them twice. Three times. I can't believe it. My name is not on the list. I'm not one of the seven. I feel sick. I look at Lara.

“I'm so sorry, Tulia.”

Before I can answer her, Mara begins addressing us all, but I can't hear her. I only hear the excitement from the chosen women, and I feel like crying. I try and swallow my jealousy.

“For the women chosen to attend the Halloween Ball, note that the Empress has decreed that, in alignment with Alliance traditions, no costumes will be worn. As you all know, it is considered sacrilegious to wear a mask or to pretend to be someone you are not in the Empire, and it is a crime that carries with it a death sentence. Please wear appropriate formal attire and be ready to leave promptly at nine from the Main House tomorrow night. This meeting is now closed. Private concerns, as always, must have an appointment, which can be made through the Main House. Good night and continue to walk in the gods' light.”

Lara squeezes my hand again. "I'm sorry you weren't chosen."

"You too."

"I didn't want to go as much as you did. I just thought it would be amazing to see the inside of the palace."

"That would have been incredible too." Then a thought occurs to me, "Kal is a member of the Temple of the Guard; they will all be there. What if he thinks I chose not to go? Or worse, what if he meets someone else?"

"Neither of those things are going to happen. Don't forget, he's Alliance. This is his culture; he'll know you weren't given an invitation. And there's that human phrase, but I think it's galactically universal, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.'"

I wave that away. "I can't be sure, can I? Because I won't be there, but these other seven human women will be there, and so will Kal."

Two

KAL

I walk into the Guards of the Temple common room, and my commander says, “Good. Now that we’re all here, we can begin.”

I take my seat. I wasn’t late, but perhaps the commander is just impatient today. My fellow brothers give me a smile as we briefly make eye contact. We all gave up our own Houses to be members of the Guards of the Temple, and as such, we’re completely devoted to one another. We’re committed not only because we swore a sacred oath under the goddesses’ eyes in the Grand City Temple, but also because joining this newly established guard is a risk, both socially and professionally. We’re the first maximum class men serving the Empire on a home planet. As such, many are against such a change.

When Empress Kara gave the decree to create the Guards of the Temple, many wrongly assumed no maximum class man would accept such a position. However, many were shocked that the number of men applying to be a brother outstripped the number of positions available by the millions.

The truth is that most of us do not want to live our lives away from the Empire only to return on holidays or to produce children. We want to be here to enjoy life in the Empire just as much as maximum class women do. But, of course, that also means a culture shift which a lot of people are resistant to, especially if it means they have to give something up. Having men of an equal standing here full-time cramps the style of many maximum class women. And just as much as the High Council and High Priestess praise the work of the Guards of the Temple, we're equally shunned by a few prestigious women's groups who spread lies that there must be something physically wrong with us as men.

I listen as my commander goes through yesterday's arrests. The Guards of the Temple's main function is to suppress a specific rebel faction whose main objective is to expel the human population by any means necessary. The Goddesses' Resistance, as they are known, is a group of religious zealots who don't believe that humans are the Lost People and believe we have gone against the goddesses by welcoming humans into our hearts. Since we've had two human Empresses, the GR has only increased in numbers, which, if left to fester, would break the Empire in two, I'm sure of it. So we are constantly on call and not always rewarded for our duty.

My commander mentions one of my arrests yesterday in the prestigious Shopping District. These GR rebels are bound by no class, making them difficult to spot until it's too late. I was able to subdue a maximum class woman yesterday before she threw a grenade into a store that had a sign that read 'Humans

Welcome.’ As the Imperial Justice System isn’t equipped to deal with these kinds of matters, it’s up to individual brothers to decide the fate of the people they arrest. I decided her punishment would be waiting a week in isolation with her thoughts in the Imperial Dungeons.

My commander further honors me by approving of my punishment. I’m grateful he’s mentioning all of this publicly. Unlike many of my other brothers who achieved their positions through distinction but also by being well-connected, I had to earn my place on merit alone. I’m originally from one of the poorest planets in the Empire, and I’m older than my counterparts as I was serving as a captain on a Beta ship out in the galaxy before applying to the Guards of the Temple. I even had to take a demotion to become a brother. My family and friends thought I had lost my mind leaving a good position for a ‘man like me.’ But my personal mantra has always been nothing is gained if nothing is chanced, and I risked it all. And now I’m being rewarded by my peers and the goddesses in the best city in the galaxy.

“Brother Kal,” my commander says, drawing me out of my thoughts and gaining my full attention by addressing me formally.

I stand. My heart is beating faster as excitement begins pumping into my soul. I’ve waited a long time for this. And I think it’s finally happening after all my months of tireless work.

“For your dedication to the Guards of the Temple, you will be promoted to High Brother. After the evening meal, the High Priestess will visit us in our sacred shrine for the ceremony and will bestow the goddesses’ blessings on you. May you walk in their light, High Brother Kal.”

“May they always guide my path, Commander,” I reply proudly. My brothers in the Guards of the Temple also repeat the same set phrase and then congratulate me by touching my shoulders.

I can’t contain my smile. Now I have the position I wanted, something I would’ve never even dreamed I could’ve achieved in my old life. And now, finally, I can formally pursue Tulia, the most angelic woman I have ever met. I knew from the moment my eyes met hers that she was my other half. Her soul is the mirror of my own. However, due to my age and rank, I was barred from legally pursuing a wife; it was one of the punishments I accepted for leaving my position on a Beta ship and, according to many, ‘setting a bad example for other maximum class men.’ But now, everything is coming together, and I’m truly walking in the goddesses’ light.

Just as I’m ready to join some of my brothers in a cup of zota to celebrate my promotion, the commander interrupts us, “Kal, if I may speak to you privately?”

I follow my commander into his office.

“I don’t want to keep you long, of course, you want to celebrate and you’ve earned it. But I want to give you the

opportunity to extend an invitation to the human woman you have a ban on for the Halloween Ball.”

“Madame Tulia Bell of House Human wasn’t given an invitation?” I use her full name just to make sure we are talking about the same woman.

My commander flashes me a smile. “Yes, that’s the one.” It seems like he’s going to say something else, but then abandons it and says, “Humans don’t always use logic about these things. I heard the Head of House Human used a lottery system to choose who would attend.”

I’m speechless. In the Empire, nothing we can control is left up to chance.

“Would you like to extend her an invitation? It’s your right now as a High Brother.”

“Yes, most definitely. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re a House after all. A strange and new House being mainly composed of maximum class men at the moment, but a House nonetheless, and it’s my duty and honor to watch over my members in a pastoral capacity as any Head would do.”

“May the goddesses always guide you.”

“And you walk in their light,” he replies with the set phrase. “I’ll have the invitation sent via the Imperial Palace within the confines of your ban. The goddesses honor you, Kal, and hopefully, their blessings will also include a marriage

ceremony soon, before your next birthday. It'd be nice to have a woman around here."

I bow in gratitude. I don't want the commander to see my face. I, too, hope for a marriage soon, but I'm not even courting Tulia so I don't want to jinx anything by appearing too self-assured.

"Now, there's a matter of you choosing Madame Tulia's holo. According to what we know about the traditions on this holiday, humans like to scare themselves to celebrate." He holds up his hand, "I know, I don't know how frightening oneself is pleasurable, but humans seem to have a culture that's the mirror image of our own."

"I agree. What do I need to do to choose Tulia's Halloween holo?"

"Our doctors have compiled attendees' profiles and singled out their three most significant fears. I took the liberty of putting Madame Tulia Bell's name down already. As I understand it, when the humans enter the Imperial Palace tomorrow night, all will seem normal at first. Then, the humans will be engulfed in a realistic horror holo drama. Apparently, they're going to really enjoy it."

"How will so many holos be individualized in such a large space?"

The commander shows me a large orange holo bracelet with a gold charm.

“That’s a strange color to choose. Is it of middling class design?”

“Most likely, they’ve all the best luxuries when it comes to entertainment. The idea is that, when each human arrives, the one who has chosen their Halloween holo will put the bracelet on them, but aren’t allowed to warn them of what’s to come.”

“So they’ll know who to blame if the holo isn’t terrifying enough?”

“I assume so.”

“Do we all get Halloween holos?” The last thing in the galaxy I want to experience is a holo of my worst fears designed by telepathic doctors.

“No, only the humans, as it’s their celebration. Emperor Ket has been instrumental in planning every detail meticulously. I think he was motivated by the Empress’s low mood. She’s not been the same since the reincarnate goddess of humanity was born.” My commander opens his computer. “I’m sending you Madame Tulia’s choice of holos now, and you need to have completed your choice for her by the Watching.”

“I understand.”

“One more thing. You should also know the holos will be broadcast for other guests who don’t have a human to participate with in the Imperial Hall. So keep that in mind when choosing. You don’t want Madame Tulia’s holo to embarrass her.”

“Will it only be broadcast in the palace?”

“As I understand it, the palace and the doctors who created the holos will keep all the records for their *professional* use.”

The commander and I share a knowing look about doctors.

Then the commander advises me, “It might be better to choose Tulia’s Halloween holo before the High Priestess visits. Rumor has it she doesn’t approve of this human celebration and may forbid you from participating.”

“I’ll do my best to have it finished before the High Priestess arrives then,” I bow to express my gratitude and take my leave. I suppress a smile until I enter the common room again and see my good friend, Jol.

“You’re certainly pleased with yourself. Did you receive more praise from the commander?”

“Better. An invitation to the Halloween Ball is being sent to Tulia.”

“She wasn’t already going?”

“Apparently, House Human had a lottery to decide who would represent them.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” we share a look, a smile, and then say at the same time, “Humans.”

“Do you think she knows about the ban and doesn’t want to see you? I’ve heard some human women call the custom ‘barbaric.’”

“No. She must know about the ban. It’s very obvious. I’m the only man who talks to her. I even RVM her.”

“Have you sent her any jewelry?”

“Not yet.” I don’t add that I’ve not sent her any jewelry because I spent most of my UCs putting a ban on her and to send her some of my Known Jewelry before we are courting is too avant-garde for a man like me.

“You should send her a small piece of jewelry to wear at the ball. Something to let her know you’re behind the invitation,” Jol suggests. “You’re in the Guards of the Temple now. You’ve access to more UCs and you’ve earned them a hundred times over, *High Brother Kal*.”

“I’ll think about it,” I reply diplomatically. It’s still difficult for me to take more UCs than what I think I need although Jol isn’t wrong, being in the Guards of the Temple allows me access to more than I’ve ever had in my life. But, I was born into a humble House, and my economic habits are still very much defined by my upbringing.

I purposely change the subject to the GR rebels, because I don’t want to talk about jewelry or UCs. But my mind wanders and soon I’m only half listening to Jol. I’m thinking about Tulia. Wondering if she doesn’t want to be with me because I’m a self-made man, and that’s why she didn’t demand an invitation to the Halloween Ball. She could do much better than me, and the price I had to pay for her ban proves that, but the way she looked at me at the last Assembly made me think she also recognizes that I’m her true other half.

I try to convince myself that it's only slightly concerning that she didn't tell her Head of House she wanted to go to the ball. I know very few other human women have bans on them, so she would've been given priority by custom.

I close my eyes, remembering the look she gave me after I kissed her forehead and was properly fined for it at the last Assembly. A wave of pleasure passes through me. *If only we would've been alone then.*

"Kal!"

I open my eyes. "Sorry. I'm exhausted."

"You're not tired. You're thinking about Tulia," Jol says.

"You're right, and you reminded me I must choose her horror holo for the ball. I'll see you at the evening meal."

"Horror? You're going to frighten a woman, and you expect her to want to see you again?"

"I have it on good authority that human women like to be terrified when they celebrate this holiday."

Jol is thunderstruck; after a second, he composes himself. "Listen, Kal, I don't think you should scare her. I have three sisters. None of them like to be scared. Tulia may never speak to you again."

I shrug my shoulders, "But they aren't human, are they?"

As I leave the common room, Jol says loudly, "Send her some jewelry! And by the goddesses, do not scare her! I think some communication has gone amiss. Trust me, Brother!"

Three

TULIA

Chime. Chime. Chime.

“Come in.”

One of the House Human slaves saunters in carrying a large green velvet bag. Her black shoulder-length hair moves with her efforts. I’m tense when I see her because ‘slave,’ is incorrectly translated into human languages, and these people only make personal visits when you’ve done something wrong. They’re more like moral and religious guardians that can issue punishments.

“What’s all that?”

“I’ve come to help you pick out a dress for the Halloween Ball,” she says, wiping her sweaty hands on her long green dress that signifies her class.

“I think you’ve got the wrong woman. I’m not going to the ball,” I say, upset that a mistake has added insult to injury.

“No, Madame Tulia. You *are* going to the ball. You received an invitation separate from that of House Human’s allotment.

Mara chose these dresses for you and sent me here to give you the good news.”

“She did?”

“She did.”

I check my IC, and sure enough, I have an invitation from the Imperial Palace. “How? There’s no name of who sent it.” But in my heart, I know, or rather I hope, it’s from Kal. Surely when he discovered I didn’t receive an invitation through House Human, he organized one for me. I feel so cared for and looked after.

“Only the gods know who explicitly sent it to you, but if I were to guess, I’d say your invitation probably has something to do with the man who has a ban on you.”

“And do *you* know who that is?”

“Do I look like a maximum class man?” the slave retorts with her hands on her hips. “You know only maximum class men can know for certain who has a ban on who before it’s made public. I thought these romantic mysteries were supposed to be exciting to women like you.”

“I’m not truly Alliance,” I say as if it’s a confession.

“Nonsense. You may have human skin, but your blood runs the same red as the rest of us. And you’ve become a citizen of the Empire. You’re as Alliance as I am. Now stop confusing yourself and look through these formal dresses. Unless you have something you’d rather wear in your wardrobe?”

I look at the exquisite dresses laid out before me. “I don’t have anything as refined as these. But I don’t know which one to choose. I know these all carry different meanings,” I trail my hand along the dresses of different styles and colors, wishing I knew with certainty what each one meant.

“What do you want to convey? Honesty, bravery, loyalty?”

“Love,” I say without thinking. But as soon as I see the slave’s startled eyes, I instantly wish I could take the forbidden word back.

“If you speak about love, the gods will surely punish you, Madame Tulia, and you’ll never experience it, or if you do, it will be unrequited.”

I don’t believe in the Alliance superstition about not finding or experiencing love if you talk about it. Still, I want to be respectful, so I make the motion for an apology by crossing my right hand over my heart and bowing. “I want a dress that says, ‘I want to be married to the man who put the ban on me,’” I say decidedly.

“But you said you don’t know who that is. Are you sure the one you want to marry and the man who put the ban on you is the same?”

“I’m almost certain it is. But if it were you, would you choose differently? Would you be more cautious?” I ask, suddenly doubting myself.

“Trust in the gods. Whoever put the ban on you is probably the same person who invited you to the Halloween Ball. He

couldn't have made any of these decisions alone. Nothing happens in isolation in the Empire. The chance that there'd be two men of a similar rank not realizing there's direct competition for you is unlikely." Then she picks up a golden-colored dress with silver embroidery along the hemline. "Take off your clothing, and let's alter this one for you. It'll convey exactly what you want."

"It's the most beautiful and probably the most expensive of all these dresses," I say, not moving to undress because I worry about ruining something so luxurious.

"You've a good eye, Madame Tulia. It's by far the most lavish among these. Mara wore this to one of Empress Kara's parties at the palace soon after she was made First Human Empress, and you know what else? It helped her secure a marriage. Maybe it'll help you too."

I begin removing my human clothing. However, when I don't remove my bra and underwear, the slave reprimands me.

"You know, Madame Tulia, it's unhealthy for your body both inside and out to wear undergarments. How do you expect your vagina to breathe and attract the man the gods intended for you if you suffocate yourself?"

"Well, I hope the man the gods intend for me knows that I'm more than just the scent of my vagina," I reply. But all the same, I take off my underwear and throw it across the room with the rest of my clothes in a pile on the floor.

The slave puts the gold dress over my head, and the silky fabric feels magnificent against my skin. No material on Earth

can compare to the soft and warm feeling the dress gives my body. I ask my room's computer to produce a full-length mirror, and I survey the dress as the slave begins making minor adjustments. It's floor length but has a high neckline and is without sleeves and completely backless. When I move slightly, I can see the faint image of smoke as an illusion on the fabric as the light hits it differently. This illusion will be even more pronounced in the candlelight at the palace.

"Stop moving," the slave says as she works on the hemline.

I stand statue still, looking at my reflection, wondering if Kal will reveal himself to me. *If he can resist me in this, then we were never meant to be, because I've never looked as attractive in my whole life as I do in this.*

Four

KAL

I return to my private rooms in the Guards of the Temple residence. It's adjacent to the Guards of the Imperial Palace residence and, in fact, within the walls of the Imperial Palace. The only difference between the Guards of the Imperial Palace and the Guards of the Temple is that the Guards of the Temple are composed of maximum class men that serve to protect the goddesses' will, and the Guards of the Imperial Palace are of the slave class and help to protect the Imperial family.

The first thing I do once in my quarters is open my computer and check my GC account. Sure enough, there's a message from the Imperial Palace.

High Brother Kal of the Guards of the Temple,

As you have a ban on Madame Tulia Bell of House Human, you must choose one of the following Halloween holos for her, as proposed by the Imperial House Alliance Doctors. Please remember that you will be responsible for her enjoyment at the Imperial Halloween Ball. If she requires medical attention after her holo experience, you will be held accountable. If she

is harmed physically or mentally, you will be fined accordingly by order of the High Council. Make your decision swiftly but wisely.

These Halloween holos are based on information gathered by the Imperial Medical Center about Madame Tulia, House Human:

Arachnids

Paranormal Activity

Virgin Sacrifice

Please review all the choices carefully before making your decision. Once your holo has been chosen, you can alter it slightly based on your own personal preference. Please read the attached 'Halloween for Humans Guidelines' to help make your decision if you are struggling to understand why humans scare themselves for entertainment. If you do not make a choice by the stated deadline, the High Council will make a choice for Madame Tulia on your behalf. You will still be responsible for all stated above. In the occurrence you decide to enter your human's holo, Imperial Guests will be able to purchase influences to your holo at that time. Proceeds of those UCs will be split between Madame Tulia and you. Walk in the goddesses' light.

I open the first proposed Halloween holo. What I see on my 3D projection is nothing compared to what Tulia will experience in a holo with the bracelet. What she sees, feels, and hears will be all-encompassing and real to her. What I see is a preview and is not all-encompassing.

I watch as big black arachnids surround me and then crawl all over my clothing and hair. No matter what I do, I cannot get them off me. Then I see a bright torch at the end of the long stone hallway and run for it. As I run, I'm stomping all over smashed arachnids, their hot and slimy organs sticking to the bottom of my bare feet. I reach for the torch only to pick it up and hear a sound like the wind blowing. I use the light to peek around the corner, and there, waiting for me, is a gigantic black spider with eight eyes that makes a strange noise like a whistle when it sees me. I see my own reflection in its large black eyes and run in the opposite direction through the dark stone hallway with smaller spiders covering every centimeter of my body.

I close the first holo. I wouldn't say I like this one because there's nothing fun or romantic about it. And frankly, these spiders didn't physically hurt me. It was just uncomfortable. I worry Tulia will be disappointed with this holo as it's not truly dangerous.

I open the second holo. At first, I don't understand what this is supposed to be about. I'm just in an empty room. My first instinct is that Tulia would think it was very suspicious because she just walked into a ball, and now she's alone. It'd give this holo away as being fake, but as the holo continues, I realize it could be assumed she became separated and in an unused part of the palace, although that's unlikely, but then again, as far as I know she's never been in the Imperial Palace. I walk around through the dark rooms. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a transparent figure with no legs moving toward me.

It looks terrible, with no eyes but black holes where the eyes should be. I want to get a closer look at it, so I stay where I am in the 3D holo. The apparition comes closer, and I reach out and try to touch it, but there's nothing to feel. Then it changes its shape like smoke with an odd moaning noise. I'm not impressed. I stop the holo. I don't understand how this would be scary to Tulia. I think this must be a joke by the Imperial Palace and I should definitely not choose this one.

The third holo seems much more promising, as it begins in the Main Reception Hall of the Imperial Palace and everything is as it should be with guests and entertainment. Then suddenly, all the lights go out, and as humans cannot see in the dark, they become blind. I know humans fear this greatly, and Tulia has even mentioned this to me a few times. Then, candles light up and everyone is in ceremonial robes with the god of war's emblem. In the holo preview, chanting men surround me and whisper to me because I'm a virgin, which I know from humanity's history is a mythical state of a woman untouched sexually by a man, I must be sacrificed. I can see how mixing the virginity theme with the god of war might be scary to Tulia, but then again, she might see through it straightaway.

Chime. Chime. Chime.

I stop the third holo.

“Enter.”

Jol walks in with his uniform all buttoned up, ready to go, the mandarin collar stiff around his neck, and holsters his gun.

“Come on. We’ve got to go. Some GR rebels are holding a junior priestess hostage in the Square.”

I immediately get up, straighten my uniform, fasten it, and grab my weapons. At the last minute, I look at my computer and decide it’s probably better to decide about Tulia’s holo now. I don’t want to miss the deadline and allow the High Council to decide. I’m worried they’d choose the paranormal one. Then Tulia would never consider me for marriage.

I quickly go with option three, the virgin sacrifice. I’m disappointed I don’t have time to alter it to make it more personal, but I must go.

Five

TULIA

The House Human transport lands just outside the great Imperial Palace. I've never been here before. The gigantic building looks even more impressive up close than it does from a distance. It's a combination of massive stone block rectangles, stacked high with very few windows, surrounded by intimidating guards and weapons. According to legend, the palace has stood for over a million years.

Ushering guests along the magnificent stone pathway are the Imperial guards dressed in their uniforms of green, armed to the teeth, and wearing impenetrable expressions. "Keep walking forward to the Main Reception Hall, Madame Tulia," one tells me gruffly when I stop to take in the palace and all the important people, both Alliance and human, walking in around me.

Once inside the grand entryway, all the guests are checked in with our fingerprints and DNA. Afterward, Imperial slaves guide us into the Main Reception Hall. As everything in the Empire is done by rank, I'm asked to stand in a different area

than the other members of House Human that are with me. This is no surprise. When a man has a ban on you, your rank becomes his and Kal's rank is far above my own, near the top of Alliance society.

I proceed to my assigned area, and when I arrive, the other Alliance men look at me, read my ID necklace, and then look away. They aren't being rude; this is direct evidence that there's a ban on me by someone of this rank or higher. *I hope it's Kal and I've not made the biggest mistake of my life in accepting the invitation and wearing this dress.*

I take a black ceramic cup of wine a passing Imperial slave offers me to calm my nerves and survey the interesting scene unfolding around me. It doesn't look like much of a Halloween Ball. There are no jack o' lanterns or any sign of any decorations from Earth, only a hint of orange color here and there. It looks like a normal Alliance ball but much more luxurious, with women dressed in formal gowns of all different styles and eccentric jewelry to denote their rank and allusions to their characters. Besides my ID necklace, I don't have any Alliance jewelry, but this isn't uncommon for unmarried women as jewelry can only be bought and given to women by Alliance men, another stipulation of the Contracts.

"The gods are great," I hear a man's voice from behind me and jump a little.

I turn around and smile. "Kal." He looks very handsome in his black Guards of the Temple uniform, denoted by his jewelry and the emblem on his collar. His formal uniform is more

formfitting than his everyday one, and I can see the outline of his large muscular chest underneath the fabric. His long black hair is half tied back and braided down his back. After a second, I remember myself and say, “May we walk in their light.”

His green eyes run up and down my dress. “May they always guide us. You look lovely, Tulia,” he says admiringly. “I’ve never seen you wear anything like this before.”

“It’s on loan from Mara,” I reply. Although everything is transparent in the Empire, I don’t want to pretend I have UCs I don’t have.

He puts a hand in the pocket of his black uniform. “I have two things for you and one you can keep.” Then he presents me with a black wooden box with a silver clasp.

My stomach begins flipping. Before I open the box, I have to ask, “Did you put a ban on me?”

“Open the box,” he says, gently holding it out to me.

I can feel the weight of some nearby onlookers’ eyes, but I’m used to it. Nothing is private in the Empire. I slowly open the black box and see a silver hair comb with a lovely organic design I know is from his Known Jewelry. I have stalked his social media page more than I’d like to admit. I can recognize every piece of his Known Jewelry collection and every centimeter of his naked, muscular grey body. I know it’s wrong Alliance men pose naked on their social media pages because it objectifies them, but if I’m going to have to conform to this culture I might as well enjoy the good with the

bad. And I've enjoyed that part of the good. I've masturbated to those pictures of him more than a few times.

I take the silver hair comb out and admire it in the dim light. "It's beautiful. Is it really for me?"

Kal takes the hair comb from my hand, our fingers touching much longer than necessary, and as his green eyes meet mine, I think he's going to kiss me, but at the last minute, he looks up at my hair to steady himself. Then he gently inserts the hair comb into place. A House Human slave insisted on my wearing my long hair up like this tonight, and it works perfectly with the hair comb. I put my hand up to feel the comb in my hair, and the small weight of it feels like a constant kiss.

Kal gets my attention by touching my cheek with the back of his hand. "It's for you, Tulia. I never knew how much I missed you until I met you. From the first moment, I knew you were my other half. As you have rightly guessed, I put the ban on you. I couldn't court you before because of my rank and age, but now, I would like to ask you officially, Madame Tulia Bell of House Human," he says quite formally, "that we begin courting for a year from today with the idea that at the end of this year, or before, we either marry or decide to pursue different romantic paths."

This is what I've been waiting for. He's finally asking me to begin courting. I can hardly hear my voice over my heartbeat, but I've memorized and practiced my lines so many times in the last months, I don't need to hear myself. "Kal, Brother of

the Guards of the Temple, I accept your offer of courtship and give you a year of my constancy.”

“High Brother.”

I give him a questioning look.

“I was promoted, which is how I can court you now. I’ve accommodation for a wife with my new promotion, and the approval of my commander.”

“That’s fantastic news, Kal.” I want to jump into his arms, but I can’t. So instead, I say, “I’m so happy for you and for us.” And I don’t mention all my insecurities about him not liking me before. I almost feel relaxed now, knowing he had me in mind all this time but was only holding back because of rank.

“I want to kiss you, but knowing I can’t is torture,” he leans down and says quietly. His deep voice touching my very core.

I smile. “You have before.”

“And I paid the fines. Now that we’re courting, if I kiss you on the lips, we’ll both be fined. And probably a lot, as we’re in the Imperial Palace.” His voice is deep as he whispers this to me. His breath sends shivers through my body, and despite his words and the fines, I want nothing more than to celebrate our new status with one simple kiss. I put my arms on his shoulders, and he tenses. His face is so close to mine. I can feel his warm breath against my lips.

Just as luck would have it, an announcement breaks our intimate moment. “Please ensure all bracelets are securely on

your human guest's right wrist as the Halloween entertainment is about to begin.”

Before I can figure out what's going on, Kal reaches into a different pocket and presents me with a beaded orange bracelet. He slips it onto my right wrist. “I hope this is the Halloween celebration you are hoping for.”

Immediately my surroundings shift, and I find myself in complete darkness. Another announcement is made.

“Attention Imperial Guests. Do not panic. Candles will be lit momentarily. Stay calm and stay where you are.”

I can hear people around me talking quietly, but my translator must be malfunctioning as I can't understand everything that's being said anymore. I close my eyes against the pitch black. I feel cold, which is odd.

I want to ask Kal to hold my hand, but just because I can't see doesn't mean we wouldn't be fined. After a few seconds, I open my eyes to the darkness and look for the reflection of his eyes. I look around, and see all Alliance people's eyes near and far, and I'm unsettled by all these shining alien eyes.

Starting at the end of the long stone corridor like a set of fire dominos, I see hundreds of white prayer candles beginning to be lit. Seven by seven until the wave passes me and I'm surrounded by the heat and light of them. The strong smell of petrichor is in the air, and loud drums start to beat loudly, echoing off the stone walls. “What's going on?”

I look over at Kal, but he's gone. Now I'm standing next to a man dressed in green and black ceremonial robes with an emblem I don't recognize. I quickly look at everyone else around me. Suddenly, I realize I'm the only human here. I look down at my dress, and it's no longer the one Mara gave me but a flimsy white linen gown, and my long hair is no longer up, but loose down my back, and the hair comb Kal gave me is gone. "Where's my dress? Kal? What's going on?" I ask again, a bit more frantic this time.

I desperately scan the crowd of ceremonial robes and grey faces looking for Kal, but it's futile. The drumbeats are getting faster and louder, ringing in my ears and almost drowning out the chanting that has begun from all around me. Large cold hands are touching every part of my body and ushering me down the long stone hallway lit by thousands of white prayer candles. My eyes are becoming teary from the smoke and petrichor incense. My vision blurs as I'm pushed, and I scrape a bare toe against the rough stone floor. "Why are you doing this to me?"

I try to push back against the hands and the crowd. *Have I been abducted by the GR?* I can't breathe. I close my eyes and wish this all away. My perfect dream has become a nightmare.

Six

KAL

I'm watching Tulia's progress through the Halloween holo and monitoring her heartbeat. She's certainly very scared. I have mixed emotions because I want her to enjoy her human holiday like she would on Earth, but I'm uneasy watching her struggle. Of course I want humans to integrate completely into Alliance life, but at the same time, I don't expect them to pretend they don't have another culture they might always prefer. I think to ask humans to shed all their humanity when moving to the Empire is cruel, although some, like the High Priestess, ask exactly that. However, watching Tulia now, I'd agree that maybe it's better for some human traditions to be left on Earth.

As I watch Tulia in her Halloween holo, Jol's advice nags at me, "My sisters would not want to be scared." And I ask myself, *Should I stop this now? What if I stop it, and she's disappointed she didn't get her Halloween holo?* It's a common rumor that human women complain Alliance men are too attentive sometimes. I don't want to disappoint her

because I'm worried. I don't know how important this holiday is to humans. I didn't have time to research it properly. After a few minutes, I console myself by deciding that, if I think she's not enjoying it at all, I'll use the function to join her in the holo first and then make a decision to completely stop it if I must. *But the Alliance doctors assured us this is what our human women would like for Halloween,* I remind myself and continue watching.

Seven

TULIA

There are Alliance men all around me. *This isn't right. This is a matriarchy, where are all the women? Men aren't allowed to assemble in large groups on any of the Alliance planets.* Then I remember my Alliance history. Five hundred years ago, men ceremoniously sacrificed a few hundred women to the god of war for women's crimes. But that was ancient history. *Wasn't it? Have I fallen into a timeslip?* My heart is pounding at the thought, and my mind has latched onto the idea and is reeling out of control. *How do you get out of a timeslip? Walk out?* I don't know. I never thought they were real until now. But I have no other way to explain this.

I'm not as tall as Alliance men, so I'm just being pushed through the stone corridor with the current of men around me. I cannot see what's at the end. I want to scream, but I'm so scared now that I go with the flow, hoping I'll walk out of this nightmare as seamlessly as I walked into it. From a distance, I hear talking, but I can't make it out—a loud booming voice is announcing something. I think I hear the word virgin, but that

can't be right. Alliance has no word for virgin because the concept doesn't exist in their culture.

I try to put my hands to my right ear where my translator is embedded. *Is it broken?*

When more people begin to speak, I assume it must be damaged. I tap my right ear, hoping that'll somehow miraculously fix my translator. This isn't a good time to not understand what's being said around me. *I'm a fool for not learning any Alliance*, I chide myself. Technology doesn't always work.

I feel the intense heat of a river of flames before we reach it. The men in front of me move to the side, and the men beside me hold my arms and shoulders so I can't move. The great flames cast crazy moving lights and shadows on an expansive cave temple that's been carved out of what must be the inside of a mountain. If I wasn't so scared, I'd think it was beautiful, and I'd be curious about this place. As it is, I'm worried about being sacrificed for Alliance women's crimes.

The river of flames is licking and smoking so much that it's difficult at first to see the priest on the other side. Unlike all the other priestesses I've seen in the Empire, he's a man. And the large statue behind him is unmistakably the god of war—the masculine god and, ironically, besides the goddess of humanity, the protector of humanity.

I find my voice and scream as loud as I can, "No! Don't sacrifice me! I'm human! I'm one of the Lost People!"

The men around me don't acknowledge that I've said anything. They continue to chant and hold me in place in front of the fire river. I'm worried my thin dress is going to catch fire from flying sparks, so I struggle against them and try to return the way I came, but it's impossible. The Alliance men are a solid wall of chanting robes.

Through my fear, my brain is trying to tell me that none of this makes sense. I remember standing right next to Kal in the Imperial Palace, one of the safest places in the Empire for humans. *If this were a timeslip, why have my clothes changed?*

Drawing me out of my thoughts, harsh words I don't understand are spoken, and I realize now that nothing is wrong with my translator. They're speaking the men's language. Then the priest in his ceremonial robes, with more ornate jewelry than the others, picks up a large silver sword from the huge statue of the god of war's feet. He checks the weight of the blade as if he's alone, and then makes eye contact with me and motions for me to cross the stone bridge to him.

"If you think I'm willing to go to my death, you obviously haven't met a human woman before," I yell across the flames. My fear is dissipating, but I can't explain why. It's like my mind is trying to tell me something repeatedly, like when I need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, but I'm in such a deep sleep that I don't want to get up, so I ignore it.

Suddenly the cave seems to become smaller, there are more men around me chanting, the drums become louder, and the heat from the river of fire intensifies. The priest is motioning

me again, and I'm being pushed. Fear is settling in once again and I'm struggling to hold my ground. I'm being pushed towards the stone bridge and there's nothing I can do about it.

Eight

KAL

The Alliance doctors underestimated Tulia's natural instinct to see right through the illogicalness of this holo. I wish I'd been able to tweak it yesterday. Of course she would've recognized this from our history and realized it was fake. Also, hearing the word virgin and knowing the Alliance has no such word makes it even more inauthentic. The only thing I can do now to keep her mind believing what's happening is real is to intensify all the details. Before, she felt everything as she would at 30%, but now I've upped it to fifty-five percent. This means it'll feel more real when she gets cut or pushed.

Nine

TULIA

Unexpectedly, Alliance men with blank faces surround me as if they'd been issued a silent command. They tie my wrists together roughly but unemotionally with a green and black ceremonial ribbon. I resist, but there are too many of them. The intense smell of petrichor incense sears my nostrils, and the fire's heat feels like a sunburn against my cheeks and stings my eyes. I close them, and a thought flashes behind my eyelids, *Am I going to die here?*

With that jolt of reality, without thinking and completely on instinct, I immediately drop to my knees, the stone sending ripples of pain up my thighs, but I don't care. The men surrounding me are stunned, and I take this opportunity and try to run. I push as hard as I can, but I'm caught by the third row of men.

They're holding me tightly now, and I'm once again being pushed towards the river of flames, pushed onto the hot stone bridge. When my bare feet hit the steamy stone bridge, I scream and run forward. I swear I smell my burning flesh.

Once on the other side, I try to run past the priest, but his assistants come out of the shadows from behind the large, jeweled statue of the god of war and easily catch me.

The priest holds up the great ceremonial sword and says some words I don't comprehend, what I assume must be some prayer to the god of war. Then he looks up to the god's statue, its jeweled eyes glistening in the light of the flames, and then to me and says in a language my translator can translate, "Madame Tulia Bell, prepare yourself; the god of war has chosen you as his virgin."

"You're mistaken!" I roar. "I didn't make any application to the god of war, and I'm certainly not a virgin!" This feels all too real now despite the absurdity of it. My mind and body are at odds with each other. How I got here doesn't make sense. I try to pull apart the ribbon around my wrists, but it's useless. I look back at the stone bridge, there's still a wall of men there blocking the entrance. I quickly take in my surroundings on this side. *There must be another way out.* My hands and arms are so sweaty, I wiggle out of the priest's assistants' grip and run to the back of the large statue only to find the river of flames surrounds it. Without anything else to do I scream out, "No! This can't be happening!"

Ten

KAL

Kal Tulia's heartbeat is too high for my liking, and her tears are running too freely. I accept the necessary conditions on my IC and enter her holo.

I, Kal, High Brother of the Guards of the Temple, will enter Madame Tulia Bell of House Human's Halloween holo for health reasons. I take all responsibility for her health and take full responsibility for all fines within the holo, just as if they were happening in real life in the Capital City—3rd day of the 65th week of the year 18909.

I now find myself in the back of the god of war's ancient temple with hundreds of men standing in the way of Tulia and me. *Of course*, I remind myself, *the palace wasn't going to make this easy for me*. This is for their entertainment as well as Tulia's. I can imagine all the other guests in the Main Reception Hall watching me, trying to save my human woman from becoming too frightened. It crosses my mind then whether I'm the only one who has entered his human's holo. *Is*

this wrong? Or was it wrong to do this to Tulia in the first place?

Tulia's scream shatters any remaining reservations I might have had about my choice to save her from her Halloween holo. I begin pushing myself through the men as they chant louder and louder. I know the longer I stay, the more interference I'll encounter from the other Imperial guests who can now pay UCs to change our holo for their entertainment.

Over the chanting and the drums, I hear Tulia howling, which makes me angry I ever went along with this. I'd rather have her resent me for misunderstanding this human holiday than listen to her shriek with fear.

It doesn't take long for the computer program to adjust to my presence, and suddenly the men are turning on me. And now they're armed as well.

"I need a sword!" I cry out. I know whoever is watching in the Main Reception Hall can buy me one, but the question is, will they? I can imagine also that bets are being made on how quickly I'll save Tulia and whether she'll be pleased I did or not. I try to put that thought at the back of my mind. I must concentrate only on this holo and what I feel I should do, which is rescue my Tulia.

A sword appears in my hand within the next minute, and I begin cutting down my enemies. *This is good; this holo wasn't programmed for combat and it'll take the computer some time to catch up.* I cut down maybe 50 men before I reach real swordsmen.

The first holo swordsman I meet blocks my path and strips out of his robe naked, in the traditional way of fighting a duel, and bows to me.

I don't remove my clothing. He's a holo. This isn't real.

"You have to defeat me to pass, High Brother."

"I'm ready as I am."

"I'll not fight a clothed man. I have honor, do you?"

"You're a holo character. You have no honor."

"It is you who have no honor. Strip, or you will never save your woman."

I step forward to lunge my sword at him, but the holo program prevents me. "Really?" I ask the audience who I know is watching and has set these limitations. Quickly, I set down my sword between my feet and remove my clothing. When I'm nude, I attach my IC to my wrist and then I bow to the holo character and say loudly, "I can't believe I'm doing this." Then I run and easily make the first strike.

The holo character isn't nearly as good as he thought he was programmed to be, and my surprise attack catches him off guard. It takes only a few more strikes before he's defeated, but behind his fallen form is another naked swordsman blocking my path to Tulia.

Eleven

TULIA

“No! This is a mistake! The god of war is supposed to protect the Lost People!”

I’m led to a round, stone ceremonial table with ancient Alliance hieroglyphic inscriptions. I can’t read what it says, but I know it can’t be good for me. I smell the fresh metallic blood in its grooves. My hands, still bound by my wrists, are moved above my head as I’m lifted onto the stone table. Once on the table, my ankles are also bound so that I’m spread eagle. I feel the cool stone and the wetness of someone else’s blood against my thin white dress.

“No!”

The priest leans over me. We make eye contact. There’s something not right about his eyes. They look hollow, his irises too grey, and again I’ve got a nagging suspicion about a thought just out of reach. But when the priest abruptly runs the silver blade down the length of my body, I can’t think of anything. I feel the blade against my skin. I hear someone screaming. I think it must be me. *How is this happening?*

I close my eyes against all of this. Willing it to end. Anticipating the final pain of the sharp blade piercing my heart. But the priest barely cuts me with the sword. Instead, he cuts off the white linen gown, exposing my naked body with only a thin line of blood down my center. Then, as if I'm an assistant in a carnival knife-throwing competition, he makes a motion to one of his men, and the stone table I'm attached to slowly becomes upright and begins to spin. I think I'm going to throw up with the drums, the heat, the spinning, and the blood.

“Tulia!”

I think I hear my name. I swallow hard. It must be my imagination. I'm losing my mind. *Are they going to kill me by spinning me to death? Will I die of dehydration?* The Empire is known for strange and unusual torture. Maybe this is one of them?

“Tulia!”

I'm moving too fast to make out any faces through the smoke and the flames, but it sounds like Kal. “Kal?” I can barely say his name, my throat is so dry. I try again, “Kal?”

“Tulia! Stay there. I'm coming for you!”

“Where do you think I'm going to go?”

Through my dizziness, I see Kal fighting off what looks like naked men with swords as he crosses the stone bridge. He's naked too. I blink and wish I could stop this spinning. *Is he really naked?* I've seen his perfect figure so many times

without clothing in his pictures, but never in the flesh. *He's gorgeous.* Then another thought occurs to me. *Am I dreaming all of this? Why are there naked Alliance men dueling with swords in a temple dedicated to the god of war?*

I concentrate on Kal. I can see red blood on his grey muscular chest and arms and hope it's not his. And despite everything that's happening, my body reacts to seeing his nakedness in a different way. An ache between my legs makes me want to put my thighs together, which is impossible on this stone wheel. Then a thought flits through my mind, *Primal-near-death-sex*, and I'm not even ashamed to admit, *I want it.*

Kal is now face-to-face with the priest after defeating the other men. But the priest seems harder to beat than the others. Kal manages to push him back with continuous lunges, enough to get close enough to me to put his strong hand against this turntable and stop it from spinning. Even though I've stopped going around and around, my mind is still spinning.

Through my dizziness, I make out the priest regaining his position with two large swords, one glowing bright green. Kal tries to hold his ground but is slowly being pushed back; then the priest has one of his swords at my throat. I can feel the pressure and try to push the back of my head as far as I can on the stone behind me.

"Kal?" I say, as if he didn't notice there's a sword at my throat.

The priest says something to Kal, and he replies gruffly, but they're speaking in the men's language. But I don't need to understand their words exactly; isn't this the scene in every

romance? The hero saves his woman after disabling the bad guy. Except in the scenario playing out before me, the bad guy isn't dropping his sword, and Kal isn't making any moves to save me. Something nags at the corner of my mind, but I dismiss it, concentrating on the scene before me. "Save me, Kal!"

A look of shock crosses Kal's face, and he continually presses his IC, which he's attached to his forearm. Finally, he looks up to the cave's ceiling and calls out something, but again, it's in the men's language. I don't know what he's saying, but if I had to guess by his body language, it'd be, 'You're not serious!?'

"Kal, tell me what's going on!" I demand. His green eyes meet mine, and he motions for me to wait in universal galactic sign language. As I watch him talk with the priest in the men's language, I can't help but admire his perfect male body. He's covered in sweat and the blood of his enemies. His long hair has come undone and is cascading in thick black waves down his back, and for some reason I find it incredibly erotic when he speaks a language I don't understand.

I should be thinking about the priest killing me but it's difficult to concentrate with naked Kal so close and come to save me as well.

Twelve

KAL

I easily defeat most of my holo challengers, but when I reach the High Priest, he informs me that only a husband can take his wife from the god of war.

“We are courting,” I inform the holo priest, knowing full well the words Tulia and I spoke to one another before the Halloween holo began were officially recorded and documented by the High Council and, therefore, legal even in this holo.

“Courting is not the same as marriage. You could easily throw her off, and then the god of war would have lost a woman meant for him.”

My eyes go to Tulia again. She’s being so brave. But I’m beginning to tire of this holo and decide to end it. I press my IC, and receive the following message:

Congratulations, participant! The Imperial Halloween Guests have voted your holo the most entertaining. Please continue for our pleasure.

Oh goddesses! Tulia and I will have to play this out until the end. If the priest is set on us being married, then it puts us in a very tough spot. And it's my fault for not thinking this Halloween holo through and how it might be used by the Imperial Palace. But I can't deny I want Tulia in a primitive way, seeing her lush naked body and full hips strapped to the ancient offering wheel. But to push her into a real marriage might be too much for my human woman.

I look at her voluptuous human body again, strapped down on the ancient offering wheel and have to calm myself. She's so sexy and this scene so erotic. Mistakes can be easily made here.

Thirteen

TULIA

Kal turns to me and speaks as if all of this is perfectly normal, and he's not naked holding a sword covered in blood. "Tulia. This is a holo. It was supposed to be a terrifying surprise for your Halloween holiday. When I realized you weren't enjoying it, I came in to stop it, but the other guests at the Imperial Palace like watching us so much they won't allow me to stop it. We must play it out until the end."

"What's wrong with you people? How could you think I would've liked this?" I try to motion with what little movement I have in my hands to everything in this cave.

"Our doctors told us that humans like to be scared on Halloween."

Despite my anger at being tricked into a Halloween holo, I still find him incredibly irresistible. His large penis is not fully erect, but not docile either, hanging between his legs just waiting to be called on for duty. But then I remember I'm still tied to this wheel naked with a sword at my throat. "I thought I was going to die! Get me down from here at once."

“There’s an issue,” Kal informs me, and then his gaze shifts from me to the holo priest, but not before he takes in my naked body spread out against the stone table. Something about this arouses him too, and I notice his penis twitch to life. I try to imagine what he sees, and what all the guests at the Imperial Palace see too, me spread eagle with my red hair down to my waist and my whole body exposed. A thin line of blood running down between my ample breasts, ending in my pubic hair. I know Alliance people have a fetish about human body hair. And I’m not going to discount my similarities in appearance to the Empress either, as we’ve similar hair color and body shape, and that’s why our holo might be popular with the Imperial guests.

Then a thought occurs to me while trying not to stare at his large erect penis, imagining what it could do to me. “Is this some Alliance male fantasy from history?”

Kal snaps his head back, his long black hair following his movements and his tone sharp, “I wasn’t planning on having public sex with you today if that’s what you mean. The fines would be astronomical, including a trip to the High Priestess at the Grand City Temple for punishment.”

“But is this an Alliance man’s fantasy?”

Kal’s green eyes meet mine steadily, but he doesn’t answer. It’s so Alliance to stay quiet, and I yell out in frustration, causing the priest’s sword to cut me slightly. “Owwwwww...”

Fourteen

KAL

“End this holo drama,” Tulia demands, and I wish I could do just that for her, but I know she doesn’t understand all that’s at stake now. This isn’t just about us. This is about House Human, the Guards of the Temple, and the Imperial Palace. Everyone in a position of power from those organizations have a stake in this now.

“We must play this out, Tulia.”

“How?”

The High Priest interjects, “Only your husband can deny the god of war his virginal bride.”

“I’m no virgin, and Alliance culture never had such a tradition. What is this? A glitch?”

“The Alliance doctors chose holos that would be frightening to you personally, and then had to integrate them with something in Alliance culture to make them seem real. This holo is called ‘virgin sacrifice.’”

Tulia squints her eyes at me. “You chose this, Kal?” Before I can defend myself, she adds, “And you thought I’d like it? You thought I’d want to be scared? Even though you knew what happened to me when I first arrived? Do you even know me at all?”

“I was told...”

“You were told wrong! Kal, how could you possibly think I’d like this?” Before I can answer, she adds, “Would you like this if it were reversed? No, of course you wouldn’t.”

“I’m so sorry, Tulia. I wanted tonight to be perfect for you. The night began so well. I revealed that I had put the ban on you and gave you some of my Known Jewelry. I was sure that you’d enjoy celebrating your holiday from Earth. I swear to the goddesses, I entered this holo to stop it when I realized you weren’t enjoying it. Not because it’s an Alliance man’s fantasy.” Unfortunately, just as I say those words, I can feel my penis twitching between my legs, and as much as I want it to go limp, it’s impossible given what I’m looking at. Tulia is just too beautiful up on the offering table, her legs spread wide, the red hair between her legs already wet with her own arousal and a bit of blood from the High Priest’s sword. This whole scenario speaks to my primal male instincts. *She’s mine and I’ll have her.* All of this is too tempting. Too easy to kill the High Priest holo, and then mount the offering table and take... Tulia interrupts my thoughts.

“Get me out of here, and I might forgive you,” she demands, nodding to the High Priest’s sword still directed at her throat.

I step towards the High Priest, but he actually begins to draw blood, and Tulia screams. Thankfully she's only feeling 55% of the pain.

"If the priest kills me, I don't die for real, do I?" she asks, panicked.

The line of red blood running down her pink taut nipples almost sends me over the edge with an orgasm. I fall to my knees, pray to the god of war, and beg him to stop tempting me. If I kill the High Priest in anger, I'll just take Tulia right there on the offering table. I can see it already in my mind's eye, my mouth between her legs. I lick my lips, imagining what her sweet human sex must taste like. And then, I tighten my grip on the hilt of my sword to steady myself and my thoughts.

Fifteen

TULIA

“Kal, what’s wrong with you?” I scream. He’s on his knees praying, but it’s not any prayer I know. *Is Kal real, or is he a holo character too?*

Then the priest addresses Kal, and they begin speaking in the men’s language again, and I’m really worried. The priest’s sword could cut my throat so fast, I wouldn’t even realize I’d been killed. I don’t want to die, not even in a holo.

“Kal, if you’re the real Kal, let’s do whatever we have to end this horror holo,” I say, interrupting them.

Kal looks at me and takes a deep breath. “It’s the real me, Tulia, but what we do here will be counted in real life.”

“What? So you’re telling me I’m dead if the priest kills me?”

“No, nothing that happens with a holo character is real, but anything between us,” he motions to me and then himself, “is real.”

“Why are you hesitating to end this? Don’t you just have to kill this guy and save me?”

“Tulia, listen, the High Priest insists that the only way I can save you is if you are my wife.”

I finish his thought. “And if we marry now, we’ll be married in real life.” I stare at Kal as those words sink in. “Are you really the real Kal? Or is this some kind of Alliance joke? Make fun of the human who has a crush on a brother in the Guards of the Temple.”

Kal takes the end of his sword and swipes a line down his palm. He squeezes blood out onto the stone floor in a manner typical of Alliance oath-taking. “I swear to you I am Kal, High Brother of the Guards of the Temple. I have kissed you many times illegally, and once the High Council never caught us for behind a tree in the Promenade near the floating baths. If I were a holo, I wouldn’t know that, and even if I did, I couldn’t bypass my programming to reveal it now. You know this happened.”

It did happen, and I can’t help but remember that kiss now. Kal suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me behind a large tree. Before I could ask him what he was doing, he cut off my words with his hot tongue in my mouth. I remember how good he tasted. How my arms went around his shoulders, and I pulled his hard body against mine. It was so forbidden and erotic for the Empire.

My body is also reacting to my memory, and I want to arch my back and move, but I can’t. I’m tied down to this wheel. But the more he looks at me with sultry eyes, the more I want him despite this bizarre situation.

Our gaze is broken by a message notification. “It’s from the High Council,” Kal informs me and reads it.

Kal, High Brother, Guards of the Temple, 3rd day of the 65th week of the year 18909.

Obstructing Justice

Fine: 10 UC per citation

Kissing Madame Tulia Bell of House Human 5th day of the 59th week of the year 18909

Fine: 25 UC per citation

Total: 35 UC

Disputes can be made publicly only.

Alternative payment methods can be made at the Grand City Temple with the High Priestess in her private punishment rooms.

“I trust you’re the real Kal. But do you really want to marry me here, with all the Imperial guests at the Halloween Ball watching us? A Halloween marriage ceremony for the gossip columns and the history books?”

“It’s even more complicated as the doctors who designed this holo will keep all of this for their *medical* records.”

“Eeeww, why are some doctors so creepy?” I say under my breath, then I ask, “What’s the alternative?”

“You die as a virgin sacrifice for the god of war,” the priest says like a villain in a play.

I wait half a second to reply because I think an evil laugh might follow his statement, but when it doesn't, I ask Kal, "Will that hurt?"

"I set your senses to fifty-five percent," Kal admits. "It wouldn't be pleasant."

"But if we get married here, does that mean I'll only be able to feel fifty-five percent of the pleasure?"

"No, because we're both real. Trust me, when I touch you, it'll feel very authentic."

"Make a choice," the priest says impatiently, and suddenly the drums and chanting become louder.

"What's going on now?"

Kal looks up from his IC. "The palace has increased the sensitivity settings to force us into a choice. I guess our audience is getting bored."

"Fabulous choices," I say sarcastically. "They either want me to die by holo or get married for real in a weird, virgin sacrifice Halloween holo?"

"Yes," Kal and the priest answer simultaneously in a disturbing way.

Sixteen

KAL

Kal

“Tulia, maybe it’s better if you let him sacrifice you.”

Her green eyes fill with panic. “You don’t want to marry me?”

“I want to marry you, but I don’t want to push you into marriage. I know humans don’t like the public side of Alliance marriage ceremonies. And I’ve a feeling that what the audience demands now is going to be more than just a public ceremony with some close friends.”

“Kal, look at me. I’m spread eagle on an ancient sacrificial table, naked for the whole palace to see. Them watching me have sex would be easier than a holo ritual sacrifice. I think I’d always suffer post-traumatic stress from it, even at fifty-five percent.”

“I’m sorry I chose this, Tulia. I should’ve chosen the spiders. I just wanted you to enjoy Halloween.”

Her face goes pale. “Spiders?”

“Yes, there was a choice. I didn’t think that one was scary enough.”

She swallows. “No, I prefer this to spiders, Thank you.”

“So you’d consider marrying me now, even after all of this?”

“Over faux dying? Or spiders? Yes.”

“I’ve died in a holo before,” I tell her. I don’t want her to say later that I planned the whole thing so she would marry me.

“It’s scarier than it hurts.”

“Yes, I think that’s the part about dying I don’t like.” Tulia’s eyes move back and forth between the High Priest and me.

“You must make a decision,” the High Priest demands. “Is she your wife or a sacrifice to the god of war?”

Then one of the lower priests in green crosses the stone bridge, “Wait, High Brother Kal, I have something for you, sent from the Emperor himself.”

I don’t recognize the man coming towards us, but I’ve no doubt he’s a palace guest and has paid a considerable number of UCs to join our holo. When he arrives, he pulls out two marriage bracelets. Tulia’s name and my name are on them respectively. “High Brother, you can’t get married without these. They’re a gift from Emperor Ket himself and carry the blessing of the High Priestess.” He puts the bracelets into my hand. “Walk in the goddesses’ light, High Brother Kal, originally from Alliance Planet Three.”

The stranger says the last to remind me of my place. I’m new to the Capital Planet and my high position in the Guards of the

Temple, and if I don't take this opportunity now with Tulia, I'll be pushed out by a more powerful man. *But Tulia is mine.* The primal thought sweeps through me, and I think it must be a reaction from the holo and what my ancestors did here. Not only were women sacrificed to the god of war, but these men attempted to form a patriarchy with their wives. That's why there's an offering table, it's not only for actual sacrifices.

"What are those?" Tulia asks as the High Priest begins to spin her again.

I put one hand up to the stone turntable to stop it, hold up the bracelets in my other, and say to the High Priest. "Tulia will be my wife."

The High Priest immediately drops his large sword with a loud clatter. "Let's have a marriage ceremony then."

I've no doubt the High Priest's holo character was reprogrammed once the audience took an interest in Tulia's holo. The High Priest motions for some of his lower priests to untie Tulia, and before I can help her, she's thrust into my arms. I'm trying not to think about all the fines I'm getting for just holding her this way, her soft naked body next to mine. My hand tightly holding her ample skin close to me and her scent from her sweat, tears, and arousal surrounding me, causing me again to be on the verge of orgasm.

"Have you convinced him to let us go?"

I realize I was speaking the men's language. "We will marry first," I say, showing her the bracelets. "Tulia, these have been given to us by the Emperor himself."

Her eyes don't show any recognition of what that means and the implications for us in the Empire if we don't marry now.

"We must trust the goddesses. The Emperor and the High Priestess, who are in greater commune with the goddesses than us, have given us their blessing. I know you are my true other half. Do you recognize me as yours?"

"Of course, Kal," she says too nonchalantly for my taste. "But we're standing before the god of war unless I'm greatly mistaken. Not that it matters much to me," she adds the last sentence quietly, which concerns me. Not because she doesn't believe in my religion but because she says so out loud.

"Do you love me?" I ask. I use the forbidden word, but I know I must reach her as a human now. She's only been in the Empire for a year, and as I've gotten to know her, I know she doesn't believe, but I must have her believe in some part of the marriage ceremony, or we won't be able to complete it. Because I've no doubt the Imperial Palace guests won't allow us to have a simple marriage ceremony. They will demand a marriage ceremony under the god of war's eyes. We are their puppets to play out this fantasy now.

"Of course I love you. And I've almost forgiven you for putting me through this." She motions with her small hand around the god of war's sacrificial cave.

"And most importantly, do you trust me to guide you through my world, now and throughout your lifetime?"

Watching the flames reflect in her pupils while I wait is agony.

Have I lost her trust over this?

Seventeen

TULIA

Tulia “I trust you, Kal. As long as you promise never to do something like this again.”

His strong jaw unclenches at my words. “I promise. My instincts were to pull you out as soon as you were scared, but I was misguided by the doctors’ advice about human traditions. I swear to you, I’ll always trust my instincts to protect you from now on.”

He looks so sincere and truly regrets what he’s done. “I forgive you, Kal. And I’ll marry you, but there’s so much we’ve not discussed. You haven’t even told me what you want for loyalty days.”

“Yes I have.”

“I thought you were joking,” I reply. He has occasionally mentioned a role-play fantasy where I’d play the part of a submissive human, with an erotic costume exposing my breasts and vulva. When he doesn’t answer I say, “One loyalty day a week then.”

“Two.”

As he stands there naked like a Greek hero, how can I deny him what will also be my pleasure? “I agree.” I hold out my hand as I would on Earth, but Kal embraces me instead. His large, hard naked body against mine, and his erect penis pushing against my abdomen is enough to kick my libido into overdrive.

Then, Kal holds up our marriage bracelets for me to inspect, and I can see my name on one.

“It’s almost too convenient that these were made so quickly,” I say, wondering who else knew this was going to happen, or if this was truly a spur-of-the-moment action. *This will be my one moment of fame in the Empire*, I reflect. *A Halloween sex holo marriage*, and I inwardly cringe.

Just as we are ready to begin with the holo priest, Lara and another man with a Guards of the Temple uniform walk in, just to make things even more awkward.

“Lara! What are you doing here?” I feel embarrassed to be completely naked. And then, when it occurs to me I’m going to have sex in front of her, more heat, and not from the flames, spreads through my cheeks. It’s one thing to have sex in front of holo strangers and people out there figuratively, it’s quite another to do it in the same room with your friend watching.

“We were called in to witness your marriage ceremony.”

“There’s one more thing as well,” the other Guard of the Temple informs us. Introductions are never made in the

Empire, but I read his ID to know his name. “You must have a marriage ceremony to honor the god of war as you are in his temple.”

I don't know what this means. I look up at Kal, and he looks troubled.

Eighteen

KAL

“I was hoping they wouldn’t make us do this,” I say to Jol.

“It was put to a vote among the guests at the palace, and the High Priestess accepted it. I have my instructions to see it through. I’m sorry, Kal.”

I look down at Tulia. She has no idea what this means. It takes me a second to find the right words. “A marriage ceremony for the god of war is much more unequal to women.”

“Okay?”

Our eyes meet, and I can tell she doesn’t understand. I doubt Madame Bai ever covered this in her classes about Alliance culture. I turn and face Tulia. I put both my hands on her small shoulders, brushing her long red hair behind them. “I promise you, I won’t hurt you.”

“What are you talking about? It can’t be that bad.” Tulia looks at her friend, who shrugs her shoulders.

“I don’t know. I was just told to come and be your witness. But Tulia, this *is* the Empire. It can be *that* bad,” Lara says and

casually points up at the statue of the god of war.

“Unfortunately, none of us have a choice. Tulia and Kal, you’ve agreed to marry, and these are the conditions the palace guests have set. That is, unless you would like to disobey them?” Jol asks.

“And end up in the High Priestess’s punishment chamber for life? No thank you,” I reply. Then I say to Tulia, “You’re resilient. Don’t worry, I won’t lose control.”

Tulia’s mouth opens but she doesn’t speak.

“Madame Lara, please escort Madame Tulia to the statue’s base,” Jol says, taking control of the situation. “Kal and I will prepare.”

Once the women walk away, Jol and I share a concerned look. “Why would they do this?”

“Entertainment and, of course, to irritate the GR supporters in the Imperial Palace right now.”

“But those rumors about the Guards of the Temple worshipping only the god of war were started by women who don’t want maximum class men working on the planet.”

“It doesn’t matter who began the rumor. The palace is using it for their own benefit. The commander told me the best we can do is to get through this as if *we* planned it the entire time,” Jol gives me a critical look. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Jol holds his hand for the marriage bracelets and replaces them with a dagger. “Good. Then let’s begin the marriage ceremony for the god of war.” Then Jol puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’m here to make sure you don’t stray into the darkness.”

I put my hand on his shoulder in return. “Thank you.” It is a real concern that I may lose control given the circumstances. According to the goddess of home and the High Council, a woman must orgasm before penetration or it’s rape, which carries with it the death penalty. However, given the position Tulia will be in, the temptation to take her at any time will be overwhelming and bringing her to orgasm in this situation will be difficult. Not to mention, we’ve never been intimate. I don’t know her body at all. And to make things even more difficult, there’s a time limit. The god of war makes everything difficult. *But the pleasure will be sweeter*, I remind myself.

Jol and I approach the human women standing at the base of the god of war’s statue. Candles are burning around them, and Tulia looks gorgeous, with her long red hair only partially covering her full breasts. I can see a hint of her nipple piercings in the candlelight. For the first time during this holo, I can calmly take in Tulia’s naked body and admire her human curves and hair. She’s just as stunning as I imagined so many times when I’ve been alone.

The High Priest and his lower priests come from behind the statue with seven vons, four-legged animals with horns. They’re lined up around the ancient circle on the floor that represents all the goddesses and gods of the Alliance Pantheon. I walk over to Tulia. “We must sacrifice these

animals together. Their blood must run through our feet to show that the goddesses acknowledge our offering.”

Tulia’s face goes pale.

I lean down and whisper in her ear, “They’re only holo animals.”

She looks up at me and nods, but I can still see the unease in her green eyes.

“Put your hand over mine and say the prayers with me.” I guide Tulia to the first von and put her hand between my own on the dagger handle. “God of war, acknowledge us through blood and pain.” I slit the von’s throat, it makes a terrible screaming noise, and a rush of hot blood cascades onto our feet and into the grooves of the seal we are standing on. I hear Tulia dry heave behind me as she pulls her slippery and bloody hand away from mine.

“I can’t do this.”

“You can,” I insist. I take her hand again and hold it with the dagger. We present ourselves to the next von and say together, “Goddess of home, acknowledge us through blood and pain.”

This time as the blood spills over our bare feet, Tulia looks like she’ll be ill, and her friend Lara pulls back her hair as Jol and I move her safely outside the pantheon of goddesses’ seal.

When she’s recovered, I put her hair back behind one of her ears. “It’ll be easier if we go as fast as possible. We must fill up the grooves so the blood will be enough for the ceremony.”

She swallows hard and then nods after a second.

I take her hand, slick to the touch, covered in blood, and we begin again. One right after another, we sacrifice the vons until we're standing in a small pool of holo von blood, now lit by sensors that react against the proteins.

We stand face-to-face in the center of the seal. Tulia looks very pale. I whisper to her, "Not much longer now."

"I don't know how long I can stand here without being ill," she confides in me.

"It'll be wonderful to be married. Keep that thought in your mind, nothing else."

She smiles at the thought, which also gives me the strength to begin the next part of the ceremony. "The goddesses have blessed us by bringing us together. Let us walk in their light and permanently intertwine our souls," I say. Then the High Priest hands me a different ceremonial jeweled dagger, and Jol holds a silver ceremonial cup. When I'm sure Jol is ready, I say the scripted words, "May we honor the goddesses for this marriage ceremony. Today two halves will be made one under the god of war's eyes." I turn over one of Tulia's hands, and our eyes meet. I cut her as quickly and lightly as possible, without hesitation, with the jeweled dagger. Then I guide her blood into the waiting silver cup.

Taking a green cloth from the High Priest, I cover her wound, placing her hand over it. Next, I cut my own hand and add my blood to hers in the cup. I've cut myself much deeper to fill the cup for this sacrifice. I lift up the cup and say, "God of war, you have guided our souls to find one another across the

galaxy. We promise always to walk in the heat of your light.” I look at Tulia and prompt her to say the same, and she does without hesitation, but her words are tinged with fear. No doubt she’s guessed what happens next.

I take the marriage bracelets from Jol. They’re the traditional black and silver and have our names engraved on them. I take Tulia’s left hand and put it on her wrist. “Madame Tulia Bell of House Human, I pledge my life, passion, and honor to you in wedlock.”

I want to kiss her, but I resist. I want this to be as perfect as possible so that no one can find fault with our ceremony. Then I hand my bracelet to her. She puts it on my left wrist. “High Brother Kal of the Guards of the Temple, I accept your pledge and promise you my life, passion, and honor in wedlock.”

The marriage bracelets tighten, and Tulia doesn’t even jump at the small pinprick. I’m very proud of her. I’ve heard that most human women are still shocked by the pain of the ceremonial marriage bracelets. But I guess, considering all that’s already happened, a small pinprick is nothing now.

“Now, Tulia, you must give yourself to me. This is different from the goddess of home ceremony.”

“I don’t understand. I know we need to have sex with witnesses...”

I take her hand and lead her out of the blood seal, following the High Priest and Jol. We come to an oblong table with green ribbon restraints.

“What’s this?”

“The god of war demands that wives are prepared to trust their husbands in everything,” the High Priest tells Tulia. He then motions for a green blindfold and hands it to me. “High Brother, blind and bind your wife.”

Tulia’s green eyes go wide.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I promise her.

“But how do I know if this is real?”

I touch her cheek with the back of my hand as is my custom, lean down and kiss her, knowing this will result in a fine as we haven’t begun this part of the ceremony. But I want to reassure her so I try to kiss her like I did on the Promenade. After a few seconds, I pull back to look into her green eyes. “Do you trust me not to hurt you?”

Her eyes search mine then finally she says, “Yes.”

Without another word, I put the silk green blindfold over her eyes and kiss her forehead. I spin her around the seven sacred times before walking her to the marriage offering table. I put her on the cold stone surface and bind her wrists and ankles.

Nineteen

TULIA

“Do you want the aphrodisiac Mara gave me?” Lara whispers in my ear as I’m lying spread eagle, pinned to a stone table, and blindfolded.

“I’ll be fine. I love him and I trust him.” And I mean what I say. If I can’t trust him now, then what’s the point of marrying him?

“Okay,” Lara says, and I hear her footsteps on the stone, backing away.

Then I hear the priest’s voice, “Who is here to bear witness for this woman?”

“I am,” says Lara.

The priest speaks again. “The god of war demands blood, pain, measure, and pleasure. May he guide you into his light as one.”

Kal and the other brother from the Guards of the Temple reply together, “He guides us.”

I tense. “Are both men going to touch me?” *What should I do? Should I ask? Is there anything I can do?* I’ve said yes to completing this.

The priest speaks again, “Begin the measure.”

And Lara begins counting, “One, two, three, four...”

“Is there a time limit?” I ask but no one replies.

I feel a hand on my ankle, moving up to my thigh. *Is this Kal’s hand?* I don’t know. We’ve never been so intimate before. But it’s only one hand, so I assume it’s Kal. Then I feel another hand. *Does it belong to the same body?*

Strong lips kiss their way up my inner thighs. And soon these same warm lips hover over my mons pubis, teasing me with little kisses. *Kal would do this, it’s similar to the way he kisses.*

And then the mouth moves lower, lightly licking the length of my labia majora, slowly and sweetly, as if we are the only two people in the world. Seconds later, I breathe out his name but get no reply. *His large tongue is stroking my vulva, up and down. Of course it’s him.*

The counting distracts me, “Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight...”

Another hand, or the same hand, pinches one of my nipples. It feels like a reprimand to ignore the counting. Then his hot wet tongue is circling my clitoris and making me forget about all my concerns and the counting. I want to arch my body further into the mouth between my legs, but I can’t move at all strapped against the table. “Kal, yes, cover me with your

mouth, suck harder.” I say, I don’t get any reply, just the deft movements of his tongue. When I think I can’t take anymore, another hand is on my other nipple, pinching it.

My nipples were pierced upon my arrival in the Empire. I was told that Alliance men adore women’s nipples being pierced and can bring a woman to orgasm just by moving the rods back and forth in certain rhythms. I never understood until now. One hand is moving the small nipple bar back and forth and pinching my nipple in such an erotic way that I can’t help but moan with pleasure and wish the other hand would do the same. I’m throbbing with desire between my legs, and I’m frustrated I can’t move my hips to add more friction and bring myself closer to orgasm. If his mouth was just a little closer...

Lara’s voice chimes back in, “One-hundred and fifty-five, one-hundred and fifty-six, one-hundred and fifty-seven...”

“I want to move,” I beg. “Kal, please... suck harder, move your head up and down. Yes, like that. Oh yes, like that.”

I hear nothing from him. But I feel his mouth working my vulva and clitoris hard now. The whole area is tingling with arousal. His other hand enters my vagina with a finger, and I hold my breath. It feels so good. I don’t care about anything now but his touch. I want his fingers to move in and out of me.

“Yes, keep doing that,” I moan.

Abruptly he stops everything, and I worry I’ll lose this feeling.

“Kal?”

I wonder if this has something to do with Lara's counting?
"Two-hundred and five, two-hundred and six, two-hundred and seven..."

Then the drums and the chanting begin again just as they did before, and I assume this is a chant for the god of war. Just as I wonder if I've imagined all of this, two, maybe three large and rigid fingers plunge into me hard and fast. Simultaneously a mouth sucks so intensely on my clitoris I reach my orgasm in a rush, but the waves last as if there'd been a strong build up. "Don't stop, it feels so good," I call out, not caring who hears me. It's been so long since anyone has touched me, and I'm reveling in all of this. I never want it to end.

The priest's voice breaks the moment though, "Note the god of war's first measure is three-hundred and fifty-five."

I want to open my eyes and ask what that is all about, but since no one has said a word to me since this began, I assume it is part of this god of war ceremony that no one speaks to the bride.

What seems like a few minutes pass and all I hear is the chanting and the beating of drums. I feel my own arousal keenly between my legs as Kal is gently caressing my nipples with his wet fingers. "I want you inside of me, Kal," I plead. *I assume I'll recognize his large appendage when I feel it inside of me. We are meant to be, so it should feel perfect.*

The priest speaks again, "Begin the measure."

Kal's brother from the Guards of the Temple begins counting, "One, two, three, four..."

Instead of entering me like I want, his hands are on my nipples, moving the bars back and forth erotically. I breathe in deeply. It feels wonderful, but it's not fulfilling. "I want your penis inside of me, Kal. Please," I implore. It's not too much longer before I feel his penis at the entrance of my vagina. I want to scoot down and ease his penis in. I'm so ready, but I can't move at all. Everything is in his own time and he's taking it.

He strokes the top of my nipples with his thumbs as he moves the bars expertly with his other fingers, and I can't help but wonder what else can be done with them. *What will he make me do on my loyalty days?* As if reading my mind, he pulls gently on the bars, causing some pain with the pleasure of it, and I feel another small wave of electric desire pass through my entire body. I want this man so much. Then, while holding my nipples up by their piercings, as if he is offering them to the god of war himself, his penis powerfully impales me. It's so big. I want to spread my thighs further apart to accommodate him, but I can't move and I must remain completely still as he has complete control of me.

Kal takes his time, slowly moving in and out, gradually stretching me to fit his size.

Somewhere in the background I hear the priest say, "That's a very tight fit," and it reminds me of our audience. *What must they think watching this sexual display? Are they aroused by it?*

And I hear the counting again, “Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight...”

Why is Kal moving so slowly if this is a race? I wonder.

My mind turns blank when the ridges on the top of Kal’s penis scrape the top of my vagina in such an erotic way that I almost feel like I’m someone else. That all of this is happening to another human woman who is ceremoniously tied down with bloody feet and being made an Alliance man’s wife as he holds her breasts up to pay homage to the god of war. I have to admit it’s sexy. And I’m glad it’s happening to me even though it’s so odd it feels like an out-of-body experience.

Kal is still moving slowly in and out. His enormous penis has stretched me out enough that his glide is seamless, but he’s still not let go of my nipple bars.

The brother’s words ring through the air, “Two-hundred and twenty-five, two-hundred and twenty-six, two-hundred and twenty-seven...”

I don’t understand why Kal is going so slowly. I want him to grab my hips and pump into me. My vagina clenches around him at the mere thought. As if that was the sign he was waiting for, he begins picking up his speed and strength, moving in and out of me, leaving my vagina and then plunging back in with such force, with every entry, I tingle from my head to my toes. All the while, my breasts are erotically moving with the movements, pain, and pleasure as he still holds my nipples tightly by the piercings. It all feels so good, and I want this to last forever.

“Yes, Kal,” I moan. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop. This feels so good, and I love you so much.”

No response.

All I hear are the numbers being counted out, “Three-hundred and one, three-hundred and two, three-hundred and three...”

I don’t even care if it’s really him or if this is even real anymore. This feels amazing. If it’s real, I’ll probably be fined. But I don’t care. I want all of this.

Suddenly, Kal begins pumping into me faster, his ridges lighting my desire to higher degrees with every thrust. I hear the counting, chanting, and drums around me now, but only as if I’m underwater, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I remember this is my marriage ceremony. I wish I could see. I hope this really is Kal. But there’s too much exquisite pleasure to care. I let myself go into another orgasm that spreads wildly throughout my entire body, not a centimeter is spared from a tingling muscle spasm of erotic delight that seems to last forever. And seconds after I finish, I feel Kal’s hot semen shoot into my vagina and down around my thighs. There’s so much semen that even after his withdrawal, I feel the warm liquid dripping out of me. His hand moves over and tries to force it back in and he circles my entrance with it, like he’s marking his territory all over that area of my body.

The priest has a knack for breaking these intense moments and says, “Note the god of war’s second measure is three-hundred and fifty-eight, barely longer than his wife’s.”

“But still longer and an acceptable pass,” I hear the man who was counting reply.

No wonder Kal was worried, he had to hold his orgasm longer than I did, I smile to myself thinking about what a confident lover he is.

Now I expect my blindfold and restraints to be released, but they aren't. The chanting is still going, and the drums are still being beat.

“What happens now?” I ask but get no reply. *Is no one responding because no one is real but me?*

Before I can ask again, I feel a mouth on my vagina, but no one is touching me anywhere else. The mouth is licking the inside of me as if it's trying to clean out some of Kal's semen. *Is that Kal?*

Then that mouth leaves and is replaced by another. I should be concerned, but it feels too pleasurable, and if this is the Alliance ritual, then so be it. It's better I have the blindfold on and don't see it. *This is taking the good with the bad,* I remind myself.

After the second tongue leaves my vagina, I feel soft hands thoroughly cleaning my body with what I assume by the smell and feel is soap and water. From the gentle touch, I guess these are a woman's hands and assume they're Lara's. I relax. She spends extra time on my feet which are covered with those little goats' blood. I completely let this happen to me again as if I'm watching someone else, but at the same time, content it's actually happening to me.

I fall asleep even with all the drums and chanting. I wake up when I hear Kal's deep voice. "We thank the god of war and our witnesses to our marriage ceremony."

Immediately the blindfold is stripped off my face, and I'm back in the Imperial Palace Main Reception Hall wearing the same borrowed dress from before. I look up at Kal. Then I check the hair comb he gave me. It's still there, and my hair is perfectly done up. "Was that all a dream?" I ask. I'm shaken and he takes my elbow quickly so I don't fall.

"Was what a dream?"

I look at my wrists. They're bare. I turn them over to make sure. *Am I losing my mind?*

Kal leans down and kisses me sensually. While he does so, he puts a marriage bracelet over my wrist, and it pinches me as it tightens. Relief washes over me.

He pulls away and smiles. "The bracelets in the holo couldn't be real. But we are really married and these are real marriage bracelets."

Then every guest at the Halloween Ball says in unison, "Thank the gods, and may you have many daughters."

I turn and look at their faces, both Alliance and human, all smiling at us. I touch my marriage bracelet and then say to Kal, "This was the strangest but the best Halloween I've ever had."

"I can obtain a copy of the holo for our personal use if you'd like to relive it every year?" Kal says.

I tilt my head. “For now, I think the memory will be enough.”

“As you wish, Wife.”

Note to the Reader

Thank you for reading “Halloween at the Imperial Palace.” If you’re interested in more stories from the Alliance Empire you can always find my books in KU, ebook, audio, and paper on Amazon.

My Books on Amazon

Lucky Chance by Ami Wright

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE A BLACK CAT-ALIEN BORN ON FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH?

You end up with the worst case of bad luck in the five systems of course. Anything that can go wrong always does. Chance is cursed. So when he meets Lea and she's his perfect match, he's not surprised to discover she's being targeted by the most ruthless organized crime syndicate in Edgespace. By saving her, Chance just became their next target. On the run from the Jade Skulls on Halloween, about to lose his entire crop and bankrupt his business, what else could possibly go wrong?

Then Lea goes into heat...

It's the worst best day of his life. Or is that the best worst day?

Content Warnings: *mentions of financial distress, debt, debt collection and organized crime; moderate violence*

One

Chance's long black tail fluffed as he stepped into the frigid air of the cool store on his cargo ship, the *Iris*, and closed the door behind him. Row upon row of cut flowers from his brand-new floriculture farm stood inside their tiny domes in the semi-freeze containers he had invented to keep them hovering perfectly between budding and blooming, so they would be just right the moment they were sold.

Checking the wall panel, he noted the humidity settings and temperature gauge for each vase, making sure everything was as it should be. His breath appeared in front of him in little puffs as he walked through the rows, checking each bud and each stalk, looking to make sure nothing was out of place. He probably could have relied on the semi-freeze containers to do the job he'd created them for. There was probably no need for him to be freezing his balls off in the cold store where the temperature was set way below comfortable. The tropical heat he'd grown used to since he had moved to Phithea was far too

hot to keep cut flowers in pristine condition, but the jungle planet was the perfect place to grow and harvest them.

Still, despite his name, he wasn't taking any chances. Not with this crop. He needed to make back the money he'd invested in developing the new tech by selling this crop at Nova Station. Preferably directly to the numerous hotels, spas, restaurants, and vendors who operated at the city-sized space station. When he'd been younger, he would have made a back-up plan.

These days, Chance had given up on back-up plans.

He'd learned the hard way he could never rely on luck to be kind to him. No matter what he did, things always seemed to go wrong. And always at the worst possible moment. What could you expect when you were a black cat alien born on Friday the thirteenth?

For all he knew, his parents broke every mirror in the birthing center, opened twenty umbrella bots inside, and stared straight into the Wolf Star while cursing the Shahra the day he was born. They may as well have. And then they'd gone and named him Chance on top of everything else. It was like daring the universe to have its wicked way with him.

But though things often didn't work out the way he planned, making a hundred back-up plans didn't work either. When he had been younger, he'd tried to be super organized. He'd tried to plan for every contingency. But the universe had a way of messing those up too. So he learned just to roll with it and come up with a new plan on the spot.

And then another.

Chance wasn't all that surprised to see a traffic jam at least fifty ships long snaking out from the doors to the space port at Nova Station. Of course there was. Because he was carrying time-sensitive cargo that needed to be delivered today, and he had to get around to every hotel and spa he had vid-called to show off what he had brought and try to establish an ongoing contract of supply in the limited hours he had before the flowers fully bloomed and lost part of their value.

Sighing, he adjusted the climate control on his semi-freeze pods one degree lower. That should buy him a few more hours without burning the delicate petals. And he could kick start their re-awakening with a burst of artificial sunlight right before he docked.

Returning to the rec room of the *Iris*, he sank into a couch and idly watched the viewscreen as the ship's AI directed them slowly to the front of the queue. What could be creating this much traffic today? Nova Station was a bustling hub of activity every day of the year, but this was noticeably different to the way it had been each of the other times he had visited since moving to Edgespace. Perhaps that was a good sign. If the station was extra busy today, there would be more customers, more revenue, and more demand for products of all kinds.

He laughed bitterly to himself.

A good sign. What a joke. No doubt it was a bad sign. He just couldn't work out what kind.

He worked it out as soon as he docked the *Iris* at anchor port 234d and stepped into the huge open chamber of the space port: human madness.

There was something sinister going on today. A new kind of fuckery he hadn't encountered before. Every human he passed had on some bizarre, disturbing outfit. Some wore long, black capes and little false fangs with bright red blood—clearly fake—painted onto their lips. Some had hideous masks with elongated tusks and ugly boils and hairs. Others had tall, pointed hats and carried sticks with bristles attached which made him wonder if they were into some sort of kinky play he'd never heard of. What on Ardun could you want a brush long enough for a giant to use on his mustache for?

He was certain he saw at least three human children dressed as Amir, the most famous winner of the popular Ardun Gladiator Games, with pointed ears on headbands and fake, tabby tails tied around their waists.

When he stopped at the ringrail to wait for the next train, he couldn't help staring at a woman who had painted her skin green and was wearing enormous bug-eyed glasses in order to look like what ancient humans had imagined aliens might look like.

A middle-aged Ardun female with a ridiculous frilly pink dress on and a fake crown sitting between her pointed ears leaned over to him. "First time on Nova Station?"

"Ah, no. But I'm pretty new to Edgespace. Is this some kind of weird human custom I should know about?"

She laughed. “Yeah. It’s called Halloween. It’s fun. You should get yourself a costume. Watch out for the trick or treaters though. You’d better get some candy, cause those kids are mean if you’ve got nothing to give ’em.” She held up her own bag of sweets. Chance blinked at the bag, then back at her, trying to interpret her words. Kids? Mean? How scary could human children be? Sticky hands on your tail was never fun, but surely that was about as much threat as they posed.

Just then, the train arrived with a whoosh, and she stepped on with one last smile over her shoulder. He shook himself and followed her onto the crowded carriage, finding a handhold just as the doors closed.

Of course his bad luck had only just begun. When he arrived at the Aphelion, the premier hotel on Nova Station, the clerk at the desk just laughed when he asked to speak to the manager. “You’ve come on the wrong day, I’m afraid. Everyone’s up on level eight at the staff party. I’m the sucker who got stuck with the Halloween shift.”

It was the same at the Twin Horizons and the Zephyr. Chance sat at a bench beneath a lovely tree, covered with light pink blossoms with deep fuchsia centers. He put his head in his hands. He knew he shouldn’t just sit there. He should keep trying. Surely he’d find someone to buy what he knew was one of the best crops of lillies and orchids he’d ever seen.

There was a shout and he looked up to see a pair of human children marching toward him. They were dressed in crazy Halloween outfits. One little boy had black stripes painted all

over his face and rounded tiger ears on his head. The other wore a toy helmet and spacesuit as if he were about to do repairs on the station. They must have been about six or seven, Chance guessed. About the same age as his little nephews and nieces.

He smiled at the boy in the tiger outfit. “Hey, buddy. Nice costume.”

The little boy put his hands on his hips and scowled at Chance. “Treat!”

The kid in the station janitor outfit poked a stubby finger at Chance’s belly. “Yeah! Trick or treat!”

He grimaced, dodging the probably sticky finger before he ended up with a smear on his nice new tunic. This must have been what that female on the ringrail was talking about. And the way to pacify them was to give them candy? “Sorry kits—I mean kids—I haven’t been down to the market hall to get any candy yet. I’m afraid you’ll have to try someone else.”

The tiger-boy’s blunt little teeth bared in a feral grin. “Trick!”

Squealing an ear-shattering battle cry, the kid in the helmet pulled out a toy blaster filled with water. Before Chance could react, they squirted him right in the face. Choking and spluttering, he held his hands out. “Hey, cut it out! This is really not the day for—”

Tiger-boy pulled out another and proceeded to douse his new tunic in water until the fur on his neck and chest was damp and clinging to his skin along with his shirt. He shouted at them to

stop, looking around for their parents. Though the commotion had drawn many eyes, nobody looked like they were about to step in. But what could he do? They were just kids. He couldn't grab them or take their things.

“Hey!” A stern female voice cut through his panic. “Push off.” A beautiful young human woman, with light brown hair long enough to reach all the way down her back, stepped in front of him, apparently unbothered by the steady jets of water now soaking the front of her dress. Chance jumped to his feet, tail lashing, about to intervene, when she held out two handfuls of sweets. “Here. Now scam!”

The two children snatched the candy and darted off into the crowd, disappearing between two shopping bots delivering goods.

The human turned, bestowing the brightest, most dazzling smile Chance experienced right on him. It hit him like a freighter's thruster jets, and then the scent that went with it nearly knocked him off his feet. Sweet, but with more rich depth than candy, floral, with notes of real flowers, but also cleaner, crisper. It was the best thing he had ever smelled. And that was saying something for an Ardun flower grower who prided himself on producing the flowers with the best bouquet in the five systems.

Her smile creased into a frown as she looked at him. “Oh no! They really did a number on you, didn't they?”

Chance's eyes drifted to the spot in the center of her chest where the wet and slightly translucent fabric of her pretty

dress was now clinging to the most perfect breasts he'd ever seen. They were small and pert, and he had to stop himself from just shredding the dress and closing his mouth over the hard nipples that were budding against the thin fabric. He opened his mouth, totally failed to think of what to say, and closed it again, shaking his head.

The human lifted one layer of her long flowing skirts and brushed gently at his face. It made him want to lean into her touch.

Hells, what was wrong with him?

“What about you?” he finally managed.

She just shrugged. “I was about to change for work anyway. Hey, why don't you come with me? I've got some towels, and I can help you clean up a bit.”

Like a damn starstruck puppy, Chance nodded, trying to be a gentleman and not ogle her breasts too obviously as he did.

Two

The Ardun male was gorgeous. He had this short beard, so dark it was almost as black as the fur that covered most of his body. His skin beneath was a soft sort of caramel and his eyes were warm and brown.

It didn't hurt that he seemed unable to drag his gaze away from the damp front of her dress. It might have been creepy except for the sweet sort of befuddled look on his face as he blatantly stared at her boobs. He had broad shoulders and was a good head taller than her, but she still felt instantly safe with him. Like he was the kinda guy who would step in front of a moving hovercar for her.

His rich brown eyes stayed locked on her as they walked through the main thoroughfare of level seven where Lea had just finished her first job, arranging the flowers for all the rooms and the lobby of the Golden Sun Hotel. It was a casual position. The type where they called her up every now and again when it suited them. But it helped. Every little bit helped, and she needed all the help she could get.

Unfortunately, it still wouldn't be enough to pay the protection money she owed to the Jade Skulls, and they would turn up any day now, ready to collect.

She stepped a little closer to her new friend and he almost tripped over a hovercase that a man walking by was steering in front of them. She bit back a giggle. Was he really so overcome by the sight of a little wet t-shirt action? She was rather pleased with her decision not to bother with a bra today. To be honest, that was her decision most days, given that her breasts were so small it was hardly a requirement. Clearly, he liked what he saw though.

“Not from around here, eh?” she asked him, half turning to catch him still staring at her.

He laughed, tugging on one pointed black ear. “That obvious, huh? No. I've been in Edgespace for nearly a year now, but I've been pretty busy getting my new crop field up and running. So I haven't had much opportunity to visit Nova. And I'd never heard of Halloween.”

“Ah.” Lea smiled. “Must have been a bit of a shock then.”

“Ha! Yeah. You could say that again. I'm Chance, by the way. And I should thank you for coming to my rescue back there.”

She reached across her body to offer him her hand and he took it for a quick shake. “I'm Lea—well it's Azalea, really, but a florist called Azalea is just a bit absurd, so I just go by Lea these days.”

His eyes widened. “A florist? You're joking!”

They neared the elevator and Lea put her hand over the panel to operate the door. As they stepped inside, she shook her head. “Nope. You think I’d lie about a name like that?”

“Oh, no! It’s just that I’m a floriculturalist. And you... well it’s quite a coincidence.”

“Really?” Lea grinned. “What do you grow?”

“Lillies and orchids mostly. But a few other crops too. They’re not ready yet. Actually, I’m at Nova to try to find buyers for my current harvest. I was hoping to sell directly to the bigger hotels and spas, but I can hardly go into places looking like this. So I’m a bit stumped actually.”

The elevator opened, and she directed him to the right, toward the section of the market hall where her little shop was located. “You do your own flower arranging then?”

He scratched at his bearded chin. “I try, but I’m not very good.”

Lea was about to ask if he’d done any training, when she caught sight of a large, hulking figure lurking right outside her shop. Thankfully the security panel was still down, and everything was locked away and there were cams somewhere on this level, but it didn’t stop her freezing with a little gasp and catching at Chance’s arm.

He stiffened, looking down at her. “What is it?” His pointed ears flicked back, and for a moment, he placed one hand on top of hers where it rested on his arm.

She dug her nails into the soft fur. “That guy,” she hissed. “I think he’s here to see me, and I really can’t see him right now.”

The guy was leaning back against a column to one side of her shop, wearing a ridiculous Halloween costume. He was probably supposed to look like a ghost. In fact, it looked like he had simply poked two holes into a white sheet and tossed it over his head. His muscled arms were crossed over the sheet across his chest, revealing several tattoos and a belt that was heavy with weapons. Lea saw at least two knives and a blaster, and there were probably more she couldn’t see tucked away somewhere as well.

There was no way this guy was just out trick or treating.

“Do you know him?” Chance whispered to her, turning her so that they stood in front of a fruit shop with a table full of oranges stacked outside.

Lea kept hold of his arm, the feel of his warm fur beneath her fingers the only thing anchoring her here and stopping her impending freak out. This was her own fault. She’d ignored the warnings and the debt repayment demands, thinking it couldn’t possibly be real. It had been two years since the Jade Skulls had really been a problem in Edgespace, and businesses on Nova were flourishing. The old extortion racket was surely a thing of the past. There was even an anti-organized crime branch of Earth’s Interstellar Intelligence Agency located right here on Phithea, only two days’ travel away.

Maybe this big scary looking dude was just waiting impatiently to buy his girlfriend a big bouquet of flowers...on Halloween...

He pulled a nasty, jagged-tipped knife from his belt, took an orange from his pocket, and began peeling it. It was hard not to imagine those deft, perfunctory movements transformed into him scalping a victim. Said to be a favorite punishment for those who crossed the Jade Skulls.

Shit.

“N—no. Not exactly. I think he’s here for money.”

Chance’s brows furrowed and he glanced back at beefy knife guy. “Is he here to threaten you?” His tail was swatting the air behind them so violently, it thwacked into her leg, and she jumped.

Beefy dude looked up from his orange and spotted Lea. He straightened, not putting away the knife or the orange. Then he stalked toward them. Lea swallowed around a thick lump in her throat. *Don’t run. Don’t run. That’ll only look suspicious.*

Through the holes in the sheet, the thug’s gaze locked on her. “Azalea Locklear?”

“Um... nope,” she squeaked. “I think you have the wrong person.”

Beefy dude went from smug to completely terrifying in one moment as he tossed the orange on the floor where it splatted with a wet plop. She hardly looked. She was far more worried about the knife.

His footsteps turned into large strides, and he was almost on them. “You owe the Tiger something, Azalea. Now be a good girl and pay up.”

At that moment, a security bot hovered past the narrow entrance to the lane and Beefy quickly tucked his knife beneath the sheet. There was an awkward pause while the bot scanned them.

They all stood perfectly still as the blue beam of the scanner ran over them.

“Listen,” Chance said. “I’m sure we can work this out. What does she owe?”

Beefy turned his spooky glare on Chance through the ragged holes in his sheet. “Fifty thousand marks.”

Chance sputtered.

Lea winced. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I should have warned you. Hanging around me is bad news.”

The bot was still hovering there. She had seconds to act. Anything she did now was a risk and she bitterly regretted getting this sweet stranger involved in any of this. But there was no question he was involved now. So, shifting her weight onto the balls of her feet, she gripped his hand in hers. “He’s got a blaster!” she shouted, pointing with her free hand at the Jade Skulls member. The security bot beeped, and it produced a flexible arm with shock stick attachment, which lit up as it activated. “Hold up your chips for scanning,” it ordered.

“Little bitch,” Beefy dodged the bot, snatching at Lea. She darted out of the way, pulling Chance by the hand.

“Run!” she yelled.

“Please halt immediately and submit to a scan,” the tinny voice of the bot commanded.

She ignored it, tugging as hard as she could at Chance. He stumbled, crashing into the table of oranges and sending them rolling everywhere. There was a zap and a curse and Lea looked back briefly to see the Jade Skulls guy doubled over after being shocked by the bot.

Then she was nearly pulled off her feet as Chance slipped on a rolling orange. He let go of her hand at just the right moment, and she staggered back to stand only to see Beefy lunge at Chance with his knife. “Get back here.”

Chance went down, slamming onto the floor just as Beefy lunged. He tripped over Chance, slipped on an orange, and crashed to the floor with a grunt. And didn’t get up.

There was a wet cough from Beefy, and Chance surged back to his feet, ears pressed back against his skull. “Fuck!”

The security bot zoomed toward them, shock stick waving as Lea stood and stared at the growing pool of bright red liquid creeping out from under Beefy’s belly.

Was he—

“Lea!” Chance tugged at her arm.

She could hardly hear him over the buzzing in her ears.

“Lea! We have to run.”

He finally broke through to her and she staggered into motion, hand clasped in his. They pushed through the crowds of people as they re-entered the main thoroughfare. A man cursed at Chance when he barged past him. Lea hardly noticed where they were going. Her mind buzzed with a howling wind and only the feel of Chance’s hand still clasping hers kept her moving.

Eventually he slowed their pace, guiding her around the corner into a narrow alley behind two shops. It was a service lane, really only wide enough for the small boxy bots that came to remove the waste. Chance pressed his body close to hers, stroking a hand over her hair. Lea realized she was gasping for air, far more than she should have been after a little dash down a few streets.

“Shhh. We lost him. I don’t think he was chasing us in any case. And there’re no bots around. Just breathe.”

She concentrated on slowing her breaths, helped by the drugging sensation of his claws running lightly across her scalp and teasing through the strands of her hair.

It was okay. It was going to be okay.

They were both still breathing for starters.

When she could speak again, she said, “Do you think he’s dead?”

Chance shook his head. “Probably not. I think he fell on his knife, but unless he was really unlucky, he could survive it.

The security bot would have defaulted to providing first aid as soon as he was hurt, which is why it didn't follow us. It should have the tools to stop the bleeding and call for a med bot."

She let out a long sigh. "Right. Good. I hate the idea of killing someone, even if it's only by mistake."

Chance nodded, pressing his lips against the top of her head. Now Lea's heart caught in her throat for an entirely new and much better reason. Suddenly aware of every place their bodies touched, she shivered as a tingle ran up her spine.

Chance went very still, hands tightening on her upper arms where he held her. Then he brushed aside the hair on her neck, leaning in to nuzzle against her skin. He groaned. Lea felt the sound at her core, where her pussy fluttered.

"Lea... your scent. We should go before more bots start searching for us, but I'm not sure I can let you go."

She drew in an uneven breath, hands creeping to the front of his tunic, holding him there. "I'm not sure I want you to." Which was ridiculous. They'd just been attacked by a gang thug, nearly killed a guy, and run through the station fearing pursuit from security. She should not be so distracted by the feel of his nose and lips tracing a path along her neck.

A wet, slightly raspy tongue flicked out to taste her skin and Chance groaned again, the sound ending on a rumbling purr. "Lea, you smell so good, and you taste like every mythic heaven." His lips and tongue found the place below her ear that made her weak at the knees, and she clung to him tighter.

Chance nipped at her earlobe, slid his arms around her waist to draw her closer still.

A shrill beep from the end of the narrow lane jolted both of them back to their senses. The tinny voice of another security bot made Lea's stomach drop with anxiety. "Please hold out your chips for scanning. Do not resist, or the necessary force will be used to detain you."

Three

He should have been grateful for the star-blighted security bot. At that moment, it felt like the only thing stopping him from pushing up Lea's skirts and rutting her against the wall like a damned animal.

He'd never had a reaction like this to any female before. His brother had been lucky enough to find a true mate, a female who would go into heat induced by their compatible pheromones. His brother's mate, Helene, had been in heat while he was around, and though he had noticed the change in her scent, it had not affected him at all. Still, Chance had seen enough of his brother's reaction to know what was happening to him now.

Fighting down his baser urges, he choked out a curse. Why now? It was not surprising. Lea blinked up at him with wide frightened eyes. "We're going to be arrested, aren't we? Oh goddess, we're going to be arrested and locked up for the rest of our lives. We're going to be sent to Denuga."

No, we were just defending ourselves. It was an accident.

That's what he should have said. That only occurred to him later. Much too late to be helpful. He should have just convinced her to submit for the scan and helped her deal with the questions until the problem was resolved. That would have been the logical, sensible thing to do.

But apparently half his braincells had been diverted to his groin, along with massive amounts of blood to fill the enormous erection he was currently sporting. So instead of remaining calm and logical, all his protective instincts kicked in.

The acrid scent of fear tainted the sweetness he still wasn't finished tasting. All he could think about was crushing whatever had caused it. He pushed Lea behind him in the narrow lane. The bot approached. His claws extended. His tail fluffed. The bot extended its scanner arm. At the last moment he ducked and grabbed the machine, dashing it against the wall of the nearest shop. A crunch. The bot dropped to the ground, still flashing. Then an awful wailing siren invaded the space in the alley and throbbed in his ears so he was forced to cover them.

Without needing to discuss it, they ran from the alley, rushing back into the crowd, bumping against people in their haste. He followed Lea, with no clear idea of where they were going. Thankfully she seemed to know, running straight for the nearest elevator tower and rushing inside. When the doors closed, they were forced to stop, but adrenaline was still coursing through his body, making it impossible to stay still. His tail lashed the air, and he had to clench his fists at his sides

to stop himself from hauling her against him or pushing her back against the wall of the elevator and pushing himself inside her.

What was this madness? Had his brother really been through this multiple times?

Had anyone?

He couldn't think, could only feel every cell in his body screaming at him to take her, bite her, claim her. His fangs ached, and it was only a tiny mercy when the doors opened and they stumbled out onto another level of the station.

Lea led him between towers and towers of identical apartments, to one at the other side of a long street. But as they neared, she snatched at his arm, halting him in his tracks.

“Oh fuck! That's another one.”

It took him a moment to force his scrambled brain to register what she was saying. He hissed as the big, bulky form of another thug wearing a pink, sparkly mask, cut-off vest, and grimy trousers.

Lea pulled him back in the direction they had come, and he glanced behind at the heavy-set human.

“Who are they?” He matched her hurried steps back in the direction of the elevator.

“The Jade Skulls. They're after money.”

“Why yours?”

Lea didn't immediately answer. They made it around a corner, and he grabbed her arm, spinning her to face him. "Lea, why yours?"

She squirmed. "I borrowed money to start my business."

"You what?" He had to fight to keep his claws from digging into her flesh. Surely everyone knew not to borrow money from thugs like that.

"I needed money, and no one would loan it to me. The repayments were steep, but I had no choice. Only they keep wanting more, and I'm sure some of it is just extortion. By my calculations, I paid them off three months ago, but they keep coming around, leaving nasty messages, and then this."

The elevator opened and they stepped inside, the doors closing and leaving them in a strange limbo for a moment.

Lea sighed. "I hate that you've got mixed up in this. You should just leave me."

"Never!" The growl tore from his throat and he gathered her against him, the ache of pressing his stiff cock against her belly torture and bliss in one. He would have said more. Or kissed her into submission then, but the cursed doors opened, and someone exclaimed. "Ugh. Can't you wait until you're in private?"

His savage hiss was enough to stop the humans from boarding the elevator. Instead, the doors closed again, and the elevator continued its journey up. And a course of action lodged in his brain.

They had to get off Nova.

There was no way he was leaving Lea, even if she wanted him to. He had a ship. That was where they were going.

When they arrived at level nine, he simply scooped her up and carried her out into the space port. People stared. He didn't care. He strode through the walkways, Lea clinging to him, head resting on his shoulder. At least she wasn't fighting it. Likely he had scared her too much to fight him, but he didn't have it in him to stop or put her down. He needed her in his ship, secure and safe and his. Now!

At the *Iris*, he scanned his ID and rushed through the door as soon as it opened. When the door closed and he could finally set her down, he let out a large puff of air. The breath he drew in was Lea's scent mingled with the familiar scent of his ship. A very small amount of tension left his body.

Then Chance got a good look at her face.

Mythic hells! She was crying, brushing at the tears with the long fluttery layer of her outer skirt. Agony! He reached for her and then stopped himself. Hadn't he done enough?

"Lea. I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. I promise I won't hurt you."

She gulped a little hiccup and her eyes widened. "What? You?"

He frowned. "Have I frightened you? I'm not feeling myself and I—"

“You? No, don’t be silly.” She rushed into his arms, pressing herself into his chest. His arms went around her like she was his and had been for years. He even had to squash down a purr.

“I’m not scared of *you*. You’ve been nothing but amazing. I’m so grateful. Can we get out of here? I don’t care where, let’s just get off Nova.”

“Of course.” His voice was choked with emotion, but he managed to bring up his holoscreen on his wrist-com and instruct the ship to take off. A low hum sounded from the engines, and they were in motion. The AI popped up with some notice, but Lea was nuzzling at the opening of his tunic, rubbing the tip of her nose against his fur, and his brain switched off. He dismissed the notification and went back to holding her.

“Thank you. You’re now officially my hero.”

He didn’t need to wait for the *Iris* to leave the airlock. He was already drifting out among the stars.

But there was a lot he had to explain if they were going to be alone together, possibly for hours. Or days! Could he take her back to his farm on Phithea? Could he keep her?

He was letting his nose do his thinking—or was that his cock?

“Lea, I think there are some things we have to talk about.” It was agony not to just press her down on the hard floor and take her, but she deserved a warning about exactly what was happening. It was clear enough she had no idea what she was doing to him.

Perhaps it didn't work the same way for human women. Perhaps she wasn't as desperate with need for him as he was for her.

She pulled back, not meeting his eyes, and he could have kicked himself.

"I know, I'm sorry. This is all my fault. I'll understand if you just want to drop me at the nearest dumping ground and never see me again."

He gaped at her. "No, Lea. That's not it at all. I don't know how this works for humans. But for Ardun, it's like a compulsion. I have to be near you. There's no way I'm letting you out of my sight. Even if you don't want me."

She frowned. "Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Your heat! Can't you feel it? Even a little?"

She gasped. "Are you saying I'm—" she broke off to gesture between them. "We're...?"

"You've gone into heat, and I've responded. You're my true mate."

Her luscious pink lips parted, and she kept staring until he thought he'd go mad. What was she thinking? Was she revolted? No, his nose was sensing nothing but sweetness. "Is it because I'm ovulating? And what do you mean you've responded?" She looked down, to where his hard cock was throbbing between their bodies.

He nodded, swallowing thickly. "I mean I need you. Desperately! But I won't do anything you don't want. I'm not

a monster.” He silently prayed to every mythic power that was true.

Light fingertips brushed over his cheek. “Of course you wouldn’t. This is going to sound crazy, cause we’ve just met, but I feel like I’ve known you forever. Like I said, you’re my hero. I trust you.”

He shook his head. “I just carried you off to my ship without your consent, so I could easily be your captor as well. Please be blunt, because my brain isn’t really functioning right now, and I’m seconds away from losing control. Tell me what you want.”

Her cheeks flushed and those big blue eyes went wide again, but the scent that coiled into his nostrils was the musky, rich scent of arousal.

By the Wolf Star! Had his luck finally changed?

“I want you too.” She tilted her face up toward him, and he had no choice. He had to capture her mouth in a hungry kiss. Was this their first kiss? She tasted so right as his tongue lapped at hers that he could have sworn he had been kissing her every day of his life. He would like to kiss her every day for the *rest* of his life.

Lea’s lips moved against his, sending shimmers of pleasure through his body. They were still standing in the entryway. He didn’t care. Backing her up against the wall of the corridor, he plundered her mouth, pressing himself against her and letting loose the purr that had been building for an age. It ripped from his chest.

Lea giggled against his lips, breaking the kiss. “Is that a purr? Are you purring?”

Kissing his way along her neck, he nipped at her skin, careful not to really hurt her. “Of course I’m purring. Look at you. You’re gorgeous. Perfect.”

Her hands slipped over his shoulders, holding him close. He kept nuzzling and kissing her, finding the places she liked best. When he lapped at the skin beneath her right ear, her fingers carded through his hair and over his ears until he moaned.

Her scent grew richer, the air thick and heady with it. Parting his mouth let him taste it on his tongue, but nowhere near enough. He had to drink it from the source.

“Lea,” he gasped, as she reached between them. “I have to have you. Let me take you to bed.”

Her small hand found his cock and he shamelessly thrust into her palm. She made a warm little hum of approval and his balls tightened at the sound. “I’d let you have me right here if you’re as clever with this thick cock as you are with your mouth, but if you insist, we can go to bed.”

He groaned, pressing his eyes closed for a moment, fighting for control. Not here. Not in the corridor, not on the hard floor.

This was his *true mate*.

She deserved a soft mattress. She deserved hours of bliss on his tongue before he sank into her. Today he probably didn’t have it in him. But if they had a future...

Lifting her, he staggered toward his bedroom, slamming his hand over the panel when the door wouldn't open quickly enough. Lea just giggled again.

They fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, and he had just enough sense left not to shred her clothing. Lea tugged off her dress, throwing it to the floor and reaching for his pants.

Fuck! He pulled back, fighting not to spill the second she had him free.

When they were both naked, she stretched out on his bed. The sight of her spread out there was so achingly perfect, he wanted to stop and take it in. He wanted to pluck every flower in his cold store and shower the petals over her so they tickled her skin and their scent melded with her lovely perfume.

He couldn't of course. Couldn't wait another moment before he settled himself between her thighs, slipped his hands beneath her hips, and lowered his mouth to sample the most delicious flavor he'd ever tasted. Purring against her labia, he licked each part of her sex, exploring and testing, loving each sigh and gasp he drew from her.

"Mmm, yes." Her hands threaded through his hair.

He increased his pace. His perfect little female was writhing under his mouth. Her folds were flushed, and her pussy kept gifting him with more and more sweet moisture.

Chance rocked his hips, unable to keep from thrusting against the mattress as he licked her.

"Oh, Chance. Oh just like that."

His tail swatted the bed. His balls tightened.

“Oh my goddess that’s good. Keep going.”

He kept licking her, pushing the flat of his tongue against the apex of her sex as she tugged him closer. The pinch of her hands in his hair was a sweet sting. The blistering ache around the head of his cock was driving him crazy. There couldn’t be any doubt she would rouse his barbs. That he would sink into that gorgeous cunt, and she would milk his cock until he sank them deep inside her and pumped true seed into her body.

True seed!

With a huge effort, he lifted his mouth from her beautiful flavor. She whimpered in protest. “Lea, please tell me you’re on birth control.”

“Huh?”

“Birth control. Condoms won’t work—barbs.” He struggled to form the words. “Lea, your heat makes me fertile.”

“Fuck!”

She didn’t need to say anything else. Of course she wasn’t. Of course the universe would send him his true mate, in heat, and *not* on birth control.

Damn his luck.

It was then that the AI pinged, and an announcement sounded through the ship’s system. “Foreign substance detected.”

Chance scowled. “What?”

“Foreign substance detected, Chance.”

“I heard you. What do you mean foreign substance? What is it?”

There was a pause. “Scans unable to identify the precise make-up, Chance, but it appears to be a patch of space mist.”

“Space mist? That’s not a real thing.” He launched himself from the bed, pacing to the screen and running his hand over his fluffed tail. “Are you malfunctioning?”

“There is some indication that tiny particles have scrambled my systems... like an egg!” The AI burst into a peal of laughter. “I’m definitely scrambled. Shutting down systems for a reboot.”

“How long will that take?”

The AI didn’t answer.

“How long?” he roared.

But the AI refused to answer any more of his questions.

Four

Lea lifted on her elbows to look for Chance, who was stalking around the bedroom near the door, looking like he was about to combust. Understandable really. His cock thrust out from his body, thick and curved and so perfect she just wanted to push him down and sit on it. She would have, except she was not ready to deal with a pregnancy. Not yet. Not while the debt and the Jade Skulls still hung over her.

But they could still have fun, right? It seemed like the AI was definitely malfunctioning, but surely being stuck in a space mist wasn't something to freak out about. They might have a few hours to wait until someone came along to help them, so they didn't have anything else to do really, except fool around.

"Come back," she said in her sweetest tone. "Come back to bed."

He groaned and his cock bobbed. "I can't, Lea. I'm so close to losing control as it is. If we keep going, I'm scared I'll snap and come inside you and I don't think you want that."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I wish I'd taken a birth control shot this month, but I've been trying to save money and it's been a while since I was with anyone."

He sighed sadly. "It's not your fault. It's me. I'm cursed. Anything that can go wrong always does. You should probably keep clear of a male like me. I'll just bring you bad luck."

"Don't be silly. How could this be your fault? It's just coincidence."

He laughed, but the sound was bitter and without mirth. "Yeah, you think that now. But wait until you've been around for a day or so. You'll see. In fact, it's better if you don't. I don't want to curse you too." He ran his hands through his hair. "Hells, what was I thinking? You can't be mine."

"Come on." She patted the bed. "Come back to bed and let me take care of you. You look like you need to come."

"Ha!" He tugged at one long ear. "You have no idea!"

She gave him a wry smile. "I have some idea." Goddess, her pussy was still throbbing.

He cursed. "I'm so sorry. I should have taken care of you properly." He still hesitated in the doorway, but he looked as if he might come back. That was promising.

"Come on," she said again. "We can take care of each other."

He sighed. "They're sharp."

Tilting her head to the side, she frowned. "The barbs?"

“I might hurt you. I never want to hurt you. It’s best if I go to the other side of the ship and try to wait it out.” He turned to go. “I’m really sorry, Lea.” Then he stalked out of the room, closing the door as he left.

Lea growled, pressing her thighs together in frustration, but unwilling to take care of the ache herself just yet. She couldn’t stop thinking about Chance. About his sorrowful expression as he’d turned and left. About the desperation in his tone when she’d said he looked like he needed to come.

His obsession with being cursed explained a lot. The salt, the charms, the constant checking of his surroundings. Goddess knew she could be as superstitious as the next person. She went through phases with it. Nothing seemed to stick. She’d followed the teachings of the Children of Nydarity, the Tellers. She’d been through one phase where she’d been devoutly Mustarian. None of them ever felt like her though.

But the idea that such a beautiful male could be cursed? Impossible. What would he be cursed with? What for? Since she’d run into him, he’d demonstrated again and again what a gentle soul he was. He’d protected her, stood by her when he really should have run for the stars. He was even kind to children who probably didn’t deserve it.

Lea got up and marched out into the corridor. She probably ought to have bothered to check if there were other crew members on board his ship, but she suspected from the way he’d been about to fuck her in the entryway that there weren’t. She didn’t bother putting her clothing back on, just looked into

every room she found until she found what she was looking for: Chance.

When she found him, he was stalking backward and forward in front of a large viewscreen in the rec room, tail lashing and cock still completely erect. He turned to her like a cornered beast when she came into the room, nostrils flaring.

“Lea. It’s not safe for you to be around me.”

He backed away as she advanced.

“Why? Because you’ll hurt me? I don’t believe it.”

“I’d never mean to, but you don’t know what it’s doing to me.” His eyes were wild, his claws extended, black fur fluffed.

“You won’t hurt me. You think you’re cursed, but I don’t believe that either.”

“Lea, it’s been this way all my life.”

“What? A bit of bad luck now and then? Everyone has that.”

“Then how do you explain all the things that go wrong every day? Take today, turning up at Nova on Halloween to sell flowers that no one wants to buy. Being attacked by those kids. I even tripped and knocked over that fruit.”

“But think about it, you knocked over the oranges and fell just as that Jade Skulls thug was lunging for you with his knife, and he ended up stabbing himself. You turned up on just the right day to save me from him. At the perfect moment. If those kids had never trick-or-treated you, we never would have met.

I don't know much about Ardun biology, but I know it's rare to find your true mate, isn't it?"

He nodded. His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "But to find you at a time like this? And get stuck in space mist with a crazy AI while you're in heat and I can't do anything about it?"

"Who says? Who says we can't do anything? I can think of lots of ways to give you a little relief."

A shudder ran through him, and his cock twitched against his belly. "Lea—"

"No, listen. You're worried about barbs but look." She held up her hands, covered with little red marks. "Florist, remember? And my specialty? Roses." She grinned as understanding dawned on his face. "You think a few thorns are going to put me off? Think again."

He took a step toward her, and Lea's heart thudded in her chest. She went on before he could pull away again. "So let me take care of you."

She took the final steps to close the distance between them, but instead of kissing him or leaping into his arms, she sank to her knees. Chance made a strangled sound but stayed perfectly still.

Grinning at her victory, she took his cock in a firm grasp and pumped him. He hissed. Not an aggressive noise, but a sound of shock and relief. Then he started purring and she knew she had him.

She slid her hand up and down his shaft, working him in earnest. Glancing up, she saw him tip his head back, his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. On the next movement, she ran her thumb over the head of his cock, and he groaned.

It still wasn't enough.

The remembered desperation in his heated gaze as he'd looked up at her from between her thighs made her want to bring things back to that fever pitch. The ongoing ache at her core reminded her she was still dancing around the edge of her own orgasm. But it felt so good to see him react to her every movement as if she held him in the palm of her hand. Well, didn't she?

Leaning in, she continued to pump him with one hand, while she opened her mouth and took the head of him inside.

“Mythic hells, Lea. So good. I'm going to come if you keep that up.”

She lifted her mouth from him for a moment. “That's the idea.”

A low growl rumbled through his chest and his fists clenched at his sides. With her free hand, Lea took one of his and guided it to her hair. He gazed down at her in awe as she encouraged him to tangle his fingers in her long hair. Soon both hands were at her head, lifting and gathering her hair, holding it back with gentle pressure.

She took him right into her mouth, savoring the salty, musky flavor. Sliding up and back, hollowing her cheeks to suck him,

she worked him harder and harder. She was still desperately empty, her labia slick as she pressed her thighs together. When she couldn't stand it any longer, she spread her legs a little and slipped a hand to her pussy, rubbing over her tender clit.

Another low rumble of approval broke from Chance. His hands tightened in her hair. "Your scent," he breathed. "Wolf Star, your flavor. I need it coating me."

She nodded. Pulling her slick hand free, she let his cock slide from her mouth with a pop. With a heated gaze, he watched as she spread her juices over the tip of his cock, tracing the tiny slit at the head with the viscous moisture.

"Fuck!" He squeezed his eyes closed. "Be careful, Lea. I'm close."

She pumped him again, her own pleasure forgotten for the moment. The sweet taste of her own moisture combined with his flavor and made her squirm. She ran her tongue around his cockhead then pulled back when he cursed again.

"Where are they?"

He gulped in a huge breath as she pressed the tip of her tongue into the slit of his dick. Chance let out an indecipherable noise.

She lifted her mouth from him for a moment and said more sternly, "Where are they?"

He growled, fingers tightening in her hair. "Around the outside of the head."

That was all she needed to know. Gripping him firmly she tongued that sensitive spot, pumping him until he let out a

long groan. “Lea, I’m coming. Lea!”

She held the base, watching with fascination as hot jets of come squirted from the tip and tiny thorns emerged from the head of his cock, pointing back like hooks toward his body. She held her mouth open and looked up, loving the expression of wonder on his face. Come sprayed over her nose and onto her tongue. And then, because she couldn’t resist any longer, she slid her hand up his shaft and tested the tip of one tiny point with her fingertip.

Oh goddess!

Her core clenched and she couldn’t help it, she clamped her fist around the head of his cock, milking a final burst of come onto her tongue as she came so hard, she nearly fell backward.

Five

Lea's eyes rolled back in her head and her scent flooded his senses, richer and sweeter than ever. Chance stared.

She was coming. His nose didn't lie.

Coming from just the prick of his barbs.

His body was still coming down from the bliss of her hands and mouth and tongue. Gently disengaging her hand from him, he bent down and scooped Lea into his arms.

Fuck!

He should have done so much more for her. Should have made her come a hundred times before taking his pleasure. But he'd been unable to resist her.

He was still half hard, the barbs not yet receded. It made for an uncomfortable journey from the rec room to his bedroom, but his precious mate was worth it. Lea was soft and pliable in his arms. She tucked her head against his shoulder, and Chance squeezed her a little tighter. How was it possible the universe had sent him someone so perfect?

By the Wolf Star, her determined little look as she had told him she wasn't worried about his barbs, then taken his cock in hand—into her mouth!

When they got to the bedroom, Chance laid her down carefully, crawling onto the bed next to her. She tucked herself against his side and put her ear to his chest as his purr grew louder. Even his tail curled around her legs. If he could have somehow wrapped himself around her completely, he would have.

She felt good there. He would still have to be careful. Her heat was nowhere near over. She might have come up with the perfect solution to his misery, but very soon, he was going to be overcome with need for her again if the way her rich scent coiled in his nostrils was any indication.

As if to prove a point, his cock throbbed weakly.

He would have to make sure he didn't let himself give in to the temptation that he had only narrowly avoided. The temptation to sink himself in her, claim her fully, and sink teeth and barbs into her in one glorious moment. With a sigh, he adjusted his cock, which had swelled to full hardness again just at the thought.

Down boy!

Gooseflesh dotted across Lea's skin. Chance pulled a light blanket over them both, gratified when her breathing lengthened and she drifted to sleep in his arms.

Chance managed to let the poor female rest for a few hours before he couldn't take it any longer. He only drifted in and out of sleep. He wasn't even sure what time it was. It didn't matter. He didn't need to eat, or sleep. What he needed was the taste of his true mate on his tongue and his name on her lips.

Rolling onto his stomach with a groan, he nudged her legs apart. Her thighs fell open, her body warm and languid in sleep. By the Wolf Star, the sight of her open and inviting and delicious was almost enough to overcome all his good intentions. But he had to do better than that.

He would only taste her, only bring her pleasure. His mind spun back to the image of her with his cock in her hand, mouth parted to receive his come as he spent on her tongue like some untried kit. Thank all the mythic hells she had come on his barbs, because he had done little enough for her otherwise.

It made him cringe to think how badly he had already performed as a mate. He hadn't even really talked to her about what that meant to him, so caught up in the scent and flavor of her body. There would be time later, when the heat passed, when he wasn't half out of his mind with need for her. There'd be forever if he had anything to do with it.

But then again, his luck would turn, wouldn't it? It always did, even when things looked like they were going to turn out well.

Suddenly his need for her was intense, a driving gnawing at his center. An ache in his fangs. He still had just enough honor

to wake her first with open-mouthed kisses along her thighs. Fuck, she was so smooth and soft he could spend an age just nuzzling her leg. Except that the aroma of her core was drawing him in.

Getting closer and closer to his goal, he forced himself to slow, forced his lips to form the words he needed. “Lea, my flower, please wake up. Please say I can taste you again.”

She murmured something, hips rolling as he nipped gently at the crease of her inner thigh.

“Come on, petal, please. I can’t stand it. You’re so fucking ripe.”

She giggled drowsily. “You can’t call me that.”

“What? Flower? Petal?”

Now she was laughing, sitting up on her elbows to look down at him. Her long hair was mussed, her eyes half lidded and sleepy. Her smile made something in him unfurl and stretch toward her. “Yes! It’s absurd.”

He groaned as another wave of her scent took him under. “You can’t blame me for anything I say while you’re drugging me with that divine smell.”

She shook her head, grin never leaving her face. “Lucky you’re so adorable.”

He huffed out a breath against her skin. “Luck has nothing to do with it.”

Reaching a hand down to cup his cheek, Lea frowned at him. “Hey. Luck has everything to do with this. With us. I’m determined to believe that. Now, do you need me to suck your cock again? Roll over.”

“No!” He pressed her thighs wider, sliding a hand up her leg to spread her pussy lips tenderly with his fingers. “No. Not yet. I need you to come for me, on my tongue. I need you to cover my face with your cream.”

She shuddered, her breath catching in her throat. From his position right in front of her beautiful pussy, he could see her clench the inner muscles he longed to feel around his throbbing erection.

Pushing that thought aside, he scooted forward until he could run his nose along the length of one damp fold, following it with the tip of his tongue. Yes! She was already juicy for him, the pink-brown skin of her outer labia like lateral sepal on an orchid, leading him to the brighter pink of her inner lips and upwards to the bud of her clitoris, peeping from beneath the hood like the cap of the column. Focusing intently on the way she was made helped him calm the raging need that urged him to claim her fully. So he leaned into it, spending time on each secret dip, each slick petal, until they plumped for him and she fell backward against the pillow with a long moan.

His chest rumbled with his purr. His cock ached where it was pressed between his body and the mattress. But the pressure helped, even if the crown felt ready to burst with the barbs hidden just below the surface.

Chance found a place beside the hooded cap of her clitoris that made her sigh and clutch at him with blunt human nails. He lavished it with attention until her hips bucked beneath his tongue.

“Yes, oh yes! Right there.”

He flicked his tongue faster, slipping a finger carefully up to push at the other side of her bud. “Mmm. Keep going, baby, I need it right there.”

He loved that his mate wasn't shy about telling him when he was doing it right. He hoped she would also tell him if he did something wrong, but since she wasn't complaining, he kept going, unable to stop as her flavor grew richer and sweeter.

Her words had become gibberish. Lea's hands tangled in his hair. Chance increased the pressure, letting the flat of his tongue drive directly over that sweet bud, and she gasped. Her limbs bucking and twitching, she held him still, so he never moved. He just kept licking, hating his claws and the fact he dared not push his fingers into her to feel her squeeze around them.

She was so perfect, the way she moaned and squeezed her legs around him. Eventually, her flavor intensified. It filled with new richness as she came.

When her fingers slacked and her thighs relaxed their hold on his head, he looked up. There was that beautiful smile, lopsided as if she felt as intoxicated as he did under the spell of her perfume.

“Chance, that was incredible.”

Had his purr been loud before? It could have rivaled the engine room of an Ardun warship now. She was just so beautiful.

Licking his lips, he cleaned the rest of her flavor from his mouth and dove down for more, unable to help himself. He had to take one more chance to feel her shudder and writhe under him. He had to drive her to that peak again. She groaned but lay back, submitting to his greedy demands.

He grasped her hips, pulling her closer, and she still didn't protest. When he was sure his claws must be digging into her soft flesh, she still didn't protest. She cried out, bucking under him again, and he dipped his tongue into her center, lapping her nectar from the source and then driving it into her over and over. Her cries became more frantic. Lea gasped his name. His whole world narrowed down to that sweet heaven, and he couldn't think. Didn't even feel the aching throb of his weeping cock pressed against the mattress.

“Please, Chance. Goddess, I feel so empty. I don't know if I can do it.”

He couldn't even stop to ask her what she meant.

She groaned, pulling and tugging at his hair and fur, trying to get his attention. “Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe you could pull out in time.”

He growled.

“Chance, please!” Lea’s tone was pleading, desperate. “Please, I need you.”

How could he resist? As if it had a mind of its own, a thrust of his hips brought his cock to the place where longed to bury it. To push deep and plant fertile seed. But he held back. Somehow he held back, only rubbing the tip through her slickness and up to push against her clit.

She pressed her eyes closed. Her neck and jaw tense with strain. “Please, Chance.” Lea rocked her hips, her body seeking his until it felt like agony to keep holding back.

“I can’t, Lea. Not now. Not while you’re in heat.”

“What if I changed my mind? What if I don’t care?”

He groaned, lowering his head against her neck. “Lea! You’re killing me. I’d like nothing more. But we have to wait.”

“Maybe we’ll be lucky.”

He really was drugged. Incapacitated by the scent of her sweetness, because for one blissful moment, he pushed through her folds, smelled her perfume surrounding him, and wondered if maybe, just maybe, she was right.

Then the AI pinged with a message. “Chance, there’s a vessel approaching with docking clamps enabled. Systems are down. Cloaking and shields are disabled. Foreign vessel will board in one minute and thirteen seconds.”

Six

She was dimly aware of the announcement over the speaker when Chance froze on top of her. He went rigid, every muscle tensed and ready. Lea still whimpered when he pulled away and left her aching, empty and cold in all the places where his warm fur had pressed against her. Chance roared, slamming a fist so hard over the door panel it sparked and went black. He raked his claws down a metal wall panel with a screeching sound that made her teeth hurt and her spine shudder.

“What? What is it?” Was he screaming at the AI, or the universe in general?

The AI answered. “The approaching vessel has not identified itself, Chance. It is a C class cruiser with shields up and weapons armed.”

“Fuck! *Fuck!* Of course it is. What else could possibly go wrong? What else!?”

A loud beeping started up from down the corridor, audible since the door was open. Chance was pacing, tail making

angry swipes behind him at each turn. Lea sat up, wanting to go to him, but worried she might only make it worse. The beeping increased, each second seeming to add another layer, until hundreds of beeps were sounding in time.

Groaning, Chance ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up on end. “Stay here. Don’t come out of this room. I will deal with this. Whatever it is.”

“No! No way!” Fumbling around, she found his discarded tunic on the floor and slipped it over her head. “I’m coming with you.”

“No!” It was a rough snarl, barely even a word. Pressing his eyes closed for one moment, he seemed to collect himself. A few strides carried him to her, and Chance cupped a possessive hand around the back of her neck, leaning in to press his forehead against hers. “I can’t have you in danger. Not now. Not when all I can think about is how I still haven’t claimed you. Still haven’t marked you so there’s no doubt you’re mine.” His thumb was so gentle against her neck, tender stroking belying the raw need in this voice. She could do nothing but tilt her head for him, baring her throat.

He growled again. It rumbled all the way through her belly to her toes. He dropped his face so his lips grazed the skin of her neck with his next words. “This spot right here. This is mine. This is where my fangs will show you what’s in my heart, my soul. That’s where your claim is on me already.”

A tremor ran through her. A phantom sting as if she could feel his bite already. Excitement made liquid of her insides.

“Twenty seconds until boarding.”

He pulled away, eyes wide and desperate. “Please stay here, Lea. Please. I’ll lose it if you’re not safe.”

All she could do was nod, her throat tight and chest heaving with pent up emotion.

Chance turned and rushed out the door, not a stitch of clothing on him. He spun in the doorway and slammed a palm over the door panel on the outside, sealing her in.

It took only seconds before she bitterly regretted letting him go out there alone. A vessel approaching with shields up and weapons armed? After they’d killed a Jade Skull and run away, avoiding payment? Surely it had to be them, seeking retribution.

But when she went to the door, the panel was fizzing and smashed. Unresponsive when she tried to touch it. A dull rumble probably signaled the ship being boarded. But it was all she could hear. The only clue to what might be happening to Chance.

“No! No, no, no!” Lea grasped the panel and pulled, earning a zap and not getting anywhere. Finally, in desperation she found her shoe, wedged it under the panel and pulled, screaming at the thing until a satisfying snap and a swoosh told her she’d succeeded in opening the door. At last!

Chance raced down the corridor on pure instinct. Even he had to admit that a plan might have been good in this case. But, of course, his brain wasn't functioning because he could still scent Lea's sweet perfume on his skin. He could still taste her on his tongue, and the only thing he could feel was a burning rage that he wasn't balls deep inside her right this second.

Hells, she had begged for him. Spread her legs and rolled those gorgeous hips, and he'd fucking hesitated! He didn't know whether to be proud of his willpower or devastated at the knowledge that he would probably die defending her without ever having taken the one thing that would make it worthwhile. The claiming bite. Sinking fangs and barbs into his female as surely as she had sunk her blunt little claws into his soul.

So, without a plan, he barreled toward the cargo bay where, even now, the docking tunnel from the other ship would be attached. They should have at least had rudimentary automatic defenses. But of course, they were disabled by the space mist. He didn't even have time to find a weapon. All his blasters were stored in the appropriate locked crate in the cargo bay. All perfectly done according to Earthlaw regulations.

The best he had was a laser cutter in the kitchen. And that was attached to the kitchen bot!

It didn't matter. If he paused or detoured for even a moment, there was a chance that whoever was boarding would get into the main body of the ship and somehow find Lea. And that was absolutely not happening.

Chance slid across the smooth floor of the corridor the last few meters to the door of the cargo bay and opened the door with a hasty motion. It didn't even occur to him that the ship might be coming to assist them. To haul them to the nearest port or check if they were OK. There was not a chance his luck was that good. Besides, who would fly through an unidentified space mist? Only his malfunctioning, cursed ship.

So expecting the worst, he was ready when the door opened to reveal a short, wide human who raised his blaster and shot straight at Chance. Diving, he rolled through the door, over the thug's feet. That was no good though, because it left nothing between this thug and the door to the rest of the ship.

Chance scrambled to his feet. He sprang onto the back of the beefy human. He dug claws and teeth in and tried to get his arm around his opponent's thick neck. And it did absolutely nothing to stop the thug from tossing him over his head and slamming Chance's back to the ground.

Pain smacked him in all the places his body connected, back, shoulders, elbows, skull. They all felt like they'd been mashed into Jell-o. He had just enough breath to roll and dodge the blow aimed at his face.

Getting out from under his attacker, he darted between rows of his precious flowers, keeping low.

Oh fuck! The flowers! His perfect flowers! That beeping earlier had been the sound of hundreds of semi-freeze containers. The automated sunlight generator he had set to come on right before docking at Nova should have had every

flower ready at the perfect time for sale. And now, every beautiful bud was bursting open under the glow of hundreds of tiny yellow lights. And in hours, they would have dropped half their value.

Not that it mattered. They'd have no value when he was dead, brains splattered against the glass cases when this thug was finished with him.

Glass exploded beside him as a blaster beam missed him by a narrow margin. *Not the orchids, you heathen!* He ducked another beam, staggering against a table. A whole row of containers smashed to the floor, and he winced. Who was the heathen now?

But it gave him an idea. Ducking low, Chance snatched up a long shard of glass, ignoring the sting as it bit into his palm.

As the heavy boots of the thug pounded past his hiding place, he darted under the table, thrusting upward. Glass and fist met the meaty flesh of his opponent. There was a grunt. Chance didn't wait to aim again, just thrust and thrust, fist wet with blood, heart tearing at his ribcage.

When the big man dropped, he could hardly believe his eyes. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. It was a struggle not to throw up all over the bloody mess he'd made of the guy, but he'd actually protected his mate.

Only then did he stand and see three more striding down the docking tunnel and his gorgeous Lea standing in the doorway to the cargo bay in nothing more than his used tunic.

Seven

Lea looked between Chance's horrified expression and the grim faces of the three Jade Skulls crossing through the boarding tunnel. She froze, holding up her hands, praying she could think of something to do or say that would stop this nightmare scenario playing out the way she feared.

It had to work out. It just did. Why would the universe send her someone like Chance and not let everything work out?

"I've got the marks," she blurted on instinct. The guy in front, with a large red skull tattooed across his left cheek and thin strands of greasy black hair falling over his eyes, narrowed in on her. The others were looking at Chance though. She had to distract them. "Yeah. I've got it. This is all a big mix up, and I'll just get it for you, and then you guys can be on your way, right?"

"Think again you little bitch. That's two skulls you and fur-boy over here have dispatched today and that needs punishment."

She glanced over to where Chance had been standing, but he wasn't there. He must have ducked down to run between the tables. The Jade Skulls were still coming at her; one had his blaster raised, the other starting to look around.

“Hey. What about extra compensation? You can add to my debt. Maybe I can work it off somehow.” She was babbling, saying whatever came into her head just to make noise and keep them focused on her.

Suddenly Chance leaped out from behind a table, throwing himself at the second guy. The front guy almost looked around. In that tiny fraction of a moment, Lea dove to the floor. Her shoulder slammed into the hard cold floor, and she winced as pain knocked the wind out of her.

Over her head, the blaster beam zipped past. There was a crackling and a beep, then the voice of the ship's AI. “Cargo bay door sealed. Threat of atmosphere loss. Manual override required.”

“Fuck off,” the thug sneered, aiming and firing the blaster again.

“M—manual override. Please store weapons ssssafely.” The tinny voice was distorted. It cut off with a fizz.

What now? Were they sealed into the cargo bay with these lunatics?

There was a grunt, and Lea looked over to see Chance wildly throwing shards of glass at the guy with the blaster. She scrambled beneath the nearest table of flowers, their bubble-

like vases still intact. If she could crawl away while the guy was distracted, maybe she could attack him from behind. Then an announcement from the AI made her stomach roil.

“Unauthorized entry detected. Venting cargo bay in one minute.”

“Get to that fucking door panel and switch that thing off, will you?” one skull shouted to the other. From her position beneath the tables, she couldn’t see which one it was.

Heavy footsteps pounded past her, toward the exit. She heard a curse and another fizzle.

“Invalid c-c-code. Venting cargo bay in forty-one seconds.”

“Screw this shit,” the other guy called. “I can’t even see where they’ve gone. Let’s just leave them here to have their eyeballs explode outta their heads when the ship’s vented.”

“Fucking moron. You know that’s not what happens, don’t you?”

Exploding eyeballs? Lea gulped, ignoring the broken shards of glass beneath her hands and knees. She had to find Chance, and they had to get out of here. That thug might be wrong, but she was fairly sure whatever happened to human and Ardun bodies in the vacuum of space without a suit wasn’t pretty.

Fuck, it was safety protocol one-oh-one when traveling in space. In the event of an atmosphere breach, locate your safety helmet. Secure your helmet first, before seeing to other passengers. Safety helmets! There had to be some in the cargo

bay. Any room that directly vented into space was required to have them. But where were they?

A hand closing over her ankle nearly made her scream, until she glanced behind to see Chance, his other hand held over his lips in a sign for silence. She nodded.

“Doesn’t matter. Just get back into that tunnel and seal the exit, asshole,” the Jade Skull thug said.

More thudding footsteps, this time in the other direction.

“Safety helmets,” she hissed. Chance nodded. He pointed to the opposite wall and the flash of red as his hand moved made her gasp. It was covered in blood. There was no time to ask though. Instead, she followed him into the aisle between the tables, getting to her feet and crouching low so they could run to the other side of the cargo bay. They made it to the cabinets on the far wall just as a hiss from the docking tunnel told Lea their unwelcome guests had left. No time to feel relieved though. The AI was still counting down their doom. “Twenty-three seconds to v-v-venting. Please apply safety protocol one.”

There was another fizzle from the door panel. A red light above the external hatch blinked on and off and an alarm started up, making Lea’s head throb in time with the beep-beep-beep.

“—have to tether!” Chance shouted over the din. She nodded. He reached into a crate and withdrew a safety helmet, handing it to her. She slammed it unceremoniously over her head, not stopping to tuck in her long hair. The band around her neck

tightened, feeling for a moment like it would choke her. She fought down the pressurized bar of panic rising in her chest and forced herself to relax. A hiss and the helmet adjusted to her, lights coming on in the visor with scrolling messages reading the temperature and location. Now that the awful feeling of the air seal had ended, she noticed the absence of the alarm. Of course it was still blaring in the cargo bay, only now she was cut off inside her helmet. There was no suit. The helmets were designed for emergencies only. A last-minute fallback in case of venting just like this. It would give them two minutes of air. Twice what they needed before the ship would automatically seal the exits and reestablish atmosphere.

Chance slipped his own helmet on, fumbling for the tether cable. She looked down to see him loop the belt around her waist and reach for his own. But just as he did, the red light flared. The room around them gave a sudden lurch and he was snatched from her.

The hatch! They'd run out of time. Lea jerked against the tether belt, a line of pain across her middle that matched the gaping, open wound in her chest at the loss of Chance. She watched, horrified, as vases shattered into billions of tiny shards which were swept toward the hatch along with the flowers.

No! It had to work out. It had to. She'd been so sure. If she could just release the belt. Maybe she could get out the door and somehow catch him. She could see him just outside the hatch. The hatch which would close any moment.

A click and she was free. She hauled herself with the belt over to the wall, then kicked off, praying she'd find something to grab as she got to the exit. It was eerily quiet in the sealed helmet, no sound permeating her little bubble of air. And it wasn't as cold as she had expected.

What a stupid thought to be having at a time like this.

She floated for so many agonizing seconds. Far too long.

She wasn't going to make it.

Then she thudded against the wall on the far side, her head spinning from trying to remember which way was up and down. It was like swimming, but with no way to move. Finally, she caught hold of the wall and dragged herself to the hatch. Chance was just hanging there, so close, but too far away. She reached but couldn't quite touch him.

Hooking her toe into the doorway, she stretched out with everything she had. Then an awful slip, a moment of disconnect, and she was drifting, scrabbling uselessly for purchase that was impossible to find. She couldn't even turn to look back at the hatch door closing behind her, shutting them out in the void.

Eight

Chance screamed inside his helmet.

It was pointless. Lea couldn't hear him.

No one could hear him.

There was nothing but the familiar useless feeling. The bitter knowledge that he had been right.

He was cursed.

He reached for her. Stretching chilled limbs as far as he could.

He didn't see the huge, black belly of the spaceship until it was literally swooping over the hull of the Iris to scoop them up.

As the doors of the large docking bay closed, there were a few seconds more where he hung suspended without gravity as the airlock sealed. Then he crashed to the floor in a pile of freeze-dried flowers and broken glass.

Chance didn't even spare a glance for his destroyed crop. Somehow pulling his legs and arms under him, he struggled to

his knees. A numb hand fumbled for the release on the safety helmet, taking far too many precious seconds to find and press it.

It was instinct to gasp as he lifted the clunky helmet from his head, despite the fact that it had done very well supplying him with oxygen.

Then he saw her.

Lea was lying on her side, her beautiful hair trailing out from beneath the seal of her helmet, her body still.

Forcing himself up, he staggered on feet and legs tingling with the pinch of pins and needles over to her. His hand shook as he dropped to his knees, heedless of the glass. Was she—? What if?

Her skin was icy cold when he mustered the courage to put his hand on her arm. Then her chest lifted a little with a breath, and he sobbed with relief.

Chance pressed the release button on her helmet, gently lifting Lea to cradle her against his chest as he lifted it off. Her eyelids fluttered open and hazel-green eyes met his, her mouth curving into a little smile. Hells, was he only now realizing what color his mate's eyes were? He couldn't even remember the precise shade of pink her wide nipples were, or if she had an innie or an outie belly button. There were a hundred—a thousand—things to memorize about her beautiful body. About his perfect mate who had somehow escaped. He had thought for sure she was dead. Taken by the curse. It was the worst possible thing that could have happened to him. Yet it

hadn't happened. Maybe—just maybe—he might get the chance to claim her. To love her.

Maybe he wasn't as cursed as he thought.

Brushing long fine hair from her cheek, he pressed his forehead against hers, squeezing his eyes closed.

He pulled back, opening his eyes to find Lea frowning up at him. “You're bleeding.”

He looked down at his hands, covered in red. Even her cheek had a tiny smear where he had wiped across it with his fingers. He hadn't even felt the sting.

Of course, now she pointed it out, all of him started to throb and sting and ache like a motherfucking bitch. Didn't matter. There was no way he was ever, ever letting go of Lea. Not ever again. He would go find that damn tether and hook her to him every moment of every day.

She winced. “Chance!”

“What is it?”

“Your claws!”

He hastily retracted them. “Sorry. Sorry. I thought...” His throat closed over the black thought.

Reaching up, she cupped his cheek, thumb rubbing along his beard, brushing down the hairs. “I know. Me too. Good thing we're so lucky, huh?”

A choking sound tore from his chest. Even Chance wasn't sure if it was a laugh or a sob. Probably both. She just smiled at

him, her hand slipping around to the back of his neck, fingers pushing into his hair. He hardly needed encouragement to lower his head and accept her kiss. It was instinct to lap at the smear of blood on her cheek, to press kisses over her forehead, her eyelids, right on the tip of her slender nose.

Lea giggled, trying to capture his mouth again, but he wasn't finished with all the other parts of her. Her nearness and her scent were more powerful than all the pain and worry and fear. And soon he had to return to her soft lips, delve his tongue into her mouth and take more of what was his. His body responded too. Eagerly. She was still in heat. And the more she kissed him, the more the acrid scent of her fear and the bitter tint of sadness was washed away by the sweet swell of her arousal. He groaned as she shifted, her hip brushing against the stiff length of his cock.

Lea broke away from him and he moaned in protest, burying his face against her neck.

“Ah, Chance.”

“Mmm.”

“Chance?”

“Busy. Need you.”

“Chance, I really think you need to stop. I'm pretty sure we're supposed to know who this is, and you might have to help me out here.”

“Huh?” He looked up and over his shoulder to the internal door to the docking bay. He hadn't really taken in much of

their surroundings, he'd been so focused on his mate. Now he scanned the space, taking in the fancy cruiser parked in the docking bay and the two armed Ardun guards standing on either side of the doorway. A tabby male stood on the left, hand on his blaster. On the right, a fierce female with pure white fur glared at them, tail lashing. And then he realized what—who—he was looking at! A slender, elegant female stood between her guards, short hair swept back between midnight black ears. She wore loose, black trousers, and a tight-fitting black corset top embroidered with a golden pattern. Her long black tail was immaculately groomed.

Shahra Fareeda, the matriarch of Ardun!

Which must mean the tabby male was Amir, head of the Royal Guards, and the white furred female was Soraya, the royal companion, engaged to be married to Shahra Fareeda.

Belatedly, he remembered he was completely naked, bleeding from several places, and his tail was a total mess. Of course.

He gaped at his monarch, unable to find any words that seemed appropriate. Lea nudged him and he twisted around so that he was facing Shahra Fareeda, still kneeling. Bowing his head respectfully, he managed, “Your Majesty.”

Chance felt Lea stiffen beside him, and a moment later, she mumbled something similar. Of course, she wouldn't recognize the Shahra of his home planet, since she was human.

Fareeda made no comment about his nakedness, lack of manners and the woeful state she'd found them in. However Soraya, her royal companion, wasn't so kind. “We should have

left them out there.” the white-furred female said, scowling in Chance’s direction. “ I don’t like the look of him.”

Fareeda shook her head gently. “Not when we could help, my love.”

Soraya lashed her tail, but stayed silent after her lover’s gentle rebuke.

“I don’t like the thought of just leaving anyone like that. And you did look like you needed the help,” Fareeda said to them.

“Ah, yes. T-thank you.” What did one say when rescued by the most powerful person on your home planet? What kind of bizarre coincidence was this? And what was about to go wrong?

“Perhaps you’d be so good as to tell me your names and how you came to be floating outside your ship which appears to be loitering several hours from anywhere.”

He blanched. Had her people found the dead body of the Jade Skull mobster he had stabbed? He could hardly deny doing it. He was covered in the human’s blood.

“Well...” How to explain? “It’s a long story, Your Majesty.”

She looked at Lea. “Are you alright? You’re not hurt? I thought I had just resolved the issues between Earth government and my own, but if a citizen of Ardunspace has done you any harm, rest assured, retribution will be swift and decisive. I’m not risking the tenuous peace I’ve just spent months negotiating.”

Chance gaped. Did she think he had hurt Lea?

“Not hurt. I’m fine. Thanks to Chance,” Lea said quickly, taking his good hand and giving it a squeeze. Chance tried to get the fur on his tail and back to lay flat again, but he couldn’t stop his tail lashing.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Shahra Fareeda. The monarch went to step forward, but Soraya snapped out an arm to bar the Shahra’s way.

Fareeda cocked a brow at Soraya, but something passed between the two in as Soraya held the matriarch’s gaze. Eventually, the white-furred female huffed. “She’s in heat, and you’re going closer? We don’t even know who they are. Look at the state of him.” Her hissed words carried across the large empty space.

Chance ran a hand over his hair ruefully. Soraya was right. He looked a mess. He was a mess. “Forgive me,” he said. “It’s been a disaster of a day, and I haven’t... We haven’t...” He looked across at Lea, unsure how much to say before they’d spoken privately. How would she react to the idea of his bite? His claim?

Fareeda nodded. “Yes, I see. You’ll be escorted to the med bay, and I’ll have the bots check you over. Then I can arrange for you to have some private time with your female. But I’ll have to speak with her first. You understand?”

Gritting his teeth, he nodded. For anyone other than the Shahra, he would have growled. Somehow he choked it back. Sensing his tension, Lea gave his hand another little squeeze.

“I’ll have someone take your statement now and you’ll have a chance to review it in twenty-four hours, once the effects of her heat have worn off. In the meantime, I need the human—”

“—Lea.” He hadn’t just snarled at the Shahra. Chance felt his cheeks heat with mortification, but Fareeda just gave him a little knowing smirk.

“—Lea, to come with me for just a moment.”

Reluctantly, Chance helped Lea get to her feet and let go of her hand. He stood, noticing again how stiff and sore his own limbs were and how the feeling was still only just returning to his feet and the tip of his tail. There was nothing to be done about the fact that his erection was on display for the whole room. At least Fareeda didn’t even spare that part of him a glance.

Lea was led out of the room by Soraya, and the Shahra followed after, leaving Chance alone with Amir, the head of her Royal Guards. Amir gave him a kind look. “Don’t worry. Her Majesty just wants to make sure you haven’t done anything you shouldn’t. Though I don’t mind admitting if you resisted biting her during her heat, you’re a better male than I am. It will all work out, you’ll see.”

Chance choked on the compliment and shrugged awkwardly. “That feels too good to be true, but I hope you’re right.”

“Come on,” Amir said. “Let’s get this med check and statement over with so we can re-unite you as soon as possible. Believe me, I know the agony.”

Amir led him down a long corridor. As they stopped to enter a door, the tabby male brought up his holoscreen.

“Yes? Please report.”

“Amir, that human ship has been captured and tethered. Shields are up, but they still have armed weapons.”

“Send a team to disarm them and then contact the Earth fleet. It will be a little more grease on the wheels of diplomacy if we can hand over renegade Jade Skulls as well as our own rogue minister.”

“You got them?” Chance blurted. Amir gave him a smile. “Seems like we did. Earth’s government has been trying to sniff out the rest of this gang for months, but no matter how many they catch, there always seems to be more out there. I take it you might have had a hand in bringing the floater we found to justice.”

“Ah, you could say that.” There wasn’t any point lying. It would be clear enough from the cuts on his hand and on the body they’d retrieved what had happened.

Amir only grinned. “Exactly what scum like that deserve.”

Nine

Lea was escorted to a sterile med bay. She sat on a firm bench and tried to keep still while the little bot hovered around her, scanning, measuring, and finally beeping when it was done. “No severe injuries. Lacerations to right elbow and knee and a bruise on her hip. Applying antibacterial, sealant, and painkillers now.”

“Go ahead,” said the quiet female Ardun in the white medical suit who stood politely at the edge of the room.

Lea was surprised when the door to the med bay opened and a young human woman with shoulder length dark hair and high cheekbones walked through. The woman smiled, approaching her and holding out her hand. “Hi. I’m Zara. Her Majesty asked me to come check on you. Make sure you’re really okay. If your mate’s anything like mine, he can get a little overzealous when you’re in heat, and with the political situation the way it is, she wants to be careful.”

“Your mate?” Lea blinked at her. “He’s Ardun?”

Zara nodded. “That’s right. And you? Is Chance your mate? Did you accept his claim?”

Lea frowned. “Claim?”

Zara lifted the hair from her neck to reveal a red scar shaped like a bite. The wound was closed and didn’t look painful. But it still made Lea’s hand stray to her own neck.

Zara smiled again. “I guess he didn’t bite you yet.”

Things had gotten pretty heated right before the Jade Skulls busted in on them. He’d called her his true mate. Surely that was the sort that led to biting. A little flutter at her core had her cheeks heating under Zara’s knowing grin.

“So I guess you’re not opposed?” she said.

Lea shook her head. “Not at all. He just...” She flushed a little more, but there was no better time to raise the next question that had occurred to her. “He said that while I’m in heat, that makes him fertile.”

Zara nodded. “He’s right. But an ordinary birth control shot will eliminate any risk of pregnancy, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Yeah. About that. I don’t have one. I’m not on any birth control.”

Zara’s eyes widened and she pressed a hand to her chest. “Aw, did he hold back because you weren’t on birth control? I’m impressed. That’s quite a male.”

Her own smile was impossible to restrain. “Yeah. He is.”

“Okay, okay. What are we waiting for then?” Zara turned to the Ardun doctor. “We can give Lea a birth control shot, right?”

The quiet female nodded. “If that’s what she wants.”

Both females looked at her. Lea’s smile turned into a crazy grin. “Yes! God yes. Can we do it now?”

Zara led her to a room which she unlocked with a swipe of her palm. She gave Lea a quick hug. “This is the private room I share with my mate. Amir already brought Chance here. I’ll go report to the Shahra. There’s going to be some paperwork and a lot of questions. I wouldn’t be surprised if it took us a few hours to get it sorted.” She gave Lea a wink.

“Thank you!”

Zara waved away her thanks. “Don’t mention it. Believe me. I get it. We’ll chat after, OK?”

Stepping into the room made her stomach do a little flip. The sight of Chance’s powerful back and shoulders as he stalked by the viewscreen a reminder of everything she was hoping for.

Praying he wouldn’t turn her down, she took a long breath in and opened her mouth to let him know she was there. Before she could even get out one word, he whirled around. His eyes locked on her, the flash of light reflecting off their deep brown

depths and the unnatural stillness to his pose sending a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

“Lea.”

He closed the distance between them. Lea leaped into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clung on tight.

“I got them to give me a birth control shot so you don’t have to hold back anymore.”

He groaned into her neck. “I don’t think I could if I wanted to. You don’t know how much I need to bite this smooth skin. How much I need to be inside you, right where I belong.” He kissed up and down her neck. His mouth was hot, each kiss led by a wet raspy tongue that made her squirm in his arms.

“Yes. Goddess, yes. I want that too.”

He lifted his head, his bright eyes searching hers. “Forever? The claim is a lifelong bond unless I choose to release you, or you me.”

She grinned, leaning in to bump her nose against his. “Forever sounds pretty perfect to me.”

Their mouths crashed together in a fierce kiss. Their lips and tongues melding together in a heated dance that made a throb start right at her center, spreading through her whole body until it curled her toes and made her cling tighter still.

At some point, Chance staggered to press her back against the wall. Then he found just the right place to grind against her. The drag of his hard length ratcheting up her need another

level. But it was the friction of material against her that had her frowning. “Pants? Who gave you pants?”

He growled. “Amir. He thought he was helping.”

“They need to come off.”

Chance set her on the floor immediately and obeyed. Lea was already pulling his tunic off over her head as he did. Dropping it to the floor, she let it pool at her feet, then stepped toward him and was gathered in his arms again.

This time the brush of soft fur against her oversensitive nipples made her shiver. Firm hands lifted her ass until she was settled against him. Now his thick cock slicked through her folds as he pulled her up and down over him. His fingers delved into her pussy from behind. Another groan. “So wet. Do you need to come first? Shall I lick you?”

Lea rolled her hips, not quite able to find the right angle to just plunge down over him. Not without taking him in her hand.

He stumbled. They laughed. Chance nipped at her jaw as she rocked over him again. “Lea! Tell me quickly what you want. You think I’ve got a will of iron. You’re wrong.”

“I want to come with you inside me. Will it be the same as before, when I touched your barbs? You know? If they’re in me?”

A low rumble in his chest vibrated the tips of her nipples where they rubbed against him. “Only one way to find out. And if you don’t come from that, you have to tell me so I can

take care of you after. Wolf Star knows I won't be able to hold back for long. Not with how sweet you smell."

As he spoke, he walked her across the room. Suddenly, Lea found herself lowered down onto a bed with Chance nestled between her thighs. She expected him to drive into her then, but he didn't. Instead, he rolled them, using strong hands at her waist to pull her up and over him, until she straddled his hips.

"I'll last as long as I can like this," he told her. "So you go after it."

Lea reached between them, took his cock in her hand and slid down over him in one long movement. Her head fell back.

Chance cursed but held still.

She quickly found a rhythm and angle she liked, leaning forward to rest her palms on his chest and ride him. When the pressure built, she leaned back, loving the way that made him hit a new place inside that gave her even greater pleasure.

Chance's jaw was tense, and his claws made ten tiny pricks against her hips and bottom where he held her. Those were the only signs that he was having any trouble holding back. Her sweet male who always put her first, and who was probably still convinced nothing truly good would ever happen to him. But that wasn't true at all.

Panting, trying to find the words, Lea kept up her rolling grind over his cock. "Still think you're cursed?"

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth as a rising tension made her want to clamp around him. Chance released her bottom, his thumb finding her clit and working her in swift, frantic motions. “I don’t know if I’m the luckiest male alive or the most miserable.”

His crazed bark of laughter when that made her clench, had her grinning. “The feel of your body around me is better than anything except the taste of you. And knowing I get to sink my barbs in you and give you true seed...” He paused, chest heaving, eyes squeezed shut.

Lea slowed her movements and he growled.

“No, flower. Don’t stop. I need you to come. Fuck do I need you to come. I’m not going to make it.”

He groaned again as she increased her speed. Then, all of a sudden, they were rolling. Chance pushed her thighs wider, holding himself over her on arms that were ropey with strong muscle and sinew.

He thrust into her. Thrust hard and deep so that his balls slapped against her ass.

“Ahh, that feels so good. Couldn’t wait. Had to move.”

She nodded, feeling almost as restless as he sounded.

When he dragged one of her legs up to tuck over his shoulder, he sank deeper still.

His cockhead pushed deeper, the stroke of his motions touching places inside her Lea hadn’t even known could feel good. “More. Oh goddess, more. Please!”

Then he purred.

The loud rattle of it thrummed through his body. A tiny vibration fluttered against her clit.

“Yes!” Lea clutched his ass, digging in nails and squeezing.

Chance kept thrusting. Over and over, fast and deep.

His words were a torrid litany. A curse or a prayer or just a plea. “Mine, mine, mine. Lea, flower, say you’re mine and come with me.”

“Yours,” she gasped.

His cock pulsed inside her.

The slapping of his balls, the bump of his pubic bone against her clit, and the brutal punishing rub deep inside her exploded into a burst of light. Pleasure gripped her. Her muscles clenched and she came, riding waves of it for long moments after.

His purr grew louder. He pushed in right to the hilt. Then Chance leaned over her, lapped quickly at her neck, and bit down suddenly. Her tired pussy tried to flutter. His hips snapped to hold him in place. And Lea was thrown headlong into another stronger, surging orgasm that felt like it came from deep within her, somewhere near her navel. It opened her up and spread across the surface of her body, leaving her limp and boneless. Her legs fell from around his hips.

A gentle kiss on her cheek made her open her eyes. Her body was still pulsing with pleasure.

Chance smiled. “Mine.”

“Mmm.”

Chance kissed her again. “Mine.”

“Yes. And you’re mine.”

He laughed at that and nodded. “I think I was wrong. I don’t think I’m the luckiest male alive. I *know* it. How could I be anything else with the sweetest mate in the five systems in my arms, my mark on her neck?”

Lea grinned at him. “See? And you know what?”

“What?”

“All those things that happened before we met? Every time you thought you were unlucky? All of them led you right here, to this moment. Every. Single. One.” She punctuated each word with a poke of her fingertip on his nose until he turned his face to nip at her hand.

She giggled.

Chance bent to kiss her lips, slow and lingering, pulling back to stare down at her in wonder. “From now on, you’re my lucky charm, and I’m not letting you out of my sight!”

Ten

As it turned out, freeze-dried flowers made the perfect table decorations and cake toppers. Freeze-dried flowers, snap frozen at the perfect moment of their best bloom, were exactly what Shahra Fareeda had been looking for, along with a bulk order of orchids and lillies for her wedding.

When she had agreed to buy the entire crop of his next harvest, along with anything that could be salvaged from this harvest, Chance could hardly believe his ears.

And when she politely asked him if he would consider a position as royal florist, he thought he must be dreaming.

With his lucky charm by his side, everything seemed to go right.

The mechanic just scratched her head when Chance asked her about the space mist. “I dunno what you think happened, but I’ve scanned her systems three times now. There’s nothing in the ship’s record about any reboot. No evidence that it’s been tampered with.” She shrugged. “Looks fine to me.”

“But I looked out the viewscreen myself,” Chance insisted.
“There was definitely something there.”

A gentle hand on his arm calmed him, and he flattened his fluffed tail and took a deep breath. Lea was right. There was no point worrying about it. They hadn’t had any issues when they had hired a tow ship to retrieve the Iris. And the mechanic was right, the ship seemed to be in perfect condition.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

She didn’t need to ask him twice.

Chance paid the mechanic, and they set off for Phithea, a day’s travel from Nova.

“I can’t help wondering what it was that stranded us before.”
Chance slouched onto the sofa, tail flicking against the leg.
“Don’t you think it’s strange?”

Lea shrugged, tucking herself up next to him and running a hand over his tail to smooth down the fur. “Does it matter? In the end, it turned out to be exactly what we needed. If the Jade Skulls had boarded us at any other location, Her Majesty might not have crossed our path in time to save us.”

He sighed. “You’re right of course. I wish I could be so relaxed about it, but you’re right.”

Lea snuggled closer, and a little purr started up in his chest despite his anxiety.

“So I hear it’s pretty wild out here in this part of Edgespace. Untamed jungles and dinosaurs!”

He tensed. “It’s not fancy. I’m sorry I can’t offer you something better.”

“Shhh.” She patted his chest. “I’m sure I’ll love it.”

That didn’t stop him fretting all the way back to Phithea.

He needn’t have worried.

As soon as Lea stepped off the Iris at the space port, she gasped. “Oh, it’s beautiful! All the trees! I forgot what it was like to see so many trees like this.”

His tail twitched and he looked around with fresh eyes. Beyond the mud and the basic space port, and beyond the humidity which made his fur stand on end, the lush jungle surrounded them. Bird calls and the faint sound of the wind through leaves caressed his senses. One simple dirt road led toward Larem, and another up the hill toward the governor’s mansion, but that was all. A single city on a newly colonized planet. It would be easy to be horrified at the primitive facilities.

“Our farm is to the north of the city, outside the city walls.” Chance pointed in roughly the right direction. “We’ll be able to get a skimmer and get the port bots to unload our things tonight. Not much to unload, since most of our cargo is gone, but we can carry a few things with us if there’s anything you want right away.”

Lea slipped her arm through his and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Only my mate, and to see my new home.”

His chest swelled with pride, and he led Lea to a skimmer and drove her out to his farm, claws extended on the handlebars while he wondered if she'd like it. *Please let her like it.*

As soon as they got in sight of it, she leaned forward, making him slow the skimmer for fear she'd somehow tip out the front. Reflexively, his hand slid around her waist. Lea just giggled. "Are those the polyhouses?"

"They are. I have five currently, but I'm hoping to build two more in the new year."

"Can we look?"

"You wouldn't prefer to go into the house first? It's been a long trip."

"Are you kidding me? I want to see your famous orchids. And you know I want to scope out a spot where I can have some roses."

Chance was grinning as he parked the skimmer and tapped his ID chip to pay the charge. He handed Lea down from the platform and picked up her bags, setting them on the front porch. The house was a simple, boxy, prefabricated, ugly brick of a thing, but thankfully Lea wasn't looking at that. She was already walking toward the nearest polyhouse and pulling back the door to peek inside.

She turned back to him with a look of wonder on her face. "Oh, Chance, they're beautiful."

He had to fight from replying with the cheesiest response in history, because right now there was nothing more beautiful

than his gorgeous mate. He approached, hands drifting to her hips to pull her closer so he could kiss the back of her neck. “You like them?”

“Mmm.” She pulled away, dancing inside and darting away between flowerbeds. “You won’t distract me. I still think I’ll find the perfect spot for some roses.”

“Flower, you can have a whole polyhouse. I’ll tear out the orchids! I’ll build you five and you can grow every variety you can name. If it will make you happy.”

She lifted a hand to caress the edge of one delicate white flower tenderly. Chance watched her, envious of the petal.

“I would never ask you to tear these out. They’re gorgeous. But I would like a whole polyhouse. Now that you’re the royal florist, you’ll have to name your next hybrid after Shahra Fareeda of course, but will you name a flower after me too?”

He shook his head. “No, flower. There isn’t a single one that I could compare with you. Nothing would be good enough. Let Her Majesty have the next one named after her. In my heart, everything I grow from now on will fall short of the perfection of my true mate.”

Lea blinked, wiping at her eyes and sniffing loudly. “Oh, Chance. I have to be the luckiest girl in the five systems to have met someone like you. Don’t ever doubt it.”

He caught her, held her, kissed her for a long moment between the beds of flowers. And for once in his life, Chance truly did feel like luck was very much on his side.

Note to the Reader

Thank you for reading Lucky Chance. I hope you enjoyed it. If you'd like more of my cat-alien cinnamon rolls, the entire Forbidden Mates of the Ardun Royal Guard series is available now and ready to binge on Kindle Unlimited.

You can connect with me here: <https://linktr.ee/AmiWright>

Ami Wright is an Australian romance author who lives in Canberra with her partner and two small children. She loves food, wine, heroes who pine and (think they're going to) perish for their women, heat, aphrodisiac pheromones, and everything to do with magic cum! When she's not writing cat-alien cinnamon rolls, she's writing about polar bear alien billionaires or monsters making spicy bargains with humans!

In Parallel by A. M. Kore

FNBi ♡♥☠

Synopsis



A TENEBRA CITY SCI-FI NOVELLA

You are a PhD student researching anti-gravity devices for your capstone when you accidentally create a portal to another planet. Unfortunately, your unhappy miraculous discovery lands you smack-dab in the middle of an extraterrestrial jungle... and your only ticket to getting back to where you came from is an otherworldly alien who claims to be a fellow scientist. Astrum has four arms, two tails, and perhaps the biggest ego in all the seemingly infinite universes... and oddly also happens to know much more about your home planet than you know about theirs...

Content Warnings: *explicit sex, human/non-human sex, mild mentions of injury, mild mentions of blood, non-human appendages used in sex acts, knotting, dubious consent/loss of*

*bodily control (due to sex pollen/pheromones, “fuck or die”
situation), oviposition*

Prologue

THE END PARADOX

The idea of “the end” was less of a concept than a paradox.

Take a star, for example—a flaming, incandescent mass that could be the center of an entire planetary system. A star could burn for billions of years, sustaining an evolutionary line of the most singular to the most complex lifeforms just as it sustained itself with nuclear fuel. Some stars could be the link to the beginning of time itself, a reminder of where we’d been, where we are, and how far we still have left to go.

Yet, as all things did, stars faced the inevitable; but rather than a fizzle, they went out with a bang.

Textbooks upon textbooks would say that the death of a star was only the beginning. In astronomical terms at least, a true ending didn’t even exist—and as one devoted to the sciences, you found your own existence in this vast universe rather humbling once you compared it to one of these heavenly bodies. When caught in one of your usual spirals about never finishing your capstone project, you often liked to think about how life would beat on, just as universes would continue to

grow and expand after something as catastrophically significant as a supernova.

As you took a deep, calming breath, trying to ground yourself amid your panic, you found that, though the day was coming to a close, something in the air seemed ripe with possibility. The gentle breeze wove through your eyelashes, coaxing you to face whatever was in front of you.

When your eyes fluttered open, you were met with a new beginning.

And far on the horizon, two swollen suns blazed violet against an emerald sky.

One

AN ENTANGLEMENT OF STRINGS

Two violet suns? Emerald sky?

You immediately slammed your eyelids shut again.

“Oh fuck.”

The words came out a mere squeak. You gripped the notebook in your hands even tighter. The metal rings warped underneath your fingers, trembling in your grasp as you slowly lifted them to cover your face. You may have been running on fumes, strung out on coffee and a dream, but despite all the scientific rabbit holes you'd jumped down in your quest to research an anti-gravity device, you'd always banked on three things: the grass was green, the sky was blue, and the sun was a spectrum of yellows to reds.

Opening your eyes again, you peeked at the ground, only to let out another squeak as you discovered that not only had your most recent discovery shaken your latter two convictions straight down to its core, but you now questioned the former.

Because the swaying blades peeking from the swirling lilac mist underneath your feet were *definitely* not green—they were *sapphire*.

“It’s just a dream,” you breathed, your notebook hitting your forehead with a harsh *thwap!* as you squeezed your eyes shut once more.

Yes! A dream, *that* was it—you were currently curled up on your couch with Dulcis et al., having finally crashed after a string of all-nighters in your pursuit to finish your project. You’d just consumed too much candy in an attempt to stay awake, the confections concocting the strange dream you faced. The life of a Ph.D. student wasn’t all moonbeams and parsecs, especially when you’d chosen to pursue a claim as ambitious as anti-gravity. As the first member of your family to go to college, you’d been grappling with the additional burden of not letting them down.

But as you muttered to yourself, mind whirling about the strangeness of your supposed dream, you remembered it wasn’t the textbook about string theory in your grip, but your trusty notebook. And while the metal rings embedding themselves into your skin were usually strangely comforting, the dull pain now only offered you a harsh reminder that you were very much awake.

“Byron,” you finally murmured, opening your eyes and glancing at your beloved notebook before gazing at the green horizon, “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Laocoön Bay anymore.”

Jaw falling a bit slack, you stared at the vista for a moment or two before a hysterical giggle rippled out of your throat. You were a bit light-headed, but that was probably more due to the situation rather than the air's oxygen content, which seemed virtually identical to Earth's. Holding your arms out, you dropped your notebook experimentally with a muttered apology, finding that the gravitational constant also appeared similar. A sudden throb in your temple had you nearly keeling over when you reached to pick Byron back up, and as you gripped your notebook with one hand and touched at the smarting area with the other, you found a pleasant mixture of blood and a teal-colored paste that seemed to be mud sticking to your fingers as you straightened.

The inverted colors could have potentially been explained by you hitting your head, and while double vision may have also been a sign of a concussion, the fact that the suns steadily slinking out of view were the only duplicates you'd encountered told you that your injury wasn't as serious as it could have been. Eyebrows knitting together, you tried to backtrack to pinpoint exactly what you'd been doing before you ended up—well, *wherever* you were. In fact, the more you thought about it, the less confident you were about having been on the couch with your textbook at all...

Peering back at your notebook, you realized it was open to the diagram you'd practically memorized by now. You'd lost count of how many tries it took to get to the final design that now graced the page, a chamber large enough for the average minotaur to stand in—it was only able to accommodate

humans at first, but you'd tweaked the dimensions to allow larger species to use it—with an exploded view of the circuit panel on the side. As your head throbbed again, the image of the panel flickered into your mind, and you vaguely recalled that you'd been standing in front of it...

You spotted your pen nestled in the rings of your notebook and quickly slid it out of its metallic confines, curling your fingers around it and placing your thumb against the plunger. Beginning to click incessantly, you squinted at the exploded view, willing yourself to remember more.

More pictures began to slot together like puzzle pieces as the *click click click* of your pen prodded your neurons into cooperating. Actually, you *had* been curled up on your couch with Dulcis et al., choosing to turn down the various Halloween party invitations in favor of continuing your work. But just as you'd started to doze, a sudden epiphany had hit you like a lightning bolt. It had come to you after thumbing through the chapter on the multiverse. The text had explained that, while the world existed in three dimensions, there were an additional six dimensions that particles even smaller than atoms vibrated and moved about in. Each arrangement of these strings within those six dimensions made up a new universe, and the possibilities were infinite.

A particular image of strings being depicted as a labyrinth of multicolored noodles had reminded you of the circuit panel, making you realize that maybe your wiring had been off. Your toes squishing against your cushioned slippers reminded you that you'd left your apartment so quickly that you hadn't even

changed out of your pajamas. You'd debated calling your friend—the naga was *so* much more gifted at circuitry than you were—but given how late it was and the fact that he probably had his tail curled around what was probably his fourth glass of some kind of hard liquor, you hadn't wanted to bother him. You recalled stepping into the chamber and opening your notebook, flipping to the diagram as you'd rearranged your wires.

You could've sworn that you'd matched your blue with orange wires—or was it *purple* with *yellow*? The longer you glanced up at the emerald sky, the more mixed up you felt about it all. Was it possible that while you reconfigured your device's wires, a different set of strings had gotten entangled?

One that... had turned your anti-gravity chamber into a portal to another *dimension*?

Another hysterical giggle burst out of your mouth, though it was quickly drowned out by your screaming. You could no longer feel the squish of your slippers beneath your toes, nor could you feel the breeze carding through your hair—instead, it felt like you were suspended in a gelatinous liquid.

Maybe this was what they called an out-of-body experience.

The screaming grew louder and louder, and you decided to snap your mouth shut, something in the back of your mind telling you that it would probably be best not to alert whatever other beings lived in this dimension to your presence. But you were startled to discover that your mouth, in fact, was already closed, and the screaming wasn't actually coming from *you*.

You quickly spun in the direction of the shrill sound, seeing a flash of silver through the dense fog that blanketed the area. It was an object of sorts, hovering in the distance, and the sleek chromatic lines seemed almost as out of place in the thick mist of the jungle as *you* were. As it quickly grew larger, you realized that it wasn't hovering, but flying—right *towards* you. At that point, you let out a scream of your own, barely jumping out of the way as a chrome blur barreled right over where you'd been standing. You were just able to make out what sounded like a shout before you watched the object veer off to the side, a smudge of purple catching your eye before it careened into a tree.

The world exploded in an array of sparks and chaos. You instinctively rolled, notebook and pen still clenched in your grip as you brought your fists to your chest and bumped along the foliage. If you'd been in any other frame of mind, you might have found the ruby plant that brushed against your cheeks when you finally came to a stop rather fascinating.

But then again, botany wasn't your particular branch of the sciences.

You stilled, allowing the cacophony of chirping and squealing to die down before flopping onto your back. As you peered up through the mist at the purple glow winking at you through the carmine canopy of trees, you realized that you were in a jungle. This probably should have worried you even *more*—not only were you in an alternate dimension, but even the biome was vastly different from the sleepy beach town where Laocoön Bay University was located.

Maybe your neurons had finally gone on strike, hence the bizarreness not fully sinking in.

If and when you got back to where you came from, you'd have to inquire if that vampire doctor you'd crossed paths with in Tenebra City knew any good psychiatrists.

Pausing another second to take stock of any possible injuries, you were pleased to find that you were mostly intact—at least *physically*. You slowly got to your feet, trying to rally your brain cells into one last hurrah to begin to formulate a plan to get the hell out of there.

You opened your mouth to let out another curse, only to freeze when a twig snapped behind you. You probably should've just sprinted in the opposite direction and never looked back, but silly you slowly pivoted, brandishing your notebook and pen like a shield and sword as you turned around.

Instead of cursing, you just screamed again.

What appeared to be a *person*—a very *tall, pissed off* person—was standing in front of you, arms held up defensively in the air with their palms facing toward you. You spied an impressive array of rings lining their fingers, only to realize that the patterns seemed to be embedded in their skin rather than adornments of jewelry. Their dark face contorted into a grimace, which could have been due to the sting of the gash bisecting one of their striped cheekbones, or due to the pitch in your scream when you counted fifteen fingers across three hands held aloft—twenty fingers across *four* hands if you included the one slapped to their forehead.

More hands to grab you and eat you with, my dear, echoed in your head.

Two fangs glinted when they opened their mouth, and an intricate, complex garble pitched in what sounded like a heated reprimand was directed at you as two of the three free arms waved. Your eyes widened, your heart thumping erratically in your chest as you could only splutter, “O-Oh fuck, holy shit.”

You realized that this stranger had eyebrows when they knit together at your voice, the silvery shade stark against their skin. The color had reminded you of an incubus you’d seen in a magazine once—some kind of tech CEO with neon pink tattoos glowing brilliantly against obsidian flesh—but as they stepped out of the shadows and closer through the mist, you realized it had a violet tint that reminded you of this dimension’s suns.

“Why are you screaming?” they demanded this time, and if you weren’t so startled at the fact that they spoke your language, you would’ve glared and shot back a cheeky, *Why do you think, fucker?* Instead, you did the first thing that came to mind—you weaponized your pen, chucking it straight at the stranger’s head before turning and bolting.

Only to immediately trip over your own two feet.

You hit the ground with an *oof*, the rings of your notebook stamping themselves into your chest. Another twig snapped behind you, and you nearly swallowed your tongue.

“You can understand me,” you gaped, heels digging into the mud when you rolled over to face them. “How can you understand me?”

“To imply I would *not* be able to is practically an insult,” they huffed. “Your language is practically primitive—”

“I’m so dead,” you groaned. But, ever the valiant one, you refused to go down without a fight, holding your notebook in front of you as if that would save you from certain doom.

“Clearly not,” the stranger huffed, the accented roll of the words off their tongue causing goosebumps to erupt across your muddied arms. Your eyebrows nearly shot off the top of your forehead at this. They appeared a lot less concerned about your presence here than you were. “Despite your own best efforts.”

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” you retorted, not liking their tone. Your neurons must have *really* been on strike if you were taking the time to fight with a stranger who could literally rip you limb from limb since they had double the arms you did.

“It must take an astounding *lack* of intelligence,” they responded dryly, their voice much deeper when they spoke your language, “for one to situate themselves directly in the path of a hovercraft operating at top speed.”

A hovercraft. So *that’s* what the chrome blimp-looking thing must have been. Sitting up straighter, you gazed at them with a dubious arch of your brow.

“And furthermore,” they continued, their bottom arms moving to fold across their chest, “do you *always* greet others with attempted assault?”

“It was self-defense!” you exclaimed, waving your notebook over your head and mustering your best glower. “I don’t typically make it a point to greet literal strangers in the middle of the jungle anyway!” Tightening your grip on it, you angled it to jab a corner in their direction. “I don’t think I’ve ever even *been* in a jungle before!” Your voice pitched dangerously close to hysteria. “This is *all* a little new to me!”

“Then you must be *particularly* unintelligent to have strayed so far from the hovergrids,” they remarked. “Especially dressed like *that*.”

You couldn’t help the offended gasp that shoved its way past your lips, following the gaze that lingered distastefully on your pajamas.

“First of all,” you said, “I don’t know what the fuck a ‘hovergrid’ is, so don’t even start with me on that.” Deciding that you weren’t in any danger—at least *immediately*—you slowly hauled yourself to your feet, though you cautiously kept your distance. “Second of all, I wouldn’t have thrown Roy at you if I wasn’t desperate!”

They looked disgruntled. “What is a *Roy*?”

“My favorite pen!” you snarked. “You know, as in ROYGBIV?” You let out a huff, not understanding why they hadn’t picked up the obvious. “Did I even *hit* you?” They shook their head slowly, though a flash of what appeared to be

bewilderment flickered in their gaze. You noticed that rather than irises, their eyes were two simple almond-shaped pinpoints of neon—the bright chrome even more shocking than their moonlit hair. *Poor Roy*. You shook your head in lament. “What a waste!” Eying the hand still clapped over their forehead, you realized it had never moved. The stance was odd, but perhaps it was one of their customs?

They quickly caught your gaze and seemed to hesitate, their head tilting to the side. Dusky lips pursing into a thin line, they studied you for a few seconds, as if debating with themselves. Then, they slowly lowered their hand to reveal what appeared to be an upside-down crescent moon from beneath where their palm had been. All four arms seemed to tense as you gazed at it, tilting your head at the hypnotic glow. It was the same silver shade as the rings around their fingers and the stripes emphasizing their cheekbones.

They stared at you, and it took you a few moments to understand that they must have been waiting for something. You arched your brow higher, wondering exactly what it was that they were looking for.

The pause at least gave you enough time to study them a bit more, noting the silvery ponytail that cascaded over one of their shoulders. Their hair was almost ethereal, tendrils surrounding their face in a halo that appeared to glow just as brightly as the crescent in the middle of their forehead. In fact, *all* their silvery stripes were now glowing, emitting an impressive amount of light that hung thick in the haze of the jungle. They definitely seemed more dressed for a leisurely

joyride than a hunt, their hair practically melting into the buttery fabric of their argent jacket. It reminded you of the poshest blazers you'd seen in those high fashion magazines from Tenebra City. The plush material looked like leather, though you probably could have put money down with certain confidence that it wasn't made from the likes of any animal you'd encountered before.

"You ripped your sleeve," you blurted suddenly, eyes landing on the small tear on their upper right arm. This time, *they* were the one gaping at you, staring at you as if you were a never before discovered organism in the middle of a petri dish.

After a beat, they finally said, "You are not from here."

"Buddy," you muttered to yourself, "you don't know the *half* of it."

"Your accent in the common tongue does not place you as from the Capital," they observed, the shock in their voice replaced with curiosity as one of their hands drifted upwards to stroke their chin. "And you did not seem to understand High Innobian..." You blinked lazily, the words *High Innobian* going right over your head. They seemed to catch this too because their eyes narrowed. Chin jutting at your temple, they asked, "How hard did you hit your head?"

"Probably about as hard as you hit yours," you returned, pointing your notebook at the gash on their cheek. It didn't escape you that it was beginning to weep a rather interesting shade of chartreuse.

“Well,” their tone was dry again, one hand turning towards the sky in a flippant gesture, “one could argue that *you* are the cause of my injury.”

You sniffed at this, lip curling into a sneer. “Whoever this ‘one’ is, I’m not sure I like their attitude!”

“This is most inefficient.” Two flickers of violet rolled towards the sky, which had darkened to a deep pine.

“No shit,” you spat back, tucking your notebook under your elbow as you folded your arms across your chest.

They sighed, dropping two arms to rest on their hips, while the others gripped the base of their hair. Sliding the tie that held the strands haphazardly together off, the rings on their fingers were a shimmering blur as they deftly gathered their hair into a loose bun instead.

“If you would be so kind as to tell me your origins,” they said when they were done, their top arms crossing their chest while the other two remained against their hips, “I could then assist in returning you from where you came from.”

Something about the nonchalance in their tone made you cackle. Here you were, stuck in a parallel dimension, talking to some random interstellar stranger in the middle of a jungle, and they were confidently speaking as if they were offering you bus fare to get home.

“Oh, sure,” you wheezed, waving your notebook as you tried to catch your breath, “you can *totally* send me right back.” Their eyebrows lifted as you shook your head. “Uh, huh. Yup.

All you gotta do is point me toward the sun. I'll take it from here—I could *walk* there.” You snickered before stopping yourself. “*Oh.*” You smirked. “That’s right. There could be *tons* of suns out there. I’m specifically talking about the one in the middle of the Milky Way.” With another hysterical giggle, you shrugged. “My stop is the third from that massive fireball. You know, the little blue planet called Earth?”

You wheezed again, as if you’d just told the best joke the universe—whichever one it was that you were currently located in—had ever heard. Given the whole *parallel dimension* thing, you fully expected this purple stranger to have no idea what the fuck you were talking about, but the surprise that dawned on their face didn’t look born from obliviousness, but knowing shock.

“You are from *Earth*?” they asked, your laughter immediately dying. When you nodded, they shook their head. “That is impossible. Travelers to Earth have to be approved by the *Crown* itself.”

You could practically hear the capital ‘C’ in the word. You would have inquired more about what this Crown was if you hadn’t been so fixated on the realization that this stranger seemed to know all about your planet, which made you less certain you were actually in a different dimension.

“Well, I wasn’t,” you said slowly, your grip tightening on your notebook. “Approved, that is.” Clearing your throat, you retraced your steps again, reciting the actions that had led you to this inverted jungle as much for your own benefit as for

theirs. “You probably won’t believe me, but I was working on a project for my degree. I’m a scientist.” You paused. “Or trying to be, that is.” With a bit of a warbled laugh, you continued, “I’m researching anti-gravity. I’d thought I’d perfected a device to achieve it, but I realized my wiring wasn’t right.” Looking at your notebook, you started flipping through the pages again, returning to your exploded-view diagram. You turned it so it was facing them and tapped the page with your finger, a warm wave of pride washing over you as you beamed at your drawing.

Nearly forgetting yourself, you excitedly gushed, “See here? *This* wire”—you pointed at one—“was supposed to be connected with *this* one”—you pointed at another—“but I must not have been paying attention when I originally connected them. So I ran back to my lab and started rearranging them. I guess somewhere I fucked up, though, because instead of creating a non-gravitational field... I ended up *here*.” You gestured vaguely around you. “Wherever *here* is.”

Chewing on the inside of your cheek for a second, you looked up, suddenly swallowing at the realization of how tall this purple stranger was, and how close they were standing to you. Your heart stuttered when you finally caught a glimpse of what looked like two tails swishing behind them.

How had you missed *those* before?

“I—uh—thought I’d opened up a portal to another dimension...” You trailed off, biting your lip briefly before

finishing with, “But the fact that you’ve heard of Earth makes me second-guess that.”

They blinked, their mouth falling slightly ajar as they regarded you. You shuffled from foot to foot, not sure that you liked the strange silence that followed. But before you could fill it with more of your rambling, their haughty demeanor was back.

“A scientist?” they scoffed, as if *that* was the most unbelievable part of your story.

You threw your arms up in the air before pointing your notebook at them. “I don’t need to take this from you—you!” You stopped, clutching the notebook to your chest. “Who even *are* you? What are *you* doing here?”

“A Tellurian,” they mused, lips twitching upward as they shook their head. “I suppose that explains your impertinence, if nothing else.” Ignoring your pitched gasp of protest, they said, “I was here to research the flora and fauna. I was just on my way back to the Capital, but obviously encountered a bit of an...” Their eyes trailed slowly from the top of your muddied temple, down to your even muddier slippers, and back up to meet your gaze. “*Inconvenience.*”

“Whatever,” you scoffed, rolling your shoulders back. Whatever shock had emboldened you must have been wearing off, because the soreness of crash-landing in the jungle and the overwhelming mental gymnastics of wrapping your head around the fact that you had done so in the first place was beginning to take hold. Lifting your hand, you rubbed at your temple, wincing at the cut you were just remembering was

there. It didn't feel deep, but it stung like hell. "Research? You're a scientist too?"

"...Yes." They sounded unsure, but you were beginning to trust your judgment less and less.

"Great. A colleague." They didn't seem to appreciate being called that, but you cut them off before they could protest.

"So, where am *I*?" You gestured around you again before pointing at them, uncaring if the gesture was *impertinent*.

"And who are *you*?"

"I suppose I could start with the easier response of the two." Clearing their throat, despite having four free hands, it was one of their tails that extended towards your palm. "You may refer to me as—" They stuttered a moment, but the hesitance was fleeting before they finished, "*Astrum*."

You blinked at their tail, tentatively curling your fingers around it. Rather than pumping your hand up and down like in a traditional handshake, you nearly squealed when it instead wrapped around your forearm up to your elbow, squeezing gently in what you supposed was their form of greeting. You hesitated for a moment, feeling their tail tense at your pause. Glancing back up, you offered your name, and their nod seemed one more of resolve than recognition.

"You were correct in your assessment," they continued, although they almost looked physically pained to admit it as their tail fell away from your arm. You could still feel the warmth of the appendage, your skin thrumming as if it had left an invisible imprint in your pores. "I am more than familiar

with your galaxy, and you are not in another dimension at all. Rather, you are on a different planet in *another* galaxy.”

They stopped, as if extending you the courtesy of allowing that information to sink in for a few seconds. You bobbed your chin up and down, that strange, out-of-body gelatinous sensation enveloping you again.

“Huh,” you finally uttered, nodding again. “I guess that’s probably the best-case scenario.”

“Indeed,” they agreed, apparently not catching your cynicism. “Which is also beneficial to myself, as I have an obligation to see you back now that we have exchanged names.”

“*Really?*” You brightened, the tiredness momentarily fading as a cocktail of relief and excitement swirled through your brain.

“You mean I can return to Earth?”

“Of course.” They shrugged, as if it was no big deal. “*Our* pocket of the galaxy is much more advanced than yours.” You ignored the snide tone, just happy that there was a new hope, after all. “The most difficult part will be returning to the capital. It is a mere few fractals of a solar cycle by hovercraft, but mine is... indisposed at the moment.” That distasteful look was back again, and you now had the sense of mind to feel sheepish about it. “By foot, it will be a couple of solar cycles themselves, considering how far removed from society we find ourselves.”

“Fascinating.” The word wasn’t sarcastic. Your fingers itched for the pen that was probably buried deep within the brush

somewhere. You could have been writing all this down. Screw anti-gravity—you were literally living in the midst of an experiential learning course on interplanetary travel. “You don’t happen to have something to write with, do you?”

Despite only knowing this *stranger*—Astrum, you remembered—for a few... fractals, they had said, you were quickly becoming accustomed to that dry look of disdain they seemed to favor. You took their expression as a *No*, scowling to yourself with a shrug.

“That’s not fair,” you bemoaned, a yearning gaze settled on your notebook. “That’s not fair at all.”

“Come, terraling,” they said, two arms extending into the mist. “We must be on our way. We have a *substantial* journey ahead of us.” They then stopped, two hands pressing to their chest. “But ah, where are my manners? Your Tellurian tendencies must have negatively influenced me.” Curling your lip at the clear dig, you glowered at their mocking tone. “Allow me to be the first to welcome you to Tradinoi Centrum. We hope your stay is pleasurable.”

Two

INFERIOR PLANET

For the first time since beginning your Ph.D. program, you were spending your Halloween out—except instead of bar crawling through the sand-kissed streets of Laocoön Bay, you were suffering through the woods of Tradinoi Centrum, miserably hacking down brush while trailing behind one of the most infuriating creatures you'd ever met.

The twin suns had set and were replaced with a pair of moons, and while you still didn't have an idea of how long this planet's day cycle was, you estimated you'd been walking for a few hours. The initial shock had morphed into bewildered excitement, and you'd subjected Astrum to a flurry of questions about their hovercraft. You'd been disappointed to learn that it operated on thrust and *not* the creation of a concentrated anti-gravitational field, but when Astrum had arched a silvery brow at the scrunch of your nose, you'd merely shrugged them off.

Despite only being in Astrum's presence for a short time, you'd been able to quickly pinpoint just the type of person

they were. They were like every other student in your program—haughty know-it-alls imbued with the fearlessness a generous financial cushion could provide. They especially reminded you of somebody you'd met in your undergrad, a Kraken from one of your general studies courses whose mouth seemed as big as his family's pockets. With his mother in politics, Destin—or was it *Denton*?—had not only been well-connected, but he was *also* an athlete, so the university coddled him. He'd had the kind of confidence born from the knowledge that his family could buy him in to or out of any situation.

Though you obviously didn't know much about Tradinoi Centrum's social culture, something about the way Astrum carried themselves just screamed good breeding. They walked with the same air as the wealthy dragon clan who often visited campus, prominent patrons with more than a few buildings named after them. Even deep in the bowels of the jungle and splashed with mud, Astrum acted like they owned the place. Their hair and stripes glowed with as much authority as the myriad of stars caught in the canopy of emerald sky, and while you were cycling between exhaustion and existentialism, their tails flicked like a lazy metronome, as if mocking your internal struggle.

Despite your misery, you knew you couldn't necessarily blame *them* for your plight. You probably should've listened to all the advisors who told you that your capstone was overly ambitious, but you'd been tired of being told *No*. For some reason, you'd had the strange idea that *you*, a random human

girl from the outskirts of Tenebra City, could ever be the first to do *something*—and you'd flown too close to Laocoön Bay's famous sun only to plunge straight into the depths of the inkiest part of their cerulean lagoon.

You supposed it could have been worse though. Despite revolving around two suns, the planet's gravity didn't seem noticeably different to Earth's, and the oxygen content was also virtually the same. You could have been dead on impact, and as much as the more macabre side of you tried to mumble about how that might've been better, you'd always been a fighter—and you were intent on making it back to your own galaxy.

So, at least this planet was *somewhat* hospitable.

Even if its company wasn't.

Another throb of your head made you wince, though you suspected it was probably from dehydration rather than the long-dried trail of blood caked onto the slight bruise of your temple that was beginning to itch. While botany still wasn't your thing, you were torn between wishing you hadn't thrown your pen into the heart of the jungle so you could write this all down and throwing yourself to the blue grass to pound your fists against the earth—

Er, could it still even be called that?

“I should've studied business or something,” you huffed to yourself, concentrating on putting one lead foot in front of the other to keep up with the moonbeam beacon in front of you.

“Come again?”

The gleam in the words caused you to scowl. You could barely hold yourself up, yet Astrum was traipsing through the brush with as much ease as a fairy through some flowers.

“Nothing,” you muttered, clenching your notebook tighter to your chest and looking down. The rings embedding into your palms were a welcome distraction from the weird itching feeling beginning in your fingertips and arms. With your luck, you were probably being eaten alive by extraterrestrial mosquitos. You only took a few more steps before you walked right into a solid wall, bouncing backward with a wheeze.

The pair of arms gripping your shoulders were the only things keeping you from toppling. “Stay vigilant, will you?”

You looked up, not realizing Astrum had stopped.

A snarky response was poised at the tip of your tongue, but you took a deep breath, swallowing it down. You knew better than to bite the hands that led you out of the jungle. Instead, you grounded yourself by focusing on the warmth of their hands on your skin, relishing in the brief moment of blissful reprieve from the jungle’s cool air.

Only to immediately take a large step back when that warmth began to oddly migrate elsewhere.

Letting out a weak laugh, you rubbed the goosebumps on one arm with your hand, the other gripping your notebook. With an absentminded itch, you said, “Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself again. Trying not to freak out, about, you know”—you

lifted your free palm to wave it around you—“the whole *ending up on another planet* thing.”

“Hmm.” Their lips tugged into a shallow frown, the twin beams that constituted their eyes narrowing as they studied you. One of their bottom arms rested on their hip, while a set of diagonal arms folded across their chest. The hand in the opposite quadrant from the one resting on their hip stroked their chin, and the whole thing nearly made your eyes go crossed. “Are you sure you are not concussed?”

“I mean,” you said with a shrug, “*anything* could be a possibility at this point.” You reached up to brush your temple. The small lump was definitely tender, but you were more concerned with the growing itch. “Your planet sure has some nasty bugs.”

Astrum’s frown deepened. “Insects are not natural to the ecosystem of this particular area,” they stated, the moon on their forehead pulsing as it creased with the furrow of their brow. Two silver flares rested on your palm where you’d started rubbing your arm more vigorously.

You barely registered the flash of silver and violet before one of their tails darted out to wrap around your arm. When it tugged you closer, you almost dropped your notebook, letting out a squeak of surprise. You immediately squirmed, but two arms clasped your waist, holding you tight as they peered at your flesh.

Alarm bells went off in your head, your instincts screaming at you to get away. But you had nowhere else to go, instead just

freezing like a deer in headlights as you attempted to keep your blood pressure under control. You practically jumped out of your skin when something tickled your face, only to see that it was just a tendril of Astrum's silvery hair brushing your forehead when they tilted their head down.

Not only did they have four perfectly capable hands and two tails that could easily snap your neck, but when their lips tugged downward again, the fangs that you'd caught a glimpse of earlier were definitely much sharper than you'd thought. You wondered if they'd finally had enough of your prattling and were going to finish the job their planet couldn't, but before you could completely spiral over that, the soft glow of the crescent moon on their forehead and stripes on their cheekbones distracted you. It seemed in tune with their breathing, pulsing gently with the soft puffs of air fanning over your jugular; when a faint breeze dragged the tendril of hair along your jaw, the scent of sweetened petrichor and ozone caused your eyelids to droop.

"Ah." The sudden sound startled you. You blinked rapidly, remembering where you were—and *who* you were with. "I see."

You blinked one last time for good measure, clearing your throat. "Care to share your findings, oh knowledgeable one?" you asked a bit too brusquely, not liking the goosebumps that had erupted across your skin.

"The mud in this jungle has been known to have some acidic properties, but it is usually mild enough that it is harmless."

Your heart skipped a beat when the two hands on your hips curled deeper into your flesh, while another snaked around your lower back. The tail wrapped around your forearm brushed against your skin, while its twin wove between your fingertips, gently rotating your hand upwards to expose your forearm. You peeked downward to watch the former rub flakes of mud away, revealing angry splotches of mottled red. “Your skin must be thinner.” Though it probably hadn’t been meant as an insult, you scowled. “Or, at least”—their lips twitched upward in apparent amusement at your reaction—“more *sensitive*, terraling.”

“Great, so your dirt is trying to eat me?” Using their distraction as an advantage, you brought up your notebook to swat at the various limbs and appendages holding you in place. They quickly retracted, Astrum’s mirth replaced with indignation. Unable to help yourself anymore, you groaned. “This place sucks!” For good measure, you then added, “And you *know* that’s not my name!”

“It does not *suck*,” they sniffed, ignoring your latter insistence. You had tried to tell them what your actual name was earlier, but they seemed to prefer their moniker instead. “Tradinoi Centrum is the center of the entire Tradinoi Galactic Empire!”

You quickly quipped, “Since your planet is closer to the sun than mine is, it’s *technically* inferior.”

“There is nothing inferior about it.” They ignored your pun. You stuck your tongue out in response. “It is merely protective of its inhabitants. It does not take kindly to *unwelcome*

visitors.” Nose turning upward, they said, “It must sense you are from an undesirable galaxy.”

“Hey!” you protested, pointing the corner of your notebook at them. “Leave my galaxy out of this!” You scratched again, stilling when their eyes narrowed. “You act like yours is so much better!”

“Oh, but it is.” There was that haughty attitude again. You scowled, scratching your arm with renewed vigor as you found something thrilling about their disapproval. “For one thing, the Tradinov galaxy is *much* more technologically advanced than its neighbors—”

You gaped, interrupting them with, “You have *neighbors*?”

“Everybody does,” they returned dryly, “do they not?”

“We’re going to table that one for now,” you breathed, the discovery of *one* additional galaxy with intelligent lifeforms enough to process for the day. “Ok, fine. How many planets do you have? Is this it?”

“Hardly,” they scoffed. “Tradinoi Centrum is merely the closest to our suns. There are five planets in total—”

Your face lit up in triumph. “Well, *we* have more than that!”

Only to dull again when they sneered, “Quality, not quantity.” You grumbled to yourself as they continued, “We have the equivalent of what, I believe, your planet would refer to as a constitutional monarchy. Tradinoi Centrum is the capital, where the Crown is seated.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Crown,” you observed, fingers pausing in their scratching as your eyebrow arched. “*And* of Earth...”

“Of course we are aware of Earth,” they responded almost flippantly. “Your planet has been on our radar for quite some time. We have enough intelligence to know to stay away from it.”

Your cheeks heated. “What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Earth is practically primeval comparatively.” They said this so matter-of-factly that you didn’t think they meant to be insulting. “All your kind cares about are conquest and war. *We* occupy ourselves with knowledge.”

“I *literally* told you that I’m a scientist.” You jabbed your notebook at them again. “We have a million different fields of study to ‘occupy ourselves with knowledge.’” You would have curled your fingers into air quotes if they weren’t currently occupied. “Clearly, we *also* care about it.”

“Not in the same way.” Their shoulders lifted in a shrug. “The Tradinov galaxy is made of scholars, not warriors. Earth focuses on knowledge for the advancement of pride, not people. And yet, pride is the downfall of knowledge itself.”

“You’re making my head hurt,” you muttered, letting out a sigh.

“*You* are the one who asked.” Not having the energy to fight, you let them have that.

“Whatever.” You rubbed your arm, wincing when the itch began to give way to more of a burn. “If you’re so anti-Earth, why are you helping *me*?”

“I told you,” they said, eyes resting on your arm again, “I am now under obligation to assist you as we have exchanged names.” Another blur of silver and violet slithered around your arm, tugging you forward as they began walking again. “And to be quite frank, I was curious. I have studied your kind in-depth, but I could not pass up the opportunity to validate those learnings in the flesh.”

More goosebumps immediately rippled across your skin, but they were a welcome distraction from the itch. You allowed yourself to be led through the jungle, grumbling, “Oh, so I’m some kind of little experiment for you?” The back half of their statement then sank in. “Wait... is Earth, like, public knowledge? Does *everybody* in this galaxy know about it?”

“The Tradinoiim make it a point to know everything about everybody, yes,” they stated simply. “Our curriculum touches on most of the nearby planetary systems.”

“And we don’t know anything about anybody,” you sighed, a bit dejected. “Alright, tabling *that* one, too.” Glancing bemoaningly at your notebook, you made a mental note after taking one last moment of silence for your pen. “Where are we going now?”

The tail not holding your arm flicked. Two moonbeams gleamed at you when they tilted their head to carelessly state over their shoulder, “To throw you in a river.”

You rolled your eyes, prepared to launch another quip back, only to have the strangest feeling that they may *not* have been kidding when the gurgle of slowly moving water drifted through the jungle. The tips of the cherry-colored plants that Astrum wove their way through were tinged an interesting shade of lemon yellow by the lime glow suspended in the mist. As Astrum continued to tug you forward, you found that the river they spoke of was more like a stream, so you weren't overly concerned about drowning.

At least—not as concerned as you were about *dissolving*.

Rather than the tranquil, turquoise tides you were used to in Laocoön Bay, this stream was a screaming green. You could practically see the atoms splitting in the nuclear neon; you were less certain that what was in front of you was water, questioning whether you might've been staring at liquid uranium instead.

“You're not throwing me in *that!*” you exclaimed after a beat, attempting to take a step back from the radioactive vat. But the tail on your arm held tight, inching you closer to the teal-tinted edge of the muddy bank.

“Of course I am,” they responded evenly, the slowness of their words making you feel like a child. “You must cleanse your skin of this mud before it completely eats away at your flesh.”

Well, you didn't necessarily like the sound of *that*, but you were still a bit skeptical.

“If your mud is trying to kill me, what makes you think your water won't do the same?” you asked, tucking your notebook

under your arm to tug at the tail wrapped around the other.

With an exasperated puff, they blew a tendril of silver out of their face. Their second tail darted out to snatch your notebook, tossing it to the side. Ignoring your protest, Astrum turned to you, silvery eyes dulling with seriousness. “Do you trust me?”

Without a single ounce of hesitation, you honestly blurted, “No.”

Their lips twitched. “Good.”

Then the warmth of their tails was quickly replaced with the sting of innumerable icicles.

Three

THE APSIS CONUNDRUM

You'd never been dissolved alive before, so you weren't sure what to expect when you waited for Death to finally catch up to you.

The purple world you'd become accustomed to became a wash of green as your slippers went flying off into the brush and your brain tried to simultaneously make its way back through the color wheel and keep you afloat. Luckily, Death still seemed to be a few steps behind, because you eventually bobbed to the surface, very much *alive* and very much *annoyed*.

"Wh-at the *h-hell*?" you managed to splutter in between an expressive string of profanities. "I could've died!"

"I knew you would live," they responded flippantly. *Unfortunately*, you could have sworn you heard them add under their breath. You slapped at the surface of the water in indignation, flapping your arms like an enraged pelican. "Does your skin not feel better now?"

You lowered your arms, though your scowl didn't falter. Now that you'd gotten over the shock, the frigid temperature actually felt blissfully cooling against your irritated flesh.

"No," you lied.

Another puff of air called your bluff.

Ignoring their knowing look, you waded forward. The deepest part of the stream only came to your chest, but the bank practically dropped off into a vertical plunge. You paused at the edge, peering more closely at the water, now satisfied that you were in no danger of fading into human soup. Cupping your hands together, you dipped them under the surface, watching the water bead together like diamonds and shimmer in the faint silver glow of your irksome interplanetary guide.

You tilted your head backward, peering up at them. The canopy of trees framed their face around the halo of stars twinkling above. "Hey, this water is pretty clean."

"Of course it is," they scoffed. Then, already ten steps ahead of you, they cautioned, "But I would warn against drinking it without boiling it first."

"Good call," you mumbled, licking your lips. They were pretty parched, but you'd experienced worse from all those times your naga friends insisted on dragging you to the beach to lay in the sun with them. You glanced at their feet, seeing how they were toeing the edge of the stream. Looking to the side, you tilted your head before gazing back at them. "How far does this stream go?"

They hummed, their bottom arms folding over their chest. One of the top ones stroked their chin, while the other gestured in the direction you'd been looking at. "It cuts through the entirety of the jungle; however, at some point it—"

You didn't allow them to finish, using their momentary distraction as a window of opportunity to wrap your hands around their ankles and tug them into the water with you. An array of limbs and tails thrashed, reminding you more of a biblically accurate angel than an insufferable alien scientist.

A sinister cackle bounced off the trees as you dove out of the way to avoid being pinned by one of their many extremities. Astrum resurfaced slowly, their eyes and stripes on their cheekbones glowing ominously behind the blanket of soaked silver hair curtaining their forehead. Four arms eventually appeared two at a time, followed by the twin whip of two angry tails. For a moment, you wondered if this was what Laocoön had seen right before being dragged into the sea by the serpent.

But when Astrum's eyes and markings flared with what looked like sodden rage, you decided it was worth it.

"*Now* we're even!" you declared, practically wheezing when they flipped their hair over their head where it met their back with a wet *smack*. "Guess your knowledge of my planet couldn't have saved you from that, *huh?*"

"You, terraling," they said lowly, two arms lifting to point at you, "are playing with fire."

You snickered again, slapping at the water. “Kinda hard to get burned with all this moisture.” Turning your nose up as they had done before, you sniffed. “But perhaps your planet hasn’t *fully* studied the chemical reaction?”

“We know of fire,” they stated, tails flicking in apparent irritation as their frown continued to deepen. The droplets of water rolling down their jacket were in sharp contrast to the dryness of the look that was leveled on you as both sets of arms folded over their chest. While you probably looked like a half-drowned cat, Astrum appeared more like a god, surrounded by a corona of rippling water edged in the soft gleam of their hair and markings. “A matter most beneficial to you, terraling, as you appear to sorely need it.”

“*Huh?*” was the most eloquent thing you could manage, your thoughts suddenly sluggish. Looking back down at the stream, you spotted three moons reflected on its surface—two from the sky, and one from their forehead. Then the picture crinkled at the edges, and you didn’t register Astrum’s advance until your nose was practically touching the center of their chest.

“Your lips are more blue than mine,” they observed, their head tilting to the side when you tilted your head to gaze up at them. You didn’t realize you were shivering until the only response you could muster was the chatter of your teeth. “Come.” You were almost used to the tail wrapping around your arm as they tugged you from the stream, nearly sighing at the warmth seeping into your pores. “Let us seek shelter for the night.”

You liked the sound of *that*, though you would've liked it even better if the word 'shelter' had been paired with 'food.' But you ignored the dull pang in your stomach in favor of focusing on keeping the sharp staccato of your teeth at bay. The once balmy air had cooled substantially; despite how frigid you felt, lazy tendrils of steam curled from your drying skin into the night sky, adding to the mist.

Making sure not to leave Byron behind, you held the notebook safely away from your dampened body with your free hand while dutifully doing your best to keep up with the long strides of the alien ahead of you. They skirted the stream in the direction of what appeared to be an inky wall, and when you squinted through the foggy twilight, you realized the wall was actually a mountain's facade. Reminding you of cracked obsidian, the edifice seemed to be tipped in starlight, a myriad of razor-sharp shards glinting menacingly from where they jutted from their embankments. Just when you became fearful they were going to make you climb over it, tugging on their tails twice in protest, you spotted an opening in the mountain's edge. It was conveniently off the ground, but not high enough that it required any real climbing.

A cave. Shelter!

You would have made a comment about how everything was coming up roses if not for the realization that luck seemed to have nothing to do with the discovery. From Astrum's sure-footed steps and the lower density of the brush they led you through, it was clear this wasn't their first time imposing on the cave's hospitality. Sniffing at their proffered arms, you

managed to hoist yourself over the lip of its entrance much less gracefully than they did.

The inside of the cavern was made out of the same glossy stone as the facade; you made a note to steer clear of the sharp edges of its walls. While the ceiling was high enough for you to stand straight, Astrum had to stoop slightly, the shiny surfaces turning an interesting shade of gunmetal when they approached them. You could vaguely make out their warped reflection, reminding you of a funhouse as they ducked to reposition a few smooth stones in the center of the cozy chamber into a ring.

Silver eyes narrowed into a command that required no words as you planted yourself on the floor, understanding what *Stay* looked like. You didn't realize how much light Astrum emitted until they disappeared into the night, the cavern immediately darkening as if a candle had been snuffed out. Your startled squeal glanced off the razors on the walls while you carefully placed your notebook to the side and tugged your legs to your chest, the still-moist fabric of your pajama pants and shirt sticking together as you did so.

The jungle was oddly quiet, considering the cacophony of wildlife from Astrum's crash. Maybe they were mostly diurnal and slept during the evenings, choosing to hunt for their food during the day.

Or maybe they were just in hiding because there was a bigger predator nearby...

Your skeleton nearly launched itself from your fingertips when what sounded like a firework split the air. You barely stopped yourself from flying backward in shock when a flash of silver suddenly blinded you. Blinking furiously, you were finally able to see Astrum had returned.

You quickly looked away from the questioning arch of their glowing brow to hide your blush when you realized the ‘firework’ had actually just been a twig snapping.

Astrum ignored your theatrics, busying themselves with deftly starting a fire. You immediately lifted your hands toward the blue flame, shoulders drooping in palpable relief as you warmed yourself. You stared at it for a few more seconds, still trembling slightly from the damp clothes that clung to you. When the dull pang of your stomach turned into more of a severe pinch, you chewed the inside of your cheeks. You didn’t want to necessarily be an ungracious guest, but if you didn’t eat something soon, it might’ve created a new problem.

Turning to Astrum, you opened your mouth to inquire about the prospect of dinner, only for the words to fizzle when your brain short-circuited. Their silvery jacket had somehow disappeared, their moonlit hair draping tantalizingly across an impressive array of muscles rippling under their violet flesh. You gaped at the pointed tip of their ear when they nonchalantly glanced over their shoulder, their crescent moon as radiant as their questioning eyes.

Any coldness you’d felt was suddenly gone, instead replaced by a pulsating warmth that seemed to heat you from the inside

out. The sound you were making was akin to a fork stuck in a garbage disposal as you gaped. You quickly snapped your mouth shut, your teeth clacking together audibly as you swallowed your squeal. Clearing your throat, you admonished yourself for getting so worked up over a shirtless stranger, only to clap your hands over your eyes and almost tip into the fire when you realized they were beginning to undo their pants as well.

“What are you *doing?*” you finally hissed, your cheeks burning under your palms.

“Ah, I knew the silence could never last,” they sighed. Slowly splaying your fingers, you peeked through the gaps, only to let out a squeak when you saw they were stepping out of the fabric. “I am discarding the clothes you so kindly drenched so I may properly warm myself.” The soft padding of their footfalls against the flat stone floor was thunderous as they walked toward the fire. “Something I would advise you to do as well.”

“Nope. I’ll keep my clothes on. Thanks.” You could practically hear their unruffled shrug. You peeked through your fingers again, seeing them settle onto the floor with the grace of a show-quality cat directly across from you. Then, feeling oddly like you had to defend yourself, you insisted, “It’s not that bad!”

“Even *I* can admit that despite my studies, I never knew your people had a penchant for hypothermia, terraling,” they responded evenly. You scowled, your hands falling from your

eyes to ball into fists in your lap. You hoped they couldn't see your slight tremor through the dancing flames that separated you.

"It's not *that* bad," you repeated dourly, staring at the fire until bright spots began to appear in your vision. You blinked them away, glancing up to see Astrum lounging like they didn't have a care in the world, one leg extended to the side while the other was propped up, obscuring their torso from you. Two arms draped over their knee, the other two resting against the ground. Their tails had entwined together like rope and hung limply over one shoulder with the thick mantle of their hair.

Your hand slid toward your notebook almost subconsciously, fingers curling over the metal rings. You tried to focus on the way they felt, but couldn't seem to pull your gaze away as your eyes trailed from the glow of the crescent moon on their forehead, sweeping to the shimmering stripes on their cheekbones, and then to the matching stripes lining their collarbones. The elegant curve of their arms was smooth, devoid of the silver glow until your glance met their fingertips. When they shifted, a flash of that same silver caught your eye, and your eyes paused on the stripes outlining the V-shaped muscles right under their abdomen.

If they had two sets of arms and two tails... would they have double of anything else?

A sudden pain in your hand alerted you to how tightly you were claspng your notebook. You quickly looked away, your cheeks heating again at how easily you were utterly engrossed.

Of course I'm curious, you told yourself. Who wouldn't be in the presence of a literal alien?

Resolved that it was the scientist in you rather than the lecher who'd wanted a closer look, your eyes flitted back to their figure. But you couldn't seem to focus on anything other than the stripes on their pelvis as your jaw went slack.

"Now *I* must be *your* 'little experiment.'"

You jumped at the sound of their voice floating over the crackle of the fire. It took a moment for you to process the words, your cheeks immediately flaring once you did. The trifecta of hunger and cold and exhaustion must have permanently banished your neurons, because you couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"It is quite alright," they called, their tone casual. "I do not mind your studying." A sly smirk tugged at their lips. "A specimen such as myself cannot help but understand the desire to do so."

"You're full of shit," you managed to say, bringing your hand away from your notebook so you could clutch your arms to your chest. "I wasn't *studying* you."

"Ah." They nodded. "So your intentions were much less moral."

"We're not having this discussion," you bit out through clenched teeth, shaking your head. "This is the weirdest fucking day." Closing your eyes, you let out a deep sigh. "Next year, I'm going *out* for Halloween."

“Halloween,” you heard them repeat. You opened your eyes to see them cocking their head in thought. “All Hallow’s Eve. A rather fascinating ritual on your planet.”

“Let me guess,” you began, hoping they detected the dryness in your voice, “you know all about it?”

“Indeed.” Their tails flicked their hair over their shoulder. “While still difficult, it is generally easier to gain approval to travel to Earth from the Crown on this particular day.”

Your eyebrows disappeared into your hairline. “I thought your kind made it a point to stay away from Earth.”

“Most do,” they responded, “but some find the allure of experiential learning too enticing. I myself have never had the time to go, but then again”—that sly smirk was back as two pinpoints of silver blazed through the flames—“I now do not have to.”

“Lucky you,” you muttered, rubbing your hands up and down your arms. The fire was definitely helping, but you couldn’t completely shake off the rest of the chill. “You seem to know a lot about the Crown.” You tilted your head. “Do you work for them or something?”

Their markings seemed to flare brighter, but it could have just been a trick of the flickering light. “You could say that,” they responded after a moment, their smile appearing a bit tighter than it was before. But they quickly relaxed, the tips of their tails lifting from their shoulder to gesture at you. “Come closer,” they urged playfully. “You claim to be a scientist. I know you cannot resist.”

You glared at them. But your limbs apparently weren't on the same page as your brain as you slowly got to your hands and knees, crawling gingerly around the fire to pause just shy of them. Folding your legs underneath you, you kept what you thought to be a respectable enough distance, back ramrod straight as you tried to school your features into a mask of indifference.

This was easier said than done, especially when they dropped their bent knee to the stone, baring the stripes on their pelvis to you. The blush dotting your cheeks deepened, but you stopped yourself from looking away, knowing they'd merely enjoy your embarrassment. Swallowing thickly, you followed the glowing streaks, eyes resting at their groin.

"Does, uh," you began, the silence clinging to you like the teal-colored mud and making your skin itch, "does everybody on your planet look like you?"

The corner of their lips quirked, the crescent moon seeming to pulse at the innocence of your question. "Hardly," Astrum responded, though the word surprisingly lacked their usual haughtiness. "Our planet and galaxy are filled with a number of species, some of which you also find on Earth." Conjoined tails lifting to brush an errant strand of hair out of their face, they said, "My kind are called the *Distellii*. We are peppered throughout the galaxy, though the majority call Tradinoi Centrum their home."

"Distellii." You tried to repeat the word, though your tongue seemed to trip over the lilting inflection. Lifting your eyes

from the stripes on their pelvis, you glanced at their forehead. “Do all Distellii”—you scrunched your nose at how flat it sounded coming from your mouth—“have the same marking as you?”

“No.” The answer was curt. Their tails flicked again as if to sweep the topic aside as they instead offered, “Possessing four arms is considered a standard trait, if you will, but not all Distellii have tails. Most only have one. Some have three.” Your eyes widened at this, trying to imagine the coordination of three tails without them tying themselves into a knot. “We also have the ability to reproduce outside of our species, though it is much more difficult to do so.” Their fangs flashed in their grin. “I believe you are familiar with the general mechanics of how that may work. The act is somewhat universal.”

The heat in your cheeks flared, along with a more concentrated heat flaring elsewhere. “Yes,” you said quickly, watching the mirth dance under the twin pools of silver studying you, “I’m familiar with it.”

“Even within our kind, it can take quite some time,” they continued to explain. You were somewhat in shock that you were really having a conversation about the birds and the bees with an alien you’d just met—a *naked* alien you’d just met. “The reproductive cycles of both parties must align.” Astrum didn’t seem as embarrassed as you were about the topic, their tone almost clinical. “The donor will implant an egg in the host, but if the donor is not fertile, the egg will not contain any

genetic material and will quickly collapse. If the host is not fertile, their body will dissolve the egg on its own.”

“You lay eggs?” You blinked, trying to process all this information. You really wished you had your pen to write it all down. “Like dragons and naga?”

“Well, not *me*,” they corrected, “*I* am a donor. I deposit them, though I am not fertile at this time.” They said this so nonchalantly, as if discussing the weather. “But, yes. We reproduce similarly, in a sense.”

At the term *donor*, your eyes automatically dipped back to the stripes on their pelvis. You then bit your lip, looking to the side while your heart thumped. “Sorry,” you quickly said. “I shouldn’t be staring. It’s rude of me.”

“I believe I extended you an open invitation to stare, terraling.” The whisper of warmth against your chin caused you to shiver. As your chin was gently guided back to face them, you realized it was one of their tails doing so. “Observation is how we learn, is it not?” Resting backward on two sets of arms, they widened their legs to bare more of themselves to you. Their other tail swished across their lap, outlining the glowing stripes near their groin. “The intromittent organ of a donor is primarily sheathed...” Their tail brushed lower, and you realized the two stripes extending between their legs framed what looked to be a slit. Unable to help yourself, you leaned closer, seeing what appeared to be a bulb begin to emerge when their tail brushed over it again. “Until they are aroused, that is.”

“*Oh*,” you breathed after a moment, the latter part of Astrum’s statement sinking in as you registered what the bulb was. It was a darker shade of violet than the rest of their skin.

“Are you a *tactile* learner, too, terraling?” Their tone was playful, their tail sliding from your chin to trail down the column of your neck before slithering up your arm. It tugged gently.

Something in your abdomen throbbed. Your eyes widened, flying up to theirs in surprise. Their head was inclined slightly, gaze even as they studied you. You swallowed heavily, your blood seeming to thicken in your veins as your heartbeat thudded in your ears. Though their tail remained around your arm, it seemed to loosen, as if sensing your hesitance.

They seemed to be able to read you better than you were able to read your own schematics, patiently waiting as you debated whether to take them up on their offer. You didn’t necessarily feel pressured by their actions, but *something* was drawing you to them. Your fingers twitched, and before you knew it, you were reaching toward their other tail.

Their markings flared brighter when you hesitantly brushed your fingertips against the bulb peeking out of their slit. You instantly snapped your hand back to your chest when it suddenly jolted at your touch, mumbling to yourself sheepishly at Astrum’s amused chuckle. Shooting them a quick glare, you bit the inside of your cheek, reaching out more confidently this time. Curling your fingers against your palm, you brushed your knuckle against the bulb.

And were rewarded by a sharp intake of breath.

The slit widened, exposing more of the member. A second bulb emerged, slightly larger than the one on the tip. You tilted your head, mesmerized by its appearance, and uncurled your fingers to gently wrap them around the segment.

The tail around your wrist tightened, and you immediately stopped.

“S-Sorry,” you immediately blurted, voice surprisingly raspy. “Did I—”

“I was just caught off-guard,” Astrum murmured back, their tail loosening to slip from your arm. It instead pooled on your lap, resting limply against your thigh when the other entwined itself in it. They gave a brusque nod, and you noticed their markings had brightened even more. “You may continue, if you wish.”

Mouth falling into a small ‘o’ of understanding, you nodded back, returning your gaze to the bulbs. While your fingers could close easily around the one on the tip, your fingertips struggled to touch when wrapped around the second. You had to squeeze them together to do so, and Astrum’s breath hitched again while a third bulb emerged.

This one was even wider, and you could already tell you wouldn’t be able to wrap your hand fully around it. But that didn’t stop you from trying, a knot in your abdomen tugging when you cradled the heavy segment in your palm. The bulbs had been slightly soft at first, but were now much more firm,

and seemed to lighten in color as if the skin was stretching taut.

Cupping your fingers, you experimentally ran your hand up and down their shaft, widening and narrowing your grip as you grazed from segment to segment. The skin between the bulbs was apparently especially tender, as Astrum's breathing caught whenever your fingertips joined in the narrow crevices. You noticed that their marks brightened when they did so too, concluding that maybe the intensity of the light they emitted was also tied to their levels of arousal.

Like a blush, you thought to yourself, trying not to fixate on how bright yours must have been as their tails twitched against your thigh. They were tantalizingly close to your own heat. You imagined them inching closer to your waistband, disentangling from each other so one could move the elastic aside while its twin slipped beneath the damp fabric...

"You are shaking." You jumped at the suddenness of their statement, though the words were soft.

"I'm just cold," you answered quickly, not wanting to admit that your trembling may have been due to your less-than-scientific stream of thought.

"Interesting," they responded, voice a tad huskier than their usual smooth drawl. "I thought you said it was not so bad?"

You tensed, looking up at them as they called your bluff. Eyes narrowing at the triumphant glow on their face, you chewed on your cheeks, weighing your options. While you weren't necessarily happy to be caught in your jumble of lies, you

were still chilled, and you didn't necessarily want to turn into a human raisin underneath the moisture of your clothing.

"Was this all just a plot to get me naked?" you huffed after a second, pulling your hands from them to begin to begrudgingly shrug your shirt off.

They scoffed, reaching to flick at a tendril of hair as they drawled, "That is granting yourself too much credit, terraling."

With a snort of derision, you fully removed your shirt and tossed it over your shoulder, careful not to do so in the direction of the fire as you began to tug at your waistband. Swallowing an embarrassed groan, you remembered how you'd imagined their tails helping you with this task only a few seconds prior. A few thrashing kicks of your legs later and you somehow managed to remove your pants and underwear without standing up, finding the stone floor surprisingly warm underneath your naked thighs when you resumed your seated position.

Despite your earlier bravado, you awkwardly folded your arms over your breasts, unable to meet Astrum's curious gaze. They hummed, one of their tails brushing your jaw again.

"Do you not feel better already?" they asked. You grit your teeth against admitting that they'd been right again. Having *no* clothes on was much better than having *wet* clothes on, and you didn't need to respond for them to know you felt that way. "You still tremble, though. Come." Their tail lifted your chin upward, allowing you to see the sparkle in their eyes as they said, "Shall we share body heat?"

Your jaw went slack, and you were a bit thankful when their tail pushed it shut. Part of you wanted to protest just for the sake of fighting back, but something about all four of those arms beckoning toward you seemed much too inviting to pass up. So, throwing caution to the wind, you grumbled under your breath how ridiculous this was while trying to unfold your legs from underneath you.

Only to find that they'd fallen asleep and gone numb, the discovery a bit too late considering you'd already tumbled onto them.

All four arms lifted to catch you, steadying you where you straddled the expanse of their thigh. The position made all the remaining circuits in your brain implode. You could practically picture the smoke coming out of your ears, though you were much too intent on the heat pulsing in the opposite direction from where you hovered just shy of their flesh.

Their hands tensed on your hips and shoulders, jaw tightening as their eyes dipped from the curve of your jaw to the junction of your breasts. You shivered under their stare, your skin practically singing in the wake of their tails trailing to rest on your thighs.

“May I?” Astrum asked after a beat, the intent in their gaze clear. Not trusting yourself to speak, you nodded, swallowing back a low moan when one of their bottom arms left your waist to cup a breast in their palm. Thumb sweeping over your nipple, they let out an appreciative hum when it pebbled in reaction. “Fascinating.”

You swallowed thickly, looking away from the intensity of their glow in favor of lowering your own gaze to their pulsating member. Reaching down, you curled your fingers around it again. Astrum shivered at your touch, but the slow sweep of their thumb across your nipple didn't falter.

Knees beginning to ache against the stone, you shifted, only to feel their tails slide from on top of your thighs to underneath them. You tilted your head at Astrum, only to realize their tails had created a hammock of sorts. You couldn't help but feel a little amused at this, your lips tugging as you allowed your weight to settle against them.

And when one of their other arms crept toward your core, you parted your legs without hesitation.

The hand on your breast moved to grip at your hip while its twin brushed at your cunt, their two upper arms moving to cup your breasts in replacement. Your heart stuttered, mouth drying as your abdomen pulsed at the various pools of warmth peppering your body. The ragged edge of your breathing and Astrum's shallow pants drowned out the crackling of the fire, and its glow seemed a shadow compared to the brilliance of Astrum's eyes.

"Tell me if I am hurting you," they murmured, a tendril of moonlight hair tickling your forehead as they ducked their head to peer at the fingers brushing your slit.

"You aren't," you breathed back, eyelids drooping when their knuckle grazed your clit. "You won't."

You swallowed another groan when their thumb pressed against it more firmly, your own fingers tightening around their member in response. Apparently liking your reaction, they repeated the action, their lips tugging as you shuddered. When they angled their hand, you knocked your knees further apart, biting your lip as their index finger dipped into you.

They curled it slowly, as if experimenting with the pace and depth as they began to piston it lazily. Their thumb rubbed small circles against your clit while the thumbs of the hands on your breasts matched the pace around your nipples, the fourth hand remaining firm against your waist. It twitched every so often when you gave their member a harder tug—but when you moved to wrap two hands around it, their fingertips dug into your skin.

You twisted your hands while you pumped, hypnotized by the faint glow it started to emit. The skin lightened to a lilac as the bulbs grew more taut under your grip, though it got even harder to focus once Astrum slipped another finger inside you. They curled and flexed as if searching for something, and when you nearly collapsed against their chest in surprise when they knocked against a particularly sensitive place, Astrum chuckled as if they had found what they were looking for.

“Fascinating,” they whispered.

They continued to angle towards that spot, and you could no longer hold back the wanton whine that had been threatening to tumble off the tip of your tongue. Not one to be outshone by a fellow scientist, though, you picked up your pace too,

matching the intensity of their thrusts as the heated coil inside you knotted tighter and tighter. As you gave their member another twist, the bulb at the tip parted slightly, a trickle of what looked like iridescent mercury beginning to weep from the small slit.

What sounded oddly like a growl rumbled through their chest as their fingers tensed around your waist, the ones in your cunt splaying wider as they simultaneously thrusted them deeper. Your cry bounced off the razors of the cavern as they added a third, and when they angled all three of them towards that sensitive spot again, your vision went silver.

It took a few seconds for you to register that you'd fallen against their chest, the curtain of their hair obscuring your vision. With a shaking hand, you brushed the strands aside, clenching around their fingertips as Astrum guided you through your release. You blinked, feeling their member jolting in your grip; looking down, you saw the trickle had turned into a more steady stream, the bulbs undulating in a rolling motion in what appeared to be their own orgasm.

Another shudder rolled through your body. You moaned, your saliva catching in your throat as you winced when the pleasure began to sting. Astrum immediately stilled at this, gently extracting their hand from you. Their tails eased you against their thigh, sliding away as they held their hand up, allowing you to see the thin webs of your pleasure shining silver between the glowing rings of their fingers.

Ozone and petrichor filled your senses as you fought to regain your breathing. Compared to when you'd entered the cave, you *definitely* were much warmer now—though you couldn't really say that you weren't as moist.

And stupidly, all you could think of to say was, "No egg?"

Their chest rumbled as they chuckled. Your nose crinkled at the tickle of their hair against your temple as they shook their head. "No. I did not release one."

"You can control that?" you asked, somewhat impressed with yourself that you were able to string the words together between ragged breaths. You opened your mouth to ask a follow-up question, only for your stomach to gurgle embarrassingly loud.

"In certain circumstances, yes." They gently eased you to the side, placing you on the stone floor while they rose to their feet. Despite what you'd just done, you still couldn't help the blush at the silver trail dripping from the tip of their member. It was partially obscured now, slowly retracting back into its slit as they moved to gather the heaps of your discarded clothes and neatly arranged them to lie flat next to theirs near the fire. "I shall find sustenance," they announced, facing you unabashedly. You couldn't help but gape at them, blinking owlishly while their tails wove themselves around each other to lope over Astrum's shoulder. "I find that you are much better use to me alive rather than dead, terraling."

"Thanks, I guess," you muttered, drawing your knees to your chest. Their lips twitched at your response, top arms folding

across their chest while their bottom hands settled on their hips.

“I shall return shortly. I do not think I need to tell you to stay here again.” Glancing at the fire, they dipped to absentmindedly throw another log onto it before stepping toward you. Their tails reached to brush at your temple, a dull pain making you wince as you remembered your injury. They must’ve had much faster regenerative abilities, because the cut on their cheekbone had completely disappeared. Silver eyes seemed to soften as Astrum then murmured, “I will find something to assist with this,” before they strode toward the entrance of the cave. They then paused, looking over their shoulder. “Are you restricted to just plants in your diet, or do you consume meat?”

“Meat’s fine,” you rasped, a bit taken aback by how quickly they could revert to business as usual.

They nodded with a, “*Good,*” before disappearing into the night.

You stared at the entrance of the cave, still not completely believing what you’d gotten yourself into. By all accounts, you’d had more of an adventure in the few hours—fractals?—you’d been on Tradinoi Centrum that you’d had in the entirety of your life on Earth.

Though you’d never admit that to *them*.

There was something dangerous about Astrum, but you couldn’t quite put your finger on it. Maybe it was your unease at the knowledge imbalance of them being much more attuned

to Earth than you were to their home planet, or maybe it was how they carried themselves. You couldn't even call them *overconfident*, coming to grips with the frightening realization that they knew just as much as they said they did.

It didn't make much sense to run at this point. You didn't know what you were doing in the confines of this *cave*, never mind the vast expanse of the jungle that existed outside of it. At the end of the day—*solar cycle*?—you and Astrum were stuck together, whether you called your union one as the result of an act of fate or your own incompetence in circuitry. To get out of this mess and return to Earth with only poor Roy as the single casualty, you'd need to play nice while keeping your distance.

Which probably would've been the ideal conversation to have prior to the whole *touchy-feely* thing.

Even with all your reservations, there was some strange pull that you couldn't escape; it was as if Astrum had become a four-armed sun and you were a mere satellite rotating around them.

Your skin still hummed where they'd touched you, and you found yourself caught in an apsis conundrum—despite your intent to remain farthest away from them in the aphelion as long as possible, you couldn't ignore the tug in your orbit.

And while the thought of aphelion was daunting... why did it seem oddly thrilling?

Four

DEGENERATE STARS

You were stuck between a parsec and a hard place.

You lived to see another solar cycle, and if it wasn't for the fact that Astrum was your ticket off this planet, you would've currently been attempting to strangle them rather than hacking your way through the jungle behind them.

After returning with what looked like a mutated magenta toucan with four wings and applying a poultice to your temple that smelled like the collective asshole of a thousand galaxies, Astrum had acted like nothing had happened between the two of you. They'd quickly cooked the bird, which you'd noted really *did* taste like chicken, and had then launched into another lecture on the downfalls of Earth when compared to Tradinoi Centrum. You'd done your best to ignore them, knowing they'd just been trying to get a rise out of you, and had been doing what you'd thought was a hell of a job, until they'd made a comment about Earth's scientists being particularly dumb. You'd demanded to know what they meant by that, only to receive the following:

“I can explain it to you,” Astrum had drawled, tails flicking their hair over their shoulder, “but I cannot *understand* it for you.”

To which you’d dryly responded, “Don’t you have a weed to go stare at?”

Consequently, the two of you hadn’t spoken since. You’d gone to sleep on opposite sides of the fire. Thankfully, your pajamas had finally dried by then, so you at least didn’t have to sleep naked—though you must have still gotten cold in the middle of the night, because you woke with a silver jacket draped over you.

Which you’d immediately thrown back at them with a huff upon waking.

You suspected their jacket had an element of temperature control technology. Even in the fall, Laocoön Bay had a moderate climate, so your pajamas were a light cotton. Despite the airy fabric, the twin suns of Tradinoi Centrum were brutal. Byron took the brunt of their rays as you used your poor notebook as a visor of sorts while you struggled to keep up with the long strides of the purple alien in front of you, who looked completely unbothered while your own clothes clung to you, dampened by the thick vaporous mist of the humid jungle.

“Stupid suns,” you grumbled, glaring at the swish of Astrum’s hair. “Stupid alien and their stupid shiny hair.”

“Did you say something?” the stupid alien in question called over their shoulder, making you jump. Your eyes narrowed at

their pointed ears, wondering if they had enhanced hearing or something. You shook your head, and one of their brows arched. “Are you lying to me, terraling?”

If you’d had feathers, they would have ruffled at their tone.

“Don’t you have a weed to go stare at?” you shot back, tilting your notebook upwards so they could see more of your glare.

They let out a chuff of derision. “You already attempted to use that insult.” Facing forward again, two arms gestured to the side. “In any case, these are not *weeds*. They are considered keystone species to this particular environment.” You rolled your eyes toward your notebook. If you hadn’t been so annoyed at Astrum’s attitude, you might have found their lecture interesting. Your eyes fell to the dense foliage around you, the crimson leaves and neon petals oddly inviting. You bent to get a better look, only to pause when they warned, “Just do not get too close.”

“*Just do not get too close,*” you repeated petulantly, pitching your voice mockingly as you tried to mimic their lilting accent. You grinned at the way their tails faltered in their even swaying.

“One of these plants,” Astrum continued, “is actually similar to a variety you have on Earth.” They paused for a moment, humming in thought. “The ‘Venus flytrap,’ you refer to it as. Or, in more scientific terms, *Dionaea muscipula*.”

“Amazing,” you grumbled to yourself, only half-listening as you trudged forward. But you couldn’t keep your eyes from flitting from bloom to bloom as they spoke.

“Your planet tends to use the Linnaean binomial system of nomenclature,” they said. “This system uses two Latinized names. Our system is comparable, but we use a trinomial nomenclature.” They cleared their throat, voice lifting as if they were projecting in a lecture hall in front of hundreds of engrossed students rather than marching through a jungle with one pissed-off Earthling. “In the case of the Venus flytrap, *Dionaea* refers to Aphrodite, daughter of Dione.” They paused again. “Aphrodite, of course, is the Greek equivalent of Venus —”

“I know who Aphrodite is,” you snarked, kicking a rock out of your path. You might have thought the notion of Latin being a universal standard to be interesting if not for how utterly irritated you still were at them. You winced when your toe throbbed as a result, your slippers not providing much cushion from the impact.

Kill me now, you thought to yourself as they went on about where *Muscipula* derived from.

“In our trinomial system,” they kept going, blissfully unaware or—or simply *unruffled by*—your quickly souring attitude, “we share the same first two Latinized names...”

Deciding the opportunity for learning something wasn't worth stroking Astrum's ego and humoring them, you completely tuned them out, continuing to glance at the plants around you. A plume of bright petals caught your attention. The particular shade of red was much more vibrant than its leaves; the image of a kind faun who'd once helped you find your way out of the

Sapphire District when you'd taken the wrong bus in Tenebra City flickered into your head as you recalled the color of his scarf, which seemed almost identical to the bloom.

“And thus, due to the particular way it entraps its prey,” they were explaining, “our variety is called *Dionaea muscipula*...” Eyes darting to make sure Astrum wasn't looking at you, you stepped closer and bent at the waist to get a better look, only to be taken aback when a thick cloud of pink pollen puffed into your face just when you heard them finish with, “...erotes.”

You coughed, waving your notebook around in an attempt to dispel the sickly-sweet haze. The pollen was oddly thick, seeming to liquidize once it hit your throat to coat it in a honey-like syrup. Eyes beginning to water, you folded forward to place your hands on your knees in an attempt to catch your breath.

And just as you managed to convince yourself that you would live—*Unfortunately*, you could hear Astrum say again—you caught the alien staring at you.

“Choked on my own saliva,” you managed to wheeze, nose crinkling as you blinked away the tears in your eyes. The arch of their brow and the way they folded both sets of arms over their chest as they regarded you made it seem like they didn't quite believe you, but their tail flicked their hair over their shoulder as they turned around and continued walking.

You leveled a glare at the plant you had thought to be innocuous before resuming your own pace to follow Astrum, walking strictly behind them in determination to not repeat

that encounter. Swallowing a few times, you were relieved when your throat cleared after the syrup slid down it. You replaced your notebook with your hand, grimacing at the sticky sweat plastering your hair to your forehead when you dragged the back of it across your skin.

The memory of the radioactive stream you'd taken a dip in before made you yearn for its blessed coolness as the suns continued to beat violet against the emerald sky. The humid fog only seemed to have gotten more dense, tinted an odd shade of pink as you curled your fingers around your notebook in an attempt to pry your damp clothes off your heated skin. It had been more than a few fractals since you'd taken a sip of water, and though you felt like you might evaporate in any second, your mouth was oddly moist. In fact, it was almost as if you were *drooling*.

Have they always been this tall? you thought to yourself, unable to pursue the oddity of not being parched any further as you were quickly distracted by the figure in front of you. The rhythmic sway of Astrum's tails as they walked was practically hypnotizing, and though the silver jacket covered their skin, you could imagine the rippling hills and valleys of muscles where their arms connected to their back underneath. While their eyes and markings didn't glow in the light of day, instead appearing a more flattened white, the incandescence seemed to be permanently imprinted behind your eyelids as you blinked.

The mist you walked through may have been pink, but your vision was filled with silver.

You remembered how brilliantly their eyes had shone in that cave, a beacon in the darkness as they flickered in tune to the crescent moon on their forehead and the stripes on their cheekbones... the *same* stripes that outlined the V-shaped muscle on their pelvis, the silver shade *also* the same as the moisture that leaked from the bulbous tip of their impressive shaft. As you lifted your notebook to fan your face, the slight breeze reminded you of the shallow puffs of Astrum's breath against your collarbone while their members pulsed heavily in your balmy grip...

A flash of heat made you audibly gasp. You suddenly found yourself on fire, yet it wasn't coming from your reddened skin—but somewhere *within*. Byron fell from your sweaty grasp as you stopped dead in your tracks, screwing your eyes shut as another bolt of heat turned into a throbbing pain in your abdomen.

When you opened your eyes, the silver gaze that met you looked bright with concern.

“Your p-planet is still trying to kill me,” you moaned, tipping forward. You managed to catch yourself by planting your hand on their chest. Goosebumps immediately rippled up your arm at the contact, your other arm moving to press against your abdomen as it throbbed again. “Are you *s-sure* you cooked that bird properly?”

Astrum's eyes narrowed. Three arms shot out to cradle you. You bit your lip when they pressed into your skin, biting back a moan when the action seemed to momentarily quell the pain.

A fourth hand lifted to press against your forehead, and you could practically hear your own breathing as you leaned into it. You remembered them being warm in the cave, but their touch seemed oddly cool now.

They let out what sounded like a curse in that complicated language of theirs, but you could only focus on how the timbre of their voice made you shiver when they asked you a question. Their lips moved again, but you were too busy staring at the flex of their arms when they shrugged off their jacket, draping it over your shoulders. The fabric felt cool at first, but it did nothing against your flushed skin. Blinking slowly, the fog only seemed to thicken when they instead stated, “You got too close to the foliage.”

Who cares? you thought, much too engrossed by the fingers pressing into your skin. They asked another question, those fingers jostling you gently when you didn’t respond.

“What did the plant look like?” they repeated, silver streaks of hair falling into their face. They tickled your forehead, and you giggled at how *silly* their frown was. “What. Did. It. Look. Like?”

“Uh.” Your brows scrunched together as you tried to think, alarm bells ringing in your head somewhere under the density of the fog. You faintly recognized that it must have been wrong. Your sluggish brain was able to conjure the image of the puff of pollen as you responded, “Pink... I think? No.” That didn’t seem quite right. The petals were *definitely* a

different color than the pollen, but... “Pink. *Everything* is pink right now.”

You hadn't realized you'd said that aloud until Astrum cursed again. This time, the downwards tug of their lush lips didn't amuse you. “You little idiot,” they seethed. “Did you not listen to me at all?” The question seemed to be rhetorical this time, because they continued to rail on with, “The plant is called *Dionaea muscipula erotes*. The third term refers to how they catch their prey. The Eroles are winged gods in Greek mythology that are associated with love and *desire*.” You tried to focus on Astrum's words this time, but it was getting harder and harder as the pain in your abdomen flared again. “Their spores are akin to an aphrodisiac. The plant counts on their target to overheat and die.”

“Is there a cure?” Your tongue felt heavy in your mouth, but you were lucid enough to recognize you were in trouble.

“Yes,” Astrum responded, though they sounded hesitant. “You are already metabolizing the chemical. The more immediate cure is two-fold: expulsion, and neutralization via a certain enzyme...” That didn't seem so bad, but the pinch of their brows underneath their crescent moon wasn't very encouraging. “These have to occur simultaneously, and in very precise ways. The former through the victim's release, and the latter can only be found in the seminal fluids of a specific subset of species.” They paused. “*My* species is among them.”

Astrum paused again, as if giving you a moment to process. You blinked, trying to ignore the electric ripples of their touch

on your skin in favor of taking advantage of this courtesy. You blinked again, your brain still a bit lethargic, but you managed to urge the gears in your head into action, hoping the momentum would play in your favor.

A few more seconds later, and your mouth dropped open.

Oh.

In other words, you could be cured via sex.

With *them*.

“Am I going to die?” you willed yourself to ask, tongue feeling heavy in your mouth. Astrum found you interesting, sure, and though you’d shared an interesting experience the night before, you were probably the last person in the universe they would want to become fully intimate with. You should have been more alarmed by this, but the emotion was dulled by sparks jolting from their fingertips into your veins. The silver in their eyes darkened to a pewter.

“Not on my watch.” Their fingers curled into your skin tighter, almost possessively. “We are a day or so from the Capital. The alternative is to seek treatment there. Considering the varieties in this particular area of the jungle are not at peak maturity, the pollen you inhaled was most likely not at full potency.” Their eyes flickered to the wilted path of plants you’d just walked through, lips pursing as they studied the foliage. “By my estimates, you have at least two days until the situation becomes critical.” Gaze returning to you, they finished with, “In short, if you would prefer the latter option, that is the one we will pursue. You may be in pain, though. I will carry you

so you may preserve your energy.” Their head tilted, one hand slotting against your jaw. “I just want you to be fully aware of your options and the matter at hand.” Then, more gently, they assured, “I will not allow you to die, terraling.”

Their hand was blissfully cool. Your head felt heavy, leaning fully into it as your eyes slipped half-shut. “Would you want me like that?”

The question seemed to hang suspended in the mist. Astrum was a pain in the ass, but you couldn’t deny the strange attraction you’d felt from the beginning. Even last night, you’d craved more—and that was before any stupid plant pollen heightened your desire for them.

“I would offer myself to you if you would prefer the former, even if it was only to dull the pain. I completely understand that,” they replied, ever the diplomatic one. “But if it is a question of *wanting*...” Their tails curled around your back, thumb sweeping against your chin to rest on your lower lip. “I wanted you *then*, terraling. Just as I do now.”

So you’d apparently been on the same page, then, you realized, heart thudding at the notion that maybe you’d been more than a curiosity and a convenient lay. Eyes widening, you stared at them.

“Do you trust me?” you asked, placing your palm over the back of the hand cradling your jaw.

“No,” they responded after a beat, mimicking your own response to the same question.

But the way their mouth twitched, the crescent moon on their forehead and the stripes on their cheeks seeming to blaze even in the blinding daylight, told you it was a lie.

Ozone and petrichor swirled against your taste buds when you lifted to place your lips against theirs. You wound two arms around their neck just as four wrapped around your lower back, crushing you to their chest. The forest was tented by silver hair, your breath leaving you in a gasp when the rough scrape of bark met your back.

Astrum's limbs were a flurry of silver and violet as they worked to shrug their jacket off your shoulders, your pajamas following shortly after as their own clothes quickly joined them on the forest floor. You couldn't seem to get enough of their mouth, whining at the brief loss of contact while they maneuvered you against the tree. Their skin felt cool compared to the molten heat pooling in your abdomen.

The throb against your hip was immediately recognizable. Your hand disentangled itself from their hair, slipping downward to stroke at the pulsating bulbs. It jolted at your touch, heavy and firm in your grip; when you swept your thumb against the smaller bulb at the tip, you were surprised to find it already slick with moisture.

Their growl reverberated down your throat at this. Two arms caged you against the tree, while the other two gripped underneath your thighs, lifting you higher into the air. A feather-light brush against your clit made you gasp, and when the press became more insistent, you realized it was their tails.

They were still entwined with each other, the twisted coils providing a pleasant friction that made you shiver. They flattened to you, grinding against your cunt while the tips flicked your clit. You gripped Astrum's member in encouragement, tugging at the silken strands close to their scalp, and tilted your head back in bliss when the tails slowly sank into you in reward.

You pumped at the bulbs in your hand, panting when Astrum released your mouth to drag their tongue across your jaw and down to your neck. The tip of their ear tickled your cheek as they sucked at your pulse point. A high-pitched keening bubbled from your lips when their fangs nipped at it while their tails pushed deeper, beginning to coil as they thrust slowly.

While they hadn't seemed thick at first, the coiling and knotting created a surprising stretch. You felt oddly pliable, just wishing for *more*. But Astrum's tails were somehow in tune with your needs, slowing to bunch more of themselves around each other before continuing their pistoning motion, feeding deeper and deeper into you.

Your release was less a surprise than it was inevitable, the wave of pleasure cresting and crashing over you allowing for a temporary reprieve from the pain that had been slowly gathering in your abdomen. But it quickly flared hotter, as if angry that it had been denied what it really wanted. Vision throbbing pink at the edges, both of your hands gripped at their shoulders, scrambling for purchase as you struggled to vocalize your need.

Their head pulled from your neck, eyes and markings swirling a savage shade of silver that could only exist in the wild as they studied you. The sudden emptiness of their tails sliding from you had tears welling in your eyes, but as their bottom arms lifted you higher, you almost wept in relief when the bulbous tip of their member bumped against your clit. It brushed against it a few times, the slickness of their moisture combining with yours, before they slowly lowered you onto it.

The first bulb was about as thick as their entwined tails. It sank into you easily, but your brows quickly furrowed at the resistance the second segment provided. You wanted *it* in you though—fully, and as soon as possible—so you began to roll your body, wriggling your hips in an attempt to take more of them in. Their chest rumbled as they dipped to brush their lips against yours. Somewhere, you thought you heard the sound of wood splintering.

But that was quickly forgotten as the stretch increased, closer to what your body craved as your cunt greedily swallowed the second bulb, already thirsting for the third. You came to a standstill, though, as if stuck, and you whined in frustration. When something brushed your clit, you immediately recognized the feel of their tails, eyes fluttering as they ground against it.

You shuddered again, legs widening as your thighs trembled. Their tails kept grinding against you, picking up in pace as you gasped once more. Your eyes screwed shut, head tilting against the tree in bliss when the third bulb finally slipped inside with a faint *pop*.

Astrum began to grind into you, the segments of their bulbs not allowing them to pull out fully. They created a suctioning effect that you'd never felt before, pulsing and pressing against the nerve endings that you didn't even know existed. Though you could feel your own slick pooling against the inside of your thighs, the stretch seemed to only intensify. Even behind closed eyes, the pink tinge deepened to red, and you knew you were close.

"I cannot hold it back," Astrum gasped suddenly, their breath fanning your ear, making you shiver. Despite your brain being otherwise occupied, you immediately understood they were referring to their egg. Something about this was oddly thrilling as you gripped them harder. "Where should I—"

"Inside," you gasped quickly, unable to fathom anywhere else. "*Please.*"

A low groan seemed to shake the fog itself. Astrum tensed, biting out a curse as they began to tremble. Your eyes widened, leaves and loose branches raining down on your figures while you moaned at the never-ending stretch.

The bulbs in Astrum's member pulsed, seeming to inflate with every throb as they ground their pelvis into yours. You winced at the sudden sting of the bulb closest to the base growing larger as their tails resumed circling your clit almost in apology. The bulb pulsed again, becoming much firmer than it had been before it deflated ever so slightly, but the relief was short-lived as the bulb in the middle expanded to the same girth.

This must have been the egg, you managed to think, shaking at the mind-numbing fullness it created. The process was slow, and you were thankful for the attention their tails paid to your clit as Astrum murmured into your ear in a language you couldn't understand. From their gentle tone, you assumed the words were meant to be soothing.

Your eyebrows furrowed when the egg finally made its way to the tip, the sharp pinch strangely foreign. It had nowhere to go, and through the heated haze of want, a cool flash of alarm bolted through you. But Astrum must have sensed your discomfort, a hand lowering from where it had been gripping the tree behind you to press a thumb into your bottom lip.

“You are doing beautifully, terraling,” Astrum murmured, their tail grinding against your clit more intently. Another hand lowered to cup your breast, your nipple pebbling as their finger brushed against it. You opened your eyes, flicking your tongue out to lap at their thumb. You closed your lips around it; a metallic taste flooded your tastebuds. It coated them like an expensive wine, and you gently sucked as they moaned.

That vulnerable sound alone was the catalyst that finally pushed you over the edge. They rocked their hips into you almost feverishly as your thighs trembled again. The sharp pinch grew in intensity until it was suddenly over, a new, different kind of pleasure taking its place. You suddenly felt heavy, sighing in bliss when the pink-tinged heat melted away at the warm ropes of their release painting your cunt.

Your name—not *terraling*—spilling from Astrum’s lips felt like a catalyst to runaway nuclear fusion. However many infinite universes out there seemed to align, merging into one. You collapsed against each other like two degenerate stars, panting into the other’s skin in an entanglement of limbs and stuttering gasps. They slowly lowered you to the ground, the mud feeling frigid underneath your feet. Exhaustion hit you like a hovercraft, but despite your fatigue, you almost whined in protest when they eased their member out of you.

They gently leaned you against the tree, quickly turning to gather your clothes. You struggled to catch your breath, lifting a hand to splay against your heaving chest as you did so. The heavy feeling in your abdomen throbbed again; when your hand slid down to rest on the firm bulge causing your stomach to distend slightly, a shiver of thrill crept down your spine.

“It will dissolve in an hour or so.” Astrum stood in front of you, two arms being used as a laundry rack of sorts as both your sets of clothing draped over it. You were pleased to note that Byron also dangled from their grip. One arm plucked their jacket from the mix, coaxing you from the tree to carefully arrange it over your shoulders. Your skin immediately cooled under the fabric, and your lips quirked into a weak smile of thanks. “Come. Let us find another stream so we may wash and rest before continuing our journey.” Their hand lifted to pinch at your chin, eyes and markings swirling playfully while another reached toward you. “I will ensure you still do not dissolve.”

You rolled your eyes, but placed your hand in the offered palm. You expected to be led forward, only to squeak in surprise when they deftly threw you onto their back. Arms instinctively wrapping around their neck, your cheeks flared in another blush as their tails lifted to cradle your naked thighs. Your core pressed to their back, and you hoped they couldn't feel the remnants of your combined releases still dripping from you...

But when their markings glowed faintly in the daylight, you swallowed your groan of embarrassment.

They began walking, and your head swam with all that you'd been through in less than twenty-four hours, or whatever that equated to in *fractals* on Tradinoi Centrum. Your friends always teased you for being a recluse, but, if you were a betting woman, you would've happily put money down on the fact that you'd probably had the most exciting Halloween out of all them.

"You know," you mused after a moment, "when you said you hoped my stay was 'pleasurable,' I bet even *you* didn't quite think it would be like this."

You still had much to learn about Astrum and their home planet, but you were aware of enough to conclude they were definitely a few choice things—they were a haughty know-it-all, but as good as their mouth was at being condescending, it was *also* pretty good at kissing. You found that the former wasn't as bad as long as they were striking a balance doing the latter.

And when their musical laughter rippled through the mist, you concluded that Astrum had quite the talented mouth, indeed.

Five

A UNIVERSE EXPANDED

The world was no longer emeralds and rubies, but platinum.

You blinked at the chrome colossus in front of you, reaching up to brush the sleep from your eyes. At some point, you must've dozed off, the rhythmic motion from being draped over Astrum's back lulling you out of consciousness.

Well, being draped over their back, and having your *own* blown out, actually.

The impressive building looming in front of you glittered lilac in the light of Tradinoi Centrum's twin suns as if it were made of crystal. A trio of vaulted domes seemed to pierce the sky itself, the sweeping arched doors and windows and impressive colonnade reminding you of an official state building or maybe even a palace of sorts. You gaped when Astrum began taking the steps two at a time, feeling their tails squeeze the backs of your thighs to hold you steady as they ascended.

Byron, you thought to yourself, glancing down to make sure Astrum still held your precious notebook in one of their hands,

I've a feeling we're definitely not in Laocoön Bay anymore.

While Astrum didn't necessarily announce it, you could already tell this must have been the capital they'd been referring to. You must have made good time, despite your brief rest stop at another stream, where you'd waited for Astrum's egg to dissolve while they applied a similar poultice they'd prepared the night before to the scores of scrapes you'd both discovered had littered your back. Astrum had even grimaced in their own sheepish apology at their roughness, streaks of green blood from the cuts and splinters on their hands a testament to how hard their fingers had curled into the tree trunk.

You were thankful for the cooling effect of Astrum's jacket, which shielded your skin from the harsh rays, though it was at least much less humid than in the heart of the jungle. Given the two extra arms thing, you hadn't been quite sure how to wear it at first, but eventually settled on stuffing your own arms in the sleeves meant for their lower two, while throwing the upper two sleeves around your neck like a scarf.

Prisms of light sparkled across Astrum's skin as they continued up the mirror-like steps. When an array of banners with what looked to be an official shield on them lined the archways Astrum then passed through, you realized that your assumption of it being a government building or palace might not have been that far off.

"H-Hey," you whispered, voice a bit raspy from disuse as you reached to poke their pointed ear, "you sure you can just waltz

right into here like this?”

A flicker of silver met your eyes as they glanced at you. You bobbed slightly as their shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Indeed.”

You arched your brow at their unbothered response, but then remembered that they had mentioned working for the government. Maybe they had a special clearance, or something.

A flurry of movement then caught your eye, and you realized you were no longer alone. The whole place seemed to be in an uproar, various beings in flowing, silver robes with the same seal as the banners in the entryway embossed on their sashes flitting about like chickens with their heads cut off. Some of them looked like Astrum, with skin in varying shades of violet and hair ranging from snowy whites all the way to obsidian blacks, while others were vastly different. One bystander appeared to be a naga with two tails, while you thought another was a minotaur, though something seemed a little different. It was only until the minotaur turned to you both and you saw that all four of their eyes widened that you realized what it was that had been a bit off.

The kinda-minotaur immediately blurted something. From the inflection, you recognized it to be the same language that Astrum sometimes cursed in. Immediately, time itself seemed to stand still as the rest of the figures froze mid-stride, before slowly pivoting towards you both, mouths agape. Then, in perfect, almost choreographed synchronization, they all sharply bent at the waist to bow.

That's an interesting form of greeting, you thought to yourself, blushing at the attention as Astrum indifferently waved at them with two arms, continuing on their journey to wherever it was they were taking you.

Apparently they didn't have to go far, though, because when they crossed from the entranceway into a much larger room, they immediately stopped in the middle. You glanced up, jaw going slack at the rainbows filtering in from the sweeping crystal dome, before gazing down at the rich, plum-colored runner that bisected the platinum tile floor. Your slippered feet sank into its plush fibers when Astrum eased you off their back to set you down.

This doesn't look much like a lab, you mused, though then remembered that if people needed special clearance to travel to Earth from this so-called 'Crown' they had mentioned, maybe Astrum had to secure the same clearance for you to return. You wondered how much of a headache it would be, considering you didn't really own any kind of special inter-planetary passport.

Something in your chest pinched.

But you quickly brushed it off when you saw you were no longer alone.

A figure was standing at the end of the runner in front of a large chair, talking with another. The former was dressed in the same silvery robe as the ones in the lobby, though their sash was the same shade as the carpet rather than the silver of the others. Their companion was dressed in what looked like

armor, a menacing spear clutched in two of their arms. They both seemed to be in distress, the robed person waving all four of their arms above their head, while the other had two palms facing them in what you interpreted to be a placating gesture. Neither of them even noticed your presence.

Until Astrum cleared their throat.

The speed at which both heads turned to them could have warranted an exorcism. They both immediately bowed, pausing momentarily before straightening again. The former stepped forward, arms waving wildly as a torrent of words in Astrum's mother tongue burst from their mouth. Their eyes, a vibrant shade of light blue instead of silver, were wide in what appeared to be relief, though they quickly narrowed in scrutiny, their voice pitching into sharp anger. Astrum quickly handed your notebook back to you to step forward, all four arms lifted to splay their palms at them in what looked like defense, but the flood didn't cease.

You wondered who this person was. Their skin was a lighter shade of violet than Astrum's, but their hair was an inky shade of onyx. A flicker of movement caught your eye, and you realized that they only had one tail.

Curiously, you also noticed that while they had periwinkle stripes on their cheeks, they had no mark in the center of their forehead.

Which was apparent when they turned fully toward you. Your eyes widened, body stiffening as an *Eep!* of surprise tumbled from your lips. Not wanting to be rude, you quickly glanced

around before stepping forward and tentatively extending your hand in greeting.

But these people didn't seem to be too fond of handshakes, as the figure let out a sharp bark and rows of other figures in the same glittering armor as the one this robed person was speaking to when you'd arrived appeared out of nowhere with their spears all flashing at you.

"Is your planet trying to kill me again?" you exclaimed, Byron hitting the floor with a crisp *smack* while your arms shot into the air. Astrum immediately stepped in front of you, all four arms held outward to shield you from view as they growled their own order. Their voice rang with authority, and the effect was immediate; all the spears lowered, metal clanging as the guards bent to bow.

Astrum turned to the robed figure, their tone tinted with annoyance this time. The figure winced—clearly, whatever Astrum was saying was some kind of verbal lashing. They shrunk in on themselves, stripes glowing in embarrassment as their cyan eyes flittered toward where you strained on your tippy toes to peek over Astrum's shoulder.

Apparently done with their tirade, Astrum stepped aside, beckoning at you with two arms. Heart still pounding, you took a tentative step forward, but relaxed slightly when the two arms pressed against your back. Goosebumps erupted across your skin while your neck heated at the tails brushing against your waist.

“This is Silian.” Astrum was addressing you, tipping their head toward the robed figure. Silian dipped into another bow, and you faintly thought of how toned all these people must have been from their rigorous greeting customs. “He is my, er —” Astrum faltered. You cocked your head as they cleared their throat. “He is my—”

“Most trusted advisor!” Silian snapped back into a standing position, robes swishing around his ankles as he rushed forward. His tail immediately curled around your forearm, all four hands gripping yours as he vigorously pumped your arm up and down. You appreciated that he had switched to your language, though you wondered if something had gotten lost in translation.

Maybe ‘advisor’ meant ‘assistant’ in their tongue?

You’d never really heard of a scientist having an advisor before.

“Nice to meet you—” you began, words jumping in pitch as your body jostled at the motion of Silian doing his best to rip your arm off.

“We sincerely welcome you to the Capital, tellurian!” they continued over-zealously, cutting you off. “We cannot thank you enough for accompanying our prince back to us!”

You blinked, the word ‘prince’ slowly sinking in. Now that *surely* couldn’t have been a translation error. Eyes narrowing, they slid toward the prince in question. Astrum’s markings swirled in sheepishness.

Not wanting to make a scene, you merely smiled graciously, though Silian's babbling only went in one ear and straight through the other as your mind kicked into gear. You didn't have much more time to process what you'd just learned, though, because Astrum quickly intervened, shushing their advisor and all but kicking him and the retinue of guards out of the room.

Everything had happened so quickly that your arm still remained suspended in the air, outstretched toward where Silian had stood. You blinked a few more times, trying to urge your brain back into motion before slowly turning to face Astrum. Four palms faced you while their entwined tails rubbed the back of their neck.

"I can explain," they blurted quickly once your eyes met theirs.

"I thought you said you were a *scientist!*" you hissed, placing your hands on your hips. You had the sudden urge to stamp your foot.

"I am!" Astrum replied. "We *all* are. I told you, my people are scholars—"

"But," you interjected, cutting them off, "you're a *prince!*"

"I cannot be both?" they returned just as quickly, two arms lowering to settle on their hips, mirroring your stance. "The two are not mutually exclusive." They stepped forward, lips tugging downward at your flinch. "My sister is the crown princess, and she is the best scientist in our family." Their eyes seemed to dim at this mention, nose contorting as if they had

smelled something sour at the mention of their sister. “In fact, that is what qualifies her to be next in line for the throne, even though she is younger.”

“Whatever.” You shook your head, lifting your arms to fold them across your chest. Astrum’s top two arms mirrored you again. “Why didn’t you just *tell* me?”

“We went over this, terraling, did we not?” They sniffed, and you felt your blood pressure rise when you realized they were becoming annoyed with *you*. “All you Earthlings seem to care about is power. I did not want my status to interfere with the genuine quality of our interactions.”

The statement seemed innocent enough, until you recalled what they had said previously: *I have studied your kind in-depth, but I could not pass up the opportunity to validate those learnings in the flesh.*

“Oh.” Your voice was low, the single syllable shaking as your blood continued to heat. “That’s right.” A humorless laugh echoed into the dome as you shook your head. “I’m just your *little experiment*. And you didn’t want to taint it. Of course.” The jacket draped over your shoulders suddenly felt itchy, and your cheeks warmed in anger as you struggled to tear your arms out of it, unwinding the sleeves from your neck and throwing it onto the floor. You quickly dipped to pick up Byron, jabbing the corner at Astrum. “I would throw this at you if I hadn’t already lost my pen in that stupid jungle!”

They winced, arms raising higher. “But—”

“But *nothing!*” you seethed, jabbing your notebook at them again for good measure. “I’m sick and tired of you putting my planet down with your *more-knowledgeable-than-thou* attitude!”

“But,” they interjected again, “*you* are different!”

Something about this admission stumped you, but not in a good way. You could tell they had said this as if to make you feel better, but it didn’t have the desired effect. As the words sank in, they were like a rash, festering under your skin.

“I can explain it to you,” you began in a sneer, “but I can’t *understand* it for you, though I desperately need you to understand that it’s not *just* me. I refuse to reduce myself down to nothing more than your idiotic attempt at confirmation bias!” You shook your head, lifting your chin in the air. “Sure, there are things that make me unique. I’m not denying *that*, but I’m not special—at least not in *this* way.” Your hands trembled, and you curled your fingers tighter around Byron’s coils to ground yourself with the metal embedding into your palm.

Your eyes widened in realization as their words from earlier finally slotting into place. “You thought I wasn’t listening, but I heard what you were saying about your trinomial naming system for plants. How you use Latin names, but if Latin originated on *Earth...*” A smirk danced at your lips as you folded your arms over your chest. “So either your galaxy borrowed the language from Earth, or our people knew much

more about our celestial neighbors than you are willing to admit.”

Your blush deepened, but the heat that warmed your face was that of triumph rather than anger as Astrum’s jaw went slack.

“We don’t know everything,” you continued evenly, straightening your back. “I don’t know everything.” A huff of a laugh shook your shoulders. “Nobody on my planet has figured anti-gravity out yet, but from what you’ve told me, I don’t think anybody on *yours* has figured it out either.” Lifting an arm, you gestured around you. “Your galaxy may have two suns and all this other fancy technology, but you’re not inherently better than us. When you think about it, we’re *both* just two specks of dust in however many universes are out there.” Tilting your head, you finished with, “The *real* difference between the two of us is that *I* am willing to admit my shortcomings. *You* keep talking about pride being the downfall of knowledge... but what else can you call it when you clearly seem to derive some sick sense of satisfaction from acting like you know so much more than us?”

Astrum was finally silent, arms lowering slowly until they were at their sides. Their tail also hung limply, no longer entwined, but pooled almost dejectedly on the floor. Silver eyes darkened, quickly darting away as they wrenched their gaze from you.

They may have been the definition of pride before, but the sagging slope of their spine and the dull pulse of their eyes and markings made them look more like desolation incarnate now.

You studied them for a moment in silence, glancing at where their jacket lay crumpled in a heap. Even that plush fabric seemed to dim, as if an extension of its owner.

A singular question had been swirling in your mind ever since the events following your pollen-sniffing incident. Unable to help yourself, you asked, “Do you regret it?”

Your voice was nothing more than a whisper, but from the twitch of their tails and slight movement of their jaw, you knew Astrum heard you, and that they understood what you were referring to. Their jaw clenched, eyes flashing with an emotion you didn’t recognize before they turned to you.

“Yes,” they answered honestly. You bit your tongue so hard at their response that copper flooded your tastebuds, but before you could turn and bolt from the room, they lifted their arms again to stop you. “I regret not warning you more thoroughly beforehand. I regret that I did not have the patience to find somewhere more comfortable than a *tree* to lay you against.” Your cheeks heated, eyes widening as they continued, “More than that, I regret that my pride stood in the way of learning more about you.”

They closed the short distance between you both, fingertips extended while their arms hesitantly reached for you. When you didn’t flinch away, their hands gently curled into your sides, tails entwining to reach up and tuck a lock of hair behind your ears.

“You are right. There are many things I do not know. That is why I was in the jungle to begin with.” They sighed. “This

mark on my forehead is what denotes my royal status, but it has been nothing more than a burden. A reminder that I have already failed, as my younger sister has already been deemed more suited for the throne.” Two deep lines carved into their forehead as snowy brows pinched. “The next in line is determined based on academic contributions to the empire. My sister has always been naturally intelligent. Everything always came much easier to her than it did to me.” Astrum’s eyes were unfocused, as if they were looking into the past. “When we reach maturity, our rite of passage is in the form of a capstone, not unlike your collegiate programs on Earth. Many of our advances had been focused on technology, so I saw an opportunity in our planet’s flora, which has been grossly understudied. But when I presented my findings, I could tell almost immediately that my parents and the council did not find much value in them, though it was another few planetary rotations until my sister reached maturity after me for them to definitively name the heir.”

Their chest rumbled in a weak laugh, but you could nearly taste the bitterness in it. “I should have known that they would pick her. That hovercraft I had been riding was *her* invention. It has completely changed the way we travel.” They shook their head, stripes glowing brighter in what looked like guilt. “I know I should not be so... *acrid* at this, as it has ultimately been to the benefit of our society, but I cannot help but be resentful that my people find more value in finding ways to go against the natural forces of nature than they do in learning more about it.” You couldn’t help but bite on the inside of your

cheeks, the notion more than familiar to you. “I have already lost, but I find comfort among the plants in the jungle. There is still so much for them to teach me, and yet...”

Their eyes returned to yours, widening in wonder, as if they were only seeing you for the first time. “I have found another topic that I so desperately want to understand. For instance...” Their head dipped, the tendril of hair brushing your cheek causing you to shiver. “What goes on in here”—their tails brushed at your temple—“when that smile lights up your face brighter than our twin suns? What makes that beautiful laughter ripple through your chest?” Voice lowering, they murmured, “What you *taste* like.” They sighed, lips curving into a bittersweet smile. “I do not expect you to forgive me, but I could not let you go back to Earth without attempting to verbalize how I feel. That, above all, would have been my biggest regret.”

You were a bit surprised you didn’t feel the floor against your chin with how open your mouth must have been as you gaped at them. The silence seemed to stretch all the way to Earth before you cleared your throat to respond.

“You’re kind of an asshole, Your Highness,” you began, shrugging your shoulders in what you hoped appeared to be indifferent nonchalance, “but I have to admit, you have kind of a cool setup here. I’m already thinking of changing my capstone topic to interplanetary travel, too. I think I have that one in the bag.” Your lips twitched, but something in your stomach sank. “Earth is my home and all, but I wish I could learn more about this place...” The sting of moisture gathered

in the corners of your eyes. You blinked, clearing your throat in embarrassment. “And, uh, about you, too, I guess.” You paused, reiterating, “Even though you’re still an asshole.”

“Duly noted, terraling.” Their lips curved, eyes brightening with what looked like relief. “But who said you cannot return?” You shivered as their fingers pressed more firmly into your skin, your veins humming as if wanting to memorize their fingerprints. “I may not be the heir to the throne, but I am still a prince. As a senior member of the royal family, I can directly grant you permission to freely travel back and forth as my own personal guest.” When you merely stared, they asked, “What? You do not believe me?”

“Astrum, I’m on a whole new fucking planet. You could tell me you piss glitter and I wouldn’t even be surprised.” You quirked your head, eyes narrowing dubiously. “Do you piss glitter?” When they merely scowled, you shrugged, and the significance of their suggestion finally sank in. You had to actively stop yourself from bouncing up and down on the balls of your feet, instead clutching harder at Byron in excitement. “You mean it?”

“Indeed.” They nodded, though they suddenly looked very serious. “My invitation comes with two stipulations, though.” You arched a brow at this. “Firstly, I require that you bring with you a few of your Earthen plant varieties so I may study them.”

“Done.” You shrugged, expecting the request to be something much more difficult. But then your eyes narrowed in

suspicion. “What’s the second?”

“That you extend to me an invitation for your graduation.” Their eyes sparkled at this, and you couldn’t stop the delighted smile from creeping across your face.

“Done,” you said confidently. Lifting a hand, you wagged your finger at them. “But I’m getting you a seat way in the back. You still have a lot to make up for, you jerk! You better have some good tours planned for me when I come visit—I want to see it all! And I want to meet your sister.” Their eyes widened in alarm, only for their chest to rumble when you flippantly said, “Somebody’s gotta tell her those hovercrafts of hers need better safety features. Yours exploded when it hit that tree!”

“And so you shall.” They took a step back from you, arms falling from your skin while their tails slid from your temple. Disentangling themselves from each other, one reached for you again, curling around your forearm as it had once done in greeting. “You may refer to me as Astrum.”

They looked at you pointedly, and you cocked your head to the side. A strange sense of déjà vu washed over you as you stared at them in confusion. Then, your mouth dropped into a small ‘o’ of remembrance. Clearing your throat, you introduced yourself as well.

“Now that I have nearly fulfilled my previous obligation of seeing you back and we have exchanged names, I have a new obligation of assisting you in seeking the knowledge you desire.” You grinned, rolling your eyes playfully at the

performative gesture. They tugged gently at your arm, urging you to follow them. “Come, terraling,” they said, two arms extending into the heart of the palace. “We must be on our way. We have a *substantial* journey ahead of us. But first, I must point out that you were incorrect.” At the arch of your brow, they stated, “*You* are no mere speck of dust.”

You giggled, relishing in the warmth of the tail wrapped around your arm. You would have a lot of explaining to do once you got back to Earth, and though something told you that you and Astrum would have to have a chat on what exactly you were allowed to reveal, you couldn’t help but marvel at the new trajectory your life would be taking. You remembered that, in astronomical terms, a true ending didn’t exist—that the idea of “the end” was less of a concept than it was a paradox.

As you followed Astrum through the palace, you caught a glimpse of the setting suns. Though the day was coming to a close, something in the air seemed ripe with possibility. The intoxicating scent of petrichor and ozone swirled around your head.

Far on the horizon, two swollen suns blazed violet against an emerald sky.

And when twin pinpoints of silver glowed as Astrum turned to you, lips twitching into a slow smile as they called your name, you were met with a new beginning of a universe expanded.

Note to the Reader

A. M. Kore is an indie author of immersive monster romance. She loves anything monsters, mothman, and *italics*.

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Craving Stardust by Ava Ross

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



I'VE FALLEN FOR AN ALIEN, BUT THE GOVERNMENT IS DETERMINED TO TEAR US APART.

I'm walking along a dark country road, on my way to a spooky Halloween party, dressed like a romance cover model. My torturous high heels are killing me, and I'm about to ditch them when a thick, mysterious mist engulfs me. The fog lifts, and a star streaks across the sky right overhead. It lands with a heavy bang in an open field nearby. Curiosity killed the cat, right? Well, consider this me having only eight lives left. My heart racing, I rush to the scene, where I nearly smack into a crashed alien spacecraft.

The hatch opens and a gorgeous, horribly wounded alien groans inside. He reaches toward me, and when we touch, sparks flare across my skin. Okay, so now I have seven cat lives left. While I should run in the opposite direction, I can't.

There's something magnetic about this green-skinned guy, and I decide to rescue him. At my farmhouse, I put him in my bed and nurse him back to health.

His name's Lordek, and the more time we spend together, the more I fall in love. But the government's hot on his trail, determined to lock him inside a lab for eternity.

Can I keep him hidden, or will I lose my star man forever?

Craving Stardust is a standalone romance novella. Ava serves her romance spicy and with a dash of humor, plus a full plate of happily ever after.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

Individual Cover Art: Book Covers by Melody

Individual Editing: JA Wren

Dedication: For my parents who always believed in me.

One

IRIS

I stood at the window of my tiny farmhouse sipping a strong cup of coffee as the sun slowly rose on the horizon. My fluffy black cat, Katie (Purry), perched on the windowsill, her tail whipping back and forth. She made little chirps in her throat as she imagined herself hunting the birds pecking their way across the side lawn.

Once the pink rays had faded from the sky and my cup was empty, I gave her a quick pat and placed the mug in the sink. I strode through the cozy farmhouse I'd inherited from my deceased grandmother, entering my bedroom to get ready for work.

Katie scampered behind me, jumping up onto my bed and flopping with a heavy sigh. She rolled onto her back, exposing her big belly for rubs.

“Silly girl.” Leaning close, I stroked her fur. “Look at that chonky tummy. So cute!” I'd inherited Katie from my grandmother, along with the farmhouse in decent shape, a barn in not-so-decent shape, plus fifty acres of overgrown fields

and woods. Katie was a bit feral when I arrived, but once I brought her inside and fed her lots of treats, she turned into the spoiled kitty she was born to be.

Until a month ago, I'd lived in a city and managed a bookstore. My inheritance offered me a new start after my divorce. I'd recently rented a storefront downtown and fulfilled my lifelong dream of opening my own bookstore.

Fortunately, my old job had paid well, and I'd saved all I could. Added to what Grannie left me, I had enough money to cover my expenses until my bookstore took off.

Katie and I lived a simple life. Sometimes I longed for someone kind to share it with me, but what I was doing now fulfilled me in ways I'd never thought possible.

After lying on the bed beside Katie and giving her lots of pats, I rose and booped her nose—she swiped at my hand.

“Missed. Ha.” With a grin, I strode out to the big barn where my grandfather used to restore old cars for a living, and climbed into my vehicle parked inside. I drove into town, parking behind the building housing my bookstore. Inside, I flipped the Closed sign to Open and started straightening shelves.

It wasn't long before my first customer arrived, raving about the enormous romance selection I'd created. More eager readers followed, and the endless ca-ching of the cash register made my heart sing.

Finally, I had a lull in the action and flopped onto the stool I kept behind the register. Ten already? Whoa. Time *did* fly when you were having fun.

“Morning, Iris,” Tessa, the fifty-something woman who ran the bakery next door, called out as she bustled through the entrance. “Here you go, honey.” With her ever-present grin filling her lovely brown face, she rounded the counter and handed me a small plate holding a donut. “Freshly glazed and still warm from the oven.”

The sweet smell of sugar and cinnamon filled the air, making my belly rumble.

She was the first person to befriend me in town, and we’d been best buds ever since. Like me, she struggled to get by. At least I had the farmhouse and my savings. Tessa rented a house farther down the road from where I lived.

“Oh my god, you’re the best.” Lifting the treat, I took a big bite, groaning at how amazing it tasted.

“Only the best for my friend.” She handed me a covered cup of coffee. “Listen, I’m hosting a Halloween party this Saturday night. I think you should come. It’ll be a great way to introduce you to the rest of the community.”

“Absolutely count me in.” Anticipation bubbled inside me. “Costume or nah?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Definitely wear a costume.”

I frowned and popped the last bite of donut into my mouth, chewing as I tossed the paper plate into the trash. “Any

ideas?”

“A toaster?”

I scowled, though it was just pretend.

“How about a witch?” she said.

“I bet there’ll be five witches at the party.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I know...” My gaze fell on a display of romance novels. Retro clinch covers were in right now, the couple clinging as they swooned at each other. “I’ll dress in something similar to what the women wear on my books.”

Tessa picked one up and studied the image. “He’s cute. Love the flowing white shirt and his long hair. Funny how guys look better on covers than in real life.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve got a red cocktail dress I can wear, one of the few things I held onto after my divorce.” I’d wear it if I could squish into it, that is. “I’ll go as a romance cover model.”

“Definitely wear your hair down.”

My one indulgence. Thick and golden, I only cut it when the ends needed refreshing. Released, it curled in the heat and hung almost to my butt, though I wore it in a braid most of the time.

“Perfect.” Tessa clapped her hands. “Can you be there about seven?”

“Yup. Can I bring anything?”

“All covered.”

Since she lived about a mile away from me, I could walk. Then, if I had a drink or two, I wouldn't need to worry about driving home. Maybe I'd meet someone at the party, and he could walk me home. We might even share a kiss at the front door.

What a delicious prospect.

“Gotta go.” Tessa strode toward the front door. She must have yummys in the oven she needed to tend.

“See you Saturday!”



Saturday night arrived cloaked in darkness. A nip of anticipation drifted through the air, telling me almost anything could happen tonight.

After squishing myself into the red dress and brushing my hair until it crackled, I added a bunch of jewelry and slipped my feet into my only heels.

Katie meowed from where she lounged on the bed on top of a big fluffy pillow.

“Glad you approve, princess.” I gave her some pats then left for the party.

My heart raced with excitement as I stepped onto the road running past my house. A cool breeze tugged at my hair, making it swirl around my head in a silky cloud.

I'd barely made it a few hundred feet before a thick mist shrouded the road, enveloping me like a fog and smelling vaguely like ozone. As I walked, my heels tapped on the pavement.

"Who knows what tonight will bring?" I whispered, my hands outstretched as I walked through the mist. "I hope it's adventure."

As quickly as it had appeared, the mist dissipated. A flash across the clear sky caught my eye.

"Ah, a falling star," I breathed. *Make a wish*, my grannie always said. I pinched my eyes closed and...

I wished for love.

A silly thing after what I went through with my ex, but it was my wish, and I'd spend it as I pleased.

The shooting star grew bigger, as if it was hurtling right at me, its fiery tail illuminating the night sky. I'd never seen one that didn't burn out long before it reached the planet.

It roared closer. Maybe it wasn't a star? A meteor then. How amazing.

When it passed overhead, I jumped.

A bang echoed in Grannie's overgrown field on my left, sending tremors through the ground.

"It hit." My heart pounded wildly, my mind racing with questions and possibilities. "I'm going to check it out." I had plenty of time left to reach the party.

With my pulse quickening and my breath hitching, I hurried off the road, taking a narrow deer path through the spindly woods. Trees loomed overhead, but I felt no fear—only excitement and an unquenchable thirst for discovery.

My one regret was that I hadn't worn something easier to walk in. Damn heels. This was why I'd thrown all the others out.

For some reason, I sensed my fate waited for me in the field, and I was determined to grasp it with both hands.

When I stepped out of the woods, I gasped.

Two

LORDEK

As I stood alone on the bridge of my small spaceship, a pang of loneliness hit me. There was nothing unusual about that. An adventurer, I'd traveled alone for many years, my only company those I met during my travels.

I gazed out the ship's viewscreen at the vast expanse of darkness, yearning for someone to share my life with. It was a silly wish. If I truly wanted someone in my life, I should move home. My family would be happy to introduce me to potential mates.

Maybe after this final adventure, I'd sell my ship and settle on the land I owned. I could become a farmer, a notion I would've scoffed at years ago. But the lure of seeing what was beyond the next planet had grown stale.

"Computer, set a course for the nearest uncharted planet," I said, sitting in the sole chair on the small bridge.

"Course set," the tinny voice said, and the hum of the engines changed as I began what would be my final journey.

As I became absorbed in the intricate calculations of my return home, I failed to notice the looming danger. It was too late when the alarms blared, signaling an imminent collision.

“Engage evasive maneuvers,” I shouted, gripping the arms of my chair. I quickly fastened the restraints.

The ship shuddered, veering off course in a desperate attempt to avoid the enormous asteroid. As we scraped past it, the ship’s hull screamed.

A bank of what looked like mist or fog appeared straight ahead.

“What?” I’d never seen anything like it before. I punched the dials on the control screen in an attempt to manually change the ship’s course away from it.

With a gut-wrenching lurch, the ship was sucked into the mist.

Darkness engulfed the ship. Vertigo set in as stars and galaxies blurred together, stretching and twisting as my tiny vessel was hurtled through what felt like a tight passage.

My guts wrenched sideways as the craft was ejected from the mist, spinning toward an unfamiliar blue and green planet.

“Computer, stabilize.”

Metal shrieked and heat drowned the ship as it broke through the outer atmosphere. The ship was coming in at the wrong angle. If I didn’t correct it... I didn’t want to think about that. I’d die and no one would ever know what happened to me.

Only now did I regret not seeking a mate.

“Attempting stabilization,” the computer said with a calmness that evaded me.

The ship shot through clouds, approaching the planet’s surface at too fast a rate.

With a sickening crunch, we streaked across the sky. The ground came up too fast, and from the warnings flashing on the screen, the left wing and engine had sustained damage. It was all I could do to control the descent.

With a jolt, I brought the ship down on a bare stretch of green land. My vessel bumped and jarred across the open area, finally coming to a halt when the nose crashed into a small hill.

The impact made my bones jar together. The restraints malfunctioned, and I was flung forward, my body impacting with the control panel.

My vision blurred as the ship’s engines went silent.

“Computer... report.” It was all I could do to speak. My right leg ached. I grimaced as I rubbed my lower limb. My uniform had torn, and my blood seeped from various wounds, but my leg lay at an odd angle. Broken, most likely.

“Assessment of ship damage underway,” the computer said.

“Location unknown.”

I shifted, trying to get up, and agony shot up my leg.

My mind slipped away...



I woke to the hatch opening overhead and the stairs unfolding.

“Computer,” I cried out.

What was I going to ask? I couldn’t remember.

The damp smell of soil and vegetation filled my senses. At least I could breathe on this world.

I tried to open my eyes but they felt sealed shut. Finally, I pried them open, taking in vegetation both short and tall. Green, so different from my home planet’s blue.

“Computer.” My voice barely rose above a whisper. “Status report.”

The dash flared before dying down; the computer saying nothing.

Something moved close to the ship, the footsteps shuffling across the planet’s surface.

Fear spiraled inside me. I grappled at my waist but couldn’t locate a weapon.

A humanoid being poked its head over the side of my craft, its long golden hair cascading over its shoulders.

Such beautiful features. The creature had high cheeks, eyes the color of the lushest trees on Sathoria, and a chin with a tiny dimple. Its lack of horns and claws made me wonder how it defended itself during battle.

Despite standing on the stairs, the being’s head barely juttred above the side of the ship. What kind of tiny creature populated this planet?

“Kan ick halpa honom?” it asked, its words a melodic jumble.

My brain implant churned, snapping into action, trying to translate the language.

“Please,” I whispered, thought I didn’t know what I asked for. Help? The creature could be planning to eat me.

Our fingers made contact. As if I’d touched a live wire, a jolt roared up my arm.

Fated one?

This wasn’t possible; I was imagining things.

“Whoa, an alien. You gave me a shock.” Female. She shook her head. “Calm down, Iris. It’s a *badly wounded* alien. Green skin. Horns. But as wounded as a stray cat you might find scurrying through the ditch on the side of the road.”

I suspected she wouldn’t harm me, but I wasn’t sure why I felt I could trust my instincts.

“I’m going to help you,” she said. She clambered up over the side of the ship and jumped into the small bridge.

Despite my dire wounds, I gaped at what she was wearing—a bright red garment that hugged her generous curves and stopped mid-thigh.

“I’m Iris.” She eased me into a sitting position, leaning against the front of the ship, but I slumped sideways. I would’ve smacked onto the floor again if she hadn’t slipped her arm around me, holding me upright.

“Lordek,” I croaked.

“Nice to meet you, Lordek.” She gaped down at my wounds and the fracture in my lower leg. “This is going to be a challenge. I should call 9-1-1. I shouldn’t be rescuing an... alien.” Her voice rose. “Damn, I can’t believe I even said the word. Aliens really are real.” A frown crinkled her smooth-skinned brow. “You’re not into probing are you?”

“What kind of probing would you like?”

She snorted. “You’re cute in a different way, but not *that* cute.”

Coot... It took a moment for my translator to tell me *cute* meant she found me attractive.

My hearts skipped a couple of beats.

“I shouldn’t move you, but...” Her eyelids pinched shut before reopening. “Let me lay this out for you. Aliens don’t exist as far as we know here on this planet called Earth. I’m sure the government is aware your ship crashed in this area. They’ll be after you, and I doubt they’ll be kind once they find you. They might kill you. So, as crazy as it sounds, I’m going to get you out of here and hide you. We can figure out what to do with you once you’ve healed.”

This wouldn’t be the first species eager to grab someone like me for experimentation.

Her finger traced down my lightly scaled arm. “Did you know your blood is almost the same green as your skin?”

“Yours isn’t?”

“Mine’s red.”

“Odd. Like your clothing.”

She glanced down at the red garment. “I wore this for a Halloween party. I was going as a romance cover model.”

I wasn't sure what she meant, but it didn't matter. I liked how she looked in the red garment. I could too easily imagine myself peeling it off her with my teeth.

“I'll get you to my house, then I'll come back with my grandfather's tractor and take your ship to the barn. Assuming I can get it onto the big wagon parked in the back of the barn. Your ship's small, so it should fit. I'll strap it down. If I dragged it, the trail would lead them right to you.”

“I appreciate your assistance, kind female. I'll assist you.”

“Good, I'll need it.”

She helped me stand, and I nearly toppled, catching myself on the side of the ship.

“Out you go.” She hefted me up with her arm around my waist. Before I could tumble over the side and hit the ground, she grabbed my arm, slowing my fall. I still made impact, and pain shot up my leg. My vision wavered. Damn, I was going to pass out again.

“That didn't go like I planned.” Joining me on the ground, her hands landed on her hips as she looked me over. “You're bleeding from a billion cuts. One of your legs is broken. I really should take you to a hospital.”

“No healers,” I growled, my mind losing touch. I was here and then I wasn't.

I woke and stared at the sky. So many new constellations. And that rumbling sound...

When I roused again, the ground beneath me rattled and shook. No, I no longer lay on the ground but in an open-air transport vehicle. A green craft pulled it, black smoke chugging from a pipe on the front.

Iris peered back from where she sat on the vehicle. "Awake. Good. I was worried. I'll have you home soon. I covered your ship with branches. It's not much, but it should keep the government from seeing it if they fly overhead before I get it inside the barn."

I shook as the vehicle lumbered along, pain rocketing through my head.

The vehicle came to a halt in front of a wooden structure. Silence descended.

"We're here," she said. "I'll get you inside, and then I'll have to leave you. Your ship scraped the grass in a swath across the field. I'll smooth it out with the bucket, then cover it with brush. The field's overgrown, and that'll help you escape notice. Branches won't stand up to searching foot traffic, but it might work well enough for anyone flying overhead." She jumped off the vehicle. "Maybe they'll think your ship was a falling star like I did and ignore it." Her voice lowered. "Maybe."

"Thank you." I could barely host the energy to speak. Blood trickled from my wounds, and my leg throbbed.

She eased me out of the vessel and onto a long, bright blue flimsy square of fabric she used to drag me inside her dwelling.

My mind kept shooting in all directions, making it difficult to focus. I wanted to help her; I hated being so defenseless. But I couldn't seem to make my limbs move as they should.

We came to a stop beside a wooden frame covered with material made up of multicolored patches.

A small black fluffy creature watched us from a high wooden stand, blinking its golden eyes. It peeled back its lips and made a *ssssss* sound, but it didn't attack. As long as it remained there, I'd ignore it.

Iris lifted me from beneath the arms, a comical thing since I was so much bigger than her. My mate was strong. Resourceful.

No, she couldn't be my mate.

Yet somehow, she was.

She hauled me up onto a soft surface, falling back with me lying on top of her.

"Sorry," she mumbled by my ear. "You're heavy. I'm not trying to be mean when I say that. You just weigh more than me."

"I'll... help." I'd try. I could barely hold onto consciousness. It kept swimming out of focus.

She squirmed out from beneath me and grabbed me at my hips. This time, I pushed off the floor with my good leg, aiding her.

Once I lay fully on the flat surface, she stared down at me, nibbling on her lower lip, a plump pink thing so unlike my pale green lips. “I have to cut your clothing off. It’s the only way I can check out your wounds and see what they need.”

“Do... after.”

“You mean after I hide the ship?”

“Yes...”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Hide ship first.”

She frowned a moment before sighing. “Alright.” She rushed from the room, returning with a strip of thick cloth. “I’ve got other stuff I’ll use later, but this will immobilize your leg for now. It’s not an open fracture as far as I can tell, but bone bleeds like a...” Her voice lowered. “Yeah, better not to mention stuck pigs. If I can immobilize it, it’ll not only be more comfortable, it might slow the bleeding. I’m no EMT. My faulty medical knowledge comes from TV shows.”

I didn’t know what she meant, but I sensed no threat from her words.

While she ministered to my leg, my eyes rolled around in my head. Agony kept crashing through me, threatening to suck me into the abyss.

“Stay with me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. Her fingers traced across my forehead with a delicate touch, and again, sparks flared across my skin.

“True mate,” I mumbled.

To think I’d found her on this uncharted planet.

Three

IRIS

Fear for Lordek gnawed on the back of my throat as I peeled off my red dress and tugged on jeans and a t-shirt. I ditched the heels—forever, probably—and stuffed my feet into sneakers.

After watching him breathe for a few moments, I raced through the house.

Katie scampered after me, shooting terrified glances toward the bedroom. I paused only long enough to pat her a few times and murmur reassurance. She'd soon figure out he was too out of it to harm her.

Loading his ship onto the big wagon wasn't easy, but my grandfather's winches helped. As I dragged the ship up onto the wagon, I prayed it wouldn't collapse beneath the weight. I strapped it down, then covered it with a huge tarp I found in one of the barn's storage rooms. Thanks, Gramps, for never throwing anything away.

As I worked, my heart froze at each random sound, and I kept second guessing what I was doing. Maybe I should let the government take him. He might hurt me once he was feeling better. But something told me to protect him at all costs, and I trusted my instincts.

To avoid being seen hauling a tarp-covered spaceship down the road, I took the logging trail between the field and the back of my property and drove in through the back doors of the barn.

Rumbles echoed around me in the narrow space, and my heartrate slowed once the wagon was inside and I'd shut the doors.

I wanted to rush inside and make sure he was still breathing, but I had more work to do. Pruning shears in hand, I raced back along the logging trail. After cutting a bunch of limbs from the surrounding forest, I covered the deep furrows etching across the meadow, hoping to make it look like the stubby trees and raspberry bushes overgrowing the area. It wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, but short of plowing the field to cover the evidence, there wasn't anything else I could do.

If only Gramps had a plow.

My hands shook as I returned the shears to the barn and crept back inside my house. I couldn't shake off the mixture of fear and curiosity that coursed through me since finding Lordek. A freakin' alien! I should be running away from him.

Instead, I ached to be with him.

Katie met me inside the kitchen, giving me a disgruntled look. Yup, I'd left her alone with a stranger. Stooping down, I scratched her neck to comfort her. After giving her some canned food to keep her occupied, I texted Tessa, telling her I couldn't make it to the party after all. Sorry, but I'd see her Monday. I grabbed my first aid kit from the bathroom and hurried to Lordek.

The sight of him lying unconscious on my bed made my chest tighten. His features were both striking and foreign, undeniably alluring. His vulnerability stirred something within me. I'd do all I could to protect him.

"Hey, Lordek," I whispered as I approached the bed. "I've got to take care of your wounds. We can't leave your leg like that." Doubts bullied my mind. I knew nothing about medicine. It was all I could do to put a bandage on a cut.

Should I take him to a hospital? If it was a choice of him dying or them helping him even while calling the authorities, how could I do anything else?

"Check his wounds before deciding," I announced to the room.

After tugging back the blankets, I set to work, carefully cutting away his clothing, a challenging task. The material was thick, almost as if metal threads had been woven into the fabric.

As his clothing fell away, I couldn't help but admire his muscular frame. He was breathtakingly gorgeous in an otherworldly way that left me both captivated and intimidated.

I made myself remain dispassionate about what I was doing. He was unconscious. What kind of person would I be if I ogled him at a time like this? But I couldn't shake the feeling that a bond was forming between us, one that wouldn't be easily broken.

Once his clothing was removed and tossed into the trash, I assessed his injuries closely. His leg was obviously broken, and numerous cuts and bruises marred his otherwise flawless green skin.

He wore some kind of armor on his shoulder, a golden, scaled thing that extended to his chest and partway down his arm. When I tried to pry it off, it appeared fused to his body, so I left it alone.

In the attached shed, I found a sturdy yet thin strip of wood and used a bandage to splint his leg as best I could. I had to hope the bones were aligned properly, because resetting them was beyond my skill.

He moaned and thrashed on the bed as I did it.

Distress gnawed away at my confidence, but there wasn't anything else I could do for him than this.

“Stay with me, Lordek.” My voice trembled with emotion. “I don't know what brought you here, but I'm going to do all I can to help you.”

As I finished covering his wounds, I wondered what fate had in store for us. Would the government dismiss his crash as a computer glitch, or would they do all they could to find him?

Only time would tell.

Unease prickled across my skin as I sat by his side, watching him. If I kept him in view, he'd get better, right?

The darkness outside pressed against the windows. Had it really only been a few hours since I left for the party?

Fear chewed on my belief that I was doing the right thing.

Then someone knocked on the front door.

My lungs froze. It was the government!

I slipped off the chair and tiptoed to the front door. I'd left the light on, and my breath whooshed from me when I spied kids in costumes standing on the front steps.

"Trick or treat," they cried out.

With trembling fingers, I undid the latch and opened the door, pressing a smile onto my face. "Well, look who we have here. A ghost, Frankenstein, and..." I frowned at the third.

A parent stood on the walkway, smiling my way.

"I'm an alien," the child chirped.

His green skin didn't match Lordek's, but it was pretty close. Lordek, however, didn't have antennae on his head.

"You three look amazing." I dropped a candy bar into each of their bags. With so few houses on the road, I hadn't expected anyone to trick or treat here tonight, but I'd bought a bag of goodies just in case.

They hopped off the steps and raced to the vehicle parked in the driveway, climbing inside.

I waved, pretending nothing odd had happened tonight, realizing how surreal this was. A fake alien had come to my home for candy and a real one lay in my bed. Who would've thought?

As the car continued down the road, I shut off the outside light and locked the door.

When I turned, someone loomed over me, their weapon raised.

I shrieked, then sagged against the door when I realized it was Lordek. He held one of my kitchen knives, and the feral look in his eyes would make even a Marine take cover.

“What are you—” I jerked forward, catching him as he started to fall.

“Protecting,” he slurred. “Protecting you.”

They were little kids, but I appreciated his determination to come to my defense.

“We need to get you back to bed.” I pried the knife from his fingers and tossed it onto the couch. “Can you walk? I need your help to get you there.” There was no way I could carry him.

He huffed, and I assumed I'd insulted him.

We wavered and staggered, him hobbling on his broken leg.

“You probably rebroke it,” I fretted as I urged him back to my room where he collapsed on the bed.

He snorted. “Leg's fine.”

I rolled my eyes. “You broke it.”

“Healing.”

After propping his leg up on a pillow, I slumped in the chair again.

At least he was still alive.

I dozed, waking a few hours later, peering around frantically before noting Lordek slept. After tugging a quilt over my chilly body, I stared out the window. Katie stalked over and after giving the bed a long, disgruntled look, curled up beneath my chair.

Darkness still encased the world, either holding it secure or unleashing horrors I wasn't eager to explore.

A person always felt their most vulnerable before dawn, as if the night had tried to creep inside you to capture your soul. I couldn't wait for sunlight to send that feeling away.

“Iris.” His eyelids fluttered open, his dark, glazed eyes meeting mine. Pain etched across his face, and he sat up, clutching his leg.

Rising, I eased him back down onto the bed. “Hey, it's going to be okay.” Silly to think I had much control over this. All I could do was take care of his wounds and hope fate would watch out for the rest.

“Zor... vatt...” Sweat trickled down his face, and I wiped it away. He thrashed beneath the covers, flinging them off and trying to sit. His groan rang out, shooting through me like a spear. His head swiveled, and his gaze locked on mine. “Iris. *Iris*. Fated one. Fated...”

A shiver ripped through me. What did he mean? He must be delirious.

He slumped back on the bed, his hand reaching toward me. I took it, holding tight as if doing so would keep his nightmares away.

The room shrunk around us, the shadows deepening and the air growing colder. My skin quaked and quivered.

“Something brought you to me.” I stroked his hand, a fierce need to protect him solidifying in my bones.

When he started thrashing again, his hand was wrenched from mine. His body shook, and I suspected he had a fever. Could I get him to take some pills? I didn’t want him to choke.

If I was going to tackle whatever came tomorrow, I needed to rest, but I didn’t want to leave him. I lifted the covers and slipped under them fully clothed, easing into his side and placing my arm around him to hold him in place. He settled immediately, turning toward me and wrapping me up in his embrace.

Sleep claimed me.

I woke to sunlight streaming through the window and him braced over me, his face dark with fever and his eyes aflame.

“Vektor abslam,” he growled.

“Shh. It’s okay.” I stroked his face. He was hot, burning up.

“You’re safe here.”

But was he?

Panic scorched across my belly. I had to do something for him, but what?

“Iris.” The tension fled his body. His gaze fell on my mouth. He leaned closer and paused as if awaiting to see what I’d do.

I should get out of bed, but I could only stare up at him.

His mouth captured mine.

Four

LORDEK

I lost myself in the depths of Iris's eyes, stolen away by the whirlwind of colors that danced and shimmered there like stardust. As our lips met, a soft gasp escaped her. My dual hearts thundered wildly in my chest, threatening to burst through my ribs.

"Iris," I whispered against her mouth. I traced my fingertips slowly up and down her side as if by doing so, I could draw an invisible line to connect us.

She shifted beneath me, pressing her hips up against mine, her hand clutching my shoulders.

Pain stabbed through me, centering in my leg. I broke off the kiss and collapsed back onto the bed, groaning.

"Are you okay?" Strain came through in her voice. She rose onto her palm, staring down at me, her face tight with concern.

My vision swam in and out, and I clung to her words, her presence. Only the thought of her kept my world stable.

Somehow, I knew if I held onto the thread binding us, everything would be alright.

Thoughts flowed back into my mind, a slow trickle that bloomed into a full river.

“Yes.” Pain washed over me, each surge taller than the last, threatening to drown me.

Despite the agony jolting up my leg, my skin pulsed.

“You’re... glowing,” she said in awe, reaching to my chest before yanking her hand back.

“I won’t burn you. Harm you,” I grated out. “It’s...” How could I tell her that she was my fated one, that her touch had ignited my mating bond?

I barely knew her name, yet I *knew* her in a way older than time.

Somehow, after years of traveling and meeting more beings than I could count, I wound up on this planet and with the only female I would ever love. Once the bond tightened, only she would complete me.

“Is your skin glowing because you’re in pain?” She pushed the blankets back and slid off the bed to stand beside it. “I don’t have much that will help, but I can get you some over the counter pain killers.”

Killers...?

“I don’t welcome death, mate.”

Her head tilted. “Are you Australian? No, wait. What a silly question. You’re an alien from outer space. But mate’s a term they use.” Her lips scrunched together. “Never mind. Let me get you those pills. They’ll help.”

“I need you to do one thing for me, Iris.”

She paused in the open doorway, turning back. “What?”

“Go to my ship and obtain the medical kit strapped beneath the seat on the bridge.”

“Your ship’s in my barn. I brought it here while you slept.” She nodded. “I’ll do it. You...” Her breath rushed out. “I was going to tell you to stay right there, but I doubt you’ll get up while I’m gone.”

“I will not.”

My mate was beautiful, with rich golden hair and blue eyes, plus a lushly curvaceous shape I ached to hold again in my arms. What would she think if I told her we were fated to love each other for a lifetime and beyond? I didn’t know if this planet produced fated mates or if they paired or not, and now wasn’t the time to ask.

“I’ll be right back.” She left before I could say anything else.

I tried to remain still. Each subtle movement sent bolts of agony up my leg, straight to my brain. If I didn’t hold on, I’d pass out.

She returned quickly, holding the kit up. “Got it.” She lowered the metal box onto the bed beside me.

I engaged the opening sequence, and the lid slid back, folding within itself, leaving the supplies exposed.

“This will help me heal faster.” I held up a regeneration disc. It was clear I’d fractured my leg. Iris had crafted a rudimentary splint, and I could see she’d done what she could to straighten the limb for healing, but I couldn’t lie here on the bed for long.

She’d mentioned authorities finding me. Capturing me. Potentially harming me. I needed to be upright if they arrived. No, I needed to leave before they arrived.

I held the disc over my wounded limb and engaged it. A beam flashed from it, impacting with my leg, and I couldn’t suppress my groan. Pain competed with an itching feeling as the disc fused the fractured bones back together.

When the light blinked out, I untied the bandages holding the strip of wood against my limb, dropping them onto the floor beside the bed.

I flexed my leg, barely wincing at the tender pull. With a nod, I dropped the spent disc into the kit where it would replenish and slumped on the bed, worn out already.

“Wow,” she said. “That... I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Healing disc.”

“It knit your broken bone back together?”

“Partly.”

“That’s amazing.” She took the bandages and started toward the door again. “I imagine you’re hungry. I’ll go make something.”

“Thank you,” I called out as she left.

Turning back, she sent me a smile that made my skin glow once more. “Any time.”

As she left, I pinched my eyes closed and contemplated what I should do next. The disc had not fully healed my leg, though I’d be able to walk upon it within a lunar cycle or two.

If her government sought to capture me, I needed to leave this planet as soon as I could. That meant I should repair the damage to my ship and flee.

I didn’t want to leave Iris, my fated one. What would she say if I asked her to go with me?

We’d just met. Did I have enough time to win her hearts?

Surely it wouldn’t be too difficult to show her she was meant to be mine.

I had to try.

Five

IRIS

The scent of cinnamon rolls wafted through the room as I checked Lordek's bandages. The rub burns on his arms were healing nicely, the angry red skin starting to knit back together already.

"I'm still stunned by what your healing discs can do." Imagine having something like that in our hospitals. It could make the difference between life and death.

"I'm not sure how they work, but I can give some to you if you'd like." He gazed up at me with an odd look in his eyes, something I took for appreciation, though he couldn't be attracted to me. How pale I must seem when compared to his rich green skin. And his thick black hair gleamed like the deepest night, infinitely prettier than my regular old dirty blonde.

"I'll take some when you..." I didn't want to say *when you leave*.

He couldn't remain here long. My pulse flatlined whenever a vehicle drove past the farmhouse, and each time my phone rang, I jumped. As if the government would call before storming my place. Nah, they'd move in with SWAT teams and armored vehicles. We'd be lucky if either of us made it out of a confrontation alive.

Would Lordek fight back or surrender?

The thought of them taking him made my throat close off tight. It wasn't just that I'd never see him again; this wasn't about me and my growing feelings.

I hated to think of what they would do to him if they caught him.

"I need to work on my ship." His soft gaze met mine. "We both know I can't remain here. I need to leave as soon as I'm able."

I suspected he'd take a big chunk of me when he left, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. His life was in the stars and mine was here on Earth. I had the farmhouse I'd just inherited, my new business to grow, and the friendships I was building. A full life.

There wasn't anything for me outside my planet's atmosphere.

He'd only been here a short time, but my heart was tugging me in his direction, telling me there was something precious growing between us. My feelings had to be one-sided. What would he think if he knew I was crushing on him already?

Talk about a poor bedside manner.

“Are you hungry?” I bunched up the soiled bandages to throw in the trash. He didn’t need the wounds covered; they were no longer open, and I suspected within a day, I’d only find faint scars.

“I am.” His grin made my bones quiver. Everything quivered actually, whenever he looked my way. “Whatever you’ve made smells amazing.”

“Cinnamon rolls. I didn’t make the dough. It came from a can.”

He frowned.

“What do you eat on your ship?” I asked.

“Food fabricated from a paste.”

Even canned cinnamon rolls sounded better than that. “I suppose you can’t carry fresh food with you on such a small ship.” If it had been larger, it wouldn’t have fit on my wagon and my winch wouldn’t have been able to move it.

“It’s rare to have fresh food, though I do get into port on one planet or another on occasion and buy it then.”

I helped him sit up on the side of the bed, glad when he didn’t sway or look like he was about to pass out. “Are there many planets with ports out there?”

“More than I can count.”

I tried to imagine multiple species of aliens and just as many cities, but the thought made me dizzy. My world shrunk to this

small place. I was such a tiny speck when compared to everything else out there.

I tugged an old pair of my grandfather's sweatpants over Lordek's ankles. They'd be much too snug, but mine would be even tighter. And he couldn't walk around naked—though I suspected I'd enjoy the view.

He shifted his hips, pulling the sweats up around his waist, keeping the sheet over his cock. I'd seen it; hard to miss something big like that. My mind kept dragging me back to that moment. It was thick and long and it had nubs along the sides.

And he had two other, smaller cocks, one above and one below his main staff. Only in my steamiest dreams could I imagine what they could do while he pumped into me.

“It must be exciting to travel.” I struggled to keep the conversation neutral. I didn't just like him, I was sexually attracted to him. I doubted he wanted me to nudge him down on the bed and climb all over him, however, despite his amazing kiss. That had been fever-induced. He may not remember doing it.

I helped him stand, and while he grunted and some of his vibrant color fled his face, he remained upright.

“It's been amazing, but I grow weary of traveling all the time.” His gaze locked on mine, and I sensed he was searching for something, though I didn't know what. “Would you ever want to travel like I have, or do you see yourself remaining here forever?”

“Travel? How could I? My home’s here. I inherited the farmhouse from my grandmother. I have friends, and I just opened a bookstore in town. Do you have books where you come from?”

He lifted his arm and only then did I see a small device fused to his wrist as if it was partly made up of his green skin but also mechanics. “I love to read. I have billions of books stored on my wrist com.”

“Wow. An entire library at your disposal.”

“Whenever I put into port, I sync with their mainframe and add to my collection as long as I can understand the book’s language. Most interstellar beings speak Universal, however, and write it too.”

“Everyone can communicate?”

“All but those who’ve chosen to remain isolated.”

He put most of his weight on his good leg, but fortunately, I’d found an old pair of wooden crutches hanging in the barn and adjusted one to the tallest height. It was still much too short, but it would support his leg until it fully healed.

He frowned at it until I explained.

“Ah, perfect.” The smile he shot me was full of warmth and a hint of something I craved.

No, I craved *him*. I suspected I would for a lifetime.

How could I feel this much so fast? It had to be the intensity of the moment. I knew the authorities could find him soon and

take him away from me. My mind must be eager to stuff a lifetime into each second.

“What would you do if you didn’t travel?” I asked, walking beside him as he slowly made his way from the room and down the hall toward the kitchen.

Katie scampered behind us, watching him intently. At least she’d stopped hissing.

“I could settle on my home planet, Sathoria, and become a farmer,” he said. “Raise a family if the fates granted me my fated one.”

There was that term again. He couldn’t have meant to apply it to me. He’d vocalized the words during a fever dream.

My traitorous mind shot to me holding his child, a baby made up of the best of us. I stood outside our farmhouse, watching as he strode toward me after a long day working in our fields.

Silly, Iris, I chided. Something like that will never happen.

Shoving aside my vision, I helped him into the kitchen and over to the small table, pulling out a chair. “Sit. I’ll finish breakfast and we can eat.”

He settled onto the chair, propping his bad leg on another, and I was grateful not to see him wince. Hopefully he wasn’t in too much pain.

I placed two over the counter pain killers and a glass of water on the table. “Take these. They’ll help.”

He stared at the pills. “How do I take them?”

“Swallow them with water.”

He tentatively placed them in his mouth and chewed, grimacing at how bitter they must be, before washing them down with the drink.

“I meant to swallow them whole,” I said.

“Ah, yes.” With a frown, he placed the empty glass on the table.

After refilling his glass, I took the cinnamon rolls out of the oven, coating each with the orange frosting that came in the package. I took plates to the table and served us both, also giving him a cup of coffee.

I nudged my chin to the steaming liquid and added cream to my mug. “I don’t know if you drink anything like coffee in outer space.”

Lifting his mug, he sniffed the liquid. “I’ve never smelled anything like it before.” A cute frown scrunched the green skin of his forehead. Like me, he added cream, staring at the cloudy liquid. “You’re sure it tastes good?”

“I promise. Although, not everyone enjoys coffee.”

He held the mug with both hands, bringing it to his lips, and took a tentative sip. His breath caught. “It’s amazing. What is it made from?”

I explained how the beans were grown in mountainous regions and how they dried and ground the beans before we brewed them.

With a grin, I waved to the cinnamon buns. “If you think coffee is good, wait until you try these.”

“If you made them, I suspect they’re equally amazing.” He lifted one and popped the entire roll into his mouth. His eyes closed, and he groaned out his pleasure as he chewed.

My breath caught. My heart froze. And heat flared deep inside me at the sound.

And that’s when I knew I was falling in love.

Six

LORDEK

She was my true mate, and I was falling in love with her. There wasn't any other way to look at this.

Our relationship was doomed, however. She had a full life here she loved, and I doubted she'd want to leave with me within a few solar cycles, assuming I could get my ship to function again. Why would she want to leave everything she knew behind to be with a male she'd only interacted with for a few Earth days?

We were equally doomed if I remained here. Her words about what her people would do echoed within my mind. I suspected I didn't have much time before they arrived, determined to capture or kill me.

If only I could have a lifetime with Iris.

After we'd eaten all the soft sweet mounds of dough, Iris left for a brief time, stating she had to put a note on her bookstore door telling everyone she was closed for the foreseeable future, that she'd reopen as soon as she could.

I worried while she was gone, sitting by the front window, staring through the glass. But she returned without incident, stating no one had mentioned the crash in town. As far as she knew, no one was seeking me.

That told me I had some time, though I doubted I had much.

“What would you like to do next?” she asked after we’d consumed *sardwitches* that were slices of another dough with strips of meat and something called *sheez* in the middle. I adored them, especially the one with *moos-turd*. “You should probably rest.”

I wanted to remain awake, to spend every fraction of time with her. “I need to go to my ship, but I’ll wait for my leg to heal another solar cycle or two.”

“We could play some games then.”

“Yes, games.”

She helped me into another part of her house with a large squishy chair we both fit on. I could even rest my leg on the surface.

After removing a game from a cupboard, we spread it out on the table in front of us. So odd to play with something called *drice* and strips of very thin material she called *moony*.

“We pay for everything with our coms,” I said, lifting my wrist.

“We use plastic cards here most of the time, but many still use cash.” She held it up—*paypeer*, she’d called the fabric.

Her fluffy black beast crept over to me and sniffed my hand.

“Allow me to formally introduce you to Katie Purry,” Iris said.

“She’s been a wonderful companion. She lived with my grandmother who died, and now she’s agreed to live with me.”

Iris’s eyes sparkled. “She’s sweet once you get to know her.”

“She’s a pet?”

“She is.”

After blinking up at me with what I took as suspicion, Katie must’ve decided I wasn’t a threat. She hopped up onto my lap, curled around and laid down, staring up at me.

“See?” Iris said. “She’s sweet. You can pat her. She likes to be scratched around her neck.”

When I did so, Katie Purry made a rumbling sound in her chest.

“That’s her purr. It means she likes what you’re doing.”

Amazing. “We don’t have beasts like this on Sathoria.” The pet was soft if nothing else. It felt nice to touch her.

“That’s too bad.”

It truly was.

After the evening meal, I returned to the bedroom, worn out. I wanted to stay awake and be with Iris, but she was correct. I needed to rest.

I woke the next morning with her lying fully clothed beside me, her beast, Katie, snuggled between our feet.

Did I dare kiss Iris again? I wanted to do that and more, but I also didn't want to offend her. My time here was so short. If I upset her, we might spend the rest of the time I had here feeling upset. I couldn't bear that.

"Can you take me to my ship?" I asked after we ate the morning meal. "I need to assess the damage. The computer can generate components at my command, but generating and replacing them is a time consuming project. I need to make sure the computer functions and assuming it does, ask it to start producing materials."

"Of course." She frowned, nibbling on her lower lip. "We can go through the shed that's attached to the farmhouse. That'll put us closer to the barn. With all the trees lining my driveway, I don't think anyone will see you as we cross the open area between here and the barn. We can also cover you."

She dressed me in a garment that stretched across my torso and pulled up the head covering, comical with my horns jutting through the soft fabric. She tied the *sweetshirt houd* at my chin. The garment was too small, the sleeves coming only to below my elbows, but she added *meetons* that covered my hands.

Leaning heavily on the crutch, I slowly made my way through the shed and to the big building housing my ship, Iris pacing beside me.

"It isn't bad," I said after she helped me climb into the bridge. Thankfully, the computer functioned after I replaced a few components, and I programmed it to start producing parts. It

would take the ship a few Earth days to generate what I needed. After that, the repairs themselves wouldn't take long.

Then I'd have to leave.

"You're okay?" Iris asked from the barn floor. She fretted, alternating between staring out the small crack she'd left in the building's front doors and standing beside the ship, making sounds with her tongue about the scratches and bangs on the outer surface. Some had come from meteors or other flying objects encountered in space, but much of the damage on the underside had been sustained when my ship impacted with this planet.

After making a mental list, I gave the computer another order, and we went back inside. We ate a midday meal and sat in her reclining area, watching a *moo-vee* about a female character called a *mur-made*. It was fun and cute, and I wished I could take it with me to show my friends and the small young in my family.

On my third day in her world, my leg was nearly healed. I should go to my ship, but I wanted more time with Iris. I sensed she wanted to be with me as much as I did her.

We played a human word game for hours, coming up with outrageous phrases and trying to stump each other.

"It feels good to laugh with you," I said. "It's something I don't do often. I'm alone most of the time. Even when I land my ship on a new world, I have exploring to do, plus a document to produce that I send home so others can share my adventures."

“Ah, so you’re kind of like a blogger.”

I wasn’t sure what a *blooger* was, but I agreed.

Katie sat on my lap again, making the friendly rumble in her chest called a *perr*. I could see why humans encouraged these pets to reside with them. They made nice companions.

“Your turn,” Iris said, leaning into my side. “Give me a five-word phrase.”

I pondered for a moment. “The hungry stars blinked awake.”

Iris laughed, the sound music to my ears. “That’s a good one. How about this? Dancing shadows, whispering dreams.”

I nodded, hyperaware of her body sitting close to mine. She smelled wonderful, like starlight dewdrops when they first opened, plus pure female. “Very poetic. Your skill with words is impressive.”

Color rose into her cheeks. “Thank you. I love reading. My bookstore means the world to me. It’s been a long dream of mine to open one.”

Since books were not physical things in my world, she’d lose her dream if she left with me.

“I can tell stories are important to you.” An idea came to me, and I leaned forward. “Would you like to hear more about my home planet? I could tell you tales of the three moons, the vast purple oceans, the—”

“Yes.” Her eyes lit up. “I’d love to hear more about where you come from.”

Warmth flooded my chest. I smiled and began to weave a tale of my distant world, happy to lose myself in memories while also learning more of Iris through the questions she asked. I watched how she responded, embellishing my tales in the hope she'd be intrigued by my home, that she might even be excited about going there.

Though our time together wouldn't last much longer, I was determined to enjoy each moment. And with her, that was easy to do. She brought light to what might otherwise be a dark, dark time. She was the twinkle of the brightest star in a sea of uncertainty.

She was stardust, exquisitely beautiful but just as elusive.

The next day, Iris suggested we sit in her garden. After hearing and seeing no sign of anyone hunting me, we decided to take a chance to enjoy the sunshine. I was eager to get outside and explore a tiny bit of this strange world.

The crisp air and forest around the farmhouse brought a smile to my face.

As we sat, Iris told me more about her bookstore in town. "It's my happy place. There, I'm surrounded by stories, helping customers find their next adventure. I specialize in romance novels. They make up about sixty percent of the market. Did you know that?" Her low chuckle rang out. "Of course you don't. You're from a distant planet, not Earth."

"I enjoy reading romance stories."

“You do?” Her eyes glowed. “Some guys on Earth do too, though many mock it, as if finding happiness and love is something to be scorned. Frankly, life’s dull without love.”

“Have you experienced love for a mate?” I watched her face, eager to hear what she had to say.

“I was married, but it ended. I don’t know if people end matings on Sathoria but it’s common here.”

“Sometimes.” Rarely if the couple were fated mates. The fates would not put two beings together unless they were destined to love each other for this lifetime and any that might come after.

“Why did your mating end?”

Her lips twisted. “He cheated on me. Can you believe it? He vowed to be faithful, but his promise didn’t last five years.”

“I’m sorry. I can understand why you would be saddened by that. Bitter.”

“I’m getting over it.” Her spine tightened. “No, I *am* over it. We split eight months ago, and when I moved here, I put him and our relationship behind me.”

Could she ever love another? Sometimes, when a fated mate died, their partner found love again even if it wasn’t the same. The couples appeared happy.

“He wasn’t what you’d call my destiny.” Her voice grew wistful. “I hope one day to experience true love, to care for someone who’ll always see me as precious. And I’ll do the same with him.”

Maybe she *could* love another. My hearts surged, and my throat choked off. “I hope you find that lasting love.”

Her lips trembled with a smile. “Thanks.”

She laced our fingers together, and heat spiraled through me. Continuing our intimacy would only make leaving this wonderful person harder, but I couldn’t deny myself the wonder of her touch.

We went back inside and ate the evening meal, then sat in the living area again, our sides pressed together, sharing more details of our lives. I ached to pack a lifetime into the one or two Earth days I had left, to store up enough memories to sustain me forever.

I sensed each moment could be our last, and I needed to know everything about her. She appeared to feel the same about me.

“Thank you for coming into my life.” She stared down at her hands clasped on her lap. “Even if you can’t stay, I’m grateful we’ve had this time together.”

Her words echoed my thoughts. How was I going to leave her behind? “You’ve brought more light into my life than I could’ve imagined.” I took a chance, stating my true feelings. “I don’t know how I’m going to leave you. You mean everything to me, Iris.”

She tilted her face up, her gaze meeting mine, and I saw so much longing there it ripped my hearts from my chest.

Cupping her beautiful face, I kissed her, hoping to convey all the feelings swirling inside me. By the time we broke apart,

we were both breathless.

She traced her fingertips across my face. “You’re dear to me. I never thought I could fall in love with someone from another world, but I have.”

“Iris,” I growled, tugging her into my arms.

“Show me what I’ll never find with another?” She clung to my shoulders, burying her face in my neck. “I don’t think I can live if I don’t have that to cling to once you’re gone.”

I carried her to the bed. Now I would claim my true mate.

Even if we could only be together one time.

Seven

IRIS

He lowered me to my feet beside the bed and stroked my face and arms.

“You’re sure?” he asked, his voice hollow with emotion.

Once he left, I’d never see him again. I wasn’t sure how I could go on, though I would. I’d survived the loss of my parents. The breakup of my marriage. I’d moved to a new town and built a fresh life all by myself, connecting my family’s past with a glorious future.

At least all that waited for me to slip back into once he’d left.

I nodded, but I wanted to be sure he knew I consented. I wanted to be with him so much. “I’m yours, Lordek. Please show me what I’ve been missing.”

As he held me in his arms, emotion rushed through me. There was something about him that made me feel more alive than before. I felt as if I’d been incomplete, and he fused all my good parts together.

I looked into his eyes and could see the same feelings reflected back at me. We both knew what was going to happen next, and yet neither of us wanted to hurry this along. We wanted to savor this moment, to make it last.

Slowly, he unfastened the top button of my long-sleeved shirt. Each button that came undone sent a jolt of electricity through my body. Goosebumps formed on my skin in anticipation.

He reached the last button and slid my shirt off my shoulders, revealing my bra barely containing my breasts.

“So precious.” He ran his fingertips over the fabric, teasing my nipples through the thin material.

I released a soft moan and leaned into his touch, my eyelids sliding closed. He stroked my breasts, and my nipples hardened. He leaned in and brushed his lips over the exposed tops of them, and my gasp echoed around us.

With a snap, I undid my bra and tossed it away. His fingers traced across my flesh, his thumbs gliding across my nipples, turning them into tight peaks.

I ached to be with him fully.

“Take this off,” I said, tugging on the hem of his shirt. He ripped it up over his head, flinging it aside. I ran my hands across his chest, savoring the feel of his muscles and the scratchiness of the device fused to his shoulder. His breathing quickened as he glided his knuckles across my belly, his fingers dipping lower and lower.

I did the same, stroking downward until I was running my fingertips over the bulge in his pants.

I couldn't take it anymore. I needed him, needed to feel his skin against mine, needed to be with him

"True mate," he murmured. "You're the only one I'll ever love."

I sensed something powerful in his words, but I was too far gone with lust and excitement to ask him what he meant.

In a fever, we ripped off the rest of our clothing.

I paused to take in his gorgeous body, to stroke his thick, long cock with a curious bulb on the end. Would that part of him fit inside me?

He scooped me up in his arms and laid me on the bed, following me down. His lips fell hard on mine, and I clung to him as our legs entwined.

He was so much bigger than me, broader and heavier.

It was going to kill me to say goodbye.

Eight

LORDEK

Looking into her eyes made my hearts flutter. The heat between us was palpable, and I felt myself pulled closer toward her, as if an invisible force had taken hold of me.

That's how it always was with fated mates.

Would I still feel the tug when I'd left this planet? I sensed I would. A cavern would open in my soul and nothing would ever fill it again.

I wanted to get lost in the depths of her hearts, to feel us become one. My fingertips found their way to her cheek, lightly tracing its delicate shape before stroking down her neck and across her breast.

She arched into my touch, and something within me tugged harder.

I replaced my hand with my lips, kissing her again, drinking from her mouth until she was moaning and writhing beneath me.

I kissed down her neck to her breasts and sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, stroking it with my tongue while I traced my fingers down her belly and between her legs.

She gripped my shoulders and ran her fingertips across the back of my neck, then across my chest where she teased my nipples. They responded to her touch, tightening, and heat shot from them to my cock.

I was stiff already, my bulgit on the end secreting lubrication. When I was inside her and came, it would open, releasing a thin thread that would wind deeper within her. There, I would plant my seed.

I'd always wanted young, but she couldn't have my child here.

My fingers stilled between her legs, and I looked up at her. "We can't..."

She grinned. "We can." We were so in tune she must've sensed my thoughts. "I'm on the pill. I can't get pregnant."

I wasn't sure what a pill could do to prevent young from forming, but I trusted her in this. There was nothing I wanted more than to have a child with her, but if her government would hunt me, I suspected they'd ruthlessly track down and capture any young we might produce. Our child would be at her government's mercy. I'd traveled to planets with settlers similar to this, and no one fared well in a situation like that.

I looked down at her, lying there before me, the woman I loved more than anything in the world. She was beautiful, her body curved and soft, and I couldn't resist the urge to bury my

face in between her thighs and taste her. The scent of her arousal filled my nose, and I inhaled deeply, savoring the heady, sweet aroma. I ran my hands over her hips, and she shivered from my touch. She moaned as I traced my fingers up her stomach and over the curves of her breasts.

But it was the taste of her that consumed me. It was like nothing else in the world, delectable and intoxicating all at once. I licked and sucked at her, reveling in the way her body responded to me. Her hips lifted to meet my mouth, and I knew I was giving her pleasure like she'd never known before.

I lost myself in the moment, memorizing the feeling of her skin against my lips and the sound of her moans filling the air. For now, we were the only two people in the world, the only beings that mattered.

As she reached her peak, her body tensing and shaking beneath me, tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. I was witnessing something sacred, a moment of pure release and ecstasy that wouldn't be repeated again in my lifetime.

And as she lay there panting from her bliss, I knew that I loved her completely. I would do anything to make her happy.

"I need you," she said. "I should be spent and ready to fall asleep." She gave me a sweet smile. "But I want all of you, Lordek."

"And you shall have me, my mate." I rose up over her, and she wrapped her legs around me.

Placing the thick head of my cock at her saturated entrance, I shifted my hips forward.

Nine

IRIS

He pushed his cock inside me, and intense waves of pleasure rocked through to my core. His body lay heavy on mine, though he braced himself over me enough not to crush me. We kissed, his lips moving heavy on mine as he pulled out and thrust back inside.

I wrapped my legs around him, savoring how wonderful it was to be with him. Those nubs on the sides of his cock... They glided across my inner walls, adding to my pleasure.

My entire life before him paled. Only this moment mattered.

He murmured words I didn't understand in my ear, but they made heat flare inside me as if he could cast a spell, igniting me. He sucked on my earlobe before kissing along my jaw, his greedy mouth finding mine again.

Each time he thrust into me, the smaller cock on the top glided through my wetness and across my clit. When the top cock started quivering, my moan ripped out.

He lifted his head, studying my face as he moved slowly, gently, as if he needed to give me the most pleasure possible with each thrust. With one hand bracing his body, his other moved up and down my side. It slid across my ribs, finding my breast. When he rolled the nipple, shockwaves rippled through me, centering in my core.

I rocked up to meet each of his thrusts, clinging to his upper arms as a fire built within me.

“Lordek,” I groaned, pushing myself into his thrust. “I need you.”

“I’m yours, mate. Forever. Remember that.” The intensity in his gorgeous eyes sunk into me, heightening my pleasure. I wasn’t sure how much more I could handle, but I was determined to take all he had to give.

“Faster,” I cried. I needed him thrusting deep inside me, filling me completely. “Make everything disappear but us.”

“Like this?” He pulled out and drove back harder, seating his thick cock with a push that inched me up the bed.

I grinned. “Oh, yeah!”

“You’re amazing. I don’t want to hurt you but...”

“But what?”

“I have so much more to give. Can you take it, my stardust mate?”

I wanted to. Needed to.

“Give me everything. I can’t stand the thought of you holding yourself back. You won’t hurt me. I know you. You’re my Lordek.” My precious love. The only guy I’d ever want to be with. Even fifty years from now, I’d look back and treasure this time we had together.

I needed a pure moment to sustain me.

“What about this?” He twisted his hips as he plunged toward me, and the small cock I’d seen beneath his main one slipped through my wetness and coasted along my back entrance.

“I’ve never done that before.” I’d never wanted to try. With Lordek, this felt so much different. It felt right.

“I’ll go slowly. The tip secretes something that will make the passage easier.” His gaze locked on mine. “You have to tell me right away if it hurts or you want me to stop.”

“I will.”

He paused, and to my amazement, his upper cock latched onto my clit.

My groan echoed in the room.

“You’re with me so far?” he asked.

Too caught up in the amazing sensation, I could only nod.

His lower cock probed forward slowly, barely slipping inside me before retreating.

My breath caught.

“Yes or no, mate?” he asked.

“So far, yes. Please...”

“What?”

“Don’t stop whatever you’re doing with my clit.”

He laughed, low and sexy. “I have no intention of stopping. Tell me about this then.”

The lower cock slid inside me again, deeper this time. It wasn’t big, maybe a little thicker than my thumb, but whoa... I liked how it felt inside me.

When it started vibrating like the upper cock, my brain pretty much blasted up through the roof and into the sky.

He started moving again, pulling his main cock out of me and thrusting it back inside. The other cocks worked independently, the top one stretching to maintain its hold on my clit, the lower one tentatively probing from behind.

“More,” I cried out, my nails digging into his arms.

“I have so much more, mate, and I’m going to give it to you.”

He went faster, driving inside my passage while the other cocks continued to pleasure me in new ways.

The world stopped moving. I could only focus on him. His three cocks. The pleasure exploding inside me.

Heat drove through me, centering in my core. And when his muscles started tightening, and his groans grew heavy, I knew he was as close as me.

I wanted this to last forever. It may be our only chance to be together. But there was no holding my body back.

My climax crashed through me all of the sudden, rocking me across a turbulent sea and leaving me limp and satisfied, lying on the far shore.

As my body shook and quivered, he locked his gaze on mine. He pumped harder, each thrust driving me up on the bed until my head reached the top.

I clung to him, rising up to meet his thrusts, and was rewarded when another orgasm shot through me, this one even better than the last.

When I wasn't sure I could take much more, he stiffened and groaned. Heat bathed my inner passage, and I lifted my upper body to kiss him, holding him as he found his pleasure within me.

He moved slowly a few more times before carefully lowering himself down on top of me. His weight felt heavenly.

Shifting to the side, he took me with him, keeping us connected. Something tightened inside me, and I swore it felt like a petals of a flower spreading wide.

“The head of my cock is opening,” he whispered. “Can you feel it?”

“I was wondering what that was.” I wasn't scared. Lordek would never cause me harm.

Something probed deep within me, poking upward.

“And now it's seeking your womb.”

“That should hurt.”

His hand stilled where it had been stroking my back. “Does it?”

“Not at all.” I gasped as a third orgasm jolted through my core, pumping against his cock and... opening me to whatever pushed higher inside me.

I truly was being probed by an alien, and since it made me come, he could keep doing it.

The movement stopped.

“I’ve knotted within you, mate. My seed is bathing your womb.”

It wouldn’t get me pregnant, and for that, I felt grave sorrow. It would be foolish to have a half-alien child here on Earth. The government would steal a baby from me.

But if I could hide, it would be a piece of Lordek I could cling to when he was gone.

I must’ve dozed, because I woke what felt like hours later, still wrapped in his embrace. His cocks had slipped from me, and I missed them already. I’d never had sex like this, and I never would again.

He kissed the top of my head. “I’m glad you slept. Dawn will arrive soon.”

“Did you sleep?”

“I only wanted to hold you.”

I snuggled into his chest, tracing idle patterns on his skin.

“Will you tell me more about your planet?”

He ran his fingers gently through my hair, stroking it. “Of course, my stardust.”

I loved that he called me that, because he was my stardust too, a person wonderful and precious, sent to me by the stars.

If only we could stay in this perfect moment forever.

He started to speak, but stilled, his arms tightening around me.

That’s when the roar of helicopters passed overhead.

Ten

LORDEK

We left the bed and hurried into the living area, me still limping, though my leg was nearly healed. Lights flashed overhead before the flying crafts continued across the forest.

“They’re looking for you,” Iris cried, clinging to me. “They’re going to find you. Take you. Hurt you.”

Not if I could prevent it.

Our time together was over. It wouldn’t be long before they returned. This time, they wouldn’t pass over the farmhouse.

They’d surround it.

Iris turned on the vision box, scrolling through to a news program.

“In national news, military officials report that an unidentified aircraft crashed in a remote area of forest near Bridgetown recently. Witnesses reported seeing a bright fireball streak across the sky, followed by a loud explosion. Was it a meteor or something more sinister?”

“Aliens could be among us, Steve,” the woman on the vision box said. She looked right at us. “Lock your doors, folks, and keep your children close. Whoever was flying the craft is considered armed and dangerous.”

“Shoot, then ask questions, right?” Steve said.

How could he smile while stating something so horrifying?

As if Katie understood what was being said, she hissed at the screen. She hopped onto the floor and raced over to rub against my legs. I picked her up and laid her across my shoulder, stroking her silky fur.

I’d only known her a short time, but I couldn’t imagine not having a pet like her. I’d have to leave her just like I would Iris.

“It’s a big mystery, Barbara, and I’m tellin’ you, it’s darn exciting,” Steve said. “The military has cordoned off the town and is searching for debris to determine the craft’s origin. Will they update us? Or will they take whatever they find to Area 51? Stay tuned for the latest details here.”

The screen flashed to a comical character singing about golden blocks of meat called *chee-con*.

I put Katie down, and she looked up at me forlornly.

I gripped the edge of the large resting chair, my knuckles turning pale. How long before they traced the crash site to Iris’s home? I had to leave as soon as possible. If I was gone when they arrived, they may leave her alone. I’d make sure I left no evidence behind.

I didn't care about myself, but I couldn't put her in danger.

"We've got to get my ship ready," I said.

She nodded, and her eyes were filled with enough sorrow to gut me. How could I leave my mate now that I'd found her, loved her?

But it wasn't safe for me to remain here with her.

Our fates were sealed long before we met, and it was useless trying to fight our endless parting.

Eleven

IRIS

Heavy rain pelted the windows, a storm casting eerie shadows in the dimly lit room. Lordek paced back and forth, his alien features tense with worry. He stopped suddenly, turning to face me, his dark, probing eyes meeting mine.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could stay longer.” His voice came out gruff.

Dismay coursing through me. I wanted to cling, but holding him back would only make the situation more tenuous.

“I should’ve repaired my ship already.” Tension clouded his voice. “Once it’s repaired, I must leave Earth. My presence has already endangered you.” He raked both hands across the top of his head. “I was a fool not to start working on it immediately but...”

He was injured. And we’d wanted to be together. Valid reasons when we believed they wouldn’t find him.

Now their noose was tightening around us.

Stark, cold fear bolted through me. Playing games and talking—even making love—had put him in greater danger.

“I’ll help.” It hurt to think of him leaving, but we couldn’t deny the danger lurking beyond my doorstep. It was a wonder the government hadn’t found him already. “We’ll do it as quickly as possible. Then you can...” I couldn’t name it.

“Thank you, Iris,” he murmured, stepping closer. He stroked my hair, rubbing it between his fingers, his gaze searching mine. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

He kissed me gently, then held me. It was all I could do not to cry, but I didn’t want his last memory to be of me sobbing. I had to remain strong or I wouldn’t be able to tell him goodbye.

Before the sun had started to warm up the day, we left Katie inside and made our way toward the barn, hovering close to the house and shed, studying the world around us. We didn’t know who might be watching.

We crept into the barn and secured the door. I flicked the wall switch, bathing the silver vehicle with dim light.

As I surveyed the damage to the ship, I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed. It would be a monumental task to repair it, and we didn’t have much time. But Lordek seemed undeterred, opening a large compartment on the side and pulling out parts the computer must’ve generated.

“My grandfather used to restore cars in this barn,” I said, pointing to the winch hanging from the rafters overhead. “We

can lift the ship if we need to reach the underside.” I waved to the long bench mounted on the left wall. “And you’ll find all sorts of tools over there.”

He nodded slowly. “Perfect.” He pawed through the tools and selected some.

My heart thudded in my chest. Sadness kept creeping in and stealing my breath.

When I loaded it onto my cart in the dark, I didn’t bother to check it out. I was too worried about Lordek to do more than make sure it was well hidden.

Let’s face it, I’d offered to help him fix it, but I’d be useless other than handing him tools.

As he got to work on what looked like landing gear, I walked hesitantly around the perimeter of his small, damaged alien spaceship. It was a strange mix of metallic, sleek lines and jagged, broken edges that looked as though they had been torn during impact. Could they be repaired well enough for the ship to fly?

Countless dents and scratches covered the silver metal, though none appeared to pierce through to the exterior. All the “glass” was intact—assuming the clear panels were made of glass. Even from where I stood on the ground, they looked thick.

A shiver tracked through me as I took in the strange, foreign symbols etched onto the side of the ship, symbols that seemed to pulse with power. While my lover might seem just like me

other than his green skin and accent, he wasn't human like those born on this planet.

It was both fascinating and terrifying that he could make his way here and survive such a horrific crash.

Despite its small size, the ship appeared incredibly advanced, with strange, glowing panels and intricate machinery lining the interiors I could barely make out through the front glass.

“You can look inside if you want.” Lordek lowered a narrow set of stairs and waved to them. “You can't hurt anything, so feel welcome to touch.” He grinned. “Just don't start the engines.”

With wide eyes, I climbed the stairs and stepped into a six feet by six feet chamber in the front of the ship. One big chair took up the center, and the walls were covered with buttons and screens. A large windscreen took up the front section of the ship, with a pointed metal nose beyond.

I took in the details of the ship's interior with appreciation, admiring how much further ahead his tech was compared to ours—or what I knew of ours. Earth ships could travel to the moon, but as far as I knew, no manned crafts had traveled farther than that.

The feeling of being in an alien space vessel was foreign yet thrilling at the same time.

When I climbed back out of the ship, Lordek was hard at work on one of the wings. He'd removed several panels and was busy tinkering with the delicate machinery inside. I could feel

his concentration from where I stood, and a wave of admiration swept over me. He was so smart.

He motioned for me to help, and I ran over. “I need a tool that looks like this.”

Something similar to a hand-held computer hovered beside him, its glassy screen showing a schematic of the wing. At his request, a tool appeared on the screen.

“I think my grandfather had something similar.” I rushed to the bench and started opening drawers, inspecting everything inside. With two tools that looked like they might fit, I returned to Lordek.

“Yes.” He took one and leaned near, giving me a quick kiss. “You’re amazing.”

“You’re the one fixing a spaceship. I’m just hanging out, trying to look good.”

“You’re beautiful. More lovely than anyone I’ve met before, and it’s more than your gorgeous surface. You’re strong and resilient. Incredibly brave.”

“I don’t feel that way right now.” Actually, I wanted to cry.

“I’ve traveled through over thirty galaxies during the past eight years, and I’ve never met anyone as special you.”

“I’m just a normal woman.” My face heated at his praise. “You’re wonderful. I’m glad I had the chance to meet you.”

Our smiles fell, both of us reminded that he’d have to leave soon, that we’d never see each other again.

After he'd finished repairing the wing, he moved on to one of the engines mounted on the back of the ship. I followed, ready to run for anything he might need.

He worked surprisingly fast, but maybe that part of the ship hadn't sustained much damage. Once he was done with the engine, he moved inside.

Looking around, he grunted. "I don't need to fix much here, thankfully. I'm nearly done."

I stood in the hatch opening holding a jumble of tools, my eyes stinging. Nearly done meant nearly gone from my life forever.

Finally, he left the ship and took the tools from my limp hands. He stared down at me, gorgeous with a smear of grease across his face, his eyes alight with both excitement and sorrow.

"It's done," he said. "I believe it's flightworthy."

"What about fuel?" It couldn't take regular old diesel or gasoline, but what did I know?

"The exterior generates power as the ship flies. Resistance. It converts the friction to energy and transfers it to the engines." He glanced toward the ship. "Thankfully, none of those sections were damaged in the crash."

"What's next then?" Dread coiled tightly inside me. I wanted to grab onto him. Cling to him. Never let him go.

But he was starlight drifting through my fingers, and there was no holding on to something like that.

He tugged me into his arms. "I don't want to leave you. I want to stay with you always. Treasure you for the rest of my days." Leaning back, he looked down at me with love in his eyes.

Tears trickled down my cheeks, and he wiped them away.

He kissed me, his mouth searing across mine, branding me in a way no one else every would.

I pressed myself against him, holding him.

And that's when I heard footsteps outside the barn.

Twelve

LORDEK

“Wait here,” Iris hissed, racing toward the front of the barn. Cracking open the door, she slipped outside.

I grabbed a big tool, though it wasn’t much of a weapon, then scaled the stairs to reach the inside of the ship. With a fully charged laser pistol in hand, I pressed myself against the door, ready to burst out and defend my mate.

“Ah, there you are, Iris,” a female said in a cheerful voice. “I was worried about you. I saw your sign up in the bookstore and didn’t know if you were sick or what was going on.”

“Tessa,” Iris said with relief. “It’s nice of you to stop by.”

“I brought these.”

My rocketing pulse eased. This was a friend.

Through the crack in the door, I watched the female with dark, tightly braided hair hand a package to Iris. “Chocolate chip muffins. Plus some chicken soup. They’ll cure anything.”

“I’m doing so much better.” Iris took the package, stepping forward to give Tessa a hug. “I’m fine now. I was just feeling... under the weather.”

“I’m glad you’re doing better. When you’re a single lady, it’s important to take care of yourself. No one else will, my mother always said.” Tessa’s sharp gaze shot to the barn, and I eased away from the crack. Had she seen me? “Are you sure you’re fine? Nothing and... *no one* is harming you?”

Iris forced a laugh. “What do you mean? There’s no one here but you and me.”

“You can tell me if you need help.” The older woman’s chin lifted, and her dark gaze went flinty. “I may not look strong, but I’ve built muscles kneading bread and hauling bags of flour and sugar around. I’ll defend you.”

“From what? Look, I’m okay.” Iris rubbed Tessa’s arm. “Do I appear harmed in any way?”

Tessa leaned close to Iris, studying her face. “You look tired, but I suppose that could be from being sick earlier in the week.”

“I’m perfectly safe. No issues at all.”

“Tell me then.” Her gaze falling on the barn, Tessa huffed.

“What do you plan to do about the alien?”

Thirteen

IRIS

Panic shot through me as I gaped at Tessa. “What are you talking about?”

“Is the alien hurting you?” Tessa placed her palm on my shoulder, gripping tight, and I sensed she’d grab me and yank me away if I didn’t reassure her. “Has he put a spell on you?”

“Isn’t it wizards who cast spells, not aliens?”

Tessa’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Say the word, and we’ll run. I’ve got a knife in my pocket. If he comes after us, I’ll gut him.”

“There’s no alien here.”

“I saw him watching us from the barn. Really, let’s go. I parked my car at the end of the driveway just in case. His spell won’t be able to reach you once we’re away from this area. We’ll beat it out of here to safety, and whatever spell he’s cast on you will fade. I promise, you’ll be safe.”

“Stop.” I huffed. “There’s no alien here.” I suspected I could protest for the next hour, and she wouldn’t believe me. A sigh

bled from me. “He’s not hurting me. Please, Tessa. Leave. Go back to town and don’t tell anyone about this.”

Tessa socked her fists onto her hips. “Don’t give me that.” Her head jerked back, and her voice lifted. “Alien? Come out now. I’m going to decide for myself if you’re hurting my friend.” She brandished her knife—one better suited for cutting steak, but still. “If I think you’re hurting her, I’m going to make sure you live with regret until your dying day.” She frowned at me. “Is he big and purple, with six arms and antennae bobbing around on his head?”

She’d storm the barn with her knife, and who knows what might happen then.

I winced. “Please tell me you won’t scream or call 9-1-1.”

“Me?” She sounded perturbed. “It’ll take more than a bright pink beetle alien to frighten me. Come out of that bar, alien! I mean now.”

The door creaked and Lordek stepped outside, a silver weapon in his hand, though he kept it by his side.

“Oh my.” Tessa lowered her knife. “Why didn’t you tell me he was handsome?” She smoothed her hair. “Well, well. Green skin. Two arms. Lots of muscles. He’s big, but I like a man with solid bone structure.”

“His name’s Lordek, and he’s a sweet guy.”

Lordek stopped beside me, his arm going around me protectively.

Tessa drew herself up stiffly. “I didn’t emerge from the egg this morning. If you’re hurting Iris, I’ll fillet you, and don’t think I won’t.”

“I love Iris,” Lordek said. “I’ll never do anything to cause her pain.”

Except leave me, but I wasn’t going to think about that. We had this moment, and I was going to make the best of it.

Tessa’s breath whooshed out. “Good. Glad to hear it.” She tucked her knife into the sheath strapped around her waist and dipped forward in a bow. “Welcome, alien one. If you come in peace, we greet you.”

“Is she from your government?” Hope bloomed in Lordek’s voice. If Tessa was welcoming, he might assume the rest of my people would be, that maybe he could find a way to stay. Then we could be together.

Unfortunately, Tessa was one of the nice people. I didn’t want him to meet those who weren’t.

“I run a bakery.” Tessa nudged the box I held. “I stopped by to bring Iris some goodies. There’s enough there for you.” Her smile fell fast. “We probably shouldn’t be standing out here in the open though. Someone might see you.”

We went up onto the front porch. At least the screens partly masked those inside.

I lowered the box onto a table. “Are they sure an alien ship crashed in the area?” Silly to ask, but I needed to know.

“Damn right, they are.” Tessa huffed. “They’ve taken over the town, renting every B&B available. They’re even hooking up RVs with lots of satellite dishes on the top to any outlet they can find. They’re looking for the ship and for an alien, and it won’t be long before they find him.”

I gulped and leaned into his side. “How long do you think we have?”

Tessa grumbled. “From what I overheard at the diner, they’re expanding the search into this area within the hour.”

So soon.

“I can help.” She nodded pertly. “I’ll head back to town right now and distract them. Buy you a little more time.”

“Would you? We were repairing his ship, and it’ll soon be ready to fly.” If she could delay them, we might have time for one final goodbye.

“Happy to do it.” Tessa shook her head. “Damn government’s always trying to interfere. I can see Lordek’s a decent guy, and I don’t want them to capture him. I’ll tell them I found his ship, that it’s way out in the woods on the western side of town. That should get them searching in that direction. Do you think a few more hours will make a difference?”

I looked up at Lordek, who nodded.

“Very well then.” Tessa hugged us both, blushing after embracing Lordek. “He really is a fine specimen. I can see why you two...” She frowned. “Well, that’s none of my

business. I'll get going and give you two a bit more time to get ready."

After giving me another hug, she strode down the driveway and got into her car, scattering dirt on the edge of the road when she floored the engine, taking the vehicle back toward town.

I turned into Lordek's embrace. Our time together was almost over. How was I going to smile when he soared up toward the stars?

"I need to leave, Iris," he said gruffly. "I don't want to go, but I have to."

"I understand." I tipped my head back, and he kissed me.

With a groan, he swept me off my feet and carried me inside, stopping in the living room to press me against the wall.

We ripped off our clothing and he captured my mouth like he'd already captured my heart.

Fourteen

LORDEK

As the pressure mounted, my hearts raced. I gazed into Iris's eyes. Fire burned inside me unlike anything I'd experienced before. With trembling hands, I cupped her face and leaned close to her.

"Iris." My voice croaked with raw emotion. "I don't know what's going to happen to us, but I need you."

"I need you." Pain and dismay came through in her voice. "We don't have much time."

It would have to be enough.

Her lips met mine in a searing kiss, and I fell deeper into her embrace. We drank from each other's mouths like two parched travelers facing a long desert trek that would never end in paradise again.

I traced my fingers through her hair, tugging gently at the strands as we continued to kiss.

We were lost in each other, our bodies melding together in a frenzy of love and desire. The universe fell away, leaving only

us, entwined in each other's arms, lost in the wonder of the moment.

My hands wandered down her body, exploring her soft curves. She moaned in pleasure as I grazed my fingertips over her waist and hips, tracing circles around her belly button that sent shivers through her body.

I trailed my lips down her neck, planting gentle kisses as I made my way to her collarbone. She sighed in pleasure and arched into me. I felt her body quiver with anticipation as I moved lower, exploring every bit of her skin with my hands and mouth.

My tongue stroked the contours of her breasts, teasing the sensitive nipples until they hardened in response. I worked my way down her torso, taking tiny bites and planting soft kisses along the way. Her breathing grew heavier as I kissed a path down to the apex of her thighs.

I moved lower, my hands caressing the sides of her thighs before slowly pushing them apart. I lifted her and she draped her legs on my shoulders.

Iris gasped as I brought my mouth to her center, licking and nibbling at every sensitive spot before finally settling into a rhythm she couldn't resist. I slid my fingers inside her, and she bucked up against me.

Slowly, gently, I licked and caressed her clit with my tongue until she was writhing beneath me in pleasure. My own desire was a fever rising inside me. I needed to be with her.

Her hands clenched my arms as she moaned out my name.

I kissed her thighs before rising over her, placing my cock at her entrance. Her legs wrapped around me, and she clung to my sides.

As I thrust inside her, we stared into each other's eyes, lost in a world where only we existed.

We moved together, me trying to plant a wonderful memory in her mind forever. My spur glided across her clit, and with each thrust of my hips, she released a heady moan.

She clutched my arms, her nails biting, her cries growing louder.

I went faster, driving her pleasure to the peak.

Only when she'd succumbed, shuddering around me, her passage milking my cock, did I give in to bliss I'd never find with another.

We tumbled onto the couch, locked together.

I must've dozed, though only long enough to unknot from Iris's body.

Katie sat on a table, staring out the window toward the road. Turning to me, she gave me a look that could only be interpreted as fear. Her head snapped back toward the glass, and she hissed.

At first, I couldn't identify the sound. It grew louder, rumbling closer.

Fuck. They were coming.

My hearts froze. I slipped from beneath Iris and dressed quickly.

I gave Katie one last pat.

Returning to the sofa, I stared down at Iris sleeping peacefully, snuggling into the warmth we'd created together.

“Goodbye my love, my stardust.” I kissed my fingertip and placed it on her lips.

Fifteen

IRIS

I woke to the rumble of vehicles on the road. So many. Was the army moving into this area of town?

The army...

Opening my eyes, I jerked upright on the sofa. I pawed at the cushions where Lordek would be, finding him gone.

“Lordek,” I whimpered.

I already knew where he was. He’d left me sleeping. He would draw them away from me. If he could get his ship’s engines going, he’d blaze toward the stars before they realized he was here.

I choked back a sob and rose from the sofa. I grabbed pants and tugged them on, yanking a t-shirt over my head.

I’d started toward the back door, determined to stuff my feet into my boots and race after him when I turned to face the room.

Yes, that was right.

I raced to my bedroom closet and pulled out a bag, stuffing a few outfits into it and the pictures of my parents and grandparents I'd displayed on the bureau. What else?

In the kitchen, I grabbed two boxes of protein bars. The only bag of coffee I had. Should I take water? His ship must have it, though I wasn't sure how. We'd share. Please let there be enough to share.

My three favorite books.

What else?!

Katie, of course. Was there anything like kitty litter in space? Well, we'd figure that out later. I stuffed cans of wet food and a bag of dry into my bag, hoping the device on his ship could create something she could eat when this was gone.

She stared at me wide-eyed while I opened her crate, and for the first time, she didn't protest when I eased her inside.

I couldn't think of anything else. Actually, I could barely think. Fear was consuming my lungs, making it impossible to breathe.

Who cared about material possessions when the guy I loved was leaving?

Before I stepped outside, I glanced around one last time. Oh, yes...

After lowering Katie's crate, I ran to the kitchen table, grabbed a pen and paper, and wrote a will. Would such a thing be taken seriously if I wasn't dead but had left the planet forever? I hoped so.

I bequeath all my Earthly possessions to Tessa Mayfair. I've left with the alien and won't be returning to Earth.

You work hard, Tessa, and I hope you'll enjoy living in the farmhouse. Sell it and buy something else if you don't want it. Sell the bookstore while you're at it, because that's yours too. I'll create a new one or something like it when I reach my new home.

Love you. Thanks for being my friend. I'm going to miss you!

Iris.

With one last look around, I whispered. "By Grannie. Grampie. Thank you for all you did for me. You gave me a new chance at life when times were tough, and I'll never be able to thank you enough for that. I'm taking you with me in my heart."

Katie meowed as I grabbed her crate and my bag. I raced out the side door and ran to the barn.

The government vehicles were loud; they must be near. Hopefully, the huge maple trees lining the driveway would block the house and barn from the road long enough for us to escape.

I ripped open the barn door and stepped inside the cool darkness.

"Lordek?"

When I flicked the light switch, I found the barn empty.

Sixteen

LORDEK

When I left Iris sleeping, it was all I could do to drag myself from her snug home.

If I stayed, would her government let me see her? It might be worth whatever they'd do to me as long as I could touch her face and gaze into her eyes one last time.

I suspected that would not be the case, however. Armed and dangerous and shooting on sight told me they wouldn't care if I lived or died. I doubted I'd survive long enough to reach wherever they'd take me. As for seeing Iris again, would they allow someone they considered dangerous to touch another human?

If my ship was gone and there was no evidence I'd been here, they might leave her alone.

With that in mind, I rushed to the barn. I quickly strode around my ship, making sure there weren't any pieces lying around to show it had been inside the building.

After opening the barn doors, I mounted her green farm vehicle and started it—something that took me too many moments to figure out. I engaged the craft and tugged the cart holding my ship from the barn and around to the back. Hidden behind the building, I might have enough time to lift off and flee before they arrived.

I turned off the vehicle and rushed to the front of the barn, securing the doors once more. Then I ran back and lowered the stairs to the ship.

Pausing at the top, I stared toward the farmhouse.

“Goodbye, my stardust. I love you.”

I was going to miss her forever.

“I’ll dream about you every single day of my life.” I closed my eyes but only briefly. I didn’t have time to mourn. There would be plenty of time to do that during the long voyage to my home planet.

I was stepping inside the ship when I heard her cry out. Pausing, I watched in dismay as she rounded the barn, rushing toward me with a pack on her back and a crate jostling against her leg.

“I have to leave. Please, return to your home,” I said. “Pretend you never saw me, that you don’t know me.” It was her only chance to remain safe.

“I can’t. Please.” She grabbed onto the thin rail running up the side of the stairs. “Take me with you.”

“What?” I stepped down to the ground beside her. “That’s not possible.”

“I want to go with you wherever you plan to go next.”

“I’m done exploring.” My hearts no longer ached to travel beyond the next horizon. If I couldn’t see Iris there, no destination mattered. “I’m returning to my home planet to make a new life.” Where I’d struggle to survive without her.

“Could your ship support me and Katie as well?”

“It could, but you can’t leave here. This is your world, your life. You have your bookstore, your farmhouse your grandmother gifted to you. Friends. Everything that makes up the Iris I love.”

“None of that matters if I can’t share it with you.” Her pretty eyes glistened. “Can I help you build a new life on your planet? Don’t leave me. I love you. I can’t stand to be without you.”

I cupped her face and stared into her eyes, finding the truth there. It stabbed through me. “You would have to give up too much.”

“I’ll give up all of it and more. Anything to be with you.”

The vehicles full of beings eager to capture me drew closer. We didn’t have much time.

“You’re sure?” It would gut me all over again if she changed her mind, but she had to be certain.

“I am.” A beautiful smile bloomed on her face. “Let’s get out of here before the bad guys arrive.”

“Yes. It’s time to leave.” I took her hand. One lift put her halfway up the narrow stairs. With the box holding Katie, I crowded next to her and eased her into the main compartment of the ship. There, I lowered the box. I held Iris’s hands, looking down at her. “I won’t be angry if you decide to remain here.”

Her chin lifted, and her gaze went steely. “Nothing matters but us. We need to be together.”

Shouts rang out from the distance.

She peered in that direction, her gaze filled with panic. “Shut that hatch and get us out of here, Lordek.”

With a nod, I hit the button, closing the outer door and sealing us inside within seconds.

She placed the box holding Katie near the wall of the ship. How would her pet fare in space? Many others kept small animals with them on ships. Katie would be no different.

I opened a cabinet and placed the box inside. She’d be safer there during takeoff.

Sitting in the sole chair on the bridge, I tugged Iris down onto my lap, securing us both with the restraints. She clung to my shoulders, burying her face in my chest. Tremors shook her frame. My brave love. I would never forget her sacrifice. She was giving up everything to be with me.

“Hold on tight, mate,” I growled with heavy emotion. “We’re about to become one with the stars.”

“Yes. Turn us both into stardust.”

I engaged the engines and held on to my mate as my ship lifted off.

We blasted toward the sky.

Seventeen

IRIS

Two Earth Months Later

Our ship coasted through the outer atmosphere of Lordek's home planet. I sat on his lap, my favorite place to be, as we drew closer to the shimmering gold and purple surface.

"It's so pretty," I said.

"Clear skies, lush soil, and pristine oceans and lakes." Pride shone in his voice. "Ages ago, Sathoria was failing. We put plans in place to bring it back to life. Now we protect it."

"I love that." He'd spoken so much about his home world. He had the equivalent of an apartment in the city, but he owned land in the country and we'd talked about building a house there. Raising our young there.

Raising Katie's kittens there if we didn't give them all away.

Katie lay in her open crate, purring as she licked her babies. No wonder her belly had been so distended. Three weeks after we left Earth, she started pacing around, meowing plaintively. Eventually, she climbed into her crate and gave birth to six

kittens. Lordek assured me they'd be well received on Sathoria, that many would beg to adopt one. If not, we'd keep them all.

Lordek stroked my belly. "Still feeling good?"

"So far. Don't rock the boat," I teased.

"Boat. Ha."

I'd had some morning sickness but it had finally passed.

"There's nothing worse than throwing up inside a tiny bathroom on an equally small ship," I said.

"It's good that we enjoy being together."

The longer we flew through space, the closer we grew. Our love had developed fast, before we'd had the chance to get to know each other well. It was a big leap to leave everything I'd known to travel to a strange new world with a guy I'd only met days before, but our time together had only strengthened our bond.

"I can't imagine being anywhere but here with you, mate," I said softly.

We kissed, and frankly, I was tempted to drag him down the rung ladder to the lower level. A bedroom and a bathroom took up most of that floor, with an engine room filling the back.

But if we went downstairs, we might not emerge for a while, and I wanted to take in everything about my new home as we flew closer.

The ship leveled and flew parallel to the planet. As we passed over one continent and then another, I could make out gold and blue sections Lordek told me were land and vegetation. The seas gleamed light purple.

“Excited?” Leaning around me, he tapped a few markers on the drive screen. He’d impressed me right from the start with his ingenuity. He could not only repair a spaceship, he could fly it through tight areas, evidenced by the debris fields we’d traversed to reach this galaxy.

“Very. I can’t wait to meet your family and friends.”

“I haven’t seen them for a long time. I kept in touch, but messages take light years to travel from the planet to my ship and back.”

He had two brothers, parents, and lots of friends he’d grown up with who were eagerly awaiting his return. They lived in the area where he owned his big piece of land.

I couldn’t wait to start building our farmhouse and planting the land.

We’d also talked about ways I could bring physical books to this world, though it might be tricky. Translator implants allowed the people living on Sathoria to read and understand any language—the device could learn—but they’d long since stopped reading books made of paper.

Some people on Earth preferred to hold a book in their hands. Maybe the Sathorians would feel the same. Lordek said there might be a way to get some delivered to our planet. How it

might come about was a surprise, he'd said, and I'd wait for him to spring it.

"Hungry?" he asked. "This is your last time to make ice cream before we land."

It wouldn't take long to reach his apartment, but it had sat empty for years and would probably need a thorough cleaning. We'd have to purchase food, something I looked forward to. What would it be like to go shopping on an alien planet?

I slid off his lap. "Ice cream, it is. Chocolate for me. How about you?"

Rising, he followed me to the galley kitchen behind the bridge where we synthesized ours and Katie's meals from a liquid the ship created from molecules in the space around us.

I didn't understand the mechanics of how it worked, but it hadn't taken me long to figure out how to create something similar to ice cream and brownies—the treat I'd craved since I discovered I was pregnant.

"I want strawberry," he said.

Inside the tiny space, we programmed the device. His fingers teased across my lower back while we waited, sparking heat inside me.

"How much time do we have before we land?" I tugged him close.

He lifted me up onto the counter and parted my thighs. "Twenty Earth minutes or so."

“Plenty of time.”

He lowered his head, whispering. “How many orgasms do you wish for, my stardust?”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “How many are you offering?”

His fingertips slid beneath my dress. “A million at least.”

“It’s going to take you a while to give me that many.”

His low laugh rang out. “Then I’d better get started.”

Note to the Reader

I hope you enjoyed *Craving Stardust*! Would you please leave a review?

While you're at it, check out the rest of my books!

Would you like a FREE book? Sign up for my newsletter, and I'll send you *Escorting the Alien*, a complete, HEA romance featuring a snarly alien diplomat and the Earth woman who loves to spark his fire.

About Ava

Ava Ross is a two-time *USA Today* Bestselling author who has written numerous titles, all of them featuring sweet and steamy romance. She fell for men with unusual features when she first watched *Star Wars*, where alien creatures have gone mainstream. She lives in New England with her husband (who is sadly not an alien, though he is still cute in his own way), her kids, and a few assorted pets.

Hologram Hookup by Bebe Harper

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



WILL SIMULATION DATING LEAD TO LOVE OR HEARTBREAK?

Crystal seduces an alien inside of a simulated environment and she has a fun time, but what she doesn't know is that she isn't interacting with an advanced AI program in an entertainment sim, but a real, live lizard alien matched to her by the most advanced dating algorithm in the known universe.

When she rates the experience 10/10 and schedules a follow-up date, Oh'Karth believes she has proposed and that they will be mated.

When he leaves everything behind to join Crystal, will she welcome him? Or will he get his hearts broken?

Content Warning: *This story is quick and so is the action! Though it's not dark, there are aliens with strange anatomy and even stranger behavior and as a result, there are some*

cultural misunderstandings that lead to intimate interactions where the consent is less-than enthusiastic. Everything's fine though, I promise!

One

CRYSTAL

“You know what this space station doesn’t have? Dick,” my bestie declares this out of the blue after we’ve sat down to lunch in the cafeteria of said space station. I’m used to Sophie’s antics so I’m not surprised she would say something so ridiculous.

“Um—there’s Brett and Mitch. Not to mention all of the alien men on this station. There are plenty of—options,” I tell her. She has a point though. There are thirteen human women on this station and only two human guys.

Sophie rolls her eyes dramatically as she chews her noodles. She has a really expressive face with big gray eyes and bold eyebrows that seem to exaggerate everything she feels and says.

“Mitch is dating Lisa.”

“Oh? Are they official now?”

She nods. “Yeah, even though everybody knows he’s seeing Amber too.”

“Really?”

Another nod. “Yeah. I mean, I’m not one to gossip—” This is patently untrue. She gossips nonstop. “—but he made it official with Lisa last week. Made a post about it and everything. But this weekend he was over at Amber’s room —”

“No!?” I’m scandalized now.

“Yes! Shirley saw him!”

Shaking my head in commiseration, I continue eating my noodles.

“And then Shirley told Luna—”

“Why!?! Why would she do that?” I demand. Luna is the sweetest little do-gooder in our group of humans. No way should she be confided in about anything even remotely shady.

“Right?! Anyway, so Luna is all like, ‘We have to tell Lisa. If I was her, I would want to know.’ And Shirley is like, ‘Girl, no. You know what happens to the messenger in this situation.’”

Nodding my head, I agree, “Exactly. Why would Shirley even tell her?” I tsk as I scoop up another bite of noodles.

“Yeah, so Luna goes by herself to let Lisa know about Mitch’s cheating, and guess how Lisa reacts?”

I shake my head again, resigned.

“She went off on her! Called her jealous and told her to mind her own business! Can you believe it?!”

“Oh no, poor Luna. When did this happen?” Luna probably cried about this. If it happened today, she’s probably still crying somewhere.

“Like three days ago. She’s alright,” Sophie assures me, reading my worry.

“Hmm.”

“So anyway, I’m not going anywhere near Mitch and that drama.” I nod in agreement and continue munching on noodles and sipping my grass-flavored electrolyte drink. “And you know Brett is married.”

I do know that. But is he really married anymore? It’s not like there’s any chance of us getting back to earth and reuniting him with his wife.

Not that I want to hit on him. I can’t see Sophie with him either.

“So that leaves alien dick,” I remind her.

She grimaces and shakes her head. “It’s not like we haven’t tried it. Or at least tried to try it.”

“What?! When?”

“Last week. You know how I went to the med bay for period cramps, thinking all of this advanced alien medical technology might be useful—but no. No help with cramps?”

I nod.

“Okay, so I didn’t tell you then, but while I was there, one of those blue fluffy aliens came in.”

“Okay.”

“And I don’t know, he seemed kind of hot in a blue-alien-Mufasa kind of way, you know?”

I smirk at that, and she keeps going.

“So I tried to hit on him. Like, I was being really, really obvious. But he wasn’t receiving the message you know? He doesn’t understand anything about dating, hooking up, hanging out, nothing.”

“That can’t be right,” I murmur. I remember at least one human who was in a relationship with one of those guys. Not on this station, but on the ship where I first woke up after being abducted. So it’s not outside the realm of possibility.

“Yeah, but you know me. I can be tenacious.” There’s an understatement. “So I was blatantly clear. I asked, ‘Do you have a mate?’”

She looks at me expectantly until I ask, “Well, what did he say?”

“He said no. Then he asked me if I was in the process of forming a grouping, and if so, can he also meet the other women.”

“What?! What does that even mean?”

“Hell if I know, but it sounds too kinky for me. I don’t do groupings. So I just dropped it.”

“Hmm.” A grouping does sound like a bit much.

“And did you hear about Abigail?”

I shake my head, can't even recall who that is.

“She flirted with that bird guy—you know the one who works at the storage bay?”

I nod.

“Well, he spit in her mouth.”

“Huh? Like during sex?” I'm perplexed.

“No, like immediately. As they were talking. He spit a loogie right into her mouth.”

“Oh my god! That's disgusting!”

She nods. “I know right? Turns out that's how those bird aliens reciprocate interest.”

“Uck.”

“Yeah, so no alien dick. There's no telling what you'll get. Just the process of hitting on an alien is too unpredictable.”

We've gotten up to put our dishes in the reclamation bin, and as we do, an alien stops us.

“Greetings earthers.”

Sophie and I look at each other and then awkwardly greet the alien. It's one of the bird ones, but I think this one's a female.

“My name is Spackley.”

“Oh, um, I'm Crystal, and this is Sophie.”

“Well met.”

As the alien is speaking, it's in chirps and squawks. I understand her because I have a translation program in my

brain implant. I was unconscious when I arrived here, so the aliens took that as permission to install an implant. I'm not mad about it anymore. It makes life on this station a lot easier. Poor Sophie has to make do with an external translator hooked to her ear. We can both understand any alien who talks to us though.

“I overheard the discussion about mating prospects. Excuse me for intruding on your conversation, but if there are no suitable males on the station, why not make use of the *claaaaw-fe-sahmeer?*”

Sophie and I look at each other again.

“Oh, it is not translating.” Spackley tilts her head, very bird-like, then says, “It is a program. So you can select a male, from any species, and sample—or no, not—you can learn. You can experience whether you are compatible or not and—I am not explaining this well—”

“A program?” Sophie asks.

“Yes! It is a projection that you can interact with—”

“Like a holodeck?” I ask dumbly. Of course, this alien has never seen Star Trek.

“It is not a deck. It is a room—”

“Like virtual reality?” Sophie asks.

The bird tilts her head. This usually means agreement. “It is virtual. And this way there are no—well—no consequences. Not real ones. You understand?”

I'm nodding along because it does sound like a holodeck. Imagine that, having a real holodeck and using it for virtual dates—

“Wait a second, do people use this to test sexual compatibility?” I ask, scandalized.

She tilts her beak again. “With no commitment or investment, you can see what sort of male you can actually mate with.”

“Wow.” Sophie and I look at each other wide-eyed.

“Sophie doesn't have an implant, can she still use this program?”

The bird shakes her head, “No, an implant is needed to interface with the program.”

“Looks like you need to go check it out and report back,” Sophie tells me.

“Yes,” our new friend agrees. “I think this will be a useful tool for you Earth Humans. This is the first new species in—I do not even know how long. There are bound to be assumptions and miscommunications if you just go around propositioning prospective mates in person without knowing anything about them or their culture.”

Well, I guess that does sound like a dumb way to act. And kind of dangerous. We humans have gotten comfortable with the alienness of all the people on this station, but I don't know how much any of us have really learned about their respective cultures.

“Okay—” I carefully agree, “I’ll check it out. I can check out a few different species and report back like you said.”

Sophie nods, but Spackley turns her head a little to the side, giving me a look that my implant tells me is alarm. “But—what if you find one you are compatible with?”

“Well that’s the point, isn’t it?” I ask, confused.

“Yes,” she says with finality. I feel like some meaning has gotten lost, but I let it go.

“How long does it usually take?” I ask.

“As long as you like. I find an hour is long enough to know.”

I nod. That sounds about right. No reason to hang about if there’s no compatibility.

“Alright. I’ll give it a try later today, before dinner.”

“And you can tell me all about it this evening then,” Sophie adds excitedly.

“I would like to hear about it too,” Spackley says.

“Okay, so let’s all meet back here at seven. That should give you plenty of time.”

“Seven is three pings before final bell,” I inform Spackley.

“Show off,” Sophie mutters. My implant helps me with alien measurements and stuff. Sophie’s ear cuff doesn’t do any of that.

“Alright.” I wave and start moving toward my room. “I’m going to get a shower and have a nap, then I’ll check it out.”

“Promise? Don’t back out!” Sophie yells at me as I move further away from her.

I do a thumbs up over my head but continue down the hallway.

At least this is something exciting to talk about. I get kind of bored with gossiping about the other humans.

Ever since we came to this station, we humans have been trying to find our place. At first we were given jobs in the storage hangar, but then we found out that the jobs were just busy work, just moving things from one place to another or repackaging them for no reason. The money we were given was absolutely meaningless too. They were these plastic coins with a picture of the guy who runs the station embedded in them. When we found out that the aliens just invented this fake work, it was really embarrassing. The aliens in charge of the place had no idea why we wanted jobs and didn’t need us to do anything because we are totally ignorant about what is involved in running a space station and most of us humans didn’t have implants anyway. Every job requires an implant.

There is real money out here in space, but it is a system of credits, and none of us humans have figured out how to set up an account yet, much less make money to put into that account. It’s not a huge deal, because every single thing on this station is free for us. If we want to leave this station though—well I’m pretty sure transport costs money/credits.

So anyway, I’ve been hanging out with Sophie and other humans. We try to print out games we remember from Earth; there are a few decks of cards. For a little while, Abby was

doing a weekly update thing. It was like a blog/newsletter about what was going on on the space station. We all have tablets that are connected so we can message each other, and she put it up for everyone to see. I think Abby ran out of things to update us about though, because I haven't seen an update in the past couple of weeks. When I check my tablet I do see Mitch's post though, announcing that Lisa and he are officially a couple. Huh.

I go take a shower, and that isn't satisfying at all. Showers here aren't relaxing. It's a bunch of foam shot out from the wall to cover my whole body, then there's a laser that zaps the foam off. I'm squeaky clean at the end, but it's not as satisfying as a hot shower. It dries my hair out something fierce too. I slather a bunch of leave-in conditioner on it. Shirley printed a bunch of it to share.

Finding my tablet again, I interface with it using my implant to try and find this holodeck/VR/Alien dating simulation room. It's really hard! Eventually, I just look up schematics for the station and scroll through until I find a room that has a title that won't translate and—bingo! There it is. It's not too far away either, just a little past the cafeteria and down another side hallway. I can find it no problem.

Okay. I try to think about how I'm going to do this. I wonder if it will really feel real? I'm excited about the prospect because the few times I tried casually hooking up, I always felt attached. Like, I knew, logically, that I only wanted a hook-up, and so did my partner. But if the sex was good, I would feel—things. I would want it to mean something more. Even though

I didn't want more. It was really confusing and draining. So I figured that hook-up culture just wasn't for me. But this is different. This is not a real man, not a man at all. I get to have all the fun I want and there's no guy to get hung up on. Win-win for me.

But how do I pick?

I want to have something really fun and interesting to report, so I think I'm going to pick the freakiest alien available in the program. Like, I know that there are some really scary ones that we've been warned not to interact with. I'll look for one of those. There are two that I can remember, one has tentacles and the other is all spidery. And if those ones aren't available—well, I'll find the next most alarming one. An alien I would be scared to talk to in real life. If I'm doing this, I might as well go all out, go absolutely over the top with it. Give Sophie some *really* interesting information about alien anatomy.

My tablet has an educational suite. It's kind of clunky, like navigating Wikipedia, but it's all about aliens and stuff. Anyway, looking up alien anatomy isn't hard, and I kind of rethink the spider aliens as soon as I get a really good look at them and all of the warnings on their page about how predatory they are. The tentacle aliens aren't necessarily scary, not horror movie scary like those spiders, but they are weird. Like, I can't tell what I'm looking at when it comes to their lower bodies. It's all tentacles. Like, is that it? No cock? Anyway, I'm starting to think that researching beforehand isn't a good idea. Most of the alien tech I've interacted with is very

intuitive. So I'm sure this holodeck has some kind of walk-through on how to pick an—experience, I guess?

Anyway, I've already screwed this up a little bit. I don't want to go in with preconceived notions. They are all aliens, and it's up to me to have an open mind and pick the most interesting one.

Picking out an outfit takes a moment. It's silly because it doesn't matter at all. Aliens don't care about human clothes. I want to look cute though, so I pick out a soft pink, t-shirt/wrap dress thing and a pair of leggings. Sophie helped me design this and print it, and it turned out great. Unlike my efforts that always make me look like a shapeless bag of potatoes.

I resist the urge to put on any makeup. So I brush my teeth, put on moisturizer and lip balm, and pluck a few strays from my eyebrows. And I'm ready. Like 80% ready. I'm not sure what I'm getting into.

Two

CRYSTAL

” Choose one of these seven hundred and thirty-five options .”

A lake, a beach, a desert, a forest... I flip through dozens of settings until I get to a foggy marsh with a dilapidated castle-looking structure in the background. Nice. I've lost track of days, but I think Halloween is coming up on Earth. I pick the creepy setting in honor of Spooky Season.

“Choose one of these four hundred and thirty-one options.”

Now I'm picking out an outfit for myself. I scroll for a good five minutes before I see an option at the top left corner of this projection that allows me to keep my own outfit as a default. I point to that.

“Choose one of these nine hundred and seventy-two options.”

Yes! Now I'm at the good part. I start flipping through prospective aliens. Unfortunately, the pictures are really small and are just their face and upper torso. There are long profiles full of information, but honestly, I can't stand to read that much. Something about the translation happening visually

instead of audibly... It gives me a headache and makes me dizzy. I could have the computer read them, but that would take forever.

So I squint at each of the pictures as I scroll through, reading a snippet here and there about my potential matches. I wonder how these profiles are compiled? There's probably some way I can sort them by age, gender—attributes? But I don't really get how to work this program. There seems to be some kind of glitch happening too because I stop at one profile, it's an alien with giant moose antlers. He's all fuzzy and angry looking, and I consider clicking on him, but then a lighted text blinks over his profile saying, "no longer available" and it disappears! What a tease. After that happens, I pay closer attention to the list I'm scrolling, and now I see that profiles are being removed and added as I scroll. What the heck? Maybe only one person can use a program at a time? That doesn't seem right though. But it's the only explanation I can think of.

There is a very intimidating alien with fangs, gray skin, and great big wings, and I think I'll click on him. But he's got an extra set of arms, smaller ones, folded up against his belly, and for some reason, I hesitate. I'm supposed to be open-minded, I tell myself. And look at those wings! I can get used to a couple extra arms—but then his profile disappears!

Ugh. I'm going to have to be quicker about this. If I pick a bad one, I can just try again after all. No reason to dilly-dally.

The next profile to catch my interest is an alien that looks like a big humanoid lizard. He's green, with a long snout, a flat head, and no ears at all. I bet if I could see his whole body, he has a tail. And claws. He has this shiny silver collar around his neck, and for some reason, that strikes me as sexy, so I click quickly before this one disappears too.

"Please wait point zero zero two spans for your environment to upload."

Okay, this is it. If it's like Star Trek's holodeck, it's going to be utterly real. And I should be able to hear, smell, see, and feel everything as if I was right there with the alien. I do wonder about the program though. Like what if I do something that goes against the cultural norms of the alien the program is emulating? Will they let me know? Or do they just go along with whatever I want?

Only one way to find out.

Breathe in one, two, three, breathe out one, two, three. Okay, calm, relaxed, not a single thing to worry about.

One moment I'm standing in the bare room that hosts the holodeck, and the next moment I'm standing in a swamp. Oh yuck, there's mud seeping into my shoes. The picture didn't really show a swamp! I guess all of the fog obscured it. This fog is something else. It's thick and it has a sparkle to it, and I can't see the ground through it.

A loud squelching sound accompanies each step, and I make my way toward a boulder a couple yards away. I can't even

see where I'm stepping with this thick, foggy mist. What if I step into deeper water? Or onto an animal? Ugh.

I remind myself that this isn't real. I'm not going to harm anything or be harmed by anything, and I make it to the boulder without any mishaps.

When I reach it, I scramble up and remove my soggy shoes. So gross! I drag each foot carefully against the rock's surface trying to wipe off all of the mud. Yuck, yuck, yuck, this mud smells like wet mulch and decay. So far, this really sucks.

And if this is how it's going, I might as well quit now—

“Good greetings.” This is from the direction I just trudged from, and there, the lizard is standing right by where I started. It's a good thing he's tall, otherwise I wouldn't be able to see him at all.

“Oh, hi.” I wave to him. “Could you come over here? I had no idea it was going to be a muddy swamp when I picked this—”

As I'm talking, our location changes, no longer a creepy, misty swamp, but now a grassy meadow with a—picnic area?

“Is this better?” he asks. His language is growly rumbles interspersed with hisses. I like it.

“Yes. This is perfect. Thank you.”

He tilts his head. Now that we've changed scenery, my socks and shoes are dried off. I think about putting them back on, but rethink it because I'm about to get naked, right? That's the plan.

“You are an Earth Human.”

I nod my head. “Yep.”

I move closer to him, inspecting him. He does have a tail, thick at the base, then long, coiling out away from him and tapering to a point. There are five silver rings fastened along his tail.

His hands and feet each have five digits with claws. As I watch, the claws of his feet extend, digging into the grass, then retract. Retracting claws huh? That’s useful. Now that I’m close to him, he resembles something like a monitor lizard.

“I am from planet *Dreeshruptissss*—”

“That didn’t translate.”

“It is the name of my home planet, where my people are from.”

I shake my head. This program is weird. How are they going to have mistranslations within a program?

“My name is Oh’Karth.”

“Oh, I’m Crystal.” I come back around to the front of him and do a little wave. He copies my wave, his claws spread briefly as he mimics the gesture. The side of his mouth lifts in an uncomfortable-looking grin. And what a mouth! He has, like, a muzzle of sharp teeth. Makes me think of an alligator, though it’s not quite that long. I don’t think things like kissing and oral sex are going to work with this guy.

His forked tongue pops out of his mouth and wiggles up and down. Oh, wow. Definitely no oral. It looks like a snake tongue, all skinny and delicate. I can't help the way I jump and giggle at the sight of it.

When he tilts his head in concern, I tell him, "Sorry! I've never seen a tongue like that before. Well, except for on a snake. It surprised me."

It's a good thing this is a program and he's not a real alien person who could be offended by my reactions.

I stick my tongue out at him and explain, "See, this is the type of tongue I expected. Shorter. Not so wiggly."

"Hmm. How can you taste anything with that? It just lies there?" he asks.

"I can taste things. I have, like, thousands of tastebuds."

He leans down a little bit and I step back as his face nears mine. His tongue pops out again and wiggles at me.

"You cannot taste the air. Not with that tongue," he pronounces.

"Heh, no. I guess I don't taste the air. Only food and drink. You know, stuff that goes in my mouth?" I study him for a moment and watch his tongue pop out yet again. I think it's a dark green, like his scales. "What does the air taste like?"

"It tastes like the elements of this sim. Grass, dirt, pollen. It also tastes of you and your pheromones."

I gasp. "My pheromones? What do they taste like?"

He sticks his tongue out again, and I have the absurd urge to reach out and touch it, to feel it move against my palm. I don't though.

"I have never interacted with a human before but—you are excited and curious. Happy."

"Well that's a useful skill." He is right on the money.

An awkward silence falls between us, and I wish I had more experience with this program. Like how do I move things along?

"So—this is my first time using this program," I explain.

"I have not been in this matrix long either."

"Oh, okay, but I was wondering—how does it usually work?"

He tilts his head.

"Like, it's a romance simulation, right?"

"Yes." His tail has started slowly swishing through the grass.

"And people—like aliens, people of different species, can test their compatibility—"

His eyes have squinted in a way that seems like he doesn't have any idea what I mean.

Well, here goes. No point in being subtle. He's not a real alien, this is a program.

"A person can test their *sexual* compatibility with someone—an alien."

His tail is swishing a little faster.

“Yes. I would think that happens often in these sims.”

I take a deep breath.

Don't be embarrassed! He's a program! This is not real!

“So—uh, people like you,” I gesture at him, “from your planet. How does it work?”

He looks down at himself and then back at me. “How do you mean? How does what work?”

“Sex.”

“I am sure it is—the basic mechanism is the same for most —?”

“No, I mean how do you go from talking to—you know—*fucking*?” Computer program or not, I'm feeling really awkward. This is ridiculous. I can't get over my hang-ups even when it doesn't matter at all? Even when there are zero consequences?

“I, um, well—I suppose it happens naturally? When two people feel the same inclination—”

I interrupt, “Yes, but how does one express an interest? Who typically makes the first move, and what is a first move? I know how it works with humans, but a few humans have tried to hook up with aliens on this station and nothing was easy or natural and it never worked out. So, just tell me in the plainest language possible, how does it usually go for your people?”

“Alright. Um, I suppose it starts with circling,” he supplies tentatively.

“And what’s that?”

“If a female wants a male’s attention, she will allow him to taste her interest. She will circle around him once or twice. Then she will lead him away, to somewhere safe and private. If he is interested, he will follow.” He seems to be done. That is his whole explanation. This program is kind of prissy about talking about sex.

“Then what?”

“Then—well, then he would mount her, would he not?” He seems unsure of this answer. “Unless it is not a hetero pairing. If it is two males or two females or more than two—I suppose that would be something to figure out. Who is mounting who. And how—” He looks a little perplexed. “But these are private matters.”

“Of course.”

I wait a moment, but he doesn’t continue with the explanation.

“Then—after someone mounts someone—then what? Is that it? How long does that last?”

“I—um—these matters are private. There is no—it is a matter of personal preference and biology,” he stammers out. The scales around his chin and down either side of his neck have darkened and boy—if I didn’t know this was a simulated program, I would think that I have a shy alien virgin on my hands. He’s more awkward than I am.

“And you say it’s the female who will circle the male?” I double-check as I start to move around him. I can already see

an issue here, because I bet when a woman of his species does this, her tail follows her and it actually forms a circle. I'm just walking around him. "Like this?"

He makes a huffing sound and tilts his head to the side, and my translator tells me that this is agreement.

"And then she walks away?" The whole sim is 'private and safe', so I just walk toward the picnic area with its seats and table.

After a couple steps, I glance back, and sure enough, he's following me. His eyes look intense, and his tail is lashing back and forth. By the time I get there, he is right behind me, his breath puffs against my hair, and when I stop, he wraps an arm around me from behind. His hand snakes under my shirt and out of the opening at the neck to wrap around my throat, his palm resting on the front and claws pricking down my nape.

His body aligns against me and—this is different. He doesn't have the same proportions as a human guy. His torso is a little longer compared to his extremities, I think. And his neck is longer too. The muscles and scales of his body are hard and cool.

In my peripheral, I see his tongue slip out and taste my pheromones again.

Am I really about to fuck this sentient lizard man? This alien guy that I just met?! Even though he is a simulation, a computer program, I still feel shocked. Scandalized with

myself. The cavalier attitude that has propelled me this far is losing steam, and now I just don't—

“I do not understand.” His hand releases its hold on my neck and slides out from underneath my dress. “How do Earth Humans do this? With all of these coverings? What are they for?”

“Um, lots of things. Modesty, warmth, protection, fashion—”

“Yes, I can see that you have no fur or scales covering your body. It is logical to make up for that lack with,” he gestures up and down my form, “these things.”

“So, um, humans will usually take their clothes off at some point. Or at least the clothing covering—” I gesture at my lower half, and when I do, I notice *his* lower half.

His cock is out. Where before he was flat as a Ken doll, now there is an alien penis proudly erect, though kind of tilted to one side. It's very, *very* different from a human dick. It has spikes all over it, and it is a rose-pink color, sharply contrasting with his green scales. I don't know if this is going to work.

I move closer, leaning down to inspect what he's working with. Oh'Karth is a virtual program after all, and I'm here to learn. But as I reach out to touch him, the object of my interest retreats and tucks itself away into a discrete vertical slit in the scales of his groin. The only evidence of it, is a slick sheen on a few of those scales.

“Hey, I was looking at that,” I joke.

“Apologies.” The scales from his cheeks down to his chest have darkened considerably. This seems to be the lizard alien version of blushing. “It is an involuntary reaction.”

“Well, where do we go from here? Should I start over and circle again, or maybe I should get undressed first?” Now that he’s not restraining me anymore, all of my reticence has gone. I’m impatient to move things forward, and this time I won’t chicken out.

“You—you are interested?” he asks.

“Well, yeah. That’s why I’m here.” I pull my shirt/dress over my head and start pushing my leggings down, just to show him I mean business.

“I thought—Your scent changed. You were not interested. And the clothing is a protective barrier that you left in place. I was not mistaken in this.” He seems a little upset. I must have offended him with my ‘disinterest’ otherwise, why would the computer program make such a big deal?

“Well, I may have gotten cold feet for a moment, but I promise I’m interested. Humans will help each other remove clothes sometimes, I guess I expected you to do that. But that’s silly because you don’t even know—anyway look, no clothes or barriers of any kind.” I hold my arms out and do a slow circle. It feels weird, I’ve never been naked outside before.

This isn’t outside. You’re in a holodeck.

When he just stands there, seeming indecisive, I decide to go ahead and do the circle thing again. It feels sexier this time,

naked and all, and I can feel his gaze on me as I walk around him. He holds perfectly still, and I walk an extra two circles for good measure, wondering if he might reach out and touch me. When he doesn't, I turn and walk away, to the other side of the picnic area. I don't look back but hear the swishing of his tail as he follows me again.

This is kind of hot. Like I'm being stalked by this big, intimidating alien male.

When I reach the other side of the picnic table, I stop and rest my hands on it and immediately feel him against my back again. This time scales against skin, and I can feel that his cock is out; it moves against the small of my back, gliding smoothly. The spikes are soft, not pokey at all, more of a ribbed-for-her-pleasure sort of thing. And as he moves against me, I can feel that he makes his own lube. That's really convenient.

He wraps his arm around me again, his clawed hand resting against my throat, and—I'm really into it this time. No cold feet. I'm turned on right now. I expect him to bend me over the table. I mean, it's right there, might as well make use of it. But no, he lowers me to lay flat on the ground, pushing me down when I try to catch myself on hands and knees.

Well, this is a little annoying. The grass is kind of rough and pokey, but even as I think it, it changes to a soft moss. Nice.

His—snout? —nuzzles against the back of my neck, and I feel his tongue flick out against my cheek. There is a movement against my thigh, and I realize that his cock is moving on its

own. His thighs are still over mine, but his cock is moving. It startles a giggle out of me because—that's kinda weird. And it tickles. So does he just lie still then? And his prehensile dick does all the movement?

Wiggling a bit, I try to move my lady bits closer to his alien bits, but I get a low growl that makes me freeze.

“Do you want this?” he asks plainly, the side of his muzzle moving against my hair.

“I—yes please.”

“Then be still.”

“Yeah but how—?”

“Be still.”

Okay, I'm lying here, being still. Under an alien. When I've had sex in the past, with human guys, it always started quickly. Like, whenever I decided to have sex, there was no waiting, only doing. But now, I have to be still and wait and it's building tension. I can feel his scales against my back, his claws at my neck. I feel his chest expand against me with each breath.

When he finally moves, he wedges a knee between my thighs and pushes my legs apart. His claws tighten around my neck momentarily, and his scales slide against me as he adjusts his position, and then—his cock, which had just been moving leisurely along my thigh until this moment, brushes against my labia.

“Ah!” His hand squeezes my neck when I make a startled noise. I’m so sensitive, so primed and ready and waiting, that even that brief contact sends a jolt through me.

“Be still,” he admonishes me again.

His tail brushes against my calves and feet as it swishes back and forth.

His cock finds my pussy again, and this time it nudges against my swollen, wet pussy lips, and I can’t help a little wiggle, seeking more—more friction, more pressure. Just more.

And that’s what I get.

As soon as it brushes against my opening, it darts in. With speed and strength that surprises a yelp out of me. It happens so fast that I barely feel all of those soft spikes, all I feel is instantly stretched, completely filled with alien cock.

There is a hiss like he’s surprised too, then I’m being fucked. Relentlessly, like a machine. The texture of his cock stimulates the inside of my pussy in a way I’ve never experienced.

“*Emph*, oh, yes—” All of the words and sounds I’m making are nonsense. I think I’m going to come and that’s never happened before. Not just from penetration. I usually need some kind of clit stimulation, but not this time. Like a wave pulling back, I feel it about to crash over me. And he’s lying above me. He’s let go of my neck and I see his claws digging into the moss next to my face, the weight of him pushing me into the soft ground, his knee between my legs, keeping them spread as his cock pumps in and out, thrusting on its own.

The other hand clasps my hip, raising my ass slightly to fit tightly against his groin, and now it's even better. Deeper. More intense. My toes dig into the ground, I wrap a hand around the arm near my face, and my whole body is strung tight, tense, and I can't control the sounds coming out of me.

“Ooooh, I—yes—yes, like that. Mmmmm—”

And I'm coming, and it's—I haven't really moved at all as I built up to it, and for some reason that makes it more—just more.

I'm gasping and quaking, trying to grind back against him, but he's holding me tightly against his still body as his cock fucks itself into me.

I'm just coming down when I feel him still inside me, his cock doing this pulsing thing that makes it feel bigger, and the spikes feel a little more spikey, and I can feel his cum—his body temperature is noticeably cooler than mine—and the feeling of him coming in me makes me twitch and squirm.

Wow. I'm kind of shell-shocked. That was really weird but really good.

His dick slips away with the same abruptness of its entrance, and Oh'Karth moves and collapses on his stomach next to me. His tail swishes over his lower legs and mine, and his face is turned toward me. His eyes are dazed, and his mouth is slightly open. He looks a little fuck-drunk.

Rolling to the side, I scoot closer to him, resting a hand on his back and hooking a foot over his calf.

His tongue pops out and tickles my nose, making me giggle.

“So—that was something.”

“Different from Earth Human males?” he asks softly.

“Uh, yeah. Usually humans move around a lot during sex, and there are physical differences.”

“Show me. How would things have been between two humans?”

“Okay, well there are a lot of positions. Um, rollover. Onto your back.” When he does, I straddle him. Not really concerned about the mess because, well, he made the mess. And he’s a computer program. He won’t *really* feel disgust or offense or anything. “This is my favorite position, because I can control the rhythm and depth and the angle. It’s the most stimulating too because—do your women have clits? Clitorises—clitori?”

He looks confused.

“Human women have a very sensitive nerve bundle—” I snag his hand in mine, then bring his thumb to my sex, careful to point his claw away. “Here.”

“Oh.” His thumb brushes softly over it when I release him, and it makes me squirm.

His tongue pops out, tasting the air, and his dick pops out at the exact same time. This time I’m sitting right on top of it, and we’re perfectly aligned. I give a startled yelp and he grunts.

“Apologies.”

“A—wha—?”

“It is an involuntary response.”

Really?

His hard scaly arms wrap around me, pulling me down to lay on his chest as his cock is moving already. It is amazing like this. Almost too much, because I’m still kind of sensitive. I feel him tense, and I can tell he’s about to roll us over and position himself on top.

“Hey!” His gaze shoots to mine and I order him, “Be still.” The look he gives me! “Do you want this?” He makes a whistling noise that my translator interprets as a laugh. “Then be still.”

He complies and I shake off his arms, sitting up and bracing my hands against the scales of his chest. My hips give an impulsive roll. It feels so good.

He’s looking up at me, wide-eyed—startled.

“Is this okay?” I ask, moving in a slow, gentle rhythm, grinding my clit down on him. Am I really going to come again? So soon?

“It is different.” He gasps the sentence out. “Not what I would expect.”

“Do you want to stop?” If it’s involuntary, then just because he’s actively fucking me doesn’t equal consent, does it? But

then I have to laugh at myself, because he is not a sentient person that has to consent—but I still want him to.

He shakes his head. Good.

“You’re going to let me take control?”

His head tilts down and to the side, and I recognize it as the alien version of a nod.

I’m still grinding down on him, and his cock is relentlessly fucking me, and this is the best.

“Be still.” I gasp, “Be good, let me ride your cock until I come. Okay?”

I feel his cock pulse inside me like it did last time when he was about to come.

“Don’t come yet. Wait for me—”

He whimpers. Oh my god, it’s so hot.

“I cannot—it is not controllable—I—”

“Try, for me—ahh—” With his cock fucking into me, all I’m doing is grinding down against him and it is amazing. I’ve never been the type to come more than once. I have trouble even achieving one orgasm most of the time. It is not a problem right now. If he can just hold off while I— “Oh, so good. I’m coming. You’re making me come so hard!”

He grabs my hips, claws pricking against my ass as he pulls me down tightly against him. I feel it again, when he comes it is a shocking pulse inside, and—my orgasm just keeps going. It’s wrung out of me, leaving me breathless and twitching.

I lay on his chest, limp, boneless, and sweaty as I catch my breath.

“That was unexpected,” he says.

“You started it.”

“I suppose I did.” A clawed hand brushes my hair from my cheek, and he asks, “Is that how it always is for humans?”

I shake my head. “No, that was exceptional.”

He wraps both arms around me, squeezing tightly and nuzzling the side of his face against mine. “I thought it might be—it felt exceptional to me.”

I sigh. If only real guys were this sweet. I’m feeling kind of attached to this holodeck guy, and he’s just a program.

Scooting off him, I stand and say, “I’ve got to get going.”

He nods in agreement.

“End program.”

His eyes go wide, but he immediately disappears, and I’m left standing in an empty room, feeling kind of—hollow?

Silly.

I got exactly what I wanted. I look around for my clothes, but there’s a holographic menu in my way.

‘How would you rate your overall experience today?’

I give it the highest rating. It was perfect.

‘How do you rate your match?’

I give Oh’Karth the highest rating and sigh.

'Please schedule a follow-up meeting with your match.'

I don't know if it's a smart thing to do, but I go ahead and select a date on the displayed calendar. I can always cancel it. But I do want to see him again.

There are a lot of different options to label the meeting. Many of them aren't properly translated and the rest don't really make sense. The second to last option says 'bonding.' Well, that sounds nice and harmless. I pick that one.

With another sigh, I get dressed. Okay, I need to pull myself together. I promised Sophie a report, and I'm not going to tell her some sad, crazy tale about me being attached to an alien lizard man who isn't even real. No. I am not going to be pathetic. I'm going to tell her and Spackley how amazing this simulation was and how fun and leave out my inappropriate feelings.

Three

OH'KARTH

“I am affianced to an Earth Human.”

My exciting news is greeted with the shocked silence of my kin. We are in the lounging area of my mother's domicile. Since I am going to join my human in the next work-span, I decided that now, this previously arranged visit where my mother, my brother, and I are all in attendance, is the ideal time to deliver this information.

When nobody says anything for a few moments, I add, “Her name is Crystal, and she resides on the Rissant Eight Space Station. I will travel to meet her there and we will—”

“How did you meet this Earth Human?” my mother asks.

“What is an Earth Human?” my brother speaks at exactly the same moment.

Before I can answer, my mother explains, “Earth Humans are that new species. You know, the ones that decorated all of those appliances that Sal'Huteck sells?”

My brother continues to look confused, so my mother ventures to the sleep area and returns with a portable screen. “See, look.” She has pulled up a video from the interplanetary communication matrix. In it, two human women are laughing and demonstrating how to perform a traditional human dance.

“This is Mandy, she is the one who designed the etchings. That is Gloria. And look—”

She is scrolling through posts.

“You are on the interplanetary matrix?” I ask. She has never left this planet that I know of and does not associate with anybody who has.

“Oh, yes. I had to establish an account so that I could join the Bonafide Earth Human Art Appreciation Group.”

“The Earth Human Art Appreciation Group?” my brother asks.

“The *Bonafide* Earth Human Art Appreciation Group. I do not own a certified piece of original Earth Human Art, so I am not permitted to join the Earth Human Art Appreciation Group or the Real Earth Human Art Appreciation Group. But Treem, the male who started the group I did join, says that as long as my appreciation of Earth Human Art is real, I can be in this group.”

My brother and I take a moment to absorb this information. I talk with my mother every day and visit her once or twice in a work-span. I thought I knew everything that went on in her life. And she already knows about Earth Humans? I am

embarrassed that I had no idea they existed as species until I laid eyes on Crystal in that sim.

“And what about your affianced human?” My brother brings my attention back to the conversation. “Is she also an artist? Could you perhaps acquire some piece of art from her so that our matriarch could join any of these clubs that she might like?”

The matriarch in question shakes her head, “Do not, under any circumstances. That would be so awkward.” She looks from me to my brother, then back to me, the scales under her chin and down the sides of her neck coloring. “But—is she an artist?”

“I do not know. She may be. Is that a common talent among Earth Humans?”

My mother is silent for a moment, then she glances again at my brother, then looks back at me. “You did not speak about her hobbies and interests?”

“No, not yet—”

“How did you meet this Earth Human female again?”

“I—we met on the virtual matching sim.” The scales along my jaw and neck heat at this admission. It is nothing to be embarrassed about, looking for a match on the dating sim. But I know some people, people with more traditional views, would find it so.

My mother nods and seems soothed.

“So, the dating sim’s algorithm matched you with her?”

“Yes, and we also picked each other from line-ups of suitable matches.”

My brother chimes in, “Well can’t you look at her profile? See what her interests are? The profiles on the dating sims are rather exhaustive, so the information should be there.”

“Her profile was mostly blank. This was her first time in a sim.”

“But she read your profile though?” my mother asks.

“Yes. She must have seen it when she clicked on me.”

“Hmmm...” My brother sounds skeptical. “What did you speak about in the simulated meeting?”

“We spoke of our respective biologies and cultures. We—” My scales are heating again. Maybe I should have waited to give my family this good news. I did not think they would ask about what I did in the sim, and I have no appropriate answers.

My brother sits up straighter and his tail swishes behind him in agitation. “Oh’Karth, did you mate this female? In the *sim*?”

My mother starts to shake her head, but then she looks at me and her tail, too, starts to flick. “Son, tell me you did not mate this girl even before meeting her in person—”

“I—”

“Oh, but what must she think of you! You were raised to treat females with more respect than—!”

“It was her,” I defend myself. “She initiated it. She cut short the conversation to—I mean, it was her idea. And I do not

think there is anything wrong with it. Compatibility is an important aspect when considering a potential mate.”

My mother’s tail is still flicking in agitation, but at least she is listening to my explanation.

“It did seem strange,” I continue explaining, “But humans are new to me. I know nothing of their culture or values. Or how courtship works for them. When I signed up for the matching sim, I decided to keep an open mind about other species because—you know I have not had any success matching among our own people.”

My mother tilts her head in understanding. My scales are very dark green. One of the least desirable colors a male can have. With no stripes or anything. My mother has the exact same coloration, but it is different for females. They are supposed to be plain.

She sighs and relaxes in her seat. “I suppose, perhaps this human found you so attractive she was overcome.”

My brother huffs a laugh from the sofa. “Yes, who could resist such a male?”

My mother’s face relaxes and the scales along her chin calm to their regular green. I do not think she picked up on his jocular tone.

“So after you—when the sim ended, she made her interest clear? Did she come to you or—?”

“No. But she gave our sim experience a perfect rating,” Pride warms my scales as I remember this. Not only did she rate the

experience perfect, but she also rated *me* perfect. “And she proposed that we should be bond-mates and scheduled a meeting in person.”

“Oh, well, she seems to be very—um—decisive.”

I nod, feeling like the less I speak about my interactions with my human, the better.

She straightens her head and her tail stills.

“Good. I am happy for you, my son.”

My brother grins, happily crinkling his eyes and swishing his tail. “I could transport you,” he offers, “I have the shuttle for another twelve turns.” He has use of a space shuttle to do his work transporting goods between our world and various stations.

“That is very kind of you. I accept.”

Four

CRYSTAL

“Did you see Abby’s latest post? She included a summary of your holodeck experience!” Sophie says as she helps me hang a black and gray garland from the ceiling of the cafeteria. We humans are hosting a Halloween party. It was Shirley’s idea that we should celebrate even though we aren’t sure exactly what day it is on Earth.

“What? Why?” It has been a week since my ‘experience,’ and I’ve gotten a little tired of talking about it. Lately, a few of the human women have been pressuring me to go a few more rounds and test out different alien species for them. I’m the only human on this station with an implant, so I’m the only one who can use the holodeck.

I don’t want to try out any more aliens though. My feelings are all mixed up from the last one. I should have expected it because I’ve always been too emotional about sex. And now I’ve caught feelings for a hologram. An alien guy that doesn’t even exist.

When I first told Sophie and Spackley about it, I was still in the afterglow and had only good things to say. The next morning though, I wanted to call Oh'Karth. Which was stupid. This is worse than a regular hook-up because—well it's like catching feelings for a cartoon or something.

Two days ago, I caught sight of a lizard alien in the cafeteria, and I swear my heart stopped. They were green and at first, I thought '*Oh'Karth! He's here!*' But not only is that ridiculous because Oh'Karth doesn't exist, but this lizard was a female. She was a lighter green and had gray stripes and her name was Hre'Smer. Her husband walked in soon after, and boy was he a sight. Bright pink from nose to tail! All of the humans in the cafeteria started talking at once and looking between me and the lizard couple, even though I don't know them from Adam.

But every human knows about my holodeck experience because that's why I did it. To gather information on alien behavior and share it with my fellow humans. And now I'm letting everyone down by not trying out more. And there aren't any single lizard guys on the station so the info I have shared is kind of useless.

I can't do this to myself again though. There is just something about my brain chemistry that's incompatible with casual encounters of any sort. The other humans are just going to have to figure stuff out for themselves.

With a sigh, I hop down from the table I had been standing on top of to hang the garland.

“Oh, it’s not so bad! The post was mostly about unexpected cultural differences. Like the pheromone stuff and the circling. It’s just a heads up to be careful when trying to seduce aliens.”

“Okay. I’ll read it tonight.”

She sets her armload of decorations on the table and throws an arm over my shoulder to give me a side hug. “You’re still depressed that your lizard boyfriend isn’t real?”

I nod.

“You want to talk about it?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, well let’s finish decorating.”

She takes a turn standing on tables to attach all of our décors to the ceiling. Then Shirley brings in a small grey cube. “Look what I found. It’s a fog machine!”

“Oh wow. I didn’t even think about that. How cool.”

“Yeah, I got to talking to the Screeg, you know the bird guy in the storage bay?” We both nod. “Well, I was telling him about our party and Halloween costumes and decorations, and lo and behold, look! They have this thing that will just start producing mist in whatever area you place it.”

She sets it down on the table and sure enough, mist starts bubbling out of the top of the thing and down its sides, quickly covering the tabletop.

“Nice!” Sophie says, “Did you invite Screeg to the party?”

“Yes and he’s definitely coming. I’ve invited a few aliens. I figure, the more the merrier, right?”

We both nod. The cafeteria is a large space, so I’m sure we can accommodate everyone.

She grabs up her fog machine and says, “We’ll save this for the party. Do we have all of the supplies?”

“Luna came through with some drinks.” Sophie informs, “*Drink* drinks. Like, I think it’s an alien mead or wine or something? I took it to the medbay to check and make sure it’s safe for humans.”

“And is it?” I ask.

“As safe as Earth alcohol.”

“Awesome! This was a great idea. It’s going to be so fun!” Shirley is headed for the door. “I need to finish getting my costume ready. This looks great, you guys! See you tonight!”

Then she’s gone.

“Do you have a costume?” Sophie asks me.

I shake my head.

“Well, let’s go print one up for you! I think you’ll make an excellent witch. Or a princess. Oh! Or we could both be zombies!”

“Zombie witch princesses?”

“Zombie witch princesses! It’s going to be epic. C’mon.”

By the time we have our costumes and makeup sorted out, it’s almost time for the party. I tell Sophie I’ll see her there and

head back to my room.

There's a feature of my brain implant that I haven't told the other humans about. Anything that I have seen, heard, or experienced, I can playback. I can lay in my bed and experience it again.

I've been replaying my encounter with Oh'Karth a lot. Like, every day. That's probably why I'm having so much trouble getting past it.

Laying down and closing my eyes, all I need to do is think of it. Think of the holodeck, and the image pops into my mind's eye, and if I continue thinking about it, it will replay. It's not the same. Not as intense. But I can see and hear him clearly. But the touch of his scales is a ghost of a sensation. In the holodeck, it was *real*.

I haven't canceled the follow-up I scheduled in the holodeck. Maybe I don't care how crazy it is; if all I want is him, I'm just going to play it out. See him as often as I want. Maybe I'll just live in the holodeck with my hologram boyfriend and only come out to eat, drink, and use the restroom. I check, and I'm surprised to be reminded that that follow-up date is tonight.

I guess I'll just leave the party early.

Five

OH'KARTH

“Has she acknowledged your ping yet?”

“No.”

This is the fourth time my brother inquired about it. As though I would not let him know immediately when she pinged me back.

“Perhaps she is—unable to answer you?”

“Perhaps.”

But how could that be? She must have an implant. And it is functioning, otherwise my ping would be flagged as undeliverable. She is just not answering.

“She could be experiencing some kind of emergency?”

That is possible.

“Do you still want to try to meet with her? Should we—?”

“Yes. Let us go. She may get in contact with me on the way there.”

He is a good brother, but Oh'Beft can be condescending. Right now, though he is not saying it, I can tell that he thinks I have mistaken Crystal's intentions. That a female meeting me, being with me for a tenth of a span, and deciding that I am the one for her—it is not believable.

I often do not believe it. But the notification from the sim letting me know that she wished to partner with me is saved to my implant, and I access it multiple times a day just to reassure myself that, yes, this is real. She really wants me as a mate. She really invited me to the space station where she lives.

But why has she not answered any of my pings to confirm our meeting? The sim delivered her contact information along with the notification and—

“We will find her, do not worry,” Oh'Beft reassures me with a pat on the shoulder.

He has the same coloring as I do, though he was blessed with a very faint striping pattern. But it does not seem to bother him when he is overlooked for males with more colorful patterning. Or maybe he is bothered, and he just hides it better than me.

“The docking bay has confirmed our spot,” he says.

“Hmm.”

“So that means you did not imagine this invitation. A spot was secured for you—but is it the sim that did that? Or was it your human?”

“I know I did not imagine it!”

“It has occurred to me that if you were hallucinating the whole thing, you may not be aware—fine, never mind. You were not hallucinating.”

“I know!”

The shuttle has docked with the station and now we need to exit. This is so frustrating! I have no idea where to meet Crystal, and what if she thinks I am not coming? What if it is a technical problem on my end and she feels ignored and rejected? The idea tightens my chest and strengthens my resolve. I will find her, even if I have to search every corner of this station.

As we walk across the docking bay, Oh’Beft sees a male he recognizes. He is feathered, with wings, a beak, and black and gold coloring. I have not seen many of his kind before, but I have rarely left my home planet.

“Screeg! My friend! Greetings!” he calls happily.

“Good greetings, Oh’Beft. I did not expect you this day.”

“Oh, I am not here for work. No, the only thing I am delivering today is my brother, Oh’Karth.” He pats me on the back. “Oh’Karth, greet Screeg. He works in the receiving bay of this station.”

“Good greetings,” I say.

“Well met.” He looks from my brother to me, his beak opens and closes, then he says, “Usually, I would stay and talk, but tonight I have been invited to a cultural event.”

“A what?”

“A cultural event. It is an Earth Human holiday, celebrating—well, to be honest, I am not quite sure what. But there is costuming and decoration.”

“Oh, well this is serendipitous then,” says my brother.

“Oh’Karth is here to meet a human! Do you happen to know if Crystal will be there?”

“Yes, all of the humans will be there. And the person who invited me said that everybody is welcome.”

“Excellent! We will accompany you then.”

This is going to be easier than I thought.

As we follow Screeg, he asks, “How did you come to know Crystal?”

My brother flicks me with his tail to encourage an answer.

“We matched in the Interspecies Matching Sim. She invited me to meet her on this station but failed to give a specific location,” I explain succinctly.

“Ah, and she did not answer when you pinged?”

“No.”

“She is the only human with a functional implant on this station, and as far as I can tell, no one has taught her how to properly use it.” He pauses for a moment, then says, “I just pinged her and it is unanswered. She may not even feel it, and if she does, she does not know what it means or how to respond.”

“That is a relief. I was concerned that my dear brother might be rejected or ignored or—”

“Crystal is not like that. She is kind, always helping her fellow humans. I cannot imagine she would feign an interest.” Screeg’s sure tone is lifting my mood with every syllable. I did not want to say so out loud to Oh’Beft, but I was worried that she may have been playing some kind of hurtful trick—

“What in creation?” Both males stop in the corridor. As I come around, I see a mist covering the floor and growing ever thicker further along. It is so much that we cannot see what is causing this.

“It is artificial fog,” Screeg explains, marching forward. “I loaned a fog-producing machine to the organizer of this event and—I do not know why they need so much fog?”

We continue forward, even though our path is obscured. If it is just fog, then it is harmless.

“We should be there—”

“*Marcoh!*” a female yells to our right.

“*Poh-loh!*” another answers.

“*Mar—oh*, Screeg it’s you!” A female (not Crystal, this one is slightly taller and has a longer, brown mane) has run into Screeg and he has caught her up in his winged arms.

“Greetings, Shirley. Why have you run the fog machine at its highest setting for so long? I cannot even see you, and you are directly in front of me.”

“Oh, um, I didn’t realize there were different settings. It just comes on when I put it down so—” She is pulling on Screeg’s wing and moving him along the inner wall of this room—I think it is a cafeteria—to a table where she pats around until she finds the device in question and hands it to Screeg. “Show me how it works.”

He places it on the table and then taps the top. The fog slows. He taps it again, and then again, and it stops altogether.

“Oh, well, that’s easy enough,” she says with a giggle. “Would you like a drink? What about your friends?”

“Yes, first let me introduce you to my friend, Oh’Beft, and his brother, Oh’Karth.” He gestures toward us.

Shirley moves her hand in a familiar wave gesture that Crystal did when we first met. “Hi, I’m Shirley.”

“Well met,” Oh’Beft and I say in unison, making Screeg chuff a laugh.

“Your name is Oh’Karth?” she asks my brother. He shakes his head and points to me. “Oh, do you know Crystal by any chance?”

I nod. “Yes, Crystal and I are acquainted. Is she here?”

The mist has cleared a little bit, so I look around at all the human faces. I do not see Crystal. But some of the females are wearing masks or head-coverings, so perhaps—

“No, she left early. I thought—Crystal told us about you, but she said you were a holographic program!”

“I—” I glance at Oh’Beft, who looks equally puzzled, then back to Shirley. “We met in a sim, so from each other’s perspective, each of us was a holographic simulation—”

Shirley slowly nods, but still appears confused.

“Sophie!” she calls.

Another Earth Human female answers, “*Poh-loh!*”

“Hey, come here.”

The other Earth Human has strange green paint all over her face. She wears an outfit of voluminous fabric and has a tall, ribboned hat sitting crookedly on her head. Her eyes widen a little bit, but before she says anything, Shirley says, “This is Oh’Karth. He is here asking about Crystal.”

“Whaaa—? But how did he get out of the holodeck?” She directs this question at Shirley but looks at me accusingly.

“I came on a shuttle. I do not know what *holo-dack* is.”

“A shuttle?” she repeats as if this is a troubling concept.

“Yes, because he is a really real lizard man,” Shirley says.

“Oh, wow. Does Crystal know?”

“I don’t know. But how could she not?”

Sophie is looking very agitated, and when I taste the air, I confirm it. She is also inebriated with some kind of alcoholic fruit beverage.

“Where is she?” Sophie turns to one side then the other, then calls, “Crystal!”

“She left—she told me she had a meeting. Wait—?”

“Yes, we had a meeting scheduled, but she did not tell me the location where I should meet her,” I let them know.

“Oh.” Shirley looks at Sophie, and Sophie does a wiggle/jerk motion with her shoulders.

“I would guess that she believes she is meeting you in the sim,” Screeg says.

Both of the females nod, agreeing with this, but my brother asks, “Why though? Why invite him here, but meet in the sim? This makes no sense.”

“She is not well versed in our technology,” Screeg says as if that explains anything. “Here, I have sent you the location of our sim room. Go see if she is there.”

I nod, “I will look. If I do not find her—”

“I will remain here for the next point two turns,” Oh’Beft says. “I will retire to the shuttle and will not leave without first speaking with you.” Unsaid is that he is waiting in case I am rejected and require transport home. I will not take the job I have been offered on this station if Crystal rejects me after all.

I nod, thank my brother and Screeg, and then leave to find my human mate.

Six

CRYSTAL

“Choose from these four hundred and seventy-three options.”

Dammit! I wish I could navigate this system better! I have already picked a setting and an outfit, but here I am, scrolling and scrolling through these profiles, squinting at every picture, and Oh’Karth is nowhere to be found.

You would think since I have a pre-scheduled appointment, the program would be on reserve and pop right up when I log in, but no! Nothing can be that easy!

“Reminder: Your previously scheduled interaction with Oh’Karth is to take place at this time.”

“I know!” I yell at the display. I try to click the blinking notification, but it is unclickable.

Fuck!

“Choose from—”

“God! Just shut up!”

Frustrated beyond all reason, I rub a hand over my face. Makeup smears over my palm. Fuck. I forgot about my zombie-princess face.

I give up.

I focus on the bottom left corner of the display until it blinks once, then turns off.

Maybe this is for the best. I can't really date a hologram. I can't really spend all of my spare time in an artificial environment with Oh'Karth. That's not a healthy way to deal with—anything.

I pull up the saved file of my previous meeting with him and stare at the bottom right corner until it blinks. It will delete if I keep staring at this corner, but I chicken out and squeeze my eyes closed.

I'll delete it tomorrow. I can't go on like this, but I don't want to delete it right now. Not when I'm not ever going to see him again.

I hear the door whoosh open behind me, but I don't turn around.

“Crystal? Are you well?”

I gasp and spin around because it's him! It's Oh'Karth!

Taking three quick steps, I'm in front of him before I know it, and I wrap my arms around him. He does the same, his scales catching on the fabric of my princess dress.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” I gaze up at him. If he had a mouth like a human, I would kiss him. Standing on my toes, I move my arms up around his neck and pull him down so I can kiss him on the side of his mouth.

His tail is excitedly flicking back and forth on the bare floor.

“Wait, but how are you here?” I ask, confused. “I thought I shut down the program?”

“The program?”

“Y—Yes. The holodeck program? Where we met?”

“Why would we need the sim? We can meet anywhere at the station.”

Stepping back out of his arms, I look him up and down from the tip of his twitching tail to the end of his nose. Something is different.

“You aren’t wearing the silver collar. Or any of the rings on your tail,” I comment inanely.

“I would have, but my brother came with me on the shuttle and I—he may have joked about me wearing them. He thinks such adornments are silly.”

“I liked them.”

“Your preferences would have overridden his. Had I known.”

After that, I quietly study him, and a few things are clicking in my brain.

Oh’Karth is a real person. A real alien that I had holographic sex with. And he’s here. The meeting I agreed to was a real in-

person meeting with a real lizard alien who is really here in front of me.

“Would you like to engage a holographic setting?” he asks.

“I—I guess we could do that if you want to. Or we could go somewhere else. Like the atrium, it has a garden. Or there’s a Halloween party in the cafeteria.”

“I would not like to share your company just now,” he answers, and—I like that. I don’t want to share his company either.

“Okay, let’s do a holographic setting then.”

He engages the holodeck and chooses a setting very similar to the meadow/picnic from before. This one is a little sunnier, with mountains in the background and a large blanket spread on the ground.

“Nice!” I enthuse.

“I am glad it pleases you.”

He’s wearing the silver band around his neck, and I love that he had the program put it on because he knows I like it. What a sweetheart.

And he’s real. My feelings for him aren’t delusional or hopeless. I can spend time with him and—it could actually mean something.

“It seems that you do not know how this sim works or what it is for,” he says baldly, and I feel embarrassed. It’s a fair

statement though. Obviously, if he's not a hologram, but a real guy, I misunderstood something.

"Yeah, I thought I knew, but I guess—"

"I will explain."

"Okay." I sit down on the blanket, and he follows me, sitting close enough that I grab his hand and intertwine my fingers with his. His tail wraps loosely around us.

"It is an inter-species matching sim. Individuals interested in establishing a romantic connection create a profile, and this way they can interact with people who are from different places, different galaxies sometimes. They don't have to traverse great distances to meet until they establish a strong connection and both desire it."

"Oh. It's a dating app. That makes sense." It also explains Spackley's attitude about the whole thing. "I'm glad. That you're real, I mean."

He makes a sound that's halfway between a hiss and a chuff.

"So—since you're here and everything, I guess you want to keep seeing me?" I ask.

"Yes. I came here with the assumption that we were engaged to be bond-mates. You rated me as your perfect match, the one you would like to spend your life with. And then you proposed this meeting," he explains.

"Oh my god, really? And you came?"

He nuzzles his face against mine and says, “Of course I came. I could not believe my good fortune. I even bragged about this to my kin.”

“Your kin?”

“Yes, my mother and my brother.”

“Ah.” I don’t really know how to react to this. He knows I didn’t really propose to him, right? It’s not really a bad idea though. “How about we just hang out together a lot? And then, if things work out, we can—we can be mated.”

“You are not obligated to offer me this. I know that your proposition was made in error.”

“I want to though. Oh’Karth I—I was so upset when I couldn’t find your profile in the program. I thought I would never see you again! And I felt so ridiculous because I thought you were a simulation, not even a real person. And then you just appeared! And you’re real! It’s like a gift, like I wished you into being. Of course I want to keep seeing you.”

“Then I agree.”

I kneel up next to him and kiss the side of his mouth again. Then again. I’m just happy he’s here. But then I remember how I acted the last time we met.

“I’m sorry I was so rude to you,” I say, feeling embarrassed. The way I examined him and pretty much demanded sex from him—and I kept telling myself it didn’t matter.

“I thought it was common Earther behavior. Were you rude?”

I nod, ducking my head and averting my gaze. “It’s not really appropriate to behave that way—to be so pushy when you first meet someone. I was out of line because I thought—well you know what I thought—”

“It is forgiven.”

“But—”

“We would not have met, I would not be here, if not for your inappropriate behavior. So I thank you for it.”

I guess he’s right. Had I known it was a dating app with real alien people, I probably wouldn’t have messed with it and—I am happy we’ve met. And that he’s here.

I sit up and turn toward him. “So you came here to get married? Are you here on this station permanently then?”

“Yes. I have engaged employment and I reserved living quarters. I did not know what your living situation is so—”

“I live in a very small room in the human wing of this station. I’m glad you got your own space,” I say.

“Hmmm. And so how long do humans usually evaluate romantic partners? And what is involved with bonding a human?”

“Oh, um, it’s different for every situation. Usually couples date for months or even years before they move in together or get married. But some move very fast. My grandmother married my grandfather a week after they met.”

“A week is five work-spans or seven? It is not translating smoothly.”

“I’m guessing seven. Can’t be sure.”

His tail swishes happily at this answer.

“I take it you want a short engagement?” I ask.

“However long you need, I will wait. I had already accepted your offer.”

I look into his face for a moment, wishing I could ‘taste pheromones’ as he can and get some kind of clue about the way he’s feeling.

Eventually, I ask, “So what made you accept my offer so quickly then? I can’t believe I won you over within one hour.”

He thinks for a moment then responds, “It must have been the sex.”

I laugh, but he says, “I am serious. That is all we really did, right? And you did not answer my comm after, so I had to make a decision based on the experience we had—”

“Oh wow. It was good sex. I did feel like we had a connection, but then I felt silly because I thought you weren’t real—”

“I felt this too.”

“In fact, I ran the experience over and over every day—”

“I did as well!” he exclaims.

I laugh with him and say, “I guess we’re equally obsessed.” He does a sideways nod like all the aliens do. “So you came here to get married. Do you know what I came here for?”

His gaze heats a little bit. “I am guessing you came for more of the same treatment. Were you going to immediately circle me? Or would you have said good-greetings first?”

“Oh, I would have greeted you alright. And then I was going to try some human mating behaviors out on you.”

“What behaviors?”

“Well, I was going to skip the circling to touch, kiss, and lick you instead.”

“Why would—”

“It’s called foreplay. It’s something humans do as a segue to sex. And I was going to try out oral. And if you weren’t enticed by any of that, I would go ahead and give circling a try.”

I’m looking at his face, trying to gauge his reactions, but it’s difficult.

“That all sounds complicated and not strictly necessary or even possible,” he finally says.

“Well, you wouldn’t have to reciprocate,” I assure him.

“What would be required of me then?”

“I suppose I would just need your permission, and if anything I do hurts you or you want to stop, you would have to tell me. Just say ‘stop.’”

He nods his head slowly but still looks skeptical. “How long would all of this human-mouth-mating have to go on?”

I giggle and tell him, “You’re making it a lot scarier than it actually is. And we don’t even have to do any of it anyway, not if you find it gross. I was just telling you what I would have done when I thought you were a sim program with no preferences.”

“Oh.” He looks at my face, tasting the air, and then looks down at where I’m holding his hand. “I would be open to trying human before-play. I know that the human way of doing things was enjoyable during our previous encounter.”

My body warms up a little remembering when we did it the ‘human way.’

He’s looking at me expectantly, his tail tense and still.

“You want me to show you now?”

He nods.

“Okay, sit up.” He straightens, and I kneel in front of him, my face coming up to his collarbone. I place my hands on his shoulders and lean up a bit, kissing the side of his mouth again. “Humans will kiss each other, pressing our mouths together, and using our tongues too. This is usually a first step toward intimacy.” I lick the seam of his mouth.

“Are you tasting me? Can you measure my mood?”

I shake my head. “Nope. We don’t do it to gather information. Just for fun.” I kiss the side of his chin, then his neck. “Humans explore each other with kisses. At least, the ones who want to do. There are a few sensitive areas we focus on.” He doesn’t have external ears, or nipples. A lot of the obvious

‘sensitive areas’ don’t apply here, so I explore his body with my hands and mouth, taking note of when he changes color or makes a sound. After a couple of minutes, I have him lying on the ground, legs spread as I kneel over him, working my way down. His dick isn’t out yet, his groin still flat as a doll’s, though there is a noticeable bump. With the softest touch of my fingers, I gently explore the seam I find there.

I’m rewarded with a growly, chuffing sound.

“Is this okay? Can I touch you here?”

He nods and hisses, so I lean down and lick along the same line I just touched, my tongue caressing his scales where they meet at a discreet slit.

“Ah—I—” A clawed hand grabs my shoulder at the same moment his cock extrudes; it thumps against my cheek, surprising a yelp out of me. “Apologies! I—”

I smile, looking over his recumbent body where he’s struggling to prop himself up with one elbow. “No worries.”

Then I lean down and swipe my tongue up the head of his cock.

His mouth falls open just a bit and he stares with a dumbfounded expression.

Continuing with my oral exploration, I find that those soft spikes of his tickle against my tongue and slightly scrape against my taste buds. There is an indent around the top, making a crown similar to a human penis, but kind of disguised by the spikes.

Pushing his tool flat up against his stomach, I realize he doesn't have any balls underneath. Huh, they must be internal? Putting aside my curiosity, I drag my tongue from the base all the way up to the crown and try to take as much as I can comfortably fit into my mouth. He's not small to start with and the spikes don't make it any easier, but I'm no quitter, and I manage to suck a respectable amount.

His mouth closes with an audible snap and his claws dig into my shoulder just a touch, then release. Hopefully, he's into it. He seems really affected.

Then his cock moves, it backs out of my mouth, spikes scraping across my lips and tongue, and then it darts back in. Past the comfortable few inches I had managed, it thrusts against the soft roof of my mouth and makes it to the beginning of my throat.

Startled, I try to jerk away, but I find his clawed hand has moved up to palm the back of my head as his cock pulls out again. I gasp but don't get a full breath before my air is blocked and his cock fucks even further, down my throat a little.

I try to relax. This is my doing, really. I didn't think ahead to what it meant that his dick moves by itself. I pretty much asked him to do this, I don't know why I'm surprised. I breathe through my nose, relax my jaw, and try to tilt my chin and line things up better.

There is a loud growl and his muscles tense under my hands as he holds my face down on his cock, fucking deep into my

throat and cutting off my air completely as he comes. Now I feel his alien cock pulse and those spikes firm all in my mouth and throat. Not quite as soft anymore, but not hurting either.

The spikes aren't the problem anyway. I need to breathe or I'm going to pass out. This is too much—

Just as I dig my nails into his scales and tense to push myself off him, he goes limp and his cock retreats, snaking out of my throat and mouth with a wet pop and hiding away again inside his body.

His arms are sprawled out and his tail is loosely limp, off to the side. I can only see his strange chin, the bottom of his long mouth sticking up straight and blocking his face from my view as he rests his head flat on the ground.

A dazed, sort of disconnected feeling has stolen over me and I'm not sure how I feel.

He leans up and asks, "This—it is a common human custom to —with your mouth?"

"*Yess—Yes.* But it's not usually—when humans do it, everything is more controlled. I forgot that your—" I gesture toward his groin, "—that it moves. That you don't control it."

"Oh—apologies! Are you—did I hurt you?" He's pulled his legs under himself and is kneeling in front of me, examining my throat and face.

"I'm fine."

"But—!"

“No, I enjoyed it. It just got a little intense there for a moment.”

He isn't consoled. His tail coils tightly around him as he looks down at the ground and then back to my face, then down again.

“I obviously behaved wrongly. I was too rough with you.”

I want to make him feel better—but if we're going to be together, I need to be honest with him.

“Next time, don't grab my head like that. Not unless I agreed to it beforehand,” I explain. He nods his head and opens his mouth to apologize again but I rush ahead. “This was my fault for surprising you. We should probably talk about new things more before trying them.”

“Yes. I agree.” He pauses for a moment then asks, “Is there a way for me to reciprocate? To give you before-play?”

It's a tough question because he's really not made for any kind of kissing or licking. And the claws on his fingers look pretty sharp, I wouldn't want him to get carried away with those.

“We can experiment with that another time—”

“So we can proceed?”

“Huh?”

“You said this was a segue. Are there any more pre-sex activities humans engage in? I am eager to learn.” He does look eager now that we've gotten past that awkwardness.

“How long is your refractory period?”

“Refractory period?”

“Yeah, so, after a human guy orgasms, there is a certain amount of time that needs to pass before he can—you know—perform again.” I glance down then back up to his face. “So how long?”

“Uh—I have not set a clock to it but—point two five work-spans I believe.”

Wow—that’s nearly four hours. “Then we’ll continue this tomorrow morning, I guess?”

He tastes the air and looks a little confused, then asks, “Your males peak only once during a session?”

“Uh—yeah. Usually.”

“I can do it twice. I have two.”

“Really?” Two what? I’m not sure that’s how a refractory period works. But he would know. And come to think of it, he came twice last time too.

“Yes. I will demonstrate.”

Bracing myself, I wait to see what he’s going to demonstrate, but he tastes the air, tilts his head, and asks, “Do I still have your interest?”

I guess we’re back to doing things his way.

Standing up, I look down at him where he’s kneeling. Every time I look at him, he’s more attractive to me. He’s still an alien—there’s no getting around that. How strong and solid his long body is, the way scales shimmer as he moves, and his

eyes are really dark. What I had originally thought was a dark brown or black is actually a very dark forest green. It's really pretty. I think I might be ruined for human men now. Like, they're kind of boring by comparison.

So, yes, he still has my interest.

I pull the arms of my zombie-witch-princess dress off, then lift the whole thing over my head to toss it on the ground. I wasn't wearing a bra, so I just wiggle out of my underwear. Now I'm naked and ready to circle.

As I walk around him twice I ask, "Can we still do it if I'm not being still? What if I move around?"

"My instinct is to release if you move around."

"But, if I'm having trouble being still, can you try and hold me still?"

He nods. "I will try."

I circle him one more time, then turn and walk off, but after walking away, I come back because the blanket really is the best place to do this.

And he's right behind me, wrapping an arm around and resting his claws against my throat and collarbone. Just to see if he really is going to hold me still, I lean forward, pushing against his forearm.

It doesn't budge but tightens a smidge. Oh, that's hot. I like that.

He tastes the air next to my face, his tongue brushing my cheek, then squeezes me even tighter as he guides me to the blanketed ground.

I give an experimental wiggle and he growls. I feel the vibration against my back. Giggling, I wiggle again, and this time he pulls his arm from under me so he can wrap his long, clawed fingers around my neck from the back, applying gentle pressure to pin me to the blanket that way. His cock extrudes at the same moment, hard and slick against my thighs, and without conscious thought, I try to adjust my position and move toward him.

Hissing, he grips my neck harder, and then he pulls me back so that I'm on my knees, but my face is still held flat to the blanket. Oooh, this will work—but when I try to spread my knees, his legs are bracketing mine and holding my thighs tightly together. And he goes ahead and fucks me this way, his hard, slippery cock tunneling into me with precision, and Oh'Karth hisses above me and his claws bite into my skin a little bit. This is so good, his cock is perfect, I squeeze down on him and that makes it even better. All of those soft spikes are rubbing me inside, and if he keeps going just like this, I'm going to come.

He hisses, “I should restrain you like this—then you could try and wiggle all you like. Next time I will have a rope—”

I'm coming. Coming so hard, I howl; I can't control myself. And when I come down from it, he's still holding my neck, still fucking me, hissing, and growling. Then he's grabbing my

hip, pulling me flush against him until I feel that tale-tell pulse and the coolness of his cum spurting inside me.

For a few moments, he remains kneeling behind me, still connected to me, but as soon as his dick withdraws, he topples to the side and pulls me with him, spooning from behind.

I adjust myself so I can cuddle comfortably, and he says, “Do not start anything. I only have two.”

“I wasn’t.” I glance back at him in time to see him tasting the air. “Two what? What do you mean by that?”

He tilts his head and then answers, “Two shafts.”

Whipping around I ask, “Two shafts? Let me see!”

He shakes his head, “I cannot extrude again for—a while yet.”

I nod in understanding, but ask, “Really though? Two cocks?”

“Yes. How many do Earth males have?”

“Just the one.”

“Hmmm. Strange.”

I laugh at that and snuggle down with him again. I want to ask so many questions! How many testicles does he have? How are his two cocks positioned, side by side, or stacked one on top of the other? Can he extrude both at once? But I decide to give him a rest and look it up later. Now that I know he’s not an educational hologram, I’m not going to bombard him with intrusive questions.

Wait—do women of his kind have two vaginas?

“I can taste your curiosity. You can ask your questions—”

I shake my head and move to stand up. “No, let’s go back to my room and wash up, then we can check and see if the party is still going on,” I tell him as I find my dress and pull it over my head and put my underwear back on.

“You can meet my brother. I left him there.”

“I would love to meet your brother!”

As I lead him down the hall, I show him how to hold hands and—I’m just so glad he’s here! It’s wild that my stupid blunder with the holodeck landed me an alien boyfriend.

Seven

CRYSTAL

Oh'Karth's brother looks very similar to him, same green scales and green eyes, but Oh'Beft has faint stripes and a more sardonic look to him. Where Oh'Karth is a sweetie who wears his heart on his sleeve and is kind of sensitive and serious, Oh'Beft is cracking jokes and talking shit from the start.

“So you exist! I had hope that you were a real woman and not a fiction my brother concocted!” he exclaims when we find him. He wasn't at the party, so we tracked him down at his shuttle.

“Real as can be,” I quip, wrapping my arm around Oh'Karth's waist. “Did you enjoy the party?”

“Yes, it was interesting after all of the fog cleared.”

“Oh? Was there a particular person you found interesting?”

He tilts his head at me, and my translator has a hard time interpreting whether that is a yes-nod or confusion. He finally says, “Why do you ask that?”

“Well, Sophie was asking about you.”

“The one with the green face?”

I nod. “Yes. But that’s make-up you know, not her real coloring.”

“What did she ask about me?”

“Just stuff like, ‘Is he single? How often does he visit the station? Will he be moving here too?’ You know, interested questions,” I reply with false flippancy.

Wouldn’t it be awesome if Sophie and Oh’Beft hit it off? Then we could have double dates and stuff and—I just want Sophie coupled up too. She was the one bemoaning the station’s lack of datable men after all.

Oh’Beft looks a little confused, but also pleased with this news. He looks from me to Oh’Karth, who tells him, “I will let her know how to com you. Humans are new to our communication technology.”

“Gratitude.”

“Oh! We got something for you—well, it’s for your mom.” I pull the folded-up garland out of my pocket. It’s black and gray ribbons with felt ghosts and bats. “I printed this out in the storage bay, but it’s my own design so I think it counts as Earth Human Art.” I’m still a bit confused as to why their mom wants earth stuff, but I’m happy to oblige. If I can make a good impression on her before I even meet her, that’s to my benefit.

“Gratitude, Crystal. She will be very appreciative.”

“You’re welcome. I hope she likes it.”

There's a conversational lull, so I happily squeeze Oh'Karth and lean against him.

He squeezes me back and his tail snakes around my calf. He tells his brother, "Travel safely."

"It was nice to meet you!" I add. "We'll see you next week."

After Oh'Beft leaves, Oh'Karth and I are off to spend the night together in his apartment. And probably the next night too. I might as well move in as soon as possible.

As we're making our way down the corridor, he tastes the air and asks, "What are you thinking on?"

"I'm just happy you're here with me. I'm looking forward to spending time together."

"Much time?"

"Tons of time. As much time as you want."

He squeezes my hand in his. "All of it then."

Note to the Reader

About the Author

Bebe Harper writes sci-fi romance and lives in rural Georgia, USA with her family, pets, and plants.

She also writes under the pen name Mimi Cloutier.

<https://www.goodreads.com/bebeharper>

<https://bebeharper.substack.com>

Also by Bebe Harper

Mandy and the Tentacle Monster

Chasing Cthulhu

The Spider Alien's Bite

Earthers Go Hard

Coming Soon: Apocalypse with an Alien

Ghostship by Bella Blair

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



WHILE SCOUTING MY ASSIGNED SECTOR IN OUR GALAXY, I COME UPON AN ABANDONED ALIEN SHIP...

Jane

A Ghostship.

Excited to explore the deserted vessel, things soon turn strange as an eerie mist follows me wherever I go, even showing me the way to a cabin that appears to have been left in a hurry. Soon I discover that I'm not only unable to leave the Alien Ghostship, but I begin to dream of a handsome, alien stranger. Is he the guy who left this ship in an obvious haste?

Wren

Thanks to my copilot's betrayal, I have been a prisoner in this cave for I don't know how long. My only hope is that my

prototype ship has left to find help, otherwise I'm afraid I will be doomed in here. One morning my tablet announces that somebody has boarded my ship. A woman of a species I have never seen before. Did she board my shop to steal it or to get help? And what is that mist that seems to follow her everywhere? And why do I suddenly begin dreaming of her? So real it is as if she were sitting right next to me. So alluring that all I care about is being with her.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

JANE

I loved everything about being a patrol pilot. Unlike some, I didn't consider the loneliness a drawback.

After growing up inside a buried space transporter, converted to suit the needs of a hundred thousand people, the solitude of being on patrol was just what I needed.

Out here, in the cold void of space, I found peace and the personal space I longed for all my life. Here, I could finally allow my thoughts to drift uninterrupted.

Saying I wasn't much of a people person was an understatement. I avoided them whenever and wherever possible. Unfortunately, Eden—the outpost where I grew up—provided me with everything I needed, except for the one luxury I craved the most. Solitude.

My ship, the *Seeker IV*, was my home, and I was more attached to her than I should've been. Together, we made our rounds of combing the area around Eden to ensure no

Abbaddoths or Intergalactic Alliance explorers made their way out here.

The day everything changed wasn't any different from the twenty-eight other days since I left Eden on this latest mission, not until my onboard computer warned me of another ship of unknown origin approaching my assigned sector.

Adrenaline filled me. If this ship turned out to be an Abbaddoth or Intergalactic Alliance cruiser, I needed to distract and lure it away from Eden and alert my commanders.

First, though, I needed to find out who the ship belonged to.

I pulled up the images on my screen, but the computer couldn't assign any origin to it. Curious. And even curiouiser still, the cruiser appeared to be doing just that, cruising, at a very low speed.

I tasked the computer to dial into the alien ship's frequency to do what I had been told not to do: make contact.

"Unknown vessel, this is Commander Doe. Identify yourself."

Yes, that was me, Jane Doe, imaginatively named by some good Samaritan who discovered me in a burned-out house on Earth before taking me away to Eden. According to him, I had been too traumatized to give my real name and I've forgotten it over the years, forever becoming Jane Doe.

Not that it mattered to me. A name was a name. Right now, my priority was to find out about the other vessel. But whoever was aboard either ignored my message or my computer hadn't found the right frequency yet. I switched

channels and tried again. “Unknown vessel, this is Commander Doe. Identify yourself.”

I enlarged the images of the unknown vessel. Every light inside was on, meaning I should have been able to make out silhouettes of the people inside. But even after scrutiny, I saw nothing. No movement, no shadows. Nothing.

Vice versa, they should have also seen me on their radar. Shouldn't they be trying to contact me as well?

Rooted in place, I stared at the ship, its granite gray color seeming to melt against the backdrop of space. It was a beauty unlike anything I'd seen before. And with our ragtag fleet, I had seen many ships of different origins. Some we stole, others we bought off pirates.

“Let's dock and find out what this is all about,” I told my computer, already pulling out a spacesuit and helmet.

Since no information came from the other ship, I didn't want to assume it would have breathable air. Without discernable life on it, I had to prepare for the worst, namely that the entire crew was dead, possibly perished from noxious gases.

A ghost ship!

The thought hit me like ice water as I instinctively felt the truth of it, but excitement over the enormous discovery quickly took over. If nobody was onboard, or the crew dead, this beautiful ship would be mine.

“Contact made, Commander Doe,” my computer informed me. “Permission to dock granted.”

I shook off nagging warnings about why the other vessel hadn't responded to my request for identification but invited me to dock. *Apparently my curiosity is greater than my fear of dying*, I thought cynically and determinedly zipped the spacesuit, put on the helmet and gloves, and laboriously made my way toward the cargo bay, waiting for the hatch to allow me entrance to the alien ghost ship.

A slight shudder moved through the *Seeker IV* as our hulls connected.

The hatch opened, and I stepped into the small sanitation space that would later decontaminate me, a process I, thankfully, only had endured once during training and didn't look forward to repeating.

The urge to move forward lured me more than fears of being scrubbed to within an inch of my life later, and I caught myself impatiently stepping from one heavily booted foot to the other waiting for the alien ghost ship to open their end and allow me entrance.

An eerie mist greeted me the second the ghost ship's hatch finally retreated to allow me entrance into their version of a decontamination chamber and, suddenly, I was grateful for the spacesuit. As cumbersome as it was, unless the mist contained acid, I would be safe. Or so I told myself. After all, I *was* dealing with not only an alien ship, but possibly an unknown species as well. *An unknown species that might be dead*, my inner voice reminded me.

I ignored that voice and pushed myself on. *Well, here goes nothing!* Filled with trepidation, I took my first step into the alien decontamination chamber.

A hissing sound startled me, and I barely stopped myself from jumping before the last hatch slid aside, allowing me entrance onto the alien ship.

When I first saw the ghost ship on the screen, the unknown vessel had appeared at least three times larger than mine, but stepping into what appeared to be the ship's cargo hold, I realized I had greatly underestimated its size.

The space I stepped into was humongous; the ceiling was a good twenty feet above the ground. Alien equivalents of forklifts stood unmoving by one wall, giving me the heebie-jeebies as I remembered the many horror movies I'd watched and expected them to suddenly spring to life and attack me.

My fingers reached for my gun. It was unlikely that a gun would have any impact against those machines, but it reassured my nervous mind to brush the steel with my gloved fingertips.

I noticed the mist from before, as it seemed to have followed me from the decontamination chamber and now spread across the floor, reminding me even more of some cheap horror movie.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of stacked boxes hid another wall, as if waiting for the forklifts on the other side.

Straight across from me, another much larger hatch opened, leading me forward and inadvertently sucking in the mysterious mist on the ground which preceded me toward the entrance.

Just as I had observed from my ship, everything was brightly lit up, but the lights weren't cold or clinical; they appeared warm, as if they were embracing my presence.

You are losing it, I scolded myself. Lights embracing you? Give me a break.

And I giggled, but the sound echoed inside my helmet and I stopped it, it just sounded too much like I was losing my mind.

Well, you came this far, I cheered myself forward to follow the mist floating above the ground and stepped into a large hallway. Gleaming, dark-colored walls surrounded me on both sides, light emanated from the edges where the floor met the ceiling.

The absence of windows indicated I was making my way into the ghost ship's center, and I suppressed dark, foreboding thoughts. Instead I craned my neck and estimated the ceiling to be about fifteen feet high, making me wonder at the height of its designers and pushing my anxieties from my mind for the time being. Either the unknown species who designed this ship were giants or enjoyed generous space.

I stopped to investigate several doors on one side of the hallway, but no matter how much I prodded, they didn't open. With a sigh, I continued to follow the mist, which seemed to

lead me intentionally—although logically, I knew that wasn't possible.

To my left, doors slid open to an elevator. I swallowed nervously. Even though the interior was generous, being locked inside it wasn't exactly my idea of a fun time.

So what? You're gonna go back to the Seeker IV? My bitchy inner-self sneered.

Unable to resist a challenge from her, I stepped into the oval space.

A computerized voice announced something in a language neither I nor my implanted translator chip understood, leaving me no choice but to stand frozen in place and wait for whatever would happen next.

I didn't even realize the elevator moved before the doors opened into what was obviously the ship's bridge.

As I stepped inside, lights flickered everywhere. Various screens sat on a raised, half-circular, narrow console, reporting and monitoring every minute condition of the ship. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand them anymore than the voice in the elevator, otherwise, I might have found a clue about the crew's whereabouts.

I wasn't a linguist, but my training included the study of several languages throughout the known universe. Most used similar lettering styles, some more closely related to others than the rest, but nothing like what I saw on these monitors.

Afraid to touch anything, I perused the monitors, trying hard to make some sense out of the readouts, but failed.

A large, vertical window ahead of me told me that we were still cruising at a leisurely speed, without any indication of the ship's destination.

I turned in a circle, taking in the bridge that would comfortably allow room for more than a dozen people.

Besides the half-circular station, smaller ones were scattered throughout the bridge, and one large captain's chair was on a raised platform.

Where are all the people? I wondered. This ship appeared in tip-top shape: clean, well taken care of, brand-new even. So where was the crew? What happened to them?

I sat down in the comfortable captain's chair and discovered it swiveled in a full circle, and I thoughtfully took in the bridge. Suddenly, a shadow darted across an open doorway, causing my heart to jump out of my chest before it began to hammer in a fast staccato.

I sat up with a jolt, and before I could think better of it, I yelled, "Hey, wait."

Realizing how stupid I acted, I still rushed out, following the shadow through the mist still clinging to the ground, while a slideshow of every horror movie I'd ever seen played through my brain.

But this was what I came here for. Why I entered this ship hoping to find whoever was flying it. I knew and accepted the

risks then, and I wouldn't stop now. No matter how bad of an idea it might be to chase after an unknown person/alien through an unknown alien ship.

The shadow was still ahead of me, swirling with the mist as if it were part of it. It was fast, and it dashed down the corridor and through a door on the left.

"Hey, wait," I called again as I rushed after it as fast as my bulky spacesuit allowed.

None of the other doors opened for me before, but this one did.

My heart hammered so hard it created a vacuum, closing my throat, making it impossible to swallow the hard lump that had suddenly formed.

"Hello?"

As my voice echoed, I recalled all the women in all those slasher movies doing the same before venturing off to meet their deaths.

How can anybody be this stupid? I remembered asking myself while watching them.

Well, here I was, about to find out.

But the room was empty, aside from the creeping mist slithering about.

An oblong window sat above a bed that took up most of the wall ahead of me, fascinating me with its brilliant design.

What could be better than falling asleep or waking up to that view?

The bedding lay half tossed on the floor, as if its inhabitant had suddenly left it to rush off somewhere. Of their own accord, my legs took me toward it and before I could stop myself, I grabbed the thin sheet with my gloved hands and brought it up to my face to smell it.

I giggled nervously, as if I would've been able to smell anything through the stupid helmet covering my face. Still, my hands caressed the material as if it held something precious.

I turned to take in the rest of the room. It was circular, just like the bridge, giving me a strange sensation of ease and comfort.

Further from the bed stood a table with a couple of chairs with clothing draped over one of them. Curious, I stepped closer to examine the black pants and shirt. The shirt bore symbols across the front, resembling military rankings, and based on the size, they belonged to a large man.

I had never seen insignias like this, which didn't mean all that much. Eden was a secluded post and liked to keep it that way. The only information we received came from our intelligence officer, Commander Gabriella Mathews.

Although, back on Eden, I was reasonably sure we'd been briefed on and exposed to all the insignias in the known universe. Most adhered to the Zylonian style anyway since they were the founders and most influential members of the Intergalactic Alliance. An alliance Eden had been staying away from.

My eyes returned to the clothing, so who was he? Was he the shadow that lured me into this room?

“Hello?” I ventured again.

“E-llo!”

I stilled. The voice definitely belonged to a man.

Two

WREN

Could this be possible?

Had somebody boarded my ship? The *Curian's* orders were to stay hidden, to avoid contact with any species, and set course for the *Stryx*, Aggamont's main ship, to hopefully bring help.

Even though I would never live down my stupidity, I would much rather be alive and ridiculed than dead and forgotten.

“Hywait!”

The words spoken didn't make any sense to me, but the voice belonged to a female.

There had been no females aboard the *Curian*. So unless I was going crazy, one must have boarded my ship.

Her words came again, “Hywait!”

What did they mean? And who was she talking to? Were there others with her?

The idea of pirates having boarded my ship filled me with dread. Nobody would ever find me. Even if I could

communicate with the pirates, they would have laughed at me.

For the umpteenth time, I hit my head against the unforgiving rock surrounding me, cursing fate and all the gods in the known universe. What a fool I had been.

In my defense, though, Gryk, my copilot, and I, had been handpicked by Aggamont to fly this prototype ship and test its limits. Before beginning our journey, I had never met the Neferum before. And since Aggamont picked him, I saw no reason to distrust him. Well, I supposed the joke was on me now.

And him, a tiny voice inside my head tried to cheer me up. Lately, more and more of them had been popping up. A result of being alone for too long. How long had it been?

My mind drifted again, which it did often lately, not a good sign. I needed to focus on the *Curian*.

It had to have been wexers—weeks— since she left, right? I supposed time moved differently on this planet than in space, but by now the ship should have made contact with Aggamont and a rescue team dispatched.

Unless the Draemon is pissed and wrote you off, the same voice pointed out.

Focus, I told myself, coming back to the female voice. That I picked up voices from the ship meant the *Curian* was still within communication range, which she shouldn't be after all this time.

One way to find out, the voice suggested.

So when the female called out a tentative, “Hello?”

I tried to imitate her, “E-llo!”

If the *Curian* was as far out as she should be, the female could have called out yaxxies—days—ago, meaning she wouldn’t hear my response for yaxxies, if ever.

“Whossethere?” came the immediate response, spoken in words I didn’t understand.

I had hoped for an immediate response as much as I dreaded it, because it meant the *Curian* wasn’t anywhere close to Aggamont yet, but also confirmed someone was aboard now. Somebody who might help me.

My heart beat faster at the blossoming hope that whoever had boarded my ship wasn’t a pirate and would come to my aid. Even though her language was alien to me, the fact that she had responded was all that mattered.

“You can hear me?” I asked.

“Shitwhosthere?”

I slung my fist in the air and almost dropped my tablet.

“Whereyou?” She called out words that had no meaning to me, so I didn’t respond. Instead, I ordered the *Curian* to give me a visual of the inside, something I should have done right away but forgot after her presence caught me off guard.

Visuals of the *Curian* appeared on my monitor, but strangely, everything was clouded in a mist. What was happening? Had something malfunctioned? If so, I needed to warn the stranger.

The ship was a prototype—anything was possible.

The language barrier would pose a problem. Why wasn't my translator picking it up?

Inside the swirling mist, I made out a white figure. Wide, but not tall. What species did she belong to? I had never seen anything like her. Whatever species the form belonged to was extremely ungainly, short and wide, with a large, rounded head. My assumption that it was a female was based only on the voice, which didn't necessarily mean anything. Rugatiers' voices were very high pitched regardless of gender.

Somehow, though, I sensed the form belonged to a female.

"You need to check the bridge to make sure all systems are functional, the mist isn't normal," I suggested. I had no idea if she understood, but it needed checking.

I switched the view on my tablet from her to the bridge to check the panels myself.

"Wahht?" she called out.

To add to my frustration, the bridge was also shrouded in mist. I saw blinking lights but couldn't make out any actual readings. At least all the lights were in the acceptable range, and nothing blinked in warning, so that counted for something.

I would have loved to get a read on the navigation's map to see how far the *Curian* had traveled, since she was still in radio range and too close unless my sense of time had abandoned me too.

Three

JANE

I turned in circles but didn't see anybody. Goosebumps rose over my skin the moment I first heard his voice. But besides the ever-present mist, I was alone.

I broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of somebody or something being here with me, toying with me.

I dropped the man's clothes as another slew of words came from nowhere, and the panic I was barely holding at bay rose to the surface.

In my imagination, I created a space serial killer, luring unsuspecting females to his ship.

I might not have been very sociable growing up, but one of the few perks on Eden was Friday movie night. Every Friday, a different movie played in the mess hall, geared to every taste. One week we watched a comedy, the next a slasher film. And now, all the horror movies I had watched over the years came back to haunt me.

The mist at my feet didn't help calm my overactive imagination. It was the opposite really, and I found myself running.

Well, if what I did in my cumbersome spacesuit could be called running.

I needed to find the damn elevator and figure out how to get back to the level where my ship was docked to this vessel.

With my blood rushing in my ears and my heart pounding I turned a corner, stumbling into the corridor I remembered leading to the bridge, where the elevator was located.

The male voice came back, sounding alarmed. Probably worried his midnight snack was getting away. I didn't care; the elevator was still open, and I lurched inside.

As the doors closed behind me, more slasher scenes came to my mind, and I tried hard to push them down, tried to figure out how to operate the damn circular thing.

The doors reopened into the large hangar, and I clambered out and towards the decontamination chamber. The one from the alien ship stood wide open, but the door to mine refused to respond to my access code.

I was near tears as I frantically reentered the numbers. Over and over. The tears fell then. What was I supposed to do if I couldn't return to my ship?

I stilled as I heard something. Were those footsteps?

Get a grip, Jane, you're a trained soldier, I admonished myself. *On an alien ship, facing who knows what,* I argued

back. Stiffening, I listened but heard nothing and cursed my overactive imagination.

With my back to the door, so I would see anybody coming, I slid to the ground. I held my phasor in one hand and the other pressed against my wildly beating heart. *Think Jane, think.*

Minutes ticked by without me noticing. Finally, I rallied myself. *Try again*, I told myself and reentered the code. But the doors that should have simply opened upon my approach remained closed.

The surrounding mist grew thicker, making breathing hard. I felt hot inside my suit, despite it being temperature controlled. Dizziness overcame me, followed by nausea; thinking was becoming increasingly harder.

The oxygen!

A quick glimpse toward my wristcomm confirmed my suit was running low. *It should have lasted for hours, days even*, I argued as panic hit me. I tried the numbers panel again, and when that didn't help, I used up the last of my oxygen pounding my fist against the panel.

Nononono, I would die on this God forsaken ship. Was this what had happened to the crew? No, with my last rational thoughts, I told myself I would have seen bodies. *You haven't seen the entire ship*, my mind threw back at me mercilessly.

An alarm beeped on my wristcomm. The oxygen levels were below critical. Time to decide. Keep the helmet on and asphyxiate in carbon monoxide or brave the alien ship's air?

You're dead either way, at least with the helmet off you have a chance.

With a pounding heart and holding my breath, I released the helmet lock and pulled it off with shaking hands. Still holding my breath, I saw the swirling mist for the first time with my own eyes and found it amazingly beautiful. The visor had failed to show the mist's iridescence, like a muted version of Earth's northern lights, which I'd seen pictures of. It was pretty. I leaned my head back against the wall, focused on the mist, before taking a tentative breath. Nothing. I wasn't convulsing. *Yet*, my sarcastic voice insisted.

My lungs screamed for oxygen, and I decided, *here goes nothing*, and took a big gulp.

Dizziness overcame me so hard and fast I almost threw up. Panic struck its menacing claws back into me and I hyperventilated for a moment, making the dizziness even worse.

When I finally got myself under control, I realized two things. One, I was still alive, and two, the air was more oxygenated than I was used to, hence my dizziness spell. But as I was slowly getting used to the higher concentration, my head cleared, and I even felt energized.

My legs were wobbly as I stood, but they held me up. I holstered the phasor and took a few steps in the suit before deciding to forgo the rest of it as well. It was exhausting work getting the bulky thing off, but I felt better once it was done.

Now what? I wondered.

Dead tiredness overcame me, but the idea of falling asleep in this creepy cargo hold didn't sit well with me.

That left two options. The captain's chair on the bridge, which had looked comfortable enough, or the quarters offering a bed but where I first heard the mysterious voice.

What you should do is figure out how to get out of here, a part of my brain that didn't realize how tired I was reprimanded.

Shut up and get with the rest of my body, I told it off.

Once again, I entered the elevator, hoping it would do its thing as it had before and take me back to the bridge level, where the only sleeping quarters I had found so far were hopefully still open.

My tongue felt thick, and my stomach growled when I returned to the room. The food dispenser, the only familiar object so far, called to me, and I tapped against random symbols, hoping whoever had been here previously stocked it with food and beverages compatible with my system.

I downed a green juice that tasted a bit bitter but came in the liquid form my body craved first, before I attacked some equally unfamiliar looking biscuits.

Then I eyed *his* bed wearily. A sensation of me being Goldilocks from the fairy tale rushed through me. *Who ate my food? Who sat in my chair? Who slept in my bed?* I giggled at the image but sobered when I imagined bears coming through the door demanding answers. Big bad alien bears.

Yeah, I decided, *you definitely need some sleep*.

I took my boots off and climbed into the extremely comfortable bed.

I turned to the side to stare out the window at the planets slowly passing by. A green sun stood out in the distance, getting closer.

A strong, masculine scent emanated from the pillow. *His*, whoever *he* was. But by then I was too tired to care. Besides, his scent was on the mattress and the blanket as well, and it wasn't unpleasant, and followed me into my dreams.

Four

WREN

I felt bad for having startled her and barely registered that darkness was settling in the cave I was locked in. During the day, sunrays found their way in through several small openings at the top, and I used their light to mark my days. They differed from what my wristcomm, programmed to Zylonian time, told me, but I used it instead. After several yaxxies I was adapting to the new sleep schedule.

I watched her make her way straight into the cargo hold, which held a fortune in mantan and other precious gems, entrusted by Aggamont to my faithless copilot and me along with the priceless ship. And I suspected this to be the motive behind my copilot's betrayal.

The female never stopped to examine the goods, though, which I thought odd. Instead, she made her way to the docking bay and a rarely used decontamination chamber. The *Curian* was only equipped with it because it was a standard issue for ISF—Intergalactic Special Forces—ships.

With most of the known universe mapped, there wasn't much reason for decontamination chambers any longer, but I supposed it was better to have and not need them than the other way around.

Regardless, that's where the alien female headed, stopping inside to pound her thick fingers against something on the wall, which after a while I recognized as a panel, probably to allow her readmittance to her ship.

I was surprised when it didn't open and felt even sorry for her when she slumped against the wall, clearly frightened. I contemplated calling out to her again but decided against it. My words of comfort would have been lost in translation and most likely frightened her more than anything else.

An alarm beeping on my wristcomm distracted me. Right, it was time to feed the ever-hungry fire again. Glad to have found an excuse not to watch the poor female any longer, I made my way towards the low burning flames.

Initially, it had taken me hoxors—hours—to get the fire going, and I wasn't about to repeat the process, hence the repeating alarms on my wristcomm.

Luck, for once lately, had been on my side when I discovered the dried seaweed here burned well and long. Plenty of it washed to the pond's shore, as if by magic, every *morning*. I collected and dried it to use during the coming night and day.

For a moment I contemplated the pond again. Besides the unreachable holes in the top of the cave, it offered the only way out. I explored it as much as possible and discovered a

tunnel not too far down. I hadn't been desperate enough yet to brave it since the tunnel would be a one-way ticket to either death or freedom. For as long as I still held on to hope the *Curian* would find help, and somebody would get me out of here I opted to wait. But with each passing day and night, I eyed the pond with a bit more willingness to take the chance.

After I stoked the fire with more fuel, I skipped my evening meal and returned to watch the alien female again, feeling a certain kinship towards her since she seemed as alone and trapped as me.

Settling against my favorite part of the wall, I leaned back, pulled my knees up, and leaned the extended tablet against them to *enjoy* the show.

She was still seated in the decontamination chamber, in a position similar to mine, only her back leaned against a metallic wall instead of rock. Her hands moved towards her head, and, in shock, I watched her take it off. Or at least that's what it looked like through the fog until I realized it was a helmet.

I chuckled at my stupidity for not having figured out sooner that an outdated, ill-fitting spacesuit caused her ungainly movements and bulky appearance.

Strangely, the mist had retreated from her, and I could make out her face as I zoomed in. She looked terrified, and my heart went out to her, but at the same time, I noticed how strange and beautiful she was.

Black hair spilled out from underneath the helmet and enveloped her like a dark halo. Her oval-shaped face was slightly long, but her straight nose and determined-looking chin completed it in a complimentary way. I couldn't make out the color of her eyes, but they seemed dark.

I was close to averting my gaze when she began to pull the rest of her suit off, but she was fully dressed underneath, in a non-complimentary, greenish uniform. Still unable to make out her shape, I watched her retrace her route back to my room, where, after a quick meal, she settled in my bed.

Despite the ill-fitting uniform, her butt stuck out tantalizingly, and my cock stirred inappropriately. But wow, that was some ass. I told myself I was acting like a jerk, yet I couldn't tear my gaze from the roundness of her hips. It didn't faze me in the least that she claimed my bed. If anything, that fact hardened my shaft more.

I caught my finger tracing the outline of her butt on the monitor and shut it off abruptly. I had other things to do besides fantasizing over an alien female.

The cave had already darkened considerably, so if I wanted to eat without digging into my precious reserves, I needed to get busy.

First, I slaked my thirst on the runoff water from the wall behind the pond, which never changed the water level, indicating the pond fed into somewhere. Where to was anybody's guess. It could be through the underwater tunnel I discovered, or at a point too deep for me to dive to. And I

wasn't ready to find out yet. Not as long as I held on to hope for rescue, which had been revived with the alien female's arrival.

My ship was programmed to return to Aggamont, wherever the Draemon was, but maybe the stranger could find a way to reprogram it and come back here to free me instead.

But even as I contemplated this option, I reminded myself of our language barrier and concluded that she likely wouldn't be able to decipher the ship's code either.

Although the ship's language, and my own, was Zylonian, I hadn't seen her kind before and wondered where she came from and who she was. Did she have anything to do with the danger Aggamont had hinted at? The reason he ordered this ship built? If so, it meant the *Curian* had fallen into the wrong hands. Because of me. That insight devastated me more than the fact that I was imprisoned in this fucking cave. I had never failed at anything before.

Suddenly, the option to escape through the tunnel or die trying sounded like a good idea. But I would still be stranded on this planet even if I escaped the cave. And my traitorous copilot, Gryk, was out there somewhere. I'd have to face him, weaponless.

That wasn't the problem, I mulled. I could take the Neferum any time, but I didn't see the sense in risking my life for it just yet.

I sighed. Nothing was certain at this point, but at least my mind had found some stimulation, which it had been lacking

for yaxxies now. That alone counted as a vast improvement.

By the pond, I pulled the trap I reset every morning, finding more curious water creatures. So far, the pond had proven bountiful, and I hadn't suffered any hunger, but I was prepared in case that should change.

Dried flesh of the water creatures lay neatly stacked in one corner of the cave, next to a collection of hollowed out rocks I used to collect water and replenished daily. Just to be on the safe side.

Besides the fish, I caught a bird here and there that found its way into the cave, and whenever I braved the walls, I had even retrieved a few eggs.

At least until I figured out that I wouldn't fit through any of the holes on top. The risk of breaking my neck in a fall outweighed the want for fresh eggs and bird meat. My situation was already precarious enough without a broken bone.

After my hunger was sated, I curled up on dried seaweed I had collected in another corner, turned my head to the wall, took a last glimpse at the alien female's sleeping form, and closed my eyes to follow her into slumber.

Five

JANE

Reptilian green eyes observed me, but they weren't threatening. They appeared more curious than intimidating. Warm even.

They were set into a masculine face that was somewhat distorted by mist, but even the floating tendrils of fog couldn't disguise how handsome he was. His countenance was chiseled, some might have called it hard, had it not been for the most sensuous mouth that curled into a mocking smile.

On a logical level, I understood that it wasn't possible for me to see him; I laid in bed with my back to him, sleeping. That I saw him though told me that I was dreaming and the disappointment of it was even palpable in my sleep.

And suddenly he stood right next to my bed, staring down at me. I saw him and me, but at the same time I was lying on the bed, facing away from him.

His hand stretched out and my stomach flipped in anticipation. Heat spread through my core when he gently caressed my ass.

I sighed in my sleep.

Rationally, I knew I should be outraged, but I was far from it. He was a complete stranger, an alien, and yet I craved his touch like I needed air to breathe. His touch enflamed my skin, awoke a yearning deep inside my core for so much more.

My rational mind wanted to cry out, *who are you?* But I remained mute, somehow sensing the spell would be broken if I spoke and he would disappear into the mist.

So I laid there with my heart racing and my breathing deepening as his hand drew slow, sensual circles on my ass, while my core began to moisten and ache.

My entire body tingled in anticipation of more, until, abruptly, he was gone as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving me wanting.

Tears stung my eyes; I wanted him to come back.

I woke with a start and a hammering heart. *A dream*, I told myself, as my eyes futilely searched the room for *him*.

But I was alone with the ever-present mist covering the floor.

I laid back down, my hand pressed against my chest as if trying to keep my heart inside, because it hammered so wildly.

My upper arm pushed against my breast, and I moaned as I remembered the feeling of his hand on my ass. I closed my eyes and pretended for a moment it was his hand on my breast and not my arm.

The image called up a flood of moisture in my pussy, and I groaned.

Unable to resist, I put my palm on my breast and rubbed it. Oh God.

Green eyes danced in front of my closed eyelids. I squeezed my legs together to alleviate the pressure from my pulsing clit, but it only increased it. As if of its own accord, my other hand moved between my legs, rubbing, and I groaned again.

This is wrong. On so many levels it's wrong, Jane, my inner self called out, but it was too late. My body had developed a mind of its own and craved release like never before.

My hands rubbed and pushed, and my hips moved in rhythm. All the while I saw his face in front of me. A man I had never seen before, a man that likely didn't even exist, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

But all those thoughts only rushed through the periphery of my awareness because my mind was totally focused on the incredible sensations my hands evoked.

This wasn't my first time pleasing myself, but if somebody would have told me I would find myself caged inside an alien ghostship, caressing myself into oblivion thinking about an alien, I would have laughed in their face.

Besides the obvious lunatic scenario, I wasn't the type to get aroused under pressure. At least not until now.

After an explosive climax, one that rivaled any of the actual physical encounters I had ever had, I rested on his bed, panting

and absorbing the feeling of my still tingling body.

Soon after, I fell into a deep, restful sleep.

Six

WREN

Her still form lay ahead of me, and I took a few steps toward her. She looked so peaceful. Her right hip lifted into the air, giving me the same view of her delicious ass I had enjoyed earlier. This time, though, I stood in the same room with her.

A dream, my mind explained.

Well, if this was a dream, I should be able to... no, that was wrong, I had no right to touch her.

Yet the urge to touch her ass, to explore her body, was overwhelming, and my hand moved out to palm the rounded, fleshy cheek. The second I made contact with it, my cock surged, pulsed. Need like I had never experienced consumed me. I wanted her like I had never wanted another female before.

I only allowed my hand to stroke her ass a few more times, because this was wrong, even if it was only a dream. I didn't understand how it could be possible for me to physically stand

there next to her, but I willed my body away, before I did something even more foolish and forbidden.

Right before I vanished, I heard a soft moan, one that rattled my core and awoke an even deeper desire for her. I craved to hear that moan again while I was inside her. And at that thought, I nearly lost it.

I found myself back in my cave, alone, wanting, and in a state of arousal that was close to painful.

My hand found my cock and only stroked it a few times before I came to the image of her.

Panting, I threw one arm over my forehead, while my wildly beating heart slowly returned to a normal rhythm. The rush of my climax left me dizzy, and with a deep longing for her. I would have gladly spent the rest of my days locked in this cave for a chance to hold her in my arms.

I wasn't the type to prolong sexual encounters. I knew females liked to snuggle and hear tender words of love after, but I had never been one for that. I always made it clear what I wanted: a quick romp. For the most part, my partners understood and obliged. Only a few became clingy afterwards, and I tried to be sensitive to their needs before I left.

This one though?

I craved her company as much as I craved the release inside her body. Perhaps the desire stemmed from my loneliness, but somehow, I doubted it. There was something else at play here, something I didn't quite understand.

Eventually, I fell back into a dreamless sleep.

Seven

JANE

I woke to the sight of the universe passing by. Lazily, I stretched before awareness of where I was and what had happened during the night returned. Strangely though, I didn't feel the panic I would have experienced the previous day, instead I felt content.

Just as I had imagined, watching space float by from the bed, his bed, was an incredible experience. My mind was still foggy from sleep, and it took a few minutes before I realized the ship had picked up speed. Like it had a mind of its own.

I sat up with a start.

Was that what was happening here? How was that even possible? Unless somebody was steering it. Somebody had to be in control of it. Right?

The same somebody who had locked me out of my ship.

I grabbed my boots off the ground and put them on, determined to find that person, wherever he was hiding, and confront him.

He had been in this room last night; I was sure of it.

Was this a game to him?

Well, he chose the wrong person to play with.

Yesterday I had been scared and overwhelmed.

Today, I would find him and force him to release the lock on my ship.

As I laced up my boots, the ever-present mist swirled around my ankles, moving up my calves as if caressing them.

I kicked out at nothing.

“Show yourself, you bastard,” I yelled at the empty room.

Only eerie silence answered me.

I grabbed the phasor I’d left next to me on the bed last night, not bothering to holster it as I left the room.

In the dimly lit corridor, I searched left and right for any movement before deciding to go left. I knew the bridge was to the right. Today I would go the other way.

Doors were set in regular intervals on both sides of the corridor, and I wondered about the size of crew the ship was meant for, and where they had gone.

All the doors stayed closed, giving no indication of how they even opened.

Panels were set next to each one like on my ship, but nothing happened when I pressed my palm against them or looked straight at them.

This is futile, my mind shook its head at me. You can search all you want. If you can't open the doors, he could be anywhere.

“Arghh!” I slid down the wall with a groan when I reached the end of the hallway, a dead end. My mind was right. This was futile and would get me nowhere.

I had other options though. I would try to return to my ship again, and if that failed, I would try to figure out how the bridge worked. And if neither worked, I would begin destroying the cargo stacked in the hold. That should bring the bastard out.

I liked the last plan. It appealed to the more violent side of me, plus I craved physical exertion. I needed to hit something, otherwise my frustration would eat me from the inside out.

I decided to check the bridge first, since the other plans took place in the same area.

The same busy lights I had seen the day before greeted me. The view through the window was the only thing that had changed.

I sat down in the captain's chair while I allowed my eyes to roam, hoping my subconscious mind would pick up on something. A pattern, a familiar symbol, anything.

My arms comfortably lay across the armrests and my palms on tablets. As nothing happened, the tips of my fingers began to drum nervously against the screens.

My eyes settled on the view ahead of me, watching planets, nebulas, and burning stars glide by.

The symbols on the screens remained as indecipherable as they had been yesterday. Frustration grew inside me. What was I doing sitting here? This was getting me nowhere.

“Where the fuck are you, you sick fuck?” I yelled, venting my suppressed anger.

Irritated, I punched my fist into the screen when no answer came.

“What do you want?” I screamed, but only the steadily flickering lights and swirling mist witnessed my outburst.

Without warning, the view of space vanished, replaced by something else. It took me a moment to get used to the subdued lighting of what I was looking at, but once I did, I made out the inside of a cave.

The image was somewhat distorted, as if the mist was floating over it, but the walls were definitely made from rock. Rocks lay on the ground, and to the left... was that a fire?

To the right, I noticed water, a pond.

Somebody was in the pond.

Coming out of the water.

My heart rate picked up. Eyes that I would recognize anywhere stared at me. My breath hitched, and I wondered if he could see me like I saw him.

All other rational thoughts, however, left me once I realized he was naked and dripping wet. Long black tendrils of hair hung down his shoulders, caressing his chest. He wasn't human, but he was breathtakingly beautiful. I had never seen more sculpted abs and chiseled pecs on a man before.

His skin shimmered golden-green underneath... scales?

But where I should have been repulsed, I found myself attracted. Maybe because I had seen images of aliens of all types before, scaled, feathered, plated. Or possibly, something about him drew me in.

He moved gracefully, and I didn't close my eyes in time to miss seeing his humongous cock between his muscled legs. Even with my eyes closed, the image was seared into my mind, and a strange aching pulse began in my pussy.

I pulled my lower lip in, gnawed on it, but that only started fantasies of his lips on mine.

My skin tingled like it had last night, and I caught myself holding my breath.

When I opened my eyes again, he had turned, and now I was allotted a good look at his backside. Good grief, he was just as muscled on the back as he was up front. They rippled in the flickering light, and I found my fingers twitching with desire to touch him.

Who was he? Where was he?

He retrieved something from the ground, something black, and wound it around his hips: a loincloth.

He turned.

I leaned forward in my chair.

He tilted his head. Listening? Looking?

My breath caught.

His eyes turned fully towards me.

I sat frozen and stared.

His eyes narrowed.

“Ung ga ho?”

I heard his voice as if he were in the same room as me.

His strong jaw clenched, and his knees bent as if he were ready to attack somebody as he turned in a slow circle. God, he was magnificent. Especially with his muscles all taut like this.

“Ung ga ho?”

Eight

WREN

From the moment I stepped out of the water, I couldn't shake the feeling somebody was watching me. I grew up having to fight for every scrap of food to stay alive, and the senses I honed over those rexxars—years—hadn't left me even after carving out a softer life for myself.

I tried to be as casual as possible as I put my loincloth back on, and once I was wrapped, the feeling of being watched intensified.

It became so strong; I expected an attack any second—second—and shifted into a warrior's stance.

“Who's there?”

Nothing.

I tried again as goosebumps rippled down my spine.

I had no weapons besides a few rocks I had sharpened to use as crude knives on the water creatures I caught in my traps.

My wristcomm, which I had extended to tablet size and left in my sleeping corner, beeped.

A message?

That couldn't be.

I snatched it up. It was set to give me a full view of the bridge. And there, in my captain's seat... Impossible.

There was the female I had dreamed about, the one I knew was aboard the *Curian*. Had she managed to establish communication?

Had she been watching me?

That thought pleased me.

"Can you hear me?" I asked, hopeful.

Her head turned. She heard me. Hope sparked through my chest.

"Whereareyou?" She replied in gibberish.

My heart sank a bit, but at least we could see each other now.

I pointed to my chest. "Wren."

She leaned back in the captain's chair, her eyes wide, following me, and I was now able to see their color; a deep, dark brown.

"Wren?"

I nodded eagerly before pointing at her.

She looked confused for a moment, but then she grinned.

"Dshann."

“Dshann,” I repeated.

She shook her head and repeated, a bit harsher, “Djaine.”

“Djaine?”

She tried again, and this time I got it. “Jane?”

She nodded, smiling happily.

Jane, my mind repeated, and I liked the sound of it.

Thousands of questions burned on the tip of my tongue, but even though we could see each other now, we still had limited communication capabilities, and I cursed my translator, which was supposed to pick up any language, even unknown ones.

For a moment we stared at each other, both of us caught up in the strange delight of not being alone, even though technically, we were.

I made a flying motion with my hands, and she nodded eagerly. Yes, she was flying.

Frustrated, I blew air through my mouth. How could I ask her where she was taking my ship? Then I remembered her trying so hard to get back to hers and being denied access. Had others locked her out?

I pointed at myself and held up one finger to indicate it was just me, hoping she would understand my charade. Then I pointed at her and wiggled my fingers up and down, staring questioningly at her.

Either she was good at charades or exceptionally smart, because she nodded, held up one finger, pointing at herself,

and holding it out again.

I tilted my head. She was alone too?

I moved my wrist in a circle, pointing a finger this way and that. But this time, she didn't grasp my question. Frustrated, I blew more air through my mouth while my mind churned. If she was really alone, who had locked her out of her ship?

Again I made the flying motion, pointed at her, flew my hand up and down and pointed at me. Was she flying towards me?

She held up both palms and shrugged, shaking her head.

So the ship was still flying itself and she didn't know where to, which implied she had no clue how to pilot it.

Frustrated didn't even come close to describing how I felt when I kicked at a rock, forgetting I hadn't put my boots back on. Pain shot through my toes; I yelped and danced on one leg.

I heard peeling laughter and stilled. When I looked back at the tablet, she held one hand in front of her mouth to stifle her laughter, but it still rang through the ether.

I had never heard anything as beautiful as that sound. I grinned. I supposed I must have been a funny sight. And frankly, any pain was worth hearing that sound.

She tilted her head and put both her hands in front of her heart, as if to say she was sorry for laughing at me.

I shook my head and grinned at her like a moxxel—idiot.

Nine

JANE

Neither of us could bring ourselves to break our fragile connection, even when we ran out of pantomiming moves to voice our questions, which became more serious, more elaborate.

I wanted to know where he was, why he was in a cave, if this ship was on the way to him or somewhere else.

So, in the end, we stared at each other for several minutes until his form on the screen turned increasingly fuzzy before it was gone, replaced by the view of space rushing by.

I sat in the captain's seat for another hour or so, watched a dying sun, was momentarily distracted by a beautiful comet, but nothing took away the deep pang of loss in my stomach.

For just a little while, I hadn't felt alone, and it had been nice.

Now it was just me, the ship, and the never-dissipating mist hugging my ankles again.

What was I going to do?

The question burned as much of a hole in my stomach as the loneliness.

I had always embraced being alone, had always preferred my company to anybody else's. Returning planetside to Eden, I had always chomped at the bit to get back out into space, to be alone again.

This was different, though.

I still didn't yearn for the company of people; I yearned to see *him* again. The strange man in the cave. The alien. Wren.

Something about him got under my skin in a good way.

Or maybe you're just truly lonely and too stubborn to admit it, my inner voice piped up. I decided to at least consider this possibility. This situation was different from anything I'd experienced. This wasn't solitude by choice. This solitude had been forced upon me. I was trapped. As much as Wren. I felt a certain kinship to him because of our situation.

I decided it didn't matter because this was all out of my control. Where I was going, that I was here, and he there. When and if I would see him again.

I learned a long time ago, when things are out of your control and there is not a single thing you can do, to accept the circumstances and try to make the best of it. What other option was there?

My rumbling stomach reminded me that it was time to eat, and I went into Wren's room to raid his food dispenser.

With my stomach filling, I absentmindedly checked his quarters again. Nothing had changed. His clothes still hung over the chair; the bed was still unmade from this morning. What stood out though, was the absence of things, there were no knickknacks or mementos of his life anywhere. Nothing other than his clothes to declare this space his.

I wasn't much of a collector either, but even I had a few things I called my own. A thin, worn chain that hung by my bed that I'd had my entire life. My favorite plastic cup, which, for some unfathomable reason, I felt attached to. A pretty, orange rock I found while watching the workers dig another tunnel. An old, tattered shirt that provided comfort and familiarity. Nothing special, but things.

Here?

There was nothing.

As if this wasn't even his ship.

I sighed. Honestly, I had no way of being sure this was his ship. I assumed the clothes on the chair belonged to *him*, but I had no proof. Yes, he had mimed flying, but had he meant *this* ship? He might have crashed in a different vessel. Or he might be just some crazy native in a cave the stupid computer randomly decided to show me.

My fingers turned the remainder of my biscuit into crumbs as my appetite vanished. It didn't matter that my gut told me we were on our way to him, and that this was *his* ship. I felt desolate and alone.

I forced myself to use his bathroom, before I checked his room for a set of clean clothes.

I found a hidden closet inside the wall with a few articles of clothing. I took out one of Wren's—I was going with this assumption, damn it—oversized shirts, and put it on.

I crawled into his bed, pulled the blanket over me, and faced away from the window. I didn't want to see space float by; suddenly it was too depressing. This lack of control was getting to me.

It absolutely wasn't because I wanted to face him should he return to this room during the night. It wasn't.

No matter how impossible it was for him to have been here the previous night, hope that he would return fueled me, keeping the tears of desperation at bay.

Ten

WREN

I should have checked the traps I laid earlier when I stepped out of the pond. Instead, I stared at the screen where mereoxers—minutes—ago, her image had vanished. Replaced by the strange fog swirling through my ship.

Loneliness, and the fact I was trapped in this godsforsaken cave, threatened to overwhelm me, and I gently put the tablet down before I broke it. Frustration was my ever-present companion, and I didn't like it one bit. I had always been an upbeat person, always looked at the bright side of things, always looked for opportunity in the direst situation. Even after being stranded in this cave, I didn't give up hope.

Now?

Now I wanted to kick, beat, break something. I wanted to yell and scream until my throat hurt. And most of all, I wanted out of this cave. No, that wasn't true. Most of all, I wanted to be with *her*. Jane.

I wanted to get to know her, talk to her, really talk, without the miming and guessing.

A few rocks fell victim to my anger as I hurled them against the walls caging me in. I vigorously tore at the rocks that sealed the entrance to this cave again, barely stopping to feed the fire before it went out. Night had claimed the cave during my fit of rage, and I would have been plunged into complete darkness had a flickering not reminded me of the dying fire.

You need to get it together, my mind admonished. All I had accomplished during my little fit was tearing some of my fingernails and ripping the skin on my digits. I forced myself to wash the blood and grime away in the pond. It would be too ironic to die of blood poisoning now, when I finally had some hope of help arriving.

Whatever my ship was doing, I needed to hold on to hope that it was either on its way back here or to Aggamont. And thanks to its newly acquired passenger, Aggamont might get curious enough to not leave me stranded here.

I laid on my seaweed bed and stared at the flickering flames that would now burn all night. The alarm was set to wake me in time to feed it again just before the sun rose.

And then a thought hit me.

Gryk!

I sat up. He was still out there. Stranded on this planet like me, but contrary to me, he was free to move about.

I needed to find a way to warn Jane. If the *Curian* came back here, chances were high that Gryk would make a break for it. He would not give one damn about Jane. He had nearly killed me and wouldn't hesitate to harm her.

The question was, how in hadex was I going to warn her? How could I mime my suspicion that the *Curian* might be headed for this planet? Or my dangerous copilot was stranded here too.

My mind replayed what happened. How Gryk had been on duty when a blaring alarm woke me. Instantly alert, I had grabbed my phasor and wristcomm but didn't bother with clothes, thinking whatever danger I was about to encounter would be a meteor shower or an attack on the ship.

"Status report," I barked at the ship's computer.

But it remained silent.

"Wren," Gryk called my name, and I ran towards the sound.

It came from the hangar, and when I entered it, I realized several things at once. The open hangar doors indicated we made an unscheduled landing, and Gryk was screaming my name from the outside.

I imagined him pinned down by some native predator or under attack by the planet's inhabitants. So my training kicked in, which is why I was still alive and not dead as Gryk had planned.

I didn't rush out blindly. I used the walls of the open entrance as cover to assess the situation outside and when I saw no

trace of Gryk but heard him calling my name again, I noticed the entrance to this cave. I didn't know why we had landed on this planet, and why Gryk had thought it a good idea to investigate a cave.

The only explanation that made sense to my jumbled mind was an emergency landing. Gryk leaving the ship to check on any damage outside without waking me would have made some sense. But him entering a cave?

That didn't compute at all.

Unless a predator had pulled him in while he checked on the *Curian*. And if that was the case, I needed to be careful.

I made my way to the cave, using the ship for cover as much as possible.

Then two things happened, sealing my fate.

The ground below me began to violently shake, and a phasor beam barely missed me, searing the top of my shoulder instead of burning a hole into my head.

Then I understood. Gryk wasn't *in* the cave at all, he was *above* it, waiting to kill me. The earthquake rattled the ground just in time for him to lose his aim.

I dove for the nearest cover, the cave and when I ducked and rolled, I watched impotently as the *Curian's* hatch closed and it lifted off while Gryk ran toward it.

I fumbled for my phasor, intent on shooting the traitor, but he either sensed me or the air disturbed by the *Curian's* takeoff

threw him off his feet, or maybe it was the shaking ground. Either way, he noticed me and hit the ground.

We both fired at once, just as an avalanche of rocks rained down at the entrance and I barely avoided being buried alive. Well, I still ended up buried alive, but at least I was uninjured.

At the time, I consoled myself with the thought that Gryk hadn't managed to escape with the ship either, as he had probably planned. The earthquake put a deep wrinkle in his plans.

Between then and now, I had ample time to consider all possibilities and decided Gryk's plan had been to kill me, steal the ship, and make it look like I did it. It was the only explanation for the elaborate plan of luring me outside rather than killing me in my sleep.

One question remained: had he planned this alone or were others on the way?

Eleven

JANE

At some point, I fell asleep.

Even in my subconscious state, I waited for Wren. I didn't know why I was so drawn to him. Yes, he was easy on the eyes, oh, who was I trying to kid, he was drop dead gorgeous. But it wasn't enough to explain why I physically and mentally craved him. Or why I wasn't scared. I should have been scared out of my mind.

I stared at the open doorway, eyes unfocused, willing him to appear, until finally, slowly, his golden-green form emerged from the mist, and my body tensed in anticipation.

Wren, my mind greeted him.

Jane, his returned.

How is this even possible? I wondered.

I don't know, but it's... he stopped, his expression of surprise mirrored mine as we realized we were communicating telepathically and understood one another.

He languidly made his way toward the bed, where I sat up, watching him approach. My skin tingled and my stomach filled with butterflies the closer he came.

How did you get aboard the Curian? he asked, stopping a few feet short of the bed.

Is that your ship's name? It looked abandoned, and I thought it would be a good idea to board it, I giggled nervously.

I patted the spot next to me on the bed. *Have a seat.*

I don't want to impose.

It's your room, I pointed out.

He sat, his thighs, thick and naked, were so close they nearly brushed against my skin.

I hope you don't mind. I borrowed one of your shirts, I felt compelled to admit, aware of his closeness.

I swear, I felt the warmth of his body, no matter how impossible it was.

Help yourself. Where is your ship?

Docked against the Curian. I can't open the hatch. Hope flared, but died just as quickly even before I asked, *you can't open it either, can you?*

His hand moved toward the blanket and moved right through it, as if he were a ghost. I stared at him in disbelief.

Last night he touched me, I knew he did. I felt it. Just remembering the touch made my skin tingle.

Tentatively, I put my hand out, placing it by his thigh, searching his eyes for permission. He nodded.

His thick muscle felt warm and hard underneath my touch. His skin rippled, and a hiss escaped him. I pulled my hand back as if I had burned myself. The blood in my palm felt as if it had been set on fire and ignited every other cell as it made its way through me.

He caught my hand, and we stared at each other in wonder.

How is this possible? I repeated my most burning question.

Our fingers entwined, and my skin tingled underneath his. I noticed some of my thoughts didn't reach him, a small favor I was thankful for, because the last thing I would have told him right now was how horny he made me.

I would very much like to kiss you, he said/thought.

I would like that very much too.

His head tilted, and I closed my eyes, felt his lips closing in on me as the air between us warmed.

His lips were so soft and felt so good pressed against mine, so right.

Invitingly I opened my mouth and the tip of his tongue tentatively entered.

And when I leaned harder against him, he pulled me flush against his hard, naked chest with a groan.

My tongue moved forward, met his, and heat spread through me from my core through every cell, nerve, and blood vessel.

His hand pressed against my back, pulled me closer to him, as if he, too, couldn't bear to have an inch of air in between our skin.

I knew we should be discussing a hundred thousand things right now, realized our lives might depend on it, but I couldn't bring myself to break our contact. All I wanted right now was him.

I wiggled until I straddled him, felt his rock-hard cock poking at the center of my heat, and shamelessly rubbed myself against it.

My hands roamed his body, explored the muscles and dips. Touched his hard, yet velvety scaled body.

One of his hands buried in my hair, and the other slowly made its way from my back toward my ribcage.

My hips rose and fell against his straining shaft and when his hand moved underneath my shirt to cup one of my breasts, I hissed in pleasure, paused, to absorb the incredible sensations he arose in me.

His fingers found my nipple, rolled it in between them, and an ache spread throughout my pussy. I didn't think I could take another moment without him entering me.

My right hand moved down his body, grabbed his shaft through the ridiculous loin cloth he wore, and moved it up and down his length.

He groaned under me.

I tightened my grip and massaged it. His size was impressive, and I wondered how in the hell he would fit into me without splitting me in two. My hand also discovered something else. At the end of his shaft was something a... spur?

A deep moan escaped me at the thought of that spur rubbing against my clit while he thrust into me, and I shuddered in anticipation.

But instead of moving forward, his grip loosened, his lips retreated.

Wren?

The very substance of him began to feel like sand moving through my fingers.

Wren?

Jane!

My fingers frantically clawed for his dissipating form. But it was like trying to hold on to sand underwater.

Tears burned in my eyes as I helplessly watched his body scatter, swirling like the ever-present mist.

“Wren!” I screamed his name in helpless frustration.

And from somewhere far, far away, an equally desperate plea reached my ears. “*Jane!*”

Twelve

WREN

I woke with a start, finding myself sitting on my makeshift bed, arms up as if holding someone. But she was gone. Dissolved like sand between my fingers.

“Jane!” I screamed her name at the unforgiving walls caging me like an animal.

She was gone. I was back in my cave, alone.

The loss struck me like a spear through the heart. The pain of our abrupt separation made breathing hard.

“Why?” I yelled. “Why?”

I stood, railed against the gods, the cave, Gryk.

Gryk!

I slammed my fist against my forehead. I had a chance to warn Jane about Gryk should the *Curian* bring her here and missed it. Instead of warning her, my horny body had taken over.

Stupid, stupid bastard, I cursed myself.

But oh, she had felt so good in my arms, so right. And that kiss!

I still felt her warm fingers caressing my cock. Nothing like this should have been possible, and yet it had.

Would the gods grant me to one day claim her, be hers? I would slay draxons for that honor. I would die a thousand deaths if I had to. If only I could call her mine.

The fire sputtered, and I hurried to add more seaweed to it. That chore done, I forced myself to the pond to check on the traps.

It might be my imagination, but the water felt colder today. Not unbearably so, but uncomfortable when I submerged myself. Diving deeper, I found the first trap, but it was empty.

When the second and third trap turned out empty, too, a slight pang of unease rushed through me. I was sure it meant something; I just didn't know what. I didn't grow up a hunter; I grew up on the streets of Vyrillian, one of many street urchins, but one who had the smarts to join the ISF and become a pilot. So what did I know about hunting or fishing? Nothing. This was a first. I might have found one or two traps empty before, but never all three.

I wondered if the decreasing water temperature was a sign of the seasons changing. Maybe the colder weather drove the sea creatures off.

When I reached the surface and stepped out of the water, my eyes fixed on mist pouring through barely visible holes in the

wall of rock Looking me in.

I blinked, wondering if the cold was affecting my eyesight, but the fog remained. Getting thicker, spreading over the ground of the cave like I had seen it do aboard the *Curian* through my wristcomm.

The *Curian*! I snagged the wristcomm off the ground. Maybe we would be allowed to see each other again. I chuckled nervously, *allowed* by whom?

The Curian, my mind suggested.

The *Curian* was a curious ship indeed. Its onboard computer was linked to my brain for command and steering. It took some getting used to but made flying a lot easier.

But why did it take off after I got trapped in the cave?

The question made my head hurt, made me recoil on the inside as if I had touched something poisonous. I didn't want to think about this. I really didn't.

I should have been able to recall it, had it blast a hole into the damn wall.

My hands moved to my head; it felt as if it was about to split in half. I really didn't want to ask these questions or find answers to them.

Thirteen

JANE

I woke knowing that I needed to get off this ship, that was the one thing I was sure of. I didn't even want to think about what happened last night. And the only way out I knew of was locked behind a hangar door. Shooting it open would do nothing for me, only allow space to suck all the air out and kill me.

Just to prove something to myself, I returned to the hangar, entering my code again by the airlock. Nothing.

This was stupid. Even if I allowed the possibility of this ship, *his* ship, to somehow control itself, I knew *my* ship couldn't, and it was *my* ship that denied me access. Not *his*.

Had I somehow gotten the code wrong? No, impossible. I had used the same sequence of numbers from the moment I took possession of the cruiser. I could recite it in my sleep.

Admitting that I was still trapped on this ship, I made my way back to the bridge, hoping to contact Wren again, even if I didn't understand how this worked.

I took my seat in the captain's chair and stared out at the translucent wall ahead of me.

The mist distracted me as it crept up the window. I watched it swirl, my heart beating faster as the cave slowly took form. Something moved, and my stomach fluttered. Wren.

"Wren!" I called out.

He didn't hear me as he raged through his cave, throwing rocks at a wall before attacking a larger pile of rocks.

I narrowed my eyes. The pile looked strange... as if it had slid down and blocked an entrance.

Understanding dawned. For some reason, Wren must have been in the cave when a massive rockslide blocked his escape. Another thought quickly followed, and with absolute certainty, I knew this ship had *left* him there to find help.

It found me, and we were on our way to save him.

Wren, I thought, *hold on. We're coming*, steadfastly ignoring the burning question of how he could be in the cave and on the ship with me simultaneously.

Fourteen

WREN

With renewed fury, I attacked the pile of rocks blocking the exit, one thought driving me: I failed to warn Jane about Gryk. I was sure the *Curian* was on its way here, and my fear that Gryk would attack as soon as it landed, taking Jane by surprise, was becoming my worst nightmare.

He would not hesitate to kill her, take the *Curian*, and be on his way. Time was running out. I needed to get out of this cave. Now!

At some point, I felt watched and thought I heard *her* voice, but stopping wasn't an option. I raged against the rocks like a male possessed. I needed to warn her.

An especially sharp rock sliced my forearm, and I jumped back, yelping. The pain, however, refocused me, and for the first time in hoxors, I stared at the impenetrable wall. I had worked on it for hoxors and had nothing to prove it. The pile of rocks was still there, still blocking the entrance. My efforts changed nothing, leaving me exhausted, hurt, and discouraged.

Frustrated, I grabbed another rock and hurled it across the cave. It bounced off the other wall and landed in the water with a splash.

The water!

I had another option.

I stepped towards the shore and contemplated the deep, clear pond. From here, I could see the underwater tunnel before the water turned dark, making it impossible to see the bottom.

Again I mulled my options over. I could try the tunnel or dive deeper. I'd tried both ways before, continuing through the darkness until my lungs burned and I turned back. Would I have drowned, or did I give up too soon?

There was only one way to find out. It could be a one-way ticket to death. And dead, I wouldn't be able to warn Jane.

Or could I?

I activated my wristcomm, scanning the ship. It didn't take long to find her. It seemed she only had access to my room, the bridge, and the hangar, though the others should have opened for her.

The other rooms... a funny feeling spread through my stomach and dizziness overcame me. I was missing something. Something vital.

My mind, however, refused to go there. Just like the solid rock wall, it didn't allow me to even consider the other rooms aboard the *Curian*. The harder I tried, the dizzier I became, until I found myself on my knees.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, and forced myself back up on shaking legs. The wristcomm had fallen from my hands, and I feared it might have broken on the rocky ground. Luckily, it was made from harder material than the rocks. The screen was intact, and I found Jane sitting in my captain's chair, staring out at a burning inferno that had once been a planet. My mind cleared as I took her in. She was so beautiful with her smooth skin. Skin so different from mine.

Scales of varied sizes covered most of my body, and I pondered the injustice of having them instead of gills. If I had gills, I could make it out of here.

Maybe neither the tunnel nor the pond lead anywhere.

No, that couldn't be. The pond was fed day and night, but the shoreline never changed. The water was going somewhere.

I considered the possibility that wherever the tunnel led, it only allowed a trickle out. I could make it to the other side only to find the opening too small to fit through.

Focus, I reminded myself. Message, I have to get a message to Jane.

I called her name, but she didn't hear me. Frustrated, I tried to contact the *Curian*, but it neither acknowledged nor followed any of my orders.

I typed a message, and for good measure, drew a ship landing on a planet being attacked by a male with a phasor. That should warn her.

If she receives the message, my mind warned.

She has to, I argued weakly.

Go to sleep. You always find her in your dreams, a new voice lured. One I had heard before, a long time ago, one... Again, my head began to hurt, warning me off this train of thought.

Just the word sleep had a strange effect on me. I was bone tired. And if I could reach Jane in my dreams...

No!

I straightened. I didn't know why, but deep in my gut, I sensed we were running out of time. I needed to make a decision. Go to sleep and hope to find Jane in my dreams or take the risk. Take the plunge.

Without knowing how I got there, I stood again at the pond's shore and stared at the peaceful water.

Tunnel or abyss?

I craned my neck to stare at the slowly dissipating light; night was coming. I needed to decide.

I stepped into the water.

Tunnel or abyss?

Fifteen

JANE

The brief glimpse of Wren inside his cave was replaced by space again, and the sense of loss brought me to tears.

My earlier feeling of calm dissipated like the cave, replaced by dread and a new sense of urgency rippling through me. I had to do something.

Go to sleep, my mind told me. You always see Wren in your dreams.

I considered that option, but for some reason, it didn't appeal to me, sensing in my gut that something was happening.

I was about to get up when the window turned opaque before swirling mist once again showed me the cave.

Wren stood by the pond, deep in thought. A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. This man was a stranger, an alien. And yet... I felt a pull towards him.

But just as I sensed that time was running out, I sensed that our connection meant a lot more. We were kindred spirits. We belonged together. Just thinking those words, I realized how

true they were. For some unfathomable reason, he and I were destined to be together. Fate brought us to this point, and now it was up to us to make it work.

A feeling of dread overcame me as I watched Wren step into the water. Perhaps it was the resignation on his face, or a foreboding that spread from my gut into my mind. Either way, I screamed his name.

Deep inside, I knew stepping into that water was a bad idea and Wren wouldn't come back up.

“Wren!” I screamed again, feeling as if my heart was being ripped from my chest. “No, Wren, no!”

His body slowly submerged into the water until only his head remained. He leaned it back, took a deep inhale, and was gone.

“No!!!!”

I jumped from my chair, toward the screen, as if I could take a flying leap into that cave. And I knew I would have if it were possible. I'd have gladly spent the rest of my life in that cave if it meant being with him.

“Wren!” I screamed.

The screen reverted to a window, and space moved by at a leisurely speed. I felt hollow, betrayed. And I wanted to pummel something.

A giant black hole appeared on the right of the screen. With growing dread, I watched it swallow meteors and space debris into the giant vacuum. I had never seen a black hole before, but it made me shudder and notice how slowly we passed it.

Why wasn't this ship going any faster? If it had been programmed to find help, me, why wasn't it racing back to its captain?

There had to be a programming flaw somewhere. Or maybe something was wrong with the engine, and it couldn't...

"Hello?"

A voice startled me. It was so faint that I'd barely heard it. But it was definitely there.

"Wren?" I called, hope flaring.

Was he here? Could he actually be aboard this ship?

Hope is a funny thing. Once blossomed, it can come up with arguments beyond reason and make you believe in anything. Suddenly, it didn't matter that I had seen Wren in the cave. I thought those might have been hallucinations and Wren was here locked in one of the rooms I didn't have access to.

"Wren?"

"Here!" The voice answered.

The mist grew in intensity as I made my way toward the hall, as though trying to dissuade me.

"Keep calling, I'll find you," I yelled as loud as I could, but my words were swallowed by the fog, which now floated up the high ceiling, trying to block me.

It didn't matter. I had explored this ship often enough to know this corridor held five doors on each side, and the elevator was at the end.

“Get me out of here.”

“I’m coming, Wren, hold on!”

Sixteen

WREN

Tunnel or abyss?

I still contemplated as I entered the water, which was even colder than it had been earlier, as if it were trying to dissuade me from my plan. But I was committed now. Determined to reach and warn Jane or die trying.

No way would I let her get surprised by Gryk. No way would he harm her.

The tunnel was already coming up to my left and called to me.

Tunnel it is, I decided.

The opening was large enough for me to spread my arms wide and propel myself forward with powerful strokes. My lungs were getting heavier as I reached the point where I turned back during my last excursions. Last time I was here, I barely made it back to the surface.

This was it. This was the point of no return.

My arms didn't even falter as they kept moving me forward.

Go back to safety, the same voice that had prompted me to sleep earlier spoke, sounding more desperate than before. *Give up, go back to where you're safe.*

I didn't listen. The cave might have been safe, but it had served its purpose.

My lungs began to burn, and the walls of the cave narrowed, as if trying to persuade me to go back.

It's too late. There is no turning back.

I was swimming slower now since my arms didn't have room to extend as far any longer. Soon my body became constricted as the walls seemed to hug me and my lungs fought my mind to open my mouth and take in air. What my lungs refused to understand was, that if I opened my mouth, I would drown them in water, not supply them with what they craved.

How could they have? For rexxars they had given the order to inhale and were provided with life-giving oxygen. How could they know what my brain did?

I almost chuckled at the thoughts hitting me. So silly, so out of place.

Dizziness overcame me, tried to force my lungs' will to supersede my mind. All the while my arms kept doing their job.

Until the tunnel became too narrow to swim, then I heaved myself forward by pushing against the walls.

My lips opened, and I forced them shut with the last of my willpower. My hands fumbled with the wall and my feet

slowed their pedaling. I felt myself drift towards the tunnel's ceiling.

My lungs had given up screaming. Instead, they tantalized my mind with how good oxygen would feel right now, as my vision began to turn black.

An image appeared in the darkness ahead of me.

Jane!

She smiled at me.

Jane!

My hands grabbed a piece of rock and moved me toward her.

My heart constricted in an immense ache, needing to be with her.

Jane!

My fists pounded against the hard, unforgiving rock.

Seventeen

JANE

I stopped as the subdued pounding of fists reached my ears.

“Wren?”

“In here,” came the reply from right next to me.

I stopped. With the mist creeping up the walls, the light had become so subdued I couldn't see much. Still, I realized I stood in front of a door.

My fingers searched for the panel I knew was here somewhere. One of the many I had tried to activate before and failed. Still, I tried again, and again, nothing happened.

“I don't know how to open the damn door,” I cried in frustration.

“There's an override across from my room.”

An override? I blinked. Of course there was an override. Why hadn't I thought about it sooner?

I turned and... was it just my imagination or had the mist grown even denser? I quickly dismissed that notion, the

prospect of seeing Wren overrode all other senses. Even the one telling me the voice I heard didn't sound like Wren. At all.

My groping hands found a raised cool square on the wall. *If I could just see it, I could open it*, but the fog obscured everything.

I groped but couldn't find a latch or clasp to open the box. I pounded my fists against it.

"I can't open it!"

"Shoot it."

I hesitated. Shooting a phasor inside a ship was a bad idea.

Even the smallest hole could have catastrophic consequences in space.

"What if I blast a hole into the outside wall?" I cautioned, voicing my worst fears.

The voice behind me cackled. "This ship is made from sprio, no phasor will penetrate it."

But the box is fair game, my mind supplied his unspoken words.

I pulled the phasor and aimed.

At the same time as I shot, the mist swirled almost angrily, surrounding me as if trying to hide me. Seconds later, every single door in the hallway hissed open.

Hands grabbed my waist, threw me to the ground, and I hit my head against the wall, losing the grip on my phasor.

This isn't Wren, shot through my head before blackness
enshrouded me.

Eighteen

WREN

Danger. Jane is in danger, shot through my mind. I didn't know how I knew this, but I felt it in my gut.

Adrenaline flooded my veins and reenergized me. The blackness that had threatened to take me under retreated, even my demanding lungs fell quiet.

I kicked my legs, using the walls to move forward.

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw a faint glow ahead of me. Dancing, flickering in and out. *Or as if fog is dancing around it*, my mind suggested.

With my strength waning, I fought toward it. But the closer I got, the further away it seemed.

My hands encountered resistance; there was a wall ahead of me.

No! This can't be how it ends.

I pounded against the wall, my lungs burned, my vision began to dim as the last of the adrenaline wore off. No matter how

much I thought of Jane and how much I was convinced she was in danger, a tantalizing voice told me to give up. To stop fighting.

And so I did.

I gave up.

And I floated.

I floated up.

Up?

I craned my neck. There was light above me. It didn't come from ahead of me; the walls had only reflected it. The true light was above me. So bright, I could basically feel my hands breaking through the surface that surely had to be close by.

I kicked against the rock to move up.

But even as I swam towards hope, I felt myself fading. It was still too far. I would never reach it.

Jane!

My eyes stung, and I closed them, finally surrendering to my lungs' demand and opening my mouth. Inhaling the water.

My body spasmed, my lungs, the only part of me surprised by what was happening, tried to expel the water, but couldn't.

Jane, I'm sorry. So sorry.

Nineteen

JANE

I fought against the blackness with all my might. My lungs screamed for air and my throat felt as if it were on fire. My chest felt heavy as if an elephant sat on me.

As I fought the darkness for some clarity, I realized several things. The weight on my chest wasn't an elephant but a Neferum. His hands encircled my throat, choking me.

I didn't have time to reprimand myself for my foolish, impulsive behavior instead of thinking things through before I listened to a stranger's voice. A voice I had known didn't belong to Wren. But there we go again with hope and it doing dangerous things to a person.

The Neferum's legs were on either side of my waist. He was leaned forward, putting his considerable weight into his hands, choking me.

I had seconds before blacking out for good. It was a small miracle I hadn't already.

Our positions didn't leave much room to maneuver. He was stronger and taller than me, and there was no way to pry his hands off with mine.

He was squeezing the life out of me, and my limbs and body were becoming sluggish. I knew I'd only have one shot at this.

One of my hands was caught between his thigh and my hip. With the last of my waning strength, I bucked, which didn't do much to him, but allowed me to bring my hand up and between his legs. I found his balls and squeezed.

His hands let go of my throat, and I took a deep, painful inhale.

He was still on top of me, writhing, holding his nuts.

I hooked my leg around one of his. With him still writhing, I managed to throw him even more off balance and scooted out from under him.

"You vaxxon—bitch—," he gasped. His hand moved for me, but I kicked it away.

He was trying to get on his hands and knees. If he got up, his size alone would overpower me.

Against my instincts, I closed in on him to kick him in the ribs.

He saw me coming and rolled.

He was still on the ground though.

I had no idea who he was, why he was here, or why he attacked me.

Along with my pilot training, I had also been schooled in combat training, and one of the things I learned was to press my advantage when I had it. My instructors had been adamant about it and that I needed to be unscrupulous.

Your first instinct will be to hold back. Don't, they had instructed. Something I learned when I took my first merciless beating. Lessons learned that way were hard to forget.

So when I pulled my leg up, the kick I dished out to his head held nothing back. My heavy boots landed on his skull, smashed it to the ground, once, twice, three times. Orange blood trickled out. I stopped, breathing heavily, and leaned against the wall to stare at the stranger, who bore no resemblance to Wren.

I noticed the mist retreating toward a door at the far end, near the elevator, beckoning me.

As the mist retreated, I saw the tiled floor for the first time, noticing stains reminiscent of a blood trail.

I picked up my phasor and followed the trail. If this was alien blood, there was a lot of it.

Filled with trepidation about what I might find, I entered the room. Four domed medchambers occupied the generous space.

The one to the left was occupied and filled with liquid.

“Wren!” I screamed and ran toward it.

His body floated near the top of the dome. I didn't have much experience with these things, but even I knew a chamber filled with liquid must be a malfunction.

I found a panel at the machine's head but didn't know the proper commands, despite realizing I could suddenly understand the language.

"Wren," I sobbed.

Was he dead?

How long had he been in here?

I pounded my fists against the dome until they hurt.

This is useless.

So I did the only thing I could think of. I lifted the phasor and shot at the dome near Wren's feet.

In an incredible explosion, the glasslike lid erupted, shooting liquid out and expelling Wren's body with such force it collided against me, toppling me to my knees and on top of him.

"Wren!" I crawled up on him. "Wren!" I took his head into my hands, shook him. "Wake up Wren!"

His golden-green skin looked dull, as if all life had left it.

"Oh no you don't!" I screamed.

I leaned over him, and my lips met his, and in a desperate attempt, I blew air into his slack body.

"Come on, come on, come back to me," I yelled between breaths.

Suddenly his body spasmed, and I scooted to the side to give him room while I cried and laughed, torn between hope, happiness, and fear.

He rolled over, coughed.

Water expelled from his lungs.

“Wren.” My voice was a whisper as the realization that he wasn’t dead, that he was here, not in a cave slowly overcame me. With it came a rush of emotions that threatened to drown me.

He turned, his eyes widened in recognition and confusion.

“Jane,” his voice was hoarse, and he coughed some more.

His eyes locked onto me. “Jane, you’re really here.”

I crawled toward him, driven by the desire to finally feel his real arms around me.

Twenty

WREN

I didn't believe she was really here until she was in my arms, and I felt her warm body pressed to mine. Her heart pounded against my chest, where it met mine, pounding equally hard.

"Jane," I laid my palms against her cheeks. She smiled at me, and I laughed.

"You're really here."

She leaned up and her lips pressed on mine. I didn't need any further prodding; my hands left her cheeks and enveloped her trembling body. Our kiss felt even more powerful than the one in my dream—had it been a dream?

I tasted salt on her lips and realized she was crying.

"Jane?"

"Oh, Wren. I thought you were dead," she cried, tears streaming down her face, threatening to drown her.

So did I, I thought, but didn't say it. "I'm here, I'm alive." I assured her instead.

I slowly took in our surroundings. This wasn't my cave or the end of the tunnel I swam through. This was a med bay. A med bay that looked vaguely familiar.

“Where are we?”

“On your ship,” she said with a slight smile, betraying some of the worries she probably still harbored for me.

“My... ship? But how? Did you bring me here?”

She shook her head. “I think... I think you've been here all along.”

How could that be? The memories of the cave were still etched into my mind, as well as how I got there, how I fought Gryk, and... Gryk!

“We need to find my copilot, Gryk, he is...”

“Dead,” Jane assured me. “I killed him.”

She killed him?

I stared at her in awe and wonder.

She must have gotten my warning then. “You got my warning?”

She shook her head, confusing me even more.

“No, I just got lucky. He took me by surprise, and it could have gone the other way.”

She was an amazing female. Not only had she overcome and killed a dangerous male, but she also seemed to have come to terms with it.

She appeared more rattled about having found me than having brushed death herself.

None of this mattered, though, not the question why I was here and not in the cave, not how she found me, nothing. All that mattered was her in my arms.

Even the question of how a stranger could mean so much to me was moot because all I desired was her.

My body still felt weak from... had I swum inside of and almost drowned in a tunnel? I didn't know what was real or a dream. Hallucination?

I lifted her up and carried her toward my quarters, the need to be safe and alone with her overriding anything else.

I walked us by Gryk's body but didn't spare him more than a sideways glance to ensure he truly was dead.

Twenty-one

JANE

I leaned my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, so powerful, so assuring.

We entered his quarters, and the door hissed shut behind us for the first time since I came aboard his ship.

“Jane,” he said, a question in his voice as he placed me on the bed.

“Wren,” I responded, hoping it answered his unspoken questions.

His hands took hold of my face, and I tilted it up. My eyes drank up his. For the first time, I had an undiluted view of *him*.

He was even more handsome in real life. Before, the ever-present mist had... where was the mist? I decided it didn't matter right now and studied his features. His face was all angles, from his square jaw to his carved cheekbones.

He didn't exactly have brows. Instead, a darker bone structure where the brows should have been gave the illusion of them. His reptilian eyes studied me, just as I did him. His irises were

golden green, like his body, his pupils slanted with a tiny yellow spark inside. As I watched, his pupils dilated, became rounder.

His nose was a bit wider and flatter than a human's, his coloring ranging from the dark green of his full lips to the gold green of his face.

"Jane," he moaned before our lips made contact.

All thought left me the moment those lips descended on mine. With a groan, I raised my arms to cross them behind his neck, pulling him closer.

The world around us disappeared and all unanswered questions with it. It didn't matter that I didn't know him, that we were basically strangers thrown together in even stranger circumstances. I craved his touch more than anything before.

His kiss made my blood run hot, raised a need for more, yet I felt... complete. I returned his kiss in full; our tongues met, and jolts of tingling sensations spread through me.

My fingers trailed his hard biceps and his velvety, hard scales. His body warmed under my touch with our kiss.

He gently applied some pressure, and I leaned back on the bed, yielded to him. I opened my legs, and he moved in between, still kissing me hungrily, while my hands buried in his long, black hair that felt thicker and stronger than a human's.

One of his hands dove underneath my shirt and I stretched to allow him easier access, both of us moaned when he palmed my breast. His fingers circling my nipple sent jolts of

electricity through me that were echoed by a hot pulse in my clit. Moisture built inside my pussy in anticipation for his cock and just the thought of us becoming one made me moan even deeper, push myself harder against him.

With some tugging and wiggling, my shirt lifted over my head, and his lips left me so that he could stare at my naked torso.

“By the gods, you are beautiful,” he breathed in a hoarse voice that sent more of my juices flowing.

His hand moved on my breast, kneaded the yielding flesh. “So beautiful, so soft,” he moaned.

He bent his head and latched onto my nipple. His tongue playing with my sensitive pebble made me cry out as undiluted lust rushed through me.

His tongue kept circling my nipple while he sucked it into his mouth and my eyes rolled back.

His hand began to knead my other tit, and I fell into an abyss of bliss.

Hard stubble on his cheeks brushed against tender skin, and the friction electrified me even more.

His lips moved toward my sternum before trailing down to my belly button. His hands left my breasts, tugged on my pants, and pulled them down, followed by my panties.

Heavily breathing, I became aware that I was totally naked under his hot stare and leaned up to watch him descend to his knees.

“Spread your legs for me,” he demanded.

Unabashed, I did what he asked, his fingers moving up the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs. I was torn between anticipation and the incredible feeling of his fingers leaving burning skin in their wake, before conquering more skin.

Soon his fingers parted my folds, and a hot spasm ran through me. My elbows shook, unable to hold my torso any longer, and I fell back. When the first tentative lick caressed my clit, I let out a small cry.

Fingers entered me, and an explosion of heat assaulted me from all sides. My hips rocked and would have left the bed had his other hand not pinned them down.

His massive shoulders spread my thighs wider even as they clamped around him.

“Wren,” I cried, shook by the climax washing through me.

My orgasm had been explosive, but I needed more. I needed his cock to spread my walls, invade me, fuck me. The ache in my pussy for it was even stronger than the waves of pleasure still rocking my body.

I sat up so I could reach his head. I pulled on his hair, crying, “Wren!”

His head came up, his mouth moist from my juices, and when he licked his lips, I felt another spasm run through me.

“You don’t want me to feed on you?” he asked.

Twenty-two

WREN

Disappointment jolted me when she pulled me from her pussy. Her juices were pure ambrosia, and I wanted nothing more than to get drunk on them as I lapped from one end of her slit to the other.

Somewhere in my nearly drunken haze, I felt her pulling my hair, calling my name, and I reluctantly came up to meet her dazed expression.

“You don’t want me to feed on you?” I asked, disappointed that she would ask me to stop. I had taken the quivering of her flesh around me to mean she liked what I did.

But if she asked me to stop, I would. Her body was a temple to be worshipped, not to be touched if she didn’t want me to.

“Yes... I mean no... I...” she moaned, shuddered, “I need you to...”

“Yes?” Whatever she needed me to do, I would do. My reason for being had finally become clear to me; it was to please her.

“I need you to fuck me,” her words hardened my already elongated, swollen shaft to the brink of painfulness.

“You want me to fuck you?” I made sure I heard her right, because once I was inside her, there would be no turning back. She would be mine forever.

“Yes, fuck me, fuck me now,” she responded, and her quivering body showed me she was ready.

With a quick flick of my fingers, my loincloth fell to the ground; it had barely contained my straining cock anyway.

I moved on top of her, hooked an arm underneath her shoulders, and pulled her with me higher on the bed. Her legs splayed wide beneath me, igniting more of the raging firestorms inside me.

I placed my hand underneath her ass, kneeled between her wide-open legs, and guided my cock toward her entrance. Her hips rose in invitation, and it was all I could focus on.

With a groan, I buried the tip of my cock into her hot entrance and then pushed deeper, further. The urge to bury myself to the hilt into her consumed me, drove me on.

I heard about mindless rutting, had always thought it to be animalistic, but once my entire cock was enveloped within her tight canal, that was what I became, a rutting primal beast.

I thrust into her again and again, reveling in her yielding body as her hips rose and fell to meet me. Nothing mattered but the sound of our flesh hitting each other in rhythm and the sound

of her mewling between pants. For a moment, I worried the beast that had unleashed inside me was too much.

“Oh, yes!” she screamed as if in response to my worry about pleasing her. Her reassurance drove me to the brink of coming.

Another cry from her and I felt the shooting, hot surge of my seed releasing into her welcoming womb. I froze on top of her, relishing in the rush of blood through my body to accommodate my enlarging cock. Then the spur on top of my shaft latched on to her clit, sucked it in.

Her eyes flew open in surprise, her mouth forming a perfect O, as she pulled air into her lungs with a hissing sound. Then her head thrashed from side to side, fell back, exposing a delicate throat to me.

Her body tensed; her hips rocked. Her nails dug into my back and would have ripped scales had they not been made of hard plates.

“Wren,” she panted.

I pushed my hips harder against hers and her entire body quivered.

Her head moved back even further, the flesh of her neck stretched taut, so taut I couldn't resist another second. I descended on it with a growl, plunged my teeth against her tender skin.

She hissed as I sucked on her throat, nipped, but made sure not to break her soft tissue.

Her mewling became louder, her legs spread even further, her walls spasmed around my cock, milked it just as my spur did her clit.

Twenty-three

JANE

I had no idea what the fuck was happening, but something sucked on my clit while Wren was buried to the hilt inside me. His enormous cock pushed against my walls, spreading them to the limit in the most delicious way, but whatever was happening to my clit sent me spiraling into unknown depths of pleasure.

Then his mouth descended on my throat. He nipped at my skin before the world as I knew it moved out of existence.

Stars exploded in front of my eyes and wave after wave of hot, liquid syrup spread through my veins, into my body, turned it into mush.

“Jane, did I hurt you?” He sounded worried.

Unable to speak, I shook my head against his chest, my pussy throbbed around his cock, and waves of an after-orgasm raked me.

“Jane, talk to me. I’m sorry if I hurt you, I...”

The agony in his voice gave me the energy to look up, to pull his head down so he would look at me. “You didn’t hurt me, Wren,” I panted. “I have never felt this good in my life.”

His lips curved. “Truly?”

I nodded, still aware of something clinging to my clit and sending more waves of pleasure through me here and there.

“What is that?” I finally asked.

“What?”

My hand reached down between us, explored until it found something similar to a small mouth attached to my clit.

“That.”

“My spur?”

Just then, it sucked some more, making me gasp. “Yeah, that,” I managed hoarsely.

His grin deepened. He adjusted himself slightly, and another orgasm hit me from out of nowhere, leaving me wheezing.

“You like it?” He gyrated his hips, and I nearly exploded again.

“Good heavens, yes,” I cried. My pussy and swollen clit were so sensitive by now, his slightest movement threatened to drive me over the edge again.

“Please, mercy,” I begged when another wave rushed through me. I didn’t think I could take another orgasm just then.

I was wrong.

As he slowly pulled out of me, my walls tightened and spasmed around him one more time. How many did that make? Three? Four? I lost count. All I knew was that I felt utterly boneless when he arranged us so I laid splayed on top of him, my head resting on his rock-hard chest.

He leaned up to kiss the top of my head. “Sleep, Jane. You need some rest.”

“Hmm,” I hummed as I closed my eyes.

My hands roamed his scaly chest. Their hardness turned me on even more, the memory of the friction of them on my tender skin popped into my mind, making me shudder deliciously.

I didn’t know when I drifted off, but the feeling of safety his arms around me created was like a cocoon pulling me under.

When I woke, I did so with a start and small cry.

Twenty-four

JANE

For one anxious moment, I feared I was alone again, being with Wren had been another dream. But then I noticed his scales under my hands.

“Jane?” The concern in his voice was evident.

I leaned back down. “I’m okay,” I reassured him. “I was afraid this was just another a dream.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes, I worried that this would be like... before. When we met in our dreams?”

His hand gently brushed my hair. “I’m here, Jane. You’re here. We’re together. This is real.”

He must have sensed how much I needed this reassurance. And it amazed me how in sync our bodies and minds already were.

As much as I would have loved to stay in our bubble, questions burned a hole in my stomach as much as hunger. I

was famished. At least until I remembered the dead alien in the hallway that needed to be dealt with.

“How?” I finally breathed, voicing the hardest question first.

His shoulders shrugged underneath me. “I’m not sure, but I have a theory.”

I sat up, reached for my shirt. I craved to stay on his chest, stay oblivious to the world, and I worried I would cave to my desires if I didn’t put some distance between us.

He also stood and naked—oh my God, how could anybody be this ripped? —he walked, no strutted, towards the closet built into the wall to grab a pair of pants.

With a grin, as if he had felt my gaze, he turned.

For a moment, we just stared at each other.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

I thought of the dead guy and shook my head; food was the last thing I wanted right now, but I was, “Thirsty.”

He ordered a drink from the food dispenser and brought it to me. He watched me eagerly until I drank my fill, as if watching me do so was the most satisfying thing in the known universe for him.

I held the glass out to him. “Do you want some?”

“Are you sure you had enough?” he asked before taking it and finishing it in one gulp.

“Your theory?” I prodded.

Twenty-five

WREN

My theory.

While Jane slept, I had plenty of time to think. I wasn't tired; I was as relaxed and peaceful as I had ever been. Maybe because I had lain unconscious for an unknown amount of time in the medchamber.

So I puzzled through what happened.

The cave must have been a prison my mind made up, a way to explain why I wasn't able to leave without going crazy. Because somehow, somewhere, part of me had been aware that I was caged in.

"This ship, the *Curian*, is a prototype of a new technology," I began. "Aggamont hired me to test fly it." I saw no reason not to be forthcoming with her. After what we did, she was MINE now. We were one.

"I think... he commissioned it for a fight with some unknown, powerful species..." Aggamont hadn't provided that

information, but rumors had reached me. Rumors of a super race coming after every living being in the known universe.

“I command the *Curian* with my thoughts.”

Jane didn't say anything; she raised an eyebrow in amazement, but I didn't see a hint of doubt on her beautiful face.

“Gryk was hired as my copilot, as a failsafe, and he resented it from day one. Made sure I knew it too. But since the *Curian* was programmed to my brain, there was nothing he could do about it, at least not as long as I was alive.”

“So he tried to kill you?”

I thought of my memories of Gryk luring me out of the ship, that too, must have been something my mind made up for some reason. I still had to puzzle that part out. But for whatever reason, my mind had created those false memories, placing me in the cave.

“I believe Gryk attacked me in my sleep. Something warned me, ripped me from my slumber.” Had it been the *Curian*? Or was I giving the ship too much credit? “And it made me turn just in time for his blade to hit the top of my shoulder, not my neck or head.

“We fought. Somehow, I got the upper hand and managed to lock him into his quarters before I realized I was bleeding out from several knife wounds.”

I clearly saw myself crawling on all fours toward the med bay. It was as if I were seeing myself through the eyes of the ship, and I shuddered at the idea.

“With the last of my strength, I managed to crawl into one and activate it... the rest...” I shrugged, “is a mysterious haze. How did you get here?”

“I was on a scouting mission when I came upon the *Curian*. For some reason, I thought it a good idea to investigate the *ghost ship*.”

“It was strange, though. From the moment I stepped through the decontamination chamber, the cleansing mist followed me. No, more like it guided me toward the elevator, the bridge, your room...”

“The decontamination chamber should have never been activated in the first place,” I observed, wondering if the entire ship had experienced some kind of malfunction.

Which reminded me. I opened the drawer on my bedstand to retrieve my wristcomm. No wonder I hadn’t been able to give any orders to the ship through it during my perceived captivity in the cave. I hadn’t even brought the wristcomm with me. It, too, had only been a figment of my imagination. But how had I seen Jane through it then?

Somehow, I made contact through it with her... my head was beginning to hurt again, reminding me of the times when I had felt the same in the *cave*. Whenever my mind had drifted to something to make me question anything too deeply.

After a quick scan, I told her, “Only a few hoxors passed between me climbing into the medchamber and you boarding the *Curian*.”

“I don’t understand any of this, Wren. How is any of this even possible?”

I shrugged and pulled her back into my arms, needing the physical reassurance of her warm body.

“It must have been the *Curian* that locked me out of my ship,” she mused. ” I assumed it was my ship. but...” she shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

I had never questioned Aggamont about this mind reading technology, accepting the task without hesitancy. And not only for the credits, but because I loved being a pilot, and even more so, being a test pilot. Something I didn’t get to do very often. And never with a ship like this.

Now I wondered how much the ship was listening to my mind and how much it might have invaded it. A notion that didn’t sit well with me.

“The *Curian’s* main computer must have somehow linked up with yours and locked you out...” I mused, before another idea hit me. “How did you even find the *Curian*?”

The *Curian’s* cloaking shield had been set ever since we left Aggamont. It had been one of his strict orders.

“Where are you from? Do your people have cloaking shield penetrators?”

She stared at me as if I were speaking a different language before she slowly shook her head. “No. I come from a very small colony. We only have ships we either steal or buy. Our technology is... pitiful.”

“I need to check something on the bridge.” I said and was glad when she followed me.

We pointedly avoided looking at Gryk, laying in a pool of dried blood on the ground. I needed to check other things before I dealt with his body.

We entered the bridge and Jane stilled.

Twenty-six

JANE

I stared in disbelief at the instruments, panels, screens, and everything else that had looked so alien to me only hours ago. All the words and symbols now made sense, were written in the intergalactically-accepted Zylonian language.

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

“What doesn’t?” Wren asked a bit absentmindedly as he entered commands into a screen. “This is weird.”

I stared over his shoulder, reading, *Cloaking shield status= activated.*

“This,” I said, pointing. “All this was indecipherable to me hours ago. I swear, all this was gibberish.”

“I’m not sure what *gibberish* means,” he smiled at me, and my heart skipped a beat, “but I think I get your point.”

My lips curved in response and for a long moment we just stared at each other, caught up in the wonder of the other person being here, being real.

He regained his senses before I said, “According to this, the cloaking shield has been active the entire time. You shouldn’t have been able to *see* my ship, let alone dock.”

I blinked a few times, trying to clear my head and break the spell he was putting me under and when I could think clearly again, I stared around with unease. “You said you control this ship with your mind?”

“Yes.”

I pondered this for a few heartbeats. “So, either this ship is truly *possessed* and a ghost ship, or...” I waited, made sure the terms I used translated for him. “Or your subconscious mind steered it.”

He chuckled derisively. “Seems my subconscious mind has been busy while I was out.”

I nodded. “Creating that whole cave scenario was pretty... inventive.”

He checked more readouts. “Everything looks fine. No errors, no overwrites, nothing.”

His eyes met mine, and he closed the short distance between us. “Well, I for one, am very happy with the way things have turned out. And I honestly don’t care if it was my subconscious mind or the ship that brought us here... together.”

He kissed me and I melted into his embrace, breathed in the manly scent that surrounded him.

“But I know one thing for sure,” he mumbled into my hair.

“What?”

“I can’t wait to take this ship back to Aggamont. Truth be told, it kind of creeps me out.”

I thought I caught a glimpse of some lingering mist, but when I blinked, it was gone.

“Yeah, me too.” I agreed.

Twenty-seven

WREN

After we cleaned up the mess in the hallway, we sat back down in my cabin and I asked, “Now what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have to... go back to your colony?”

Her brown eyes regarded me. “Where else would I go?”

I hesitated. I didn't know anything about her; her likes or dislikes. The only things I knew for sure about her were that she was adventurous, a fighter, and that I liked her more than anybody I had ever met before. And that I never wanted to be without her.

How do you say that to a person you just met without sounding crazy?

“Aggamont paid me well for this trip, enough so I can buy my own ship.”

“What will you do with your own ship?”

I thought about becoming a trader,” I voiced my deepest dreams. “I want to find exotic things, things not sold everywhere else.”

She leaned back in her chair. “That sounds... nice.”

“I could use a... partner.” There, I said it.

“A partner?”

“Yes, after this debacle, I would feel much safer with a co-pilot I can trust.”

“A co-pilot?” she pursed her lips.

“For starters. We could see where it leads.” I had a pretty good idea where it would lead, but I didn’t want to scare her off. I wasn’t an impulsive male, a risk taker, yes, but not impulsive.

Somehow, though, I knew we were meant to be together, that Fate had brought us here to this place. Something had manipulated my ship, my mind, even her ship. Perhaps it had been Fate. Whatever it was, we were here, and I was only sure of one thing; I never wanted to be without her.

Even though we just met, I sensed we were not only compatible but that we would make it work between us. There would be no fights on which side of the bed one of us slept, or if bromm tea was better than bromm juice. And if we did, I knew in my heart we would make up.

I knew she had people, a whole colony. The thought of her having a special male there turned my stomach. But then I argued that if she did, we wouldn’t have done the things we did.

You don't know her, my inner voice reminded me.

I turned it off, because I *did* know *that* about her, without a doubt. She would never be unfaithful; she wasn't the type. It was written in her guileless eyes, the way she moved and talked, she was self-assured, knew who and what she was. Her shoulders were straight, no guilt weighed her down.

What if she had family and friends she couldn't leave behind?

What was I thinking? Of course she would have family and friends. Not many people were orphans like me, without attachments. With nobody who cared if they lived or died.

If she had family and attachments to her colony, I understood and would find a way to make a living there to stay with her.

Then she turned my world upside down again with the brightest smile I had ever seen. "You know what? That sounds like an excellent idea."

My heart somersaulted, and I jumped up to pull her into my arms. "You're serious?"

"If you'll have me." I caught a glimpse of insecurity in her eyes and kissed it away.

"Of course I'll have you. Don't you know I won't be able to take another breath without you by my side?" I kissed her again, before I voiced the questions I didn't want to ask, but felt I had to. "What about your colony? Your friends? Your family?"

Twenty-eight

JANE

My mind and heart still whirled with his words, but first I needed to answer his questions. “I have no family and no real friends to speak of. Coworkers,” I shrugged, doubting they would miss me, all except maybe Gabby, “I doubt anybody will mourn my absence.” I gave Wren’s disbelieving face a wry smile. “They might care about the cruiser not returning, but not me.”

“Jane...”

I cut him off, taking his hands. “No, it’s all right, don’t you see? This is the way it was supposed to be, so that we can be together.”

His face brightened.

“What about you?” I asked, “Do you have any family? Friends?”

“I have friends,” he said and added, “but no family.”

I had never really considered my future before. Occasionally, I had, of course, daydreamed about having a family one day, but

I had never met the right man, until now.

What Wren suggested not only sounded like a great idea, a great life, but it was the first time I saw myself having a future with somebody by my side.

“Are you sure?”

“More than I’ve ever been about anything in my life,” I assured him.



During the month-long journey to finish Wren’s mission and return the *Curian* to Aggamont, Wren and I grew closer.

I had never met anybody who craved space the way I did. We laid for hours on his bed, stared through the window at planets, burned-out stars, and all the wonders the universe offered, not saying a word. We laid in each other’s arms, reveling in the nearness of the other person, surrounded by peace.

That’s how we fell asleep, and that’s how we awoke. It was the happiest I had ever been.

During the day, Wren showed me the *Curian*’s intricacies, and I asked, “How does it feel?” meaning his telepathic connection with the ship.

“It’s strange. I don’t even think about it. It’s like I suddenly know the course needs to be adjusted, and then it is.” He frowned. “It doesn’t feel invasive or foreign. It’s just... there.”

I still didn’t quite understand, and his unease with it was palpable. As much as I tried, I failed to imagine what this

would be like and shuddered. He smiled and pulled me closer. “It’s really not bad at all.”

“Do you think the *Curian* knew the medchamber would malfunction and that’s why it *lured* me in?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, but if it did, why didn’t it just fix the problem?”

We still had many questions but sensed they would remain unanswered. At least until we reached Aggamont, we hoped he might have some.

When we found him, nothing was as expected.

The *Stryx*, Aggamont’s ship, was among an armada, containing fleets from throughout the Intergalactic Alliance.

“What’s happening?”

“I have no idea,” Wren said and requested to dock next to the *Stryx*.

Where we were greeted by guards with phasors drawn, handcuffed, and taken to a cell.

Wren paced agitatedly back and forward. “I don’t understand. I’m sorry, Jane.”

“It’s probably a misunderstanding,” I tried to soothe, but even I had heard about Aggamont’s punishments for those who crossed him.

I didn’t know how long it took, but finally the doors to the hall outside our cell opened and Aggamont stepped in. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t execute both of you.”

Wren stepped closer to the bars. “I don’t understand why you would consider executing me at all, Lord Aggamont. I—”

“The only reason I haven’t ordered your execution yet is because you returned my ship and cargo. Very puzzling, after all these rexxars.”

“Rex-xars?” Wren stuttered, and a cold hand reached for my heart. We hadn’t been gone for years, impossible. “I was only gone for the exact time our contract stated.”

Lord Aggamont rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “I trusted you, Wren, and I don’t trust easily.”

“Read the ship’s manifest, it’ll tell you exactly—”

“I did,” the Draemon responded. “And it raised more questions than answers. Your co-pilot, Gryk, tried to kill you and steal the *Curian*?”

“Yes,” I answered, as Wren was still coming to grips with the situation.

Aggamont regarded me thoughtfully. “And why are human females always in the middle of trouble?” He lifted a hand to stop me from answering, and I closed my mouth.

“According to the ship’s logs, only two monnoths—months—have gone by, just like you claim.” Aggamont narrowed his eyes. “The logs appear to have been tampered with though... at the exact time the ship flew too close to a black hole.”

The cold hand around my heart turned even icier. I remembered seeing the black hole and wondering why we were so close and passing it so slowly.

One of Aggamont's soldiers entered. "Sir, we discovered a major malfunction with the *Curian's* gases."

Aggamont tilted his head towards the man. "The dyron gasses?"

"Yes, sir. There was a leak. We found and fixed it."

Aggamont rubbed his chin, and his unnerving red eyes assessed us. "Let them out."

"Yes, sir."

The door unlocked and Aggamont invited us to follow him. "I have to be at a function. Come with me and we'll see if we can puzzle this out during our trip."

"What is dyron?" Wren asked.

"It's the gas that enables and stabilizes the link between your brain and the ship's computer system." Aggamont explained.

Everything still felt surreal, and I was glad when Wren took my hand. I needed the contact to steady me. Years? We were gone for years? If that was true, it would explain how Wren and I had felt so connected to one another in such a *short time*. Our feelings for each other hadn't grown suddenly over the course of a few wexers, it had, unbeknownst to us, grown over years.

I squeezed his hand, and he squeezed right back, and I swear I could feel his emotions as if they were my own.

Aggamont gave us a speculative look. "Like I said before, I don't trust people very often, but something tells me you two

are telling the truth.”

“As a matter of fact, if what my technicians say is true, it seems I owe you an apology.”

I raised an eyebrow. The spymaster wasn't what I had expected him to be, after listening to the rumors buzzing about him.

Among many unexplained occurrences during Wren's and my adventure, there was one that tantalized me the most, and I took the opportunity to ask, “So you think the dyron malfunctioned, got out, and somehow connected Wren's and my minds, allowing us to communicate?”

Aggamont stopped short and assessed me from head to toe before turning to Wren. “I see you found another very sharp, intelligent specimen of the human female menace.”

Then he turned to me, his intense red eyes not as frightening or off-putting as before. “Yes, I believe that's what happened.”

“But how...” My face burned because I was about to admit something intimate between Wren and me, but my curiosity was greater than my embarrassment. “How is it possible that sometimes, in our dreams, we were able to touch?”

The Draemon tilted his head. “Everything is possible in dreams. Especially in shared dreams.”

We talked and theorized during our shuttle drive to the largest spaceship I had ever seen.

“The *Tuerix*, King Cygroth's ship.” Aggamont explained when our destination came into view.

Never had I seen a spectacle like this or a ship like the *Tuerix*, until a few minutes later, another battleship, even larger than the *Tuerix* came into view.

Aggamont led us toward a large hall, filled with so many people, it already made my head hurt.

“Please, enjoy the festivities tonight. Tomorrow we can talk some more. But I would like you to consider another offer,” Aggamont said, waving off an approaching purple male.

“I can’t say much yet, but war is coming. We will need all the pilots and ships we can spare. You are an excellent pilot, Captain Mont’Mart, and you already know the *Curian* inside and out. I know you have other plans, but I want to offer the *Curian* to you both in exchange for your services. You would be shipping goods from one place to another. After it undergoes repairs of course.”

Wren looked at me and opened his mouth, but Aggamont cut him off. “Please take time and consider my offer. We will reconvene in the morning.” A woman caught his eye. “Violet, my dear, hold up.”

And with a quick nod, he left us to stand and stare after him. When I looked at Wren, he appeared lost in thought.

“You want this, don’t you?” I asked quietly, sensing his desire to keep the *Curian*.

“Only if this is what you want,” he said wistfully. “I want us to be happy, Jane, no matter where or how.”

I snaked my arms around his waist. “The *Curian* brought us together.”

His head tilted toward mine and his breath tickled the fine hairs on the sides of my face. “But she makes you uncomfortable.”

It was true, the ship had made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t feel that way now. “Only because there were so many unanswered questions. She’s an exceptional ship, and this is a very generous offer.”

A tentative grin lifted his lips. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I only want us to be happy too. And you and she... listen to me, I should be jealous.” I chuckled. “You and she already have some kind of connection.”

He lifted my feet off the ground and twirled me. “You are the most amazing woman I have ever met. I love you.”

We both froze for a moment. I had felt our love grow from the first day, but we’d just never said the words before. Now that he had, warmth spread through me. “I love you too.”

Twenty-nine

JANE

Wren and I didn't need to deliberate long. The decision to accept Aggamont's offer was easy enough. The *Curian* had become part of Wren and me and even though I still didn't understand the ship's ins and outs; she had somehow led Wren and me together. Without whatever she had done, we would have never met.

I still had questions, like how she had managed to lock me out of my ship and how it had been possible for me to see her when she had clearly been shielded by the cloaking device. Even though Aggamont had shrugged that part off as another malfunction, I wasn't so sure.

I remembered the Draemon saying some secrets are better left alone, and even though I burned to find more answers, I sensed I would neither get them nor necessarily like them, so I let it be.

Wren and I were happy, and that was all that mattered.

Our first mission was to take the original cargo the ship still held to a planet named Bantus and a King Areus, who would receive the mantan.

We were told to take the gems to King Brondyk to receive more mantan. These were easy enough assignments, but they took us to places I had never seen before, and the cloaking device ensured we wouldn't be involved in the war with the Maraguay.

Before we took off for our first mission, Aggamont ordered Wren's cabin changed, so it now held a larger bed and furniture that didn't look as utilitarian as before. The ship was homier, and I felt grateful towards the Draemon.

"Happy?" Wren asked, as we laid snuggled together, staring out through our favorite window by our bed.

"Never more." I confessed.

He kissed my exposed neck and goosebumps ran down my spine. His nearness made my blood sizzle even though we had just made love for hours.

In captivated silence, we stared at a giant orange marbled planet as the *Curian* flew by it.

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" I asked.

"I have," he said hoarsely, nibbling my neck.

I smiled and turned to look into his green eyes and agreed with him. To me, he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The End

Note to the Reader

I hope you enjoyed this spooky tale.

This story takes place in the *Intergalactic Alliance* universe, a fourteen book series, each book ends with its own HEA but follows a larger storyline.

If you would like to read more about this universe and the *Intergalactic Alliance*, here are some links for you:

Get a free novella with Newsletter sign up

The first book in the Intergalactic Alliance: The High Commander's Mate

The Witch's Warrior by Chloe Parker

MF ♥♥☠

Synopsis



IN THE HEART OF THE DEEP, DARK WOODS LIES A FORBIDDEN LOVE THAT TRANSCENDS GALAXIES.

When Skoll warrior Ivarr finds himself lost in the woods of post-alien invasion Michigan, he's captured by the enigmatic cyborg witch, Circe, who calls the woods her home. She locks him in chains, demands to know his purpose in the woods... and then she begins to play.

Undressed and defiled, Ivarr gives into his desires as Circe makes him her toy, discovering there's a certain kind of pleasure in pain. But as their attraction grows, so do their feelings—and Ivarr realizes he loves this ethereal, frightening creature of darkness. Drawn to her mysterious aura and tantalizing beauty, Ivarr becomes determined to unravel the secrets that shroud Circe's past.

Will Ivarr succeed in winning her heart? Or will she pull him into the darkness with her?

Content Warnings: *bondage; sado-masochism; pain play; bloodplay; pegging*

Author's Note

This story takes place in the world of the Celestial Convergence, an alien invasion masquerading as the Rapture. You won't find much explanation of this event here because the nature of apocalypse is chaotic and disruptive—and that's how our characters understand it. However, if you'd like to find a full account of the Convergence, please check out **KREWE OF DEVILS**, a full account from a firsthand observer (with plenty of delicious WhyChoose romance thrown in).

Prologue

CIRCE

In the deep, dark woods of the great white north, there sits a house.

My house.

A fairytale cabin, tall and lonesome and sprawling, with decorative gables and wooden walls. It crumbled for a time, lost and forgotten, a relic of the world before the Celestial Convergence. In those days, a rich man lived in this house, spending summers here fucking his mistress—a girl with dreams of glory, who knew no better.

The apocalypse came.

He was punished for his sins.

Then I was here.

And I brought the cabin back to life.

I have made this place into an island of misfit toys, filled with creatures big and small who came here at death's door. My home is their sanctuary—poor misshapen beasts of land and

sea, field and forest. Injured by circumstance or by the other creatures that roam the woods, I take them in and make them whole.

What am I?

Oh...the wicked witch who haunts these woods.

And today, a new pet has roamed into my territory.

Tall and lean, injured and starving. My new pet is handsome, even if I've forgotten, on some level, what that word means. His antlers make him at least seven feet tall, perhaps more, with bronze skin that shines even in the dark Michigan winter, amongst the fog that rolls across this abandoned land.

I watch from the tower of the fairytale cabin in the woods.

I wait.

And when he falls, I will catch him.

One

IVARR

I am hopelessly lost.

I've been wandering for days, tracking a wounded elk that I hoped to bring home as a meal for the Kjarr M'yr Clan. The Hyperboreans have cut off our food supply and my village is starving, our human mates even worse off. We need to eat.

I have no mate, so I was sent out with the hunting party.

And now...here I am.

Lost in the woods.

On death's door.

I haven't eaten in weeks, my body emaciated and thin, my arms almost too weak to even hold up my axe. It's unbecoming of a warrior to be in such a state—it would be better to die in battle rather than succumb to the elements—but this planet, Earth, is far more hostile than I ever expected. The humans are so soft and vulnerable that I assumed their planet would be a paradise, but this...

...this planet will kill me.

As night falls, I duck into the hollow of a fallen tree, wrapping my furs around me in a desperate attempt to survive. I hear nothing, an eerie quiet descending over the snow drifts and the roiling fog of Hiawatha Forest, the woods lit up with the otherworldly glow of deep winter. There are not even tracks, no sign of animals at all...

I've lost my quarry and now it's time to die.

Hypothermia comes with a sort of euphoria. I become exceptionally tired. My body feels warm and tingly, and I think I must be dreaming when a warm creature curls itself around my shoulders. Then another comes. And another.

I shift between waking and sleeping.

And somehow, I am lifted.

I open my eyes to find myself slung over the back of some wild beast with thick brown fur, a single bionic leg in my field of vision. A bear—I'm being carried by a bear, rabbits and foxes scurrying alongside us, all with varying levels of cybernetic enhancement. My weapon is gone, lost somewhere in the snow, as lost as I am here on the back of this arcane creature in the middle of a forest I do not know.

Then—there in the distance, looming in the trees—is a house.

A sprawling manor made of timber, its windows glow with firelight. I fade in and out of consciousness, convinced that I have slipped out of reality. But the body of the beast beneath

me is warm, and I'm carried along to whatever awaits me in that mysterious human fortress.

We draw close to the door and it swings open as if by magic, revealing a dark channel into the void. Bleary-eyed, I seek out any sign of what may be inside as the door swings shut—but the bear carries me from the front door and up a flight of stairs, then another. My antlers knock on the steps, making my head ache and my mind reel, and the cacophony inside my skull makes me think I'm hearing a woman's voice.

“Oh dear,” it says, rich and sultry. “You've got his brains all scrambled.”

I groan as the bear rumbles beneath me, warm steam enveloping me. I'm starting to feel my limbs again, twitching my fingers, my toes. Then hands are on my shoulders, pulling my furs from my torso with unnatural strength. Whoever is touching me slides their hands down my back, then continues to undress me, peeling off my trousers and leaving them pooled on the floor.

“Into the tub, dearest,” the sultry voice says. “He needs to be warmed up.”

The bear shifts closer to the tub, those hands come around me again—and then I'm lifted and plunged into steaming water. It sears my skin, and I hiss and arch in pain, my vision swimming...but my heartbeat picks up and my Skoll blood heats. The white spots in my vision subside, and then I see her.

The woman.

Real.

I lie in a heated tub in a candlelit room, moonlight shining through the window. The room is immaculate, yet somehow full of woodland creatures. They watch from the dark corners, eyes glittering.

And on the edge of the tub sits the woman.

She is not human—that's certain. Her eyes glow a soft pink, the clear sign of a cyborg, black hair falls in straight locks around a face that must have, at one time, been round and plump but whose cheeks have somewhat caved in. Her lips are red, luscious, and her white canines are capped in fangs of that same silver.

She is naked.

Beautiful.

And blush-tinted wings spread from between her shoulder blades.

I blink up at her, unable to comprehend what I'm seeing. Some of my comrades have shared stories of a woman like this—the mistress of the woods, a sorceress who commands the forest's denizens. I lick my lips to find them chapped, and she tracks the journey of my tongue across my lips before she runs her gaze down my body.

My cock twitches at the way she looks at me, despite how hungry I am, how weak.

She is stunning.

“Where am I?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“You were lost in the woods,” she says. “I saved you.”

She doesn’t answer my question; I get the impression she doesn’t feel she has to.

I am under her complete control.

“What is your name, pet?” she asks.

“Ivarr,” I reply, “of the Kjarr M’yr Clan.”

“And what brings you to my forest?”

I look nervously at the woodland creatures. Is my quarry among them? Did I try to kill their kin?

“I was hunting,” I tell her. “I’m sorry.”

Her red lips part, her brow furrowing. She looks around the room at the cybernetic animals, each of them meeting her eyes.

“You will not hunt here again,” she murmurs.

I’m paralyzed with fear, pain...and desire. She leans over the water and slides her fingers across it, and I realize she has long, silver claws.

Was she ever human?

“How far are we from the Kjarr M’yr encampment?” I ask quietly. “I need to tell my people I’m safe.”

Her head cocks to the side. “Why do you think you’re safe?”

Terror floods my system, my eyes widening as I stare up at her. I move to get up, my system already rallying after being

warmed by the water, but she puts a hand on my chest and pushes me back into the water with unnatural strength and grace. I meet her eyes, pinned to the back of the tub, naked and vulnerable.

I don't think I could escape even if I tried. Even if I used my antlers, my Skoll strength...she would stop me.

"You will stay in this house until you are healed," she says, her voice measured. "And then I will decide what to do with you."

"Why heal me if you plan on killing me?" I ask.

"I don't plan on killing you," she replies.

Then she stands and leaves me in the bath...surrounded by the beasts I would have once hunted.

I'm at their mercy—and hers.

Two

CIRCE

My new pet is a pretty thing.

I return to fetch him from the bath after I've prepared my room for him, my beasts watching over him so he doesn't flee. My bear glances up at me with mismatched eyes as I enter, one cybernetic iris unblinkingly staying on Ivarr.

Yes...he's exquisite. I, too, have a hard time looking away from him. With bronze shoulders and icy grey-blue eyes, messy blond hair and a short, recently shaved beard, he looks like a god in the water. His antlers rise over him, shining just as brightly, catching the candlelight and casting strange shadows across the wall behind him.

He looks back at me, evoking a growl from my bear's throat.

"Hush, darling," I murmur to the bear. "He's no threat to us."

I sit on the side of the tub again, dipping my hand into the water to test the temperature. Ivarr's cock responds to me instantly, alien and bronze, covered in ridges, swelling with blood, if only a little. I slide my gaze appreciatively up his

body, over his muscled chest, and I sense his heartbeat and his breath quicken.

He wants me.

And I want him...but I've wanted him for a long time, haven't I?

"What do you plan on doing with me?" he asks.

I smile softly. He's so frightened by me.

He should be.

"I plan to feed you," I reply. "You're half-starved. Hunger does your beautiful body a disservice."

Ivarr shudders—from fear or pleasure, I cannot tell, though his cock grows ever harder. "And after?"

"What would *you* like to do after?" I ask.

He gulps, his throat working. He's trembling; I can see he's already growing cold. I understand that; the house is chilly and it can't help that he's still hungry.

But his body tells me more than just that he's cold and hungry...because his cock is now fully erect. I resist the urge to reach down and take it into my fist; I must get him fed first.

I stand and pick up a set of cuffs from where I set them down behind me earlier, holding them as I stare at Ivarr. "Get out," I murmur. "The water's getting cold."

Ivarr looks confused. "You plan on keeping me prisoner?"

"You came here threatening my creatures," I say. "I don't know you. You are clearly a powerful warrior, and I'm just a

woman alone in this big house.”

His lips curl slightly. “I suspect that you are far more than that.”

I laugh low in my throat, and Ivarr’s face flushes. “The cuffs go on and you eat and stay warm, or I toss you naked back into the cold,” I say. “What will it be?”

Ivarr hesitates for only a moment before he stands, droplets of water trickling over his muscled torso, down the V of his hips to his hardened cock. I stare openly at him as he steps out, taller than me by a foot, decisively alien. I’ve met more than my fair share of Skoll—and slain many of them—but he’s one of the finest I’ve ever seen.

And younger, I think. He doesn’t have the battle scars, the long beard, the rough complexion, the broad muscles. His species can live to be thousands of years old, but a quick assessment leads me to believe that he is no more than maybe fifty.

Close to my own age.

Both of us strange and out of place.

“Turn,” I command.

He turns around, showing me his muscled back, which sports a large and ugly scar across his shoulder blade. I wonder if it still pains him; such a wound might. He puts his hands behind his back and I clasp the cuffs around his wrists, letting my knuckles graze his tight ass.

Ivarr shudders.

“Come with me,” I order.

We walk from the bathroom to the connected bedroom, my sleeping chambers in the master suite of the cabin. The woman I was spent time here long ago, the abused mistress of a man who did not understand and did not deserve her...but since then, I have not had a man in my bed. Since the Convergence, I haven't been sure if I would ever even want a man again.

My desire, though, has suddenly returned.

Ivarr walks behind me, flanked by my bear. Her footsteps thud on the wooden floor, but I know she would warn me if he tried anything, and she doesn't make a peep. When I turn around, Ivarr is standing obediently, still hard, his cheeks now flushed with desire. A fire roars in the hearth, keeping the room nice and cozy.

“I brought food up for you,” I murmur. “Skoll rations, and tea heated over a fire. This should nourish you.”

“And you?” he says.

“I've already eaten,” I tell him. I look over at my bear. “You may leave us, dear.”

She rumbles softly, but then she's headed out the door. I shut it behind her.

I turn to face Ivarr, gloriously naked in my bedroom.

“Sit,” I order.

He does as he's told once again, ever responsive to my commands. Ivarr sits on the edge of the bed, and I come

toward him to pick up a tray of Skoll rations—dried meat and dehydrated alien vegetables—before holding them before him. I pick up one of the pieces of meat and hold it out in my sharp silver nails, far enough that Ivarr can take the food.

He does.

...and he sucks my fingers into his mouth, heedless of the sharp claws at the end.

I did not mean anything by my nudity—I have no need to wear clothes here in the woods, and Ivarr’s clothes are still soaked and drying—but now our shared state of undress feels remarkably intimate. I can’t help but step in between his knees, his antlers on either side of me.

“Why have you come here, Ivarr?” I ask, holding out another piece of food. “Tell me the truth.”

He takes the food, again sucking on my fingers. His eyes never leave mine, his tongue swirling around the digit. Heat pools between my thighs.

“I didn’t lie,” he replies, chewing thoughtfully. “I was trying to hunt because our clan is starving. There’s a Hyperborean—Heavenly Host—blockade cutting off our connections with all other rebel groups.”

“I don’t like hunters, Ivarr,” I chide, but I offer him yet another piece.

He takes it.

The heat between us grows.

“But you like me,” he murmurs.

His hands are still cuffed behind his back, but I get the impression they would be all over me if he were free. The Skoll are used to casual intimacy, accustomed to hard rutting as a mere introduction. Ivarr means to charm me.

It’s working...but I’m not so easily talked into bed.

And I have certain tastes that Ivarr might find surprising.

“I do not even know your name, beautiful creature,” he says.

“Will you give it to me?”

That question tips me over the edge; I hold out another morsel, and he takes it with relish, dragging my finger into his mouth.

I leave it there.

I fuck my finger past his lips, into his throat. Ivarr’s eyes widen for a moment before clouding over with lust, his hard cock jutting against my belly where I stand between his legs. He moans in his throat, and I reach up to drape my hand over one of his antlers to keep him from rising up.

“My name is Circe,” I murmur. “But you will call me ‘mistress.’”

He nods, sucking hard on my finger. I have him entirely under my control, in my clutches. Being my pet comes so easily to him.

“And though your name tastes so very sweet on my tongue...I will call you ‘pet,’” I continue. “At least while you stay at my house.”

He nods, still sucking on my finger like it tastes better than any food I could have provided.

“If you are a very good pet,” I say, “I will free you and send you back to your clan...but the weather has set in and the blizzard will sit on top of us for at least a few days. I cannot very well send my pet back into the cold.”

I pull my finger from Ivarr’s lips with a pop, the proud Skoll warrior gasping for breath. His cock is a hard rod against my belly, his body straining for release.

“Now,” I tell him, “my pet has had a hot bath and nourishing food...and now he needs a good fuck—doesn’t he, Ivarr?”

His chest heaves as he stares up at me, but I don’t make a move. No matter how much of my humanity I have lost, I understand the limits of what I am permitted to do—and treating this man as my pet without his say would make me no better than the creatures who twisted me into this shape.

But to my relief, Ivarr nods his head.

“Yes, mistress.”

Three

CIRCE

Ivarr is hard and hot and begging for my cunt.

He gazes up at me as I straddle him, his cock hard and pressing against my belly, his wrists still cuffed behind him. His eyes dart from side to side, roaming over the large wings that spread and curl around us.

“Eyes on me, pet,” I murmur. “You look elsewhere only when I tell you to.”

“Yes, mistress,” Ivarr says, his voice low and rough. I’m certain his cock is painfully hard now, and the Skoll are not accustomed to holding back.

“You’re doing so well, pet,” I smile, running a single silver claw down from his temple to his jaw. I put my finger under his chin and lift it to face me. “Learning so quickly. I think my pet has earned a kiss.”

I tilt my head and open my mouth, and I take his lips in a bruising kiss. My pebbled nipples brush against his chest, sending desire coursing through me, but I do not let myself

cave to those base instincts as I plunder his mouth. After all this time, I wish to be fucked, to be filled...but he hasn't yet earned that.

Ivarr lets out a needy groan as I pull away, my smile now wide and lusty. His lips are swollen from my kiss, a little trickle of blood coming from where I nipped him with my fangs.

I can't help myself.

I lean in to lick it away.

Ivarr groans again and bucks his hips, so I pump my wings to keep him pinned to the bed. A great rush of wind surrounds us as my feathers rustle, and Ivarr looks away from me again.

I capture his chin between two fingers. "What did I say about keeping your eyes on me?"

"To never look away, mistress," he replies.

My pussy throbs at his words.

"And if you do it again, you will need to be punished," I murmur.

He nods, but all that comes from his throat is a strangled moan. His eyelashes flutter.

I keep my fingers on his chin. "Ivarr...open your eyes and look at me," I order. He does so. "Are you comfortable?"

His chest rumbles, a Skoll growl that comes out as more of a purr. "I want to taste you, mistress," he murmurs.

I raise my hips to just barely graze my cunt against his cock. My lower lips kiss at the thick head of his cock, and we both

sigh. “Oh, sweet pet...tell me again. Tell me more.”

“I want to suck your rosy nipples into my mouth, mistress,” he breathes. “To play with you. To taste and lick and suck and... Yrsa help me, I want to lick your cunt until you come.”

“Then beg for it, darling,” I whisper. “Beg.”

I clutch his head to my chest and he takes a nipple into his mouth, sending threads of desire pulsing through my whole body. He ravishes me with his mouth alone, having to work harder because his hands are bound behind him.

“Please, mistress,” he gasps, one nipple leaving his mouth with a pop as he moves to the other. “Please let me lick your cunt. Give me your sweetness, your clenching heat...I want to make you come, mistress.”

His tongue lashes over me, his teeth. I almost lower my hips onto his cock, desperate to feel him, to come...but I don't.

I push him backwards onto the bed, his back arched, his muscled shoulders contorted behind him to accommodate the cuffs. He doesn't so much as complain, greedy for my desire, his eyes still on me like a good boy. I pulse my wings once and it propels me forward, my knees dragging over his shoulders as I drape my legs in his antlers and mount his waiting lips.

He devours me without hesitation, without complaint, his tongue dragging from my entrance to my clit. My pet thrusts his tongue inside me, sucking, tasting, groaning and rumbling low in his chest. The thick muscle of his tongue is enough to

do more than tease, finding the spot within me that makes me scream.

No man has touched me in so long...

I lose myself.

I come on Ivarr's face, my fingers flying up to play with my own breasts, my wings keeping me steady and holding both of us in a tight embrace. His hips thrust wildly at the edge of the bed, desperate for my cunt, for my mouth, for anything I want to do to him. I find myself grateful for finding such an eager learner, my lonely pet wandering the woods in the snow...

"Keep going," I moan, grinding my hips against his open mouth.

He makes guttural, low sounds as he fucks me with his tongue, his hips still working in vain to reach me. I enjoy the exquisite torture of it, withholding my cunt from him as he pleasures me instead. "Harder, pet," I command, my voice hoarse. "Fuck me with your tongue, darling...that's right..."

I trail off as I come again, unbothered by the prospect of suffocating him, dominating him completely. The strong, tall warrior melts between my thighs, shouting a Skoll curse up at the sky as he wrenches his lips away from me...

...and he comes in a hot ribbon against his belly, my backside, my back.

I crawl over him, turning to find his eyes glazed and his lips red and plush from pleasuring me. He breathes harshly, a sticky mess, and I lean down to press a kiss to his lips.

The kiss is lazy, serene. We're both hazy in the aftermath of orgasm, Ivarr having come from pleasuring me alone.

"What a good pet you are, Ivarr," I purr. "I think I might keep you."

He shudders, leaning into my touch and closing his eyes to press a wet kiss to my palm. "Please, mistress."

I trace circles on his chest, dying to sink my claws into him. I wonder if he would enjoy that...if he's interested in the darker and more painful games I'd like to play.

How hard he would come at the lash of a whip.

The intrusion of a plug in his hole.

"You want to stay with me, pet?" I ask.

He opens his eyes and looks up at me. "Yes," he says.

But I know he's merely playing our game...and my smile vanishes.

"We'll see."

Four

IVARR

I want to know everything about her.

This witch of the woods...this angel, this *goddess*. Circe, naked in the bath with me, steam rising from the water, her wings draped over the opposite end. She gazes at me as she places her feet on my shoulders, and I turn my head to kiss the delicate arch of her foot.

In a mere matter of hours, she has taken me into her home, saved my life...and made me her pet.

Being under her command does not seem like a horrible way to live.

“You may touch me, pet,” she murmurs, her eyes darting to her foot. I raise my hand in response and begin to massage her arch, between her toes, washing her. She’s told me I’ll be punished for making such a mess of her when I came earlier... and I look forward to finding out what that means.

As a Skoll warrior so far from home, part of the Infernal Legion, I’m accustomed to harshness. To taking orders.

This is preferable to a cold winter spent with the Kjarr M'yr clan.

“Mistress,” I ask as my hands skate up her lean calves, drag back down her knee. “May I ask you a question?”

Even the act of having to ask for her permission makes my cock twitch. This game we play is delicious. I can't believe I've never indulged in such things with the people of my clan before.

“You may, pet,” she replies.

I flatten my hand against her inner thigh, pull her slightly closer. She allows it.

“How did you come to be here?” I ask. “I've seen few creatures such as you in these woods.”

Her lips curve in a half-smile. “You've likely seen very few creatures like me at all,” she says. “The Heavenly Host no longer enhances human foot soldiers for their celestial army; we were too unruly for their liking, and too powerful once they lost control.”

“So you were with the Heavenly Host?”

Her rose-tinted, glowing eyes slide over my shoulder, glazing over slightly as she looks through the wall to some dark past. “For a time,” she says. “I flew with them in the early days of the Convergence. Their cause was mine. It gave me purpose.”

“And then?”

Her brow furrows. “Then...I realized how very cruel they were, so I escaped. I brought as much material as I could. And I came here.”

“Why here?”

“Because I lived here once, with a man who didn’t love me,” she says. “Before.”

I switch to her other leg, running a sponge over her skin, caressing every available inch. I don’t dare touch her cunt without her permission, but I long to taste her again. I want to show her how very absurd it is that anyone could live here with her and *not* love her.

She’s taken command of me, body and soul.

My heart is hers, if only for the night.

“I was a healer before the Convergence,” she continues unprompted. “A surgeon. They took me because I had a mind well-suited for learning, because they perceived me to have a certain cruelty they desired in their flock. They sensed that I enjoyed inflicting pain...and I do, dear pet. But not in the way they thought.”

I hold her knee, propping her foot on my shoulder. “How do you like to inflict pain, mistress?”

She laughs low in her throat. “I’ll show you, pet, if you’ll allow it.”

My body tenses, my cock already standing at attention once again. There’s a chance I’ll always be hard for her. I can’t seem to calm my body into submission.

“I would like to learn more from you,” I murmur, entirely enchanted by her.

“Good boy,” she purrs, trailing her foot toward my mouth. “Now...suck.”

I take her toes into my mouth, eager to touch her again, to taste her, to lick every secret piece of her. I kiss my way up the arch of her foot, over her delicate ankle, up to her knee. I would drown in the bath for the smallest taste of her cunt, and I would die content.

Her other foot finds my cock, drags along my shaft. I buck my hips slightly, unable to control the movement. She lets out a throaty laugh, then pulls her feet away only to crawl toward me, to wrap one steady hand around my cock.

I thrust into her hand, helpless.

“You must learn something, Ivarr, if you’re to stay in my house,” she murmurs. “As my pet, you will come only when I say you come. You will stay hard for me always, but you’ll find your release only at my behest...do you understand?”

I nod, groaning softly as she strokes me up and down. Her touch fires every nerve in my body.

“Yes, mistress,” I grit out.

“If you come without my order,” she continues. “I will punish you. And the pain I enjoy...it can be brutal. Lashes, chains, even more withholding. Have you ever had your hole filled, Ivarr?”

My whole body tightens around those words. I want to come; if she were any other woman, I would grab her, bend her over, fuck her on the edge of the bath...

...but she is *Circe*.

And she's the one who will dominate me.

"No," I say through clenched teeth. She's stroking me faster now, with relish. "I've never been...agh...penetrated."

"Would you let me do that?" she asks.

I was hoping she would ask.

I nod vigorously.

"Good *boy*, Ivarr," she says, and her words make me proud, make my cock strain in her hand. "Now...come for me, pet."

My hips jerk and I moan as I come into the water, eager to please her, to show her how well I can follow instructions. Her grip is almost painful as she works me to the end, crouched before me, her wings spread wide overhead.

Beautiful.

Daunting.

My mistress.

Five

CIRCE

Ivarr sleeps.

He's beautiful—tousled blond hair splayed across the pillow like a halo of sunshine, bronze skin flickering with firelight from the hearth, his antlers bright gold and sharp as nails. He looks peaceful in his sleep, unafraid.

I will not hurt him.

But...he may hurt me.

I leave his clothes and his weapon on the chair by the bed as I descend the stairs of the lodge, my creatures lounging on the old, torn up furniture of the living room. This is where I've saved so many of them from certain death, where I've sewn them into new shapes. Their eyes find me on the stairs, a lynx cat with cybernetic eyes and lower jaw brushing against my legs, a raven gliding over on mismatched wings to land on my shoulder.

Ever since I fled the Heavenly Host prison on Eagle Island, I've been alone here with my menagerie. I took as many

cybernetic pieces as I could from the Hyperborean lab, and I have since made my own, a new home in this lodge where a woman once spent months upon months with a man who never loved her.

She was hurt.

I made a vow to never be hurt like that again.

Yet Ivarr...he stirs something in me.

He wishes to be dominated, to obey...and I wish to order him around, to drag him through exquisite pleasures he has never dreamed of. I expected nothing like this from a rough-hewn Skoll warrior, but he is beautifully open to exploration.

My raven moves to my knee, and I idly stroke its head as it basks in the firelight. Here, vines grow around the hearth, the only point of warmth in this cold old manor, moss carpeting the floor. The woman I was once lay here naked at her master's pleasure, waiting for orders as he planned to betray her.

Now, *I* am the master of this house.

And Ivarr is my sweet pet.

I would never betray him, even if he must either stay in this house at my side or return to his clan.

His presence fills the room as footsteps sound on the landing upstairs, and I look over my shoulder to find Ivarr standing with his hands on the railing, gloriously naked, his antlers shining gold. His blue eyes survey me from above, his ribbed and rigid cock already hard once again for me.

“You should sleep,” I tell him. “You must still be exhausted from your time lost in the snow.”

He hums low in his throat. “How am I to sleep when one so beautiful sits naked within reach?”

My flesh heats, and my raven flaps away as I turn to face him. He hasn’t dressed; he ignored his weapon, his clothes.

“Your clothes are beside the bed if you wish to go,” I murmur, looking up at him.

His strong brow furrows. “Is that what you want?”

I twirl a strand of hair around my fingers, unable to look at him. “No...but right now what’s important is *your* desire, Ivarr. I don’t want to keep you merely by casting a spell; I want you to stay of your own volition. You are not my prisoner.”

“But the chains...”

“Meant to keep my creatures safe,” I tell him. “And do not doubt that I will not hesitate to kill you if you hurt them—but you may also return to your clan.”

He lingers at the top of the stairs, his eyes darting back toward the room. Now is the moment when he will decide—between me and his war party, our shared heat or the home’s hearth, isolation or community. I hope he’ll choose me...but no man ever has.

“My business isn’t finished here,” he murmurs.

Ivarr takes a step down the stairs, a step toward *this choice*. Then he takes another...and another. His pace increases, like he's gaining confidence that I won't stop him, and I allow him to move closer to me because I want this to be *his decision*.

I've played games with him since he arrived.

I've had my fun, my pleasure, and I've made him beg.

Now, this powerful alien warrior stands before me, his cock jutting out, silhouetted by the flames. I gaze up at him, my lips parted, and I maintain eye contact as he kneels before me.

He kisses my knees, one after the other.

My thighs.

His hands find my hips.

"Circe," he says, using my name with *intention*, wrapping his lips around it like a passionate kiss, lingering on the consonants and dragging out the vowels. "I stay of my own free will...but I want to play your prisoner."

I slide my tongue across my lower lip, spreading my legs wide as he nestles his face between them. He licks long and deliberately up my seam, breathing in my scent as I wrap us both in my wings. Sparks light along my skin everywhere he touches me, and I want more, more, *more*.

"Such a very good pet," I purr. "You've earned the opportunity to do what you wish...and I know you have longed to take me."

He lifts his head to look at me, his lips wet with my arousal.

“I’ll take you after I taste you, mistress,” he growls.

His hands are on my inner thighs then, spreading me out and pushing me back, and he falls upon me like a ravenous beast. He’s just had me, but he’s starving for more, his tongue lashing me just as the flames in the hearth lick along the timber, swallowing me whole. I arch and stare into the skylight overhead, crusted over with frost, and I wonder if it will melt away due to the heat we share.

Then Ivarr is kissing a trail higher, along my hip bone, over my belly, my ribs lined in silver and steel. He worships each nipple individually, sucking hard then licking a circle around them, holding me as if I am some delicate thing to be treasured. His antlers brush the feathers of my wings, alien pieces making contact; I gasp in a breath when I feel his cock at my entrance.

I have only ever touched myself there for decades; only toys have penetrated me.

He stills, gazing down at me with shining blue eyes.

“I want you, Circe,” he growls. “I am *aching* to have you.”

Even now, he asks for permission. A smile twists my lips, my teeth biting into the swollen flesh.

“Lie on the floor, pet.”

He pulls back, every muscle twitching with reluctant discipline, and I prop myself on my elbows to look down at him. When I get to my feet, he’s lying perfectly still, his fists

clenched at his sides, his cock pointing up toward me and begging to be fucked.

I stand over him.

I bend my knees to straddle him.

He sucks in a breath at the kiss of my cunt against his cock.

I drag my nails down his chest, leaving vivid red marks.

“Breathe, pet,” I murmur.

I sink down, taking him all.

He shudders and groans, never touching me without permission. My pet, my Ivarr, fills me in ways I didn't expect, reaching places that have not been touched in what feels like centuries. I roll my hips and brace myself with my wings, working through the pain, the pleasure, until I'm little more than nerves and sighs.

“Mistress,” he groans. “Your cunt...you...”

I place a finger to his lips. “Hush, sweet pet. Let me play.”

He watches me as I rise up and fall again, leaning into how he feels beneath me, savoring every last moment with him. In this sliver of time, I'm convinced that he is *mine*, fully and completely, my pet, my lover. He grips my hips and I throw my head back, my hair falling all the way down to his thighs, over my wings, before I look back down at him.

“Do you feel the way I hold you within me, Ivarr?” I moan.

“This cock belongs to me. This body is mine to touch, to enjoy, to lick and bite...to play with.”

“Yes, mistress,” he groans as I increase my pace. “Yes...”

His hips jerk as he loses control, but I dig my nails into him until I draw blood. Ivarr’s eyes widen and he grits his teeth.

“Not yet,” I hiss. “Hold out for me, pet. Hold...ah...”

My inner walls spasm and I quicken to a punishing pace, squeezing around Ivarr’s thick cock. His jaw is so tight that a muscle twitches at the hinge, and I gasp when he reaches up to touch my breasts, to play with my nipples. He hasn’t asked for permission...but it’s alright. I plan on punishing him later.

“Now, pet,” I command. “Come.”

His hips jerk up and he howls in pleasure, yanking and twisting, my nails biting into his chest. I hold him by the antlers and pin him down, using my preternatural strength to control him, to move him how I see fit. I feel his liquid heat fill me and seep between my thighs, the two of us falling together, slick with sweat.

I lick the place where I clawed at him, salty sweat mingling with the tang of blood. Ivarr lets out a choked breath, his hand stroking idle lines up and down my spine, between my wings.

It’s tender.

I allow it...and I love it.

“I could get used to you being here,” I murmur suddenly, unable to stop myself.

His chest rumbles as he sighs in contentment. “Tell me to stay and I’ll do it.”

I look up at him, propping myself on my elbow as my wing shades us both.

“That is one thing I will never do, Ivarr.”

He frowns. “Why?”

I swallow hard. “Because no matter how much I wish for you to stay...that should be your choice. Not mine.”

Ivarr reaches up and touches my face, running his thumb along where metal has been embedded in my cheek—an implant that lost its function long ago.

“Then I’ll stay because I would like to,” he says.

I smile, even as it breaks my heart.

And I say nothing as I turn and press a kiss to his palm.

Six

CIRCE

As the seasons change, I make myself vulnerable to Ivarr.

Winter snow thaws. My menagerie leaves the house to run through the trees, to soar across the forest, out toward the Great Lakes. Ivarr and I spend our nights tangled in the sheets, my proud warrior kneeling in supplication at my feet, begging me for pleasure.

And though I am his mistress, and he is my pet, I make myself vulnerable to him.

I tell him of the woman who once lived in this house with a man who did not love her. A woman budding with potential, like the spring flowers opening on the trees outside. A promising young surgeon blinded by love...and ruined by it.

Then, the Convergence.

Then, Circe.

The woman I was had a name, but I forgot it a long time ago— or, at least, those memories were *extracted* for the sake of

making me into something new. The Heavenly Host succeeded in their quest to remake me, but my will was too strong.

My future had already been stolen once.

Circe was not going to let that happen again.

We lie naked amidst wildflowers in the late spring sun, Ivarr with his arms wrapped around my waist, his head against my breasts as I languidly stroke his spine. He presses kisses to my collarbone, my chest, wraps his lips around my nipples, follows the lines of metal and wires across my skin.

He calls me his mate. He claims our meeting was pre-determined by his alien goddess, Yrsa.

I fear I'll lose him.

"Do you ever wish to return to your clan?" I ask, terrified of his answer. "I'm sure you miss them."

He sighs, warm breath against my cool skin. "I won't return to them if it means losing you."

"But if you had the choice..." I pause. "If it *wasn't* a choice. There must be people close to you that you left behind."

His chest rumbles. "I don't even know if they made it through the winter."

I go still. "Things were that dire?"

"The war against the Heavenly Host rages on," he says. "Our forces have been blockaded on the peninsula for the past two years, no food, no supplies. We've taken to hunting and

foraging as we once did long ago on our homeworld of Kanin. It's why I was in your forest, of course."

I should help them.

But I'm afraid. Afraid of losing Ivarr, of what might happen if I reveal myself to the Skoll. For all they know, I am their enemy.

"We should go to the encampment," I murmur, stroking his hair. "Find your people. Deliver supplies. I have rations... weapons."

He props himself up on his elbows. "You would do that?"

I run my fingers along his jawline. "For my mate? Anything."



We leave the next day.

I gather whatever I can spare, and I pack it into a satchel...and I feel myself open to new possibilities. For years, I have concealed myself in this cabin, a relic of my past, where I was once someone different. Now though, I want to help Ivarr.

I love him.

The thought strikes me in the most mundane of ways, like a truth that has just been uncovered as I move the dust away from the relics I keep in the basement of the cabin. It isn't a realization so much as an acknowledgement; I *love him*.

We've had our pleasures together, and now...he has cracked open my cold heart.

We dress ourselves for the first time since he arrived, Ivarr in his trousers and the leather harness for his axe, myself in old clothes from my former life. I slice away the back of a light sweater to make room for my wings, step into jeans that have grown soft with age.

Ivarr looks at me with new eyes.

“Have I lost my magic?” I ask him with a soft smile.

He shakes his head and takes me in his arms.

“*Never,*” he murmurs.

Then we’re off—through the budding, balmy forest, where snow drips from the branches. A few of my menagerie travel with us: a bear to carry our supplies, my raven on my shoulder, the lynx cat in the shadows, watching our backs. The Heavenly Host lurks on an island in the Great Lakes; we have to skirt around their base, ensuring that they won’t find us.

It takes us three days to reach the edge of the Kjarr M’yr Clan’s encampment, my raven scouting the way. Ivarr traveled far to reach my cabin; that he found me at all does indeed seem like some strange twist of fate. I wonder if this will be the end of our story, and Ivarr’s hand finds mine.

“It will be alright, my love,” he promises.

A scout sees us soon enough, and they ride out to meet us on their beasts—giant, alien goats with large horns. I have rarely seen so many Skoll at once, and I understand how they strike fear into the hearts of their enemies—with their shining gold

antlers, their sharp battle axes, their blue eyes glowing like winter frost in the midst of bronze and bearded faces.

But they have humans with them—men and women, some with enhancements like mine.

The world has been changed by the Convergence...and perhaps there is a place for me here, in all my strangeness.

Seven

IVARR

Something has shifted between us.

We are no longer mistress and pet—or at least, not all the time.

We are...something else.

Partners.

Mates.

Lovers.

I keep my hand entwined with Circe's as we're allowed into the encampment, her raven on her opposite shoulder, the bear behind us, the lynx cat at her heels. My old friends lead us through the village—Odran, our warlord, asking us questions, while his lieutenant, Ulfric, walks beside us with his mate. They're both much older than me, and wise at that...but even they cannot understand how I survived the winter with this ethereal creature at my side.

Circe's beauty overwhelms all others.

She's the wilderness brought into civilization.

Keeping me wild and hungry.

I'm pleased to find that the war party has managed without me, that they've even made some advances against the Borean forces to the north, on Eagle Island. Still, they are eager for our help, and even more eager to parse through the weapons that Circe has delivered. Not only that, but she knows the interior of the prison on Eagle Island, a mental map constructed of interwoven wire and synapses from her time there.

She's never even told me she was once kept prisoner there... but it starts to make sense how closed off she was, how she wears her enhancements like armor.

She's been hurt.

And more than ever, I know it's my job to keep her safe, even if she's a fearsome creature.

Circe is clearly exhausted when we retreat to our quarters for the night—my old house, a place decorated with trophies from my time in the Wild Hunt years ago and a galaxy away. Her menagerie is clearly perturbed by my trophies, and I feel a tinge of guilt at how I once thought of these majestic animals.

They're my family as much as Circe.

Her beasts settle into place by the hearth, the raven perched on Circe's shoulder as I stoke the fire. I turn around to find her sitting on the bed, looking more human—more vulnerable—than she ever has. At her cabin, she was always naked,

otherworldly, unshackled from the earth. Here, though...I see her as she is.

A human woman taken by Borean forces. Experimented upon. Made into something new.

Being around other people has taken a toll on her.

I kneel before her and take her hands in mine, then kiss each and every knuckle. Her long, sharp nails bite into my palms, but I ignore the sting, even revel in it.

And Circe—my mistress, my *goddess*—begins to cry.

“My mate...my love,” I whisper. “What’s wrong?”

She bows her head and pulls my hands to her face, hot tears against my knuckles. Her hair is messy and wild, dark strands threaded with silver. “I kept you prisoner,” she murmurs. “I took you from your family. And now...what a fool I was to return you here when you had so much waiting.”

“Circe,” I shake my head, starting to argue.

But she puts a finger to my lips.

“Cassie,” she breathes. “My name was Cassie.”

I kiss the tip of her finger. “I will call you whatever you wish, my love,” I reply. “Circe, Cassie, my mistress...my heart is yours. And tomorrow, we’ll return home.”

Her brow furrows. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I want to,” I reply. “Yrsa delivered me into your arms last winter...and there I’ll stay, if you’ll have me.”

She takes me by surprise by crumpling to the floor and flinging her arms around me—and we stay like that, in one another's embrace, for a long time. I breathe her in and she breathes me out, sharing oxygen, heartbeats.

We are at war, but we are alive.

I think she needed to be reminded of that.

As we make love that night in the Kjarr M'yr encampment, I'm tender with her—I make her feel safe, beautiful, loved. I take her gently, pulling her astride me to take me at her own pace, putting her in control. And I call her my mistress—not because we're playing games, but because she commands my lust, my heart.

Because I'm hers, as she is mine.

And tomorrow, we will return home, with a new partnership with my clan...but we will have our refuge in the woods.

In a cabin that once was haunted, we will drive the ghosts away.

Epilogue

IVARR

Six Months Later

I've reached the precipice of pleasure...where my mind ceases to be. I am *all body*, a body that feels everything and nothing all at once, a body that floats in midair.

Held in chains, my wrists over my head.

Held in my mistress's dark embrace.

We've been playing this particular scene for a few days now—training my body to take her in places I've never before experienced, honing my obedience, preparing to feel her. She's even taken a new toy crafted by my compatriots in the Kjarr M'yr Clan, a phallus slung low across her hips.

Her claws drag down my chest, opening thin cuts that sear and pulse. Her other hand reaches down to grasp my hard cock, squeezing as she leans in, her feathered wings fluttering behind her. She is a bird of prey, a beautiful devil, eyes glowing pink in the candlelit shadows of her cabin.

“My strong, beautiful warrior,” she purrs. “Is today the day that I’ll finally break you?”

She strokes my cock and my chest rumbles, my breath strangled in my throat. My mouth waters as I starve for her, saliva dripping to the floor around the strip of leather tied around my head, stuck between my teeth like a bit in my mouth.

I groan.

Her hands feel too good. Her claws, her teeth, the chains around my wrist...she’s reaching all of me at once, her hands trailing over me as she walks in a circle behind me. I hear a bottle open and then the drizzle of fluid, but I can’t see what she’s doing. I can hardly move at all.

Something blunt and hard presses against my hole...not the phallus I know she plans to use on me, but some other device.

A plug.

She presses it into my ass, the familiar sensation of being filled making me moan. Circe hums in satisfaction at how well I take it, thrusting my rear toward her as my cock grows painfully hard. She reaches around to stroke me slowly while she settles the plug inside me, and I clench around it even as she continues to get me harder.

“What a good pet you are, my love,” she purrs. “Waiting to come until I say so...taking this plug so very *well*.”

My hips jolt as the plug pushes on that place inside that feels so good, and Circe strokes me until a small amount of clear

fluid weeps from my cock. It feels so good, but I need more—I need sensation, thrusting, the thick press of that phallus.

She's been making so many promises of filling me, but it's been a year...and she'll finally make good on it.

She suddenly releases me from the gag and tosses it to the floor. I suck in a breath, bowing my head, gasping and swallowing hard as my cock twitches. "Circe...please," I stammer.

I don't know where the switch came from, but it lashes against my thighs, a sharp sting making me hiss as my hole clenches around the plug.

"Use my title, Ivarr."

"Mistress," I gasp out. "I want you to fuck me. I *need* you to fuck me."

Another lash. "Then beg me for it."

The chains come loose from the ceiling and I fall to my knees, gazing up at her as she comes around in front of me. The whip is in her hand, her naked body silhouetted in candlelight, her wings spread wide. The phallus is long and thick, made of some kind of sealed wood and crafted by the finest woodworkers in the Kjarr M'yr Clan. My people have used these for eons...but I've never had one used on me.

"Open," she commands.

Her hands find my antlers, tilting them to pull my face up. I open my mouth.

“Suck,” she continues.

I wrap my lips around the phallus and pull it into my mouth, making sure I tug hard enough that the leather strap between her legs will shift against her clit. Circe watches me the whole time, holding my antlers and pulling me in until I’m choking on her toy, until she’s made me into a plaything too. She thrusts her hips as if she was born to fuck me, and the plug in my ass feels too small.

“Good boy, Ivarr,” she says, her voice rough. “Good, *good* pet.”

I want to touch myself so badly, to stroke my cock as she did before...but I know it wouldn’t feel nearly as good. Even so, the plug presses on that spot, and more clear fluid spurts from my cock.

“You need to be fucked, don’t you, Ivarr?” she asks, still thrusting the phallus down my throat. It’s thick and smooth... I’m eager to feel it. “Nod your head.”

I nod and she gasps at the sensation of that leather strap between her legs.

“On your hands and knees, pet,” she orders.

She steps away and I get into position, thrusting my ass into the air and waiting for her. I let out a strained moan when she pulls the plug out and sets it aside, and I try to maintain my composure when I feel her get to her knees, the oiled phallus now pressing at my ass.

“Tell me if it hurts, darling,” she says.

I hope it does.

At least a little.

She reaches around to fist my cock as she presses the head of the phallus inside me, and I unleash a haggard breath. She pulls back...then pushes in again, deeper this time. She strokes her hand. I'm feeling everything, inside and out, overwhelming. Circe's lips are against my spine, her tongue flicking out to taste the sweat beading on my skin.

"Mm...sweet, handsome pet," she whispers. "You're taking my cock so *well*."

"Thank you, mistress," I breathe.

"Do you want more?"

I shake my head. "Yes," I reply. "More..."

She gives me more, more...until I'm so full that it makes me hold my breath. Her hand trails down my spine as she straightens her back, burying her phallus in my ass. "Breathe, Ivarr."

She takes my antlers in her hands and pulls my head up to arch my back. I hiss out a breath, inhale deeply.

"Good boy," she purrs.

Then she begins to fuck me.

My cock aches to be inside her, even as I revel in how she fills me. Her hand finds my cock again and strokes, and my breath becomes heavy and labored. I'm dying to come for her—however she wants, in whatever position, with her phallus in

my ass or with my cock inside her. Circe sighs and groans, and I can smell her arousal in the air, filling the cabin...

My instincts kick into gear.

I almost come.

“Ivarr...” she moans.

I can't help it.

I lunge forward and away from her, then I whip around and tear the phallus from her hips. Circe laughs and arches her back as I pick her up, then plunge my cock into her wet cunt. She spreads her wings as I pin her to the wall, letting out a rumbling breath as I nearly come at that first clench of her around me.

“Oh, pet...” she sighs. “You're going to have to be punished for that.”

“You can punish me later,” I growl.

And then the tables are turned; I'm fucking her hard, touching her everywhere, my tongue on her breasts, her throat, invading her mouth. Circe relinquishes control as I hold her tight, and it's only a matter of seconds before I'm emptying myself into her, filling her with my seed, claiming her.

My beautiful mate.

My mistress.

She strokes my hair as I lower us to the floor, peppering kisses down her neck as I remain lodged inside her. Her wings come

around us, a pink glow emanating from her rose-tinted eyes as she gazes at me.

“You’ve been very bad, Ivarr,” she croons. “Next time I’ll have to take the whip to you while I’m inside you.”

My hips twitch involuntarily at the suggestion.

“I can’t wait,” I murmur.

“But for now...” she pauses. “For now, I suppose I’ll enjoy this coupling. We have plenty of time to explore.”

That we do—hundreds of years, lost in the woods.

I’m so glad I get to spend them with her.

Note to the Reader

Chloe Parker is a full-time smut peddler and part-time academic with a master's degree in Alien Eggplant. When she isn't crafting intricate worlds and otherworldly love stories, she's usually busy hanging out with her three dogs and her strange husband or running her romance bookstore. You can learn more about her work and stay updated on the Codex Celestia series at www.chloeparkerromance.com.

Defy Gravity by Cleo Rose

MF ♥♥

Synopsis



ABDUCTED BY THE GREYS...

The Scientist is feared throughout the Milky Way and Andromeda Galaxies. No one knows who - or what - he is. He has taken to abducting innocent human women and experimenting on them.

Content Warnings: *body horror, body mutilation, body transformation*

One

ATLAS

“There!”

My nest brother, Soren, pointed a talon toward an expanse of grassy hills that stretched from beneath the shadow of the cobalt mountains to the fringes of the tropical jungle that kissed the sea beyond the horizon. Nestled within the centre of these hills were the crumbling ruins of an ancient temple that once belonged to the Goddess Thuanga, our Mother and Healer of All. After countless solar rotations, the stones used to build the temple had weathered under the unforgiving sun, bleached white and, for some, crumbled to dust.

Banking to the left, I angled my wings and began a slow descent, allowing them to fill with air that carried me gently toward the ground. The sharp talons on my toes gouged the earth beneath my feet, tearing up clumps of lush, green grass; solid ground was welcome after countless hours soaring the skies in search of this place.

Soren landed beside me with a grunt, tucking his enormous wings close to his back before draping them about his

shoulders like a gallant cloak some of the noble *zhu'e* wore. The tip of his tail flicked against the thick muscle at its base, cracking loudly in the air. Lifting my lip at him in a silent snarl, I flicked my tail toward him, snapping at his ankles painfully to remind him to be quiet. We were all weary after several sun falls of flying with no rest in between, but that was no excuse to forget to be aware of our surroundings.

“Ow!” he cried, dancing away from my whipping tail. “There’s no one *here*, Atlas!”

A snarl rattling in my throat, I launched myself at Soren. Wrapping my arms around his chest, pinning his arms to his sides, I wrestled him to the ground, pinning him beneath me. Using the powerful dewclaw on the tip of each wing, I anchored myself down and held my brother in place. Lowering my mouth to the shell of his ear, I hissed, “How can you know that? You assumed that we were alone because these hallowed grounds appear deserted. If you were paying attention, you would have noticed the *ghaikvel* sleeping in the shadow of the trees.”

I jerked my head in the direction of the slumbering beast. *Ghaikvel* were natural ambush hunters and preferred to hunt their prey in the dark of night, but they were aggressive when disturbed from their slumber. They often slept in the lower hanging branches of the enormous trees that the *zhu'e* built their homes in.

My rookery brothers rumbled their discontent with my nest brother and his light blue skin darkened with shame and

embarrassment. I waited for a moment to ensure that he understood the lesson, then rose to my feet, playfully slamming his face down into the soft grass. Soren glowered at me, his cheeks and forehead dark blue, but dusted himself off and accepted my scolding with a bow of his head, his small horns glinting in the twin suns' light.

“Should we kill the beast?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “As long as we do not disturb it, the beast should stay asleep. But we will remain vigilant. Kyson, Micah, the two of you shall stand guard.”

Both males were as weary as I, but their shoulders did not sag nor did their wings droop at my command. They nodded curtly and turned away from me, separating to expand their patrol area, but did not fly. I did not begrudge them that. Their wings must be aching, as mine were. Micah retrieved his collapsible spear from his travel pack attached to his waist and began to assemble the weapon. Kyson unsheathed his blade from its holster on his thigh.

Every muscle in my body complained, my wing joints aching, the heavy muscles in my shoulders throbbing with heat from overexertion, even my tail was sore. I longed for a cool bath.

Thuanga's temple was said to guard the entrance to an underground spring filled with crystal clear water that bubbled gently thanks to the heat from our planet's core. This spring was rumoured to heal any ailment, to cure any disease or poison, and to strengthen a weary soul.

And *that* was why we were here.

My long-time friend and the *zhu'e* king, Silas, begged me to help find a cure for his first mate—the queen—who was slowly dying from an unknown poison. He did not wish to hear it, but I suspected that she was being poisoned by his fourth or fifth mate, both of whom were lower-ranking females within his harem. A female *zhu'e* could not inherit the throne unless Silas decided to break from hundreds of solar rotations of tradition and name one of his daughters as his heir. Silas was *not* progressive; he would never claim a lesser female as his heir apparent.

For all of his faults, Silas *did* love Zarina.

Striding toward the ancient ruins that guarded the entrance to Thuanga's temple, my tail dragged tiredly on the grass behind me. The entrance was cast in shadow from the looming mountains behind us, the twin suns that chased each other across the sky hanging low as sun fall rapidly approached.

Soren darted ahead of me, filled with the exuberance of youth, and peered inside before he turned to face me, his eyes glowing faintly as they adjusted to the darkness.

“Are we going in there?” he asked me.

I prayed for patience.

My nest brother was no great warrior.

Tall and lean, with features that many of my clan's females found attractive, Soren's role within our society was to mate and breed with any receptive female, ensuring that our bloodline remained strong. If we were under threat, Soren and

his rookery brothers that shared his position within our clan, were to seek shelter with the females deep in the nesting caves.

This task, searching for the ancient temple of Thuanga, our Mother and Healer of All, was bequeathed to me by King Silas —*not* my clan's Elders.

When one of Soren's rookery mothers learned of my task, she and my nest mother demanded that I allow him to accompany me. I argued fiercely with them. I did not wish to nursery sit my nest brother. I did not have the time or the patience to show him the proper respect he deserved as a breeding male to our clan's future hatchlings. Every moment I devoted to Soren meant less time to searching for the ancient ruins and the legendary healing waters that would save Zarina's life.

"*You* will remain here, with Kyson and Micah," I drawled. "*I* will enter the temple."

Soren frowned at me.

"That's not fair," he muttered. "You never let me do anything fun, Atlas."

My lip curled and I bared my fangs at him, a growl rumbling in my chest.

"This is not meant to be *fun*, Soren!" I snarled. "Zarina's life is at stake. You are treating this as some form of adventure. You are no longer a hatchling, and I am tired of having to treat you as such. I do not have time for it. *I* command this Wing, not you. Now do as I say!"

Soren's wings and tail drooped, his pale blue skin darkening with the flush of humiliation at my scolding. I did not care that I had embarrassed him in front of my wing brothers, or that he would tattle to our nest mother when we returned home. Zarina's life was more important to me than any punishment my clan Elders would force upon me.

Lifting my hand, I murmured a spell of illumination and an orb of blue-white light hovered above my palm, filling the dark temple with ghostly light.

Without a backward glance, I entered.

The pathway began with a slow descent, the air cool and damp, filling my nose with the scent of moss, moist earth, and wet stone. Ivy clung to the walls, their vines thin, their leaves quivering softly from the disturbed air currents created by my wings and tail. The blue-white light from my illumination orb cast eerie shadows along the stone walls, the emerald green of the ivy bleaching to gray beneath its ghostly rays. My talons gouged the earth beneath my feet, echoing ominously in the empty corridor, but there was no malice lingering here; I sensed only a bone-deep sorrow.

This temple had been abandoned for tens upon tens of solar rotations, left to the mercy of the elements, and the faded murals etched within the stone walls attested to that. I trailed my fingers along the wall, my claws tearing through the delicate ivy to reveal more of the temple's long forgotten history.

There was no grand reason as to why the temple fell into ruin. There had not been some great battle waged here. These grounds were hallowed because of the goddess's favour, but there were no dead that lingered here. The truth was never as glamorous as one would have you believe and it was often quite simple: my people, as they grew and explored our world, forgot about its existence until it faded into legend.

Bowing my head, I murmured a soft prayer to the goddess. Her temple had not deserved this fate.

My clan worshipped Thuanga with an enormous temple and surrounding garden. We left her tokens, flowers, sweet teas, and sparkling stones as offerings, and we prayed to her for blessings and healthy hatchlings, to keep us strong. The priestesses burned incense and the entire temple smelled of herbs and spices for several sun falls.

Weariness dragged at my mind and body as I continued my slow descent to the spring hidden below the temple.

By the time my feet reached level ground, every muscle in my body ached, and I blinked rapidly to keep from falling into immediate slumber.

Tilting my head, the light of the full and twin moons nearly blinded me with their brightness. Blinking spots from my eyes, I fumbled, my wings stretching to their full length, and I groaned in pain as my wing muscles shrieked displeasure. Sinking to my knees, my exhausted body refused to move one step further. Falling forward, my hands caught me, my arms

shaking beneath my weight. Soft blades of grass tickled my fingers, and the earth was springy under my hands and knees.

Goddess, I thought desperately.

Light shimmered at the edge of my vision, and I lifted my head to find silver moonlight bathing the inside of the Goddess's underground temple. There, in the centre, was an enormous pool of water, its surface smooth and still as a mirror. Sparkling insects darted above its still surface, shimmering like the jewels that Zarina and the other female *zhu'e* favoured.

But it was not the pool that caught my attention.

Silver mist swirled in soft tendrils across the pool of water, delicate and wistful, curling around the shadowed form of a female *Orlick*.

Am I dreaming?

I was exhausted beyond comprehension, and it was possible that my tired mind was conjuring an image of the beautiful female.

The silver mist gently uncoiled from around the female, as though it were caressing her with a nest mother's loving touch, to reveal her sleeping form. She slept upon her side, her skin a hue of dark red that did not exist within mine or the surrounding clans, and the membrane between each finger in her wings gleamed metallic gold. Her features were soft and delicately feminine, her nose small and upturned at the tip, with full, luscious lips a brighter red than her skin. Her hair

spilled down her shoulder and over the curve of her breasts in golden waves that shimmered gently beneath the moonlight. Her waist tapered in the middle and her hips were wide, perfect for carrying two or three eggs within her womb. Oddly, there was a patch of hair at the apex of her thighs that pointed down toward her sex. Her tail coiled loosely around her leg, the tip twitching in her sleep.

What is she doing here? I wondered.

It was unheard of for a female to travel without an escort. I did not recognize her, and she was not a member of my clan—my nest brother would have fallen upon her immediately if she were, for a red and gold coloring on an *Orlick* was rare to nonexistent in this part of the world.

Perhaps, I thought, she is from one of the northern continents?

Her beauty stunned me. When the clan Elders learned of her, they would punish me for looking upon her with such desire, but I could not help myself. I had never seen a more beautiful female! Clearly one of the northern clans was missing one of their daughters.

Swallowing, I dragged myself toward her and frowned at the pool of water that separated us.

Would the goddess be furious with me if I were to bathe in Her waters? I wondered.

I stared at the slumbering female.

She was worth the risk.

Without hesitation, I plunged into the warm waters of the Goddess's healing spring.

Two

SIENNA

It was the gentle caress of warm air brushing over my naked skin that woke me from my restful slumber.

For a moment, I was confused.

I didn't sleep in the nude. I preferred silk nightgowns or a pair of shorts and a tank top for my pajamas. There were no sheets tangled around my ankles and there was no pillow halfway down my back. I was a deep sleeper and I tossed and turned a lot during the night, throwing off my covers and twisting every which way like I couldn't get comfortable. I only knew this because I often woke up on the opposite side of my bed, my head and arms hanging over my mattress.

But all of that had changed the night I was abducted by aliens.

I didn't remember much.

I hadn't been drunk. It was the middle of winter, just after the holidays, and I'd been walking to my car after the end of my workday. I remembered that it had been snowing, the day surprisingly mild for mid-January, and I'd stopped to watch

the snow swirl beneath the golden light of the parking lot's streetlamps. With dark grey clouds obscuring the sky and the Greys highly advanced technology, of course I didn't see the spaceship that hovered directly over my head. Like those silly documentaries about people being abducted by aliens reporting a strange bright light, I saw a strange bright light too.

When I awoke, I found myself locked in a windowless cell. I was naked. At first, I'd thought it was some cruel prank played by my coworkers, and then that changed to me believing that I'd been kidnapped by a serial killer. And then I experienced the greatest shock of my life when the door in my cell opened to reveal the diminutive alien. It wasn't a human adorned in theatrical makeup or some advanced form of CGI. First of all, it was ridiculous to spend that kind of money on a prank on someone like me. I was a low-ranking administrative assistant at a law firm. Second, I didn't know anyone in the entertainment industry that would *want* to do something like this to me. The third and final reason it couldn't be a human was because of my body's reaction to it.

All the hair on my body stood on end, a shiver racing down the length of my spine, and my heart pounded against my chest. A fear unlike anything I'd ever felt before washed over me like a tsunami; this fear was primitive in nature and could not be overcome. It was primal instinct. And my hindbrain lit up like a neon sign demanding that I *get away* from it as fast as possible.

The alien that stared down at me, unblinking, my naked body reflected back at me in its large, fathomless black eyes, was a

Roswell Grey.

It was small and genderless, standing less than three feet tall, covered in smooth grey skin that absorbed the light around it, with a bulbous head, a tiny, lipless mouth, and enormous black eyes that sparked with intelligence, cunning, and a hint of maliciousness. It hovered several inches off the ground, its slender two-digit hands folded together as though in prayer, wearing a white robe that fluttered in a non-existent breeze.

I shrank away from it, unable to stifle the whine in my throat.

I didn't know how much time had passed from the night that I was abducted, there were no windows in my cell, and I feared that I was no longer on Earth. With no windows to view the passage of night into day, and, if it were as I thought, we were in the dark reaches of space, it was difficult to guess how long I had been their prisoner.

Be still, a cold, hollow voice had whispered in the space between my ears. The Grey did not speak with its lips but with its *mind*.

I scrambled backward, my back slamming into the cold wall of my cell, sliding down its length to pull my knees close to my body. I crossed my arms over my bare breasts, my fingers curled into fists that shook with fear, and I cowered before it.

The alien floated closer to me, its body swaying gently up and down, and my eyes darted to peer beneath its robe, noting that its legs were small and deformed. It stretched out a hand—I flinched—and grasped a strand of my hair in between its two-digit fingers.

Homo sapiens, its cold voice, devoid of any emotion, hissed in my mind. *Of the Hominidae family. Evolved from the order of primates.* It stared down at me, its enormous head a third of the size of its body, its black, fathomless eyes unlike anything I'd ever seen before. There was no curiosity or interest in its expressionless face. I was a *thing* to this extraterrestrial being, little more than an insect. *A human female.*

I whimpered.

Thoughts tumbled through my head, my mind struggling to grasp at an idea that would help me out of the situation I found myself in, but fear gripped me too hard. Logic dictated that attempting to escape was not a smart option; I was not on Earth where I could hide amongst the local populace and coordinate myself from there. If I attempted to slip past the alien and through the open doorway, I wouldn't know where to go or how to navigate the ship back home. I didn't want the alien to hurt me and, right now, I didn't know if it would be physical pain, mental agony, or a combination of both. Escaping my cell was not an option right now.

The alien released my hair and turned its back to me, floating slowly out of the open doorway, and I flinched at the soft electrical hiss of air as the door slid closed behind it.

After my first introduction with the Roswell Grey, I lost all semblance of time. I did not know if hours, days, weeks, or months had passed from the night I was abducted. My cell was dark, the only light provided by the glowing strip around the triangular metal door. It was barely bright enough for me to

see the outline of my fingers if I held my hand up in front of my face. There was no cot for me to sleep on, and they did not provide me with a blanket to wrap around myself—my cell was cool but not cold. There was a small bowl-shaped depression in the far corner that I used to relieve myself; similar to a bidet, there was a second basin beside the first that cleaned me thoroughly. I was fed regularly but not often, my estimate was once a day, and it was a soft, jiggly substance similar to jelly but lacking heavily in flavour.

I never realized how much pain a human body could tolerate before the Greys abducted me.

I was experimented upon, poked and prodded with devices similar to needles, sliced open with delicate machinery that people back on Earth would drool over. They drew my blood. They cut me, everywhere. They injected me with serums that caused my insides to writhe and my body to burn with fever. A strange contraption was placed over my head that held my jaws wide open as they traced their instruments over my gums, teeth, and tongue. Blood filled my mouth. But the absolute worst about all of this was the metal gurney that resembled the examination table at my doctor's office. They inserted a thin metal prod between my legs that stretched up the length of my cervix and into my uterus. It *hurt*.

I was out of tears and my voice had died a long time ago, my throat hoarse and bloody from screaming in agony. The Greys did not provide an anesthetic.

I lay flat on my back on the metal gurney, my knees trembling, blood pooling between my legs, when *he* entered.

The Scientist.

This being was tall, averaging a height of roughly six feet and seven inches, and resembled a human male. Slender, built like an athlete, he walked with predatory grace, and I was distantly reminded of the way that the Elves carried themselves in my favourite high-fantasy novels. A slender tail curved daintily between his knees, the tip dividing into a two-pronged fork with vibrant-coloured feathers that gleamed in the artificial light of the laboratory. A large helmet with a black vizor obscured his features; black leather-like material covered his lean body from neck to toes, his four-digit hands and feet wrapped in gloves and boots that seamlessly blended with his clothing.

I thought I had hurt when the Greys tortured me mercilessly with their strange instruments, but he was much worse.

The pain was *excruciating*.

He monitored the Greys as they obeyed his direct orders, unstrapping me from the gurney and transporting me down the too-white hallways to the Scientist's private laboratory. His lab was exactly how one would think an alien laboratory would look: everything was neat and organized, cages of varying sizes—largest on the bottom, smallest on the top—lined against the wall opposite me. There was the familiar gurney that I'd been strapped to, and there was a second chair-like device that sent chills blasting down the back of my spine

because of the needle attached to its arm and the spiked headband. There was a holo-screen at his desk, along with a familiar-looking tablet. The room was pristine, sterile, and cold.

I didn't fight the Greys that transferred me to the chair-like torturing device, my body still covered in burn scars from their electrical prods. They attached my wrists and ankles to the arms and base of the chair, but I had more freedom of movement than I did when I'd been strapped to the gurney. There was a hole in the back, right above the base of my spine, and I wriggled my hips uncomfortably; the metal was cold against my bare skin.

The Scientist approached me, carrying a long and very sharp syringe in his left hand. The serum inside that dripped from the needle tip, was a light blue colour, and was more gelatinous than pure liquid.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I stammered through numb lips.

He ignored me.

With the tips of his fingers, he trailed the veins in my arm, searching for the perfect place to insert the needle tip into my skin. I swore but couldn't look away when that sharp metal tip pierced my flesh. I watched in abject horror as that gelatinous blue substance entered my bloodstream and blood welled from the cut in my arm. This was not like going to the doctor's and having them extract blood; this hurt. My skin was beginning to turn blue with bruising.

He injected me with this serum often enough that my skin no longer bruised when he inserted the needle into my vein.

Then my body started to *change*.

I *had* noticed that my skin seemed to be changing from its sickly, pale white to a light shade of red that reminded me of a sunburn. My skin itched too. My cell remained in total darkness and I didn't know how long the Scientist kept me strapped to this strange-looking chair.

Could I have developed a burn from the lights? I had wondered. When was the last time I saw the sun? How long have I been here?

But worse than my reddened and itchy skin, were the aches and pains of my transforming body. My breasts were small, and they ached with the pulse of my beating heart, and I swore that I'd grown a cup size. They were heavier than before, and my nipples hardened in the cold laboratory.

My hair had grown several inches from the night of my abduction, and that terrified me because it meant that I'd been with the Greys for over a year. (My hair didn't grow fast, even with the strange serum the Scientist injected into my veins.) It flowed down to the middle of my back in gentle waves, curling around my enlarged breasts. The strands were dark and greasy, knotted and tangled from having never been brushed.

My jaw ached. I constantly ran my tongue along my gums and teeth, nicking the tip on my canines when I accidentally bit down. I didn't want to admit to myself that my canines were

pointier and longer than I remembered them being. Even my bottom canine teeth seemed sharper and pointier than before.

My fingers bled as my nails popped off, one by one, to be replaced with lethal gold claws that belonged on one of Earth's predators. The sharp tips tickled my palms when I closed my hands into fists.

My mind rebelled at the physical changes altering my body. I really *was* being experimented upon!

As more time passed, the changes in my body became harder and harder to ignore.

The base of my spine actually lengthened by small increments until it was thick and muscular and the complete height of my body. At first, I didn't know how to wield the thing. I was like a baby, learning how to use this new limb that was now a part of me. It wasn't heavy like I thought it would be; it was thick at its base and then tapered into a soft, rounded point at the tip. The Scientist bound my tail to my ankle via a small set of cuffs that prevented me from using it as a weapon.

And then my wings started to grow.

I first noticed them when my shoulder blades itched no matter how often I scratched there. At some point, blood trickled down my back from how often and how deeply I scratched. The Scientist bound my wrists together to prevent me from further damaging myself, and I screamed in frustration because I couldn't relieve the itch. When the itchiness finally started to ease, it was because my new wings had sprouted,

tiny, weak, featherless wings like a gosling. I couldn't see them, but I could *feel* them.

Their weight was slight on my back at first, and I hardly noticed them unless I pressed against the wall or the Scientist touched them. But they *grew*. My shoulders bent beneath their weight until I adjusted, the Scientist forcing me to flap them in his laboratory where one of the Greys wrote down important notes.

But I was no longer in the Scientist's laboratory *or* my cell.

It was the gentle caress of warm air brushing over my naked skin that woke me from my restful slumber. A shimmering, silver mist swirled around me, droplets of moisture clinging to my hair and the underside of my wings, the grass beneath me softer than the finest goose down feathers.

Slowly, the mist parted to reveal that I was underground, ancient stone walls climbing up to an open canopy that revealed an unfamiliar sky. The stars were familiar in their distant twinkling, but the constellations and the fact that there were *three moons* in different phases of fullness unnerved me. There was no streak of the creamy white Milky Way Galaxy stretching across the horizon.

I was very far from home.

The soft *splash splash* of water drew my attention, and I lowered my head to stare, wide-eyed, at the being bathing in the pool of water in front of me.

Three

SIENNA

He emerged from the pool in a spray of water, droplets shimmering in the moonlight, clinging to his midnight hair and sluicing off his muscular body in rivulets. He turned toward me, and my breath caught in my throat.

He was *exquisite*.

His features were sharp and angular, too rugged to be considered pretty, with a square-shaped jaw and an aquiline nose. His eyes, a deep cerulean blue with bursts of yellow in their depths, were set under a pair of heavy-lidded brows that drew one's gaze to the twin spikes on either side of his temples. There was a small cleft in his chin and his lips were thin; he was broad-shouldered, heavy-chested, and adorned with muscle.

I trailed my gaze hungrily down his torso, his wings twice the length of my own and tucked close to his shoulders. Water gleamed silver as it ran down his naked thigh, and I quickly averted my eyes from his groin—but not before I caught a glimpse of his size and length. My insides lit up like fireworks

on the First of July. I'd had girlfriends talk about their man's size and length but *none* of them compared to the male in front of me.

His skin, like his eyes, was a deep cerulean blue that darkened in certain places along his wrists, the tips of his fingers, his inner thighs, upper chest and the back of his shoulders. He stretched his arms over his head, the muscles in his biceps bulging, and I quivered with desire. He was the epitome of masculine perfection.

Turning to the side, his muscular tail hung between his heavy buttocks, thick and long, and filling my head with fantasies I shouldn't want to indulge in.

Mesmerized, I watched him spread his magnificent wings and dip them into the water, like a bird cleaning its feathers.

Angling his head in my direction, his nostrils flared and his cerulean eyes glowed, those pinpricks of yellow blazing bright gold, his lips curved in a gentle smile.

"I see that you are awake," he crooned.

His deep voice rolled over me like the rumble of approaching thunder: dark, intense, and heavy with a hint of promise.

My body reacted.

My nipples hardened and arousal slammed into my belly like a punch in the gut. My clit *throbbed* with every beat of my heart. Liquid heat pooled between my legs. My tongue darted forward, licking my lips eagerly. My tail writhed, the long muscle coiling around my thigh like a snake winding itself up

a tree. My wings extended on either side of me, the muscles in my shoulders loose.

“I am,” I said.

The winged male alien stepped toward me, his powerful thighs treading through the water, and my eyes dropped to his length. Heat crept up my neck and burned my cheeks. He was long for a male at rest and his thickness had to be that of my closed fist. The tip was pointed and coloured a dark blue and not the familiar mushroomed head of a man. He stirred, growing semi-hard beneath my curious gaze.

He walked closer, his cock swaying from side to side, and I clenched my hands into fists, struggling to resist the urge to kneel before him and wrap my lips around him.

This strange, animalistic desire frightened me.

I wasn't a virgin, but I hadn't exactly been sexually active when the Greys abducted me. Too many bad experiences with men, including a cheating ex who slept with my best friend. And, yes, I *was* still bitter about it. I'd thought Christine was my friend, and she'd gone behind my back and slept with my boyfriend. But, as it turned out, everyone in our friend group knew that she'd been fooling around with Logan and none of them thought to tell me! With *that* realization, I'd cut all of them out of my life.

“Where is your escort?” he asked. “Surely your nest father or mates would not leave you unattended?”

I blinked at him, raising my eyebrows in confusion.

Escort? I thought. Nest father? Mates? As in, more than one?

“Um,” I hummed, trying desperately to think of something appropriate to say. How the hell was I to answer something like that? I didn’t *need* an escort and my father was enjoying his retirement with my mother by traveling the world on a luxury cruise. And I wasn’t interested in a mate. Or mates.

“And I need an escort?” I asked the winged alien slowly.

I needed to be careful.

While I might *look* like a female of his species to this alien male, I wasn’t. I was a human.

“Perhaps the northern clans do not escort their daughters as we southern clans do,” he murmured thoughtfully to himself.

I blinked at him in confusion and the tip of my tail twitched, uncoiling from around my leg to rest by my ankle in the soft grass. I had no idea what he meant, either about the northern and southern clans or the clans escorting their daughters.

But an idea began to form.

He didn’t know that I was human. He didn’t know that I wasn’t a female from one of these northern clans.

I could use that to my advantage. Returning home was my ultimate goal—but first, I’d need to find a way to reverse engineer whatever the Greys and the mad scientist had done to me. I needed to find a way to become human again.

Surely, I thought desperately, *there has to be a way.*

Claiming to be a female from a northern clan would allow me to learn more about his people and their culture without giving myself away. It would give me a chance to discover if this planet was technologically advanced like the Greys, primitive, or somewhere in between like Earth. Once I knew that, I'd know if I'd be able to make it off planet.

Please, I silently hoped. Please, please, please.

“That is correct,” I said, adding a light note to my voice. My wings rustled, and I tucked them in close to my body, silently marveling at their light weight. It seemed that, like a bird, the bones in my wings were hollow.

Perhaps the bones in the rest of my body are lighter too, I wondered.

“I haven't needed an adult's supervision since I was a teenager,” I added, fondly thinking of my grumbling father as he drove me around the city to meet up with my friends.

The big blue alien frowned at me. “What is a *tee nay ger*?”

Oh damn.

“An adolescent nearing adulthood,” I said carefully.

Wow, all of this is starting to give me a headache.

“You speak strangely, female,” he growled.

I clamped my lips shut, my nostrils flaring as I inhaled sharply. Fear tingled down the back of my spine to the tip of my tail, and my wings shuddered. I could not forget that *I* was the alien here, not him.

He stepped forward and boldly draped his right wing around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his chest. His warm breath fanned across my face, his strange eyes beautiful in their intensity.

“But I do not mind,” he breathed.

My bare breasts were crushed against his massive chest, my palms resting flat on his chiseled abdomen. My fingers twitched, desperate to touch his semi-erect cock. His skin was warm beneath me, the hard muscles flexing beneath my hands, and I tilted my head back, gazing into his inhuman eyes. Warmth suffused my limbs, flaring in my ribcage and then slowly trickling into my belly and pooling between my legs, my clit throbbing in a slow, measured beat that was damn near torturous. The base of my tail tingled, and an image flashed before my eyes of the male coiling the length of my tail around his hand and wrist and *yanking*. I gasped at the rush of pleasure, my thighs tensing instinctively.

His wing was heavy, draped around my shoulders, pinning my wings to my sides, and holding me close to his chest. I was trapped, unable to escape him. Awareness sizzled along my nerve endings, my synapses sparking, my body thrumming with the unexpected pleasure, and my mind was simply along for the ride.

He stepped back and stared at me, his eyes trailing over every inch of my exposed body. Heat warmed my cheeks at his slow perusal, desire and embarrassment mixing together in my bloodstream.

“I have never seen such a beauty as you,” he murmured, his voice soft with reverence.

My heart slammed against my chest.

He thinks I'm beautiful.

I didn't know what I looked like in this new body. There had been no mirrors in my cell, and the Greys and the mad scientist were careful to prevent me from being able to see my reflection in the windows in the laboratory where they experimented on me. I wasn't used to anyone, let alone an attractive *man*, looking at me with such desire that it darkened their features with lust. But the male in front of me *did*. He stared at me as if I were the sun, the moon, and the stars all wrapped up in one pretty bow.

It was a rush, that was for sure, to *see* how desperately this male desired me.

One of his hands trailed up my flat stomach, leaving goosebumps in its wake, and stroked the small valley between my breasts; my nipples hardened. I gasped, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip to stifle the moan building in my throat because of the pleasure. I'd never been quick to arouse, and Logan often complained about how much foreplay was required before I was ready for penetration. My breasts had never been very sensitive to stimulation before either, but with *him*? Arousal sparked along each individual nerve in my body, my most erogenous zones lighting up and sizzling with the promise of the pleasure to come. My breasts swelled and my dark red nipples were hard and aching to be sucked.

His touch ignited an inferno within me.

It'd been so long since I'd experienced pleasure like this that I wanted to give in to the temptation he presented.

His fingers were tipped with lethally sharp claws that tickled my sensitive skin and left my imagination running in a direction I'd never contemplated before. He delicately circled one of my nipples, the tip of his claw tickling my sensitive breast, and warmth pooled into my belly and flowed between my legs.

His nostrils flared and his lips twitched, quirking upward in a small smile that was both charming and sinful.

“The scent of your arousal reminds me of a ripening *lodhu* berry,” he growled, his eyes fixed on my hard nipples and swollen breasts. “Sweet, with just a hint of sour to encourage you to keep drinking its delicious nectar.”

My lips parted and my eyes widened. My cheeks burned.

No one had ever spoken to me like that.

I wasn't a fan of dirty talk and Logan was absolutely terrible at it the few times he'd tried.

He sank to his knees before me, his head level with my navel, his warm breath fanning across my naked skin. He gazed up at me, the yellow sparks glowing molten amber and enhancing the deep cerulean hue of his blue eyes. His hands grasped my hips, the sharp tips of his claws pricking the curves of my rear, and I shuddered with pleasure, my tail twisting in the grass at my feet.

“Oh, please,” he begged, pressing his forehead into my belly. His voice was guttural, heavy and raw, when he looked up at me and said, “Allow me to taste your sweetness. I promise to bring you pleasure, to savour every drop of your pleasure on my tongue.”

Four

ATLAS

Her sweet scent filled my nose, her taste tingled on the tip of my tongue, and my mouth watered. I hungered for her.

Breaking every rule that had been taught to me since I was a hatchling, I leaned forward and swiped my tongue from the interesting hole in her middle to the patch of wiry curls between the apex of her thighs. Her knees trembled and I tightened my hold on her hips, my claws digging into her red flesh. Her skin was salty with her sweat, but there were hints of other flavours that I could not name that teased my tongue; all of it coalesced into her unique scent.

I took my time, circling that dip in her belly with my tongue before I caught the skin between my teeth and bit down in a gentle bite. Her entire body tightened, and her hands fell to my shoulders, her claws prickling against my skin.

I lifted my head, licking my lips slowly, savouring her unique flavours, and stared up into her eyes. Her eyes were bright gold and luminous, glowing in the darkness of the temple, her body bathed in the silver light of the full and twin moons. Her

hair shimmered with hints of liquid silver, golden fire, and blazing copper, enhancing her ethereal beauty.

She will be the envy of every female in my clan, I thought. Soren will not waste a moment in courting her when he sees her.

I did not know why the thought of her joining with my nest brother irritated me. I was not a breeding male like Soren, I was a warrior. It was my duty to protect my clan from any and all dangers, and I was content with that fact. It was forbidden for a warrior to join with a receptive female; to dilute the pure bloodlines with a warrior's spawn was unacceptable and would result in banishment.

I was not inexperienced in the ways of pleasuring a female. While it was unforgiveable for a warrior to join with a female of breeding age, I *had* joined with older females that sought companionship.

Staring up at the beautiful female before me, I found it hard to care about being banished when this lovely female gazed at me with such gentle curiosity on her exquisitely feminine features.

Leaning forward, I licked over the indentation of my teeth imprinted in her belly and slowly travelled southward. I paused at the apex of her thighs, admiring the muscles that framed her sex and the coarse golden hair that was wet with her arousal. Trailing my thumb over her hip, I then gently pushed the digit in between her soaked folds, surprised at the heat that surrounded me.

She hummed softly above me, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

I waited for her to protest, to demand that I stop, but she did not, and I returned to exploring the most intimate part of her body.

I pushed my thumb deeper into her soaked folds and discovered a nub at its apex. Curiously, I brushed the tip with my claw and my female cried out in surprise, her hips jerking forward unexpectedly.

Oh.

Her pleasure nerve was external rather than internal.

Fascinated, I traced around her pleasure nerve with the tip of my claw, watching a flush darken her cheeks, her small fangs sinking into her plump bottom lip, and her golden eyes flaring. She jerked forward, angling her hips and spreading her legs to open herself up completely before me.

My length throbbed hard between my legs. Pleasure churned low in my belly, tingling at the base of my spine and traveling down to the very tip of my tail.

“Say yes,” I begged the beautiful female standing over me. I would not proceed further unless she desired my touch. “Let me pleasure you.”

Her fingers tightened their grip on my shoulders, her claws prickling my thick skin. Her golden eyes were wide, her hair spilling down her long neck and over her shoulders to cover

her breasts. Her tail twitched in the tall grass, revealing her restlessness.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, please, don’t stop.”

Wrapping my arms around her thighs, I surged forward, shoving my face between her legs, my tongue searching frantically for her pleasure nerve. My eyes rolled and I groaned, long and low, my tongue easily sliding through her wet folds. Her taste was more concentrated here and the sweet flavour, with a subtle hint of sourness, reminded me of a *lodhu* berry. I would drink her sweetness forever, if she would allow it.

I was slow, exploring her inner folds with my tongue, breathing in deeply and holding a lungful of her sweet scent before exhaling. She started squirming, her hips rolling forward in small, instinctive thrusts. Her tail shot forward and wrapped around my ankle, tightening until my pulse pounded. Her hands grasped the back of my head, her fingers tangling within the long strands of my hair, pulling with the right amount of pressure that pleasure streaked along my nerve endings and shot straight to my hardened length.

I circled her pleasure nerve with my tongue and that tight bundle of nerves pulsed with her rapid heartbeat. Then I wrapped my lips around her pleasure nerve and sucked heavily. Her moan was not the pretty sigh of a receptive female but one lost to the pleasure consuming her: it was long and low and deep. The sound sent a bolt of electricity straight to my length—and pride swelled in my chest that *I* had caused

the female to forget herself enough to succumb to her body's desires.

Sucking her slowly, I teased her, the sweet scent of her arousal growing stronger and sweeter as liquid heat flowed from her opening between her legs.

My claws gripping her thighs hard enough to pierce her flesh, my mouth and nose buried between her legs sucking on her pleasure nerve, I weaved my tail between my knees and pointed the tip upward. Focused on the flavours rolling over my tongue and down my throat like a male dying of thirst, I eased my tail along her swollen, silken folds. Liquid heat dampened my tail and I grinned ferally.

She was panting above my head, her fingers clawing at my scalp, her wings flared to their full width, the thin membrane between each skeletal finger shimmering as brilliantly as her golden eyes.

She was beautiful.

A goddess.

My goddess.

“More, more, more,” she begged softly. Her lips drew back in a grimace that revealed her dainty upper and lower set of fangs. “Please, more.”

Continuing to suckle greedily from her pleasure nerve, I dragged my tail southward to her entrance. Those hidden inner muscles contracted on the tip of my tail, holding me tightly inside her for the briefest of moments before she released me.

“Oh God!” she gasped, thrusting her hips forward aggressively.

“Not God,” I growled, my words vibrating against her silken folds. “Atlas. I am Atlas.”

Her head dipped and she blinked at me for a moment before her lips formed the syllables of my name. My length hardened further, pleasure spiking through my system in a heady rush, as I imagined those lips wrapped around me.

I swiped my tongue over her pleasure nerve to distract myself from such thoughts and I was rewarded with another guttural moan.

Lowering my tail, I shifted my female’s weight to the very tips of her toes, shoving one of her legs over my shoulder to better access the nectar dripping from her center. Her talons dragged along the back of my right wing, and I shuddered pleasantly. To join with her as our bodies plummeted toward the earth, our wings and tails tangled together, was a fantasy every male *Orlick* dreamed of.

Releasing my hold on her pleasure nerve with a *pop*, I readjusted my hold on her thighs, my claws dragging over her skin and leaving scratches behind, and then plunged my tongue inside her center.

Her hips bowed as she thrust downward and cried out my name in ecstasy.

I controlled her. I did not increase my pace, remaining slow and meticulous in my consumption of her, my tongue thrusting

in and out of her at a sedate pace. Her hidden inner muscles attempted to clamp down tightly on my tongue. I grinned when she whimpered and her hands tugged frantically at my hair.

“Please, Atlas!” she begged prettily. “Please let me come!”

Since she asked me so very nicely...

I thrust my tongue inside her welcoming heat and angled my hand to stroke her pleasure nerve with the tip of my claw on my thumb.

For a moment, she grew still.

And then she shattered.

Her head fell back, with a feral cry erupting from her parted lips, and her body began to spasm around my tongue as liquid heat gushed from her center. She writhed, riding my tongue hard, the claws on the tips of her nails pricking my scalp, the talons on her toes scratching the back of my wing. Her breasts bounced with her heavy breathing. Her wings flared wide, gleaming gold in the pale light of the full and twin moons, and her tail writhed wildly.

She was beautiful.

Her knee wobbled and I caught her, easing her down gently upon the soft grass, my mouth wet with her pleasure.

She gazed up at me, her golden eyes luminous, bathed in the silver light of the full and twin moons, her body splayed before me like a great gift from the goddess, Thuanga, herself. Her hair spilled behind her in loose tendrils, her wings splayed

on either side of her, her tail resting limply by her right foot. A small, satisfied smile curled her lips.

My length remained hard between my legs, throbbing, pulsing with the need to release.

“That was... *wow*,” she breathed. “*Amazing*.”

“*Uh may zing?*” I repeated curiously. I had never heard this word before.

Leaning on her elbows, she pushed herself up to stare at me, her bare breasts on complete display, and tilted her head to the side.

“I’ve never had a man—male go down on me the way that you just did,” she said. “It was incredible.” She fluttered her lashes closed and said softly, “It made me feel special.”

“You *are* special,” I growled.

A blush coloured her cheeks and she dipped her head shyly, which I found strange after the moment she and I had shared. The receptive females of my clan were not shy, although they enjoyed teasing the breeding males as if they were.

I surged to my feet, my length jutting out from between my legs, and turned toward the quietly bubbling pool where I had bathed and the goddess had restored my strength. The pool’s healing properties were the reason that I and my Wing had come here. Zarina would die without drinking the healing water.

I glanced back at the beautiful female to find her eyes trained on my hardened length.

Inhaling through my nose, I puffed out my chest, swelling with pride and a little vanity that she found my body appealing.

“Do you want me to...?” She trailed off, uncertain, and my cheeks burned at the thought that this female felt she needed to reciprocate. While I would greatly enjoy her hands and mouth on my length, it was unheard of in my clan for a female to pleasure a breeding male. The Elders would have a conniption if they ever learned about what had transpired down here between the two of us.

“No,” I rumbled, my voice gruffer than I had intended. Seeing the hurt that flashed in her golden eyes, I gentled my tone and said, “I thank you for the offer but that is not expected in my clan. Receptive females receive pleasure. They do not give it.”

“That’s stupid,” she muttered.

My tail snapped in the air and I shifted my wings restlessly.

“It is the way of the southern clans,” I said.

Her elegant brows arched downward in a frown. “I’m not from the southern clans.”

“No,” I agreed. “You are not.”

Rolling over to her side, she tucked her feet underneath her and rose to her knees, her wings extended to their full length on either side of her shoulders, her breasts gently bouncing as she shifted her position, her naked body displayed gloriously before me.

She was eye-level with my middle, her warm breath fanning over my hardened length, slowly eroding my hard-earned control. I had *never* been drawn to a female this strongly before, and I wanted to do everything that was forbidden within my clan. I wanted to sink inside her warmth. I wanted to fill her womb with my seed and watch her belly swell with our hatchlings. I wanted to mark her, to claim her as my own. I wanted her for my mate, and I wanted to be her mate in return.

I was a warrior male, not a breeder. I was not allowed to join with a receptive female. I was not allowed to claim a female. There were no mated pairs within my clan. Females of breeding age were encouraged to join their bodies with many attractive young males to prevent them from developing a strong emotional connection with one individual male. The Elders did not believe that such ties would strengthen the clan, only weaken it. It had been tens upon tens of solar rotations since a mated pair was a part of my clan.

It would mean exile to betray my clan this way.

Her warm breath caressed my hardened length and my tail jerked, the tip snapping through the air with an audible *crack*, when she wrapped her fingers around me and squeezed. Arousal spiked in my bloodstream, pleasure tingling along each individual nerve, the veins in my length pulsing with growing need.

I stared down at her, my eyes wide, and she offered me a wicked smile that revealed the sharp points of her fangs on both rows of her teeth. Her pert nose flared as she inhaled my

scent, her red cheeks darkening with her mounting lust. Her bright tongue darted forward, moistening her lips, and then she tilted her head down, a plume of warm air blasting over my hardened length, and wrapped her mouth around the head of my length.

My world shrank, my entire being focused on the pleasure that suddenly consumed me, mind, body, and soul.

Five

SIENNA

I wrapped my lips around the tip of his cock, my eyes widening in surprise at his girth, but I flattened my tongue and loosened my jaw, allowing my movement to become natural as I started to suck. My lashes fluttered. His flavour was surprisingly sweet, and his taste tickled the tip of my tongue, causing my elongated canines — my fangs — to ache. It wasn't painful; it was a gentle pulse that matched the beat of my heart, spiking my adrenaline and mounting my own pleasure. I hummed and Atlas growled above me. It was an entirely animalistic sound that should have frightened me because no human could make such a noise, but my belly fluttered and my clit throbbed.

An ache began to build within me, a familiar ache that reminded me of how *empty* I was, and, slowly, I ground my hips up and down, imagining him deep inside me. My breasts were heavy and swollen, my nipples hard. Warmth flared in my belly, and my thighs and the underside of my tail were wet with my arousal. My clit pulsed and my fangs throbbed and

the tip of my tongue tingled at his sweetness. My wings twitched restlessly.

Lifting my lashes, my lips curved in a naughty smile as the hard muscles in his abdomen tightened, the skin here a darker shade of blue. Curiously, I pressed the flat of my palm against him, right above his thigh, marveling at the contrast in our colours. His skin was warm, almost hot, but it wasn't soft and covered in fine hair like a human's was. It was hard and smooth like granite. Curling my fingers, I pressed the tips of my claws against his hard thigh and gently dragged them downward.

He caught my hand and I lifted my head to stare into his brilliant blue and gold-starred eyes.

“Do not tease me with gentle strokes,” he snarled at me, his lips drawing back to bare his fangs at me. “Scratch me. Claw me. Make me bleed with your claws. Pain does not frighten me, and I relish the idea of you marking me, but do *not* tease me, pretty female.”

His words startled me enough that I swallowed around his cock, and his free hand curled around the back of my head, forcing me to remain where I was. A thrill raced down the back of my spine to the tip of my tail. His controlled dominance excited me more than I realized.

I had never enjoyed the thought of rough sex. One of my exes, before I'd met Logan, had pressured me into trying a few things I wasn't comfortable with, and the desire for anything more quickly faded after that. Logan was not interested in *my*

pleasure. I was a hole for him to blow his load into whenever the need took him. Needless to say, my sex life hadn't been filled with pleasant experiences. But Atlas was the first guy — male — to give me a mind-numbing, earth-shattering orgasm. And he expected nothing in return.

If he wanted me to scratch him hard enough to bleed, if that would arouse him, I'd do it.

My lips, teeth, and tongue were tingling now, his pre-cum filling my mouth with his sweet taste. His hips rolled forward in tiny thrusts that forced his cock deeper into my mouth, and I angled my head in a way that allowed him even deeper without gagging me. His claws tickled my scalp, his fingers yanking on my hair. Pleasure raced down the back of my neck, my spine, and to the tip of my tail, the nerves in my thighs and buttocks sparking with arousal.

Humming low in my chest, I held his beautiful inhuman eyes and then dragged my claws down from his pelvis to his upper thigh. Five long, thin red lines bloomed with blood that slowly trickled down the hard plains of his body.

His pupils contracted and then expanded, blowing wide, his lips peeling back to bare his fangs in a snarl that rattled deep in his throat.

My clit pulsed and my hips dipped downward in an instinctive thrust, that empty ache that had slowly been building inside of me growing into an all-consuming *need*. This was somehow deeper than my body's desire to join with my male partner; it was physical, yes, but it was also psychological. I had never

craved to be with any of my boyfriends the way that I wanted to be with Atlas.

He dragged his claws through the strands of my hair, yanking hard enough that pinpricks of pleasure sparked through my scalp, and he cupped my chin. He gently inserted his thumb between my parted lips, sliding the digit over my tongue, as he rolled his hips back, dragging his cock with him. Staring up into his eyes, I snapped my teeth over the pad of his thumb, biting down hard to leave an indentation of my teeth, but not breaking the skin.

“Stop,” he rasped, flashing his fangs at me in warning, “or I will spill my seed *on* you, instead of *inside* you!”

Oh God, I thought, heat flaring in my belly, *why does that sound so hot?*

I stared up at him, my entire body quivering with ecstasy, my nose full of his scent, my mouth reveling in his sweetness, my clit pulsing, and that unfamiliar empty ache growing between my legs. My wings were tucked close to my shoulders, their tips brushing my outer thighs, and my tail writhed restlessly behind me. My nerves sang with pleasure, the arousal consuming every molecule of my being, bordering on painful.

“Turn around,” he growled, his voice low and menacing. His wings flared to their full width on either side of him, his arms resting on either side of his powerful thighs, his broad chest hard with muscle, his handsome features harsh as he gazed down at me. His tail, unlike mine, remained still. “Present yourself to me, female.”

My heart pounding in my chest, desire flowing through my bloodstream like magma, hot and all-consuming, I turned and lowered myself onto my hands and knees. The grass was surprisingly soft beneath me, tickling the sensitive skin of my knees and shins, as well as my palms. My breasts were heavy and swollen, my nipples hard. My arousal coated my inner thighs and the underside of my tail, my clit pulsed with a faster rhythm than my beating heart, and the empty ache between my legs grew. Instinctively, I tucked my wings close to my sides, knowing that Atlas would pin me down beneath his much larger body, and I lifted my tail.

He didn't give me time to think as, with my next breath, his chest pressed down against my back, he wrapped an arm around my middle, squeezing my ribs, and pinched my nipple with his other hand, and the tip of his cock teased the wet folds of my entrance. His warm breath fanned across my neck and shoulder and his teeth nipped my flesh in a biting kiss that tightened the muscles in my body. His tail twined with mine, the sensation similar to holding hands, but, somehow, it was much more intimate. His wings stretched out on either side of me, both massive *and* impressive, the rich blue tones shining deeper in the silver light of the full and twin moons.

My fingers flexed with impatience, and I dug my claws into the soft grass beneath me, turning my head to bare my fangs at Atlas. His beautiful eyes flared with an emotion I couldn't name, and his lips curled in a malicious smirk. He twisted my nipple, his claws pricking my flesh, and I hissed—I actually *hissed* like a damned snake—at him.

His fangs flashed bright white against the dark blue of his lips when he smiled at me, and then he stole what little thought remained in my head when he thrust his hips forward, spearing his cock deep inside me.

“Yes,” he growled, his voice raw and guttural, his lips brushing the shell of my ear in a phantom kiss. “You can take all of me, pretty female. I know you can.”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head.

God *damn*.

He was so *big*.

He waited, allowing my body to adjust to his massive girth and immense length, my thighs quivering from the heft of him. Tingles raced outward from where our bodies connected, centring on my clit, my inner thighs, and my belly. Forcing myself to breathe slowly, I rolled my hips forward, clenching those hidden inner muscles around him, and he groaned. His fingers pinched my nipple. I was *full*, the empty ache slowly fading beneath the weight that filled me so completely between my legs.

“Are you ready for more?” he asked me, his warm breath tickling my ear. He trailed his free hand down my belly and between my legs, his fingers plucking at my clit like a musician would his instrument.

“Yes!” I gasped. Tears coated my lashes from the pleasure consuming every molecule of my being. My heart thundered in my chest. Atlas teased my clit with expert knowledge, his

fingers swirling around the swollen nub and pinching me with just the right amount of pressure to make me beg for release. “Yes, yes, please! I need more!”

He pinched my clit between his thumb and forefinger and drove his hips forward in a powerful thrust. I gasped, my knees trembling, and fell forward, weakness settling in my arms; this allowed him to push deeper inside of me. His weight was heavy on my back, but it wasn't smothering; I *liked* him covering me with his body, his tail twined with mine, a growl rumbling in his chest. He dropped biting kisses along my throat and the curve of my shoulder, pinching the delicate skin between his teeth and bruising my flesh.

We both groaned when he slowly withdrew, his length sliding back out of me, leaving only the tip of his cock inside me, before ramming his hips forward. His fingers alternated between teasing my clit, massaging the smooth skin around my sensitive bundle of nerves with my arousal, and my nipple, his claws pricking my skin, the tiny sparks of pain *heightening* my pleasure.

This slow torture of easing out of my body, only allowing his tip to remain kissing my entrance, and then surging forward, did little to ease my growing pleasure.

I was a mess at this point.

I was lost to the pleasure consuming me from the inside out. My skin glistened with sweat and my breath was hard and heavy and the wet slapping sounds of our bodies joining together was music to my ears.

Atlas's warm breath fanned over my throat, and he dragged his nose down to the curve of my shoulder where he nipped me with his fangs. Sparks of pain and pleasure leapt from one nerve to another, racing through my bloodstream and straight to my core; those hidden inner muscles contracted around his cock and triggered an internal explosion.

With a soft, exhausted moan, my body convulsed in a mind-shattering orgasm that forced all thought from my head.

But a sharp cry tore from my throat when Atlas sank his teeth into my shoulder, biting down hard, piercing my flesh in a possessive, dominating, claiming bite, and he came. It *hurt*, but the pain mixed with my pleasure in a heady ambrosia, and I sobbed uncontrollably into the grass, euphoric, lost to the sensations consuming me. His cock pulsed, his seed filling my womb until it overflowed, spilling between our joined bodies. He bucked into me, no longer slow and torturous, but hard and deep. I knew, on some primitive level, that he wanted to ensure his seed took root and that life bloomed within me.

I groaned, pressing my forehead into the soft grass, and inhaled through my nose, breathing in the sweet scent of water, moss, damp earth, and unfamiliar flowers. Atlas nuzzled the crook of my neck, a soft vibration, almost like a cat's purr, rumbling in his chest, and I found my muscles relaxing. I hummed when his cock slid an inch deeper inside me. I should be terrified but the emotion warming my chest was the complete opposite of fear; it wasn't love, not yet, but it was stronger than affection. I shivered, my wings and tail

twitching, when he licked over the wound on my shoulder, his warm tongue laving away the pain and blood.

Without removing himself from me, he shifted our bodies so that he lay on the grass beneath me, my head resting on his hard chest, and his wings curled snugly around me.

“Mm,” he rumbled, his chest vibrating with that soft purr beneath my ear. “Sleep now, my beautiful female. Sun rise will come soon enough and then we must return home.”

Home.

Tilting my head back, I gazed up at the unfamiliar full and twin moons in an unfamiliar sky on an unfamiliar planet.

I was very far from Earth.

I was very far from home.

Six

SIENNA

It was the gentle warmth of the sun's rays shining in my face that woke me from my slumber. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept well; it was definitely *before* the Greys had abducted me. It had been even longer since I'd felt the warmth of the sun on my skin. It was the middle of winter when I was taken, the sky grey even in the middle of the day, the ground covered in snow and slush, and a cold that lingered in your bones. Where I lived, the winter seemed to last forever, although I'd never experienced the month of perpetual daylight or darkness like Alaska or our northern territories.

Groaning softly, basking in the warm glow of the early morning sunlight, I rolled my hips back, tossed my arms over my head and pointed my toes down, stretching my muscles. A delicious burn sizzled along my nerve endings, my wings and lower back trembling, and arousal pooled in my belly; my tail flicked lazily from side to side.

Sharp claws tickled my belly and warm breath caressed the side of my neck and the curve of my shoulder as Atlas's hot

mouth dropped tender kisses to my skin. His sharp claw tips tickled my sensitive skin and those hidden inner muscles contracted around his cock still buried deep inside me.

“Happy suns’ rise,” he murmured, his deep voice soft and heavy with sleep. His teeth nipped at the lobe of my ear, tiny sparks of electricity racing down my back and settling in my belly.

“Good morning,” I said.

He opened his jaws and rested his teeth on my shoulder, in perfect alignment with his claiming bite, and rolled his hips forward in a gentle yet powerful thrust that forced my eyes open with a gasp. His fingers trailed south, below my belly button, and he played with my clit, teasing me slowly, ramping up the pleasure until every muscle in my body tightened with the need for release. When I did come, it was a slow, all-consuming orgasm that fluttered outward from my centre, hardened my nipples, and curled my toes. I was too breathless to do little more than gasp. The pleasure was sweet and satisfying, not hot and passionate and demanding like last night.

I hummed when Atlas kissed my throat, his teeth nipping my flesh, and slowly pulled himself from me.

Rays of sunlight spilled through the opening above, filling the cavern with golden light, the sky a brilliant azure blue that matched Atlas’s skin tone, and I basked in its warmth. The grass that I laid upon was a deep emerald green, the blades soft enough that it tickled my ankles and the tip of my tail. Vines

climbed the walls of the cavern, gnarled and twisted, with beautiful purple flowers, smaller than my thumbnail, creeping up its length. The surface of the pool was still, a mirror reflecting the twin suns back up at the sky, the water a pale turquoise that reminded me of the Caribbean back home. Butterflies, or insects that resembled butterflies, darted between the pond's reeds, their delicate jewel-coloured wings sparkling with each flutter. Other insects hummed and chirped, reminding me of the trailer park that I'd gone up to every weekend during my childhood.

Atlas turned to me, his wings slightly extended, his tail flicking idly between his legs, and offered me a hand. I wasn't expecting him to pull me up quite so easily and I stumbled, falling straight into his chest. His arms wrapped around my waist, and he draped his wings around my shoulders like a heavy cloak as he nuzzled my cheek. My heart thundered in my chest as I stared up into his beautiful eyes, the golden pinpoints shining like bright stars in his blue velvet coloured irises.

"You are even more beautiful in the rising suns' light," he rumbled.

My heart skipped a beat, emotion swelling in my chest, and I inhaled sharply through my nose to avoid the hot sting of tears.

Smitten.

I was smitten.

And that was dangerous.

It would be so very easy to stay here with him.

But I couldn't.

Although I resembled a female of his species, I *wasn't*. I was human. And I needed to *be* human again.

“As much as I would like to bask in the morning suns' light with you, we must return to my clan's territory,” he said, his voice a low rumble that vibrated in my chest. “One of the females in my friend's harem is very ill and she needs the healing waters of this spring, or she will die very soon.”

Wait a minute.

My head jerked back, and I stared. “Harem?” I repeated through numb lips. “You're—you have a *harem*?”

While I held nothing against people with multiple partners, I was not the type of woman that was comfortable sharing her man with someone else. I wanted his attention solely focused on *me*.

Atlas chuckled and that sound of amusement, of pleasure, struck my nerves like a guitarist strumming the strings of his guitar. My entire body loosened, arousal blooming in my middle, liquid heat pooling between my legs. My tail twitched, and he caught it with his own, twining our limbs together in a gesture that was somehow more intimate than holding hands in public. He cupped my face in his palms and pressed his forehead to mine, his warm breath fanning over my face.

“My beautiful, jealous mate,” he growled, and his lips curved upward in a small smile.

“I do not have a harem,” he said slowly, enunciating each word carefully. “My friend is a *zhu’e* male and he is the one with the harem of females. It is his first female and chosen mate, Zarina, that is ill.”

Oh.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, not entirely sure what I was apologizing for. I hadn’t said anything cruel or mean, I’d jumped to a conclusion.

He stepped back, unfurling his wings from around my shoulders, and smiled, a strand of long black hair falling between his eyes and bisecting his face. My fingers itched to push it aside.

“Go,” he said, nudging me forward with his tail. “Bathe in the pool and drink its waters. You will find your strength restored.”



The turquoise waters of the healing pool belonged to the Caribbean Sea; the water cool enough to be refreshing but warm enough that I didn’t shiver as I stepped into its shallow end. I shivered. The sand was soft and white beneath my talons, the surface of the water was calm, clear as glass, allowing me to gaze down to its sandy bottom. The pool teemed with life, tiny fish, unlike anything I’d ever seen on Earth, darting between swaying fronds of seaweed and lily pads. The air was cool and held the scent of fresh, growing vegetation and the moistness of fresh water.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Atlas watching me intensely.

He sat upon a large boulder, his legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles, while his hands sewed two large leaves together in the beginnings of a skirt for me.

I thought I'd fallen hard before when he complimented me by calling me beautiful but it was here, in this moment, that I felt as if I were struck by lightning. On Earth, I'd never known any man that could sew; while times were changing, sewing was still considered to be ultra feminine, and men were teased ruthlessly if they were discovered doing it. But there was absolutely nothing feminine about Atlas's large hands—hands that had held me and petted me so gently last night—deftly poking a needle through the leaves and pulling the thread taught.

He had bathed before me and now he wore a loincloth made from the hide of an animal I didn't know the name of. It was leather, finely oiled to keep it in pristine condition, but there were no fancy adornments or buckles or clasps. It was a simple thing, designed to clothe his genitals while not restricting the movement of his tail or thighs.

Catching me staring at him, he lowered his head so that the twin horns on either side of his brow were pointed toward me. My lips twitched, and I smirked. Playfully slapping the surface of the pool with the tip of my tail, I surged deeper into the water, ensuring that his eyes followed my bouncing breasts and swaying hips.

Inhaling deeply through my nose, I held my breath in my lungs and allowed my body to dip beneath the calm surface. Warm water surrounded me. My wings and tail were weightless here. I twisted, my tail twirling around my legs and my wings drifting on either side of me like enlarged fins. Opening my eyes, I squinted beneath the bright rays of the twin suns, momentarily blinded. Humming low in my throat, I reached up with my hands and massaged my scalp and hair.

Atlas's claiming bite on my shoulder tingled and the subtle ache of my abused pussy lessened.

With a gasp, I surfaced, droplets of water sparkling in the air like broken diamonds, and the smooth surface of the pool now danced and shimmered with ripples. Lifting my head, my hair plastered to my skull and shoulders, I cupped my hands and filled them with water.

As though I were a woman dying of thirst, I tilted my head back and poured the water down my throat.

Seven

ATLAS

My fingers trembled with desire as I watched my mate playfully smack the water with the tip of her tail, water droplets clinging to the backs of her wings and strands of her hair, sparkling and shimmering in the early morning sun's light. Her hips swayed from side to side, the large muscle of her tail enforcing the curves of her rear, and her breasts bounced, her dark red nipples hard and demanding my attention.

She turned to face me, a wicked smirk curling her lips, her golden eyes blazing with arousal and a hint of affection, and then she sank beneath the surface.

I did *not* shift my legs as my length stirred at the sight of my female.

I was *not* ashamed of my body's reaction to her.

The Elders of my clan taught those of us who were not breeding males that to desire and to lust after a female's flesh was shameful, to be considered a mighty sin; breeding males,

however, were *encouraged* to revel in those desires to attract a breeding female. Warrior males such as myself served only one purpose: to protect the clan.

I snorted at the thought.

My clan, and our neighbouring clans, had been at peace for tens upon tens of sun falls; generations had come and gone with the rotation of our planet around its twin suns. During that time, the clans no longer required a vast majority of their males to defend them, and the warrior males were slowly being bred out of the southern clans. I was not an anomaly though; once in every ten breeding cycles, a female would lay an egg that would develop into a warrior male. With each new generation, the number of warrior males grew smaller and smaller. Apart from myself and my Wing, there were another six males in my clan that were classed as warrior males.

Watching my mate bathe in the healing waters of Thuanga's ancient temple, I wished that I were a breeding male, like my nest brother Soren, and not a warrior. I wished that I were a slender, attractive male, skilled in the art of pleasing a female. While I knew how to pleasure a female, my partners were solitary elder females that lived on the fringes of my clan's territory; *they* taught me the joys of joining one's body with another, but I would never be as skilled or as attractive as Soren.

She emerged from the pool with a quiet gasp, her golden hair plastered to her skull and shoulders, the water droplets

clinging to her wings shimmering in the early morning suns' light. Her beauty stole the breath from my lungs.

Cupping the clear water in her palms, she tilted her head back and I watched, entranced, as she angled her hands to allow the water to flow between her parted lips. She reminded me of our time together last night, when she wrapped her mouth around the head of my length and sucked on me as though I were her favourite treat. My length hardened. My heart thundered in my chest. My blood boiled with arousal. My tail twitched. The muscles in my thighs tensed as I prepared to launch myself at her and claim her all over again.

As she drank thirstily, the still surface of the healing waters began to tremble, as though from an underground quake, and the cool breeze shifted into a miniature cyclone that whipped free loose tendrils of grass, dirt, and vines. A low hum vibrated in my eardrums, rapidly growing into a roar that swallowed all other sounds. The wind plucked at my hair, yanked at my wings until I forced them close to my shoulders, and pulled at my tail.

Squinting against the furious wind, I watched my mate flounder in the Goddess's healing pool. The water was not turbulent like the rough seas that separated the northern continent from the southern, but the cresting waves were large enough to slap her over her shoulders and slam her head beneath the surface. She was in danger of drowning—the current whipped up by the violent wind was tugging at her wings, forcing them to remain wide open, and preventing her from swimming safely to the shore.

Her golden eyes were filled with fear as she attempted to use the violent current to carry her closer to the shore.

The heavy wind and the furious roar that filled my ears blinded me to everything around me.

I sank low to the ground, my wings tucked tightly against my back, and crawled toward her. Blades of grass whipped against my ankles and calves, stinging my wrists, but I ignored the pain in my desperation to reach her.

An ominous shadow slowly flooded the cavern with darkness, blocking out the light of the twin suns, but this was no eclipse. Looking upward, the blood turned to ice in my veins at the sight of the strange triangular-shaped object that loomed above us. I had never seen anything like this before. I had heard tales from the elders of my clan that sometimes spoke of witnessing bursts of light that were not comets or asteroids streak across the sky. According to the stories, the behaviour of the strange lights was far too methodical for it to be natural.

How could I fight this strange flying devil that did not belong to my world?

The enormous flying object blocked out the light from the twin suns, bathing the ancient ruins in complete darkness, until a pale, blue light emanated from its centre, engulfing the entire grotto in its ethereal glow.

My eyes narrowed against the light's brilliance, and I watched in absolute horror as my beloved mate disintegrated into tens upon tens of particles.

No.

My mind blanked at the notion that she was gone.

No.

I had only just found her.

No!

Throwing my head back, I thrust my chest up, my wings extending to their full length behind me, and roared my fury to the Goddess—

—and then *I* disintegrated into tens upon tens of particles too.

Eight

SIENNA

Elite Commander Amon Ss'rith T'ien'khala of the Interstellar Alliance's Star Fleet was an impressive male.

He was alien in the sense that there was nothing remotely human about his physical features.

He was *huge*.

Resembling one of Earth's greatest legendary monsters—that of an enormous sea serpent—his scales were coloured green and jade, like the dark emerald waters of a deep fresh lake, with black striations, like tiger stripes, running down the back of his head, arms, and tail. His dorsal fin stretched from his crest to the tip of his tail and lay flat upon his back, relaxed. His features were striking because they were truly exotic, with heavy brow ridges over eyes that were an electric blue with a ring of neon green around his slit pupils, and a serpentine muzzle. He folded his arms across his chest, the muscles in his biceps and forearms bulging, enhancing the sharp fins on his elbows, and lowered his head, his eerie stillness reminding me of a snake waiting to strike.

Larger than the biggest green anaconda, this sea-serpent-alien had to be at least 50 feet long from the tip of his snout to the tip of his tail. His broad shoulders and massive chest were twice my body's width, and his tail was a powerful weapon, currently tightened into neat coils underneath him that belied his strength.

I sat nervously upon my seat in the alien commander's office, the tip of my tail twitching anxiously, and I couldn't help the agitated fluttering of my wings.

The sea serpent alien stared at me with those eerie reptilian eyes, goosebumps rippling down my arms and legs, my hair standing on end, because I was in the presence of a predator.

The Greys and that vile Scientist had frightened me, yes, but it was because of their aloofness and lack of empathy. Like the ants that I squashed in the summer if I found them in my apartment, they had viewed me with the same disdain. I was little more than a curiosity to them, nothing more than a bug that was scrabbling against the clear walls of the jar she was kept in.

Elite Commander Amon Ss'rith T'ien'khala was a predator that dominated the seas of his home planet, Songal.

I was potential prey to this enormous, male sea-serpent-alien and my instincts were clamoring in my head like a clanging bell: *Danger. Danger.*

The Elite Commander's electric blue eyes followed Atlas as he prowled in front of me, keeping himself between me and the larger, more deadly male. His blue velvet eyes glowed, the

yellow points in his irises sparkling. The muscles in his thighs and calves bulged with every tense step, his talons tearing through the seamless white floor beneath our feet. While his wings weren't flared to their full length, they were upright and curved slightly inward, providing the illusion that he was much bigger than he actually was, and his tail lashed from side to side.

"I apologize for interrupting the two of you during your courting period," the commander said, his voice rumbling over me like thunder during a summer rainstorm, "but when I learned of your presence in this part of the Zoavif Galaxy, Sienna Wright, I could not abandon you and take the risk of the Ir'eils finding you once again."

He knows my name.

"You" —I licked my lips nervously— "You know who I am?"

His electric blue eyes never wavered from watching Atlas pace protectively in front of me.

"I do," he said. "You are not the first human the Ir'eils have abducted over the past several millenniums."

My brain short-circuited. A shiver raced down the back of my spine to the tip of my tail, and I instinctively tucked my wings close to my shoulders, a roaring filling my ears at the implication of his words.

The stories of the Greys abducting people were *true*.

Oh my God—

"What is a human?"

Atlas had stopped pacing and had turned to face the Elite Commander head on, holding his gaze steadily. The muscles in his back jumped with tension, his muscular tail thick and heavy between his legs, the dark blue membrane between the fingers of his wings appearing translucent beneath the light. Hair blacker than midnight spilled down to the small of his back in tangled knots, and my fingers itched to undo them. While the Elite Commander was a deadly predator both on land and beneath the sea, *Atlas* ruled the skies. Nothing about him was soft or flabby; he was broad and muscular, with powerful wings that would allow him to maneuver easily through the air. He was a predator too.

The two males stared intently at one another and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. While there was no challenge in their gaze, their inhuman stillness triggered my survival instincts. It was during a moment like this that I was reminded that we were all alien to one another. The surrealness of the situation left me lightheaded.

“A human is a bipedal being similar to the *zhu’e*,” Elite Commander Amon Ss’rith T’ien’khala explained. “However, unlike the sapiens from your planet, Atlas, humans have evolved to survive their temperate climates without the use of fangs, claws, fur, or tails. They rely upon their ingenuity, and it is *that* which makes them the dominant species on Earth.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about my planet, Elite Commander,” I murmured.

“While Earth is not yet allied with the Interstellar Alliance, it is my duty as Elite Commander to defend the unallied planets in both the Zoavif and Vraar Galaxies,” he said. “In order to better protect a planet, it is important that I know as much about it and its inhabitants as I can.”

I blinked.

“But...” I shook my head, confused. “The galaxies are infinite! Who knows how many planets with intelligent life are actually out there? And you’re expected to know how to defend *all* of them?”

The Elite Commander’s electric blue eyes flared, the ring of green around his slit pupils glowing neon, and his lips twitched with amusement.

“I do not know the inner workings of every unallied planet within the two galaxies, Sienna,” he said with a chuckle that rumbled in his massive chest. “I oversee the protection of each unallied planet, yes, but I am not alone in my duties. My second in command, Commander Malekith Ska’arzal, and I delegate between each other. We then instruct our captains and lower-ranking officers on which planets require our aide. It is rare for a planet, unless it is under siege, to require the use of both our warships. Earth is an exception to this rule because of the Ir’eils interest in your planet.”

“And *why* are they interested in Earth?” I asked.

“It is not Earth itself, but its inhabitants, that the Ir’eils are interested in,” the Elite Commander murmured. His electric blue eyes blazed, and his dorsal fin flared, the delicate spines

glistening with droplets of venom. “This will also explain why the Ir’eils abducted you, Sienna. Humans are one of the few intelligent life forms in the known universe that are capable of successfully breeding outside of their species.”

His words struck me like a freight train.

I sagged against the couch, my stomach twisting into knots, as I finally understood why the Scientist had abducted me. He wanted to breed me. As though I were a broodmare!

“If that is true,” I said slowly, thinking the thought that was bubbling inside my head aloud, “why did this Scientist experiment on me? Why did he change me from a human to an alien, if it was already possible to breed with my species?”

The Elite Commander’s electric blue eyes blazed, the ring of green around his slit pupils glowing neon, and his forked tongue flicked between his lips, tasting the air. My tail twitched and I was once again reminded of snake waiting to strike its prey.

“That is a very good question,” he rumbled, unperturbed by Atlas’s display of aggression. “Unfortunately, I cannot answer that because I do not know why the Scientist is doing so.” He swung his head, capturing my gaze with those electric blue eyes of his. “I can tell you that you are not the first human he has attempted his experimentation on, Sienna, but you *are* his first successful one.”

“Then *how* did I end up with Atlas?” I demanded. “If I’m the Scientist’s first successful experiment, there’s no way in hell he would’ve just let me go.”

The Elite Commander's dorsal fin flared to its full, impressive height, and he twisted his head to the side, enhancing his serpentine profile.

"I am unfamiliar with the Scientist's motives," he said. "All I can tell you is that he is an ally of the Ir'eils but he is not beholden to them."

I was experimented on for this Scientist's jollies? I thought furiously.

"Since you do not know how my mate ended up in the ancient ruins of my goddess's temple," Atlas said, "perhaps you can explain to me what happens now?"

"That," the Elite Commander said, looking directly at me, "is up to Sienna."

Nine

SIENNA

I could be human again!

The Elite Commander's words echoed in the back of my head until they repeated and became a jumbled mess.

According to him, the Interstellar Alliance had its own science department, with branches that specialized in the type of experimentation the Scientist had conducted on me. Their scientists would be able to reverse engineer (or something like that) whatever the Scientist had done to me, making me human again.

The caveat though was that I'd have to return to Earth and leave Atlas behind.

True, I hadn't known him very long but, in the time that I'd known him, he'd shown me more consideration than any of my previous boyfriends had ever done while we'd been together. He cared about my pleasure, and I *didn't* think it was a cultural thing after he called me his mate the morning after.

But, if I stayed with Atlas, he would be banished from his clan forever.

Could I live with the guilt, knowing that his clan would do such a thing because he loved me and claimed me as his mate?

It would mean that he and I would be forced to find new territory to begin a clan of our own, possibly with his Wing and his nest brother. The thought of that wasn't abhorrent to me. Atlas had mentioned that he was close friends with the *zhu'e* king, and they lived in the lower branches of the enormous deciduous forest that bordered the sea between the northern and southern continents. The king might welcome us into his troop and we, too, could live in the treetops—and relative comfort—instead of having to start with nothing save the clothing on our backs.

If I stayed with Atlas, it would also mean that I'd never see my parents again.

I was an only child and my parents and I were close. They were traveling around the world on a luxury cruise. I'd last seen them at Christmas the previous year. Their cruise ship docked on the other side of the country from where I lived, and it was too expensive to fly out to visit them every few months. They were happy with their lives. I didn't begrudge them that. But would I be okay with never seeing them again? Ever? And would they want this for me, if they knew what I'd get in return for giving up Earth?

I glanced over at Atlas, allowing my eyes to trail hungrily down his masculine form.

Not only was he an extremely attractive male, he cared about me in a way that none of my exes ever had. He was willing to defy his Elders and his clan for me.

I lowered my gaze to stare at my hands.

Physically, I was no longer a human. Thanks to the Scientist's experiment, my skin was dark red, and I had wings and a tail that would enable me to soar over the mountains that split the southern continent in two. And I would lay eggs, not give birth the way that I had expected too.

It would be a huge adjustment.

If I stayed here with Atlas, I'd miss my parents terribly, but if I went home, back to Earth, my heartache over losing Atlas would be inconsolable.

"There never really was a question of me going back to Earth, was there?" I asked.

The Elite Commander stared at me with those harsh, electric blue eyes of his, his face unreadable. Atlas turned to face me, his hands clenched into tight fists by his sides, his thick, muscular tail twitching, and his wings tucked tightly against his shoulder. Those blue eyes with their gold, star-like sparkles, flared with emotion.

"No," the Elite Commander growled, his lips twitching with a smile, as Atlas rushed toward me, "there was not."

Atlas lifted me into his arms and his mouth crashed down on mine in an aggressive kiss that stole the breath from my lungs and made my heart soar.

Ten

SIENNA

“You have nothing to fear,” Atlas rumbled, his mouth close to my ear, his warm breath fanning across my chin and throat. “I will always be here to catch you.”

“How reassuring,” I said, my voice tight with fear.

Atlas, his nest brother, Soren, his Wing, and I stood upon the edge of a literal cliff. The mountains rose high into the sky directly behind us, while the shadow they cast stretched down below, hiding the ancient ruins where Atlas found me. The Elite Commander had returned the two of us to the grotto, and I’d watched his magnificent warship slowly vanish into the clouds before a subsonic *boom* shook the ground beneath my talons. He had returned to the stars and, with him, my one last chance to go back to Earth.

But I had no regrets.

Atlas’s hands were warm as he cradled my hips, his tail twined with mine, his presence soothing the nerves jittering across my skin.

“We can’t delay much longer, Atlas,” Micah said. “Zarina draws closer to death with each passing sun fall. We must go now.”

Atlas pressed a kiss to my temple.

“Spread your wings, my love,” he crooned. “I promise I will not let you fall.”

Inhaling through my nose, I shook the nerves from my fingers and toes and spread my wings wide. The wind here buffeted my face, whipping my hair behind me and plucking at my wings, filling them with air. Swallowing all sense of restraint, I surged forward and threw myself off the cliff with a shriek.

I did not plunge to my death.

In fact, I didn’t even dive forward.

The wind filled my wings with air and lifted me up and up and up until my feet dangled several meters above the cliff edge.

I swallowed a whimper of fear. Heights had *never* been my thing. And now I was *flying!*

Atlas’s weight was a comfort at my back and, using his body, he showed me how to angle my wings and tail to adjust my height and the direction we were headed in.

I was too focused on not plummeting to my death to really enjoy the first few hours of our flight.

The twin suns were high in the bright blue sky, and I was just now starting to find joy in the gentle burn of my muscles, in the cool air that whipped my face and filled my wings, helping

me soar high above the mountaintops. Atlas kissed my neck, his fingers caressing my hips and lower waist, and I turned my head to stare at him as he grinned back at me wickedly.

My heart light, I bravely twisted in his arms, jerking free of his hold, and rolled backward, diving toward the ground headfirst. My wings were tucked close to my body. Air roared in my ears and yanked at my hair. Adrenaline surged in my veins and my heart started to race. Blinking against the tears streaming from my eyes, I rolled in mid-air and spread my wings wide, the jolt sending bolts of pain streaking down my shoulders and the small of my back. But it was worth it.

A moment later, a pair of arms wrapped around my middle, pulling me flush against Atlas's chest, and his teeth nipped at my neck.

“Are you trying to frighten me?” he growled.

I grinned.

“You said you'd always be there to catch me,” I teased him.

“And you did!”

He huffed, his brilliant blue and gold-starred eyes flaring with heat and happiness.

Yes, I thought. I'd never give you up, Atlas. Not for my parents. Not for my boring job on Earth. Not even for my humanity.

Boldly, I grabbed Atlas's hand and dragged it to the front of my belly, where I pushed his fingers down to the apex of my thighs. I wore a light loincloth designed of soft material that

would not impede my flying abilities, and I yanked it to the side, parting my legs for him.

“You want...?” he sounded surprised.

I rolled my hips back in a powerful thrust, enjoying the long, low groan that emanated from his throat.

“I always want you, Atlas,” I said breathlessly—and it was only partly because the wind stole the breath from my lungs.

He growled and my head fell back on his shoulder with a muttered curse as his talented fingers plunged between my legs and he immediately circled my clit.

This was not the sweet lovemaking of our first time.

I swore an oath as the pleasure built slowly, coiling in my belly like a snake about to strike, and my hips rocked back and forth in silent demand.

Our wings pumped the air out of sync, both of us keeping ourselves aloft but not actually flying (which is much harder to do). The air was cold but fresh and only added to the pleasure that heated my blood.

I hooked my leg behind his, widening my thighs, and he plunged inside me with a ferocious snarl.

My lashes fluttered.

I would never get tired of him filling me so wholly and completely.

“Come for me, Sienna,” he rasped, his teeth nipping at my ear.

“Only for me.”

Laughing, breathless with happiness and my encroaching orgasm, I shattered around him.

Eleven

ALARIC

Somewhere in the Vraar Galaxy...

The Scientist had acquired another poor soul to add to his collection.

He watched the *Krotoil*, a thick, muscled alien that resembled living rock, from the planet Krotol, carry the Scientist's latest acquisition in its four arms. The *Krotoil* caught him watching and slammed the palm of one of its massive hands against the clear door of his cell in warning. His ears flattened on his skull, and he bared his fangs, snarling at the other male.

"Enough, Kroton," the high, cold voice of the Scientist whispered through the cell block. "I ordered you to bring the human female to my laboratory, *not* antagonize the *Arevian*."

The *Krotoil* offered him a furious glare before he shrugged his enormous shoulders and tromped off in the direction of the Scientist's laboratory.

Alaric's tail writhed, agitation causing the fur to bristle along his upper arms and chest. His fingers tingled as he unsheathed his retractable claws. He glared at the clear door of his cell, knowing that his claws could not pierce the material; they would not even leave a scratch on the smooth surface. Anger burned inside him, his heart pumping wildly against his ribcage, his chest heaving with his furious breaths. His fangs ached with the urge to sink his teeth into the Krotoil's throat, to tear into his jugular and watch as his lifeblood pooled around him. The fact that he could not only heightened his rage. Snarling, his body trembling with the excess adrenaline now coursing through his veins, he threw his head back and roared his fury.

"How... very... interesting," the Scientist crooned. "You haven't roared since Kroton first brought you here solar cycles ago, Arevian. I'm curious. Why the change?"

Alaric's ears flattened further against his skull. He pressed his lips together, refusing to answer the Scientist.

"Very well," the Scientist growled, his voice growing impatient. "It is of no matter to me. I have a new toy to play with."

His eyes narrowing, Alaric's lip curled back to reveal his fangs.

That poor female, he thought with helpless rage.

He did not know what kind of horrific experimentation the human female would suffer at the hands of the Scientist. The Scientist enjoyed tormenting his female captives the most. He

violated them in the most intimate of ways, inserting instruments into their female genitalia, sometimes removing bits of their wombs or trying to artificially inseminate them with other beings' sperm. He enjoyed watching them suffer as his experimentation caused their bodies to undergo painful transformations. Most of the females died during this process or shortly after.

That was what was in store for his latest victim.

Alaric's hands shook with fury.

Trapped in his cell, he could do nothing to stop the females' torment, and, the Mother and her two Daughters as his witness, he had *tried*.

The first time he heard a female's screams, he managed to break free of his cell and attacked Kroton. Physically, Kroton was much larger than Alaric, towering over him and twice his width, with a body comprised of living stone, but Alaric knew where the Krotoil's weaknesses lay: the joints of his elbows, behind his knees, and the soft skin of his neck. Alaric had surprised Kroton and managed to sink his claws into the other male's elbow before the Krotoil slammed him into the opposite wall. His attack on Kroton had done nothing but offer the female a few minutes reprieve from her pain. Kroton tossed Alaric back into his cell and now he was heavily watched every minute of every planet rotation.

He did not know where he was.

The Scientist was a criminal wanted by the Interstellar Alliance in both his home galaxy, Zoavif, and its neighbour,

Vraar.

The Interstellar Alliance had issued a kill order for the Scientist. They did not want the alien to continue abducting females from their planets and running his monstrous experiments on them.

Alaric wondered if the Scientist had discovered a planet outside of the Interstellar Alliance's jurisdiction. That would explain the appearance of the unknown alien female Kroton delivered to the Scientist and the fact that the Interstellar Alliance could not find him.

For five and ten solar cycles, Alaric served among the Interstellar Alliance's star fleet, alongside a Malnorian male, Malekith Ska'arzal, with an impressive set of horns, and another male Songiell, Amon Ss'rith T'ien'khala. The three of them formed a strong friendship, having fought beside one another during the hardships of war—both planetside *and* in the cold vacuum of space. Both Amon and Malekith rapidly climbed the ranks, reaching the position of Elite Commander and Commander within their first seven solar cycles. Alaric stood outside of the Alliance's military classification system due to his position as heir to the throne of his father's empire.

Alaric deeply missed his family and friends.

He wanted to roar his fury into the void, and, when the Scientist first imprisoned him, he had done so, fighting Kroton, attempting to escape at every opportunity, until he figured out that the Scientist *allowed* him to do so. He never managed to leave the cell block.

His tail twitched and his claws flexed.

He would give anything to return home; would give anything to see his mother and father and sister again. After so many solar cycles, they must believe him to be dead. Not even Malekith and Amon would know that he was alive and being held prisoner due to the methods of his capture.

He closed his eyes, his fury melting into a grief that stretched the cosmos. His sister would inherit their father's throne when she came of age.

Gods, he thought, how old must she be now?

The last time he saw his sister, she had been a young kit, barely taller than their mother's knees and holding the Empress's hand as she stared up at her older sibling with brilliant blue eyes. He spoke with her briefly while he served the Interstellar Alliance and watched her grow into a sweet kit with a penchant for mischief, according to their mother. She would have been twelve solar cycles old the last time he saw her. Now...

Now, she would be fully grown, the princess and heir to our father's throne, the jewel of his empire.

He could not imagine his precocious sibling as anything more than his little sister; imagining her as a young adult female short-circuited his brain. The males he would need to kill for even *daring* to look at her...

And what has become of Cirrha, my betrothed, he wondered.

He and Cirrha grew up together, both spending the summers at the palace of Alaric's home planet, Areva, and the winters on Cirrha's planet, Cirhana. Although they were betrothed to one another, the hope between their parents was that they would develop a friendship for one another that would eventually grow into something more. His parents need not have worried; Alaric adored Cirrha from the moment they first met at the young age of five.

My Cirrha, he thought longingly.

Would her father find her another suitor? Perhaps a male from their own planet? Or would he choose an upstanding male from the military that served his parents? Cirrha could not marry his sister. It was very possible that Cirrha's father would partner her with a wealthy male from a neighbouring planet. He and Cirrha agreed to wait until he completed his tenure with the Interstellar Alliance before their Joining Ceremony. Neither of them expected him to end up captured by the Scientist. He could not blame her if she found another mate.

The deep *thud thud thud* of Kroton's stomping feet announced his return from the Scientist's lab. Unlike before where he carried the alien female in his arms, now he had slung her over his shoulder as though she were dead weight and not an intelligent being deserving of those rights. The colour of her hair, a brilliant shade of purple that reminded him of the sunsets on Areva, shocked him. He watched her head bobble with Kroton's ungraceful movements before he shrugged his shoulders, and she slid down to the ground in a boneless heap. Alaric's ears flattened. Alien or not, every female deserved to

be treated with respect. With the exception of one or two species, females were the givers of life, nurturers of the young and the heart of every male's existence.

From within his cell, he watched the alien female curl into herself to appear smaller and less threatening to Kroton. The Krotoil usually ignored the females the Scientist subjected to his horrific experiments but, for some reason, this one seemed to have caught his attention. With a rumbling sound that forced Alaric to grind his teeth, Kroton reached out and touched the female's purple hair, running the silken strands between his fingers.

She whimpered.

Alaric's ears snapped forward, his tail growing still.

"Leave her be, Kroton," he growled, unable to keep the feral rumble from deepening his voice.

The enormous Krotoil turned to face him, the swiveling of his body forcing the female to follow unless she wanted him to remove a portion of her purple hair from her scalp.

Alaric's eyes darted between the Krotoil's fingers holding onto her hair and the female twisted in his to grip to alleviate the pain on her head.

"Keep a hold of her like that and you will snap her neck," he warned Kroton. He allowed his lips to curve into a malicious grin. "The Scientist will not be pleased if you break his new toy."

The female stared at him, her wide eyes the colour of the Arevian jungle in the early morning.

Kroton released her.

She scampered to the other end of the cell, pressing her back into the corner, and curled up into a trembling, shivering ball.

The Krotoil rolled his massive shoulders before stomping out of her cell. He pressed his thumb to the touchpad on the side of it, and, with a soft hum, the door slid down into place. With a menacing leer at the female, he strode away.

Alaric inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring, the fur along his arms and chest standing on end with the depth of his anger.

Exhaling slowly, he swung his gaze over to the female curled up in a tight ball in the corner of her cell. She stared back at him with her exotic green eyes.

“It’s all right,” he murmured. “You’re safe now.”

He couldn’t help wincing at his words; she would never be safe from Kroton or the Scientist—not until death finally claimed her.

Note to the Reader

Thank you so much for reading *Defy Gravity*. I hope you loved reading about Atlas and Sienna as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Defy Gravity is the first book (technically it is book 0) in my softly rebooted series titled: *Abducted by the Greys* that feature some characters people might recognize (the Ir'eils, the Scientist and Elite Commander Amon Ss'rith T'ien'khala, for example). If you do not, that is perfectly okay!

I also have a novel published under a different name that I have not gone out of my way to promote because I am in the process of rewriting it. I have several new ideas/concepts that I would like to introduce in my sci-fi romance novels.

I do plan on releasing *Defy Gravity* as a full-length novel early in the new year (2024).

Alongside *Defy Gravity*, I am hoping to re-release *His Forbidden Mate* with a new title and a story that more reflects

Amon and Aella's forbidden romance (which will be book 1 of the *Invasion: Earth* series).

If you're of a mind to learn more about me, you can follow me at:

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Bloodbound to the Space Vampire by Deysi O'Donal

MF ♡♥☠

Synopsis



IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A FUN NIGHT OUT WITH
FRIENDS...

A chance to dress-up for Halloween and let loose before the stress of finals.

Instead, I end up being chased down the street by a real-life vampire.

Except, Jaro isn't *really* a Vampire. He's an alien, and his kind have been on earth long enough to have infused themselves into our mythology.

When I arrive at his party, he's so intoxicated by my scent that he goes completely out of his mind from it. When he bites me, I should be terrified; instead, it's the most pleasurable thing I've ever felt. When he shares his blood with me, I should be disgusted, but I can't get enough.

Now he insists that I'm his, which would be crazy, except I can feel the connection between us. What am I supposed to do now? I wasn't planning to end up bloodbound to a space vampire, but here we are.

Content Warnings: *There is one scene in which the FMC is chased by the MMC, then bitten and bonded without her permission.*

One

BETH

Being trapped in the backseat of a Corolla that smells suspiciously of weed, sandwiched between two overly excited girls, has me rethinking everything in my life that led up to this moment.

Traffic into the city is thick, and Cori is weaving recklessly in and out of it while singing along with Taylor Swift at the top of her lungs. Next to her, in the passenger seat, Mora points out directions with one hand braced on the dash and the other clutching the oh-shit bar. On either side of me, Maggie and Portia wiggle and dance, their hips and elbows jostling me from side to side.

“Come on, Beth. You’re not singing!” Maggie giggles before belting out the chorus to “Anti-Hero.”

This is not what I was expecting when Maggie talked me into going with her to a Halloween party. First of all, I thought it was just going to be the two of us getting out and letting loose a little before the end of the semester. If I had known that

Queen Cori and her court were going too, I would have run in the other direction.

Now I'm trapped in a car with them, going to a party I'm no longer looking forward to. I want to fold my arms across my chest and pout a little. I don't hate the girls. In fact, I can't even pinpoint exactly what it is that gets on my nerves so badly. Except that we seem to gravitate to the same social circles, and I just can't seem to get away from Cori and her vapid clique. Nearly four years of college and being around them is like being stuck back in high school.

"Turn there!" Mora shouts over the music, pointing to the right.

We're in the farthest left lane, and without any consideration for anyone else on the road, Cori darts across all three lanes and takes the turn fast enough to chirp the tires. It forces me to grab the back of her seat or end up sprawled across Portia's lap while everyone else in the car laughs. Jesus, am I the only one with any clue as to how stupid that stunt was? How is it she didn't crash into anyone?

And that is why no one ever invites you anywhere, I remind myself. I've always been Beth: the reliable one. Or Beth: the serious one. Or my personal favorite, Beth: the one who takes everything literally. It's not that I don't want to let loose and have fun, but it seems like there are always consequences that no one else seems to care about.

"Start looking for parking," Mora says without taking her eyes off her phone. "It should be at the end of this block."

As if by magic, a car pulls out of a spot right in front of us, and I press my lips together. Of course Queen Cori has that kind of luck. I can never find parking when I'm in the city.

Maggie is the first to jump out of the car, digging through her clutch for some change to feed the meter. I climb out after her, with Portia right behind me. After being packed in the small car for the last forty-five minutes, the crisp autumn air feels good against my bare arms. Taking a deep breath through my nose, I tip my head back and admire the eerie way the clouds are drifting past the nearly full moon hanging just overhead. It's the perfect mood lighting for a Halloween costume party.

"Oh no. Your wings are wrinkled," Portia sighs just before I feel her tugging at my costume, adjusting my feather-trimmed wings.

It was Maggie's idea to dress as an angel. *A slutty angel*. I'm wearing an ivory babydoll dress that hardly covers my ample chest and barely reaches to the middle of my thighs. A pair of wedges completes the outfit, giving me an extra three inches of height. The costume is finished off with a halo headband nestled in my blonde and purple hair, and the feather-trimmed wings.

Maggie is a hot devil in a red bodysuit and pitchfork-shaped tail. Her almond-shaped, cat-eye lined eyes and black bob contrast nicely with the bright red satin. Portia is a fairy, which suits her small ethereal stature perfectly. Tinsel is woven through her tight braids, and her skin is dusted with gold body glitter. Mora is a witch, complete with a corset pushing her

boobs up under her chin, and a wide-brimmed, pointed hat. Cori, of course, is going as a queen. The Queen of Hearts, to be specific, with a short tulle skirt, heart-shaped lipstick lips, and a cute little lopsided crown.

Cori, Portia, and Mora link arms and strut down the sidewalk, leaving Maggie and me to follow them as icy fingers of unease start to creep up the back of my neck. This isn't a part of the city I'm familiar with. The buildings are all dark, and there doesn't seem to be a soul besides us on the entire block.

"You said this is a club?" I ask Maggie.

"Party," she corrects. There is a bounce in her step, and she doesn't seem to share my concern at all as she adds, "Very exclusive."

"And how did you get the invite again?" I ask.

"Oh, I didn't. Cori did."

My blood turns to ice. "You didn't mention that part," I grit through clenched teeth.

Maggie shrugs, nonchalant.

Up ahead, the girls stop and look up at the dark building in front of us. It has to be at least ten stories, and not a single window is lit up. My stomach is churning with nerves, and that little voice everyone says to listen to is screaming at me to turn around and *run*.

As if Maggie senses I'm about to bolt, she reaches out and threads her fingers through mine. She grips my hand hard enough to make the tips of my fingers tingle.

Cori steps up to a large double door made of dark glass and tries the handle. When it turns easily in her hand, she shoots us a wide grin over her shoulder before pushing forward.

Soft golden light spills out across the dark sidewalk, and my mouth falls open in astonishment as we step into an opulent, gothic vestibule. Gilt chandeliers let off a fractionated glow over dark wood and crown molding. Gold-framed paintings of anonymous people line the walls, and a side table with a bouquet of black roses completes the gothic vibe.

“Greetings.”

A husky, feminine voice draws our attention to the tall woman suddenly standing before us. Her skin is pale, with lips painted the color of blood, and dark, smoky eyes. Long black hair falls down her back in a silky curtain, and she’s wearing a black sheath dress with a slit on the side that practically reaches her armpit.

“We’re so glad you could come,” she purrs and then smiles, showing off two sharp fangs that look like something out of Hollywood. “Please, follow me.”

I shoot a nervous glance over at Maggie, whose brown eyes are sparkling with excitement. Ahead of us, Cori and her court are practically vibrating as they follow our hostess. With Maggie still gripping my hand, I have no choice but to follow.

Two

JARO

“You’re so beautiful,” the woman draped across my lap sighs dreamily.

Her pupils are blown from whatever drugs she took before coming here, and there is a sickly-sweet scent oozing from her pores that makes my nose twitch.

She is currently sliding her hand up my chest. The first four buttons of my black silk shirt are undone, and she is quick to touch the smooth skin exposed there. The tip of her tongue darts out to wet her lips as she curls her fingers around the side of my neck. When she leans in, trying to pull me down to her lips, I bring my wine glass to my mouth instead.

I want to roll my eyes at the way her pouty lips turn down. Clearly, she isn’t used to rejection. She’s lovely of course, with her bleached hair and enhanced breasts that are spilling out of the lingerie she is calling a costume. But her body is slender to the point of emaciation and lacking the womanly curves I find much more appealing.

Setting my glass aside, I curl one hand around the back of her neck and the other behind her back. Every move I make is fluid and graceful as I slide her from my lap and across the settee. Angling her head to the side, I expose the thrumming vein that runs down the column of her slender neck. I lick my lips and almost moan at the aching throb as my teeth lengthen from the heady promise of her blood, tainted as it will be. My body will burn off whatever is in her system before her essence infuses me.

Leaning over her, I slide my body to the side of hers. Her eyes flare and then flutter prettily. When she tries to turn her head toward me, her lips parting for my kiss, I use my thumb to turn her away again. Instead, letting my breath ghost the side of her neck, I drop a soft kiss over the place I plan to strike, and she moans like a porn star.

Parting my lips, I steel myself for what is to come. Feeding, even from a stranger, is an intimate act for a Vrykos.

While we embrace the vampire moniker, we're actually very different from our fictional counterpart. For one thing, we're very much alive. Although the lack of a perceptible heartbeat makes those who've noticed us think otherwise. We also don't come from Earth, although we've been here long enough to indoctrinate human folklore with our presence.

Baring my fangs in a grimace, I'm just about to strike when the most delectable scent tickles my senses, and my head snaps back from the female under me. Her chest is heaving in anticipation of whatever she thinks I'm going to do to her, and

I lower my nose to her skin. After drawing her scent deep, I pull away in disgust.

No. That amazing scent definitely didn't come from her.

Another tantalizing whiff hits me, and I push myself up, searching for the source.

“Hey!” the female under me yelps.

Movement across the room draws my attention to where a new group of women have arrived for the exclusive Halloween party we're hosting. We throw these parties every few months to satisfy our need for blood. But we especially look forward to the ones that fall around Halloween, since it gives us a chance to be a bit more like ourselves.

My eyes skate over the new arrivals. They are all dressed up in appropriate costumes, and at least these women haven't self-medicated before arriving. My nostrils twitch. Well, apart from the one dressed as the Queen of Hearts, who smells like marijuana.

“Hey, where did you go?” the woman under me moans. She fists her fingers in my shirt, trying to pull me back down to her. I drag my eyes away from the new group and that tantalizing scent, trying to focus back on my... date.

“Right. Where were we?” I purr, licking my lips.

The woman moans when I tilt her head away once more, but when I lean in, her scent turns my stomach. I part my lips only to recoil when saliva floods my mouth and I gag.

What the fuck?

“My dear, I’m afraid there is something I just remembered I need to attend to,” I say, as I rise to my feet with a feigned apologetic look.

“What?” Her glazed eyes focus on me for the first time since she arrived. “Um. O-okay, I guess. Are you coming back?”

I don’t bother answering her, instead grabbing my glass of wine and making my way across the room and through one of the many secret entrances. I don’t know what is happening, but I need to separate myself from whatever it is. At least until I can figure it out or get control of myself. These rooms are set up in case we want a little more *privacy* with our chosen *dinner date*. Or, in this case, a place to pull my shit together.

My feet take me back and forth across the small room decorated to look like a gothic bedchamber.

What the hell was that? That has never happened before! I stop my pacing just long enough to drain the rest of the wine from my glass. Then I set it on the closest surface and resume the back and forth.

Enough time passes for one of my brothers to stick his head into the room.

“Jaro?”

My head snaps to the side and my legs go weak when I catch the smallest hint of that delectable scent that followed him into the room.

Thram’s brows are furrowed as he looks around the small room. “Are you okay?”

“Do you *smell* that?” I hiss at him instead.

Sandy brows lift almost to his hairline. “Uh. Smell what?”

My fingers dig into my hair as my nostrils flare, drawing in more of that sweet scent that is making my head swim. “*That!* God, I’ve never smelled anything so fucking good.”

Thram is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. And maybe I have.

“Is it that blonde you had?”

“No!” I snarl around the word. That female was disgusting. My stomach clenches painfully just knowing how close I was to biting her. The thought of actually taking her essence into me...

“Did... did you just gag?” Thram sputters in disbelief.

Pressing the back of my hand to my mouth, I swallow down the bile that’s trying to surge up my throat. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“I need you to get rid of her,” I beg him.

“Thorn is tapping her now. Then we’ll send her on her way.”

I nod and finally start to relax when Thram steps through the door, closing it behind him and cutting off the scent.

“What is going on with you?”

Dropping onto the edge of the bed, I let my head fall into my hands. “I don’t know. I’ve never... This has never happened before.”

“You gotta feed,” Thram says wearily. “You missed the last party, and you know how dangerous it is to let it go too long.”

“I know. Just... give me some time.” Blood lust is rare, but we can let ourselves get too complacent, and it can creep up. We use these parties to bring willing women and men to us, in order to keep our hunger in check. Our work—we’re businessmen, after all—keeps us busy, and I especially tend to neglect myself.

He stands there and watches me for several minutes, then finally crosses back to the door. “Lanna is about to start the costume contest,” he tells me before slipping out and leaving me alone.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to clear my mind of the mouthwatering scent that still lingers in the back of my nose.

Three

BETH

My fingers tighten around the wine glass I was handed, and I'm trying to avoid looking at where I'm pretty sure there is a guy railing a blonde in the corner. Meanwhile, someone lowered the lights and started up a fog machine, so smoky tendrils of vapor lick across the floor while "Hunting Season" by Ice Nine Kills plays quietly through hidden speakers.

"This is so fucking cool!" Maggie squeals quietly beside me. Her body is rocking to the beat of the song, and she's already on her second glass of red.

Cori and the rest of her court have found seats and are soaking up the attention being lavished on them by several gorgeous men, and a few stunning women too. A few smaller groups of women and men arrived shortly after we did, and now the party seems to be switching into full gear.

"Can I top you off?" a husky voice asks, and I look up to see the woman who led us here when we arrived. Her eyes are latched onto Maggie, with a bottle hovering over her nearly empty glass.

“Mmmhm. Yes, please.” Maggie bats her eyes at the woman, who grins back at her seductively as she tips the bottle.

“I’m Lanna,” the woman introduces herself. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“God yes. Thank you for having us. I’m Maggie.”

Lanna’s dark eyes lift to me expectantly.

“Oh. Uh. I’m Beth.”

Her eyes drop to my still full glass and then slide back to Maggie, and it’s hard to miss the way her mouth softens.

“We’re about to start the costume contest. Why don’t you both find a seat?” She brings a long-fingered hand up and strokes the side of Maggie’s face. “I’ll find you later?”

Maggie blinks slowly and nods, and then we’re alone once more.

“Oh god,” she moans as she watches the woman walk away with a swing in her hips I’m certain is all for Maggie’s benefit.

“I think I’m in love.”

Everyone at this party is model-gorgeous, and I’m trying not to feel self-conscious. Most people describe me as *cute* or *pretty*. I’ve always had a curvy figure, and I’ve been struggling with the freshman fifteen for the last three years. Normally, I don’t let my weight or body shape bother me much. I’m so much more than just a number on a scale! But being surrounded by so many utterly beautiful men and women has my self-esteem taking a bit of a hit.

Maggie pulls me over to the couch where Cori is holding court, and I tuck myself against the end. I pull the short skirt down as far as I can when it threatens to ride up high enough to show everyone my panties.

“Attention, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time for what you’ve all come here for,” Lanna says as she walks through the crowded room. “The costume contest.”

A cheer rises, and someone cranks up “Run” by AWOLNATION.

The smoke machine fires up again, and stage lights flicker to life. As if by magic, Lanna appears in front of us and holds her hand out to Maggie first. Without a second of hesitation, Maggie takes the woman’s hand and, with their fingers twined, Lanna leads my friend across the room to a small stage.

“First for tonight, we have this devilish bite.” Lanna lets her eyes rake hungrily over Maggie’s red satin-clad body as she leads her across the stage. On the other side, she gives her bottom a little swat, and Maggie turns back with an equally hungry look in her eyes.

Next, she grabs another woman, who’s dressed as a naughty nurse. Then a spartan warrior, who fills out his costume perfectly with stacks of abdominals. Cori is after, and she saunters across the stage with a wide grin, blowing kisses. I can’t help my snort at the way most of the men in the room watch her. Kisses won’t be the only thing she’ll be blowing by the end of the night.

Something out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I watch as a tall man appears from a door I hadn't noticed before. Folding his arms across his wide chest, he leans against the wall to watch the contest, and I take advantage of my spot to watch him.

Thick brows hang low over equally dark eyes, and he's doing gorgeous and brooding to perfection. His hair is a dark brown but not quite black, with a wave to it so it curls around his ears and around the collar of his black dress shirt. The soft material is open halfway down his chest, showing off smooth skin and a chiseled body. My fingers flex, and suddenly, I want to know if he feels as smooth as he looks. What does he smell like? Does he wear cologne? Or would it just be his natural scent?

Okay, Beth. Down girl, I tell myself as I take the first sip of my wine, completely forgetting I wasn't planning on drinking it in case it was drugged. I have never, ever wondered about what a man smells like before, and I'm not sure where that came from just now.

Before I have a chance to go back to watching Tall, Dark, and Moody, Lanna appears in front of me.

"And last, but not least, we have an angel," she tells the room as she pulls me from the couch and right past the man I've been watching.

I keep my eyes on the ground, but I still catch the way he straightens as I pass by him. Almost like someone hit him with a livewire. Before I have a chance to think more on it, I'm

being pulled onto the stage, and Lanna is telling everyone how *cute* my costume is.

Clenching my teeth, I make myself smile instead of rolling my eyes.

But that smile quickly dies on my lips when I realize the man I was watching is no longer leaning against the wall but standing with his fists clenched at his sides. The tendons in his neck are bulging, and he's breathing like he just ran a marathon. That's not what has me freezing though. He's staring *at me*. Full lips are curled back from his teeth, and he's flashing a pair of those Hollywood-worthy fangs—wait. Is he snarling? At me?

“She's *mine*,” he announces in a deep voice that sounds like he's been gargling gravel.

I look over at Lanna, who looks just as startled as I feel. Her eyes dart over to where a group of men are making their way across the room.

“Jaro, what are you doing?” she hisses at the crazy man.

“*She's. MINE!*” he roars, making Lanna and I both jump, and then he lunges.

Lanna steps in front of me, but I doubt she could have done much to stop him. Thank god for the men already coming at him. The moment he lunges, they are on him, taking him to the ground.

A howl like I've never heard before echoes through the room and sends my hair standing on end. My wine glass slips from

my fingers, and I don't even care that it splashes back at me, staining my dress scarlet. My heart is pounding, and every cell inside my body is screaming *DANGER! PREDATOR!*

I shake off Lanna's hold, and then I'm running.

"Beth!" someone shouts after me, but I'm already through the door and taking the stairs two or three at a time. I don't know where I'm going, just that I need to get away. Far away!

Four

JARO

Mine! She's mine! *Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I wasn't paying any attention to the quiet little female in the corner. In fact, I didn't even notice her until Lanna strutted her past me and I caught her scent.

That scent. The one that makes my head spin and my cock hard. The one that makes all other scents revolting.

Fuck!

"Let me go!" I snarl at my brothers, snapping at their hands holding me down like some kind of rabid beast.

I can't look away from the female up on that stage. When my sister stepped in front of her, I wanted to laugh. She thinks she can hide her from me? Protect her? *From me?* I buck against the hands pinning me. "She's mine!"

"You've said that, brother." Thram grunts from the effort to hold me in place. "But you need to rein it in. You're terrifying her."

“You’re terrifying everyone,” Thorn adds.

A putrid scent rolls off him. He smells like that blonde I almost had, and I snap my teeth at him, narrowly missing taking off one of his fingers.

“Jesus, *fuck*, Jaro!” he hisses at me. “What is your problem?”

Before I can snarl some more about her being mine, she bolts.

One of my brothers curses under his breath, and my entire body tenses as I follow her across the room with my eyes. There are gasps and calls for her to come back, but she doesn’t stop. When she reaches the door, she flings it open and disappears.

And that’s when the strangest feeling comes over me. Inside my head is a maelstrom, and my muscles clench and then quiver until... something snaps in my brain, and I *disappear*.

Or, rather, my body dissolves, leaving nothing but a curling mist behind while I’m still very much here.

I watch from above them as my brothers collapse on top of each other and then jump to their feet, looking around for where I could have gone as panic creeps into their expressions. All around the room there are gasps and then frightened screams.

“What the fuck?” Thram chokes. He and Thorn exchange identical tense, wide-eyed looks.

Thorn looks up at Lanna, whose eyes have gone wide as saucers. “Did he just turn into *mist*?”

Lanna nods.

“That’s impossible!” Thram shakes his head. “That can’t really happen, right? It’s just in stories.”

I’m trying to figure out what has happened right along with them as something tugs inside me, like a tether pulling taut then reeling me across the room. My focus is redirected away from my brothers, and then I follow it willingly.

She went this way, something whispers in my ear.

I need to get to her. *She’s mine.*



Beth

My breath is coming in shallow pants, and I’m running as fast as these ridiculous wedges will let me. I’d kick them off, but they are buckled to my ankles, and I’m not about to stop long enough to pull one foot after another into my lap so I can undo them.

So I scamper down the sidewalk, praying I don’t roll my ankle like some bimbo in a horror movie.

My heart is thudding against my ribs thinking about what I just saw. The way his eyes latched onto me. The way the muscles and veins in his neck bulged and his face contorted when the other men tackled him to the ground. But what really has me

panicking is the way I soaked my panties when he shouted, “*She’s mine!*”

Gritting my teeth, I remind myself that drug-induced obsession is *not sexy!* Because he has to be on drugs, right? No one has ever been that kind of infatuated with me. Especially not after a single shared look.

I make it to the end of the block and turn the corner, only to come to a hard stop when the man from the party materializes in front of me.

And I don’t mean he suddenly appeared when he stepped out of the shadows. I mean he *solidified from vapor!!*

My mouth drops open, and I let out a little squeak as I spin around and start running back the way I came. I make it maybe three steps before his arms band around me, and he lifts me off my feet.

I scream, kicking and twisting against him.

“Shhh,” he whispers against my ear. The brush of his lips sends chills skittering across my skin.

“Bet you taste as good as you smell,” he moans just before I feel the brush of his lips against the side of my neck, followed by a brief flash of pain.

My body tenses, and my heart starts to race. He—did he just bite me?

He moans in ecstasy as a dull throb starts to radiate from where his mouth is clamped down on me. It’s quickly followed by heart-pounding waves of pleasure.

“Ahh!” I moan. “*Oh my god.*”

My body clenches, and my eyes roll back as I arch into the orgasmic waves rolling through me. My hands grab at anything I can reach, which happens to be his thick arms that are banded around me, and I dig my nails into his muscles as my hips roll, and I moan with each cresting wave.

With a guttural sound, he tears his mouth away from my neck and staggers until his back hits the wall of a brick building. His legs buckle, and he slides to the ground, cradling me in his lap. He’s hot and hard at my back. Goddamn, he feels so *big*. I don’t fight him when he loosens his grip on me and lifts his wrist to his mouth.

“Drink,” he orders me as he presses the front of his wrist to my lips.

When I open my mouth to argue with him, the first drops of his blood hit my tongue like an electrical pulse, forcing a gasp from me. Reflexively, my lips part and fuse around his wrist at the same time his mouth returns to my neck, and I can’t help moaning at the sharp sting of his teeth. I should be shocked, *repulsed*. But instead... I moan as the warm, coppery taste of his blood floods my mouth from the gash he opened on his wrist.

Between the sensation of having him at my throat and his taste on my tongue, something happens, something I have no explanation for. My body starts to throb in time with my pounding heartbeat as I grab his wrist, latching onto it so I can drink down his blood like it’s the most amazing, melted

chocolate. Like I can't get enough. Soon my head starts to spin and my body radiates with warmth, like I've had one too many glasses of wine.

When his arms loosen around me, I don't try to fight or escape. Instead, I hold on to his wrist with one hand so he can't pull it away. My other hand goes between my legs to ease the ache pulsing there.

"Yes," he hisses when he pulls away from my throat. "Make yourself come."

Whimpering at the loss of him, my fingers circle over my tight little bud faster and faster. My panties are soaked, and I can smell the sweet scent of my arousal. A little voice tells me I should be embarrassed, but I'm so close. I work my fingers faster, but I can't seem to drive myself over the edge. My orgasm is maddeningly just beyond my reach.

He drags his soft tongue over my sensitive bite mark, lighting up nerve endings I never knew existed. His throaty groan rumbling against my ear is what finally sends me spiraling. I arch up, pressing my fingers against my clenching flesh as breathy moans spill from my lips.

"That's my good girl," he groans. *Christ*, I can feel him, hot and hard, like a steel bar pressing into my back, as he starts to purr. The vibration rolls through his chest and into mine.

My eyes are growing heavy along with my ebbing orgasm, and it's getting harder and harder to think straight. When my head starts to droop, he pulls his wrist from my mouth.

“No,” I whimper pathetically.

“You’ve had enough for now,” he tells me, and I lick my lips, needing to catch every drop of him left behind.

My head rolls against his shoulder, and I watch him lift his wrist to his mouth, where he drags the raw bite covered in my saliva across his tongue. The act sends another wave of heat through my core, and I moan.

“Rest now, *desa’aimos*.”

But I don’t want to rest. I want more of what he just gave me, but my eyelids are so heavy. My body is boneless and exhausted and still thrumming from my orgasm. But no matter how hard I fight, I’m dragged away to sleep.

Five

JARO

When I return to my building, all the guests are gone, and Lanna and my brothers are straightening the furniture.

“Oh thank god!” my sister sighs when she sees me coming through the doorway. Her relief is short-lived though, and she quickly adds a muttered, “Oh shit!” when she notices the limp female in my arms.

“What did you *do*?” Thram drops his end of the couch that he and our brother are carrying to storm toward me.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.” Glancing down at the woman in my arms, I sigh. Actually, it might be worse.

“You’d better have a damn good explanation,” Thorn growls, stepping up behind his twin. “Especially since her friends are probably on their way to the police right now.”

“Friend. Her friend is on her way to the police,” Thram corrects. “But those other three were trying to talk her out of it.”

“That fiery little devil was going to be my choice for the night,” Lanna snarls at me. “Now I’m going to have to go out and actually hunt—” Her nostrils flare, and she steps closer. “Why do you smell like sex?”

Everything after getting that first hit of her scent is foggy, and my eyes keep dropping down to where she’s cradled in my arms. Her face is peaceful and lax, her cheeks rosy from my blood.

Shit! Did I really feed her?

“Jaro!” I force my head up when I realize Thram has called my name more than once. “What happened to your wrist?”

I glance down and rotate my wrist to reveal the gash my teeth left when I ripped open my vein. *Oh damn. I did feed her.*

Thram’s eyes dance from my wrist to the bite mark on the side of her neck. “You didn’t. Did you fuck her too?”

“No. I didn’t fuck her.” At least I can say that with certainty. *I didn’t fuck her, but we both came with my teeth sunk deep in her neck.*

Just the memory of dragging my tongue up the slender column of her throat, licking her to close the punctures and accelerate their healing, has my cock stiffening again.

“I—” What can I even say? I can’t lie; the evidence is all there. And yet... “I didn’t have a choice.”

That sounds better than *I couldn’t help myself.*

I have never fed a female before. I've never had the slightest urge to. But something about this female, her potent scent that now mingles with mine, did something to rewire my brain.

“And how the fuck did you just up and vanish like that?” Thorn speaks up.

Reluctantly, I drag my eyes from my female to frown at my brother. “How did I do what now?”

“You vanished,” Thram says quietly. “As soon as the female ran out of the room, you just...” he flicks his fingers out in front of him like something exploding, “*poof!*”

“Oh. Right. I don't know how I did that.” *Or why*, I think as I look back down at my sleeping female. Her hair is blonde with streaks of lavender that frame her full face. Thick, dark lashes feather across her pale cheeks, and full pink lips are pursed in sleep. I like the way she fits in my arms. The way her head is pillowed against my shoulder, and the weight of her pressed against me. Now that I have her, that she's safely tucked against me, I feel much calmer.

“Is it *desa'aimos*?” Lanna's soft voice cuts through the silence.

Bloodbound.

“That shit is nothing but a fairy tale,” Thorn scoffs. “A story told to impressionable little girls who ache to believe that their soul's match is out there somewhere.”

“And yet, I remember so fondly that it was *you* who told me those stories,” Lanna fires back. “Promising me that someday

my perfect match would come and whisk me away to my happily ever after.”

Thram digs his elbow into his twin’s ribs as he laughs. When he looks back at me, the humor drains from his face. “What’s with that look?”

“I—” I look down at my female again, because isn’t that what I called her? “I think she really is my *desa’aimos*.”

Silence descends upon the room like a weighted blanket, all of us looking at each other and then down at the sleeping female in my arms.

“But she’s *human*?” Lanna finally says.

In all the stories, a bloodbond was only depicted between Vrykos. I always thought that, one day, if I ever returned to our home planet, maybe I’d be lucky enough to find mine. I never considered that I might find her here, or that she would be a human.

“First by scent and then by blood...” Lanna whispers, remembering a rhyme from our childhood. *“The call betwixt two sides succumbed.*

I’ll taste your vein, and you’ll taste mine,

if we are intended, our souls shall twine.

With a great thunderous sound, all will be found.

Awakening a sacred Bloodbound.”

“You smelled her before you actually saw her,” Thram adds.

“And then you immediately ditched the blond because you

couldn't stomach her anymore.”

“She was high—”

“The drugs were mostly out of her system anyway,” Thorn counters. “And she smelled just fine to me. Tasted as good as any other female too.”

“The stories also say that finding your *desa'aimos* can unlock hidden abilities,” Lanna says, giving me a long look. “Like shape-shifting or *turning into mist*.”

My arms tighten around my female—shit, when did I start thinking of her as *mine*?—as I consider all of this. It's a lot to take in, and I'm not sure if I am ready to believe it just yet.

“You should send her back to her friends before they really do send the police to our door.” Thram's words make me tense. Enough that my female starts to stir from her deep sleep.

“No,” I tell him firmly. Not only am I not ready to let her go, but I should also be with her when she wakes. She'll be disoriented, and, especially if what the stories say is true, I may not be the only one of us affected by a bloodbond. “I'm taking her up to my suite. After she wakes, if she wants to go home, I'll take her then.”

Lanna's lips are pressed into a thin line, but my brothers seem to agree with my logic.

Up the stairs I carry her, into the elevator, and push the button for the ninth floor. Each of us have turned a floor of the old apartment building into our private living spaces. Being the oldest, mine is the top floor, of course.

Entering my home, I quickly make my way to my bedroom, where I lay her down on top of my bed. Christ, I think as I step back, have I ever seen a more stunning sight?

A loud vibrating draws my attention to her, where I find her cell phone tucked into the side of her skimpy dress. It's being blown up by text messages.

I swipe my thumb across the screen and then hold the phone up to her face, unlocking the screen so I can open the text app and read the most recent ones.

Maggie: Beth, please let me know you're ok!

Maggie: If I don't hear from you in the next five minutes, I'm calling the cops.

Portia: Hey, girl, I hope you're having fun. But Mags is really worried about you. You should let her know you're okay.

Queen Cori: Get it, girl!

Maggie: Ok, that's it. I don't like this. I'm calling!

Before I consider whether this is a good idea, I open Maggie's text message and reply.

Me: There is no need to worry. I'm fine. I'll talk to you in the morning.

Almost immediately I see the dots across the bottom of the screen, signaling that Maggie is responding.

Maggie: Bullshit. Who is this really?

I chuckle softly to myself. Astute female.

Me: My name is Jaro. I swear on my honor, your friend is fine. She had a bit too much wine and is currently sleeping it off.

(Not exactly a lie. Vrykos often refer to our blood and wine interchangeably.)

Maggie: I don't believe you.

Me: Please, let me put you at ease. She's in the same building as the party, but I've moved her up to my apt on the ninth floor.

Stepping back, I turn her phone and take a picture—with her head tilted to hide the marks on her neck, of course. Even just looking at the image has my chest tightening with feelings for this strange female. *Beth, her friend called her Beth.*

After I send the image I reply.

Me: She will remain here, and I promise to be a perfect gentleman. In the morning, I will be happy to make sure she calls you and makes it back to her home.

The dots drift across the screen. Stopping and starting for what feels like an eternity, until finally she replies.

Maggie: You better. And if she has a single hair out of place I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE!

Me: Fair enough. Good night.

Setting her phone on the stand beside my bed, I make sure to plug it in so it will be fully charged by morning. Then I carefully unbuckle and remove her shoes, rubbing her feet and ankles where the straps have chafed her delicate skin. Then I take the halo out of her hair and remove her wings.

I lift her up once more, so I can pull the bedding down before settling her back into my bed. With the blankets pulled up to her shoulders, she curls up on her side and lets out a soft sigh, burrowing down and falling deeper into sleep.

I stand beside the bed, watching her for what feels like hours. Eventually, I drag myself across the room to my closet. Normally I sleep nude, but since I plan on sharing my bed with

Beth, I opt to throw on a loose pair of sleep pants before crossing back to the bed, where I slide in on the opposite side.

Turning so Beth and I are facing, I lie there and watch her for the rest of the night.

Six

BETH

I'm trying so hard to ignore the insistent buzzing of my cell phone that's working to drag me from the warm cocoon of sleep that I'm not ready to give up.

Has a bed ever been this comfortable? I'm surrounded by warmth, with the most delicious scent in my nose. Not like my bed back at the dorm. Even with the four-inch-thick memory foam topper, it's like trying to sleep on a—

This isn't my bed.

My eyes snap open.

This isn't my room. And I'm draped over a strange man!

His eyes are closed, his head turned toward me, and he's breathing slow and deep, suggesting he won't be waking soon.

My head pops up from where it's pillowed on his shoulder, and my arm and leg are slung across him like he's my own personal body pillow.

Shit! I look around the unfamiliar room. It's done in dark blues and grays. All masculine minimalistic.

Then my eyes go back to the man I'm sleeping with. He's vaguely familiar. He has dark brown hair that is tousled from sleep, full lips, cheekbones that could cut glass, and an angular jaw. The sheet is pooled around his waist, exposing a chiseled chest that I've only seen on thirst traps.

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth as my gaze wanders to where the sheet is hiding the rest of him. Is he bare there too?

Oh, geez, Beth. Get a friggin grip! I chastise myself for ogling the strange man. My eyes drop to my body and let out a relieved breath to find that I'm still dressed in my angel costume. And a quick press of my legs suggests that my panties are still in place, and I didn't have sex last night.

My phone buzzes somewhere behind me again.

"Are you going to get that?" a deep, gravelly voice asks.

With a gasp, I realize the man's eyes are open, and he's awake and watching me.

"I—um. I—"

Without warning, he rolls over me, pressing me into the soft mattress with his hard body. His nose goes to the side of my throat, and he inhales deeply before letting out a growl that has heat flowing through my body and flooding my panties.

"Your scent," his voice rumbles against my skin as he drags his nose down the column of my throat. "I have never smelled anything so luscious in my life."

A whimper escapes when he pauses at the hollow of my throat and then continues down before pausing at where my cleavage presses against the tight dress. My nipples pebble against the sheer fabric, and he glances up at me with a wolfish smile before his mouth covers one, drawing the tight bud into the warmth of his mouth through the silk. My back arches, my whimpers turn into a low moan, and my fingers delve into his thick hair.

He releases my nipple with a soft *pop* and moves to the other one, making sure to pay it the same attention.

“Oh god!” I gasp, arching up into his mouth again as my hips roll up off the bed.

“You taste so fucking sweet,” he growls when he releases my other nipple. “I want to taste you everywhere.”

More heat floods between my legs.

“Would you like that?” he asks me as he drags himself further down my body. “Can I taste you, sweet Beth?”

Before my brain can catch up with what exactly he’s asking, I nod, and then he pulls my dress up over my head and tosses it away. A low growl rumbles out of him when my hands go to my chest, trying to cover myself.

“No.” He snaps his teeth as he pulls my hands down to my sides. “Do not cover yourself from me.” Then he hooks his fingers in the waistband of my panties and drags them down my legs.

I jump when his hands land on my knees. His fingers curl around to the insides.

“Let me see, Beth,” he purrs as he eases my legs apart. “Show me.”

My breath hitches as I bend my knees and let them fall to the sides, exposing my most private place to his hungry gaze. His nostrils flare as he breathes in.

“Fuck yes. You smell even better here.” A look of rapt desire is etched on his face as he leans down. His wide shoulders push my thighs wider until his mouth is level with my pussy. Curling his arms under my legs, he spreads me even wider as he leans in and licks up my seam. The heat and pressure of his tongue slicking between my folds have my hips jumping off the bed and my mouth dropping open.

“Fucking delicious,” he groans.

Suddenly his weight shifts, and he pushes my knees farther back, practically folding me in half until my ass is almost pointing to the ceiling. One arm curls around my thigh and slides down my stomach. His other hand braces me as his first two fingers spread me wide and hold me open so he can lick and suck at my folds.

“Oh! *My god!*” I gasp when he flicks my clit with the tip of his tongue and jolts of need take my breath away. Palming my heavy breasts, I squeeze the sensitive tips, pinching my nipples as he drives me closer and closer to a life-changing orgasm with his lips and tongue.

I gasp at a sudden sharp bite of pain, but then his mouth closes over my clit, and his tongue laps at me while he sucks until I detonate. My legs start to shake, and my eyes roll back as stars burst behind my lids when I come against his mouth.

When he rocks back on his heels, his eyes are closed, and his mouth is glossed with my juices and... *my blood*. His expression is pure rapture as his tongue darts out and swipes the crimson drop from his lower lip with a low hum. Very slowly, he opens his eyes and then smiles at me, showing off those Hollywood fangs from last night.

“Fucking delicious.”

My stomach clenches when he eases my legs back down onto the bed before he turns around and stands up. He stretches his arms over his head, giving me a view of his muscular back and the sleep pants riding low on his hips. I refuse to be disappointed that he’s wearing them. Not when they leave so little to the imagination the way they are tucked between his firm ass cheeks.

When he turns around, my jaw drops, and my eyes do a slow slide down his stacks of muscles to land on his dick, at full attention, curling up toward his belly button. It’s long enough that its head is peeking out the top of his pants.

He quickly hikes up the loose sleep pants, but not before I’ve gotten an eyeful. And not that the thin material hides much, even with him covered.

“Talk to your friend; she’s been worried about you.” He points to where my phone is sitting on the stand. “I’ll make some

breakfast and give you privacy.”

Before I can respond, I watch him walk out of the room and close the door behind him.

My phone buzzes just then, startling me back to reality.

Oh god. I reach over and snatch it off the table. My eyes bug out at what looks like *hundreds* of missed texts, most of them from Maggie.

I push myself up against the headboard and open the most recent text.

Me: I'm here, you can stop panicking. Sorry, I'm fine.

Maggie: Jesus, woman, do you have any idea how worried I've been?

Me: Considering you might have maxed out the storage on my phone, yeah. I got that. Really. I'm fine.

I'm more than fine, if the way my body is still buzzing from my amazing orgasm says anything.

Maggie: I have been worried sick about you.

Me: I'm sorry! I don't know what happened. The night is a bit of a blur.

Maggie: Did that creep touch you? Do I need to bring the police?

I look down at my nakedness and my cheeks burn bright red.

Me: There is no need to get the police involved.

Maggie: I'm so sorry I dragged you to this party. I should have listened to you that Cori couldn't be trusted. Those bitches totally bailed after you ran off, and I had to call an Uber to take me back to the college.

Me: I'm sorry they did that, but I can't say I'm surprised. Glad that things didn't end up worse.

Maggie: I'm coming to get you. Right now!

Just then, the door swings open, and the man comes striding in carrying a tray laden with dishes. I drop my phone and grab the sheets, pulling them up and tucking them around me as he crosses to a small table by the window. After he sets down the tray, he pulls the curtains open to reveal a stunning view of the city and letting in what should be golden morning light.

Except there is something on the panes filtering the brightness. It makes me think of how there wasn't a single light glowing in any of the windows of the building last night.

"Where am I?" I ask. "Am I still in the same building as the party?"

He's arranging a place setting and pauses to glance over his shoulder at me. "Yes. The party was in the basement of this building. I moved you to my suite so you would be more comfortable," he explains, then glances down at where my phone is still going off. "Did you message your friend? She has been very worried about you."

I look down at Maggie's messages and nod. "She wants to come get me."

"It will take her some time to get into the city." The man nods and pulls out the chair for me. "Eat, and then you can shower. I'll find you some clothes to go home in."

My eyes drop to my wine-stained dress that's in a pile on the floor. Then, keeping the sheet wrapped around me, I slowly slide from the bed and make my way over to the table.

"Thank you."

He pushes my chair in, and I don't miss the way he leans down until our cheeks nearly brush when he does it. The action should probably disturb me, or at least throw up some red flags. But instead, it has my stomach doing little flips and my skin tingling where he almost touches me.

“Um, what happened last night? My memories are foggy.” I eye the spread warily. There is perfectly cut-up fruit. Toast with avocado. Pancakes. An omelet. “Was I drugged?”

He shakes his head firmly. “No.”

“But why can’t I remember?” I look up at him, but he’s looking out the window rather than at me.

“Eat,” he tells me instead. “Then you can shower, and after.... we’ll talk.”

I stare at what is far more food than I’d be able to eat on my own, and he adds, “I wasn’t sure what you like, so I made up what I had.”

What a crazy, sweet thing to do. Especially for a total stranger.

“I’ll leave you. The bathroom is just through there, and everything you might need is already set out.” Then he just... leaves, closing the door behind him.

Leaning back in the chair, I gaze out the window. When my phone buzzes in my lap, I pick it up to text Maggie back.

Me: He made me breakfast, and then he’s going to find me something to wear while I’m in the shower.

Maggie: OMG! Where are your clothes?

Me: I spilled wine all over my dress.

Maggie: Oh. Ok. I'll leave in a few minutes and be there in an hour or so.

Me: Do you need the address? I forgot to ask him.

Maggie: He told me where you were last night.

My brows knit tightly together.

Me: You talked to him last night?

Maggie: He answered your phone. At first, he tried to play off that it was you, but I knew right away it wasn't. He told me you were sleeping, but that you'd be better off there for the night.

Maggie: Oh god. Please don't tell me I made the wrong call!

Me: No, you were right. I'm completely fine. I'll see you soon.

I want to tell her not to hurry, but that's crazy. I don't even know this man. Besides, I have a paper to write this weekend and finals to study for. So instead, I dig into the amazing breakfast and end up eating almost all of it! Everything is just so good, I can't help myself. After I carefully stack all the

plates and clean up a little, I head to the bathroom, where there is a fluffy robe, towels, and toiletries waiting for me.

I close the door behind me and flip the lock.

The shower is a huge, slate-tiled walk-in with more showerheads than I can count. I turn on the water, and as I'm waiting for it to warm, I step in front of the mirror. My hair resembles a bird's nest, and my skin has that freshly fucked glow. Something catches my eye, and when I tip my head to the side, I pause.

“What is tha—” I lean closer, turning my head more, and my heart starts to pound.

It's mostly healed, but the bruises and teeth marks are dark against my pale skin. Something—or someone—bit me, with two half circles marked by blunt teeth, and two sharp punctures. Just like...

A memory flashes before my eyes of the same handsome man standing in front of me, a crazy look in his eyes and his mouth spread in a wide grin, showing off sharp vampire fangs that look nothing like the fake prosthetic kind.

I clamp my hand over the side of my neck and scream.

Seven

JARO

I set down a neatly folded stack of clothes at the end of the bed when Beth's piercing scream sends my blood racing. Without thinking, I bolt to the bathroom door, but it's locked. So, I take a step back and kick it in.

The door flies inward, and Beth spins to face me before screaming again. She has one hand clamped against the side of her neck and the other holding the sheets up to her chin, and my stomach drops. Did my bite open? Shit, did something happen?

I storm into the steamy bathroom. "What's wrong?"

She staggers away from me until her back hits the wall behind her. Her eyes are round, and her face is no longer rosy and flushed from sex, but pale.

"Are you hurt? Bleeding?" I demand as I reach for her hand, pulling it away from her neck.

My breath rushes out of me with relief. It's fine. A little bruising, but my bite is healing quickly. My eyes track to her,

and I ask her again, “What’s the matter? Why did you scream?”

She’s staring up at me, frozen.

“Beth,” I say softly and then cup the side of her face. “Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Her hand darts out so quick, and I’m not expecting it when she uses her thumb to pull my lips away from my teeth. My head jerks back, but it’s too late.

“Those don’t look like dental caps,” she murmurs quietly.

Damnit. This is not how I wanted this to go.

“Beth, the water is going to get cold,” I tell her as I try to move her over to the walk-in. “Get your shower, and then when you’re done, we can talk.”

“Something’s wrong.” She blinks her blue eyes up at me, and I watch as her lower lip starts to quiver.

“No, sweetheart, no,” I try to assure her, sliding one hand behind her neck and stroking the other down the side of her face. “Everything is just fine. You’ll feel better after a warm shower, and then I’ll explain everything.”

Fuck. How I’m going to do that and not freak this poor girl out is beyond me. But it’s obviously not going to work to try to keep it from her either.

Her eyes dart over to the still-running shower, and she slowly nods.

Stepping out of her way, I watch as she lets the sheet fall to the ground and steps under the cascading water. My cock throbs, and it takes all my strength not to follow her in.

“I’ll be right outside,” I tell her. “Call out if you need anything.”

Her back is to me, but I still catch the slight nod she gives me. With much reluctance, I force myself to leave her alone, going straight to my closet to busy myself getting dressed. This is not a conversation I want to have half naked.

By the time I’ve dressed, the water turns off, and I listen closely as she moves around the bathroom. I assume she’s drying off, putting on the robe I left her, and pulling a brush through her hair.

It feels like an eternity before the bathroom door finally opens, and she steps out. Her skin is flushed pink from her shower, and she doesn’t look quite as shocked as she did when I left her.

“I brought you these.” I motion to the folded clothes. “The track pants will be big, but the waist has a drawstring.”

She glances at the pile for a moment, but then her eyes come back to me. The robe she’s wearing practically swallows her up, especially when she folds her arms across her chest and notches her chin up at me.

“What are you?”

“Maybe you should sit—”

“Stop stalling!” she snaps at me. “Tell. Me.”

I blow out a breath and run a hand through my hair. “I’m Vrykos. But your kind knows us as vampire.”

She is silent, but her eyes don’t stray from mine. I can practically see her brain churning around what I’ve just said, no doubt trying to put some kind of spin on it to help her make it make sense.

Instead, she surprises me.

“So, what is a Vrykos? And why did you call yourself that instead of a vampire?”

I can’t help but smile, and this time I don’t try to hide my teeth when I do it. “Vrykos is our species. Long ago, humans were a prolific race among the universes. So much that they spread their DNA to the point of overbreeding. The few pure humans who remained became sought after and trafficked to the point of their extinction. Or so everyone thought. There are still a few hidden pockets of pure humans out there, and Earth is one of those pockets.

“My people, Vrykos, were put in charge of keeping Earth hidden and safe. We’ve been here almost as long as you have, although we’ve tried to keep ourselves hidden, but not before indoctrinating ourselves into your folklore.”

The whole time I talk, she doesn’t move except to blink.

“So vampires are actually aliens who have been tasked with keeping Earth safe from other aliens?” she finally asks.

“Yes.”

“And, like vampires, Vrykos drink blood?”

“Yes.” I’m a little more hesitant with my admission this time.

“So, the party.” I can’t help but notice the way her breasts rise to the opening of the robe with her inhale. “Is that how you find your meals?”

Her eyes are taking on that panicked look again, and I cross over to her, gently looping my arm around her shoulders and leading her over to the end of my bed.

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking.” I sink down beside her. “No one is drugged unless they’ve partaken on their own before arriving. It’s all very consensual, and our chosen for the night have no idea what we are doing to them, beyond mutual pleasure. We don’t harm them, and the amount of blood taken is less than what you might donate to the Red Cross.”

I turn to face her, looking into her eyes while trying not to fall into the vast blue wells. “Feeding is a very erotic experience.” I add, “For all involved.”

Her eyes grow round. “Did you—did we—?”

“No,” I say softly, resisting the urge to kiss her slightly turned-up nose. “I did not touch you, except to hold you. But,” I can’t help the dark chuckle that floats between us, “that did not stop you from touching yourself.”

Her mouth falls open, and that lovely pink stain creeps up into her cheeks at the same time her body blooms with her most delicious arousal. Fuck, I want to scent it from its source again. To taste her on my tongue and lips.

To drink from her there. I got the smallest taste when I accidentally nicked her, and now I want more.

“So, this is normal for you? You always have your... girls stay the night after you’ve fed?” There is disappointment in her voice, and my heart thuds knowing it’s there. That she might be jealous. *For me!*

“No.” I reach up and cup her face, making sure she cannot turn away from what I’m about to say to her. “No, none of this is normal. I’ve never been affected by a human’s scent before, but the moment I caught yours, I could not tolerate any others. I’m afraid I wasn’t prepared for it, and I went a bit... feral.”

Her eyes widen.

“Beth, I’ve never felt for anyone what you make me feel.”

Eight

BETH

I'm sitting on the edge of a bed, in nothing but a bathrobe, listening as this man confesses that not only is he a real-deal vampire, but he feels something for me that he's never felt for any other snack he's had.

As if that's not the oldest line in the book...

My head is screaming at me to placate him enough to get away and make a run for it. Except that what he's telling me seems to have unlocked some of the previous night from the bank of fuzzy memories. Specifically, me sitting in his lap, lapping at his wrist, and drinking his blood like I might die without it. Like it was the best thing I've ever tasted.

And then there is my heart, which wants me to fall at his feet and confess my undying love for him. My heart can't be trusted, obviously. I don't even know his name, for Christ's sake!

"It's Jaro." His voice is deep and rumbly and—

"Huh?" I pull myself back to the present.

“My name. It’s Jaro.”

Shit. Did I just ask that out loud? What else did I say?

“I’ve always been told to trust one’s heart, but I can understand your unease,” he continues.

Fuck! I really need to get my mouth under control.

“You realize that all of this sounds completely bat-shit crazy, right?” Then I look up at him, and my heart does that little flip-flop in my chest at the way he’s looking down at me. His eyes are dark pools, and his full lips are curled up at the corners in a sexy little smirk.

“I’m aware,” he says softly as he angles his body so he’s facing me full on. “If it helps any, this is all new to me as well.”

Before I can think about what I’m doing, my hand is reaching out, seeking his. His fingers are long and slender as they wrap around mine. His grip on me is firm, and my heart skitters in my chest, and I remember how he felt at my back with his arms banded around my body and his mouth at my neck. I close my eyes as shivers race up and down my skin.

“God, Beth,” Jaro groans as he captures my other hand in his. “When your scent blooms like that, it’s hard to...” He gnashes his teeth together and pulls back from me.

My rational side recognizes what he’s doing; it knows I should let him go and put more distance between us. Instead, my fingers tighten around his, and I pull him closer. As I start to inch across the bed, I’m sure it’s just my imagination, but the

bite mark at my neck is throbbing. An ache starts up in my breasts, and my nipples tighten from wanting his hands on me.

Our thighs are touching, and when he brings our linked hands to his lips, I melt against him. I'm practically falling across his lap as he tilts my chin up, and then his lips are on mine. His kiss is feather-light and teasing, and I can't help my frustrated moan, because I want more.

When his lips spread into a smile beneath mine, I'm lost.

Suddenly I'm straddling him. My knees are spread on either side of his hips, and we both moan when I rock my core over his hard length. Twining my arms around his neck, I sink my fingers into the softest hair I've ever felt. Tilting his head back, I slowly lower my mouth to his... when suddenly my phone starts going off with text messages.

"That must be Maggie," I sigh, trying to hide just how disappointed I am.

Jaro lets out a long sigh, and his arms tighten around me. "I don't suppose I can talk you into staying?"

He pulls me up against him so that almost every inch is touching, and before I can stop myself, my head is resting against his shoulder. I want to say yes. In fact, it's a little frightening just how much I want to say *yes*.

"I can't," I say instead. "I have school. It's almost the end of the semester, and I have finals coming up."

My phone starts to ring.

Jaro blows out his breath, then leans back and lifts me from his lap. “You should probably answer that before your friend calls the police.” He smiles like he’s trying to make light of it, but his eyes are pained.

I reach across the bed and snatch my phone. “Hey. You made good time,” I tell her before she can start yelling.

“I’ll let her in while you get dressed,” Jaro tells me before striding out of the room, leaving me sitting on the edge of the bed, holding the phone away from my ear and Maggie’s rantings.

I’m still sitting there when Maggie comes storming into the room. Jaro is nowhere to be seen, and my heart sinks further.

“I brought you some clothes,” she tells me when she finds me still in the robe. “Then I thought we could stop by Bitchin’ Biscuits while we’re in town.”

“Yeah. Sure.” With a shrug, I take the bag she hands me.

Maggie pulls me to my feet and then pushes me into the bathroom, instructing me to get dressed. It’s like I’m on auto pilot. Going through the motions, doing what I’m told. I have a feeling if Jaro stormed in here and told me that I’d be staying right here with him, I’d do that without question too.

So what does it mean when I grow more and more disappointed when that doesn’t happen?

A few minutes later, I’m dressed in my own clothes. I hang the robe on the hook behind the door where I found it and find Maggie by the window.

“I’m ready.” I watch her turn around with a wide grin.

“This is a hell of a place!” she exclaims, pointing to the view out the window. “This view!”

I shrug. Suddenly all the splendor around me seems to have lost its shine.

“Let’s just go,” I tell her.

Maggie looks at me, *really looks at me*, for the first time since arriving.

“You okay?” she asks in a soft voice.

“Yeah. Just tired and ready to get back to the real world.”

She continues to watch me, and I don’t think she’s buying it, but she nods anyway, and we head out of the room and down a narrow hallway.

Jaro is waiting for us beside the elevator that will take us down. His expression is drawn, but he forces a strained smile when he sees me.

“Thank you for everything,” I tell him.

His jaw is clenched tightly, making the muscles tick, and he nods.

Everything kind of happens in a blur after that. I follow Maggie out to her car. The drive to the biscuit place flies by, and when I choose to stay in the car, she decides we can just go another time, and we start the drive back home.

The farther from the city we get, the more my heart aches in my chest until tears are leaking down my cheeks.

“Beth, are you sure you’re okay?” Her voice sounds worried, but all I can do is shake my head. “You’re freaking me out, and I can’t read your mind, so you’ve got to tell me what is wrong.”

I don’t mean to worry her, but I’m struggling to understand why I’m having such a hard time keeping my shit together!

“I’m just overwhelmed,” I finally tell her, leaning back against the headrest and closing my eyes against the late morning sun.

I can feel her watching me the rest of the way home.

Nine

JARO

I stand in the window and watch Beth exit the building far below, into the morning sunlight, knowing I cannot follow her. Even if I wanted to, she is truly out of my reach.

Thanks to the protective UV filters coating the windows, at least I'm able to watch Beth get into the small car. She looks so... dejected by the way she hangs her head and all but falls into the cramped passenger seat.

When she pulls her seatbelt across herself, my chest begins to tighten. Her friend climbs behind the wheel, and I hear the soft purr of the motor. Beth's eyes stay down the entire time, until, *finally*, she glances out the window and up at me. I could swear our eyes meet in that brief moment. It's such a small thing, but it makes my heart soar.

Lifting my hand up, I press it to the sun-warmed glass. I know she can't really see me, since the coating over the windows makes it impossible, as it acts something like one-way glass. But I don't miss how she also lifts her hand and presses her fingertips to her window, as if in reply.

Then she's gone, and I'm left alone.

My hand clenches into a fist, and before I can stop it, I slam it against the glass as a low growl starts up deep in my chest. A now familiar maelstrom begins swirling inside my head moments before the soundless detonation. This time I'm more prepared for the change.

In my new form, when I come up against the window, I'm able to find the most miniscule gaps, and then, before I can stop myself, I'm rushing outside to greet the sun's poisoned rays. To my relief and surprise, the sun cannot harm me in this misty form, and for the first time in my life, I'm free. No longer burdened by gravity and the threat of the sun, I can go where I please. Of all the places that are now available to me, there is only one place I want to be. One thing—one person—who is pulling at me.

Much like what happened the night before, I let myself go. Trusting whatever this strange pull of fate has in store for me.

Time and distance don't seem to have any meaning when I'm in this form. In no more than a blink, I'm across the city. Traversing rivers. Skating through smaller towns. Hurling over hills and mountains. And yet, the sun has set when I find myself standing in front of a tall brick building.

No sooner have I arrived in my corporeal form, than the heavy glass doors of the dorm burst open, and my female spills out. Her face is flushed, and her breaths are sawing in and out of her lungs in a struggle to hold back her sobs. Strangely enough, she doesn't seem to have any idea that I'm here. In

fact, if I hadn't reached out and caught her, she would have stumbled right past me.

The moment I have her in my arms, her head snaps up, and her eyes find mine. And then she dissolves into the tears she's been holding on to.

Her arms come around me, and she presses her face into my chest as I hold on to her just as tightly. "What are you doing here?" Her watery voice is muffled against my shirt. "How did you know where I am?"

With one arm banded around her back, my other hand sinks into her colorful hair as I curl myself around her, pressing my nose into the top of her head and breathing in her intoxicating scent.

"I don't know," I answer truthfully.

She's quiet for a moment, then tilts her chin up so she can look at me. "I should be freaking out," she snuffles. "Showing up like this is awfully stalkerish, but I'm glad you're here."

Dipping my head lower, I place a soft kiss against her forehead. "I can't seem to stay away from you. No matter how much I try to."

"Let's just stop then," she tells me. "Because I'm miserable without you." She laughs and hides her face back against my chest. "Which sounds insane because I barely know you!"

"What about your school?" I ask her. "I also have certain... requirements that can't be ignored."

“Can we worry about that stuff another time?” she asks as she slides her hands up my chest and then curls her arms around my neck. “Right now, I feel like I might die if I don’t have you.”

My cock shoots to attention, and in the next moment, she squeals when I drape her over my shoulder and start running.

“Where are we going?” she laughs breathlessly.

“Which car is yours?” I ask her while praying she *has* a car.

She points to the back of the lot, to a small hatchback. “I don’t have my key!” she says when she realizes I’m serious.

I already have the passenger door open, and I practically dump her inside, then run around the other side. Sliding into the seat, I adjust it and then hover my hand over the ignition. Closing my eyes, I use my new ability to manipulate the mechanism, and the car starts up.

“We’re going to talk about this,” she says with open-mouthed shock.

I put the car into gear and tear out of the lot.

“Where are we going?” she asks me.

“Back to my place.”

“Jaro!” she squeaks. “That’s almost an hour away!”

I wink at her and then hit the accelerator. “Not the way I drive.”

Ten

BETH

I feel like I might die if I don't have you.

I can't believe I told him that! I've never been so blunt with anyone in my entire life! Although, to be fair, I've never felt this level of lust for anyone either. And *it wasn't a lie!*

Far from it. Even now, I'm rubbing my thighs together, trying to alleviate the building pressure between them.

Which is awkward since I'm sitting next to the object of my desire—who happens to be a space vampire with a very keen sense of smell... if the way he's also squirming in his seat is any indication. Or the reason he has every window in the car down.

"Beth," Jaro groans. His hands are white-knuckling the steering wheel, and beads of sweat are starting to break out across his forehead. "You have to stop, or we're not going to make it."

"I thought you said you were a fast driver?"

“Your little car won’t *go* any faster!” he moans. “Please. Think of... garbage trucks. Or beached whales. *Anything* but whatever you’re thinking of right now.”

If I wasn’t as equally miserable, I’d be laughing. Instead, it’s all I can do not to climb into his seat and straddle him on the freeway.

Finally, we make it into the city, where Jaro gives Cori’s driving skills a run for their money as he weaves in and out of rush hour traffic. When he pulls up in front of his building, he’s out of the door and around to my side faster than I can track. As soon as he helps me from the car, I find myself draped over his shoulder once again.

“Jaro!” I gasp. “What are you—put me down!”

He ignores me as he races inside, skipping the elevator and running up the staircase faster than... well, than humanly possible. When we reach the top floor, he bursts into his suite and marches straight to the bedroom.

“Jaro!” I squeak when I find myself sailing through the air before landing in the center of the bed.

I’ve barely lifted myself up on my elbows when I freeze.

Jaro is standing at the foot of the bed. His eyes have an eerie red shine to them and are locked on mine. His shirt is already gone, and every contour and ripple of his muscled chest is a distraction. That is, until his fingers start working down his fly. My mouth goes dry when he yanks his jeans open and then pushes them down his thick legs.

I'm mesmerized by the way his fully erect cock bobs and sways with each move he makes as he toes off his shoes and pulls his jeans off completely. When he stands up, it curves past his bellybutton and my mouth falls open.

I knew it was big. Rubbing up against it told me as much, and then there was the quick glimpse I got of it this morning, but seeing it unobstructed... I'm trying not to compare it to the human dicks I've seen, but I wasn't expecting the differences. Like the way the flesh ripples into ridges that line the underside and possibly wrap completely around it. Or how his flared head is much wider than anything I've seen before.

He curls one hand around the base, starting a slow drag up and down the lower part of his shaft. His other hand reaches down to cup his heavy sac. His chest is pumping, and he tilts his head back with a low moan.

Jesus *God*, I don't think I've ever seen anything so fucking hot.

"Please, Beth, tell me you want this as much as I do," Jaro grunts as his hand starts working faster. "I need you to be ready for me. I'm so fucking close to losing control, the last thing I want to do is hurt you."

Heat flares between my legs at the thought of him losing control because of me, of pinning me down and forcing me to take every single inch of that monster cock.

"*Fuck!*" he hisses between his clenched teeth, and his hand clamps down around his cock. "Did that just turn you on? I can smell how much you want this."

Heat builds almost painfully in my lower stomach as I hook my thumbs in the waistband of my leggings. In one smooth motion, I push them down my hips, along with my panties, and then I kick them off as my hands start tugging my shirt over my head. When I'm finally naked, I lie back and drag one hand up my stomach so I can cup a heavy breast, while the other slides down to cup my pussy. The soft curls there are sticky, and when I delve a finger between my folds, I'm slick and ready.

"Jaro," I moan. My hips arch restlessly into my touch.

His lips part as he sucks in a sharp breath of air. The flash of sharp teeth has more liquid heat coating my fingers, and the side of my neck throbs in time with my pulse.

There is a flash of motion, and then he's between my legs. His knees spread me wide, *wider*, until he can notch his hips between them, and he braces himself with his hands on either side of my head.

I moan when he rolls against me, sliding his cock through my slick lips, coating himself in my cream. Reaching out for him, I try to bring him down onto me. I need to feel his skin against mine, but he holds himself over me as he settles into a gentle rhythm, teasing me with each roll of his hips. He notches the tip at my core before pushing it past to slide through my lips and over my clit until I'm shaking with need. Until I can't take it any longer.

When he notches his cock against my entrance again, I arch up sharply, impaling myself on his thick head, forcing him inside

of me.

“Ah shit!” Jaro grunts as his arms give out and he drops down on top of me. At the same time, his hips jerk reflexively, driving himself even deeper.

Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I whimper at just how big he is. I’ve barely taken the very tip of him, and already he’s lighting up nerve endings I never knew existed.

“Goddamn it, Beth, I told you I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Breathing through the delicious stretch, I can’t keep back my smile. “Maybe I like it when you hurt me.”

Jaro stills above me for a moment, and then a low growl rumbles out from his chest. Before I can react, his arms snake around me so he’s holding me tightly. Then he braces his knees into the bed and drives himself forward, thrusting every inch of his enormous cock all the way to the very end of me. Driving the breath from my lungs and peeling my eyes wide in shock, he forces me to take all of him. And I love it.

With our bodies locked tightly together, he lifts his head and looks down at me. “My Beth,” he whispers. “Mine forever.”

Using his thumb, he tilts my chin, exposing the side of my throat. Then he strikes, sinking his teeth into my neck, hitting the same place he bit me before.

Heat flares out from where his teeth are buried deep, followed by pleasure like I’ve never felt before. My core clamps down on his cock, and we both groan as his hips begin to rock and then thrust until he’s driving himself as deep as he can go.

Over and over and over, alternating drawing from my neck and driving himself so deep. I dig my nails into his back as my mouth goes dry, and then everything starts to tingle as my orgasm races to the surface. It's all I can do to hang on as he ruts me like an animal.

"Harder!" I gasp as my pussy clamps down. "Please. Oh god. Jaro!" His name echoes through the room as I arch and then fall apart in waves and ripples.

Jaro rips his mouth from my throat with a roar as he thrusts his hips once... twice... I can feel his cock swelling deep inside of me. But then he does something completely unexpected. He palms the back of my head, pressing my mouth to the place where his neck and shoulder meet.

"Bite me," he groans.

I part my lips, and my tongue darts out to taste his salty skin.

"Bite me! Now!"

My head is swimming with pleasure, so I do as he says. I open my mouth and sink my teeth into his skin.

"Harder!" he grunts, and I do. Clenching my teeth around his shoulder, I bite down until I taste blood. It's warm and rich, and it goes straight to my head like a glass of wine.

"Yes!" he howls, and then he thrusts into me once more, holding himself deep as he finds his release and fills me with jet after jet of hot cum.

My lips seal around my bite, and I hum with each heady swallow.

“That’s it, Beth. Drink from me, take as much as you can,”
Jaro moans against my neck just before I feel the soft drag of
his tongue over where he bit me. “My Beth. My love.”

His weight collapses on top of me, and that’s when I feel the
first pounding thump of his heart.

Eleven

JARO

Our bodies are fused together, slick with sweat and other things. My arms are wrapped around her, and I've long since closed the bite mark I left, but I still can't seem to stop dragging my tongue over it. I can't get enough of her taste, the feel of my mark in her flesh and knowing she left her mark on me as well.

And then there is the thundering beat of my heart.

That's another thing the lore got wrong about Vrykos.

I knew Beth was mine, at least I wanted her to be. But now that my heart is thundering behind my breastbone, I know for certain.

The soft pads of her fingers trace down the column of my neck, and when they drag over the bite she left in my flesh, I shiver. If she notices, she doesn't let on as she drags her fingers lower until she settles her hand on top of my pounding heart.

“I never noticed your heart beating before.” Her voice is all sleepy wonder, and the feel of her hand on me has my cock trying to stir to life once more.

“No, you wouldn’t have. Our heartbeat is undetectable until we find our *desa’aimos*, our bloodbound.” I look down at her and smile. “And now it will beat for you for eternity.”

“Eternity?” Her eyes flare wide and lift to mine.

“Well, maybe not quite that long,” I laugh softly. “But we do live much longer than humans, and now that we’re bloodbound, you’ll share my life cycle.”

“*Desa’aimos*,” she repeats softly. “Is that what happened when I bit you?”

“A bloodbond forms when blood is exchanged between mates. Even though we exchanged blood that first time, the bond only seemed to form on my end. I’ve never heard of—a bond has never formed between a human and Vrykos. So maybe it takes longer, or there needs to be more than one exchange for humans?”

“Can it be broken?” she asks. It’s an innocent enough question, but, still, it cuts me. Does she want to break it?

“No,” I tell her softly. “But *desa’aimos* cannot form between those who are not meant to be mates. If you weren’t meant for me, and me for you, we never would have—”

She reaches up and places her fingers against my lips. “I didn’t mean to say I didn’t want—”

Before she can finish, I dip my head and swallow the rest of her words, sipping soft kisses from her lips before delving my tongue into her mouth to toy and tease her tongue. She's breathless when I finally pull away, and I can't hold back my satisfaction.

"So, does being bloodbound mean I'll be a vampire now too?"

I can't help my snort of laughter. "No, my love. It ties us together, but that is all. It cannot change your biology."

"I'm a little disappointed by that," she admits. "And I don't know how to feel about that."

"Well," I kiss the upturned tip of her nose, "if it helps, now that we are bound, I will only be able to feed from you." She perks up at this, and I can't help the warm feeling that flares in my chest. *My female likes to feed me.*

"And how often do you need to, um, feed?"

"Not often. Every few months or so. Although it's common to take small sips when fucking."

Her scent blooms, and I watch as her cheeks flush as she thinks about that. Seems my female *also* likes being bitten with my cock deep inside of her. I promise to make that happen again soon. Just as soon as I can move. Because right now, wrapped around my curvy little mate, is the best place in the world, and I'm not ready to give that up.

"What other questions do you have?" I ask her, partially because I want to keep her talking so I can listen to the sound of her voice.

“Hmm.” She thinks for a moment, then her eyes dart nervously to mine. “What about kids? Can I get pregnant?”

“I’m not sure,” I answer truthfully. “Like I said, we’re the first human-Vrykos pairing I’ve ever heard of. Do you want kids?”

Her shoulders lift. “Maybe someday? But not now. I want to finish school first and work a little in my field. Maybe travel?”

“We have all the time in the world to do all of that,” I assure her. “In the meantime, we’ll be careful.”

She snorts, “Well, so far, our record for being careful is zero. But from now on... What about you?” she asks next. “Do you want kids?”

“If the gods bless me with children, I’ll be very happy,” I tell her honestly. “And if it isn’t to be, I’ll still be happy because I’ll still have you.”

Beth snuggles down against me and sighs. “This is all happening really fast.”

“That seems to be the way of mates,” I sigh as I rest my chin on the top of her head. “I’ve been told it’s like being hit by rogue lightning on a sunny day.”

The soft giggle she makes has my heart skittering in my chest. I want to hear her make that sound always.

We lapse into silence until I think she must have fallen asleep, so I stay still and enjoy the feel of her warm and relaxed in my arms until she speaks up again.

“What do we do now?” Her voice is quiet, but the suddenness startles me.

“What do you mean?”

Beth rolls to her side so she can look up at me. “I have one more semester of school left before I graduate. But when I left to go home for—jeez, it wasn’t even a full day!—I could barely stand being away from you. When I found you outside the dorm,” she gives me a bashful smile, “I was going back to the city. When I saw you standing there, my legs wanted to give out with relief that I didn’t have to wait the next hour it would take to get back to the city.”

Tightening my arms around her, I lower my head to kiss her forehead. “After you left, I was so distraught, I turned to mist and followed you back to your dorm. But I had to wait for the sun to set before I could take form again.”

“What a pair we are,” she snorts.

“I could rent a house there, until you graduate,” I say. “Or buy one, if you want to stay in that area.”

“You would relocate for me?” She tilts her chin up, and I can’t help but kiss her lips that are parted in surprise.

“I can do my job anywhere,” I assure her. “Until now, I’ve had no reason not to live close to my family. And besides, it’s hardly a great distance from them. Especially now that I can travel in mist form, even in daylight.”

Her blue eyes turn shiny, and her lips tremble. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not, Beth. I’m offering.”

“But—”

“Stop. It will be almost impossible to spend time apart, especially newly mated. This makes the most sense.”

“You’re talking about buying a house like it’s *nothing*. I can’t ask you to do that!”

I laugh again. “Beth, I could buy your entire college and not blink an eye.”

Her cute little mouth drops open. “Oh. Um, I guess that’s okay then.”

“I’ll call my realtor in the morning and have her start looking.”

I settle her back against me. “Will there be any problem with you moving out of the dorm?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “The dorm was just more convenient.”

“That settles it then.” I shift so she’s beneath me again. “And now, my pretty little mate, my appetite seems to have returned.” To prove my point, I rock my hips against her so she can feel that my cock has come back to life.

She hums and spreads her legs, cradling me between them.

“You’re not the only one who is hungry again,” she purrs.

Epilogue

BETH

It's been a week, and the movers just left after spending most of the day delivering and setting up the furniture Jaro and I picked out for our new house. No matter how much I tried to rein in his spending, including the brand-new house he bought, sight unseen, simply because it was secluded but still close enough to the college to make it convenient for me.

Jaro's company, it turns out, creates the special filters that keep out harmful UV light and he had them installed on all the windows a few days ago. There is also a fully finished basement that we've decided to turn into our bedroom and private space.

He's been spending his days at his apartment in the city while I'm in classes. But as soon as my last class is over, he mists himself over, and then we drive back to the city. I usually do my homework on the drive, then we make dinner and do all the domestic stuff couples do. He fucks me to sleep each night before he drives me back to school the next morning and mists himself back to the city.

Turning a circle around the newly furnished living room, I can't believe this is mine. *Ours*. The sun is still a while from setting, but I know Jaro will be here anytime, so I leave the front door cracked open. I'm going through one of the boxes when I hear the door shut and lock behind me. My heart leaps and starts pounding as I spin around to find Jaro leaning with his back to the door. His dark eyes are hooded, hungry, and locked on me.

"Fuck, Beth, I never thought today would come," he rasps.

Heat collects low in my belly, and wetness soaks my panties because *neither did I*.

Even though I've seen him every day since we bonded, the distance of our separation has been hard on both of us. We've discovered that distance makes a difference in how we feel when we're apart. So even though we'll still be separated while I'm at school, just having him closer will make being away from each other that much easier.

I hold my hand out to him. "Do you want the grand tour?"

I blink, and he's across the room, wrapping me in his arms. "Mm, let's start with our bedroom. I want to see how good you look spread out in our bed. Then up against the shower wall. Then across the kitchen table, and then bent over the couch while we watch a movie."

I moan as more wetness soaks my panties. Jaro's nostrils flare, and I know he can smell me. A moment later, he scoops me up and rushes down the stairs to the basement, where I've hung fairy lights across the ceiling above the bed that is made up

with pillows and silky sheets. Not that Jaro is in any state of mind to appreciate what I've done. The way his dick is digging into my hip, decorating is going to be pretty low on his list of things to notice. Probably somewhere after that movie we're supposedly going to watch.

My back hits the bed, and he's naked and over me before I finish the little bounce.

God, whatever this new life has in store for me, as long as I've got Jaro at my side, I'm all in.

Note to the Reader

Bloodbound to the Space Vampire is a standalone novelle set within my Earth's Bounty universe. To find out more you can sign up for my newsletter and find my other novels at www.deysiodonal.com

Thank you so much for reading. Please be sure to leave a review after you've enjoyed all the stories in this amazing anthology.

Deysi has been penning stories since she could hold a pencil and spends most days working as a vampire and her nights playing with the imaginary friends that live in her head. If she's not writing or stabbing people with needles, she probably has her nose in a book.

She enjoys loud music, sunny afternoons, and leisurely trips through social media.

Fated to the Lost Warrior By
Erin Hale

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



WHEN TWO LOST SOULS COLLIDE...

Eloise

When space pirates attack the exploratory spaceship I work on and I'm forced to evacuate in an escape pod, I never expected to crash land on an alien planet. I have no idea where any of my fellow crew members are or if they even got away. I'm entirely alone. Or so I think. Instead, I'm rescued from a fierce predator by a towering purple alien with a tail and color-changing tattoos who ignites strange feelings inside me.

Zedam

Many seasons ago, I woke up with no memory of who I am. Since then, I've lived alone, making the forest my new home. When a strange object falls from the sky, I discover a lone female—a human, although I don't know how I know what

she is. With a single touch, my mating marks flare to life and I know that the goddess has blessed me with my fated mate.

Except without my memories, I am not whole. Together, we work to restore them. Until enemies arrive and steal my mate, leaving me for dead. But the goddess has other plans. Now I must rescue my mate before it's too late.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

ELOISE

If I survive this, I promise to be a better person who never complains about anything ever again.

Okay, so maybe that last part is a lie, but I'll definitely try to be a better person.

I swear.

My eyes scrunch tightly shut as my small escape pod shudders, its walls growing hot, no doubt from the atmosphere it's slicing through. Sweat beads on my forehead and upper lip. *Great, I'm going to have heat stroke before I crash into smithereens.*

I'm not sure which one's the better way to go.

Crashing. Definitely crashing. At least my death will be instantaneous—I hope—instead of slowly being cooked alive inside this pod. A morbid laugh bubbles up from my throat. I'll probably taste like chicken to whatever creature stumbles across my body when I land. *For god's sake, Eloise, pull yourself together.* Just as I'm on the verge of passing out from

the heat, it occurs to me that the temperature inside might actually be cooling down.

I'd grab a bladder of water and take a celebratory drink, but I don't dare risk it. This pod only came equipped with a limited supply of it along with MREs. I can only hope that there's edible vegetation on the planet below. Which makes me pause.

Why haven't I...?

The escape pod crashes into something so hard, my teeth rattle. I'm jostled around, my body securely strapped in, but every jolt hurts. Then it comes to such an abrupt halt that something breaks off the interior and smacks my head viciously. Black spots dance in my vision, and then everything goes dark.



I groan at the massive headache that's pounding behind my right eye. How many times have I sworn I would stop drinking Xurxell beer? It always leaves me feeling like death the next morning. I try to roll out of my bunk, but something is pinning me down. Memories flash in my mind.

The attack on our ship by space pirates, running to reach the escape pod, being jettisoned out into the blackness of space right before the explosion, and desperately trying to locate any other pods near me. Had everyone gotten out? Had Johnna? I have a vague recollection of five or six pods in close proximity to mine, but the shockwaves pushed us all in different directions.

Reaching up to cradle my head in hopes the throbbing will ease, I encounter wetness. I draw my hand down and find blood smeared across my palm and fingers. Great. I close my eyes again as the wooziness hits. I've never been a fan of the sight of blood. Passed out on more than one occasion from it. *Focus, Eloise*. I take a deep breath and evaluate the rest of my body, wiggling my fingers and toes, and carefully shifting as much as the secured straps will let me. Nothing hurts or feels broken except my head.

I try to assess the damage to the pod. The small, reinforced window is cracked, the lines shooting out like a spider web. The hatch is also broken and partially open. At least the air of this planet is breathable. I have no idea how long I've been unconscious and breathing it in. I unhook the straps holding me down and push on the hood of the pod, hoping it's not stuck. Sure enough, it lifts with minimal effort.

Once I've gotten it open the whole way, I sit up. I'm surrounded by what appears to be an endless forest. At least, I assume it's endless, because a thick mist lays heavy in the air, clouding everything. It rises from the ground like a specter. A shudder runs down my spine. I tip my head back to try and get an idea of the time, but the coverage of purple leaves and black branches hinders my view of the sky.

It's definitely evening though. That much I can tell. Or maybe the creepy as fuck mist that's hanging over is distorting everything. Maybe this is a dream. The attack never happened, and I'm lying peacefully in my bunk in the cabin I share with Johnna. Any minute, I'm going to wake up and tell her all

about this crazy and wild dream I'd had. We'll laugh about it before readying for our work shift.

A crack of noise and the rustling of leaves makes me jerk in the direction it came from. Spearing pain shoots through my head and I groan with it. The sound stops. I strain, trying to hear anything, but the forest around me is eerily quiet. No birds—if such a thing exists on this planet—sing. No crickets rub their body parts together to make that annoying chirp. There isn't even a breeze blowing. The air is completely still. That never bodes well.

I have two choices. Stay in the pod and wait for whatever's out there to make an appearance, or I can get the fuck out of here. Both of those options suck. I quickly search for any type of weapon and come up empty. A survivalist I am not. Hell, I barely passed the combat exam required to join the crew of Helios 3. The rustling sound begins again. This time, much closer than the last. Fuck it. I'm not keen on my last breath being taken inside this coffin-sized box. No way. No how.

Grabbing the rucksack from the small compartment in the wall, I shove as many MREs and bladders of water in there as I can. There's also a small filtration canister, in case I find some type of water source. It'd be just my luck that I manage to escape whatever's out there only to die of dysentery. I snatch the mini first aid kit from another compartment.

I throw my legs over the side of the pod and hoist myself the rest of the way out, until my feet thud on the yellow-carpeted ground. I swing my sack of supplies over my shoulder and

decide which way I should go. My gut says left. Which means I go right. I've learned never to trust it. It's the one thing that always steers me wrong. Johnna laughed when I told her my intuition was defective. I'd certainly got a lemon when it came to instincts.

So, right it is then. I take off in that direction, doing my best to keep my footsteps light and quiet, a task that seems nearly impossible given my clunky work boots and the fact that I've never been the most graceful. It's as though every branch or twig that lays scattered on the forest floor finds a way under my feet. Snaps and crunches follow my every step.

Son of a bitch. The echo of a similar crunch comes way too close.

The damn mist is like an impenetrable smoke screen. Anything beyond an arm's length in any direction is impossible to distinguish. It reminds me of those old horror vids I've watched where a young, beautiful woman—not that I'd consider myself either of those things, but whatever—is trying to hide from the creepy monster trying to kill her. She's in the same type of eerie mist that surrounds me and always collides with the masked killer carrying a machete.

A loud crack from right behind spurs me into action. *Run, you dummy.* That's the only advice I need, even if I take offense to the dummy part of it. I crash through the brush, dodging thick black tree trunks that are wider around than my entire body and beautiful plants with bright blue flowers that, on any other given day, I might have stopped to appreciate. Today's not that

day. My breathing is ragged, and soon a stitch grows in my side. I glance over my shoulder and because it's just my luck, I trip over something and fall.

“Fucking hell.” The curse slips out and the sound of it ricochets off the trees and echoes around me sending birds—or whatever flying animals that they equate to here—scattering, with shrieking whistles and cries.

I manage to get to my feet and take off again only to come to a resounding stop when I run smack dab into a brick wall.

Only brick walls aren't lavender in color and don't smell like chocolate. I stumble backward and my eyes go up and up until they meet a pair of yellow ones with a black vertical slit similar to a cat's. Jesus, he has to be at least seven feet tall. He reaches out and a glint of something metallic flashes. *Machete*. All those horror vids flash again, and I open my mouth to scream, but a large purple hand covers it while the other clasps the back of my head.

“Silence, female,” the serial killing monster holding me whispers harshly.

Panic washes over me and I try to escape his grip, but one second, I'm about to knee him in the balls—or at least where I assume they're located—and the next, I'm flung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He takes off running and everything falls out of my rucksack to scatter along the ground, slowly getting swallowed up by the thick, creepy mist the farther away we get until it's all gone. I'd try again to

scream, but all the breath was pushed out of me and I'm struggling to pull in another.

I pound on his back but only get a sharp, stinging swat on my ass for my trouble. Finally though, I'm able to suck in one large inhale, and sputter as hair comes with it. I spit and try to swipe my hair out of my face, but it's no use. Not with me belly-side down on this hulking beast. I lose all track of time, but after what feels like forever, my abductor slows and then comes to a stop.

He flings me backward and I land on my feet with his hands around my shoulders, steadying me. All the blood that had rushed to my head leaves and a wave of dizziness hits. I stumble and would have fallen if not for his support. Once it passes, I shrug out of his hold and glare at him. My belly flutters.

Holy shit, he's gorgeous. Sharp cheekbones slice across either side of his face, angling toward plush lips I'm a bit envious of. His jawline could cut glass. Johnna would kill for the long, flowing yellowish hair this guy has.

His appearance is so alien, yet not. The lavender skin—I'm ignoring the fact it's my favorite color—is almost leather-like. And damn if I haven't always been a sucker for a man with tats. And this man—alien—has them aplenty. Dark purple designs that are almost getting darker the longer I stare at them.

I blink away the stunned trance his appearance has put me under and take several hurried steps away from him. *Psycho*

killer, remember?

“Who are you? Why did you take me?” I cringe. I’d meant it to come out demanding, but instead it was almost a whimper. My heart pounds. Do I really want him to answer? Can he even understand me?

“I am Zedam. And as for why I took you, it is because if I hadn’t, you would have been the next meal of the luani that was stalking you.” He crosses his arms over the most muscular and impressive tattooed chest I’ve ever laid eyes on.

It takes a second for his words to register. “A meal for what?”

“A luani. One of the fiercest predators on this planet.”

Okay, this is way too much to process. I put my hand against my forehead and pace. Rational Eloise should be screaming and running for her life. Irrational Eloise—the one who rules almost every decision I make—mutters to herself, completely ignoring the man—alien—standing there staring at her. I’m stranded on some strange planet. Something was going to eat me. This alien guy allegedly saved me. I have no food. No water. And my escape pod, smashed as it is and of no use to me anyway, is god knows how far away from here.

“Fuck.”

Two

ZEDAM

I stare at this alien female with disbelief. Who is she, and how did she come here? Most importantly, how is it that she is my *keeshla*? The moment I touched her, my mating marks had flared, burning my skin as they darkened in color.

Fuck is right.

It is impossible that our goddess Deeka has sent this female here as my mate. I am not worthy of a mate. Especially not one as beautiful as she. Pushing away those thoughts, I focus my attention back on her.

“I have told you my name, but you have not told me yours. Or how you are on this planet?”

She stops her back and forth walking and faces me. Dried blood streaks across her face and down the side of it. I clench my fists and fight reaching for her to ensure she is not truly hurt. She mimics my pose and crosses her arms, which pushes her chest mounds farther up. I drag my gaze from them back up to meet her eyes that are so different from mine.

“My name is Eloise, and I’m a crew member on the exploratory ship Helios 3. We were attacked by space pirates, and when the ship exploded, it pushed my escape pod straight into your planet. Speaking of, where exactly am I?”

Ship? Escape pod? These words are familiar, yet the blank spots that have been inside my head for so many seasons don’t let me produce an image of them. I’ve long tempered my frustration at being unable to recall things. I pray daily to Deeka that she will supply me with all my memories again and not only the fragments she gives me on occasion.

“You are on the planet Tavikh.” It’s one of the few pieces of knowledge the goddess has supplied me with.

The female—Eloise—glances around the narrow clearing where we stopped. My dwelling is just within the small grouping of fiku trees behind us. My mating marks flare again as I picture her lying on my furs. Beneath my leg coverings, my cock hardens. Her gaze drops to it, and her eyes—the color of the livando plant—widen. I curse the fear that flashes behind them. Swiftly, I turn my back to her. She gasps.

“Holy shit, you have a tail.”

I glance over my shoulder to find her staring at it. Do human males not have them? My breath catches. *How do I know she’s human?* Damn my head. “We should return to my settlement before it gets any darker. There are creatures who wander this forest. Plus, I have food and water.”

Eloise clears her throat. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

I face her again, my swollen cock finally having receded. “It is not safe out in the open like this. I swear on the goddess Deeka that you have nothing to fear from me female.”

She twists her lips in clear indecision. After several beats, she gives me a small nod. “Okay. But you better not try any funny business, or you’ll regret it.”

I do not know what this funny business is, but based on her threat, I can take a guess. I cross my arm over my chest and place my fist at my heart. The gesture makes me pause. A memory tickles my mind, but just when I’ve almost made sense of it, it disappears like a wisp of smoke. I meet Eloise’s gaze. “On my honor, you are safe from me.”

I would never hurt her. To do so would hurt me. Not only physically, but my heart would break. Hoping my words reassure her, I head toward the trees that hide my small camp. Her footsteps follow closely, and she mumbles to herself. I push away the low hanging branches of the nearest fiku tree to expose my home.

I’ve erected a simple tent from the hides of the dreri I’ve hunted ever since I woke up, many lunar cycles ago, with no memory of who I was or how I’d gotten to the large clearing near the slice of water that ran alongside it. Slowly, bits and pieces of things have returned to me, including my name, but where my village lies and other memories continue to elude me.

I gesture for Eloise to continue forward. As she walks by, I try to observe her impression of my home. It isn’t overly large,

but it serves my needs. There is a small fire pit where I cook, and a nearby flowing water source where I bathe and drink. She slowly turns in a circle, her gaze taking everything in, before coming to a stop facing me.

“This is where you live?”

“Yes.” Does she not approve?

“Where is everyone else?” There is confusion in her tone.

I glance around. “It is only me.” A sharp pain stabs my mind, and I grab the offending spot with a groan.

Eloise steps closer. “Are you okay?”

Trying to ease it, I shake my head and gently rub the place. Moments later, it subsides, but leaves a dull throb behind. “It is nothing.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “That wasn’t nothing. You acted like someone had shoved a hot poker through your head.”

“I merely get the occasional ache. As I said, it is nothing.” I continue putting her off, not wanting her to know I am lacking in any way. Who has empty places in their mind where they do not know things? “Come, there is some water for you to clean your face of the blood. I will start the fire and make us something to eat.”

I head to my tent, draw back the flap, and step inside. There is no flame in the small pit I dug in the center, but it does not matter. I am easily able to make everything out in the dark. From a small table I built, I wet the cloth in the bowl of water

and return to where Eloise remains standing in the middle of my camp.

“For your face.” She takes the cloth from my outstretched hand and gently wipes away the blood caked on her skin.

Once I have the fire going, I pull out the remaining bit of dreri meat I’d smoked. Tomorrow, I will have to go hunting to refill my food stores before the cold season comes. While it is still many lunar cycles away, I want to be prepared. I gesture to the large, covered bowl I made from a fallen branch. “There is water there, and a drinking vessel beside it.”

Eloise crosses the distance and helps herself. The fire is slowly growing larger. Which is a good thing as the sun has completely disappeared and the two moons hang low in the sky. Soon they will glow bright enough to provide more light, but until then, we will have to get by with only the firelight.

She joins me and sits on the narrow bench I also crafted from a young fiku tree that had been trampled. I pass the smoked meat to her. She sniffs it and takes a small bite. She chews and her eyes brighten.

“Oh wow, this is delicious.”

Pride fills me that I’m able to provide for my *keeshla*. She takes several more bites, each one bigger than the last, and slowly chews as though savoring the flavor. When she finishes what I’ve given her, I offer more, but she waves me away.

“I’m full, but thank you.” She glances around again. “So, are you the only other being on this planet? I mean, where are

your people?”

Her questions cause my mind to ache again. “I am the only one here.” I grit my teeth against the pain.

Eloise cocks her head and stares at me with a narrowed gaze, but she doesn’t speak of it again. “You said that there was a lua-something out there.”

“Luani. Yes, it is a massive beast with razor-sharp teeth and claws that can cut through a male with a single swipe. I have fought one only once, last lunar cycle, but it was sick and old so it wasn’t as difficult as it would have been had it been at its full strength.” Even then I was lucky. “They are nearly impossible to kill with only one hunter, so I avoid them. Which is why I took you. I worried I would not be able to protect you.”

Eloise’s pale skin loses more of its color and she sways on her seat. I rush to her side to steady her. My mating marks flare again at the feel of her skin beneath my fingertips. She slowly recovers and her color returns to normal. Or what I assume to be normal for a human. Although I know what she is, I can not bring to memory what another looks like.

“I’m fine now,” she says shakily.

I am hesitant to release her, but I can tell she still does not fully trust me. This is something I will earn from her though. I will do anything for my mate, including protecting her with my life. With great reluctance, I return to my spot near the fire and toss another log on it. Sparks fly and the flame rises higher into the evening sky.

“What do your tattoos mean? Why do they get darker sometimes?” Eloise studies my mating marks.

My body heats from her gaze and I will my cock not to rise again. I have no wish to frighten her. Something tells me that she is not ready to hear the true meaning behind them. I do not want to lie, but I also do not want to scare her away. I try for something in the middle. “They darken when my emotions are high.”

The two small lines of hair above her eyes shift and the distance between them shrinks, causing a small wrinkle to form between them. “You mean like when you’re angry or scared or happy?”

“Mostly when I am happy.” That is the truth. It pleases me greatly when I touch her.

“Hmmm,” she mumbles, and the wrinkle slowly smooths out. “What do you do out here?”

I do not understand what she’s asking. “This is my home. I protect it. I also hunt, gather supplies, prepare the furs, make coverings for each season, and anything else that might need to be done. That is what I do out here.”

Eloise’s skin color grows slightly paler and I’m ready to rush over if she nearly falls again, but she remains steady. For several beats of my heart, the only sounds between us are the crackling fire and the faint tapping of the tiny claws of the family of ketri that live in a small hole in the ground just within the trees. I ran across one of the kits who’d been injured, possibly by a predator. Its dark-colored fur had been

caked with blood, and I'd found several puncture wounds along its side. I'd nursed the small thing back to health and returned it to its home. On occasion, the kit returns. It chitters at me as though making conversation, nibbles the berry of the korret bush I find out on my hunts that I give it, and then it returns home. Days will pass before I see it again, but it will show up.

"Can I ask another question?" Eloise speaks up, breaking the silence.

"You may ask me anything you wish."

"How can you understand me? I mean, I assume my translator is helping me understand your language, because you're definitely not speaking English. But how is it you understand me?" She tips her head just slightly sideways.

I blink. Blink again. Then the same, familiar stabbing pain shoots through my head and this time I can not stop myself from clutching my head and crying out from the agony of it. I try to pray to Deeka to ease it, but it continues for endless beats. Until soft hands stroke my hair. As quickly as the pain stabbed through me, it stops. Behind it is Eloise's voice, but it is her like I've never heard before.

Awareness slowly returns. I'm lying on my back, but my head is cushioned by the softest, sweetest smelling surface. I carefully open my eyes, waiting for the pain to return, but it does not. Above me is my beautiful mate, her face tight with worry. The sound continues coming from her as she gently runs her fingers over my brow ridges. Pleasure like nothing

I've experienced before courses through me. Her mouth closes and her soothing voice stops. Yet we still stare at each other as emotion sparks between us.

Three

ELOISE

I nearly freak out when Zedam grabs his head and topples over.

That reaction is certainly not *nothing*.

Frantic, I debate what to do, until I remember my mother singing to me whenever I got hurt when I was a little girl. I nearly tumble off the log in my rush to get to him. As gently as possible, I cradle his head in my lap, run my hands over it, and sing. It's the one—the only—song I remember from my childhood.

As quickly as the pain hit him, it stops. I don't quit singing though. Zedam's hands lower and my fingers find themselves caressing the hard bone ridges where his eyebrows should be. His leathery skin is so much softer than I imagined it to be. The tattoos that decorate portions of his shoulders and chest flare brighter and then darken in color. He wasn't being quite truthful with me, because he's certainly not happy at the moment.

Pushing aside the question, I glance down, only to find him staring up at me with something like wonder and awe in those alien-looking yellow eyes that are starting to become familiar.

Look away, Eloise.

Except I can't. It's almost like there's a tether connecting us. No matter how hard I tug or yank, it won't break. In fact, it only draws us closer, until I'm bent over him, our mouths nearly touching. His breath ghosts hotly over my skin. Then, in a moment of madness, I close the sliver of distance that remains between us and press my lips to his.

The kiss is soft. Tentative. Almost as if Zedam has never done it before. I'm not sure why, but that pleases me. It can't be jealousy. But I do like the fact that I might be the first. A boldness comes over me and I flick my tongue out to swipe across his lips. He jerks slightly, and cursing myself for doing something he doesn't like, I try to draw away, but his hand curls around the back of my neck, holding me to him.

He returns the gesture with his own tongue. It's as cautious as I'd been, like he's gauging my reaction. I open my mouth, and it's as though knowledge suddenly fills him, because he takes control, deepening the kiss. One minute, Zedam is lying on the ground and I'm above him, and the next, our positions are reversed, with me on my back and him over me. I should be panicking, but instead I wrap my arms around his shoulders and let myself fall into the best kiss I've ever had. By an alien no less.

The pleasure continues with the heavy weight of him over me. It's not crushing, merely warm and protective. His tongue sweeps through my mouth, tangling with mine in a sensual dance. Zedam's fingers gently caress my cheek. I expect them to start wandering, but it's like he's satisfied with just that touch and the kiss. Far too soon, he drags his lips from mine. I open my eyes to stare up at him, the rise and fall of our chests completely in sync.

His long yellow hair flows over one shoulder and down his back. The firelight brightens one side of his face while casting the other in shadow. His most visible yellow catlike eye reflects the light, and his vertical pupil has dilated. I reach up and caress the near-black marks that have darkened along his purple skin. His muscles flex and move beneath my fingertips. My gaze meets Zedam's again. That same striking awareness of him hits me. What is happening?

"What do these tattoos mean?" I ask again in a whisper, not satisfied with the answer he'd given me. Not after that kiss and the way they've flared every time we've touched. Even when he was in pain.

"They are my mating marks." The confession comes out low and gruff. "When a Tavikhi warrior meets and touches his *keeshla*—his fated mate—the marks flare to life and grow bright in color before darkening to their final shade to mark our skin and show that Deeka has blessed us."

I blink. *Keeshla? Deeka?* Does that mean...? "Are you saying I'm your mate?" It can't be. *Then why do you have this warm*

feeling in your belly?

“Yes. As soon as I carried you away to safety, they were activated. Our goddess has blessed me with a beautiful mate.” Zedam caresses my cheek again with this thumb.

I push at his shoulders, and he moves away to sit back on his heels while I push myself upright. How can I be this alien’s mate? Fated mates aren’t real. Are they? I pivot away from him and draw my knees to my chest and stare into the fire. This is all too much to take in. Between the escape, the crash, and then being carried away by a stranger, it’s more than one person can handle for a day. Or, at least more than I can handle. Let alone adding in the fact that the alien stranger thinks I’m his fated mate.

Zedam rises to his feet and holds out a hand for me. “It is late. Sleep, and we can talk more in the morning.”

Slowly, I reach up and take it and he pulls me to standing. I glance at the single tent and back at him. Am I prepared to have him inside there with me? “Where will you sleep?”

“Beneath my furs with my mate. But only for sleep. You have my word.”

I study him a moment longer and nod. I believe him. He didn’t have to stop with only that kiss we just shared. I still have so many questions, including what had triggered that pain in his head. There is definitely something he is leaving out. I stifle a yawn as I let Zedam lead me into the tent. It’s nearly pitch black in here and I’m afraid of stumbling over something, but

he continues to hold me close and guides me across the distance.

“I will make sure you have sufficient lighting in here tomorrow evening. I apologize that the fire hasn’t been started.”

“Thank you.”

“My furs are here.” We stop and he clasps my hand, guiding it toward the ground until I’m touching something soft.

“Let me take off my boots first.” I sit at the edge of the pallet and unlace them. Once they’re off, I glance around, but it’s too dark for me to even find a place to set them.

Zedam’s fingers brush mine. “I will place them nearby.”

With that settled, I climb under the soft furs and scoot to the farthest side, but facing where he will lie. There’s a soft, rustling sound, then a pause, and finally he settles in next to me. I wish I could make him out, but it’s too dark in here, even though my eyes have adjusted. Everything is quiet except his light breathing and the occasional pop from the fire outside.

Whereas moments ago I’d barely been able to keep my eyes open, I find myself wide awake. The heat radiating off Zedam’s body warms me. There’s a comfort in the fact that if I had to crash on any alien planet, at least I crashed on one where there’s a friendly face. One that kisses me as though he never wants to stop. His markings appear in my mind. Mating marks if he’s to be believed. I have this sudden urge to know more about him. Starting with the headaches.

“Will you tell me why your head hurts you?” I coax gently. “I can tell it’s extremely painful when it happens.”

There’s a subtle movement of the shadows. “Tomorrow, *keeshla*. Morning will come soon. I promise I will try to answer all your questions then.”

Having to be satisfied with that, I don’t ask again. Instead, I tuck my hands beneath my cheek and close my eyes while Zedam’s breathing finally evens out.



Warmth embraces me, as does softness. My bed in the crew cabin I share with Johnna isn’t this comfortable. It’s lumpy, with a thin mattress and a scratchy blanket. The cabin also doesn’t smell of smoked meat mixed with another unidentifiable scent. I breathe in deeply, and with the air I take in, the memories come with it.

My eyes jerk open. A faint amount of light creeps in around the flap closing of the tent. I can make out shapes of what appears to be a table with something round resting on top of it and several long sticks or branches propped up against one of the side walls. I’m alone.

I throw back the furs and spot my boots a short distance away. Quickly, I shove my feet inside and lace them up before walking out of the tent. Beside the fire where something is cooking, Zedam squats and reaches out to check on the food. He glances in my direction and my breath catches. He’s even more stunning in the light of day. His long golden hair is kept

in some sort of braid that flows down his back. Every one of his muscles stands out, rippling with his movements.

The mating marks that decorate his skin draw my eye. Visually, I trace them. Admire them. I meet his gaze again and there's a small smirk on his face as though he can read my thoughts and how much I'm appreciating the view he offers. I clear my throat and glance away briefly before closing the distance and taking a place on the log.

"Something smells good." I breathe in the scents.

"I caught several peshku in the water. Their meat is tender and flaky. They're also easy to cook over the flame." Zedam reaches forward, plucks a small piece off the spit, and hands it over.

It's hot, but not so much that it burns me. I pop what I can only assume is some type of fish—I hope—in my mouth. It melts over my tongue in the most delicious way. A moan escapes.

"Oh my god, that is so good."

He chuckles. "I am glad you are pleased."

Zedam removes the two spits from over the fire and passes one of them to me. We eat in silence. I completely devour the fish, even going so far as to suck the meat off one of the bones that is far bigger than one belonging to any fish on Earth. He tosses his skewer into the fire and I do the same.

I nibble my lip.

"Um, is there a place for me to relieve myself?"

“Of course. I will show you.” He stands and I follow to where he points to a small gap between the trees. “Just past there you will find a place.”

I give my thanks and traipse through the ankle-high yellow grass. It’s only a short distance from camp and I’m sure Zedam will hear if something comes, but I stay alert, quickly take care of business, and return to the fire. He waits there with a bowl of water and a handful of green berries. “For washing.”

“Thank you.” I dip my hands in the water and rub the berries between them. To my surprise, they suds up like soap.

Once my hands are clean, I turn back to him. It’s morning and time for more questions. As though he can read my mind, he gestures toward the bench. I take a seat and wait. Zedam sits quietly on the ground with his ankles crossed and his knees drawn up.

“I suppose it is time for your questions.” His tone is weary.

Four

ZEDAM

This is when my *keeshla* discovers I am an unworthy mate. But Eloise deserves to know the truth, no matter how painful it might be. Not just inside my head either, but in my heart. I meet her eyes while I dread her first question.

She studies me a moment, like she is trying to decide where to start. “What do those headaches really mean?”

It is as I suspected and that would be what she wants to know the most. Unable to witness the disappointment that will no doubt come to her, I stare into the fire. To really explain them, I must start at the beginning. “Several seasons ago, I woke up alone, not knowing where I was, except that I was still on Tavikh. I didn’t recognize my surroundings. It wasn’t a place I believe I’d ever been before. Nothing around me was familiar aside from the fiku trees and the color of the dirt.”

I pause and bring back that day and the feeling of helplessness I couldn’t recall ever experiencing before. I didn’t know for sure, but an inner voice said I had not.

“It wasn’t just the place I did not know though. It was nearly everything. I did not even know who *I* was. I had no knowledge of my name or where my people were. My head was filled with an endless number of blank spots where memories should be. I knew how to hunt, at least. But not knowing what else to do, I wandered for many turns of the sun, searching for... something. Yet nothing came.”

Finally, I force myself to meet Eloise’s gaze, expecting disgust and contempt. Instead, I am met with soft eyes filled with... understanding? She scoots off the bench and comes to sit beside me. Her hand encloses mine and she threads her five fingers through my four. I stare down at our entwined connection—her pale skin complementing mine—and glance back up at her in wonder.

“Is that why your head hurts? Because you’re trying to remember?”

I nod. “Over time, little things have come back to me. Like my name, and flashes of people who look like me. I’ve also had visions of a different species that brings anger with them. I can only assume these other beings are enemies, although I do not know what they are called or where on this planet they reside. I know how to make a fire, tan hides, prepare food and coverings, and build a tent. But anytime I think too hard about *how* I know these things, a stabbing pain shoots through my head.”

Eloise’s shortest finger rubs up and down mine. “Where I come from, we call what you have amnesia. It’s all the things

you described. The loss of memory with bits and pieces returning.”

“There is a name for this disease? Is there a cure?”

She shakes her head and my heart sinks.

“I don’t know a lot about it,” she says. “I’ve heard stories about people who’ve suffered from it. Some recover all their memories over time, but some don’t. There’s no way to tell for sure, I’m afraid.”

It is as I thought. I am defective. It has been many seasons. If I was going to recover from this amnesia, should I not have done so already?

“Hey.” Eloise squeezes my hand. “Don’t give up. I don’t want you hurting if that’s what it means to remember, but I also don’t think you should stop trying.”

I try to offer her a reassuring smile, but it comes out forced, I’m sure. “It is my turn for a question.”

She jerks her head slightly and blinks. “Alright.”

“What was that sound you were making last night when you were comforting me? It was beautiful.”

A bright color climbs up Eloise’s cheeks and she ducks her head. I place a finger under her chin and tip it up. I don’t want her to hide from me for any reason. Her small tongue darts out to wet her lips and my gaze is drawn to it. I have to withhold my groan. Thankfully, she does not appear to notice where my attention has gone.

“I was singing. My mother used to sing to me when I was a little girl and had hurt myself. It always made me feel better, so I thought I would see if it helped you. Do your people not sing?”

“No, I do not think this is something we do. I very much like it though. And it did help. In fact, it’s the only thing that has ever made the pain stop.” I recall the fact with awe. The minute she started this singing and touched me, it disappeared completely. A thought occurs to me. I pivot toward her, never loosening the hold she still has on my hand. “I would like to try something, if you are agreeable to helping me.”

Eloise nods. “I’ll do my best.”

“I would like for you to do this singing for me while I attempt to bring forth more memories. Your voice and touch made my pain cease instantly. Perhaps if we did this together, it might cure me of this amnesia disease without hurting my head.”

Her eyes widen, but she straightens with determination. “Do you think it might work?”

“There is only one way to find out.”

With that, Eloise opens her mouth, and that glorious sound comes from it again. It is the same one she made last night. I close my eyes and concentrate. All the things that have already returned to me are there, but I search for one of the blank spots and focus on it, straining for anything to appear. A twinge of pain works its way through, but it is bearable. Nothing like it has been previously when I have tried to recall any memories.

I strain harder, trying to force my mind to work and the blank space to fill, but after long moments, it is still as dark and empty as it has been. Cursing, I release Eloise's hand and jump to my feet. I stomp away with frustration, toward the water source, and stand rigidly at its edge with my fists clenched at my hips and my tail thrashing in angry slaps behind me.

Loud footsteps follow until a gentle touch against my tail tip makes it settle. Tiny arms wrap around my waist and a warm body embraces me from behind. Eloise presses herself against me, holding tight. Her breath tickles my skin. My emotions calm with her presence, and I lay my hand over hers.

"I'm sorry it didn't work this time. But that doesn't mean it never will. We just have to keep trying, as long as it doesn't cause you any pain," she says quietly.

I turn to face her, and her arms remain wrapped around me. My mate is both wise and beautiful. Unable to resist, I cradle her head between my palms and lower myself to mouth touch with her again. She had surprised me with this last night, but I enjoyed it immensely. This is not something my people do, I am sure of it, because the sensations of touching my mouth to hers, tangling my tongue with hers, was something I would surely remember if I'd done so before. The pleasure is that great.

Eloise opens for me and I sweep my tongue inside to taste her. She moves even closer and rubs her chest mounds against me. Beneath my leg coverings, my cock hardens. I try to draw my hips away so as not to frighten her again, but she is having

none of that. Instead, she pushes herself against me. I love that she does not hesitate telling me what she wants.

As bold as she is, I cup her chest mound within my hand. She fills it perfectly, the little nub in the center hardening beneath my touch. Eloise's hand slides down my back and caresses my tail. I nearly release my pleasure like an untried kit. I had not understood how sensitive it is.

She pulls her head back and stares up at me. "Was that okay? Touching your tail, I mean? You jerked like I'd hurt you."

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips. "It only hurt in the most exquisite way."

That pretty color enters her cheeks again. Then a mischievous twinkle sparks in her eyes and she grips the base of my tail between her small hands and gently squeezes. A groan of pleasure rumbles out of my chest. "You play a dangerous game, my *keeshla*."

In answer, Eloise rises up on her toes and mouth touches me again. We stand at the bank of the water, continuing to hold each other and mating with our mouths until chittering sounds from near our feet separates us. She glances down and lets out a squeak.

"What is that?"

I release my hold on her and squat down to greet my little friend. It sits back on its two rear legs and chitters again. I rub its head and it makes a sound of pleasure. "This is a ketri. I nursed it back to health after it had been injured a lunar cycle

ago and it occasionally returns to visit me. Come, it is harmless and only a kit.”

Slowly, Eloise lowers herself next to me and sits on her knees. The ketri creeps closer and my mate gently holds her hand out. The kit sniffs her and then rolls onto its back with an excited chitter. She laughs—a sweet sound—and carefully pets the animal’s belly. I stare in complete wonder. Ketris are not so easily trusting, and for this one to present itself so submissively to my mate, shows extreme trust. It also shows what a good heart she has.

“Oh my god, he’s so soft. I thought his fur would be coarse and prickly, but it’s not at all. He kind of reminds me of a chipmunk. It’s a small rodent-type animal that once belonged on Earth. Sadly, they don’t exist anymore. I always thought they were adorable though.” She turns toward me. “Does he have a name?”

“No. It is not usual for my people to give names to the creatures of this planet.”

“Hmmm,” she murmurs with another scratch to the ketri’s belly. “Well, I think he looks like a Theodore.”

As though it knows we are speaking of it, it flips over and runs around Eloise with a loud chitter. Another laugh spills from her, making her eyes light up. It circles her once more before running toward the tree line where its home is buried. My mate watches until it disappears. Her lips turn down slightly and her eyes lose their sparkle. I reach for her. “Do not worry, my *keeshla*, it will return. It never stays gone long. Come,

there are tasks that must be completed today. We will continue our questions while we work.”

Five

ELOISE

By tasks, I had no idea that Zedam meant he'd be teaching me how to fish. After Theodore disappeared, we'd returned to the tent, and from inside, he pulled out two spears and handed one of them to me. The thing is so heavy, I nearly dropped it, which of course made him chuckle.

We've been standing on the shore of the river for what I swear feels like hours. Zedam has caught ten times the number of fish, or *peshku*, as I have. My single, pitiful catch lies at my feet in a mocking display of my terrible skills. Despite that, he's been incredibly patient with me, even after the time I nearly fell in.

"I've never been very coordinated." I can recall all the bumps and bruises I suffered during my training at the academy. "This is hopeless."

"Nothing is hopeless, my *keeshla*," Zedam reassures me. "You show promise."

I shoot him a glance, trying to gauge him, but he actually looks serious. My shoulders sag a little. “Thank you, but I’m not sure that’s true. I appreciate you saying it though.”

“I would never lie to you.”

That makes me feel better, I suppose.

“Tell me about your home,” Zedam says as he catches yet another of the peshku. “Since I can not tell you more about Tavikh beyond what you have already seen, I would like to hear about yours.”

I prop the spear on the ground and swipe the sweat off my forehead. Who knew fishing was such a workout? *Focus, Eloise*. Yes, right.

“Well, I’m originally from Earth, but I haven’t been on planet for a very long time.” Not since my mom died. “For the last five years, I’ve been part of the crew of Helios 3. It’s an exploratory ship that travels the galaxies, searching for new planets and new life. My specialty is computers—tech—and data. I make sure that, when we terraform a new planet, it gets set up for communication. Not only with the inhabitants, but also with any nearby satellites and our ship, so it can be contacted when the people on the planet need anything.”

Which leaves me ill-prepared for a primitive planet where none of that exists.

Zedam’s attention has shifted from the water to me, and he listens intently. “That sounds like you were a very important member of this crew.”

“Yeah, maybe I was.” There were times when I didn’t think so but saying it all out loud definitely does change my perspective. I worked hard at the academy to get my degree. The ability to create an entire tech infrastructure for brand new societies has always fascinated me, especially when I learned that we’d begun terraforming other planets. I almost wish we’d stopped on this planet before. Maybe I would have met Zedam sooner.

I glance down, and right in front of me is a giant peshku. I quickly grab my spear and stab it into the water. With a shout, I jerk it back out, and there, impaled on the pointed tip, is my prize. “Oh my god, I did it.”

“Well done, *keeshla*.”

A ridiculous amount of pride swells inside me at his compliment. I point my spearhead down and use my foot to hold my catch while I yank the spear out of its body. I’m not brave enough to touch it with my hands yet. I’m not sure I ever will be. Zedam bends and shoves his haul into a sack and then adds my two. “Now we clean them.”

My stomach lurches a little at that. I’ve always been squeamish with dead things. I’m not sure if I’m up to the task. I don’t want to disappoint him, and I really do want to contribute. We walk the short distance back to the camp and he sets the sack on the ground next to the bench I’ve been sitting on. Then Zedam brings over a small table from beside the tent, along with two knives.

He gestures for me to sit and hands me one of the blades. “I’ll show you first, and then you try.”

I nod uncertainly, but I don’t protest. Instead, I carefully study exactly what he does. Thankfully there isn’t any blood. I’m honestly not sure I could have handled it if there had been. He finishes the first one, and then reaches into the sack to pull out my last catch, which also happens to be the biggest of the day.

While Zedam watches, I begin. I’m a little slow, but he’s more than patient with me and gently corrects me if I make a mistake. Each touch of his hand on mine brings a small spark with it. It takes everything I have to concentrate on what I’m doing. By the time I’m finished, there’s still too much meat left on the bone and it’s not the neatest job, but I’m still pleased with how well I did.

After another word of praise, he hands me another peshku while he brings out another for himself. Silently we work, and before long, they’re all cleaned and ready to be cooked.

“You did well, mate.”

I preen at this. “Thank you.”

While Zedam cooks them, I wash my hands using the same berries from this morning. Then I sit back on the bench and observe him working. He’s quick and efficient, as though he’s done this hundreds of times. No doubt he has. I’m entirely too aware of the man—alien—beside me. His scent. The way his muscles flex and move. More than once, our eyes meet and hold, before I quickly break the connection and study the ground.

I take another quick peek. We haven't tried me singing and us touching again to try and recall some of his memories. I consider his amnesia. From my understanding, it usually occurs after some sort of trauma to the head.

"Zedam?"

He lifts his gaze from his task to stare at me with eyes that no longer seem weird or alien. "What is it, *keeshla*?"

"You said that you woke up in an unfamiliar place all that time ago. Can you recall if your head hurt then? I mean, like you'd been injured? Was there blood?"

His brow ridges shift and his eyes lose focus, almost as though he's thinking hard and trying to remember. He nods. "Yes. I stopped at the water flow and rinsed the blood from myself. There was a large lump on my head where most of the pain came from."

Zedam stiffens, and wide-eyed, he stares at me. "I was also covered in green blood."

Green? "Is that not what color yours is?"

He shakes his head. "No, I bleed black."

Because of course he does. "Okay, so that means you must have been hunting something. Can you think of anything that has green blood? Any creature you've killed?"

Zedam has that look of concentration on his face, but then it shifts, and even from this distance, I can tell that pain accompanies it. Once again, I rush to his side and palm his cheeks, forcing his gaze to clear and his eyes to meet mine. I

lean forward and kiss him. Something wraps around my waist and tugs me closer so we're chest-to-chest. I end the kiss and stare at him. All the pain that had been present, has been erased. His lips curl just slightly, bringing out a single dimple. My belly flutters.

“What is this mouth touching you do?”

“It's called kissing. Do you not like it?” Surely I haven't been reading him wrong.

“I like it very much. Perhaps too much. Not just because it makes the pain here”—he points to his head—“go away.”

I can't help but laugh. “I don't think there's such a thing as too much.”

Zedam's eyes darken, and his gaze turns intent and heated. Okay, so maybe I get what he means, considering he's looked at me that way more than once tonight. “This kissing makes me want to see how the rest of you tastes. I would like to kissing your chest mounds. Your cunt.”

As if to emphasize his point, he puts a few inches of distance between us. Enough that he's able to slip his hand in and cup my breast. I suck in a breath and hold it, not just from his touch but also his words. My nipple tightens and a spark is lit which travels through me and settles in a warm, gooey puddle of arousal right in my center.

“Kiss.” It's only a whisper, but it sounds like a shout in the silence that crackles with sexual tension.

“Kiss?” Zedam cocks his head in confusion. “Did I get it wrong? You said kissing.”

I have to clear my throat to be able to speak. It’s clogged with need and want. In response, I ghost my lips across his again, flicking my tongue out to tease and taste. “That is a kiss.”

Pressing myself harder into his hand, I cradle his face again and repeat the touch, only this time he opens and I swoop my tongue inside to gather up his flavor. “This is kissing,” I murmur against his lips.

Another heavy weight wraps around my waist, adding to the first, and Zedam deepens the kiss, taking control until the scent of something burning reaches us. We break apart like someone cut the tether holding us together.

“Fuck.” He grabs the now blackened peshku he’d placed over the fire to cook.

I sit back and cover my mouth with my hand to hold back to giggle. I’ve never been kissed so silly that a meal has burned before. It only goes to show how much Zedam affects me. It’s insane, this thing between us. I’ve never felt like this before. As though I’ve known him forever. He says we’re fated. There’s this weird part of me that says he might be right. What other explanation could there be for me to have such strong emotions about him? Or for me to have crashed on this planet in the first place?

He’s gotten rid of the scorched, inedible pieces and started over. I shift to move back to the bench, but Zedam’s hand

stays me. “Sit with me, please. Your close presence soothes me. We shall save the kissing for later.”

My cheeks grow heated at his words. I settle back next to him while he finishes cooking our lunch.

“I did remember something.”

That makes me sit up straighter. “What was it?”

“There were two other males like me. Each of us held a sword and we fought beside each other against the same beings I’ve seen in my head. The ones that make anger boil inside me. They are the ones that bleed green. The enemies.”

Well, that’s definitely something. “Do you know who the other two men were?”

Zedam shakes his head slightly, his long hair swishing across his back, and breathes out a heavy sigh full of obvious frustration. “Only that they were familiar to me. The way we fought together—moved together—it was as though we were as one. As though we had done this many times before.”

I lay my hand on his knee. “That’s good. Little memories at a time add up.”

He makes a noncommittal sound. It hurts me that he’s disappointed in not being able to remember more. It’s clear in the way his body curls and his shoulders sag just slightly. Like the burden is too heavy to carry. Well, I’m here, and he doesn’t have to carry it alone anymore.

Six

ZEDAM

We pass several turns of the sun catching peshku for our meals and wandering through the surrounding trees while I teach Eloise about the various plant life on Tavikh. I point out the ones to avoid and the ones that provide berries that are safe to eat. She learns to identify healing plants as well and how to start a fire. We also practice this kissing. Something I enjoy far too much, because it leaves my cock hard and aching each night as we lay in our furs. Eloise has shyly explored my body, and I hers. I long to feel the tight clutch of her cunt around me, but I try to remain patient.

I need to hunt, but I do not want to leave Eloise here unprotected. A lone dreri—a creature she said kind of resembles a deer from Earth—had stumbled too close to our camp and I was able to bring it down, but it will not last long. Our food stores are dwindling, and the pile of hides I've been using to make coverings has shrunk as I've been providing new chest and leg coverings for my mate.

“You look deep in thought. Is everything all right?” She sits in front of the fire eating the rest of the peshku she caught this morning.

“I need to go hunting.” The sun sits high overhead, but there has been a small drop in temperature each morning. “The cold season will be here within the next two lunar cycles and finding creatures will soon become more difficult. But I cannot leave you here alone.”

Eloise flattens her lips and hesitates. “Why don’t I come and help? I’m getting better with my spear. I’ll do my best and try not to be a bother or hindrance.”

I reach across and cup her cheek. She leans into my touch and pleasure rolls over me that my mate enjoys it. “You could never be either of those things, my *keeshla*. Finish eating, and we will prepare.”

She quickly finishes off the remaining peshku and then rises, dusting the dirt from her lush ass. As always, I admire her curves. They are unlike those of Tavikhi females, who have no chest mounds or plump bottoms. I freeze at the new memory. If there are male Tavikhi who look similar to me and it would appear I’m familiar with our females’ appearance, does that mean they are out there somewhere? Perhaps even searching for me? A sharp pain spikes in my head, but just as quickly, disappears.

Eloise’s tender touch, delicate scent, and her singing soothe me. Her voice trails off, but she continues caressing the mating

marks along my chest. “Did you remember something just now? Is that why you were hurting?”

“Just more visions of others like me, but nothing else.”

She steps closer and wraps her arms around my waist. Her cheek rests against me. I hold her close, thankful for her embrace. It helps to ease the hurt and anger.

“I’m sorry you are in pain,” Eloise murmurs, her breath tickling my skin. “But I’m glad I can help make it stop.”

“I would endure anything if it meant you were always by my side, my *keeshla*.”

She lifts her head and I lean down for a kiss. If we didn’t need to hunt, I would carry my mate into our tent, and we would not leave our furs until the morning. It takes all my effort to draw back from her. “Come, sweet Eloise, let us search for dreri, or perhaps we will find some lloshko. We will save mating for later.”

Her cheeks brighten in color. I run my finger along one. “What does this mean? When your skin changes shades?”

If anything, it darkens, turning into the same color as the mjeder berry. She places her hands on either side of her face and will not meet my eyes. Perhaps this is a sign of distress. Have I made unwelcome advances? “If you do not welcome my kiss, please forgive me.”

Eloise turns quickly to me and rests her fingertips along my chest. “No, that’s not it. It’s nothing really. Our skin just gets

red sometimes. Like if we're hot or angry. But it can happen when we're embarrassed."

I study her. I do not believe she is overheated or upset, so it must be this 'embarrassed.' Nearly all of her language has translated in my head, but this is a word I do not know. "What does that mean?"

She hesitates. "It's hard to explain. I guess that, sometimes, the way you kiss me or look at me makes me a little self-conscious. Shy, I guess."

"You do not ever have to be shy or,"—I pause to replay the word in my mind—"embarrassed with me. We are mates, and neither of us should change colors for the other. Unless, of course, they are the darkening of the mating marks. That is a blessing."

I reach for her hand. "Let us get our spears and we will bring home the largest *dreri* we can find."



The sun is slowly falling, and on the opposite side of the sky, one of the moons is peeking through the trees while the other remains hidden below it. Eloise has done well with not only being quiet as we travel through the forest, but she spotted the first leburin that had darted out from beneath the nearby lulebore bush and quickly speared it. Then her eyes leaked water—something she called tears—and she sobbed against my chest. My *keeshla* has a soft heart. She quickly wiped

away the tears, took in a shuddering breath, and stated she was ready to continue.

Since the first one, we have caught several more leburin—an animal she says is similar to a rabbit from Earth but without the tall ears or small, round tail—which are tucked in the carrying sack I have slung across my chest. She leaked tears with each one and then thanked them for providing us meat. While this will get us through several turns of the sun, we need to find a couple dreri, which has been proving difficult today.

A rustling occurs ahead, and I raise my hand for us to stop. Eloise holds her spear at the ready, her gaze fixed on the spot in front of us. I breathe in and scent several things. There is a dhembe nearby and it smells like blood, as though injured. Perhaps it escaped another predator. I wave my fingers at my mate for us to proceed slowly. She follows in my footsteps, placing her small, booted feet exactly where I step. It has served us well for the silence needed with the hunt.

I continue along the trail, carefully stepping over fallen branches and bypassing the sharp points of the trendafili bush that edges the path on one side. Tension radiates off Eloise, thick enough that it bounces off me. Finally, I spot the source of the sound through a break in the trees. A lone dhembe, stumbling slightly from a large wound in its side. One that still holds the weapon used to try and kill it. I'm on instant alert, my gaze darting around, searching for an enemy that might be lurking nearby. I breathe in deeply again, but the only thing I smell is the dying creature.

Unwilling to let it suffer any longer, I rush forward with my blade and swiftly slit its throat. I also thank it for providing for us, because it feels like the right thing to do. It is not something I have ever done before, but I will continue to do so from now on. Something I can thank Eloise for. She joins me and squats at my side as I remove the long-handled blade embedded in its side. Her lips move in their own silent thanks, and she turns to me with a cautious glance around.

“Do you know who did this?”

“I do not. But it isn’t safe to remain here, in case the hunters are searching for their kill. Let us head back in the direction of our camp.” I hoist the dhembe over my shoulder, and my mate and I rise.

We set off for home, both of us remaining on alert. No other sounds beyond the usual forest ones reach me, nor do any other scents. Still, that does not mean there isn’t an enemy close by. It only makes me that much more determined to quickly reach camp and make sure that Eloise is safe. Neither of us speak until we reach the small clearing where we reside.

I drop our bounty near the fire. “I am going to wash and then get to work.”

She nods and picks up my spear and hers and props them against our tent. I quickly remove all the blood from my hands and chest and return to my mate, who is already getting the fire started. She glances at our kills, does that thing with her lips she does whenever she is uncertain, and peers up at me.

She clears her throat. “I’m not really good with blood. I’m not sure how much help I’m going to be with whatever it is you need to do to them.”

I reach for her. “You were wonderful today and helped me tremendously. I will take care of the majority of this, and if there is a task you think you will be able to perform, then I am more than happy to show you. If not, that is all right as well. I have been doing this for many seasons. You have a kind and gentle heart, my *keeshla*.”

Eloise laughs softly. “More like a weak and sensitive stomach.”

While I set to work skinning our kills, my mate flitters around the camp, tidying and getting things ready for our next meal. She travels twice to the water source and fills two bowls. One for drinking, and another for inside our tent that we use for quick washing before we crawl into our furs and when we rise in the morning. When there is nothing further for her to do, she finally joins me, but keeps her gaze averted.

“Today is the first time I’ve ever killed anything,” she breaks the silence. “I barely passed the combat portion of our training, because I had a hard time shooting. I’m sure part of it is my aversion to blood, but another part is that I watched my mother waste away, and I was with her when she died. I’ve seen what death looks like and a part of my mind rebelled against being the one who caused the death of something else.”

Death is all part of the circle of life. It is neither good nor bad. We have always been welcomed by Deeka when our time comes. Do humans worship their own god or goddess? “I have never before thanked my kills for what they provide me. That is something you taught me, but it is a good practice to maintain. The creatures give their life in order for us to eat and survive. The least I can do is thank them so their death does not go unappreciated.”

Eloise lifts her shoulder in a gesture I’ve come to recognize. “It just felt like the right thing to do, I guess.”

“It is.”

She finally glances toward the discarded furs. “Is there something I can do with those?”

“If you are able to clean them in the water source and help to remove the fatty tissue on their undersides, that would be helpful. I will show you how to scrape it off with a blade. But, if it will upset your stomach, then leave it, and I will take care of it.”

She straightens her shoulders in a determined gesture and gathers them all up. “No, I will do it.”

As she walks toward the water source, I cannot help but keep my gaze on her. Eloise is a worthy mate, and I will continue to thank Deeka for her for all the rest of my days.

Seven

ELOISE

A small fire burns in the shallow pit in the center of Zedam's tent, making shadows dance along the walls. I'm lying on the pallet of furs, trying not to move. Every part of my body aches. Who knew cleaning an alien saber-tooth tiger hide would be so much work? The wounded animal Zedam and I had come across resembled the prehistoric predator, all the way down to its two upper tusks that curved downward. Only this thing was black and purple. Apparently to blend into the forest.

It still freaks me out to be surrounded by massive trees with black trunks and purple leaves. Add in the bright yellow dirt that makes up the ground, and the yellow grass that resembles cotton balls on a kebab, and there's no doubt I'm not on Earth. The two moons that hang high in the sky only further cements the fact.

The flap covering the entrance is lifted, and Zedam steps inside. In his hands is a small bowl. "I brought something that

should help ease your aching muscles. If you do not mind, I am happy to apply it for you.”

At this point, he could do anything he wanted so long as it helped with the soreness. “Yes, please.”

He moves across the space and kneels beside me. His gaze heats and travels over me. “You will need to remove your chest covering.”

We stare at each other for a moment while I weigh my decision. For the last few nights, we’ve fooled around a little, but it’s all been over the clothes. There’s a look in his eyes that tells me if I remove my shirt, there might be a bit more to whatever he’s about to do. Am I ready for that? To become Zedam’s mate?

A sense of certainty and boldness come over me. I’m probably not getting off this planet. I’m not sure I even want to. Not anymore. “I’m not sure I can move even that much. You’re probably going to have to do it for me.”

His nostrils flare and the black vertical slits of his eyes dilate. He sets the bowl down and helps me sit up. I bite back a groan of pain. “I will ease you, my *keeshla*.”

We both know he means more than just my aching muscles.

I peer up at him. Even sitting, Zedam towers over me. With gentle hands, he lifts the hem of the shirt he made for me and drags it up my body and over my head before carefully setting it aside. Despite the fire burning nearby, my nipples harden.

His gaze drops to my breasts, and I nearly combust at the blatant need on his face.

He finally manages to drag his eyes away from me and picks up the bowl. I remain still as he moves behind me. Curiosity makes me want to turn to see what he's doing, but I stay facing forward. Waiting for whatever comes next. Warm hands glide along my skin, over the slope of my shoulder and down my arms, leaving a slickness behind. A fragrance similar to eucalyptus—but with a medicinal tinge—surrounds me.

Zedam begins a gentle massage. First my upper neck, then the top of my shoulders. I sweep my hair over to one side and tip my head down to give him better access. He takes great care, making sure to work out every tightness he comes across. Soon, I become a languid puddle.

“Lie on your front.” His voice deepens in my ear and his breath rasps across my flesh. A shiver ripples down my spine.

Slowly, I twist around and lie face-down, with my arms folded and my cheek resting on my hands. My eyes close as Zedam works his way down my back, kneading at each knot until they loosen. The silence that fills the tent is only broken by our breathing. There's an underlying sexual tension that grows more taut with each passing second. It won't be much longer until it snaps.

His fingers graze the side of my boobs. “Turn over, *keeshla*.”

Ping. There it goes.

I roll onto my back and stare up at him. My chest rises and falls, and under my pants, I've grown wet. Slickness runs out of me. I've never been more aroused. Zedam's gaze travels over me, heating each inch of my flesh. Hands covered in some type of oil palm my aching breasts. He gently kneads them, plucking and tugging on my nipples. A heavy tension settles low in my belly. My clit throbs with a need to be touched.

"You are the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes on." The reverence in his tone only ramps up my arousal that much more. No one has ever looked at me with such adoration. Such longing. Such... love?

Needing more, I cover Zedam's hands with mine. I tighten his hold on my breast, but then guide his other hand lower, where the ache has grown and can only be eased by him. He dips beneath the waistband of my pants. I've long ago stopped wearing underwear, since I only had the one pair, so his hot fingers caress my bare skin. My pussy grows even wetter, especially when his magical fingers flick my clit. I gasp and raise my hips, pressing myself upward to increase the friction against it.

"You like this, sweet mate?" He circles the sensitive bit of flesh, and a shudder runs through me.

I stutter out a breathy moan in response and my head nods in a jerky movement. All I can focus on is the pleasure. The want. The need. Zedam glides through my slickness and presses a thick digit inside me. "God yes."

He drags his finger out of me before plunging it back in. First slow, then fast. He adds a second, stretching me wide. His soft lips brush across mine, deepening the kiss until his movements match the pace and thrusting of his hand. I wrap my arms tightly around him, meeting each stroke of his tongue with mine. His thumb flicks my clit. It's enough to push me over the edge and send me soaring.

My back arches and I cry out as my climax hits. Zedam swallows the sound. I collapse in an exhausted, sweaty heap, my breathing heavy and loud. I open my eyes and meet his. With that single glance, my heart opens and my mate settles inside. I don't know how it's possible, but I've fallen in love. My fingers dance along the mating marks that line his shoulders. Even in the firelight, I can tell they flare bright for just a brief moment and then darken, turning nearly black.

Despite my release, I need more. I need him to fill me. I drag my hands down his chest, briefly teasing the hard bump that's a nipple, but not. The leather texture of Zedam's skin gives me shivers. My fingers dip into the valleys that form his abs until I reach the top of his pants. I reach around to where his tail exits the hole designed for it and gently squeeze it at the base the way he loves.

“Careful, *keeshla*. It is hard to control myself when you touch me like that.”

I smile coyly. “Maybe I want you to lose control.”

Another squeeze makes his breath catch and a low growl erupt from his chest. Taking pity on him, I glide my fingers around

and loosen the tie at his waist. Zedam covers my hands with his and my eyes jerk up to meet his.

“Are you sure of this, mate? Because once I have been inside your sweet, juicy cunt, I won’t ever be able to let you go.”

I nod shallowly. “I’m sure. Fuck me, please.”

In seconds, he’s tugging my pants down until I’m naked. He discards his own and displays his body proudly. Unable to help myself, my gaze wanders over him, admiring the pure perfection of his muscles. Then my eyes drift down to his cock, unsure what to expect.

I swallow.

My pussy, on the other hand, drips with wetness and pulses as though it’s calling out for Zedam. He takes himself in hand, stroking up and down his thick length. Nodes line the top of it, and the tip that’s slick with pre-come, flares out like an umbrella. I clench, imagining how it’s going to feel inside me.

Finally, I drag my eyes back to meet his. He drinks me in, his eyes burning with a passionate fire. He stares for so long that I nibble my lip, worried he’s changed his mind. I have no need to worry though, because I blink and then Zedam has his face buried between my thighs, his tongue sweeping through the wetness pouring from me.

I cry out again in pleasure and thread my fingers through his hair. It’s soft beneath my touch. Zedam takes long, slow swipes, as though he wants to lap up every bit of juice that spills from me. It doesn’t take long for the tension to return.

When he pushes two fingers inside me and nips at my clit, that's all it takes for another release to rocket through me. I'm barely coming down when I feel the head of his cock at my entrance.

"You are mine." In a single thrust, he's embedded to the hilt, filling me fuller than I've ever been.

"And you're mine."

As though my words unleash the inner beast in Zedam, he begins a punishing rhythm, those nodes hitting me in all the right spots. Then another sensation is added. It's like the softest bristles run across the interior walls of my pussy. And a warm heat fills me. My eyes widen and meet his.

"My mating nodes have opened. They are tiny little hairs that secrete a fluid that's meant to increase our pleasure." His words are raspy and disjointed with the force of his thrusts.

Tick another box for things I never expected when I landed on this planet.

Secrete all you want little magic nodes, because this feels amazing.

He moves again, going even deeper, and I swear I could almost forget my own name, the pleasure is that great. All I can focus on is how close I am to coming. My whole body buzzes with it. Zedam reaches between us and fingers my clit, and that's all my hyper-sensitive flesh needs.

Colors burst behind my eyes, and I shake with the force of the orgasm that crashes over me. He increases speed, those little

hairs tickling my inner walls, and my scream comes right on the heels of his roar. Hot thickness fills me, and he collapses half on top of me, his heaviness like a weighted blanket keeping me safe and secure.

Any ache I had aside from the delicious one between my thighs has disappeared as I lie in an exhausted heap beneath Zedam. My mate. He shifts mostly to the side, his cock slipping out of me. I nearly groan in disappointment at the loss of it. The fire has dwindled, and I shiver. He pulls the furs over us and tugs me against his side. His fingers brush the hair off my forehead and then trail a line down my cheek. The exhaustion of the day finally hits me, and my eyes grow heavy.

I snuggle closer to him, his warmth seeping into me and taking the chill away. There's a whisper-soft touch of Zedam's lips against mine.

“Sleep, my beautiful *keeshla*.”

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I drift off with a smile on my face and joy filling my heart.

Eight

ZEDAM

My beautiful mate sings while she works on finishing scraping the furs she'd started yesterday, although today should be easier since it is the smaller ones she is working on. Although I do not want Eloise hurting, I'm more than happy to ease her aching muscles again with the oil provided by the nafte plant. I will never grow tired of touching and exploring her body. Of finding all the new places that bring her pleasure and make her cry out my name.

This morning, while we lay together beneath our furs, she sang to me while I tried to bring forth any memories from the blank spots, but again the effort was wasted, as nothing returned. I try not to grow frustrated over the fact. Will remembering change anything? I have my mate at my side. I should be satisfied with that. Except, I long to be whole.

I sit quietly for a moment and just take her in. Eloise's cheeks are a pretty color and not the same as when she is embarrassed. Pride fills me that I'm the one who put it there. A soft glow surrounds her, as though she's a star that has

fallen from the sky to bring light to my life. She glances up and catches me staring. A brilliant smile crosses her face. I filled her sweet cunt again when we woke. Her cries of pleasure still ring in my ears.

She sets aside the fur and stretches deeply, her chest mounds almost straining toward me. My cock hardens, but I have to ignore it until later. There is too much work to be done today. But tonight, I will fuck her hard and fill her with my seed. My tail thrashes happily in anticipation.

“This is the last one.” Eloise gestures to the fur beside her.

“Excellent. Well done, *keeshla*.” She has worked hard the past two days, helping me prepare the animals.

She straightens with pride. “What else can I do?”

I rise and help her stand. Then I guide her over to where I have the bones soaking in water. “We will use all of these bones to make weapons and other items.”

My mate studies my every move as I pick up one of the bones and a rough stone and begin to shape the flexible material into a spear head by scraping its edges to form a sharp point. Once I’ve given her the instructions, I hand both items to her, and she gets to work.

While I continue preparing the meat, Eloise prepares the bone. We work as the sun continues rising, only pausing to eat or when she needs additional instruction. She sets down the small drinking vessel she has been crafting and opens and closes her

hand, spreading her fingers wide. It's an arduous task she's been performing.

"I'm feeling a bit peckish. I think I'm going to grab a few berries to snack on. Do you want some?" She stands and stretches, her chest covering riding up and exposing her curves.

I drag my gaze from them, my mind slow to process what she asked. "I am fine. Be careful, and don't go too far into the forest."

She nods and sets off into the trees. I take inventory of our food stores and check on the progress Eloise has made, which has been significant. She is a quick learner and doing excellent work. I glide my finger over the spearhead she crafted, and it's as smooth as any I've made, with a sharp tip that draws a drop of blood from my fingertip. For someone who says she is better with what she calls "tech," she truly is doing well.

A memory flashes in one of the blank spots, and the pain flares sharply. I drop the spearhead and clutch my head. A scream pierces the air. *Eloise*. I rush to the tent and grab the spear propped against the side. Just as I move to run into the forest, my mate stumbles out of it, breathing hard and pointing behind her.

"Two ugly aliens,"—she pants out, unable to catch her breath—“coming this way.”

Pounding footsteps grow louder. Whoever approaches is not taking care to hide their presence. I push Eloise behind me and lift my spear, prepared to protect my mate with my life if

necessary. Several beats later, beings who resemble the images of the enemies inside my head crash out of the trees, holding weapons similar to the one we found in the wounded dhembe yesterday. These must be the hunters. They must have tracked the blood trail here. I curse myself for not being more cautious.

“What is a Tavikhi warrior doing so far away from his village? And with a pretty human, no less?” The nearest one leers at Eloise. “She looks like a tasty morsel. Although she’ll probably prove just as weak as the rest of them and provide us equally weak younglings.”

What do these beings know of humans? Behind me, my mate whimpers in fear. They will not touch her. The two enemies spread out and stalk forward with their weapons gripped firmly. I study them both. The smallest of the two appears slightly younger. No doubt he will be faster. I need to take him down first. Not waiting for them to strike, I move first. I charge at the bigger one, but quickly change directions and spin at the younger, catching him off guard.

He recovers and swings his blade at me. I dodge it. Taking the opening, I stab at him with my spear and pierce his side. He roars with rage and attacks. Strike and block. We trade hits until Eloise screams and my attention shifts from my opponent to her. She has the other spear and is trying to keep the second enemy at bay, but he keeps advancing on her. Forgetting my current battle, I rush forward to protect my mate. She manages to jab him in the stomach, but he grabs her weapon around the shaft and jerks it from her hands.

I growl and dive for him, soaring through the air until I collide with his body. We roll across the ground. A sharp pain licks across my leg. Warm wetness tickles my flesh. I've been cut. Ignoring the ache, I jump up and face the enemy who tried to hurt Eloise. His mouth slit opens into what appears to be a gruesome smile of sort. I grab my spear tight and the two of us circle one another, hoping for some type of opening.

Eloise appears again in my vision. She holds the spear that had been taken from her, but she isn't nearly as steady as she'd been. I can only keep fighting despite the disadvantage. I move again, trying to gain the advantage, but I'm sluggish. More damage must have been done to my leg than I suspected. Tavikhi heal quickly, but not that fast.

The larger of the two charges. His blade swings toward me. I barely dodge it in time to avoid having my head removed from my body, but the sharp edge slices across my chest. Stinging pain sizzles through me, and I release a heavy grunt. Already the blood runs down, soaking the top of my leg coverings. Eloise's screams are muffled, but I force myself to stay focused on the single enemy in front of me. I cannot help her if I am dead.

Strike after strike, we exchange blows, neither of us landing the killing one. Drops of black and green blood dot the yellowed ground; our feet smear it with each move we make. My wounds ache fiercely, and I blink away the tiny black flashes that threaten to overwhelm my vision. I must protect my *keeshla*.

Spotting an opening, I jab with my spear, but I underestimate how wounded I am, and my movement is far too slow. My opponent dodges and swings his weapon. I duck, but the long wooden handle clips the side of my head, making me stumble. As I collapse face-first onto the ground, I search out my mate. Her eyes leak water, and she fights and kicks against the strong hold the smaller one has on her. Against my will, everything begins to go dark. As my eyes close, the enemies run, taking my *keeshla* with them.

Nine

ELOISE

After running for what feels like miles, we finally stop in a small clearing. My stomach aches so bad—not only from being carried face-down over a rock-hard shoulder for so long, but also from hunger. I threw up the few berries I'd managed to eat before I spotted my captors. I whimper.

With every swallow, my throat hurts. I screamed and screamed for Zedam until I couldn't scream anymore. He can't be dead. He just can't be.

These disgusting aliens have taken me farther away from my mate with every step. They are the most horrifying things I've ever laid eyes on. Their beady black eyes stare into me and give me the willies. Although that's nothing compared to the thick, snake-like ropes of what I take for hair that flow over their shoulders and writhe around each other. Their color shifts from black to a metallic green like an oil spill across water.

But their most terrifying feature is the vertical slit with a short tusk on either side that makes up the lower half of their face. It folds open when they've growled orders at me, showcasing a

mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. The one who carried me away from my home has snapped them at me more than once. Then threw his head back in a horrific mockery of laughter.

The fire my captors have built isn't doing anything to keep me warm. Especially since that creepy fucking mist has returned. The air is cold and damp. My dreri-hide shirt isn't doing any good against the dropping temperature. I've shed all my tears and have been left with nothing but a raw throat that feels as if I've been swallowing jagged rocks. All I keep picturing is him falling to the ground, his mouth forming a word that I could swear was my name, and then his eyes fluttering closed as black blood soaked into the yellow dirt beneath him. A rough sob escapes, but I stifle it with a hand over my mouth. I don't want to bring any more attention to myself. So far, while we've made camp, my two captors have largely ignored me. Neither has spoken aside from a few grunts.

A branch snaps somewhere out in the forest, and they spin in that direction. The one unsheathes his hatchet from its leather holder strapped to his back while the other draws a sword at his hip. Irrational Eloise rears her head. As slowly and as carefully as I can, I rise to my feet while they're both focused on the noise. When bushes start rustling, I take my cue. Before I can talk myself out of it, I take off into the mist, away from Zedam's killers, praying I can hide within it. What comes after that, I have no idea. But anything is better than whatever those two assholes have planned for me. I'd rather get eaten by a luani. Maybe. Probably.

A blood-curdling roar comes from somewhere behind, but I don't stop running. Holy fuck, what was that? On its heels are two additional ones, these definitely not the same. That first one came from something big. A true predator. The mist thickens, almost like it's keeping its secret dangers even more secret. At least until it wants to show them to you. I've always been a terrible secret keeper, so the mist and the forest can keep theirs, thank you very much.

My chest burns from exertion and my legs are weak and wobbly with fatigue, but I keep going, barely dodging a giant tree that appears in front of me.

The forest is completely silent.

Like that eerie fucking silence right before the machete-wielding, mask-wearing serial killer jumps out and slices and dices the pretty young co-ed. I slow, stumbling around in a circle, my arms swinging out and away from my body as my gaze snaps left and right, waiting for the agonizing pain of the blade. I hope it's quick.

A loud bump and groan comes from far too close. A tall, dark form materializes within the mist, stepping slowly closer. My heart pounds in my ears.

I cry out and nearly fall. Tears fill my eyes and spill down my cheeks, blurring the vision in front of me. I must be dead, and this is what my unconscious brain needed to see before I landed in whatever afterlife I'm destined for. The man—alien—keeps walking and doesn't stop until he's directly in front of me, reaching out to cradle my jaw in his gentle, loving purple

hand. I wrap my hand around his wrist and press myself into touch, needing to feel him against me.

“How?” I manage to rasp out of my sore and scratchy throat, my fingers hovering over—but not touching—the dried blood caking the horrific wound across his chest.

Zedam smiles, his dimple a deep crater just at the outer edge of his curled lips. “I told you that Deeka has blessed me. She wouldn’t take me away from my *keeshla* when I have only just found her.”

I don’t understand how this is possible, but who am I to question a goddess? Then his knees give out and I’m barely able to catch him before he falls. I grab him around his waist and sling his arm over my shoulder so I can support his weight as best I can. Any more questions will have to wait. “We need to get you patched up.”

“There is a water source just through there.” Zedam points to the right.

Trusting his knowledge of the forest, I slowly guide him in that direction. Oddly, the mist begins to thin and I’m able to make out the clearing and the river bisecting it. I carefully help lower him to the ground, where he rolls onto his back. There’s nothing to use to wipe the blood away, so I rip off the shirt I’m wearing, break the seams, and tie what’s left around my breasts like a bandeau. I wet the fabric, and being as gentle as possible, wash his chest off, staring at the wound. *How did he even survive this?*

Ten

ZEDAM

I found my *keeshla*. I send up another prayer to Deeka as the cold water rushes down my sides to pool on the ground underneath me. I hiss at the pain, and Eloise freezes.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you.” Sorrow thickens around her.

I force my eyes open and reach for her hand. “Your touch is the only thing that can heal me.”

She returns to tending my wound. Her gentleness soothes away any aches I have. “How did you find me?”

“You must attract the luani. Another one, or perhaps the same one, was stalking you. I merely followed. While the Krijese battled it, I went after you instead.”

Eloise pauses. “How do you know the luani isn’t still out there? Or the kree-heebie-jeebie things? I assume those are the two aliens who took me.”

I dip my head. “The Krijese are the enemies of the Tavikhi. We have been fighting them since long before I arrived. As for

the luani, it has satisfied itself with the kill, so it will not bother us. After they feed, they return to their dens until they grow hungry again.”

“How do you know the...Krijese”—she says slowly, and I nod —“didn’t kill it and are now looking for us?”

“While not entirely impossible, the chances of even two of them taking down a luani are slight. They are the most-deadly predator on this planet for a reason.”

Although Eloise doesn’t seem entirely convinced, she finishes her task. I can feel the darkness coming and fight against it. A familiar chittering comes from nearby, and my mate gasps.

“Theodore. What are you doing this far away from home? And what’s in your hands?” She takes the small bundle of gethet leaves from the sherim plant and turns to me with a question in her gaze.

My heart soars that she thinks of our camp as home. There’s something nudging at my mind that I need to tell her, but the growing ache in my chest must be tended to first.

“Grind the plant up, and mix just the slightest bit of water to it and form a paste. Cover my chest with it. There are healing properties within it that will help close the wound.” Bone-weary fatigue seeps into me, and I’m no longer able to keep my eyes open.

Beside me, Eloise gets to work, but the darkness wins and drags me back under.



Warmth heats me on all sides. I slowly open my eyes, a task that proves far more difficult than it should. At last, I get them open and observe my surroundings. Close by, a small fire burns within a circle of stones, the light flaring too brightly for me. I search my mind and sigh in relief. All the blank spots that have been there for so many seasons are still full. When I woke to find Eloise gone, they all flooded back in at once.

I turn my head and my beautiful *keeshla* lies curled up against my side, her long leg thrown over mine and her hands tucked beneath her cheek. A soft chitter causes me to raise my head. The ketri kit she has named Theodore is tucked against her back and peeking over her to stare at me.

“Thank you, my little friend. It would appear we are even with saving each other’s lives.”

He cocks his small head, chitters once more, and runs off into the forest. An ache settles in my heart, because this is the last Eloise or I will ever see of him again. He’s paid his debt. But also, my mate and I will soon be setting off on a journey and leaving our camp for a new one.

Eloise shifts and groans softly. Her eyes flutter open, and as the events of the last day return to her, she sits upright and her gaze drops quickly to my wound which has already begun to heal. She glances around.

“Where’s Theodore?”

With great effort, I push myself up. My *keeshla* helps until finally, I'm no longer lying on my back. "He has returned to his family."

Her face falls, but then brightens. "I guess I'll see him when we get back then."

I reach for her small hands that are so different from mine. "I do not believe we will be returning."

"What?" Eloise jerks.

"My memories have finally returned. I don't know if was the hit to the head I received or if Deeka thought it was time, but I know who I am, and where I come from." A stabbing sensation pierces me. Will she not want to come? "I live in a village far from here, with my family."

She pulls her hands from mine and water—along with pain—fills her eyes. "You have a family?"

I try reaching for her again, but she scuttles away from me and quickly rises to her feet and does that walking back and forth she's done before. She mumbles to herself and swipes at the wetness spilling down her cheeks. I don't understand. As difficult as it is, I make myself stand.

"*Keeshla*, tell me what is wrong."

Eloise comes to an abrupt halt and whirls on me.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" Her voice grows in pitch and her fists clench at her sides. She is stunning in her ferocity. "Ever since you found me, you've been telling me I'm your *keeshla*. Your fated mate or whatever. You made me fall in

love with you, and all this time, you have a *family*? Is your wife your fated mate too? How many kids do you have? Do you sucker every woman into believing she's been gifted to you by your goddess?"

At last, the reason for her anger becomes clear. If not for how much pain there is in her voice—in her eyes—I would laugh at her misunderstanding. Instead, I carefully approach her until we're nearly touching. I cradle her head between my hands and stare directly at her until she meets my gaze. I smile softly, my heart growing fuller at her words. "I love you too, my Eloise. There is no mate other than you. When I said my family, I merely meant my brothers. That is all."

Eloise pulls in a sharp breath and breathes it out on a soft, "oh," sound. It is partly my fault for not explaining things to her.

"When a Tavikhi warrior meets his *keeshla*, it is for life. No female but she will make these marks darken. There has never been another mate, nor will there ever be another besides you. We are fated together even beyond this life. When one mate goes to the land of our goddess, the other follows." I kiss her forehead and then her lips.

She doesn't hesitate to open for me. I sweep my tongue inside and taste her. I'd feared never being able to do this again. A touch to my chest brings enough pain to draw me from her. We have all the time in the world to explore each other again later.

"How many brothers do you have?"

“Two. Zander is the eldest, and the shefir of our tribe. Zydon and he shared a womb, a rarity among the Tavikhi.” Another memory had surfaced as well. Will this change Eloise’s mind about staying with me? “There is one other thing.”

The wariness returns to her. “I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

“You asked me not long ago how I could understand you. The answer belonged to one of the many blank spaces that occupied my mind. Until now.” I take a deep breath. “There are humans here. On Tavikh. In a settlement not far from our village. I do not know if more have come since I’ve been away, or if they are even still there. But several seasons ago, they numbered around fifty. We have offered them our protection from the Krijese, who attacked the ship they arrived on and killed several of the human tribe members.”

Eloise blinks several times and gives her head a small shake. “Other humans? Here? But how? When?”

“They arrived perhaps six or seven lunar cycles ago.”

She takes several unsteady steps backward and plops down on a large stone. “Wow. I had no idea that this planet had been terraformed. It certainly wasn’t by us.”

I move to sit on the ground next to her. Which is a good thing as I’m not sure how much longer I would have been able to stand. The ache in my chest grows increasingly stronger. It will take several turns of the sun before I am fully healed. I want to hold back my next words, but I can not. Even if they break my heart.

“If you would prefer, I will take you to the settlement so you can be with your own people.”

Eloise turns. She slides off the rock and sits on her knees before me. “I’m not saying I don’t want to visit, but I don’t know those people. I know you. I *love* you. Which means that my place—my home—is with you. If that means we go back to your village where your brothers are, then that’s what we’ll do. I am your *keeshla*, right?”

I reach for her hands. “Of course.”

“Then, where you go, I go.”

Not caring about my injury, I pull Eloise onto my lap. She briefly struggles until she realizes I have no intention of letting her go. “I love you. My people will love you as well.”

Eloise relaxes and lays her head on my shoulder. “I love you too.”

It has been many seasons since I have been gone. I have no doubt my brothers believe me dead. Especially if they found my sword. Our tribe brother—and weapons maker—Benham, gifted Zander, Zydon, and me with our own blades long ago, when we were barely older than kits. Ones we have never parted with since they were given to us. My heart aches at what the thought of my death has done to them. We have always been close. Especially after our baba and nene passed into the lands of Deeka.

“We will spend the next few turns of the sun here to give us both the chance to rest and recover. Then we will set off for

my village.”

Eloise nods against me. “I’m glad you got your memories back.”

As am I. A part of me would have always wondered what those blank spots contained if they’d never returned, but even if they hadn’t, having my *keeshla* with me would have helped ease the emptiness. But I’m more than ready to return to my people. No doubt there will be many changes that have occurred in my absence and many stories for my brothers to tell. I look forward to them all.

Note to the Reader

Thank you so much for reading *Fated to the Lost Warrior*!

Want to know more about the Warriors of Tavikh?

Be sure to check out *Fated to the Alien Warrior*, book 1 in the series, featuring Zander and London.

Erin Hale resides in the South where the summer humidity sucks the breath right out of you. She's mom to the best dog on the planet. In her free time, she enjoys reading about swoon-worthy aliens (and secretly wishes one would land on Earth) and monsters alike. She also loves traveling the globe and can be seen most often in any of the pubs in the UK—where the weather is much more acceptable—with a raspberry gin and lemonade in hand.

To stay up-to-date on all her latest news, be sure to join her newsletter [HERE!](#)

You can also join her Facebook reader group, [Erin Hale's Hideaway](#), where we share our love of aliens and romance

books.

Quit Your Waning by Etta Pierce

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



WHEN THE DEAD HEAT OF SUMMER DEEPENS THE SHADOWS OF THE FOREST, THE MONSTERS COME OUT TO PLAY...

At least, that's what Jihae learned from Korean ghost stories as a child. Now, with the jungle covered in fog and the colony's new Halloween Festival on the horizon, she knows it to be true.

But it's not the kind of monster she expected. This one flirts and licks his thousand-tooth grin every time he makes her blush. It's Sizzle, the human colony's resident hellhound, with a mischievous spirit to match the glint in his yellow eyes.

When Sizzle admits that the cure to his insatiable hunger is her submission, Jihae becomes fascinated by the taboo of their mutual craving.

Does she have the courage to say yes?

Content Warnings: *four-legged hero, theft, stalking, obsession, heroine with minor tremors*

One

“*Aya! Otokkae...*” I lamented, dropping my key fob as I attempted to shove it in my pants pocket. It hit the red, iron-rich dirt with a *clack*, the fluffy ball and handmade cat charm landing face-down. I crouched on my heels, shuffling out of the way of the school pod’s double doors and stairs.

Setting aside my large box of white fabric and plas balls, I angled the charm into the gloomy light of mid-morning as the children and their guardians scooted past me, excitement in their voices. Today was the day the entire colony would start to decorate for the Halloween festival. They’d spend their mornings splatting black handprints on trees and tying together garlands of orange, green, and purple streamers, then the afternoons back at school for their lessons.

But my classes were in the morning, so I was off the hook except the day before the festival. All the teachers were going to tell spooky stories from their homeland, and I was beyond excited. Though the North Americans felt odd celebrating Halloween in the muggy heat of the jungle, it felt more

familiar to me. Korea's spooky season was the dead of summer. When the smell of rot grew stronger, when the wind died and the air thickened.

Even if it was hot as hell, it was my favorite time of year. Korea came alive at night during the summers, with stores open almost as late as the bars, spilling out into streets too crowded with people for cars to squeeze by. The night I'd been taken, I'd been distracted, admiring the fuzzy little charms hanging from a bright pink wall at the entrance to a small shop in Myeongdong. It was nostalgic, reminding me of high school and the massive collection of characters and charms that hung from my red JanSport backpack.

Which is why I'd labored over my cat face charm for several nights of nostalgic heat and warm memories. It was a chubby-faced white cat with blue eyes and grey spots... that now sported a patch of ginger dirt. I pursed my lips together in thought and shrugged. I knew it would happen eventually. My tremors were worse here than on Earth, without beta-blockers to help.

Besides, he was still cute.

Boots crunched down the path towards me and I shuffled to the side, blowing excess dirt away from his delicate ears.

"Oh hey, Jihae," Mikaela said from above me. I looked up at her, squinting into the diffused glow of the sun behind the morning gloom of the spring jungle, and smiled with a little wave.

"Hey, *onni!*"

Every time I called her big sister in Korean, she blushed and glowed. I loved calling her the friendly honorific because of how good it made her feel. This morning was no different as she looped her long hair extensions behind her ear with a smile.

“Do you need help with that box?” she asked, pointing next to me.

I waved both my hands with a smile and popped up to my feet. “Ahh, no, no. I’m good. I just dropped my keys. Are you going to the playfield?”

We walked together, talking about the various tasks that Tinsley had doled out to all the volunteers. Mikaela had been a construction worker in Dmitri’s architecture firm back in Russia, so she’d spent the last week building things. Scarecrows, large wooden tubs for apple bobbing, storage sheds, eerie lanterns...

“*Wah~*” I marveled, halting in front of the playfield. It had been partially transformed already, with rickety fences and event areas. Hunar, a shilpakaar and the colony’s chief engineer, was testing orbs of light that hovered while all the children watched in awe, and Bajora, the culinary engineer, was passing out experimental snacks to taste test. Mikaela left to find Wade and Dimitri, giving me a thumbs up as she followed the sounds of hammers and drills.

In Korea, Halloween was mostly celebrated by kids in English class or marketed as a spooky version of Valentine’s Day. But the colony didn’t have a lot of couples yet, and only a few

dozen kids. Apparently, though, the North Americans took it to a whole other level. Tinsley was even blaring a Halloween soundtrack nearby and wore a homemade mini witch's hat on a headband. When she saw me, she waved over the crowd of volunteers with... was that a whip?

“Jihae!”

“Hi, Tinsley!” I said, waving merrily. I hoisted my box of bits and baubles for her to inspect from her pulpit. She leaned down with a hum of excitement, checking things off her list. “I brought white medical gauze and this holographic white stuff. Is it okay?” I pulled the fabrics over the edge of the box and she nearly squealed.

“Oh my gosh, they're *perfect!* Thanks, Jihae, it's such a big help.” She ticked me off her list, and I set my offering to the mighty holiday goddess next to dozens of others. She licked the corner of her lip in concentration, looking over her list of things to do, then tapped her clipboard. “What do you think about working on the haunted trail? It's what you printed your box for, and I don't have any volunteers for that yet. It's a kid and adult favorite!”

“Oh, ah...” I looked out at the treeline, masked in a thick wall of fog from the morning steam. The jungle was bloody red purple during this time of year, and the fog so thick, you could taste it. When I glanced back, Tinsley was wincing with hope, fingers crossed beneath her clipboard. How could I say no without feeling guilty? She said it was for the kids too, which twisted my arm. In Korea, I'd been a product designer, but in

Renata? I was an English language teacher. I saw those lovable goblins every day and knew how excited they were.

So I put on my bravest smile and gave her a thumbs up. “Sounds good.”

Tinsley made a *ka-ching* gesture with one fist, then squatted on her barrel so I could see the list. “Yesss. Alright, let’s check the levicart and make sure all this stuff is loaded up. Ghosts for the trees, will-o-wisps—that’s what Hunar is testing out with the kids right now—cobwebs, reflective eyes...”

The list went on to include giant black spiders, hands and tombstones to stick in the dirt, a literal mountain of jack-o-lanterns... No wonder Mikaela had to build storage sheds. Some things were still being constructed and tested, but there was plenty to last a couple days. I took the list and a scribbly little map of Tinsley’s ideas, then shoved the levicart towards the treeline. My trepidation vanished, replaced with all the spooky nooks and crannies I could design along the loop trail.

“Oh, I forgot!” Tinsley called. “Sizzle will be patrolling over there. Maybe you can sweet-talk him into helping? He can at least spot you while you use the ladder.”

I tripped over the toe of my boot.

Did she say... Sizzle?

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled at that name. Sizzle was a bilong, an intimidating red and black hellhound with a y-shaped mouth that descended the length of his neck and opened like the gates to Hell. I was already nervous enough

using the ladder, now I had to actually speak to the most dangerous creature in the galaxy?

I swallowed hard, a smile plastered on my face. “Totally!”

But Tinsley was already seeing her next volunteers, putting them to work. To her credit, she tried to get them both to help me with the haunted trail. They nervously made excuses about their knees and back. Determined to do a good job for the kids, I pushed my floating cart into the misty treeline.

I took my time, mapping out my plans as I walked towards the center of the trail, noting neon green ropes with scribbled labels to block out some places for structures like a witch’s hut and a murderous campsite. When I reached a sprawling glade of black grass and lingering fog roped off as the cemetery, I stopped the levicart. The bulk of my cart was tombstones, zombie parts, and jack-o-lanterns. If I got this part done in a day, it would be so satisfying and encouraging.

Besides, being in the jungle alone was nerve wracking. The echoing hollers of animals, the constant splintering of branches and rustling of leaves... There was no way I’d be safe on a ladder today.

But tomorrow! Tomorrow, I’d feel more confident.

And maybe there would be more volunteers too.



Approaching lunch, I stripped off my lightweight button-down and tied it around my waist, fanning the inside of my tank top

with a waxy purple fern leaf. The jungle's humid stillness was thick, the ground steaming as the midday heat rose and misted my skin. I shoved another tombstone into the ground, heaving my weight over the stake.

Then goosebumps rose on my arms. I looked at my skin as tension twisted around my spine. One of my ears jumped, making me spin in a circle out of alarm.

The jungle had gone silent except for an eerie, chittery clicking in the shadows beyond the cemetery. With a gasp, I picked up the next tombstone by the stake and covered my back with it. I'd seen a documentary about Bengal tigers once, and how local hunters and farmers would wear a mask on the backs of their heads so the tigers wouldn't pounce on them. My shaking palms immediately grew sweaty, so I gripped the stake hard with both hands and opened my eyes wide, spinning in a slow circle.

Then I let out an embarrassed sigh with a groan.

"Is that... Sizzle?" I asked, feeling like an idiot, looking at the shadows where I'd heard the sound.

A black draconic muzzle appeared out of the deep shadows to my right instead, teeth glinting in the overcast pink of the canopy. "In the flesh."

I gasped, dropping the tombstone as I scuttled backwards, my butt hitting the levicart. A jack-o-lantern rolled off the cart at my feet as the black and bloody ferns parted around the colony's resident bilong.

Sizzle was a behemoth, so much bigger than I'd thought at a distance. His wet fur steamed as the fog clung to his withers and jaws, floating up from his nostrils like incense. Flat gold eyes dilated from sharp slashes to round diamonds as he took in a deep breath, that razor-sharp, thousand-toothed grin closer to my stomach than was comfortable.

He hummed from his draconic lungs, licking his teeth.

"Do I scare you, morsel?"

I swallowed hard, hiding my shaking hands behind my back.

"No. And my name's Jihae."

"You're a terrible liar," he snickered, lifting his nose up my sternum to my neck.

Without even thinking, I smacked his nose and pointed straight in his face. "No," I said forcefully, as if talking to my mother's jindo dog. He blinked at me, nose screwed up sideways with surprise. I held my breath, frozen in place.

What did I just do?!

Then Sizzle sat back on his haunches, lifted his head to the canopy, and howled with laughter. Birds and bugs that had been hiding in the shadows of the trees burst from the canopy in fright, and I swore my heart launched with them. It beat a thousand times a minute, punching my sternum in fright. I blinked at my finger, still pointed in Sizzle's face, and pulled it back with a squeak, pressing my hand against my mouth.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, my voice muffled by my palm.

Sizzle reined himself in and looked at me with one reflective yellow eye, his head turned sideways with curiosity as he sized me up. “Why?”

“B-because I just scolded you like a dog.”

He purred in understanding, getting to his feet again, tail swishing behind him playfully. “Ah, the pet, yes? Is that what you see when you look at me?” he asked, prowling around my left side.

“No!”

“You expect me to jump up on you?” He bent closer, damp fur pressed against my shoulder. “Lick you in greeting?” My stomach flipped at his tone and suddenly it was hard to breathe. He reached around my leg with one massive claw. “This is what pets do, isn’t it?”

“I-”

“It’s alright, morsel. I’m a beast, just like your *dahg*. I’m not offended,” he murmured sincerely, pulling away. I blinked at him, my knees weak, as he lifted the fallen jack-o-lantern, his claws carefully holding it by the holes of its toothy grin and eyes. “I came to see if I could help. You shouldn’t work alone in the jungle.”

“Thanks. And sorry.”

The air whooshed from my lungs in a confusing mixture of relief, gratitude, and excitement. I’d just swatted a bilong’s nose and lived to tell the tale. I brushed my palm over my forehead, swiping away the anxious sweat and flyaway hair, as

Sizzle put his front claws on the side of the levicart, looking over what things I had to work with. The cart tipped sideways under his weight as he set the jack-o-lantern back in its pile and chose the last tombstone. It was much larger than the others, plastered together by Wade and his team, no doubt. A stony devil with a pitchfork and horns grinned from his perch on top, tail wrapped around the stone. Sizzle picked it up with one claw and looked at me expectantly.

“Ah,” I cleared my throat, looking at the space I’d reserved in the center of the cemetery. “This way. Can you turn his face to look at the trail?”

“Anything you want, morsel.” Sizzle set the devil’s grave in place and arrested my stare as he turned the handsome statue towards me. “Does this please you?”

Dizzy. That’s how I felt. Was this living, breathing dragon flirting with me? Was that even *okay*? He walked on four legs and had a muzzle.

I was completely open to our alien neighbors and hosts. None of the interspecies relationships in the colony fazed me. They were all just men and women that looked different.

But Sizzle was very, *very* different...

My cheeks grew hot, and my belly tightened as the silence dragged on.

“A little... little further right,” I breathed dumbly, unable to blink. The bilong grinned, licking his teeth back into alignment as he moved the statue.

“I smell a nutrient bar in the cart. Sit. Take a break,” he teased, grinning wide. “And instruct me on how to please you next. Perhaps the jack-o-lanterns or corpse hands will do the trick?”

He picked up a zombie hand with his tongue, gently couching several of them between his neck’s length of teeth, and winked. They stuck out of his open throat as if he’d swallowed several people, but his mouth was free to speak. I stared up at him, overwhelmed as he handed me the nutrient bar.

“Relax, morsel.”

“My name is Jihae,” I reminded him.

“I know.”

Then he stalked out into the cemetery, awaiting instructions.

Two

One Week Later

Licking my teeth back into alignment, I prowled my meticulously organized pantry—er, scrapyard—hungry and looking for... for *something*. I snarled at myself, frustrated that my appetite was so confused. I sniffed a fermenting carburetor, what the others called “rusted junk,” and sneezed for the dozenth time.

Why did everything smell like fucking *soap*?

Soap was the *worst* marinade. It reminded me of freshly showered flesh, which tasted awful.

So why was I licking the soapy carburetor and purring?

“Blegh.” I tossed the scrap and scraped my tongue with my claws.

Before I could examine my own behavior too deeply, I spied what I’d been looking for and hadn’t even known. With a happy huff, my ears perked up tall above my head, I trotted over to the intact pilot’s seat that peeked out from beneath a

tarp to keep the moisture and rain away, clicking with self-satisfaction. It was perfect, exactly what I was craving. I tossed the tarp, opened my throat teeth wide, unhinged my jaw so I could fit the whole thing in my mouth at once...

Then paused, head cocked in deliberation.

“Hmm...” I rumbled in thought, zipping my mouth closed. I had better uses for this than eating it right now. Besides, I was hungry for something... *substantial*. The seat was clean, full of air, and not appetizing at all.

But it would look perfect in my new collection.

“Hey, Siz,” Vindilus, the venandi arms master called, strolling into my territory from the direction of the hangar. I spun around with a snarl, clutching the pilot’s seat close.

“It’s *mine*,” I snapped, sure he was there to steal my new collectible. It was so soft. *Perfect*. I couldn’t let him have it.

Vin raised one of his crimson brow plates at me, golden eyes narrowed in confusion. “Okay,” he said slowly, palms up. “What’s your deal, big guy?”

I blinked my reflective eyes at him, ears twitching. Why was I being territorial? Vin was a venandi, one of the plated guardian species of the Intersolar Union. He had mandibles and fangs, talons on his three-fingered hands. His kind could best a bilong, if they knew how... But he ate meat and sugar. He didn’t give a shit about my scrapyard. I *knew* that.

“I’m... collecting things that are important.” I licked my throat teeth and then clicked them shut in a slow, shifty cascade.

Click click click click...

“So that’s why this place has gotten so much easier to navigate, huh?” Vin teased, cocking a hip. He crossed his arms, chuckling through the vibration of his mandibles. “Cleaning house?”

I sneezed again, my wet nose scrunching up with distaste, stomach growling. “Maybe. Why so curious?”

Vin cracked his neck and walked over to me on his two legs, laying a hard clap on my shoulder. “Imani got a buncha complaints about noises in the jungle. Asked me to come by, see if you’d heard anything...” He collapsed on top of a sofa I’d dragged out of Rosie Turner’s apartment.

I squinted at him, sitting on the soft cushions, spreading his two legs out, rubbing his crown of spires like a conceited dick. Maybe I didn’t need the pilot seat. Maybe I needed that *sofa*...

But I spied stains and mold spots in the fabric and decided no. It wasn’t good enough. My choice was better. Of *course* it was better.

Vin clacked his mandibles to get my attention and his stare sharpened.

“So?”

I cocked my head. “What?”

He raised his brow plates, looking at me with concern. I sneezed again, my maw shaking side to side.

“*Fuck*,” I growled, rubbing my nose into my fur to quell the itch. But everything smelled the same. *Everything*. Even me. I couldn’t get that itchy soapy swill out of my lungs, no matter what.

“You good, Siz?” the arms master asked. I snapped my jaws at him, exhaust leaking out of my nostrils in frustration.

“Fine.”

“Like hell you are,” he snorted. “D’you listen to what I said? Weird noises in the jungle at night. Scaring the humans. Panicked calls to Imani.”

I blinked. Oh... No, I hadn’t heard that. I gripped the pilot seat a little tighter, trying desperately not to look out at the treeline near the home towers where I’d decided to set up my collection. It was *mine*. No one was allowed there except *me*.

My eye twitched, hackles rising on instinct. I snarled, putting myself between Vin and the path to my new... my new *collection*. Vin gasped and pointed a talon straight into my face.

“It was you, wasn’t it! Fuckin’ souls, are you nesting?!”

I snapped my jaws together with finality. “*No*.”

Vin’s eyes sparked with evil intent. He wriggled his talons. “Gimme the seat then.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped, shielding it with my body. “You can’t have it.”

“You sure? It’ll fit my big ass perfectly. Maybe I’ll turn it into a recliner. Or fuck Imani on it on the weekends.”

I gasped and reared back in scandalized alarm. “If a single whiff of your scent gets on my fucking chair, I’ll eat you alive.”

“Uh huh,” he said, sitting back again, crossing his arms with satisfaction. “Still sure you’re not nesting then?”

I realigned my teeth and dug my free front claws into the ground with uncharacteristic uncertainty, still protecting my prize. “... Maybe.”

Vin smacked his hands together. “Ha!”

“I’ve been collecting,” I admitted, drumming my claws against the pilot seat’s frame, wondering how much I should admit to. “My canopy loft isn’t big enough anymore. I need a roof, and soft things. It has to be perfect.”

“For who?”

My hackles puffed up out of surprise, eyes as big as saucers, literally. “What?”

“It has to be perfect, yeah? For *who*?”

Me... right?

I looked down at the seat cushions with sudden indignation. Why would I decorate my new loft with empty calories like batting and upholstery? Soft goods were—what did the humans call it?—junk food. I huffed steam from deep in the volcanic pockets of my lungs. I hated that shit.

But Jihae didn't. She was plush and sweet and wore a jacket in the mornings with batting inside, just like my collection of cushions.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. "I feel like I'm going insane."

Vin smiled. Not with infuriating amusement, but with understanding, staring off towards the hangar where Imani, his *vira*, was likely fielding security flags and reading logs. "That's what it does to you. So I take it you're the poltergeist making all the noise at night?"

I clicked my teeth in affirmation, setting the seat down and taking a wary step back from it. "I claimed three trees four nights ago," I said, my tone hollow and distant. "Been stealing planks from the hangar." I gave him a sharp look before he could ask. "I don't care if Hunar runs me through with his soldering laser, I'm not giving them back."

Vin gave me a long look, setting his elbows on his knees. "You need to talk about it? I can take you off patrols for a few days to figure shit out. Just say the word."

"No," I snapped. My chest tightened, the haunted trail flashing in my mind. Long black silk, pink cheeks, pale, trembling fingers...

Fuck me, I really *was* nesting.

My resolve caved. "Fine. I'll call Novak."

Vin nodded once in the human way and sprung to his feet. "Good. I'll let Imani know about the noise. Better call him

soon, before it gets worse. You dig?”

I swatted my tail in agreement, then stalked towards the treeline.

I had a nest to decorate.



Spinning in a circle to fluff my cushions just right, I lounged in the center of the largest and most complete platform amongst the trees near the home towers with a huff of steam. I looked up at the unfinished roof and the rope bridges between four other platforms made for a body a quarter my size...

When did I add those? As soon as the sun set every night, I lost my mind with hunger, but nothing tasted right. Soap soap soap. I was *starving*. The idea of crushing a pneumatic cartridge in my muscular throat made me salivate, but as soon as I even looked at one, I lost all interest.

With a grimace, I lifted my left claw and brought up Novak Gaul's comms on my holotab, choosing audio only. No way I'd show him the insanity around me, even if my tail fluffed with pride. The conceited advenan answered immediately.

“Cousin,” he said, voice taut as a bowstring. “Is the colony—”

“It's fine. But I'm going fucking insane.”

The krol of my guild breathed a heavy sigh of relief. His grin seeped through his voice, which annoyed me greatly. “That's all? I think we've long established that.”

I nearly hung up, my claw hovering over the comm prompt floating above my forearm.

Then a drone ran over my tail. I glared back at it, hackles standing on end. First I build bridges in the middle of the night, and now I'm stealing drones too? It whirred past on a dwindling charge, weatherproofing and sealing every wooden plank it could find. I racked my memory, and the foggiest recollection surfaced. Me, stalking through the hangar doors, snatching three drones against my chest after eating one, then hacking it back up, mostly intact.

I closed my eyes, resigned, "I'm nesting."

Novak whistled meaningfully. "Well, that's unexpected."

"No shit."

I sneezed hard enough to rattle a collection of plates, trays, bowls, and bidets.

Not a collection. A pile of *home decor*. There was also a rug, colorful pillows, another pilot's seat, fucking *twinkle lights*, eight comforters stolen from a home tower supply closet, a jack-o-lantern...

I stared at the eerie face cut into the fake orange gourd for a long, hard minute.

"As much as it pains me to admit, I need insight, Novak."

He hesitated, then said, "Alright. What kind exactly?"

Thank the abyss. Advenans were our closest relatives, and we had no social or educational structure. Most bilongs never

nested, or even sired pups with each other. We were destined to die out, and most of us were just fine with being an anomaly on the evolutionary timeline. “The woman is human. I’ve been working with her for a week. Alone.”

“A whole week?” Novak marveled. “Are you sleepwalking yet? Fasting?”

“I’ve been building my nest at night, but it’s a blur. And I’m not fasting, I just can’t eat. Everything tastes like shit. Is that normal?”

“Humans are potent. When you find one that calls to you, it’s maddening.” He spoke quietly, as if from personal experience. “If you were advenan, I’d say you’re spun already.”

“How can I tell for sure?”

“Eat. That soapy taste is part of spinning. Your taste buds are turning over, attuning themselves. I don’t know about bilongs, but advenans fast during the spinning, then we feast once we’re spun.”

“How long does that take?”

Novak let out a thoughtful, long sigh. “Shils and venandi? Couple weeks, at most. But humans... probably much faster.”

I picked up the jack-o-lantern, turning it this way and that as the calm before a hunt overtook my anxious territorialism. “So you’re saying I could be spun within the day.” I threaded my tongue into the decoration’s eye hole, tasting the plas interior, hoping it wouldn’t make my guts churn. Still soap. “And then I’ll get my appetite back and can eat whatever I want.”

“Well, yes, but that’s not what I meant by feasting,” Novak said with a suggestive hiss. “Advenans don’t nest, but I’d bet my best hand cannon that your thoughts will turn to filling yours as soon as possible.”

My tongue slipped through the grinning jack-o-lantern’s mouth and I tasted an unexpected, delicate and misty salt. Jihae immediately filled my mind, laying in my nest as I ran my tongue over her naked flesh instead of the gourd’s hard plas. Soft skin and curves, so easy to clutch, rend, devour. Delicious syrup ran down her thighs as I lapped at her pussy and made her scream. Desperate hunger gripped my stomach. Unlike thinking about a pneumatic cartridge or a carburetor, when I thought of Jihae, I didn’t taste soap.

I tasted *sex*.

“**Fuck,**” I growled an octave too deep, licking the length of my throat in anticipation.

“Exactly. I suggest you talk to your human, and soon,” Novak cut in. “Good luck, cousin.”

The comm went dead as I took myself in hand with feverish intensity. My cock was throbbing and needy, bulging from my prepuce and so sensitive that a single claw stroke sent my helices bulging with desperation.

I’d see Jihae tomorrow, maybe even pull off a civilized facade. But tonight?

I’d bite a cushion and growl her name as I marked our nest.

Three

I hadn't been sleeping well, but I felt more energized than I ever had in my life. My dreams were riddled with panting and huffing, screams that turned to moans, the feel of fur on my bare skin, and a long, dextrous tongue dragging between my—

I slapped both of my cheeks like I was applying toner, attempting to soften the bristling heat crawling up to my eyebrows. Like a lot of other Renatans, I'd heard the strange knocks and howls near the home towers. At first, I'd thought it was Tinsley setting the Halloween mood, but she'd denied any involvement at all. Perhaps there *were* ghosts in the woods and they were infecting my dreams.

Or *maybe*...

Who was I kidding? I'd been working with Sizzle for over a week, and each day, my heart skipped harder when he teased me, looked at me, even if he just breathed in my direction. He was so much more than I'd expected. Attentive, patient, helpful...

And *so forward*. I wasn't used to that at all. Though times were changing, people in Korea still weren't so open about what they wanted. But Sizzle? His stare dripped with interest, not to mention his *very* long black tongue. And sure, he walked on four legs, but after a couple days working together, I'd completely forgotten.

In fact, thinking about the sashay of his muscular shoulders made me press my thighs together.

There was no denying it.

I was infatuated with my decorating partner, despite the taboo and danger.

The jungle's chorus withered to silence, and the hair stood on the back of my neck. I smiled, not afraid, but excited. I looked into the foggy trees, brushing sweat off my brow, and waved at the ghostly morning shadows where I thought I saw movement.

"It's adorable how unaware you are," Sizzle greeted, prowling out from a different direction, the fog clinging to his fur like a cape. "Brings out all of my best predatory instincts."

"You're welcome," I said, pulling one of Hunar's light orbs from the levicart. We'd gotten nearly all the big stuff done. Now it was time to hang cobwebs, reflective eyes, and orbs from the trees. I blanched at the thought of climbing a ladder on uneven ground and dropped the orb with a squeak. "*Aya!*"

Sizzle and I both reached for it. He swiped it up with his graceful claws, looking at the boughs high overhead. "Ah," he

hissed languidly. “Horrors below, horrors above... I like your human holidays.”

“Thanks,” I said awkwardly, clearing my throat as I watched his rows of teeth click and realign.

How did a bilong show affection? Nuzzling? Love nips? My cheeks grew hot again, so I dragged the ladder to the side of the levicart. “I know you have to patrol too, but could you watch the ladder while I climb up?”

Sizzle set the orb back in its crate and lifted the ladder one-clawed, inspecting its height. He tossed it to the undergrowth in a shiver of bloody fern leaves, sending the fog racing from the bushes, and pinned me with his intense yellow eyes. “What if I have a more enticing proposition?”

My heart skipped. “Such as?”

“You don’t need that unreliable four-legged menace,” he quipped, nodding his muzzle at the ladder sticking up out of the ferns. “You need *this* one.”

He gestured to himself and leaned in, his fur teasing the collar of my light jacket, reaching one long limb behind me to the levicart’s controls. It rose several meters into the air at my back and I startled, not knowing it could do that.

“But how will I—”

Sizzle’s claw, as long as my entire hand, sank into the tree beside my shoulder and he leaned into my ear with a curious click of his teeth. I blinked back at his deep draw of breath.

“Have you ever wondered what it’s like to climb a bilong?” he teased, sighing against the bare skin of my neck. “Because I will be your ladder today.”

“You say things that way to embarrass me,” I accused him, throat tight.

“Mm,” he rumbled in agreement. At the blush creeping down my neck, he pressed his tongue into one of his fangs and grinned. “Your scent ripens when your cheeks rush with blood.”

My scent...? A sudden thought hit me like a freight train.

Sizzle could smell a lot more than just my shampoo.

But rather than being embarrassed as his wolfish face loomed over mine, I wondered...

Do bilongs kiss?

I licked my lip on instinct, staying still against the tree, expecting—I don’t know what. Sizzle’s eyes slashed to my mouth and he swallowed, pushing his massive bulk away. I took a deep breath, staring at his withers as his shoulder blades pistoned with his gait.

“I’m on leave from patrol, which means I’m all yours,” he said with weight. Then his y-shaped grin curled along the outer hinges of his jaw. “Now turn around and spread your legs, morsel.”

“*Excuse me?*” I yelped defiantly.

Sizzle snickered, steam jetting from his nostrils. “If you trust me, you’ll turn around and spread your legs for me.”

There he went, asking me to trust him again. I was growing suspicious, squinting at his sly expression. He was no better than the wolf in Red Riding Hood. But I *did* trust him, so I turned around and stood with my feet apart.

Like a superhero, not a vixen.

It was a matter of principle.

As if he had his own gravitational pull, I felt Sizzle come up behind me and my legs swayed with anticipation. When his coarse red and black fur brushed between my legs, I startled, looking down. His head appeared between my legs, ears popping out after passing my knees. He took a careful step forward until his withers were pressed against the backs of my thighs, then held me steady with one front claw.

“Grip behind my ears,” he instructed.

I bent forward, feeling silly, and did as he asked with my chronically trembling fingers. Then he shifted his weight, putting his back legs beneath him, and suddenly I was in the air five, ten, *twelve* feet, gasping as the fog swallowed the trail like the River Styx below.

“Oh my god!” I gasped, clutching his fur like a life ring. Sizzle snickered, cracking his neck with nonchalance, and pulled the levicart towards us.

“What shall we hang first?” he asked, rummaging through the options with his free claw. I brushed my sticky hair away from

my forehead and blinked down at the hammer he held up. “I’ll hold the nails while you choose.”

I dropped more nails in the first ten minutes than I think I ever had in my life, but Sizzle never complained. He brushed his claw against my calf in time with his deep, slow breathing, and eventually my tremors lost the edge of anxiety. We set a rhythm and listened to the melancholic summery tones of Hyukoh on my holotab, hanging ghosts and cobwebs and will-o’-wisp charging docks. I expected Sizzle to set me down after a few minutes, but he never did, only crouching now and then to pick up my detritus or listen to the trail. He claimed he never saw anything dangerous during patrols, but the habit died hard. His teeth would itch and clamp shut if he went too long without checking our surroundings.

When my playlist ended two hours later but my hands were still occupied, I turned to small talk to fill the silence. A genuine compliment was always a safe conversation filler, so I said what was on my mind. “You must have amazing core strength to hold me up on two legs like this all morning. Thank you.”

Sizzle turned his head sideways to stare at me with one big eye in calculative silence. I blinked at him, hanging the charging dock from two nails, pretending like I didn’t notice the way his claw tightened on my knee.

Then he said, “I can walk on two legs. Some of my kind prefer it. Do you prefer it?”

I faltered with the hammer and dropped my nail, eyes cutting to his in the cool red glow of the mid-morning canopy, absolutely appalled.

He could walk on two legs?!

Was this common knowledge? Did the other humans know, just not me? How should I answer? What did he want to hear? Confusion and surprise addled my social graces. I swallowed hard, not knowing what to do, what to say. I felt like an idiot.

Sizzle crouched, saving me from myself, and leaned forward with his head bowed so I could stand. I caught the faint glint of the nail at the base of the tree and picked it up with a grimace.

“Uh... Found it!” I said, trying to change the subject. I could save face for us both if I pretended like my faux pas never happened. I turned towards him with the nail held high and a bright smile, but my jaw went slack.

Sizzle crouched on the balls of his back feet, elbows resting loosely on his knees. His head dipped between his shoulders, poised and awaiting my reaction.

There was no mistaking his body in this pose as being humanoid but *not*. His underside was covered in a short sleek coat of black that rippled over muscular thighs and abdominal muscles like a god of death. He was as dark and deep as a shadow, full of the passive violence of a dragon, and his proportions, previously hidden in the length of his bristly coat, incited visceral human fears of things that go bump in the night. He was terrifying, regal, otherworldly...

Breathtaking.

“Is this better, morsel?” he asked, cocking his head to the side. His throat teeth clicked down the length of his esophagus and into the divot of his sternum where a human heart would be as he awaited my answer, staring me straight in the eye.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I breathed, voice thin and uncertain. “I... I like you either way.”

I’d never noticed Sizzle’s pupils dilating, but now they grew so wide only a thin ring of highlighter yellow pierced his stare. He crawled forward, resuming his four-legged gait as he stalked towards me. Goosebumps rose all over my arms and neck. Like prey, I was rooted to the spot.

“W-why don’t you ever walk on two legs?” I bumbled, trying to cut the tension.

Instead of eating me, Sizzle brushed his black draconic nose against my neck with a hum of sinful satisfaction. Knees quaking, I pressed my lips between my teeth to keep in a sound of timid anticipation.

“I’m more beast than man, Jihae,” he rumbled against my collarbone. “That’s why I don’t walk on two legs. I don’t want to fool anyone into a false sense of security. But *you*...”

I squeezed my legs together, the sudden urge to pee tingling in my groin. Sizzle slid his claw to my hip and held me in place as he pressed the flat bridge of his skull against my sternum. He huffed, hackles rising as he panted. I held onto his

shoulders as he dragged me closer, afraid I might fall if he let me go.

“You smell so good,” he growled like a subwoofer full of gravel. That nose pressed against my pelvic bone as he filled his lungs and shivered. Heat blasted through my veins as I tried to pull my hips away, arching my back and shoving at his shoulders. Sizzle’s grip tightened for a harrowing moment, then he dropped his claw. I stumbled back, eyes wide, panting for air, unable to speak. But he was calm as he brushed his claw down his throat teeth and ran his tongue across their surface to get a taste of my clothing.

“I’ll do anything you ask, play every trick in the book, roll over like a fucking pup... If only you’d let me peel away those useless clothes.”

“I didn’t shower this morning,” I blurted nonsensically, struggling to keep up, to breathe, to just *stay vertical*.

Sizzle grinned. “Guess I like you dirty.”

A fire burned hot between my legs, needy and throbbing. I rubbed my palm into my chest, heart pounding, pressing the heat of his forehead straight into my bones. Terrified, intrigued, on the precipice of... of...

“I don’t like to mince words, morsel, so let me be clear. Your *chemia* calls to me. It’s all I think about, all I smell, all I *taste*... I want to feast on you. Not once. Not twice. *Forever*. Do you understand?”

I shook my head, shocked into silence.

“It means I’m yours for the taking, if you’re brave enough.”

Sizzle rose to his hind legs, stretching up into the misty boughs of the trees, and lowered the levicart while the floor dropped out beneath me. How had I never noticed he was no different than a man? An eight-pack stretched high as he reached his overly long arms into the trees, carefully dragging down our equipment.

“But we- we’ve only known each other two weeks,” I reasoned, dumbfounded.

“My biology doesn’t lie. And I bet your dreams are telling you the same thing.” He shook out his coat, pink pollen spraying out into the weak beams of light streaming through the murky red canopy.

“How did you know about my dreams?” Brow creased, fists clenched, I held my ground, tantalized, frightened, *tempted*. Huffs and moans filled my ears as if my dreams were ghosts lurking in the jungle.

“Think about what I’m offering. I’ll stay out of your way while you do.”

“But the trail,” I said weakly.

Sizzle cocked his head. “You think I’m like a man, now, is that it?”

I licked my lips. “Aren’t you?”

Sizzle smirked, chuffing a short, bitter laugh. “I’ve shot up a *ryhidon* tranq the last four mornings to take the edge off, but having your hot pussy pressed against the back of my head is

shredding my civility. So understand, morsel. I'm *not* in control, and I *will* rip your clothes off the moment my drug-induced patience fails.”

Sizzle leaned in and took a deep breath. “Or is that what you want?” he asked pointedly as I squeezed my thighs together.

Oh god...

Was it?

Sizzle grinned, all sharp teeth and triumph. “Don’t worry. I won’t ever be far.”

Then he winked at me, turned, and walked away. The fog swallowed him up long before the hum of the levicart faded.

As soon as I lost sight of his withers and their powerful sway, I sat on my heels, breathing hard.

Four

The Halloween festival loomed closer each day, and though nearly everything was done along the trail, Sizzle hadn't shown up to help me since admitting that he liked the scent of my... my pussy.

At first, I hadn't been comfortable thinking about it in such bold terms as he did, but dancing around the subject wasn't helping anyone. I'd made a concerted effort to call it that in my head. Not "between my legs," not "womanly scent." He'd said his biology didn't lie, and it seemed like mine didn't either. Whatever he felt, apparently I felt it too, because each day he wasn't with me left me more disturbed and distracted. I paced fifteen minutes of every hour, looking up at the trees as the aforementioned junction of my legs wept, missing his antics and cursing him for being elusive.

Because Sizzle hadn't lied. He'd never been far. Each morning, I'd returned to my spooky tasks to find a large chunk of the trail's canopy complete. It had to be him, since I hadn't felt safe going up into the trees with the ladder even once. I

was too shaken, too tired from lusty dreams that kept me up and hot all night. This morning, though, the levicart sat abandoned at the end of the trail, empty of its will-o'-wisps, ghosts, cobwebs, and reflective eyes...

And I was scared.

Now that Sizzle had no other tasks, would I not be able to take a midday nap on the levicart and smell where he'd been working overnight? I pressed my cheek to the empty levicart and breathed in his bonfire scent. I hadn't noticed it at first, but it had gotten stronger over time. And just like every morning when I awoke tangled up in damp sheets and panties, the urge to spread my legs and work my clit over until the desperation faded nearly consumed me.

My eyes popped open. Maybe I could convince Tinsley that I needed to hang spiders...

"Sleepin' on the job, Jihae?" Wade called. I jumped up, spine ramrod straight, and blushed from my neck to my forehead. He laughed, waving big from halfway across the playfield as he, Kokebe, and Ngozi, two grey, orc-like uids that he'd employed for a while, hauled over the witch's house.

"Good morning!" I said brightly, pushing flyaway hairs off my forehead. Already, the gloomy humidity was pushing rivulets of sweat down the back of my neck. I unlatched my light jacket and tied it around my waist. "Sorry, I wasn't—"

"Don't stress, just takin' the piss outta ya, sweetheart," Wade said, clapping his heavy palm on my shoulder. I wasn't too familiar with some of the phrases he used because it was so

different from the American English we learned in school, but I could guess that he meant he was joking, so I smiled at Kokebe and Ngozi as I pushed flyaways out of my hair.

“Halfway down the loop, was it? For the witch’s cottage,” Wade asked as he guided their cart down the embankment where wooden poles had been laid into the muddy hill. Even though they floated, the carts still followed the angle of the ground. They were technically designed for hangars and docking bays in microgravity, not rough terrain.

I held onto the perfectly crumbling facade of a stone fence as it slid towards the edge of the platform and blew the hair from my face again. “Yes! Less than halfway from this side of the loop.”

“Bonza,” Wade huffed, shoving a heavy wall back into the center of the cart to level it out. “We can get outta ya hair in time for you to make it to ya story gig.”

I blinked, having completely forgotten about ghost storytime. Good thing I’d prepared for it as soon as all the teachers decided to do it. I’d been so wrapped up in what was happening between Sizzle and I that I had completely forgotten about my other responsibilities.

As the ground flattened out and Wade increased the cart’s speed, Ngozi pulled a sweatband off his forehead and held it out to me with a tusky smile. He winked his two right eyes and dipped his chin towards my forehead. “Your silk looks quite bothersome.”

“Oh, thank you.” Bewildered, I held out both of my hands to accept the sleek band. It was cool to the touch and spongy like neoprene but breathable like cotton. I shoved it over my head then pushed it back up, securing it just above my ears. Instantly, the humidity abated against the back of my neck and my forehead where the fabric cradled my hairline. “Ooh, this is so nice!”

Ngozi smirked. “It’s a cooling band. You can find them cheap on the holomarket. The shilpakaari haven’t shown you?”

I smiled, jumping over a network of *biria* roots. “I’ve never seen them wear one, maybe because they like the humidity?”

Ngozi nodded with a grunt of contemplation. “And venandi like Vin thrive on the heat. I bet this is a cool autumn day for him.” He flashed me a grin, his bright tusks catching the pink morning filtering through the canopy as we waded through the fog. “Kokebe and I will share more tricks for the heat then. Uids must be closer in temperament to humans than the rest. It’s fortunate we’ve found sanctuary here.”

My obsessive preoccupation with Sizzle dissipated while the four of us navigated through the back end of the trail and erected the witch’s cabin. Ngozi and Kokebe were ferocious in appearance, but easy to talk to. They worked as a single unit, one picking up a conversation while the other concentrated on a difficult task. Partway through the morning, Kokebe offered me a canteen of cold water and motioned for me to take a break against a mossy tree while they secured the half-scale cabin’s roof.

“Wadda ya reckon, pretty sweet hey!” Wade awed, hands on his hips. He stood back while the uids hammered the fake dilapidated stone wall into the ground. “Maybe we should seal it, leave it up year round as a campsite. The kids’d love it—”

I stared at Wade as he continued to make plans, but his voice was distant and distorted by the rush of blood in my ears. Clutching the mossy tree trunk at my back with shaking fingers, I breathed in deep and my pussy pulsed. I wasn’t panicking...

I was *coming*.

The tree smelled so much like Sizzle that it bowled me over and immediately made my legs shake. His bonfire scent shrouded me like the jungle fog, so thick the moisture gently prickled my skin and moistened the insides of my nostrils. I instantly didn’t want to take a shower today or ever again. His smoky aroma was in my hair, all across my back, and seeping into my clothes... I was crushing it into my palms, rubbing the tree’s pink moss into my knees without realizing, while the incessant pounding between my legs grew stronger and stronger—

Ngozi slowed, looking at my hands as they rubbed into my thighs, staining the front of my pants. I paused, breath hitched as he tilted his head and met my eye. He *knew*...

I opened my mouth to deny what I was thinking about, but he beat me, an easy smile pulling his lips across his tusks. “Think we’re done, Wade,” he called.

The Aussie nodded, knuckling his salty blonde hair. “Yeah. Let’s break for lunch, boys. Then we’ll have a go at that fancy grave. That alright with ya, Jihae?”

“Ah? Oh, yes, of course,” I stammered, afraid my voice would crack on a desperate moan.

Ngozi strolled over and crouched in front of me, holding out his meaty palm for the canteen. My hand shook as I passed it over.

“Are you in heat?” he asked in a murmur. “I’m happy to escort you to the clinic.”

Ngozi’s question didn’t register at first. Was I having a heat stroke? No, but he wasn’t checking my temperature, he was looking at my neck, where my pulse was running rampant. When I realized that “heat” was the English way of saying *baljeonggi*, I gasped, my cheeks turning red as my pussy throbbed with my heartbeat.

Oh my god...

“Am I?” I breathed, squirming with discomfort. Ngozi took a deep breath, his wide nostrils flaring. He huffed the breath away from me to dispel it in a different direction, fog blooming around the force of his exhale.

“You’re Sizzle’s lover, right?” He nodded to the tree. “His scent is all over the moss. Fresh. Likely marked it last night. A bilong’s seed will do that to their partner.”

My eyes went wide. I sat up, desperate for information. “You know about bilongs? How?”

Ngozi's four eyes twinkled. "Uids are from the Outer Rim, not the union. Bilongs don't mate often, but the uid homeworld is a safe haven for their pups when they do." He stood, and I clutched his pant leg, desperate for answers. He didn't try to shake me off but took a long drag from the canteen. Kokebe chomped his tusks together twice, and Ngozi answered with his own hollow call before handing the canteen back to me. My fingers slipped, and it tumbled into my lap, drizzling water across my thighs. "Sizzle is a good man and an effective monster. I enthusiastically approve of the union."

Blazing embarrassment coursed back up my spine and into my cheeks, sending my skin prickling with nerves. I licked my lips and hugged the canteen as I looked up at him with pleading eyes. "How do I stop the... the heat?"

Wade called to us and I jolted, having forgotten the others were there. "You wanna join us, sweetheart? We can give ya a ride on the cart if the heat's gettin' to ya."

If only he knew...

Ngozi looked over his shoulder, first at Wade, then settling heavily on Kokebe. "She has plans. A date."

Wade whistled with appreciation, tossing tools on the levicart. "We won't get in ya way then. C'mon, Kebab, Goatsy, let's pack it up."

Ngozi looked down at me one more time and grinned with a feral edge that fit his features too perfectly for comfort. "If you want to ease your heat, call on the bilong. He will happily relieve you of your symptoms."

They walked away, Kokebe and Ngozi taking up the rear, staring up into the trees with knowing smiles. The hum of the levicart faded around a bend of giant magenta palm fronds and aubergine moss dripping with condensation as the fog turned to steam and rose into the eerie red canopy. I sat just where Ngozi had left me, hugging the canteen upside-down and empty, hardly able to draw breath. Now that the boys had left...

I realized that the jungle was quiet.

I slid my tongue out to taste the sweat beaded on my upper lip in thought.

Well, not so much thought as carnal *madness*.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back against the moss. I opened my mouth, the word poised in my throat.

“Sizzle,” I rasped, so quietly I was sure the fog devoured the word before it reached him.

A low, electric hum rumbled through my aching skin, sending my clit into a fit of excitement.

“I’m here,” he murmured like thunder on the horizon.

I opened my eyes to find him staring upside down at me from above, claws sunk deep into the *biria’s* bark, crawling down the same tree I pressed my back into with shaking legs and arms. His red and black fur blended with the bloody tree trunk like camouflage, tail wrapped around its girth and his head mere feet above mine. Massive black claws kept him aloft, leaving deep ravines in the soft bark, as if it were warm butter.

He watched me sideways with one dilated yellow eye, and though I couldn't see his throat teeth, I heard them click and realign, muffled against the moss and bark.

"Is it like this for you?" I asked, lower abdomen clenching painfully in anticipation.

He grinned, fangs glinting in the pink light. "Worse."

I groaned, and the tree creaked as his hold on it tightened.

"Don't make noises like that unless you mean it, morsel."

I swallowed hard. Did I mean it? Had I done it on purpose?

"I've had fevers and dreams every night," I admitted.

"Mhmm~"

He didn't sound surprised. In fact, he sounded distracted, a string of saliva falling from his largest left canine as he stared down my body. The hot dollop landed on my collarbone and descended into my shirt, leaving a trail across my sweat-soaked skin.

"What have you done to me?" I whimpered.

His attention returned like the crack of a whip. "I could ask you the same thing."

"You don't know?"

"My instincts do." His grin faded. "The clinic has heat suppressants in stock. Dr Ahlberg can alleviate the nightmares just as well as I."

My brow furrowed, offended on Sizzle's behalf. "They're not nightmares."

Sizzle crawled off the tree, his face staying perfectly still, rotating until he looked me dead in the eye and his body was crouched low on the ground, ready to pounce. He looked at me with such intensity, it was a challenge. “I want you forever, morsel. That’s not a nightmare?”

“No, just... intimidating. Fast. *Really* fast.”

Steam billowed out of Sizzle’s nostrils, his tongue surfing up the seam of his y-shaped mouth in hunger. “I am overly possessive, *obsessive*. I will covet you if you let me. What is that animal of human legend... a *drahgun*? I will destroy civilizations to keep you once I get a taste, Jihae, and that’s not an exaggeration.”

“Where I’m from, dragons aren’t greedy or destructive. They’re protectors and symbols of hope.”

Sizzle snapped his jaws at me. “The only hope I represent is a quick death.”

“Are you sure?” I licked my upper lip again, taking a deep whiff of his fiery scent as I looked up into the trees. “Because I’ve hoped every day that you’d be here.”

Sizzle’s posturing softened thoughtfully, but the tension was still as taut as a bowstring. He reached a long, curved claw towards my knee and dragged it across my pants, stuttering over every thread. My breath hitched, waiting for the fabric to give, for blood to well across my thigh.

“Not nightmares then,” he asked without really asking.

I shook my head. “No.”

He turned his head sideways, and his round yellow eye caught mine. “Fantasies.”

My abdomen stung with adrenaline, too intense to call it a flutter. “Yes,” I breathed.

That claw hooked in the crux of my knee and pulled wide, coaxing my legs open. My heels dug into the soft roots, still crouching, as the heat between my legs yawned. Sizzle breathed in deep, then licked his snout as if tasting the scent, but never blinked.

“So hungry...” he purred, saliva dripping from his teeth. He leaned forward on one hand as his tongue teased the seam of his throat, approaching me without a sound. Not a single leaf or splinter of bark snapped beneath his weight. His other claw slid up the inseam of my pants and my pussy pulsed. I swallowed hard, clutching the mulch, stock still and lightheaded.

Sizzle loomed over me, three times my size. He was so big and overwhelming. How was this going to work?

Oh god...

My spiral of thoughts ended with a gasp as his claw traced the seam of my slit through my pants. He paused, staring me in the eye. *Go ahead*, his focused gaze said, *tell me no*.

I bit my lip and gave him the smallest nod of permission.

He pressed that claw a little harder, and the fabric gave way, splitting open along the length of my groin. Goosebumps

erupted across my forearms and neck as he hooked my underwear, pulled, and sliced it in half.

As I inhaled a sharp breath, Sizzle pressed his forehead against my sternum and growled with desperation, his nose flaring. A claw sank into the bark by my face and his shoulders hunched, curling in close, enveloping me in his scent and fur. I was beginning to pant, caught between sublime fear and impatience. Like rolling over the highest summit of a rollercoaster with no seatbelt.

Then Sizzle's slick, hot tongue covered my exposed slit from start to end and dragged slowly back into his mouth, taking my soul with it. My voice broke on a high-pitched moan, nearly a whimper, and his fur stood on end, even the sleek black coat of his arms and face, as if *I* gave *him* goosebumps for a change. His deep lungs pumped, ragged, as he did it again.

I strained my legs wider and pushed my hips out, balancing on the balls of my feet beneath my pelvis. *Yes*, this is what I needed. My heat-addled brain eased, even as the desperation for relief ramped up. In what felt like a death-defying stunt, I unclenched one fist in the dirt and clapped it to the back of Sizzle's head, clutching the base of one ear and his fur.

“Yesssss...”he snarled, his voice so bass that it vibrated my chest near the lowest register of my hearing.

In a split second, he hooked his claws beneath my butt and pulled me off balance. My back hit the ground cover with a *thump* as he dragged me beneath him. My hair snagged in dead leaves and twigs, shirt riding up my spine and catching

on my breasts, as he pushed my legs open under his claws. The seat of my pants ripped further, and he bared his teeth in a snarl.

Not just the teeth in his muzzle, but *all* his teeth. A line of pearly white like dissection stitches traveled down the long length of his neck, ending at his sternum. His mouth opened as the skin around his nose and eyes bunched with a feral, possessive growl. I propped myself up on my elbows to look down his clenching abdominal wall towards his prepuce, where a swollen, purple cock protruded from its black sheath.

My thighs ached at the sight of it, my toes curling in my boots. But the glimpse was fleeting, lacking in delicious detail, because in the next second, Sizzle dove forward, pressing the top of his snout into my pussy before he ascended my body, his tongue delving deep into my channel to get at the taste he'd been waiting for.

My eyes rolled back as his tongue drove into me, strong and dextrous, hitting my cervix and curling over itself to fill me up. He pressed the long muscle against my clit too, undulating pressure into the bud. I mewled and clutched his ears, pushing him into me, recklessly addicted to his cocktail of fear and pleasure.

It didn't take much. My knees shook and my brow creased. I begged in a shaky whisper. "I'm- I'm-" Then my voice was wrenched from me as a forceful orgasm clenched every muscle in my abdomen, squeezing his tongue, drenching it anew.

Sizzle's mouth opened down the length of his esophagus, exposing strong throat muscles similar to the pillowy mouth of a viper or python. He crawled up my body, brushing his face over my belly, dragging it across the mounds of my breasts, all while his tongue stayed between my legs, milking me until the last ounce of my climax left me a wobbly mess. I raked my fingers through his steaming fur, wet with fog and pollen, as his lower jaw unhinged like a snake, cradling my throat from ear to ear while he purred. The sound vibrated all the way through his mouth and neck, through each fang that gently pricked my flesh from groin to collar. He let go of the crushing grip he'd had on my knees and slipped one claw beneath the small of my back, tensing his mouth muscles until the vacuum of his most dangerous asset sucked lightly on my skin and clothing.

I blinked breathlessly, then huffed a small smile. "Are you... hugging me?" I asked with disbelief. His forearm bound me tighter as he rubbed my cheek with his snout.

That was as close to confirmation as I would get with his mouth preoccupied, so I hugged his neck and ran my fingers through the mats of thick fur around his collar. His tongue slowly receded from between my legs and his mouth closed from bottom to top like a zipper pull. *Click click click click...*

The haze of need faded as he pressed the heel of his hand into my back and lifted me to my feet. He pulled his mouth away from my neck and rehinged his lower jaw, kneading the inside of his mouth with his tongue and gums in an eerie, inhuman way. It was fascinating, terrifying... Is this what he was like

unrestrained and completely himself? Knees still weak, I held onto his shoulder for balance as he crouched, a bright red blush completely overcoming my face. He smirked, tongue lolling from his jaw with a suggestive pulse of muscle.

“Mmm... Delicious.”

I opened my mouth to respond with a lame *thank you*, but my holotab vibrated against the bone of my thumb. Sizzle’s ear twitched. I lifted my arm to see the holographic display implanted there and gasped.

“Storytime! *Mang hesso, mang hesso!*”

Sizzle eyed me sideways, looking at the alarm blaring beneath my skin. I had ten minutes to get to the school pod before it was my turn to tell the kids ghost stories from Korea. Even if I ran, I’d never make it, and they’d been excited for today all week.

With a whine of disappointment, I turned off the alarm, worrying my lip, bouncing from foot to foot, feeling all the sticks and twigs in my hair. Sizzle covered my holotab before I could send a message off to one of the other volunteer storytellers.

“Shake out your silk, then I’ll take you. If they ask, tell them it’s because my head was between your thighs.”

“Sizzle!” I admonished. He chuckled, then pointed to the canopy.

“Ladder, remember? You have such a dirty mind, morsel.”

I squeezed my thighs together and shook my head. Even now, the rip in the crotch seam of my pants slipped over my ruined underwear. I couldn't go anywhere remotely proper like that, much less storytime. Sizzle glanced down at his handiwork, then swiped something from the ground. He looped my light jacket around my waist and tied a knot.

"It'll be our little secret," he hummed, pleased with the idea. "Now hurry with your silk."

Swearing colorfully in Korean and in complete denial that I was about to go be a teacher with my pants split open beneath my jacket, I pulled my hair out of its tie, flipped it over my head, and shook it with vigor.

Five

The school pod was too small for a beast like me, so I stalked the open entrance, watching my morsel tell stories to the pups and stealing glances over their heads. Her cheeks were as bright as candied *luris* and she squirmed in her seat, knees pressed together.

The perk of my ears and crooked grin upon my face had a mind of their own. No matter what gruesome daydreams I conjured up, the stupid look of happiness wouldn't abate. I plopped my head on the top step of the pod and sat on my haunches.

Jihae was *mine*.

To my absolute horror, my tail started wagging.

I licked my nose to coax the last of her pussy's sweet taste into my mouth as a consolation. No amount of tail-wagging embarrassment could take this victory away.

Jihae caught me, stumbling over her words, and I chuffed with delight. I did it again, slower, pulsating the impressive muscle

as the tip folded over itself like it had inside her pussy. She pressed her black and purple spell book against her chest, crumpling the aged pages, and crossed her ankles. *Pfft*. As if her legs could close any more tightly than they already were.

Fuck, I loved playing with my food.

“Ahem.”

My ear twitched sideways at the familiar voice of Little Miss Pubescent Pom Pom. The pink shilpakaari girl was fiery and clever, but small, standing at barely half my four-legged height. She twisted her short crop of head tentacles at me like I was in trouble. Knowing her, I was.

“Snacklette,” I greeted.

“What’s going on with you and Miss Jihae?”

“Yeah,” came Rambir’s voice, the human boy from *India*. I slid my gaze lazily towards him and he crossed his arms, playing the tough guy.

“I see you brought your side dish with you,” I drawled, ignoring their question. “Shouldn’t you be inside with your fellow pups?”

Pom Pom wasn’t easy to deter. Despite being sick most of her life, she had a backbone of steel and a mind so stubborn, it rivaled me in bite force. She rolled her striped red eyes with a quirk in her mouth that spelled mischief. “Sure, go ahead and report us for playing hooky. I’ll just tell Miss Jihae about that one time you ate my pet *urundu*—”

I hissed for her to keep quiet and pushed away from my perfect perch at the door, checking to see if my morsel had heard. To my relief, she was making strange, daft faces at the pups, who were giggling as she wriggled her fingers.

“What do you *want*, Pomahrutvi?”

Vin’s adopted daughter grinned. “Are you spun?”

I snorted, a smirk growing across my face far different from the happy grin I’d been wearing. “Ah, so you want to know if I’ve bent her over and claimed her yet. Why, is Rambir interested in the honors? Do you have eyes for your teacher, pup?”

Predictably, the human boy choked on his own spit, a maroon blush overcoming his warm, dusty cheeks. I snickered as Pom Pom rolled her eyes.

“Please. We have holotabs. We know how this stuff works, so stop trying to embarrass us.”

“But it’s so fun to embarrass the humans. Look at how pleasing their coloring becomes.” I lifted a claw in Rambir’s direction. Then I stepped closer to them both, my smile fading. “If you want the answer, it’s yes. Now, if your curiosity is sated, I suggest you stop disrespecting your teacher and march up those stairs to hear her stories... Or I’ll tell Imani.”

At the mention of her father’s *vira*, Pom Pom’s tendrils shrank back. She glanced at Rambir with urgency, urging him with a nod of her head. I raised one brow, waiting for him to speak.

He took a deep breath to gather courage, then asked, “Would it be okay if I went as a bilong for Halloween?”

I blinked at him. *What?*

“You want to pretend to be a bilong... as a costume?”

He nodded with a wince. “Maybe I shouldn’t have aske—”

“Do all Halloween costumes need a blessing? Does everyone dress up as other people?” I was confused—a common state of being for me these days—making my fur stand on end. This was not how Tinsley had described the tradition. “Is it not liberation from your daily life and responsibilities? Do you not get to pretend to be anything you want?”

“Well yeah, but it’s just that, on Earth, it’s not good to dress up as other cultures, you know? I always hated seeing *Uhmaerikin* kids on *tivi* dressed as *Shiva* or *Aladdin*.” Rambir raked his thick black silk with a wince. “But it’s cool to dress up like our heroes, so... it’s complicated? Where I’m from, we don’t have this holiday.”

I sat up straight on my haunches, puffing out my chest. I had been a boy once too, so I knew exactly what Rambir’s pride wouldn’t let him say. He wanted to dress like *me*, not just any bilong. Excitement made my heart swell in my chest at the prospect.

“I’d be honored if you were a bilong for Halloween,” I told him.

The boy’s face lit up. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never seen a bilong pup, other than myself. So yes, I would like it very much.” I leaned in, licking one of my yellow eyeballs for emphasis. “But if you don’t get your pup butts inside now, I will absolutely eat you for lunch.”

They giggled, one of my favorite noises—far better than screams—and Rambir hopped up the stairs to join the rest of the students. But Pom Pom paused and leaned into my ear to whisper a secret on her way up.

“Miss Jihae is going to have a costume at the festival, so you should think of something too. I’m going as a *jel’li* fish.”

My eyes flashed to Jihae, where I could just barely see her shoulder through the door. “I’ll think about it.”

Pom Pom nodded once, as if my answer were satisfactory. Then she glanced between us, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I’m going to have cousins soon, right?”

I snapped playfully at her tendrils. “Go.”

“Vin and I have a pool. I bet three, he bets five.”

I drew saliva onto my tongue and licked the side of her face with sloppy slurping sounds.

“Ew, fine! I’m going!”

I lifted my face to the gloomy sky and trumpeted with laughter as she rushed up the rest of the stairs.

Scaring children? What a delight.

Six

The Halloween festival had finally arrived, filling the night air with eerie dance music, purple lamplight, and laughter. I swayed through the crowds, admiring all the amazing costumes and smiling faces, saying hi to students and fellow teachers, neighbors, and strangers. A few volunteers dressed as zombies scared the kids and snuck up on people, filling the party with screams and laughter.

The entire colony had holed up in their units all day, preparing their costumes, including me, too much of a ball of nerves to sleep or do anything else. It had been a relief to arrive early and help set up, walking through the haunted trail with the smaller children while there was still a bit of dusky light oozing through the canopy. I held their hands, making silly faces and noises so they felt fearful excitement rather than anxiety, all while stealing glances into the trees, looking for familiar yellow eyes.

Sizzle had tried to help with finishing touches on the trail but chose to stay away while Wade and his crew finished erecting

the haunted well and campsite. He'd nearly ripped my clothing off with the other men so close, determined to cover me in the smell of his fur and oils, purring like a cat, and being just as persistent.

So instead, he came to me at the end of the day, climbing down from his perch, eyes dilated and famished, ragged from holding himself back. He'd pressed me up against the nearest marked tree and feasted between my legs while I'd held on for dear life. We'd become more and more desperate for each other in the days since giving in, to the point where he'd scratched one claw into the boughs of the trees until it was blunt and smooth, using it along with his tongue to soften how tight I was a little bit more, a little bit faster, each day. He was working up to bonding with me fully, he'd explained with a wink, because bilongs were not your average ISU species.

That had made me slap my hot cheeks with embarrassment, a reaction Sizzle thoroughly enjoyed.

But at the end of each of our wild reunions, when he'd hug me with the pillowy muscles inside his mouth, I'd realized...

What he was really doing was giving me an escape route.

Each time he hugged me in silence, the chorus of buzzing, chirps, hoots, and shivers returning to the tree boughs filled with our cobwebs and ghosts, he'd held me tighter. I'd asked him the night before the festival about it, petting his fur, rubbing the edge of one ear between my thumb and forefinger.

"Why do you hug me with your mouth like this?" I asked quietly, brushing my shaky fingertips over all the fangs

splayed out along my sides and thighs. This part of his mouth wasn't wet, so it felt like hugging a naked lover without the stickiness that came with drying sweat. As strange as it had been at first, I was growing to love the intimacy.

Sizzle had zipped his throat closed with reluctance, watching my expression closely as he hovered over me. "Do you dislike it?"

"No, I like it."

He'd exhaled with relief, his breath ruffling the flyaways around my forehead, and straightened my clothing, picking debris out of my hair and off my sweaty skin. "My mother hugged me with her mouth like that. It feels right. Comforting."

"What does it feel like?"

Sizzle adjusted his teeth, rolling his tongue around the inside of his mouth. "Imprinting you in my senses. I feel your vitals, temperature, bone and muscle structures... You also taste more like metal than other species. Iron. I like that."

"Humans need iron. It's in our blood," I'd explained.

"*Tch.* Shilpakaari have copper in their blood but don't taste like copper." Then he'd cleared his throat with a hesitant croak. "Not that I've eaten one... recently."

Thinking back on that conversation as I slipped through the crowds of costumed Renatans dancing in the spooky purple lamplight, I poured myself a Witch's Brew, the cocktail of the evening. Its dry ice fog spilled over my hand, refreshingly

chilly in the humid dusk. I took a sip of the glittery purple drink and smacked my lips together. Berry tart and a bit like sangria, if it were crisp and bubbly.

“Hi, Jihae!”

Omi, the hairstylist from Jamaica, and her coil, a shilpakaar named Siatesh, came up to me with smiles on their faces, hands clasped together. My eyes bulged out of my face at their incredible butterfly and wasp costumes. I gestured to them with a huge smile as Siatesh poured them both a brew.

“Wow!” I gasped, admiring her gossamer wings and his antennae. “Your costumes are incredible!”

“So’s yours! A spooky black cat, I love it.” Omi tapped gently on one ear protruding from atop my head and I laughed, looking down at myself.

“Actually, I’m a *kumiho*, a nine-tailed fox? It’s a legend where I come from.” I shook my hips and turned sideways, showing off the several tails bouncing out from the small of my back. I’d only fit five on my belt, not nine, but they were still beautiful, fluffy and full.

“Oh, you and Sizzle must have coordinated!” Omi realized slowly. Her chocolatey eyes glittered with excitement. I cocked my head with confusion.

“No? I didn’t know he was going to wear a costume.”

Actually, I didn’t know he *could* wear a costume...

Sizzle never wore clothing, letting his natural coat hide his assets while walking on four legs. To my embarrassment, it

was something I'd never even thought of. All the humans simply thought of him as a hellhound, and dogs didn't have to wear anything. We were pre-conditioned to the idea that Sizzle would be naked.

Omi leaned in close, and I clutched both hands around the rim of my drink. I gulped half of it down, determined not to spill on her costume as she nudged my bicep.

"Ah course, it's not your *average* costume. Everyone up at di shop spent all day brushing out his undercoat. Conditioning, thinning, drying... There's so much black fluff on di hill, you'd think it snowed coal." She opened her eyes wide with an exhale to express the massive effort, then did a little dance with her shoulders. "Ah, but it was *worth it*. I can't wait for you to see him!"

"He's certain you'll be pleased," Siatish added with his usual stoicism, ovoid gold eyes catching on me from his blue-black face. His tendrils swirled around his shoulders, painted in gold stripes for the wasp look, and mischief upturned one side of his mouth. "If you aren't, I suggest you act so anyway."

"Sati," Omi scolded. His face broke in a reserved smile as he lifted his cocktail.

"I'm only ensuring he doesn't eat you, *priya*." Omi snorted with amusement and bumped her hip against his. He hid his mouth against his cup as his smile faded and looked at me again. "You do know what he's capable of, yes?"

"Yes, of course," I assured him. "And I like him very much."

“And you know that he’ll imprint upon you once you’re intimate?”

“Sati,” Omi warned again. She gave him a sideways glance. “They’ve just started, don’t scare her off.”

Siatesh shook his head. “We didn’t court all that long, *priya*, and advenans and bilongs have much more ruthless instincts. Perhaps it’s too forward a topic for a party, but someone should ask. He would want her to know, even if his instincts urge him to take every advantage.”

“Siatesh is right,” I admitted. “But we’ve already talked about it, and it’s okay. We’re, ah... moving forward.”

“Are we, now?”

Sizzle’s voice dripped down my spine and goosebumps prickled my skin right on cue. Omi smiled with excitement, biting her lip.

“I’m taking full credit for that masterpiece,” she decided with a definitive nod over my shoulder. She pointed at Sizzle with a warning in her eye. “You better tell people it was me. Damn near made my fingers bleed—Hey!”

“What is the saying? You must learn to read the room,” Siatesh goaded her. He bobbed his head in farewell, entwined his tendrils with his *priya*’s braids, and coaxed her away. He pointed Omi towards Tinsley, her best friend, and the Canadian descended upon her, stealing her attention in an instant.

I swallowed hard as Sizzle huffed against my spine, wobbling the tails affixed to my waist. I would have turned around, but I could tell he was enjoying himself, pressing his draconic nose against the jack hammering pulse in my throat. He licked me beneath the chin, scratching a claw through my tails, and hummed.

“Happy Halloween.”

“Happy Halloween,” I said back, breathless, chest tight.

“What are you meant to be... a bilong?” he asked, slipping his tongue down the front of my bodysuit to taste the mist of sweat between my breasts. A black glow flickered over the shadow of his face in my peripheral vision, and his usual bonfire scent was stronger, mixed with something floral. Shampoo, I realized.

“A *kumiho*,” I told him. “It’s a creature that pretends to be a beautiful woman, then eats the livers of unfaithful men to regain her humanity.”

The bilong hissed with laughter. “Is that what you plan to do? Seduce and eat me?”

At that, I smiled, pressing back against his massive shoulder. “You wouldn’t hate it,” I teased.

Sizzle chuffed, blowing my hair forward. “Predation is my favorite game, morsel. Of course I wouldn’t hate it.”

He curled one sharp claw around the cup of my jaw and turned me around to face him. My jaw dropped.

Sizzle had “dressed” as a *bulgae*, one of the fiery hounds of Korean folklore. Legend says they chase the sun and the moon in an effort to bring light to *Gamangnara*, the realm of darkness, causing eclipses. They are fierce, unapologetic, determined, and fit Sizzle so well, tears welled in the corners of my eyes.

His thick, musty fur was now silky soft, the undercoat he’d grown prior to living in Renata completely stripped away. A perm suspended his coat in waves of red and black that resembled flames, while intricately shaved patterns cut through the short coat of his arms, legs, and chest. They were the patterns painted onto temples and palaces throughout Korea. And his *face*... Black flames danced around his expression, emphasizing the thick ruff of fur behind his ears. Sizzle really *was* a masterpiece, just as Omi had claimed.

“Do I look like I want to steal your light, morsel?” he asked. He stared at me with one sideways eye, stock still. I could clearly tell he was uncertain, even if no one else could.

But if I spoke, my voice would shake with emotion.

Seoul, my home city, was full of modern buildings and international people, but Korean history was visible everywhere. We celebrated our roots with pride, even if we didn’t take time to visit the palaces and museums or read old books outside of school. Our culture was alive and rich and seeped into daily life like a quiet ghost. When I’d been taken though, that daily reminder of who I was and where I was from had been ripped away.

I nodded to answer Sizzle's question, then gently rocked forward, burying my face in his fur and breathing him in. I rubbed the tears from my eyelashes against his neck before they could fall, running my fingers through his silky coat.

My reaction to his costume had hit me like a train. Not because I missed home so much—most of us did, so that wasn't new—but because he hadn't felt a sense of belonging... probably *ever*. He'd never been surrounded by the history of his species, had never known his parents or gone to school. His path had never crossed with a bilong pup or a sibling. Everywhere he went, he was met with fear and suspicion. Bilongs didn't even have their own language, music, or architecture. And if they did? There was no record of it.

At least I could stream K-dramas and music from our archives.

Sizzle wrapped his claw around the small of my back. "Perhaps I chose poorly," he hummed with hesitation. "I considered being a dragon for you, but this seemed... more fitting."

I shook my head, brushing his fur across my face, then pressed my lips against his cheek. His ear twitched and he chuffed the moment he realized I wasn't afraid but *touched*. He squeezed my waist tighter as his tongue lolled out from the split in his lower jaw.

"It's perfect. Better than a dragon. Better than anything."

Sizzle pulled his face back so we could look at each other and grinned. "You *did* scold me like a dog, if you remember."

I let out a belt of laughter, petting the traditional patterns shaved into his chest. “I did, and you deserved it.”

“Mm, I like when you’re bossy,” he panted, realigning his throat teeth with hunger. I ran my fingers over them as their clicking descended to his sternum. The oils in his fur bloomed with that fiery smell as I petted him, gathering the addictive perfume on my palms. My pussy clenched, and I looked around the crowd, biting my lower lip.

Everyone was there, and though some were staring, the looks on their faces were surprise, not judgment. The children ran around playing tag, giggling, and dancing to another remix of *I Put a Spell on You*. Rambir waved as he ran by, wearing a furry cape and ears that looked suspiciously like Sizzle’s.

When I turned back to my bilong, I reached up on my toes to speak into his ear. “I like you, Sizzle.” I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. The phrase in English lost a lot of the feeling the Korean words carried. “I *adore* you. I know you’ve been holding back, but I want to keep you.”

My beautiful monster snarled and pressed his forehead to mine, clutching me harder. “Careful, morsel.”

Gently removing his claw from around my back, I took a step away. Sizzle, with black flames dancing around his face, let me go, his claws digging into the earth. I shook my head.

“I don’t want to be careful,” I breathed.

Sizzle’s head cocked to the side, a malicious grin showing off all his teeth in the purple mood lighting. “Are you telling me

to chase down my sun and moons, Jihae? Because unlike a *bulgae*, I *will* catch and keep you. You'll never leave my realm again."

I didn't answer, backing up until I was past the food tables and the crowd. He prowled after me, head low to the ground, hackles high and agitated. Then I turned in a slow circle until my back was to him, and immediately, his hot breath was behind me. Not a sound, not a whisper. My breath shuddered with excitement and trepidation as he nipped my ear.

"If you're foolish enough to run..." he rumbled, turning my shoulders towards the shortcut trail back towards the home towers. We hadn't decorated it, and it wasn't part of the festival, so the entrance was dark and claustrophobic, overgrown with ferns and creeping vines. "I'll find you in the dark."

His heat retreated, and I took one measured step after the other, away from the crowds and decorations, away from the safety of the party. My prey mind knew that if he saw me run immediately, he'd tackle me to the ground. So I took it slow, breathing in measured breaths. Left foot, right foot, my knees and hands shaking with fear and excitement. I unbuckled the *kumiho* tails from around my waist and dropped them at the treeline with an exhale of relief.

Then the jungle swallowed me up, and I ran as fast as my feet could carry me.

Seven

The light of my holotab quaked across the shortcut trail, its choppy blue glow just barely enough to see by. Steam billowed around my sprinting feet as the night air cooled and the groundcover released the heat of the day with an audible hiss. The sound was disorienting, even if it was familiar. Maybe it wasn't the jungle, but Sizzle stalking nearby, licking his chops, waiting to pounce.

I knew logically that he wouldn't hurt me, but evolution demanded I evade him at all costs. Imaginary claws raked at my back and bit down on my neck. My breath grew more shallow as my pulse skyrocketed, thumping in my temples and flooding my ears.

Then a howl filled the dense jungle, revving up like the sound of an airstrike siren, hollow and otherworldly. It was far away, but I knew it wouldn't be for long. Sizzle had given me as much time as he could.

But now, he was coming for me.

My rabbit brain took the reins. I pulled my fluttery skirt off, rubbed my face on it, and threw it into the underbrush. Then I slid into the ferns in the opposite direction and backed away from the trail as far as possible, wide eyes trained on the dim glow of fog bubbling up on the path. I closed my holotab and waited.

Within seconds, Sizzle's heavy claws vibrated the ground and animals fled. The branches above me cracked and swayed, and the canopy shivered as slumbering birds burst into the sky. My bilong was only visible by the illumination of his holographic black flames. He slid to a stop on the trail, spraying mulch and slicing up exposed roots. His hackles rose as he searched the trail, separating his bifurcated lower jaw and snapping it together with feral impatience. He caught the scent of my skirt, ears swiveling towards the brush across the path, then shot off like a rocket, shaking the trees as he disappeared.

Wasting no time, I shuffled backwards, holding my breath, knowing that if I crawled far enough, I'd end up on the other side of a bend in the path. I was so close to the end of the trail, and if I made it that far, I'd feel victorious. Worthy.

Certain that there was no movement from the path, I rose to my hands and knees, the mulch poking holes in my black tights. Ferns tickled my shoulders and caught on my bodysuit. I kept one eye over my shoulder, desperate to catch any movement. When I was sure there was none, I heaved a sigh of relief and faced forward.

Sizzle's black, flaming face waited for me, submerged in the glade of ferns and grinning as if he were a sea monster awaiting his prey in an ocean of blood. I gasped, my limbs shocked and locked as I scrambled, falling over myself. The most terrifying Cheshire Cat ever imagined, his teeth glowed in the blacklight flames, the long line of throat teeth down his chest exposed and illuminated.

“Boo.”

Sizzle lunged forward, grabbing me by the ankle in his three-part jaws, wrapping his tongue around my calf as I shrieked with pure instinct. He snapped me up and threw me over his shoulder, rising to two feet with a haunting trumpet of triumph aimed at the sky.

I clutched his fur as he sprinted straight through the jungle, ignoring the path. Tree boughs broke, vines snapped, and the mist blasted apart around us, climbing the black tree trunks in billowy shrouds and gusts. Sizzle jumped, pushing the air out of my lungs, and caught onto something, lifting us into the canopy.

And onto a platform.

The world turned upside down and the wind blew right out of my lungs in a *whoomph* as Sizzle tossed me down onto something soft. I panted, staring up at him... then around at the warmly lit room.

I was sitting in a deep well of cushions covered in a cooling net stapled neatly into a basin within the floor of a round treehouse, the massive *biria's* trunk cutting right through the

floor and ceiling at Sizzle's back. The wood was polished to a deep magenta, every plank new, shiny, and clean. It smelled like *heaven*—bonfires and fall leaves and barbecue...

Maybe also motor oil.

And all around us sat dozens of jack-o-lanterns. Some were partially eaten or licked clean of the orange exterior, but still gleeful with triangular eyes and toothy grins.

“Turn around, morsel.”

I redirected my attention to Sizzle as he crouched, tongue lolling, fur standing tall and stiff. His voice shook my chest like standing next to a subwoofer blasting a bass note too low to hear. He spread his legs open, leaning his weight on the knuckles of one hand while the other squeezed the aubergine cock protruding from the bulging prepuce between his legs. I couldn't help but stare as precum slid over his claws and dripped onto the floorboards.

I licked my lips and spread my legs in defiance, staying on my back. Even though I was fully clothed, I felt bare and vulnerable, rubbing my middle finger against the throbbing bud between my legs, so swollen I could feel it from above my bodysuit and tights. Sizzle's ears flattened and he snarled, still spreading seed along his shaft.

“Turn. Around.”

“But I'm enjoying the show,” I breathed, eyes sliding down the shaved designs of his chest. I bit my lip as he gave himself another tug with the long slide of his fist.

In a flash, he grabbed my hips and flipped me over, pinning me to the cushions. I gasped, one of his claws engulfing the small of my back from hip bone to hip bone. As I turned to look at him, his other claw pressed down on the nape of my neck, keeping my head turned to the side. He brushed the matted hair from my cheek and forehead gently.

“Look at me.”

I strained to see him, meeting his yellow stare. He was calm, dangerous, and so in control that my pussy pulsed and my thighs grew wet.

“I am going to fuck you, Jihae, and you’ll never be the same.”

I nodded against his grip, whispering my agreement.
“Jaebal... “

Sizzle sliced open the bottom of my body suit with a *snap* that made my thighs jump, then pressed his muzzle into the crux of my tights and rubbed against my wet, aching slit. He hooked his many teeth into the delicate netting of my tights and ripped the seat free, swallowing it with a growl of desperation.

With the deep, sinister echo of an active volcano, his stomach rumbled. I gasped, the hair prickling on my neck as he shoved his long, dextrous tongue into my pussy and pushed me prone to the bed.

“Oh my god,” I breathed as his tongue flipped over itself when it hit my cervix. He doubled its girth by folding it backwards, then pushed forward against the entrance to my uterus slowly,

stretching the length of my channel. I squeezed his face with my thighs, and my muscles contracted around the abnormally large tongue.

Sizzle chuckled, a billow of steam seeping from the corners of his mouth. He eased off, then pushed again, folding his tongue again and again until it felt like a fist rocking back and forth, right on the edge of hot, syrupy pain like a strong massage. He pulled his tongue back, putting pressure on my entrance from within without unraveling the long muscle, then pressed forward again, forceful but not fast.

“*Balli*,” I begged, rocking back with my elbows, trying to get him to move faster. He refused with a growl, unable to form words with his tongue kneading my depths. When the knot of his tongue popped free and left me empty, I mewled with disappointed shock.

Until he drove back in, pressed deep, and popped back out. He repeated this several times, the points of his claws pricking my side and cheek as he grew more ravenous. Summoning saliva into his mouth, he finally, *finally*, gave me what I wanted. He shunted me with force, pistoning inside my channel without pulling away, slippery and desperate.

“Yes!” I shouted, out of breath and whimpering. I curled my toes and pressed up on my hips, shaking with the effort of fighting against his weight as the tension crescendoed and I exploded, crushing his knotted tongue with my orgasm.

He unraveled the muscle, sliding it up through my cheeks as he withdrew it back into his mouth with a dangerous purr.

“Are you ready?”

I could hardly gather the breath to speak, so I nodded, my cheek and forehead pressed to the cushions. My muscles shook as I raised my butt into the air so there'd be no question.

I was ready.

Expecting him to clutch my hips and prick my skin with his claws, it surprised me when he pulled my opposite elbow beneath my body, twisting my spine so I was looking back. I blinked, reaction glazed with the tingling, lazy heat reaching through my muscles and veins. My hips swayed in his massive palm as he loomed over my sweat-misted spine.

“Eyes on me, morsel.”

I nodded again, one breast cushioned against my neck and chin. Sizzle took his cock in hand and pressed precum from the tip, letting it fall on my upturned pussy. It was warm like candle wax, every rivulet that cascaded down my opening and caught on the hood of my clit digging a groove in my memory.

He was big, I knew that. I'd caught glimpses as he'd fed on me in the jungle, felt his cum splatter the earth. I'd even licked it from his claws once or twice. But seeing its full length now, in the warm light of the jack-o-lanterns, was awe-inspiring.

It was long and thick, with a blunt head like a scalloped mushroom or flower petals, as long as my forearm *plus* my hand. Deep scars spiraled around the base until halfway up his length, almost like seams...

My eyes widened as his fist descended his shaft and his cock spun like a corkscrew, bulging the spiraled base out like a wicker basket.

Sinister amusement lit his eyes as he put on a show, pumping his cock while his hackles rose with aggressive excitement. With each retreat of his fist, the spiraled knot bulged and his cock spun, then he'd tug and it would stretch to its full length again, rotating back. The scalloped slope of his head mesmerized me as it spiraled back and forth. More than precum was dripping from the hood of my clit now.

I whimpered and pushed my hips back, desperate to make skin contact. He let out a hiss as our feverish bodies met and the back of his knuckles raked through the mixture of our fluids. Luckily, Sizzle was not a patient monster. He slid his head into the groove between my legs and rocked back and forth, slick thumb pressing his shaft down hard.

His head changed directions, the scalloped cap nudging at my channel. I strained my hips open, holding my breath, as he fed me his length inch by glorious inch. As his head butted up against my cervix, it spiraled, and that scalloped edge twisted up my nerves in a way I'd never experienced before. The knot pressed against my entrance, fully spun, then he eased back and his cock rotated again as he withdrew to the tip.

"*Oh*, my god," I breathed, channel already pulsating, even though I wasn't mid-climax. Brows scrunched together, I tilted back to meet him as he thrust again, and again, gaining momentum. He snarled, baring his thousand-tooth grin from

jaw to sternum. His snake-like lower jaw split open, saliva dripping from his fangs as we both watched him claim my body.

Suddenly, his claws crashed into the edge of the sunken bed as he loomed over my back, enshrouding me in his shadow. I gasped, his hips shunting into me hard enough to lift my knees off the cushions. That bifurcated jaw clasped the back of my head, my neck, my shoulders... The muscles in Sizzle's mouth gripped me like a fist, his teeth a spiked collar, as he drove into my pussy with abandon.

Then Sizzle seized up, his powerful abdomen bunching above my spine. Thick, hot jets of seed filled my pussy to overflowing as he pressed that spiraled knot against my entrance hard, trying to make room for it. They vibrated, and a mist coated my inner thighs and butt. Unable to stop himself, he ripped his mouth away from the nape of my neck and howled that eerie siren sound up at the ceiling.

My thighs slumped, the strength leaving me completely as the haze of lust receded. Everything in me ached, but I smiled, exhausted and sated, covered in semen, some sort of mist, and still wearing a half-eaten *kumiho* costume.

Sizzle and I said nothing at first, panting and in awe of what had just happened. He huffed, sniffing me, rubbing his nose against my spine, dragging his claws down my ruined tights. I gave him happy little moans in response, but anything more was beyond me.

Once Sizzle had calmed, he unraveled his tongue, held my hip, and cleaned me with long, languid strokes. The sweat and dirt from running through the jungle, the mess between my thighs...

“What was the misty feeling?” My voice was rough when I questioned him. Had I made that much noise while we were having sex? I must have. The grin on his face was beyond smug.

“Mmm, let’s call it birth control.” When I raised a brow, he snorted. “Without forcing my helices into you to fertilize my seed, I’m impotent. Neat trick, isn’t it?”

I hummed in agreement, glad he’d at least had the mind to think about that. But we were different species, weren’t we? There was no way we could have children together naturally...

Then he tugged on the remnants of my tights, and my lazy train of thought shifted. He curled over me, a firm claw on my hip, and my brow creased with confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“Having dessert,” he simmered, slipping a claw beneath the netting to slit them open as if he were flaying dinner. “I’d share, but I’m territorial, and I want them.”

I smiled, letting my head fall on the soft interior of my bicep.

“Okay, but what will I wear later?”

Sizzle slurped up the tights like he was eating ramen. His rough palm brushing the entire length of my bare leg as he

swallowed. “You won’t want for clothing, but I suggest you never get attached to anything you wear.”

“*Wae?*” I asked sleepily. He understood, even if Korean wasn’t in our translation database.

“Because I plan to feast on them every night for the rest of my life.”

When our eyes caught, the playfulness had left him entirely, the orange glint of the jack-o-lanterns’ menacing light dancing across his fur. He was lounging stock still, one wary eye turned towards me to watch my reaction to that confession. Becoming part of Sizzle’s diet was tantamount to a direct proclamation of love.

I licked my lips, turning in his grip to face him with a sober expression. His nostrils flared, a nervous huff filling his lungs. He adjusted his bifurcated lower jaw, his teeth *click click clicking* back into formation down his throat.

“Not my boots or my favorite bra,” I warned in a grave tone. He licked his teeth, yellow saucer eyes glancing down at my bare chest. I tapped him on the nose like a dog and he immediately looked back up, licking the spot on his snout. “This is very serious. New boots and bras aren’t comfortable.”

“Is this an ultimatum or a negotiation?” Sizzle hedged, ears perking up. I pressed my lips between my teeth, trying desperately to keep a straight face.

“What are you offering?” I asked in a professionally stoic tone.

Sizzle clacked his claws against the floor in thought. Though the bed was huge for me, it was just the right size for him, and I rolled towards his superior weight, loving the feel of his short fur against my naked skin. His prepuce, pressed against my thigh, was swelling as he pondered his terms.

“When they’re no longer comfortable, I can eat them,” he decided.

That’s it?

“Okay, dea—”

“... And you wear a different toy in your pussy everyday so I can savor the last one until I pluck the next day’s from between your legs.”

I blinked at him as his tongue surfed over his teeth. His eyes glazed with excitement at the possibility, and I squeezed my thighs together. No *way* should that be so thrilling...

I cleared my throat and pushed my hair from my face, trying to sound like anything but a thirsty idiot. “That seems reasonable.”

Sizzle clacked his jaws together in celebration and rolled me beneath him. I squeaked as he slid his knees beneath my thighs and grinned down at me.

“Do we have a deal, morsel?”

“Y-yes,” I breathed, overwhelmed and blushing.

Sizzle leaned forward and pressed his forehead to mine.

“You’re mine, Jihae.”

“You’re mine too,” I responded immediately, clutching the fur of his neck, hugging him close to me. He nuzzled my collarbone lovingly, fur standing up on end, then a claw slid around my throat as he nipped my shoulder.

“I hope you’re ready,” he growled, his cock growing from the pouch of fur between his legs, weighing heavily on my stomach.

Whether he was talking about round two, or the rest of our lives, I wasn’t sure.

But I was ready to find out.

Note to the Reader

ETTA PIERCE is a gloomy woman who thrives on thunderstorms, skeletal autumn trees, and lowkey photography but is doomed to scorch under the relentless Southern California sun. To escape the hellish sunshine, she writes cinematic scifi slow burns, complex heroes, and nuanced worlds that will knock your socks off.

This is primarily because she didn't know what a trope was until last week and has dug herself into her own grave. She likes her new real estate though...

It comes with shade.

Check out her other related series:

Intersolar Union Series

Epic interconnected action/adventure with Mass Effect vibes, featuring fiercely competent heroines. This series opens up the entire world of Etta's writing.

Over the Moon Series

Small colony vibes with a touch of emotional turmoil and healing, focusing on cultural, gender, and age diversity.

Blind Date with the Alien by
Holly Hanzo

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



KIDNAPPED... OR RESCUED?

Kidnapped during the invasion of Earth and forced into dancing in a tavern on a space station for aliens by her new owner, Meadow is tired of her long days and losing hope.

Zaith, a struggling artist, is making a delivery when he sees her and instinct kicks in, leading him to 'rescue' her by yanking her off her dais and bringing her to his planet.

He claims she's his mate but leaves her with his mother. His mother convinces Meadow to give Zaith a chance before she's sent to a sanctuary planet for rescued humans.

He has three dates to prove himself. Three dates to win her over. Three dates to make her his.

Is he her fate, or is he just another kidnapper?

Content Warnings: *kidnapping, violence, light family angst*

One

MEADOW

I heard the distinct clacking of the Elodian footsteps against the metal floor of the spaceship before I saw the bodies of our insectoid alien captors. The cockroach-like aliens walked on their hind legs, with sharp pincers along their mandibles, making their appearance truly terrifying. Once I'd gotten used to their insectoid appearance, I loved the possibilities they represented for humanity.

They approached Earth under the premise of becoming our ally in the universe. Our scientists had welcomed their knowledge and technological and medicinal advances. The Elodians taught humans Galactic Standard, as well as offered translators for those who struggled with the language. Learning Galactic Standard, had become one of my favorite pastimes, and I'd embraced the new culture that the Elodians brought to Earth. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect their betrayal.

When I was first grabbed in the largest claw of the insectoid alien, I thought it would clamp down hard enough to instantly

kill me like they'd done to my family while we attempted to escape. Instead, I'd been tossed like a ragdoll among the aliens until I was thrown into the cell I now called home. The first three days were the worst. Left alone in the dark, bound by my wrists and ankles, my chances of escape were next to nothing. Yet determination filled my heart. Every time the cage door opened and one of the creatures slid meal bars inside, I hurled insults at my captors in English and Galactic Standard.

A few times, I launched my bound body through the opening. My plan wasn't well thought out. Piloting a space shuttle in deep space wasn't something taught in school. Maybe if humans took back Earth from the Elodians, it would be one day. Too bad I wouldn't be around to see it.

On the third day of my captivity, the bleakness of my situation changed when the Elodians tossed another woman into the cell next to mine. Her auburn hair was snarled in horrific knots and dirt streaked her limbs. While she slept, I wiped her down as best I could with the supply of water the Elodians left in my cell. Lacking a rag, I tore the bottom of my shirt. I used my fingers to untangle her hair as much as possible, attempting to keep it damp with the water. Thankfully she was unconscious for the worst of the knots.

Noelle woke after a full day. She and I bonded over our predicament, and I grew to love how she said my name with her Scottish accent, more like 'medal' than Meadow.

Eventually, the Elodians captured and threw at least two dozen other women from multiple countries across Earth in the hold

with Noelle and me. Two women, brought into the cargo hold together, managed to take the Elodian guard by surprise as he dropped off our food. They made it to the hold's door but were easily overpowered and dragged out of the hold in the pincer claws of the largest and meanest Elodian. After they disappeared, the remaining women waited for them to return. Minutes turned into hours, which turned into multiple night and day rotations. When the Elodians returned without the women cycles later, we realized they were never returning to the group.

In the hold, the remainder of us all tried to communicate, but not everyone had a translator implanted or spoke fluent Galactic Standard. The first time the floor shook constantly for more than two day and night cycles, we were treated to an Elodian guard's cackling laughter as he flipped a handful of switches on a panel near the hold's door. Metal walls against the far side of our room turned into a floor-to-ceiling viewscreen.

"Enjoy the view," the guard chattered. He turned, leaving us in total darkness. Our only source of comfort, the view of Earth, grew smaller as the ship that held us captive raised higher into orbit.

Airi, a gorgeous woman from Ethiopia, sat pointing at the shrinking image of Earth while tears streamed down her face. Keiko, from Japan, chatted with another woman whose knuckles turned white with the force of her grip on the bars of the cell. I glanced at Noelle. "We're never going back, are we?"

“I don’t think so,” she replied.

“What do you think these aliens are going to do with us?” Airi asked.

Noelle shrugged her slim shoulders. “It can’t be good.”

“Do you think they’re going to eat us?” Beatriz asked in her thick Dominican accent.

“I think they’re going to sell us,” someone behind Keiko said.

“I’ve believed in fate since I was a child. There’s a reason we’re alive.” My declaration stunned everyone. “I’m not sure what it is yet, but there’s a reason.” I shivered at the way my voice warbled. That was the last of the conversations we had as a group, not because of any disagreements, but because of the Elodians.

The next morning, or whatever the cycle was, the engines rumbled and slowed. Two guards entered the hold where we were kept with a new species of alien with six eyes and three rows of jagged teeth. The new alien sauntered through, inspecting us. He pointed at five women who were promptly dragged out of their cells. We never saw them again. The situation repeated until only Noelle and I remained.

To say I hated the Elodians was putting it mildly. If these aliens were the best the galaxy had to offer, I wanted no part in knowing any of them.

I had yet to decide if being kidnapped instead was a fate worse than death.

“Attention. We are going through the Plutonian Rift,” a mechanical voice announced over a loudspeaker I didn’t know the Elodian ship possessed.

“Noelle, do you see that?” I whispered, trying to keep my voice low enough not to alert our captors.

“What?”

“That mist.” I inched my way to the edge of my cage, as close as possible to Noelle, making sure my voice remained low and didn’t carry to the ears of our Elodian captors.

Noelle slithered across the metal floor as close as she could to me.

“Do you see it?” I whispered.

“There’s a bit of a haze, but nothing out of the ordinary.” Noelle shrugged. “I’m not sure what you’re seeing Meadow.”

“How do you not see the brilliant colors? They’re dancing. It’s almost as if the Aurora Borealis is in the mist floating down from the ceiling.”

“Meadow, get down,” Noelle said. “I don’t see what you do, but it could be dangerous. Don’t take a chance with it.”

I slumped against the floor, a sweet, intoxicating scent filled my nose. “Oh, who’s that? He’s not an Elodian.” I wedged my hand between the bars, reaching for the strange alien.

“Meadow?”

I heard Noelle’s voice but couldn’t tear my eyes away from the broad back of an alien shimmying his hips in time with the

colors of the mist. He looked humanoid enough, with two legs, an expansive back, and long dark hair obscuring a full view of his face. Judging by the width of his broad spike-covered shoulders, he stood a full head taller than my five foot six. My fingers tingled, and I wanted to touch the spikes and scales that dotted his shoulders more than anything. I wagged my fingers in his direction, my mouth open to call to him, but couldn't hear the words I said. He turned on the balls of his feet in a graceful motion, like the ballerina in a jewelry box. For the first time since the purple and green mist filled the cargo hold, I saw his face and my heart thudded. His orange skin was the color of the ripest Halloween pumpkin. Full, burnt umber lips lead to chiseled cheekbones. My eyes roamed his face, and I became enamored with his dark eyes, surrounded by the thickest lashes that drew me in. I could lose myself in his eyes for eternity. He was captivating. Maybe *he* was the reason the Elodians took me. The mist inched forward, purples, greens, and yellows danced, bringing *him* closer to my waiting fingers.

Droplets of water fell onto my cheek. It felt like I was swimming through a heavy fog, but not the gorgeous one with the man, no, alien of my dreams. From somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I felt the mist recede. In its ebbing, unseen shackles released me from its grip and my mind, thick with sludge, clawed its way to consciousness.

“Wake up please. I don't want to go through this by myself.” Noelle's voice poked through the sludge in my brain. The fog clouding my mind dissipated when she slapped my cheek.

“Ow. What happened?” My voice sounded funny to my ears.

“What happened?” Noelle repeated. “How do you not know? Meadow, you zoned out talking about a mist. I couldn’t wake you.” Noelle’s hands shook.

“I’m okay. I don’t know what it was either.” For some reason, I kept the vision of the orange alien to myself, wanting to savor the image in my memory. Whenever I slept next, I hoped visions of the new alien filled my dreams.

I stretched out on the cool metal floor with hope for the first time in cycles. My dreams started pleasant earlier in my captivity. The longer I remained a prisoner on the Elodian ship, the darker they turned. Thanks to the artificial day and night cycles on board the ship, time ticked away until I no longer knew how long I’d spent between the bars of this cell. Sleep claimed me, and for the first time in ages, my dreams were pleasant, filled with images of the handsome alien.

“Get up. You two have reached the end of your journey with us.” A guard smacked the bars of our cell with its claw. Spindly antennae twitched in my direction, dropping an outfit that could best be called *barely there* on the floor. Despite our reservations about the clothing, in no time, Noelle and I donned the skimpy lace outfits. “Let’s go.”

I forced my legs to push forward, squinting my eyes in the harsh lighting of an enormous hangar bay. Spaceships in all shapes and sizes rested in pod-like parking spaces. “Woah.” I couldn’t help the awe from filling my voice.

“Welcome to your new life,” the Elodian clacked.

Two

ZAITH

Art is my life. All I've ever wanted to do is create beautiful things for people to enjoy. Whatever I'm making now, I'm not sure the civilized galaxy would call it art, but it's what my client wants, and what the client wants, the client will get.

"Zaith, what's the deal with this stuff?" My cousin, Klaus, asked, dropping down in a chair at the edge of my studio. "Since when are you making furniture?" His eyes scanned the room. "I thought art was more your thing."

"It is art. I'm making it to the client's specifications." I shrugged. "Clients are clients." I grabbed a textured rag and a smoothing tool from the wooden shelving unit on the wall.

"True." Klaus shifted in his chair. "Doesn't look the same as your usual stuff."

"Yeah, well, they're a set of five pedestal sculptures. I'm getting paid well." I turned my back to resume texturizing the base. I couldn't afford to turn down any paying client. As it

stood, my choice of career was a source of contention among my family.

“Who commissioned them?”

“One of the Bhalungs living on Sancus Station.”

“A Bhalung? Does he want to do anything specific with them or just add to his collection?”

“Does it matter? He’s a paying client, and Bhalungs are filthy rich.”

Klaus snorted. “They collect things. Their hoard’s value grows over time.” He stood and stretched. “Got much more to do?”

“As long as their credits are good, I’ll create whatever they want.” I ran a rough cloth over the pedestal base, adding to the texture. “A bit. Final touches have to go on, then I’ll contact the Bhalung buyer to pick them up.”

“Good. Make sure all the credits are deposited in your account first.”

“Of course.” I sighed. “I’m not stupid, no matter what the family thinks.”

“We want you to be successful and earn tons of credits.”

“Success comes in many forms. I might not run a successful business like our fathers, own a small fleet of ships like our cousin, Kal, or lead a technology company like you do, but I’m happy, Klaus. I enjoy what I do, and by my own terms, that makes me successful.” I tossed the rag into the cleansing

unit, making sure my back faced my cousin to hide my sneer.
“Aren’t you supposed to be at your office?”

“The company functions fine without me for a few days. I needed to clear my head.”

My eyebrows raised, but I remained silent, unused to hearing my cousin verbalize his desire for a break. He’d always been the family’s favorite, going to the best schools, making decisions our parents considered better than mine. Over the years, I’d grown sick and tired of living in Klaus’s shadow. My father constantly compared my failing art career to my cousin’s, but with the commission I’d make on these pedestals, my family would have to take my career seriously.

I hoped that with my soon-to-be influx of credits in my account, my muse would return and with it, the urge to create decorative pieces for filthy rich beings of the galaxy. I missed my normal muse, the freedom to create for the exhilaration of creating, for no other purpose other than because I wanted to. One day I’d get that back, or at least, I wished for it. Perhaps with giving up some of the constant pressure to make a living via my art, I’d step out of Klaus’s shadow.

With those thoughts lingering in my head, I finished the last sculptured pedestal. Thrilled with the final products, each unique in their own right, I snapped a few image captures with my tablet to upload to my portfolio. As soon as I clicked the last image capture, my comm buzzed against my wrist. I sucked in a deep breath before answering my mother’s communication. “Mother, how nice to hear from you.”

“Zaith, how are you?” My mother’s voice echoed through my studio.

“Excellent, thank you. I finished a commission today.”

“Oh, that’s great news. Will your pieces be exhibited?”

I cringed at the excitement in her voice. She must have sensed my hesitation, because she coughed delicately into the comm.

“I didn’t ask. A Bhalung commissioned them.”

“Them?” Her voice perked up. “Multiple commissions. That’s wonderful, Zaith.”

“Four.” Pride filled my chest.

“Incredible. I hope your benefactor pays you well.”

“Do not worry. I have been well compensated with credits.” My chest puffed in pride even though these pedestals weren’t my favorite commission. I knew my mother well, and suspected the mere mention of credits would bring up a topic I did not wish to discuss.

“With the notoriety you’ll be receiving, perhaps you’ll attract a mate.”

There it was. The mate topic. I knew she meant well, but she wished for more for me. “Mother, I’ll take a mate when I’m ready.”

“Zaith, you’ve been mature for a while. I’ve set you up with females from impeccable bloodlines and even the more free-spirited types. You need someone who can be your partner in all walks of life.”

“When the time is right, I will mate. I will find the perfect mate, one who accepts me for me and appreciates my art.”

“I have a feeling your time is coming sooner than you think,” Mother said sagely. “It’s written in the stars.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever you say, Mother.” I knew she believed in the fates and placed a lot of trust in her instinct. Over the revolutions, her intuitions became legendary.

“When are the sculptures due?” Mother abruptly changed the subject.

“Within the next *astea*. I took images for my portfolio. When the suns break the horizon, I’ll comm my patron to inform him of the status of his order.”

Mother yawned. “A wise plan. Do not keep clients waiting. It is imperative that your integrity as a business owner remains impeccable.”

“Of course, Mother.” I tried to keep my voice level. “For now, I think you should rest, it’s been a long day, and you sound exhausted.”

“Will we speak again soon?”

“I’ll comm you after I know the delivery schedule.”

“Wonderful.” Mother paused.

“May the blessings of the goddess be upon you this evening.” I hesitated a moment.

“Zaith?”

“Yes?”

“Have faith in my visions. You will be with your mate sooner than you think. It’s foretold in the stars.”

“Yes, Mother.” I restrained myself from rolling my eyes. Mother ended the comm and I resumed my evening routine.

Sitting on my bed, wearing my favorite black Worath silkworm sleep bottoms, the *rachis* scattered over my back and shoulders tingled. For the first time in my thirty-two revolutions, the burnt-orange tendrils sprung to life. “What?” I leapt from the comfort of the bed and raced to the nearest looking glass to see my reflection. On the way to the washroom, I caught sight of the night sky blazing in brilliant blues, greens, and yellows. A misty haze filled the sky but didn’t dull the brightness of the colors against the stark white of our triple moons.

The *rachis* across my upper back stood on edge, so still it was almost painful. I stared through the misty haze at the lights’ sultry dance, blinking rapidly at the vision of a female, one of a species I’d heard of, but never seen in person. Human, I believed they were called. She had expressive eyes, in a color I couldn’t make out, and long, straight dark hair. Her face captivated me, from her high cheekbones to her pouty lips. My *rachis* crept forward, reaching toward the woman, my mother’s words echoing in my head, “Your mate will be with you sooner than you think.”

Could this strange occurrence in the sky possibly bring my fated mate to me? For the first time in my life, I put faith in my mother’s visions and words. The hazy mist crept closer,

teasing my senses through the window I kept cracked for fresh air. I inhaled, savoring the sweet scent, before my eyes rolled back in my head and I passed out.

My comm beeped, waking me the next rotation. I shielded my eyes from rays of blinding yellow light streaming in the window, all signs of the odd mist disappeared in daylight. The *rachis* on my back still tingled but weren't painful anymore. "Uggh," I groaned, standing up from where I'd spent the night on the floor. "I'm too old for this nonsense."

Turning toward my comm, I groaned after reading my client's name. I quickly ran my hand through my hair to hide any stray tangles. My finger shook as I clicked the pick up button on the comm. "Hello?"

"About time you picked up. Are my sculptures finished?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll meet at Sancus Station in three rotations." My client's tone brooked no argument.

I blinked. "What? I thought you were picking them up here on Melrun."

The voice on the other end of the comm scoffed. "No. I'm paying you enough. Deliver them to me in three rotations or I'll withdraw the credits I deposited in your account." The voice paused. "Check if you don't believe me."

My two hearts sank into my stomach. I needed the currency. "As you wish."

"Three rotations." The comm clicked off.

I took a fast shower to clear my mind, then sat at the small wooden table sending fruitless comms to the five rental shuttle businesses around. “Stars.” I threw my tablet across the room after the last place delivered the final devastating blow. No shuttles were available for at least six rotations. I was screwed unless I got a shuttle.

I sighed, knowing there were no other options and I’d owe an enormous favor to someone who would never let me live the humiliation down. My voice remained steady as I called in the biggest request of my life. “Klaus, I have a favor to ask.”

Three

MEADOW

I guessed this was my life now, gyrating my hips in a glass cage for all sorts of alien species in an off-the-beaten-path space station in a popular bar and brothel called Ale and Tail. At least, that's what we've been told.

Noelle and another human named Victoria served food and beverages to patrons, while I danced in a skimpy outfit in a cage in the center of the pub. According to the owner of the Ale and Tail, I drew the attention of the patrons because of my wide hips and swaying hair, and when their attention focused on me, the patrons didn't realize how many credits they spent on ale, then, in the brothel section, tail.

While some hands did grope us, and patrons spewed lewd comments after they'd had a few drinks, the comments weren't usually directed at me. From what I could discern, the aliens that patronized this sector of the galaxy preferred their females full figured. While I've got plenty of curves, and I'm a solid size twenty, I'm still a bit skinnier than Noelle. She took the majority of the comments.

Thankfully, Penrith, the Naporean owner of the bar, had taken Noelle and me away from the area on this station known as the Galactic Red Light District, hidden in plain sight on the station.

I supposed, for what it was, the Ale and Tail was an upscale place. Penrith kept us fed and mostly safe. From what I'd learned, Naporeans had a convoluted view on alien trafficking. They didn't mind slavery, and eventually trusted slaves could purchase their freedom, but Naporeans would only allow willing participants to work in the brothel. I was not willing.

Noelle, Victoria, and I knew we were lucky. Others weren't as lucky as us. At least we worked for and belonged to Penrith. His friend, Tenby, we nicknamed the collector.

Tenby came by every few rotations, bringing clothing for some of the servers, or odd adornments for my cage. One time, he brought a live reptile and seemed offended when I refused to dance with the alien equivalent of a snake across my body. Tenby's usual lemon-yellow complexion turned sour, and it took Penrith's interference for me to not lose my job then and there.

Day in and day out, the routine remained the same. Noelle carried a tray in an elegant lift toward a full table. My clumsy self could not be trusted to carry a full tray of food and drink, so I rocked an imaginary hula hoop around my hips in the glass prison.

Today, however, Penrith broke our usual routine. Noelle, Victoria, and I were ushered into a showroom where aliens of

all genders reclined. Patrons plucked food off their naked bodies. “Keep your eyes down,” Penrith ordered. “You will be here long enough for the next exhibit’s installation in the main room, then you’ll return to your usual station.”

“No way in hell,” I murmured. “I can’t.”

“Us? As tables?” Victoria’s eyes widened.

“I hope not. I really don’t want my fat to jiggle while someone attempts to grab food off my naked body.” Noelle’s face turned crimson.

“At least you’re not jiggling your fat and getting chub rub between your thighs while dancing,” I said.

“What are we going to do?” Victoria asked.

“Penrith?” I asked, my voice low. I prayed he wouldn’t hit me or force me to become a human table.

“Speak.”

“Where am I supposed to dance?” I couldn’t believe how steady my voice sounded.

“See the dais,” Penrith began.

“Boss!” Tenby bellowed from the main room.

Penrith pursed his lips, disapproval written all over his face. “You three, follow me. I’m not leaving you here alone.” Three of his gray fingers snapped in our direction. “You,” he pointed at me. “Once we’re back, dance in the cage behind the bar while they install your new platform.”

I turned to Noelle and mouthed, “Platform?” She shrugged.

“No talking. Your human voices are grating my ears today.” He led us, single file back into the main area. I followed Penrith, Noelle walked behind me, while Victoria brought up the rear.

We had just passed the threshold of the main dining room when my vision blurred. I followed instructions and climbed the steep stairs behind the bar and swayed, throwing my hands out in a vain attempt to keep my balance. I’d never danced on the stand behind the bar; it was higher up than I’d imagined, and I attributed my lack of balance to a combination of its height and my clumsiness.

My spine tingled and I felt eyes staring at me, as if someone were trying to make me turn around. For whatever reason, I remained silent even though my heart threatened to pound outside my ribcage. I felt myself turn and saw two enormous aliens, one with cold features. Short, cropped hair accentuated the sharpness of his cheekbones and ice-blue skin that looked like granite. While he was handsome in a wild sort of way, the other, shorter and slightly less muscular alien, intrigued me more. I couldn’t see his face. He carried a large object wrapped in fine cloth and protective wrapping. His arms were bare, his skin the burnt orange color of autumn leaves. Long dark hair rippled in waves past his exposed shoulders.

I stifled a gasp. It was the alien I saw through the mist the night on the ship. My mouth moved, but no sound came out. I gripped the heavy wooden shelf with such force my knuckles turned white. “It’s you,” I croaked. “I saw you.” My knees buckled, and I held onto the shelf for all I was worth.

The burnt orange alien turned, the object in his arms nestled on the floor. Shock crossed his handsome features as once flat tendrils stiffened across his shoulders. His eyes darkened, and a feral growl burst from his lips. “Mine.”

“Meadow!” I heard Noelle scream, panic filled her tone as the orange alien with mesmerizing eyes leaped over the bar to catch me as the grip I had on the shelf gave way. Noelle said something, but her words sounded like she was underwater.

The ice-blue alien ran to Noelle, holding her with one arm in a football player’s hold, while Victoria sobbed.

The orange alien lifted me as if I weighed no more than a newborn. He cradled me against his chest, two heartbeats lulling me to a sense of calm. “Don’t leave the other one,” a gruff voice rumbled from my alien.

Before my eyes shut, I saw the icy-blue alien with crystals on his shoulders grab Victoria under his free arm. Then, he bolted, leaving the Ale and Tale behind. My alien followed on the blue one’s heels.

Four

ZAITH

“Zaith, what the fluxx, were you thinking, cousin?” Klaus bellowed once we were safely aboard his ship, affectionately called *Slay*. “Do you know what you just did?”

“Keep your voice down, you idiot. You’ll wake my mate,” I hissed.

“I am not an idiot. I have never seen anyone, ever, do something so fluxxing stupid.” Klaus paced the hold of the ship, decently sized now that my commissions had been delivered. He balled his fist and drew his arm back, ready to punch the hull. Klaus’s fist lowered, his shoulders drooped. “What did you say?”

“I said, keep your voice down, you idiot. I don’t want you waking my mate.” My *rachis* stood at attention, fluttering about as if they had a mind of their own, searching for my mate.

“Mate?” Klaus parroted. “What the fluxx are you talking about? Have you finally lost your mind?” He stepped into the

corner of the hold of his ship, making a big production of wiping non-existent dirt off the wall. “What am I going to tell our family? How the fluxx do I explain kidnapping three females? And human females at that?” His rage filled the empty space.

I stood, stripped off my vest. It fell to the floor with a thud. “I haven’t lost my mind. Quite the contrary. I’ve never had more clarity than now.” I jerked my thumbs toward my shoulders. “Look for yourself. My *rachis* have awakened. That human is my mate.”

“Impossible,” Klaus scoffed. “No Melrul has mated to a human. Their species is protected by Klagan warriors. And if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not tangle with them.”

“The Klagan warriors would not dare separate fated mates.” Confidence filled my chest. “I would not allow it. She is mine.”

“I don’t want to be the first Melrul to find out what they’ll do.” Klaus crossed his arms.

“The human female sleeping in the quarters you assigned to me is my mate. I have no doubt. Look for yourself.” I’d never felt as emboldened as I did now. Her presence on the ship gave me strength. “Do it.”

“Zaith, stop deluding yourself,” Klaus said. I knew the instant he saw my *rachis* flare. His face changed, awe coating his features.

“A few rotations ago, Mother had a vision.” I kept my voice even, explaining about the odd mist outside my window and how I’d succumbed to its otherworldly charm.

“I saw the mist too, but I wasn’t as affected as you.” Klaus’s shoulders slumped. He pounded a meaty fist in the center of my shoulder blades. “I suppose we should celebrate with some Xhuit whiskey.”

We headed to the utilitarian galley where I heated two bowls of soup to coat our stomachs before downing the exorbitant amount of whiskey Klaus poured into two glasses.

“Mates are something to celebrate,” he said, filling my glass to the brim.

“Easy with the liquor. I want to have a conversation with her once she wakes up. As it stands, I don’t even know her name.” I sipped the drink. “If I finish this, I won’t function for days.”

“Lightweight,” Klaus groused.

“No, rational,” I countered. “I wish to be near my mate when she wakes. She’s in a strange ship and will probably be petrified when she wakes.” My hearts ached to be closer to my mate. I ached to protect her. Though I wasn’t a warrior, I would do anything within my power to shield my mate from harm.

The light in the galley hit Klaus’s bare chest, his crystalline *rachis* glinted as he moved to clean the bowls. “Um, Klaus?” I hedged.

“What?” he twirled his finger around the rim of the glass.

“I’m not the only one.”

“Only one, what?” His brows crinkled.

“When you get a chance, you might want to look at your own *rachis*. I think one of the other two humans is your mate.”

Klaus poured another two fingers of the Xhuit whiskey into his almost empty glass. “Fluxx,” he groaned.

Five

MEADOW

My body hit the floor with a thud, my legs tangled in a soft blanket. I groaned, “What the fuck? Not again.” Wasn’t getting kidnapped once enough? I put a hand to my temple and added a pinch of pressure to relieve the whopper of a headache that had formed inside my skull.

“Are you all right, mate?” a rich bass voice asked. Burnt orange hands lifted me off the floor, placing me on the softest mattress I’d felt since I left Earth. If I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine I was back in my own bedroom, on my own mattress, wearing my own clothes.

Clothes! My hands shimmied down my body, relishing the feel of the soft, not-quite-cotton of the tunic top that covered from my collarbone past my thighs. I figured if I stood up, the top would fall to my knees.

“I’m sorry my cousin’s ship did not have a pair of pants to cover you more.” His head hung as if he were ashamed.

“You covered me?”

“I did not want to ruin your modesty, so I put this over your other clothing. I hope that is acceptable?” His eyes met mine.

Every instinct in my body screamed to trust this alien, but to reassure my brain, I peeked under the neckline of the enormous top, breathing a sigh of relief that my clothing, skimpy as it was, was still in place. My hand reached to touch his. “It is. Thank you.”

“I would do anything for you, mate.” He leaned forward, inhaling. The spikes on his shoulders danced and moved toward me.

“Whoa, buddy. Quit the sniffing.” I wrenched away, my back pressed against a cool metal headboard. “Those things on your back and shoulders are kind of freaking me out.”

“My apologies.” He leaned back so far, his weight put him off center and he toppled off the edge of the bed and onto the floor. “What does freaking you out mean?” he asked from the floor.

A laugh, true laughter, burst from my throat. “Are you okay?” I asked. I leaned forward, my hand extended as if I were strong enough to pull this massive alien male off the floor.

He chuckled. “It takes more than a small fall to hurt me.” He stood and dragged a chair from a corner of the room closer to the bed. “They’re not spikes, they’re *rachis*, and are common among my people. Are you feeling well? I don’t suppose your people feel the mating bond like we do. Maybe you do. I don’t know about humans.” He fiddled with an invisible thread on his vest. “You are human, right? I’ve only read about them.”

“Yes, I’m human. What species are you? I haven’t seen your people before.”

“I am Melrul, from the planet Melrun.”

“Well that’s going to be confusing.” I pulled a blanket over my legs. “I’m human, from Earth.”

“I’ve heard of Earth. It’s one of the more recent planets known to our side of the galaxy. I’ve read all I can about it. One of the archivists on Kлага is in the process of gathering information and testimonials from rescued humans. He’s putting together a compendium so your history does not get lost to time.”

My mouth went dry. All I could do was nod. “Oh.” A single tear dripped down my cheek. Then the dam burst, and the tears I’d held back for so long streamed down my face.

“I screwed up again.” He sounded forlorn. “I should have known talking about your home planet would upset you.” His handsome face contorted into a frown. “Screw up of the family, that’s me.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to talk about it.” I clamped my mouth shut.

“I’m sorry, I should have thought before I spoke. I didn’t mean to cause you distress. Causing my mate distress is the last thing I want to do. You’ll find that sometimes I get fixated on a topic and can’t stop myself.”

I arched an eyebrow, my tears slowed. This alien was endearing in a weird way. “It’s okay.” His childlike innocence

and sincere demeanor melted my heart. “I don’t think you’re a screw up.”

“You’d be the first,” he muttered.

“I’m serious. I don’t think you’re a screw up. You mean well.”

“I do.” He sounded so sincere, I believed every word he said.

“Once we get back to Melrun, if you’d like, I can call for one of the Klagan warriors to take you to their homeworld. There’s a large population of humans who live on Kлага.”

As an unwilling resident of this side of the galaxy for more time than I cared to admit, I’d heard of the Klagan Warriors, elite forces, similar to galactic police. Once, in the Ale and Tail, I’d seen one of their warriors in action, ending a disagreement among patrons in a matter of heartbeats without bloodshed. Based on my previous experience, blood was typically shed in barroom brawls. Because of this handsome alien’s willingness to deliver me to relative safety, all fear I’d harbored disappeared.

“No. I don’t think I want that.”

“What do you want?”

“Answers.”

“You only need to ask, mate.”

No longer afraid of this alien, I leaned forward, closer to the intoxicating smell of him, a rich, earthy scent of clay and citrus. “I have many questions, but three spring to mind first.” He remained silent, allowing me to continue. “Question one,

where the hell am I? Two, who the hell are you? And three, where the hell are my friends?”

Rich laughter filled the sparse quarters. “Another screw up. I should have started with all that. I am Zaith, of the Melrul people. We’re on my cousin Klaus’s ship, headed back to Melrun, our home planet. Your friends are in my cousin’s quarters, through that door, across the corridor. They are safe. When you collapsed, all I could think about was your safety. Klaus carried your friends out of the tavern.”

“That ice-blue guy is your cousin?”

“He is.”

“I want to see my friends to make sure they’re safe.” I threw the blanket off my legs. Zaith raised the light’s brightness so I wouldn’t trip on my way to the door.

“It’ll be bright in the corridor,” he warned. “Shield your eyes.”

I winced as I ignored Zaith’s warning and barged into the hallway, searching for my friends. I opened the only door I saw and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Noelle and Victoria sound asleep, fully clothed on the double bed. I raced inside the room, checking their pulses. Satisfied, I passed Zaith waiting a respectful distance from both rooms.

“Come here,” I beckoned with my finger.

“What do you need, mate?” he asked, his voice full of curiosity.

I stood on my tiptoes, and wrapped my arms around his neck, careful not to touch the spiky things peppering his shoulders

and upper back. He lowered his head toward mine. I gave in to my temptation and pressed my lips against his. My tongue darted out to lick the seam of his lips. I wasn't sure if Zaith had ever kissed anyone, but he was a fast learner. He held me gently, as if I were the most precious thing to him. It seemed as if he wanted to put me at ease and in control of everything, because he pressed his back against the metal wall and let me lead. By the time I broke the kiss, my chest heaved and dampness dripped down my inner thigh.

“Mate,” Zaith groaned.

“By the way, my name isn't mate, it's Meadow.” My voice came out huskier than I'd intended.

“Meadow,” he repeated. “A beautiful name for a beautiful female.” His hand warmed the small of my back as he guided me back into the free quarters.

“Are you leaving?” I hated how needy I sounded.

“I know how you feel,” Zaith ground out. “I want you, but I will not claim you yet. Not until you're sure.” My nipples pebbled at his heady promise.

He turned, strode across the room in three steps, and kissed me breathless. “I could not resist another taste of your sweet lips. I will return for you, beautiful Meadow. For now, rest.”

And there I was, left alone with my traitorous body clamoring in need, damning everything for what Noelle liked to call, ‘feeling all the feels.’

Six

ZAIITH

“Cousin, you don’t know the first thing about females, do you?” Klaus berated me.

“I told her we were mates. I offered to take her to the Klagan Warriors if she didn’t wish to stay with me.”

“That is not what you do to woo your mate!” Klaus’s eyes narrowed. “Do I need to teach you everything?”

I cocked my head, the long braid of my hair tangling in my *rachis*. “And you’re doing better with your mate?”

“That infernal female,” Klaus sputtered. “She laughs at me every chance she gets. My name reminds her of an old human with hair growing from his chin and a bulging stomach.” Klaus gestured to his toned midsection. “Does it look like I have a bulging stomach?” I shook my head as his rant continued. “Then she had the audacity to laugh at the name of my ship! I slay the competition. I’ve explained multiple times that it’s not the sleigh she’s thinking of. No wild or magical flying creatures pull it through the sky. I even took her to the

engine room to prove it. When we got there, she doubled over in laughter and her eyes leaked.”

I grinned. I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for my cousin. He'd always had the better luck with females, but I think he finally met his match. I wasn't sure which of the two women Klaus was talking about since Victoria and Noelle went everywhere on the ship together. Truth be told, I didn't care what Klaus or anyone else thought, I wanted to spend time with my mate. “At least I'm trying to woo my mate.”

“What's this I hear of wooing?” Meadow padded into the galley in makeshift slippers I'd fashioned from some supplies I'd found in a storage box. They were too big for her, but when I presented them to her yesterday, she smiled gratefully before putting them on. I would purchase her an entire wardrobe once on Melrun.

“Klaus is struggling with his mate,” I said.

“She can be feisty.” Meadow's eyes twinkled. “But what about you, Zaith? How are you faring with your mate?”

“Hopefully, better than Klaus.” My hearts sank at her question.

“What do you know about human mating customs?” Meadow asked.

“Nothing,” I admitted, my shoulders sagged.

“Girls,” Meadow called. “We need to give these guys an education in human women.”

Klaus and I exchanged a look. I hoped Meadow was only teasing, but I couldn't be sure.

Victoria bounded into the galley. “What’s up?”

“We don’t know anything about wooing human females. I want to woo my mate,” I explained.

“How do you know you’ve found your mate?” Victoria asked.

“Our *rachis* come to life for the first time. They move like Zaith’s, and they attune to our mate’s moods. I’ve heard it can be painful,” Klaus said.

“Do they glitter or glow?” Noelle asked from the doorway.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Klaus’s *rachis* never glowed before we pulled the three of you out of the tavern.”

“Hmm,” said Noelle.

“What do you do when you first find your mate?” Victoria asked. “How do you get to know them?”

“We copulate and cement the bond. Our *rachis* will extend to come in contact with our mate’s skin. I’ve heard it’s an exhilarating experience.” I felt heat rise in my cheeks.

“Oh. Some humans copulate before deciding to form a bond with someone,” Noelle said.

“No, you misunderstand. There’s a difference between sex and mating sex. Only with our mates will the *rachis* reach out and deepen the bond. Melrul can have pleasure partners. The only difference is our *rachis*.” Now I knew my face was an ugly shade of orange. I couldn’t stop the heat from filling my cheeks.

“Humans have sex for pleasure too,” Meadow said. “But before we decide to form a bond, we date.”

Klaus’s eyebrows pinched. “How does knowing the stardate help you know if you’re compatible with a potential mate?”

Noelle laughed. “Not like that, you goof. We go out and do things together. There’s usually a lot of talking, getting to know each other, talking about our compatibility and long term goals. Humans have a lot to decide. Like, if we want children, or what our religious preferences are. Some of those things can be deal breakers in a potential partner.”

I eyed Meadow, gauging her reaction. “What are some good dates?”

“I liked sharing a meal with someone. How someone treats the person serving the meal is how I would know if I wanted to proceed with a second date.” Meadow smiled. “I worked as a server in a fast food place for a few days.”

Victoria chuckled. “Maybe on Earth. You didn’t last five hours in the Ale and Tail.”

“True.” Meadow grinned.

“What about you, Victoria?” I asked. “What kind of dates did you like?”

She pushed her hair behind her ears. “I preferred a date where I had to work with my partner to achieve a result.” I must have had a blank look on my face, before she rushed to continue. “There was a business I went to on a date once. You could bring a bottle of wine, and we had to follow an instructor to

paint the same picture they were painting.” Her eyes got a faraway look. “I’m no artist, and the more wine I had, the worse my art got, but I had a lot of fun.”

I nodded, my brain in overdrive attempting to think of similar things to do on Melrun.

“And you, Noelle?” Klaus prompted.

“I was never good with men. My friends would try and set me up on blind dates.”

“Interesting. My apologies for not knowing much about humans. I can do better.” I reached to take Meadow’s hand.

“Now you know what human women like.” Meadow’s fingers stroked the top of my hand. In the three days since I’d known her, I’d come to crave her touch. I treasured every caress.

“I’ve been a terrible mate. Please let me make it up to you. Meadow, will you give me three dates to prove I’m worthy of you? You and your friends can stay with,” I gulped, “my mother if you’d like, while I prepare the dates.”

“Your mother?” Klaus shuddered.

Meadow held out her hand. “It’s a deal. Three dates.”

Seven

MEADOW

Once the *Slay* landed on Melrun, we were met by Zaith's mother, Cirane, who greeted us with open arms. Cirane insisted my friends and I stayed with her until I agreed to be Zaith's mate. At first, I didn't know what to make of the planet with four main continents, one for each biome, and three moons. My feet hadn't touched solid ground, planetary ground, since I was taken from Earth, and I was unprepared for the flood of emotions that coursed through my body when I stepped onto Melrun for the first time and felt fresh air on my skin.

Victoria, Noelle, and I knelt in the dark green grass, so similar, yet so foreign from the grass we knew, and marveled at its softness. Once Cirane learned my name, she practically bullied her son and nephew to take us to a grove of flowers, or as she referred to it, 'your namesake.'

Melrun was different than I imagined. We'd been here for the better part of two weeks, with daily visits from Zaith and Klaus. Cirane was lovely; she somehow knew when we

needed time to ourselves and the other times when we needed a friend. She never pushed us to tell our stories but was there if we wanted to share. Without fail, Cirane and her sister, Irigan, Klaus's mother, cooked every meal for us, and always asked if we felt comfortable eating with them. I immediately liked both of them. Their outgoing demeanor and willingness to answer any questions I had put me at ease.

While I thought Noelle, Victoria, and I were adjusting well, by the end of the second week, Victoria made a surprise announcement over breakfast. She wanted to go to the human settlement on Kлага. Nothing Noelle or I could say would change her mind. Irigan contacted her other son, who had contacts with the Klagan military.

I couldn't stop crying when Victoria boarded the ship with Kal, Irigan's youngest son. "I can't stay here," Victoria whispered. "I don't belong, but you and Noelle do. You've got Zaith, she has Klaus, and I," she trailed off. "My future's out there, in the stars. Cirane said so, and I believe her."

"Comm me when you get to Kлага?" I begged.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily," Victoria said. "This isn't goodbye, that's too permanent. Let's say, see you later, because then we have to see each other again."

"I'll take you to visit Victoria whenever you want," Klaus promised Noelle and me.

"I'll save up for a ship of my own, so we can travel too," Zaith promised.

“For now, we can use my ship,” said Klaus.

“Or mine,” Kal said. “I would never want you to be without your friend.”

“I’ll be fine. I promise. This is my destiny,” Victoria called from the stairs on Kal’s ship.

Somehow, I managed to hold back my tears until Kal’s ship broke Melrun’s atmosphere with my friend inside. Once I could no longer see the vapor trail in the sky, I buried my head against Zaith’s chest, listening to his hearts beat.

“Come here,” Zaith crooned. He picked me up, cradling me against his chest like he did the first day we met. He carried me to the meadow with the blooming flowers, setting me down on a wooden bench that hadn’t been there on our first visit.

“This is new,” I said.

“Before she left, Victoria gave me the idea for this date, and a sketch for this bench. She called it a picnic, and said it was the perfect idea for our first official date.”

My lower lip trembled. Zaith rubbed his thumb gently over my cheek.

“No crying here. We are to share a meal and talk. Victoria’s orders.” Zaith bent to pull a small basket from under the bench. He placed the basket between us before he straddled the wood. An assortment of the foods I’d tried and enjoyed since we landed on Melrun rested inside the basket.

I reached in and pulled out a sandwich similar to egg salad. “How did you know I’d like this?” I asked as I stuffed the sandwich in my mouth, groaning in delight.

“I’m not an expert cook, but I’m passable,” he said. “As for your question, I had some help.” He winked, and my heart fluttered.

“Cirane told you the foods I liked.” I had to give him credit for creativity. I never suspected a thing. While he ate, I watched and admired. He’d maintained a respectful distance the last two weeks, but I missed him. The kiss we shared on the *Slay* lingered in my memory, brought to the forefront every night before I fell asleep. I was greedy and wanted more.

“So did my aunt.” Zaith smiled.

Over the meal, we chatted about our childhoods, our hopes for the future, our dreams. Occasionally we lapsed into companionable silence while we ate; Zaith admiring the view of the suns over the flowers. As for me, I admired Zaith. Not only did I find him incredibly handsome, but he was kind. I admired his work ethic and desire to prove himself to his family as an artist. When I could eat no more, I covered the basket and placed it underneath the bench.

“Come with me,” I said, tucking my hand into Zaith’s much larger one.

“Anywhere you wish to go, I will go with you,” Zaith said, following me deeper into the grove of flowers. We meandered through the flowers, following a slight trail where few flowers grew.

“Do many people come here?”

He shook his head, his braid waving between his *rachis* with the motion. Strange as they looked, I ached to touch them and feel them.

“Good.” Without thinking, I reached up and stroked his *rachis* with my palms. The skin coating them was soft, yet I knew a spiny center lay hidden beneath. “Softer than I imagined,” I murmured. “How does it feel?”

Zaith managed a groan. “It’s like you’re stroking my cock with your hands.”

I filed that piece of knowledge away for another time. “Oh?” I dropped to my knees, thanking my genetics that I was tall enough my head was at just about the height of his cock. I’d never been one to enjoy giving blowjobs, but now, I wanted to. I craved it. I wanted to bring him pleasure with my mouth.

“What are you doing?” Zaith grunted.

“You’ll see.” I unbuckled his pants and freed his cock. To my surprise, he went commando. His cock jutted proudly, thick at the base, tapering slightly to a bulbous head with small tendrils around the ridge. I licked my lips before licking from his balls up to the head of his cock. The tendrils moved on their own, and I wondered how they’d feel when he filled me. Would they rub against my walls? Or would they search for my g-spot? Either way, I believed Zaith would be it for me. After him, no one else would ever compare.

I opened my mouth, pulling his cock against my tongue. I used my hand to stroke him as I rolled my tongue around the tendrils. They felt like they opened and closed, mimicking my motions. With my free hand, I caressed his balls, feeling them tighten. I sucked and stroked faster, with a firmer hand. I opened my eyes to look up at him when his leg muscles stiffened. His breath hitched, and he reached down to stroke the crown of my head. Wetness dripped between my parted thighs, coating the ground with my arousal.

“So good,” he panted. “I can’t hold back,” he breathed. His hand held my head steady, caressing my hair. I opened my mouth as wide as I could as I felt his cock stiffen and the tendrils fanned out in my mouth. He grunted and released a jet of cum down my throat. I’d never enjoyed swallowing, but Zaith tasted incredible, like butter, sugar, and cinnamon.

Zaith pulled out of my mouth, falling to his knees next to me before pushing me onto my back. “Now it’s my turn for dessert.” He raised the loose brown dress over my head, and I lay naked against wildflowers. He lay next to me, kissing me senseless while his hand skimmed my body, rolling my pebbled nipples between his fingers. I’d never liked being naked with a man; I was always conscious of the way my body jiggled and didn’t look like a magazine cover.

With Zaith, I felt different. I was different. He looked at me like he saw me, the real me, and he didn’t care what my body looked like. When he looked at me, I saw raw hunger in his eyes.

I stiffened a bit when his hand skimmed over my stomach. He must have noticed, because he pressed his lips tighter against mine before his fingers encountered the wetness of my core. I parted my legs as far as I could with his body pressed tightly against mine. His fingers found my clit. I cried out at the slight pressure. “Did I hurt you?” he asked, his eyes held concern.

“No. Feels so good,” I moaned.

He smirked and pinched my clit lightly. His head lowered, sucking a nipple in his mouth, putting a slight pressure on it with his teeth. His thumb rubbed small circles around my clit while he slid a thick finger inside my soaking channel. “You like that,” he murmured, releasing my nipple with a pop.

I couldn’t answer with anything other than a moan. Zaith sat back on his haunches, spreading my pussy with his free hand for his view. So wide was his hand, that the palm held my lips back, exposing my clit to the air. He used two of his fingers to stroke in a v shape around my clit, while two fingers from his other hand were buried in my channel.

“Find your release,” Zaith encouraged, fucking me with his fingers. My head thrashed from side to side, and I came with a scream when he bent down to lick my clit with his broad tongue. I’d heard of earth-shattering orgasms but had never experienced one until Zaith.

He held me while my tremors subsided, whispering sweet words in my ear. We lay there until the moons began to rise in the sky.

We walked hand in hand back to the picnic bench. “How was our first official date?” he asked.

All I could do was laugh.

Eight

MEADOW

“Ready for our second official date?” Zaith asked three evenings later from the doorway of his mother’s home. “You look beautiful, Meadow.”

I jumped up, smoothing wrinkles out of the brand-new hunter-green dress Cirane purchased for me. “Ready! I’m excited to see what you’ve planned for this date. You’ve set a high standard with the first date.”

“Zaith, take good care of our female. She passed out the other night when you dropped her off.” Cirane glared at her son. “I thought the purpose of these dates was to convince her to stay and mate with you.”

I started to giggle but covered it with a cough. “Zaith is working hard at convincing me to stay. The other day was what humans might call an emotional roller coaster. It was a lot to process, and I needed to sleep to recharge my batteries.”

“Humans have batteries?” Cirane exclaimed. “Where do you put them?”

“It’s an expression. Sometimes we call resting recharging.”

“I see,” said Cirane. “Humans are funny. I like your sayings.”

“There’s plenty more I can teach you.” I grinned. “Both of you.”

“Later. Now, our second date.” Zaith looked edible in pressed black dress pants and a maroon flannel-like long sleeve shirt, rolled up to his elbows. I replayed our conversations but didn’t think I’d mentioned how sexy I thought a man’s forearms were. I accepted his proffered arm. He walked down the path to the main road toward a random cross between a hover bike and land skimmer. I followed his instructions on how to climb onto the conveyance. “Shut your eyes,” Zaith commanded.

Cool fabric covered my eyes, and I felt a gentle tug at the back of my head where he tied the fabric. “What’s going on?”

“We’re going on a blind date,” Zaith explained. “I’ll be your guide on this date since you can’t see.”

“Interesting,” I said. Part of me wanted to explain what a blind date was, but he sounded so proud of his plan, I decided the explanation could wait. “Let’s go.” He bracketed my body with his arms on the handles. The skimmer hummed to life under us, gliding across the land.

With my sense of sight dulled, I relied on my other senses to paint a picture of what I was missing. Small insects chirped a melody, while I breathed in the crisp early evening air. I’d never understood how much I missed relying on only one sense.

“We’ve arrived,” Zaith announced. He helped me off the skimmer, making sure I had my balance. “Skimmer travel can disorient your equilibrium a few minutes after dismount. Do you need to adjust?”

“No, I feel fine. Thank you.” I reached up to touch the silky material and pull off the blindfold.

Zaith’s fingers tapped my ass. “We’re on a blind date, remember? The blindfold remains.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” I saluted.

“Another strange human expression. I’m not a captain,” Zaith said. “But I am in charge for now. Now you must follow my instructions.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

“Rely on your other senses and my guidance. Step toward me,” Zaith said. Crunching stones from heavy shoes guided me forward. “Now, stretch your arms.”

Leaves danced across my hands, and I breathed the night air. I followed Zaith’s voice through multiple twists and turns until my entire sense of direction was out of line. If he left me now, I’d never find my way back to the transportation. “Zaith?” my voice warbled.

“I’m here, right in front of you.”

“Where? I don’t sense you.”

“Five steps more until your reward, sweetling.”

I placed my foot down but lost my balance when the toe of my shoe stuck in a patch of mud. Strong hands steadied me before retreating. “You’re still here?”

“I’m not leaving. Would you like to hold my hand as you walk the final steps of the blind date journey?”

Zaith made me feel stronger. I held my hand out into the unknown. He allowed my hand to rest on his, but he did not pull me toward him. I recognized Zaith’s offering for what it was, a journey I had to make on my own. Either I could willingly walk to him into a new life, or I could rip the blindfold off and leave. I stood at the crossroads of my future. Without hesitation, I walked into Zaith’s warmth, tilting my face so he could capture my lips with his. To my disappointment, he broke the kiss.

“I’m so proud of you. Would you like to see the surprise?”

“Yes.” My excitement was palpable.

“Ask and you shall receive,” Zaith said, lifting the blindfold from my eyes.

We stood inside a row of medium-height bushes, orange fruits or vegetables littered the ground. “Pumpkins!” I exclaimed.

“They’re called nanguas,” Zaith said, sitting on a thickly padded mossy patch on the ground. “I took the liberty of reaching out to one of the researchers on Kлага, asking for human traditions in cool weather. Pumpkin mazes and corn patches sounded interesting.”

“They are amazing,” I agreed without correcting him. “All the pumpkin mazes and corn patches on Earth couldn’t compare to what an experience tonight’s date was.”

“It’s not over,” Zaith said. He pulled me on top of his lap, facing him. His lips captured mine, and his hands ran a line down my spine. I shivered when his hand fisted in my hair and he gave a slight tug, exposing my neck. He kissed down my jaw, pulling our chests together.

My hands ran over his back, stroking his *rachis* like I’d stroked his cock. I shifted my weight to straddle Zaith, my bare core above the clasp of his pants. He held me with his right hand while his left undid the buckle and released his swollen cock.

“Tell me no and I won’t,” he rasped.

I gripped two of his rachis with my hands, stroking them as I impaled myself on his cock. I screamed at the fullness of his invasion. It had been so long since I’d been stuffed by a cock, and never one as thick as Zaith’s. The tendrils I’d tasted a few nights earlier flickered against my inner walls, pulsating like a setting on my favorite vibrator back on Earth.

Zaith pulled me impossibly closer, and his *rachis* reached out to flit across the sensitive skin on my exposed chest and neck. I screamed my release when the *rachis* and tendrils on Zaith’s cock worked in tandem to ring two orgasms from my body.

“Once more, together?” Zaith panted.

My legs shook and I squealed my third release of the night and coated Zaith's cock with my pleasure, soaking his pants and the ground.

"I love you, mate," Zaith murmured into my ear.

Nine

ZAITH

I dropped Meadow at my mother's house in the wee early hours in the morning. Mother was awake, awaiting our return.

"Did you have a nice date?" Mother asked.

"Incredible. Zaith recreated a favorite autumn activity for me. It's a night I'll never forget," Meadow replied with a yawn.

"One more date to go." She kissed me before sauntering into the dimly lit hallway. "I'm not sure how you're going to top tonight's date though."

"I'm sure he'll find a way," Mother said. "He's determined to have you choose him."

"Whatever he's doing, it's working," Meadow called from the washroom.

Mother poured me a steaming mug of her favorite herbal tea. She patted the chair next to her at the table. "Sit. Tell me about your date."

In as few words as possible, because I wished to keep my memories of the events that transpired between Meadow and

me private, I recounted creating the nangua maze over the past days, and the idea of the blind date. Cup of tea now empty, I placed it in the cleansing machine and kissed my mother's cheek.

“Zaith, it is good for my soul to see you so alive. Meadow brings out the best in you. She is good for you, and you her. Do whatever it takes to keep her.”

“I will, Mother. We are going on our next date in two days.” My hearts beat a staccato rhythm. I had two days to come up with a date idea that would make Meadow say yes when I asked her to remain with me on Melrun as my mate. Problem was, I had no idea what I was going to do.

I pulled the skimmer into its charging port next to my studio. The automated lights flickered on inside my home with my movements. Though it pained me to change my clothing, I wasn't sure if evidence of Meadow's pleasure would stain through my pants.

After pulling on my favorite black silkworm pajamas, the ones I'd worn the night I had the vision of Meadow, the pants I'd worn earlier in the evening rested in the empty space next to me on the bed. Did I really want to clean them? I was proud of how she'd fallen apart in my arms. She stroked my *rachis* like she rode my cock. I was lucky to have her. I balled the pants in my hands. In the corner of my washroom, my clothing refresher sat, mocking me. I held the pants in my hand, debating what I should do. In the end, I decided to wash them since I was almost certain Meadow would agree to stay with

me after our third date. Once she agreed to stay on Melrun, I'd spend the rest of my days bringing her pleasure. I'd make sure she exploded on my cock multiple times a night, or day, or whenever she wanted.

Sleep didn't come easy that night, no matter how many times I relived the first time I made love to my mate. Eventually, sleep must have claimed me, because for the first time in months, I woke up inspired. My absent muse had returned. For good, I hoped. My muse was no longer some ethereal being, or a deity, but a flesh and bone creature from a far flung planet on the other side of the galaxy. My muse was no longer nameless, her name was Meadow.

Last night was everything I could have hoped for, and yet somehow, it was more. When we finally made love at the center of the pumpkin maze, every fated mates romance novel Meadow described to me made sense. Meadow and I, we clicked, like the heroes and heroines in the stories she told me she liked to read about. And when my *rachis* touched her shoulders and neck? The sensations! Poets could try for millennia to describe the feeling, but none would ever come close.

I'd always thought it cliché when I heard mated pairs say they didn't know where one ended and the other began, but it's true. With the right person, or alien, whatever, when it was right, it was right. It might have taken Meadow getting kidnapped twice, once by me, to find my other half, but now I'd found her, I didn't want to let her go.

I had two days to plan the perfect third date, the most important date of my life. I had to think, and since, in the past I'd done my best thinking in my studio, I changed into trusty working clothes, turned on some music, and sauntered into my studio.

Over the years I'd worked with various artistic mediums, but clay became my preferred. From a damp lump of wet goop, I could meld clay into anything. If my hands could form it, the clay would hold form. Now, I needed the therapeutic benefits it brought as it brought clarity into my life. The music hummed through hidden speakers in my studio. My potter's wheel turned to life as I threw a raw lump of clay on the turntable. Soon I had a vase I sculpted, and went to work on a handle inspired by Meadow's sensuous curves. One vase turned into six, which multiplied into a dozen. Then I realized vases would never be enough.

I lost myself in my work, pliable clay transforming from lumps into wall sconces, statues and statuettes, goblets, paperweights, anything I could think of. Everything I created bore one striking similarity. Meadow.

She'd invaded my headspace, taken over my every breath. Meadow wiggled her way into my heart and life in the short time I'd known her. She was as much a part of me as my secondary heart. I needed her in my life.

Time passed, but it held no meaning. The urge to create, to share my love for Meadow with Melrun, overshadowed basic urges like hunger. When I finally sat in my grandmother's old

rocking chair, exhaustion claimed me and I went willingly,
with a smile and Meadow's name across my lips.

Ten

MEADOW

My cup of tea remained untouched while I waited for Zaith to arrive to pick me up. The pink tea grew cold hours ago, and I dared not drink it. If I drank it, I accepted the fact Zaith stood me up for our third and final date.

“Meadow? You’re still here?” Cirane asked. “Weren’t you supposed to go out tonight with Zaith?”

“Zaith forgot about our date! How could he?”

“Hush, child. I’m sure my son had a good reason.” Cirane stroked my hair with a mother’s caress. My tears fell, dampening Cirane’s plaid shirt as she rocked me in her light orange arms.

“I thought he wanted me to stay with him. I thought he wanted me as his mate. We were supposed to be fated mates,” I sobbed. “I loved him.”

“Loved, as in past tense?” Cirane looked aghast. “Do humans fall out of love after a slight bump in the road?”

“Not all of us,” I wailed. Deep down, I knew I was acting ridiculous, and I was sure there was a logical explanation, but neither my heart nor head wanted to hear it. Right now, I wanted to wallow in a pool of self-pity and loathing.

Cirane handed me a tissue to wipe my tears. “Meadow,” she said, clasping my hands in hers. “I know my son. He wouldn’t stand you up as you say. Let me make you a fresh cup of tea and send a few comms. I’ll get to the bottom of this.” Cirane fussed around the kitchen, attempting to distract me from my negative thoughts. Minutes later, she swapped my cold tea for a steaming mug of what smelled like peppermint.

I heard Cirane’s soothing voice talking low on her comm, in a language my translator didn’t have the capability to translate. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I made an educated guess at a local dialect used on Melrun. Though she spoke low and fast, I could tell by the tone she was angry. By the time her conversation ended, my tea cooled enough. I drank greedily.

“That was Klaus and Kal. Neither knows what’s happened to Zaith. Kal is on his way to Zaith’s home and studio as we speak. Kal will comm as soon as possible. Klaus is otherwise indisposed.” Cirane flushed. She rubbed my back. “Why don’t you use the washroom to freshen up? I’ll bring some warm towels and I’ll heat a robe for after the shower.”

Like a zombie, I made my way down the hall to the washroom. In order to not see my reflection, I used the dress I was no longer wearing on my date to cover the mirror. I cranked the handle for hot water as far over as it could go,

hoping that, between the steam I was sure to generate and the dress, I wouldn't have to see my reflection.

Deciding I wasn't a total masochist, I cooled the water to slightly less than scalding and stood under the hot water for a time, letting it flow over my body. I scrubbed everywhere, determined to clean away my sorrows. Fascinated, I watched the sudsy water flow down the drain.

Three warm towels waited for me on the counter near the sink after I stepped out of the shower. I appreciated everything Cirane had done for me. She'd taken me in without hesitation and shown nothing but love to me. It wasn't her fault her son was an ass.

"The robe will be ready in a few minutes. It'll be on your bed by the time you dry off."

"Thank you," I called. The robe was indeed on my bed when I emerged from the bathroom, warm and cozy, like a hug. I put it on and flopped on the bed, leaving the bedroom door open because I didn't feel like being closed in. My hair fell loose from the warm towel wrap, falling in damp tendrils off my pillow, down the side of the bed. A lovely metaphor for the cascade of tears I'd shed. My thoughts jumped to Victoria's journey to Kлага, and how happy she must be in her new home with more humans than on Melrun. The more I thought about it, the more details to a plan formed.

Cirane's voice echoed through her modest home. Though she spoke low and fast, this time my translator caught words and phrases. I couldn't make sense of most of the conversation,

save for one part Cirane said sternly, “You will make it up to that female if it’s the last thing you do.” I smiled at the force she pushed into the word ‘will.’ Their conversation carried on longer, but I didn’t want to eavesdrop more than I had, so I rolled over to formulate the rest of my plan.



“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” I groused an astra later. Somehow, Cirane coaxed me out of bed and into a fancy dress with kitten heels and makeup.

“It’ll be one final thing for us to share before you embark on your new life on Kлага,” Cirane said, her voice full of emotion.

“I’m doing this for you, you know,” I said, wrapping my arm around her waist. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“It was truly my honor,” she said. “Should we make our grand entrance?” Cirane cut a striking figure in a sparkling black dress draped over her classic Hollywood starlet frame. She swept her arm in a graceful arc as if drawing back the curtains on a theater’s stage.

In front of us was a three-story building with glass windows across each level. Shaped in an arc, marble-like stairs beckoned guests to enter. “You’ve been a touch vague on the details. What is this place?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” Cirane’s cryptic answers over the past week were wearing on my nerves, but I decided to let it go, since whatever her surprise was, her energy was contagious. We climbed the steps arm in arm, pausing for Cirane to show me some of the town’s sights.

“Welcome, honored guests,” a distinguished looking Melrul bowed as we reached the final marble stair. “Enjoy.” He inclined his head and opened the door for us to enter.

Bright lights filled an entire hall, bigger than any wing in any museum I’d ever been in. Everywhere I looked, there was art in varying shapes and sizes.

“How beautiful,” I murmured, transfixed at the vast quantity and quality of the sculptures.

“Look closer,” Zaith’s deep voice said from behind me.

My heart constricted. “Zaith.”

He stood close enough to touch, but far enough away I’d need to step into him. “I’m sorry, Meadow.”

My eyes watered, but I was determined not to ruin my evening. “You forgot.”

Zaith hung his head. “It wasn’t my intention.”

“The road to hell is paved with the best of intentions,” I murmured.

“Living without you this past astra has been hell for me.” Zaith gestured at himself. “I’ve barely slept knowing how much I hurt you.”

“Well,” I trailed off. “I’m leaving for Kлага.”

A crestfallen look crossed Zaith’s handsome features. “I’ve lost you.”

“I think it’s for the best. Don’t you?” I reached out to caress his hand.

“Before you go, will you do me one favor?” he pleaded. I arched an eyebrow. “Will you please look, truly look, at the sculptures?”

I nodded. “It’s the least I can do.” I walked through the exhibition hall, studying each piece. After a few pieces, they started to look familiar, but I couldn’t place my finger on it.

The ooh’s and ahh’s of the gathered crowd startled me, and I looked up to see my reflection in the glass. I glanced at my reflection, then at the closest statue. Were all these beautiful, voluptuous figures me?

“This exhibition is the reason why he missed your third date,” Cirane said, making sure to keep her voice low. “Zaith was creating. He sees you in everything.”

“He does?”

Cirane nodded.

“I do,” Zaith said. “My mother helped set this exhibition up in record time. She has contacts all over Melrun. Each guest here is wealthy in their own right. All the pieces are up for sale, with the proceeds going to help fund an acclimation center for humans who wish to remain on Melrun.”

“And you did all this...” I gestured wildly.

“Because you inspire me. I love you and want you to remain with me,” Zaith said, his voice cracking.

“Then maybe I shouldn’t leave for Kлага after all. I mean, my heart is telling me to stay with my mate,” I said, turning to capture Zaith’s lips in a soft kiss.

Note to the Reader

If you enjoyed *Blind Date with the Alien*, please check out the **Klagan Warrior Series!**

Cyok, Klagan Warriors Book 1

Bavrilz, Klagan Warriors Book 2

Strels & Isir, Klagan Warriors Book 3

Christmas with the Klagan, A Klagan Warriors Novella

A Very Klagan Valentine, A Klagan Warriors Novella

Holly has loved reading romance since she was a teenager and borrowed her mother's books. She's a nerd through and through, pulling her love of space into her books with sexy aliens and the Earth women they can't resist. She loves to travel and is currently living her best life with her husband making their own happily ever after.

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Monster in the Mist by Honey Phillips

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



WILL THE MONSTER IN THE MIST SEDUCE HER—
OR SAVE HER?

Kim can't catch a break. First she's abducted by aliens, then her desperate attempt to escape ends when she crash lands on a mysterious alien planet.

Every night the mists come, and every night they become more frightening. The most terrifying part is her response to the seductive voice that calls to her from within the mist.

Exiled to the jungle many years ago, Tiva feels his mind slipping away. But then a strange, beautiful female appears—her presence a beacon in the darkness—and their connection calls him back.

Kim doesn't think she needs help. Tiva doesn't think he needs rescuing. They're both wrong.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

A murder bird screeched from the branches overhead, and Kim flinched, giving it a nervous glance as she finished collecting the rest of the berries. It wasn't actually a bird, of course—it had scales instead of feathers, wings like a bat, and long, disturbingly hand-like feet—but it was as close to a bird as she was going to find on this godforsaken planet. As for the murder part? She'd watched through one of the windows of the ship in horror as it waited for one of the little furry mammals to emerge from the underbrush, then stabbed it repeatedly with that long, vicious beak.

Fortunately, despite its aggressive behavior, the murder bird was relatively small—smaller than a chicken—and it seemed to regard her size as a deterrent. Equally fortunately, it hunted alone. She shuddered at the thought of what a flock of them could do, but from what she had observed, they were as likely to attack each other as any other prey.

It was as vicious as everything else on this planet, and she kept a wary eye on it as she stripped the last remaining berries off

the bush. She immediately started to hurry back towards the ship, then noticed that a faint blue glow was already beginning to emanate from the ground. *Damn.* She'd stayed out too late—the mists were already coming.

Increasing her pace as much as she dared, she made her way rapidly through the jungle, the thick, humid air wrapping around her like a blanket. She didn't want to run. Running attracted attention—attention she did not need. Moving too quickly also made it harder to avoid traps like the murder vines or the murder bushes.

I really need another adjective, she thought to herself as she ducked beneath the long fleshy loops of a murder vine, looming ominously in the increasing dimness. Unfortunately, everything on this planet seemed determined to eliminate everything else. She suspected that only the fact that she was a stranger—an unknown quantity in this murderous ecosystem—had saved her so far.

The mists were rising, swirling around her calves now, and she could already catch a hint of the thick, sweet scent of decay that accompanied them. She refused to panic, even though her free hand was clasped so tightly on the metal pipe she carried as a makeshift weapon that her fingers ached and a line of sweat trickled down her back.

She sidestepped another vine, then moved as quickly as possible across the stones that made a path through the sinking mud. Finally she saw the gleam of metal from up ahead as the last rays of the sun struck the ship. *There!* She raced across the

patch of ground cleared by the crash, punched the airlock door open, and stumbled through, slamming her hand against the control to close it again. It slid closed just as the mists started to creep up the landing ramp, and she collapsed against the closed door with a muffled sob.

One more day. She survived one more day alone on an alien planet where everything seemed determined to kill. But how much longer could she last?

Two

When Kim's hands finally stopped shaking, she picked herself up and went through the airlock into the main part of the ship. It wasn't a large vessel. On one side of the airlock a small lounge led into the cockpit, while the bedroom and sanitary facilities were to the rear of the ship. A compact galley lay straight ahead, and the lower level held the mechanical room, engines, and storage area.

The ship where she had awoken after her abduction had been far larger.

Abducted.

Despite the undeniable reality of her current situation, it still seemed unbelievable.

She'd stayed late in her office, finishing up a proposal for her next expedition, then headed home across the moonlit campus. Although the details of her project were still running through her mind, some sixth sense had warned her that she wasn't alone. She'd spun around to find a short, stocky man, his

features strange and heavy in the moonlight. He'd barked something at her in a strange growling language as he raised his hand. A flash of silver was followed by a searing pain in her neck, and then the world went dark.

When she regained consciousness, she found herself in a cage, one of dozens that stretched out of sight along a curved corridor. Her clothes had been removed, replaced by a thin, white garment, and some type of translator had obviously been implanted because when two of her captors came by she could understand them clearly. Under the bright lights of the ship, she wondered how she could ever have mistaken them for human.

"I thought we were seeking younger females," one of them said, scowling at her.

The other male shrugged.

"She'll fetch a good price anyway."

"Price? I'm not for sale," she protested.

"Shut up, female." The first male's face darkened even more.

"You belong to us now—and we know how to deal with troublemakers."

His fists clenched, but then a device on his belt squawked and he stalked away. The other male gave her a not unsympathetic look.

"Don't provoke him. If you want to survive, accept that your life has changed and adapt."

She wasn't about to accept her fate that easily, but she was intelligent enough to realize that she stood a better chance of escape through watching and learning rather than useless defiance. But there had been no escape, and the terrifying, blue-skinned alien male who eventually purchased her made it quite clear that he wasn't interested in her acceptance. He wanted her to fight—and lose.

He dragged her on board the ship, his fingers digging into her wrist and his hand wrapped painfully in her hair. Shoving her down on one of the plush couches built into the compact lounge area, he cupped an obvious erection, red eyes gleaming.

“I'm tempted to begin your lessons immediately, but I would rather not be interrupted while I'm enjoying your screams.”

When she darted a desperate glance back towards the entrance, he laughed, revealing horrifyingly sharp yellow teeth.

“The hangar is already open. Even if you could open the airlock, all you'd find is death.”

Leaving her sprawled on the couch, he slid open a wide door panel at the front of the lounge. Beyond it, she could see a chair, a bank of controls, and a window—a window that revealed only darkness sprinkled with stars. He took the pilot's chair and began manipulating the controls, humming to himself.

Huddling into the corner of the couch, she looked around frantically, searching for some way to defend herself. The wooden panels and built-in furniture reminded her of a yacht,

but there was nothing she could use as a weapon—even the lamps were fixed in place.

A slight vibration indicated that they were moving, and then a violent shudder rocked the ship. Her fingers spasmed on the arm of the couch when he swore... and a piece of trim moved beneath her hand. She painfully pried it loose, tearing two of her fingernails in the process, then surreptitiously slid it onto her lap. A thin piece of wood, perhaps ten inches long, with the broken end in a jagged point. It wasn't much, especially given his size and strength, but it was all she had.

The sliver slickened beneath her damp palms as she watched him, waiting. He seemed to be annoyed, swearing at the controls, but eventually the ship settled into a smoother path. He rose and returned to the door opening, those red eyes gleaming maliciously when he saw she had retreated to the furthest corner of the couch.

“Remove your clothing,” he ordered.

He clearly expected her to disobey, and he equally clearly anticipated punishing her. Her hand tightened on her makeshift weapon. She had one chance to take him by surprise, and she wasn't going to waste it. Taking a deep breath, she screamed her defiance and charged him. His eyes widened in shock and she actually succeeded in striking him, the wooden spike sinking into his body with horrifying ease.

The force of her attack and the unexpected blow made him stumble backwards, tripping over the door threshold and falling, his head slamming against the control panel as he fell.

She scrambled back against the wall, her heart pounding in terror as she waited for him to come after her. There was nowhere to run.

But he didn't get up. His hands twitched a few times, and then there was a long, rattling sigh. He didn't move again, but it still took an eternity before she forced herself to her feet, cautiously approaching the sprawled body. His head was at an awkward angle, and there was a dark pool of purple blood beneath him. Shuddering, she nudged his foot. Nothing.

Every horror movie she'd ever seen flashed through her mind as she bent closer, half-expecting his eyes to open as he grabbed her. But he didn't move, and when she finally found the courage to touch his wrist, there was no trace of a pulse. Assuming aliens had pulses. *They must have some type of circulatory system*, she reassured herself. Still, she returned to the sofa, watching him warily, her fists clenched, for a very, very long time before she let herself believe that he was dead.

She had gotten her wish—she was free. Free in a spaceship she didn't know how to pilot, heading for an unknown destination, alone with a dead alien.

Three

Kim had spent most of her life studying the past, and nothing in those studies had prepared her for piloting an alien spaceship. Not only were the symbols on the controls indecipherable, she suspected that the alarming number of blinking red lights on the control panel indicated that he'd caused some damage when he fell against it. In the end, all she could do was wait and pray she didn't end up on a planet full of aliens like him.

She hadn't—she'd crashed on a planet filled with unknown dangers instead.

She'd been lucky that her first encounter with the mists hadn't been worse. It had been right after the ship crashed and she'd been outside, still dazed and disoriented. So stunned that it hadn't occurred to her until after she stumbled away from the ship that the atmosphere might not be suitable for humans. By the time she thought about it, she had been outside for long enough to know that it was breathable.

She was hunched against a rock, still shivering, when the first tendrils of mist crept into the clearing created by the crash. She actually thought the shimmering blue was pretty, but she was more focused on her situation than her surroundings. What was she going to do now?

Despite the black streaks along the sides, the exterior of the ship looked remarkably intact. But even if it was salvageable, she had no more idea of how to fly it than she did of how to land it. Maybe there was a civilization on this planet, beyond the jungle.

It was the silence that eventually warned her. She'd done fieldwork in jungle settings before, and nights in the jungle teemed with activity as insects buzzed and chirped, and leaves rustled as night predators hunted. Not here.

The background noises that she'd paid little attention to before had faded, replaced by a thick, heavy silence. The mists had slowly crept into the clearing, rising up to her waist now, and filling the air with an overpowering sweetness. The fine hairs on the back of her neck prickled as she looked across at the ship.

She didn't want to return to it. The horror of her attack still lingered, but she didn't feel any safer out here. The mists swirled around her seductively as she made her way back to the airlock, like the brush of cool, soft fingers against her skin. Just as she was about to climb up the landing ramp, a stray whisp drifted up over her face and that sweet, suffocating

scent filled her lungs. A sudden panic pushed aside her hesitation, and she raced up the ramp and inside.

She barely made it through the outer door before she began to feel the effects. Her knees weakened and she swayed dizzily before she slumped down against the wall. In her distorted vision, the walls began to breathe, moving in and out in a slow, ominous rhythm. Then her former owner appeared, blood dripping down his face as he reached for her. Some tiny fragment of her mind knew he couldn't possibly be real, but she screamed anyway.

The horrific visions continued for what felt like hours, but what replaced them was even worse. A deep, seductive voice called to her from outside the ship, urging her to open the door and join him. Twice she found herself with her hand on the release for the airlock without knowing how she'd arrived there.

By the time morning arrived, she knew that any thought of creating a shelter outside the ship was impossible. And if she couldn't get more than a half-day away from the ship, any search for civilization was also impossible. She was trapped.

Despite the despair filling her, she refused to give up. She would figure out how to survive, then she'd come up with a plan. The first step was to get rid of the body.

After she'd finally stopped shaking on the night of the attack, she'd wrapped it in a sheet and stuffed it into the storage area. Now she pulled it back out and began laboriously tugging it into the jungle. She didn't know what type of predators might

exist on this planet, but she wanted it as far away from the ship as possible.

That decision had inadvertently saved her from one of the other perils of the jungle. She stumbled over some hidden roots and lost her grip on the sheet. The body rolled down a small incline ahead of her, crashing into a tangle of vines. She was trying to decide if she was far enough from the ship to leave it when she realized the vines were moving.

One crept under the sheet and curled around a leg while another circled the neck. Yet a third vine found an exposed wrist—and then the vines began to tug on the parts, like children fighting over a toy. She watched in horror as they ripped the body apart before curling around their prizes and disappearing up into the trees. She was shaking so badly she could barely find her way back to the ship, trying to achieve the impossible task of not touching any of the thick vegetation.

But she'd made it, and over the next few days she forced herself to set aside her fear and to learn. She studied her surroundings from within the ship at first, trying to identify the other dangers lurking in the jungle. The murder birds had been one of those discoveries, along with a huge, hand-sized insect that drained the bodily fluids from its victims. In addition to the vines, the murder bushes were equally deadly, their branches drawing back to reveal the glowing orange fruit in their center, then closing behind any animal foolish enough to be tempted by it.

The only bright spot was that there seemed to be very few large predators. The only one she'd spotted was a cat-lizard type thing that occasionally appeared very early in the morning, high in the branches, as the mists retreated. She suspected it preyed on any animal still caught in the toxic hallucinations caused by the mists.

Every night the mists returned, swirling around the windows and pressing against them as if demanding to be let in. Even the way they moved was hypnotic, so she very carefully avoided looking through the windows once night had fallen. But then the dreams began.

Four

The memory of those dreams made Kim shiver, but she pushed the memory aside as she picked up her container of berries and rose to her feet. They would be a welcome addition to her small but growing collection of native food.

Although she'd been able to get one of the machines in the galley to produce food, the only thing it seemed capable of providing was a hard, dry biscuit. It was filling enough, despite its lack of taste, but she had no idea how long the machine would continue to work. She'd been trying to supplement it by experimenting with food from the jungle.

She discovered the berries after watching small mammals feeding on them. She'd tested them over a series of days before deciding they were safe to eat, and now they were a regular supplement to her diet. The long blue fruit that dangled from some of the trees was less successful—edible but very bitter. So far she'd avoided any of the multiple types of fungi that climbed the tree trunks because so many of them were deadly, even back on Earth.

I might not have a choice soon.

She'd had to go farther to gather these berries. Although today she'd simply misjudged the timing, how long would it be before she couldn't find any within a half day's journey from the ship? How long before the food machine stopped producing and she had to depend entirely on the jungle to survive?

She sighed and went to eat her meager dinner. Afterwards, she resumed her studies. She'd found a data tablet, and even though she couldn't read the text, she'd stumbled across some kind of news feed. The stories were frequently accompanied by pictures, and she was slowly and painfully trying to decipher the captions to create a vocabulary list. Even though she hadn't made a lot of progress, it gave her something to do and kept her from focusing solely on her dismal future.

The third time she yawned, she bit her lip, then pushed the tablet aside. As she rose to her feet, a shiver of dread—and anticipation—slithered down her spine. Would he come to her tonight?

Wooden panels also covered the walls of the small bedroom, surrounding a large built-in bed. Her squeamishness about sleeping in her former owner's bed hadn't lasted longer than one uncomfortable night on one of the couches in the lounge. She'd raided his wardrobe with equal distaste, but she was pragmatic enough to accept the necessity.

Stripping off the abbreviated tunic that was all she needed in the warmth of the jungle, she took a quick shower. As she did

each night, she wondered how much longer the power would last. So far the ship still had no problem providing lights and hot water, as well as fueling devices like the food machine—but how long would it last?

She dimmed the lights and slipped into bed, her nipples already tingling as she stared into the darkness.

At first the dreams had only consisted of the voice she'd heard when she hallucinated—deep and seductive, calling to her from the mists. Then the eyes had appeared, glowing at her from the corner of the room. The first few times she'd been terrified, waking with her heart pounding and her pulse racing. But eventually she realized that, although there was hunger in that glowing gaze, there was also something else—a loneliness which matched her own.

Perhaps that sense of sympathy, of connection, had unlocked her subconscious because after that, the dreams intensified—from sound to looks to... touch.

She shivered again and closed her eyes, deliberately settling her breathing into the slow, rhythmic breaths that would put her to sleep.

She dreamed...

Her covers slipped down as the eyes appeared, watching her avidly, and she stretched, exposing herself to that hungry gaze. A light touch feathered across her now rock hard nipples, teasing the aching buds. It slipped between her thighs, a cool breath on slick, heated flesh—arousing, but ultimately unsatisfying. Her hips shifted restlessly in search of the climax

that hovered just out of reach. A harder, deeper touch and her eyes snapped open, a long-delayed climax sweeping over her as she met that burning orange gaze. She cried out, her eyes closing again as pleasure washed over her.

When she opened them again, she was alone except for a lingering hint of spice in the air. *Nonsense. I was dreaming.* The languorous satisfaction of her climax still filled her body, and her eyes started to drift closed. She turned on her side to snuggle into her pillow, and that's when she saw them...

Softly glowing symbols were scrawled across the wall.

It's just a hallucination, she told herself, probably because of her earlier exposure to the mist. But her finger trembled as she reached out to touch one of the glowing lines, convinced it would disappear. Instead her finger came away damp, a faint trace of luminescence shimmering on the tip.

Five

She is real.

The conviction filled Tiva's mind as his eyes opened.

No. It wasn't possible. No resident of Aetheria had ever looked like that—lean and strong despite those lush, tempting curves. Grey eyes in a delicate face, and hair that held hints of fire when the light touched it. His mind was playing tricks on him as it so often did these days. He was beginning to wonder if he were as mad as the Elders thought.

Too restless to sleep, he left his rooms to pace around the courtyard. Outside the barrier, the mists swirled and raged. If he stared at them long enough, he would hear them talk, see images he did not wish to see. Were those images real? Was the female just another vision? Yet that moment—the moment when her eyes opened and he met that soft grey gaze—had felt so real. Her fresh, citrusy scent had filled his head, and he was sure that if he reached out, he would actually have been able to touch that soft golden skin.

She can't be real.

But sleep was no longer possible, and he decided to work instead. The Elders might have condemned him to an existence without tools or equipment, but a scientist could always find a way.

He was cross-pollinating two species of fungi in order to... His mind stuttered and he suddenly couldn't remember why he was conducting the experiment. The yawning cavern of madness threatened to open again, but he slammed the door on it.

The purpose would come to him. In the meantime, he would lose himself in the familiar routine of observation and recording, just as he had always done.

His genius had been discovered early, his parents thrilled at his abilities and sparing no expense to make sure that he had the finest tutors and the best equipment. Everything he could have wanted, except perhaps affection. Those privileges had followed him to university, where he rapidly became the youngest academic star amongst that highly select group. His future had shone as brightly as the brightest star—until it all went wrong.

Impatient to reach a conclusive result in his latest studies, he had ignored standard protocols, arrogantly certain that his intelligence had correctly assessed the risks. He had not, and someone had died—an innocent volunteer who trusted him.

His grief and guilt had overwhelmed him, but that had not been enough for the Elders. They had condemned him to live

out his life alone, confined to this one location, and surrounded by deadly jungle during the day and those endless mists each night.

The first years had been the hardest. He had ranted and raved, fought against his confinement—and the horrible, soul-destroying guilt. Eventually he settled into a sort of numb acceptance and began his work, doing what he could with his limited resources. And yet he'd made progress. Much of it had been lost in one of his fits of madness, but he refused to give up.

The female's face appeared in his mind again, those soothing grey eyes wide and startled, lush lips parted, and his body reacted, his shaft stiffening in another useless erection. Normally he paid little attention to his physical body—it was just a tool that served his needs—but ever since he had sensed her presence, his body had hummed with new and unexpected sensations. Each time he stoked her arousal, his own flared as well.

With every ounce of discipline he'd acquired, he ignored the demanding throb and bent back down over his records. But even as he did, he found his thoughts racing ahead to the upcoming evening. Could he draw another of those tantalizing responses from her? And perhaps more importantly, would she look at him again?

Six

The next morning, Kim took a deep breath and slowly slid the bedroom door panel open. She'd spent the remainder of the previous night huddled on the couch in the lounge, trying to convince herself that she wasn't going mad. The mists danced outside the window, shimmering seductively, and she buried her head in her hands, refusing to look at them.

When the sun rose and the mists retreated, her courage returned and she decided to face her fears. Her decision didn't stop her hand from shaking as she opened the door panel.

The symbols were still there.

For a moment, her eyes closed in despair. Then she took a deep breath and edged a little closer. The marks no longer glowed, faded to thin white lines, but their presence was as inexplicable as it had been the night before. Was she going mad? Had she written them herself in her dreams?

Setting aside the fact that she had no way of making the marks, the writing didn't resemble hers in any way. And the

more she studied them, the more convinced she became that it was some type of writing. A message?

From who? The man in my dreams? She wanted to scoff at the idea, but then again, she would have scoffed at almost everything that had happened to her since she was taken.

She studied the symbols again, then frowned. There was something vaguely familiar about them after all...

Hurrying back to the lounge, she retrieved the list of words she'd been assembling. *There!* The two characters were not identical, but the one she'd retrieved from the newsfeed could be a simplified version of the one on the wall. A similar process of simplification occurred in many languages that began as pictographs. She searched eagerly for the meaning she'd derived for the word.

Danger.

Great. Either her subconscious or some unknown entity was warning her of danger. Was it a new threat? Or just the constant peril of the jungle?

She spent the rest of the day perched on the bed, tablet in hand, as she tried to see if she could identify any more of the symbols. Neither of the two additional words she deciphered made her feel any better—*trap* and *mist*.

Approaching the message as an intellectual exercise had helped her push her fears aside, but when she finally looked up and realized that night had come, her mouth went dry. What would tonight bring?

Forcing herself to eat one of the dry biscuits, she tried to focus on the other plans she'd made to improve her situation but it was no use. The memory of the previous night haunted her—and yet the low hum of arousal created by the dreams hadn't completely disappeared. When she went to wash her face and get ready for bed, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright.

I look like I'm expecting a lover.

The thought flashed through her mind, and she couldn't immediately dismiss it. She'd had a few short-lived affairs over the years—bonding over the excitement of discovering traces of ancient civilizations in unfamiliar lands—but they had never created the same level of excitement.

She closed her eyes, imagining those glowing eyes watching her from across the room, and something shifted in the air. A cool breeze wafted across her neck, accompanied by that haunting spicy scent. She whirled around, but there was no one there. Her body sagged with relief. Of course no one had entered the bathroom.

She turned back to the sink, but when she looked into the mirror, the room behind her was no longer empty. Glowing eyes appeared in the reflection.

“You're not real,” she whispered as she clung to the sink.

The eyes drew closer, and as they did, the figure behind them took shape. A man—*no, an alien*. A tall alien with a lean, sculpted body and a beautiful, inhuman face. His eyes still glowed, but now she could see the intelligence mixed with the desire. He was bare-chested, clad only in dark silky pants, and

his skin had a dusky hue, a combination of deep blues and purples that blended into the shadows. He was the living embodiment of the mists, beautiful and deadly as he prowled towards her.

“Am I not?” An uncertain look crossed that sculpted face. “Perhaps you are the one that doesn’t exist.”

A hysterical laugh trembled on her lips. Her hallucination thought she was hallucinating?

She clutched at the sink, the metal cold and hard beneath her fingers as she watched him in the mirror. He appeared to be right behind her, but all she could feel was a coolness against her back, skating down her spine.

“You’re not real. You can’t touch me.”

He stepped even closer, and she felt a hint of pressure against her back as a frustrated look crossed his face. In the mirror his arms circled her, his hands closing over her breasts. Her nipples tightened, even though when she looked down she couldn’t see anything except the thin silk of her sleep shirt, trembling with her rapid breathing.

“I am real,” he said almost desperately, long fingers plucking at her erect nipples in the mirror. Despite her fear, despite her confusion, a spark of excitement ignited at the sight. As her arousal surged, his grip suddenly solidified, his fingers warm and firm on her breasts.

He echoed her startled cry—and then he was gone. The mirror was as empty as the bathroom when she jerked around to

check.

Her knees threatened to give way, but she refused to let them. Unless she was willing to believe that she'd truly lost her mind—and she wasn't—there was an explanation for what was happening to her and she intended to find it.

Tiva stared down at his hands. They still tingled from that brief tantalizing touch. She had felt so real, but how? He hadn't seen or sensed anyone in... years. His mind suddenly stuttered and when he returned to himself, he was pressed against the barrier surrounding his enclosure, his skin burning as it pushed back against him. He stumbled backwards, trying to arrange his thoughts in their usual logical order.

His hypothesis was that she was real—which meant he needed to test that hypothesis. Beginning the next time he saw her.

A slow smile curved his lips as he went to tend to his plants.

Seven

After the incident in the bathroom it took Kim a long time to fall asleep, but he came back to her as soon as she did—the tall, strong body leaning against the bedroom wall as he watched her with those glowing eyes. Now that she had seen him more clearly, she had no trouble distinguishing the details that had previously been kept hidden.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“I am Tiva of Karmalan.” The answer was smooth, arrogant, but then his eyes flickered and he raised his hand to rub it against his temples. “At least, that is what I believe. And you?”

“I’m Kim Walker.”

“Kim,” he repeated in that low, deep voice, and her body responded.

Hunger flared in his eyes as he stalked towards her. Part of her was tempted to explore more of the passion that flared between them, but she also wanted answers.

“Wait.”

Her voice came out breathless and husky, seductive, but he stopped.

“Where are we?”

“The planet is named Aetheria.” Those burning eyes swept down over her. “You are not from here.”

A choked laugh threatened to escape, but she only shook her head.

“I was... taken from a planet called Earth. This ship crashed here.”

He looked around, frowning slightly, as if he were noticing their surroundings for the first time.

“That is why you could be here. Could be real.”

It wasn't a question, but she nodded.

“And you? Where are you?”

His eyes darkened, and then his whole body seemed to flicker like a candle in the wind before he frowned at her.

“I did not come here for a discussion.”

He raised his hand and the covers that had been up around her shoulders fell to her waist, leaving her clad only in the thin silk shirt she used as a nightgown. Her nipples beaded beneath the silk and his eyes heated as he focused on them, but he didn't come any closer. How far did his powers extend in this dream world? Could he make her shirt disappear just as easily? And why wasn't that speculation more frightening?

But despite the arousal humming through her veins, she wasn't giving in that easily.

"I am not a puppet," she said firmly. "You can't just make me do whatever you wish."

"Can I not?" He looked oddly thoughtful before he sighed, sadness washing across his face. "I know that all too well."

"Why are you here, Tiva?"

"I... do not know." He looked surprised at the admission. "Just that there was something—someone—that called to me. You."

"But how? How did you even know I was here?"

"I don't know. Just that there was a... brightness. Something calling me back from the mists. The mists in my mind," he added. "They are far more dangerous than the ones that fill the forest at night."

The sadness on his face made her reach out impulsively to take his hand, or at least to try and take it. It was there, but it was not there. Even though when she looked down she could see their hands clasped together, all she could feel was a faint, cool pressure against her fingers.

"You touched me," he said quietly.

"I tried."

"It has been a very, very long time since anyone tried. Thank you, little viragi."

He adjusted his grip, the pressure changing as he raised her hand to his mouth. Then he brushed his lips across the back of

her hand, and this time it was more than coolness, it was warm and hot and real. Their eyes met for a moment, and then he was gone and she woke with a start.

Damn.

She hadn't wanted him to leave so soon. Having someone to talk to was surprisingly comforting. *Even if I'm just imagining him?* For a moment the possibility that she was having some kind of psychotic episode floated through her mind, but she shook her head. She refused to believe that there wasn't some kind of rational explanation.

I need more information.

Too restless to go back to sleep, she started compiling a list of questions to ask him when he returned. And he would return. She was sure of it.

Eight

Tiva paced.

The situation was more complicated than he had realized. It had not occurred to him that his female—Kim—could have crashed on Aetheria. *Which means she's real.*

Although he couldn't entirely suppress a flare of delight at that knowledge, it also meant that she was trapped here. As much a victim of the mist as he was. He could not free himself—could he free her?

“How did you get here?” he demanded as soon as he returned to her the next night. “You said you were taken. Is this not an Earth ship?”

“No. Our technology is not this advanced.” Her gaze dropped to her hands, her fingers twisting together. “I was taken from Earth and then sold to a male.”

“An Aetherian?”

She shook her head, shuddering.

“His skin was a lighter blue, and he had a... crest of dark hair. Plus terrible red eyes and sharp teeth.”

“A Derian,” he said automatically, then frowned. How had he known that?

“I think that’s what the slavers said.”

“What happened to him?”

She finally looked up at him, grey eyes wide and haunted. “He was going to... hurt me. I attacked him, and he hit his head when he fell. He died.”

A red haze filled his vision, and her eyes widened even more.

“Tiva?”

He realized that the lights in the cabin were flashing wildly, and somehow he managed to bring himself back under control.

“I should... You should have been protected.”

Her mouth twisted. “Maybe. But sometimes a woman has to look out for herself.”

So small and yet so determined. As much as he hated the thought that she had been at the Derian’s mercy, the fact that she had managed to defeat the male filled him with pride.

“Now I have a question,” she said, clearly ready to leave the subject behind. “What does your message say?”

Message? He followed her gesture to the words scrawled on the wall. It was his handwriting, but he did not remember writing them. The room flickered and she cried out, but when he looked at her, his surroundings solidified once more.

“What does it say?” she repeated.

He hesitated, then read them to her.

“He who is trapped will only be freed when she faces the dangers in the mist.”

“What does that mean?”

“I wish I knew. I do not remember writing them.”

She came to his side, cautiously putting her hand on his arm. He only felt the slightest hint of warmth from her touch, but even that sent fire racing through his system.

“Are you trapped?” she asked softly.

“Yes.” He was sure of that much at least.

“Why?”

“Because I was arrogant. I was conducting an experiment to unlock dormant genetic material, but in the process, I created a volatile mutation. It overwhelmed the subject’s biological systems, leading to a catastrophic failure. She died.”

Her breath caught, but she didn’t pull away. If anything, her hand tightened.

“I’m so sorry.”

“As I said, I was arrogant—foolish and arrogant. My methodology was flawed, but it never occurred to me to question it until it was too late.”

“What happened?”

“My people sent me into exile.” He laughed bitterly. “A living death. Year after year of loneliness and a slow descent into madness. I lost entire periods of time, but something always seemed to call me back.”

Returning with no idea of how much time had passed. Finding his notes destroyed, his gardens dead or overgrown, his house falling down.

“This time, I believe it was you who called me back.”

“Me? How?”

“I don’t know. I just felt a warmth... a brightness.”

Unshed tears sparkled in her eyes as she looked up at him.

“I heard you calling me. From the mists.”

He shuddered, horrified at the thought that she might have entered the mists trying to find him. Would he never learn?

“It was not intentional.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.” She bit her lip, then gave him a speculative look. “And the other dreams, the ones where you touched me? Were they intentional?”

“I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “But you called to my body as well as my mind.”

Her hand left his arm, trailing gently down his stomach to the waistband of his pants, the warmth from her touch increasing as it descended.

“You called to mine as well,” she whispered, and her hand slid lower, tracing his erection with a warm, soft, and undeniably

real hand.

A groan escaped—and then he was back in his prison, alone, confused, and very, very aroused.

Nine

Tiva vanished and Kim startled awake, finding herself next to the wall where the message was written. It was the first time she hadn't awoken in her bed—which was a little unnerving—but she found herself staring at her hand instead. She wouldn't normally have been so bold, but the odd intimacy of their encounters had encouraged her—and she didn't regret it, even though the lingering ache of arousal had only intensified. He was so thick and hard... and not human.

He came again the next night, but they didn't discuss their mutual entrapment. He asked her about her life on Earth, fascinated by her archaeological studies. He told her a little more about his own work—he was a xenobiologist, his work focused on genetic adaptations and symbiotic relationships. She quickly discovered that anything that came too close to the incident which had led to his exile would cause his appearance to flicker. She didn't try to touch him again, and yet they ended up sitting next to each other on the bed, the

sides of their bodies touching in an oddly comforting way as they talked until the sun rose and he vanished once more.

He came again the next night and the next. Their conversations were far-ranging and interesting and could continue for hours—as long as he didn't touch her. Each time arousal flared between them, it was only a matter of time until his touch became corporeal. As soon as it did, he would inevitably vanish and she would awaken alone.

As long as they did not touch they could prolong their time together, but there was an almost magnetic pull drawing them together. His hand would reach for hers, or his arm would slip around her waist, his fingers brushing the sensitive undersides of her breasts. Her hand would rest on his thigh, relishing the feel of those firm muscles and skating gradually closer to his cock. Those stolen touches became a kind of game, a test to see how far they could go without shattering their connection. And then came the night when he kissed her.

It had been a difficult day. Even though her body was asleep during their visits, she wasn't truly resting, and she found herself waking up later each morning. She'd been neglecting her food gathering, and in an effort to be more efficient, she'd spent too long in the jungle, returning as the mists were rising. Even though it hadn't reached her face, she'd breathed in enough to feel dizzy and disoriented when she returned to the ship.

On top of all her other troubles, she'd brushed her leg against a new kind of plant and her skin had reacted, turning red and

itchy. She fell asleep feeling tired and unhappy, and it carried over into her dreams. He knew something was wrong as soon as he came to her, sitting next to her and putting his arm around her shoulders.

The touch was reassuring rather than arousing, and she fought back the urge to cry as she leaned into him.

“What’s wrong, viragi?”

He’d told her the term meant flower, and it usually made her smile, but not tonight.

“I had a bad day.” She raised her leg, still red and swollen. “And my leg hurts.”

“A darstal plant,” he said immediately. “Did you wash it off?”

“Of course I did.”

“Hmm. Come with me.”

They had discovered that if one of them left the room the dream would end, but she only frowned at him.

“I told you I washed it. And I’m tired.”

“This will make you feel better,” he said with a flare of his previous arrogance, and then he picked her up.

Although she could feel the cool pressure of his arms beneath her, it wasn’t quite the same as being held and she gasped and clung to his neck.

“I will not drop you, little viragi.”

He looked amused, and she scowled at him. Ignoring her expression, he placed her on the sink counter, then inspected

the contents of the cabinets. He returned with a white powder that he sprinkled over the reddened skin. Heat flared briefly, quickly replaced by a soothing coolness.

“What is that?”

“A type of antiseptic. It’s very common on...” He frowned, then shook his head. “I don’t know.”

She had the sudden urge to cry, and he must have seen it on her face because his expression softened.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know either. I don’t know anything about any of this. I’m tired of being here. I’m tired of trying to survive. I’m tired of not being able to touch you.”

The last part came out as a wail, and he stepped closer, putting an arm around her waist as he cupped her face.

“My poor little human.”

She leaned into his hand—surely an innocent enough touch—and then he groaned and kissed her.

His mouth crashed down over hers, warm and firm and... real. His tongue swept into her mouth, shockingly hot and wet, his spicy taste filling her senses. She grabbed his shoulders as he yanked her closer. For one brief, glorious second, she could feel the warm, hard press of his body against hers. A sob threatened to escape. She hadn’t realized until that moment just how much she missed that physical contact.

And then he was gone, her hands clutching at empty air. She woke as the tears started rolling down her cheeks.

Ten

Tiva slammed back into his body so hard that the ground seemed to shake.

“Kim!” he cried, still feeling the sweet press of her body against his.

The mists swirled in a raging torrent, and the barrier surrounding his prison suddenly flickered. It was only for the briefest second, but he caught it. What had triggered that? His need? Or her response? Could that be the answer?

A wild hope flared in his chest, but he did his best to suppress it. While he couldn't deny the strength of the connection between them, was there more power in it than he realized?

He thought about it as he went about his daily business, and by the time night fell, he had a plan.

As usual, she was waiting for him once he fell asleep, perched on the edge of the bed, her face already flushed and smiling. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he was afraid it would bring their time together to a rapid conclusion.

“I want to try an exp—” He quickly amended his words. “I want to try something.”

“All right.”

She smiled up at him, the trust on her face creating a wave of doubt. Was this the right decision? *It's just a test*, he reminded himself and returned her smile.

“I want to please you—both of us—more completely.”

“I'd like that too, but I don't see how. As soon as we actually touch each other, the dream ends.”

“Then I won't touch you.”

“But...”

“Remember the first night we really saw each other?”

Pink rushed to her cheeks, but she nodded.

I am in control, he told himself, and reached for her sleep shirt with his thoughts rather than his hands. Her eyes widened as it began to rise, but she didn't object. It slipped over her head, leaving her naked and almost unbearably tempting. His hand shook with the need to reach out and touch her, but he forced himself under control.

“Lie back on the bed, and keep your eyes on me.”

She gulped nervously, but she obeyed.

Using his thoughts to do what his hands could not, he stroked her cheek until she relaxed and smiled up at him. He continued the soothing touches, traveling down her neck to the upper slope of her breasts. Her breath was coming faster now, her

nipples taut and erect, but she looked excited rather than nervous. Good.

He sent more tendrils of thought to curl around those tempting peaks, tugging lightly on the rosy tips. Unable to resist, he leaned closer, close enough to let his breath waft across them, and she gasped.

“Tiva!”

She reached for him, but he was afraid to take her hand, afraid to break the moment.

“Yes, my viragi?”

Another tendril curled lower, sliding between her thighs as her legs parted.

“I want to touch you.”

“I know. I wish it was actually my hands on your beautiful body. But you are enjoying this?”

He stroked the small, swollen nub at the top of her slit and she gasped again.

“You know I am.”

“Good.”

He stroked a little harder, and her legs opened even more to reveal flushed, glistening folds. How much he wanted to bury his face there, to taste her and breathe in her scent as he brought her to climax. He slid lower, finding the small entrance to her body, and sent the tendril deep inside.

Her eyes were still fastened on his face, but a pink flush covered her chest as her hips shifted restlessly. His cock throbbed, and he fisted it impatiently, still concentrating on her pleasure.

“Come for me, viragi,” he ordered, and her body convulsed as her climax swept over her.

She cried out his name, her eyes fixed on his, and that desperate cry triggered his own release. Fire streaked down his spine as his body spasmed, and a wild burst of energy swirled between them.

The lights in the cabin suddenly flared white, the light so blinding he could barely see. The ship quivered beneath his feet before everything went dark, the cabin suddenly dead and silent.

“Tiva?” Her voice shook, scared and uncertain.

Fuck! What had he done? This ship was her refuge, feeding her and protecting her, and he’d drained the power from it in another moment of arrogance.

The lights flickered and then the soft hum of the engine kicked in. She sighed with relief and smiled up at him.

“That was ama—”

“Incredibly foolish.” The fact that the power had returned, that he had been lucky this time, did not change his reckless stupidity. “I am very sorry, my viragi. It will not happen again.”

He closed his eyes and willed himself away.

Eleven

Kim stared at the emptiness where Tiva had been. Her body still quivered with the remnants of her climax, but the ache in her heart rapidly took over.

What had happened? She'd felt so close to him, and then he'd pulled away.

I'm not asleep, she suddenly realized.

How long had she been awake? And how had she continued to see him until that very last moment? She didn't have any answers, and eventually exhaustion won out and she slipped into a dreamless sleep.

He didn't come to her again that night, or the next night. It was the first time he hadn't appeared in her dreams since they'd spoken, and she woke in the morning feeling more alone than she had since those first terrible days after the crash.

Where had he gone? Was he all right?

The day passed with excruciating slowness, but as eager as she was to fall asleep, she tossed and turned for hours. When

exhaustion finally overtook her, she immediately looked for Tiva, but once again, he didn't appear.

Maybe I could go to him.

It seemed impossible, but then, everything that had happened was so far outside her experience. Why not push it a little further?

She closed her eyes and thought about him, about his deep voice saying her name, and about those glowing eyes fastened on her. Nothing happened. But then she thought about the mists swirling around his tall, lean figure and she felt a... pull. Just the faintest tug, but she followed it, envisioning herself drifting along with the mist as the warmth of his presence increased.

When she was convinced he was right in front of her, she opened her eyes.

He was there, his eyes fixed on her, but unlike when he came to the ship, everything else was dim and misty. She had the faintest impression of crumbling stone buildings set against a jungle-covered slope but he was all that mattered.

“Kim.”

He smiled at her, but then his expression shuttered, his face turning distant.

“You should not have come.”

“Why not? And why did you stop coming to me?”

“I refuse to take any additional chances with your safety.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I knew that our connection was... powerful.”

Was?

“I was foolish not to consider the possibility that it might affect your ship.”

“That’s what this is about? The fact that the power flickered?”

“This time,” he said grimly. “What if it had not come back? I endangered you. It cannot happen again.” He gestured at his surroundings. “I must resign myself to my fate.”

For the briefest second, she felt the brush of his fingers across her cheek, warm and firm.

“Goodbye, my love.”

And then she was back on the ship, staring wide-eyed into the darkness.

He thought not seeing her would keep her safe? She would have laughed if she hadn’t been afraid it would turn to tears. Didn’t he realize how much more dangerous it would be to be completely alone?

The rest of his words replayed in her head, and she suddenly jerked upright as she realized what he meant. He thought that their attraction was so strong it could alter their physical environment—and it had.

Was it strong enough to release him? There was only one way to know. Somehow she had to find him and convince him to try.

But how to find him? Those crumbling buildings could have been anywhere in the jungle—except for the land rising up behind them. All the land around the ship was flat. How far would she have to travel to reach that kind of slope?

Everything looked the same at ground level, but if she could get high enough, would that peak be obvious? When she'd first crashed, she'd considered climbing a tree to get her bearings. She'd abandoned the idea once she realized that the mists would limit the distance she could travel. But now...

Fighting back a rush of nerves, she went to study the trees surrounding the clearing. A thick-barked tree with wide reddish-green leaves was most prevalent, but it also seemed to be favored by the murder vines. On the other hand, they seemed to avoid a narrower tree with long, silky, teal leaves. The fact that it was thinner meant she wouldn't be able to climb as high, but it was still a better option than facing a murder vine in the treetops.

It wasn't the first time she'd done this, and after the first few feet, she settled into a comfortable rhythm, working her way steadily higher. The temperature decreased a little as she climbed, the thick humidity lessening as the branches thinned, and she began to enjoy the climb.

When the canopy opened enough for her to feel sunlight on her face, she wedged herself against the trunk and looked around. Jungle stretched in every direction, covering a vast river basin sprawled between two mountain ranges. A break in the trees ran down the center of the valley, indicating the

location of the river, but it was several days away and the mountains even further. Her heart sank. If Tiva was imprisoned close to either of those ranges...

Biting her lip, she swiveled around enough to look north. Another smaller peak rose out of the river basin, probably volcanic given the almost conical shape. It was closer, although she still didn't know if she could cover the distance in a single day.

Did it seem familiar? It had been such a brief glance, and she'd been so focused on Tiva that it was hard to know for sure, but... she thought so. Something seemed to tug her in that direction. It was too late to set out today, but if he didn't come back tonight, she would leave as soon as the mists retreated in the morning.

This is a bad idea, she told herself the next morning as she paced back and forth across the lounge waiting for daybreak. Even if she were right, even if those glimpses had accurately revealed his location, it would take almost a full day to make her way there. She would not be able to return before nightfall—which meant she would be at the mercy of the mists. And, if by some miracle she did manage to locate him, would the barrier surrounding his prison allow her to enter?

They were all valid reasons not to go, but if there was even the remotest possibility that she could free him, how could she not take the chance?

And even if she couldn't free him, at least they could be together. Being trapped with him seemed far more desirable

than a lifetime by herself, risking her life in the jungle every day as she waited for the ship's power to eventually die.

The sky began to lighten and the mists withdrew. She picked up the small pack she'd assembled and as soon as the mists were below her knees, she took a deep breath and set out.

The journey started off well enough. She kept the rising sun to her right as she made her way carefully through the jungle. Now that she was familiar with the numerous dangers, it was easier to avoid them.

But familiarity didn't change the sheer physical effort of making her way so carefully through the dense vegetation, trying to watch for danger from all sides. The thick humidity dragged at her, weighing everything down. By the time the sun was beginning to descend over her left shoulder, her limbs were heavy and aching. Strange spots danced before her eyes, and a metallic taste filled her mouth.

How long had she been walking? She couldn't remember. The thick canopy above blocked out much of the sun, shrouding everything in an eerie twilight. She stumbled over a tree root and crashed to the jungle floor, her knees hitting the damp soil. For a moment she lay there, too exhausted to move.

Get up, she told herself. With a groan, she pushed herself to her feet. But as she took a step forward, the ground seemed to tilt and shift under her. She blinked, disoriented, and realized with a start that she was hallucinating. Panic rose in her chest. Were the mists already rising?

No. Despite the dimness, it was still daylight. She forced herself to take a deep breath and a drink of water, and the world steadied. Summoning the store of willpower that had kept her going so far, she set out again. Slow, deliberate steps. One foot in front of the other. Don't stop.

The sun continued down across the sky, the late afternoon rays beginning to slant through the trees. Her chest ached as she started to look around for one of the trees she had climbed the previous day. Her gamble had not succeeded. Mind fuzzy with fatigue, it took a few moments to realize that the shape in the distance was a stone archway, more stone appearing beyond the wall.

A muffled sob escaped as she hurried towards it.

The air beneath the archway seemed to shimmer, but she no longer trusted her senses and she kept going. There was a moment of resistance—as if she were pushing her way through a thick curtain of clinging fabric—and then she stumbled forward into a large, stone-paved courtyard. Beds thick with plants edged the crumbling stone walls, some in tidy rows, others rampant and overgrown, while a wide veranda ran across the rear of the space. And there, standing beneath an ancient, gnarled tree in the center of the courtyard, was a tall figure with dark hair and eyes that glowed like golden diamonds.

Tiva.

Twelve

Tiva clutched the branch of the bonsam tree for support as he stared at Kim. It must be another hallucination. The arch had always taunted him with the illusion that it offered an open passage to the world beyond. No one had passed beneath it in... His mind stuttered, a wave of dizziness passing over him.

“Tiva,” she said softly, her voice calling him back.

The sound released him, and he crossed the distance between them in a few long strides, snatching her into his arms as she fell against him. Her face was flushed and damp, her hair in a wild tangle, but she had never looked so beautiful. She was actually here, warm and soft and sweet in his arms. Real.

“I don’t understand. How are you here? Why?”

She bit her lip, and he watched in fascination as those small white teeth closed over her plump lower lip, every minute detail clear.

“I came because I was worried about you. Because I wanted to be with you.”

His heart ached, filled with an unfamiliar tenderness.

“But what if you cannot leave again, viragi?”

She didn't flinch, her grey gaze clear and certain.

“I would rather be confined with you than free without you.”

She reached up and smoothed away the line between his brows with a rueful smile. “And I wasn't really that free. The mists had me trapped too.”

For the first time he noticed that the light was fading and gave her a horrified look.

“If you had not found me, you would have been alone in the jungle when the mists came.”

He felt the betraying tremble of her hand against his face, but she lifted her chin.

“I had a plan. I was going to climb up into the trees, above the mists.”

She would have been high above the ground when they came? He shuddered and pulled her closer, and she leaned into him with a contented sound.

“You feel so good. Now kiss me.”

How could he refuse?

He kissed her, the touch of their lips soft, almost tentative, but even that one brief touch sent arousal sweeping through his body. Their dream touches, even when they had felt real, couldn't compare to the true softness of her lips against his,

her sweetness as she welcomed his kiss. Every inch of her body was pressed against his, soft and strong and perfect.

He groaned and deepened the kiss, and she met him eagerly, her small tongue sliding seductively against his. His erection was throbbing painfully against his pants when they finally separated. She looked up at him, eyes shining, mouth pink and swollen.

“Do you really think the strength of our connection can free you?”

“I don’t know. Based on the strength of it, it seems to be a logical conclusion—but I’m not sure that I trust my logic.”

“I trust it,” she said, and his heart skipped a beat. “I trust you, Tiva.”

He shuddered. Until that moment, he hadn’t realized how much he’d longed to hear those words, even if she had more faith in him than he did in himself.

“Thank you, my viragi.”

“Now take me to bed, and let’s see how much power we can generate.”

His heart too full for words, he picked her up and carried her to his bedroom.

Kim’s heart pounded against her chest as Tiva lifted her into his arms—not from fear, but from excitement... and hope.

He carried her across the courtyard and the wide veranda into a large open room. She had a brief impression of terraced

gardens cascading down the hillside before he continued through it and into a large bedroom. The last rays of the sun gave a golden glow to whitewashed walls and an elaborate mosaic tile floor, but the room was almost bare. The only furniture was a large bed draped with white linen, and he put her back on her feet next to it.

He made an abortive gesture with his hand, then gave her a rueful smile.

“I cannot make your clothes disappear in this reality.”

“Of course you can—you just have to use your hands.”

She guided his hands to the hem of her shirt, her breath catching as he slowly raised it up her sides, his fingers leaving a heated trail as they brushed against her skin.

“This is better,” she whispered.

“Much better.”

His hands jerked as he finished removing the shirt, leaving her exposed to his avid gaze.

“Beautiful.”

He cupped her breasts, thumbs stroking gently across the rosy peaks of her nipples, and she shivered.

“So very responsive,” he murmured approvingly.

His hands trailed down to her pants, plucking at the length of cloth serving as a makeshift belt. A quick tug released it, and the pants fluttered to the ground. Her instinctive reaction was

to cover herself, but she kept her hands at her sides, loving the rapt fascination on his face.

“You were beautiful in my dreams, but the reality is so much better.”

“Your turn,” she urged. “I want your reality as well.”

He didn't hesitate to remove his own pants, pushing them down thickly muscled thighs and leaving him gloriously naked. And very erect. And very *not* human.

Her assumptions had been correct—he was not built the same as a man. His cock was a long, thick shaft, but instead of a smooth column, sinuous bulges wrapped around each other in an intriguing pattern of hills and valleys. She traced one of the fascinating bulges from wide base to equally thick head and he shuddered, then put his hand over hers.

“You will make me lose control, and I wish to take my time.”

“I don't. The dreams were our foreplay—I'm ready for the real thing.” He looked so uncertain that she smiled up at him. “You can take all the time you want—next time.”

She gently squeezed the thick shaft and his restraint vanished. He tossed her onto the bed in one easy move, then came down on top of her, kissing her frantically as his hand moved down her body, lingering just long enough to pluck at an aching nipple before sliding easily between her legs.

His thumb brushed against her clit as he dipped lower, a thick finger probing at her entrance. He pushed inside, testing her

readiness. It was a tight fit—it had been a while—but it felt so good that her body already hovered on the edge of climax.

“I think you’re ready,” he agreed as his finger began driving slowly in and out of her while his thumb circled her clit.

Despite how wonderful it felt, she wanted more, and she arched her hips in silent invitation. He obliged, rising up on his knees between her legs, then lifting her hips so his cock notched against her entrance.

“My viragi,” he murmured, and thrust.

Oh my God. Her back arched so violently that she would have thrown him off if his hands hadn’t been so tight on her hips. Electricity swirled through her body in a raging current at the wonderful, overwhelming stretch. Even her fingertips tingled.

He paused for a fraction of a second, studying her face, and then he began to move. Not slowly or tentatively, but in a hard, demanding rhythm, pulling her back onto his cock over and over again as her body tensed, her arousal soaring to impossible heights. In this position she was completely exposed to him, but his eyes were intent on her face.

The familiar glow brightened his eyes, the color deeper and richer as his speed increased. She kept her gaze locked on him as the tidal wave of her orgasm climbed higher and higher. His hands suddenly tightened, holding her in place as his hips jerked, a rush of heat filling her as the wave crested and crashed down over her. The world sheeted white, his eyes the only thing she could see as the climax rolled on and on.

Her body was still quivering helplessly when he collapsed over her, whispering her name over and over as he pressed kisses to her face and neck until she recovered enough to smile up at him.

“Did it work?”

For a moment he actually looked confused, then he shrugged.

“Perhaps.” He kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Don’t you want to check?”

“Later.” The other corner. “This is more important right now.”

This time his mouth came down directly over hers, and her questions disappeared in the pleasure of his kiss.

Thirteen

They spent the night making love and exploring the reality of each other's bodies. By the time day approached, Kim was tired, sore, and completely happy.

They washed each other in the beautifully tiled shower, then curled together as they watched sunlight begin to fill the bedroom, washing the peak behind the house with a faint, pink glow. She couldn't stop smiling—it was a new day and he was still with her.

“Do you think it worked? Do you think you can leave here now?”

“I think perhaps it did,” he said slowly. “I am always conscious of the barrier, like a pressure against my mind. It feels... lighter now.”

“And if you can, what then?”

“We will have to leave this place. Without the barrier, there will be nothing to restrain the mists.”

“So back to the ship?”

The idea was not as unappealing if he were with her, but in the end, it was only exchanging one prison for another. *And it's beautiful here*, she thought with a pang as she sat up. Despite the obvious signs of decay, there was a grace to the airy rooms and lush gardens.

“What was this place?”

“A summer pavilion,” he said immediately, then a shadow flickered across his face. “Perhaps. I’m not entirely sure.”

It made sense, she decided, taking another look around. The large rooms with the tall ceilings and open sides, the wide porches, the terraces flowing down the hill. The Romans had created similar summer villas to escape the heat of the city... But where was the city?

“Why here, in such a deadly location?” she asked softly.

“It was not always so. The mists were only found along the banks of the river.” He frowned. “They have spread. And the inhabitants of the jungle have adapted.”

“But what about your people?”

“Gone.”

The single word echoed in the quiet room.

“Do you want to find them?”

“No. They condemned me, and however justified that judgment, I cannot forget that no one spoke in my defense.”

She didn’t press it. Maybe he would change his mind one day, but for now, she understood his feelings.

“Then I suppose we’d better go. It’s a long walk.”

They dressed quickly, and then he gave her some fruit to eat as he took a last look around. He paused the longest in the room on the other side of the central room, standing in front of a big table piled with a random assortment of papers.

“Is there anything you want to take with you?” she asked.

He rested his hand on one of the notebooks, then shook his head.

“No. This is all behind me now.”

“Shall we?” she asked, holding out her hand.

He took it, and together they walked across the courtyard and through the archway. A faint sound, like the tinkle of distant windchimes, was the only indication that they had passed the barrier. Once they were through the arch, he turned and looked back.

“Free.” A haunted look crossed his face. “Or is this just another dream?”

She squeezed his hand firmly.

“Not a dream.”

He nodded, but he kept a tight grip on her hand the entire way back to the ship. He moved with surprising ease through the jungle, his eyes darting around constantly, surveying their surroundings.

“It all seems so different,” he murmured at one point, his hand tightening over hers.

“You mean because it’s daylight now?”

“No,” he said hesitantly. “It feels as if it should be different—as if it were different once.” He shook his head, clearly frustrated. “My memories are so uncertain.”

“I’m sure they’ll come back.”

But even though she gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, she wasn’t entirely convinced. He said that he’d missed long periods of time, and it had been reflected in his prison. The odd mix of crumbling stone and freshly repaired walls. The layers of fresh dirt and new plants interspersed with ancient specimens in his gardens. Had those who condemned him even considered what isolation and guilt would do to him?

Her hand tightened again, with anger this time, but he glanced down at her and smiled.

“Do not concern yourself, my viragi. I remember you, and that is all that really matters.”

He’s right, she decided. How would it help to try and dig up memories of that wretched time?

He seemed to push it aside as well, although she still saw the occasional puzzled frown cross his face. The frown deepened when they finally reached the ship.

“This is not what I expected.”

“But you’ve already seen it.”

“Only from inside—and I was far more interested in the occupant.”

The warmth on his face filled her with happiness, even as he resumed his study of the ship.

“Interesting. It appears to be structurally intact.”

“Do you really think it’s salvageable?”

“Perhaps.” He smiled at her. “We will find a way.”

Fourteen

Even though it had been a long time since he'd worked with technology, Tiva found himself enjoying the challenge of repairing the ship over the next few days. The language on the control panel and on the datapad Kim showed him was not entirely familiar to him, but there were enough similarities that it didn't take him long to decipher it.

Fortunately, the vessel had been well-built and the only real damage appeared to be to the controls themselves. After studying the schematic on the datapad, he was eventually able to rewire them.

"I think we're ready for a trial flight," he told Kim.

She looked up eagerly from the datapad. With his help, she'd been trying to learn the written language.

"Does that mean we can actually leave this wretched jungle?"

"Yes."

"Where will we go?"

“To find a place that is safe for you, with no deadly mists or murder animals.”

“Or murder plants,” she added with a smile. “But as long as we’re together, I suppose the location doesn’t really matter.”

“I think I remember a place,” he said slowly. “An ocean planet with a warm sun and warm seas.”

“That sounds wonderful. Of course, I don’t have a bathing suit,” she added with a teasing smile.

His cock immediately reacted to the image of that lithe golden body emerging from crystalline seas.

“Even better,” he murmured, and tugged her into his arms for a kiss.

She responded as readily as always, and he was contemplating carrying her back to their bed, when a soft chime sounded from outside the ship.

Fuck. He should have known.

She gave him a startled look.

“What was that?”

“The Elders,” he said grimly. “Wait here.”

As soon as he walked down the landing ramp, the air shimmered and three males appeared. Long white hair streamed down over white robes, their faces stern and unreadable.

“You have escaped your confinement,” the first Elder said.

He had the oddest impulse to use one of Kim's gestures and roll his eyes at the old male for stating the obvious.

"Yes," he said instead.

"With the help of the female."

A spike of fear shot through the swirl of emotions that already filled him.

"She had nothing to do with it."

There was a long silence.

"Not intentionally," he finally added. "She came to me because I called to her."

"That does not change the fact that she did come, and that she freed you. She knew you were imprisoned, did you not, female?"

The last was addressed to Kim as she came to stand next to him, sliding her hand in his.

"I did," she said quietly. "I wanted him to be free."

"Then it seems appropriate that you share his punishment." Eyes faded with age studied her. "Or perhaps you should take his place."

"No!" he cried desperately, stepping in front of her. "She does not deserve to be punished. Punish me in whatever way and for however long you deem appropriate, but do not imprison her."

"If we accept her in your place, then you would be free," the Elder pointed out.

Gain his freedom at the cost of hers? Never.

“No. I have cost one female her life. I will not be responsible for taking another.”

“She would not be dead, only confined.”

“It is a living death.” He shuddered at the memory. “I will not allow you to condemn her to that.”

“What if she were to share your exile?” another one of the Elders asked. “The two of you could... support each other.”

For a horrible moment he was tempted, but no. A shared prison was still a prison.

“No,” he repeated. “Take me back if you must, but let her go free.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” she said fiercely.

“You must. This planet is too deadly for you. I will program the ship so it will take you to the ocean planet.”

He gave the Elders a defiant look even as she shook her head.

“Not without you. I love you, Tiva.”

Gratitude and despair filled him in equal measures.

“I love you too, Kim. That is why you must go free, so I know you will be safe and happy.”

“I won’t be happy without you.” She gave his hand a firm squeeze. “We stay together.”

“But—”

“Together,” she repeated, and turned to glare at the Elders. “Even if you are foolish enough not to see his worth, I won’t make the same mistake.”

As much as he admired her bravery, she had no idea of their powers. He quickly put a protective arm around her, tugging her back against his side.

There was another long silence as the Elders contemplated them, and then, to his astonishment, the leader smiled.

“Very well. We will not separate you.”

Fuck. As much as he wanted her with him, how could he allow her to remain?

“But—”

The Elder didn’t give him a chance to continue.

“You are both free to go.”

“Really?” Kim asked, a suspicious look on her face.

“Yes. Your only crime is a rather foolish love. And as for you, Tiva, although it’s taken a very long time, you’ve finally learned to put someone else’s welfare ahead of yours. Do not forget that lesson.”

He bowed his head at the admonishment. There was another chime, and when he looked back up, all three had disappeared.

“Is it really true?” she whispered. “Can we leave?”

“The Elders do not lie. I’m finally free.” He picked her up and whirled her around triumphantly as joy filled him. “And even more importantly, you love me.”

“Very much. Now put me down and let’s get the hell off this planet.”

He laughed and obeyed.

Kim held her breath as the ship rose into the air. The ship shuddered and she tensed, but then the flight smoothed out. Tiva flew across the jungle, testing the controls, while she looked down at their former prison. It looked so different from up here, lush and beautiful. Benign.

As they circled, something caught her eye—something no one other than a trained archaeologist would probably have noticed. The lines of the trees, the patterns of the vegetation... There had been a city here once—a city so lost to time that no trace of it had remained above ground.

The memory of the crumbling walls of his house popped into her mind, along with the ancient tree in the courtyard.

“Tiva,” she whispered. “How long were you trapped in the mists?”

“A very long time,” he said absently, banking to the right.

She looked down again at the ancient city swallowed by the jungle, and then the male at her side—real and vibrant and alive. Had she freed him from more than just a physical prison?

But then he looked over at her and smiled, holding out his hand.

“Ready for our next adventure, my viragi?”

“Yes,” she said, and took his hand.

However long that past had been, it was behind them now. The future waited.

Note to the Reader

Thank you so much for reading *Monster in the Mist*! I had a great time exploring the mysterious mists—and the equally mysterious hero—with our intrepid heroine. I hope you enjoyed them as well!

For those of you who don't know me, I write super sweet and super spicy science fiction romance—with a few monsters thrown in as well. I love writing about hot alien warriors and the human women they can't resist!

This story takes place in my *Alien Abduction* universe—if you'd like to know more about that universe, *Anna and the Alien* is a great place to start!

To learn more about all of my series, please visit my website at honeyphillips.com!

You can also receive a free story in my *Alien Invasion* universe by signing up for my newsletter [here](#)!

Thanks for reading!

Love, Honey

Orelia's Orc by Iona Strom

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



I AM A BLIGHT UPON THE LANDS WHICH I RULE.

A harbinger of darkness where I dwell within the shadows of my grief. Once a gift was wielded like a curse in a moment of great sorrow. My wrath, the architect of a pestilence that scorched all within its reach. Alone I wallow in an endless night, thriving on the magic laced within my labrys while begging for death to claim me.

Until her. With a single touch, she eases the agony of my shattered heart. Gives me hope where I thought none could exist. The light of her essence is a beacon that lures me from the gloom of my existence. One that will lead me through the darkness of my despair so I may live again.

And I shall claim her as *mine*!

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

MORAG

I am a scourge upon my world. A pestilence of endless sorrow that drains life from everything within my reach. A malignant force, forever destroying. The plague of the living, a harbinger of death and despair.

My presence is a turbulent cloud that looms darkly over all that is good, poisoning the very air with my toxic energy. I am the eye of the storm. The bringer of pain and agony, the architect of suffering and despair.

The land cries out in agony at my approach, as I leave nothing but destruction and devastation in my wake. My touch is a curse, a blight upon the very land itself.

Throughout all time, I will remain. Cursed with magic, I will never rest, never fade, and will haunt the shadows of an endless night.

Here I sit on a crumbling throne, my crown cast aside and forgotten, ruminating on the sorrow of my past. Reliving the day of her death over and over in my mind. Grief has hardened

me until my heart no longer beats, but I need no organ to pump my blood through icy veins. An enchanted moonstone adorning my labrys is what keeps me from death.

Though this world would be better served by my absence—would thrive if I no longer existed—my double axe is attached to my soul. I share in the magic that swirls around my weapon in the smoky mist that drives my immortality.

The magic can restore life as well as take it away. Yet, life no longer holds any meaning for me. I prefer to look upon a barren landscape. Even that is more than I deserve.

What was once a gift from the Lir, those magical nymphs who I had aided in a time of need, is now a curse. Had I been at my beloved's side, instead of rescuing a Lir mound from total annihilation, she would still be alive. It is my fault she no longer lives. I was not there when she needed me the most.

Shrouded in guilt, it is a heavy mantle I must bear. The weight of it, stifling. Not even death can free me from this vile existence.

Immortality is my bane. I cannot die no matter how hard I beg death to welcome me so I may join my beloved in her unkempt grave. An ossuary long overdue for tending. I chose the castle garden for her final resting place, but I cannot force my feet to venture there again. The pain of knowing she resides below the ground is too great.

So, here I sit, wallowing in my despair. A husk of the male I once was, perched on a throne inside a forsaken castle overlooking an abandoned kingdom—no longer revered. My

crown sits discarded, collecting dust beside my throne. A circle of frelament, the most precious metal in the North Kingdom, I once wore the symbol of my anointment with great pride. Not anymore.

Inside my great hall, I dwell. Haunting the shadows of bygone splendor. My only light is slices of eerie radiance streaming across the grimy stone floor at my feet. Forever night, I pass the endless dark with nothing but the glowing eye of my wrath peeking through the bank of narrow windows to keep me company.

Peering around, it is hard to believe this wide-open space was once host to so many jubilant gatherings. Such revelry had taken place within these walls. So many lavish feasts consumed at the long table now vacant and disheveled. All vague memories of a past turned to dust long ago.

How my beloved adored the festivities we hosted for the people living within my kingdom of the North. On this night, as I have every other night of late, I struggle to see her face clearly. The passage of time is my enemy, fading her loveliness from my memory. All that remains of her is a dwindling warmth that once filled my heart with joy.

I am to blame. No one else. Her soul fled her body before I could reach her. Not even the magic within my labrys could reanimate her soulless corpse.

My beloved is gone and with her, my light.



Orelia

I'm so screwed and not just because I'm about to blow chunks inside this escape pod from all the topsy-turvy spinning. I'm hurtling through outer-freaking-space with no clue where I'm headed.

Any other fate was better than becoming a sex toy to a giant slug. That was my reasoning when I managed to get free of my chains and bolted from the slug man's bedroom. I'd run willy-nilly through alien corridors on my abductor's spaceship until I found a long tunnel full of these weird black, bean-looking pods. I'd jumped inside the only one with an open hatch.

I only meant to use it as a temporary hiding spot, but as soon as I closed the hatch, straps locked me into the seat, the walls started blinking with a zillion tiny lights, and I was jettisoned into space.

The positive? I was no longer on the ship in danger of being found by the slug men who held me captive. Hah! Joke's on them. They'll never find me out here.

Eyes closed tight. Breathing erratically. I fight through nausea worthy of a five-star roller coaster until I feel the pod begin to slow its spin. Once it levels off, I cautiously open my eyes. Alarmed by what I see, I shrink into the seat, my fingers curling around the edges in a white-knuckle grip.

Giant planets whiz by as fast as signs on a highway. Except those orbs aren't directional signs but huge alien worlds. Talk

about feeling like a speck on a flea's backside. The pod that was hurtling me toward an unknown destination was a dust particle in comparison to what was passing by the hatch's window.

Was I even in the Milky Way, or had I been flown to another galaxy altogether?

There, in the distance, a bluish-green pinpoint appears in the center of the hatch's window. It grows larger until it appears as a planet. It's beautiful beyond words, but it's not Earth. The land masses are all wrong and the water is more green than blue. There's a black cloud with a bright center, like a monster's eye churning over a section of land, and I'm headed right for it.

"I need to land anywhere but there," I mumble. "I don't want to get caught in some alien shitstorm."

The closer I get to the planet, the faster I go, until I'm hurtling toward it at breakneck speed. I frantically look for any kind of controls to steer this thing away from the storm. There're no buttons, no levers, nothing to help me. Nothing that looks familiar. And why would it?

"This isn't a car, Orey," I chide myself.

I'm so screwed.

As if to confirm my fears, the pod begins to shake and rattle until my teeth are clacking together. The closer I get to the planet, the hotter the air inside the pod becomes. I'm going to

burn up in the atmosphere like a dropped marshmallow in a campfire.

And just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I confirm I'm headed for the bright center of the black, swirling storm. My heart races. The pod is coming in fast, and I know my landing is gonna be hard.

A fiery wind howls around the hull of the pod. The air inside is hot and getting hotter, like a tanning bed visit gone wrong. Sweat drips between my breasts. Moisture pools under my arms. I'm gonna burn to death plummeting to the surface of an alien world. Not an ideal way to die. As if I had a choice.

I'm not usually a crier, but this situation warrants tears. I give in to the hot press and let large salty drops spill down my cheeks.

As I brace for impact, my mind races through my past, trying to find some kind of closure before the end. I think of my family, my friends, my life on Earth. Regret fills my heart as I realize how much I had taken for granted.

When I'd woken up on the spaceship a few days ago and realized I was an abductee, I had never given up hope that I would one day find my way back to Earth.

I'm about to die and no one will ever know what happened to me.

Two

MORAG

The endless night flickers with light, as if a torch has been lit within the heavens. Fiery licks of warm illumination pattern the floor as it dances through wavy panes of dirty glass. Disinterested in what is happening beyond my own internal despair, I disregard the phenomenon and get back to my wallowing.

As the light grows brighter, the pattern on the floor shifts positions. Whatever is out there is moving through the sky.

With a reluctant turn of my head, I shift my focus from the dusty floor stretched out before me to the bank of narrow windows at my side. A twinge of curiosity prods me to push uncaring bones from my throne and lumber over to the rows of murky glass. I can see nothing but the blur of jagged images through glass coated with the filth of ages past.

I choose a window at random, finding the handle tight from disuse, but it is nothing against a strong wrenching. The window pops free of the frame with a long-suffering groan.

Eyes cast to the storm, I go still.

“What in the name of Yuro is this mischief?” I grumble, watching the fiery orb fall from the churning storm clouds at an alarming rate. I should not use the master of all creation’s name in vain, yet the strange object has me confounded.

Hour after hour of endless night had always remained the same ever since my beloved’s untimely demise. I was not in any kind of mood to welcome change.

Consumed by fire, the orb continued its harrowing plunge, aiming for the lifeless forest just outside the dilapidated village. Light cast by the hurtling object stretches and twists shadows across the land, creating haunting figures that seem to move on their own. It is as if the night itself has come alive, a wild and untamed creature.

Leafless branches pointed at the heavens appear as spindly fingers reaching for the flame-licked object as it draws closer. Once it falls beyond the tree line, I lose sight of it. A bright plume rises from the point of impact, taking out a row of trees in its wake. The old, dry woods ignite instantly in the smoldering aftermath.

I snarl and huff out an exasperated breath, knowing I must trudge down the mountain to investigate the thing that has fallen from the storm and has set the ancient forest ablaze.

I do not recall the last time I left the castle, but I do recall the last time I walked the path to the fall of stone steps cut into the craggy mountainside. It was the day I had found her broken

body laying at the base of the steep, stone steps where she had lost her footing and fallen to her death.

The day of my most epic failure. I should have been with her, to escort her down to the village below. Not off at the border between kingdoms where the Lir resided. Their burrows in danger, I had rushed to their aid, but only to my beloved's detriment.

With my labrys in hand, I leave the great hall to descend the grand staircase to the gallery below. My footsteps are marked by an alarming creak and bowing of rotted wood.

Faded paintings and tapestries of people and places from long ago adorn the cracking walls. Curls of peeled paint litter the wooden floor where time has stripped the room of its former grandeur. The once opulent furnishings and plush rugs are now worn, frayed, and faded from the unforgiving passage of time.

Dust coats every surface, yet despite the obvious neglect, the intricate details of the architecture and the carefully crafted pieces give a glimpse of the grandeur that once existed. Beautiful relics of the past, frozen in time and forgotten by all.

Overhead, a massive chandelier dangles, forever waiting for its candles to be lit. Cobwebs blanket the elegant fixture, sweeping in soft waves with the stirring of air.

I reach the great door and push one heavy wooden leaf aside. The hinges complain with a reverberating screech, a gruesome echo that bounces off the stone walls and high ceilings.

I take to the path. The pavers crumble beneath my booted feet, as do the steps as I reach the side of the mountain and begin my descent. The way down is just as steep as I remember.

I freeze as I reach the last step. The stain of her demise still mars the pavers at the base of the stairs. I tear my eyes away, steel my spine, and refuse to give in to the trembling of my bottom lip as I take a giant step over the site of her death.

As I approach the vacant village, the silence is deafening. The few buildings stand empty and in ruins, with some completely collapsed. The wind whistles through the cracks, and the sound of my footsteps echoes off the remaining walls. Guilt rides me hard, knowing I am the cause of this once thriving village becoming a barren wasteland.

I continue along the path, through the village and into the dense forest skirting around. My nose burns with the stench of smoldering wood. The crackle of small fires dotted through the dense tangle of tree branches blends with the crunches of dried leaf debris under my heavy booted steps.

Tendrils of smoke curl through the gnarled branches as though beckoning me forward. As I push my way through the skeletons of once majestic trees, the solitude and isolation of this place washes over me as it did the day of my beloved's demise.

My heartbreak had fueled the rippling wave of death detonated by my roar of anguish. A once jovial ruler, none had ever witnessed the anger and torment that had rolled out of me at the sight of her broken body.

As the magic from my labrys had swelled and brightened, all had run away. Taken flight to the kingdom of the East. The eruption of magic that had followed laid waste to everything it touched. I had destroyed all I had treasured at the sight of my lifeless beloved.

Not another living creature could be found for miles around. My only solace was the villagers had all escaped. At least their deaths were not on my hands.

The closer I get to the crash site, the more leery I become. Up ahead, a sleek black egg is not what I expected to find. There is no charring of the object even with spot fires burning at its base. No visible damage has been done to its shell even where it mowed down several large trees.

I move in for a closer look. The reflection of myself stares back as I reach out a cautious hand.

The shell pops open with a sharp hiss. I jump back and assume a fighting stance, holding my labrys up and ready to strike. When nothing moves from within, I take a cautious step forward. The interior seems barren until I reach the edge and look inside. My head tilts with a sense of wonder at what is revealed. More like *who*.

A female.

A very naked *otherworldly* female.

Where did she come from? How did she get here inside a giant egg? And where are her clothes? Does her kind not believe in covering their bodies?

She is a stranger to my world. I have never seen anything like her in my long life. Lovely in her repose, I stare unabashedly at her peculiar beauty. Flesh a honeyed brown, her complexion is as flawless as the golden cream that used to flow from the spring at the base of the golmore tree.

Thick lashes splay in twin crescents across high cheekbones. Unlike the Kulks of my world, her nose is small and pert. Odd but cute, it fits her delicate face. Her lips are full and inviting, and though, strangely, she lacks tusks, I'm not repelled. I am intrigued and fascinated.

My hands itch to test the texture of her rich, black mane of spiraling curls. They lay about her head and shoulders in captivating disarray. My people do not have manes like those of animals. It is as perplexing as the tuft of fur growing from the juncture of her slightly parted legs.

I lean in for a closer look and growl when I spy the petals of her sex hidden beneath the thatch of fur. My mouth waters of its own violation, and I immediately wonder at her taste. Would she be as sweet on my tongue as a Kulk female? If she granted me entrance to her most sacred treasure, I would gorge myself on her juices.

I shake myself and snarl. She is a stranger who sleeps. All I should feel is shame over ogling her naked body in her repose. Though she is lush and curvy in all the right places. Her hips are bountiful and fleshy, perfect for a male's hands to hold while rutting. The mounds of her breasts are a bounty to be

explored, each tipped with plump, ripe peaks perfect for suckling.

“Yuro’s cock!” I curse aloud. “What trickery is this?”

She is too beautiful to be real, yet her chest rises and falls with her breaths. Was she sent here to taunt me? If so, by who? The Lir? By Yuro himself? After all this time has the Master of all Creation decided to punish me for destroying what he created with this lush female who forever sleeps? Is she the embodiment of temptation? A delicious morsel kept just out of my reach.

What if I am wrong? What if she was hurt in the crash and needs my help? I worry that she still slumbers. Maybe I should try and wake her.

Before I can act on my impulse to give her shoulder a shake, bright golden eyes blink open. She peers up at me with a dazed expression from her place inside the egg.

Unused muscles trigger back to life, lifting the corners of my mouth into a wide grin. It feels strange, this stretch of my cheeks and lips.

Thick lashes sweep up and down in languid blinks as she gets her bearings. Then she squints, taking me in. As the fog clears from her pretty gaze, her expression turns from one of peace to wild-eyed terror.

Her pretty mouth drops into a frown, and she releases a shriek sure to rock the heavens.



Orelia

Shrek is fucking real!

And not the cute, animated version. And he's not green but a mottled grayish-white, as if he's made of stone. A real live orc is leaning over me. His bright, blue eyes glow as if lit by flashlights inside his skull. And he's wearing a sneering grin like he's sizing me up for his dinner table.

I didn't survive a crash landing in an escape pod to be a meal for a monster.

The straps no longer hold me in the seat. I shove myself up and lunge out of the escape pod, landing on my hands and knees. Everything around me is either scorched or on fire. I choose the least fiery path and push to my feet, scrambling across broken tree branches as I flee the monster.

I don't know where I am or how I survived, but I'm alive and I intend on staying that way. Getting away from the leering orc is my first order of business. Finding a place to hide is my second.

My breaths come out in harsh pants as I run headlong into a forest of lifeless trees. Like some place straight out of a horror movie, it's a fairytale gone wrong. I yelp and curse as the soles of my feet slap down on prickly forest debris. Dried leaves and

broken sticks poke and slash at my flesh, but I don't stop running.

Despite low-hanging branches slapping at my body, I race through the thicket, trying to put as much distance as I can between me and the monster orc. My heart is pounding in my chest as I dash through the thick undergrowth. I chance a glance back. The glowing weapon he holds in a meaty fist bobs and weaves through the tangle of branches.

He's coming for me.

I know I can't keep running forever. After my sprint through the spaceship and my terrifying fall to this world, I'm already feeling fatigue setting in. I was never the athletic type, and now I wish I had been, but I never figured on having to run for my life.

My legs are burning, my lungs are on fire, and my vision is starting to swim. But I force myself to keep pushing, focusing all my attention on staying ahead of the orc.

Suddenly, I burst out of the thicket and into a derelict village. If I can hide inside one of the dilapidated structures, maybe he'll pass me by.

Heavy footsteps sound out behind me. The orc is closing fast. I reach down and pull from energy reserves I never knew I had and push myself harder than ever before, racing for my life towards a grouping of huts. Just as the orc emerges from the thicket of gnarly trees, I slip into one of the abandoned huts and pray that I'll be safe. I bury myself in debris, trying not to make a sound as I listen to the monster prowling outside.

My heart races as I wait for what feels like an eternity. Sweat drips down my forehead and I barely breathe, hoping that the orc doesn't detect my presence.

Finally, the footsteps recede, and I'm left alone in the darkness. I take a full breath and let it out slowly. Then another and another until the dizziness subsides. I know I can't stay here forever; I need to get out of here before the orc comes back.

With shaky hands, I rummage through the debris and grab a broken piece of wood. I hold it tight, hopeful that it'll be enough to defend myself if I'm discovered. I relax a little, but my heart still pounds inside my ears.

As quietly as I can, I ease up on my knees and peek through a crack in the hut's wall. The village looks more than deserted. A settlement long forgotten. It's a veritable wasteland, but there's a faint impression of a path leading out and around the base of a craggy mountain range. It's risky, but I know he'll find me if I stay in here, and I need to find food and water. I must get as far away from the orc as possible.

I take a deep breath and, armed with my broken piece of wood, exit through the same hole I entered, and sprint as fast as I can toward the path. Overhead, the storm I saw from space rages in a tempest of swirling black clouds. It rolls and churns in billowing waves like an angry sea in the sky. I shudder, taking in its bright center. The intensity of its glow is like the eyes of the orc that's after me.

Through gritted teeth, I run on wounded feet through the village that looks like it's seen a war. Every hut has sustained damage. Some had lost their thatched roofs, while others had their walls and supports severely weakened by whatever had occurred here. Maybe the storm overhead was the cause of all the destruction.

As I break free of the village and make it to the path, I skid to a halt. I stare transfixed at the magnificence before me. Looming over the valley and nestled between two jagged mountain peaks, is a medieval castle. It's obscured by a milky fog just like what surrounded the orc's weapon. Dark and desolate, it looks to be hundreds of years old.

There are too many turrets and towers to count, all seem to be reaching for the death storm raging above. The jagged peak of the mountain behind provides an eerie backdrop for the ancient structure. I wonder who the builder of the foreboding fortress was. Is it the orc's home?

A gust of wind whips through the valley, shaking me from my musings, and I remember where I am. Naked and alone, on an alien world with a giant orc with mottled gray skin who looks to be made of stone, with the ruins of a village at my back and a creepy castle shoehorned on the top of a foggy mountain in the distance. And me with only a broken stick of wood for a weapon.

The crunch that sounds out behind me might as well be a gunshot ripping through the awful silence. Weapon up and held like a baseball bat, I spin around on my heel and suck in a

harsh breath, holding it as I search the darkness for any movement inside the village ruins.

I can feel the sweat starting to bead on my forehead despite the chill wind. My heart pounds in my chest, but there's nothing but the sound of my breathing and the wind howling against the abandoned buildings.

Then I hear it again. Another crunch. A chill that has nothing to do with the cold air swirling around my body, nails me in the ass and spurs me onward.

“Screw this,” I curse and run toward the path and steel myself for what lies ahead.

Three

MORAG

She thinks she can run and hide from me. I tilt back my head and sniff at the air. Her intoxicating scent is a trail that lingers, teasing me and beckoning me to follow. I stay my feet, keeping my distance so as not to frighten her further. At the edge of the forest, I watch as she follows the old path toward the river.

Even if she runs beyond my sight, I can follow the sweet scent she leaves upon the air or the bright red drops of her blood. I snort and pace, ashamed over the trail caused by her injuries that were because of me.

She would not have fled had I not been hovering above her when she woke. I should have stayed back away from her egg and made an introduction like the noble male I was raised to be. Instead, she had opened her eyes to a stranger. One ogling the splendor of her naked beauty like a lecher on the verge of ravishing her.

I scrub a heavy hand down my face. Was that not what was playing through my mind? She could probably read the shine

of lust gleaming from the intensity of my gaze as exactly that.

My mouth had even watered, lost in my fantasy of getting drunk on her nectar. Suckling the peaks of her perfect mounds until she writhed for my cock to fill her.

And I am doing it again! I growl at myself.

My mind fills with images of my mouth devouring her until she is ripe for the taking.

I snort with disgust.

I have been too long without a female. That must be the reason for my debaucherous thoughts. I do not even know her name.

In my defense, I was smiling at her. An expression of friendliness I figured to be universal. But how would I know? I have never met another being other than Kulks.

She is obviously terrified of me. Probably never having seen a Kulk before; I must look as strange to her as she does to me.

Now she is on the run, having left the hut where she was hiding. Naked and afraid, she follows the path leading to the river once used by the villagers. She will find no water there; it has long been dried up—since my anger exploded across the land. Nor will she find any game to hunt or any food to forage in the gardens or orchards. All is gone. She will find only death in the North Kingdom.

I have needed neither food nor drink to live. My body forever replenished by the magic of the moonstone adorning my labrys. I had thought to starve myself and join my beloved in

death. After weeks of denying myself sustenance, to my chagrin, I lived on.

I keep my strides short and unhurried as I follow at a far distance behind her. I might not need these necessities, but she does. If the wicked cold does not get her first, she will die without my help.

I must prove to her I will not harm her. Persuade her to return with me to the castle and out of the bitter cold. Convince her I am worthy of her trust.



Orelia

I can't stop shivering. My hands having gone numb, I lost my hold on my broken piece of wood, dropping my makeshift weapon somewhere along the path. The combination of cold and fear rattles my teeth, clothing me in gooseflesh. I hug myself, rubbing my arms with icy fingers, but the friction does nothing to stave off the cold.

On numb feet, I trudge ahead on a neglected path that feels endless. It winds through what could have once been a beautiful path lined with bountiful sweeps of weeping branches. I imagine the boughs of the trees filled with leaves on a perfect spring day.

Instead, it's as if a million whip-thin fingers are all reaching for me as I pass under them. Each lazily waves in the sharp chill of a soft breeze. I hug myself tighter, making myself as small as possible to avoid being touched by the flagging limbs.

I look up through the skeletal vegetation to the dark, churning clouds above. The brewing of a perpetual storm haunts the sky. A looming threat. No wonder everything looks dead. No sunlight for things to thrive and grow. Except for the orc.

I know the whole world isn't covered by black clouds because I've seen this planet from space. The rest of it was a brilliant blue-green. How far must I travel to get out from under this storm?

My mind races with thoughts of what else might be lurking in the shadows. I quickly scan the darkness but spot nothing. Is there more than one orc out here hiding? Another terrible beast watching my every step? Maybe there's an even worse creature about to pounce and devour me whole?

I try to silence the paranoid voice in my head, but no amount of rational thought can quiet the unease that grows within me. I know I'm not alone. The orc is out here somewhere, and I can't shake the feeling that something is watching me.

The crack of wood rips through the silence. My heart racing, I turn quickly, scanning the area for any signs of movement. For any signs of the orc. Nothing. Only the trees swaying silently in the frigid air. I turn back to the path and quicken my pace.

As I round a bend in the path, I pause at what I find.

A river, dried up long ago, winds through a garden with square tracts containing neat plantings of blackened vegetation. On the far side, I spy row after row of medium-sized trees. An orchard? All brittle and leafless, it's as if death suddenly cast a wide hand over all the land, killing everything at once.

There are no birds. No sounds of chirping insects. There's nothing anywhere. Just me and the orc.

I continue down the path, drawing closer to the garden. I pause to examine the blackened vegetation and notice the intricate patterns in the dried-up leaves. It's as if each plant had its own unique design etched into its surface.

Crouched low, I pinch the remains of what looks like a shriveled head of lettuce. It crumbles in my hand, reduced to dust at a mere touch. A soft breeze sweeps past, floating the fine powder around me in a swirl before dissipating it on the wind.

I stand and continue walking, swallowing hard, knowing I'll starve to death if I can't find my way out from under this cloud cover. I just have to keep going no matter how tired I'm starting to feel.

Past the orchard, and farther still I go, every muscle now trembles with cold. The only good thing about the frosty weather is I can no longer feel the tender spots worn on the soles of my feet. I'm surprised my teeth haven't chattered into dust. I try to swallow, but my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, my throat tightening from dehydration.

My sluggy captors hadn't taken very good care of me the short time I was chained to the wall on their spacecraft, but at least I had water and the occasional scrap of food tossed my way.

My throat had gone dry the second I was ejected into space. It's beyond parched now. Every icy inhale sucks the last drops of moisture from my nose and mouth. My muscles cramp as much from dehydration as from the cold.

I look longingly at the riverbed which parallels the path. It yields no cool, refreshing drink. Only a parched bottom of spiderwebbed cracks, dotted with smooth rocks where water once flowed.

I cross an arching bridge that takes me to the opposite side of the river and leads me away from the orchard. The landscape becomes wilder as I go. An unkempt forest compared to the neatly arranged grove of trees.

I pause at the tangled tree line, hating that I must venture inside another creepy forest. Shoring up what little courage I have left to scrounge, I step into the shadows. The air is thick with the scent of decaying leaves and damp soil. Twigs snap under my feet as I make my way through the matted branches. I keep my ears and eyes open for any signs the orc might be following.

As I move deeper into the forest, the trees become taller and closer together, the twisted canopy blocking out what little light filters out from the storm's bright central eye.

I walk for what feels like hours, the forest getting denser and darker with every step. Tears prick my eyes as all feels

hopeless. I might have crash landed on another world, but I couldn't feel more lost than I do right now. No matter how much longer and farther I walk it doesn't feel as if I've made any progress at all. It's an infinite forest of nothing but death.

Through the breaks in the gnarled branches, I glance up at the swirling black clouds with their bright central eye which seems to be following me. I'm no farther away from it than I was before I started. I want to scream my frustration, but the orc might hear and discover my location.

I'm tired and cold. And fucking thirsty. I just want to go home!

A spark of excitement builds as I spot something in the distance. Tears pool and threaten to spill, making the small break in the trees wavy. I swipe my eyes and blink at the structure mostly swallowed by the surrounding trees. Could it be?

Shelter!

My heart lifts at the thought of being out of this cold, where I can rest a little while before continuing this endless trek. I glance around, making sure I'm alone before I cautiously approach the small stone structure.

I stop outside the weathered wooden door, waiting and listening for any sounds from within. When I hear nothing but the rustling of branches in the constant breeze, I push open the door with trembling hands. The hinges groan in welcome.

Inside, the stone house is nothing more than one small room. The floor is strewn with leaves and other bits of forest debris which blew inside long ago. Stacked in one corner is a pile of bulging sacks.

Grain maybe?

My mouth waters and I try to tamp down my rising hope as I close the ancient door as quietly as possible and cross the room. I don't want to be too disappointed if there isn't anything edible in those sacks. Then I remind myself my situation could be worse.

I'm no longer chained up and waiting to make my debut as a sex slave to an alien that looked like a giant slug. And, most importantly, I'm alive. I just need to steer clear of the orc and find my way out from under the perpetual storm.

My fumbling fingers are numb from the cold. The ties holding the coarse material of one of the sacks are kicking my ass. I hold my fingertips to my mouth and breathe out warm air, then vigorously rub my hands together. The tips of my fingers start to tingle as the feeling returns.

I pluck at the stiff knots with trembling hands until the pads of my fingertips grow sore. Finally the first gives way, and then another and another until the flap falls open and some of the contents spill out. Little black, bean-shaped things bounce across the hard, dirty floor.

I reach inside and gather a few of the little beans in the palm of my hand. Poking at one, I pinch it between my fingers and squeeze. It's hard as a rock.

With a quick inhale of courage, I place it in my mouth and bite down. I feel the hard shell crack under my molars and then the bean crumbles into grainy sand.

It tastes like dirt, and it feels like dirt in my mouth. I spit and sputter out the mess, wishing more than ever for a drink of water. The beans might have been edible at one time, but that time has passed.

I finger the sack. I may not be able to eat what's inside, but maybe I can wear this. The material is as coarse as burlap, but it *is* fabric and fabric can be constructed into a garment.

I might be hungry and thirsty, but on the plus side, at least I won't be naked. Without further ado, I dump the first sack of dirt beans on the floor and then a second.

The door rattles on its hinges. I spin around and freeze, holding the empty bean sack against my chest like a shield. I wait and listen. Afraid to breathe. Afraid to move. Praying the orc hasn't found me.

Wind whistles outside, giving the door another rattle. I exhale, long and slow, relaxing my grip on the bean sack, and take a few deep breaths.

"It's just the wind, Orey," I whisper to myself. "Just the wind."

I grab the next sack off the pile. It's heavier than I anticipated, and I droop under the weight. Just as well, the heavier the better.

I drop the sack and push it up against the door. Not as good as a deadbolt lock, but it's better than nothing. I'll sleep better

with a barricade. If the orc happens by and tries to open the door, maybe he'll think it's locked and keep going.

I finish emptying the remaining sacks, unraveling one to use for thread. I have no needle, but the weave is large and course enough I can just poke the thread through for construction. Pretty soon, I have pants and a long-sleeved top.

“Yay me. I just designed scarecrow couture.” I purse my lips and pull at the seat of the baggy pants, hating the feel of the rough material chaffing my skin. Then shudder recalling the leering expression on the orc's face when I first came to.

“Anything's better than naked,” I mutter. “Now, for some shoes.”

I empty the remaining sacks of dirt beans, spread a few sacks out on the dirty floor against the wall farthest from the door, and take a seat.

I shake out one of the leftover sacks and decide how best to fashion footwear. I push my bloodied and battered foot inside, fold down the extra material and tie it around my calf with the coarse strings I unraveled and had left over from constructing my outfit. I make a matching one for my other foot.

Booties are the best I can do. I'm grateful for the coverage. I can already feel my poor toes tingling back to life.

Now for some rest. On my side, I stretch out on the mat of sacks, pillowing my head on my bent arm. I breathe out an exhausted sigh. The adrenaline high I'd been riding fades fast,

but my eyes refuse to close. They're glued to the door, terrified at any moment, the orc will bust inside and get me.

I force my eyes to close, listening to the chill wind that can no longer reach me as it swooshes around the stone walls. The ancient wood of the door keeps the wintery gusts at bay but rattles the hinges enough to keep me on my guard.

"It's just the wind, Orey," I repeat over and over again until the tenseness bleeds from my tired, overused muscles.

Maybe tomorrow, I'll reach the bluish-green part of the world I thought so lovely.

Four

MORAG

The female is inside the old grain house. Made of stone with a roof constructed of shakes from tuma trees, the hardest wood in all four kingdoms, and the same which roofed my castle. I was not surprised to see the house still standing and in good condition. The stone was quarried, cut, and laid by my kingdom's best masons.

Abandoned long before the loss of my beloved, the villagers had moved the grain fields to the opposite side of the orchard, leaving behind the house in favor of more fertile soil. A single, sturdy dwelling amongst many trees, the surrounding forest had slowly crept in, reclaiming the field.

The female has been in there a long time. I worry she has been bitten by the cold. The chilly wind does not bother me, but I watched her lush body shiver as she journeyed. I hope she is merely resting inside and not suffering from an illness.

And she bleeds. I have been following the trail her wounds have left behind for miles. What if she succumbed to her injuries?

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, growing more concerned for her well-being with every passing second. Fretfully, I wait from my spot hidden within the tangle of trees of the forest for her to resume her march west.

The longer I wait, the more my anxiety spikes. Right here I stand. I could help this female. Heal her with the magic infused within my labrys.

I should go in after her. Demand she returns with me to the castle where I will light fires in the many hearths to warm her chilled bones. I would bathe her in magic from head to foot to make sure all her wounds are mended.

But the image of her terrified eyes holds me back. I cannot frighten her further. She would not be wounded if it were not for me scaring her into running on bare feet through the forest.

I must be patient. She will come out on her own, and then I will approach her with caution, soften my voice, and convince her she has nothing to fear from me.

I stifle a grumble. I should let her go. Follow her and make sure she safely makes it to her destination. Nudat, the King of the West, will be leery of a newcomer, but because she is female, he will take her in. Feed her. Shelter her. Have his healer tend her wounds.

There is nothing but sacks of decades-old zimin inside the grain house. I hope she did not eat any of it. I would imagine the petrified grains might make her ill.

And the clear, refreshing water of the Drus River no longer flows, so there is nothing for her to drink. The river is as dry and desolate as the land.

As I am no longer mortal, food and water are no longer needed to nourish my body, but hers will wither away, and she'll die without sustenance.

Nudat has all the things she needs, and he has yet to take a wife. If he is as fascinated with the exotic female from the heavens as I am, he will want her for his own. I have no doubt. Her scent is intoxicating. Her body plump and curvy, built for a male's pleasure.

“Nah!” I snort and shift my feet angrily.

The female is *mine*!

None will wed her but I.

The voice screaming within me comes as a shock. I go stock-still.

I should be devoted to my beloved. My wife, long gone, whose face has faded with time. Yet, I cannot even bring myself to speak her name without great pain. I should not be entertaining this infatuation with another female, especially one who is not even Kulk.

But there was no fighting the enchantment she held over me.

If I am to help her, I must reach her before she leaves the North Kingdom. *My* kingdom. Once she crosses the border into the east, the lands she aims for, she will be lost to me.

I redouble my determination to wait. I will give her time to rest. When she emerges, I will insist upon helping her.



Orelia

I wake up to blurry vision and a pounding headache. Every bone in my body hurts. I blink hard and focus on the door, relieved it remains closed, and the sack of grain leaned up against the old wood is still exactly where I left it.

My muscles are sluggish and achy when I stretch out of the fetal position I curled into to try and keep warm while I slept.

I'm freezing, chilled to the bone, and I feel worse than I did before I stopped here to rest. The side I lay on is numb from the icy floor. The empty sacks I slept on not having done a damn thing to stave off the cold.

My body screams as I force myself to sit up. The pounding in my head worsens, and I'm tempted to lay back down. I push myself into a sitting position knowing I can't stay inside this icebox forever. I need to keep moving. Get beyond the weird storm covering this dead land and to the blue-green portion of the planet I saw from space.

I scoot on my bottom until my back rests against the wall and stretch my legs out in front of me. Everything aches and throbs like I have the flu. No nausea, just drained with full body

aches. Aside from my pulse-pounding headache, the pain in my feet comes in a close second for discomfort.

With great effort, I bend my knee, bringing my foot closer for inspection. I untie and tug off my burlap bootie and gasp. I do the same to the other. My feet are so swollen and discolored, they look like they belong to a bloated corpse.

I wiggle my toes. Movement triggers a zillion pinpricks to spark like my feet have fallen asleep. Is this why I don't feel well? Have the scrapes and scratches on the soles of my feet become infected while I slept?

Panic surges through me. I have no antibiotics. No medical supplies of any kind to clean the wounds. If the infection gets into my bloodstream, I could die of sepsis!

I push the thought aside and examine the damage more closely. The cuts and bruises covering the soles of my feet have worsened. I shake my head in frustration. I'd walked a long way in my bare feet, but I didn't expect them to get worse after I rested.

I take a deep breath and focus on the miles I have left ahead of me. I'll fold the empty grain sacks I slept on to provide more cushion for the bottoms of my booties. The added cushion will help protect me from additional damage.

With sluggish fingers, I add extra padding to the soles of my ruined feet, cover them back up with the burlap sacks, and tie them around my calves.

"All right, Orey," I pep talk myself. "Let's give it a go."

I heave myself up from the floor. My head spins and my body lists to the side. I try and catch myself on the wall, but it's no use, and I crash to the floor with a bone-jarring thud.

I roll to my back and stay down, afraid to get up. I close my eyes and take stock of my body. I move my arms and legs. Nothing feels broken. I run my hands over my ribcage. It doesn't hurt when I breathe, and the bones feel solid.

I'll just lay here a minute and ponder my next move.

My mouth is so dry, I can't even make myself swallow. I know I could shake this headache if I drank some water. I'm so dehydrated, but there's nothing to drink or eat.

Tears press behind my eyes, but I refuse to cry over the dried-up riverbed, or the lifeless orchard, or even the blackened gardens. I survived an alien abduction, which I thankfully don't remember. I'd gone to bed and woken to the nightmare of being chained to a wall in a slug man's bedroom.

I escaped that only to survive a fiery crash landing on an alien world. I even escaped being captured by a giant gray orc.

If I keep walking in a straight line, I'll reach the end of the storm. I just have to pick myself up and keep going.

"I can do this," I tell myself. "I'm not a quitter. I just need to lay here a minute."

I close my eyes and try to relax. Let the ache of my fall leach out of my body. Then I'll head out. Today, I will reach the end of the storm, find food and water. Then everything will be better.

Five

MORAG

The thud I hear from inside the old grain house is faint but there is no denying it is the sound of a body hitting a stone floor. I knew she could not survive under the noxious clouds churning overhead. She has fallen ill because of me. The magic gifted to me had turned venomous in my hands when I cursed my kingdom with my rage.

I must go in after her. No more waiting her out. She needs my help, and I will not stand by while another female dies. The fear in her eyes had wounded me, but this was about her well-being. My pride be damned.

My determined stride is wide and fast. In the time it takes me to blink, I am standing before the ancient wooden door to the abandoned grain house. I push down the handle, but the door does not open.

I shove my shoulder into the old wood only to hit something soft and heavy. Afraid her body is blocking the door, I cautiously push my way inside.

I see her lying in the center of the small space. A huge pile of zimin grain sits in one corner. To my astonishment, she has crafted a garment from the grain sacks. Even foot coverings. This brings me back to my original question about why she was naked inside the egg that brought her to Xuta.

I had first thought her people preferred to be naked but given how much trouble she had gone to to make the crude garments, I was mistaken.

I have so many questions, but my curiosity about her will have to wait. Her honeyed-brown flesh no longer glows with vitality. As I approach and crouch next to her, she remains still. Lifeless.

“No. Please no,” I mutter and focus on her chest. Her breathing is so shallow, it is barely discernable.

With a careful hand, I brush my fingers down the silky smoothness of her cheek. Despite how astoundingly soft I find her flesh, she is shockingly cold to the touch.

“Yuro have mercy,” I softly curse.

I stand over her prone form, my labrys clutched tightly in my hand, swirling with the magical mist of the Lir’s moonstone. The past barrels down on me to become the present. The female at my feet is not my beloved wife but an otherworldly stranger. Yet, there is something about her that calls to me.

I cannot—*Nah!* I will not allow her to die. This time is unlike the last. This female still holds breath within her lungs. She might be pale and lifeless, but her soul remains within.

She is not beyond saving.

My weapon trembles in my powerful hold. I have only ever called upon the Lir's magic once to save another and had failed. Anxious in the face of failure, I silently pray to Yuro for the strength to mend her fully.

All I have ever used this most precious gift for was destruction. My rage had even chased the Lir out of my kingdom. The nymphs had abandoned their sacred burrows where countless generations had dwelled for millennia. And all due to my wrath.

But now it shall serve as a medium for healing instead of ruination.

I close my eyes and focus, reaching deep within myself to the well of magic that connects me with my labrys. It echoes with power and potential, waiting to be unleashed. With a deep breath, I draw upon the Lir's gift, feeling its energy flow through me to my weapon like a river.

My eyes open to see the glow of the moonstone brighten, the mist swirling faster around the twin blades as it pulses with power. I push all that energy toward the injured female, willing it to heal her wounds. The magic glows with a soft light as it surrounds her, weaving through her body.

Time seems to stand still. Lost in the flow of magic, my head falls back on my shoulders to the gentle, soothing hum of energy that electrifies the air.

The glow fades as the magic recedes, and I look down at her body to find her flesh no longer holds the pallor of death. A soft mist haloes her body in a ghostly essence. She glows with vitality from within. Her honeyed-brown complexion restored to the creamy splendor of health. Her chest rises and falls in the deep, steady breaths of a healing slumber.

I release a sigh of relief, feeling the tension ease from my limbs. My weapon falls to my side, and I take a knee, feeling slightly drained.

As I continue to look upon her ethereal face, there is something else. An odd impression that we are somehow connected. The magic held within the Lir's moonstone infused us both while I healed her. Thin wisps of a residual tether still bind us, as if she now shares in the magic enchanting my labrys.

I secure my weapon to my back in the leather holster crossing my chest. In gentle arms, I gather her up and there is no denying how perfectly her bountiful curves fit against my body.

My cock thickens, but I ignore it. Now is not the time for carnal pleasures. I must get her out of the elements so she can rest.

With my cherished bundle, I run the distance back to the castle, planning what must be done once I arrive with my treasured guest. There are so many sleeping chambers to choose from, but I know the perfect one. It has a large,

canopied bed with many windows that overlook my kingdom, and a cozy fireplace to keep her warm.

There is a blanket of dust over everything, which must be cleaned away. Fresh linens will be needed for her bed. Pillows will need to be plumped. All these things I took for granted as king. Now I would give my fighting hand for a chambermaid. I know nothing of cleaning and the making of beds, but I will have to manage.

My labrys jostles against my back as I run. Perhaps the magic in the moonstone can do more than heal and restore people. I have only ever wielded the magic for good twice, once on my beloved and a second time on the female cradled in my arms. I shall try to restore the sleeping chamber to its original splendor.

Everything must be perfect when she wakes.



Orelia

The mattress I lay on is divine. My old pillowtop needed replacing but living paycheck to paycheck as a personal assistant to a CEO of an up-and-coming company, I had no extra money to purchase the one I wanted. Had I bought one of those memory foam pads I'd been eyeing to extend the life of my worn-out bed and just forgotten?

No matter. I snuggle deeper into the plush softness and sigh, content to lay here and enjoy the tranquility.

Flashes of nightmarish images won't let me rest. Slug men chaining me to a wall. Falling from outer space in a fiery descent. An orc with skin the color of concrete leering above me like he was deciding how best to eat me.

My eyes fly open to a tufted ceiling of rich burgundy. Golden light flickers off the sheen of the fine silken material. I smooth my hands down the bedding that covers me, finding it soft with a satiny slickness.

Where the hell am I?

Last thing I remember was laying low inside a small stone structure and making an outfit out of burlap sacks. I'd laid down to rest and woken up feeling worse than I had before I closed my eyes.

This pillowy softness is not the cold, hard floor of the stone house.

I peer around from where I lay on my back. Curtains the same burgundy silk as the tufted ceiling, fall around me from four corners. Thick woven braids of elegant golden ropes draw them open and hold them in place around thick posts of gleaming mahogany.

What I first thought was the ceiling is the canopy of a four-postered bed. It's a bed fit for a princess in a palace.

Or a castle.

Oh no! I must be inside the castle I saw tucked between two mountain peaks as I ran away from the orc. He must have found me inside the stone house and brought me back here while I was unconscious. I never recovered from my fall but had closed my eyes.

I recall being suffused in warmth. It had ribboned around me, filling me with a sense of well-being and comfort. I'd been relieved of my terrible headache. The numbing pain in my feet had lessened until it was completely gone, along with the aches plaguing my muscles.

A presence had been with me, though I never opened my eyes, I knew someone else was there. Someone that was male with a regal bearing. I wasn't afraid of the stranger. Only comforted by his presence.

Slowly, I sit up, taking in the room past the curtains. The walls are adorned with intricate tapestries and sparkling wall sconces. A fireplace blazes at one end, flanked by two overstuffed armchairs. A table sits off to one side with a shiny metal dome over a large plate, along with a pitcher and goblet I hope contains water.

The room reeks of opulence and wealth, confirming my initial fear that I'd been brought back to the castle by the orc.

I toss back the bedding and freeze. I'm wearing clothes I don't recognize. The crisp white fabric of the modest tunic that falls just above the knees, feels like fine linen. It looks to be impeccably stitched.

What happened to my scarecrow couture, and more importantly, who changed my clothes?

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand on feet that are no longer bloated from injury. My dizziness from earlier is gone, and I feel as good as new. My bare feet sink into a plush area rug covering the majority of the rich wood floor. I wriggle my toes into the soft fibers, taking a moment to enjoy the luxury underfoot.

I'm super curious about the dome and pitcher on the table but what's got my full attention is the door off to my right. The soft fibers of the elaborately designed, jewel-toned carpet cushion my steps as I beeline for the oversized wooden door.

I jiggle the handle and am not surprised to find it locked. I turn and face the room. It's gorgeous, but still a cage.

"Better than being chained to a wall," I mumble and head over to the table.

I lift the shiny dome off the plate and nearly cry. There's a bowl filled with a grainy mash. Steam rises off the food in curling wisps. Next to the bowl are two round objects. One is pale pink and the other is bright yellow.

I set aside the dome and check the pitcher. My heart leaps when I see it's filled with a colorless liquid. Wasting no time, I fill the goblet and sniff at what I just poured. It doesn't smell like anything.

I take a tentative sip and moan. Colorless and tasteless. I down the rest in greedy gulps, then panic as I realize how careless

that was. It could be tainted. Poisoned.

But then, why bother putting me in this extravagant room if he was only going to kill me?

Maybe it's not tainted with poison, but drugs. I should wait before I eat anything and see if the goblet of water I just slugged back will have any ill effects.

I replace the dome over the steaming bowl of food and choose one of the oversized chairs near the fire. The seat is heaven, and the upholstery is velvety beneath my fingertips, but I can't fully relax. I'm too tense over what I just haphazardly consumed.

I wait for what felt like an hour but was most likely only fifteen minutes. I don't feel any different. Not even the slightest bit drowsy.

"Ok, Orey," I mutter to myself and return to the table. "I think it's safe."

I lift the bowl and sniff encouraged when the steamy contents have a nutty aroma. Using the flat utensil next to the bowl, I scoop up a bite. It has the mealy texture of oatmeal and a slight flavor of cashews. Not my fave, but it's good. As hungry as I am, it could taste like cardboard, and I wouldn't care.

Table manners cast aside, I polish off the bowl standing up and choose the yellow sphere I think is fruit. Weird there's produce here when everything under the storm clouds is dead.

"Why didn't I think of that before?" I'm so stupid to assume I was saved by the orc. Maybe whoever lives beyond the storm

cloud found me and took me back with them. Had I reached the blue-green land while I was unconscious?

Yellow fruit in hand, I rush to the closest window and part the drapes. The scene before me is deflating.

Nope.

My shoulders slump as I take in the storm cloud with its glowing central eye raging above me. My eyes fall to the wasteland stretched out beyond the window. Off in the distance, the escape pod I crashed in still smolders. Tendrils of smoke lazily twirl and drift upward to join the chaos of the dark, churning clouds. Everything is blackened and lifeless for as far as my eyes can see, which still doesn't explain where the fruit came from.

I'm so high up, it's like being on the top floor of a skyscraper. The height is dizzying. The orc must have put me in the castle's tallest tower to make sure I couldn't escape out a window. I need to find a way out of here before the orc returns.

I set the fruit aside and begin to search the room for anything that could aid in my escape. The room is the most luxurious space I've ever seen in my life. The furnishings are ornate and expensive, but I can't be blinded by the wealth.

I start by pulling open every drawer of the tables placed around the room searching for a key or something to pick the lock on the door in the way of my freedom.

Then I swing open the ornately carved double doors of the armoire and gasp. Inside hangs an eye-popping array of dresses in every color imaginable. I tug the fabric of royal blue skirting. It's embellished with tiny beads of the same color in a floral pattern, and it looks like it was all done by hand. It's impeccably made.

So engrossed with my find, the clunking of the lock on the door registers too late. My heart pounds as I scan the room for a place to hide. The wardrobe is choked with dresses, leaving no room for me to squeeze inside, so I make a mad dash for the drapery of the closest window.

I step behind the curtain just as the door to my room opens. It's a pathetic hiding spot and had I not been enamored with the stupid dresses; I could have picked someplace better.

Six

MORAG

I step into the room and lock the door behind me, slipping the key into my pocket. The bed is empty and seemingly, so is the room. She is here within, someplace, hiding.

I grin, pleased she has eaten the bowl of yim and the pitcher and goblet have been moved from where I left them. The yosh fruit remains on the plate but the vort now sits on a table near the far window. I hoped she would have eaten all of what I left her. The yim is high in protein, but the fruits are full of vitamins and minerals.

Had I disturbed her meal?

I cross the room to where the wardrobe is left wide open. None of the dresses are missing. I sweep my hand over the selection of garments I collected from various rooms all over the palace, pleased the magic infused in my labrys worked to restore not only this room but the tattered material of the garments. Most had belonged to guests. Others were from female relatives who lived within the castle. All left behind by those who fled when my rage consumed the land.

However, none had been owned by my beloved wife. I could not bring myself to enter the room we once shared. I have not been inside since the morning of her passing. The door remains closed and locked. The room, the same as it was when she and I left it that fateful morning, hand in hand, to break our fast in the great hall.

I lean farther into the wardrobe, pressing my arm through the crush of dresses, but she is not hiding within, so I close the double doors and look around the room with a curious eye.

Where could she be hiding?

I adjust the strap crossing my chest that holds the labrys across my back and drop into a crouch at the foot of the bed. I bend to search. She is not there. From my squat position, I quickly scan the room. I nearly miss her little toes poking out from under the drapes covering the window on the far wall. I catch myself, swallowing my chuckle. She is adorable, this otherworldly female with the tiny honeyed-brown toes.

I pretend not to have found her and stand to stroll around the room. I palm the vort as I pass the table where she left it and approach where she hides within the folds of the heavy drapery. Standing an arm's length away, I wait, but she does not reveal herself.

Will she come out of hiding on her own?

My patience wears thin as I continue to stand before her hiding spot. I reach out and move the drapes aside and freeze. Her soft brown eyes still glow from the magic that healed her, so

like my own. I had not thought her body would still hold the magic.

Is she now connected to the Lir magic the same as me?

Her glowing gaze is wide with alarm as she raises it to my face. I hate that she fears me. Plush lips I long to kiss are parted to help her breathe through quick, erratic puffs.

My heart squeezes from her wild expression. I drop my eyes and humbly take a knee. I assume a submissive stance and hold the vort fruit up for her to take.

“You need not fear me, beautiful,” I say. “I will not harm you.”

Back pressed against the window, she inches around me, then makes a run for the locked door.

“So, I’m a prisoner?” She jiggles the handle and spears me with an accusing look.

I blink dumbly. “What are the words you speak?”

“Let me out,” she babbles again.

I tilt my head as if that will help me to understand her. Her back slams into the door as I rise and cross the room to the table where I left her food and place the vort on the platter. Fine tremors wrack her lush body as she watches my every move.

“Will you finish your meal?” I gesture to the food while speaking softly so as to not startle her further. “The fruits are good for you.”

Guilt floods me when she reaches behind herself and fiddles again with the door handle. She has committed no crime, yet what choice do I have but to keep her within this room and the safety of the castle until we can reach a level of trust? How will that be possible when we cannot even understand each other?

“It will take time and patience for you to grow accustomed to my presence,” I say. “I will remain here until you no longer fear me.”

I unsheathe my labrys and settle into one of two chairs flanking the fireplace, resting my weapon on the side of the chair. The hearth blazes with a warm fire. Dressed only in the tunic I exchanged for the zimin sacks, I worry she will catch a chill so soon after being ill.

“Come, sit by the fire.” I wave her over and point to the chair opposite me. “Come warm your bones, beautiful. No need to stand all the way over there. I will not harm you.”

Her honey-hued eyes dart to the chair and then back to me. She gives her head a little shake. The riot of springy curls flowing about her shoulders brushes her skin in a soft whisper. My fingers curl up tight, longing to touch her again.

As an honorable male, I did not disgrace myself by fondling an unconscious female. I had dressed her in the clean garment, diverting my eyes as often as possible while properly donning her clothes. When I placed her on the bed, I had smoothed her wild curls from her ethereal face.

The texture had been divine.

The female gasps and hugs the wall at her back, inching even farther away. I wonder at her actions until I catch the low growl rumbling up my throat.



Orelia

“Please don’t eat me,” I squeak when the orc’s eerie blue gaze glows brighter. A low, steady growl rolls out of him, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end.

I rattle the door handle again, but the orc locked it after he came inside, leaving me no place to run. Unless I want to leap out a window and plummet ninety stories to my death.

I shiver. My muscles tighten up all over. The glowing intensity of his predatory gaze shrinks my flesh to my bones. I’m not ready to take that plunge even though the big, gray beast is drooling.

“Nug id luyk, bala.” I jerk as if I’ve been shot when the orc speaks again. His words are soft, but still, it’s shocking to hear his thick baritone, and even more strange to watch his wide mouth form words with the pair of tusks jutting up from his lower jaw. It’s an unsettling sight.

He motions for me to sit in the chair across from him. I’m tempted. The fire is blazing, and I would love to feel the heat of it on my skin. He seems amicable enough once I get past

the intense glow of his stare, but I'm not ready to get that close to him yet.

“Yis vort and yosh, bala.” He points to the table with the food and nods. “Ble grut dit newt.”

He wants me to eat the alien fruit. Now I'm leery of it. The water and the nutty oatmeal have had no ill effects on me, so the fruit should be safe to eat too. But now I'm afraid all over again that he's up to no good. I don't know his intentions, and with this language barrier, I can't simply ask.

The orc casually leans back in the cushy armchair. His gaze leaves mine to peer into the roaring fire before he shifts and stretches fur-trimmed booted feet out before him. Scratching his belly, he rests his head against the back of the chair and closes his eyes.

Now that the orc has taken a load off and looks to be taking a siesta, I have a chance to study him. He's massive, with huge, rolling muscles and abs for days. Crisscrossing his bare chest, he wears a wide leather strap that normally holds the huge axe now leaning on the side of the chair, to his back.

He's built like a linebacker with wide shoulders. Tattered, leather skirting like a kilt hides his groin, while an intricately carved metal buckle in the shape of a creepy skull keeps the thick belt clasped around his tight waist. Stretched over all that strength is mottled stone-gray skin. Even his bald head looks like it's made of stone.

His odd skin tone isn't his most unusual feature. Aside from his tusks, what's more disarming are his pointed ears. They

stick out from the sides of his head and taper to a sharp point. Sometimes they twitch as if he's flicking away a sound he doesn't want to hear.

Despite his fierce expression, I wouldn't call him ugly. Now that he's no longer staring at me like a meal ready to be eaten, I find there's something primal and captivating about his rugged appearance, with his chiseled jaw and high cheekbones.

His face and body bear many scars. Each I'm sure carries a story, a battle he's fought and survived. Bisecting his right eyelid runs a thick scar, lending a crude charm to his ferocious character.

Something is alluring about his rough edges and raw masculinity, something that captivates me despite my better judgment. It's as if he's a wild animal that I can't help but be fascinated with, even though I know he could hurt me if he wanted to.

But he hasn't. He somehow healed me and brought me here. Why heal me only to hurt me? It makes no sense.

I want to believe his intentions are good under that gruff exterior, but until I know for sure, I can't let my guard down. I need to stay wary. He could turn on me yet.

After a while, his chest continues to rise and fall in the steady rhythm of sleep. The big guy has fallen asleep. My eyes flicker to the weapon propped up against the side of his chair, then quickly scan his ratty kilt for a key to the door.

I'd heard metal scrape against metal when he entered and there's an odd cut out below the handle for a key. The orc has it on him. But where? I don't see any pockets, and it isn't like I'm gonna march over there and pat him down. Maybe if I get closer, I'll see it.

I creep over on shaky legs. The closer I get, the more my bravado wanes, until I'm on all fours crawling across the plush carpet. My hands and knees sink into the nap a couple of inches, and I have to admit, for a beastly orc, he sure has a nice house.

I'm mere inches away from him now. So close, I can see the varying shades of gray that make up his skin tone. He doesn't look like stone anymore this close up. I lift my hand, itching to touch what appears more like ultrafine velvet.

Have I lost my mind?

I catch myself with my fingertips a fraction of an inch away from his muscled forearm. I need to be finding the key and getting out of here, not copping a feel of the giant orc dude who, need I remind myself, followed and found me inside that old stone house.

Yet, had he not found me when he had, I would, most likely, be dead, I inwardly argue.

Rescuer or not, he cannot be trusted. Locking someone inside a room is an untrustworthy action. I keep that little nugget of reasoning at the forefront and stay low, scanning his body for something that looks like a key.

I fast-crawl to the opposite side of his chair, past his size sixteen boots. Geez! This guy is enormous. Luck is on my side, and he doesn't even so much as flinch. I'm not taking any chances and hunker down to wait to make sure my movements haven't alerted him to my creeping around.

When the orc remains still, I raise up on my knees and check his other side.

No key.

Crap! Now what?

My eyes land on the softly glowing weapon. It's a huge two-headed axe. The thing must weigh a ton. After studying it, I discover it isn't the weapon that glows, but the oblong-shaped stone embedded between the two wicked blades. I gulp, wondering how many lives this thing has taken.

A wispy mist pulses and flows from the stone in smokey waves. The waves thin to tendrils that ribbon around the weapon and touch the orc's arm, linking them together.

A thin tendril peels off from the rest and floats toward me to wrap around my wrist. I wave my hand through the air, dispersing the mist. That only serves to scatter the mist into a larger plume that envelopes my arm. It's like a living thing laying claim to me.

I don't know what to make of it. The warmth in my limb is reminiscent of the floaty dreams I had at the stone house. It was like being submerged in a warm bath. All my aches and pains washed away. But that's insane.

How can blue smoke from a stone heal someone?

The answer? It can't.

It's the heat from the fireplace at my side that's warming my skin, I silently chide myself. Yet there is no denying the orc had somehow healed me.

I glance up at the orc's sleeping face before wrapping both hands around the handle of his weapon. The plume covering my arm gathers into a thread and spirals around both my wrists. I don't plan to kill the orc, but if I have a weapon, I can demand to be set free.

I pull the weapon's handle toward me, but before I can steal the double axe, I'm struck by a fast clip of images. It's like my life just flashed before my eyes, except the scenes from the past aren't mine. They are his!

Most of what I see are battles and victories. A kingdom shielded from enemies. The village alive and bustling with other orcs—whole families. The castle gleaming and majestic from up high.

Tiny nymph-like fairies in need of help. A powerful gift given in gratitude.

A crown clangs to the ground. An effort failed. Then darkness. A crushing loss. The face of a female orc. Her eyes are closed, and under her head is a pool of blue blood. A heart fractured. A love lost. Anguish and despair become a wave of fury that scorches the land like a nuclear blast.

Then I see me. I'm looking down at myself inside the escape pod. I'm filled with amazement and concern, then shame. Then a wave of great joy washes over me as the fine, glowing mist surrounds and heals my injured body.

I shake myself out of the strange trance. Tears fall unchecked down my cheeks. The pain of loss still wracks my body, but now a bit duller from the passage of time. There's also a relief so great, it stutters my heart, but these aren't my feelings.

They're his.

Seven

MORAG

Alarmed to see her holding my labrys, I snatch it from her hands. Tears stream down her cheeks in rivers. I set the weapon aside, slip off the chair, and start checking her for injuries.

“Where are you hurt?” I see nothing, only tendrils of the Lir’s magic clinging to her hands.

I see no wounds on her anywhere. Has the magic hurt her within, and I cannot see?

“I’m so sorry,” she sputters incoherent words in a foreign tongue.

“Where are you hurt, beautiful?” I tilt her chin up and turn her face this way and that. “I see no visible wounds. Are you hurting from within?”

“I saw your past.” The female reaches up and cups her hand along my jaw. Her thumb smooths across my cheek. I lean into her unexpected caress. “I felt your heartbreak as if it were my own.”

Her words make no sense, but her actions are undeniably heartfelt. She is apologizing for trying to take my weapon. I had wanted to wait her out. See what she would do if I feigned sleep and made myself vulnerable.

I am struck with a wave of guilt for underestimating her. She has a warrior's heart. The instincts to protect herself are strong. Never did it occur to me she would make a grab for my weapon. And never did I think simply touching it would cause her such distress.

"I meant you no harm," I say apologetically and lift her free hand, turning it over to inspect the palm. No marks mar the smooth surface. "It was just a test to see what you would do. I need you to trust me. To be comfortable in my presence. I cannot risk you running away again."

"She was the love of your life, and you lost her," she says in her weird tongue.

"You are safe herein, beautiful," I say, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks. "Naught will harm you inside these walls. I will not allow it."

Her warm honeyed eyes search my face. It is clear by her perplexed expression; she cannot understand me any more than I can her.

"I don't know what you said." She shakes her head at me.

Her springy mane brushes her shoulders. I give in to temptation, lifting a hank to rub between my fingers. It is softer than any pelt on Xuto.

I lean in to test the softness against my cheek. Her scent overwhelms my senses. She is an aphrodisiac. A sweet temptation. A morsel to be savored.

She gasps when I bury my hand in her mane, gently tug her head back, and drop my face to her throat. Inhaling her exotic perfume, she shivers under my touch but does not push me away. Encouraged, I pull her closer, nuzzling her delicate flesh. Her lush breasts press against my chest. Her scent sharpens and deepens.

Did I imagine her tiny moan?

When I ease away, the peaks of her bountiful mounds have pebbled, and I ache to suckle what strains against the fabric of her tunic.

“I, um,” the female looks upon me with hooded eyes. “Was that some sort of orc greeting? Maybe we should exchange names first. I’m Orelia.”

I reluctantly lean away, but keep my hand tangled in her soft mane. The texture is like nothing I have ever felt. Now that she is awake and could protest my touch, she has not. I find I am not ready to relinquish her.

“I’m Orelia,” she says and pats her chest, looking at me expectantly. “Orrealyah.”

“Orreeela,” I roll what I suspect is her name off my tongue.

“Almost.” She grins. “Orr-real-yah.”

“Orrrealyahh.” I say her name long and slow. Drawing it out in verbal caress.

“Yes.” Her grin falters and her eyes slide closed when I smooth my fingers over her scalp. “That feels amazing.”

She allows me to massage her scalp for a time then seems to catch herself, and gently tugs my hand from her hair. “What’s your name?”

“I am Morag,” I touch my chest.

“More-ogg?”

“Yes.” I nod.



Orelia

“Now that we’ve officially met, any chance you’ll let me out of here?” I point to the locked door and say more simply, “Orelia out?”

Morag tilts his head at me. A gesture I should not find adorable, but his fierce expression has softened. His eyes remain intense, yet there’s sadness lurking within the blue depths I had not noticed before. A vulnerability just beneath his brutal exterior. Yet, I must remember, he is no less dangerous.

I don’t completely understand all that the weapon revealed to me. Like what were the little fairy creatures? Was the gift they gave him magical and that’s what healed me? I’m not one to

believe in magic and fairytales, but when I'd held his axe, it had shown me glimpses of his past.

I can't unsee the female orc broken at his feet. I can't unfeel the shattering of his heart or the anguish that had exploded from him. Whether I want to believe in magic or not, what I had seen and felt was real.

Through fresh eyes, I can now see beneath his brutal exterior. He is not the monster I first thought him to be. There is so much more to him than that. A complexity and depth I wasn't expecting.

I stand from where we sit on the carpet and walk to the door. I give the handle a purposeful jiggle. "I don't like being locked up."

Morag is slow to stand. His expression is unreadable as he slowly approaches. I still my imagination as it runs wild with what his plans are for me. My gaze flickers to the bed and I gulp, worried he took notice of my spontaneous reaction to his touches. I should not feel desire for this alien orc.

Though I'm grateful to him for saving my life, gratitude doesn't make a person horny. Could it be the food and water were laced with an aphrodisiac? But why bother? He could easily overpower me and take what he wants.

My body flushes with heat. My gaze flicks again to the bed. An image of me sprawled under his hulking frame while his hips curl in tight is so vivid, my core warms and throbs with a forbidden ache.

Alarmed at the direction of my thoughts, I rub at my temples to chase away the mental porn. It isn't like me to have such intense carnal cravings. I've never been one of those oversexed girls who is always on the lookout for their next cock. I mean, I don't even have a boyfriend, and on the rare occasions when I have, sex isn't first on my priority list.

My thighs are still damp from where I melted under the orc's strength. When he tilted back my head and nuzzled my throat, I easily submitted. He could have molested me and there would have been nothing I could have done to prevent it. My screams would have gone unheard.

I should have been terrified when his beefy hand had tangled in my hair, but my heart had simply sped up and not entirely from fright. I had wanted him to touch me. I should have been trembling with fear when he dropped his face to my throat and inhaled my scent, but I trembled for a very different reason. My girly bits tingle from the recent memories.

Would I have let him strip me naked, welcomed him between my legs, and let him fuck me on the plush carpet? My head says no, but my pussy was singing a different tune. This orc was flipping all kinds of switches on my libido, and all I could think about was what hung between his thighs.

As Morag comes to stand before me, my eyes land between the valley of huge pectorals before slowly rising to his face. I'd been pressed against that mountain of a chest and liked it way too much. Had just stopped myself short of rubbing my nipples against all that muscle.

My deep inhale was spontaneous. His scent, earthy and feral, was doing funny things to my insides. The longer I stood in the shadow of his immense presence, the more I craved him. Craved the dark desire building and coiling with anticipation of a mysterious pleasure.

When he'd held me by the hair and pulled me to him, it should have triggered me to fight his advances, not encouraged me to get closer. The power he radiated was heady and the growing bulge under his tattered kilt piqued my curiosity with a pooling wetness.

"Huk lec veet," Morag says and points to one of the many windows. "Sida yuk?"

I return the intensity of his stare. He waits for an answer, but I don't have a damn clue of the question.

"I don't know, Morag." I shrug. "I don't know what you're asking."

His glowing gaze searches my face before he releases a long but patient sigh. My eyes follow him as he crosses to a window. He pushes the curtains apart and points to the ground below with a stern shake of his head. "Orelia nef."

"Nef." I side-eye him. "Why does that sound so much like no?"

"Orelia nef." Morag crosses his arms over his wide chest. "Nef gute."

I join him at the window and look out at where he points. "No, I'm not planning on jumping."

“Orelia nef grish lut monnu.”

“I won’t jump, big guy.” I point to the door. “I just want the door unlocked. I’m not into captivity.”

His eyes follow the point of my finger, and he grunts, standing firm on whatever point he’s trying to make.

Never having used my feminine wiles on a man, I decide this is a great time to give a little female persuasion a try. Maybe I can seduce him into giving me what I want.

I duck my head and coyly peer up at him from under my lashes the way I’ve seen girls do in movies. “Please unlock the door for Orelia.” I feel stupid talking in the third person, but just short of a game of charades, we can’t communicate.

Morag’s eyes narrow on me suspiciously.

I chuckle at his astute expression. “So orc females play the same games with orc males, huh? Power of the pussy.” I swallow my nerves and step in close enough to feel the heat radiating off his powerful frame and trail a finger along his collarbone. “I shouldn’t be encouraging you, but I really want that door unlocked. I want my freedom.” And I crave something else. I keep that little aching tidbit to myself.

Morag proves to be easy prey. His stance softens. His gaze hoods and I know I’ve got him.

“I just want a tour of your big castle,” I coo and brush light fingertips over his scarred cheek. “Surely, I’m a guest and not a prisoner. You did heal me with the glowing rock in your giant axe, right?”

Morag snuffles. His head drops and his hands start to lift as if he's about to reach for me, but I take a casual step out of his reach and turn toward the door. Keeping my eyes cast over one shoulder, I reach back and capture his hand in mine, tugging him along behind me.

His gaze is so laser-focused on the exaggerated sway of my hips that he doesn't even realize where I've led him. Once we reach the door, he keeps coming until my back is pressed against the wood and my front pressed against his muscled body.

"Hudf gre luq, Orelia." Morag squeezes my hips in possessive hands, and I moan with need.

Instead of fear, a white-hot lick of lust shoots through me. I squeeze my thighs together as a rush of wetness pools in my core. I played my hand too well, and now he wants more. I can't get caught up in my own seduction. The name of the game is to get him to unlock the door.

Then why is my body screaming for more?

I'm no longer completely terrified of him after witnessing his past. I know he isn't evil. His love I felt for the orc female was immeasurable. But he's still an alien orc. A monster with tusks and pointed ears. Yet a feral craving threads through me. A forbidden need for more of his demanding touches.

"We can play house later." I plant my palms on his pecs but my intentions of nudging him away turn into a grope. "Before I give you anything, you're gonna open the door and let me out."

Would I run like I originally intended? I doubt it since my traitorous body just undulated against his erection hardening and thickening down his thigh. It kicked between us, hitting my leg with a solid thump.

“Geez, Morag, you’re hung like a horse.” My remark was meant as a jest, but my body sang it as a praise.

What would it feel like to have the orc’s enormous cock inside me? Would I arch under his thrusting hips, loving the feel of his massive dick, or would his girth stretch and hurt me?

The last question sobered me up enough to shake me from my rabbit hole of illicit thoughts. I can’t let this go on. I need to regain control of the seduction I started. If I can get him to unlock the door, I won’t run, because where would I go? But I need to make him understand that I’m not his prisoner.

My mouth goes dry when I feel his hand slip under the hem of my tunic and skate up the inside of my thigh. My legs tremble with as much uncertainty as greedy need.

His fingers dip to the apex of my thighs and brush lightly over my pussy. I shudder. My belly coils up tight with a yearning for more. My hand slaps over his but not to stop him like I should. An unnatural curiosity takes over and I widen my stance. Filled with a dark lust, I ache for the orc’s touch.

With my feet wide apart, I open myself up for him. An unspoken permission, welcoming his large hand to wedge between my thighs. A single, thick finger glides through my sodden folds. My mind spins with uncertainty. A voice of reason, telling me I shouldn’t allow a strange monster such

liberties, muted from the pounding of my heart. My pussy throbs and aches for something it shouldn't.

But there's no one here to judge me. No one here to label me as a slut for letting an orc fondle my pussy.

Morag pulls his hand away. Disappointment is *not* what I should feel, it should be relief that he didn't go any further. Entranced, I watch as he holds his finger, wet with my juices, to his nose and sniffs. My face floods with mortification. Then he licks his finger clean with a groan and I freeze.

"You're a dirty orc," I accuse in a voice too husky to be my own.

"Orelia, gur lef drik." Morag rips my tunic in half before I can blink, drops to his knees before me, and leans in so close to my crotch, I feel the heat of his breath wash over my fevered flesh.

He sniffs at my pussy. I slap a hand over my eyes, completely horrified that he's all up in my business. I look down my body to where he smooths his fingers over my tight curls.

"Fret yelt luj," he rumbles and peers up at me in awe.

I watch with hooded eyes as his thick finger plays over my folds. I lick my lips with a sigh of pleasure. Then both his thumbs massage over my labia before spreading my sex wide. He simply stares with a mixture of puzzlement and reverence at my pink center.

"I don't think this is a good idea." My face reddens with embarrassment when he takes great pulls of the air like he's

smelling me.

Before I can utter another protest, Morag's tongue unfurls and my eyes widen over the length. His dark gray tongue laps at my spread pussy. The scene I stare down at in disbelief is lascivious.

Instead of insisting he stop, I strain against his tight hold to get closer. I need more, but I shouldn't.

My concerns die with the spearing of his tongue. Driven up on my tiptoes, I bend my knees and thrust my hips toward him. Every doubt and reasonable thought shatters on the width and reach of his probing tongue.

His fingers dig into my hips, pinning me to his slurping mouth. I cry out as he expertly works me with his tongue, his tusks bumping against me in just the right way. He explores every inch of me with a hunger that matches mine. I moan in pleasure as he draws out every sensation, leaving me breathless and desperate for more.

My hands drop to his smooth, bald head. Instead of pushing him away, I hold tightly to him, afraid he'll stop when I'm so close.

"So close," I groan.

His hands reach up and find my breasts, toying with my nipples, rolling them under his palms and between his thumbs and forefingers until I'm grinding on his face.

He eats at me, licking and sucking like I'm the last ice cream cone on the hottest day of summer. Dazed with a dangerous

lust, my plan to seduce him into unlocking the door has failed miserably. At the moment, I don't care. What he makes me feel is animalistic, primal, and completely exhilarating.

He nips at my skin, leaving small marks that will surely bruise, but I don't care. I want more. I need more. I grind against him, feeling his excitement growing in response. His spicy scent fills my nose, and I can't get enough of it. It's musky, primal, and intoxicating.

As I'm about to reach my peak, he pulls away, leaving me aching and gasping for air. He spears me with a look that's pure animalistic desire, and I know we're far from finished.

I'm trembling all over when he lifts and carries me to the bed. He carefully places me near the edge and unbuckles his belt. His worn kilt falls away, revealing a monstrous cock thick with veins. The bulbous head reaches mid-thigh, and it's a darker shade of gray than his girthy shaft.

With greedy hands, he grasps my hips and brings my pelvis up to meet his erect member which kicks up, jutting out like a living thing in anticipation of the fucking.

I breathe through the trembling ache of my flesh and the anticipation of the unknown. Morag doesn't plunge inside like I expected him to. He drags the fat head of himself through my folds, bumping my clit with every languid pass. By the time he's done lubing himself with my juices, I'm all but begging for his cock.

He nudges my entrance only to slip off and try again. My pussy strains under the pressure and I start to worry he'll rip

me in two. I'm so slick with need, his head pops inside.

“Oh fuck! Yes.” I roll my hips in time with his easy thrusts.

As hard as stone, he quickens his pace, curling his hips tight until his heavy sack slaps against my ass. Buried to the hilt, he seems to lose himself and thrusts into me harder and deeper.

I can hardly move but I don't care. I arch in his hold, loving the feel of him filling me, fucking me like a wild beast. The heat in my pussy builds, teetering me on the knife edge of release. I let go and tumble over the edge, my body exploding into a million pinpoints of light.

Eight

MORAG

Orelia's strange but beautiful furred sheath squeezes my cock. Her silken tunnel, tight and generously slick with her juices, greedily milks me of every drop of seed. My sack cinches up tight to my body, painful in the most pleasurable way as I empty into her.

Her foreign tang still coats my tongue. A flavor to relish. A taste I will never tire of.

Her body relaxes from its dramatic arch. Her face, pinched with her release, now creasing into a blissful smile.

“How is it you are even more beautiful now?” I return her peaceful grin.

I had never thought to feel anything but emptiness and rage after the death of my beloved, but this being from the heavens—my Orelia—makes me feel...*alive*. Nearly happy. Almost content.

None can ever take the place of my truest love. My beloved, my wife, had been my light, the reason I drew breath. That

fateful day, I had died along with her. Ever since, I have haunted this manse a shell of the male I once was.

Until Orelia.

This otherworldly female fell from the heavens and breathed new life into my lifeless existence. Gave me another reason to want to live. She may not be my beloved, but in her own right, she is a treasure beyond compare.

Has Yuro, the creator of all things, gifted me a new beginning? Am I even deserving of such a thing? Deserving of *her*? This beautiful otherworldly being.

Still joined in the most sacred of embraces, I tilt back my back and pull hard at the air thick with our coupling. The spice of it is rich and sultry. I take another breath and another, reveling in the feel of air filling my lungs.

Once shattered from the loss of my beloved, I bask in the beat of my heart behind my sternum. My Orelia has swept the cobwebs of my mortality away on the torrent of our passion. Breathed new life into the ghost of my being.

I sway in my boots, shocked that I had not removed them before claiming my female, but one taste of her sweet nectar had gone to my head. Drunk on her essence, all thoughts were cast aside except licking up every drop of her desire.

“That was amazing,” my Orelia purrs in her weird tongue. “I hope you don’t think I’m normally that easy, but we’ll blame it on you. M’kay?” Her laugh is huskily satiated. “I mean, how could I resist after the tongue-lashing you gave me?”

I nod at her questioning tone and tilt my head, hoping to make some sense of her garbled words. She wiggles below me, and I reluctantly release her thighs, easing my spent cock free of her fragrant slit.

I long to be inside her again. My cock already stiffening in anticipation of another mating. My Orelia may not be ready again so soon. She will need time to rest. She is so much smaller than a Kulk female, more delicate. Fragile. Yet she had sheathed me so sweetly. So tightly. Had taken every inch of my girth and moaned her pleasure.

Orelia scoots back on the bed but not too far, not as if she wishes to escape me. Then she pats the spot next to her for me to sit. Her reverent smile basking me in a warmth I thought never to feel again.

I shake away my illicit thoughts, cover my growing erection with my worn kilt, and sit on the bed next to my female.

“A gentlemale should remove his boots before claiming his female.” I drop my head, peering up at her with apologetic eyes. “Your lusty scent ignited my desire. The taste of you addled my brain. My thoughts were consumed with a hunger to possess you.”

Orelia gazes at me in her perplexed way then prattles in her soft, pleasing voice. “I don’t have a clue what you just said, but if you were telling me that was the best sex you’ve ever had, then I wholeheartedly agree.”

“Even if I do not know your words,” I cup her face in my hands, “I could listen to the song of your voice for centuries

and never tire of it.”

She wrinkles her nose at me in the cutest way and sighs. “We need to figure out how to talk to each other. Maybe you can teach me orcanese or whatever you call your language. I’m a fast learner.”

As I stare down into her lovely, upturned face, I wish with all my heart for the chance to make amends with the Lir. Not just to atone for using their sacred gift as a weapon of destruction, but selfishly to learn the foreign tongue of my female.

Orelia pats my hands and scoots off her side of the bed. “For now, I need a ladies’ room.” She crosses her legs and does a funny dance. “You know, a bathroom?”

I watch her a moment and her meaning is slow to dawn. I have not had to use the facilities in a long while. Not since I broke my fast with my beloved on the day of her unforeseen demise.

I show Orelia to the washroom adjoining this room and thank the Lir for the magic of the moonstone. Her pleased gasp and bright expression fill me with pride. She is pleased with the rooms I have selected and restored for her.

I don my kilt and belt while she does her business, sheath my labrys in the cross strap I swing across my body, and step to the wardrobe.

I flip through the selection of gowns I found in the many empty guest rooms, stopping to remove a heavily beaded, deep blue frock I think she will like. As she emerges from the

washroom, I hold the gown to my chest and splay the skirting out with my hand.

“Oh! That is lovely.” She purses the pillows of her lush lips and whistles low. “Is that for me?”

I hand her the gown as she approaches then lean into the wardrobe to find the small slippers left behind by a child which I think will fit her tiny feet. She accepts those as well and I tend the fire while I wait for her to dress.

“Morag.” I turn to the sound of my name and freeze with the fire poker in hand. “What do you think?” Orelia turns this way and that in the deep blue frock for me to see.

“My eyes have never seen such beauty.” I knew the color would complement her honeyed-brown complexion. “You are a vision beyond this world.”

“Thanks,” she says. “Your body language says you like what you see.” She twirls again, then stops in a swoosh of skirting, bending to lift something from the rug. “Um, so I’m guessing this is the key.”

My hand instinctively touches the pocket it had fallen from in my haste to mate my female.

“Orelia out?” Her gaze is a mixture of expectation and longing.

“Of course, beautiful.” I cross the room to where she stands. “You are not my prisoner. After what we shared, I do not believe you will run away from me again.” I take the key from

her hand and unlock the door. “This will be our first step toward trust between the two of us.”

I open the door and bow with a sweep of my arm for her to exit before me. Orelia steps to the threshold in a restrained rush. She takes a hesitant step into the hall, and I cringe. Awash in shame as I recall my manse is filthy from years of neglect.

Dust layers the furnishings lining the hall like a thin blanket. The fixtures overhead, sway with thin veils of cobwebs. It paints an eerie picture: a reminder of the toll time can take when left unchecked.

I deserve the humiliation washing over me. It is a small atonement for the destruction my anger caused. I must make amends with the Lir. Show the nymphs I am worthy of the gift they bestowed upon me.

I must discover how to use the moonstone to permanently revive the land to its former splendor. The life I restored to the fruit trees to feed my Orelia had begun to fade as soon as I walked away. I must learn how to wield this magic for the good it was intended.

Orelia lifts her skirt so not to dirty the hem. In wide-eyed wonder, she meanders down the length of the hall, opening every door to peer inside each room before moving on to the next and the next.

“This place is like a fairytale castle from the ancient past,” she whispers back to me. Her gaze round with fascination and wonder. “Do you live here all by yourself?”

“I do not know what you ask, but I am undeserving of your awe-filled expression,” I say. “My castle is as neglected as my kingdom. The light of your smile you so generously bestow upon me is lifting me from my grief. I shall endeavor to be worthy of your praise.”

Orelia smiles at me and pauses before the ornate floor-to-ceiling mirror at the end of the long hall.

“Is this hand carved?” She runs her hand over the wood frame, carved in the image of twisted juy vines and the crush of trumpet flowers. “I love flowers. I’ll bet these are amazing in real life.”

Orelia leans in close to the mirror. “What the hell?” she breathes out and swipes the layer of filth away obscuring her reflection. “Why are my eyes glowing?”

She wheels around to face me. I need no translation for her question, yet I have no explanation.

“The Lir’s magic must live within you the way it does me since I used it to heal you.” I point to my eyes and back toward my labrys strapped to my back. “That is why I worried you would run from me. I am not sure what will happen if you travel too far away from the source of the magic. Until I can find and speak with the Lir, you must remain close.”

“Leer?” she shrugs her lovely shoulders and shakes her head. “What is that?”

“Lir are magical nymphs who live within sacred burrows on the edge of my kingdom. Or used to. I do not know where they

dwelt now. I ran them from their homes when my anguish scorched the land.”

“Leer small?” Orelia approaches me and points to my labrys, measuring with her hands. “They gave you this weapon for helping them, didn’t they? Leer gave Morag weapon?” She measures with her hands again and points to my labrys.

“How do you know of the Lir?” I eye her inquisitively. “Did the magic in my labrys show you something of my past?”

“Leer Morag weapon?” Orelia keeps repeating.

“Yes.” I nod in amazement. What did she learn from holding my weapon? “The Lir gifted me the moonstone for coming to their aid. A gift I regretfully abused.”

She does not speak again, merely searches my face for the meaning of my words the same as I do hers. Her radiant smile turns watery with sympathy as if she knows everything from my past. I stand before her, vulnerable, stripped of my defenses, as if she can see straight through me.

Time stands still as we continue to stare at each other. Then she steps forward and takes my hand in hers. The warmth of comfort and acceptance washes over me in a wave of relief. I sag with the weight of her forgiveness.

“I know what happened after you lost your wife,” her words are spoken softly. “I felt your loss as if it were my own, and I don’t blame you for losing your shit. I’ve never been married, but I know about losing a loved one. My mom died in a car

crash when I was nine. It took me a long time to come to terms with her loss.”

I merely blink at her, absorbing the gentleness of her tone and the kindness of her smile.

“Come on.” She tugs at my hand. “We have a lot of rooms left to explore.”

Hand in hand, we continue down the hall, down the winding steps, and explore the floors below. Before I realize where she has led me, we step into the castle’s garden. A once magnificent courtyard of a lush garden now frozen in the moment of my destruction.

The vort and yosh fruit trees I restored have withered from lack of water. The magic I used to revive them faded quickly.



Orelia

I hold tight to Morag’s hand, afraid to let go after what I saw in the mirror. My eyes glow the same as his. Is that the reason I feel a strange connection to him? Are we bound by the wispy tendrils of a magical stone given to him by the small beings he calls Leer?

Morag leisurely strolls alongside me, allowing me to tour his castle. The place is enormous. It will take days to see all the various rooms and climb the endless stairs up all the turrets.

My legs are tired, and the adrenaline of my initial curiosity is spent for the day. Our tour ends inside a courtyard. Surrounded by the castle walls, it's an enormous rectangular affair of blackened vegetation except for two medium-sized trees and a low, bushy shrub with little round nuts. The bright fruits shriveling on the weeping branches, I recognize as what Morag had left for me on the food platter.

Had he used the glowing magic to bring the trees and shrubs back to life to feed me?

I point at his weapon and then at the trees. "Did you do that?"

Morag's eyes follow my gestures. He nods and makes his way along a debris littered path to the trees. I follow, wondering what he's about to do.

I step out of the way as he unsheathes the double axe from his back. The stone embedded in the center begins to glow brighter. Then he aims the blades toward the trees, sending wispy tendrils to ribbon around the dying foliage. Before my eyes, the leaves uncurl, the branches perk back to life from where they withered, and the fruit plumps on the stems.

A mixture of wonder and concern fills me. My eyes are glowing because of that stone. Will the magic fade from me the same as it had the trees? Will my wounds return? I gulp, apprehensive, with so many unanswered questions. The only person who I can ask doesn't speak the same language as me.

Will I die if Morag doesn't replenish the magic that illuminates my eyes?

There is so much I'm unsure of, but what can I do except live one moment at a time until Morag and I can figure out how to communicate and my questions can be answered.

Morag plucks a bright yellow fruit and hands it to me. The same fruit he tried to give me before.

"Vort," he says.

This time I take what he offers. "It's called vort?"

He nods. "Vort."

"My first orc word. Vort. It's a start, right?" I point to his weapon. "What else can that thing do?"

Morag begins to meander along the neglected path. I follow, a silent companion until we come upon a large headstone with odd writing scrolled across the face.

"Is that her grave?" I look up at him, knowing he can't understand me. The swell of unshed tears and deep frown creasing his face is all the answer I need.

To the side, I notice a garden of tall flowers. Their petals burnt and crumbling.

"Can you bring these back to life?" I move to the plants and point. "Morag," I gently gain his attention. "Can you use the Lir magic on the flowers?"

His eyes lift to meet mine. His pain a tangible thing that crushes my heart. Morag comes to my side and touches the glowing wisps pulsing from the stone to the plants. As if by a

divine hand, the blackened stalks and petals are restored to their former glory.

“So pretty,” I say and kneel before the bed of flowers.

They’re like long-stemmed roses with no thorns. Leaves only grow at the base of the stalk, and the head of petals grow tightly together in layers to form a compact, rounded shape. Blue at the base, the petals erupt in a saturation of purple out to the scalloped ends.

Morag cast me a perplexed eye as I pick the most perfect ones to form a nice bouquet and stand. I return to kneel before the female orc’s grave. “For your lost love.” I place the bouquet at the base of her headstone.

Morag crouches next to me. His face fell into a heart-wrenching sadness. I touch his hand and his eyes swing to meet mine. His expression brightens to one of thanks. With lips that tremble, he gives me a stiff nod.

Before I think twice, I reach up to cup his neck and bring his head down for a chaste kiss. Funny, I hadn’t thought about it until now, but after all we did in that bedroom upstairs, we hadn’t once kissed. Going by his flummoxed expression, this was new to him.

“It’s called a kiss,” I say.

“Kiss?” Morag touches his lips and then mine.

“Yes,” I nod. “That’s right. Your first human word.”

A soft breeze kicks up and rustles the through the mostly dead courtyard. Soft light spills out around us, brightening the

gloomy atmosphere. I look up at the sky in surprise.

The dark churning clouds have started to thin, and the angry glow of the eye centering the chaos no longer looms with a predatory gaze.

“You know what I think, Morag?” I drop my gaze back to his. “After what the glowing mist around your weapon showed me about your past, I think that storm is somehow connected to your emotions. Just like this feeling I have in my gut that we are both connected to that stone the Leer gave you.”



Morag

“Thank you,” I utter. “My beloved would have adored the flowers. Her name...” My voice thins before growing stronger. “Her name was Truga.”

“True-gah?” Orelia tilts her head in question.

I gesture to the grave in answer.

“That was her name?” She asks gently. “True-gah?”

My nod is solemn. I have not said her name in so long, it is painful to speak it now.

“When my mom died suddenly, it was a while before I found closure.” Orelia surprises me by gathering my hand in hers and squeezing it in a way that comforts and soothes me. “I know you can’t understand me, but I’m here for you. I don’t think you’ve allowed yourself to properly grieve your loss. Whatever that glowing stone is embedded in your double axe,

it's feeding off your anger and pain. I think if you find closure, then your world will be restored.

"You're consumed by your grief." I know not her words, but her tone speaks of understanding and acceptance. "You need to let it out. Let it go so you can find happiness again."

"I channeled the Lir's gift for a noble and selfless purpose, to save your life. It is a small step towards redemption, towards making things right between my kingdom and the magical creatures who once dwelled here. But it is a step nonetheless," I pronounce. "Perhaps one day, I can let go of my guilt, turn loose of my grief, and restore my kingdom to its lost splendor. With you at my side, I believe anything is possible."

Orelia gives me hope where I thought none existed.

She is my light in the darkness that guides me through my despair.

Note to the Reader

Iona Strom writes for readers who love hot and endearing romances featuring exotic alien males who fall hard for their human mates.

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Alliance with the Alien Pirate by
Ivy Knox

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



A HAUNTED HOUSE ROMANCE IN SPACE

Erin is in a serious rut. She spends her days scraping meat scraps off a kitchen fryer on Station N87, and her nights holed up in the apartment just above the restaurant. She tries to stay positive, but space is a dangerous place for humans, and she wants nothing more than to buy a house where she can plant a little garden and live a safe, quiet life.

Khatazo is a surly former gladiator-turned-pirate who's convinced that no one can be trusted, and the universe is an endless pit of despair. During their last job, a member of his crew was critically injured, and in order to get his crewmate the medical attention he needs, they need credits, and fast.

Both chasing their individual goals, Erin and Khatazo volunteer to participate in a research study wherein their physical and mental responses are monitored as they make

their way through a facility called The Cursed Compound. The compound is made up of several rooms, where monsters of all shapes and sizes lurk in dark corners, waiting to strike. There's also a mysterious red fog that gets unleashed sporadically, sending the participants into a state of insatiable lust.

Alliances between participants are allowed, and there's a big pile of credits for each of them at the finish line, as long as they survive. However, not only are they different species, but also polar opposites in the way they view the world. Can they work together to make it out of the compound alive? Or will the red fog keep them clawing at each other for the rest of time?

Content Warnings: *This book contains scenes that reference kidnapping, psychological and physical torture, racism, sexism, parental death, drug use, drug addiction and overdose, as well as graphic violence which may be triggering for some.*

Individual Editing by: Tina's Editing Services, Mel Braxton Edits, & Owl Eyes Proofs & Edits

One

ERIN

Everyone on the shuttle to Huva II is staring at me, and I wonder if it's because I'm the only human on board, or if it's because I reek. Working as a fry cook at Station N87's only restaurant keeps a roof over my head, but it also means the smell of meat and oil clings to my hair and emanates from my every pore, no matter how many times I shower.

Oh well. I might be hanging out like a hair on a biscuit, but I don't have time to stress over it. I need to focus on what lies ahead, and that's the research study I signed up for. All I need to do is make it through the entire compound in order to be eligible for the two-hundred-thousand credit payout that will be more than enough to quit my job and buy a house on the neighboring planet, Yeronix. Humans are welcome there, which is a rarity in space.

My watch buzzes, and a photo of Gr'va, my roommate, pops up on the screen.

"It's only been four hours since I left, Gr'va," I say with a smile. "You miss me that much already?"

Her feathered brow furrows, and she blinks several times before she speaks. “Not at all,” she says. “I will be eating the slice of *bunti piz* cake you left in the chiller.” She lifts the cake into the frame to show me, then takes a large bite, the gray frosting sticking to the corners of her mouth. “That is what you wanted me to do, yes? Tell you before I eat your food?”

“Pretty sure I wanted you to *ask* first,” I gently correct her, “but it’s fine. I won’t be back for a few days, at least, so it would’ve gone bad anyway. Enjoy.”

“A few days?” she scoffs with her mouth full. “It is unlikely you will survive. I have already moved your mattress into my room since you will not be coming back.”

Gr’va has worked at the same restaurant as me for several decades, and she couldn’t keep a roommate for more than a month until I came along. I suspect it’s because she has the manners of a wild boar. I have no idea if it’s a cultural thing among the lavender-scaled beings from her home planet, or if that’s just her personality. Most of the time, I appreciate her blunt honesty. But today, what I need is encouragement.

“I know what everyone says about Huva II, but I promise you, I’ve got this,” I reassure her. “It’s just a big, haunted house, and I love those. Before I was taken from Earth, I’d spend the weekends in autumn hitting every haunted house and hayride I could find. It’ll be easy.”

“It will not be easy,” she insists, her mouth forming a grim line beneath her black beak. “Huva II is a chaotic cesspool of a planet where Empress Motavvi and her kin have tortured

entire species for the sake of their research. The prize she offers at the end of this Cursed Compound study will not be worth it, and you might not even live to collect it.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Spend the rest of my life working at The Meat Pocket, barely scraping by on the few credits we earn each month?” I ask her. “I want a home and a little scrap of land where I can plant a garden. Besides, the station isn’t a safe place for humans, Gr’va, and I’m tired of hiding in our apartment whenever I’m not working. I go to bed each night thankful I survived another day, and I’m tired of it. I just want a safe, quiet life, where I can thrive.”

Gr’va laughs, throwing her head back as little cake crumbs spray out of her mouth and across the screen. “You think Empress Motavvi is the key to your eternal happiness? I care not what the advertisement said. With the empress, there is always more to what she offers. A trick of some kind.”

I understand her pessimism. Like me, she was kidnapped from her home planet and has struggled to survive ever since. Space is an unforgiving, violent place, but we’re both still here. While Gr’va credits her general distrust of everyone around her as the secret to survival, I can’t live like that. Each day my heart still beats is an opportunity to improve my situation, and this research study is the best chance I have to create the life I want. There’s no turning back. I need to see this through.

“I’m not stupid,” I tell her. “I’ll be careful, okay? And if I make it to the end, it’ll be worth it.”

Gr'va sighs. "Well, I shall pray to the moons that you do not get your innards ripped through your eye sockets by a heavily medicated and twisted creature of Empress Motavvi's creation."

That's as close to *a good luck* as I've ever heard from her. My eyes sting with unshed tears at her genuine well-wishes. "Thank you," I say, trying to swallow my emotions. I open my mouth to tell her I'll miss her, but before I can, she disconnects the call.

It's just as well. I don't like goodbyes anyway.

The rest of the ride is smooth and quiet, allowing me to snooze on and off before landing an hour early on Huva II, which I take as a good omen. Early bird gets the worm and all that.

Huva II's port is abuzz with beings of all species when I deplane, but I keep my eyes on the signs featuring the Cursed Compound's logo—a distorted white castle with an ominous red glow around it—and follow the accompanying arrows through the narrow, cobblestone streets. Eventually, I end up at the back of a very long line that reminds me of the zigzagging lines I'd see at airports back on Earth, though I suppose it also resembles a group of cattle being herded into a slaughterhouse. I blink a few times to refocus my brain on the airport image, since it's less ominous.

The study is open to all species, sizes, genders, and ages, and the line in front of me very much reflects that diversity. I don't recognize the majority of species represented in this queue, but I do notice that I'm the only human here. That's... not ideal.

Due to our fragile skin and short lifespans, humans are often the butt of the joke in space, but if we were too weak to participate in this study, surely they wouldn't allow us to enter. Yet my application was approved, so Empress Motavvi must want more information on the physical, emotional, and mental limitations of the human body.

After a few failed attempts to engage others in line with small talk in the universal language used by the five planets within the Crinda Galaxy, I decide quiet reflection is the best way to ride out the rest of the wait.

The line moves quickly, and from my view of the entrance, I see that they're letting five people in at a time. Dark-wood double doors creak loudly before each group enters, and I watch closely as they disappear behind the doors and the high, white, concrete-like walls that must be fifty stories tall.

What awaits me behind those walls is sure to frighten the bejesus out of me, and my stomach flips with excitement. I love the thrill of being scared. That rush of adrenaline and not knowing what kind of creature will pop out next is so deliciously fun.

When I finally make it inside, I'm ushered through a series of narrow hallways with sky-blue walls and white marble floors. Then I'm called into a sterile beige room with metal tools lined up neatly atop steel tables, where a trio of two-foot-tall aliens with black scales and silver jumpsuits begin taking samples of my blood and skin as they attach circular discs to

the back of my head, under both ears, on my chest, lower back, and on the outside of both knees.

A moment later, a statuesque creature with orange skin as smooth as glass and Gorgon-like brown hair that looks alive strolls in with a beeping tablet in her hands. She wears the same silver jumpsuit as the others but has the vibe of someone in charge. She looks me up and down—the ends of her hair stretching and wiggling toward the ceiling the whole time—then back to her tablet and nods. “I am Doctor S’Ko. You are now cleared to participate in our study.”

Doctor S’Ko leads me out of the room and points to the open auditorium at the end of the hall. “Wait in there. We shall begin shortly.”

The doc didn’t lie. Within minutes, she steps onto the stage and a hush falls over the crowd. “Welcome all,” she says with her three-fingered hands outstretched. “Soon you will enter the Cursed Compound, a revolutionary interactive experience that allows us to monitor your biometrics consistent with your respective species as you go from room to room and encounter monsters from all over the universe.

“There are recording devices throughout the compound that will show us what you are doing, and the monitors we placed on your bodies will show us what you are experiencing emotionally and physically while you are inside.”

Exhilaration pumps through my blood as she continues to describe the compound. What kinds of monsters will I get to see? Will they be like the standard werewolves, vampires, and

creepy crawlies from Earth? Or will they be totally different, like the spindly, goo-covered, three-headed *xorkabeasts* from Gr'va's planet that eat hair?

“Within the compound, there are five different tracks, allowing us to have five of you begin at the same time. These tracks are similar in design,” she explains, “but the empress and I are constantly making improvements and adding new obstacles, so even if you have previously completed a track, you won't be able to predict what lurks behind each door.”

She gestures to the screen behind her, and a short list of rules is projected onto it. There are no communication devices or outside weapons allowed, and food and med stations are set up throughout each track to ensure basic needs are met. Once you enter a new room, the door to the previous room locks behind you, so you can't go backward, and you're not even allowed to quit the track. It's finish or die, basically. The most interesting rule, by far, is the last one, which says we're not allowed to leave the compound with pets or trophies found on the track, and I wonder how many times someone has attempted to smuggle a monster out of this haunted house to take them home.

“There is no time limit to complete your track,” Doctor S'Ko says. She clasps her hands in front of her and a slight smile tugs at her lips. “You will encounter other participants on your journey through the compound, and you are allowed to work together, should you choose to do so. There are passageways that allow you to enter another participant's track in the event you would like to form an alliance. This will not disqualify

you from earning your credits. The only thing required of you is to reach the finish line.”

We can form alliances? That’s a game changer. If I can find someone to partner with, this experience will be a lot easier.

Doctor S’Ko instructs us to follow her out of the auditorium and into the little courtyard area between the high barrier walls and a row of five black doors that look like they lead to a dungeon. Goose bumps race across my skin as I get closer to the front of the line, and the sound of my beating heart rings loudly in my ears, making me bounce on the balls of my feet.

When my name is called, I jog the short distance to the starting line, my fists clenching as I wait for my door to open.

This is it. My future lies beyond that door. No matter what I have to face on this track, I’m going to survive so I can claim my credits and finally get the fresh start I’ve been dreaming of since the day I was taken.

I can do this. I’m *going* to do this.

Two

KHATAZO

“I cannot believe I am doing this,” I say with a wary sigh as I trudge through the iron door and enter the track. It is not my first time participating in a research study for Empress Motavvi, but I hope it is my last.

Alas, the life of a pirate is not a stable one, and jobs in the Crinda Galaxy have waned in recent days. The credits I earn at the end of this study will pay for the arm amputation my crewmate, Qibor, desperately needs after our last job, as well as the cybernetic limb that will be implanted in place of it.

Qibor did not want me to do this for him. My brother Aukellin also voiced his strong objections once he read the advertisement I found, but we have no other options. We cannot take another job with Qibor’s injury, and an influx of credits will not come until we take another job. The credits from this study will cover us until my comrade has recovered.

This track should not prove difficult. I completed the last study in record time by shoving my fist through each wall and face that stood between me and my credits. I was younger then, and

in much better shape. Though my limbs are stiffer now, I expect to finish this track quickly.

This Doctor S'Ko and her promise of dangerous monsters does not scare me. As a former gladiator, I have encountered the most fearsome beasts from the deepest pockets of space, and I have bested them all. There is a reason "Khatazo the Destroyer," was chanted loudly each time I entered the arena, after all. This will be no different.

The first room I enter is a sustenance station. The overhead lights blind me, and the room is completely bare except for tables of protein cubes and bags of water, and a smaller table in the back offering plates of various hallucinogenic drugs in powder form and vials of *wispo*, a sweet, pink liquid found in every debauchery hole in the Crinda Galaxy.

The beverage makes my head fuzzy, and my limbs feel light as air when I drink it. Some species grow stronger and more focused on these substances, but I have no interest in consuming the powder or the *wispo*, as I need my head clear for this endeavor.

I quickly throw back twelve protein cubes and four bags of water, ensuring I will have enough energy to complete the first few rooms. Hopefully the sustenance stations are plentiful, as I have an appetite to match my massive frame. There are tiny sacks the size of my palm dangling on a hook next to the protein cube table, and though only one water bag and a few protein cubes fit inside each, I grab as much as I can, and I

stuff the sack before strapping it to my belt and opening the door to the next room.

Sticky air immediately coats my skin as I step into the strange, dimly lit conservatory; the humidity so thick, it is hard to breathe. Plants cover the floors, hang from ropes attached to the glass ceiling, and perch on shelves, their leaves rustling whenever the automatic misting machine turns on, and letting out a quiet, somber squeal when it shuts off.

I have no idea what I am expected to do in here.

But the moment I step toward the door on the far wall and the floor creaks beneath my foot, this room's purpose becomes clear. The leaves of each plant sway in my direction, and several sets of sharp teeth begin to glow. It is a room full of carnivorous plants, and the only way I can reach the other side is to walk past their open mouths hungry for flesh and try to avoid getting bitten.

"*Fiyk*," I grumble, then take a deep inhale and charge toward the exit. Multiple sets of fangs sink into my forearms, stomach, and legs, cutting through my uniform, and I grit my teeth to keep from howling in pain. I raise my arms above my head to cover my face, and flesh is torn from my body with each step.

The plants grow more desperate to make me their meal, and I have to slap away the wide, bright yellow leaves that hang in my face, blocking my view of the door. The sting from the plants' venom is crippling as it settles into my blood, and I

swear I can hear the quiet sizzle of my flesh burning away. My knees start to buckle, the pain so intense.

I cannot allow the first room of Empress Motavvi's compound to best me. It would be humiliating. Aukellin would be merciless in his mockery. A few snapping plants will not take me down.

Steeling my spine, I clench my fists and sink my fangs into the inside of my cheek, creating a new source of pain to distract from the burning wounds covering my body. Reaching for the closest plant, my hand wraps around several stems and pulls. A wailing cry follows the moment its roots separate from the soil, and I cannot help but smile at the plant's demise.

I tear myself from the plants currently latched onto my calf, and duck just as a plant with spiky, rectangular leaves speckled with bright red spots drops its head and attempts to bite my nose. With the back of my hand, I slap it away, and it flies off its shelf.

A tall plant hanging from the ceiling hisses down at me, its blue petals darkening with what must be rage. I have killed some of its friends, and now it wants to avenge them. But I do not relent. I continue to pound the leaves that rustle in front of me, rip the roots from their cozy, dampened quarters, and the pots that contain their life forces flip, their contents spilling over the floor like the blood of past foes.

As I reach for the handle of the door, potted teal flowers aim their petals upward, and hot liquid shoots from the center of their ovules, hitting me in the eye. I let out a loud bellow as I

claw at my eyes, desperately trying to wipe them clean. My vision is blurred as I feel along the wall for the door. Panicked that I have permanently lost my sight, I drop my right shoulder and slam my body into the obstacle. The wood splinters, and I fall forward onto the thin carpet of the next room.

Rolling onto my back, I lift my eyelids just as a cooling spray shoots down from the ceiling and covers my face. It cleans enough of the burning substance from my eyes that colors and shapes return before me, and I can just make out the broken slabs of the door folding back into place until it is completely solid once more.

Despite the lingering pain and cloudy vision, I spring to my feet, preparing for the next threat, only to find large, colorful blocks scattered across the white carpet. In the middle of the blocks is a deep, diamond-shaped box.

“A puzzle,” I growl.

I *despise* puzzles. An extraordinary waste of time, they are. Does Empress Motavvi wish to study my ability to snap the bones of other creatures like kindling or fiddle with strange shapes, trying to make them fit together? If mental endurance is something she wishes to research, then there should be a separate track with mind exercises such as this.

I am capable of completing puzzles in a short amount of time. I simply... choose not to. The most impressive part of me is not my mind, it is my body. My strength. It is why I was such a celebrated gladiator. My brother Aukellin was also a gladiator, but he enjoys activities requiring such deep thinking.

Perhaps he should have volunteered for this study instead of me.

A tapping sound pulls my attention to the left, and I discover a small female on the other side of a glass wall dividing my track from hers. I have never seen another like her. She bangs on the glass with her tiny fist, trying to get my attention, and when our eyes meet, she smiles. Strange to behold, she is. Her face is flat and smooth, with a large forehead and a nose so narrow it looks as if it would fold in on itself with a flick of my finger.

No protective plating covers her ample chest and round stomach, and I see no fins protruding from wrists or ankles to help her navigate rough waters. Perhaps she has retractable parts that keep her safe, because if not, I do not know how this female has survived this long.

Her voice is muffled by the thickness of the glass, but she shouts, “Hey! Me and you, work together?” in Crindan, the universal language of this galaxy. She points to her chest. “I’m Ehrn,” which, I assume, is her name.

I wave my hand away, dismissing her attention and offer for teamwork. Doctor S’Ko said working with other participants in this study is allowed, but that does not mean I have interest in such thoughts. Besides, of all the beings I could partner with, this weak, ugly female is the last I would choose.

Ehrn rolls her eyes in frustration and returns to the obstacle on her track. She seems to be in a puzzle room like I am, but hers has much smaller pieces, all black, and her hands work

quickly as she gathers the pieces and sticks them into the frame on the wall.

For a moment, I watch her to determine if her puzzle is like mine, but her frame is an entirely different shape, as are the pieces she picks up with her many fingers.

Letting out a growl, I smash my foot into the frame of the puzzle, hoping I may trick it into rendering the puzzle complete. When that does not work, I return my focus to assembling it the way the empress prefers. I must complete this if I wish to move farther on the track. Hauling the large purple piece into my arms, I drop it onto the floor in the center of the frame and shift it horizontally until the puzzle frame lights up and lets out a pleasant-sounding beep to indicate it is in the right spot. It takes longer to get the green piece to fit and sweat runs down the sides of my face by the time I lift the red piece off the floor.

Banging on the glass has me looking up to see Ehrn smiling widely at me, displaying her many square, blunt teeth. The door to the next room is ajar, and I wonder why she has not moved on. "I'm good at puzzles!" she shouts. Ehrn gestures between her chest and mine. "Let's be allies."

I shake my head, again declining her offer. Mind-bending puzzles are not where my strengths lie, but still, I wish to complete this track alone.

She shrugs and strides confidently through the open door, and I am left wondering, for the briefest of moments, if I shall regret not making her my ally.

“No,” I say quietly. No, I am stronger on my own. I am *P’daki*, a former gladiator, and a pirate. The most ferocious monster in the compound. Whatever lies ahead should fear *me*.

Three

ERIN

I take my time in the sustenance station, slowly eating the dry, flavorless protein cubes as I replay the interaction with the big red alien in my head. No one enjoys the feeling of rejection, and while my ego is certainly bruised, it's probably for the best. Having an ally of his size, covered in bulging muscles, sure would've been handy, but who knows if he has any useful skills beyond the brawn? Putting that puzzle together, he looked like a pig on ice.

A chuckle escapes me as I picture his huge, four-fingered hands as they held one of those giant puzzle pieces over his head. Everything about him was very alien, but he was also kind of cute. The way his long, seafoam-green hair hung around his broad shoulders, the shimmer of his red scales whenever the light hit them, and the width of his nose paired with the gold barbell piercing at the bridge of it made him look like he's in a permanent state of crabbiness. There was also a prominent bump in the middle of his nose that gave him a rugged look.

I would guess he's at least seven and a half feet tall, and the bones on his shoulders and elbows stick out in sharp and intimidating ways, but I sensed a gentleness in him, a vulnerable side that he tries to keep hidden. Maybe that's just wishful thinking on my part—I'm a sucker for a scarred cinnamon roll—but the way he scratched his head as he stared at the puzzle pieces and tilted his head side to side as he formulated a plan reminded me of a dog hearing the word "treat" or "park."

I gulp a bag of water as I wander toward the back of the room where there are plates of drugs and little bottles of booze. My stomach can't handle wispo, and I've gotten sick from it enough times to abstain, but I take two nips and stuff them into one of the canvas totes they have hanging up and tie the handles through my belt loop. Maybe I can use projectile vomit as a weapon of some kind. You never know.

The next room I enter has a floor made of sand and two ropes strung from this side of the room stretching to the far side, one up high, and one about a foot above the ground. It looks like the space version of a volleyball court, but since there's no ball to be found, and because I'm not a fool, I know there's more to it than that.

There has to be something terrifying under the top layer of sand, and I have no interest in getting bit by alien crabs, so rather than walk across the sand to reach the door, I step onto the bottom rope and grab the rope above my head to steady me. Two steps across the rope are all I get before my foot slips, and I fall onto the sand.

Keeping one hand on the bottom rope, I pinch my eyes closed and wait for bugs to start crawling all over me, but they don't come. Instead, I notice the muddy, clay-like bottom of the sandpit and the way it's quickly sucking me into its depths.

"Quicksand? Seriously?" I shout toward the sky. My hand never leaves the rope, and my other hand flails as panic sets in.

What do I do? How do I get out of this?

I wish I could remember the cartoons of my youth that made quicksand seem like a national crisis, popping up in every town, swallowing children whole.

The only thing I can remember is that you're not supposed to panic like I'm doing right now. But how am I supposed to stay calm when the clay feels like it's hardening around my feet as it pulls me in?

Going against every instinct, I stop kicking my feet and twist my body just enough so I can get both hands on the rope. Facing the side of the room allows me to look through the glass wall at my big, red friend.

I'm surprised to find him watching me. His yellow reptilian eyes don't blink as they remain locked on me, and he has one hand pressed against the glass, the webbing between his fingers so fascinating that it temporarily distracts me from the fact that I'm slowly drowning in dirt.

Tightening my grip on the rope, I pinch my eyes closed and take a few deep breaths. I don't have much upper body strength, but I summon all that I can to pull myself up. That

gets me barely an inch out of the sand, and I have to bite my lip to keep from crying hopelessly.

Slow and steady, I tell myself. *One inch at a time.*

As I'm trying to haul my butt out, I end up moving along the length of the rope, and if I'm caked in mud from the waist down for the rest of the track, I'm fine with that. Just as long as I get the heck out of this room.

I'm grunting and sweaty and maybe only three inches out of the sand by the time I'm halfway down the rope, and my gaze drifts back to Big Red. I could swear he looks slightly impressed. He probably thought I'd be dead by now with my weak human arms and tissue-paper skin.

I'll show him.

About a foot from the end of the rope, I manage to get one leg free, and it's just close enough that I can lift myself out and get my foot planted beyond the edge of the quicksand pit. It gives me enough leverage to climb all the way out. I flop onto my back, and my chest heaves as I try to catch my breath. Laughter escapes my lips at the realization that I defeated quicksand, and I know seven-year-old me would be very proud.

I look over at Big Red, hoping he's on his knees, ready to apologize for underestimating me, but the room he was in is completely empty.

A bone-chilling roar fills the air, shaking the glass wall separating my track from his, and I launch myself toward the

door. I don't need his name to know that scream was his, and I can't let him face whatever it is alone.

Four

KHATAZO

I must applaud the efforts of Empress Motavvi and Doctor S'Ko. The last study I participated in was a challenge in strength, but this... this is a test of true psychological torment. The room I am in looks like an empty hallway with peeling wallpaper, a handful of portraits on each side, and a dingy carpet that appears to have decades-old blood splatters covering it.

Of course I suspect it will not be as easy as walking from one end of the hallway to the other, but I did not expect to be on my knees, sobbing into my palms this soon.

This is not my first ghost encounter, but it is by far the worst. I have no idea how the empress did it, but she made it so the spirits that emerge from the portraits on the wall look and sound like the loved ones I have lost.

My father seeped out of the frame of his portrait, called my name, and admonished me for becoming a professional thief. My younger brother, Vixato, who was mauled to death by a

rom tuk qi beast in the arena, appears from the second frame and begs for death.

Over and over, he pleads with me to pierce his heart, and I know he speaks not to me. These are the last words he ever spoke. His fight versus the *rom tuk qi* beast was highly anticipated and broadcast across the planet. Everyone heard him beg for death, and the beast wasted no time in granting his wish.

But here in this haunted hallway, his words repeat. His voice cracks on the blood bubbling in his throat, and he lets out a choked sob as he waits for his own heart to stop beating. I cannot imagine anything more gut-wrenching could come out of these portraits, but there are so many left between my body and the door that I fall to my knees, clutching the sides of my skull as Vixato moans, “Please. Please, kill me.”

I crawl a bit farther along the carpet, and Vixato’s voice begins to fade. It feels like a victory, enough so that I am able to breathe again. A heartbeat later, my mother’s voice reaches my ears, and it shatters my remaining resolve.

She cries out for me, telling me to care for my brothers as she knows she will no longer be able to. These are the words she spoke before she was decapitated in the town square in front of me, Vixato, and Aukellin by the king who led his army into our atmosphere, landed on our shores, and slaughtered our people.

“Tazo, keep them safe!” my mother’s spirit shouts.

An anguished roar rips free of my lungs and fills the air. I press my palms into my eyes, refusing to look at the horror on her face, but I see it clearly in my memories anyway.

The Bugoros took our planet and made my people their slaves. Me, my brothers, and a handful of other strong males were spared a life of servitude only because the king thought we would be better as entertainers inside the arena. When not fighting for our lives, we were forced to live in cramped underground cages beneath the arena. When we were victorious, our bodies were offered to the wives of politicians and guardsmen the king worked closely with.

My mother's spirit does not relent. "Do not let them watch."

I did as she asked that day, covering Vixato's eyes, while Aukellin kept his gaze on the stone beneath his feet as tears streamed down his cheeks.

If this is what I am to expect of the rest of this track, I do not think I can go on. Though the empress will not allow me to quit. How will I endure this level of torture if there is more ahead? I would sooner impale myself on a sword than be forced to listen to my loved ones utter their final words.

Black spots appear at the corners of my vision, and the room sways around me. It feels as if the walls begin to move, inching closer to me on either side. I should not be surprised. The only thing worse than listening to my family cry out in pain is to be forced into a tight, confined space, and, of course, the empress has figured out a way to weaponize my greatest fear.

“No. No more,” I mumble, my speech slurring as I press my forehead into the dirty carpet.

“Get up!” a voice shouts.

Relief washes over me when it is a voice I do not recognize.

“Come on, Big Red,” the voice says again. “I can’t carry your two-ton tush. Get up.”

Wait, I do recognize this voice. It is the ugly female from the other side of the glass. Ehrn, I think she is called. When I lift my head to look at her, the light from the ceiling casts a glow around her head like a halo. She has come to save me?

There is an empty frame toward the end of the hall that is hanging ajar, as if it is a secret door. That must be how Ehrn reached me from her track.

Her green eyes roll at my reluctance to follow her orders, and she stomps toward the middle of the hall. There, Ehrn places a vial of wispo on the carpet, opens her arms wide and over her head, and utters a string of words I do not recognize.

The translucent faces of my family swirl around her, continuing to howl their tales of woe, but she is unfazed. She drops a second vial next to the first and repeats the words again.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

A moment later, the spirits evaporate and silence fills the hallway. She rushes back to my side and tugs my hand. “We need to move. Now!”

In a daze, I stumble to my feet and let her pull me toward the door. Once we are on the other side, we slam the door closed and lean our backs against it, side by side.

Ehrn turns to me and says, “Since I just saved your butt, wanna be partners?”

Reluctantly, I nod. It is not as if I have any reason or leverage to refuse her help. She is better at this than I. The thought embarrasses me, but I can deny the truth of it no longer.

“What did you do in there?” I ask.

“Hmm?”

“To rid the spirits?”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Oh, my sister was a practicing witch. She made potions and cast spells since we were little. She said our granny’s house had bad energy upstairs, so she’d steal a bottle of liquor from the kitchen, recite a spell, and leave it at the top of the steps as an offering.” Ehrn sighs wistfully. “She swore it worked every time, so I figured I’d give it a try. I can’t believe I still remember the words.”

“What did you see upon entering?” I ask, unable to refrain.

“Were there spirits from your past?”

She nods but does not elaborate. Creases form on her flat brow, and the look in her eyes is tormented. Could her past somehow be more traumatic than my own? If so, how did she manage to maintain the composure required to save me?

Ehrn shrugs. “Everyone has ghosts.”

I do not know what to say to that. Awe is the only way to describe what I feel. This little female is remarkable.

“Huh,” Ehrn says, taking in the room we’re in now. She pushes off the door. “I was just in a sustenance station, but I guess I should be thankful for all the breaks we get from the nightmares, right?”

I clear my throat and follow her to a table with med supplies. “Yes, this is a welcome respite.”

She stands on tiptoes and grabs my chin, turning my face side to side. The scent of her mane fills my nose, and it reminds me of freshly fallen rain over the flower fields during the hot season. “Looks like you could use some bandages.”

I grunt in agreement as I look down at the scratches covering my arms, the fabric of my shirt now in tatters from the carnivorous plants.

“What’s your name?” she asks with an amused chuckle. “Or do you prefer I keep calling you Big Red?”

“I am called Khatazo,” I reply, placing a hand over my heart. “And you are Ehrn, yes?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

She smiles as her gaze meets mine, and this time, I find her blunt teeth sort of endearing. I wonder how she is able to eat and if her body is getting the nutrition it needs. Perhaps she liquefies her food. It is a shame she recently ate because it would be quite humorous to witness her trying to chew on a protein cube.

And her eyes. They are bottomless pools of green that remind me of the ponds near the home where I grew up. How fascinating.

Other beings mill about the room, paying us no mind and chatting as they wander from the protein cube table to the water bags. A few even lean over the drug plates and inhale neat lines of the powder through their nostrils.

It is strange to see so many others in here, as my track has been empty other than the ability to see Ehrn through the wall. Then I notice four doors along the walls in addition to the one she and I came through, and I realize this must be a communal sustenance station that all tracks lead to.

“Now that we’re allies, care to share what made you sign up for this study?” Ehrn asks as she rubs sticky blue ointment over my open wounds.

Normally, I would not be inclined to share personal information, but since we are allies, I suppose there is no harm in telling her. “My crewmate. The credits from this study will get him the medical attention he needs.”

“That’s nice of you,” she says, impressed. “Your *crew*? Are you in the military?”

I laugh at her words. “No, my pursuits are not that noble. I am a pirate.”

The thick lines of tiny fur above her eyes lift, and I am mystified by the way her pupils expand.

“You’re a pirate?” she asks excitedly. “That’s cool.”

“That is not the word I would use to describe my profession,” I tell her. “It is often dangerous and unpredictable.”

“So you just fly around the galaxy stealing buckets of rare jewels?”

I shake my head. “We have not encountered any *buckets of jewels* lately, which is why I am here. Though, if you have any wealthy friends, I would appreciate their exact coordinates.”

She laughs, the sound reminding me of holiday bells—light and cheerful. I suddenly feel the desperate urge to touch her skin. I wonder if it is as smooth as it looks.

I lift my knuckles, brushing them along her cheek, and I hear her breath hitch at the contact. It is as smooth as sea glass, and as I run the pad of my thumb across the line of her jaw, my cock hardens at the thought of touching her elsewhere.

Ehrn is not ugly like I previously thought. She is different. Her skin is the color of *nfiutio* milk, but when she is nervous—like she is now—her cheeks and neck pinken like a *Ratchutahzi* sunset. Though her stature is small compared to mine, she is round and soft all over, making me want to sink my hands into her abundant flesh, kneading and gripping her most sensitive parts until she is writhing with need.

“Apologies,” I say, letting my hand drop to my side. “Your skin does not seem adequate. It is far too delicate to protect your vital organs.”

“Preaching to the choir, buddy,” she says with a weary sigh. “I’d give anything for some protective plating around my

noggin.”

Her words make no sense, but her expressions are so animated when she speaks I can look nowhere else.

“And I still get bacne. Can you believe that? At thirty-six. That nonsense should be behind me.”

“What is back-nee?”

She scoffs. “If you don’t know what it is, you’ve clearly never had to deal with it, and for that, be thankful.”

Ehrn bends at the waist and applies the ointment to a long gash across my calf. From this angle, I notice the outline of her thick, luscious bottom, and I run my tongue along the sharp points of my fangs as I fantasize about biting into it.

“Why are you in this study?” I ask, subtly adjusting my pants to keep my throbbing cock from poking her in the face.

Thankfully she does not look up as she answers. “I’m tired of the life I’ve got, so I figured I’d come here, score some credits, and buy myself a fresh start.”

I understand this desire. “This fresh start of yours, the credits you earn will be enough?”

She covers the gash on my calf with one of the rubbery bandages and shrugs. “I think so. I don’t need much, just a roof over my head in a place that’s quiet and safe.”

A laugh escapes me. I cannot help it. “You plan to find this roof of safety in Crinda? With no mate to protect you?” I ask. Her goal is so very... lofty and unrealistic.

Ehrn's gaze turns cold as she finishes applying the ointment to a cut across my knee, then rises to her feet. "Why is that funny?" She folds her arms across her chest, pressing her teats together in a way that makes my mouth water. "I'll have you know, Yeronix just reopened its borders and is currently allowing humans to settle there, including unmated humans. The ad specifically said unmated humans were welcome. And the credits I get from this will be more than enough to buy a house and cover my expenses as I get settled."

"Yeronix?" I ask, unable to keep my jaw from falling open. She could not have chosen a worse planet. "Empress Motavvi rules Yeronix. The same empress who created this insidious compound. You think she will welcome you without conditions?"

Her lips part, and I expect a cutting retort, but she says nothing.

Guilt fills my chest as I watch the bravado leave her body. I have hurt her, but I would rather her heart be hurt by my words than her delicate human bones be broken by whatever nefarious creatures the empress lets roam freely on Yeronix.

"It is a trap, Ehrn," I say, softening my tone. "Yeronix has long been a beacon for pitiful souls such as yours, desperately seeking freedom. A safe place, that does not make it. I have seen it with my own eyes. It is a lawless trash heap."

Ehrn's fire returns, and she jabs me in the chest with two of her little fingers. "Did you just call me pitiful?"

Did I? “*Fiyk*,” I mutter the moment I realize I did use that word. “That is not what—”

My words are cut off by the sudden presence of red fog entering the room through narrow cracks along the floor. It billows around us like a cloud made of blood, and my head turns dizzy as I breathe it in.

Ehrn coughs as she waves a frantic hand in front of her face, trying to clear it away.

The fog fills the room. So much so, I no longer see the other beings strolling about. I see nothing beyond the fog. Instinctively, I grab hold of Ehrn’s shoulders and pull her into my arms. A relieved sigh whooshes out of me at my ability to still see her flat face.

She places a hand on the part of my chest where my shirt is torn, and her touch sets my skin ablaze. A hunger builds at the base of my spine, a hunger that only the press of Ehrn’s body can satisfy. I want to taste her skin. I want to run my tongue along her neck to see if she tastes as sweet as she smells.

“Khatazo? I... um,” she whispers, her heavy-lidded gaze dropping to my lips. She sinks her flat teeth into her plush bottom lip, and my cock hardens against my thigh, making my pants uncomfortably tight.

Before I can lean down and press my mouth to hers, the fog clears, and the others in the room become visible once more. Two males mate rigorously in one corner, and in another is a female surrounded by males. She has a cock in her mouth, one in her cunt, and the other male’s mouth leaves a wet trail

across her teats. Two females near us claw at each other's skin while a male looks on with his cock in hand, and three other males snarl as they continue to inhale the drug powder.

The fog is causing this mating frenzy. There is no other explanation. Mere moments ago, every being in this room was focused on finishing the track and collecting the credits from this study. Now, we are drunk on desire and giving in to those urges.

It must be why Ehrn continues to touch and look at me as if I am the only male in the universe capable of giving her pleasure. It also explains why my cock is throbbing to the point of pain, my sac tight against my body, ready to explode.

For the barest fraction of a second, I consider feeding this need I have for her and pressing her against the wall as I drive into her wet heat. I envision the explicit bliss of her walls squeezing around me as she screams my name, her cunt milking me as I fill her soft, supple body with my seed.

But when the males by the drug table drop their empty plates to the floor and step toward us, I shove Ehrn behind me and rip off the tattered remains of my shirt, freeing my arms of any constrictions.

I am bigger than all three of these males. I am not concerned about winning this battle. It is Ehrn and her weak human body that worry me. If one of these males gets close enough to swipe their claws along her skin, she will bleed out. That cannot happen. I need her. There is no chance I will be able to finish this track without her.

I also suspect Ehrn needs me too. Perhaps not as much as I need her, but we are a team, and I shall do what is necessary to keep her safe from harm.

“What are you doing?” Ehrn shouts from behind me.

I have no time to explain, so I yell, “Stay down. I will not allow them to touch you.”

It is clear to me now that she is the mentally stronger competitor of the two of us, and if the only way I can contribute to this alliance is through violence, then I shall slaughter every beast that stands in our path.

The males close in on us, and my fangs lengthen inside my mouth until I taste blood. They launch themselves at me, all three at once, and I welcome them with sharpened claws.

Five

ERIN

I can't see what's happening. In fact, I can't see much of anything beyond the broad expanse of Khatazo's back, but if the growls and loud, wet thuds are any indication of what's happening, I'm thankful for my big, red blind spot.

A furry gray limb flies toward the corner of the room, blood spurting out of it like a squirt gun, and a pained howl immediately follows. I didn't even notice the creatures that Khatazo is currently tearing apart before they attacked, but that's probably because I was in a horned-up daze and only had eyes for my ally.

It's been years since I've been attracted to anyone. I had a small crush on a member of the kitchen staff at The Meat Pocket, but it went away the day he told me he had five mates who all had eggs in their bellies that were about to hatch. I don't even like eating eggs, so the thought of growing one and it hatching inside me, scratching up my organs when it cracked, freaked me the heck out.

Gr'va bought me a vibrator last year, but she got it at the station's pawnshop, and it had so many buttons and sharp edges that I was afraid to put it anywhere near my lady parts. I used it as a nightlight/white noise machine instead.

But Khatazo, mmm-mmm-mmm. He is a snack and a half. This might be the red fog talking—no, it's *definitely* the red fog talking—but I kind of want to run my tongue all over his body and ride his face until I pass out.

A howl roars from him as he rips the head off a boar-like creature with burnt-yellow tusks. The boar-man's body folds in on itself in an awkward heap at Khatazo's feet, and he kicks it away, sending the corpse across the room. It lands on the table of water bags, popping most of them. The table collapses beneath the weight and a watery red puddle forms on the floor.

I become entranced by the flex of his back muscles as the fight continues, and I can't stop myself from reaching my hand out to touch his skin. He tenses at my touch and stops punching long enough to ask, "Ehrn, are you hurt?"

He says my name like "urn," and I'm surprised by how hot I find it. Who knew the name of a vase filled with dead-people dust could sound so sexy? The concern in his voice sends a swarm of somersaulting butterflies through my belly, which conjures an odd image, but the butterflies are definitely not just casually flying around. These butterflies are high on red fog, and their wings are flapping crazy fast. Much like the beat of my heart.

Eventually the growling and wet thuds cease, and Khatazo turns to face me. He's covered in blood, sweat, and lots of other things I'm not sure I want identified, and I've never wanted anyone more. His eyes search my face as he grabs my shoulders, then he looks me up and down. "Are you well?"

"Yes," I moan. I'm breathless, and I don't know what to do about these feelings. This desire is so intense that my clit is throbbing, but as much as I want Khatazo to strip me bare and take me right here and now, I can't let that happen. If I do, I'll never know if I really want him or if it's just the fog.

Not that I expect to stay in touch with him once we leave the compound. He's a pirate, and I want a quiet life in the middle of nowhere—on Yeronix, preferably. I don't care what he says about the empress. Unless I get some proof that Yeronix isn't safe, I'm still going there once this is over. This partnership with Khatazo and I won't extend past the borders of Huva II, and I need to remember that.

"Here," I tell him, taking his hand in mine and leading him to the side of the water table not damaged by a monster corpse. "Let's get you cleaned up." There are four unpopped bags, and I use those to rinse the blood from Khatazo's hands and chest.

"Thanks," I eventually say as he tosses three protein cubes into his mouth at once. "For saving me."

He shrugs, then gestures between the two of us. "Allies," is all he says, and part of me wonders if that's all we are, and if I'm okay with that.

There are still a few couples having sex in the room as we leave, and I'm amazed that the pile of dead bodies and severed limbs did nothing to kill their lust. It's impressive really.

The next room on our track looks like a library, with bouquets of flowers strategically placed throughout the shelves like bookends. There's no furniture in here, but it looks far too orderly for the setting of a messy battle. A puzzle then maybe? I can't find any puzzle pieces though, and there is no frame to put them in.

"I do not understand," Khatazo says, looking around with a discerning eye. Glad I'm not the only one who's confused.

"Well, let's just move on." I head toward the far door, but a low buzzing sound slowly builds until it's all I can hear. "What the f—"

I can't even finish dropping the f-bomb, and while I'm sure Granny would be pleased as punch by that, the swarm of bugs flying around my head is pissing me the fuck off. It's too dark in this room to get a good look at them, but from what I can see, they have large wings like dragonflies, four legs with pincers on the ends, and long white-and-brown-speckled bodies the size of my finger. That's a big-ass bug, and there are hundreds of them.

Khatazo shouts something at me, but I can't make out the words over the buzzing that's now deafening. "What?" I shout back.

"Run!" he yells. His big body bumps into me, pushing me toward what I hope is the door, and I close my eyes and cover

my face with my hands as I put one foot in front of the other.

My elbows hit a wall, and I keep one hand over my eyes as I feel along the surface for a doorknob.

A sharp pinch at the back of my neck sends an electric jolt down my spine, and a bug crunches beneath my hand as I slap it. Triumph is quickly replaced by hot, blinding pain shooting down my body and into my fingertips. I let out a frustrated moan and drag my hip along the wall as I feel for the door, keeping both hands around my head.

“Over here!” Khatazo shouts. He doesn’t sound far, and I stumble toward the sound of his concerned voice.

When I reach him, he pulls me into his arms and throws the door open, shoving me forward. My arms flail as I fall backward, and I snag his wrist, dragging him with me into a pool of water that fills the room.

The moment I’m submerged, I notice this isn’t normal water. It’s thicker, with a brownish color and a syrupy texture, which terrifies me.

“Khatazo!” I yell when I breach the surface. I’m freaking out, which, as with the quicksand, is the last thing you’re supposed to do. But this isn’t regular water. Even if it were, it wouldn’t matter. The result would be the same.

He wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me against him. “You are safe, Ehrn. I am here.”

I’m so grateful to hear his voice and feel his body against mine that tears stream down my face, making him look like a big

red blur. “I-I can’t swim,” I choke out, the shame like weights tied to my ankles. “I d-don’t know how.”

He takes my hand and runs my fingers along the sharp protrusions near his elbow. “I have fins.” Then he hauls me onto his back, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Do not let go.”

I do as he says, holding as tightly as I can until he lets out what sounds like a cough mixed with a chuckle, signaling I need to loosen my grip a tad. My legs float behind me, but when I feel him start to kick through the water, I follow his lead, thinking it’ll help us move faster.

He pops his head out of the water to say, “Stop. You are kicking *me*.” So I cling to him like a barnacle on a ship as his arms and legs cut swiftly through the water.

A couple feet to our left, a spiked, serpent-like tail breaches the surface, and it splashes the sticky water at my face as I scream at the top of my lungs. Some of it gets into my mouth, and the mysterious acidic flavor will forever be burned into my memory. I never want to learn what it is or where it came from.

“Go! Go, go, go!” I shout, kicking my heel into Khatazo’s ribs.

He looks up just as the tail pokes out of the water again, and he growls low in his throat before picking up the pace.

This pool is humongous, and even though we’re already halfway across, it feels like we’re standing still. We need to reach the other side before we learn exactly what that spiky-

tailed creature is and how many of them are swimming around us.

Two more tails splash us from the other side, which means there are at least three serpents in here. The odds of us getting out of here alive go from bad to worse.

I kick Khatazo in the ribs again, even though I feel bad about it. I don't mean to treat him like a horse, but he really needs to swim faster. Like, now. Preferably *right* fucking now.

His body shifts to the side as if he's trying to swim around something, and my grip around his neck loosens, making me slide down his back. I let out several frustrated huffs as I wiggle my way back into place.

Just a few more strokes, and we'll make it to the other side, right in front of the door. My breath is lodged in my throat as I watch the distance between us and the ledge slowly disappear.

Suddenly, something latches onto my foot. I assume it's the serpent, and that theory is confirmed when I feel it move up my foot and past the top of my boot. Several large teeth sink into my lower calf, and I let go of Khatazo's neck the moment the fangs hit bone. I don't know if I scream, but I do know I've never felt pain like this.

The serpent drags me beneath the surface of the water, and I wave my hands wildly, trying to fight its vise-like grip, but it's no use. I hold my breath as long as I can—which isn't very long—before the thick, sticky water floods my mouth, filling my lungs as the pain grows more intense. It feels like my blood is on fire, and my bones are disintegrating.

Even my fingers and toenails hurt. How is that possible?

This is not how I want to die, but as the serpent drags me deeper and my vision starts to fade, I resign myself to my fate. I wonder how close we were to the finish line. To my fresh start. I guess I'll never know.

Before I lose consciousness, I feel the serpent's grip on my calf tighten, then release me entirely, and I'm yanked above the surface as Khatazo tosses me over his shoulder and climbs out of the pool. He slaps my back over and over until I vomit, the brown water splattering all over the floor and burning the bejesus out of my throat and sinuses in the process.

I don't even notice the massive open wounds on my leg until Khatazo gasps at the sight.

"Oh," I mutter between coughs. My leg tingles, and the rest of me is somehow sweating *and* shivering, but I can't feel anything beyond that. I must be in shock because several silver-dollar-sized holes gouge my leg, and I'm not even screaming. I should be screaming.

"Can you walk?" Khatazo asks, his yellow eyes filled with worry, his thin, vertical pupils widening slightly the longer he looks at my leg.

A loud cackle echoes through the room, and it takes me a minute to realize it's coming from me. Though it was a rather silly question. "Can I walk?" I repeat before throwing my head back and laughing some more. I'm fairly certain my leg will need to be amputated, so walking is out of the question.

He looks around the room for first aid supplies, I assume, but there are none in here. What he does next catches me by surprise.

Khatazo stares at the inside of his forearm, then lowers his head and rips a gash in the skin with his fangs, creating a large open cut where his black blood instantly begins to pool. He turns his arm over and lets the blood drip into my wounds.

“Wh-hey! What are you doing?” I shriek, trying to scoot away from him. There’s no way this will heal me, and at the very least, it’s extremely unsanitary.

“You will survive, Ehrn,” he says quietly. Then, louder, “Do you hear me? You must survive.”

The tingling sensation in my leg fades and is quickly replaced by a sting so sharp that my eyes water, and I have to bite my sleeve to keep from crying.

“The Bugoros conquered my home planet and enslaved my people,” he explains, his words a welcome distraction from the agony. “They found our blood has healing properties. Household servants were required to give blood each moon cycle to ensure the health of the king and political leaders.”

He grunts as he squeezes his arm, causing more blood to spill from the slice he gave himself. When his gaze meets mine, my body warms, and I wonder if the fog is lingering in my system. “I do not know if my blood can heal humans,” he says, swallowing hard, “but you must live, Ehrn. You must.”

Six

KHATAZO

I fill the silence in the pool room with mindless chatter as I wait to see if my blood helps heal Ehrn's wounds. We remain on the edge of the pool, a safe distance from the choppy, serpent-infested waters, as I watch over her. The punctures on her leg are deep, and even if we had access to medical supplies, I am not sure they would be enough to undo the damage the serpent has caused.

Fiyking serpents. Three of them splash the revolting brown liquid at us as they pass by, probably because they cannot reach us here. I would laugh at their pettiness if I were not so worried about Ehrn. I am not leaving the compound without her. Even if I must carry her lifeless body through a dozen more rooms while fighting an army of twisted beasts, I will do so, if only to ensure her remains are properly cared for.

My entire body trembles at the thought of losing her. It is an entirely unacceptable outcome. She is not mine, I know this, but she deserves to live a full life exactly as she has imagined it—with her tiny house and tiny garden and endless quiet.

It sounds boring and dreadful, but if it is what Ehrn wants, then she should have it.

She asks me questions about the Bugoros, and I answer each. None of the memories are pleasant, but Ehrn listens intently and squeezes my hand when my voice grows thick with emotion.

I tell her about Aukellin and Qibor, and a time we ended up with a bag full of fake *skzanit* rubies and Qibor's torn-up arm. "Not our finest performance," I say, embarrassed at how easily we were swindled.

"Don't beat yourself up," Ehrn says warmly. "My college boyfriend bought me these gorgeous diamond earrings—well, he *said* they were diamonds—but they were actually cubic zirconia, and even when I put them next to real diamonds, I still couldn't tell the difference."

She tells me stories about time on her home planet, somewhere called Urth, and while I do not understand most of the words she uses, the way she smiles with her whole face warms my insides.

"Hey," she exclaims, pointing at her foot. "I can wiggle my toes."

I did not realize she was incapable of doing that before, but I am relieved that my blood seems to be working. "Good. That is good." She tries to get up at one point, but I gently nudge her down onto her back. "There is no rush, Ehrn. We do not have a time limit to complete the track. Take your time. We will move when your body is ready."

Ehrn argues at first, but ultimately lies back.

She tells me more about her sister, and how they both went to live with their grahn-nee in the south when their mother died from an accidental drug overdose. “That was a tough time,” she says, her tone somber but never wavering. “My sister was ten. She didn’t really understand what happened, but I did.” Ehrn laughs to herself. “Granny did not go easy on us. She started whipping us into shape on the way home from Mom’s funeral. We learned the proper way to eat soup, which forks to use for salad, and if we ever swore in front of her,” Ehrn throws her head back with a huff, “whew, boy. That automatically meant no dinner and thirty minutes of sucking on a bar of soap.”

“Soap?” I ask, unsure if I understand her meaning. “What would that solve?”

“Washing out a dirty mouth.” She nods when I give her a horrified look. “You only make that mistake once.”

The words tumble out of my mouth as soon as they enter my head. “You are much harder than you appear.”

Ehrn stares at me for a moment, and I wonder if I have insulted her. Her green eyes sparkle with amusement, and a smile tugs at the corners of her lips as she says, “Thank you. I love when people underestimate me.”

“You do?”

“Oh yeah. It’s my favorite thing.”

I chuckle at her response. “Why is that?”

She props herself up on her elbows. “Because there is nothing more satisfying than witnessing the moment someone realizes they were wrong about you. It’s just...” She trails off, scrunching her little nose as her gaze lifts to the ceiling. It is like she has to mush her features together to find the correct words she seeks, and I find it adorable.

I am growing attached to this female, and that is a problem I do not know how to solve. If we make it out of here, we will each collect our credits, and she will waste all of hers traveling to Yeronix for a quiet life she will never have. Empress Motavvi is luring her and those like her to that planet under the guise of safety and prosperity, but I would bet my life that neither can be found there.

Part of me is annoyed by Ehrn’s ignorance. She is smarter and stronger than she looks, but this is a trap she is strolling directly into. We have endured so much together. I feel obligated to keep her safe now. No, not obligated precisely. That is not the right word. I feel it is my duty, but also an honor. I want to protect her for as long as she will let me.

“Ooh, check me out,” Ehrn says with a wide grin. She rotates her foot in a circle, then goes in the opposite direction. “I think I might be able to stand on it.”

Before she can shift onto her hands and knees, I put a hand on her shoulder. “Not yet.”

I use my claws to tear the leg of my pants below the knee and rip that cloth into three strips. Putting pressure on the wounds, I wrap the cloth strips around them and tie a secure knot

against her shin. The bleeding has stopped, which is a good sign, but I am still not sure Ehrn should be putting weight on it.

Slowly, she pulls herself forward, and I insist she leans on me as she rises. It takes a while, at my repeated insistence that she not rush, but she does stand. She is not fully healed and leans heavily against my side as she limps across the floor, but it is a far better outcome than I first envisioned.

Not until we stand in front of the door do we realize there is a circular puzzle just above the handle that we need to solve in order to unlock it. The pieces hang in a small sack beneath the knob, and Ehrn opens it in her palm to study the pieces.

“There are so many of these,” she says with a frown. “And they’re all the same color.”

This does not seem like a puzzle she wishes to solve. When she turns back to face the pool, I realize it is because she wants nothing more than to leave this room. “Let me see,” I say, pretending to examine the puzzle pieces. “Ah, yes.” I look closely at the frame on the door, take a deep inhale, and shove my fist into the center of the frame. The mechanism that unlocks the door is crushed beyond recognition, but when I hear a click below the knob, the door opens.

Ehrn giggles, the sound echoing through the room and making my heart skip. “Well done, sir.”

I help her hobble into the next room, the smallest by far, and we scan the walls for clues as to what we can expect.

“Just a bunch of levers,” she says, sounding equally confused and wary. It is how I have felt since the moment I entered the compound, and I am pleased to finally hear some skepticism coming from her.

“Shall we pull?” I ask.

“Think the door is unlocked and we can just leave without touching anything?”

I shake my head. “Unlikely,” I reply. But I indulge her in case she is right. We make it to the door; the knob does not turn. I slam my fist into the center of it, but not even a dent is left behind. It is the sturdiest door we have faced.

It is frustrating to offer Ehrn my strength and have it not be enough to deliver results, but once again, we shall rely on Ehrn’s resilient spirit until we may exit this room.

She sighs heavily. “Let’s pull, I guess.”

We slowly make our way around the room, first pulling on one lever and waiting for the torment to come. When nothing happens, we move on to the next, and the next, and the next, until there is only one lever left. Ehrn pulls on it, and her grip on my back tightens as we wait.

The monsters never arrive, but what does come is the red fog.

We exchange a knowing glance as it fills the room, and I lower myself to the ground to wait it out. She drops into my lap and leans her head against my shoulder. My fingers flex with the desperate urge to touch her, to caress her soft skin and unpeel the layers of her clothing until she is lying bare before me. I

resist though, because giving in to my needs would mean disregarding hers, and I do not know if my touch is even something she would want.

“We shall wait,” I vow. “The fog will dissipate, and we will leave.”

I shift Ehrn in my lap, hoping she cannot feel the obvious erection barely concealed by my pants. Her hot breath fans my chest, and the world stops moving. The moons, the suns, the planets that fill each galaxy across the universe—none of it matters. Everything outside this room ceases to exist as long as her skin is against mine. She places her palm on my stomach, and I grit my teeth the moment it starts to move lower.

Covering her hand with mine, I growl, “Stop.”

She looks up at me, her beautiful eyes swirling with lust, and I am powerless. This little human has my heart, and she is not even aware of it. “Why? You don’t like when I touch you?”

I hold her gaze, for the first time noticing the flecks of orange and blue in her irises. So very captivating. “I like it far too much, Ehrn. This is the problem.”

Her lips part at my words, and I wonder if the rapid heartbeat I hear is coming from her chest or mine.

The fog does eventually dissipate, but when we try the knob, it remains locked. We return to our spot on the floor, and this time, Ehrn sits beside me. She entwines her fingers with mine and smiles at the stark difference in size.

“Now what?” she asks.

“I do not know.”

A moment later, the fog returns, this time thicker and more potent than the last.

Ehrn places her hands on either side of my face and pulls me closer.

I grab her wrists. “No, Ehrn.”

“You don’t want me?”

Hurt is in her tone, and it is the last thing I want her to feel.

“No,” I tell her with a groan. “I want you more—”

My words are cut off by the soft press of her lips against mine. At first, I am frozen, unsure if I should proceed. I know if I kiss her back, I will never want to stop. When the smooth tip of her tongue brushes against the seam of my lips, my chest burns with longing, and I lose all semblance of control. My fingers get lost in the long strands of her mane as I savor the taste of her.

Her lips slide across mine in a way that feels like a caress, but her tongue is hot and determined as it pushes past my lips. I suck on her tongue, pulling it into my mouth and letting the forked end of mine dance around hers.

Then she pulls back, her pupils blown out as she looks at me.

“I need this,” she says in a breathy moan that goes straight to my cock. “I need you, Khatazo.”

“You are certain?” I ask, terrified I have just given her a way out. I need her more than I need my next breath, but I will not pressure her into this.

“Yes,” she says, pressing her forehead against mine. “Touch me. Please.”

Her words release something inside me, and a growl rips from my throat as I gently toss her onto her back. I look down at her clothes with anger. How dare they come between my eyes and her magnificent skin? Carefully, I tear them from her body and toss them across the room.

A word pops into my head at the sight of her naked. Only one word, and the longer I look at her, the deeper it sinks into my soul: *Mine*.

Seven

ERIN

I expect Khatazo to devour me like a man starved the second I'm naked, but he doesn't. His gaze travels down my body slowly, so slowly, I grow uncomfortable under such focused attention, but he sucks in a breath and places a hand over his heart. "You are no human. You are a goddess." He moves backward on his knees and bends down, pressing his forehead into the tips of my toes.

"What are you doing?"

He looks up at me through his long white eyelashes. "I am worshipping at your feet of course."

I giggle shyly. "Duh."

Khatazo presses a featherlight kiss to each toe, then along my shins—carefully avoiding the bandaged area—and then moves up my knees and thighs. For someone whose lungs are filled with the sex fog, he sure is taking his time to savor me.

I don't think I have the patience for that though. Not this time anyway. My pussy clenches around nothing and my clit pulses

with need. I don't even need to touch myself to know I'm wet. Just looking at Khatazo with his strong jaw, intense reptilian gaze, and muscled, heaving chest has me rolling my hips, trying to close the distance between our bodies.

I could stare at him for days and never tire of the view. Suddenly, little details I never noticed before, or didn't have the time or capacity to notice with the horrors of the compound closing in on us, become clear as day. A couple of black horns stick out just behind his hairline for instance, and many shorter horns on either side disappear behind his ears, almost like a gothic crown made of thorns. Then there are glowing, thin white lines—I assume they're tattoos—that start on the outside of his nostrils, trace the outside of his wide, rugged nose, and jut out above his brows.

“Touch me,” I beg, my hand going to my breast and squeezing.

He groans as he watches me stroke and pluck at my nipple until it hardens to a stiff peak. “Mine,” he breathes, his voice a low, velvety purr.

The fog is starting to dissipate again, but my need for him pulses through my bones, and I suspect that the strange red mist is playing a smaller role than I originally thought. Sure, I might not have gotten naked in the compound without it, especially given that there are cameras everywhere—the knowledge of which is only making me wetter—but I found Khatazo attractive before the fog first emerged. And my feelings for him have grown stronger ever since.

Because of each brush of his hand against mine, his promises to keep me safe—which he immediately made good on by killing any creature who came near me—and most importantly, the way he made himself bleed in the unlikely chance that his blood could heal me.

The fog is not influencing me to have sex with him, it's just bringing us to the same inevitable conclusion we'd have without it. "I want this," I tell him, needing to say the words aloud so he knows how present I am.

Thankfully, Gr'va helped me find drinkable birth control that works on humans at the station a few weeks ago, so I won't need to worry about getting knocked up by a rogue alien pirate.

Khatazo removes his belt, tossing it aside, and roughly shoves his pants down his legs before kicking them off. The moment I take in his huge, glorious cock, I'm pretty sure I utter, "Holy fucking shit."

Sorry, Granny! Though I suppose some things are worth sucking on soap for.

"I'm not sure you'll fit," I tell him, reaching out and taking him in my hand. He's hard, obviously, but it's not just that he's erect; his dick is like a red pole made of smooth granite. But unlike the cool exterior of stone, he's hotter here than the rest of his body, and I shudder when he starts pumping into my grip.

The moment his hips start to move, little dark slits appear down his length, and curved maroon ridges appear, tickling

my palm.

“You will take me, Ehrn,” he says, panting. “All of me.”

I nod as I guide his dick toward my entrance, powerless to suggest otherwise when he’s looking at me with such ardent possessiveness. Running the tip along the seam of my pussy, Khatazo’s entire body begins to tremble. But when he removes my hand, I let out a pitiful whine.

“I must ensure you are ready first,” he says, cupping my mound and easily slipping two fingers inside.

A couple thrusts of his wrist are all it takes before wet sounds fill the room, and he smiles proudly, his forked tongue peeking out between his lips just enough to remind me of how exquisite that kiss was earlier. Forked tongues are the best tongues. This is an indisputable fact.

“Mmm,” he groans, his eyes falling closed. “So wet for me, little Ehrn.”

I part my thighs as wide as they’ll go and press my nails into his back, pulling him closer. “Now, Khatazo. Need you now.” My pussy is dripping and empty and so ready to be filled, I can barely see straight.

He gives in to my demands, slowly pushing his hard cock through my swollen folds. His back and shoulders are rigid as he enters my core, his face scrunched in agony as he holds himself back to ensure my comfort. “Tell me if I hurt you.”

“No pain,” I tell him, giving his thick forearm a reassuring squeeze. My vocabulary becomes more limited the deeper he

goes, those incredible ridges touching me in places I never knew existed. “So good.”

After what feels like a century of waiting, our hips meet, and he’s fully sheathed inside me. I can’t move. I can’t breathe. The only thing I can do is feel. And I feel him everywhere.

“I’m going to move,” he warns through gritted teeth, his jaw flexing as his control wanes.

I nod, unable to form words. His heavy balls hang against my ass, and I’ve never felt so full. Then he pulls almost all the way out before slamming back into me, and stars dance behind my eyelids as I hold on for dear life. I don’t notice it until he sets a brutal pace, but my entire body is shaking beneath him, and then I feel it. His ridges... they’re vibrating.

“Oh god,” I cry out, slamming my head back on the floor. Every nerve in my body comes alive and heat pools low in my belly, telling me my orgasm is already starting to build. Not surprising, considering I’m stuffed to the gills with a gigantic cock and a dozen vibrating ridges.

He wraps a hand around my neck, gripping my nape. “Look at me,” he growls.

Forcing my eyes open, I focus on the yellows of his irises to ground me.

“Mine,” he says again. I don’t disagree. I’m his in all ways right now, and I don’t want that to change. Eventually it will, once we reach the finish line and go our separate ways, but

right now, I'm his and he's mine, and there's nothing else but us.

My tits bounce each time he drives into me, and he watches intently, groaning after every jiggle. He drops his head and swipes the forked tip of his tongue across my nipple, and the orgasm that's been building tears up my spine, suddenly, violently, and explodes out of me.

The roll of my hips turns erratic as my walls clench around him, and my body becomes a boneless heap. Khatazo's thrusts continue, and when I come again, I feel myself floating through space and time, no longer tied to a physical body, but taking on a completely new form that is pure sensation. I shake and float and come while he roars into the sky and his hot seed fills me.

Eventually he growls into the crook of my neck, and his heavy body collapses on top of me. I expect to feel crushed, for my ribs to actually crack under his weight, but it feels good to be under him like this. His body covers mine so well that I practically disappear beneath him, and right here, I've never felt safer.

He whispers words of tenderness in my ear as he peppers my cheek and neck with kisses, and I rub his back. "It is always like this?" he asks, his forked tongue tracing the shell of my ear.

"No," I tell him reverently. "This," I sigh, "this is rare."

He grunts in response, and I wish I could hear his thoughts.

We take our time getting dressed, and when we try to turn the knob this time, the door opens. “Well, I’ll be damned. I guess the empress wanted a show.” I look up at one of the cameras in the corner of the ceiling, put on my brightest smile, and bow. “You’re welcome.”

I never expected to enjoy the feeling of being watched, but knowing people could see me as Khatazo gave me the best orgasm of my life is surprisingly hot. If we weren’t already dressed, I’d suggest we do it again.

Khatazo chuckles as he takes my hand and guides me through the door. As soon as it shuts, four steel cages in the room we’re in fly open, and the biggest, freakiest wolves I’ve ever seen crawl out. Their fur is an off-white, beige color, their eyes are blood-red and bulge out of their sockets as if on the verge of popping like balloons, long gray feathers encircle their necks, and they walk on six legs.

Maybe I’m still dazed by the incredible sex, but an idea forms in my head that I just can’t shake. Taking a cautious step forward, I say, “Granny had a dog that was always in a bad mood, but I was the only one who could get on his good side.” I reach out a hand. “If I just—”

“No, Ehrn!” Khatazo shouts, yanking me back behind him.

The volume and aggression of his voice frighten the space-wolves, and they yip and howl while digging at the floor, as if kicking up dirt.

“You need to speak in a baby voice,” I point out. “Dogs like that.”

“These are not Uuurth dogs,” he says, bungling the name of my home planet. “Stay behind me.”

I don't listen. I know I should, but I can't help but peek around his bicep to look at them one more time, if only to remind myself that these are dangerous creatures who want to kill me. One of them catches me peeking, and white foam flies out of its mouth as its jaw snaps shut.

“Are you a fool?” Khatazo asks, his tone harsh and mocking. “Letting you get mauled by these beasts is not something I will allow. I have witnessed enough death for one lifetime. That is a pain I hope you never know.”

It's the worst possible time to get into this discussion, with the snarling, feathered spider-wolves closing in on us, but I feel the need to set the record straight. “Actually, I do know that pain. I know it very well. I found my mom's dead body in our living room the morning after she overdosed. She was supposed to drive us to school, and I couldn't wake her up.”

Khatazo's hands drop to his sides as he listens, still facing away from me and toward the wolves.

“My sister died in front of me in a hospital bed, two years after she was diagnosed with a brain tumor,” I continue. “Granny had a heart attack while I was helping her wash dishes in the kitchen. Everyone I've loved has not only died, but they died in front of me. So don't talk to me like I'm some helpless little lamb.”

His head drops, and he lets out a frustrated growl as he scrubs a hand down his face. “I am sorry, Ehrn. A helpless lay-yum,

you are not.”

My eyes roll at the adorable way he pronounces lamb, and it eases some of my anger.

“Allow me to rid us of these creatures, and I shall fill the hole I have made in our alliance, yes?”

“Okay, fine,” I say with a chuckle, knowing he’s sincere, and that his promise to *fill the hole* is probably an unintended sexual innuendo.

I make myself as small as possible behind Khatazo’s back as their growls get louder. He growls back, and I press my forehead against the wall as the fighting begins.

It doesn’t take long for him to obliterate the small pack, and I turn just as he kicks a limp body toward the ceiling. The force of it cracks one of the ceiling panels in half, and the broken pieces fall to the floor, covering some of the mess.

I laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, but Khatazo puts a finger to his lips and points to the hole in the ceiling. That’s when I hear it. People talking. Two women, by the sound of it.

“The empress,” Khatazo whispers.

Stepping over a severed head, I get closer to the hole, and their words become clear.

“I will just say it was an unexplained weather event,” the empress says, her tone casual.

“You think they will believe this explanation?” the other person, Doctor S’Ko, I think, asks.

The empress laughs. “Have you seen some of the beings that come to settle on Yeronix? They have the weakest bodies and mushiest brains in the galaxy. They will not question it.”

Okay. Not loving the direction this conversation is taking so far.

“But has Yeronix ever had a red fog like this?” Doctor S’Ko asks. “Historically, the fog on the planet has been a light purple shade, has it not?”

Oh my god. The empress wants to release the sex fog on the residents of Yeronix? Why?

The empress sighs impatiently. “Even with the open borders, my subjects are not breeding at the pace I need them to. The fog will fix that.”

Sweet baby Jesus. She’s going to drug an entire planet to get them to have sex. Entire races of people will be so high on the red fog that they’ll have unprotected sex, get pregnant, and have children with people they don’t know or care about.

I... I can’t think or breathe. What does this mean for me? For the life I’ve been fantasizing about for years? The life I’m so close to achieving?

“We just need to acquire more of the humans,” the empress adds. “In terms of gestation, they are the ideal breeders.”

I race toward the door, and thankfully, it’s unlocked. The next room is a sustenance station, and there’s nobody else in here. The perfect place for me to curl into a ball and mourn my shattered dreams.

Eight

KHATAZO

I was right about Yeronix being a trap. Though I say none of this to Ehrn. She sobs in a heap on the floor of the sustenance station and seeing her this heartbroken claws at my insides.

The empress is a vile creature, and this plan of hers does not surprise me in the least. She has selfish goals, and she pursues them thoughtlessly. It is the way she has always been, much like her father before her and her grandmother before him. The Motavvis are a political dynasty, and many have lost their lives under Motavvi rule.

I do not know how to comfort Ehrn at this moment. She wants stability, quiet, and a place to call her own. That image of her life has been destroyed. I am glad she is able to see the empress for who she truly is, but I did not want it to be like this.

Ehrn does not let me hold her while she cries. It is the only thing I wish to do, but I respect her boundaries. She does not eat anything while at the sustenance station. I consume three

protein cubes and two bags of water. When I offer her a bite, she shakes her head, her shoulders sagging and her head low.

We move on to the next room, which has four puzzles. Ehrn remains quiet as she gathers the pieces and puts them into the frames on the wall. I offer to help, but she dismisses me, halfheartedly moving about the room and not even cracking a smile after each one is solved.

The door unlocks after the fourth puzzle is complete, and the finish line appears before us. Empress Motavvi and Doctor S'Ko stand side by side and cheer in applause as we step across the line. The trio of tiny creatures who placed the circular discs all over my body quickly remove them from my skin, then do the same for Ehrn.

“On behalf of Crinda, I would like to thank you both for your participation in our study. The data you’ve allowed us to gather will be used to create groundbreaking advances in Crindan medicine,” Empress Motavvi says, her tone sickly sweet as she pretends to be grateful for the hell we just endured. Her soul is full of rot and her mind is twisted into thinking her actions benefit someone but her. She might fool others, but she does not fool me.

She steps in front of Ehrn and takes one of her hands. I grit my teeth at the sight, trying to resist the urge to tear the skin off her face for touching what is mine.

“I must say, human,” she begins, not even attempting to use Ehrn’s name, “your performance in the compound was quite

impressive. In fact, I would like to offer you a residence on the neighboring planet of Yeronix. Have you heard of it?"

The furry lines above Ehrn's eyes lift at the offer, and I silently beg for her to turn it down.

"Yes," Ehrn says, clearing her throat. "I have."

"It is a beautiful planet, full of beings just like you who want a place to call their own."

Diabolical.

"In addition to the credits from this study," the empress continues, "I would like to reward you with a two-bedroom home on the south corner of Yeronix, free of charge."

"That is quite a generous offer," Doctor S'Ko exclaims with wide eyes, as if they have not practiced spewing this lie a dozen times. "What say you, human?"

"Um..." Ehrn trails off.

No, no, no, Ehrn. Do not fall for this.

I want to shout the words at the top of my lungs, but the empress would surely have me hanged for such an affront to her generosity.

As surprised as I am to see Ehrn contemplate this, I am more surprised by her restraint. This is the same empress that crushed her dreams two rooms ago. While she views her problems through a lens made of sunshine, Ehrn could not possibly be considering accepting this offer from the empress. Could she?

“Thank you,” Ehrn finally replies. “It’s a lot to consider. I’ll think about it.”

She will think about it? Why? What is there to think about? She either chooses a life without freedom as a breeder on Yeronix, fornicating with males who care nothing for her, or she makes a different choice. Perhaps with me.

I cannot offer a stable life of quiet like she wants, but I would put my energy into making her smile. I would put her needs before my own, and I would spend each night using my fingers, tongue, and cock to give her the pleasure she deserves.

I may not be the mate she has long envisioned, or even the mate she wants, but I would give anything to keep her.

Nine

ERIN

Empress Motavvi instructed us to make our way into the garden at the back of the compound while I consider her offer. It's dark out, probably the middle of the night if I had to guess, and the air is crisp and refreshing as it hits my skin. Tall, slender robots wheel around the grass holding trays of finger sandwiches and chilled glasses of wispo.

I decline each time they roll past me because my appetite is nonexistent. It's not because of the empress's offer. I already know my answer to that will be a polite—but firm—no, thank you. There's no way in heck I'd willingly move to Yeronix after learning about the fog and how she intends to use it.

The thing that's messing with me is why Khatazo hasn't invited me to go with him on his ship. I mean, seriously, what the fudge? I know we agreed to be allies inside the compound, never promising anything beyond that, but I thought we had a real connection. I feel closer to him than I've ever felt with anyone. We survived some serious situations and remained a steadfast team throughout the track.

Maybe these feelings are one-sided though. He said I was his, but that could've been passionate sex talk, not meant to be taken seriously.

I sigh as I drop my head in my hands. Where do I go from here? Back to the station? Spend the rest of my days working at The Meat Pocket, stinking to high heaven of grease? That sounds miserable. Though the credits I've earned will certainly make life more comfortable, without knowing where it's safe to settle, I'd probably just stay at the station and move into a bigger apartment that I wouldn't have to share with anyone. I might get more space, but I still wouldn't be able to wander around the station on my own, and without Gr'va, I'd get lonely too. I don't want any of that.

Empress Motavvi's eyes light up when she exits the back gates and spots us on a bench in the middle of the garden. "There you are." Instinctively, I get to my feet and bow my head when she comes to stand in front of me. "Have you decided yet?" she asks, her mouth forming a tight line as she takes me in. I'm sure she's not used to waiting... for anything. This must be infuriating for her.

Too bad.

"Indeed," I say, steeling my spine. I'm not about to be intimidated by this evil wretch, no matter how elegant she looks while committing unspeakable acts of cruelty. "Thanks for the offer, ma'am, but I'm going to pass."

"You wish to pass?" she asks, her voice going up an octave. "On free lodgings on a peaceful planet?"

“Yep,” I reply, crossing my arms. I refuse to give her an explanation because she doesn’t deserve one. Also, it doesn’t matter. She won’t care what I think about her plans to use the fog. I’m nothing to her. She didn’t even bother to learn my name.

She clears her throat. “Well that is a shame. Best of luck in the few remaining years your body has left in this life.” She stomps back through the gates and into the compound. I hope I never have to see her sharp, angular face again.

Khatazo is grinning like a possum eating a sweet potato when I turn to face him. “Excellent decision,” he says, nodding with pride.

We walk through the exit and into the night air, our watches buzzing the moment the credits hit our accounts, saying nothing as we make our way toward the port.

“Do you wish to return to the station?” he asks.

No, I almost say. I want to stay with you. Invite me to stay with you. Don’t let me go.

“I can give you a ride on my ship, if you would like.”

“Oh,” I reply, my lip wobbling with emotion I don’t want him to see. “Okay, yeah. Thanks.”

I could swear I hear him growl quietly in response, but I have no idea why. If he didn’t want to take me to the station, why offer?

Whatever. He gets to take his credits, get his buddy all patched up, and return to a life of treasure hunting while I spend hours

scraping burned meat scraps off the edges of the fryer.

On the way to his ship, we pass the shuttle stop I used to get here. A long line of people wait to board, and I wonder how many of them are dreading going back to their lives. What kinds of horrors did they encounter in the compound that will continue to haunt their dreams? For me, it's gotta be the serpent. Or maybe the giant bugs. Or the quicksand. Lots of trauma is coming back to the station with me, and there'll be plenty of time to unpack it.

"Which ship is yours?" I ask as we near the end of a row of impressively large and shiny ships.

The sound of metal crumpling beneath Khatazo's fist makes me jump. The roar that follows sends shivers down my spine.

"Am I not worthy of being your mate?" he shouts, twisting the mangled remains of a streetlamp in his grip. "Is it because of the ghost hallway? The way I wept in front of you?"

"Whoa, what?" I ask, utterly confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Or is it the puzzles? You require a mate skilled at puzzle-solving? I can do that. Or I can... *try* to be better at it. Perhaps there is training I can ta—"

"Hey," I say in a soft voice, holding out my hands like I would if I spotted a skittish deer in the woods. "It's okay." When the murderous look in his eyes starts to fade, I say, "I don't care if you're good at puzzles. Why would that bother me?"

He tosses the crushed metal aside and crosses his arms. “Ehrn, I know I am not your ideal mate, but you are mine, and I would like to keep you.”

The deeper the words sink in, the wider my smile gets. He wants me. Khatazo wants to make me his mate, move me onto his ship, and spend his life by my side. My heart is so full, I’m worried it’s about to burst. “Interesting,” I say, taking a step closer to him. “Because I thought I annoyed you.”

“You do!” he shouts. “You are far too positive, especially when optimism is inappropriate. I worry you will wander into the mouth of a fire-breathing dragon simply because you think his tongue is pretty.”

I laugh because he’s not wrong. Of course I’d want to get a closer look at a dragon with a pretty tongue, but I wouldn’t be stupid enough to let it eat me, and though he’s shouting otherwise, I think he knows that too.

He steps toward me, keeping me locked in his gaze. “But even in the darkest corners of that miserable compound, you found the light. You... *are* the light.”

My heart skips several beats. He’s giving me exactly what I want wrapped in the most beautiful words I’ve ever heard. So why does he still seem so distraught?

“I fear my soul has grown too dark, my pain too consuming, to see without you, Ehrn.” He sighs, turning his back to me. “I wish you felt the same.”

I launch myself at him like a flying squirrel and wrap my arms and legs around him the moment I land on his back. “I do feel the same, you big red dummy.”

“What?” he says, jerking his head around to look at me.

I slide down his body and hop around him until we’re face to face. “I don’t want to go back to the station. That place sucks. My life there sucks. I want you and everything you have to offer.”

Khatazo searches my face as if trying to uncover a lie.

“I never said you weren’t good enough for me,” I tell him, pressing the point of my chin into his chest as I gaze up at him. “That wasn’t even a thought that entered my mind. I like you just the way you are. You didn’t invite me to stay with you on your ship, so I figured you didn’t want me. And I wasn’t about to invite myself. Granny taught me better than that.”

“So you will stay with me?” he asks, his deep voice cracking with hope. “I cannot give you the quiet life you wished for on Yeronix, but I will give you the protection of my body and the stability you seek can be found in my heart, which is eternally yours.”

I smile up at him, joy seeping out of my every pore. “That’s more than enough for me.”

He lifts me into his arms as if I weigh nothing, and I cross my feet against his lower back as he carries me up the ramp to his ship.

“Take me home, Big Red.”

Epilogue

ERIN

A month later...

Pirate life is much easier than I thought it'd be, I think to myself. I twirl my new emerald necklace around my finger as I check on the plants in my hydroponic garden. The growth is slow for some of the vegetables, but since these aren't Earth veggies, I'm not sure if that's to be expected. Luckily, Khatazo carved out enough space in the food closet so they have room to grow.

The last month has flown by, and it's been the best month of my life. Once Qibor fully recovered from his procedure and got used to the feel of his new cybernetic arm, Khatazo started lining up jobs across Crinda. I didn't know how I'd be able to contribute to Khatazo's crew. They're a well-oiled machine when it comes to stealing from the rich, and I was worried I'd get in the way.

It turns out, this team has been lacking a key ingredient to their thievery: bait. I am spectacular bait. On our first job together,

Aukellin told me to act dumb and look confused while wandering onto a slaver's ship orbiting Niifrahn, a planet not far from Huva II.

Khatazo immediately shot that idea down. "No, do not act dumb. Be yourself. Be Ehrn."

So once our ship locked onto theirs, I walked down the tunnel and played with the short hem of my skirt as I took in the unique, swirling lines on their ship's walls. The guards lowered their weapons immediately when I came into view, their tongues hanging out, and Khatazo, Aukellin, and Qibor charged past me, taking them down as well as the rest of their crew.

We took the group of Niifrahnians we found locked in a large metal cage back to their home planet and kept the reward credits and jewels for ourselves.

Our coffers are overflowing, and there are plenty of jobs ahead of us to keep us fat and happy as we map out our long-term plans.

"There you are," Khatazo growls as his fangs nip at my ear. Then he glides his tongue down my neck. "Mmm, you are my favorite meal."

"Oh yeah?" I reply, turning in his arms. I climb up my little stepladder, then sit on a ledge that Khatazo cleared to make room for my future plant babies. Lifting the hem of my dress, I part my thighs and expose my pussy. "Care for a snack then?"

I've come to learn there's no point in wearing underwear around him. We've had sex all over the ship, and my clit is in a perpetual state of throbbing need in his presence.

His pupils dilate as he devours me with his eyes, then lowers himself to his knees before me. I let my gaze drift over his body, feeling particularly grateful he walks around shirtless all day, and I bite my lip as I follow the rigid planes of his chest. My mate is built like a weapon of mass destruction, but only I get to see the sweet jelly in the middle.

Once his mouth is on me he doesn't go slow, because he's learned how much louder I scream when he goes fast, and like a typical guy, he loves hearing me shout his name. Khatazo's forked tongue delves between my folds and fills my core, marking it, claiming it, as his grip tightens on my thighs. I arch against his face, my clit seeking friction as I moan, "Yes, yes. More."

His tongue is hot as he thrusts in and out of me. My hands flail as they seek the edge of shelves, the wall, anything to hold on to as I roll my hips against his mouth. I feel his breath turn ragged as the tip of his nose brushes against my clit. He continues to lap at my dripping pussy, drinking me down as I wrap my hands around his tall horns and hold tight.

"Come for me, Ehrn," he mutters against my folds, the vibration of his voice bringing me closer to the edge.

In the same moment, his claws bite into the bare skin of my behind as his fangs brush along the side of my clit, and right there in the food closet, I detonate. My eyes roll so far back, I

worry they'll eject from my skull and bounce across the floor. My voice goes hoarse while screaming his name, and still, his tongue ripples inside the deepest corners of my body until my vision blurs.

I don't know how long my orgasm lasts. I just know that Khatazo's arms are wrapped around me, holding me firmly against his chest as I come down. Also, the front of his pants is soaking wet. I guess he came when I did.

I'm still shaking as he rubs my back and kisses along my collarbone.

"Mmm, you've got quite the tongue," I tell him, turning his face toward me so I can feel the fierce press of his lips.

He smiles against my mouth. "Not quite as talented as yours, but I appreciate the compliment."

This is certainly not what I imagined my future would look like when I stepped off that shuttle on Huva II and strode toward the compound. It's not a quiet life, and maybe it's not always safe, but it's the only one I want. "We make a great team, huh?"

Khatazo chuckles, his bare chest rumbling against mine with the sound. "That we do, my heart. That we do."

Note to the Reader

About the Author

Ivy Knox has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, but quickly found her home in sci-fi romance because life on Earth can be kind of a drag. When she's not lost on faraway worlds created by her favorite authors, she's creating her own.

Ivy lives with her husband and two neurotic (but very cute) dogs in the Midwest. When she's not reading or writing, she's probably watching *Bridgerton*, *New Girl*, *The Office*, or *What We Do in the Shadows* for the millionth time.

Read more of Ivy's books here: www.amazon.com/Ivy-Knox/e/B08PCD51K1

Linktree: linktr.ee/ivyknox

Spiderwoman by Jade Waltz

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



WAKING UP NEXT TO THE WOMAN OF MY DREAMS...

...with no memory of how I got there should've been a warning sign.

I didn't realize there were eight legs lurking beneath the silk blanket.

To survive, I've become a spiderwoman's pet...

But things aren't as bad as they first appear.

Content Warnings: *bondage, master/pet scenario, large spider(woman), drinking alien pleasure essence from breasts*

One

CHAR

The harsh clatter and tremble of an alien force splitting the quiet calm of my territory jarred me from my slumber. It echoed through the dense forest of my home, cutting through the dark curtain of the night and stabbing into the peace of my sanctuary.

It was a noise that didn't belong, a cacophony that threatened to shatter the serene world I'd claimed as mine.

My eyes snapped open, the multifaceted view of my hometree's interior momentarily disorienting in my sudden wakefulness. I flexed my long, barbed legs, my spinnerets unconsciously weaving a thin thread of silk in my irritation.

Intruders.

During the heart of the mating season no less.

Such audacity was beyond my comprehension, especially during the twilight hours.

A growl slipped from my lips, resonating through the hollow of my hometree. I flexed my fingers, the muscles rippling up

to my shoulders before I reached for my trusty dart pole, its familiar weight comforting in the wake of such intrusion.

It was a carefully crafted weapon, its deadly tip honed from the hardest tree bark, its shaft long and flexible. My meticulous care ensured it was always ready, always lethal.

With weapon in hand, I descended my hometree, the silk lines of my home network trembling beneath my touch as I navigated downward.

My mind reeled with scenarios of what could have caused such a disturbance, and if I would need to call my fellow sisters for assistance, even during such a highly stressful time.

It was an intruder, a threat.

And if large enough, it was possibly my next meal. I could store it away to dine for many days within the safety of my hometree.

I scurried down the massive trunk, feeling the vibrations of my kin nearby, the threads connecting our home network trembling with their frantic movements.

I was not alone in my confusion or my anger. This was our land, and such audacity would not be tolerated.

The chill night air brushed against my chitinous exterior as I reached the ground, my many eyes adjusting to the ambient moonlight that filtered through the towering foliage. The scent of burnt wood and something... alien filled my nostrils.

The crash site was closer than I had first suspected.

I darted across the leaf-laden forest floor, my legs whisper quiet against the underbrush. The silent promise to protect my ancestral home fueled my determination to confront the source.

The journey across my territory was always one of wary alertness. The looming shadow of other predators lurking in the underbrush ever present. Predators who may have been attracted by the disturbance, their curious noses sniffing out the cause of such a noise.

I was Char, huntress of the Peutreae, queen of my realm. I would allow no threat to go unchallenged, and any who dared to raise a tooth or claw toward me would become my next meal.

Whoever or whatever had dared to crash into my world, onto my land, disturbing the peace, would soon learn the consequences of their reckless trespass.

I slowed as I neared the site, my eyes taking in the scene before me.

The glint of foreign metal drew my attention.

Amid the trunks of two ancient trees, a strange round object lay wedged, its exterior radiating a peculiar glow. The moonlight played off its surface, casting eerie shadows and reflections that danced across the night-draped forest.

This metallic vessel was far too small for my species, and its shape could only indicate one thing: this was an emergency escape pod.

Beside this wreckage, a creature lay crumpled and still. It was not a species that I recognized, but I'd never cared about the other species within the Interstellar Protections Agency—IPA. There was no point, unless they'd dared trespass on my land, since my sisters and I ruled this planet and didn't need aid from the galactic government.

But somehow, this was different...

The sight of its battered, unconscious form sprawled amongst the underbrush struck a chord within me. A fragile-looking alien in my territory during mating season was a complication I hadn't prepared for.

As I approached, my heart pounded in my chest, the rhythm echoing in my ears, my gaze locked on my target, dart weapon poised and ready. I could have struck from a distance, ended the threat before it even became one, but the scent that reached me gave me pause.

It was a rich, husky aroma that cut through the cool night air and curled around my senses. It caused an instinctual reaction, an immediate physical response that sent shockwaves coursing through my body. My mammary glands began to leak, a clear sign of arousal among my kind, and my spinnerets vibrated with a powerful need.

This creature... It smelled delicious.

Inviting. Too inviting perhaps.

For the first time in my existence, the idea of consuming a creature was repugnant. There was a pull to this being, a lure

that went beyond mere physical hunger—a primal need unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

The way my body was reacting to this alien, this male, was undeniable.

A swirl of emotions, as complex and tangled as my own web, churned within me.

Against all logic and reason, against the very fabric of my world, my body craved his.

I must have him.

I cast my gaze around the perimeter, searching the underbrush and shadows for any signs of my sisters or any other lurking predators.

This was my find, my rightful claim, and I refused to let anyone attempt to raid this site while I was here.

Thankfully there were no flames licking the wreckage, no beacon of light to draw unwanted attention. The thick canopy of trees shielded us from prying eyes, and the looming clouds gathering in the sky promised a coming storm, which would wash away any lingering traces of the crash.

A primal urge took over. I needed to secure my prize. He was mine, and I would take him back to my hometree, back to the safety of my web. My body tingled with determination, protective instincts I didn't realize I had kicked in.

Sister or not, no one would take him away from me.

Approaching the unconscious male, I knelt down next to him, my eyes scanning his form. His steady breaths were a comforting sound in the otherwise quiet night. Aside from the scrapes and bruises that painted his skin, he appeared to be unharmed.

As I assessed his condition, my fingers brushed against his skin. It was warmer than I expected, a stark contrast to the cold metal of the ship he'd arrived in. I found myself lingering, the alien sensation captivating.

The storm was nearing, and I had no intention of leaving him exposed to its wrath. My prize was precious, and I would protect him.

With a lingering glance, I decided to carry him back to my home, into the safety of my webbed sanctuary. There, I would tend to his injuries and clean him up, and perhaps sample from him.

As the first drops of rain began to fall, I reached for my spinnerets, fingers brushing against the delicate yet resilient threads of silk I produced.

An almost palpable relief swept through me as I allowed my body to instinctively spin the intricate threads, turning the energy that had been bubbling within me into something smooth and firm, the tool I required to secure my prize.

Gently—so very gently—I positioned his limbs together, my fingers mindful of the bruises and scrapes marring his skin.

Working with meticulous precision, I began to bind the unconscious alien male.

His limbs, though battered and bruised, were strong and well-formed. I was careful to ensure my bindings were firm but not restrictive, enough to hold him securely without causing any further harm.

His body, save his face, was encased in my silken webbing.

I would not suffocate him in my haste.

Encased in the white silk of my web, his form contrasted starkly against the vibrant green foliage. I took a moment to just... look at him, the alien male who'd crashed into my world and stirred up a torrent of unfamiliar feelings within me.

My fingers found their way into his hair, combing through the strands as I leaned closer.

His scent, that intoxicating blend of musk and foreign spices, wafted up to me. It was a heady, inviting smell that made my mouth water and my glands leak with an inexplicable longing.

My entire body throbbed with the need to claim him, to mark him as mine.

But not here, not now. It was not the time—and definitely not the place.

Suddenly a shiver ran down my spine, the sense of being watched. The forest was full of eyes, and I could feel them on me, a prickling sensation on the back of my neck.

I couldn't afford to linger.

Swiftly I lifted my ensnared male onto my back, weaving more silk to secure him in place for our journey.

Looking back at the strange vessel lodged between the two ancient trees in my territory, I felt a sense of satisfaction.

Its alien contents held little appeal for me; I had already claimed the most valuable treasure from the wreckage.

Let the others squabble over the remains. I had what I desired.

My spinnerets danced as I wove my message between the trees, a language of silk and pattern that only my sisters could understand. I was releasing my claim to the crash site, handing it over to them.

They could scavenge for whatever they deemed useful.

I had far more pressing matters to attend to now.

Just as I finished the final thread, the rain began to pour, large droplets splashing against my carapace and soaking into the forest floor. The looming storm I had sensed earlier was now upon us, its heavy, rhythmic thrum a powerful backdrop to my mission.

My weapon in one hand, my prize secured on my back, I ventured deeper into my territory. The rain was a blessing, washing away our scent, hiding our tracks from prying eyes.

Every creaking tree branch, every sudden movement in the underbrush, was scrutinized, a potential threat that needed to be addressed.

The journey home was a blur of alertness and anticipation, my senses tuned to the highest degree. When my hometree finally loomed into view, a sigh of relief slipped from my lips.

We were home.

Carefully, I unwrapped my slumbering treasure from my back, his body limp and warm against mine. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, a sign that he was unharmed.

Ensuring he wouldn't roll away and tumble to the ground, I tethered him to my nest with a few strands of silk. The bonds were gentle yet firm, a safety measure to keep him secure.

Once satisfied, I nestled beside him, drawing my web-woven blanket over us. The soft fabric cocooned us, providing a barrier against the cold. Despite the security of my hometree, I kept my weapon within arm's reach.

Unlikely as it was to be needed, I couldn't let my guard down, especially with it being mating season. While I had alarms and traps throughout my land, for anyone bold enough to try to conquer me during a mating dance, I knew I was being bold by resting beside my intruder.

But he was *mine*, and from what I saw of him, he was defenseless against me.

As the pattering raindrops echoed around us and his steady breathing filled the silent night, I allowed myself to relax. His scent was a heady intoxicant, filling my den with its aroma, making me hyperaware of his alien presence.

Letting his delicious scent envelop me, I let the rhythm of the rain and his steady breaths lull me into sleep.

For the first time in a long while, I wasn't alone in my nest. It was a comforting and peculiarly enticing thought.

Two

AVERY

I awoke disoriented and drowsy. My body felt heavy, like I was cocooned in a comforting weight, my limbs bound. In my befuddled state, I recalled the familiar fuzziness of waking up after a night of overindulgence.

Had I drank too much at the wedding reception?

The memory was hazy at best. There had been laughter, music, the clinking of glasses, and then... nothing. The last thing I remembered was admiring the array of attractive women aboard the space cruise ship.

A chuckle slipped from my lips. Had I scored big and didn't even remember it?

It was dark where I was, but there was enough light for me to make out the figure beside me. I felt my breath hitch. Was I dreaming? She was easily the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. How had I gotten so lucky?

As my eyes adjusted to the low light, I took in her ethereal beauty. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically, her large breasts

pressed against my side through her revealing silk tank top. Her hair, an enchanting shade of purple, was strewn across the sheets, glowing under the dim light. Her cheeks were delicately pointed, complementing her luscious, dark rose-stained lips. Framed by thick lashes, her eyes were closed, hiding the color of her irises, but I already knew they would be captivating.

She was sleeping peacefully, her chest rising and falling gently, the sound of her breath a soothing lullaby. I felt a twinge of guilt, realizing that I didn't remember anything about our time together. She was breathtaking, and yet I had no recollection of what must've been an incredible night.

I tried to stretch, to bask in the lingering warmth of sleep and the soft body pressed against me. But my own body refused to comply. My arms were pinned to my sides and my legs were held fast as if by a tourniquet. The drowsy fog of sleep cleared as panic started to creep in.

Was I still tied up from some risqué BDSM play?

I racked my hazy brain for any memory of it, but there was nothing. I'd never been into that kind of stuff, so why was I like this?

Struggling against my restraints, I grunted, the inexplicable bondage feeding my rising anxiety. The soft fabric, which had felt comforting earlier, now felt like chains.

My movement must have awakened my bed companion.

I froze as her eyes fluttered open to reveal the most mesmerizing dark green eyes I'd ever seen. In the dim light, they seemed to glow, stunning me into silence.

The sight of her disoriented me. I stopped my struggles, taken aback by her unique beauty. A sleep-soft smile graced her lips, and she let out a small chuckle, the sound as sweet as honey. The melodic timbre of her voice sent a shiver of arousal down my spine, stirring my cock to life.

I swallowed hard, feeling an unexpected tightness in my pants.

Why was I so turned on right now? This was hardly the time or place, and yet my body seemed to have a mind of its own.

Her gaze met mine, her lips still curved in that intoxicating smile.

What the hell was happening? How had I ended up here?

The night's earlier events were a blank canvas in my mind. But, looking at the captivating woman beside me, I couldn't deny the flare of lust that shot through me.

Whatever the circumstances, I found myself hopelessly drawn to her.

"Hey, sexy," I said, wiggling in my restraints. "Want to help me out here?"

"Or I could leave you there," the beauty cooed, her large breasts nearly falling out of her top. She licked her lips as she dragged one of her long fingernails down my cheek to my neck, tugging at the ties that held me bound. "You are too valuable to let go. I'm going to keep you forever."

As those glowing green eyes held my gaze, alarms blared in my head. Was this the situation I had so often warned my friends about? The crazy-hot scale—a humorous theory that measured a woman’s attractiveness against her level of insanity.

The hotter she was, the crazier she could be, and you’d still overlook it.

And let’s face it, my bed companion was beyond hot. The way her tank top clung to her chest, outlining those large breasts, the wild cascade of purple hair, those vibrant green eyes...

But the fact that I woke up bound, with no memory of how I got there? That was a solid point in the crazy column.

I had to admit though, even with the panic gnawing at me and the confusion muddling my thoughts, I couldn’t stop myself from being entranced by her.

I must have been losing my mind. Maybe this was just some vivid, twisted dream brought on by too many drinks.

“Forever is a very long time, babe.” I wiggled in my restraints, attempting to bend enough to see what she was up to, glancing between her beaming face and her bombastic boobs. “This is supposed to be a long vacation. I’m not interested in anything serious. Too free spirited. You understand, right?”

Her words hung in the air, demanding my attention. “I don’t think you understand. You’re in my land, in my nest, and I won’t let you leave.” Her voice was soft, but her tone brooked no argument.

I scoffed, incredulity sweeping over me. “Look, I’m not into this role playing shit. I want out. This isn’t fun anymore.”

My heart hammered in my chest. Was this a joke? Some twisted prank? Or had I wound up in the bed of a genuine psychopath?

She growled, low and menacing, and threw off her blanket. My blood ran cold. All the air in the room seemed to leave with that blanket, and my heart stalled in my chest.

I screamed, the sound echoing eerily in the confines of the room, and tried to roll away. But my body was bound, unable to move more than a few inches. Fear prickled at the base of my spine, crawling up and over me as the reality of the situation set in.

Beneath the blanket, where I expected to see two human legs, I was met with a sight out of my worst nightmares. A large, grotesque spider body, complete with eight, long legs.

My head spun, the world teetering on its axis. This was impossible.

Gazing down at the monstrous form, a cold, paralyzing horror swept over me. She was all at once beautiful and terrifying—a fever dream sprung to life. The purple-haired goddess I’d admired just moments ago now revealed as a monstrous arachnid.

With each movement of her legs, a cold shiver raced up my spine, making my heart clench in terror. Every thread of reason told me to flee, to struggle against my webbed bindings

and run as far away as I could. But there was nowhere to run. I was trapped.

She smiled at me, her eyes as vibrant and green as before, but now I could see a new depth to them. A predatory gleam I hadn't noticed before. Her fingers—still human—traced over my cheek, a touch as soft as silk but cold as ice.

I flinched back, a pathetic whimper escaping my lips.

“It’s all right,” she cooed, her voice both soothing and unnerving. “You’ll learn to love me.”

What the fuck?

My eyes darted around the room. It wasn't a bedroom. This wasn't a luxury suite on the space cruise ship. There were no modern comforts. Instead, it was a cavernous tree hollow, dimly lit and furnished with what seemed to be primitive items fashioned from nature.

It was the setting of a nightmare.

“I don't understand,” I managed to choke out, meeting her glowing emerald gaze with my own bewildered eyes. “What do you want from me?”

She paused, her fingers still tracing my cheek, before slowly moving down to my chest. The soft touches sent unwanted shivers through me, making my heart pound all the more. “I want you,” she said, her declaration rolling off her tongue like some sacred command. “You’ve crash-landed onto my world, into my territory... You are now mine.”

“But... I’m not some object to be owned,” I protested, but my voice sounded weak and feeble. “I’m a human being.”

She smiled then, a strange, chilling grin. “Your species isn’t registered as a part of the IPA as my species is,” she murmured, leaning close. Her breath washed over my face, sweet and intoxicating. I was startled by the genuine warmth in her eyes, the strange fondness that seemed so misplaced in this horrifying scenario. “Therefore, you’re mine.”

Her words echoed in my mind, filling me with a deep-rooted dread.

How was I going to escape this? How was I going to survive?

The world tipped on its axis once again, leaving me feeling nauseated and dizzy.

She spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, as though she was explaining the simplest of truths and not sentencing me to a lifetime of servitude or death.

“Your species,” I echoed, my voice coming out as a mere whisper. “You mean, there are more of you?”

She chuckled lightly, the sound both eerie and beautiful. “Yes, there are many more of us. I am the queen of this land, ruling over my huntress sisters as we protect our ancient hunting grounds from intruders... like you.”

I tried to process that. A planet filled with half-woman, half-spider beings. “And if you hadn’t found me... your sisters would have...”

The corner of her mouth lifted in what I could only guess was her equivalent of a smirk. “They would not have been so gentle. As I said, you are lucky.”

Lucky? That was not the word I would have used. Cursed, maybe. Trapped, definitely. But lucky? It felt like a cruel joke.

“How am I lucky?” I spat. “I’m trapped here, on a planet where it appears that I’ve fallen to the bottom of the totem pole.”

“Because you smell too delicious to eat,” she drawled out, her voice coming out more like a purr. “So I’ve decided to keep you here as my pet... And if you’re good, you’ll be rewarded.”

“And if I’m bad?” I forced myself to ask, although I already knew the answer. Her green eyes were staring right into mine, vibrant and unblinking.

Her lips parted, and I could see the tips of what appeared to be fangs. A shudder ran through me. “Then I will feast on your blood,” she said, the words sending a fresh wave of terror washing over me. “It will sustain me, keep me within the safety of my hometree during the dangerous mating season.”

Her words were like ice water poured over my head. The thought of being considered a pet made my stomach churn. My mind raced, thoughts of escape, of survival, of the impossible situation I found myself in.

Here I was, trapped on an alien world, in an alien creature’s nest, considered nothing more than a pet, or food if I proved to

be too troublesome. My choices had narrowed down to servitude or death, and it was a terrifying reality to face.

No training, no preparation, could have prepared me for this. I was stuck, and I had no idea how to escape.

My body shook as the tears came, hot and unstoppable. The brutal reality of my situation hit me like a sledgehammer, ripping away the last vestiges of denial.

“No, please...” I begged, my voice hoarse from fear and desperation. “I’ll be good. I promise. I don’t want to die.”

She moved then, her spiderlegs silent on the web-covered wooden floor, and before I could react, she scooped me into her arms. I tensed, the fight-or-flight instinct kicking in, but there was nothing I could do, bound the way I was.

“Shh...” she whispered, pressing my face into the valley of her large breasts. “Everything will be all right. You will be okay as long as you are a good male.”

Her words sounded absurd to me, but the lulling rhythm of her heartbeat under my ear was undeniably soothing. Her scent, a mix of earthy and something floral, filled my senses, strangely comforting in its unfamiliarity.

Her hand stroked through my hair, each caress a promise of safety and warmth, as long as I obeyed. I was torn between the terror of my predicament and the reassuring care she was showing me.

I closed my eyes, my mind whirling, my heart heavy.

Could I do this? Could I be the pet of a half woman, half spider alien being?

The choice, it seemed, was no longer mine to make.

It was submit or die.

For now, I chose to live.

Three

CHAR

A satisfied smile spread across my face as the human male's sobs ceased, replaced by hesitant breaths. His scent filled my senses, a sweet, intoxicating mix that sent my instincts soaring. There was fear there too, acidic and sharp, a smell I knew all too well. But it didn't sit well with me; fear wasn't a scent I wanted from my male.

"Will you be a good male?" I asked, my voice dipping low, seductive even. "Promise not to run away?"

His eyes, a rich brown that reminded me of the deep forests and the damp soil after a rainfall, peered up at me from my breasts. He swallowed, the motion drawing my attention to the delicate curve of his throat, and then nodded.

"I'll be good," he murmured, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I don't want to die."

I savored his submission, my spinnerets quivering with the thrill of it. But I needed to be sure. "Can I trust you?"

He didn't hesitate. His gaze locked with mine, and he nodded, his eyes wide and filled with earnestness. "Yes," he said, and for a moment, I allowed myself to believe him. "I'm too young to die."

It was a dangerous game we were playing. For both of us.

His words alarmed me. A youngling? It was a disturbing thought. While I was not averse to having a pet, I certainly had no desire to care for an immature one. Especially a human one, for they weren't even members of the IPA for a reason. I turned my gaze to him, taking in his features.

"Are you a youngling? Or are you mature for your species?" I asked, my voice low, calm, despite my rising concerns.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly shook his head, a determined look flashing in his eyes. "No, I'm fully mature," he said with a firmness that eased my worries.

"And what should I call you?" I asked, intrigued by his sudden change in demeanor. "Unless you want me to name you Pet."

"My name is Avery," he replied. And then, with a look of curiosity on his face, he added, "How can we understand each other?"

I chuckled at the question and reached up to tap the device behind my ear. "Universal translator," I explained. "It's constantly updated by a crew stationed on your home planet, through our galactic network system."

He looked at me in awe, his eyes taking in the sight of me. "And what's your name?" he asked, his voice barely a

whisper.

“Queen Char,” I answered, a hint of pride in my voice.

His reaction surprised me, his eyes growing wide with a hint of reverence. “If I wasn’t bound,” he murmured, his voice a shaky whisper, “I would be on my knees, bowing and begging for your forgiveness.”

I chuckled at the thought, amused by the picture he painted. It was tempting to see him so... submissive. “That could be arranged,” I teased, my voice low and husky.

His eyes met mine, a desperate plea in his gaze. “What can I do to be freed?” he asked, his words coming out in a rush.

I considered his question, weighing my options. Could I trust him? The risk was high, but the rewards... The thought of having a willing pet was alluring.

“You promise me that you won’t attempt to flee,” I demanded, my tone brokering no argument. “Not only will you encounter a creature far less forgiving than I, but you’d also surely fall to your death.”

He swallowed and nodded. “I promise,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Reluctantly, I pulled Avery away from the warmth of my chest and laid him on the webbed nest. I watched his reactions, taking in his wide-eyed astonishment and the flush that colored his cheeks.

“Like what you see?” I teased, holding up one of my hands. Four shiny black talons sprouted from the tips of my fingers,

gleaming in the low light of the den. I flexed them, enjoying the way he watched, his eyes wide and lips parted. “These are just one of my weapons,” I said, a note of pride in my voice. “I have more... deadly attributes.”

His eyes flickered to mine, fear and curiosity mingling in their depths. “Okay,” he breathed out, his voice shaky. “I don’t want to figure out what they are.”

“Stay still,” I ordered, my voice sharp. His head bobbed in a nod.

With a flick of my wrist, I sliced through the silken strands of my web cocoon, watching as it parted under the sharp edge of my talons. I peeled the sticky strands away, slowly revealing the trembling form of my human pet beneath.

His immediate reaction was to clutch at his throat, fingers scraping against his skin. I watched as he pushed himself up into a sitting position, the movement tentative as he wiggled his limbs, carefully examining his body for damage.

His scent, woody and uniquely male, filled the air around us, now unobstructed by the webbing. It wrapped around me, sinking into my senses, and I found myself shuffling uncomfortably. My glands reacted instantly, leaking with the instinctual desire to mate that was triggered by his aroma.

My gaze darted back to him. My human pet, so fragile and weak.

What was I doing? This was madness.

I should have simply eaten him and been done with it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“Nothing,” I snapped, more harshly than I intended. “Don’t worry about it.”

But Avery was not so easily deterred. He rose to his feet, wobbling slightly as he took in his surroundings. His gaze landed on my hunting top, now damp from my body’s uncontrolled reaction.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked, his eyes meeting mine.

Mother Web. Why couldn’t he just be a good pet and not ask questions?

“My body is reacting to you,” I admitted, my voice rough. His scent, the submissive way he carried himself... it was a far cry from the aggression I was used to from the males of my species. It was... enticing.

He glanced down at the short, black garment clinging to his hips, then back up at me. “You’re the most attractive female I’ve ever seen. Well, your top half at least,” he confessed, his cheeks flushing a dark hue. “Your bottom half... it scares me.”

“As long as you behave, you have nothing to fear,” I assured him again, my gaze never leaving his.

He swallowed hard, his eyes wandering back to my chest.

“Why are you... leaking?”

“Those,” I explained, looking down at my own breasts, “are full of nutrients. They’re for my breeding partner. They take what they need to ensure they can plant their seed without fighting me.”

His next question caught me off guard. “Do you... need them drained?” he asked, his gaze flitting between my face and chest. “Like breastfeeding mothers?”

“Yes,” I admitted, a strange sensation filling me. “They will continue to produce until they are drained. Then the process repeats itself until the mating season ends.”

“How often do you need them drained?” His voice was so small, so innocent.

I turned my gaze toward the entrance of my dwelling, the new day just beginning to break. “Daily, or every three days. It depends on... how aroused I am.”

“I can help,” he offered, his eyes meeting mine with a newfound determination. “I can be a good pet, Char. I can... I can help with your needs.”

Four

AVERY

“How often do you need them drained?”

She turned her gaze toward the dwelling’s entrance, the morning sun just beginning to break. “Daily, or every three days. It depends on... how aroused I am.”

“I can help,” I offered, her eyes meeting mine with a newfound hope. “I can be a good pet, Char. I can... I can help with your needs.”

I couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. I was offering to... to service her, to relieve her of her discomfort. But she was my savior, in a way, and perhaps by showing my usefulness, I could survive.

She was beautiful. There was no denying it.

Her green eyes sparkled with an otherworldly glow, her purple hair cascaded over her shoulders like a royal mantle. I just had to keep my focus above her waist, and everything would be fine.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward, meeting her gaze with as much courage as I could muster. “I know my way around... women,” I told her. “I know how to make you feel good, if you’ll let me.”

A moment of stunned silence followed before she finally spoke. “Please,” she said, a single word, yet it held a multitude of meanings.

Stepping closer, I looked deep into her luminous green eyes. “Trust me, Char,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. I swallowed hard, my heart pounding in my chest. “I won’t harm you. I just want to... to make you feel good.”

The silence that followed was deafening. The rustling sounds of the tree canopy above our heads and the low hum of distant alien life were the only background noise.

For a moment, I thought she would refuse, perhaps even laugh at my feeble attempt to please her. But she didn’t.

Instead, Char lowered herself onto the web-covered wooden floor of her nest, her spider body reclining gracefully. Her eyes, full of a strange, alien vulnerability, met mine. She spoke then, her voice soft but determined. “I am not worried, Avery,” she said, her gaze steady. “You can’t harm me.”

Slowly, with the gentlest of touches, I reached out to cup Char’s ample breasts. The firm yet yielding flesh beneath my fingers sent a jolt of arousal through me.

I could see the anticipation in Char’s green eyes as I leaned in closer. Her breath hitched, the quiet sound echoing in the

relative stillness of the lair. My heart pounded in my chest, each beat a testament to the strange reality I found myself in.

Char's breath hitched slightly, her emerald eyes growing brighter as she watched me. There was a moment of hesitation before I leaned in, closing the gap between us.

As my lips met hers, everything else fell away. The gentle pressure, the taste of her, was intoxicating. Her lips were warm, slightly rough yet yielding, and I lost myself in the feel of them against mine.

Her lips were soft and pliant, with a slight tang of something fruity. I let my tongue gently explore, tracing the outline of her lips before deepening the kiss. Her hands found their way into my hair, her fingers threading through my strands, pulling me closer.

My fingers tightened on her breasts, squeezing gently. The sensation of her nipples hardening beneath my touch sent a rush of desire through me. Her skin was warm to the touch, and beneath it, I could feel the rapid fluttering of her heartbeat.

The noise she made, a low, husky sound deep in her throat, only spurred me on.

I kept the kiss slow, savoring every second. My thumb brushed over her nipple, drawing a soft gasp from her. The sound vibrated against my lips, stoking the fire within me.

I explored her, my hands and lips not enough to satisfy the hunger that had awakened within me. The contours of her body were familiar, yet not.

My mind was a whirlwind of sensations: the taste of her lips, the feel of her breasts in my hands, the soft sounds she was making. Despite everything, the thought that I was actually kissing an alien, a spider-like alien no less, was oddly exhilarating.

It was madness, pure and simple. But as I deepened the kiss, feeling her response, I couldn't bring myself to care.

With a sudden ferocity, Char's hands shot down from my hair, covering mine on her breasts. She ripped her top open, and I was suddenly confronted with the sight of the most incredibly full breasts I'd ever seen.

They were massive, round, and topped with hard, teal nipples that leaked a strange, sparkly substance.

Mesmerized by the sight, my fingers brushed lightly over her nipples, causing her to gasp. I couldn't help myself, the curiosity was overwhelming.

Leaning forward, I let my tongue dart out to take a tentative taste.

It was sweet, like fruit punch, yet more intoxicating. It flooded my senses, swirling through me like a heady cocktail. There was an addictive quality to it, a drug-like intoxication that left me wanting more.

And I did want more. So much more.

I leaned in, letting my lips wrap around her nipple, sucking the strange nectar from her breast. Her body arched in response, a throaty moan escaping from her lips.

The sound was intensely arousing, stoking the fire of desire already burning within me.

My body reacted of its own accord, a firm hardness pressing against my black boxers. All thoughts of where I was, or how bizarre the situation might be, were replaced with a primal need.

A need to taste her, to touch her, to pleasure her. To hear those sweet, throaty moans that she made when I touched her just right.

My heart pounded as Char's arms slid around me, pulling me closer. Her hands reached down to my boxers, deftly pushing them down and off, leaving me bare before her.

My breath hitched, a gasp escaping against her breast as the chill air of the room grazed my heated skin.

But I didn't pull away.

Suddenly her voice was in my ear, a sultry whisper that sent shivers down my spine. "Can I make you feel good too, pet?"

"Yes, please," I breathed out, almost begging. The thought of her touch on me was enough to make me throb with anticipation.

Swift as a shadow, she used her webbing to tie my hands. I watched, breathless, as she secured the other ends to the ceiling. She coaxed me to stand tall, leaving me in a vulnerable position, arms raised high, exposed in more ways than one.

With a purr that vibrated deep in her chest, she leaned in close, her breath fanning my bare skin. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you,” she whispered, her voice laced with a tantalizing promise. “You did me a favor, and it’s only right that I repay it.”

With that, she pulled away, her gaze running over me, predatory and possessive. Despite the fear coiling within me, there was an exhilarating rush, a thrill that had my heart pounding in my chest. I was about to be pleased by an alien queen... and I was eagerly awaiting every moment of it.

Her gaze fell from my face to the throbbing hardness between my legs, curiosity dancing in her emerald-green eyes. “Is that your... stav?” she asked, tilting her head slightly to the side.

My brow furrowed in confusion. “Stav?”

She nodded, her fingers tracing a gentle pattern in the air. “Yes. A male’s... mating member.”

I felt a heat creep up my cheeks. This wasn’t a conversation I was accustomed to having, especially with a creature as magnificent as Char.

With a nod, I swallowed and admitted, “Yes, it’s my... stav. It might not be as large as the ones the males of your species have though.”

Her laugh echoed in the room, a sweet, melodic sound that made my heart beat a little faster. She shook her head, her eyes warm. “It’s perfect, pet,” she whispered, her voice filled with a sincerity that warmed me to my core. “Just perfect.”

My breath hitched, my heart pounding in my chest. The approval in her gaze was something I hadn't known I needed until then.

But the confidence in her words, the surety, it sparked something in me, made me want to show her just how *perfect* I could be.

Char began to circle me, her eight legs moving in a fluid, almost hypnotic dance. She stopped when she was behind me, her soft, womanly torso pressing against my back as her hands moved around to cup my hardness.

The cool touch of her fingers was soon replaced by something warm, slick, and altogether unfamiliar. I gasped, my back arching as she smeared the substance over me. The smooth glide of her hand made me realize it was her essence she was using as a lubricant.

The feel of her hand stroking me was exquisite. Her movements were delicate and confident, her touch exploring and teasing. Each stroke was firm yet gentle, building a fire within me that I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Her lips found the shell of my ear, her hot breath sending a shiver down my spine as she began to whisper. "You smell so good, Avery," she purred, her voice sultry and mesmerizing. "Such a good male... a good pet."

The words she used should have made me feel demeaned, but instead, they made my heart pound harder in my chest. Each word, each stroke, made me want to prove myself, to show her that I was more than just a pet.

“I’m going to reward you, Avery,” she breathed into my ear, her hand’s pace quickening. The tingling sensation began to coil tightly within me, the intense pleasure building with every stroke.

Her voice was a soft purr in my ear, sweet nothings interspersed with dirty words that had me grinding my hips into her touch. She complimented me, told me how good I smelled, how well I was behaving.

Her words were like an aphrodisiac, amplifying the pleasure that was already coursing through my body. She promised rewards, her words vague and teasing, but the promise of pleasure was clear. It was a promise that had my heart pounding and my body aching for more.

The arousal was all-consuming, pleasure sparking along my nerve endings, coiling tight in my lower abdomen.

Her words, her touch, her scent, they all combined to create an experience that was out of this world.

The hand job was slow and steady, a building of pleasure that had me teetering on the edge, wanting more yet dreading the end.

This was a reward I would not soon forget, an experience that was as incredible as it was surreal.

Pleasure coiled tightly within me, its intense spirals tightening until it was unbearable. Then, like a supernova, it exploded, a blinding rush of ecstasy that swept through my body, leaving me shaking and gasping for breath.

My vision blurred, the world tilting and shifting as the pleasure rolled through me in wave after wave.

I was dimly aware of the restraints slackening, of a warmth surrounding me, of being gently lowered onto a soft surface. My limbs felt heavy, my senses dulled, the aftershocks of pleasure still coursing through me, making my body twitch and shiver.

When I next opened my eyes, I was lying on top of her, the softness of her breasts cradling my head, her eight legs wrapped around me, enclosing us in a silken cocoon of warmth and safety.

The room was filled with a soft fog, diffusing the light and creating an ethereal atmosphere. Looking up, my gaze met hers, those glowing green eyes staring down at me with a softness that was welcome.

Her fingers began to thread through my hair, combing through the tangles and knots with a gentleness that had my eyes drifting shut.

“Still early, pet. Sleep.” Her command was soft, a whisper against the quiet hum of the cave. Her hand never stopped its gentle movements, lulling me back toward the edge of sleep.

A slow, sleepy smile spread across my face at her words. There was something comforting about her call to rest, about her gentle ministrations. I nestled further into her warmth, my eyelids growing heavy. The soft hum of the cave, her rhythmic caress, it all coaxed me back into the realm of dreams.

As I drifted off, a thought flitted through my mind.

As the darkness of sleep claimed me, I felt a sense of peace wash over me.

I was safe. I was cared for. And for now, that was all that mattered.

Note to the Reader

USA Today Bestselling author, Jade Waltz lives in Illinois with her husband, two sons, and her three crazy cats.

She writes character driven romances within detailed universes, where happily-ever-afters happen for those who dare love the abnormal and the unknown. Their love may not be easy—but it is well worth it in the end.

Jade enjoys knitting, playing video games, watching Esports, green tea, and writing all the stories that live in her imagination.

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Anchored to the Sharkman

Interstellar Protections Agency #4

A life for a life.

With piercing amber eyes, fins, and sharp teeth, he was both terrifying and beautiful.

A shark saved me after my ex-boyfriend tried to kill me.

Ever since that fateful night, a sharkman has haunted my dreams, begging me to aid him.

When I start my new job working for my grandfather at his underwater aquatic lab,

I run into the rescuer that everyone insists is a figment of my imagination.

Now I'm drawn to the mysterious and captive creature being held in the high-security facility.

As I become aware of his inhumane treatment, I decide to risk everything to assist him in escaping.

We must avoid being apprehended by government agents while seeking assistance from others along the way.

Our journey draws us closer together, and I find myself falling in love with this magnificent aquatic male.

I must choose between remaining on Earth with a target on my back,

or leaving with my newfound love to begin a new life among the stars.

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Tricks & Screams by Kahaula

MMMMF ♥♥☠

Synopsis



HALLOWEEN IS HERE AND THE RED EMPRESS
HAS GONE ALL OUT!

Lisi and the males who love her are determined to make this holiday special for their own reasons. Will they repair their dark past together or is this night only for fleeting fun?

Tricks & Screams is a Dark Second Chance, SciFi w/Aliens, Heritage Holiday, Polyamory Romance novella set in the world of the Red Rules Series.

Content Warnings: *explicit sexual scenes/seferences, recreational drug use, alcohol consumption, consensual sex work, healing from past trauma through sex work (The FMC experienced past sexual violence from 2 of the 3 current romantic partners. She CHOOSES to interact with them as clients and they have also CHOSEN to make use of therapy &*

rehabilitation programs to understand & unlearn their past choices/actions.)

Off the Page Mentions/References: *abduction/kidnapping, racism/speciesism/sexism, sentient trafficking, rape, sexual assault, sexual violence, torture, slavery, forced sex work, forced breeding/surrogacy work, forced gladiatorial fighting, threats regarding fertility/pregnancy*

One

LISI

“ *Tricks or Treats?* ” Echoed across the vast space of The Pit. The disembodied voice continued on, full of laughter, “*Our Red Empress is devious indeed, so why not both!*”

Laughing at my fellow citizens as they chased one another in creative masks and costumes, I dodged the other pit workers as they tossed out glowing candies, cuffs, confetti bombs, and all too realistic creepy crawlies. A Rentok officer spat out a candy while their compatriots laughed that they undoubtedly got a nasty tasting trick candy. *It's their turn for a trick!* To even it up, I grabbed a handful of infamous Pxy feather ticks from a passing pit worker and threw the lot at their friends, who immediately stood up, smacking themselves in distress. Their friend laughed and pointed at their friends undignified hopping around; it was *their* turn to enjoy at the group's expense, their nebula-like irises sparkling with mirth. When they realised the ticks were life-like gummy candies—maybe harmless treats or edibles laced with intoxicants—the group of off duty warriors

chuckled nervously, then bravely consumed the lot together. *Brave indeed, considering*, I mused to myself.

The holiday revelry was a week long, but tonight was *the* night.

Ula Nui's first official Halloween.

The Red Empress had gone all out.

Wet fog roiled around my ankles, hiding the floor in pulsing obscenity, the only light from the backlit symbols inlaid therein. Thousands of words from thousands of worlds all there at our feet. I didn't know how she managed it, but the entire space was filled with a cloying warmth—a lover's skin against one's own—while an icy chill of unfocused excitement crawled up one's spine from the cool fog between our collective toes. Multi-coloured mists, some cohesive enough to be called clouds, others nothing more than a tantalising and dangerous shimmer in the air, lazily floated at various heights, turning The Pit into an eerie and erotic forest. Patrons' moans, gasps, giggles, and screams echoed, but in no comprehensible order.

The Red Empress ruled our planet, Ula Nui, but The Pit was her personal domain. The Pit was her elliptical playground of delight and depravity, situated well below the Pleasure Palace and accessible only by puzzle-like invitations for first timers. We were inching toward our third year of freedom, and this quintessential human holiday of Halloween was our most recent reward.

“She’s pulling out all the stops,” I mumbled to myself, the sound nearly lost to the pounding music. Faux trees and pit workers like me were part of the spell that she cast. So many species mingled tonight, and everyone was indulging in the fantasy that lived and breathed around us.

As one of The Pit’s sex workers, my full-face mask had built in re-breathers that cleansed every inhale, one-way clear vision, internal & external built in security comms, and even tactical support. All of which was individually keyed to the owner of the mask for higher functions and general functions should another pit worker pick up an unaccompanied mask they might find. For the untrained eye, our masks looked like no more than intricate and exotic props. *Our Red Empress was nothing if not a master of function and form*, I snickered to myself. The masks kept our faces unseen while working—unless we chose to take them completely off in private sessions or adjusted it so we could use our mouths with clients in public or private while keeping the upper halves of our faces concealed. Not all species had features that could work with a mask like this, but the Red Empress took great pleasure in the challenge of accommodating their needs to match this part of our uniform.

This practice wasn’t anything to do with shame, though it did lend us a mystique of mystery. No, the true reason was that it kept us safe, sober, and alert. No matter how many drug-laced mists we walked, ran, danced, or swaggered through. *And, should there be a massive security issue, the Red Empress wouldn’t hesitate to gas The Pit*. She preferred non-lethal

methods in public spaces and *our* safety was her first priority. Having a Rentok as one of her mates, a species who's sweat and... other secretions could cause euphoria, was also why she was working on a patch so that our masks could filter out any intoxicants both synthetic and organic that could enter our systems topically or via fluid exchange.

Drops of shimmering dew, both beautiful and literally intoxicating adorned my skin. Hands, claws, talons, tentacles, and more, reached for me through the haze and tangle of bodies, never quite reaching me. I revelled in the power I had. No one, *no one*, was allowed to touch a pit worker without their consent. To do so was to lose that limb. Attempting to subvert, coerce, or override our consent was to forfeit one's life.

Gone were the days of the Old Master.

Ula Nui was free.

Ula Nui's citizens were free.

And more than that?

We. Were. Respected.

Or is it feared? Thoughts colliding with the present and past, I nearly missed the three males that stood stock still in the undulating crowd, each standing as a sharp point to their triangle of intense focus. On *me*. They weren't dressed for the festivities tonight, nor were the expressions on their faces jovial or carefree.

A M'row.

Two Syleans.

My Dragon Man and my Guards, I thought absently.

Nothing about our time before the revolution was remotely pleasant. Minotaur and Trihla, two of Planetary Security Commander Melinda's mates, were sex workers like me. They both had been forced into it, like I had after my abduction from Earth, before the uprising. Minotaur was our Pain Master, and he ruled his dungeon with an iron hoof. Trihla worked upstairs in the Pleasure Palace, picking and choosing his clients with the utmost care, often secretly charging them on a sliding scale and or using his employee issued regen wand to heal injuries or illnesses they may have.

The man was a saint, as my mother would have said. She would have been tickled pink to learn that he was also from an avian-based species. A smile tugged at my lips as I swayed my hips to the music pounding through my muscles. *She always took everything in stride, loving all that made life unique.* A nostalgic glow filled me as I spun in place, taking in tonight's splendour. As a single mom in San Francisco, it was her personal mission to show me the beauty all around us, even naming me after li shì, because while my birth was a surprise, it had many times over enriched her life.

Where others might have griped that Trihla didn't have wings, my mother would have been in awe and delighted that he had a crown of feathers. From the species files, I knew that his people had downy feathers that surrounded their genitals too, but I had never had a Pxylar client. Trihla offered a session

with any fellow sex worker who was looking to learn his lauded skills regarding ‘Compassionate Client Care’, but I hadn’t yet taken him up on the offer.

I might never. Brow pinching behind my mask, I slid my slicked hands up my wide hips and waist.

I struggled. So. Fucking. Much.

When the Old Leader had abducted slaves from Earth it was with the initial goal of making us bait prizes for gladiators and or their owners. We weren’t as breakable as the Pxylar, but we were considered just as nonthreatening to clients. I shuddered at the bile that tried to rise up from inside me at the old memories. Stamping my feet to the increased beat of the bass, I stomped down the remembered evil of those days.

After the Old Leader realised that human females existed in different sizes and shapes, he began separating us according to his own system. This led to such an increase in profits that he stopped abducting human males. *Why would he, when human females came with three holes to fill instead of only two?* The Old Leader’s self-made categories sealed our fates and gave him another way to add ‘justifiable’ surcharges on his client’s choices.

Lush.

Hearty.

Delicate.

Disposable.

With the level of degradation we lived in daily, there were some days one prayed to be labelled 'disposable', if only because we were guaranteed a permanent end to our suffering. The worst designation was 'delicate'. My cell had been next to a woman, Ally, who had been designated 'delicate' from the moment she arrived. Clients called her their 'pretty doll' and our Sylean guards called her the 'ragdoll' and worse. She disappeared after the revolution and all I could do was pray she was in a better place. The nightmares I woke up from weren't always about me. Sometimes they were only memories of looking at her mangled yet still breathing body.

Similar to Ally, I had been put into one designation from the beginning of my time as a slave.

Lush.

Jaw clenching, I waved my arms about, trailing my fingers along my large drooping breasts, wide hips, and abundant curves. Like the ancient cultures of Earth, many species of the Galactic Core of Worlds and their Outlier Worlds still worshipped a fecund figure as a symbol of fertility. It somewhat saved me from being thrown to anyone and everyone in the slave brothel the Old Leader ran, but it didn't stop the Sylean guards from forcing their slithering cocks or whip handles down my throat and up my ass.

My cunt, however, was off limits.

Because I was *Lush*.

Because I was a Breeder.

Some species had difficult pregnancies, naturally high infant mortality rates, or could only have offspring within their species. But, if they were lucky, they could go to the fertility clinics that existed to assist them. Should they require or prefer a surrogate, or if they had a partner(s) they weren't breeding compatible with, and or if they simply desired designer inter-species offspring, they could legally go to those clinics. For the very rich, having all of that legally at their fingertips wasn't enough for them. For the very poor, they often lacked the access to or funds for basic healthcare, much less the time lost for one of their people to be off from work while pregnant or recovering from childbirth.

The Old Leader knew this, profiting both from entitled central world scions and literally dirt poor outlier world settlers. My only two pregnancies carried to full term were each from the above categories. Medically raped for the former simply so the parents could brag to their inner circle that the surrogate for their spawn had been 'a primeval goddess of fertility from an equally primitive world'—surely a blessing on the child and their illustrious family. At the time, this faux ancient religiosity and symbolism had been all the rage on their world.

Our Red Empress did her best to find any offspring that had been forcibly created from Ula Nui citizens, some used physically like me, others having their DNA stolen from them for designer labs. She left it up to us how we proceeded from there if and when the child or children were found. Some were legally fought for and reclaimed.

I sighed heavily, a wry sadness filling me, taking a bit of shine off the festivities surrounding me. My second pregnancy had been of the latter type. A poor farmer and his wife wept as he had raped me, knowing what he and they were doing was so far beyond wrong. The Old Leader loved the paydays from the rich, but he practically glowed with malice when he owned the debt of the poor forced into inescapable payment plans. It was how he was able to feed his slaves without spending money, after all.

The Red Empress found my genetic offspring. The little male was on an outlier world we traded with, a requirement of that trade was the end of slavery, forced breeding, and forced prostitution on that world. They readily agreed, not realising they already had a handful of people who had broken those new laws in the past. I had worked myself up into a rage, hellbent on ‘saving’ my child from those who had violated me. What I saw instead was a child loved and adored by parents that begged my forgiveness on their hands and knees.

They explained that they would have lost their entire homestead if they couldn’t produce evidence of a next in line to work the farm—a sudden requirement by their central world landowner, designed entirely to kick homesteaders off farms already fully set up by poor settlers. It didn’t excuse what they had done, and they vehemently understood that. They only hoped that I would see how much they loved their son. In the end, seeing the little boy’s happiness and their remorse gave me the strength to make peace with the past. Once or twice a year, I visited them. I was Auntie Lisi—the female who helped

his Mommy and Daddy have him. For him, it was as simple as that.

A merciful goddess, I grunted and spun through the drunk patrons around me, touching my fingers to their lips or proffered genitals in a mockery of benediction. *That's right, this 'goddess' is blessing you on a holy night*, I sneered, *may all your fuckery be consensual, or else*.

Flicking my eyes to the males orbiting me, I watched as both the Syleans stiffened. They were both part of planetside security, though the one with dangerously narrowed yellow eyes was wearing the uniform of an arena guard. *He made captain*. I resumed my dancing, but slowly made my way across the wide expanse toward the edges of The Pit. To anyone looking on, The Pit seemed to exist as a giant roughly-hewn cavern with an inner circular structure for themed group rooms. Perfectly spaced bars along the outer walls that distributed drinks, drugs, and music were bursts of colour against the dark rock. Regular private clients of The Pit and employees knew that the wall was a facade for two floors of rooms.

Some stark, only a bed or a pile of supplies.

Some extravagant, full of toys and exquisite fabrics.

Some flooded with water.

Some, like the one I was heading toward, only had one item.

One piece of otherwise innocuous grav-furniture.

What possessed me to choose this room for the men watching me, I couldn't say.

The M'row male was an uncomplicated client. He splurged twice so far this year to have a few hours with me. His minutely scaled skin was yellow to a vibrant orange in some places. As a male, his skin was a darker, warmer orange around his joints and along the pointed edges of his ear lobes. The low lighting in The Pit made him appear like a walking tower of flame, burning his way slowly forward to consume me.

Iridescent scales that shimmered like sunshine graced the tops of his cheeks, above the bumpy darker, pointed row of his eyebrows, and all along his horizontal breeding cloaca. In the process of becoming bipedal, they evolved a secondary opening to expel waste while their original cloaca housed their breeding organs. The same was true of the Syleans, Pxy, Pxylar, Rentok, and many more species. Another similarity was that Syleans and M'row both were naturally hairless.

The M'row no longer had large femoral pores near a single all-purpose cloaca like their distant ancestors either. Much smaller pheromone producing pores that looked like clusters of dark stars were at their wrists, under their arms, around their breeding cloaca, and behind their multi-pointed ears. Those pores were seen as the reason why the M'row were obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness. Much in their culture was centred around them. After The Shift, this cultural bedrock grew into attitudes and laws regarding 'societal or species cleanliness' that some outsiders considered draconian.

Before my rough and horrific introduction to this world, I had been an avid romance reader. Never in my wildest self-induced fantasies would I have ever thought there was a species that looked like the dragon shifters of my dreams—or that being snatched in the night from my planet meant I would, eventually, get to experience what it was like to be with one. There was one main difference with the M'row as opposed to the other sentient reptilian-based species.

Hemipenes.

Prehensile Hemipenes.

Kartok had *two* penises that everted from their horizontal slit. M'row weren't known for their length like the Pxylar were, but they were known for their girth. Each of Kartok's penises measured at about a little over a large human's handspan lengthwise. His people usually had about a four finger space between each, but Kartok's cocks were well above average thickness even for his species. So much so that, when they hung, they touched midway down. M'row hemipenes were prehensile, but nowhere near as mobile as Sylean cocks. Kartok's were so heavy that he could only direct their movement in controlled bursts. I giggled and rolled my shoulders.

Surprisingly soft and wet, I mused, *a dash of dark rose at the tip of a perfectly cylindrical smokey quartz.*

It was a logistical impossibility for him to double stuff my cunt or ass with both, but it didn't stop me from shivering at the fantasy. *But with a bit of work, he **can** fit one in each hole*

at the same time, I smirked. A decidedly proprietary ember burned a little hotter inside me thinking that his cocks must have been made with me in mind, because their thickness rubbed against one another like my wet thighs.

No gap between his cocks.

No gap between my thighs.

Especially with him between them.

A soft purr vibrated all the way up from my belly to my throat. Becoming a sex worker had helped me retake the reins to my sexuality, opening myself up to a world built on mutual pleasure, each client a new and exciting experience. My first M'row client had been clumsy and quick to orgasm. Too overwhelmed by breaking societal norms to do more than cum and run. Knowing what I did about their people hadn't prepared me for that, and that's what led me to Trihla's lessons. By the time Kartok had entered my space for his first private session, I was more prepared.

I was gentle.

I spoke softly.

I moved slowly.

I, no, *we* explored one another.

Our second session was more vigorous and playful, but each touch still held a kind of wonder and awe I hadn't felt in years. Turning my back on the Syleans, I rolled one hip then the other. Head tossed back and hair brushing my ass, I tapped the tips of my fingers behind my ears, on the insides of both

wrists, along the sides of my jiggling breasts, and traced down the 'v' that my womb made between my thick thighs.

Kartok's lips parted, and his chest stuttered. He still wore his doctor's utilitarian slate-blue uniform. He, like the other two, must have come straight from work to The Pit.

To me.

I repeated my gestures in reverse this time up my body, his golden eyes following the tantalising trail with which I teased him. All touch points a scandalous overture of intention. Blinking rapidly, breath stalling in my throat, I gasped as the back of Kartok's ears and down the line of his jaw turned an orange so dark it appeared black. Visual proof of not only his lust, but his desire to *breed me*, held me suspended in a full body clench.

Spinning on my heel, I forced myself to playfully jog ahead, the three males left to desperately push through the throngs of revellers to surround me once more. Ss'tin, F'sah, and Kartok reformed the points of their triangle around me. Heart beating faster, I realised that their presence was a protective one. *They* kept those too drunk or too high away from me. *Their* presence gave me the room to dance—to enjoy my free time. *And they're early*, I belatedly realised, my gaze darting up to the clock at the top of my mask's inner screen. They worked all day, then immediately came here to find and protect *me*. *All to ensure that I still got to enjoy the holiday festivities?*

Back tingling with Kartok's burning gaze, I twisted round and danced for my two Syleans. Ss'tin's yellow slitted eyes were

two bright daffodils in the dark forest of his scaly green and black mottled skin. A shock of heartbreaking delight that had starred in my waking terrors every time he would visit my old cell. The beautiful colour lending a horrific edge to everything he did to me as a slave guard.

F'sah was barely a silhouette to my left in the feigned dark of The Pit. Unlike most Syleans, he didn't have bright eyes. His matched his naturally dark green and black skin, as if Nature had declared that this one would be cut from a single cloth fashioned for the sole purpose of being the monster who blended into the wall in your bedroom. No amount of staring at him would bring him to the forefront, your screaming hindbrain the only thing that knew you were in the presence of a predator.

That was what F'sah was. More so than anyone I had ever met since being brought to this planet.

F'sah didn't walk, he stalked.

He didn't talk, he commanded.

He didn't ask, he took.

He didn't fuck.

He mounted and bred you into exhaustion—his.

Not yours.

With shaking fingers, I cupped and lifted my bare breasts that glistened with paint, sweat, and powdered narcotics. A few were hallucinogenic, specially added and laced at mild doses on the decorations, to enhance the frightful yet playful

Halloween experience. If I didn't already know better, I would think I had somehow imbibed some of what slid down my skin along with my sweat.

Maybe that would explain why, after all the history between myself and these two Syleans, I would be stroking and fondling every favourite spot of theirs. What I was doing in front of Ss'tin and F'sah wasn't like what I had done with Kartok. That was teasing. A bit of fun. This? It was rolling myself in red paint, prancing around with red ribbons, and taunting two pissed off bulls suffering from severe blue balls.

Syleans were the scum of the galaxy.

I experienced this firsthand.

But it didn't change that I wanted *these* Syleans.

The Syleans were a Fallen People. Their planet, society, families—*everything*—decimated by the great galactic fallout after The Shift. It was that sliver of grace and understanding—along with months of therapy on my end and mandatory retraining on their end, combined with capital punishment for murder and sexually based offences—that had prompted me to accept their request for a private session each earlier this year.

It had been...

Explosive.

Transformative.

Powerful.

Undeniable.

As slave guards, they had turned my breeding kink against me.
As my clients, they had helped heal a part of me, made me stronger. My stomach trembled with fear.

Tonight was special, but not because of the holiday.

If the Red Empress could repair her bond with her own Sylean turned Imperial Consort, then why can't I?

Resolution firming up, I walked boldly past my three males into the room I had set up. With five minutes to spare for a quick shower, I would be ready.

Two

SS'TIN

Clustering together, we watched Lisi pass through the energy barrier that created a faux rocky facade. I couldn't see her face, but her spine could have held up a battleship with the strength that poured off of her. I had never ranked high enough to have anything else but her mouth when she was a slave. F'sah's cock knew the wet warmth of her mouth and the hot grip of her ass.

Shame poisoned my lust filled thoughts.

We were part of the local Syleans who had survived the purge after the slave revolution. It wasn't enough that we served Commander Hs'tar, now Planetside Security Commander and Imperial Consort. We had to un-learn everything we had ever known, then learn a whole *new way* of thinking. Like children, we pushed back against the changes—some more than others. Syleans were the scourge of the galaxy.

We were rapists and murderers nearly from birth, *everyone* knew that.

We knew that.

Until the Battle Queen's revolution.

Until Commander Hs'tar's words truly penetrated our fetid souls.

'A Fallen People does not have to remain so. We are citizens of Ula Nui now. We need no longer be chained to the past. This. This world—our people—are our present and our future.'

F'sah, one of the scariest of the Old Leader's slave guards, had baffled us all by being the first to accept our new less violent and much more upstanding way of life. I thought he had been pretending. Surviving. Being smart.

He hadn't.

He truly *believed*.

At ten solar rotations older than me, three of which had been on Ula Nui *before* the slave uprising, I thought perhaps his decision was based on hard won life experience. Lessons that kept him alive where most Syleans his age were dead or enslaved themselves. Shocked to see him leaving one of The Pit's private rooms while a positively glowing Lisi indolently watched him go, I approached him. The male was as unreadable as the red sands of Ula Nui, buying him a drink to loosen his lips barely budged the grim set of his jaw.

Never in a million rotations did I think Lisi would allow him anywhere near her again. I was no better, but he was an animal by comparison. *Does his gut gnaw away at him with guilt like*

mine does for all that we did? Our lives were vastly different than all that we had ever known, both on this planet and before. We were living lives that proved our existence could be better and us along with it. *Freeing the slaves had freed us as well.* After four drinks that I could not afford to buy him, he finally spilled his thoughts in a single, devastating sentence. A sentence that built a pact between us everyday since that night.

*'Lisi screamed **for me,***' he had said. He hadn't broken a tooth in his clenched jaw, but he had crushed his drink tumbler in his tight grip after he spoke.

'She didn't let me anywhere near her cunt,' I had confessed at the time about my own session with her.

'Nor I,' his lips screwed up in a grimace.

'Just her mouth, like... like in...before...,' I mumbled, flopping my hand in a stupid wave to our new reality.

*'I want **more.***' F'sah rumbled as he had nonchalantly picked glass from his palm and fingers. *'More of her willing screams. More of **her.***'

Was tonight different?

It had to be.

Our three orange wrist bands lit up.

It was time.

She was waiting.

Looking at F'sah and Kartok, equally as obsessed with the beautiful and jovial human female, excitement shot through

my veins. Kartok joined our pact, and together, we three had saved every credit we could for nearly a solar rotation. Months of barely eating, surviving the double shifts we all took on—Kartok at his newly established clinic, F'sah training as sub-commander under Commander Hs'tar *and* running daily drills with the new recruits, and myself taking on a secondary guard position with the recently approved gladiatorial houses for the Blood Arena—and hoping that the near-paradise we currently lived in was still free from one double sunrise to the next.

We didn't speak.

We moved as one.

Kartok took position in the front, a friendly face for Lisi should she be nervous, then me, followed lastly by F'sah. Kartok disappeared behind the faux rocky wall. Two steps later I stopped dead in my tracks. F'sah slammed into my back, throwing me a scowl before he too jerked to a stop on my right. From the corners of my eyes, I saw all our throats bob in unison.

There was no bed.

Only a bench.

A Breeder's Bench.

Three

KARTOK

“What the...,” I breathed out. *Wasn't any form of breeding kink on Lisi's hard limits list?* I peered to my right at Ss'tin and F'sah, but they only had eyes for the captivating human female draped over the most brilliantly designed piece of 'furniture' I had seen.

“Is...,” Ss'tin cleared his throat, “Is this what you want, Lisi?”

“Yes,” her softly spoken words echoed beautifully in the room, a trick of the acoustics so that all words and sounds would be amplified. F'sah stomped forward, ripping off his uniform and boots, his chest heaving like some enraged rzzok. I barely reached him, cutting him off before he could get to Lisi.

“Easy, F'sah, easy,” I soothed calmly. Slitted eyes dilated, more black than the matching dark greens of his scales, I stared him down. I was as much of a raging animal as he when it came to Lisi, but unlike myself, he had a darker past with her. One that we didn't want to invoke.

Lisi hovered mid-air, her belly and breasts hung like ripe fruit, mouthwateringly within reach. Her head was dipped down, her forehead resting on the backs of her hands. Her hips were canted back and up, thighs spread obscenely wide, the soft bend of her knees naturally prompting her sweetly arched feet to press against one another. Thin, transparent grav-strips down her sternum, forearms, and on the top and bottom of her thighs, ensured that she could be manoeuvred without strain on her or us. Marvelling at the deviously ingenious repurposing of technology that I normally only saw in my surgical rooms, I couldn't stop my bifurcated tongue from involuntarily dipping slightly past my parted lips to taste Lisi on the air.

F'sah grunted, my fingers tightening in a punishing grip around his bicep. Densely packed musculature and bone structure ensured that M'row were naturally stronger than most known species, Syleans included. I didn't believe my greater strength would be necessary, as crazed as F'sah and Ss'tin were for Lisi—and as terrible as they had been in the past toward her—I somehow *knew* they would never hurt her again. The painful grip on F'sah was all my own barely controlled desire. A bit of self-doubt crept in. *Was I merely a psychological safeguard for Lisi and nothing more?*

“M-my...,” our eyes snapped up to Lisi lifting and turning her fully uncovered face to us. Beautiful browns, Lisi was a study in the many shades of rich soil and all that lived because of it. Dark nipples like the bark of the sacred *vala* tree, hair like loam run through with wet, iron rich clay, skin like the hardy

vines that defiantly clung to the many sheer cliffs of my homeworld, and splashes of pinkish and red browns that frequently turned her lips and cheeks into vibrant flowers. *No world living and complete could exist without grandeur so fundamental.* She cleared her throat, then continued on in a brave voice that only shook a little, “My males.”

F’sah flinched and took one tumbling step back and Ss’tin’s lips parted in a sharp inhale. I was in as much shock as they were, my hand falling limply from F’sah’s arm. There was no coy giggle or playful wink. This wasn’t a staged fantasy, fictional and fun.

She was... serious.

And nervous.

She rolled her face toward us more, vulnerability flushing her cheeks. With all that I knew of the Sylean males by my side and their history with Lisi, earlier thoughts of my clinic’s uses for grav-strips and hers became oddly similar. She wasn’t my patient, but tonight, she was healing in this room.

“We’re here, goddess,” I heard myself say. I immediately wanted to take the words back, again because of what I knew of her medical history, but instead of flinching, the lines beside her widened eyes wrinkled in amusement and affection. I smiled at her, slowly peeling off my clothes. F’sah let out a long hiss, and Ss’tin panted and groaned as Lisi arched backward gracefully then cupped her heavy breasts.

“Come for me?” A haughty mischievousness lit up her eyes.

“Always,” Ss’tin’s response held zero cheek, only painful longing. Desperation made his movements jerky as he disrobed. His body lithe, approaching wiry with how many meals he had cut in order to tuck away credits for this very moment. Lisi’s brow pinched, and I could see the moment when she noticed the change in his physique, now that his uniform couldn’t hide his body away.

Ss’tin’s muscles vibrated with desperation and... fear.

Fear of rejection.

Fear of doing wrong by Lisi.

Of the three of us, he was the unwitting bearer of our underlying hope. Hope that she would see every free community health course I created was also my attempt to spend more time with her, engaging her keen mind and earning her gasps of wonder when she learned something new. Ss’tin worked gruelling double shifts, then volunteered at the Red Empress’s nature preserve so he could send Lisi bi-weekly cut flowers with plant information, hoping it would delight her love of nature. F’sah? He thought I didn’t know, but I had overheard him speaking with Trihla in the Bazaar one day. F’sah, a giant brute of a Sylean, humbly and nervously requesting for the Pxylar male’s Compassionate Care supplemental training specifically for former Sylean slavers, was not a sight one forgot.

Lisi’s eyes glimmered in the warm lighting, her gaze roaming over all our naked bodies. Ss’tin shifted from foot to foot, his bright yellow eyes darting to mine, unsure if he should go to

her like he wanted or wait. We had all been so focused on getting to this point that we hadn't thought about how it would go. Nor had we, in our wildest dreams, thought Lisi would present herself to us thus.

"Ss'tin?" Lisi let her breasts spill from her hands, reaching out to the young Sylean. Relief was a cascade, a deluge of joy and undisguised love, on his face. He stumbled across the short distance and crushed her cheeks in his palms, passion blooming between their lips. She danced the tips of her fingers along his bulging vertical slit, and he broke the kiss to press his forehead to hers with a groan. "Let me taste you?" The male couldn't speak, just nodded his head up and down, his black cock extruding, then twisting and wrapping round her hand. He shook and squeezed his eyes closed tight as she pulled and played, throwing his head back when she took his whip like cock down her expert throat.

"Fuck... Lisi... fuck," he blinked rapidly, his eyes shocked and disbelieving at what he was seeing. Lisi let out a garbled shout when I applied my own forked tongue to her glistening cunt. Moaning at the taste of her, I gently teased my thumbs along her lower lips, the tiny scales abrading the swollen skin to a darker dusky pink. Ss'tin staggered and recovered when Lisi bucked and moaned with every purposeful motion I made.

"Please..." she whimpered. Lisi's eyes connected with mine as she looked over her shoulder. Ss'tin viciously gripped and smashed her breasts together while he fucked between them, taking the time to pull back completely so he could lash the tip

of his naturally slick wickedly prehensile cock against her puckered nipples.

“Tell us, goddess, what do you need?” I plunged my tongue back, deep in her cunt, swirling the wide forked tip against the spongy tissues of her front wall.

“My males’ cocks,” she moaned. Her next words were an outburst on the edge of a truth so powerful that I could physically feel how much she wanted to share it with us. Obviously struggling internally, she courageously fought to express it to us, “My males’ c-cum... i-in me. Filling me up.” Pressing one last sloppy kiss to her dripping cunt, I stroked the back of her thighs as I slowly stood.

“All yours, goddess,” I growled, everting my cocks. Slipping one through her wetness up and down, I fortified myself mentally for the ecstasy of her flesh. She screamed and bucked as I battled to get the fat tip of one cock into her fighting and spasming core. Chest heaving with exertion, I was grateful when F’sah stopped his prowling around Lisi to tease and squeeze her clit. “*Fuck!*” I barked out, her hot, convulsing flesh simultaneously pulling and pushing me deeper.

“Be good and take your male’s cock,” F’sah rumbled, his free hand petting Lisi’s hair softly. “Your males will fill your soft cunt again and again with our cum.” Ss’tin, Lisi, and I moaned. “But you have to earn it. Do you want that?” F’sah’s words were evenly spoken, but I saw the nervous bob of his throat.

“Yes!” Lisi begged.

“Our good little breeder,” F’sah breathed out, stroking down her spine. Ss’tin’s and my eyes immediately connected in alarm.

“*Yes!*” Lisi’s scream echoed bombastically in the room around us. Arching and fucking herself onto the last bit of my length, I kneaded her ass and hips in encouragement.

“Then earn it!” F’sah punctuated his command with a hard slap to her ass. This time it was my bellow that reverberated through the room as Lisi crushed me within her in response to F’sah’s strike. Sweat drenched my skin and higher functioning ceased. Pulling halfway out, I slammed back in. F’sah tipped her down, grabbing her screaming jaw before stuffing her face with his thick cock. Its black length was near thick as my own. Ss’tin dropped to his knees, first sucking on her nipples then crawling under us to dance his tongue over her stretched hole.

Lisi shook and came.

Again.

And again.

Roaring, I plugged her hungry cunt with my cum, my other cock smearing pre-cum along her inner thigh. Blinking through euphoria and sweat, I chuckled when Lisi mewled in frustration as F’sah held her head and jaw immobile while he lazily fucked her mouth.

“Ss’tin, don’t you let a drop of cum escape our breeder’s cunt,” F’sah pulled his slithering cock from Lisi’s mouth to slap it against her cheeks. She flushed, and I shivered as her

cunt trembled around me while I gently withdrew. “Earn Ss’tin’s cum, little breeder.” The male in question popped up and took my place behind her. Tracing the curves of her belly, I tipped her face toward me. Hazy with aftershocks, her tongue painted a delicious circle on her lips. Spit and Sylean slick dripped down her chin and throat. “Ss’tin don’t tease her,” F’sah growled, “*Fill* her.”

“Our little breeder’s cunt is so pretty when it’s dripping with cum,” Ss’tin’s naturally cutting banter threw back, “How can I not play with her?” Lisi’s body tensed up and Ss’tin pressed his forehead against the back of her shoulder in contrition, “Shh, my pretty flower, it’s only us.” He placed soft kisses along the nape of her neck, whispering in her ear, “Only the ones you allow. *Your* males. *Yours*.”

“M-mine,” she whispered, breathing purposefully slow, in and out. Reaching back, she trailed the tips of her fingers along Ss’tin’s cheek. “*My* choice. *My* males.”

“Yes, Lisi,” I hummed with a small smile that she tentatively returned. Ss’tin rubbed the bridge of his much flatter nose against the back of her left shoulder blade, hiding away the tears that escaped from his eye. Her declaration and purposefully pliant form spread a peace through Ss’tin that loosened every sinew in his body, his arms wrapping tightly around her.

“All yours,” F’sah’s rumble was living thunder, demanding we look up to where he stood over us all. “Ss’tin, give her what she’s earned.”

Four

F'SAH

She wants us.

She wants me.

“Kartok feed our little breeder your second cock’s cum,” I scrubbed my fingers against Lisi’s scalp, soothing her and myself, “Reward her for her bravery.” The M’row male’s jaw and entire throat scales were black, his rounded pupils blown wide to match. The normally buttoned up doctor was well on his way to a mating frenzy.

“I have more than enough to give,” Kartok smiled sharply. Lisi groaned as Ss’tin entered her cunt from behind, rolling his hips, head thrown back in rapture. Her eyes darted down to Kartok’s pitch throat and jaw, her nostrils flaring and flesh trembling from more than Ss’tin’s thrusts. “You see?” Kartok pressed her hand against the onyx flesh, his voice gruffer and thicker. “My scales tell you the truth more than my words.” I teased her bottom lip with the tip of my cock and she latched on, suckling on what little I gave her, her eyes never leaving Kartok. “I will breed you, my mate,” Kartok chuckled as I

stuffed more of myself down her throat when she gasped at his bald words. “*We* will breed you. Over and over. All night.” His lip curled back on a feral snarl. “And Vala willing, we will breed you *every* night,” Lisi whimpered, “*every* day,” I thrust harder down her throat, “*every* moment we get for the rest of our lives.” Lisi’s eyes rolled back. Ss’tin hissed out a hacking moan with each of Kartok’s declarations to Lisi, then half bent forward with a final pained groan. Mesmerised, the young male stepped slightly back to swirl his cock in the mixture of his fresh cum with Kartok’s as it welled outward from around where Lisi’s cunt still held most of him. He would be ready again in moments, so I left him to his reverie.

Kartok pushed up from the floor and shouldered me out of the way, my cock whipping out of Lisi’s mouth. I hissed at him then belted out a laugh when he snarled back, spittle flying from the normally quiet male’s unhinged jaw. Roughly, he pulled open Lisi’s jaw, pushing his un-sated cock’s punishing girth down her delicate throat. Roaring with laughter that it was he and not I that had turned into a slavering fiend first, I stepped behind Ss’tin.

“Get under her,” I commanded the younger Sylean. He merely jerked his head up and down in acknowledgement then tumbled below to position our Lisi to ride him.

Glurk, glurk, glurk.

Lisi’s mouth overflowed with spit, her eyes streaming tears as Kartok took her mouth like a mad man. *She needs preparing.* Having taken her ass many times as a slave guard, it made my

chest tighten with an indescribable feeling when she reached behind and spread her cheeks wide at my slick cock's probing touch there. She was pinioned on two voracious males, and she *willingly* begged me for more.

Everyone calls me a beast behind my back, as if I wasn't born with ears. What they didn't know was that I didn't disagree with them. Except for one point.

I wasn't any beast.

I was *her* beast.

And I would take her ass as the beast she craved.

Lisi screamed around Kartok's cock as I slammed myself in with one thrust. She tried to squirm and squeeze, but the time for her doing anything for our benefit was well past. It was time for *us* to earn *her* favour.

Her love, my depraved heart whispered.

Claws piercing the voluminous flesh at her hips, I locked her down. Dripping spit from her mouth, cum and Sylean slick from her cunt and ass, and bright red ribbons of blood at her sides, we *destroyed* her. Ss'tin grunted around a mouthful of one breast, his teeth holding her firm. A low, approving hiss rumbled my chest. His teeth were bound to leave tiny cuts and an undeniable bruise later. Squeezing firmly, Ss'tin pulled her nipples out and away from her again and again while he slammed and hooked his hips up into her. Lisi panted through her nose, her head held up by Kartok's hard knuckled fistful of hair. Kartok pulled out of her mouth, yanking her forward to

smear her lips and cheeks against the pores dripping with his pheromones around his cocks, marking her in his scent. She lapped at them eagerly and the male let out a vicious growl, before stuffing his cock down her bulging throat. Lisi struggled to breathe for long torturous seconds as Kartok bent forward over her back to rub more of his scent, this time from his wrists, onto her sweet rump, leaving behind gleaming iridescent streaks.

Ss'tin tried to time his strokes to alternate with mine, but lost that battle when he too realised how far gone Kartok was. Lisi coughed and wheezed when Kartok finally lifted his hips back, his fat cock no longer obstructing her entire airway. Catching Ss'tin's eye, I silently let him know that we didn't have much more time. Reaching down, I trapped Ss'tin's cock in my fist and pulled it from Lisi. The younger male shouted, arching his back.

"Hold steady, boy," I sneered. He grit his teeth at me with a warning hiss. Wrapping my thicker cock around his, we thrust as one, impaling Lisi on our combined girth. Lisi sobbed and choked, her cunt squelching and splattering on us and her thighs. Her body began to shake as Kartok alternated his cocks into her mouth.

"I can't..." Ss'tin shook, his harsh inhales and exhales barely passing his clenched teeth. Ripping her off us, I repositioned her listless hands to hold her asscheeks wide. I wanted to come in her cunt so fucking badly, but Kartok would unintentionally harm her in his frenzied state if we didn't get her ready. *And I*

have had enough of standing by while she's hurt. Intentionally or otherwise.

“Brave little breeder, open for us,” Running our combined slick against her tight ring of muscles, I was gentler this time. I rolled her back and down, swirling our cocks, stretching her, teaching her ass to welcome us. “Good, my little breeder, good.” Ss'tin stroked her skin everywhere he could reach, nuzzling against her breasts while I traced my claws carefully down her spine.

“We'll fill all your pretty holes with our cum. Wouldn't you like that?” Ss'tin's sweetness pulled a whimper from Lisi and she softened more for us, easing our way. Kartok's previously un-sated cock exploded all over her face and he snarled down at her in approval, barely pausing before stuffing his other cock back in her mouth. Quickly, Ss'tin and I flexed as one, twisting and untwisting our cocks in Lisi's ass while we drove into her. Ss'tin shouted, the tips of his claws creating his own tiny red rivers on Lisi's waist. His cock flailed within her, setting off my cock to erupt my cum into her back hole as well. Kartok did the same down her throat mere moments after us.

Falling back onto my ass, I watched in stunned appreciation as Kartok spun Lisi on her side in the air so that she faced me. Dazed and dripping, she screamed as Kartok pummelled one cock into each of her two gaping holes. Ss'tin watched from on his back, disbelief blushing his cheeks at Kartok's blind ferocity. Tapping out a sequence on my orange wrist band, a small panel flew over from the wall.

“Clean yourself and hydrate,” I threw him a toothy smile,
“He’s only getting started.”

Arms and legs flailing about over a growing puddle of leaking cum, Lisi came on Kartok’s cocks. Then he flipped her and began anew.

Yes, I hummed to myself, *this is only the beginning.*

Five

LISI

“Drink, pretty flower,” Ss’tin’s gentle words barely penetrated the cotton in my ears and exhaustion in my limbs. A double heartbeat thumped against my cheek and careful hands tipped my head back. Blinking one eye a little slower than the other, I gradually came back to my senses.

“Are you with us, my love?” F’sah’s green and black slitted eyes looked at me with such tenderness that I thought I was in a beautiful dream. *He said ‘my love’*. His rough thumb wiped away the happy tears that leaked from the sides of my eyes, his other palm cradling the back of my skull.

“Yes,” I croaked, coughing a bit as he and Ss’tin sat me upright on F’sah’s lap.

“Easy, goddess,” Kartok winced as he ran a regen-wand over my throat. Tentatively, I swallowed and tried to speak again.

“Are you ok?” My eyes darted down to his throat and jaw, back to their normal yellows and bright oranges.

“Is *he* ok?” Ss’tin guffawed, his eyes lighting up.

“My wrist band caught the... uh... frenzy in time, and the room administered the proper suppression medication,” Kartok’s cheeks shimmered brightly and I held back a giggle at his M’row version of a blush.

“What he means to say is that he got darted in the ass,” Ss’tin laughed loudly, F’sah’s chest gave off a pleasant tickle to my side when he chuckled too.

“We’ve had you in the room’s tub resting as the diluted regen-liquid in it healed you,” Kartok’s professional mask slid off when he reached forward to run the backs of his knuckles gently above the line of my eyebrows. “Are you feeling better?” F’sah’s tense muscles were mirrored in all of them as they waited for my answer.

“Only a little tender,” I smiled. They sighed and F’sah’s hand left my scalp to brush down and up my spine. “But...” I turned carefully to straddle the massive Sylean under me.

“But what?” F’sah could hide his thoughts and emotions from all those around him, but never from me. I never truly knew why and something inside me said tonight was the time to push.

“You said I needed to earn my males’ cum,” I spoke softly and with great care. Ss’tin and Kartok moved through the warm enhanced water to F’sah’s left and right, sitting on the same ledge and watching silently. They sensed, as I did, that this moment was the key to something as explosive as Kartok’s mating frenzy. “Did I not earn yours, my beast?” F’sah inhaled sharply.

“Many times over, my love,” he whispered, kneading my hips. Muscles in his jaw feathered at his clenching and unclenching, “Long before this night.” He squeezed his eyes shut and I raised my hands from the warm liquid surrounding us to cup and stroke his cheeks. “I remember,” he swallowed thickly, his eyes open and his lips a harsh slash, “I remember when you were starved and unwilling.” The others tensed, angling themselves toward F’sah, ready to protect me, but I knew there was more. “Then we were free, and you came here like so many others,” he grasped at my waist and belly under the water, “I came to the Pleasure Palace every week under the guise of patrolling, just for the *hope* of glimpsing you in the hallways.” Tears once more silently dripped down my cheeks. “Soft rolls back on your body—like when I first laid eyes on you—only somehow, even more beautiful.” He smiled fiercely, “I was so proud of you. Your strength, your courage.” His throat bobbed and his gaze was a wormhole sneaking me glimpses of his soul, “Lisi, it was *you* that gave me the courage to believe in the truth of Commander Hs’tar’s words.” Steam from the water wisped around us, stealing away my soft gasp of surprise. *Even when he was the hardened Sylean slaver, I was the one shattering the chains on him.* “You led me to truths that have changed my life. Literally *saved* my life.” He chuckled ruefully, looking away from me to Ss’tin, breaking the heady pull of gravity between us. “And now... it’s we who starve to be with you.”

“F’sah,” I put a bit of command into my voice, pushing my palm against his cheek, letting him know I wouldn’t let him

hide away. He turned back to me, “You say I’ve more than earned my males’ cum, but you have yet to reward me.”

“You must be hurting...,” he tried, but I covered his mouth with my fingertips.

“Keep your word, my lovely beast, or your little breeder will be very cross with you,” I intoned solemnly. The edges of my lips twitched.

“Then climb my cock, my little breeder, and take your reward.” I wiggled in exaggerated excitement on his lap, and he threw back his head on a belly deep laugh before lifting me up. His slit bulged and his cock uncurled like steel rope. He eased me down on him while Ss’tin and Kartok kissed along my shoulders and neck.

“Your beast only speaks or has a sense of humour when you’re around, apparently,” Ss’tin snickered against my warm skin.

“Because I’m fucking delightful,” I moaned as all three chuckled. F’sah kneaded my breasts in his giant palms while Ss’tin and Kartok sucked and nibbled on my nipples. F’sah’s hips kicked, and he hissed in approval when I bore down on him within me. His tight grip switched from my breasts to my hips, communicating clearly that I was no longer riding him, but *he* was fucking *me* on his cock. Waves rippled and splashed around us in the tub, the sounds of that and my screams a beautiful cacophony in the room.

“Good little breeder, soft little breeder,” he breathed out on a whisper. He took my mouth for his own. His tongue wrapped around mine, yanking on it, before he ripped his mouth away.

“Scream for me, scream for us,” F’sah’s gaze locked to mine, his words guttural, “Your beautiful, hungry, soft cunt will get all the cum it needs. And one day, your womb will become round and full. Full of *us*.” I screamed out my orgasm and F’sah bellowed as he ground my hips down on his, his cum and flailing cock making me ache in the best of ways.

Ss’tin and Kartok moaned beside me. Their mouths may have been on me, but their hands had been working their own cocks under the water so that their orgasms matched ours. I giggled breathlessly and flopped down on F’sah’s chest, his arms wrapping around me, one hand stroking my spine protectively as his chest heaved.

“Shall we do this again next week?” I teased. They chuckled and I leaned back to see their faces.

“We would love to,” Ss’tin tried to hide his grimace, but I saw it. My pulse raced, *have I misinterpreted everything? Was this only lust?*

“You’ve fumbled your words, boy,” F’sah shook his head, as he and Kartok scowled at Ss’tin, “and hurt our female.”

“I didn’t mean—I meant...,” Ss’tin rambled quickly through the rest, waving his hands placatingly, “It took months of our combined savings to get all night with you, Lisi.” Kartok rubbed at his temple, glaring at Ss’tin digging his hole deeper. “We would, of course, love to... And I—we—would work hard to do so again, b-but it just might take... months...,” he trailed off.

“Employee discount for families renting a room in The Pit is infinitely cheaper.” Nibbling my lip anxiously, I waited for them to understand my meaning. Their eyes lit up and their spines straightened.

“I... uh... bought land through the Red Empress’s new Defence Forces loan.” Our eyes snapped to F’sah’s addition out of left field. “Trihla, I mean, Planetary Security Commander Melinda’s Pxylar mate, happened to suggest it,” F’sah’s hand held his knee in a death grip. He cleared his throat, “There’s no house, but...” He stopped speaking when he saw me and the others gaping at him. “What?” He gruffed. He continued matter-of-factly, “He said he and Minotaur built their home on the hope of showing Commander Melinda that they were serious about being more. I agreed with his foresight and strategy.” He crossed his massive arms over his chest, “We proved that we could work together and save for you. If we can do that in hope of *one night* then we can definitely save up and build a home worthy of you being with us forever,” he grumbled, looking away to the side. Kartok and Ss’tin’s stunned faces shifted to determination, nodding at F’sah then each other.

“Is that... Is a future with us something you would want?” Kartok asked. Hope lit up their eyes as they waited for my answer.

“Yes,” I laughed. Giddy warmth bubbled up inside me. This Halloween had been all about facing the horrors of the past, honouring its death, then moving forward. I reached for my males with a big smile on my face. F’sah pulled me into his

chest and the others surrounded me in a warm hug that had me laughing harder.

Happy Halloween to me!

Note to the Reader

Kahaula Who?

I'm a Hawaiian #WhyChoose Polyamory Romance LGBTQIA+ Author. Personal Life Goals: Peer alpha for friends only & make highly inappropriate jokes.

Find me & my books here: <https://linktr.ee/KahaulaAuthor>

Newsletter Sign Up: <https://bit.ly/3CgIr6F>

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FB Group: Kahaula Dreams Reader Group

TikTok: kahaulaauthor

Savage Mist: Arden by Kassie Keegan

MMMMMF ♡♡

Synopsis



IN A WORLD WHERE DREAMS INTERTWINE WITH
DESTINY...

Can she find her Mates before their hearts are destroyed?

Arden has shared vivid dreams with her beloved Vai, Rally, and Kano for countless years, but when kind and charming Shane enters the fray, a tempest of desire stirs within their shared dreamscapes, leaving them vulnerable.

An unseen enemy lurks in the shadows.

A soul-sucking intruder relentlessly stalks them through their dream-scapes, threatening to shatter the Bond that holds them together, preying on their deepest fears and doubts.

Driven to the precipice of despair.

Arden and her Mates must rise as one, uniting against the malevolent force. Their courage will be tested as they face

their individual insecurities to embrace a love that is both their greatest strength and their most profound vulnerability.

Their unquenchable desire ignites.

Burning need fuels Arden and Shane's determination to find and Claim their Mates, knowing that only a completed MateBond can shield them from the evil that seeks to devour their hearts and souls.

Will they triumph over the encroaching evil, securing a love that defies all odds, or will they be consumed by the darkness that threatens to extinguish the light of their dreams forever?

Content Warnings: *sword-crossing, insta-love, tail play, fated mates*

A Confession

Dear Esteemed Reader,

I need to make a confession.

I am addicted to Capitalizations and hyphens.

I love them! I've tried to walk away from them, but every time I did, it only made me want them more. So, now I simply accept my needs and their presence in my life. I revel in the dash and Cap, using them with pleasure-filled, reckless abandon.

You'll see Capitalizations and hyphens everywhere, and I even Capitalize and SMASH words that have no business being smooshed together. And italics. Oh, italics are *yummy*. It's a free-for-all, y'all!

Perhaps you'll think to yourself, "Did she really mean to do that?" The answer will always be, "Yes. Yes, she did."

And let's not get started on apostrophes...

...

...

No, LETS!

I created a whole naming system that uses apostrophes.

Like, when a gorgeous Lio male from a 'Fiel Pride is being introduced, there's either "Bon," "Pon," or "Lon" in front of the 'Fiel.

“Bon’Fiel” means this muscle-bound, silky-furred, beastly-male was born on Lio HomeWorld. “Pon’Fiel” means he was born in a ‘Fiel Pride on a Lio Fleet traveling the Known Galaxies. “Lon’Fiel” means he was born on a Lio Colony World. A Lio knows all that just by the letter that begins his PrideName.

And when a Prime Ambassador male gets mated, the entire Pride is so excited everyone changes their PrideName to start with “Argen,” “Pargen,” or Largen.” It’s a big deal!

And I use lots of wide, open space for the words to breathe.

Yeah, maybe I have a vicious dislike of dialogue tags, but that’s beside the point. I have dear ones who have difficulties reading, and a wall of unbroken text is intimidating. I want experiencing these Lio Adventures to be super-smooth and effortless.

Enjoy the ride! Stay Savage!

~ Kassie

Dedication:

For Mr. K, who ignites my flame!

Thank you, Etta, for your friendship.

For all who fight despair one moment at a time, you are worthy of love.

Prologue

THE LIO

When Earther humans advanced into the Space Age, they encountered the Lio. The bi-pedal lion-like humanoid beings who seeded the Known Galaxies with the beginnings of life, allowing Worlds to develop according to their evolutionary presets.

Earthers worked alongside female Lio Nessas and male Lio Nels, eventually leading to the Lio sponsoring Earth into the Galactic Alliance. Earth became a Protectorate of Lio HomeWorld and their Lio Fleets.

When the Lio Cataclysm happened, and Lio could no longer produce female young, Earth and the Galactic Alliance rallied to find the cause and cure it. But their efforts were thwarted at every turn.

Through miraculous Happenstance, some called Fate, the Lio found a solution.

Earth, never forgetting the generosity of the Lio, sent a male and female scientist, boosted with Lio genetics, to live, study,

and work on Lio HomeWorld, hoping to find a cure. The genetically altered scientists became a new race the Lio named Honored. So called because the Lio honored the Earthers' commitment to their people. The man became an Honored Nel, the woman, an Honored Nessa.

Unexpectedly, the couple fell in love and MateBonded with a Coalition of native Lio Nels, producing the first Lio Nessa female young since the Cataclysm.

Since then, humans have been even more treasured by the Lio. Without them, the Lio would no longer exist.

Through the efforts of the L.I.O., the Lio Inquiry Office, and the Lio StoryVids Programs, human men and women apply to the L.I.O., hoping to be chosen and become Honored. Doing so gives them longer lifespans, added strength and abilities, and untold opportunities to create lives for themselves that would have otherwise been impossible.



The Family

The icy darkness of Space hides untold dangers. Natural-born Honored Nessa Janine Vogel had unfortunate experience with many of them.

Bodiegon Dragoon SpacePirates captured Janine and her family on a Space Pleasure Cruise excursion when she was a teen. They brutally killed her parents. Her older brother and sister suffered before they, too, died. By the time a Cyborg slave sacrificed himself for her escape, she'd been devastatingly abused and damaged.

The Lio healed Janine as much as possible, but could not restore her ability to conceive children. They also helped her win her case against the Space Cruiser that should have protected her family. The Galactic Credits she won would support her for life. Though she would have preferred having her family.

While recovering and training as a Medic, Janine bonded with Honored Nessa Takeda Hiroki and Honored Nel Karlin Seidel, who had also endured horrific abuse from the Bodiegon Dragoons. Together, they healed and loved. And together they stayed, Bound by Heart to a mission to protect, adore, and support orphaned and abandoned Honored children in their new home on SpacePort Bazzini.

Not long after arriving on the SpacePort, Janine saved the life of Lio Nessa Intakah and her newborn male young, Shimbir. First, Intakah's Harem of Lio Nessas Shiri and Vorona, and their six Lio Nels protected Janine and her Mates, Takeda and Karlin, from gratefulness. Then from desire and love.

They MateBonded together, creating a new Pride sanctioned by Lio HomeWorld. Needing a new PrideName, they chose to honor Janine by taking her last name for their own. Together

they became Pon'Vogel, a Lio Pride formed in Space. The Lio joined their beloved Honored Mates' mission to find and raise all Honored orphans they could.

The Pon'Vogel Pride became renowned among SpacePorts throughout the Known Galaxies. Beings of all races quietly delivered orphaned Honored children they found into the care of the Pon'Vogel PrideFamily.

They adopted many Honored Nessas and Honored Nels. Adding to their Lio Nel young, they were a PrideFamily that would never stop growing. Janine's mom always told her she was 'free as a bird,' so they named each of their Honored children after birds, hoping they would fly unfettered. Happy and free.

One

ARDEN

The cool mist of dreams enveloped Arden in silky-smooth comfort. The slide of fur on skin was a lush, tactile sensation she sought night after night. Their touches had become so much more sensuous these past few nights. Firmly gripping here, rubbing there... Soothing and inciting all at once.

They spoke to her in dreams. Their deep voices were now as arousing to her as their phantom touches. She'd told them about everything except her sexuality. This was new.

Yet, they knew her from the inside out. And she knew them. They had been together in each other's minds for many year spans, coming into her dreams sweetly. Innocently. Cuddling and soothingly petting her as she rested. Held securely in their loving embrace.

There was nothing innocent about their touches now.

It was becoming a sensory overload. Lately, she'd had to get off as soon as she awakened, the build-up of tension growing too much for her.

Arden began pulling away into wakefulness, planning to relieve her need on her own. Her occasional bouts of sex were physically satisfying. But her heart belonged to her Dreams, so she chose partners wanting brief pleasures who she would likely never see again.

A deep, masculine tenor spoke in her mind, making her heart flutter and her thighs clench with need.

“Oh, no, beauty. Where are you going?”

Vai sensed her trying to stir herself awake.

Arden was breathless.

“I need to go, Vai. I can’t rest like this.”

He was the most mysterious. Hidden depths of knowledge and shadows of thought peeked at Arden through their connection, yet Vai never hesitated to share his feelings or opinions with her. She sensed he kept much of himself concealed but didn’t know why. To her, he was patience personified.

“None of us are ready to rest yet. Tell us your needs, Arden. *All* of them.”

She felt the pull of Vai’s demand on her will but resisted.

Fear gripped her. She kept her sexual needs out of her dreams. Dreams were for love and understanding, hugs and cuddles. But they were changing the rules on her.

Arden felt a loving caress across her cheek, then lips softly kissing it. The tip of a masculine thumb pressed her lower lip open, fur softly tickling her upper lip. She couldn’t help but

lick, enjoying the hint of sheathed claw at the tip contrasting the smooth textured flesh on the underside of his thumb.

The Lio Nel growled as she flicked her tongue.

“Oh, yes, Arden. Show me what that soft tongue can do.”

Rally.

Arden helplessly sucked the tip of Rally’s thumb as arousal rode her hard.

“That feels so good, Arden! It makes my imagination go wild.”

She relished his sensuous openness with her, recognizing how special it was.

Rally was a turbulent soul. So wary. He would not tell her why, but she felt his longing to connect despite his hesitation. It had taken many year spans before he completely opened his mind to her, trusting she would not invade his secret places without permission.

Rally took his thumb away as the gentle stroke of phantom fingers crossed her sensitive nipples. A low whisper rumbled in her mind.

“What does my pretty pet need?”

Kano.

He’d called her ‘pet’ for years, but never in *that* tone. She couldn’t help but gush and writhe.

He was a bulwark of strength and sureness. His heart and soul were hers. There would be no other. His love and strength

belonged to them. He listened before asking questions that helped her make her own mind up about situations, something she appreciated about him. Now they were insisting she share that last part of herself, her sexuality.

Vai's lips pressed hers in a soft caress.

“Open this to us, Arden. Let us see and understand all of you.”

How I want to!

But sex changed relationships.

Her cry came from deep within.

“I don't want to lose you!”

They stilled. Kano's voice was soft and reassuring.

“We will never leave you, Arden.”

“What do you mean? It's not like I have you *now!* You're just my Dreams.”

Vai chuckled.

“We are much more than Dreams, beauty. And you know it.”

Arden snorted a laugh.

“Yeah, now you are my *Wicked* Dreams!”

Vai hummed enjoyment.

“Hmm. Yes.”

He pressed his lips firmly to hers and twisted them open, stroking inside confidently, sure of his welcome. Arden drowned in his textures, loving the faint hint of flavor that teased her senses. Her hands reached up to feel his long, wavy

mane, to stroke the velvet edge of his large, round Lio ears. She felt the brush of a silky tail tip along her flesh, the graze of other long manes.

How she longed to see the shapes and colors of these males.

She touched all she could of their velvety-furred, firm, muscular bodies. Curiously, she did not feel their cocks pressed against her. When she would reach where she thought an erection would be, her hand was gently redirected to other intriguing spots.

Vai pulled back to give Rally room for kisses as their touches became more deliciously focused on her nipples. She felt a phantom mouth suckle and groaned her need into Rally's kiss.

Arden arched out of the kiss as a hard, firm hand clasped over her mound, caressing slickly over her folds. Two fingers slid deep, making her gasp.

Kano's deep voice shook her control.

"Tell us what you want, so we can give it to you."

Arden needed. Craved. Burned. Broke.

"Make me come. Please, please. Make me come!"

A hot mouth slid over her clit and a firm tongue teased her. She shouted as she peaked, body clenching rhythmically hard on the phantom fingers within her. Deep moans rang with hers as they joined her in dream-world pleasure.

A satisfied whisper ghosted across the sensitive shell of her ear.

“Good pet.”

Arden shivered.

Rally snuggled close.

“He’s coming, Arden. As are we.”

Pleasure still hazed her mind.

“What?”

The phantom bodies shifted places. Vai spoke in her ear as mouths danced across her skin.

“*Find* us, beauty. Claim us for your own. He’s coming for you.”

Vai took the rest of her mind with his kiss.

Kano whispered close.

“Keep coming for *us*.”

Yes!

Two

ARDEN

Arden craved the males in her dreams with a hunger that blazed through her soul. Her need for them burned so hot it colored every waking moment, changing the simple life she lived.

Her small private berth on Lio Trade Valen was cozy. She was content working while traveling the Known Galaxies in the safe keeping of the Lio, staying in close contact with her PrideFamily.

But a whisper of knowledge ghosted through her awareness. She was content because her dream-loves traveled with her. Arden realized she was constantly searching, never still. Feeling trapped when not on the move because she was driven to find *them*. Only when she was progressing in her hunt, did she feel happy.

What a subtle, sneaky goad to search, that is.

An Honored Nel arrived the next day.

He's the One.

The pearlescent aural glow surrounding him confirmed it. After she saw him, she stumbled and hid deep in the dark shadows of closely stacked crates before dropping to her knees, stuck in place with an arousal so overpowering she could only moan with the intensity of it.

Her grumpy, unsociable Lio Nel co-worker, Bergstrom, happened upon her as she panted, frozen. He took one look at her, and a big sniff of her arousal scent, seeming to understand what she was coming to realize.

I'm locked into my Call to Mate.

She'd been warned that things would change fast when an Honored Nessa found her Honored Nel Mate, but she could never have prepared for how fast.

Bergstrom plunked down in front of her to look in her eyes.

She regarded his lion-like, red-bearded face and piercing green eyes with desperation. Arden was burning up, hurting with arousal.

“Ah, lass, you're in a bind, aren't ya? Old Bergstrom here will help ya. But you must consent.”

“What am I consenting to?”

“Pleasure. I'll get you off quick-as-you-please, then I'll protect ya until the MateBond is complete.”

Arden blinked. Fear in her eyes.

“Don't worry, lass, our coveralls will stay on. Everything will be over-the-clothes. It's the only way to be released, lass. I

know my way around a female's body, sure enough. Been a long time, though."

The shadow of loss colored his expression before he shook his head. Bergstrom didn't look old, but Lio rarely did.

"It's been since I lost my entire Harem in a Vessel collision many spans ago. Barely survived without them. Feels like my soul didn't. Been living solely for my job and to keep a promise I made."

Bergstrom sniffed looking down for a moment, then raised his gaze to her.

"Do you consent, lass?"

Arden liked Bergstrom despite his stand-offish nature. Now she had a clue as to why he was that way. He was looking at her with compassion and care.

"I consent."

Bergstrom removed their tech-bags and boots, setting them aside.

He scooted in close behind her, straddling her onto one of his thick thighs, facing away. Grabbing a firm hold of her hips, he led her in a nasty, satisfying grind that had her quickly moaning her peak. She was left in a breathless heap, held loosely and soothingly while sitting comfortably in Bergstrom's lap.

Arden laughed while catching her breath, shaking her head.

"Abah-Sah. That was fast!"

“There now, you’re a good lass to go over so easy. That’s better. Yes?”

She looked over her shoulder at the Lio Nel, confusion and wonder warring within her. Taking a deep breath, she crawled from his lap to lean against the pallets and regard him. Her mind was back online and working fast.

She wouldn’t waste her time with what-ifs. Bergstrom had seen her need and helped her. Arden respected that. She wasn’t a shy virgin, either. Plus, what happened hadn’t aroused him. He was not a Mate. He was a friend.

Arden mentally moved forward.

“What now?”

“I’m officially your Shumal. We stick together, you and I.”

“Okay.”

“Do you see it?”

“The glow? Yep.”

He nodded.

“So, we do our work organizing the goods, preparing for the trade with Slarrah. You get to know that pretty Nel that got you all locked-up, and I’ll protect you.”

“Not sure what the big danger is, but okay.”

“You and your Honored Nel need to get to your Lio Mates. You’d not be locked into your Call to Mate if it wasn’t time to MateBond.”

Arden narrowed her gaze at the scruffy, gruff Lio.

“I don’t have a Coalition.”

Bergstrom’s eyebrows raised high, his tone incredulous.

“That’s a bunch of nonsense. This doesn’t happen out of nowhere, my girl. Think again.”

As she did, many things became clear. Her Wicked Dreams were her Lio Nel Mates. And the handsome golden-haired, golden-skinned Honored Nel she’d glimpsed was also *hers*.

Possessiveness filled her.

Mine.

“Okay, but they’re not here.”

Bergstrom’s eyebrows lowered low, looking stern. Arden sighed.

“Well, not *here*, here.”

He stared at her. Arden stared back for long moments before telling the secret only her closest family knew.

“I dream of them.”

Bergstrom’s expression cleared, settling into thoughtful lines.

“You have at least one Abassan Mate, then.”

Tingles swept through Arden. Abassan were the male priests of the Lio deity Abah-Sah, who guided them. It was Vai. The glimpses of what she’d sensed in him made sense now.

“How do you know?”

Bergstrom shrugged.

“It’s known that Abassan dream to their Mates. It’s all woo-woo stuff the Abassani steep themselves in.”

Amusement welled up in Arden as she tried to keep her tone even.

“Woo-woo?”

Bergstrom narrowed one eye at her, but Arden recognized his gruffness for rough affection.

“Yes, lass. Woo-woo. Ya got something to say about that?”

Arden laughed.

“As a supporter of the woo-woo, and probable Mate of someone who does the woo-woo... no. I’ve got nothing to say.”

Bergstrom gave her a fierce grin, then sobered.

“Try to find them soon, lass. You’re in a vulnerable place until the MateBond is Sealed.”



Arden introduced herself to the newly arrived Honored Nel later that day at evening meal, and he kept her attention.

Shane Davenport filled her days as fully as her dream-loves filled her nights. Handsome, friendly, golden Shane, who had a pearlescent aural glow around him only she could see.

Wild, wavy blond hair stacked high on the top and tight on the back and sides. Light, clear-blue eyes that sparkled with mirth

were also penetrating and perceptive. Tall and lean. His smile charmed her. His intelligence and wit seduced her.

He'd been boosted, becoming Honored many year spans ago when he and his sister, Irene, left Earth for life among the stars. He was a Trade Negotiator, but did not say what Irene did for a living, and Arden didn't ask. It was probably Intelligence.

Shane's job title did not fool Arden, either. Trade Negotiator often meant the keeper of secrets to trade. She had her own secrets. He could keep his.



Her Wicked Dreams would not tell Arden how to find them, frustrating her.

Vai understood, but did not relent.

“I cannot, beauty. *You* must find us. *You* must Claim us. Then your commitment is clear on every plane of existence.”

Everything within her stilled. Vai caressed her chin.

“You seem surprised. Are we not flesh *and* spirit?”

“We are.”

“There you have it. When the time is right, when we *all* dream-share, I can give you verses to direct your path.”

“Verses?”

“A poem.”

“With clues in it, like a sneaky guide?”

Vai, Rally, and Kano laughed. Rally snuggled her close.

“Yes! And you are the cleverest! You’ll figure it out and find us, won’t you?”

He gave her a tender kiss. Longing bleeding from his words.

“*Won’t you?*”

“Yes.”

Kano licked below her ear and their touches became sensual.

“Good pet.”

Arden shivered.



Within a week’s span, Shane met her for morning meal at the Level Two Dining Lounge with a deep blush, not quite meeting her eyes. She wondered at it, then had a flash of insight.

“Dreams?”

Shane’s eyes widened. She asked again, with innuendo and understanding.

“*Wicked Dreams?*”

He blinked, then looked at her with piercing awareness.

Looks like my Dreams got wicked with my new guy. Can’t blame them, I want to get wicked with him, too!

“You know these dreams?”

Arden grinned back at him.

“Intimately, I think.”

He grinned with relief.

“Definitely intimate. They’re amazing! But there’s *you*.”

Shane sobered, rubbing his chest over his heart.

“I wasn’t sure what to do with my feelings. I didn’t want you upset, Arden.”

She put her hand on his, squeezing gently.

“Don’t worry, Shane. I understand.”

“If we share them, I’m okay. I just never... It’s so much!”

He shook his head, his gaze far-away. Arden understood.

“Yeah. They’re a lot.”

Shane looked at her, his eyes searching hers.

“You seem comfortable with it all.”

“I am, now. You will be, too. You get comfortable with weird after a while.”

“If you’re good with it, then I am.”

She smiled at him, liking his answer. He smiled back, speaking distractedly.

“Irene has dreams. They’re not happy or sexy ones, though. She says the same thing. Unusual is the norm.”

His expression became full of wonder as he came back to her.

“You are *so* gorgeous. Your glowing, caramel-brown eyes match your beautiful caramel-colored hair perfectly.”

“You mean brown.”

“No.”

He reached forward, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear with a lingering touch.

“I mean caramel. It’s my favorite treat from Earth. And you are my favorite everything!”

Arden laughed.

“How do you know? I mean, you haven’t tasted me yet!”

“Let’s fix that.”

Arden focused on his lips, gasping as he leaned in close. Her lips throbbed, hungry for the press of his.

“May I taste you, Arden?”

She melted into a puddle.

“Yes. Please, Shane.”

He cupped her cheeks, pressing in with lush precision. Soft licks enticed her to open to him, and she moaned at his masculine flavor. He gasped, muttering.

“So sweet.”

Bergstrom’s deep interrupting cough broke them apart with a startle. He slid in to sit across from them, his expression amused. He snickered as they peered at him with muzzy confusion.

“Well, now. That’s a fine breakfast, but not a lot of fuel to burn through the workday.”

Shane spoke under his breath.

“Speak for yourself.”

Bergstrom narrowed his eyes at Shane, who promptly cleared his throat, giving him his most innocent look.

With a moment more of a stare, Bergstrom relented.

“Keep your lips to yourself for a while.”

They ate in a comfortable silence.

Shane turned to Arden as they finished up.

“I dreamed unusual dreams before I met you too, Arden.”

Her interest piqued.

“You did?”

“Yes. I dreamed a poem, actually.”

A poem? Huh.

Shane glanced over at Bergstrom, then back to her.

“You may think it’s silly, but I believe it’s part of how I found you. I’ve been restless ever since. Until now.”

Arden smiled.

“I take dreams seriously. I have them. All my sisters, like yours, have them. What did you dream?”

“Hidden among names that soar, Find the way with wings that explore. A flock of secrets they’ve unfurled, To fly and seek two souls imperiled.”

Arden’s mind churned.

“Names that soar. Most of my family’s names are for birds!”

“I know.”

She looked at Shane, who gazed at her sheepishly.

“I researched you after we met.”

Arden grinned.

“I did the same.”

He leaned closer, chin propped up on his hand, looking at her curiously.

“Did you discover anything unexpected?”

“Two parents, three sisters, two brothers, two dogs, three cats, and a budgie. What the hell is a budgie?”

Shane laughed.

“It’s a bird!”

Arden laughed with him.

He took her hand in his, his eyebrows scrunching up in puzzlement.

“But you’re not named for a bird.”

“Actually, I am. Kinda.”

He looked confused.

“Me and my two sisters, Astor and Ava, were all adopted at the same time. We are close in age. Mom Janine wanted all our names to start with an ‘A.’ She named me Arden, which means Valley of the Eagle in some language on Earth, somewhere.”

Understanding dawned on Shane's face.

"So your name soars, too."

Arden nodded.

"Sure does."

His eyes explored her as if he was discovering what she looked like anew. She felt like she was devouring him, too, leaning in for another kiss.

A smack on the table got their attention. Bergstrom's ears were back, his tail agitated.

"No lips!"

"C'mon, Bergie!"

He blinked at her nickname, then ignored it, staying insistent.

"No. Lips."

She sighed, turning back to Shane.

"I guess it's time to get to work. See you at evening meal?"

"You know it."

Bergstrom leaned close to Shane.

"I'll meet you at your private berth before afternoon meal today. Prime Myron is looking forward to an introduction. He has some things to explain."

Shane hummed in surprise, but nodded.

"Sure, Bergstrom. My morning meetings will be over by then."

“Good.”

Bergstrom stood up to leave, snatching his tray, looking at Arden meaningfully.

She stood with her tray, ready to leave, then paused. She looked back at Shane, who was watching her go with a smile.

“Maybe tonight we will all dream *together*.”

The flush that reddened his cheeks had everything to do with arousal, not embarrassment. She liked the look on him.

Bergstrom growled at her.

“C’mon, Ardie, lass. Let’s get on to work. You can torture the poor male later. He will need more than a minute to let that raging cock-stand go down. Might keel over if he stands up too soon. All his blood is below the waist!”

Arden giggled as they pushed their trays into the auto-wash.

“Wait. Ardie?”

“Thought you’d get away with that ‘Bergie’ business, did ya? Ha!”

Arden laughed as she followed Bergstrom to work. She hoped it was a good day, and perhaps an even better night.

Three

SHANE

Shane didn't meet Arden for evening meal. He had no notion of the passing time after Prime Myron left him in a relaxed haze on his bed with a soft caress. The lodestone of sleep dragged him under.

Eventually, the diaphanous, cool mist of dreams enveloped him.

Gentle feminine fingers caressing his face and brow brought him to awareness. The silky smoothness of soft, naked flesh and sweet curves pressed against his hard planes and angles. Fur slid like velvet against him, tails stropping along his arms and legs. He was petted and rubbed.

He felt like purring his enjoyment, then a low burr of sound smoothly rumbled in his chest. He felt the hums of pleasure his Lio gave as they stroked, licked, and kissed wherever they could reach.

A feminine groan paused his rumble. He couldn't see, though. Not really. But, oh, how he could *feel*.

“Arden, love?”

He felt subtle movements making him think she was being deftly fingered by a Mate. Her voice was thick with pleasure.

“Yes, Shane. We are dreaming. *Together.*”

He arched up to kiss her while she moaned her orgasm, her body shivering. The textures of the kiss were sharp and distinct, but her flavors were muted.

Strange.

He was turned on his side toward her as their phantom Lio caressed them, lifting his leg over a thick thigh, spreading him open for deeper touches. Ones he remembered well and wanted more of. Long, nimble fingers grazed his cock and balls, teasing his hole, making him clench with the memory of their fingers and tongues inside him. His shaft pulsed.

A deep voice spoke in his ear.

“Welcome, Shane.”

Takano.

Shane shivered.

“My pet calls me Kano in her dreams. You may do so.”

In his dream-state Shane asked a question he might not have while awake.

“Am I your pet, too?”

Kano scraped his hip carefully with phantom claws, making Shane rub uncontrollably against silk and velvet flesh.

“Most assuredly.”

Arden’s teeth pressed against his shoulder as she moaned through another peak. The sounds and sensations made his balls tighten and ache.

“Fuck, that’s enticing. I might come without a touch.”

“But where’s the fun in *that*?”

Arvai chuckled as he stroked Shane’s flank, then rhythmically pressed slick fingers against his tight ring.

“My beauty calls me Vai.”

Beauty. A perfect name for my beautiful love.

Vai took Shane’s lips in an absorbing kiss as he sensed positions shifting around him.

Arden gained his attention with a gasp.

“Where were you? Bergstrom told me you were fine, but I worried.”

Regret filled him.

Shy, tentative Kiraly caressed her throat, trying to soothe her.

“Shh, Arden. Your anxiousness is unfounded. He is here, with us, because he was prepared to Call you to Mate.”

The sounds of deep kisses surrounded him as tiny ones dotted his shoulder, relaxing him enough to accept Vai’s fingertip with a moan.

Kiraly’s low voice was breathy when he spoke again.

“I am Rally to Arden. I can be that for you, too.”

Shane sensed the weight of Rally's invitation. He reached forward, stroking Rally's thick, bushy mane.

"My pleasure, Rally."

Rally treated him to a long, slow, lingering kiss as Arden moaned through another orgasm with Kano, the breath of her moans tickling his chest, making his nipples tighten.

Vai whispered to him.

"Show us what happened."

"Show?"

"Remember..."

Vai's voice came from far-away as he catapulted into the scene with Prime Myron.



Prime Myron was a beefy beast, one of the tallest, most muscular Lio Shane had ever seen. Certainly one of the hairiest. There was long, thick mane-fur everywhere, even arrowing down the front of his torso. Only the traditional Lio skirt-like shendyt and a heavy belt armed with a lethal-looking sheathed knife, and mag-sandals adorned his body.

No Bandel wrist-cuffs?

Bergstrom introduced them, escorted them into Shane's room, then promptly and abruptly left without another word. There were practically skid marks on the floor, he'd left so fast. Shane looked after him in surprise.

Prime Myron looked after him, too.

“Not very subtle, is he?”

Shane chuckled, looking over at the towering male.

“No, he’s not, but I like it. He’s direct. I know where I stand with him.”

“You like direct?”

“I do.”

“I am here to prepare you for your Call to Mate with Arden Pon’Vogel.”

Shane eyed the male’s huge fangs, tensing.

“You’re not going to bite me, are you?”

“Only if you ask nicely.”

Shit!

“Why the fuck would I do *that*?”

“If that’s what you need to come.”

Shane shook his head in shocked confusion.

“Um, what?”

Prime Myron matter-of-factly explained Honored Nels needed one final hormone-boost from a Prize or Prime male in order to spiritually “Call” their Mate.

“What if I don’t do it?”

Prime Myron didn’t waiver.

“No boost. No Mates.”

“Fuck that. I *need* her!”

Shane paused as realization hit him. He spoke more quietly.

“I need *them*.”

“Every Mated Honored Nel does this, Shane.”

Shane stared as Prime Myron emphasized his statement.

“Every single one.”

Shane’s mouth tightened.

“Look, I don’t want to fuck you, or bite you.”

Prime Myron didn’t look offended.

“That’s fine. All you need to do is lick my wrist. You’ll come, I’ll come, and we will be anchored by each other’s scent.”

Shane had serious doubts just licking this male’s wrist was going to get him off, but if that’s what it took to get his Mates, he’d try it.

“Clothes on?”

“Clothes on. But Shane, you can bite if you need to.”

He blinked, then allowed himself to be herded to his bed. Prime Myron removed their mag-shoes, and his belt and knife, putting them aside. Then he laid down with Shane, cuddled close along his back. The hard bar of the Prime’s long, thick dick dug into the crease of his rear through their clothing.

Prime Myron rested Shane’s head back against his broad chest, presenting his wrist to Shane. The potent male scent made Shane’s mouth water and his jaw clench with the need to bite.

Fuuuck. Maybe he will get me off this way!

Prime Myron encouraged him.

“Do it. I offer freely.”

Shane bit, moaning as his shaft filled with a rush. His teeth locked tight over the male’s thick wrist, never breaking the tough skin. His tongue lapped hormone-rich essence. Prime Myron pumped his free hand along Shane’s trouser-covered shaft, making him come long and hard.

Prime Myron moaned as he rolled against Shane’s backside. The delicious scent of Prime-male cum, combined with the mind-numbing hormone-rush, overwhelmed him. Shane fell into a tranquil drift, held securely by the relaxed, purring Prime.

Shane came to brief awareness as he was gently cleaned with an insta-dry cloth.

“You’re a fit male for a sweet female. May Abah-Sah guide you to your Mates, Shane Davenport. The sooner, the better.”

Prime Myron covered Shane with a light, soft blanket. Then he triggered the cleansing blue laser-wash of a Solaray, cleaning sweat and grime, and removing his bodily waste, leaving his scent undisturbed.

“Rest deep now. Arden is safe. You are safe.”

The last thing Shane felt was the soft caress Prime Myron gave his forehead before restful darkness descended.



As Shane came back to his Mates in their dream-scape, he realized they'd all come with him from his memory. He heard panting moans and satisfied groans as they all relaxed together from their peaks.

Phantom fingers buried inside him, stretching him wide-open. Firm caresses against his pleasure-spot extended the duration of his throbbing pulses. Sweet kisses and licks followed the length of his shoulder and neck. Vai whispered.

“Good, Mate. Now ready for your MateBond.”

Shane melted. Arden groaned.

“Shane, that was amazing! I need you, too. I didn't know that had to happen.”

He chuckled with a moan as Vai's fingers slowly left his body.

“Me either! Until today. I guess...”

Shane stopped speaking as a frigid breeze wafted over his flesh. He and Arden shivered.

Arden sounded scared.

“What is *that*?”

Four

ABASSAN VAI

Vai didn't recognize the spiritual 'flavor' of the mind intruding upon their protected dream-state. Only a being well-trained in the Abassani Arts could assert themselves so decisively. They would soon find Vai was also very well-trained.

Because he was vigilant, Vai snatched a deeply buried, crucial snippet in the brief, wide-open moments the stranger's mind connected its dream-state with theirs. A single word powered their hunt.

Roquemarel.

The intruder's vicious glee held the ephemeral knowledge that Arden and her beloved PrideFamily sisters were being sought.

Vai had perfected Psychic Camouflage, protecting them in their dream-scape. But *daydreams* were not protected.

His heart overflowed with emotion. His Honored Mates were as in love and lust with them and each other as he, Rally, and Kano were. Such powerful feelings would inevitably leak into

their waking lives, becoming detectable to seeking soul-suckers while separated from their Mates.

Arden and Shane daydreamed about them, and a soul-sucker now had their psychic scent.

The emotion-filled time between an Honored Nessa being Called to Mate and Claiming her Mates, Sealing their MateBond, was a favorite time for nefarious beings to snatch beloveds from the care of their Lio Mates.

The evil-ones were double-fed by the sweet emotions of love and desire, then the sheer terror and utter despair wrought by stealing the Honored Mates.

He'd hoped they'd all be together and MateBonded before the danger he sensed stalking them found his Mates.

I was mistaken.

The intruder had shadow-trailed the spiritual scent of their nascent MateBond and followed it into Vai's dream-scape.

He, Rally, and Kano needed to officially bring Shane into their Coalition and Declare for Arden, making their intentions abundantly clear to both. Their enemy would try to feed any doubts they harbored and separate them.

Vai took Arden's face in his hands and kissed her softly, his love pouring into her from the gentle press. His scalp tingled as her love answered his. He spoke from the depths of his heart.

“Arden, I Declare for you. I will be Claimed by you and no other.”

Rally wrapped Arden in his arms, giving her a deeply passionate kiss that left her panting.

“I Declare for you, Arden.”

Kano turned her with a gentle grip of her hair. He bent low to her lips.

“I Declare for you, my beloved pet.”

He kissed her gently and pulled back. None touched her as Vai spoke.

“Shane, do you know what is happening?”

Arden and Shane reached out to hold hands. Vai loved that they comforted each other even as he felt ripped by their need to seek it.

“No, but it feels important. And urgent.”

“Yes, loves, there is no more time for enticement. It is time for decisions and commitment.”

Shane took a deep, steadying breath.

“Shane, will you join our Coalition seeking Arden’s Claim upon us? We will love you all our days and unite in devotion for Arden unto our last breaths.”

Shane exhaled with an audible whoosh.

Vai was stretched thin for interminable moments in a waiting stillness. Rally and Kano suppressed their emotions as much as they could.

Vai sensed that Shane loved them, but that didn’t guarantee commitment. He hoped Shane had sensed enough about them

in their brief time together to try.

Please have the strength to trust us and step into the unknown.

Shane was strong and sure.

“I will join your Coalition.”

A faint, far-away hiss floated through the swirling mist around them as Rally’s joy burst through their dream-scape with a sweet, powerful rush. Shane and Arden moaned at the power of it. Kano growled.

Vai grunted, then groaned, as he sensed the release of a tension so tight in Rally, it painfully ached when released. Rally panted, overwrought by emotion, healing through his mutual love with Arden and Shane.

Thank you, Abah-Sah.

Kano wrapped Rally and Shane tight in his arms, his voice deep and filled with joy.

“Welcome to our Family, Shane.”

Shane’s voice was muffled in the fierce hug, but he never let go of Arden’s hand.

“Thanks, Kano.”

Kano relaxed, allowing his relief to show.

“We Declare only once in our lives. To be joined in Coalition, to be Claimed by Arden, is something we’ve longed for.”

Shane spoke softly, meaningfully.

“I understand. I’m happy to be here with you, too. I feel like I already belong to Arden.”

Arden’s tone was possessive and sure.

“You *do*, Shane. Vai, Rally, Kano, you are all *mine*. I feel it in my heart, down to my bones. What do I need to do to Claim you?”

Rally’s need bled through.

“Take Shane. Claim him for your own. *Find us! Claim us!* Only then will this soul-sucker no longer be a threat.”

The words of the verse poured out of Vai in a torrent, embedding them deep in Arden’s memory, so she would not forget.

“Where serpent’s gaze meets cosmic skies, A reptilian realm where secrets lie. In slithering dance and wisdom old, The path awaits as stories unfold.”

“Do you have it, Arden?”

“I got it.”

A slow, scratchy voice wended its way around them. The sound cloying and intrusive.

“You will search *forever* and never find them. Always searching. Your MateBond never complete. Bereft. Alone. *Hopelessss.*”

The dark presence would plant doubt if it could find fertile ground.

Vai clothed the precious, vulnerable spirit-flesh of his Honored in the dream-scape, making sure they had that small, but clear, measure of protection around them.

“Ignore that weak attempt to influence you.”

An angry hiss drifted over them.

Arden was fearful.

“If the verse has my clues, does this mean that thing knows how to find you, too?”

Vai would hide nothing from his Mates. They were strong and smart and deserved the truth.

“Perhaps, my beauty. What is important here is *you* finding us, not them. They fear us.”

A defiant snarl swept through their minds. Vai ignored it.

“Arden, Claim Shane and stay the course. Focus and find us. That’s where to pour your energies.”

Shane looked to Vai.

“Can’t we just wake up?”

“Yes, but then whoever this is would have a spiritual pinpoint on your location. And perhaps ours, too. It’s best to defeat its purpose and push it out while we dream together.”

A stabbing force of doubt crashed into them.

Vai used his Emotion Absorption, feeling the strength of his opponent draining his energy well. It didn’t matter. If he became a dry husk protecting his loves, he would do it.

Arden made a small sound of distress as she sensed the invisible battle around her, but her strength held firm. Shane was as determined.

“How can we help, Vai?”

There *was* a way.

“You can Reality Anchor me. This evil intruder wants you to feel fear and steal your happiness. Think about things that bring happy feelings. It will fight you, perhaps revive ugly memories. Rebuke that. Remember the good. It strengthens me and feeds our Bond.”

Five

RALLY

Rally felt every sharp scrape of doubt's claws flaying the darkness in his mind. He'd stayed in shadowed places so long, so comfortably, that peeking into the light of his Honored's love felt scary and new.

Deep, *deep* inside, he believed he was his Coalition's weakest link. The most damaged. The most vulnerable.

He felt his fears devoured and delighted in. The vicious being excruciatingly dug into his past to shame him to his Mates.

Vai and Kano shored him up with their devotion, but Rally felt torn, fighting the soul-sucker's influence *and* himself. With such a divided defense, it was inevitable he would lose.

Memory took him.



Blow after blow landed on young Kiraly. Kicks, punches, hits. Whether fists, mag-boots, or blunt weapons, they all hurt the same. Never ending.

His growls became weaker as blows unceasingly landed through his unshielded defense.

He'd let a helpless-looking Honored Nel convince him to leave the protection of the Dome on Lio Apoctah during his first Prowl through the Known Galaxies.

The moment he'd looked over and saw the tell-tale atmospheric shimmer of a small, cloaked Land-to-Space Vessel lurking nearby, his supposed 'friend' snuck a Shield Cap on his Mimetic Shield Disc in the muscular groove under his collarbone, leaving him vulnerable. Earthers in full SpaceGear descended upon him en masse.

With every strike, he'd felt the depth of his betrayal. And his stupidity. His PrideFamily had warned him. He was ashamed he hadn't listened.

Kiraly was close to unconsciousness when an Earther female cleared her visor, and the blows stopped. He looked up at her, panting, his entire body throbbing with pain.

She crouched low, looking him over.

Maybe she will show me compassion.

“He has extraordinary color, Steiner.”

She looked over at Kiraly's 'friend.'

“Excellent choice. The dark-tipped golden mane alone will fetch a high price. But with all that pretty, gold-tipped fur! They will line-up and pay triple to get their hands on this pelt!”

Lio poachers.

They would kill him for his mane and fur without a care. Exactly as he'd been warned.

I'm such a fool. A dead fool.

The Earther female stood, looking down at him with blank, soulless eyes.

“Finish it. But don't damage the fur, only the muscle and bone. Go for the neck. Make it quick. They may be on to us.”

Kiraly tensed to defend against the final blows, when a figure stepped out from the cloaked shimmer of the hidden vessel.

“You murderous bitch!”

The Earther female turned.

“Carlo, I thought you were waiting for me in my bed.”

“You mean drugged into a stupor until you had a use for me. No. That's not what I'm here for.”

Kiraly caught his breath as a new group of SpaceGeared Earthers surrounded the vicious ones. The Earther male walked close to the female.

“I had to see the truth for myself. All the rumors were true.”

His eyes never left the Earther female.

“Take them, Officers.”

The fight among the Earthers was brutal. The Officers saved him, taking painful laser blasts to shield him until they could

remove his Shield Cap and he could protect himself. The poachers were defeated and taken away.

They sent Kiraly to Lio HomeWorld to heal.

His body healed and recovered, his heart and soul did not. He could not go home to his PrideFamily, could not go back to Lio Fleet Draux.

All he had left was despair.



The invasive spirit fed deep on Rally's wretched shame, rasping with delight as his beloved Vai shuddered in fierce mental defense.

“Yesssss. You will always be weak. Gullible. *Defenseless*.”

My fears are true.

The voice spat gratingly.

“Too pretty. A danger to others because of it. They will suffer because of *youuu!*”

I'm the lynchpin that will break my Coalition apart.

A small feminine hand firmly gripped his neck, pricking him with her tiny nails, bringing him out of his dark reverie.

A displeased yowl raked their dream-scape.

She pressed close, bringing their cheeks together, her voice strong and clear.

“No, Rally. I won't let you go into that abyss. You're *mine*.”

She dug her hands deep into his mane, shaking his head with her grip.

“*Feel* this.”

Rally plunged into agonizing hopelessness as Arden shared her harrowing memory of being teased and taunted. Refuse thrown at her. Unwanted, cold, and hungry.

There was a brief memory-flash of a red-bearded male rescuing her, taking her away from her abusers.

He gasped at the slashing sting of Arden’s mortifying moments.

“Rally. Do you hate me now? Am I less because people tried to hurt me?”

His heart broke for her, rejecting such thoughts about the beautiful soul he adored.

“No! Why would you say this?!”

“I was horribly weak, Rally. I accepted their awful words for a long time. Should I be ashamed?”

Rally grabbed Arden tightly to him, burying his face in her neck, wishing he could experience the true depth of her delicious scent.

“Not for even a second, my beloved!”

Arden grasped him to her just as desperately as he embraced her.

“That’s how I feel about *you*, my Rally.”

Rally stilled.

Oh, Abah-Sah.

He was now in Arden's delightful memory of the delicious spicy scents of food cooking at home. Good-humored loved-ones surrounded her and her belly was nice and full. Her heart still felt unsure, but she tentatively trusted these people to care for her as much as she cared for them. She had a warm home and a wild new family. It felt good.

Next, Arden and her sisters were thrilled and frightened as they furtively crawled on hands and knees to spy on a Slarr Slink. They piled on each other, peeking through the grate of a low-level air intake in one of the Private Nestor Lounges on SpacePort Bazzini.

The scary, yet beautiful, snake-like Slarr slink-danced in matching patterns for hours, leaving Arden in awe. Then they got all wrapped in a writhing ball, which was much less interesting, so she and her sisters discreetly left.

They'd loved listening to Slarr music. She and her sisters slink-danced in patterns together often, giggling with the fun of it.

Rally's heart melted at the cheerful memories Arden shared.

I have those, too. I can do this.

Rally remembered inviting dreams with Arvai and Takano. Freshly arrived on Lio HomeWorld, he slept in the Bon'Fiel Lio Nel Sanctuary for Prowling males.

They'd warmly accepted him, kindly understood him, deeply wanted him despite his brokenness. He fit them like a puzzle

piece. His Brethren.

Takano left his Bon'Fiel PrideHome to meet Kiraly and never went back. All of them choosing to live at the Abassani together as Arvai completed his studies. They had been together since. Rally took deep satisfaction in this.

He remembered how they'd taken Arden's lovely dream-names as their own. It gave them all a fresh identity. A new way to be. Only she, and now Shane, knew them.

Shane slid close, hugging him and Arden tightly, as Rally wrapped his arms around his precious treasures.

Rally experienced the joy of tentatively trusting again. Stepping into the light to grasp the hope of Coalition with the shining soul that was Shane, the first Honored Nel he'd allowed himself to confide in since the incident.

Shane grasped his neck, the moist drip of tears in the fur on his shoulder.

"Rally. Dear Rally. I may not be able to physically protect you right now, but I'll keep your heart safe."

A chafing hiss of frustration filtered over the dream-scape.

Rally kissed Shane, gratefulness sweeping through him.

"Thank you, Shane."

He stroked Arden's cheek and gave her a heart-felt kiss.

"Thank you, Arden."

He felt her smile against his lips.

Six

SHANE

The depth of the beautiful connection Arden had with Vai, Rally, and Kano overwhelmed Shane. He loved being with them. He yearned to have a family again.

He and his sister, Irene, felt the call of Space ever since they learned of its possibility. When the L.I.O. accepted their application, they went.

The memory of his parents' disappointment scoured him, making his stomach churn.

Shane shook his head, willing his thoughts to happier things.

Being Honored was amazing, he loved the advantages of being boosted. Irene had told him one of the best parts of being an Honored Nessa was her complete control over her fertility. They both were happy.

Wind loudly creaked the edges of their dream-scape, but wasn't felt inside the coziness of their dream.

He turned to Arden, still in Rally's embrace, reaching up to stroke her shoulder.

“You know, we’ve never talked about kids. Do you want them?”

“Sure, but not now. Not for a long time, really.”

Shane nodded.

“I’m good with that. I don’t feel ready to be a daddy yet. But I like the idea of it.”

Arden swept her gaze over the spirit-forms of their Lio.

“What about you? Vai? Rally? Kano?”

Kano was sure and steady.

“We wait for your readiness, Arden. We had no other expectations. We belong with you. We are yours. Young will be born when you desire it. We are content.”

Shane grinned.

“That’s settled!”

A sizzling, unhappy hum dragged low and insidious, becoming thin and airy before dissipating.

Vai hugged Shane from behind and gave him a kiss on the shoulder.

“Well done, Shane.”

“What?”

Vai smiled.

“You pushed the malicious spirit away by focusing on the good, as is your nature. A natural defense, my love. A powerful one.”

Shane was surprised, then relieved. He'd never thought of cheerfulness as powerful before.

I like it!

Seven

KANO

How sweet my precious pets are!

Kano loved how Arden and Shane helped Rally move past some of his mental scars from the trauma of betrayal. He adored how ugliness simply bounced off Shane's good-natured outlook.

They are such worthy Mates. Abah-Sah, let them find us fast.

Losing her and Shane would be his death knell. Compared with that, all the hardest parts of his life made no difference. Even his darkest moment, which was inextricably tied to Vai's lowest point.

The icy fingers of the malicious entity pricked at the painful memory. He resisted its influence effortlessly, thanks to Vai's Emotion Absorption taking the brunt of its pressure.

Kano put his hand on Vai's shoulder. The fine, tight tension in Vai's spiritual form concerned Kano.

Shane turned around to hug Vai, rubbing his cheek on Vai's shoulder in loving support, and Kano's affection for Shane

grew even more fierce.

Kind, amiable Mate.

Shane would be well-rewarded for his loving nature when Kano was finally truly with his sweet ones.

Vai relaxed into Shane's embrace, turning his attention to Kano.

“Let them see. They should know.”

Kano would do this for his Brethren. He understood that freely giving these memories would steal the flavors of pain from their enemy, giving it no fuel for its cruelty.

“By your will, Vai.”

Vai aligned their memories, letting them fly unchecked into the minds of their Mates.



Devastated, Arvai sensed the evil prowling toward his Brethren because of him. Abassan mated, but there were potential consequences to their Mates.

This might be too high a cost to bear. Perhaps it is better to leave Kiraly and Takano together and safe on Lio HomeWorld.

Takano rushed into their private quarters in the Abassani, shouting his pain at his wayward Mate.

“You would leave us?”

Arvai blinked up in surprise.

“You know my thoughts?”

Takano was blazing angry.

“I know your *heart*, Arvai.”

Takano paused, rubbing his chest through the ache.

“You are ripping ours apart. Stop.”

“I don’t want you hurt!”

“Then we stay together. Come what may.”

They sat down across from each other, reaching their hands out for connection, gazing into each other’s eyes as Arvai absorbed the depth of connection they already possessed. To break it would break them. Kiraly would be lost, too.

Arvai pushed the possibility of separation away, never considering it again.

Takano stood steadily by Arvai and Kiraly.

Always.



Kano shivered at the echo of potential loss.

“I thought I’d lose my mind that day.”

Vai snickered.

“You lost your mind long before that!”

Kano’s laugh overpowered the gritty, miserable moan of the intruder.

“That’s a fact.”

His heart filled with joy as he remembered the first time he’d seen Vai, surrounded by beautiful, pink flowers, leaning against MotherTree in the Bon’Fiel Meadow.

Arden sighed as she enjoyed the moment he shared.

Their dream-scape had warmed considerably. Kano believed the dark entity’s hold was collapsing.

A grating cry of horrid disappointment echoed around them.

“I will have you! You will *never* be complete.”

They ignored it.

Vai drove it to the very edge with a blast of spiritual light sparked by the memory of jubilation he felt when he first sensed Arden all those spans ago. Rally added his exhilaration, and Kano reveled in his thrill at discovering her. Arden shared her wonder.

“No! You are *hopeless*. Hopele...”

Shane was delighted.

“How amazing!”

And just like that, the screeching soul-sucker disappeared from their dream.

Eight

ARDEN

Arden popped into consciousness like a bubble reaching the surface of the Ocean.

Shane was gasping next to her on the bed.

When did he get here?

“What the ever-loving *fuck* was all that, lass?”

Arden startled, looking at an anxious Bergstrom hovering over her and Shane.

Arden’s voice was rough.

“It was woo-woo, Bergie. *Big* woo-woo.”

Bergstrom handed them hydro-packs, his voice gentle as he watched them closely.

“I was scared for ya. I came to check on ya. You were moanin’ and cryin’ out for Shane. I went and got the fella. Found him in the same state and carried his ass here.”

Shane sounded shaky.

“Thanks, Bergstrom. We were scared, too.”

They took long moments to recover, consuming without protest, every bit of food and drink Bergstrom gave them.

When they were done, Shane implored the gruff male.

“Can I stay with her? I don’t want to be alone. And she doesn’t want to be, either.”

Arden cuddled closer to Shane.

“He’s right. I want him to stay.”

Bergstrom looked at them with compassion.

“Listen, a Shumal is around to protect a lass from fearsome beasts with claws and fangs. No offense, lad, but you seem as weak as a kitten.”

Shane took offense.

“Hey! I am not *weak*.”

“There’s the lad I know. Would you rather I bed down on *this* side of the door, or the other side?”

Shane peered at Bergstrom, then Arden, and back to Bergstrom. He dramatically fell back onto Arden’s bed with a groan.

“I am *exhausted*. So weak. Like a kitten. *Meow*.”

Bergstrom surveyed Shane knowingly.

“Thought so.”

Arden giggled.

“Did you just *meow*?”

Shane pointed at Bergstrom.

“You want him snoring on *this* side of the door?”

Without a beat, Arden turned to Bergstrom with a completely straight face.

“Meow.”

Bergstrom regarded them blankly for long moments, then snorted.

“Keep it down, ya pussies.”

He stood up to leave as Shane protested.

“I am not a pus...”

Arden firmly put her hand over Shane’s mouth, stopping his words.

Bergstrom froze, turning to peer at them with an eyebrow raised. Arden smiled up at Bergstrom, her eyes blinking up innocently, her tone a tiny plea.

“Meow?”

Arden turned to Shane, licking her lips as she removed her hand. He was deeply appreciative.

“Mee-yoww.”

Arden leaned down to passionately kiss Shane. They barely heard the decisive snick of the entry closing with Bergstrom on the *other* side.

When Arden pulled back, she admired Shane’s kiss-swollen lips and his lambent gaze. His voice was low and thick.

“I have never been so happy to be called a pussy.”

Arden laughed, then gasped as Shane reached under her thin nightgown and stroked up the seam of her sex.

Shane grinned.

“What have I found *here*?”

Arden gasp-chuckled.

“A pussy?”

Shane softly caressed her silky flesh, pleasuring her while watching her face intently. He was so handsome. So loving.

“You have a glow around you.”

Shane’s gentle touches continued, his gaze amused but penetrating.

“Like I’m healthy?”

“No. An actual glow. It’s part of how I knew you were mine.”

Shane reached his free hand up, cupping her cheek to bring her down for another deep kiss. He licked his lips as they parted, as if savoring her flavor. She adored his taste.

“I *am* yours, Arden. I knew it when you introduced yourself. You’re the one I’ve been searching for.”

Arden understood completely.

“We found each other.”

“Yes.”

They kissed.

Arden spoke absentmindedly, but resolutely.

“We are going to find our Lio, too.”

“Yes.”

“Let’s talk with Captain Valen tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Another deep kiss. Shane’s voice was unrecognizably deep with arousal.

“Tomorrow.”

Shane removed her nightgown and his t-shirt and sleep-shorts. His hands caressed her as she greedily stroked and kissed all she could reach of his beautiful body. She adored finding those places that made him gasp and twitch, or arch for more. He made her writhe and moan.

She straddled him, both gasping as her slick softness pressed his hard length. She lifted to take him, but hesitated.

I want more.

Shane caressed over her arm as he nodded in understanding.

“You want *them* here, don’t you?”

Arden nodded, feeling a little sad they weren’t.

“I do, too.”

Their gazes met, eyes searching.

“Can we wish them here? Like, *here*, here?”

Shane smiled.

“It’s worth a shot. It’s just more woo-woo, right?”

Arden snickered.

“Okay. Let’s close our eyes and *wish*.”

When they opened their eyes, there were shadows of shape and form with them. She could feel their cool, ghostly touches.

Vai’s voice was faint, but clear.

“Thank you, loves, for inviting us here with you.”

Emotion overwhelmed Arden. She had all her Mates with her as she’d longed for. She felt the burn of tears before they fell.

Shane lovingly wiped them away. She breathed and relaxed, her passion fierce, deep, and true for her gentle man.

His voice was soft.

“You ready?”

“*So* ready.”

She lifted as Shane held his cock up for her to take. She sank down on his delicious hot shaft, feeling a sense of homecoming as he filled her.

Possessiveness overwhelmed Arden. She leaned close as she staked her Claim.

“I Claim you, Shane. You’re *my* Mate. *Mine*. Forever.”

Shane moaned.

“Yes, love. Yours. Forever.”

Vai’s spirit-voice intoned.

“Arden Pon’Vogel has Claimed Shane Davenport.”

Arden and Shane thrust together in delicious counterpoint, moaning their pleasure in each other. Kissing in a frenzy of lust, she peaked just before Shane joined her.

Their kisses calmed, becoming soothing.

Cool fingers stroked her spine. She looked over at a spirit-mist Rally, still in a pleasure haze.

“Thank you, beloved Mates, for sharing this with us. *Find* us. We hunger for you. Until the MateBond is Sealed, the soul-seeker will come after you. Be careful.”

And then they were gone.

Arden and Shane looked at each other with determination. He was firm.

“We will find them.”

Arden nodded.

“Yes, we *will*.”

But Arden wasn’t done with Shane. Not even close to done. Her hips undulated as she clenched on him tight.

Shane groaned.

He rolled Arden onto her back, his lips taking her kiss and her mind as he began a hard steady rhythm.

“Let’s work out some tension first, shall we?”

Arden moaned her agreement as he gave her another deep, heavy thrust.

Nine

SHANE

Shane was ready to follow Arden anywhere. He and Bergstrom. The male had dug in like a tick, hardly leaving their sides.

First thing in the morning, Arden voice-commed her folks on SpacePort Bazzini. When her PrideFamily asked her to describe him, she delighted in making him blush.

Nice to know my woman likes my looks.

They gave their full support for her leaving Lio Trade Valen to seek her Mates as long as Bergstrom joined them.

It's a good thing I really like the guy.

Arden's PrideFamily reassured her they would do everything they could to stay safe, staying on high-alert now that they knew their family was being targeted. They had considerable resources and would use them.

Shane commed Irene. She was delighted to meet Arden. Their personalities meshed as he hoped they would. They would be wonderful troublemakers when they met in person.

Captain Valen Hanson Lon’Fiel, who the Lio Trade Vessel was named for as Lio tradition dictated, was a rare, natural-born Honored Nel Prime from the colony-world Lio Libaax. He and his Lio Nel LifeMate, Falcone, were still searching to complete their Coalition.

Captain Valen had truly beautiful wavy brown hair with blond ends. The layered length was pulled back from his face, falling well below his shoulders. He had a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. Chest hair was visible in the deep V of his sleeveless vest. He wore a Lio shendyt, a belt with *three* sheathed knives, and mag-boots.

He’d cleared his schedule for a short period to meet with Shane, Arden, and Bergstrom. Arden concisely explained what happened. Bergstrom shifted restlessly when she used the term ‘woo-woo’ to describe the unusual dream-scape battle. She was careful to keep the details of her Mates’ memories private, as she’d done with her PrideFamily.

Captain Valen seemed as amused as he’d felt when he first heard Arden use ‘woo-woo.’

“This business sounds *very* woo-woo, Arden. I make a point of never standing in the way of woo-woo Mate business.”

They all chuckled, but Captain Valen took them seriously, despite his humor.

“Say the verse again, please.”

“Where serpent’s gaze meets cosmic skies, A reptilian realm where secrets lie. In slithering dance and wisdom old, The

path awaits, as stories unfold.”

The Captain looked down as he pondered, rubbing his beard.

“You’ll be going onto the Cross-Trade Vessel we are meeting today. We are trading with the Slarr, the snake-like humanoids from Slarra. They could be your ‘serpents’ and ‘reptiles.’ You’ve probably considered this.”

Arden nodded.

“We have. Bergstrom and I have been double-checking the trade-goods for this delivery. We’d like to accompany the goods and maybe meet the Slarr representative.”

“Done. I’ll add Trade Credentials and Permissions to all of your access codes. You’ll be able to speak with the Slarr Nesters in charge of the trade.”

Shane swallowed, but stayed quiet. Gaining Lio TCP would unlock enormous trade opportunities for them. Captain Valen had given them a tremendous gift.

Captain Valen swept Arden and Shane with his gaze before regarding Bergstrom.

Bergstrom shook his head.

“I will not leave them. I made a promise.”

Arden turned to Bergstrom.

“I don’t remember you making any kind of promise to me.”

“This promise wasn’t to you, lass. I promised others on the night you saved my life.”

What?

Arden echoed Shane's confusion.

"What?"

"You saved my life twice that night, although I didn't know it for a very long time."

Bergstrom looked at Arden with pain-filled affection. She reached for Shane's hand. He took it gently, pouring his support through the simple touch.

"I was on SpacePort Arata trading some goods. I saw this skinny ragamuffin with unkempt hair and the shiny gold skin of an Honored Nessa being taunted by vicious little beasts. I had to get you out of there. I'd heard about the family on SpacePort Bazzini who took in Honored orphans. You fit the bill."

Arden reached up and stroked Bergstrom's beard.

"It was *you*. Maybe that's why you've never scared me."

Bergstrom snorted.

"Nah. You're a fearless lass. You threw trash back at those little beasties as fast as you could. I respected your courage. It's what caught my notice."

Arden put her hand on Bergstrom's chest.

"But how does this save *your* life?"

"I commed my Harem, told them about you. Sent images of you asleep, curled up in my lap. Told them I'd be a few day spans later than planned to give you a safe place to rest and gather up some supplies for ya."

Bergstrom's voice became tight.

"I was to meet up with them at Lio Fleet Draux after they finished their final trade run of the day. They would change course to meet me at SpacePort Bazzini after I dropped you off."

Arden moved her hand to his heart as Bergstrom looked down and shook his head, unable to speak for a moment before continuing.

"My females were so loving and compassionate. They made me promise to keep you safe until I saw them again."

He cleared his throat and looked up, tears welling in his eyes, but not falling.

"That final trade went bad. They were escaping when they collided with another Trade Vessel. There were no survivors."

Shane's heart broke for Bergstrom. The thought of losing his Mates stabbed his soul.

How did he survive the loss?

Bergstrom reached his hand up and covered Arden's.

"You saved my life because I would have been with them if not for a fierce little lass who needed protecting. You saved my life again later when I was Bereft. I had no reason to live other than my promise to keep you safe."

Arden's expression colored with wonder.

"You were the shadow-man protecting me and my sisters!"

Bergstrom sniffed, then snorted.

“One of them. Your fool brothers, too. I don’t know how any of you survived without more scars than you have. The Pon’Vogels took care of me as much as they did you little ones. There are more protectors, like me. You needed us. You all are a scary bunch.”

Arden laughed, then looked at Bergstrom affectionately.

“Thank you, Bergie.”

Bergstrom grunted gruffly.

“Fair trade. You scamps kept me busy, so I lived. Then, one day, living wasn’t so terrible. I had a purpose.”

Bergstrom turned to Captain Valen, his eyes narrowed.

“I go where *she* goes. And her fella. He ain’t going anywhere else, either.”

Shane decisively nodded his full support.

Damn straight, Bergie.

Captain Valen scrutinized Bergstrom with a thoughtful gaze.

“I’ll add Authority to be Official Witness and Declare MateBonds Sealed to your Lio TCPs, Bergstrom.”

Bergstrom blinked, then bowed low with respect.

“Thank you, Captain Valen.”

He bowed back and smiled.

“Pack your things, I doubt you’re coming back to my Vessel. If your PrideFamily needs anything, let me know. Safe travels. Blessings upon you.”



Within an hour's span, Arden and Shane rendezvoused with a large duffle each.

Bergstrom had a duffle and two large portable shipping containers.

They stared at him.

“What? I collect things! Besides, the lower crate is Arden's from her PrideFamily.”

Bergstrom shrugged.

“They sent me with this pallet of goods to give to you when you needed it. I believe now is that time. It is a fortune of trade goods that, if carefully used, can keep you going for most of your life.”

Arden considered it.

“This makes us huge bandit bait.”

Bergstrom palmed the sheathed knife in his belt and turned his back to show them a small laser cannon strapped across him.

Shane lifted his shirt to show them his concealed blasters.

Arden pointed to her mag-boots.

They smiled at each other, then piled their duffles on the pallets. Arden and Shane, holding hands, started toward the Cross-Trade Vessel, Bergstrom easily moving the mag-assisted shipping crates behind them.



Their new TCPs got them quickly into the Slarr Lounge. They entered quietly as rhythmic music played.

An imposingly massive Slarr had their back turned to the entryway, looking at a view of the stars beyond. Scales gleamed blue-black in the low light. Their multiple arms were raised, hands at interesting angles as its body moved in sinuous flow with the beat.

Arden whispered under her breath.

“I *know* this one!”

Before Shane or Bergstrom could say a word, Arden approached the dancing Slarr.

The being turned, its split tongue tasting the air as she walked up to it. Their toothy, fang-filled smile was frightening, but Arden was unfazed.

She lifted her hands at similar angles to the beings and began a side-step that joined the tempo of the music. They clapped their hands simultaneously, then she side-stepped the other direction as the Slarr slid with her in unison. Their synchronized movements continued smoothly.

Watching Arden connect with the amazing being without saying a word charmed Shane.

The music ended, but Arden and the Slarr stayed gazing at each other.

The Slarr's voice had a double timber, as if it spoke in two voices at the same time.

"It's been ages since I had a lovely slink-dance partner."

They bowed to Arden, who bowed back.

She said nothing, just looked at the being expectantly.

"I know what you seek."

She gave them a huge smile, allowing her joy to show.

"I know!"

Shane was thrilled.

They know!

"This way."

The Slarr began leading them to a private hold, its two-toned voice hypnotic to hear.

"I knew in my heart I would show the treasure to the one who slinked with me."

Bergstrom did not sound impressed.

"That's not weird *at all*. Fucking woo-woo *here*. Woo-woo *there*."

Shane rolled his eyes at the grump.

"I figured you'd be used to it by now."

Bergstrom snorted.

They all entered a vast, dark hold filled with enormous, shadowed items. The Slarr lead them to a sleek Lio Stinger. It

was a stream-lined Vessel angled into a single point with blade-like extensions along its undercarriage that could rip a fuselage apart, just like a bee's stinger.

Arden's voice was reverent.

"They are here. In *there*."

The Slarr wordlessly bowed low, then started back the way they'd come.

Bergstrom was impatient, looking around nervously as the Slarr silently signaled they'd been followed. Two bodies hit the ground with meaty thumps in the Slarr's wake.

We are definitely bandit bait.

"Get up in there!"

Before Arden and Shane could move, a small rear bay door opened and three lovely, graceful, sleek Lio Nessas exited the Stinger.

One approached, while the other two took up defensive positions.

"Arden?"

"Yes."

"Welcome to The Ardent. We've anticipated your arrival. I see you have some uninvited guests."

Bergstrom stood stunned, looking at the Lio Nessa like he'd never seen one before. His eyes devoured her form. His tone was distractedly gruff while he pointed at the bandits.

"They're not *ours*."

Arden and Shane quickly got the gear into the Stinger and turned to watch the scene unfold from the protection of the entryway.

The Lio Nessa walked straight up to Bergstrom and rubbed herself full-body against his torso. Bergstrom panted, arms out to the sides in a sign of non-aggressiveness.

She gestured to her Lio Nessa companions as they eyed Bergstrom invitingly.

“No? We could be *yours*, though. What’s your name?”

Bergstrom’s lips moved, but no sound came out for a moment.

“Bergie.”

Shane burst out laughing at the cute way he’d said a name he had scoffed at previously.

“Hmm. Handsome Bergie. You stay here while we take out the trash.”

The Lio Nessa petted through his mane and pulled his beard before turning to join the other Lio Nessas as an aggressive mixed group of Earther and Alien bandits approached.

The Lio Nessas made quick work of disabling their opponents without killing them. It was poetry in motion. Poetry Bergstrom very much enjoyed if the enormous erection lifting his shendyt was any sign. He didn’t hide his aroused reaction.

Shane shouted to Bergstrom.

“Bergie?”

Bergstrom shook his head, lifting his hands helplessly, never looking away from the battling Lio Nessas. He seemed as surprised as Shane was.

“It slipped out. They steal my senses, lad.”

Shane looked at his beautiful Arden and completely understood how a female could scramble a male’s brain.

Tell me about it.

Two Lio Nels rushed past Shane and Arden. They nodded a welcome to them, then strode up to Bergstrom, sniffing him on both sides. One growled and rubbed his cheek on Bergstrom’s before turning to fight. The other grabbed Bergstrom’s ass and bit his shoulder before joining the Lio Nessas to finish the clash.

A quick victory had the Lio joining them in the hold shortly.

Bergstrom chuckled.

“I like people who know how to take out the trash.”

A Lio Nessa cuddled close under Bergstrom’s arm.

“Yeah? We know how to take care of lovers, too.”

Shane bantered.

“Do you kill them?”

The Lio Nessa had eyes only for Bergie as she answered.

“Only a little death. Over and over.”

Bergie growled long and low.

The Lio Nessa who first welcomed them laughed, then turned to Shane and Arden, her expression softening to affection.

“Go find them. We will take care of Bergie.”

Bergstrom’s growl sounded like anticipation.

Shane felt the same.

Ten

ARDEN

Arden opened her senses to her Mates, breathing over the back of her tongue to test the air.

Finally, after all these year spans she could taste the full flavor of their rich scents.

“This way.”

Shane followed her as she went through room after room. She briefly admired the warm earth-tones, with pops of black and cream that dominated the decor. The interior was sleek, but comfortable. Homey. *Their* home.

Arden felt feral possessiveness rise within her as she sensed she was getting closer. She eyed Shane to make sure he was with her. Her voice was a low growl.

“Stay close.”

Shane looked at her, his nose flaring, nodding as he licked his lips with anticipation. Arousal poured out of her. She glanced down. He was engorged and ready.

Good. Because I will take them all. They're mine.

She approached a wall with a pattern of rectangles on it, some in high relief, some flush to the wall. The pattern repeated throughout the spaces they'd passed. There was no obvious entryway, but she sensed they were *here*.

Perhaps a hidden entry?

They hadn't passed through any private berths as they searched for their Mates.

Reaching out, she pressed a raised rectangle with her palm. The entry slid open with a low shush.

A Solaray triggered as they entered a room of curved, textured cream walls with dark accents. There was subtle, warm lighting throughout, with a sitting area off to the side. But what caught and held Arden's attention was the enormous, round-edged bed. And the three Lio Nels who laid upon it.

They were unconscious and didn't stir. Not even their noses twitched.

They must be in deep.

Vai was in the middle. Kano and Rally, on either side of him, cuddled close with one hand on his chest. His hands covered theirs as they slept.

They were beautiful, their lean, fur covered bodies larger than she'd sensed in her dream-scape.

Finally.

Arden breathed their scents. Shane joined her at the foot of the bed, looking at them. She breathed deep again, this time with all her Mates' scents mixed in a heady ambrosia.

We are together.

Deep emotion welled up, pricking her eyes with tears.

We've waited so long for each other!

A low growl rumbled in her chest as a rage of possessiveness washed through her. She'd never felt so wild. So sexually charged. The needs swirling inside her were demanding and vicious.

She turned her gaze to her gentle man. Shane was *not* vicious.

Can he handle this?

Shane looked back at her, his eyes wide as he swallowed.

“Fuck, Arden, if you don't crawl up there and Claim our guys, I think I'll lose my mind and attack them myself.”

He can take it!

She gave a low growl of approval and crawled up on the bed. Shane followed her closely, settling on his knees beside Kano.

Arden didn't stop until she straddled Vai.

Vai had lovely golden fur, typical of most Lio, but with a magnificent, heavy, long, wavy black mane laying in a wild tumble around his head. His face had black fur above his lips and on his chin, matching his tail tuft.

Shane admired them with her.

“Kano has your colors!”

Kano really did have caramel-colored fur that matched her hair color. His mane and facial fur were all the same rich tone. Arden loved that they matched that way.

His mane's texture is spectacular!

A lush, dense mass of tight, springy coils invited her touch.

I want to bury my hands in its beautiful thickness.

Arden remembered how Rally was described in his memory, but it was a pale shadow compared to the reality of him.

His long and luxurious, shaggy golden mane had glossy dark brown tips. But his fur was extraordinary. It was a rich brown with pale gold tips that gave his fur a sumptuous golden sheen with a unique depth of color unusual among the Lio she'd seen.

So beautiful. So tender-hearted and hurt.

Need for her Mates blazed hot.

Time to be Claimed, my loves.

She leaned forward, bracing herself by covering their hands with hers as she leaned forward to kiss Vai. Her lips pressed softly as she breathed his scent. She sensed stirring beneath her hands.

Then Arden was on her back, being kissed with focused intent. She loved the textures of Vai's kiss and reveled in licking his huge fangs.

She felt Kano sit up and spring to the side, hearing Shane's whoosh of breath as Kano landed on him.

She felt the barest hint of claws as Vai ripped her clothes from her body.

Shane moaned as his clothes were quickly ripped away, too.

Arden's face was turned for another's kiss.

Rally.

His flavor was distinct and delicious. Vai wasted no time, pushing deep inside Arden, filling her with his hot, hard cock. She arched back and gasped at how different he felt.

Opening her eyes, she gazed into pale-gold eyes, shimmering with heat like the sun.

She murmured.

“Sunshine.”

Rally smiled, petting the hair back from her face as she moaned at Vai's next thrust.

“Hello, Arden.”

Vai pushed hard and deep again, groaning his delight in her.

Rally crawled over to greet a groaning Shane, and Arden saw the lover who was inside her, pleasuring her so well.

Vai's eyes were a deep-gold.

She whispered.

“Flame.”

Vai answered her as he descended for an endless kiss.

“My beauty!”

Eleven

ABASSAN VAI

Being with Arden, *in* Arden, was all he could have dreamed of.

Her beautiful face glowed with her rapture as she drenched his cock with her hot cream. He joined her, his mind bursting with exaltation, pouring his heart and soul into her with his nectar.

She shuddered with the intensity of the nectar-rush.

“Yes, sweet Mate. All the nectar you need.”

“Vai. Vai! I love you! I Claim you. *Mine!*”

She growled and reached up, grabbing his mane, bringing him down for a fierce, demanding kiss. Her slick cunt clenched hard, needing more.

I will provide.

“Yours, love. *Yours.*”

He gave himself over to her, providing the intoxicating euphoria they both craved. They rode another peak together.

Shane’s surprised exclamation got their attention.

“Fuck me! You have a cock in your tails!”

Arden turned wide-eyed to see as she panted through her aftershocks.

Both Kano and Rally had revealed their most vulnerable parts.

Kano’s tone dripped with deep satisfaction.

“It’s a Sabah, Shane. Let me show you how it feels.”

Shane moaned with abandon as he took his first Sabah deep.

Vai felt Arden tighten on him as she enjoyed Shane’s pleasure. He lifted up and out as they groaned, turning her to face their Mates. Then Vai pushed back deep inside, holding still, giving her something to clench on.

Kano crooned to Shane.

“You take me easy, yes? Being prepared on the dream-scape prepares your body, too.”

Shane and Arden gasped.

“Yes, my pets. You will take our cocks so sweetly.”

He leaned close to Shane, who breathed his answer.

“Yes.”

Arden seemed fascinated by Rally’s Sabah, which he was enticing Shane to lick.

Vai leaned close to Arden’s ear.

“Do you want to see my Sabah?”

“Yes!”

Vai gave her a gentle thrust of approval as Kano took his tail in hand and eased close to them, still using his Sabah deep inside Shane.

Rally lowered himself over Shane, devouring his silky, golden flesh with soft licks and open-mouth kisses, wanting to taste Shane's cream.

Kano pulled off the Serc that ringed Vai's tail beneath his tuft. He parted the fur at Vai's tip and slid the Serc back into place, securing the thick strands back, away from the now-naked tail tip.

Slowly, Vai revealed his Sabah to Arden. First came the flexible tip on his pointed crown. Then he showed his darkly-nubbed column of golden flesh. It was as thick as his tail and as long as his hand.

Vai crooked his Sabah's flexible tip so she could see the potential such an appendage had for bringing her pleasure.

“Oh, wow.”

Kano hummed as Shane shouted his orgasm, Rally suckling him deep into his throat, drinking his Mate's offering with obvious delight.

Kano put Vai's Sabah near his long, thick length.

“They are similar, but different. See? They both have nubs to delight you, but we do not give nectar from our Sabah.”

Kano nudged closer as his voice enticed.

“However, both love the stroke of your pretty tongue and the clasp of your warm mouth.”

Arden swiped her tongue between Vai’s Sabah and Kano’s cock, making them both gasp and moan.

She panted and began licking both alternately with fervor.

Vai couldn’t help thrusting shallowly as she made his dreams come true with her velvety mouth. Lio could not kiss each other or suck shafts like Honored could. Their fangs and the rough centers of their tongues prevented it.

“You taste so good!”

“Arden, my pet. You’ll be taking my nectar soon.”

Arden stopped, making both Vai and Kano still.

“I Claim you Kano, for my own. You’re mine!”

She capped Kano’s cock with her soft mouth and drank him down as he roared his joy while feeding her his nectar. Vai felt her shudder and clench, thrusting into her to give her a sweet peak with Kano.

He whispered praise.

“Beautiful Mate. Generous Mate.”

Vai looked over at Shane and Rally, who watched them with lust-filled gazes.

“Sweet Mates. Come here.”

Twelve

KANO

Kano looked down at Arden as she gave his crown a final swipe of her amazing tongue, licking her lips.

“I hope you enjoy my flavor, pet. I’ll be filling your mouth with nectar every chance I get.”

Arden looked up at him with her gorgeous, golden-brown eyes.

“My pleasure, Kano. Any time.”

He shivered.

I could give her another load of nectar so easily.

But first, he’d be getting deep in her ass. He knew she was a virgin there because of all the time he’d had to take preparing her. She’d be ready now, beautifully loose from the many orgasms Vai had already given her.

He looked at Vai, who pulled slowly out, making Arden groan.

Kano’s voice was deep.

“You’ll be filled again soon enough.”

Arden licked her lips, looking at him with need. His cock throbbed.

I will always meet your need, my beloved pet.

Vai pulled Kano's Sabah out of Shane, licking it clean of the nectar he'd used to lubricate it. Kano panted, losing his control just a bit more. He looked at Vai, who smiled knowingly.

Vai dropped down to feast on Shane, as Rally enjoyed Shane's tender mouth.

Kano lifted Arden's precious face, cupping her cheeks, before diving into a deep kiss. She was utterly delicious. He loved having his flavor mixed with hers.

He lifted back, gazing at her, letting her see how she owned him.

“Arden, you know I'm yours, right? I might call you ‘pet’ but the reality is I'm yours to command. Completely yours. Everything. *Yours*. Never-ending.”

Arden's hands slid up his torso to caress his face as he cupped hers.

“I know it, Kano. I *feel* it. I like what you call me.”

His heart filled with devotion as his soul settled. He smiled.

“Good.”

He turned her on her hands and knees to face the sexy scene of Vai drinking Shane's cream as he moaned into Rally's mouth in slayed abandon.

She was dripping with cream and nectar. He gathered it up, testing and stretching her.

Perfect. Creamed and ready.

Kano used a pleased spurt of his own nectar to slather his length.

“Did you know that Lio nectar is the perfect lubricant?”

She shook her head. Kano brought his crown to her loose ring. His cock was more pointed than an Honored’s blunt-tipped shaft. And nubbed. They would be very different experiences even if she hadn’t been a virgin there.

“Push out, pet. Let me in. You’re ready for me.”

Arden gasped and grunted, accommodating him beautifully.

As she pushed out, her ring bloomed around him, and he slid his crown into her tight depths with a slick press. He gave her time to adjust, then eased himself completely into her. They both panted as he pulled her back further onto him, fully seated.

Kano wrapped his arms around Arden, reveling in her. He felt languid, content being entirely inside his beloved. He buried his face in her neck, loving her scents and textures. Loving *her*.

“I love you, Arden.”

She clasped her arms around his enfolding ones and rocked back into him.

“I love you, too, Kano.”

Thirteen

RALLY

Rally adored beautiful, golden-haired Shane with his loving, generous nature. Protectiveness welled within him for his gentle Mate.

Shane turned to gaze at Arden like she was the tastiest treat he could ever have. He did that frequently, making sure she was happy and enjoying herself. Shane's expression softened while witnessing Arden and Kano declare their love for each other.

Such a lovely, caring male.

Then Shane turned his eyes upon Rally and Vai with the same sweet desire he showed for Arden and Kano.

There was a quiet battle raging in Rally's heart as Shane reached over and stroked the fur on his thigh.

"You are so beautiful! Rally, look at these gorgeous colors."

Shane stroked a strand of Vai's mane.

"I've never seen a black mane before, Vai!"

Shane smiled as he looked over at Arden and Kano.

“And Kano, your fur matches Arden’s coloring. You both are so stunning. Especially together!”

Arden smiled, petting a loving hand over Kano’s forearm. Shane expressed such genuine appreciation for his Mates. His open, kind soul matched the female they all loved.

Rally sensed the stillness within Vai and Kano as they watched his reactions. They waited to see if he would allow his past to quash his future.

Will I allow myself to enjoy Shane’s sweetly innocent admiration?

Rally watched Shane’s absorption as he sifted the colors of Rally’s fur on his thigh, completely unaware of how he pushed at Rally’s trauma.

He thinks I am beautiful.

Rally wanted to be beautiful to his Mates.

Ever since the attack, he’d hated his own appearance because it made him and his loved-ones a target. Yet, he treasured the cherishing look in Shane’s eyes as he complimented him. It was precious.

Do I want to taint the joy Shane takes in me?

The answer was obvious to him in a flash.

No. That stops now.

Rally caressed Shane’s cheek, bending down to bring their mouths close as he spoke against Shane’s lips.

“Thank you.”

Shane smiled, stroking his hands deep into Rally's mane.

"My pleasure, Rally."

Rally poured his heart into his kiss, leaving them both breathless. When he raised up, he grabbed Shane and brought him up too.

Rally sensed Vai and Kano relax. Vai grabbed Shane, treating him to kisses as Rally turned to Arden and Kano.

He felt a little light-headed, soaring over his last barrier, choosing to trust the loving need his Honored Mates showed him. Arden watched him with focused attention. He thought perhaps she understood the enormous boundary he had just crossed.

I want all of my Mates. I must give them all of myself.

Her eyes searched his as he came close. She reached up, caressing his face, smoothing his mane back. He saw her enjoyment touching him.

"Do you think I am beautiful, too?"

Arden looked at him in stark truth.

"I think you are gorgeous, Rally. Inside and out."

I will have this female.

"I've only been with Vai and Kano. May I be inside you? With Kano."

Arden rubbed her thumb across his lips as she nodded.

"I've never had two before. It will be new to us both, Rally."

Rally and Kano helped her lift her legs to wrap them around Rally's hips. He pressed the crown of his cock to her heat and pushed in slowly, gasping at the hot, wet clasp of her tight sex around him. He felt Kano's length with his as he pressed inside. It was intoxicating.

Kano and Arden moaned as Rally took his place within her. They clutched each other as they became used to the feel of each other.

Arden caressed his ears as he focused on her, panting.

“I Claim you, my beautiful Rally. You are *mine*.”

Rally's heart soared as he pushed deeper. He was finally Claimed by the female he loved to his depths. He and Kano matched their rhythms in counter point, Kano pushing in while Rally pulled back.

Arden was soon coming, the grip-and-release of her peak bringing him and Kano over to join her. They panted as Kano eased onto his back, bringing Arden and Rally with him.

Rally could not leave her, so he leaned forward, bracing his weight on his hands, looking at her like she hung the moon. Kano surprised him by reaching forward and grasping his flanks, spreading him for the males behind him.

Rally felt himself clench, knowing what he wished, but didn't dare ask for.

Fourteen

SHANE

Shane watched Kano's hands spread Rally wide, longing to plunge into the male's tight heat. Hoping to be granted that pleasure. Not that he would know what it felt like. He'd never fucked a male before.

Vai went close to Rally and grabbed his mane in a firm grip. He leaned low and spoke insistently.

"Tell us. Tell us what you need, Rally. What do you hope and long for?"

Shane blinked as the language Vai used matched his own internal thoughts.

Rally groaned.

"I want..."

Arden stroked Rally's face as he struggled in Vai's hold.

"Ask for what you want, my Rally."

Rally moaned.

"I want Shane in me while I am in my beloved."

“That’s what I want too, Rally.”

Shane caressed Rally’s gorgeous flank. His cock throbbed to be inside him, but Rally’s struggle made him hesitate.

“Why is it so hard to say it, Rally?”

Vai shook Rally’s head with his grip.

“Oh, don’t hurt him!”

Vai looked at Shane with deep sexual knowledge.

“Sweet Shane, this doesn’t *hurt*. It makes him burn. Right, Rally?”

Rally hissed his answer through a pleased moan.

“Yesss.”

“Tell him why it was difficult to say.”

“I’ve feared Earthers since they attacked me!”

Vai let Rally go as he buried his face in Arden’s neck.

Oh, Rally. My beautiful Rally.

Shane wanted to lie over Rally’s back protectively. Needed to.

I would never let anyone hurt you, my love!

Instead, he wrapped his arms around himself.

If it bothered Rally, he would not do it. Neither would he enjoy taking Rally in that new way. They could do other things very happily.

He reached out to pet Rally’s arm gently, no longer sure of his welcome for a more intimate touch.

“I’m sorry, Rally. It’s okay.”

Rally raised up and roared in anguish. Shane recoiled, but Vai hugged him into a snug embrace, comforting him, whispering.

“Shhh, listen to his heart.”

Rally shook with the power of his emotions. Arden soothingly caressed his shoulders as Kano kept Rally anchored inside Arden with a grip on his hips.

“No! I need you, Shane! I need you to touch me and love me like you do. I feel your hesitation with me and it *hurts*. Please. Please! Take my trust in you. Honor it. Take me!”

Shane’s flagging erection filled to bursting at Rally’s words.

Vai turned Shane’s body, touching the tips of their shafts together. He spurt a measure of nectar on Shane’s shaft until he was abundantly coated with his Lio’s natural lubricant.

Kano opened Rally for him, and Vai helped place him at the perfect angle. Shane leaned close.

“I love you, Rally. I will always protect you. We all will.”

Growls of approval sounded as Shane pushed in deep with one steady thrust. He groaned at the tight clench, but it was Rally’s cries of approval that made heat rise within him and his cock throb.

“Are you okay, Rally?”

“Yes! Yes, love. More!”

It unleashed Shane. He made love to Rally with all the tenderness in his soul, his body undulating with sensuous

waves, stroking his lover's back, tail, and mane, feeling Vai's sweet caresses as he *loved* his Mate.

He realized Kano and Arden were crying out their enjoyment with Rally. Shane was close. He was ready to gear up for a grand finish when Vai grabbed his hair in a firm grip, stopping him.

The sexual rush of being controlled made his spine tingle.

Vai's voice was guttural.

“Wait.”

He pushed Shane hard up onto the bed, his knees solidly planted, shins dangling off.

Vai held him firmly still while he spurted nectar on his hole.

Fuck, yes!

“Push out. You're ready. Take me.”

Shane obeyed, pushing out as the thick, textured, invading column of Vai's cock took his virginity while he moaned with excitement.

Shane accepted him easily. They had stretched and prepared him well. Vai kissed his shoulders and growled as he dug deep.

“Good Mate.”

Vai thrust smooth and steady, hitting a delicious spot deep inside Shane with unerring accuracy, zinging pleasure throughout his body, making him moan. Each firm thrust pushed Shane into Rally, who pushed into Arden and Kano. They cried out their pleasure.

Vai was deliciously fucking all his Mates simultaneously.

Fifteen

ARDEN

The build was steady and high. Arden shivered in the grip of rapture. Her longed-for Mates were buried deep and being pleased.

Arden saw the faint aural glow surrounding Shane envelope them all. It hovered over them as incandescent ecstasy took her in its gorgeous grip.

She embraced the uniqueness of each of her Mates, anticipating the lives they would make for themselves. She burst with hope for their future, full of love, anchored by their strength and support.

She understood the abiding joy Shane felt being in a family with them. He had a river of contentment flowing within him, ready to be tapped by his Mates when they needed.

She felt the steadfast devotion Kano held for each of them. Unending. Unwavering. Unto death.

She saw Rally's healing ease his heart as he melted into the elation of his Mates' generous love. He accepted and trusted.

She experienced Vai's eyes fill with tears as he witnessed his Mates' bliss bring healing. She knew his happiness that they would be MateBonded and protected from spiritual harm. She burned with his hungry passion for them.

They rejoiced, delight soaring as they peaked together, her Lio Nels roaring their pleasure.

Panting in the aftermath, Arden saw the glowing aura covering them separate into tiny flames above each of their hearts and be absorbed there.

They groaned as they separated their bodies.

Kano picked Arden up, tossing her onto his shoulder, shouting back as he carried her into the grooming room.

“Mistaray!”

They piled into the Mistaray, which looked like a single, giant, freestanding white tusk suspended over a dip in the floor. Water sprayed deliciously over them, and they efficiently and affectionally washed each other.

Arden and Shane soon found themselves wrapped in warm blankets, being cuddled close in the sitting area on a huge couch while their Lio fed them until they were full. Vai and Kano fed Arden on one end, facing Shane who sat in Rally's lap on the other.

Arden loved seeing Shane gradually relax his inhibitions as Rally welcomed his admiring glances and casual touches.

When she was full, Arden began feeding Vai and Kano. Shane did the same for Rally.

Kano leaned in close to Arden, his expression questioning.

“Arden, we want to ask you something.”

“What?”

Vai watched her steadily.

“May we take your name for our own?”

Arden felt stunned.

“You want my name? Pon’Vogel?”

Her gaze went from one Lio Mate to the next.

“*Why?*”

Vai spoke solemnly.

“You gave us new names, fresh identities. You brought us Shane.”

Rally kissed Shane’s cheek. Kano caressed her arm lovingly.

“You found us and Claimed us. We are so proud to be *yours*, Arden.”

Rally spoke softly.

“Being yours gives me courage. I’m finally ready to go back to Lio Fleet Draux. I want to carry your name when I do.”

Shane beamed at Arden.

“I, too, would be honored to carry the Pon’Vogel name.”

“I love that! I love you! *All* of it! Yes!”

Vai, Kano, and Rally roared their joy while she and Shane laughed.

Rally smiled broadly.

“Do you like my Vessel? I named her The Ardent, after one of the most passionate and beautiful people I know.”

Shane looked at Arden appreciatively.

“She’s gorgeous.”

Arden blushed at the heated looks all her Mates were giving her.

“So, this makes you Captain Rally?”

Rally nodded while leisurely sifting his fingers through Shane’s golden hair.

“Yes. And I am seeking a Trade Negotiator. Do you know any of those?”

Shane grinned at Rally.

“I might!”

“Kano is Chief Officer. Vai is clearly Abassan. I have nine other crew. Ten, with Bergie.”

“What about me?”

“What do you want, Arden?”

Arden licked her lips, need for her delicious Mates rising within her. Her gaze swept them possessively.

“I want to be yours, like you are mine.”

Rally and Shane were halfway up, coming to her at the other end of the long couch, as Vai and Kano kissed her shoulders, caressing her exposed arms and legs.

Bergstrom abruptly rushed into their quarters, wearing only a hastily tied cloth around his waist. He sported a wildly tangled mane, his fur matted and fluffed in unusual places.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. Bergstrom spoke anxiously.

“You done? Is it done?”

Arden laughed.

“It?”

“Yeah. The thing. *Your* thing.”

Shane shook his head in amazement.

“Our MateBond?”

“Yeah, *that*.”

Shane looked concerned at how mussed, rushed, and confused Bergstrom was.

“Are you okay?”

A female’s voice called through the open entryway.

“Get back here, Bergie! We aren’t done with you!”

Feminine giggles and several masculine chuckles rang out.

Bergstrom looked back over his shoulder as a sinuous tail waved at them from the entryway.

“I gotta get back to the place. With the people. *Them!*”

He pointed behind him.

“So, are you *done*?”

A masculine voice snickered.

“Because *he* isn’t!”

Arden took pity on the poor male.

“We are MateBonded, yes.”

The other room erupted in cheers. Bergie looked relieved.

“I Declare this Coalition Claimed and Sealed!”

This time Arden and her Mates joined the cheer with the crew.

Bergstrom turned, speaking as he left in a rush.

“Have fun! I know *I* will!”

Shane called after him.

“Bye, Bergie!”

Arden looked over at Shane.

“How about *that!*”

Shane grinned.

“Now we are all happy!”

Their Lio Mates growled their agreement.

Arden bit her lip, gaining their immediate attention. She husked.

“Where were we?”

This time her Mates growled with sexual intent.



Much later, through the calm, cool mist of dreams, verses came to her, embedding in her mind.

“In caverns deep where glimmers play, Light’s glow will guide the way. With luminescence, the path they pave, To free the missing from a stardust grave.”

Arden awakened with a rush, sitting up, knowing instinctively who needed to hear the words she’d dreamed.

She and her guys were piled into bed together.

Vai was awake, watching her, his expression concerned. Arden reassured him.

“I’m good. I dreamed verses for my sister Astor.”

“Verses?”

“Yes. It seems like she’s going on her own grand adventure.”

She sensed Vai using some of his woo-woo to assess internally and externally. She smiled when he relaxed.

“All is well. Comm her tomorrow. Rest now, love.”

Vai reached up and Arden snuggled back into his embrace. Rally moved closer, dropping his arm over her hip. She enjoyed the warmth of her lovers cuddled close. Contentment settled deep.

She’d found her Mates. They were together. She was home.

Note to the Reader

About Kassie Keegan

USA Today Bestselling Author **Kassie Keegan** is the wildly untamed writer of the Savage Series featuring futuristic, bestial Lio heroes and the beings who love them.

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Savage Planet Embrace, Book 1, Savage Planet Series

Savage Planet Secret, Book 2, Savage Planet Series

Savage Planet Discovery, Book 3, Savage Planet Series

Savage Galaxy Rescue, Book 1, Savage Galaxy Rescue Series

Savage Quest: Lord Rawdon, Book 1, Savage Galaxy Quest Series

Savage Mist: Arden, Book 1, Savage Mist Series featured in the *Supra Vellum Anthology*

Mist a Trick by Latrexa Nova

FNBi ♡♡☠

Synopsis



A FAKE DATING, ALIEN, ROBOT-DOCTOR ROMANCE

I think I was supposed to die tonight.

But instead, I'm saved by a swarm of sentient medical nanobots. Now they want to fix the one broken part of me science can't: my broken heart.

Who knew the prescription would be a night of fake-dating and getting to shape them into the perfect man?

Content Warning: *The "LI" is *many* but can appear as one. Some nonconsensual degradation from a past relationship is mentioned. Double penetration, fingering, oral, some gore, manipulation.*

One

I can barely breathe. That much I know.

I also know that something is all around me—but not quite touching me. And yet it is? My mind is a mess of memory—tripping on a felled branch, falling. The falling feels like it's still happening. The arguments. Yelling. Someone close, and yet not.

Breathing gets easier.

The thing that is touching me and not, it's fixing me. Maybe. Or maybe I'm dreaming. Strangely, I still seem to be spread out amongst the detritus, if the cool touch of leaves at my back is any indication. Oh, it's nice that I can actually feel the leaves at my back.

I'm pretty sure my spine was injured in the fall. Come to think of it, I should be dead.

Nice that I'm not.

Little by little, I start to regain feeling in my fingers and toes. There's pain—so much pain—and then nothing. But not

because I can't feel again. Because now I can.

I feel... okay.

"You should be able to speak again in five... four... three... two..." a gentle, calming voice says. It's neither male nor female. Neither young nor old. It just is.

"What happened?" I ask. "Who are you?"

My vision is still a little blurry, or maybe I'm blind. All I see all around me is white, like mist.

"You can call us CASPR," the voice says. "You took a terrible fall, I found you at the bottom of this cliff. Too dangerous to move you then, but you can probably move yourself now."

I check. My limbs don't feel the same.

Maybe better.

"How?" I ask, looking around so I can thank my savior.

Saviors?

Did they say *us*?

"Nanotechnology. We rebuilt the broken parts of you. Well, as much as we could."

"What do you mean? Here?"

"Yes, here. What is it you're struggling to comprehend?"

"How..." I shake my head. "I can't see. Where are you?"

"Right here," the voice says, gentling. "There shouldn't be anything wrong with your vision. What can you see?"

"I see... mist. Pretty much nothing but mist."

“Ah, there is nothing wrong with you. Allow us to remedy that.”

In a moment, the mist swirls away and collects into a tight ball, revealing the moonlit night. The cliff I fell off looms overhead. Queasiness fills my stomach, and I look away quickly. In the opposite direction is a placid lake. Now that the mist isn't surrounding me, I can hear the night. Hear the birds and the scuttle of wildlife amongst the woods.

But no sign of my savior. Just that strange ball of mist.

“What is that?” I ask.

“That?”

“The... ball... of mist?”

“That is us.”

I sit back down promptly. “I'm sorry?”

“There's no need to apologize. You may sit if you like.”

The ball of mist is... not quite a ball. Not quite still either. It's constantly moving. Like a swarm of bees. Except a swarm of bees makes a sound you can hear a mile back in the right circumstances. My eyes close, listening intently. If it's not mist, if it's something more like a swarm, there should be a noise.

And then...

With a small gasp, I recognize the low hum as coming from the swarm. But it's nothing like the anxiety-inducing buzz of bees. It's something almost electrical.

“Are those the nanobots?” I ask, trying to put two and two together.

This is not how I expected my Halloween to go, but here we are. Diving head-first into some crazy sci-fi shit. Honestly? An improvement on the night, if my memory is to go off of. Not that I can remember everything—or maybe it’s more that I don’t want to. All I know is that I was at a party... a work party, I think.

“Yes,” the voice answers.

“And what about you?” I ask, trying to understand who is talking to me, hoping they’ll elaborate.

“Us? Yes.”

I bite the words back, trying to process this strange person’s even stranger way of answering things.

“You. Yes,” I repeat. “The nanobots?”

“Yes.”

C’mon, Dana. You can do this. Your brain isn’t that broken. Or is it?

“What parts of me couldn’t you fix?” I ask, now that I’ve gotten to that thought.

“Any sort of malady of the mind is too risky for us to deal with directly. Could make you a different person. If there’s anything we can do to help in that regard, we are always happy to learn new methods.”

I stand up and try to inspect the nanobots closer. If this is a prank, which I suppose is still a possibility, it's a really good one. I push my hand into the swarm, and gasp at the light touch that presses down on me all around. Like little feathers all over my skin.

"Is there something wrong with your hand?" the voice asks.

The nanobots nip at my skin, checking for any sort of infirmity. A giggle escapes me.

"No. That tickles."

The nanobots stop, now swarming away from my hand. I'm wearing a glove of air that they don't dare to touch.

"Apologies."

It occurs to me that the voice is much closer now that I'm right next to the nanobots.

"Wait... Casper, please don't make fun of me if I'm wrong. Are you... is this you? The nanobots?"

"Correct," they respond, the nanobots swirling in affirmation.

"Phew, wow, okay," I say, trying to process.

"We detected some anomalies within your brain. Can you confirm for us that you know who you are?"

"Dana Andrews," I respond easily. Good, at least I know who I am.

"Very good. Do you know what you were doing at the top of the cliff?"

My heart drops. I remember being scared. Angry. Tormented.

“Not entirely. I remember running from a party. Something... stupid happened.”

“Do you know how to get back to this party? We should return you to people who can take care of you.”

“I don’t think anyone at that party wants to take care of me,” I say, the words ringing true even if I’m a little shaky on the details.

The nanobots spread around, checking me over before swirling into a little vortex. The motion is more frantic, more like concern.

“We must take you back. It isn’t safe here.”

Two

“Couldn’t you go into the party with me?” I beg, actually beg, the nanobots.

Inside the party are my coworkers. A work retreat. I don’t know who thought it was a great idea, but spoiler alert: it sucks.

And amongst my coworkers? My ex.

Ah. Yes. Now I remember. He’s working his way through the company, moved on to a new woman who he has manipulated into tormenting me for his own amusement. That’s why I ran. Harry didn’t just break up with me. He edged me out from all his friends, since because of him, I distanced myself from all my own friends.

“In our experience, Earth humans do not respond well to our technology,” they say, almost as if sighing.

The nanobots have taken to swirling around me as I walk. As if I am the eye of the storm, and they are the vortex around

me. It's captivating in the way that watching sand fall through an hourglass can be.

"It would be weird, I suppose, if I just walked around with mist. If only you could wear a costume," I muse.

"We can alter our appearance. That is a simple task."

I stop, cross my arms over my chest. Look the mist square in the there's-no-eyes.

"You could have said so," I accuse.

The nanobots stop swirling. Form a face to copy my own. It's like looking into a mirror, if all the life and color was sucked out of you. Like how Greek statues used to be decorated with all sorts of color and wiped clean to only show the white marble. Disorienting. Chilling.

"Don't make my face," I grumble.

"What face should we make?" they ask. "Most of the Earth humans we've interacted with run."

"Oh. Uh. I don't know. I guess..."

Is it wrong to ask my new nanobot friends to make my ex jealous? I don't want him back. Never. But since he's insistent on driving me crazy, trying to rub his new relationship in my face, I figure turnabout is fair play.

"How do I explain how you should look like?" I ask. Without a point of reference, I'm not sure how to describe what I want.

Not what I want. What I think will drive Harry nuts. What will make him feel small and emasculated.

“You can try to sculpt the features.”

A small sound of suppressed glee comes out of me. I’m about to have a Pygmalion moment, sculpt the perfect man. Or at least, the masculine ideal of a perfect man just to fuck with Harry. I couldn’t be bothered to care. I mean, yes, I do care what people look like to some extent. But to me, it’s more what’s inside of a person that really speaks to me. Looks don’t last forever. It’s how someone takes care of you. And I think I forgot that when I got with Harry.

“This should be fun!” I squeal, waiting for the nanobots to settle into a vaguely human shape.

I take the face, which already has a shape for a nose and mouth, and do my best to smooth them out, create the hard lines of his cheekbone... The pouty curve to his lips that will make anyone attracted to men anxious to kiss...

Even as I shape them, I feel heat grow in my belly. But why shouldn’t it? I am making their shape to be as universally attractive as possible. The lips weren’t for Harry, but for all the women at the party who will salivate over Casper. When his face is all done, the hard, rigid angles, the careless fall of his hair, I move to the torso.

I suck in a breath, surprised at how aroused I’m getting from forming the shapes. From the hyper-defined muscles at his shoulders and arms, to his pecs, down past his ribs to his abdomen. My hands come back up as I swallow.

“Hands are very complicated,” I explain.

And hands are very delightful. The right kind of hands on a guy can make or break him. I don't want to mess this up. The little globby nubs that wait to be formed into proper fingers take my hands, inspecting them.

“Yours do seem rather complex. Twenty-seven little bones, such fine little tendons, all these nerve endings and capillaries...” Casper notes. “Earth humans are rather remarkable creatures if they are anything like you.”

A swarm of tiny robots should not be making me blush, but here we are.

“Can you make fingers like mine, but a bit longer and thicker?” I ask, turning the nubs over and over in my hand, unable to grasp how to shape them properly. As I stroke them, they take on the form of real fingers. Long, elegant fingers—

“No, sorry, can you make them thicker?”

Long elegant fingers would be for *me*. But Harry won't be emasculated by a man with gentle hands. The palms and fingers grow thicker in my grasp. Hands so much bigger than mine don't usually make me feel a type of way, but there's something about this process that stokes a fire within me. Even still, I know something is missing.

I pinch up some of the skin along the forearm, pull it down to the back of the hand. Form veins. I do this again and again until I'm satisfied. Until it looks like Casper's muscles are meant for grabbing and dominating. My heart thuds in my chest.

I skip past the pelvis, move to the legs. Shape the feet so that they could step on Harry's soft little head, a little heart in the calves to show off their definition. I draw out the thighs, give them power and muscle Harry could only dream of.

That leaves just one thing. No, two.

"Turn around," I instruct, feeling them—him—slide around beneath my hands. So smooth—I might see if he can change that.

It's easier to focus on the ass. My cheeks feel so hot as I form them. This feels wholly indecent, but I'm not copping a feel. I'm sculpting. But it's impossible to ignore the six foot tall god I've built before me. With the ass done, I run a finger down the spine, from the lines of a gorgeous, muscled back with rippling shoulders. Everything about him from behind is perfect.

"Are you all done?" Casper asks, turning towards me.

A shiver runs down my spine. He really lives up to his namesake, all white and misty like he is. Practically a ghost.

"No, there's still..." I breathe in deep and turn him towards me.

I pull at the nanobots at his pelvis until they are long enough. Hold my hand around where the shaft should be, pushing and prodding the nanobots until they take the right shape. My breath grows short and fast, my skin is aflame.

"There seems to be some sort of malady overcoming you," Casper says, reaching a hand out to check on me.

I gulp, try to hold still as his hand brush across my cheek. As his hands—now fully formed and so horribly masculine—pass over my shoulders, my chest, press down against my heart.

“Do you have a flu? Should we fix this?” Casper asks.

I step back until he’s no longer touching me.

“No, I think you may only worsen it.”

He stands, hands on hips, almost as if offended. Taken aback. A swarm of nanobots.

In my mind, I keep calling them ‘he’ and ‘him,’ now that I’ve formed them into a fully masculine—and very naked—man. Should I have made clothes? Could I have? At least now he’s just alabaster like marble, not fully human. Not something so tangible I can take his skin between my teeth or slide my tongue along his...

“I need to get you clothes,” I grumble, trying desperately to keep my horny little thoughts at bay.

Lucky for us, I’m not particularly short. I’m not anywhere near six feet, but I’ve always been long in the legs. We make our way through the woods until the dim lights of the cabin beckon us forth. And then finally, my car. I hit the trunk—the locking mechanism broke long ago, so now all it takes is a little light violence to steal all my personal possessions. My overnight bag sits there, untouched because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to stay. Not with how Harry was behaving.

My fingers rifle through the bag, through the eight sets of clothing I packed to spend three nights away from home.

Amongst the leggings and dresses is a pair of jeans which wear a little loose on me. They should be fine on Casper, though he may have to turn into even more of a triangle to fit them.

“Put these on,” I instruct while searching for a top.

When I turn around with a plain black t-shirt, my jaw falls open. I don’t know what it is about a shirtless guy in jeans that does it for me. Maybe not *all* of Casper was designed to fuck with Harry. Maybe if I’m being really honest with myself, it was impossible not to put my own desires into him when I could. And the way his ass pops...

“You better throw this on,” I say quickly, forcing myself not to act too strangely.

“Do I look human now?” Casper asks rather innocently.

It should be innocently. Except that he’s got those heavy-lidded eyes and the dimples over the quirk of his mouth. He’s just a swarm of nanobots, but the way my center pulses with need and how my heart thuds at our eyes making a connection tells me that my body doesn’t care.

What *are* the ethics of Pygmalion and Galatea if Galatea already has an operating system? If Galatea was a bunch of mini Borgs?

Basically what I’m trying to ask myself is—how fucked up is it for me to seduce the nanobots who saved my life now that they’re obscenely hot?

I bury my face in my hands, embarrassed that I'm like this. I don't go feral for a person's looks.

But Casper did save my life.

That has to be it.

“Are you able to change your coloring? So that you don't look so pale and ghostly?” I ask.

“Should I copy your coloring?”

I shake my head. “People will think we look related. I'm pretty pale, you should be olive-skinned or tan or something. More yellow and green where I am pink and blue. Not in the extreme. Subtle.”

All those art classes I took as a kid are really starting to pay off. Art doesn't pay the bills. It was nice to have dreams though.

I take his—their—hand in mine and pull them towards the house.

“Oh, one more thing, Casper, you can't call yourself ‘we.’”

“Casper will not call themselves ‘we,’ then,” Casper agrees.

“No, I mean. You have to use ‘I’—as far as any of the ‘Earth humans,’ as you put it, think you're one of us, they'll be really confused about you calling yourself ‘we’ unless you've got a personality disorder or you're the queen of England.”

“Both of those things would be impossible with us—with me. I am Carbon-based Assisting Sentient Pathology Robots. Curing infirmities is what I do.”

“Carbon-based...Assisting...” I repeat. “Wait, have I been thinking of your name wrong this whole time? Is it C-A-S-P-R?”

“If it pleases you. But as I have expressed before, I am many. One name serves us all and also doesn’t.”

“Okay, I think I get what you’re saying. And also that it doesn’t matter. Good to know. But now I know why you share the name of a friendly ghost. I did think it was a little on the nose for a mist-like specter on Halloween to throw out pop culture references.”

“There is nothing on your nose or mine.”

I boop him, because he’s being exactly what I expect from a bunch of tiny robots. It’s weirdly cute and also endearing.

Am I assigning a personality to this swarm of nanobots? Can they actually feel and think? But then I think about humans and how we’re just a big mass of cells that all joined together. Is it much different? Maybe when the nanobots combine a certain way, their sentience takes to new heights.

The thought is distracted by a skeleton wearing a pair of devil horns.

“Oh!” I exclaim, plucking them off and instead depositing them right on top of Casper. “Now you’re perfect.”

Three

“Did you hire a prostitute?” Harry asks, pulling me aside as Casper gets us another round of drinks.

I roll my eyes. “No, Harry. Some of us like to find meaningful connections that will last past a paycheck. No offense to some of the women you sleep with. They deserve every cent and more.”

His hand squeezes around my wrist, a movement I didn’t realize was so violent back when I mistook it for love. Now, I glare down at the space where we touch. My jaw sets.

“Shouldn’t you be fawning over your latest conquest? I assume this one wasn’t hired, considering we work with her.”

“Real feminist of you to talk like that about her, Dana,” Harry smirks. “But I know you can be a bitch when you’re jealous.”

I don’t even want to argue the point over if I’m jealous or not. Because whatever I say, Harry will twist it. Obscure the reality until he is right. Always right.

My mouth opens to respond, but I feel a feather-touch of lips at my cheek.

“Your punch,” Casper offers, holding the drink out for me.

Where did that instinct come from? I wonder. How does a colony of nanobots feel any urge to kiss? On the cheek? It was the sweetest gesture, but now I’m all torn up.

We’ve spent the night playing games, sharing stories. People asked how Casper and I met—he was my doctor, of course. Harry made fun of his name—eyeroll, of course. And Harry, of course, pulled Sandra, his new lover, close, kissing her and showing off how affectionate and adoring he could be to someone who isn’t me.

Maybe that’s how Casper got the idea. Is it wrong of me to hope he got some other ideas too? But we’re fake dating, so shouldn’t I get a little PDA out of it?

“You know, Casper, I don’t know how you do it. But one man’s trash, eh?”

Casper sets down the other glass and pulls my wrist towards him, looking at the light bruising left behind by Harry. His eyes harden as he glances between us both.

“One man’s trash what?” Casper asks, not taking his hands off my wrist.

He bends down, kisses the inside of my wrist. A backdraft of heat, a fucking explosion. Where is this coming from?

Another shiver traces up my spine when I feel the bots do their work, healing the broken capillaries beneath my skin. He holds

eye contact with me, almost ignoring Harry.

“You know the saying,” Harry repeats, like he’s afraid to come out and say exactly what he means.

“No, I don’t. What saying?”

My eyelids flutter as the nanobots absorb back into the full Casper body. His lips stay there for a few moments, until he kisses down to my palm. There’s no way he got this from watching Sandra and Harry dry hump each other. This is beyond sexual, it’s sensual and erotic. It’s foreplay, something Harry has never heard of.

“Well, that—”

I’m so sick of thinking about him. About relating anything to him. Sick of sharing space with him. My eyes flick to Harry, pure hate in them.

“You’re still here?” I grumble. “Honestly, Harry, you shouldn’t act so jealous. You’ve already got a girlfriend, don’t you? You spent the whole day making sure everyone knew.”

I pull my wrist towards my face, hoping that Casper’s lips would follow. They do.

“Oh fu—” Harry starts, before a swarm of nanobots fly from Casper’s fist to silence him.

I laugh, pressing my mouth to Casper’s. His mouth molds to mine, his tongue quickly learning the way of things. My hands smooth down his arms, reveling in every little muscle I designed, tracing along the vein of his forearm. He pulls me close, wraps my legs around him.

“This is what humans do, right?” he whispers, kissing along my neck. “I have seen some of the others slip into dark corners, thinking no one was watching. I do not think you wanted me to kiss you like Harry.”

“No,” I laugh, grateful for the quick study. “Thank you, absolutely not.”

He steps forward until I am being pinned against the wall. Each move is a fascinating discovery into how debauched everyone else is getting at this work party. Gotta be the costumes. A mask always unleashes someone’s true desires.

Not that I’m wearing a mask. It occurs to me now that I’m being pinned against a wall and kissed within an inch of my life, I look pretty dreadful. My costume was a zombie to begin with, and after the very real life-to-death-and-back-to-life-again situation at the edge of the cliff, it must be incredibly gross. Casper takes my hands, holds them above my head.

My shirt gapes open, from the distressing I did to it before the party started just as much as the fall off the cliff. It does seem quite a bit more revealing now than it did then. Like my whole tit is hanging out. Casper takes it in his mouth, pressing himself into me.

“Is this right?” he asks, popping the nipple out from his sinful lips.

“Impossibly yes,” I answer.

“Not impossible,” he says, sliding my other breast out to offer it the same service. “Merely improbable, at best.”

I grind into his hips, desperate for connection. A groan escapes me when I realize he isn't hard. Of course he isn't hard. He's a thousand tiny little robots, all playing puppetmaster to this body I designed.

"You seem distressed," he notes. "Perhaps you need something else, I saw..."

I'm pulled from the wall. My vision doesn't make it to the back of my head, unfortunately, and Casper keeps kissing me as he walks. Very inconvenient for trying to see where he's taking us.

"Casper, I need..." I moan, about to tell him about his penis problem. I need full support here.

My butt hits something soft and carpeted. My back next. Stairs.

I lie back with a sigh, hoping he's understood. I'm gonna need that dick deep inside me, stat. That's doctor speak, right? Not that he's an actual doctor.

Or... well, he's lots of tiny little doctors. Oh, that's weird to think about right now.

"Casper," I begin, only to be interrupted.

My pants are ripped straight down the right leg, showing off some of my underwear. Casper reaches through the hole, massages my aching lips.

"Oh fuck," I giggle.

It's a strange sensation, to be pet through the torn hole of one's pants. Almost taboo, in a way. I roll my hips against his fingers a few times before I grow frustrated with the limited touch. My fingers fight the button and zipper, getting them out of the way as soon as possible. I grab Casper's hand, shove it underneath my underwear this time. He outlines the labia before testing my clit.

"Your responses to these stimuli," Casper murmurs, watching me in what I like to believe is rapture. "So captivating."

"Please, Casper, I need more," I beg. "Inside, please."

"Inside," he repeats, processing what it could mean. How much can he learn from watching others? Did any of the fine femmes at this party get fingered in his observations? I take his wrist, follow it down until my hand covers his, until I am touching myself through his fingers.

"They're so big," I gasp, feeling the press of his index finger alone at my entrance. I did this to myself, literally. Twice over.

But I press on, spreading my legs wide for him, pushing deeper.

"Yes," I sigh, "Just like that. But in and out, please."

I take my hand away, settle my arms on the stairs next to me. Anyone could walk in on us at any moment, and that makes it all the more delicious.

"I saw..." he murmurs, pumping in and out, building that delicious, wonderful tension.

“Yes?” I urge, my hips bucking up into him. No control over my own movements.

“There was someone who...”

And then he presses his mouth to my peak, draws out his tongue across my clit. The double onslaught between his tongue and his fingers is almost too much.

I thought it might be too much, but his other hand grabs a hold of my wrists—gently, so intently gentle—and holds them above my head. Tingles rush across my skin, both from my body’s reaction and a light layer of what feels like nanobots teasing over my skin.

“Casper!” I cry out, my thoughts descending into a senseless fountain of moans and sighs and half-starts to words.

As he presses his hands deep inside me, I unleash. The coil of blissful tension twisted up inside of me bursts. I am far too loud in this public space where he has debauched me, nearly daring the whole office to come and watch.

“Casper,” I whisper, pulling him up so that I can kiss those perfect lips for doing what they were made for. Our lips and tongues intertwine, my climax dripping from his, sending a dizzying shockwave of desire through me.

It must be time to tell him about his penis.

Except then we hear a scream.

Four

Casper, bless his little bots, is the first to arrive at the source of the scream. Outside, Sandra is bent over Harry, wailing as he has been...

Torn apart?

I can't look, instead grab for Casper. He gives me a light squeeze before bending to help.

"Harry, can you hear me?" he asks.

Harry's corpse doesn't respond. Is he doing first aid on a corpse?

Sandra wails.

I don't know how much time passes, but all I can think about is... if Harry dies, does it make me a bad person to be grateful? To have him out of my life? Yes. It absolutely does. But we can't all be saints. Some of us were not made to be little perfect nanobot doctors. Some of us have feelings.

But it *is* good that Casper is fixing him. Which I assume is happening, because Sandra's sobs lessen.

"How did you do that?" she whispers in awe.

"We are—"

"He's a doctor," I cut in, knowing the truth will break her poor little mind. It's a lot to process watching your boyfriend ripped apart by—oh gosh, we haven't even processed that yet. A monster? A serial killer? A bear? We'll get there. But to also discover there's aliens... it's too much all in one go. Resurrection will have to be all for tonight.

"I'm a doctor," Casper repeats. "Everything is going to be fine. Harry, can you hear me now?"

"Unngh..." Harry responds.

My head whips back to see the progress. Harry looks decidedly not torn apart. That's a very solid improvement. As much as I hate him, I don't know how I'd deal with that much carnage if we really had to get down to it.

"Harry, can you describe what happened to you?"

"He's still healing," Sandra complains.

"It's important," Casper insists.

What did Casper say to me when we first met? *It's not safe out there.*

"Do you know what happened to him?" I inquire.

Casper looks to me, eyes wide. "I have an idea. Am I supposed to share it here?"

His eyes flicker to Sandra.

“Maybe a little.”

He stares down at Harry while still roaming his hand across, giving the nanobots a chance to break off from the main body and do their magic. Or science? Sandra is too in shock to really process what’s happening, I think.

To be honest, same.

In moments, Casper leans back.

“He should be better now,” he says, moving back so Sandra can latch on. And so that we can talk.

“What is it?” I whisper.

He comes close, until his body is right next to mine. I hate that even in this awful, tense moment, I’m having flip-flop heart feelings for a being that is essentially thousands of tiny little bug bots. But this swarm has treated me better than anyone. So maybe it makes sense.

“The ship I came in on... That *we* came in on... There was a creature there... One that can take immense amounts of damage. We were restoring its mental faculties but didn’t quite finish when we breached your atmosphere.”

That’s not a euphemism. Unfortunately.

No, I need to not think about Casper breaching my atmosphere.

“The signs of attack all over Harry were exactly the predatory habits of this creature.”

Five

I panic when Casper tries to leave, to go searching into the darkness alone. Well, okay, technically not alone because how can you be alone if you're thousands of little nanobots but—

There's no way he's going out there without me. That *they're* going out there without me.

I follow closely behind as Casper shucks off his human disguise, once again becoming many. Sandra and Harry went back inside once he was well enough. We warned everyone to stay inside and lock the doors. Casper tried to get me to, but I just couldn't.

The mist that is CASPR spreads all around, nanobots heading in every direction to follow the path of the creature's footsteps until it disappears.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" I call out, rather unhelpfully. Or maybe it is helpful, I don't know. Maybe I'm bait. That's my purpose.

Regardless, I don't have much fear over what will happen to me with CASPR here. They put me back together once, they could do it again.

"Dana, shh," CASPR chides, the form of the face I sculpted appearing like a shadow in the mist.

"No, CASPR, I think..."

I look around. There's no one else here but me. If anything is going to lure this monster back, it's me.

"HEY BIG GUY! I KNOW YOU'RE OUT HEEERE!" I call out.

"Dana!" CASPR growls, more of them taking solid form. They wrap around me, hold my mouth closed. "Don't get yourself killed."

Stars help me, I'm kind of turned on by this mist being all protective over me and caring about my well-being.

But it's too late. The monster bursts from the trees. I try to scream, but CASPR envelops everything. It's impossible to see. The monster is here. Its breathing echoes in the near silence. I can nearly hear the dripping of saliva from its mouth.

"Oniku," CASPR says slowly. "Poinluta amirnu."

The creature growls back in the strange language, lashing out like it's trying to claw away.

"It's looking for a broken piece of itself. One I was supposed to fix."

CASPR speaks again, pleading to the monster to let them work. The monster says something quietly.

CASPR disperses. And then I see it. Large and horrific, something like a werewolf and yet so much worse. I can see its tendons and bone, muscle and skin, all at once. And its eyes glow red, so red and piercing my heart beats too fast. Its shape is anthromorphic, a bipedal creature, but it's the way his skin seems at war with his body that makes it so grotesque.

It advances, comes close to me.

And sniffs.

All the hairs on my skin stand on end. This is the end. CASPR has abandoned me.

The monster growls, and then finally backs off. Takes a seat, like a docile little puppy.

CASPR swarms around the creature, presumably doing what they do best.

I sit, waiting in both anticipation and fear. What if this doesn't work?

And what happens when the monster is fixed? Do they return to their mission? Can they?

The creature lets out a low howl that builds and builds, echoing across the terrain.

Finally, CASPR dissipates, pulling back from the monster. The nanobots swirl around me, comforting after everything.

"Dana?" the monster asks.

I gasp. It knows my name.

“We had to leave some of us in here,” the monster continues.

“We are still one, and yet not. But it was the only way to restore his mind.”

“Do I call you something different then?”

“He has only ever been Creature.”

“Creature, then... Are you... Are you well?”

The creature gets up, saunters towards me. Presses his muzzle against my cheek.

“Oh this is new,” Creature says.

“What is?”

“This feeling... Before, when I was with you, touching you, something was missing. But now... now that I am a Creature, I have feelings that I could only pretend at before.”

I suck in a breath. Was I foolish to think a bunch of nanobots could fall in love with me? But maybe this solves the problem.

“Well, you’re a bit opposite of my type, I have to admit,” I joke, looking up at the monstrous figure.

Creature whines. The nanobots, the mist of CASPR, swirl together.

“We can be anything you want, even if he can’t,” they say, taking the form I built for them.

I look between them, heat building in me once more.

“Are you offering to double team me?”

Six

Casper kisses me first, starting at the lips and working his way down to my neck. Creature goes next, licking down my neck until his tongue laves over my nipple. I fall back, let CASPR settle me to the floor.

“Oh, I meant to talk to you about your penis,” I giggle, seeing the hard cock between Creature’s thick thighs. From this angle, his bottom half looks halfway human. Creature has no need to worry over his own cock.

“What’s wrong with my penis?” they both say, coming up from kissing me only long enough to ask the question.

“Not you,” I say to Creature, lightly bopping him on the nose. He growls, scrapes his teeth across my belly. Testing the threat mixed with gentleness. It drives me wild.

I grab at Casper, pull him close. Work my hands up and down his skin.

“This is supposed to react,” I murmur, taking his cock in my hands. “Supposed to harden when you’re aroused.”

“It’s not... We can make that happen,” they say.

Casper hardens immediately, growing and swelling wonderfully in my hands. As if he was made for it—which he was.

“I want you both inside me,” I moan, stroking Casper now that he’s got the hang of it.

“Where?” they ask.

“Creature, here, between my legs. Where Casper pleased me earlier.”

Creature presses between my legs, runs his tongue along my inner thighs. He licks and nips at the area between my legs, preparing me for his humongous girth.

“Casper,” I say softly. “Let me please you.”

“Me?”

I lie back, urging him to straddle my chest. Trapped between them both, I luxuriate in the feeling of helplessness.

This is what I always wanted. Why I put up with so much awfulness before. I wanted this, but on my terms. Helplessness that I chose.

I guide Casper’s cock into my mouth, delighting in the way his nanobots tickle along the inside of my mouth. Then I feel a pressure between my legs.

Creature. He presses the head of his cock between, teases the entrance once... twice...

I moan around Casper's cock, unable to direct him. I'm at his mercy. At their mercy.

And then finally, Creature slides in. Slow, assuring I can manage all of him. It hurts, but the nanobots fly over, mending and helping to stretch me until all I feel is exquisite, blissful pleasure. Creature pounds hard and fast into me as Casper slides his cock in and out. I reach out, desperate to hold their hands. They each take one of mine, squeeze tight.

Then I see it on Casper's face. The change. The moment when his cock is doing more than a performance. When it seems to feel. If I am not mistaken.

Fuck, the look on his face, it's pure bliss. My inner walls quake, release snapping and breaking me apart. Creature pounds harder and harder until he, too, climaxes inside me. Casper buries his hands in my hair, thrusting and thrusting and then...

When Casper shatters, he truly does. His human form breaks apart, spreading out all over until the mist is so thick, nothing can be seen for miles.

Creature pulls his cock from between my legs, licks at the fluids left between them. His bliss and mine. Cleans me up before resting next to me. His thick, furry arm rests over my belly. CASPR settles over us like a blanket.

And we all, together, fall asleep.

That is, if nanobots dream of electric sheep.

Note to the Reader

Latrexa Nova wants to marry Halloween. But that's not legal yet, so they write about screwing all sorts of Halloween monsters instead.

Check out their anthology of human ladies getting railed by classic monsters in the Thirteen Kinks of Halloween:

<https://mybook.to/13kinks>

Or check out their series about mental health and monsterfucking:

Sacrificed to Monster Gods

<https://mybook.to/WillingSacrifices>

Or if you love silly, sexy sci-fi with a gradually increasing serving of revenge and aliens with an *electric* touch:

Mated to the Xirashi

<https://mybook.to/xirashi>

The Aelyzaen by Marlowe Roy

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



WHEN YOUR ALIEN BOSS IS HUGE, HANDSOME,
AND WANTS TO USE YOU FOR RESEARCH...
WHAT'S A GIRL TO DO?

Struggling to care for her hybrid daughter and desperate for cash, Agata accepts a temp job assisting a galactic archivist, one of the insular race known as the Aelyzaens.

But after fumbling their introduction, she realizes that—despite his lush fur and a voice like molten dark chocolate—he's another alien boss. Undaunted, Agata resolves to ignore her attraction and get the job done.

Until, when working late one night, a lavender-tinted mist infiltrates her room. Not only strange and suspicious, it contains a chemical that short-circuits human arousal. Overcome by sudden and uncontrollable urges, Agata's situation couldn't get any worse.

Then her boss walks in.

Her steamy secret discovered, the stern Aelyzaen suggests the unthinkable: she continue self-pleasuring and... she let him watch.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

“Mama, are we almost there?” Agata’s six-year-old daughter tugged insistently on her hand, tearing her from her budding panic. “My feet hurt.”

Agata squeezed Bozena’s long-fingered hand in automatic maternal reassurance. Shadows oozed across the poorly maintained rural road as the dual suns dipped over the horizon. The dust cloud kicked up by their sluggish feet merged with the encroaching mist that snaked out from between the foliage like an army of ghostly skeletons.

She did not want to be caught out here after dark.

But when no one showed up at the train station to convey them to the athenaeum where Agata would be working for the next month, she’d had no other option than to set out on foot. Even if she had credits to afford it, there was no hotel or temporary lodging available. She didn’t even have enough credits for a communication transmission to her new employer, which she suspected was the reason for this lack of welcome.

The station agent, an elderly Gruelix female with bulbous eyes deflated by age, gave Bozena a long, curious look before suggesting that if they hurried, they could get there before the suns set. The female even offered to store their larger pieces of luggage behind the counter for safekeeping; an unexpected bit of kindness Agata gratefully accepted.

Several hours later, Agata faced the distinct possibility that the agent had pointed them in the wrong direction. Not that she could do anything about it. The unfortunate fact remained that they ought to have turned back over an hour ago; now they were going to have to face the rapidly descending darkness alone.

Agata had lived on B'Lixara for twenty years, but she'd never been to the remote Graxis region. According to rumors, few humans had ever ventured this deep into the wilderness. Yet stories of the red Graxis mountains—reverently named the Crimson Range—were spoken about with hushed awe by the Gruelixians. Their peaks were said to rise up out of the dense jungle like benevolent gods surveying their supplicants. Glancing up, Agata could hardly imagine how large a mountain range would need to be to intimidate the towering trees above her head. Painted in shades of shimmering emerald, deep aubergine, and endless navy, leaves the size of elephant's ears formed a canopy barely penetrated by rays from two separate suns. A cool, loamy-scented breeze tickled her cheeks, an ominous reminder of the dropping temperature as the meager light decayed with every passing second.

If I don't see something around this next bend, we're going back. Sleeping on benches at the station would be better than hunkering down in this place, where god knows what animals would soon come out of hiding.

“I'm huuuuuuungry,” Bozena whined, her jutting brown eyes swiveling up to add an extra helping of pitiful to the complaint. Agata's heart clenched. The last of their credits bought a meager luncheon on the train, and Bozena plowed through that and every bit of food Agata had scavenged from the cupboards before vacating their home early that morning. Agata's stomach rumbled loudly in agreement. What kind of a mother was she, not even able to feed her own child?

That's why we're here. One month working for the Aelyzaen and we'll have enough to eat and comfortably travel off-world. One month to turn our fortune around.

God, she needed this job. Desperately needed it, and she'd be lying if she denied that that accounted for her determination to report for duty rather than delay in order to confirm the travel details with her employer. The Aelyzaen hadn't been exactly *forthcoming* in their communications heretofore.

“Mama! It's a light! I see a light up ahead!” Bozena raced ahead as the shadow of an imposing structure came into view.

Rising up out of the mist, the hulking building resembled prisons back on Earth. Looming, austere, censorious architecture, as if the building itself wanted to express how little it thought of her. Or anyone, she supposed. But,

combined with the lack of welcome from her employer or any offered transport from the station, it did feel a bit personal.

“Biggest place in the whole region,” the station agent had said. *“You can’t miss it.”*

Well, that was certainly true. As they approached, mist slithered out from the forest to encircle the base of the building and creep along the high walls. She’d heard about the Graxis mist; the apocryphal stories of the way it moved with an uncanny sentience. She’d thought it mere folklore, but to see the gray-green tendrils sweep over the harsh lines of the structure as if checking it for weak spots, maybe she’d been too hasty in her dismissal.

Was the mist dangerous or merely sinister? Surely the human council would not approve a placement where she’d be in actual danger, would they?

Yeah, right. They hadn’t shown a single morsel of concern for what had been going on in the textile factory; why would they care about sending a single woman into a remote region to confront a dangerous mist? They’d probably be delighted if she and Bozena disappeared. One less human to drain the waning Gruelix goodwill. One less hybrid child to cause discomfort in everyone who laid eyes on her.

A gong-like chime invaded the quiet gloom and Agata’s eyes flashed to her daughter, wincing as Bozena bounced in place after ringing the formal bell at the front door. Agata had planned to creep around the back to find a worker entrance

suitable for their late arrival. Naturally, her intrepid child had blown that plan to pieces with an impatient finger.

Agata sucked in a deep calming breath. Steeling herself, she glued her heels together and stood to her full height. After an interminable delay, a female Gruelix answered the door. Like all of her kind, she possessed the typical exaggerated height and long, spindly arms and legs with double the number of joints compared to humans. Given their height, thin bones, and willowy skeletal structure, Gruelix constantly moved in a subtle swaying motion, almost as if they were floating while standing still. Their heads were larger than human heads and, besides the lack of a nose, were notable for two oversized, protuberant eyes on opposite sides of their head that moved in all directions. When Agata had first laid eyes on a Gruelix all those years ago, they'd immediately reminded her of a chameleon back on Earth.

The female surveyed them in a manner that might be described as “I down her nose,” if she had one. Before Agata could utter a greeting, she chirped, “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Agata did not require the chip in her head to translate the put-out tone. Annoyance was plastered over the female's face.

Agata began with a tentative smile. “Hello. I'm here for the —”

“No human language.” The female cut her off with a vague gesture to her ear, where Gruelix implant chips resided. Human vocal cord anatomy was incompatible with the clicks

and high-pitched squeaks needed for the alien language, so humans and most Gruelix used translator chips to bridge the divide. Except for this one, apparently.

The female zeroed her disapproving gaze on Bozena, who flashed a big, extra-toothy grin. “My mother has job here,” Bozena said in stilted Gruelixian. Bozena could make the required sounds, but given her reluctance to attend her edu-pad lessons, her knowledge of the language was rudimentary at best. “No conveyance. We walk.”

Then, with impeccable, embarrassing timing, Bozena’s abdomen gave a loud, unmistakable hunger squeal. The female’s expression darkened even further.

“No one told me anything about a human showing up, but *thisllaine* is forgetful,” she muttered, perhaps forgetting that Agata could understand her even if the opposite was not true. She stood back from the doorway and gestured them in, her demeanor softening ever-so-slightly. “You are hungry, child? Come.”

As her daughter skipped inside, Agata looked down at her feet, making sure to lift her long skirts high enough to clear the step at the threshold. Wisps of mist as thick as milk froth swirled around her ankles, so dense it obscured her shoes. A glance over her shoulder revealed that the road behind them was now completely swallowed by the hazy darkness. They wouldn’t be able to find their way back even if they wanted to.

With a shiver, Agata hurried inside.

Two

One would think that after rising early, carrying all of her belongings to the transit station, and then enduring a several-hour walk, slumber would welcome Agata. Yet she could not sleep.

After begrudgingly serving them a simple meal, the Gruelix female—the estate manager whose name was Gormira, they clarified in stilted communication—showed them to a quiet, seemingly deserted wing of the sprawling building as directed by *thisllaine*. Gormira had used the word once before, and it stuck out to Agata’s ears as clearly not a Gruelixian word, but also not one translatable by her chip.

She knew her employer was not Gruelix, but another somewhat mysterious race called Aelyzaen who, like humans, were not native to this planet. Unlike humans, however, she suspected this particular Aelyzaen had not come here as a refugee dependent on the goodwill of the famously inhospitable and isolationist Gruelix.

Twenty years prior, with the destruction of Earth imminent, the Galactic Authority intervened. They decided humans would be evacuated and strewn all over the galaxy in an act of magnanimous largesse. Evacuations happened in waves and, as Agata had been amongst the final few exits, she'd landed on the far-flung planet of B'lixara.

But hopefully not for much longer. She had an interview for a teaching job scheduled in three weeks. Working for the Aelyzaen would earn her enough to pay for the interview transmission and, provided she got the job, for her and Bozena's relocation to a planet far from B'lixara. A tenuous plan, but the best one she'd had in years.

Her muscles ached, her bones sagged, and her eyes drooped, but after tossing and turning for hours, enough was enough. Scooching down the bed, Agata slipped on her worn shoes. She hadn't had a proper tour, and Gormira had not explicitly told her she couldn't leave her room. It wouldn't hurt to take a look around. With a final check on Bozena, who snored softly in the second bed, clutching her stuffed rabbit to her chest, she slipped into the hall.

Once outside the door, a faint haze loitered in the dimly lit hallway. She squinted into the shadows, noting a lavender tint to the floating waves. Not grayish-blue like the mist outside. A trick of the lighting, or a different substance? How did it make any sense for there to be outside mist and inside mist? This building appeared rather airtight, so how would mist get in from the outside anyway? Strange, all the way around.

Rubbing her bare arms against the chill, she crept down the corridor, encountering nothing but closed and silent doors. The massive estate featured long halls that snaked uphill and down, taking her to differing levels without the use of stairs or orienting signage. At every intersection, she took right-handed turns, but the twists and turns ensured her mental map soon became a jumbled mess.

Thoroughly disoriented, she was contemplating returning to her room when the ever-present mist began to thicken and congeal. Dense, violaceous haze clung to the walls and hung from the ceiling like cobwebs. It tickled her nose with a sharp, herbal tang and dampened her face. Unexpected warmth bloomed on her exposed skin, a rush of blood flow that thawed her chilled flesh and lured her deeper into the depths of the concentrated clouds.

She stood, transfixed, as the sensation worked its way deeper into her body, waking up a perplexing, and long-dormant, flutter in her core. Agata swayed side to side with the delicate seduction, but just as her eyes dipped to half-mast, a door whizzed open to her right, startling her back to reality.

Lilac clouds poured out in great billowing plumes and instinctive fear hollowed out the warm place in her chest. Heart thumping, Agata stumbled on clumsy, slowly reacting feet. Panic tore through her, her mind questioning a thousand small decisions that led to this moment, when a hulking beast crashed through the vapor. Agata gasped and cowered as a giant shadow with massive shoulders and horns invaded her

visual field. Palms raised in surrender, Agata opened her mouth to scream.

“*Do not* wake the household, *human*,” the beast snarled in a voice that rattled her chest.

Agata trembled from her teeth to her toes. Lungs clenched tight, she stared up into the tenebrious mass of hair and horns that loomed above her as her brain caught up to his sentence. Wait. The beast had spoken... *English?*

Her eyes adjusted as the mist thinned and revealed that his mass of black hair, rather than being a wild mess, was actually quite deliberately styled. It fell from the top of his—she hated to assume, but she was *fairly* sure it was a him—head, ending near the nostrils of a humanoid nose in the front, and all the way to his shoulders on the sides and back. Large horns, coiled like a ram’s, parted the thick locks on either side of his head, and a wide mouth contorted in a snarl sat on the bottom half of his face.

The alarming thing was his lack of eyes. Or, rather, maybe he had eyes buried beneath his hair. But she wasn’t sure.

“I’m sorry,” Agata croaked through a parchment-dry throat. “I’m Agata, the new—”

“I know who you are,” the creature said, no less imposing. “You are Agata Veronika Novak, a human refugee from Earth, a planet your race single-handedly destroyed. I am Tethys, your employer.”

Agata lowered her palms and clutched icicle-cold hands in front of her waist, the fear ebbing as her temper flicked to life like an old-fashioned butane lighter. “So you *were* expecting us,” she blurted. “No conveyance came for us at the train station. My daughter and I walked the entire way here.”

The alien—Tethys—straightened and took a deliberate step back, but his overall manner was no less reproving when he said, “I sent you a message three days ago requesting confirmation of your arrival. I received no response.”

Agata’s lips tightened and her eyes darted to the right, trying to remember all she’d done in the last few frantic days. Had she forgotten to send him the travel details? She’d been under the impression their arrangements were finalized and had not wanted to spend the credits to check yet again. But, in the rush to move out of their apartment, maybe it had slipped her mind.

“Obviously,” he continued ponderously, “I’ve clarified the matter with Gormira. She set you up with rooms, did she not?”

Tethys cocked his head to the side, a curtain of glossy hair cascading over a bare shoulder capped with small horns. A sleeveless vest showed off sculpted shoulders, as he tucked his muscular arms behind his back. The formal posture pushed his massive chest forward and strained the fabric of the close-fitting garment. Below his waist a long skirt flowed all the way to the floor, hiding his legs and feet. In stark contrast, Agata’s thin nightgown scooped into a low neckline and barely reached her knees, inconveniently highlighting her ignominious exposure.

Searching for calm, Agata took a deep breath. The faint, spiced scent from earlier, woody and sharp like cloves, tickled her nose and again sparked a curious buzzing in her cheeks and exposed chest. The back of her neck heated with a combination of shame at her reaction and the uncanny sensation of being watched... closely.

“Although,” Tethys continued when she didn’t respond, “I have no guesses as to why you are wandering around in the middle of the night rather than sleeping in your appointed rooms. Especially given the difficult day you have had.” The note of mockery in his voice was unmistakable.

With as much dignity as she could summon, Agata lifted her chin. “I was finding it difficult to sleep,” she told him. Then added sheepishly, “and I seem to have gotten myself lost.”

With an elegant gesture, Tethys pointed a huge, clawed finger to her right. “There’s a shortcut this way. Take a left at the next intersection and follow it down. You will end up near your quarters. I would suggest you endeavor to get some rest. Your duties begin promptly after the morning meal.”

“Yes, of course,” Agata rushed to say, anxious to end the interaction. “Terribly sorry for interrupting your night; I look forward to getting started in the morning.”

“Very well.” With a regal nod, Tethys turned on his heel and strode back through the doorway, muttering a dismissive “*good night*” as the door shut. Emotions reeling, Agata sped toward her rooms, turning the first corner before the hollow echo of his footsteps died.

Three

“Here’s where you’ll be working.”

Gormira stood aside as Agata peered at the dusty stacks of transport crates and boxes of all shapes and sizes. Her shoulders slumped at the literal mounds of work filling the cavernous room. The job description called for a human with knowledge of multiple earth languages to catalog artifacts for preservation, but she’d had no indication of the sheer volume she’d be required to process. It had been listed as a limited, one-month post with no option for extension. He expected her to process this entire hoard?

“And none too soon,” Gormira continued, confidently striding inside to activate the lights. “*Thisllaine* has been ignoring this room for far too long, just shoving deliveries in here week after week. The cataloging terminal is in the corner; it’s to be used only for the appointed task and is not equipped for off-world communication.”

“There’s a window!” Breaking free from Agata’s hand, Bozena scurried over the piles like a nimble mountain goat.

Well above Agata's head, she gestured excitedly to the view only she could see. "You can see all the way to the Crimson Range. They are so pretty! Mama, come look."

"Be careful up there, child," Gormira chided Bozena gently. Even though Bozena primarily spoke English, Gormira displayed no distaste or reluctance to engage with the little girl. Agata counted this small blessing. Some Gruelix refused to even look at Bozena, or rudely pretended they did not hear when she spoke to them. If Gormira had shown animosity toward her daughter, this job would be untenable, no matter how much it paid.

Gormira twitched her gimlet eyes to Agata. "There will be consequences if there is damage to the materials; *thisllaine* does not appreciate carelessness."

Agata nodded to indicate understanding of the unnecessary warning. After their tense meeting, the last thing she desired was to aggravate her employer further. This job paid too well for her to lose it before the month ran out.

Her eyes ranged over the towers and pyramids of work, immediately forming a plan for how and where to start unpacking. *This will be okay*, she reassured herself. The Human Displacement Agreement established by the Galactic Authority specified her pay could not be withheld as long as she performed steady work the entire month. Even if she did not finish this colossal task, she would earn the promised salary.

Agata called up to her daughter. “Bozena, please tell Gormira thank you for breakfast and for her help, then it’s time to come down and start your lessons.”

In Gruelixian, Bozena chirped out a cordial thanks to Gormira, who briskly exited the room.

“Well, nothing for it.” Agata rolled up her sleeves. “Let’s get to it.”



By lunchtime, she reconsidered her earlier optimism. Dust coated the entire front of her body, tendrils of sweat-soaked hair stuck to her forehead, and her back ached from the heavy lifting. After hours of work, she’d cataloged a single transport container stuffed to the brim with books in a multitude of human languages. Her facility with English, Spanish, Russian, and Mandarin Chinese helped a great deal, but books in languages other than those required the painstaking process of first translating and then cataloging. The computer terminal helped with the translation, but it took hours nonetheless.

With a groan, she stood and executed a deep back bend, appreciating the resultant crack. Just as she righted herself to standing, a door in the corner near the terminal slid open and her intimidating employer stomped into the room. Her brows rose in surprise; she hadn’t even noticed that door.

In the daylight, Tethys’s horns displayed a pattern of markings carved into the bone and inlaid with gold. The symbols and complicated filigree swirled and danced around the twisting

contours in an elegant design. Unlike last night, a black, opaque blindfold covered his forehead down to the bridge of his nose. Not that it obscured his vision, she noted, as Tethys' head rotated side to side, as if taking stock of her progress.

“Greetings, human,” he said coolly.

“Agata, if you please,” she supplied, discreetly checking on her suspiciously quiet daughter, who perched high on a box reading her edu-pad. “Let me apologize for last night; I had hoped for a more positive introduction. I certainly did not intend to disturb you in any way.”

He faced her, and the weight of his undivided attention once again hit her full force. Without any true eye contact to latch onto, her gaze tripped over new details of his anatomy. His arms—still bared in a sleeveless vest—featured two textures. One a smooth, warm burgundy skin that composed the underside of his upper arm and forearm, and a dense, short, black fur that covered the entire length—from the back of his hand, over his wrist and elbow, and up to the small horns on his shoulder caps. Most remarkable of all, the fur gleamed with an iridescent blue-green sheen, like a fuzzy beetle shell. The effect sparked a mad urge to run her fingertips over the texture in exploration. Was the hair soft like a rabbit or more bristly like a goat?

“I take it you understand what is required of you here,” he said, not even acknowledging her apology.

“Yes...” she gestured toward the mountain of crates, “although this is quite an extensive amount of work for a one-month

position.”

A gust of irritation-infused air whistled from his nostrils. “An apprentice Aelyzaen *thismaen* could process this in a week. But I suppose that kind of efficiency is unheard of amongst humans.”

Agata bristled at the criticism. “Beg your pardon, sir, but it is physically difficult to maneuver the items in and out of boxes. I’m a strong woman, but there are limits to my physical abilities even if my work ethic is intact.”

“Indeed.” His mouth firmed into a frown and his chin angled up toward the stacks. “The Gruelix recently mandated my participation in the Human Displacement Agreement; I don’t want to invite additional penalties by injuring one. I shall help you with the larger items.”

Understanding dawned, illuminating the gaps in many questions she’d had about the position. The Human Displacement Agreement required all Gruelix employers to provide jobs for a certain number of humans; it was no small source of resentment for many, Tethys apparently included. She wasn’t misunderstanding his stiff manner as contempt for their cultural differences; he was merely tolerating her distasteful presence.

“You have not had a human employee before?” she asked with careful blandness.

“No. The Aelyzaen Academy is a research and archival order and, as such, we are generally exempt from local mandates where we establish athenaeums such as this one.” He waved a

large hand in a vague gesture. “I have been stewarding this location for many decades, but for some reason the government now insists I employ a human. Hence your position here for the minimum requirement: one human for one month.”

“Of course,” Agata said in a small voice. In her quiet inquiries, she’d failed to find any rumors about this employer, and this was why. The circumstance reminded her of another pressing concern: her upcoming interview with the Terran Heritage School. “Given that this is short-term,” she said cautiously, “I’m in the process of securing my next job. Is there a communication terminal I may use? During non-working hours, of course. I believe after a few days of work I will have earned enough credits for a short call; what do you charge for that?”

His head gave a little shake and the dark, silky strands of his hair slid over each other like a flowing river of black oil, complete with a flash of rainbow sheen, courtesy of a refracted sunbeam from Bozena’s precious window. *Beautiful.*

Tethys stood very still, his mouth parted the softest degree. “Charge?”

Agata’s brows tightened. “The fee for using the communication terminal. My Gruelix employers provided access for a fee, so I assumed—”

“No fee.” The gruff certainty knocked her off kilter almost as much as the proclamation. “Communication technology is a

necessity, not a luxury. Gormira will show you the room. Use it when you have need.”

She wouldn't have to spend credits to interview for the off-world teaching position? Agata's spirits vaulted to the ceiling, near the highest reaches of the piled-up work. Relief poured through her, so fast it brought a watery gloss to her eyes. “Thank you, sir. Thank you so very much.”

“My office is there,” he nodded to the door in the corner, “if you need—”

“Mama! There are kids outside!” Bozena called. Agata's eyes flashed to where she'd last seen her daughter only to land on the abandoned edu-pad. Climbing over boxes, Bozena bounded into view and ran to tug on Agata's skirts. “Can I go play with them? Please?”

Tethys made a rough grumbling noise. “Ah, yes, the child.”

Agata stiffened and laid a protective hand on Bozena's back. “Tethys, may I present my daughter, Bozena. Bozena, please say hello to Tethys.”

“Hello.” Bozena studied him shrewdly for a long moment before aiming an imploring glance at her mother. “Can I go play? I did my lessons.”

“Well, I don't know who they are, sweetheart. Or if it's safe, or...”

Tethys made another throaty hum. “I believe Gormira's young males are outside at the moment. Sometimes Bzoug, the groundskeeper's young female, joins them. As long as they

stay on the premises, they are quite safe.” He dipped his chin in a gesture of deference. “You’re free to verify that for yourself, of course.”

Before Agata could answer, Bozena peeled away from her side. “I’ll ask Gormira. Okay, Mama?”

The remembrance of the twisting, winding corridors tore through Agata’s mind, followed by the memory of her scantily-clad introduction to Tethys. She turned her head to hide the color stealing over her cheeks. “I should take you so you don’t get lost.”

“I can find my way!” In a blink, Bozena dashed out the door, shouting a hasty “*bye*” over her thin shoulder.

“Bozena!” Scurrying after her daughter, Agata slammed her shin into an obstructing container. “Ow!” She doubled over, hand to her injured leg. Elegantly avoiding the jutting container that nearly felled her, Tethys stepped to her side with a rumble of concern. A whisper of his furred outer arm skimmed Agata’s hand, firing a shiver down her spine at the delicacy of the inadvertent touch.

The pain eased and her thoughts cleared. She’d promised Tethys her child wouldn’t hinder her work, and now she was abandoning her post to chase the girl during her first day on the job. After two quick rubs of her smarting shin, she unbent and faced his still-very-close body. “I’m so sorry, I’ll come right back and make up for the missed time.”

His mouth curled up on one corner as he craned his neck toward the empty hall, as if confirming Bozena’s

disappearance. “Go see to your child, Agata,” he said, his gentle tone smoothing over her skittering nerves. “The work will be here when you return.”

Bozena’s footsteps rapidly diminished into the distance, urging Agata to follow. Yet she stood rooted for a moment that seemed to stretch to infinity, immobilized by the heat of Tethys’s far-too-near body and the scandalous impulse to sample another taste of his fur against her bare skin. The allure swelled as the image composed itself in her mind, the feel of lush fur caressing her bare skin like a million tiny fingertips. If she moved her arm a spare inch, she’d have it.

But have what, exactly? She knew better than to jeopardize this job, and she knew far too well the complications of inappropriate interactions between bosses and employees.

Taking two limping steps away, Agata mumbled a “*thank you*” and chased after her child.

Four

Night poured over the bedroom like a dark, stale pot of coffee. Coffee, an Earthly luxury she hadn't tasted in two decades. Strange to be thinking of it now, but all sorts of strange ponderings were ambling through her mind, courtesy of another bout of insomnia.

After bestowing a kiss on Bozena's sleep-warmed forehead, Agata once again stole into the hall, praying she could avoid Tethys. She'd worked late into the evening to compensate for the missed time while she hunted down her exuberant daughter, but barely made a dent. If she wasn't going to sleep, she might as well distract herself with work.

Since coming to B'Lixara, she'd lived and worked in the industrial cities. During the afternoon, she'd paused a few times to wipe sweat from her brow and look down on the grassy area surrounding the athenaeum where the children played. Listening to her daughter's shouts and laughs blend with those of the other children, she ached with wistful

normalcy. This was what Bozena's life should be: playing outside, having friends, adventuring in place.

So different from the life Agata could provide her in the city. What would she do if she didn't get the job at the Terran Heritage School? Would she be forced to return to the textile factory? Her stomach clenched at the thought.

Slipping into the workroom, she keyed the cataloging terminal to life, illuminating the stacks with its dim glow. Quickly, she neatened a stack of books, preparing to scoop them up for shelving. With a quick glance at Tethys's office, she noted curls of the lilac mist framed the closed door, and her next breath caught a lungful of the spicy clove scent. Faster than the night before, the sensation sped through her like a wave of pleasant inebriation with a single destination: directly between her thighs.

What the hell was happening? Was she... getting *turned on*? Here? *Now*?

Agata's mind flashed to the image of Tethys from earlier, with the swish of his dark hair and his hard and soft mouth speaking hard and soft words. A stern recitation of policy —“one human for one month”—and then a gentle command. “Go see to your child, Agata.” The memory of that command agitated her soaring arousal. Other words he could say in that hard-soft tone whispered in her mind. *Take off your clothes. Kiss me. Get on your knees.*

Overcome, she braced a forearm against the desk and pressed her palm against her sex, sinking into the pressure like a long-

lost friend. She ought to go back to her room and finish this off, but walking on jellied legs was impossible. Even through the worn fabric of her nightgown, she felt the heat of her sex. Its lush wetness swelled as blood and desire pooled. She bucked her hips, not sure how far she would go, how much her body would demand.

Behind her, the door whisked open and Agata spun, her hand glued between her thighs, to see Tethys bustling in, large and intimidating. Just as embarrassment hurled itself up from her stomach, a fresh billow of mist mushroomed out from the open doorway behind him. Tinged with lilac and redolent with the concentrated spice, it streamed over his broad shoulders.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

His hard voice straight out of her fantasies, the chemical reactions fizzing in Agata’s core amplified a need for release so strong it felt like pain. With effort, she pried her hand from her body. “I’m sorry, I... I think something’s wrong with me.”

Tethys cleared the space between them in three giant strides, his size growing massive with each smooth, mist-kissed step. His unbound hair cascaded in a dark curtain over his eyes, unobscured by the blindfold mask. “You are ill? You need medical attention?”

“No.” She shook her head. They were so close now, if she leaned forward and repeated the movement, she’d rub her nose into the broad plane of his chest.

She’d never wanted to do something more.

Her nipples, already pushing against her gown, hardened into tight, aggressive points. The urge to pinch the angry nubs had her weaving her fingers together in a self-imposed prison of restraint. Another deep breath brought only more exquisite, aching misery. Slick droplets seeped from her sex and condensed on her upper thighs; if the spice lessened, she would smell her own tangy arousal. “It’s this mist,” she said faintly. “I think it’s doing something to me.”

“Doing what, exactly?” His baritone rumble softened into molten dark chocolate, hot enough to scald the roof of her mouth while seducing her tongue with sweetness. Agata sealed her lips together, as if to refuse the decadent taste. She couldn’t *say* what was happening to her. Not out loud, not to *him*. “Here, Agata, come sit.”

The beseeching tone of his command shot through her, the syllables of her name like bullets of bespoke eroticism intent to blow her apart from the inside out. She inched forward and let herself be guided to the chair at the terminal. His touch was gentle, but firm, and she mourned it instantly when he withdrew to crouch at her side, his curvaceous lips formed into a perfectly concerned purse. Instinctively, she sought a reaction in his eyes, only to be reminded of his lack thereof.

“Where is your mask?” She swirled a finger near her own eyes in demonstration.

“At night I can manage without it. Aellos is always in darkness, and our eyes cannot tolerate light.” His lips pulled to the side and he jerked a chin toward his office. “There is a

chemical in the *ariseum* that helps with this. It is quite soothing to the sensitive eye tissues after the strain of the day.”

Agata balled her hands in her nightgown, which had ridden up on her thighs. The words “sensitive” and “tissues” stuck out like pins. She also possessed some very sensitive tissues, and one quick tug would bare them to the air, the mist, and to him. A wild urge to do just that beat against her resolve like a pounding surf.

She was acting like a cat in heat. He was her boss. He didn’t even like humans. This was *crazy*.

She clenched and unclenched her fingers, working the fabric into a crinkly, sweaty mess. “The *ariseum* is the mist coming from your office?” He nodded. “It is quite... stimulating to my own... tissues.”

Tethys seized in a momentary startle, the first indication she’d ever seen of him not being entirely in control. There was something validating about it, as if he had now joined her in careening through this moment with the brakes off. “You are speaking of *sexual* arousal?”

Agata’s head swam, intoxicated by his mouth forming the words “sexual arousal” in that syrupy voice. This situation had degenerated from uncomfortable and embarrassing and was speeding toward shameless depravity.

A voice screamed in the back of her mind. This wasn’t her. She was careful and planful and responsible. She was practical and resourceful. A survivor of a destroyed planet, a daughter of loving parents she’d left behind knowing they faced certain

death. She was a mother, with a child conceived not in love or lust but as an accidental byproduct of a situation, the furthest thing from sensual or beautiful. It had barely been consensual. She wasn't prone to romance or flights of sentimental fancy or even raw, physical lust. She wasn't like *this*.

She knew that. She *did*. But under the influence of the mist that cloaked all her sense and reason, she couldn't remember how to function as the person she was. Right now, she was the opposite of all those things. Lustful and wanton, sensual and reckless. Full of greedy, selfish yearning.

With horror, she suspected the only way back to herself, to her true self, lay on the other side of a chasm of desire.

"I'm not sure I can get back to my room right now," she said hoarsely. "Perhaps... you could leave and give me some... privacy?"

The request was humiliating, but disgustingly exhilarating too, and the pulse of need punched against her restraint. Tethys's chin tipped upwards, his mouth relaxed and parted the softest degree. Larger than a typical human mouth and colored a rich shade of burgundy, the plush contours revealed extraordinary amounts of expressiveness in every small twitch and fold.

"Would you consider..." his lips rolled together, like sheets neatly tucked into the bottom of the bed, and a sigh gusted from his nose, "allowing me to observe?"

Five

Scorching heat flamed her cheeks. He wanted to watch her masturbate? Oh, good lord, why did that idea make her absolutely *wild*?

The remaining shred of Agata's decency held on by its splintering fingernails. "*Excuse me?*"

"I do not mean to impose, and by all means, you may refuse without fear of retribution, but it's of an... *academic* interest." He flicked his fingers toward the bins teeming with books and artifacts behind him. "Humans have been assigned to me as a research topic, and since your species appears to be sex obsessed, I admit to a certain fascination with the practicalities."

"Sex *obsessed?*" she repeated, tamping down her thrill at the illicit turn of their conversation. She took issue with that broad characterization of her people, although it felt very, very accurate to her personally right about now.

He tipped his head to the side. “I’m happy to expound upon my observations, but you seem to be quite uncomfortable.”

“You want to watch me?” He gave a single, austere nod, as if she’d asked if he’d like a glass of water. Another lilac-tinged cloud wafted through the doorway, and Agata’s thighs began to tremble with the effort to not rub them together. “But no touching?”

His shoulders straightened. “Of course not. Strictly scientific. You have my word.”

Research. He was doing research. Did that make things better? Oh, hell, what did she care? She was leaving in a month. He’d made that abundantly clear. Fizzing, popping bubbles of excitement burst forth like a bottle of shaken champagne.

Fuck it.

The decision made, Agata’s fingers crawled along the tops of her thighs and hiked her gown to her waist, exposing her sex to the Aelyzaen. He made no sound, but shifted from a crouch to resting on his knees. Given his size, he still towered over her, but she watched his head follow the path of her hands as she spread her legs and hooked a knee over the chair’s arm. His posture hunched, and he drew ever-so-slightly closer—not touching, as promised—but she swore she felt the warm tickle of his exhale on her damp inner thighs. The sensation, so whisper-soft, yet so profound, commanded her attention and honed her mind on *him* as the source of her relief.

It was his face she watched as she parted her own sex with her fingers. His mouth she studied as she gathered wetness and

spread it in a sloppy mess. His fur she craved when she began her circling caresses. His voice she replayed and his words she scripted inside her own fantasies.

“Touch yourself, Agata.”

“Just like that.”

“Let me watch you make yourself come.”

“Come hard for me.”

In the room, in reality, he said nothing. Merely waited, his too-sensitive eyes hidden from her view, even as she displayed the most secret part of herself. There was something nuclear hot about being studied so intently. In a room full of hidden wonders, to be the sole focus of this learned male’s attention was a heady thing.

Her sought-after climax ripped through her with a violence like a report from a gun. Her back arched and her knees jerked toward her chest, grazing the thick, luxurious fur of his arm in an accidental touch that felt as stimulating as the rhythm of her stroking fingers. “Oh god,” she breathed, and a second starburst of pleasure exploded on the heels of the first.

Her legs shook and the brush against his fur happened again. Happened because he didn’t move away, didn’t flinch, didn’t recoil from her skin. In fact, somewhere in the orgasmic haze, she became aware of the complimentary push on her inner calf. An equal and opposite force, an undeniable realization that *he pressed back*.

Six

Agata dragged her feet. Reason after reason to stall the start of her duties conveniently presented themselves, and she indulged each and every one. Bozena needed a button resewn on her overalls. Gormira needed a hand bringing in the produce order. So many tiny tasks to do.

Bozena, who wanted to go to the archive room to crawl around the maze of containers, finally threw up her hands and declared she was going to see what Gormira's children were doing. In the silence of her absent child, the minutes of the clock prodded her toward her work like a sheepdog nipping at her ankles. She knew what she was avoiding, or rather, whom.

They'd parted the night before in a curt, if not unfriendly, manner. Once Agata came back to her senses, she'd covered herself, mumbled a hurried "*good night*", and fled to her room. Tethys, for his part, mirrored her actions and dove back into the secretive confines of his office.

"Pull it together, Agata," she chastised as she wrung her clammy hands. "It was a one-time, crazy thing. Just pretend it

didn't happen." With a single fortifying breath, she entered the hushed atmosphere of her workspace, saying a silent prayer of thanks to find it empty.

Yet, it was hard to pretend last night hadn't happened when the faint clove scent lingered in the corners along with the dust. Not enough to affect her in *that* way, but just enough to notice. Had it always been here or had she developed a heightened sensitivity? Hard to say, but one thing was clear: there would be no more midnight adventures to the archive room. She didn't care if she laid in bed all night staring at the ceiling without a wink of sleep. Hellhounds couldn't drag her back into the mist.

She picked up a stack of books and began to place them on the shelves. It was simple, really. All she had to do was keep her head down and stay away from the mist. At the end of the month, she'd have a decent padding of credits in her account and hopefully a new job off-world.

"Greetings, Agata." The low timber of Tethys's voice startled her into a fumble of the armload of books. Some quick, reflexive contortions saved them, and she threw a cool glance over her shoulder.

"Good morning." His name dangled on her tongue, unsaid but buzzing like a resisted itch. Saying it felt too personal, too... intimate. They weren't friends, after all. They weren't lovers. He was her employer.

Who had watched her get off less than eight hours ago.

“When you’re finished, I’d like you to work on this shipment.” He tapped a standard off-world container. “If you can process these larger bins, it will be easier to move around in here.”

Turning away, she resumed shelving with a nod. “Yes, of course.”

Tethys said no more, but muffled rustling gave away his location. The dull scuffle of packing materials impatiently shoved aside and rooted through. *What was he doing?* She wanted to know, but even more, she wanted to examine him in the cool, dust-dotted glare from the window. He wasn’t as appealing as she’d imagined last night. It had been the spell of the mist. Nothing more, nothing less. Yet she refused to allow so much as a peek, starving her curiosity like a flu.

Scavenging completed, the sounds died away and his presence diffused into the room, becoming nowhere and everywhere at once. The books dwindled in her arms and she slowed the shelving to a comically slow pace, aching for him to leave, to excuse himself, to leave her in the blessed silence of aloneness.

But he didn’t. Each taut second stretched like a wad of taffy on a pulling machine. Her lips twitched as she remembered watching them as a child, mechanical arms spinning and folding the candy end over endless end. Infinity-shaped strings of sugary heaven. How her mouth would water for a taste.

Was there a taffy machine somewhere in these boxes of Earth refuge? Had anyone thought of saving one? No, certainly no one had, and that thought, strangely, scraped against the never-

healing wound of her planet's destruction. Was this all that remained of that watery blue sphere? Artifacts scavenged like crumbs brushed off a dinner table and caught in an open palm to be dumped into the trash?

Far too much work for "*one human for one month*," yet so little.

"Agata."

She blinked to dispel her filmy, dry-eyed morosity and faced her employer. "Yes?"

Tethys sat near the cataloging terminal with a spread of books and papers in the fabric cradle slung between his two spread knees. His fingertips flicked absently through the edges of some papers, iridescence gleaming in his lush, blue-black fur. Two-textured fur, the inside of her calf had informed her, gliding over her skin with a warp and a weft, like a velvet skirt she once owned.

Visceral recognition, having nothing to do with the mist, pooled in her belly. Desire warred with reason. Base desires craved release into the world. A hunger for another taste of what she'd sampled last night. No, not a taste—a complete glutinous meal.

"You haven't moved in several minutes," Tethys said, his voice serene and lulling. "Are you unwell?"

Agata considered the question. "I am well, thank you." Ignoring her rampaging libido, she crossed the room and peered into the container he'd opened. "This is the next one?"

The books kissed her sweaty palms with their cool, indifferent heft as she unpacked and piled them on the table for processing. All the while, her neck burned under the intensity of Tethys's regard. Beneath that blindfold and all that hair, he watched her. She knew he did. She wanted to ask him to please go, to leave, to give her a moment of peace so she could staunch the unrelenting flow of fantasies. So she could slip into her mind-numbing tasks and return to the state of untethered numbness she'd adopted to survive.

He shifted his weight, causing a grating noise as the chair leg scraped against the stone floor. "We ought to discuss last night."

Sweat prickled along her neck and hairline. She firmed a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the packing container. "Is that necessary? Perhaps we could... pretend it didn't happen and move forward?"

The refutation came in his straightforward, but insistent, tone. Certain, but not critical. "But it did happen."

Agata leaned onto the container and bowed her head, avoiding any risk of eye contact. "I shouldn't have been working at that time of night; I promise it won't happen again."

A scuffle of books and papers heralded Tethys's transfer from the chair to his feet. A moment later, he laid his palm on the crate's edge, a mere foot from her own death grip on the container. "You're embarrassed."

Agata squeezed her eyes shut. To compromise herself with another boss—it was beyond belief. That wasn't the kind of

woman she was.

Maybe that is the kind of woman you are, an insidious voice whispered. *Whoring yourself to this Aelyzaen the same way you did with Zalbgrix*. She jammed the heel of her palm into her eye, pushing back against the brewing headache.

“Yes, of course I am.” Her chest heaved with the kicking up of long-buried shame. “You’re my employer. At a job I desperately need. You believe humans are over-sexed animals and I confirmed that at the first available opportunity.”

“I do not think the blame is yours.” Again, Tethys’s patient insistence sent her into a tailspin. “It appears the *ariseum* contains some aphrodisiac that precipitated your response. I’ve been searching our records all night to look for reports of humans responding in this way. I’ve sent out a few communications as well to my coll—”

Agata whirled on him. “You *what?*”

Tethys continued, unbothered. “It is quite unusual, and as far as I can tell, an undocumented phenomenon. I should like to study it further.” Slowly, he turned to face her, his blue-black fur winking in transition. “I was hoping you might assist me.”

Agata gaped at him. “Assist?”

“Yes.” His fingers drummed against the container. “I was hoping we might repeat the experience to gather more observations and data. This is a rather unprecedented discovery.”

Agata's mouth dried up. "You want to research your special mist and its aphrodisiac properties with me?"

His lips flattened to a single line. "Perhaps this is untoward."

She folded her arms over her chest. "You *think*?"

Despite her outward affront, horny thoughts rampaged through her mind. In the full light of day, his appeal only increased. She wanted to lick his corded neck, comb through his hair, and trace the inlaid designs on his horns with a fingertip. She wanted those hands spread over her back and stomach and breasts and thighs. She wanted to fall asleep curled against the wide expanse of his chest, sated and held and understood. Mist or no mist, she wanted another swish of his fur against her skin. She wanted a taste of those sensual lips.

"I'll do it," she said softly. So softly he might not have heard. Agata held her breath for a half-second that stretched to infinity. Heart drumming against her breastbone, she added, "But not alone."

His chin rose a slow, uncertain inch. "How do you mean?"

"I'll provide you your observations, but I don't wish to be observed like a specimen." Gathering her courage, she asked, "Would you consider participating in the... research?"

"You would prefer to engage in sexual activities with me?"

His voice dropped several registers, so deep it seemed to vibrate in her body.

"If you want to make a study of it, then yes. Only if you're willing, of course. If you don't find me repulsive and if it is

not against some Aelyzaen code of morals or anything.”

He made a low, contemplative noise in his throat. “I am your employer.”

Agata wet her dry lips, half in disbelief she was even having this conversation. She could back out. Admit it was inappropriate, beg his pardon, go back to work, pretend this never happened. *Gruelixian whore*. The snide murmurs and judgmental stares of other humans burned in her memories. She hadn’t done anything that dozens of other women at the factory had done to appease their corrupt boss. But she’d been the only one to flaunt her shame and bear his child.

But that wasn’t *this*.

Zalbgrix was not Tethys. She’d never, not for one second, felt any attraction for her former boss; those joinings had been acts of coercion, capitulation, and desperation. After Bozena’s difficult delivery, she could bear no more children, so there would be no damning evidence. Maybe she was splitting hairs, but this *was* different.

This felt like her old life. Like her old self. A much younger version of Agata who’d dated and slept with men and enjoyed the heady intoxication of crushes. Before Earth became unlivable. Before her life blew apart as she rocketed through the stars.

Her gaze skittered over the boxes, out the window, anywhere but on his face. “We can keep this separate from that.”

“How so?”

“You aren’t demanding anything from me or leveraging favors. Not to mention, you propositioned me last night. Didn’t you consider you were my employer before you did that?”

“I admit,” Tethys rubbed his knuckles against his chin, “I may not have thought it all the way through.” He shifted on his feet. “I was perhaps a bit caught up in the moment. In the discovery, I mean.”

She waved a hand. “It’s fine. You propositioned me and now I’m propositioning you. Even Steven.”

His wide lips twitched. “Who is Steven? That is a human name, yes?”

“It’s an expression. It means we’re both equally responsible for,” she flapped her hand between them, “this.”

“And... mating with me is something you desire?”

Hadn’t she said as much? Sudden shyness overtook her; she couldn’t look at him and baldly admit it, no matter how true it might be.

“It is... agreeable to me, yes,” she managed. “Do... Aelyzaens not enjoy such things?”

More nervous shuffling of his feet ensued. “We do,” he said stiffly. “It is not forbidden.”

Neither of them seemed to know what else to say, but Agata was well aware that he had not yet assented to her counter offer. She rubbed her thumbs together, the dust and grit on her skin rough under her finger pads. A rush of self-consciousness

made her examine her dirty hands. The lines of a forty-something-year old refugee who'd labored in a textile factory for the better part of the last two decades creased her skin. She wasn't young, and she'd never been considered particularly beautiful. What did she have to offer the stern Aelyzaen anyway?

Insecurity clamped down on the back of her neck. Ready to rescind the whole thing, she took a step toward the door, her eyes glued to her shoes. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Tonight," he interrupted. Agata's chin lifted, wary relief coursing through her veins. Tethys resumed his stiff, chest-forward-arms-back pose, his body hard all over except for the softness of his lips as he said, "If you are feeling rested, come to my office. Tonight."

With a decisive nod, he turned and strode from the room. *Well, okay, then.*

Tonight.

Seven

What did one wear to a pseudo-scientific assignation with an alien?

She had no idea, but as she rapped on Tethys's office door, she reconsidered the decision to wear her skimpy nightgown. After bathing and slipping it on, she'd chosen to belt her threadbare bathrobe over it in a nod toward decency. This was for scientific purposes, right? Perhaps he had some protocol that didn't involve her hurling her half-naked body at him straightaway.

Although she wouldn't mind that either.

The door opened and an ember of excitement flared in her chest. This was really happening.

"Come in, please," Tethys said, gesturing with an open palm. As she'd noticed before, excepting their very first interaction, his manners were cool perfection. His stiff but proper courtliness made her feel unsophisticated and oafish in comparison. Especially as she took in the fluid, silky robe he

wore, clearly finely made and shimmering in the scant light. She eyed the loose tie at his thick waist; it would take nothing at all to tug it open and slip her hand inside. Run her palm over his dual-textured skin and spread her fingers over the gentle bulge of his abdomen.

“Thank you,” she murmured as the door closed with a shush. Hands clasped tightly at her waist, Agata blinked into the dimness, trying to accommodate to the lack of light.

The room was a facsimile of her workspace, only more organized, cleaner, and far more comfortable. A soft carpet gave way under her feet, and she stepped out of her slippers to feel the plush nap on her bare skin. Furniture dotted the space, a few practical chairs for extended work and a few comfortable-looking pieces ideal for curling up with a book. They were all enlarged, sized for an Aelyzaen, or at least, sized for Tethys. At the far side nearest the windows sat a half-couch similar to an old-fashioned chaise. Her breath quickened at the sight, her mind instantly full of all sorts of activities one could do on such a piece of furniture.

The faint clove scent tickled her senses, and her arousal system pricked its ears. Yet its subtle presence drew a contrast to the lack of the great, voluminous clouds of lavender haze that poured from the room last night.

“Where is the mist?” she asked, the question forcing her to finally look into his face. Hair alone covered his eyes tonight; no mask. “The one for your eyes?”

“I did not turn on the machine yet.” His throat bobbed in a deliberate swallow. “I thought perhaps to introduce the substance slowly, so as to better gauge your reactions as they happen.”

Agata appreciated the reminder of the dispassionate nature of this endeavor. This wasn't bad, right? This was simple observation. Research. *Science*.

“That makes sense,” she said, with a barely-there wobble in her voice.

“Agata.” His silken tone commanded her attention. “You don't have to—”

“No,” she interrupted. “I want to.”

As her eyes adjusted, she could make him out better. Could see the twisting uncertainty in the tilt of his lips, the pulse of tension at the angle of his jaw, the gentle rise and fall of his chest. A sudden fear jolted through her, a worry that he might decide the impropriety was beyond acceptable and call this all off with his next breath.

Before that could happen, she charged into the room, bypassing the neat stacks of books and artifacts and the endless shelves stretching to the ceiling, and dropped onto the chaise with a small bounce.

“Is this acceptable?” she asked, sitting as upright as a schoolgirl.

Tethys's thick neck convulsed. “It is. Let me turn on the *ariseum*.” He disappeared behind a shelf, activating a machine

with a petite *click*. Reappearing, Tethys hovered awkwardly on the other side of the room as the lilac tendrils began to slither toward her. Wispy and soft and barely-there, a mere exhale of a thing, yet electrified gooseflesh raised on her arms like an army standing at attention.

The first full inhale of clove, paradoxically, relaxed her to her purpose. Slowly, she removed her robe and draped it over the back of the couch. One by one, her senses came alive and her body remembered how to do something other than toil, stress, and mourn. There was no hurry this time. No rush. No furtive hiding or doubting. She'd come for this, and she'd come before she left.

Agata resettled herself with the chaise supporting her back and her legs stretched out along its length. She filled her nose with the deepest breath she'd taken in hours. The mist poured into her veins and worked its magic from the inside out. Blood zipped to her skin, her heart pounding, her nipples contracting, her sex swelling.

The beginnings of that clawing need buzzed beneath her skin, and she lifted her palm to the alien, still too far away. "It's starting," she said with a new huskiness.

Tethys hesitated, his chest expanding and body becoming all the more overpowering and looming in one micro-instant. Then, speeding through a handful of quick, decisive strides, he was at her side. Agata's hand moved, without hesitation, to brush over the silken folds of his garment. Although silk, an Earth substance, would seem coarse compared to whatever this

was made of. The fabric glided between her fingers like warm oil, nearly too fine of a thing to even hold.

A rumbled throat clearing came from above her and Tethys lowered himself to the couch, settling on the edge next to her liquid-feeling knees. The robe slipped over his broad, bare knee and listed open to expose the grooved musculature of a massive thigh. A whirling, flying sensation accelerated in her blood. *Oh god*, the things she wanted to do to that thigh. Agata let out a groan.

“Agata,” Tethys prodded with an urgency she’d never heard before. “What are you experiencing?”

A low frequency pulsation thrummed inside her. Her skin so needy, she rubbed a palm over her sternum, barely stopping herself from roughly groping her own breast. “So many things.”

The large shadow, an outline of horns and shoulders and arms, pitched forward. His hidden eyes bored into hers through the mass of hair. “Tell me.”

“My skin,” she said, splaying her fingertips over her collarbone with one hand while the other gathered the hem of her nightgown upwards, “feels tight and... and *hungry*. It wants to be touched.”

His big palm flattened on the chaise, near her hip yet not touching, and he encroached on her even more. She couldn’t look away, couldn’t tear her eyes from the burning intensity of his unwavering regard. He held her fastened, immobilized by his invisible eyes.

“Everywhere?” he asked, his tone gritty and strained.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, immediately. On an impulse, Agata hiked her garment all the way to her waist. Tethys’s hardened jaw melted at the reveal and Agata did not hesitate before boldly sliding one naked leg into his lap.

Her inner thigh brushed against his exposed abdomen, his skin caressing hers in a velvety greeting. An ache gathered in her sex, a demand for all of those textures against her most intimate places. She lolled her head back against the couch, drunk on the contrast of firm muscles, buttery skin, and the perfect slip of his delicious garment.

“And what else?” Tethys took a firm hold of her proffered thigh. The hot heaviness of his grasp penetrated through her swirling arousal, which turned into a moan when his fingertips pressed and dented her skin, as if wanting to prove to himself that she was real.

“My blood... is burning and racing everywhere all at once.” His hand strayed the length of her leg and back up, boldly venturing almost to the apex of her thighs. Agata shuddered with the near-miss torture of it. “My breasts are so heavy.”

“What about...” his hand slid upwards to hold her entire sex in the broad, heated cup of his palm, “here?”

Agata nearly thrashed with the relief of it. She arched her back, grinding her swollen, slippery heat into his touch. Her throat vibrated with a brutal, plaintive noise and she let her body do what it desired, seek what it wanted, take what it needed. “Swollen. Sensitive. Aching.”

His fingers—thick, strong, elegant—skated through her wetness and delved between her lips. The gentle breach as he slid two inside, made her claw at the couch in spiraling insanity. “Oh god, that feels good. All I can think about is relief,” she whined, now unable to stop talking, “but, at the same time, never wanting it to end.”

Shamelessly she rocked her hips to the rhythm of her arousal and he followed her along, meeting her thrust for thrust. His robe had fallen further open, displaying the horned caps of his shoulders and the impressive expanse of his chest and gently furred belly. Legs spread wide, Agata’s calf dragged over his lap and the hard lump between his legs. What did he look like fully bare? Did he have what she needed?

She wanted to be taken. Stuffed full. Possessed and consumed like a thing worth having, a thing worth ravishing, from the sheer weight of desire. To let her cast off for a brief time, that cloak of invisibility in which she lived, and erase the patina of scorn she suffered. “I need more,” she panted. “Can you give... more?”

Undone, Agata heaved herself forward, encircling Tethys’s neck and attempting to haul him over her. He resisted for a brief moment, then gave way, his huge body crashing into hers with impossible, solid weight.

And, just as quick, he righted himself. Eased up to his knees and flung the robe aside like it was a nuisance rather than a priceless fabric. Agata’s eyes tripped down the front of him,

drawn like a heat-seeking missile to the jutting thickness between his thighs.

Like everything about him, it was two-toned, imposing, and beautiful. It rose from a pedestal-like base, dusky and thick where it attached to his pelvis, before narrowing to a textured shaft with a knobbed tip. A network of complicated swirls decorated the fleshy column, catching the light and shadow. Decorative veining, so much richer and varied than human men, culminated in a golden ring nestled neatly beneath the tip. Not a ring like one worn on a finger, but a golden band inset into his flesh, reminiscent of the markings on his horns.

“It’s beautiful,” Agata breathed in undisguised awe. She hovered her hands above his member like a couple of orbiting satellites, her fingers itching with the need to explore all the textures. “May I touch it?”

With a grunt, Tethys seized one of her hands and brought it to his sex, lightly dragging her fingertips over the veining. He directed her touch over every angle and surface, even down to the deep underside where it merged with his body. He had no bollocks, which was strange, but perhaps the bulky base of the cock housed more of his reproductive organs. She didn’t know—and honestly, didn’t much care—so entranced by the corrugated feeling of his flesh and nearly incandescent with the thought of how it might feel rubbing against her, rubbing *inside* of her. A frantic flush spread from Agata’s chest and up to her cheeks. There was something so perfectly, brutally filthy about it. Her stern boss using her hand to deftly masturbate his impossibly perfect cock.

At the next shuttling caress, her thumb caught on the lip below the head. “How is it gold?”

Tethys huffed with amusement. “The gold is decorative.” One corner of his mouth ticked up. “I had that added. A bit of a commemorative mark.”

“Like a tattoo?”

He released her hand then, and Agata tried a light, twisting pass all on her own. Tethys’s stomach muscles rippled with a whole-body shudder. “Just so,” he said, sounding strained.

“Commemorating what?” she asked sweetly, repeating the motion to tease another shivering response in the big male. More comfortable, Agata played along the length of him, her fingertips dragging and tracing and eliciting more satisfying ripples of pleasure in his body.

Before answering, Tethys’s hand delved between her legs and resumed the steady, grinding pressure. Agata’s eyelids drooped with the renewed pleasure of it, and his lips flexed into a half-grin. “Finishing my studies and achieving the rank of *thisllaine*.” Boldly, he explored her splayed-open sex, caressing flesh so slick and engorged she could hear the wet slide of every pass. “I don’t want to talk about that. Tell me what you are feeling now,” he commanded darkly.

Agata stuttered in her movements, the combined assault of his fingers and rich voice almost too much to bear. “Empty.”

A rough vibration emerged from Tethys’s chest and his thick thighs began to lean into her hands in small, searching pulses.

“You wish to be filled?”

“Oh, yes. *Please.*”

With a solemn nod, Tethys gathered Agata’s hips in his hands. Her body, straining but pliant, bent easily to his arrangement. Hoisting her half onto his lap, her knees spread wide on either side of his abdomen, he brought their sexes together. She watched as he slid his cock through her sex, dragging every toe-curling bump and veiny swirl over her clit. Pleasure spiked through her, her peak rapidly approaching as he did it again and again and *again*. Every pass more intoxicating than the last. Agata forced herself to keep her eyes open, the impulse to close them and drown in the pleasurable delirium of his touch almost too much to take. When her insides coiled so tight she thought she’d combust, he hefted his cock in his hand and impaled her in one swift thrust.

Agata screamed and shook. The hurtling exhilaration of exquisite fullness overshadowed the discomfort of long disuse. “Tethys!” she gasped.

Mouth pressed into a firm line, Tethys executed one perfect stroke, in and out, and Agata let out a vulgar swear. It felt so good, so perfectly decadent, she was sure she’d wandered into some kind of fever dream. Some fantasy born of the mysterious mist and this alien planet, because surely this could not be real. It was incongruent and incomprehensible given the entire course of her history leading up to this moment. This brain-melting, bone-disintegrating pleasure made no sense for someone like her.

“Agata,” Tethys said, drawing her attention out of her inner world. “Your observations?”

“It’s good,” she sobbed, her peak so close she could taste it. “I feel filled. Tight. Captured. *Free.*”

A vein popped in his neck as his movements sped, harkening the climax she craved above all else. Her entire world narrowed to the sensations below her waist. Nothing else mattered, only the rough slide of his body against hers, the thudding impact of their hips colliding, the wet arousal that coated both of them in a dripping mess.

“Oh god,” she breathed, lungs so tight her words mingled with incomprehensible grunts and moans. “Oh god, *yes!*”

Her climax burst free like someone had grasped the back of her neck and tossed her off a cliffside. She blazed—freefalling, freewheeling—through spasms of shuddering, grasping release. Insane with relief, she clawed at his chest and arms, fisting bunches of his coarse fur between her knuckles as she rode him into incandescent oblivion.

Dimly, she was aware that his climax followed on the heels of hers. Aware of his lusty grunts and the strong flex of his neck as it arched up toward the sky. Inside, the bulging pressure of his spend throbbed against her channel as his release went on and on and on, until finally he pulled out and a river flowed between her thighs.

“Oh no, your couch!” Agata said, aware of the mess spilling over and onto the beautiful fabric.

Tethys, chest still heaving, laid a quelling hand on her knee as she scurried to mop herself dry with the edge of her bunched-up nightgown. “Hang the couch,” he breathed before bending to plant a soft kiss to the inside of that very same knee. “A sacrifice to science.”

Eight

Not too shabby for three weeks' worth of work.

Agata surveyed the cleared spaces, the neat avenues that snaked from one side of the room to the other, all the way to the window Bozena discovered that first day. She'd lost track of the number of bins she'd cataloged, but her progress was apparent. Each one unpacked, inventoried, and then triaged into its final destination. The books staying in Tethys's library got shelved, and artifacts like art or cultural items or other human ephemera, destined for some Aelyzaen archive off-world, got repacked and sent on their way.

Each day, Tethys left her a small, accessible pile of work to do. Containers retrieved from the highest echelons of the room were left by her desk. During the daylight hours, their interactions remained professional, and during the night, she stole through the doorway to his office. Her body never ceased wanting him, to the point where she considered whether the experience likened to a drug addiction. One hit and she was hooked.

Granted, there was something quite addictive about a shortcut to arousal and pleasure. One that did not require the spinning of elaborate fantasies or assistance from a mechanical device to coax a world-weary body into a reluctant release. But it wasn't only the easy, effortless arousal she craved. She craved *him*.

A schoolgirl crush gone nuclear, she desired him in a way that strained her daytime responsibilities. She hungered for the whizzing exhilaration when she heard his voice, or when they shared space close enough for his body heat to mingle with her own, or when he complimented her work, as he did more and more frequently now.

"Hello, Agata." She turned to find him in the opened doorway to his adjoining office and immediately recalled the way he'd bent her over his massive desk mere hours ago. His unhinged murmurings would be embedded in her memory forever.

"Ah, I feel you clamping on me again."

"Yes, just like that, Agata."

"Such a tight human cunt you have."

Agata had thought herself well beyond girlish reactions, but a fiery blush licked its way up her neck. She suppressed a knowing smile. "Good morning."

If he noticed her heightened color, he did not say, but Agata swore his stern mouth adopted a pleased-looking curve. Quickly erasing the expression, Tethys gestured toward an

open container. “This one... the contents are perplexing to me; perhaps you might provide some context.”

“Yes, of course,” she said, and hurried to peek inside, delighted by both his presence and his request for her expertise.

Tethys lifted several paperback books from the box. Flashes of bright colors winked at her: glowing purples, neon greens, and lava reds. Tattered and not particularly lovingly packed, the books overfilled Tethys’s large hands as he arranged them for her examination. Agata reached for one, gaping at the sight of a shirtless man’s torso taking up the bulk of the cover. Not a regular shirtless human man, however, but one manipulated and colored a vibrant blue, his skin accessorized with an unusual scaling pattern and swirling tattoos. Her gaze flashed to the title, *Hot Alien F*ck Lords*, emblazoned across the top of the book in shocking green.

“Oh!” Agata’s hand flew to her mouth, and she regarded a second book, this one with two orange-red colored upper bodies sporting horns jutting straight up from their heads like the pair on an ibex. This one entitled *Invasion of the Stern Starship Daddies*.

“These appear to be somewhat bizarre representations of alien species’,” Tethys said carefully, “but these... *figures* are unlike any other species I am aware of.”

Agata shuffled through a few more titles: *Her Martian Mechanic*. *Space Commander’s Concubine*. *Galactic Dick Down*. She looked up at Tethys, amusement winning out as

she said through giggles, “These are fiction. Stories read for enjoyment.”

Tethys thumbed the yellowed pages of *Operation Off-World Orgy* with a seriousness that made the situation worse. Agata fought back peels of outright laughter. She wasn’t laughing at the books or the people who enjoyed them, but the idea that, of all the things scavenged from a dying planet, someone shoved several hundred alien-themed romance novels into a box for saving. Maybe taffy pullers had been abandoned, but not every odd quirk of humanity had been lost after all.

Tethys gestured toward the box filled to the brim with similar titles, his mouth twitching. “The covers do bear a striking resemblance to human males.”

“Indeed.” Agata wiped her eyes, her laughter settling down. “Although I don’t suppose those books do much to refute your idea that humans are sex-obsessed imbeciles.”

The corners of his lips curled up and he stroked his chin as if to erase the display. “If they are, they certainly aren’t alone.”

Agata gave him a suspicious side-eye as she unloaded more of the paperbacks. “Perhaps human libido is contagious.”

He made a low humming noise, an exceedingly neutral response, but did not otherwise respond. Unbothered by his daytime formality, Agata sat down at the terminal to enter the information for the first novel on the stack.

“I have another question, if you don’t mind,” Tethys said, moving some piles aside to perch himself on the corner of her

desk. “It is of a somewhat personal nature.”

Agata’s fingers slowed on the keyboard and she slid him a glance. “Yes?”

“You’re obviously an educated woman. You know several human languages, and you learned this job quickly and work efficiently. It is puzzling to me why you were working in the textile factory.”

With one simple question, all her twenty years on B’Lixara tallied up like the crates in the room, year after year of disappointment and struggle, always seeming to get harder and harder, never easier. With a sigh, Agata’s hands drooped from the keyboard and came to rest in her lap. “I was a teacher on Earth,” she said, proud of the steadiness in her voice despite the difficult topic. “Language, obviously. But when the evacuations began, the schools closed. You might know that humans were resettled in waves. My younger sisters left first, one by one until I was the only one left. We had elderly parents, you see, and it wasn’t clear that they would be transported, so someone had to stay with them, and that person was me.”

Tethys rotated to face her more fully, his jaw firm in serious contemplation. “I fear this story does not have a happy ending.”

“Well,” Agata said with a rueful smirk, “I suppose it depends on where the story ends. My parents did not get evacuated, and they insisted that I leave and try to find my sisters to watch over them in my parents’ place. But, by that time, the planets

willing to take human refugees were dwindling and, as you might know, the Gruelix only agreed under intense political pressure. At any rate, I landed here only to discover the human schools were established and not needing any language teachers.” She tapped the base of her skull. “Besides which, with the translator chips, there’s really no point.”

Tethys leaned forward, as if rapt in attention. “And your sisters?”

Despite all the years of separation from her family, the usual pang of loss stirred to life in her chest. “I have not had luck locating them. Humans were resettled all over the galaxy, and the record keeping was rather slapdash.” She gestured to the room around them. “Certainly nothing as organized as this.”

He scowled. “The Galactic Authority could be improved with some Aelyzaen organization.”

The touch of haughty pride in his voice made her smile. “No doubt.” She considered him a moment—the pull of the fabric across his shoulders as he leaned forward, the light glinting off the golden inlay in his horns, the soft drape of his hair—and that pang in her chest crescendoed even more. In another week she’d leave here, and Tethys would be yet another lost connection in her life. She ought to be used to it by now, yet the stark reality tightened her throat in dread. “What about you?” she asked in a wavering voice. “Do you have family on Aellos?”

His lower lip thinned, a kind of half-grimace in his otherwise unbothered visage. “I have been assigned here for many turns.

Perhaps fifty? I have lost count.” The grimace became self-deprecating. “Not very Aelyzaen of me to lose track. But, in that time, I have returned to my home world only once.”

“So long,” Agata marveled.

“I am a younger son in a large family, and it is traditional for younger children to join the Archival Order. So I did,” he spread his palms wide, as if holding a tray, “and here I am. It is not expected that I will return; our deployments are lifetime appointments.”

“Lifetime?” Agata braced her hand over her heart. To have a homeworld, one that lived on without you, with people who you cared for, and not be able to return? “That is... tragic.”

“Perhaps.” He shifted to lean back, bracing his beefy arms behind him on his palms. “I rarely miss it; my work here is fulfilling.”

“Archiving humanity?” Agata’s face scrunched. “Cataloging a species so inept and selfish, they ruined an entire planet in only a few thousand years?” She distractedly tapped a key on the terminal. “I’m not sure we’re worth preserving, to be honest.”

“We do not judge the worthiness of our study subjects. Think of everything that would be lost if we did.” He nodded toward the stack of novels on her desk. “You may think this is inconsequential drivel, but consider these examples of human imagination. Not every species has so much; you are remarkable in that respect.”

Agata sensed no condescension in the warm compliment. “That’s very generous of you.”

“I admit, I was not initially keen on making the shift to humans. But,” he shrugged and added softly, “I am finding myself unexpectedly enamored with your kind.”

A careful stillness fell over him then, and Agata’s lungs froze in the suspension of time. Caught in the tractor beam of his hidden eyes, her heart began to pound like an agitated prisoner against a locked door. Surely he couldn’t mean anything to do with *her*?

Outside of their liaisons, he remained so aloof. After their nighttime assignments, they parted ways without any kind of languorous, post-coital lolling about. This conversation, happening now—after all these weeks, and after she’d slept with him dozens of times—was the closest they’d ever come to any kind of real, non-sexual intimacy.

“What is Aellos like?” she asked.

Tethys tipped his face toward the ceiling, as if he could see beyond the stars. Shiny hair drifted back from his brow, revealing the opaque eye protection. The sharp angles of his cheekbones pressed against his skin like the blades of a knife, a hidden danger in all the soft curtains of hair.

“Dark. Very dark. You would not be able to see there without assistive goggles, for example. And cold. Very little snow and rain; just dry cold, like a desert. There are wide, flat plains blanketed with luminescent moss that create its own light. It extends as far as you can see, all the way to the horizon, a

multicolored landscape of glowing, living things. Aelyzaen artists construct elaborate sculpture pieces for the moss to grow on, and they coax it into different colors and shapes, to make living scenes that defy description.” A small smile lit his face. “My sister is an artist of this variety. She sends me photos of her work as it progresses. But there is much of her artistry I have never seen with my own eyes.” His chin dropped and he faced her again. “Most Aelyzaens work indoors, as the outside is quite inhospitable. It is a bookish culture, you might say. Hence, we became the de facto archivists of the galaxy.”

“All this work, but... is that all there is for you here? Work?” Her palms sweat in anticipation of his answer. Like a card player’s gambit, she pressed the advantage. “Don’t you get lonely?”

The room held its breath. Agata felt the weight of his gaze on her face, the searching, possibly offended, possibly fascinated, regard. His lips remained lax and unbothered, and entirely too kissable. He was such an enigma. Reserved, and yet, at this moment, stunningly, breathtakingly open.

Small footsteps thundered in the hall, and Bozena tore through the door, waving a flag of red paper she’d fastened to a stick. “Mama, Mama!” Ignoring Tethys completely, she brimmed with excitement. “Gormira’s making *lizog* cakes and says I can help if you say it’s okay. May I? Please? I’ll do my lessons later, I promise.”

Agata smoothed her daughter's sparse hair back from her forehead. "She offered to let you help? Or did you pester her?"

Bozena's face contorted in childlike affront. "She offered."

"I see." Agata rose from her chair, reluctant to leave with her questions unanswered. "I'll go and check with her myself, if you don't mind."

As if feeling victory within her grasp, Bozena bounced on her toes, but paused when her eyes landed on Tethys. "If your name is Tethys," Bozena asked, "why does Gormira call you *thisllaine*?"

Agata's eyes flew to his face. A muscle in his smooth, red-brown cheek twitched, winking a dimple—which was more attractive than it had any right to be—in and out of focus.

"I am Aelyzaen," he said in a tone as soft and rich as melted butter. With elegant economy of movement, he slid from her desk and squatted in front of Bozena, putting them at eye level. "*Thisllaine* in our language means *learned one*, akin to *professor*. Many years ago, Gormira was hired to manage this research center. All the communications she received referred to the *thisllaine* assigned to this post in a general sense. When I arrived, she informed me that she'd learned how to say exactly one word in Aelyzaen and wasn't about to learn another. Thus, nearly everyone here calls me *thisllaine*. It is not technically incorrect, merely a general term rather than my unique name."

Bozena gave him a shy smile and pointed. "And the designs on your horns, were you born with them?"

“Bozena!” Agata scolded. “What have I told you about making comments about people’s bodies?”

Her daughter flashed her a dark look. “It wasn’t a comment, it was a question.” She turned back to Tethys. “I wasn’t trying to be rude.”

To Agata’s utter surprise, he flashed a toothy grin of perfectly squared-off teeth in a bluish shade of white. “The markings signify academic accomplishments. I began getting them when I was little more than your age, and they continued until I reached the level of *thisllaine*.” His hand rose and he thumbed over an intricate flourish that capped the curved horns. “And then I had to stop going to school because I’d run out of horn.”

“I wish I had horns.” Bozena giggled, and Agata’s heart tumbled end over end like a child rolling down a hill.

She’d never fantasized about a father for her daughter. Human men, lazy and listless after the resettlement, had no interest in her before she became a mother. And afterward, as a forty-something woman with a hybrid child, her presence offended and insulted their fragile egos. Bozena’s Gruelix sire had objected to her birth, threatened Agata over her insistence to carry the pregnancy through, and ultimately disavowed any responsibility. Not that Agata had had any illusions that he would do otherwise; having Bozena had been solely her decision. She’d accepted that from the beginning and refused to indulge in what-ifs and if-onlys.

But, to see this severe Aelyzaen, so gentle with her child... It plucked at something tender, deep inside, exposing a well-

camouflaged yearning that had been invisible even to herself. She'd asked him about his loneliness—while ignoring her own.

Rising from his crouch, Tethys extended an open palm toward the hallway, giving them leave to go. “Best not keep Gormira waiting.”

Too choked with emotions to speak, Agata reached for Bozena's hand and left the room, feeling his gaze upon her back the entire way.

Nine

“Hurry, Bozena! I’m going to be late!”

Agata hauled her protesting daughter down the hallway by her wrist. It was close to the girl’s bedtime, but in five minutes her interview with the principal at the Terran Heritage School would begin, and she needed to be at the terminal waiting and ready to go. Bozena, however, aggravated by her mother’s insistence that she not be left unsupervised on the other side of the building, resisted.

“Why do I have to be there?” she whined.

“Because I don’t have anywhere else for you to safely be,” Agata said through tight lips. “Besides, the principal knows I have a daughter. Perhaps she’ll want to meet you.”

Bozena snorted and dragged her feet. “I doubt it.”

The minutes evaporated in seconds, and after setting Bozena off to the side with her edu-pad, Agata barely signed on in time to establish the connection.

“Hello, can you hear me?” A pinched-faced white woman with thin lips and gray-blond hair stared out from the communication terminal.

“Yes! Yes, I can!” Agata flipped a few switches, trying to bring her face up on screen, and praying she didn’t appear as harried as she felt.

“Ah, there you are.” The woman gave a tight, unfriendly smile. “I’m Caroline DePalm. I assume you are…”

“Agata Novak.” She smiled with what she hoped was an appropriate amount of friendliness. “Thank you so much for meeting with me.”

“Indeed. Well, let’s get to it, shall we?” The woman’s eyes dropped to a datapad in her lap and she flipped through whatever was loaded there. “It looks like it has been quite some time since you’ve been in the classroom. Can you explain the gap, please?”

Agata cleared her throat and answered the question. And the next. And then the next. Question after question interrogating her abilities, experience, teaching methods, favorite books, and sources of inspiration. The principal judged no detail too small to chase after, no apparent inconsistency too inconsequential to clarify. Agata had nothing to hide, but after forty-five minutes, her head throbbed with exhaustion.

“Well,” the woman scrunched her nose at her datapad, “I suppose that’s all the questions I have for you—”

“Mama, can I *please* go to my room?”

Agata startled at Bozena's sudden presence at her side. "Oh! Hello!"

Bozena rubbed an eye, contorting her hand such that her fingers laid along the length of her forearm. "I'm tired."

Darting a glance at the screen, Agata rubbed her child's back. "Just a few more minutes, okay? We're almost finished."

Not to be put off, Bozena crawled into her lap, draping herself over Agata like a warm blanket. Agata gave the interviewer a conciliatory smile. "I'm so sorry for the interruption, Ms. DePalm. It's quite late here."

"Yes," the woman said tightly. "We are indeed finished."

Agata squinted into the monitor, feeling a change in the woman's visage and tone that sent alarm screeching through her mind.

"Thank you for the opportunity," Agata said with forced brightness. "When would I expect to hear from you about the position?"

The woman's face darkened. "Unfortunately, Ms. Novak, I don't believe you will be a good fit here at Terran Heritage. Thank you for your time."

Agata's head spun with confusion and panic. "I don't understand. I have all the qualifications. When we corresponded, you said my knowledge of several languages was exemplary."

Through the monitor, the woman's eyes pointed toward Bozena's head, where it rested on Agata's shoulder. "The

mission of the Terran Heritage School is the education of *human* children.” She sniffed. “Our families are committed to the ideals of the school, and we exclusively hire teachers with similar values.”

Agata’s stomach soured. She should’ve seen through the veneer of respectability from the start. Stupid. She’d been so stupid to think this would work out. Of course a school intent on the upholding of Earth “values” would be this way. Because Agata had a hybrid child whom she loved, a child they would not allow in the school or around their precious human children, she was an unfit candidate.

Rage bubbled up from an ugly place inside her and insults ping-ponged around her head. *Speciesist. Prejudiced. Hateful. Small-minded. Ignorant.* They hurled themselves against the back of her teeth, and Agata locked her jaws to keep them inside. But only because Bozena didn’t need to know any of the woman’s prejudice was prompted by her mere existence. Angry tears lashed at her eyes, but she held them off, not wanting this rude, hateful woman to see them, not wanting to give her the gratification of knowing her barb had landed.

“I see.” Scrabbling for the controls, Agata’s fingers trembled as she clicked to end the transmission without another word. She stood on shaky knees, bracing a half-asleep Bozena against her chest.

Damn them. Damn them! She’d banked all her hopes on this stupid school, and the opportunity was gone. She would ride this wave of fury as long as she could, because buried

underneath waited other, much more vulnerable, feelings. Fear. Uncertainty. Looming destitution.

“Come on, baby, let’s get you to bed,” she said, hoping Bozena missed the fracture in her voice. Agata moved with purpose, focusing on her mission: getting back to her rooms and putting her child to bed. A child whose heart was bigger and purer than an entire green and blue planet teeming with life.

She charged out the door, swerving at the last second to avoid a collision with her enormous boss. Tethys’s hand flashed, clasping her arm to steady her. Agata glanced up into his face, noting the skin stretched tight over his cheeks and the thin twist of his lips.

“Agata,” he said, that deep voice laced with sympathy. “Pay that woman no mind.”

Anger evacuated her body in a sudden whoosh, replaced by a deep, shameful quaking. It wasn’t sympathy she heard in his voice; it was pity. He’d heard it all.

How weak and pathetic she must appear to him. How utterly lacking in nearly every aspect of her life. How silly she must seem, striving for scraps from a morally bankrupt school on some far-flung planet she’d never been to. How disgusted he must be, to allow her contemptible existence to pollute his serene, ordered world.

Agata’s stomach bottomed out. She was going to lose it. Right here, right now. In front of this beautiful, austere male who never had a single emotion out of place, who was now in the

splash zone of her messy human emotions, which were primed to explode out in a torrential downpour.

“Come.” Tethys reached for Bozena and easily lifted the limp child from Agata’s unresisting arms. “I’ll get Bozena settled. You take a moment.”

Reeking of shame, Agata released her daughter, too overwhelmed to do anything other than acquiesce. With one last inscrutable look, Tethys marched toward Agata’s rooms in long, distance-eating strides. Bozena did not protest at the transfer, and even snuggled her face into Tethys’s hair as he walked, shattering Agata’s heart into a million other pieces of long-buried grief and disappointment.

Was this what it would be like to have a partner? Someone who cared for both her and her daughter? Who could pick them both up when they stumbled and fell? The small morsel of concern unearthed an unmet need so deep and profound it made the lost job inconsequential in comparison.

But no, she could hope for none of that. In another week, he would genteelly bid them farewell and then return to his cataloging, her sojourn here a small blip in the long years of his life. His kind actions were surely born of pity.

A scream gathered in her throat as Agata whirled and tore down the sloping corridors. Her hair spilled loose and flapped against her shoulders, and her skirts tangled around her knees. Not slowing, not pausing, she gathered them in tight fists and ran.

Ten

Thudding pain shot through her feet and ankles as she pounded toward the exit on worn shoes. Another reminder of her impending destitution, as if she needed one. Welcoming the pain, she refused to slow. She ran out the heavy stone door as it dispassionately swished open, its controlled efficiency in total contrast to her inner turmoil.

Exploding into the night air, the mist swarmed her body for one heart-stuttering beat. Eyes filled with its blue-gray curtain, she rammed through it, perversely gratified when it parted around her velocity. Away from the building, she slipped on the damp vegetation and nearly lost her footing. But she didn't stop. Not when her breaths came short and her lungs heaved with the effort to take in air. Not when she sucked the mist into her chest in full defiance of everything. *Go ahead*, she wanted to scream at the planet itself, *suffocate me and be done with it. You've taken everything. Why not possess me from the inside too?*

Tears blurred her vision. She had no idea where she was going. She glanced behind her, only to find the athenaeum had disappeared, consumed by the mist. No location, no landmarks, no orientation. Nothing existed around her, only the mist that covered this world like cheesecloth. With a jolt, her foot caught on a vine and she tumbled forward, slamming her knees into the ground and scraping her palm against a rough shrub to break her fall.

An agonized howl ripped from her soul. Agata stayed on the ground, bringing her blood-streaked palm to her face as she sobbed the sobs of a thousand wounds. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. She'd worked so hard, did everything she could, tried to be good and kind and responsible, and all to be punished over and over, beat down again and again. And her one selfish act—just *one*—of her whole life, was to birth a child so she would feel less alone. Was that her worst crime? To breathe life into the universe? Had she doomed her precious daughter with her selfishness too?

She sobbed so hard her eyes grew raw and swollen. Sobbed so hard, snot ran down her face and mixed with her tears. She sobbed till her throat burned and her voice gave out. The crying would not help. Eventually the tears would end and she would have to face her problems, yet she could not stop.

“Agata.” Tethys’s voice cut through the fog, distant and muffled. She smothered her tears and choked down her cries, not wanting him to see her further lowered and debased. “Agata,” he called again, but she ignored him, curling in on

her stomach as to disappear under the layers of vegetation and mist.

But then he was there; on his knees, hauling her into his arms and pulling her tight against his thick chest. As tight as he'd held Bozena, so small and delicate in his burly embrace, moments ago. Completely spent, Agata sunk into his solidness, the only real thing on this planet of mist and lies.

She would have to leave him too.

She saw herself retracing her steps from that first day, walking away from the athenaeum, trudging back to the station, doing her best to keep her chin up and tears batted down. She'd never see Tethys again. Like her dead parents and her scattered sisters and her long-gone friends. Like everyone she'd ever loved.

She gulped in a soggy breath, buoyed by the warm, familiar scent of him. Not the tangy herbal aroma of the *ariseum*, but his own unique attar. It flooded into her, bringing with it a spill of arousal cresting on the tidal wave of sorrow. She would lose that too. Lose the tight fit of their bodies, lose the euphoric frenzy of their joining.

Suddenly, it was one thing too many. She needed his strength and his body and the perfect oblivion of their connection at least once more. With frantic determination, Agata clawed at him, slipping her hands inside his silky evening robe to run her battered palms over his warm, velvety flesh. She raised herself up on her knees to arch her chest into his.

“Tethys,” she pleaded, desperate with hunger for him. “I need you to fuck me.” She pulled at the robe, tearing through the ties at his waist before turning her fingers on her own garment, yanking at buttons so hard one flew off into the mist like a piece of popcorn. “Please,” she begged without shame. “I need you. I need to feel something that isn’t this. *Please.*”

His body went still. What had been pliant, perfect solidity transformed to a block of hardened ice. Large hands encircled her upper arms to ease her away, and as her mind cut through the swirling sexual need, she stilled as well, feeling the impending impact of this rejection.

“You don’t want me?” she asked, her voice as broken as her soul.

“Agata,” he said, drawing the vowels of her name out like a sigh. “You want this? Now?”

“Yes, now.” She made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. “Why not now?”

“We,” his voice caught in a thick swallow, “we are not in my office. There is no *ariseum* out here... and you still want me?”

Confusion crowded her throbbing head.

Agata trailed her fingertips over the furred texture of his arms. “I don’t need the *ariseum* to want you.” His mouth, with its sensual curves and contours, slackened and parted ever-so-slightly. He gaped at her, seemingly stunned out of words. “Tethys,” she said, fisting his fur to give him a little shake. “I

always want you. I've desired you since the start. The mist simply... accelerates things."

Something shook loose in him then. His chest rose and fell in a great, shuddering sigh that gusted across her cheek one half-second before his perfect lips embraced her own. Soft and firm and ripe with feeling, he assaulted her with an unrefined ardor which she'd never in her life felt. If she weren't kneeling on the damp, cool ground, she would have thought the planet fell away entirely.

His hands tracked upwards, over her shoulders and neck, to lace into the strands of her hair as he drove the kiss ever deeper. Agata moaned, meeting his caresses and nibbles and licks, rejoicing in this gift. He was so kind, so considerate, so generous to give her this when she needed it most. Next week, she would go back to the city to humble herself for any job she could find. But she would always have this. This small piece of adult love to secret away and treasure forever.

Salty drops flowed in rivulets down her cheeks; not the downpour of anger and frustration, but bittersweet tears of impending loss. The bite of salt tingled on her lips, changing and heightening Tethys's subtle taste. He pulled away, his thumb erasing the slow trickle. "Do not let this woman hurt you, Agata. She is nothing."

If he meant to quench her weeping, this did not help. Agata shook her head, her chest aching with the depth of his misunderstanding. These tears were not for the Terran

Heritage School. These tears were for *him* and him alone. “I... I will miss you, Tethys,” she said with feeling.

Tethys shook his noble head, sending black hair swinging over his thick, brawny shoulders. “Miss me? No need to miss me. You will not go. You will stay here. With me.”

Agata’s heart galloped an irregular thud. Did he say... stay... *here*? With him?

But then, like a falling meteor, reality crashed hard and sudden. Surely he meant she could stay and continue their exchange: her body for his observations. Exchange *Greulixian whore* for *Aelyzaen whore*. Had it all been leading up to this indecent proposition?

Wretchedness consumed her. “Stay here so you can continue to *research* me?” she said, her voice chilled. “Stay here and be your whore?”

With a grunt, Tethys reared back. “No! Why would you say this?”

“I won’t do it,” she said, firming her trembling chin. “I don’t have much pride left, but I do have a little. I won’t be exploited by you or anyone. Never again.”

Tethys’s lips compressed to a tight line. “You believe that I would disrespect you in this way? Do you truly think so little of me?”

Chagrin rushed through her at his question. Of course this strict Aelyzaen would never stoop to something so base and demeaning, for either of them. Hell, *she* had to convince *him*

to commence their little experiments. But, if it wasn't *quid pro quo*, then why would he...

"I won't take your charity," she said, her pulse pounding in her temples as the obvious explanation rushed to the forefront of her mind. She'd seen him outside the communication room, the shock and disgust carved into the hard lines of his face. He didn't want her. He felt sorry for her. "I won't accept a position out of pity."

He paused, tilting his head back a spare inch and sending the swirling mist into furious eddies, like mini crowns atop his noble brow. "*Pity?*" Tethys's massive shoulders deflated in an exasperated exhale. "Agata, be assured, pity is *not* my motivation."

"Then what is?" she asked in a small voice.

His hands clutched and released her arms in a restless pattern, like he feared she'd disappear if he let her go for even a moment. "Listen carefully," Tethys said slowly. "There is no whoring; there is no exploiting. No more experiments. No more observations. You stay to continue your work or you stay and be... mine. That is the choice, and it is yours to make. In my bed or out of it. Either way, you *stay*."

Agata could hardly breathe. "Be *yours?*"

"Agata," he said, his voice gravelly and thick, "for the last week I've spent every waking hour trying to justify convincing you to stay when you longed to leave this place and start your life anew. My guilt for wanting to keep you here, keep you for myself, was immeasurable." He shuddered. This huge, stoic

male *visibly shuddered*. “I stood outside the communication room, with the full weight of your future absence bearing down, and I nearly barged in and interrupted your interview! Agata, it *cleaved me in two*. So, no, this has absolutely nothing to do with *pity*.”

He flashed a sardonic grin. “I told you I did not understand humans, but I understand this.” He lifted her chin with his thumb. “*You* are what is good in humans. You have so much love for Bozena, love for your work, love for your home and your people. You give of it freely, selflessly, and without end.” His fingertips traced the line of her jaw and sifted through her hair to cradle the back of her neck. “Even if your feelings never extend to me in that way, just being proximal to your love for all those other things is enough. You, Agata, have brought love to this cold place, and I find now I cannot go without.”

Agata eked out a disbelieving whimper; her throat constricted so tight she could not speak. He... he wanted not her body, but her *love*?

“Stay,” Tethys whispered in that warm, hot-fudge voice. “You and Bozena. Make your home here, for as long as you like.”

Agata’s mouth opened and closed. Words refused to form, all of her thoughts and feelings a jumbled pile of elation and disbelief. Like her work here, she’d need a lifetime to sort through and catalog each and every one. He offered her work—meaningful work—and security. He offered her a home, a

soft place for herself and Bozena to land, with no strings attached.

And he offered himself. She could have all that *and* him. She could have their daytimes and their nighttimes and all the times in between. And all she had to do was say yes. Say yes, and she could give him the love he craved, which, she could now admit, he already had.

“I’ve lived here for decades,” Tethys continued, stringing together beautiful words that rained down on her like a shower of pearls, “and it never felt like home. Until you and Bozena came. So I ask you, why—in the history of space and time—would you consider my offer one of pity?”

Exhausted, Agata leaned her head against his chest. The truth of his words filled up the empty places inside of her. Somehow, she’d come here in a last-ditch effort to earn a new life, only to stumble into one in the last place she’d ever thought to look.

“I don’t know,” she said, well and truly and astonishingly convinced.

“The answer is,” Tethys purred into her ear, “I wouldn’t.”

Lifting her head, Agata pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You want my love?” she whispered. In response, Tethys wrapped his arms around her back and yanked her against him, so tight the ever-present mist rushed away, ceding the air between their bodies. His lips descended, possessing her own in a rush of passion and devotion. She met him in kind, giving and taking in equal measure as she bunched her

skirts to her waist and wriggled out of her underwear. Pulling away with a gasp, she said, “You already have it.”

Tethys made an inarticulate sound of relief and gratitude. With a gentle shove to his chest, Agata pushed the huge male onto his bottom and climbed on top, aligning their sexes with unerring familiarity. His mouth split into a grin of delight twinned with a grimace of pleasure as she sank down on the proud thickness of him. “You want this too?” she asked, equal parts teasing and confirmation-seeking. She wanted to hear it, wanted to hear every single one of his thoughts and reactions as she rocked against him in slow, grinding waves. Pleasure spiked through her, the deep, delicious stretch of him exquisite, erotic perfection.

“Yes,” he groaned, his deep rumble vibrating in her fingertips as they braced against his chest. “I want you. I want you tonight, and tomorrow night, and the night after that, and every day and night you’ll have me.”

“I’ll have you,” she said, choked with feeling. Agata placed her palm against his cheek, sighing as he turned his face to kiss her wounds. The sudden impassioned movement displaced a swath of his hair. It parted to reveal a single small dark eye, glinting in the spare moonlight. No larger than a small coin, the lidless sphere peered out of the messy strands, as dark and beady as a bird’s eye. The startling size, so petite among the broad planes of his handsome face, made her lean forward for a better view. Slowly, ready to be rebuffed, Agata swept the rest of his hair off his brow to expose three others, arranged like compass coordinates on his forehead. She smiled

slightly at the benign surprise. In her imaginings about what he concealed behind all that hair, she'd never speculated on the presence of more than two.

“Does this hurt you?” she whispered, feeling as if she'd discovered something precious and holy; feeling as if she finally *saw* him, truly and completely. Carefully, she pushed his hair back into place, immediately wanting to protect her discovery from any and all harm.

Tethys's strong, broad hands rose to cup her cheeks and guide her mouth to his. “Your face...” warm breath puffed against her lips, “soothes me more than the *ariseum* ever could, in any light.”

His kiss met her own and Agata sunk into it, freely giving everything she had and taking everything he offered. It wasn't true, what he'd said, and they both knew it. But it didn't matter, the sentiment too poignant to dispute and too beautiful to deny. Agata wove her fingers into his satiny hair, kissed him deeper, and resumed the grinding, sensual climb.

By unspoken agreement, their movements deepened, quickened, grew more frantic and needful as Tethys flexed to meet her stroke for stroke. Around them, the mist swirled and undulated as if it, too, were part of their dance. Cocooning them in a protective layer, it coated her own vision like a wedding veil as Agata rose and fell on his strong, powerful body. With a guttural moan, Tethys reached his climax and Agata followed, her own finish cresting in a dizzying, hurtling peak as she spun out into the vast universe, no longer alone.

Note to the Reader

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Marlowe Roy is a Midwestern transplant living in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. She writes late at night and on weekends and does not want to go for a hike.

Sign up for her newsletter at marloweroy.com and get The Alpha's Revelation, a FREE steamy, strangers-to-lovers short story.

If you crave heart-rending romance with sexy, silver foxes and mature, grown-ass women, check out the AfterEnd Omegaverse series: <https://books2read.com/MarloweRoy>

Then, follow Marlowe's irreverent hot takes on Instagram and Facebook.

Midnight Mist by Michele Mills

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



A MYSTERIOUS MALE MEETS MY GAZE FROM
ACROSS THE DANCE FLOOR.

Mine Corp's annual Dark Moon Costume Ball on Timbur is held this evening and I've managed to snag a ticket. A handsome Margol Xylan male dressed in formal black with a matching black mask has been eyeing me all evening.

I feel a magnetic pull towards this arrogant Illibrium miner I'm trying to avoid.

The clock strikes midnight when he correctly guesses my secret identity and I'm about to be unmasked. Then a dangerous white mist rolls in and the cavern turns dark and foggy. Half of the assembled guests drop to the ground, the other half run screaming. What a mess.

Bayzon's hand clasps mine as he pulls me to safety.

And the moment our bare skin touches, all hell breaks loose.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

NAOMI

Double doors slide open and I gasp with surprise.

A crush of costumed beings and a wall of loud voices hit my sensitive human ears. Bright lights and laughter fill my senses as my gaze darts from one amazing alien outfitted in scary clothing, to the next. At first, there was a quiet main tunnel with a few beings still lined up to enter and then the doors slid open and now...

I knew this event was a big deal but, wow.

The annual Dark Moon Costume Ball on the planet Timbur, a Xylan species outpost, is being held tonight within a giant cavern, inside Timbur's famous Illibrium mine. And therefore, this event is filled with Mine Corp employees dressed in gruesome costume. Wall to wall beings garbed as killers, warriors and bloody assassins or beasts and even more vicious beasts.

A whimper escapes my lips because it's a lot for one small human to take in.

The ceiling is so high in the enormous cavern it's hard to clearly see the edges of rocky outcropping and the strings of lights held above that zig zag everywhere. To help amplify the creepy atmosphere, old-fashioned candelabra are lit and positioned on heavy wooden tables and in dark corners. Strange Xylan music from a live band plays in the background and beings laugh and chat, exposing sharp fangs and flashing claws. Everyone wears dark masks over the top of their faces, leaving holes for their glittering eyes. There's an array of dazzling costumes, but I can still detect their tall forms, long hair and powerful bodies. I've never in my life stood amongst this many Xylan in one place. They're intimidating. I am easily the shortest being in this crowd.

Saxon, my best friend's husband, hands off our three invite chips to security as we enter the costume ball.

"Dancing, eating, games and prizes for the best costume and last mask of the evening," he yells out happily. "This is going to be great. Admin spared no expense for this event," he explains, with a wide, toothy grin. Saxon of Nine is a Margol Xylan miner, dressed tonight as an ancient warrior with a fake 'bloody' sword he holds in one claw. Jeez, he's a fright. He even wears chain mail over his wide chest and a fierce metal helmet on his head, and his long, dark braided hair flows down past his shoulders. There's a black mask over the top half of his face, which makes him scarier.

But I can't help but smile as I watch his exuberance. It's infectious.

The miners on Timbur are basically celebrities in the four sectors, spoken of in awe and hushed tones. The rare Illibrium crystals which cleanly power all the major industrial, military and tech hubs of the four sectors are found only on this one planet and in this one mine. Illibrium crystals specifically “fever” bond amongst certain lines of the Margol Xylan and only allow these chosen beings to carefully extract them from the mines.

The fact that my best friend fell in love with and married one of these famous guys and scored a job for herself on Timbur never ceases to amaze me. Leah was in engineering at university, always knowing she wanted to eventually work at a mine. Meanwhile I studied art and marketing. We were roommates, thrown together in student housing at our first day in university, who became fast friends.

I’ve been allowed a one-month tourist visa to visit my friend, her husband and her young daughter, Argylia. We’ve kept in touch after graduation via daily or weekly vid talks and messages and remained close, but I’m happy the timing is right and I’m able to finally visit this remote location she calls home. And I’m excited to meet her husband and daughter in person.

Saxon’s other claw is positioned on the small of his Bride’s back as he guides Leah inside.

I follow beside them, the hem of my long, black gown swishing against the stone floor. I didn’t have much time to ready for this, but I do love this elegant dress we were able to

fabricate. The top is strapless and accentuates my waist and manages to make my small breasts look bigger than they actually are. My long, dark hair is styled into an updo at the nape of my neck and I'm wearing a bit of makeup. Strappy heels in a gray metallic shine click on the floor. A black mask and long, elbow length green gloves complete the outfit.

I was only cleared to attend after I arrived, so there wasn't much time to create a costume. Also, I'm not much of a dressing in costume kind of person, so I was secretly pleased to have an excuse to not bother. As long as I wore a mask and formal attire, I'd be allowed inside. Although now that I look around, I worry because I'm the only one tonight who didn't dress in costume.

Oops.

"Isn't this ball amazing?" Leah exclaims. My friend is dressed as a ghost hunter and looks both cute and feisty in her tan utility pants, black boots and green jacket. Leah wears a black mask too, like everyone else. Apparently, there's a competition called "Last Mask" that ends right at midnight. The point is to be the only guest still wearing a mask, therefore having managed to remain anonymous, with no one guessing that being's true identity until the stroke of midnight.

Leah flashes a smile at me. She's comfortable and at ease in this crowd of Xylan because she's a human mine tech employed by the mining corporation and knows everyone. This is her home. Saxon's large family is also her family.

Meanwhile, I'm trying to adjust to this new setting. I shake my head. "Um, it's kinda scary," I comment, wringing my hands.

"There's nothing to be scared of, small human," Saxon chuckles. "Humans are allies of the Xylan. We will protect you from harm."

I roll my eyes, because, yes, the Xylan did long ago come to the rescue of the enslaved humans on New Earth, freeing us from our evil captors, the Hurlians for which we are forever grateful. But the Xylan are also well-known for considering humans delicate and unable to care for themselves, which at times can be slightly insulting. The Xylan are noble, but also a bit arrogant and full of themselves. I've heard the Royal Pigment Xylan are even more arrogant than the Margol Xylan who mainly fill this event.

"The Xylan take their Dark Moon festival very seriously," Saxon continues, looking over my head into the crowd. "It's a recreation of an ancient festival from our home planet, Chronos. We enjoy celebrating it on Timbur because this planet happens to have a yearly eclipse similar to our home planet, so we hold it on a different date than Chronos but incorporate many similarities. Be glad we do not still include events from ancient times, such as bloodletting and beheading between Morgols and Royal Pigment during costume disputes."

My eyes widen. "Thank you for the explanation," I squeak.

"No problem, Naomi Sato."

He keeps saying my name that way, with the first and last name together at the same time, as if that's how I should always be addressed.

Before I can correct him, someone boisterously shouts to him in greeting.

"Hook," a deep-voiced, masked Xylan, dressed in a beastly costume greets and slaps Saxon on the shoulder. "That was easy. I'd recognize those deadly fists anywhere."

The Timbur employees call Leah's husband "Hook." She told me he got this nickname because Saxon is notorious for his Mean Right Hook—his ability to slam an opponent to the ground with one massive blow of his closed fist.

"Godsdammit," Saxon yells back, snatching his mask off his face and snarling with frustration. "I barely stepped in the front door and the game is already over for me."

"Come over here and join our crew," the other masked Xylan laughs. "And you'll also have a chance to guess my identity if you like, as well as everyone else."

Saxon looks down at Leah for confirmation.

"Go," she laughs. "Go. I'll find you later. You'll be doing me a favor, giving Naomi and I some time alone together."

Saxon grins at his Bride. "I'll be back," he tells us both. Then he gives Leah a quick kiss and he's gone.

Bloodletting? I mouth. *Beheading?*

Leah bursts out laughing.

“Your husband is scary. They’re all scary.”

She laughs again. “You’re so funny. Don’t worry, Naomi. I’ve lived and worked here on Timbur for two years now. It’s safe. The Xylan look intimidating, and yes sometimes they are arrogant, even the Margol Xylan, but they are kind and treat me well. And they like humans and think we’re charming.”

I push my mask up further on my nose, trying to keep it more firmly in place. “Charming?” I snort. “I’ve ever been described that way in my life. My entire family considers me annoying and has banished me.”

“That’s because your father and brother are jerks and can’t see your value. But I do. Come on,” she bumps against my shoulder and grabs my hand and pulls me along. “We finally have a moment alone. Let’s get this party started.”

I snort and nod in agreement and eagerly move behind her through the crowd.

We reach the open bar and Leah orders something called Flaming Fire Ale that is literally on fire on top. Two different Xylan females, both dressed as shredded pink flowers with layers of puffy fabric, and both already unmasked, laugh and help Leah to blow out the flame.

I ask the attendant for their most popular drink and I’m handed a mug of an alcohol that tastes fruity but is so potent I have to take small sips to avoid falling down drunk in two seconds flat. I turn with the drink cupped in my hands, my lips on the rim and pause because there’s a break in the crowd around me

and my whole body freezes as I gaze at a masked Xylan male, dressed entirely in formal black, wearing dark green gloves.

I lower the mug and stare a beat too long, because holy crap he's so freaking handsome. It's as if there's a spotlight shining on him from above. Wide shoulders, long, braided dark hair with streaks of gold. His skin is an amazing shade of luscious brown. His regal head turns and I swear he's looking right at me.

And then the crowd shifts and I lose sight of him. He's gone as if he never happened.

Who was that guy?

"Seeing you in person is always better than through a screen," my friend gushes from beside me. "And I can hardly wait to introduce you to Saxon's family. I didn't even tell any of Saxon's brothers or their Brides yet that you were coming because I wanted it to be a surprise."

I blink and turn to meet Leah's bright gaze and focus on her comforting features and smile. I clink our glasses together for a mini toast. "I'm happy to see you too," I confirm. "I still miss you as my roommate. Just because you're married doesn't mean we can't sometimes hang out like old times."

"I agree." She gives a throaty laugh. "Being married with children isn't so bad, though. I think you'd like it too." And then leans in and whispers, "And now that I know you're attuned to the Illibrium, I think you should find a job here and move to Timbur too. I want you with me all the time. Timbur needs more humans."

“Are you drunk already?” I laugh. “I’m not moving to this remote mining planet. And anyways, they’d never hire me. What type of job could an artist do here? The only reason I’m on this outpost right now is because the request for my visitation was finally approved and you’re staying in employee housing which offers me a guest suite. This isn’t exactly a vacation hot spot.”

She crooks an eyebrow. “You know you hated your job. And now they fired you for basically no reason.”

I growl because she’s right. I did dislike my job because it had nothing to do with my art or marketing degrees. But it was the only position I could find that actually paid my bills. Then they had to downsize and let me go. And now I’m truly terrified I won’t be able to find anything else that paid as well. I’m basically overeducated with an enormous amount of educational debt. And no family whatsoever to help me out.

“You hate your tiny apartment. Your loser boyfriend broke up with you and moved away. Girl, there’s nothing tying you down anymore to New Earth, you might as well make the jump. I’ve wanted you with me the moment I got this job, but I didn’t know if you were attuned to the Illibrium. But now I know you are, which changes everything.”

I nod, remembering that odd moment when I was ushered off the transporter disk and into a small cubicle where they made sure an Illibrium crystal would retain its glow with me nearby. Luckily the Illibrium crystal glowed brightly in response to my nearness—so they gave me the highest level of clearance,

which mean full access to the mine and this event. I was surprised because I'd never been close to Illibrium before or seen it in real life. I assumed I wouldn't be attuned, but I was. If I wasn't, I still could've visited Leah but my movements would have been restricted to the outpost buildings and the surrounding town, but not allowed to enter the actual mine. This would also have meant I couldn't have been hired for a position with Timbur Mine Corp. All Admin and employees are attuned to the Illibrium crystals, it is a requirement.

“Now that you went through the attunement and it was positive, I can let you know there's a job opening which would be perfect for you.”

I narrow my eyes. “Wait. Is that why you invited me to visit? To tell me to apply for a job and move here?”

She smirks. “Maybe.”

I glance around, discreetly glancing again for that amazing male I glimpsed earlier, but he's still nowhere to be found. I can't keep my mind off him. Those wide shoulders and trim waist need a second glance. “I don't think this idea is going to work,” I mutter. “I can't live here. They wouldn't have a position for someone with my degree.”

“Well, if you don't want the job offer, the signing bonus, or the included free housing, you don't have to stay. But no harm in me trying. Why wouldn't I try my hardest to get my best friend living on the same planet that I do?”

Now she's got my attention. “Housing? Signing bonus? What job offer?”

“Yeah, that spacious guest suite you’re staying in right now is the apartment where you could choose to live if you remain. It would be considered employee housing and part of your contract.”

“I’m not a sellout,” I huff. “I need room to create, not produce crap for corporations.”

She waves a hand. “I know how important your creativity is to you. Mine Corp needs someone to do artistic renderings of the Illibrium and turn that artwork into its own following. They saw your last exhibition on other gems and minerals in the four sectors, so they know your area of expertise is perfect for this. They will even pay off your educational debt. They will pay for your Illibrium artwork and you won’t retain the rights to any of the art that you produce of Illibrium. But you can still freely produce art under your own name of other gems.”

“Dammit. It does sound perfect,” I admit. “More like a collaboration than actual employment, which I would enjoy. *And they will pay off my debt?*”

“Yep.”

I look around. Butterflies take flight in my belly and I try to hide a giddy smile. This could be an opportunity to take my highly reviewed artistic specialty from obscurity into the big time. I’m already itching to message my agent. “But there’s hardly any humans here on this planet,” I try to complain, because I’m comfortable living on New Earth. “Isn’t it weird, being one of the few of your own species?”

“No, it’s not weird,” she explains. “It’s a lot like how it was when we were at university, but better. Tonight, there are a lot of Xylan because this is an event for their culture, but there are actually many other species on the planet, especially in the village. And all of Hook’s brothers are mated to humans too, so I’ve got a group of women who are in the same situation I’m in. I like them. It’s instant family. You’ll like them too.”

“You’re devious.”

“I am,” she laughs, “and proud of it too.”

And then I’m distracted because out of the corner of my eye is the same male I noticed earlier. He’s even more handsome than I remember. And I love the arrogant lift of his chin.

He’s also standing alone.

“Do you see that male?” I point and question. “Who is that masked man?”

Two

NAOMI

Leah turns to look but doesn't catch sight of him. The mysterious male has disappeared again behind a wall of costumed beings. "Who are you even talking about?" she questions, taking another sip of her drink. "You know that all the Xylan here are masked, right?"

I laugh, feeling silly, not ready to admit instant attraction towards a stranger I've never met and only seen across the dance floor. But I'm strangely disturbed to lose sight of him. A feeling of unease that he's gone. "I've seen him twice now. He's dressed like me, all in black, with a mask and no costume. It means I'm not the only one here without a costume. But he's disappeared again. He was there a moment ago and gone again. Darn it."

Leah shrugs, obviously unimpressed.

Then I focus again on what just happened—me being offered an amazing job on Timbur and the ability to move and live and work near my best friend. Leaving New Earth now sounds like

a great idea. And I grab Leah tight and give her a big hug because I can't stop myself.

"Ooof," she exclaims and laughs.

She's such a lovely human being. We both know what it's like, trying to make our way through life on our own through hard work with zero family. "I'm going to pursue this opportunity," I promise. "And thank you for looking out for me. I'm lucky to have such a good friend."

"Oh, Naomi, I'm lucky to have *you*. We've been a great team since those first days at school. Nothing has changed."

I wipe at the tears welling up and let her go, trying to smile and look normal. "Okay," I sniff, "back to the party."

"Party," she agrees.

We click our glasses together in another mini toast and I look around again at the nearby group of Xylan dressed as bloody ghosts. "Maybe the fruity drink is working on me because I feel much more comfortable. These Xylan aren't scaring me like they did when I first walked in. In fact, I want to stay until midnight to see if I can win that grand prize."

"Yeah, that's a good goal. There are already Xylan not wearing masks. The being left with a mask on at midnight wins the grand prize. You can join in on the game. All that matters is that you have a mask. And you look so beautiful tonight. I love your hair up like that and that's a gorgeous gown."

"Oh thanks. And you look great too," I gush. "I love that ghost hunter costume and the matching one you made for Argylia

was precious.”

“Thanks. You should’ve seen all the work I did ahead of time to get our costumes just right. But it was worth it, she loved it.”

I shake my head. “I thought in university you were all business and science, all the way. You never used to talk much of being a mom.”

Her lips twitch. “I met the right partner and started the family I’d always secretly wanted but wasn’t sure was going to happen. And working on this mine was always my dream job. I feel so freaking lucky, I have to pinch myself because how can this life be real? But there was always something missing about living here and that was...you.”

“And now you’re getting me excited about moving here.”

“Really, I think you’ll like it. It’ll be fun having you here so you can be Argylia’s aunt.”

“I didn’t know I loved babies so much until I learned my best friend was pregnant and I was going to be an aunt. I wouldn’t have even minded if it turned out I wasn’t attuned, because I could’ve stayed behind to baby sit Argylia for you. She’s getting so big now.”

“Isn’t she? No worries. J’luik, our Creekan neighbor is wonderful with her and an amazing babysitter. And your attendance at the Dark Moon Costume Ball is a perfect way for you to meet everyone. And since we’re a tight knit community I know they’ll be happy to meet you.”

I tug at my long green gloves. “Remind me why I have to wear these?”

“Those are the gloves of the unmated. If you take those off, there’s a chance you’ll find yourself instantly married and pregnant.”

“What?” I gasp. “That’s crazy. Of course that won’t happen.”

My friend shrugs and takes another sip of fire ale. “I thought so too, but my glove fell off the first day I arrived. I held onto Saxon’s bare hand while we were stuck in a broken elevator and then mere hours later I was already pregnant and he was my husband.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’ve got to be lying. I’ve heard that story before and always thought you were skipping a step.”

“No, I promise, all true. Our bare hands clasped and when our skin touched I felt a spark of energy. And Saxon became enflamed.”

I grimace. “Enflamed?”

She winks at me. “It means exactly what you think.”

I wag my eyebrows. “Right there in the elevator?”

“No,” she laughs. “We managed to wait until we got back to the holosuite. But not everyone has that kind of self-control.” She leans in close and whispers. “Some have to put out that heat right away with the claiming.”

“Oh, I remember you telling me all about that wild claiming.” I look around at the other males in the vicinity. “This place is

crazy.”

“Don’t worry,” she laughs again. “It’s perfectly fine. If you don’t want to end up with any attachments tonight all you need to do is leave those gloves on the whole time you’re here and you will be fine. That way there will be no accidental mating match.”

“Are you trying to get me married?”

“Is that so bad?”

“Maybe not,” I admit. “I just turned twenty-six and I’m single again. I might be ready for something real in my life.”

“Well, there are a lot of unmated Xylan miners, or males of other species on this planet. I know you’ve only dated human men, but I’ve learned that looking for a husband off planet and of a different species isn’t such a bad idea. You never know where you’re going to meet your partner.”

I place my hands on my hips. “You want me to marry one of Saxon’s brothers?”

She claps her hands with excitement. “That would be great. Saxon is one of nine brothers. Bayzon, Texon, Maxon and Cayzor remain unmated. But Xylan only mate with a partner they find as a match by clasping hands. They perform a formal mating ceremony where they take off their gloves and clasp, to see if they are compatible by touching bare skin to skin. Most of those ceremonies end with the two Xylan being unmatched. So the chances aren’t great that you’ll be compatible with any

of Saxon's brothers. But again, no harm in bringing you here to see if one of them is a match with you."

"Are all of his brothers here at the ball tonight?" I question.

"Yes, the fever brothers crew are all here in the crowd somewhere. And they all have nick names too."

"You like them? I thought you said before that his brothers were intrusive and annoying."

She laughs. "Yes, I've complained. Sometimes amongst such a large family it's hard to find enough privacy, but we live in a separate apartment so it's okay. I like all of them. You'll like Bayzon. His nickname is Chief. I've always secretly thought you two would be a great match, but I never said anything because again, I didn't know if you were attuned to the Illibrium and without that you would've only been allowed to remain on this planet as a guest with the one-month visa. Plus, in order to become a Bride of a miner you have to accept living on Timbur for the rest of your life and I wasn't sure if that's your thing. I mean yes, you're thinking of taking a job here, but living here for the rest of your life and having half-Xylan babies is a whole other decision. Oh, I think I see Heavy and his Bride, Jada. Let's go, you'll love meeting them."

"Wait, why do you think I'd be a good match with Bayzon?"

"Oh, because—" Then Leah's tablet lights up. She stops and takes it out of her pocket, taps the screen and gasps with worry. "Oh no. I need to get back home. There's something

wrong with Argylia. It sounds like her stomach is upset. I have to check on her.”

“Oh no. Do you want me to come with you?”

She looks around then back at her screen. “No, stay. I don’t want to ruin your evening. It doesn’t sound like an emergency, but I need to go back to the apartment for a minute. I’m messaging Saxon too, letting him know I’m checking in on her. We decided for this event it was my turn to be the one on call.”

“You’re sure you don’t want company?”

“No. I don’t want you to miss any of the fun. I come to this ball every year, but this is your first time. I’ll be right back. Jump in and start playing the unmasking game. You’ve got a great shot at winning the grand prize tonight because of your secret weapon—no one knows who you are because you just arrived.”

“Ooh, that’s true. What do I win?”

“An all-expenses paid, first class space liner cruise of the Nebula.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“Right? You need to start letting other beings question you, so they know you are joining in the competition. Oh look, the buffet just opened. Stand in line and get something to eat. I won’t be gone long. Start playing the game. Let them try to ask you who you are. And you have to try and guess who they

are too, so you're playing for real. You've got your tablet, right?"

I nod and pat my pocket.

"Good, I should be right back. I'll keep in touch. Message me if you need anything."

And then she's gone.

I stand alone for a moment and tug on my green gloves making sure they're firmly affixed before I mingle because they're a little loose and I'd hate for them to fall off causing me to touch someone's hand and start something weird.

The crowd moves and the mysterious male appears again from across the dance floor. My heart flutters double time and I bite my lip. I can't keep my eyes off him. His back is turned and he's being questioned by two other males in costume.

Then the other males walk away. He turns, and our eyes meet. He shifts on his legs and boldly watches me too.

Warmth spreads in my chest at his perusal. And I shift on my feet, trying to relieve the heat between my thighs. What is wrong with me? I've never reacted this strongly to a man before, especially a stranger. This is crazy. And normally I never approach a man to make the first move because I'm notoriously shy, but in this instance I'm suddenly bold, even though he might very well be another miner and is obviously Margol Xylan. And Leah was right, I've never dated anyone other than a human. When we were at university my

boyfriends happened to always be human. This is new and different and yet feels *right*.

I have to meet him.

I take a step forward, as if pulled by a magnet, ready to approach and introduce myself. Maybe start a conversation by remarking on our identical attire. He could be the very first male I try to unmask.

Before I can get close a Xylan female wearing green gloves and a bright costume walks up and asks the male a question I can't hear. I continue to approach and watch as he frowns and gives her a gruff response. The female covers her mouth, visibly upset, and runs away, tears welling up in her eyes.

I stop in my tracks. Uh oh.

My mind flashes to all the times my last boyfriend said something biting, or unkind. The red flags I should've noticed from the way he treated others.

Is the male I've been admiring an asshole, too?

Been there, done that. Made that mistake already and not going down that road again. Maybe I should wait for Leah to return and introduce me to Saxon's brother, Bayzon? The one who she thinks is right for me. Because it's looking like my own instincts aren't to be trusted.

Yeah. I'll wait.

I've got the hots for this guy, but I also have a level-headed mind that can override that stupid desire.

I turn my back, walk the other way, and disappear into the crowd.

Three

BAYZON

I see her again out of the corner of my eye.

The dazzling human female I've been boldly watching whenever I catch her lovely form amidst the crowds in this crazy gathering. She wears the gloves of the unmated.

She's watching me too. I straighten and meet her gaze, ready to walk over and greet her to find out more.

But a costumed female approaches and blocks my path. A low growl rumbles in my chest because I've tangled with this particular female many times over the years. I shouldn't know who she is at this ball, considering her elaborate costume and mask, but she's the same female I scented long ago, when we were both barely of age, and learned we were not future mates. I've never once asked her to test, but she questions me whenever she has the opportunity. For some unknown reason, my denial of testing is difficult for her to process.

"Maxon?" she guesses inaccurately on purpose. But she knows who I am. The female crosses her arms. "Will you test mating

compatibility in honor of the Dark Moon?” she questions.

A flurry of longer, harsher denials float through my mind, but instead, I simply offer a one-word denial. “No,” I respond. The both of us know it is against the Scales of Xylan Law for her to continuously ask like me this after my initial denial years ago. I could, in fact, complain to the peacekeepers about this abuse if I chose, but I don’t. I’m not even on the Xylan mating database because I don’t want to be asked for compatibility testing.

“But...”

“Female, this is enough. You have my answer. You’ve always had my answer. You need to ask other males for testing because I am a dead end. It is not happening.”

She cries as if I said something mean and darts away, tears in her eyes.

I sigh. Another reason why I don’t go out often. I look up and find the human female who I wanted to meet, has now disappeared in the crowd again and is nowhere to be found.

Dammit.

“I hate this ball,” I mutter under my breath.

“We know you hate it,” my brother Trunk grunts as he walks up. “You’ve complained about having to dress up and come here every year since you came of age. But you’re here now and you’re staying. Stop complaining and try to enjoy yourself. The dancing will start soon and this is your favorite part. Once you start dancing, you always enjoy yourself.”

I scan the crowd and I'm annoyed that I still can't find that female again. Maybe she has left. I cross my arms. "I'm going home."

"Chief, you're being ridiculous."

"I've done my job. I made sure all of you are here. I've been seen. Now I can go."

My other brother approaches our group. "No," Cannibal growls. "The buffet just opened. Stay and I'll get you some food. It will make you feel better."

He's gone before I can answer and a low growl rumbles in my chest. Cannibal thinks everything can be fixed with food. But my actual problem is that I'm an unmated male who never asks other females to test mating compatibility and they are disgruntled. I am recently deemed to have more importance. They never used to bother me like this. When the fever brothers were banished to the worst housing on the planet and the worst shift, I was left alone and mainly unwanted. But recently, now that my crew is first in production, they all seem to think I'm worthy again.

"They all want to test mating compatibility," I complain. "And when I go out like this, they try to approach. When I'm at work or at home, I can ward it off and live in peace."

"Yes, it's such a terrible burden to be in demand as a future mate by all the unmated females on Timbur," my youngest brother, Maxon grumbles with heavy sarcasm because, as the youngest, he gets asked for testing the least.

That's when I see her again.

My breath catches in my throat and my chest expands, trying to catch her scent, even from this distance. This reaction is unusual. I finger my personal crystal in my pocket, trying to remain calm.

"You still leaving?" Maxon questions.

"No."

My whole life I've never given another female a second look, never wondered what it would be like to mate. My position as leader of our mining crew keeps me busy. And I've been through so much recently, with the mysterious death of my parents and the subsequent trauma of my oldest brother being banished, as well as my crew being targeted. My life holds much responsibility and there's no time to long for a mate or offspring. Also, long ago I'd already scented all the unmated females living on Timbur and I know that none of them are my future mate. And because I can't leave Timbur and live elsewhere due to my fever bond to my personal crystal and my position as an Illibrium miner—I assumed I would remain unmated.

And yet tonight, for the first time in my life, I continue to gaze at this one particular female. Drawn to the curve of her chest and the sway of her hips.

Why?

I know she's a human female because of her shorter, fragile stature. She lacks pigment, claws, or fangs, just like the other

human females in my family line. And she is dressed like me, without an actual costume, with only formal clothing and the requisite mask that covers her face. Her exotic human hair is long and dark as the hair of a Royal Pigment Xylan and is held up at the base of her delicate neck. She is lacking color more than any other human I've met. If she'd been born on Chronos, she would've been thrown into the wildlands as an infant, so that nature could reclaim its mistake.

But I enjoy the colorless glow of her soft skin. And the juxtaposition of that royal pigment hair and the lack of pigment on her skin, I find attractive.

She walks in the opposite direction, towards the buffet.

I try to follow, but another male approaches and stops to speak with her. Yet another growl rumbles in my chest. What is this? Why do I churn with agitation? Why do I care who she speaks with? The male tries to guess her identity. His shoulders droop at her negative response.

She turns away from him and continues on her way.

I thought I knew all the humans on Timbur. A few of my brothers are mated and all of them have chosen humans as Brides. I'm now highly familiar with this odd species and I've learned I enjoy humans. In fact, we are teased often by the other mining crews and staff as "human-lovers." And it's probably true, especially since I'm right now staring at this female for far too long. I can't even make out her exact features, but this doesn't matter. All I want is to get closer and introduce myself.

“Who is that human female?” I ask when Cannibal passes by me with plates of food.

He glances across the room and examines her with disinterest. “I don’t know,” he shrugs. “I’ve never seen her before. And the mask doesn’t help matters. That’s odd, I thought I knew all the humans on Tarvos.”

I snort in agreement.

Cannibal leaves a plate for me at a nearby table and is gone.

Maxon appears again at my side. “Maybe she just arrived on Timbur?” he offers. “I can question her for you.”

I growl and bare my fangs in response.

My brother gives me a look of surprise. “What the hells is wrong with you?”

“I don’t want you looking at her either,” I snarl.

“Why?”

I glance down at his green gloves.

“Uh oh. Is another human joining our family?” he sighs. “We really are human-lovers, aren’t we? I’ll go warn Trunk and Scar to stay away.” And then he’s gone.

Before I can stride across the room and finally speak to this human, a group of costumed females approach and block my path.

Now I’m getting angry. Why am I constantly thwarted in my attempt to simply speak to the human? Why is this so difficult?

“Are you Bayzon?” one boldly questions, without preamble. She pokes a finger at my chest. “I discovered who you are, so you need to take off your mask.”

I look down and meet her gaze. “I’m not playing this game,” I growl. And I leave the damn mask on and try to step around them and continue on my way. I know these females too, and they are the exact group who seems the most disgruntled over “the fever brother’s obsession with humans.”

They surround me in a semi-circle, still blocking my path. “Cheater.”

One of them places a hand on her hip. “We know you can scent us and that’s why you never test.”

“But it’s not fair,” another cries. “How do the fever brothers know for certain that they are right?”

“And why do all of you end up with human mates?”

“You always cheat, don’t you?” another female snarls.

A deep sigh escapes my lips. And then I find myself wishing that I was mated, just so this would end. No more scenting of unmated females or wearing special gloves. Having to decline testings. Normally, etiquette requires Xylan to agree to testings that are set up between houses and lines. But my parents are both dead and I have the rare ability to scent my mate prior to clasping, so I consider these rules null and void. This doesn’t mean that others don’t find me offensive.

But I have had enough. This ends now.

“Females,” I growl. “I have the utmost respect for all of you, but if you do not all step aside and go your own way and stop this harassment, I will immediately report all of you to the peacekeepers and the mating commission for your constant campaign of abuse. I am not joking.”

Their eyes widen because I’ve never spoken this way to any of them before. And maybe this is why it continues. This is something I needed to do long ago.

They all squeak with surprise and step back. Some of them continue to grumble with anger but they step back too. All of them turn their backs on me and walk away.

And then I look toward my chosen female again and this time I see she’s speaking to a costumed demon I recognize.

What is this?

Four

NAOMI

A tall male wearing green gloves approaches me at the buffet table, dressed in costume as a menacing demon.

Lovely. I take a step back.

“We’re not that scary,” he chuckles. “Have you met the Hyrrokin species yet? They are frightening demons. The great houses of Chronos are truly brutal, but here on Timbur we are mainly Margol Xylan who harvest and tend to the Illibrium crystals.”

I nod, not really believing.

“Do you want to guess who I am? And then I will try and guess who you are,” he questions.

I try to join in the game and remember the names of Saxon’s brothers, because they’re basically the only names I know.

“Um...are you Bayzon?”

He throws back his head and laughs. “No, but that was a good guess. My turn, are you a human?”

“Yes, I am human,” I admit, feeling strangely comfortable around this male, as if we’re already friends. “But that’s only half the battle. You know my species but not my name.”

“Correct. Well, neither of us got as far as getting the other to remove a mask but at least we met and...” Then his tablet flashes and he takes it out of a pocket and reads the message. He glances over his shoulder and then back at me. “I’ve got to go. It was nice talking to you, female. I’m sure we’ll get to know each other better in the future. Welcome to the family.” And then he gives me a wink and he’s gone.

‘Welcome to the family?’ What was that about?

I glance around again, searching for a sighting of the male in black. The one I said I wasn’t going to approach. I told myself not to do this anymore. He’s not for me. The last thing I need is a boyfriend who thinks of himself first in all instances, treats me with disrespect and gaslights me into thinking this is normal behavior. But I continue to try and monitor his location.

Reminder to self—he’s probably an asshole.

Let it go.

The tempo of the music changes to a different type—dark music with heavy drumbeats. My foot taps on the floor to the addictive beat. More candelabras are lit and hang from the ceiling. The atmosphere is still spooky, but now it’s been elevated to shadowy elegance. The black, gleaming dance floor clears in the center of the room and my chest warms

because I love dancing. My fingers snap to the beat, eager to get moving. This party is finally turning fun.

I grab a plate, trying to find snacks at the buffet appropriate for human tastes so I have plenty of energy for the dancing. Costumed Xylan females talk loudly next to me in line, regaling angsty stories of mating compatibility tests gone wrong. None of them are in masks anymore. I lean in because gossip is always interesting, no matter the species or planet. Also, I think I hear names of some Xylan I recognize.

“Did you see that they’re all here?” one of them grouses. “All four of the unmated fever brothers are here and they aren’t going to dance with any of us in this group. I’ve seen them dance with some other Xylan females but not with us? Why?”

I take a step closer because these females are talking about Saxon’s brothers.

“Those fever brothers are so full of themselves.”

“I can’t believe what Bayzon said to us earlier. The nerve.”

“I’ve asked Bayzon twice a year, for the last ten years to perform the mating compatibility ceremony with me and he always says no,” a female cries out. “It’s not fair.”

They’re all quiet for a beat and then someone offers, “You know none of those fever brothers clasp hands. They never ever perform the mating ritual and then they always end up with human brides. Only human brides. It’s weird.”

“I think it’s sick. Why would they want to only mate with humans?”

“Yes, it’s gross,” another agrees.

“And Bayzon of Thirty-Six is the worst. Look at him right now, not even bothering to dress properly for the Dark Moon Costume Ball. He’s only dressed in formal attire and a simple mask. Who is he kidding? We all know it’s him because he’s the only one who doesn’t bother to wear a costume. Like he’s too good for the rest of us.”

“Why is Bayzon their crew leader? Why? He’s no leader.”

“I bet they’re all waiting to meet humans and take them as mates, that’s why they won’t test mating compatibility with a female of their own species.”

“They’re human-lovers,” one of them hisses. “All of them.”

And then one of the females glances over at me and her eyes widen because she knows I heard everything.

I give a rueful smile in return, not even trying to hide my eavesdropping.

She bites her lip and elbows the others.

“What?” one of them growls.

And then they all look over at me, but just sniff the air, lift their chins and guide their group away from me. They leave the buffet line. No excuses or apologies, just disappearing in the crowd.

I chuckle and shake my head. Well, I don’t know whether to believe them or not, but they sure made Saxon’s brother, Bayzon, sound terrible. Huh.

Then I turn and see the male in black again. The one I'm supposed to be avoiding. He and I are the only ones in this entire ball not dressed in costume. He's walking towards me and why does my breath quicken? There's literally a flutter of butterflies in my stomach. Again. I see him and there's that pulse of heat between my thighs. His black jacket is perfectly fitted as are his slacks, to show off his powerful, muscular body while still remaining just a little bit loose.

He's sex on a stick.

The puzzle pieces all fit together to make a stunning connection. This mysterious male I've been noticing all evening is in fact Saxon's brother.

This is who those females were referring to, this male they think is snooty and arrogant. The male is black, with no costume is Bayzon—the male Leah wanted me to meet, who she thinks is right for me? He looks like he could give a shit about being here. I have a good excuse for not being in costume, but what is his excuse?

What was Leah thinking?

I've watched him cause one female to cry and listened to a whole group of females complain about his actions. This doesn't bode well.

'Sex on a stick' isn't good for me. This is why the multi-gods invented dildos.

I frown at him and turn away, hoping he'll get the message.

Yes, the sexual energy I feel for this man is off the charts. He must feel it too since he's been gazing at me so intently. There's something there between us, but I need to let it go. My body might want this male above all others, but my mind and heart need to remain sane and make good choices.

A tall female approaches and looks me up and down. "You're the new female med tech, Rylan Bander?"

"No."

"Dammit," she snarls.

And then I'm being asked again and again by one Xylan after another. I'm amongst the last beings still wearing a mask tonight and they want the honor of unmasking someone difficult to discover.

Soon I'm having a great time, trying to get to know the other guests as they question me, trying to forget about that mysterious masked Xylan. Focusing on meeting others and enjoying the game. I immediately like these Xylan, which is good considering I'm hoping to take a job here. They are much, much taller and more powerful than me (even the females) but they treat me with care. I laugh at their jokes and enjoy the variety of costumes. Normally I'd be freaked out at a party where I don't know anyone, but they make me feel instantly included. It's nice.

And Leah is right. I think I'm going to win the grand prize tonight. The fact that I just arrived gives me an edge. My competitive instincts kick in hard. They know my species, but they don't know my name.

The grand prize tonight will go to the last being who remains masked at midnight.

And that person is going to be me.

Because I've always wanted to go on a space liner cruise of the Nebula.

A message from Leah blinks on my tablet. I take it out of my pocket and look down. *Sorry, I'm still at home. It's taking much longer than I thought.*

I tap a quick response. *How is Argylia?*

She's having an allergic reaction to something she ate. I've got her at the med lab now. It's so weird. We didn't even know she had any allergies. Saxon is here with me now too.

Oh no.

Don't worry, it sounds worse than it is. She'll be fine and in her own bed tonight, but we won't be returning to the party. But I want you to stay. Win that grand prize at midnight! Are you okay there? Are you having fun? Can you stay or do you need a reason to leave?

I look around, catching sight of Bayzon again out of the corner of my eye. Lurking but not approaching. Not talking to anyone else and sipping a drink. Remaining handsome in an antisocial, anti-hero kind of way.

I'm good. This is fun. I'll stay. I'm on track to win this whole thing. Only about ten of us still have masks on. Also, the dancing just started.

You go girl. And I know how much you love dancing. Have fun!

Give Argylia a kiss for me.

Will do.

I tuck the tablet into my pocket. Couples step onto the dance floor. I remain on the edge and watch as the dancing begins, eager to learn how the Xylan dance and to try and join in. I chat with other nearby Xylan, who do their best to explain the moves to me. This species seems to prefer prescribed dances with formal patterns. Usually it's male and female pairings, but not exclusively because some appear to be same sex. All the couples move together, near each other and usually hold hands, following the same steps.

I grab a flute of a bubbly alcoholic drink off a passing tray and take a few sips, trying to extinguish any last vestiges of reticence. Then I watch two dances the whole way through from beginning to end, swaying to the music, examining their foot work and movements before finally deciding I can do this too.

“Would you like to learn how to dance?” a nearby male questions. “You look like you're enjoying the music.” He's dressed all in white, like a professional chef from a fancy restaurant on Omega 9. But he isn't wearing a mask any longer and I don't recognize him because I don't know that many beings at this ball. But I see that he glances back at Bayzon, who is now quietly standing on the opposite side of

the dance floor from me. It's obvious these two know each other. Interesting.

The male isn't wearing gloves, letting me know he's mated.

"Yes," I answer, grateful for the opportunity to get started. "I would love to learn how to properly dance to Xylan music. It looks fun and I love to dance."

He smiles. "Good. My name is Gorzan, but my crew calls me Cannibal. Let's go." Then he takes my gloved hand and pulls me onto the floor and in moments we're moving together fast in the midst of a lively dance. It starts swiftly and I'm laughing as he holds my arms tight and swings me around. But then we're moving together, slower, next to dozens of other couples moving to the beat in neat rows. It's wonderful.

"This is so much fun," I gasp. "I can keep doing this all night."

"I have a brother who also normally enjoys dancing, but tonight is not partaking," he tells me. "It's a sad state of affairs. I try to offer him delicious dishes of food to keep him happy but he's still disgruntled."

I crook an eyebrow as we move. "Are you going to ask your one question about my mask and try to discover my identity?"

"Yes, but really I'm asking this question for someone else."

I shrug. "This is acceptable."

And then we separate for a moment and walk around in a pattern that involves another nearby couple. In moments we are face to face again.

“Are you here visiting as a relative of one of the human females who is already mated to a fever brother?” he questions.

“No,” I answer truthfully. “Can I ask a question about your identity even though your mask is gone?”

“Of course.”

“Are you a chef or a miner?” I ask.

“A miner,” he laughs.

“Are you part of the fever brother crew?”

“Ah that’s two questions. Not fair.” Then he glances toward the edge of the crowd surrounding the dance floor. “And I think I have to stop,” he says, right as the dance slows down.

“Why?”

“Because someone’s getting uneasy at us together.”

“Who?”

He grins. “I think we both know the answer to that one.”

Our dance ends and this male bows over my hand. “It was nice meeting you, female,” he says. “I’m sure we will know each other more later. I already have plans on what dishes to cook for you later. Welcome to the family.”

My eyes widen because that’s the second male that has told me that this evening.

He chuckles and walks away.

In moments I'm easily whisked onto the dance floor again by another male dressed as a bloody warrior because I'm addicted to the beat of the music.

"Are you a transportation driver in the main town?" the new male questions.

"Nope." That was easy.

The dance ends and I'm handed off to someone else. The next partner is a female who asks a question, trying to figure out my identity. She's wrong, as usual. That dance ends too and I'm immediately handed off to another partner. This happens so many times in a row the faces become a blur. And none of them can correctly guess my identity. And each dance is thrilling and I'm getting better at keeping time and following the footwork.

And now there are only three of us still wearing masks. The large mechanical clock on the wall lets me know midnight is fast approaching.

A male with very long fangs and a deep voice dances with me. "You are a delightful human to dance and speak with, and I appreciate the opportunity to drive Chief crazy. He's getting angrier by the minute. Thank you and welcome to Timbur."

He walks away and that's when I realize Bayzon really does look angry. That male hasn't asked anyone to dance. His arms remain crossed and he still wears a mask. Underneath is a look of dour unsmiling, pride and arrogance.

Hmm.

I'm asked again to dance, but I'm distracted because I see one lone Xylan female, dressed as a multi god nun, looking at the moving pairs on the floor, tapping her foot, obviously wanting to dance too. It hurts me when I see someone accidentally left out, because I know what it feels like to want to dance but needing a partner. "Thank you for asking but I don't feel well," I tell him. "I'm going to have to sit this one out, but I have someone else for you to dance with." I pull him over to where the other female waits. He smiles brightly and she does too. And then they take each other's gloved hands and move onto the floor and join the dancing.

This works out much better because I was ready for a short break. It's me alone on the side of the dance floor and the pairs are swirling and swirling to the music and suddenly I realize a presence next to me.

I'm standing next to Bayzon.

I take a sharp breath. How did this happen?

Five

BAYZON

“What is wrong female?”

Naomi Sato, the female I want close so very badly, lifts her perfect chin. “Nothing is wrong. I was simply surprised to see you standing so close.”

She is so very beautiful and self-possessed. I love the sound of her lovely accent when she speaks my language. I can’t keep my eyes off her. I couldn’t stay away any longer on the side of the dance floor and watch the human I want being held by other males as they swirl and step to the beat. I want to be the one who shows her how to move to Xylan dance.

This distance from her is causing actual physical pain. Random growls rumble in my chest. The more time this human female is in my vicinity, the more I am certain she’s my future mate. Why else would she affect me this way? I haven’t fully scented her yet, but I am already ninety-nine percent certain she will one day become my Bride.

“I’ve been watching you all evening,” I admit, because her potent arousal for me fills the air between us, letting me confirm our feelings are mutual. Scar told me that he saw this particular human originally enter the ball alongside our brother, Hook. I messaged Hook while I watched her dance and he told me everything about her identity. “I was gathering intel and giving you the space you required after I tried more than once to introduce myself. But you turned and walked away. Is it proper for me to speak to you now or does this make you uncomfortable? If so, I will depart.”

She shrugs. “It’s true that we need to talk.”

“Did I do something wrong to cause such a reaction? If so, I would like to understand what I did to make it right.”

“Bayzon, I’ve been watching you too. In fact, I witnessed the female you made cry. And I overheard a group of disgruntled females at the buffet complain that you treat them unfairly. I’ve watched you stand alone and arrogant and angry, not playing the masking game. And you’ve never graciously danced with anyone all evening. All of this made me question getting to know you. I wonder if you’re not a very nice being and in fact someone to stay away from.”

“Oh hells. I can explain. There are reasons for my behavior that might make sense to you.”

“You hate dancing?”

“I’m not much into dressing in costume, but I do enjoy Xylan dancing and music and I always participate. But this evening I

didn't want to touch anyone but you. I waited to dance until you became available."

Naomi holds up her green, gloved hand, the fabric identical to mine. "But you're not really touching anyone through two layers of fabric."

"My body only wants *you* that close. The touch of another female right now, even through a barrier sounds abhorrent."

Her eyes widen. "Me? You only want to touch me?"

"You. Only your hand in mine is acceptable."

"Do you realize that two different males, both of whom are part of the fever brothers crew, have danced with me this evening and welcomed me into your family line?"

I can't help but smile.

"And someone else admitted he loved dancing with me simply to make you angry. Why would it make you angry to see me dance with him?"

My fangs immediately elongate. "I don't like anyone else touching you but me," I growl. "The other crews need to stay away."

She takes a step back.

I also scent fear from this female, which is wrong. My future mate must never be frightened of me. I decide to put all my intentions on the line and tell her the truth of the situation. "Female, I suspect you might be my future Bride. This is causing me to behave in ways that aren't normal for me."

She's quiet for a moment, then looks up at me again. "I've been told by someone close to me that you and I might be right for each other, but I don't want to make a mistake and become close to someone who won't treat me with kindness and respect. Especially since," –she waves a hand up and down at me— "you're so big and powerful compared to me. This becomes more important."

I clench my jaw and give a curt nod of understanding. "You are a human who needs to be choosy for her own safety. But understand that I am the leader of my crew, which means I am responsible for our work performance as well as our business ethics. You are safe with me as your protector."

An eyebrow crooks over her mask. "I look small compared to your species, but this does not mean that I'm weak in any way."

The more time I spend with this female, the more I like her.

The delicate scent of her arousal still wafts in the air. Other species pleasure mate, which the Xylan consider odd and slightly disgusting behavior, but it is common. All Xylan learn to accept that indications of desire might happen from other beings in the four sectors they speak to, work with, or befriend. We always ignore these odd signals and carry on as usual. But this time I remain thrilled and honored that this gorgeous human wants to pleasure mate with me. For the first time in my life, I wish I could comply.

"Give me another chance," I request. "For too long tonight I stood by the side, just watching, stunned and in fact a little

scared to approach a female that affected me so greatly. I've been showing you my worst, disordered side of my personality this evening. But let me convince you with my words and actions that we can make sense together."

My female visibly softens and nods in agreement. She takes a step closer. "It's true that the actions I saw earlier, and the conversation I overheard from those females could be easily misunderstood or untrue. And I can understand everything else you said about wanting only my touch because to be truthful, I feel the same way about you too. I can touch other Xylan to dance, but I really have wished to dance with you too. And I'd like to get to know you better to see if there's something more there."

"Let's start over," I announce. And then I try to change the subject to show I can act normal. "I take it you are enjoying this costume party?"

"Yes," she laughs. "I am. More than I thought I would. I did not want to arrive in costume. I mean, one thing you and I have in common is that neither of us are good at dressing up."

My lips twitch. "I did notice that about you early on. I think we are the only two at the ball who aren't in costume this evening."

"Are you going to ask your one question to try and take my mask?" She looks around. "There were three of us still masked but now my competition has narrowed and it's only you and I left wearing masks this evening." She points at the official countdown clock. "There's only ten minutes now until

midnight and one of us will be the last mask of the evening. I heard last year no one won the grand prize because the final Xylan still wearing a mask, was unmasked just moments before midnight and then no one won. They are very serious about needing to keep this mask on exactly when the clock strikes midnight.”

A growl rumbles in my chest. “I don’t care about the game.”

She crosses her arms. “Well, I do care about this game and I plan on winning. One of us is going to win the grand prize and I want it to be me.”

I grin, enjoying her competitive nature. My own aggressive focus on the fever brothers being the highest producing crew in Mine Corp history is legendary. “I meant the grand prize is not important to *me*. I only wear this mask to gain anonymity. But if the prize is important to you, then it is important to me that you win. You deserve to win because you really are the last mask.”

“I don’t understand. You said you weren’t playing the game, but now you are? You’re the last Xylan questioning me tonight. Everyone who was interested has already questioned me. Bayzon, you’re the only one left.”

“Perfect. That means you’ve already won because you know my name, so we’re done.” I take off my mask and shove it in my pocket. “Yes, I am indeed Bayzon of Thirty-Six, the crew leader of the fever brothers.”

A lovely smile widens across her features. “It’s nice to meet you, Bayzon. My name is Naomi Sato. And you’re the most

handsome male I've ever encountered.”

“We'll get your vision checked later,” I chuckle.

The prior dance ends and the last song begins, signaling the close of the evening. Voices ring out around us in a loud cheer. The crowd grows ever more raucous. A crush of bodies rush for the floor, to partake in the final dance. Many exhausted Xylan have already left for home and their beds. Those of us that remain are the ones who enjoy the finality of the countdown clock and watching the dark side of the moon along with the announcement of the grand prize winner. Naomi is the only being in the room left wearing a mask. Half of the Xylan around me have stripped off their costumes now too, in order to more easily dance.

I hold out a gloved claw and smile wide. “After dancing with two of my brothers and most of the other competing crews on this mine, have you saved the last dance for me?”

She laughs and puts her gloved hand in mine. “Only because you ask so nicely.”

“If we dance, I'll fully scent you,” I warn. “Do I have your consent to inhale deeply and confirm our bond?”

She blinks. “What does that mean?”

“I have the rare ability to scent my mate. If I stand closer and hold you in my arms, I'll be able to fully scent your pheromones and know if you are my Bride. It is very similar to clasping hands for testing mating compatibility. We do not

have to dance if this is something you are not ready for. I know you wanted to hear my explanation earlier...”

“Does this mean you will instantly become enflamed?”

“No,” I rasp, because sudden explicit sexual images flash through my mind, of me, emptying my seed between this female’s thighs. I lick my lips. “But you are human and I need to explain this to you carefully. Pheromones are powerful indicators for Xylan mating. We’ll both know that later, if we want to become mates, we can clasp bare hands and that’s when I will become enflamed. And then we will immediately need to perform the claiming ceremony in the holosuite, which is a recreation of an ancient chase between mating Xylan in our forests on Chronos. This is how we officially become legal according to the Scales of Xylan Law. Do you understand a claiming and feel this is something you can do?”

“Yes, Leah told me all about it when she married Saxon.”

I nod. “But I might become possessive once I inhale and confirm that you are my future mate. Just watching you this evening and standing next to you is already affecting me, so a deep inhale will certainly increase my need to keep you close.”

“You’re that certain we’re mates?”

“Yes. And I’m hoping that you’ll decide to take that new position offered to you and remain with me, here on Timbur.”

She smiles. “You do?”

“Yes.”

My Bride stares at me hard for a moment, processing all I've told her. Then the next song begins. "I understand. Let's dance." And she pulls me onto the dance floor.

I grasp her hand through two layers of fabric and feel the heat of her skin. Never have I wanted so badly to touch a female's skin. My fangs scoring her and my tongue licking up her essence. I'm losing my mind with want. I place my claw on the small of her back and swing us out among the other couples who are also enjoying the last dance. Automatically, I move to the beat of the drums, taking her along with me.

I gaze down at her beautiful features, still half disguised by her lone mask. Dancing with her in my arms is as wonderful as I assumed. She's striking, with her black hair up at the nape of her neck. Her gown exposes the perfect slope of her shoulders and my arm is around her tiny waist.

Our eyes lock and I admit, "I've been drawn to you since the first moment I saw you across the room. That's never happened to me before. I don't react this way to other females. Only you."

Her eyes are on my lips. "I feel the same. And you smell wonderful. It's addictive. Like sunshine and soil."

We dance as if it's just the two of us on the dance floor. This dance normally allows space between partners, but I pull her close, so her body is against mine and she allows it. All the others fall away as if we are the only two beings left in the room. The light and the noise of other voices and their

movements drown away and it's just us circling and circling.
And I'm now following the steps through muscle memory.

My arms tighten around her as we swing in close circles,
ignoring everyone else.

I bury my nose in her human hair and inhale deeply, allowing
myself to take in her fresh scent. It's nothing like I've ever felt
before. My lungs fill with warmth as I fully inhale her
pheromones which light up receptors I never knew existed.
I'm not fully enflamed. I know this because my cock is not
hardening but I feel an even stronger need to keep her close. I
cannot let her out of my sight.

“What's the verdict?”

My personal crystal is bright and warm in my pocket,
confirming the Illibrium likes her too. “You're mine. Does this
frighten you?”

She reaches up and cups the back of my neck. “No. No, not at
all,” she says with a hint of surprise. “I'm...happy?”

I bend down and lean my forehead against hers. “Good. And
the reason you like how I smell is because my pheromones
affect you as much as yours affect me.”

She laughs nervously. “Is this some crazy silent mind trick?”

“Maybe.”

“I was told I needed to make sure I wore the gloves of the
unmated at all times, which I'm doing. I'm following the rules,
but I've still started something with you. Is that wrong? Are
they going to kick me off the planet and not hire me?”

“No, we have both been following the rules. Usually, Xylan clasp bare claws with another unmated Xylan during a formal mating compatibility test. But for me, I know ahead of time. No need to put us both through the ceremony.”

“But what if you’re wrong?”

I swing us around again. “I’m not wrong. It’s always correct. It’s always been you. I’ve been waiting for you to arrive on Timbur my whole life.”

She laughs. “You’re out of your mind. Have you been drinking?”

“No,” I chuckle. “The only one who has been drinking was you.”

“You saw that?”

“I’ve seen everything.”

And then the music stops and the clock strikes midnight.

“I win,” she shouts.

“You do.”

The other Xylan around us start offering their congratulations on Naomi’s win, but also our obvious connection, which they’ve been watching unfold all evening.

“Congrats, Chief on finding yet another human Bride to add to the fever brother’s growing collection,” a familiar voice chuckles in my ear. This is Lycrus, the crew leader always second best in our competitions.

A break in the crowd forms, allowing Naomi a path to the stage to accept her eventual award.

And then the lights cut out leaving only a shaft of moonlight from the opening above. A drumbeat starts, signaling the arrival of the Dark Moon.

“Outside, on the ground, the entire planet is now being covered in darkness by the eclipse, which also effects the mine. We are about to experience utter darkness through the hole in the roof of this cavern. The lights are set to power down too, so we can comply with Dark Moon. It’s exciting for Xylan to perform this on Timbur because we are lucky to have this eclipse occur here, which is similar to Chronos. All the other Xylan that live off planet have to recreate Dark Moon on a holosuite, but we have the real thing here on Timbur.”

Suddenly a white mist fills the cavern, surrounding us and reaching tendrils up toward the ceiling.

Naomi turns. “Oh, is this mist part of the party too? Is this how it ends?”

A deep growl rumbles in my chest. “No, this has never happened.”

Six

BAYZON

Lights cut out and there's now a total eclipse. We're covered in deep darkness, filled with a sinister white fog which glows in the pitch black.

My Bride lets go of my hand and suddenly she's gone.

I can't see her. My night vision doesn't penetrate the mist. "Naomi," I shout. "What the hell's happening?"

Chaos ensues.

Xylan drop to the ground next to me, some snoring loudly. Others are screaming with fear as half the assembled try to run for the doors. Beings collide into me in their haste.

The top of her dark head emerges from the white mist. "I'm okay. I tripped over someone."

But then she's gone again.

I hit the floor too when a male plows into me. I toss and tumble and can't see a godsdamn thing as I move forward on

my hands and knees, wanting to get to my Bride. I must protect my mate. Claws dig onto my gloves but slip away.

Soon the area quiets and I can't see her, but I can still scent my Bride. I inhale deeply and follow her pheromones, across the floor, over many still bodies. Each one I pause to check. No one is dead. They are all deeply asleep and I have a feeling no one made it out and they are all instead flat on the floor, snoring.

What the hells?

And why am I not asleep too? Instead, I'm fully awake and alert, on a mission to find Naomi.

"Naomi," I bellow.

"Bayzon," a familiar human voice replies.

I follow the sound and feel with my hands and find her pinned underneath two large males who passed out on top of her.

"Help," she squeaks. "They're so heavy."

I push off both the snoring males and reach out and take her hand in mine and pull her up to a sitting position. And that's when I realize not only is my glove gone, but hers has also fallen off in the melee. And now we are sitting together on the floor, with our bare hands clasped, as if we are performing a testing.

"Oh no," she breathes.

The heat at the location where skin meets skin is already spreading. My personal crystal continues to glow in my

pocket, brighter than ever before.

I squeeze her hand then reach up and gently remove her mask because I want to see all her beautiful features. “I’m sorry, female. I meant to wait. To give you time. I was going to court you in the proper human tradition first, but now that I am touching you... the claiming...the need for the claiming is coming on fast.”

The shock of desire and need rockets throughout my body.

A moan of need escapes my lips.

I pull her into my arms and on my lap and kiss her with all the passion I’ve never had in my life until this exact moment. It’s my first kiss. Therefore, I’m running on pure instinct. My lips against hers and my tongue sweeping inside her mouth.

She melts into my arms and kisses me back with equal passion. My female is an expert at kissing. Her hands cup my cheeks and she’s schooling me on how this is done. My body continues to flash with the heat of desire. Naomi tastes amazing. Her pheromones rush through my veins and I want more and more.

Finally, I pull back. Because my thick cock is hard as rock and leaking. It is an amazing sensation. I am ready to breed my female.

My Bride grinds her ass on my crotch and pants with need, also enflamed now due to the rush of our mingled pheromones. I need her and she needs me too.

“Scar?” I bellow.

“Here,” a voice responds.

“Cannibal?” I pant.

“Here, we’re all here, including Brides.”

“And we’re the only ones awake in this entire cavern,” Scar comments. “Everyone else has passed out and are asleep on the floor. I’ve heard of this before, but it hasn’t happened in our lifetimes. Illibrium gas will become charged and escape during the Dark Moon and flood the cavern. It isn’t deadly and is already retreating, so that’s good.”

“Why aren’t we asleep too?” I ask, barely able to speak and think.

“Maybe we’re protected from reacting to it for the same reason that we can all scent our Brides? And the Brides are protected by having shared our pheromones.”

Meanwhile the heat between our clasped hands continues to flame. And my cock throbs with need. Naomi’s arousal is thicker than ever. I let out a roar of desperation. All I want is to chase this female to the ground and plunge my cock inside of her welcoming heat.

“Bayzon? Where are you?”

Suddenly a trio of personal crystals shine in my face. My brothers and their Brides are all there nearby, staring in shock.

“Bayzon, what’s happening?” Trunk questions. “Why are you and Leah’s friend sitting together like that?”

“Oh gods, look at them, they’ve lost their gloves and they’re clasping hands.”

My brothers curse and argue amongst themselves. The human Brides join in, alarmed and concerned.

I bare my fangs and growl in response while Naomi whimpers in my arms.

“It’s a confirmed testing. He’s enflamed and she’s in need,” Scar declares. “There’s nothing we can do to stop this now.”

“True.”

“No, not true,” a female voice challenges, “she always has a choice.”

Scar sighs. “Human, you need to make a choice, quick,” he tells my Bride. “You can either perform the ceremony with Bayzon right now in the mine. Or we can all jump him and knock him out and we can get you off planet right away. Do you want to be his Bride or not?”

My claws dig into her hips.

Naomi lifts her head, her eyes blinking at the light of the personal crystals. “I want to be his Bride,” she confirms.

I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Naomi, you need to know that it will happen right now,” a female voice shouts out. “Claiming means he will chase you to the ground and have rough sex with you and get you pregnant right away. Tomorrow morning you will wake up, pregnant and married. I’m worried for you because you just arrived and

met Bayzon only this evening and maybe you're not ready for this. It's happening so fast..."

"And you need to fight him off to make it good for him," my brother adds. "A broken bone is preferable."

I grunt in agreement.

"Thank you for your concern." My mate tightens her free arm around my neck and rests her head on my chest. Her ass continues to mindlessly grind into my crotch because she needs relief as much as I do. "I know. And it's true that we just met but this is right. Now or later makes no difference. I want this claiming."

And that's when I know I love her. She's human and it's true that the pheromones do affect her, but not in the same way as for a Xylan. She could leave and recover and manage to forget all about me. I would go insane. But according to Xylan law, she has the right to choose. And I'm grateful and proud that in such a short time, she chose me.

"Human, you'll have a head start. Then it will be you and him. We'll leave immediately so you two can do this in private, here in the tunnels of the mine."

"Good luck," a female voice says.

Then they're all gone and it's just the two of us.

"Now," I growl. "Now I will claim you in the ways of old." I stand, not bothering to hide my enormous erection tending my pants anymore.

Naomi stands and watches as I strip off my shirt and jacket and kick aside my pants. My clothes are in a pile on the floor. The crystal in my pocket gives just enough light to allow my human to see shapes and outlines.

I gaze down at my own cock which I cannot believe is so very large. I've never seen it like this and I'm dizzy with need. Seed is already leaking out the slit on the tip, ready to impregnate my Bride.

"You're so big," she gasps.

I reach down and give my throbbing erection a few rough strokes.

"Oh my gods." She kicks off her shoes and stands proud and ready in her black gown, the mask gone and her dark hair loose and flowing over her shoulders.

I'm naked in the glowing mist. All the other Xylan remain passed out and the white, glowing mist covers their still forms. This makes our claiming intimate and private as if it's only the two of us in the main cavern.

The ancient phrasing of a claiming, in the ways of old, easily flows from my lips. The words I've always known and expected to say one day to my chosen Bride pass easily, nothing forgotten. Speaking these to Naomi is the proudest moment of my life. Finally, I reach the end of the words of claiming that all males say to their Brides. And I give the last order, which starts everything.

"Run," I growl.

She looks confused. “Run?”

“Run.”

And she turns and sprints out of the cavern, leaping over bodies in the way and she's out the open doors and into the main tunnel. From there she will have access to a network of tunnels and offices, just on this level.

I wait, pacing, but giving her the time she needs.

Finally, I throw back my head and let out a thunderous roar. The chase starts now. Adrenaline flows through my veins, allowing me additional strength. I race after my female, following her trajectory out of the cavern and soon I'm running down the tunnel.

I inhale and listen for the sound of her breaths or for the scent trail of her pheromones. It's still pitch black, the Dark Moon still in full force. I have my night vision, but humans cannot see in the dark.

I go right and search a few rooms and find nothing. Then I exit and run back the way I came, passing the entrance to the cavern and going in the opposite direction.

Is she in the lift?

The med labs?

The admin offices?

She could be anywhere and I'm impressed at her resourcefulness. I truly am having trouble finding her. She's never been here before and she's in utter darkness, but my

female is managing to make this hard for me. And I'm delighted.

I sniff the air, reverting to more animal than Xylan. And that's when I catch her trail. A growl rumbles in my chest. She's hiding in a storage room.

I toss open a door.

"No," she screams. And then she manages to slip under my arm and she's running again. I follow around a corner, so close, almost touching her. My arm is out in front of me, and that's when she pauses and slams her hand on the shutting mechanism for the heavy lab door, directly onto my outstretched arm. And we both hear the snap of my broken bone. I pull my arm back and the door shuts between us.

I gaze down in shock at my worthless arm, intense pain radiating through the left side of my body. My arm is broken. I look up at her and meet her wide eyes through the small window of the closed door. This tiny human managed to break my arm.

I grin. It's a nasty break and hurts like hell. And it's perfect.

I roar out my challenge and immediately find a secondary entrance to the lab and corner my female, ready to mate.

"No," she shouts, biting and scratching.

It's wonderful.

I tear her clothing down the back, buttons flying.

"Hey, I like this dress."

Now all she wears are scraps of fabric that cover her hips and the triangle between her thighs and her perfect breasts. The fabric is also black. My claws flash and her breasts are free for my gaze. They are perfect. Not too big which I like. I love every curve of her slim body.

She wiggles, still trying to free herself from my arms, trying to continue the chase.

But I am done. Despite my broken arm I keep her pinned with my large body. "Mine," I roar. I pull her down with me to the floor. We hit the ground with me on the bottom and her on top. Then I roll us over, with her beneath me, bracing myself with my one good arm.

And then finally, finally my female complies. She widens her thighs for me, allowing entrance.

My head is between her thighs in moments because I have to taste her, fill myself even more with her taste and scent. I lick and suck at the nub that I know is her spot that brings her the greatest pleasure.

She cries out with joy, grabbing onto my hair and grinding herself closer to my tongue. I should stay right here and bring her to release. But I can't wait. I lift up and plunge two fingers into her tight channel, making sure she's wet and ready to take me.

Then I cover her and my hips are between her thighs and my throbbing cock finds her entrance. In moments I plunge all the way inside.

She throws her head back and screams.

I pause, waiting for her to assimilate.

The sharp pain from my arm and the difficulty of having one arm not working, makes it all better. I'm taking her for the first time, despite the trauma, the pain and the difficulty. I am showing her that I will always be able to protect her. She honors me with her defiance and then her gift of compliance.

Soon my lips cover hers and I slide in and back out, loving the feel of her wet, hot channel. I can hear the squish of our juices as I begin to move faster. She grabs onto me, her legs around my hips, riding with me.

I lose my mind, slamming faster and faster, wanting nothing more than this female, for the rest of my days.

How did I live so long without this pleasure in my life?

And then I change direction and I must be hitting something perfect for my female because she screams out her release. I can feel the clench of her channel and watch as her back bows and feel the scratch of her nails on my back.

And then my own pleasure floods my system. My first orgasm ever. I lift my head and roar out my release. The pleasure starts in my spine and races up my back and I'm almost blacking out from the dizzying feel of my seed jetting out and filling my female. There's so much. I continue fucking her hard, making sure she gets all of it.

Finally, I'm empty.

And I collapse onto her, and then to the side, managing to avoid falling on my broken arm.

She snuggles into my good side.

I smile and pass out.

Seven

NAOMI

The next morning my tablet rings on the nightstand.

Ugh. My eyes blink open.

I groan and reach over and check the message. It's from Leah. She's left a series of texts that I didn't see because I was busy claiming my new husband. They all say basically the same thing: *Naomi, are you okay? I heard there was a heavy mist at the end of the ball and lots of people fell asleep and didn't wake up until hours later?*

I rub my eyes and tap out a reply, *I'm fine. I didn't fall asleep.*

Where are you? Are you still at the mine?

No. I'm back at the guest quarters in employee housing.

Well, good I'm happy to hear you're okay. Hey, just wanted you to know that I invited all of Saxon's family here to our apartment for lunch today. All his brothers and their Brides and the kids. You can meet everyone, including that one brother I think you'll like, Bayzon. I never got a chance to fully

introduce you to everyone last night so this way you can meet them all at once.

I can't help but laugh. *No worries. I already met Bayzon.*

You met Bayzon at the ball? Oh, how did that go?

And now I'm laughing harder. *It went well. In fact, he's here with me right now, recovering.*

What?

Suddenly I'm too tired to even talk. Also, I want nothing more than to stay in bed with Bayzon for the next couple of diurnals. *Ask the others, they'll tell you the whole story. Won't make it today. Maybe a few days from now? Love you.*

I'm about to toss the tablet aside. And then I get another message, this time from the Costume Ball event planner, letting me know I did indeed win the grand prize last night because just as the mist engulfed the space, I was the last being still wearing a mask. No one managed to identify me. And as I had a valid ticket, I am now the grand prize winner of an all-expenses paid, first class, weeklong luxury space cruise of the Nebula. Transporter trip there and back included. For me and a guest.

I roll over and put my arms around Bayzon, who is blinking awake. My palm immediately goes to his amazing abs and the skin just above that hard shaft. "You can take vacations, right?" I ask my new husband.

"Yes."

“Good, because after your arm fully heals, we’re taking a honeymoon to the Nebula.”

He looks down with pride at the healing kit that encases his lower arm. I broke his damn arm last night and he’s in love with it. Last night, right after we returned from the med lab and made it back to my apartment he sent a dozen pictures of it from many angles, on his tablet to his brothers and other friends on the mine. Then he pulled me into a hug and had us take selfie pictures together of us, with his broken arm.

“I love you, female.”

“You do? Are you sure that’s not just your body talking?”

“No, it’s more than that. You are my Bride. My best friend.”

“How do you feel” I ask. “Are you in pain?”

“No. Those pain killers work good.”

I look down and see his enormous length. And lick my lips. I pull down the sheet to expose his leaking morning erection. Just for me. He’s thicker and longer than any man I’ve ever seen and he feels so good. Big but not too big. Like some kind of amazing custom-made dildo, just for me. I want him now.

“Where are we going to live?” I question.

He raises his hips, eager for my touch. “Do you want to move into the fever brothers crew quarters?”

I grab his length and start stroking. “Is that where you live? With your brothers?”

He moans with delight. “Yes, I am the crew leader. Do you think you could move in with me, there?”

“You want me to live in a house with all of your brothers and their wives and children?” I question.

“Yes, but we would have our own bedroom for privacy. I need to live there because they need to have me there to lead us out to work. I have to be close to keep the others on track. Hook lives elsewhere and meets us at the mine, but my role is different. I know our schedules and every crew member’s role in order to accomplish our quota for the shift. And I communicate with the other crew leaders. We are the number one producing crew and I want to keep it that way.”

I change direction, speeding up my hand. “Yes, I can try living there. But tonight and tomorrow I want you to myself, with no interruptions. After our honeymoon, we are going to your quarters.”

He meets my gaze. “Are you ready for this, my female? Our clasping was a mistake. I told you that I scented you were mine right away, but to me that meant I would take the time to court you like I know a human requires. You were only here visiting but now you are staying for the rest of your life because I can’t leave. This is my job for life. Can you stay here with me?”

I grin. “I would be honored to stay with you on Timbur.”

He pulls me up with only one strong arm and he’s kissing me. And it’s the second-best kiss of my life, only after that first

kiss as we sat together on the floor of the mine with our hands clasped.

I love the scrape of his fangs against my teeth and lips. Just a light amount to make this edgy. His tongue sweeps in my mouth and I melt further into his arms. He tastes amazing. I can't believe he's a virgin and never before kissed. Because he's really, really good at this. I'm already loving the idea of having sex with him, and only him, for the rest of my life.

"Mine," he growls.

"Mine," I agree.

"I love you female," he pants as he rolls me over and slides his cock into my hot channel.

"Oh, I love you," I pant. "Until days turn into time."

Note to the Reader

I hope you loved Chief and Naomi's story.:)

Start at the beginning!

Mean Right Hook (Fever Brothers #1) Hook and Leah's story:

<https://books2read.com/u/4A2xBk>

Devil in the Details by Nancey
Cummings

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



FORGET SERVING REVENGE COLD.

Zelda wants red hot, molten lava justice. Her ex ruined her life and framed her for a robbery. Now he's back in town, planning his next heist. To get vengeance, she'll bargain with a charming, incredibly hot demon.

The demon's price? Just a kiss.

This must be a trick, right? But what choice does she have?

Content Warnings: *none listed*

One

This was a terrible idea. Just the worst. Also, illegal. The only problem was, Zelda couldn't think of a better plan. So her choice was to go with the terrible, highly illegal plan, or learn to live with Walker Rocheford getting away with ruining her life.

Honestly, it wasn't a choice at all. The terrible plan was her only option.

Zelda took a deep breath. Her hands shook as she took up the chalk. The circle she laid was lopsided, the line wavered, but there were no gaps. Did penmanship—chalkmanship?—matter when summoning a demon? Probably not. It was an unbroken circle. All the sources agreed that was the important part.

She placed her offering of salt and herbs in the center, lit a candle, and spoke. "I appeal to the Daimoni. I seek vengeance. Walker Rocheford must pay for his sins."

Zelda waited, feeling foolish. What was she doing? The summoning ritual made no sense. This was the modern age.

The Daimoni weren't demons. They were aliens. Yes, they had a long history of contact with humanity before humanity had even been to Earth's moon. How long a history? Nearly every language on Earth had a variation of their name: demon.

The Daimoni were shapeshifters, tricksters, and bargain makers. Most importantly, they liked humans, or at least liked toying with humans. Allegedly, they considered humans to be adorable little pets.

They traded wishes for a person's soul, first-born child, or something equally precious. They couldn't be trusted. They'd trick you into a contract, honor it to the letter but not the spirit, and screw you over. Everyone knew that. They were chaotic evil lawyers. Worse.

Bargains with the Daimoni had been outlawed for decades for good reason. Don't make deals with a demon.

Yet here she was, sitting in her living room in a summoning circle, because she was desperate and too petty to let her anger go.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered. "I'm ridiculous."

Of course this wouldn't work. Summoning an alien demon with a candle and items raided from her kitchen? The Daimoni were shapeshifters and possibly telepathic—how else did they find desperate people? They lurked in shadows, mingled with people while wearing false faces, and waited until they spotted a mark. They didn't appear out of thin air.

Obviously.

The summoning ritual was nothing more than a test to identify the gullible. Well, good job, Zelda. She was as gullible as they come.

“It’s fine,” Zelda said, rising to her feet. “Walker Rocheford stole a priceless cultural treasure, ruined my reputation, and replaced me with another woman, and it’s fine. I don’t need your help. I’ll leave nasty reviews online. I’ll post bad photos of him. I’ve got one where he’s slightly less stunning than usual, so that’ll show him.”

She couldn’t prove that Walker had been behind the theft, but she knew it in her gut. Someone used her keycard and knew her passcode. No one else had access. Of course, Walker was with her when the actual robbery happened, but there had been something in his eyes when she received a visit from the police after the fact. Anticipation. He had known.

Rumors lingered after the investigation cleared her. The museum didn’t fire her for the break-in, but she was let go shortly after for bullshit reasons.

The end result being, she lost her job, her apartment, and her friends.

“He has to pay,” she said quietly.

A mist filled the room. Zelda panicked, fearing a leaking gas line or a contaminated atmosphere. Her apartment building wasn’t exactly up to code. She needed to find her cat and leave.

The overhead lights flickered, then went out. The candle provided the only illumination in the room. The flame wavered, then snuffed out. Darkness surrounded her.

“Zelda Kniffen, you called me here for petty revenge?” a deep voice asked.

She jumped back. “Who are you? How did you get in here?”

A chuckle made the hair on her arms stand on end. The menace was off the charts.

“I was invited,” he said.

“You’re a Daimoni.”

Her eyes adjusted to the dark. There was a large figure in the middle of her circle. Large was being polite. Massive better described the being.

There was a massive demon in her living room.

“I am called Malgraxon.”

The figure clapped his hands. The lights returned.

Zelda blinked in the sudden light.

In the center of her poorly drawn summoning circle stood a demon wearing an old-fashioned suit. His face was nothing but a shifting, inky black haze. He had no eyes, no mouth, and no body. He was just a black fog wearing a suit.

“Nice suit. Did you rob someone’s attic?” She slapped a hand over her mouth, mortified at the sarcastic question. Sometimes her mouth started running before her brain came online. Okay, not just sometimes. Often. It was a problem.

He tugged on the cuffs, nonplussed. “A museum actually. Oh, don’t look surprised. They weren’t using it.”

“A museum,” she said, not impressed. Was he messing with her? *A museum.*

“Relax. It was a university theater department. I saw it on stage and knew this was made for me. Fits like a glove.” He turned, displaying his backside. “Don’t give me that look. They had a spare.”

Zelda collapsed in a lounge chair. She summoned a sassy demon. Awesome. “You’re a cloud. Why do you need to wear clothes?”

“Ah, the eternal question. Social expectations, mostly. People tend to shout and scream when you stroll around in nothing but a fog,” Malgraxon said. Zelda had no way to know this for sure, but he was smirking. It wasn’t a fun, light-hearted smirk—it was a smug smirk.

She didn’t like it or his haughty attitude. She didn’t like him. That did not change the fact that she needed him.

“Would it help if I looked like this?” he asked. The fog swirled and condensed, the black draining away and color fading in.

A square-jawed man with honey brown hair and blue eyes stood before her. Walker.

“Zelda, honey—”

“No. Absolutely not,” Zelda said, springing to her feet. She didn’t need the demon that badly. She’d find another way.

“You can go.”

Walker—Malgraxon—tilted his head. His eyes were black swirls, void of light. “You wanted a contract. I heard you, Zelda Kniffen. You have a grievance. You want justice. I can give you justice.”

“I changed my mind.”

“This man stole from you. He took your reputation. Your love.” He said the last word like it was a foreign concept.

“Walker didn’t steal my love, but he abused it. Betrayed me,” she said, her voice giving a little wobble.

Malgraxon flashed a smile that was not Walker’s. The teeth were all wrong and... pointy. Way too pointy.

Shit. He had her, and he knew it. She’d agree to anything because of that wobble in her voice. Fucking Walker.

“I can gut him and knit you a sweater of his innards.”

“God no! Do not do that.”

“It is no trouble. The trick is to soak them in a saltwater bath —”

“No! Stop... stop talking about entrails.” Then, because it couldn’t hurt, “Please.”

Malgraxon folded his arms over his chest. “Well, I feel that you are missing an opportunity to send a powerful message. Why, if not bloody vengeance, have you summoned me?”

Why indeed.

“I want vengeance, just not the blood. I want to expose him for the weasel he is. I want everyone to know.”

Malgraxon gave a dramatic yawn. “Boring.”

“Sorry, but if I wanted him dead, I’d hire some ruffian.” The details on how to do that were sketchy, but they would give her less lip than the demon, so it’d be worth the trouble.

His lips twitched, betraying his amusement. “Sure, ruffians. While you’re at it, hire a rapsallion, a few scallywags, and a cad.”

Zelda blinked, slowly processing the sheer amount of snark coming from the demon. “I don’t need a cad. I want revenge on one. Anyway, don’t mock me. You’re the one dressed like you’re on the hunt for Jack the Ripper.”

“Thank you.” He smoothed down the front of his suit with a pleased grin.

“That wasn’t a compliment.” Zelda ran a hand through her hair. She didn’t have a lot of options here. She had to make a deal with this demon, as aggravating as he was. “Look, we got off on the wrong foot. Would you like a drink?”

“I desire the water of melting snow collected from the sacred pools of Jesare,” he said, like that was something she could pick up at the store.

“No sacred water, but I’ll find something.” She had hot chocolate. That was sacred in her books.

He waved a dismissive hand. “Very well. Surprise me, mortal.”

Zelda scurried into the kitchen, very aware of the demon watching her with his swirling black and blue eyes. She

resisted the urge to tug her sweater down over her butt. She didn't need to draw more attention to her big behind.

While water boiled, she leaned against the counter. This wasn't going the way she expected. The demon wasn't supposed to be real. She fully intended to do the little ritual and when nothing happened, laugh at herself, have an ugly cry, and get on with things like an adult. Then Malgraxon had the nerve to show up and ruin her perfectly reasonable pity party.

She poured boiling water over the powdered mix, stirred in peppermint syrup, and topped it with whipped cream and crushed peppermint candy. Nature might have given her extra padding, but she saw no reason not to treat herself.

When she returned to the common room, Malgraxon sat on the floor, embroiled in a staring contest with her cat, Mr. Fishtopher. Mr. Fish's tail was straight in the air, wary, but not puffed in alarm.

Zelda set the mugs of hot chocolate in front of Malgraxon. "It's better hot," she said, grabbing Fishtopher and setting him on her lap. The cat wasn't having it and moved to investigate the hot chocolate.

"That is mine, foul fiend," Malgraxon said, cradling his mug to his chest.

"Fishtopher is not a fiend. He's a good boy," Zelda said, reaching for her own mug.

Malgraxon sniffed the mug, frowning. An obscenely long tongue darted out, taking a swipe of whipped cream. His

eyebrows went up in surprise. He greedily downed the drink, leaving whipped cream on his top lip. “What is this?”

“You never had hot chocolate before?”

“No. Humans insist on plying me with whiskey or wine. It’s rather tedious.” His long tongue licked the inside of the mug. It was wrong, but she couldn’t stop staring. His tongue was forked.

How would that feel?

Zelda blushed and stared into the bottom of her mug. She had no business imagining his tongue doing stuff... Moments ago, he annoyed her. Yes, he was handsome, but he was a shapeshifter, so a good-looking face didn’t mean much. Hot or not, his attitude needed an adjustment.

“This is not tedious,” Malgraxon said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Well, help me take down Walker, and I’ll treat you to an ice cream sundae,” she joked.

His eyes flashed and he leaned back against the sofa, laying his arm along the cushions. For no good reason other than to torment her, that tongue licked his lips, getting the last of the whipped cream.

He did that on purpose.

Zelda shifted, pressing her thighs together because she did not need to be having thoughts about that tongue. “I, uh, have, that is, I saw, on the newsfeed about the, umm—” She stumbled over her words because he was biting his lower lip as he

watched her, looking as if he knew full well she was having thoughts about his tongue. “Walker’s going to be at a party,” she finally managed to say.

“You require a date? I am flattered.” Despite sitting on the floor, he managed to lord over the room.

His uncontrolled attitude had the effect of taking a cold shower. All her desire vanished. She said in a flat tone, “I don’t need a date. I need an invitation. It’s exclusive. Look, did you hear about the ruby slippers that were stolen?”

“I do not keep tabs on human shoes.”

“They’re famous. They were props from an old Earth movie, *The Wizard of Oz*.” She waited for recognition, but none came.

“The ruby slippers are priceless from a cultural standpoint. I am—I used to be—the curator at the Martian Historical Society. The ruby slippers are—were—the only pair off Earth. They were stolen, and the thieves used my keycard and passcode to do it.”

Malgraxon eyed her untouched hot chocolate. She handed her mug over to him and was rewarded with a genuine smile of delight.

Walker never looked at her like that. She saw that now. Their relationship had been entirely one-sided, infatuation on her part, and him just telling her what she wanted to hear.

“I know Walker was behind it, or at least part of it. He used me, and then vanished after the robbery.”

“You suspect,” Malgraxon said.

“I know!” Fishtopher jumped on the couch and butted his head against her arm. She scratched behind his ears the way he liked. When her voice was steady, she said, “I don’t have any physical proof, but certain things he said make sense in retrospect. He was with me at the time of the robbery, but that was just to keep me distracted.”

“You are each other’s alibi. What did the police think? The insurance adjuster? They are often more concerned with recovering the item than the legal authorities.”

Zelda tossed her hands up in frustration. “Nothing. They were more interested in me, but that’s ridiculous. If I had anything to do with it, I’d have to be brain dead to use my own codes.”

“Yes, that would be shortsighted on your part.”

“Well, eventually they came around to that opinion, but I couldn’t shake the gossip. Anyway, long story short, I lost my job, and no museum, gallery, or archive will hire me.” She leaned back against the sofa cushion, perfectly aware that she was sulking. “The art world is small, especially on Mars. Insular. No one’s going to hire me unless I clear my name.”

“Relocate for employment. That is the obvious solution, not making a deal with my kind.” His eyes glowed as he spoke, swirling black and luminescent blue.

“Why should I have to move? This is my home. I’m a third-generation Martian.”

Malgraxon gave a dramatic yawn, the jerk. “This is my concern why?”

“Because he’s going to do it again. Amiron Yan is having a party next week. Halloween.” She paused, waiting for a reaction. “It’s an old Earth holiday. People dress up like ghosts and devils. You’d like it.”

“As intriguing as that sounds, I do not see a reason to be involved.”

Zelda grabbed her tablet and projected an image onto the far wall. It was a vase of white flowers with two red poppy blossoms in the lower left of the arrangement. “That is ‘Poppy Flowers’ by Van Gogh.”

“You show me flowers,” the demon said, sounding unimpressed.

“It was stolen in 2010 and never recovered.”

He licked the last of the hot chocolate from the mug, giving no indication that he cared.

“The rumor is that Amiron has it,” Zelda said.

“You are suggesting that your beau will want this painting.”

“He won’t be able to resist—and he’s not my beau.” Not any longer. Zelda was embarrassed to think how head-over-heels she had been for Walker, but it hadn’t been real. Nothing about that man had been real.

Malgraxon remained silent, studying the painting. Finally, he said, “You have no proof that Walker Rocheford is responsible for your misfortune.”

“I don’t need proof. I *know*.” It had to be Walker. There was no other opportunity for someone to grab her keycard and codes.

“You are desperate to blame your ex-lover for all your woes rather than accept that he left you for the typical reasons. He grew bored. Your relationship was stale. Unexciting. Tedious.” With each word, Malgraxon’s presence seemed to grow larger, chasing out the light in the room until it was just him.

“No,” Zelda protested.

“You are nothing more than a spurned lover. There was no plot. You are just another pathetic human looking to blame someone else for their troubles.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Prove it,” Malgraxon growled.

“Men who look like Walker don’t date women who look like me,” she said, mortified at her words.

Barely a heartbeat later, she was pressed flat on the sofa with Malgraxon looming over her. He pinned her hands above her head in a firm grip. One knee wedged itself between her thighs.

He licked his lips, the long tongue moving with all sorts of promises.

“Now that is a lie. Do not lie to me, Zelda Kniffen.” He sat up, no longer holding her wrists, but she was still restrained by an unseen force.

“I’m not lying.” She squirmed, and his eyes went entirely black, which probably wasn’t good. “Hot guys don’t go for chubby chicks unless they want something.”

“Is that something sex? Because—” He growled again, deep in his throat, and it went right to her core.

“You can’t say things like that.” She turned away, her face burning in embarrassment.

With a snap of his fingers, he released her wrists. Gently, he grabbed her chin, turning her to look at him. His eyes were completely black, void of light. “I will say what I please. The truth does not care for your inhibitions.”

This wasn’t about her inhibitions, thank you very much. This was about Walker dazzling her with his handsome face, and her being so desperate for affection that she overlooked the fact that he used her. What had she been thinking? Guys who looked like him were never interested in women who looked like her. That was just a fact.

Malgraxon growled again, interrupting her self-recriminations. “I see now. He took more than your security clearance and your job. He took your spark.”

Ugh. *Pity*. She didn’t want pity.

“My spark is just fine,” she said.

“Hush.” He pressed a finger over her lips, smirking. “I will take your contract, Zelda Kniffen, third-generation Martian.”

He sprang to his feet. She absolutely did not miss the weight of him on her or his heat, because she was not lusting after this

arrogant demon who wore her ex's face.

"I will ruin Walker for his transgressions against you," Malgraxon said.

"In exchange for what?" she asked, sitting upright. There was a price. There was always a price.

His gaze swept over her, heated, and his tongue did that thing again. "A kiss."

"A kiss?"

"Yes, you have convinced me of the righteousness of this task. Walker Rocheford must be made accountable for all he has done to you. A kiss is my price."

"Just a kiss?" That was too little. She'd read stories about how the Daimoni took the first-born child or something equally horrific.

"Do you think I need gold or jewels? I have plenty. But I have never tasted your lips. With my long life, unique experiences are difficult to find, and your kiss will be a unique experience. Do we have a deal?" He held out a hand.

It had to be a trick. She turned his offer over in her mind but couldn't see how.

"Deal," she said, taking his hand.

A tingle or a spark went through her when their hands touched. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and she gasped.

“Now,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Tell me more about this auction Walker will attend.”

Two

The largest city on Mars, Opportunity, flanked the volcano Arsia Mons. Lava tubes and caves sheltered the first settlers from radiation and the harsh Martian climate. Then the domes came, forging an enclosed environment. The domes expanded, eventually creating a continuous ring around the volcano. Inch by inch, humans carved a place for themselves on Mars. Terraforming was still a science fiction dream, but reality was getting closer. The atmosphere was almost breathable. It wasn't farfetched to think that Zelda might one day be able to walk outside a domed city without a breather, though she'd be an old lady when it finally happened.

The sky was still pinkish red. Some things stayed the same.

Tucked away in the oldest parts of Opportunity, deep in the tunnels, with no natural light, was the only place on Mars willing to hire Zelda. The pawn shop wasn't exactly a good use of her art history degree. Their typical clients hardly ever brought in antique paintings or fine silver to sell, unless they were stolen. While the shop's policy was not to ask questions,

some items were too hot to bother with. They dealt in jewelry. Zelda spent her days testing, authenticating, and giving an appraisal. Whatever the value, her boss took thirty percent off the best offer and marked up the item by fifty percent. It was robbery, but people were desperate.

Zelda was one. She did her job and minded her own damn business.

“What do you think of these?” A customer leaned forward and tapped the glass display case. The piece in question was a crystal necklace designed to resemble a fish curled around the wearer’s neck with a fanned tail at one end and head at the other. The display card claimed it was a “dragon” design, but it looked like a goldfish to Zelda.

“Crystal set in sterling silver. Each link has some movement, while the overall structure maintains the shape. A piece that will make an impression.” If that impression was that the wearer really liked guppies.

“Yes, but I asked what you thought, not its credentials.” He looked up through the light brown hair that fell forward. The light caught the blue in his eyes. He sported two days’ worth of scruff along his jaw. Oddly, that only made his lean face more appealing. Some men wore unkempt well.

“It’s very shiny,” Zelda said.

The man did not seem impressed. She smiled blankly.

He hummed and tapped a finger against his lips, thinking. “Is there anything noteworthy in the shop, in your opinion?”

“Noteworthy,” she repeated. The shop didn’t have much in the way of noteworthy. The truly valuable pieces were listed on the network. Mostly tat and flashy junk filled the display cases.

Zelda pulled out a nondescript wooden box and opened it to display a polished gray rock set in the center of two golden rings.

“This is interesting. Martian meteorite,” she said, holding the pendant up by the chain. With a flick of her finger, the rings rotated around the central stone. “The central stone is Mars. The smaller stones are the moons Phobos and Deimos.”

“How is a Martian rock interesting?”

“A Martian meteorite,” Zelda said. “It broke off from Mars, fell to Earth, was discovered, set in this piece, and made its way back home. No one has traveled more than our friend here.” The pendant spun lazily, gleaming in the shop’s lights.

“And you like this?”

“My opinion doesn’t matter. Only the opinion of the person who wears it counts,” she said.

“Then your opinion matters.” He licked his lips and Zelda knew.

Malgraxon.

“You!” She took a step back from the counter and glanced around. The shop was empty, and the owner, Gilly, was in the backroom. “You changed your face.”

“You don’t like this one? You didn’t seem to appreciate my face last night.” Malgraxon planted both his hands on the counter and leaned forward, giving her a good look at his swirling black and blue eyes. “It’s a good face, I think.”

“Your face is fine.” In a whisper, she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“We have details to discuss.”

“Are you serious? Here? Someone might overhear us.” She looked over her shoulder to the doorway with a beaded curtain that separates the back of the store. Her boss could hear everything.

Gilly failed to come charging out, threatening to fire Zelda for slacking.

“Who?” Malgraxon spread his arms wide to draw a point to the shop’s emptiness.

“My boss is in the back, and I’m supposed to be working.”

“Hmm,” he agreed with a hum—and damn it, that should not make her heart flutter. “You’re very good at working too. It’s adorable. I’ll take the well-traveled rock. When you are done with that, I will take you shopping.”

“I’m working,” she repeated. “Honestly, I get that’s probably not a concept you’re familiar with, but us mere mortals need money for food and rent.”

“I am familiar with the concept. Now hurry. You are cranky and I think you need to be fed.”

Zelda couldn't fight the blush that colored her cheeks. Was that a crack about her weight? Like all a chubby chick did was eat?

"I'm not hungry," she said. Lunch had been a cheese sandwich and a bag of stale popcorn. Hardly wholesome, but it did the job, and it was cheap.

Malgraxon tilted his head like she was bizarre, and honestly, it was the most alien thing she'd seen him do. "I have upset you."

"I can't leave. If I leave, I lose my job, which is a problem because this is the only place willing to hire me."

"Sounds tedious."

He was impossible.

"Malgraxon, life is tedious. This conversation certainly is." Maybe a little vinegar would make him go away.

No such luck. He flashed a dazzling smile, her sour response only seemed to delight him. If he had a tail, it would be wagging. Actually, he might have a tail. He was a shapeshifter.

"Mal, please," he said. "I will speak to your boss. It is not a problem."

He tossed a credit coin onto the counter and headed toward a doorway with a beaded curtain. "Purchase the necklace. I want to see you wearing it when I return."

"Gilly's not back there."

“I hear a second heartbeat. Either it is the shop’s owner, or you have an intruder. Either way, you will thank me.”

She turned to watch him go by, not to check out his butt. Other reasons. She couldn’t think of one, but definitely other reasons.

Mal looked over his shoulder and gave her a wink before disappearing through the beaded curtain.

Zelda slumped against the counter. She needed Mal’s help. That hadn’t changed. She wished he were more discreet. Deals with the Daimoni were illegal for good reason. The Daimoni were unpredictable. Tricksters. They’d deliver a contract to the letter yet manage to screw you over and do it with a smile on their faces. They couldn’t be trusted, and Mal was in the back doing who knew what to Gilly. Mind control? Spinning lies? Making another bargain?

Gilly was savvy. She wouldn’t be charmed by a pretty face. She’d see through Mal’s facade to the Daimoni demon he was. As long as she didn’t have proof, as long as he didn’t reveal himself, Gilly could be as suspicious as she liked. The older woman was suspicious of most people.

The thought calmed her. Gilly’s natural disposition leaned more to mistrust than trust. She’d toss Mal and his handsome face out on his nice butt.

Whistling, she rang up the necklace, adding the inconvenience fee they used for annoying customers, and gave herself a generous tip. Very generous. The necklace was all bagged up when Gilly emerged, dragging Mal by the wrist.

“Zelda! You didn’t tell me it’s your birthday,” Gilly said in an aggravated tone.

“Because it’s not—” she started to say.

“Not important,” Mal cut in, speaking over her. “I told you she would say that, Miss Gilly.”

Gilly folded her arms over her chest and made a disapproving noise. Through thick glasses that magnified her dark eyes, she glared at Zelda. It was terrifying.

“Take the afternoon off,” Gilly said, frowning.

Correction: *now* she was terrifying. This had to be a trap. Gilly wasn’t a tenderhearted person. She ran a shady-at-best pawn shop in a shady neighborhood. It’d be nice to think that she’d hired Zelda because she didn’t give a fuck what other people thought, but Zelda knew it was because Gilly saw the chance to grab a highly qualified expert for practically nothing. Zelda was a bargain, and Gilly was shrewd. Giving afternoons off didn’t figure into that. What had Malgraxon done?

Then came the thought that chilled her. Did Gilly know the truth about Malgraxon?

“You’ve got those boxes from the estate sale to sort through,” Zelda said.

Gilly’s frown intensified. “Let your nice fella spoil you on your birthday.”

Nice fella? Oh, Gilly knew. She absolutely knew.

“I’m not sure what he told you, but it’s not true,” Zelda said.

Gilly snagged her arm and dug her bony fingers in. She spoke quietly, “Mal told me enough. I’m just glad you’ve met someone. The way your last man treated you was a disgrace.”

Zelda blinked. She hadn’t shared all the mortifying details with her boss, so Malgraxon must have spilled the beans. “Yeah, Walker was a real piece of work.”

“Go enjoy your day. The boxes from the estate sale will be waiting for you,” Gilly said.

“Thanks,” Zelda said, still suspicious, but she grabbed her bag and left before Gilly could change her mind.

“I like her,” Malgraxon announced once they were on the street. “She’s spicy.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth.”

All her blood drained away, leaving her cold. “The truth?”

“Relax. A tailored version of the truth.” He snagged two apples from a fruit vendor on the corner and tossed a credit chip to the merchant. “It’s always easier to tell the truth than spin a lie.” He crunched into an apple. “Lies have so many details to remember,” he said, mouth full of apple. Juice dribbled down his chin, and his long tongue flicked down to lap it up.

She might have been staring.

“What? Did you want one? You claimed you were not hungry.” His eyes swirled black and blue, and he looked

thoroughly amused at catching her staring.

“I might be a little hungry,” she admitted.

“Ah, I see you understand the art of telling the partial truth.”

He grinned and tossed her the other apple.

Zelda muttered very rude things before eating her apple.

A vehicle stopped at the curb and a door opened. Malgraxon gestured for her to enter. Mouth too full of apple to protest that she didn't accept rides from strange demons, she climbed in. Her feet hurt too much for walking anyway.

The richly appointed interior smelled like money. Lots of money. The driver—a real person and not an AI driven car—confirmed wealth.

Malgraxon munched on his apple, watching her with his oddly swirling eyes. Whatever he was getting out of this arrangement, it wasn't money. He had plenty already.

The vehicle glided through the tunnels. Buildings huddled close together. None were taller than two stories. Moss clung to the rock ceiling, embedded with lights that were either too bright or failing. Despite the controlled temperature inside the vehicle, her hair stuck to the back of her neck thanks to the humid, warm air. Between the heat and the suffocating feel of the tunnel about to collapse, it was no wonder that people built outside as quickly as possible.

“Where are we going?” she asked as the vehicle exited the caves. A murky pink sky spread out over them. She hardly

noticed the dome or the structural supports anymore. It was all part of the scenery.

“To procure appropriate clothing for the auction.”

“I have a dress.”

“No,” Malgraxon said.

“You haven’t seen it—”

“No,” he repeated. “You clearly do not have the ability to dress yourself.”

“Hey! There’s nothing wrong with what I’m wearing.” She wore a draped front cardigan with a hood. The drape of fabric was generous enough to be wrapped up and affixed to the hood to protect her face. It was a wardrobe staple. Mars was dusty, even inside the enclosed environment. Traffic stirred it up from the ground, and the air circulation system spread it throughout the city.

Her outfit might not have been fashionable, but it was practical. Everyone wore one.

“Do not be embarrassed. Dressing well is a skill that requires cultivation,” Malgraxon said.

“You literally stole your outfit from a theater department.”

“Did I?”

How would she know? Probably. She didn’t know him well but that seemed like the kind of stunt the Daimoni were known for. They were capricious. Interested in their own amusements. Indulgent.

He finished his apple, eating it whole, core and all. He eyed Zelda's apple core, his long tongue licking his lips. She passed the core over without a word. He swallowed it with grin.

The city rolled past the windows, moving from the shabby familiarity of her neighborhood to the swankier part of the city. The buildings still had the shiny gloss of newness, paint not scoured away by dust, and zero signs of rust. Miles of flawless glass panels slid by. The people they passed might as well have been a different species, which Zelda knew was silly. They were as Martian as she was, if better dressed. They were elegant and cool, in pristine outfits that red dust wouldn't dare sully.

The vehicle stopped in front of the kind of discreet store with understated signage that meant expensive. "Here we are."

Inside, the shop was a cozy space with wood panel walls, potted plants, and a plush leather couch. Definitely expensive. The wood looked to be actual hardwood, imported from Earth, not the processed kind made from the fast-growing bamboo cultivated on Mars.

Zelda failed to see any actual clothes.

"Malgraxon—"

"Mal," he corrected.

"Mal, I can't afford this," she whispered.

"Nonsense."

"Not nonsense," she said.

Malgraxon didn't listen and grinned as a clerk approached. "My female requires a selection of gowns suitable for a gala. My account," he said, handing over a credit chip.

The clerk gave Zelda a critical scan. "I see. Does madam have a preference?"

Something cheap, she nearly answered.

"I'm not sure," she eventually said.

"Hmm. Measurements first, and then I'll check our stock." Out came the tape measure, followed by clipped orders to raise her arms. "Have a seat and enjoy some refreshments," the clerk said before vanishing in the back.

Malgraxon settled onto the couch, resting his arms along the back like he was in his own home. Another clerk brought Zelda a steaming cup of coffee served with a chocolate wafer cookie on the side.

"This is too much. I'll pay you back," she said, unsure how, exactly, she would do that. Her wages from the pawn shop barely covered her bills.

Malgraxon raised a hand to silence her. "Cease your protests. It is tedious. This is part of the contract. You will be paying me appropriately." Zelda's back stiffened. Before she could tell him and his high-handed, cocky attitude to get stuffed, he continued, "When stalking prey, it is necessary to blend into the environment. In this instance, you are my companion to an exclusive party at the home of Amiron Yan. As charming as I find your current outfit, you must look the part."

Zelda resisted the urge to wrap her cardigan around her like a shield. “I guess that’s reasonable,” she said, though she still worried about *how* exactly Malgraxon would insist on being paid. A kiss. “Do you have a plan once we get to the party?”

He waved away her concern. “I will sort out the rest of the details, but the bait in the trap must be irresistible.”

“Is it more or less complicated than throwing a bucket of red paint on Walker?” she asked, completely ignoring the fact that he implied she was irresistible. And bait.

His eyes swirled, and his lips twitched with amusement. “Slightly more complex than that.”

The clerk returned with a rolling rack stuffed with options. Zelda gravitated toward a simple black dress with long sleeves. Malgraxon proclaimed it was too ordinary. She loved the way the teal green dress with puffy sleeves fit her, but Malgraxon declared that it would draw too much attention. She needed to blend in.

“This is the one,” Malgraxon said when she emerged from the dressing room in a midnight-blue satin dress with a fitted skirt and lantern sleeves.

The shiny fabric went against everything Zelda had been told about fashion rules for her body type, but the dress hit her waist just right. She turned in front of the mirror, admiring the reflection from all sides. She was afraid to ask the price. This was the kind of shop that didn’t put price tags on the merchandise.

“It’s missing one thing,” Malgraxon said. He reached into his pocket and produced the meteorite necklace.

“I can’t—” she protested.

“Why?” He hesitated, the golden chain stretched between his hands. When she couldn’t explain why accepting the necklace felt wrong, like that gift would make this a date and not a business transaction, he stepped closer to place the necklace around her throat.

Zelda held her breath. He was so close and smelled so good, of impossible things like rain and blue skies.

“There. It traveled to Earth and back for you,” he said. He lingered, his fingers brushing the back of her neck. Was he going to preemptively claim his kiss? Did she even mind? No, not really.

He smiled, a real one that touched his eyes.

All this for a kiss. That didn’t seem balanced. At the end of this, when Zelda got her vengeance and Malgraxon got his kiss, she’d still be in debt to him.

None of this made sense.

Three

The midnight-blue dress along with every dress she tried on that afternoon, and many, many accessories arrived the next day. Zelda found the selection of underwear intimidating. It was lovely—delicate little scraps of silk and lace designed to make the most of her ample rear—and no doubt, the bill more expensive than a month's rent. They were completely impractical. She was more of a boring, high-waisted panties with built-in support kind of gal and resisted the urge to try on the silky undergarments.

Unable to resist the pull of the red satin dress, Zelda held the gown against herself and studied her reflection. The dress was strapless with a structured waist and layers of fluffy petticoats underneath. She couldn't ever imagine needing to wear such a dress, yet she desperately wanted to try it on and maybe do a little twirl. She had on the underwear already and, really, it didn't hurt to slip the dress on...

Someone pounded on her apartment door.

Zelda flinched, tossing the dress back to the pile of too expensive and too fancy gowns that Malgraxon bought for her. She tugged on an old sweater and leggings.

The pounding continued. If the building's AI worked, the face recognition would send her a notice about who was trying to beat down her door. As it was, Zelda had to do it the old-fashioned way and check the screen next to the door.

Malgraxon stood outside, holding a carryout cup in one hand and a carrier loaded with more cups in the other.

Zelda took a deep breath before entering the code to open the door.

"Explain," he demanded, shoving a disposable cup in her face.

"Well, hello to you too." She took the warm cup. The aroma of chocolate wafted up. "What am I explaining?"

"I have sampled several hot chocolates, and they are all inferior. *Explain.*" Malgraxon brushed past her to stand in the center of her tiny apartment. His form waivered, and his face morphed into one with a crown of horns. A dark mist rolled across the floor.

Fishtopher the cat did not appreciate this and fled to the safety of the bedroom with a hiss.

Zelda looked at the carrier filled with multiple cups. "They don't make theirs with love?"

He huffed. "Love is not a palatable ingredient."

“And yet—” She took a sip of the hot chocolate. It wasn’t bad, but the chocolate was weaker than she liked.

“A trade,” he said. “Teach me your secret and I will prepare a meal for you.”

“You can cook?”

He gave a weary sigh. “Yes. I would not have survived these centuries if I were unable to feed myself.” Centuries? She started to ask, but he made a grumbling noise. “A Daimoni lifespan is not the same as a human’s,” he said.

“But centuries? How old are you?”

“I will not discuss it. Do you accept the terms of our deal?”

“My hot chocolate recipe for a meal. What are you making?”

“What ingredients do you have?” Without waiting for her to answer, Malgraxon opened every door in the kitchen. What he found was a bunch of nothing. He made a disapproving clicking noise. “This is unacceptable.”

“Ah, well, you see, it’s the end of the month and money’s tight. My pantry is a little bare.” She’d been living on pasta and cheese sandwiches.

“I will purchase the necessary supplies. Do we have a deal?” He extended his hand.

A Daimoni offering a bargain set off all the warnings in Zelda’s mind. Agreeing to a second bargain was reckless, and here she was, taking his hand. A familiar tingle surged through her.

Malgraxon watched intently as Zelda prepared the hot chocolate. “It’s nothing special. This is just a powdered mix, but I like to add syrup to make it fancy.” He noted the size of the spoonful of mix she used, the temperature of the water, how much peppermint syrup she added to the mug, and even the amount of whipped cream she sprayed on the top.

In the end, he cradled the mug and inhaled. His long, forked tongue flicked down and lapped up the whipped cream. He made a happy, growly noise that bordered on obscene. “This is correct. Thank you.”

“It’s nothing special—”

“False humility does not suit you. Do not diminish your beauty to appease others.”

Well, she didn’t know how to respond to that. She used an instant mix and not even the fancy brand. It was a discount brand with a cartoon logo. As for beauty, her hair was a mess, and her shirt had an old coffee stain down the front. Glamorous was not the word she’d use to describe herself.

Malgraxon drained his mug and slammed it down on the kitchen counter. “Excellent. Dress for dinner while I prepare our meal. Do you have any allergies or dietary restrictions?”

“Umm, no. I’ll eat anything. I like... food,” she managed to say. Her mind went blank on exactly the type of food she enjoyed because Malgraxon held up her skillet to the light like he was inspecting a treasure. “Sorry, what are you doing?” she asked.

He waved the pan in her direction. “Go. Dress. I want to see you in one of the lovely gowns I purchased.”

“For dinner in my apartment? I’ll ruin it.”

“If you’d rather be naked, I will not complain.” His tongue flicked out, licking his lips, and she blushed hot enough she feared she’d combust.

“Be right back,” she squeaked. Malgraxon’s laughter followed her into her bedroom.

Zelda took a quick shower. Sorting through the estate sale boxes had been dusty work. Apparently, no one bothered to clean the items before packing them away. Zelda had decades worth of dust on her.

The red dress, hastily tossed on the bed, called to her.

With hair still damp and curling around her ears, she opened the box with the black silk panties and matching bra.

Why not? It’d be a crime to wear her old drab things under her lovely new dress.

The silk panties slid over her skin, and the red dress fit like a dream. Turning in front of the mirror, she twisted her head to catch a glimpse of her behind. She felt decadent wearing such expensive things just to hang around her apartment, but she was in no hurry to take them off. As a finishing touch, she wore the meteorite necklace.

When she emerged from the bedroom, dinner waited on the table, along with a fresh bouquet of flowers. Candles had been lit, giving her dingy apartment a shabby chic flair.

Malgraxon kneeled on the floor, attempting to woo Fishtopher with a bowl of milk. The bowl sat between him and the cat.

“He doesn’t drink milk,” she said.

“Your feline is misinformed,” Malgraxon replied. “I can cite multiple sources of Earth lore that indicate that cats drink milk in saucers.”

He pushed the bowl forward an inch. Fishtopher ignored it and licked his paw.

“I hate to tell you, but television lied. Adult cats can’t digest milk. It makes Mr. Fish farty, and we don’t want that.”

“Very well.” He dusted his hands on his trousers as he stood. He gave her an appraising look. “You’re as lovely as a falling star. A blazing comet. You must dress like this all the time. I insist we destroy your old rags immediately.”

Zelda smoothed a hand over her stomach. The fabric fit snugly but did not pinch. Most importantly, the fabric belt did not roll down or dig into her waist. “Thanks, but this isn’t practical to wear every day.”

He made a dismissive noise. “Who cares about practicality when you look delectable?”

“If you want Fishtopher to be your friend, try bribing him with canned tuna,” she said, completely ignoring that he called her delectable.

Malgraxon found a can of tuna in the pantry, and Fishtopher began to cry immediately. The cat was on the tuna the moment

Malgraxon swapped it out for the bowl of milk. He even allowed the demon to pet his head.

Mal crouched down next to the feasting cat, a grin on his face. “He is now my minion,” he said with satisfaction.

“Oh, that’s not how this works at all. You feed him the good stuff. You’re *his* minion.”

“That is acceptable.” Mal continued to stroke the cat, who tolerated the demon’s touch while he greedily scarfed down the tuna.

Zelda caught the aroma of dinner. Her stomach rumbled.

Mal sprang to his feet. “Let us feast!”

With a flourish, he escorted her to the table decorated with a pristine white tablecloth. She had no idea where the tablecloth came from because it was not hers.

Dinner was mushroom risotto, grilled chicken, asparagus drowning in butter, and fresh baked rolls. A bottle of wine chilled in a bucket.

“What is this?” she asked. He didn’t have time to cook, and none of the ingredients came from her kitchen.

“I took the liberty of examining your food purchasing habits, my comet, and ordered before I arrived.” He smiled, displaying his inhuman pointy teeth in his otherwise human face. “I am clever. You are welcome.”

“You hacked me.”

“Only a little.” He gestured for her to pick up a fork. When she did not, his brows pulled together. “Was that wrong?”

“Invading my privacy? Yeah, that was wrong.”

“Eat. I went through all the trouble of breaking several passwords and a few inconsequential laws to have dinner with you.”

She eyed the plate. The risotto looked creamy. Starving to prove a point was just a waste of good food. Really, she’d only be punishing herself.

This is what the Daimoni did. Dangle temptation in front of their target and make it seem like the logical choice to accept, the only choice...

Zelda pushed the plate away. “You’re the devil.”

He grinned, all teeth, and his eyes went dark. “Such flattery.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

Malgraxon uncorked the wine and poured two glasses. “I apologize for invading your privacy. I wanted you to be pleased with the meal, and I did not think how it would make you feel to have your passwords broken.”

Zelda accepted the glass, moved by his thoughtful apology. Dinner and flowers were nice gestures, and he wanted to win over her cat. That counted for a lot. She said, “Thank you. Don’t do it again.”

“I will not, but I suggest a random string of words, not *Iheartfishtopher*.”

And he ruined it.

Zelda drained the glass too quickly to appreciate the perfectly chilled wine. “Why are you here, Malgraxon?”

“Mal, please,” he said with a coaxing grin. “Malgraxon is too formal for friends.”

Yeah, they weren’t friends. Whatever *this* was, it wasn’t friends. Fucked up, absolutely.

“Why are you here?” she repeated.

He picked up his wine and frowned. “One does not like to dine alone. It’s not civilized.”

Sure. That made as much sense as anything.

“Eat,” Malgraxon said, only now all the coaxing had vanished. It was an order.

Zelda picked up the fork and dug into the risotto. It was superb. Everything was fantastic. She remained silent. Malgraxon apparently didn’t care, holding up her side of the conversation. He chatted about nothing in particular, from a documentary he watched on famous art thefts on Earth, to her favorite flower, and an amusing anecdote about his tailor.

The whole evening was surreal. A Daimoni was in her tiny apartment, had spent a small fortune on a new wardrobe for her, and brought her dinner for no reason more serious than he didn’t want to dine alone.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“You see, merino wool is perfectly serviceable, but this is vicuna. The quality is entirely different.”

“Not about your clothes. My clothes. The dresses. The wine. All of this.” She touched the necklace.

His swirling black and blue eyes gazed at her. “This is the bargain we struck. The ruin of Walker Rocheford for your kiss.”

Yeah, he wasn't going to give her a straight answer.

“Why did you come here tonight? Sure, you wanted the secrets of my instant mix hot chocolate, but I ain't buying that,” she said.

Malgraxon refilled his wine glass and leaned back in his chair, swirling the red contents. “When we attend Amiron Yan's party, it is imperative that we are comfortable in each other's company.”

Zelda turned that over. “You mean I acted weird at the dress shop, and you want me to relax.”

“Precisely. You must chill.”

She laughed. It wasn't funny, a demon sitting at her rickety table, drinking wine that cost more than she wanted to know, telling her to chill. “How is this a fair trade? What's in it for you?” There was a trick, always a trick with the Daimoni.

His eyes went black. “Revenge,” he said.

“Revenge,” Zelda repeated, because that made no sense. “Against Walker?”

“Amiron.”

Okay, that made sense. Zelda recalled how Malgraxon had seemed unusually interested in her situation. “If you want revenge against him, you don’t need my help.” Certainly not a scheme that involved them being comfortable in each other’s presence or whatever it was he had planned.

“Unfortunately, even my kind must abide by rules. I cannot move against Amiron directly, as much as I wish to smite the slippery male.”

Interesting. Malgraxon had rules he had to play by. There was a ton of lore about the Daimoni but few actual facts. “So you’ll come at him indirectly through Walker?”

“A happy coincidence.”

Somehow, she doubted that.

“What did Amiron do?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

She really doubted that.

She must not have much of a poker face because Malgraxon said, “We had a bargain. I fulfilled my end of the contract, and he avoided the consequences of his.”

“He outmaneuvered you. Learn to lose gracefully.”

His expression grew dark and dangerous. For just a second, no longer than a heartbeat, black fog steamed from his eyes and his shirt collar. His human face dissolved, and she saw a skull wearing a crown of horns.

“He eluded our bargain once, but I will bind him to an obligation that not even he can escape,” Malgraxon said, his voice deep and resonating in her chest.

Zelda swallowed, suddenly very afraid of Malgraxon and his wrath. There was only a table between them, but it would take nothing for him to reach across and snuff the life out of her.

Then the manifestation was gone.

Malgraxon scowled, but Zelda released the breath she had been holding because the smoke and skull special effects had vanished. He said, “Amiron broke the spirit of our bargain and wormed his way out of the contract’s obligations. It is vexing.”

He was outplayed at his own game. Yeah, she could see how that would be vexing. Rather than share her insights, she should keep her mouth shut. Mal didn’t seem to be in the mood. Yet she said, “And you can’t come at him directly.”

“I will engineer a situation and create a new obligation, one that Amiron will not be able to manipulate.”

“You mentioned a trap—”

His eyes grew dark, the black completely swallowing the light. He reached across the table. Gripping her fork like it was the last line of defense, Zelda remained motionless as he cupped the side of her face with one hand.

“You will be the most magnificent bait,” he said.

Bait... Yeah, nothing to be worried about there.

“What happens if you break the rules?” she asked.

Mal snatched his hand away and stood quickly from the table. “Be ready tomorrow evening. Do something with your hair. I find this ragamuffin appearance charming, but it will not do with Amiron Yan’s sort.”

She touched her still damp hair as she watched him leave. He had said a lot that evening, but it had been mostly empty prattle. What he didn’t say was more interesting.

There were tons of stories about djinn that granted wishes only to twist them. Or monkey paw wishes that came with a terrible price. Fae that offered a bargain that appeared simple on the face of it but was much more complex. Stories of the human getting one over the bargainer, however, were few and far between.

What had Amiron done? What rules tied Malgraxon’s hands?

Worry eased within her. Whatever Malgraxon’s motive, he wasn’t after her. She was just a bystander caught up in his ultimate target: Amiron.



A knock sounded on her door at the top of the hour.

Right on time.

After their disastrous dinner, Zelda half-expected Malgraxon to turn up the next morning with coffee and bagels or burst into the pawnshop like nothing happened. He did neither.

“You’re here,” Zelda said, opening the door to Malgraxon.

Dressed in a well-tailored suit, he was elegance personified with the same face as last time. The eyes, though—they were entirely human, and it looked wrong. Dull.

“We have a bargain,” he said. His gaze swept over her, his eyes shifting from regular blue to smoky black and back again.

Zelda touched the meteorite necklace. She couldn't help but recall how his eyes blazed when he put the necklace on her, how she felt sure he would lean down and preemptively claim his kiss. She got the same vibe from him now, which was silly. She knew what she looked like. The midnight blue dress was very flattering, but there was only so much she could do with her hair and makeup. Tonight, she set her chestnut hair in loose curls, and thankfully her hair cooperated.

“Your lips are very red,” he said.

“Thank you. It's called rouge star.” The vivid red lipstick was a risk, but it worked well with her complexion and the classic look of the dress.

“It suits you.” His eyes flared again, and he pressed a finger to his lip, contemplating her.

Zelda blushed, unused to such open admiration.

“Are you wearing everything I sent?”

Zelda nodded.

He leaned in to whisper, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

“The black panties?”

She sucked in a breath. She had worn the black silk panties the night before. Tonight, she wore a pink pair. It seemed a crime not to wear them.

“Not black. What color?” he asked.

“Pink.”

“Good,” he said, his voice purring.

She shivered. So help her, she shivered.

“Shall we? I have enemies to smite,” he said, holding out his arm.

Right. He wasn't here for her or the pink silk panties. They had a contract.

It was better this way. He was flirty by nature. It had nothing to do with her. She was just collateral damage, caught up in the force of nature that was his charm. This was strictly business. She wouldn't want her emotions to get confused.

Four

Amiron Yan lived in the penthouse suite in a tower that pierced the dome. The more expensive towers extended beyond the city's dome, using a haze field to keep the Martian dust out and the atmosphere in.

Malgraxon's vehicle rose into the sky, and the city below grew smaller. Beyond the dome, farms and homesteads shimmered in their enclosures, spreading out from the city in a tangle. Traffic in and out of Opportunity funneled through gates positioned around the dome. It was not a fast process. Surely docking in the tower's lower level and taking an elevator would have been faster than slowly inching their way up before finally being allowed to pass through the haze barrier.

Red dust surrounded the vehicle. Zelda's nose itched just imagining the grit trying to work its way inside, but not a single speck made it through the seals.

As the vehicle approached the tower's docking bay, the computer requested an access code. For a moment, the control panel went dark. After a moment, the vehicle's dash unlocked,

and it glided smoothly into the bay. Once parked, the doors remained closed. Mal drummed his fingers on the controls.

“You are familiar with the plan,” he said, not asking.

“Yes. Be bait.” Zelda didn’t like it, but it was the plan. “I don’t see how that’s a good plan.”

“Walker is unlikely to make a move. Reconnaissance is required for a successful robbery.”

“What if he just goes for a smash and grab?”

Mal scoffed. “Was the robbery at your museum a smash and grab, or was it carefully orchestrated?”

It happened after hours in the midst of the museum upgrading the security. New cameras were not yet online, and the staff ID cards opened doors without requiring a retina scan. Not a single alarm had been triggered. The entire affair reeked of an inside job. Someone told the thieves the best day to strike. Zelda looked so damn guilty she almost suspected herself.

“You made your point,” she mumbled.

“Just be your charming self. You will distract the unworthy male and throw off the game,” Mal said, patting her on the head.

Zelda smoothed down her hair and glared at Mal’s retreating back, not appreciating the way her heart thumped at his compliment, even if its delivery had been haughty.

Mal swept through security, barely pausing to flash his invitation, and strode into Amiron Yan’s penthouse apartment

like a conquering king.

Or a demon come to claim a soul.

The penthouse was the peak of money and elegance. Glass walls opened the penthouse directly to the blue and violet sunset sky. The last rays of the sun caught in a crystal art installation over the center of the room, scattering a cool blue light.

The painting was the centerpiece of the room. It was subtle, the way the furniture was positioned to draw the eye to the small canvas with vivid yellow flowers hung over a fireplace. Guests milled about the room, purposefully ignoring the lost Van Gogh like it was nothing special.

Mal grabbed two drinks from a passing tray and handed one to her. “Drink conservatively. Be alert.”

“More camouflage?” she asked, taking a sip. The wine was alarmingly tart. She wrinkled her nose. Was this considered fine wine? She wasn’t a wine person and had no idea.

“Stay with me,” he said in a quiet command, steering them through the room with a hand on her lower back. He greeted people with empty pleasantries. Zelda couldn’t tell if Mal knew the people he spoke to or if it was all a show. She recognized a few faces from the museum—the art world on Mars was small, after all—but no one acknowledged her, but she heard the whispers.

“What is *she* doing here?”

“I thought she went back to Earth.”

“Poor thing. I heard she’s working in a pawn shop, of all places.”

Zelda’s jaw clenched as she struggled to hold her tongue. Gilly’s shop wasn’t glamorous, but it was honest. Well, honest-ish. Fine, fine, the shop was shady, but Gilly would never whisper about someone behind their back. She’d give them a piece of her mind right to their face.

Mal’s fingers dug into her back before relaxing. “Ignore them,” he murmured.

“They’re not wrong. I shouldn’t be here,” she said, taking another sip of wine.

“They are jealous,” he said. Before she could protest and claim that no one in this rich person’s soiree was jealous of her, he said, “You are interesting and unexpected. Notorious. People can’t resist discussing you. What is interesting about them? Nothing. The number of credits they have in the bank, that’s all they have to discuss.”

“Being notorious is not all it’s cracked up to be,” she said, faintly amused.

Mal paused by the fireplace and the painting, allowing her to take a closer look without being obvious.

“What do you think? Would you like it? I’ll steal it for you. Just say the word,” he said.

Zelda gave him some side eye, not convinced that he was joking. Reminding him that they were there to stop the painting from being stolen, not to steal it for themselves,

seemed like the sort of thing she shouldn't have to say. Still, better safe than sorry.

"It's a gorgeous painting," she said. "Too bad it's fake."

Five

“A fake, you say?” Mal stroked his chin. Zelda could see the wheels turning in his head. “How can you tell?”

“Well, the best way would be radiocarbon dating the paint and the canvas, but we can’t do that right now,” she said. A savvy forger would use a canvas from the right period. Often, unwanted paintings were stripped from the canvas or simply painted over. Paint dried out and wouldn’t have survived the centuries. “The forger might be using age-appropriate pigments, but the linseed oil would be modern. The second best tell would be the back. The real thing would have stamps from every gallery and auction it’s been at. If it’s too clean, it’s a fake.”

Zelda’s fingers itched to lift the frame from the wall and inspect the back of the painting. A nearby guard gave her the stink eye.

“Right now, I’m going with the fact that there’s the wrong number of poppies in the painting. The real one has two red blossoms and one bud. This has three full blossoms,” she said.

“Are you certain?”

Zelda rolled her eyes. “About one of the most infamous stolen works of art? About a painting rumored to be on Mars and one I researched before the party? Yes, I’m certain. Honestly, I don’t question your deal-with-the-devilry.”

“That is false. You have questioned me at every step,” Mal said, amusement in his voice.

Zelda turned to Mal. “Is Amiron the kind of person who’d be upset if he were cheated, or is this a prank he’s playing on us?”

Mal considered the painting before answering. “He is vain and craves constant attention. This may be a ploy. The painting’s existence was a badly kept secret.”

“So, he knows it’s fake, and his humble brag drew the wrong sort of attention,” she said, nodding her head. “He deserves to be robbed.”

Mal laughed and it was bone chilling, like a leak in the dome that let in dust and radiation. All the hair on the back of her neck stood at attention because something very bad was coming.

“You have a petty heart, Zelda Kniffen. I approve,” he said.

Night had fallen. Below, the lights of the city glimmered. Above, the two moons huddled together in the sky. Soon the larger, Phobos, would pull away, leaving Deimos alone.

None of that held her attention.

Zelda stared at her reflection. She didn't recognize herself. It was more than the dress and how her shoulder-length hair flipped up in curls. It was also more than the striking man standing next to her or the way his eyes smoldered when he looked at her. Literally smoldered.

She was happy.

Malgraxon needled and teased her, treating their entire arrangement like a private joke, but she liked the feeling of being in on the joke. Could she be this person all the time, or was this a one-time deal?

The party fell silent, just a natural pause in conversation. Zelda spotted Walker exiting the elevator. He looked the same, which was to say flawless and handsome, with his square jaw and perfectly styled hair. The woman on his arm was gorgeous. That went without saying.

Mal stood next to her, his hand resting on her shoulder.

From this distance, she didn't feel much of anything. She expected to be hurt, maybe sad, definitely angry, but right now, her emotional landscape was as cold and barren as the red planet she called home.

Walker must have sensed her staring at him. He turned. For just a moment, his eyes went wide, and the color drained from his face. The woman on his arm spoke, snagging his attention, and the charming smile returned.

Mal's grip tightened on her shoulder, prompting her to look at him. "I will hunt our host. You will remain here."

“And be bait,” she said in a dry tone. “Although, maybe reconsider your use of the word hunt.”

For a second, his eyes went black. “I did not misspeak.” He did not shout. Even though he spoke barely above a whisper, she felt his words reverberate within her.

Zelda managed to make a squeaky noise as a response.

He cradled the side of her face with one hand. She couldn’t look away as the black in his eyes swirled and eventually dissipated. “Do not let that unworthy male rattle you. Only I get that pleasure.”

The way he said that word, like he was lapping up honey... and now she was blushing. Before she could form a reasonably coherent retort, he left to speak with a silver-haired man.

The man stood out from the crowd, wearing a casual black sweater, white linen trousers, and no shoes. Zelda recognized Amiron Yan, the wealthiest man on Mars. Who else would have the nerve to go barefoot to a posh shindig?

She drifted over to a glass sculpture on a pedestal. It was a complicated, free-flowing form spun in crystal clear glass, and it was absolutely boring. Technically difficult, sure. Not a single bubble or blemish marred the glass, and that was what made it soulless. It was too perfect. Zelda couldn’t imagine the hours that went into handling the molten glass, blowing it, working it into the correct shape, reheating and shaping again, twisting the liquid glass so the finished product looked like it was trying to melt its way off its pedestal. The sculpture was definitely a statement piece, but whether it was about a

philosophical stance or just a commentary about how some people would hand over loads of cash for fine art, she wasn't sure.

Actually, now that she circled the sculpture, she was certain it was about taking money from fools.

"It's an impressive piece," Walker said, sliding up next to her.

"Technically impressive," she replied, turning her gaze to him. Her grip tightened on the wine glass. "It's an attractive package that, much like clear glass, is transparent. There's nothing inside."

Walker huffed and grinned. "Why do I get the feeling you're not talking about the sculpture?"

"I like it," the woman clinging to Walker's arm said.

"Zelda, this is my fiancé, Luna," he said.

"Luna like the moon," Luna said, for no good reason. Her gaze swept over Zelda, as if calculating how much of a risk she posed. "How do you know each other?"

Now that she was face to face with the man who betrayed her, Zelda expected anger to overcome her. To blind her. He used her, framed her, and replaced her. Absolutely no one would blame her for throwing her drink in his face. Instead, she felt cold.

"We used to work together," he answered.

"Oh, I didn't know you were an art dealer," Luna said, giving Zelda a cold smile. "The art world is so small here. I thought I

knew everyone.”

“I do appraisals for a private dealer now,” Zelda replied, bending the truth a smidge.

“How interesting. Oh, Bebe wants to talk. I’ll let you two talk shop,” Luna said, planting a kiss on Walker’s cheek before leaving.

Zelda raised her glass at the display. In an artificially sweet voice, she said, “Wow. I completely expected her to pee on you and mark her territory.”

“Don’t be crass,” Walker said, his tone still genial. With that fake smile still on his face, he scanned the room to see if anyone was listening to him. “I heard you were working in a pawn shop.”

“Well, I admit the situation is a bit humbling, but that’s what happens when you’re framed for robbing your boss. Makes potential employers skittish.”

“Is this a joke to you, Zelda? What are you doing here?” He touched her arm, but she jerked away.

“Same as you, I expect,” she answered.

“Oh, I doubt that.”

She lifted her chin and gave a subtle nod in the direction of the fake Van Gogh.

“I have no idea what you mean. I’m just here for the booze and conversation,” he said, draining his glass. He grabbed another from a passing tray. Worry lurked behind his eyes and

made his shoulders sag. Under the lights, he appeared waxen and gray. Dull.

Boring, she could hear Mal whisper.

Zelda watched their reflections in the window. Up close, Walker's glossy perfection was overwhelming. In the reflection, with the cold Martian night on the other side, he was just bland. Technically flawless, but empty.

This was the guy who had her in knots? Who took up so much of her mental energy?

What a waste. She liked his face much better when Mal wore it.

"Was any of it real?" she asked, turning her attention back to him. She didn't want to know, but she needed to know. Was he coerced? Or did he spot an easy mark with Zelda, someone willing to overlook his inconsistencies, and faked the entire thing?

"It was as real as it needed to be," he said.

There it was, absolutely the worst response.

"Wow, you could at least try to lie to me and spare my feelings."

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "Doesn't seem worth the effort. Not much about you required much effort, honestly. You were just so grateful for any attention."

Zelda's gaze flicked to the heavy glass sculpture. Smashing him over the head with it wouldn't solve anything, but she'd

feel better.

“I wouldn’t,” Walker cautioned. “You don’t want to add assault and vandalism to your list of crimes.”

“Don’t be silly. The spatter would ruin this dress,” she replied coolly.

Walker opened his mouth, no doubt for some cruel and witty retort, when glass shattered.

Six

The far wall exploded, sending glass shards flying into the crowd. A smoking canister rolled across the floor. A panic-filled cry surged through the party goers as they tried to flee the gas. The ventilation system kicked on immediately, drawing away the smoke.

Malgraxon was beside her in an instant. “Are you injured?” He ran his hands over her, searching for nonexistent injuries.

“I’m fine.” She rubbed her watering eyes. “So much for this not being a smash and grab.”

“You did this,” Mal growled, turning on Walker, who held up his hands in surrender.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Walker said.

Another cry of panic rippled through the crowd. A cargo vehicle, the kind used for deliveries, hovered just outside the broken window. Armed men leaped down, glass crunching under their boots.

One strode to the front and fired his rifle into the ceiling. More cries and some sobbing. “Listen up!” he shouted over the uproar. “Don’t try to be a hero and everyone gets to go home tonight.”

Several things happened at once.

Zelda ran a finger over her bracelet, activating the communication function. Contacting emergency services was as easy as mashing her fingers against the screen. The network would determine her location and send a response.

The silver-haired Amiron Yan ran toward Mal through broken glass, with bare feet.

Zelda clenched her teeth, imagining the pain.

“Stay put!” one of the robbers shouted, then fired a shot into the floor.

Amiron flinched but stopped in his tracks. “Okay, okay,” he said, holding up his hands.

“On the ground.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Amiron said, not grasping the fact that he was not in a position to negotiate.

“On the ground!” Another shot, this one not a warning. More screams.

Amiron dropped to the floor, clutching his leg. “You shot me!”

The gunman ignored Amiron’s cries of pain. “Anyone else think they deserve special treatment?”

As all this happened, another gunman pointed a rifle at Walker. “You. Grab the painting over the mantle.”

Walker didn’t protest, hopping over to the fireplace.

A silence had fallen over the room. Amid whimpers and soft sobbing, no one spoke. No sirens. No security system alarm, presumably having been disabled. Nothing disturbed the quiet, not even wind as the haze barrier kept the dusty Martian atmosphere out.

“Emergency services are unable to reach your location,” a flat, computerized voice informed Zelda. She slapped her hand over the bracelet to muffle the sound.

The nearest gunman turned his rifle toward her. Malgraxon growled. Actually growled. “Do not,” Mal warned.

“You called the cops?” the gunman asked, ignoring Mal.

“No. I didn’t,” she said, frantically trying to put the device on silent. “That’s my virtual assistant. I need to take my meds.”

Amiron rolled over to look at Malgraxon. “You have to do something,” he pleaded in a quiet voice.

“Do I?” Mal asked, not taking his eyes off the man pointing a rifle at Zelda.

Another robber kept his gun pointed at the crowd while another two smashed glass cases and removed the treasures within. It was oddly leisurely. The fifth person had a pistol on Walker as he removed the poppy painting. No one bothered with the glass blob near Zelda.

“You can have anything you want. Just make this stop,” Amiron whispered.

Walker clutched the painting, a pistol pressed against the back of his head. They moved through the room, toward the smashed window and waiting vehicle.

“You will owe me a favor,” Mal said, his voice taking on the resonant tone.

The robbers rushed to the vehicle, still threatening the crowd with their weapons. They’d be gone in mere seconds, and the emergency responders were nowhere to be found.

“Yes, yes. Anything,” Amiron said.

Mal gave a weary sigh and snapped his fingers.

Walker tripped over his own feet, falling to the ground. The painting hit the ground, the frame giving an alarming creak of splintering wood.

How? Was Mal telekinetic, not telepathic?

“It’s a simple gravity distortion field, and I’m observant,” Malgraxon said, anticipating her thoughts. He chuckled, cradling the side of her face with an indulgent expression. “It’s all over your face, my sweet comet. No telepathy required. Do not touch that one,” he snarled, turning his attention back to Walker.

A robber grabbed the painting and jumped through the window, into the vehicle. As quick as they came, they were gone.

The crowd remained still.

“You were supposed to stop them,” Amiron said, pointing an accusing finger at Mal. His shout echoed in the room. Red spread on his white trousers.

“You demanded that I make it stop. It is over.”

“They took my painting. Do you know how much money it took to get it to Mars?”

Zelda grabbed a towel from a discarded tray and pressed it to the wound on Amiron’s leg. “Someone call emergency services,” she ordered.

“I’m trying. The gate is blocked,” a voice said. “There’s a vehicle fire.”

There was only one gate nearby that allowed traffic through the dome. Others were scattered across the city, but it would take time to reach them. No wonder the robbers weren’t in a hurry.

“You,” Mal growled, stalking toward Walker. “You did this.”

“Me? I had a gun to my head,” Walker said, all charm and smiles. He ran a hand over the back of his head, mussing his hair. Mal’s back was toward Zelda, so she couldn’t see his face. Whatever Walker saw—whatever visage Mal was showing him—it made the color drain from his face.

Mal’s hand snapped out, grabbing Walker by the throat.

Fury etched into his very being, Mal dragged Walker through the suite to the open balcony. The crowd parted around them.

Gasping for breath, Walker clawed at Mal's hand, but to no avail.

Zelda hurried after, worried what Mal would do.

Mal lifted Walker, whose face was now red, and held him over the edge of the balcony. His legs kicked uselessly. Mal opened his hand and stepped back.

"Wait! Don't!" Zelda said, extending a hand like she could catch Walker.

Walker hung suspended. His eyes went wide in disbelief.

Right, a gravitational distortion.

"I should let this pathetic creature fall," Mal said with a snarl. His eyes were black as ink—black as the void. Moving his hand in a circular motion, Walker turned upside down.

"Please don't," Walker croaked. He dangled in midair, one leg rigid like he was suspended by an invisible rope. The other kicked wildly.

"You can't just drop him off the side of a building," she said.

"Why ever not?" Mal sounded genuinely perplexed. "You wanted vengeance. This is vengeance."

Mal's hand twitched and Walker dropped a foot, yelping in surprise.

"Yeah, I wanted him to suffer, not to be murdered. Big difference," she said. Dropping Walker to his death was too much. Why couldn't Mal see that?

“Is this loyalty? You owe this male nothing,” Mal said. Then he grimaced, like he had a bitter taste in his mouth. “You have lingering feelings for this male.”

“Absolutely not,” she said instantly. She didn’t know how long Mal could keep Walker suspended like that. It must have been tiring. This seemed like the sort of thing that warranted a quick resolution.

“You lie.”

Walker dropped a foot and yelped in surprise. “Don’t drop me. Don’t drop me. Please. I’ll do anything you want,” he begged. Honestly, she was embarrassed for him. Abject terror was not a good look for him.

“A few hours ago, I might have agreed with you,” Zelda said, “but I’m over him.”

Mal huffed. “A likely story.”

“Look, just because I don’t want you to murder my ex doesn’t mean I still have feelings for the guy. He’s a snake.”

“A handsome snake,” Mal said, his lips curled in disgust.

“A handsome snake, but what do I want with snakes? Really, all he’s got to offer is good looks. He’s just empty and greedy. I’m over it.” Zelda didn’t know how to better express herself. Then, for good measure, she added, “Besides, he’s boring.”

Mal’s eyes swirled black and blue. “He is rather tedious. All this screaming and begging.”

“Whatever you want, I’ll do it,” Walker promised.

“Confess your involvement in the robbery tonight.”

“I didn’t—”

Mal sighed. “Boring.”

Walker dropped half a foot, giving a high-pitched screech. “Okay! I didn’t know they were going to do it tonight. I swear.”

“Boring and a liar.” Mal rotated his wrist, and Walker turned slowly.

His face green, Walker silently pleaded with Zelda to do something. Anything.

“You know what you have to do,” she said. She really didn’t want to watch Mal torture Walker, but the lout also kind of deserved it. She held up her bracelet with the embedded comm unit to record Walker’s confession. “Hurry up. I don’t want the authorities to catch Mal playing with his food.”

Walker made a strangled noise. “Fine! Fine. Yan’s security is too good. The party was the only chance to grab the painting.”

“Tell me about the museum,” Mal ordered.

“What museum?”

Oh, the nerve of this guy. Dangling upside down, held aloft by only the power of one irritated demon, and he was playing ignorant.

“You’re right, this is boring,” Zelda said to Mal. “Drop him.”

“No! No, wait! It was me at the museum,” Walker blurted out. His eyes were glassy with tears. Snot trickled down from his

nose. It should have delighted her that he had been reduced to a snotty, blubbering mess, and part of her wanted to be horrified or dispassionate, but it did delight her. She was a petty, vindictive woman.

“And?” Mal prompted.

“I used Zelda’s credentials. I’m sorry. It was all me. She had nothing to do with it.”

“Hmm. Was that satisfactory?” Mal asked her.

“That will do.” She ended the recording and sent the file to various outlets.

“Excellent.” Mal waved his hand, and Walker fell.

Seven

Walker vanished below the balcony's railing.

Zelda's heart dropped all the way to the ground, all twenty zillion stories. She ran to the balcony's edge, gripping the railing.

Below, on a balcony one story down, Walker sprawled on the ground. He moaned and moved his legs.

Luna—where had she been this whole time?—rushed to the railing. She turned on Zelda, jabbing a finger at her. “What did you do? You pushed him!”

“I didn't—”

“Do not worry. It was only a little fall,” Mal said, steering Zelda away.

“Don't walk away from me,” Luna ordered. “Walker told me all about you. We'll sue!”

Mal waved a carefree hand, not stopping as he walked away. “I believe he will be too preoccupied to bother with such

trifling concerns.”

Zelda tried to turn around, to watch as emergency services finally arrived. Luna shouted for a medic.

“Shouldn’t we... I don’t know, help?” Zelda asked.

“I caught him. He fell a meter. Only his pride is injured,” Mal said.

“Oh,” she responded, unable to think of anything else.

No one stopped them as they headed for the elevators. Zelda wasn’t sure if it was another one of Mal’s tricks or just the general chaos of very important people all vying for the attention of the emergency responders.

Once in the elevator, he pushed her against the wall.

Zelda gasped, their bodies pressed together. He had a hand planted over her hand. The other toyed with the meteorite necklace.

“I showed compassion. Does that please you?” His black eyes bore down on her.

“Yes,” she answered, her voice thick.

“I ruined that male for you. Does that please you?”

It did. It really did.

Zelda nodded.

“Good. Now show me the pink panties.”

“Shouldn’t we—”

He tugged on the necklace, pulling her forward. “My kiss,” he said.

“Then kiss me,” she said, lifting her face to his.

“Panties. On the floor. And then I will have my kiss.”

Oh. *Oh*. A kiss down there. That was the trick. They hadn’t specified the location of the kiss.

Her blush intensified. Zelda felt as if she might burst into flames. She should be appalled at Mal’s manipulation of their bargain, of him taking more than she intended to give. Oddly, she didn’t mind so much. “Here? In the elevator?”

“I want to taste you now, and I am a male inclined to indulgence.” He stroked a finger along the curve of her cheek. His eyes were black, swallowing the light. A dark mist gathered in the elevator. Mal wore a crown of horns. He was terrifying. When he spoke, his voice echoed inside her head. “If you do not wish for this, I will respect your choice.”

The rational part of her mind told her that she should be frightened. Yes, her heart beat faster, but it wasn’t from fear. She wanted Mal. She’d been attracted to him almost instantly. The flirting and the charm made her hesitant, like he was faking it, but she saw desire in those dark eyes.

For her. *Her*. Plain old Zelda Kniffen, who worked in a pawn shop.

“Okay,” she said.

“Yes?”

She nodded. “Yes. I want you to kiss me.”

He leaned in and nuzzled his face against her neck. “Where do you want me to kiss you, my comet, my falling star?”

“Anywhere you like.”

He growled, then licked the column of her throat. With a flick of his hand, the elevator stopped.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I will not be rushed, and I’d rather the doors not open while I enjoy you.”

Zelda lifted the hem of her dress.

“Allow me,” he said. With another flick of his hand, the hem rose, revealing the pink silk panties. He rubbed his fingers against the fabric, groaning to find it already damp. Kneeling, he hooked his fingers under the waistband and slid them down.

Another flick of his hand and Zelda was lifted in the air. She yelped in surprise.

“I have you,” he said, spreading her legs open. “You’re so lovely, Zelda Kniffen.”

She didn’t have time to worry about being exposed or what Mal thought of her bits. He dove straight in with the enthusiasm of a thirsty man guzzling the last glass of cold water.

He kissed the soft flesh of her inner thigh, then licked her folds. That tongue. It was as wonderful as she suspected. Warm, silky, and just enough texture to make her shiver as he

lapped her up. He circled her clit, eliciting a gasp. She reached for his head, grabbing one of the spikes in his crown of horns.

He growled, his ministrations growing in intensity.

Then his tongue went inside her core. Pleasure coiled tightly inside her. She wanted to wrap her legs around his head, to lift her hips and hold him against her, but she was pinned to the wall by an invisible force. His tongue hit all the right spots, places she didn't know she had. Her nerves sang with delight and begged for release.

“Mal, please,” she pleaded.

“What do you need, my falling star?”

“Don't stop.”

His tongue, long and so, so perfect, filled her. He pulled back, and somehow, he was able to lave both her sensitive clit and plumb the depths of her core all at once.

That wonderfully long tongue.

Ecstasy coiled tighter and tighter, squeezing her until she thought she might break from the pleasure of it all. Pinned against the wall, held up by more than Mal's hands, all she could do was let sensation roll through her. She squirmed and bucked, grabbed his horns, and twisted her fingers into his hair. The black smoke curled and wrapped up her arms. The cool touch made his tongue and mouth that much more intense. He was heat where he licked and sucked. His fingers dug into her soft inner thighs.

Her climax came with a cry, echoing off the elevator walls.

Mal remained in place, breathing her in. Gently, he pulled back and lowered her to the floor.

Zelda wobbled on unsteady legs. She tugged down her dress and smoothed a hand over her hair. Flush and tingling, she was sure she looked a mess. Anyone who saw her would know what they'd been doing. Again, oddly, she didn't mind.

Still kneeling, Mal licked his glossy lips. His face shined from, well, her. Rising to his feet, he gathered her into his arms. Zelda lifted her face instinctively, wanting another kiss.

His swirling eyes gazed down at her, as intense as ever.

Zelda smiled back. That moment felt endless. She could happily rest there, in Mal's embrace, for a long time.

Apparently, at some point the elevator had started up again. She hadn't noticed until it stopped suddenly.

"This is our stop," Mal said as the elevator opened to an elegant hallway.

"This isn't the garage." She pulled away, the moment over. Their bargain was finished. She'd go home and back to her ordinary life. Maybe she'd get her job back, but she wasn't sure she wanted to go back. The museum and all her old colleagues dropped her without a second thought. Gilly, for all her flaws and questionable notions of property ownership, was reliable.

"Such an archaic word," he muttered. "No. My residence is on this floor."

“You live here?” Zelda stuck her head out of the elevator, like she could tell which door belonged to Mal.

“I must sleep somewhere. This is as good a domicile as any.”

Zelda disagreed. The building was expensive and exclusive. There were plenty of places good enough to sleep in. This was one of the most luxurious buildings her little planet had to offer. “I thought you’d take me home.”

“I will feed you,” he said, frowning as if he didn’t know why he said that.

“You don’t have to do anything. Our contract is finished. All obligations met.”

“No. I want to feed you.” He extended his hand. “My gift, freely given.”

Zelda searched his face for some hint as to his motivation. Was this pity, another trick, or did he enjoy her company? Perhaps he was simply hungry.

Don’t overthink it.

“Sounds good,” she said, taking his hand. Her skin tingled where they touched. Unlike the electrified jolt that went through her when they made their bargain, this felt lighter. Promising, like a beginning.

Epilogue

MALGRAXON

She was meant to be temporary. A means to an end. It wasn't meant to be *complicated*. He loathed complications. He cooked for her, for fuck's sake.

Amiron Yan now owed him a favor. He could feel that obligation binding them together, and he would keep it in place as long as possible. Having the richest person on Mars bound to him was no small thing, after all, yet Malgraxon was not satisfied.

He wanted more.

Her taste lingered on his lips, and he yearned for another taste.

Definitely a complication.

Now he waited in her apartment for her return.

Mal stroked the feline's head, causing the creature to purr. Paws kneaded his lap, claws pricking through the fabric of his trousers.

“This is vicuna wool, you heathen,” he said, continuing to pet the cat who did not care a jot.

But Mal cared, and that was the problem. Somehow, the human female had wormed her way past his barriers. He cared about her fragile emotions when that lout Walker insulted her. He cared about her approval when she asked him not to drop the same lout off the top of a very tall building. He wanted her to know that she was desirable and worship her. Honestly, it was no bother at all worshipping her luscious form.

Caring. Bah.

He rubbed his chest at the unfamiliar sensation. His kind did not form attachment to their prey, and humans were most definitely prey. Imagine the scandal if he formed a mate bond with a human.

For a moment, he gave himself the luxury of imagining just that. The first thing he'd do is install his mate in proper quarters, one with an adequate security system. Her current dwelling was a hovel, and the security system a joke. It took no effort at all to bypass, and she had not updated her passwords. Any novice could break in.

Proper quarters with a challenging security system. It was decided. Then he'd teach her how to break the most advanced security systems. Zelda seemed the sort to enjoy a spot of breaking and entering, no matter how she claimed she was a law-abiding citizen.

Law-abiding citizens did not make deals with his kind.

Taking a human mate wasn't strictly forbidden. Other Daimoni would not be pleased at his choice, but would their displeasure be limited to empty words, or would there be consequences? Further complications?

Mal was reluctant to jeopardize his soulstone. For so long, he had hoarded his remaining lives. He was a selfish male.

Something had changed, and he did not approve.

Not long ago, the idea of sharing his days with anyone seemed abhorrent. Cutting his lifespan short for what? Companionship? Sex? He had never experienced any great difficulty obtaining either of those, but if it was with Zelda, who burned as bright as a falling star... Yes, that was different.

It was strange and wonderful and more than a little frightening.

In other words, perfect.

The door chirped, and the ancient lock turned.

"What are you doing here?" Zelda stood in the doorway, key in hand, her luscious mouth rounded with surprise.

By all the stars in the sky, she was a delight. An approving growl rumbled in his throat.

"I have a proposition for you," he said.

Note to the Reader

Nancey is a *USA Today* bestselling author. She writes fast-paced, low-angst books about kissing aliens, because that's how she rolls.

She once had an argument with her husband about being married in space. He claimed that marriage was a legal contract and ended when a person left orbit. Nancey said the vows were “till death do us part” not “until the spaceship departs.” She has written twenty books about being married in space just to prove him wrong.

Let's keep in touch! Join Nancey's newsletter for all the latest and get a free copy of *Korven's Fire*.

<https://BookHip.com/VSTBJK>

Bride of the Hallow King by Olivia Riley

MF ♡♥☠

Synopsis



EVERY HALLOW'S DAY ON DRAK IS FILLED
WITH CELEBRATION. AND FEAR...

Every year Sara and her people give offerings to the Hollow King who claims the land they call home as his, in hopes of keeping him and his vampiric kin away. To keep some sort of peace.

But this year is different. The Hollow King wants more than offerings. He wants a bride.

He wants Sara.

Content Warnings: *implied violence and death*

Drak

THE END OF SUMMERTIDE

Elsyn

Despair seeped into his very bones.

Elsyn paced the high terrace above his keep, the red moon—Amara—hanging above him, a giant in the sky, unable to do anything but cast her soft light onto him, currently his only comfort.

For years he had been utterly alone. That is, without a queen by his side. He had his children, the vampyra, his creations, made from the melding of his blood and that of nocturnal beasts, carefully constructed in his labs. He loved them but only as a father or a king would, even if they would sacrifice everything to be his eternal mate.

But his mate could not come from them. There were the others of his own kind—the vysra—but they were a dying breed. What few vysra women were left were barren, the queen

sisters of the black sea the only ones left who might be able to naturally birth another. But they had become too blind to their own power and control of their domains to want to share it with another. They would rather steal one's power instead. Their manipulation and deceit were known to many who did not swear allegiance to them.

So he had been resigned to his fate for some time.

Until he'd spoken with her, his cherished one.

She was a starling—a fallen one—as he called her kind, though some called them outsiders. They called themselves humans. They had come from the deep heavens from ships that had crashed on his planet ages ago. They had been explorers, but fate had brought them here. They could not return to their own home, so they made do with his. They kept to themselves and all the vysra asked in return was their fealty. Many gave it out of fear; some didn't, also out of fear.

But that was long ago, and he hadn't thought much of them, only as strange curiosities. Some had settled and made cities, one currently in his territory. His children sometimes toyed with them but as the starlings started sending offerings in hopes of gaining peace, he ordered his vampyra to leave them be unless any starlings were foolish enough to come within the domain of his keep.

That was how he discovered her.



He had been walking alone near to the mountainside when he'd come across the remains of a soldier. The memory of it seeped into his brain now as clear as still water. The soldier had obviously been looking to infiltrate his keep and had been attacked and killed on his journey by one of the many beasts that stalked the grounds. Now only his bones, tattered clothing, and pack remained. Elsyn had studied the specimen for only a moment and was about to continue on his walk when he heard her voice.

"Is someone there?"

The feminine voice had caught him off guard, making him halt in his tracks. He returned to the body of the soldier, noticing the voice had somehow come from it. It was there, beneath the bones, that he found the communication device, a small handheld transceiver.

He turned it in his hands and the voice returned, coming from the little device. "Hello, anyone?"

He understood she did not come from inside the little box but was speaking through it, likely from somewhere else on Drak. Curious and somewhat amused, he pressed at the center of the transceiver and replied.

"I'm here."

There was a moment of silence then, "Wow, I can't believe someone actually, responded."

A little smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth. "I can't believe I heard someone calling."

Her laughter was soft and genuine, and he found he liked the sound. “I figured the other receiver might be lost somewhere since I found this one in the forest. Are they yours?”

He glanced down at the soldier. “No. They’re not.”

“Ah, so you found the other one too?”

“I did.”

“I see. It must have been fate then.”

His hand tightened around the device. “Perhaps.”

He heard her laughter again, a little uncertain this time. “So what city are you in?”

He paused, considering how much to tell her. It was refreshing to hear someone speak to him so casually, to not have to hear the fear laced in their voice or listen to them call him ‘Sire’ after every sentence. He decided, unwilling to lie entirely, to tell her that he lived in a remote place near the mountains.

“Ah, interesting. I didn’t know people had established a new settlement out there. Aren’t you afraid of the vampyra?”

He wasn’t sure how to better respond than to say. “No.” And that dwindled down any assumptions that she was one of his own. Perhaps one of Garik’s werelings since she mentioned the forest?

“I’m south of the mountains. In Havencrest.”

He went still. That was the city of the starlings within his domain. She was one of them.

“That is a well-established city,” he said matter-of-factly, forcing himself to be as neutral as possible. He no longer had any qualms with their kind, especially ever since they sent the offerings each year on Amarith’s Day. But there was still a shaky history between them and his kindred, with fights that had broken out over the years. The soldier was a testament that some still disliked him and his kind, even if they acknowledged him as ruler of the domain. He may need to be wary of telling her too much.

“It’s not so bad,” she said, about her city. “Though I would have liked to see an ocean.”

“You have never seen one?”

“Not any near me.”

That was too bad but not entirely surprising. He was told the starlings rarely left their cities except for some who might be traveling in between settlements.

“You should see them. They are beautiful,” he said, thinking of the sapphire sea more than the black.

“Maybe someday...”

There was a loud rush of noise on the other end and for a moment he feared he was losing her.

“Ah, I have to go,” she whispered. “Oh, but please keep in touch, won’t you? I’d love to hear more.”

He straightened, his eyes studying the little device as if believing he might see a vision of her if he stared long enough.

“I will, you have my word.”

He could practically hear her smile. “Good. Oh, and my name is Sara.”

He smiled too. “Elsyn.”

That had been only the beginning. He had hidden the communicator on his person and brought it back to his keep. He kept it on him at first, and in the hours he was alone he would call to her, and sometimes she would respond and sometimes she didn't. Sometimes she called him, and he couldn't respond back until later. Eventually, they figured out the best times to speak, usually at night before the moons were at their peak.

Within the small alcove in his library, he sat in his favorite chair and would read and wait. Then he would hear the small rush of noise coming from the box and know she was there.

“Elsyn?”

He grabbed the communicator and pressed the center. “I'm here.”

He heard her breathe softly, like a sigh of relief, as if she would always be afraid he might not answer. “You won't believe what I found today.”

He sat up, eager to hear her speak. Her voice was deep and smooth, and he liked the sound, like a favorite song in his ear. “What did you find?” he asked.

“Promise you won't be angry?”

He gripped the little box tightly. “I'll try.”

She took a breath. "I found the Bleeding Heart."

He grew still. The Bleeding Heart was a rare tree only found near the mountains. They bloomed deep red flowers that hung like hearts. He had one in his own gardens, which is why he mentioned it once to her. He only told her he had encountered it himself, however, and that they were rare, very rare. Only born from the carcass of a nightstag, drinking and absorbing the beast's blood from the roots.

"That was very... risky of you," he said. He wanted to say careless, but he didn't want to upset her. He wasn't her father, and it was not his right to scold her. But going that deep into the mountains... one of the vampyra might have caught her. Or any number of beasts. It was a wonder she didn't make it to his keep, though he had it well hidden.

"I know. I'm sorry," she said. "But it was so beautiful, just like you told me. And I was careful."

He closed his eyes, thankful nothing had happened. Careful or not, his vampyra were skilled hunters. As were many creatures in the deep wood along the mountains. "Just promise you won't go that far in again. Not alone."

She sighed. "All right, I promise. But you know I can't help leaving the city."

He knew. She told him she was what the starlings called a scavenger. She helped find resources for the city outside its walls. It's how she had found the other transceiver. Discovered it among the bones of a long-dead animal while out on one of her runs. She told him she was a daughter of a councilman

from Havencrest, one of two children. But they needed all the help they could get, and so she volunteered her time scavenging the wilds with others like her.

She told him this and many things about her life, and he was glad to just listen, to learn everything he could. In contrast, she knew little of him, only that he lived on the other side of the mountains and that he knew much of the world from the many “missions” he’d gone on for the sake of his settlement. It was a white lie really. He did travel to many places, but it was not to discover more of his world. A world he knew by heart, some of which he had helped cultivate. Rather, his travels were to visit others of his kind when the need arose, and sometimes it was to keep the peace among his vampyra. She knew nothing of who he truly was, and he assumed she imagined he was just a mere civilian from another city.

He didn’t enjoy lying to her. But he couldn’t bring himself to tell her the truth. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Because he feared as soon as he confessed who he really was, their talks, their blooming friendship, would end. If she knew he was the very being to which her kind felt forced to bow, whose shadow they lived in fear of, who they sent animals and jewels and other gifts every year in the hope he would not come down upon them and destroy every single thing they held dear, she’d likely never speak to him again. And he wanted so badly to have her know he was not to be feared. That he could just be Elsyn. A friend and guide. He liked just being someone she could talk to, telling him her wants, her loves, her worries. He loved the air of excitement in her voice when he told her about

all the amazing things in this world. About the seas and their creatures. About the great white deserts and the twisted forests. And the near-mythical beasts that inhabited them. About his encounters with werelings and vampyra and the water lorelei.

He told her all he could without giving too much away. And he suspected sometimes she did the same, but he never pressed her. He was content to stay this way, even though deep in his heart he yearned to see her face, to have her by his side. He didn't let himself dwell too much on his growing feelings, he was just incredibly happy to have someone to talk to on lonely nights. Someone he could be himself with.

But the need for her was growing. Only becoming worse every time she mentioned coming to see him.

"I could go," she said many nights after her discovery of the Bleeding Heart. "I could come visit you. They'll have a party going out to Greymoor nearby, I could separate and meet you."

He heard the desperation in her voice. And it filled him with tight longing. "It's too dangerous," he said.

"I can manage. Just tell me the coordinates and I'll make it."

"Sara... you can't go alone."

She sighed. "I just want to see you." The disappointment in her voice made his heart ache. "Maybe you could come here," she offered, sounding eager again. "Come to Havencrest."

He shut his eyes. "I... don't know if that's possible."

“Why not?”

He so badly wanted to tell her. But the idea of her rejecting him for who he was, hurt too much to bear. “I’m needed here. With my people. I’m sorry.”

She went quiet and his heart raced, worried she would hang up on him and he wouldn’t hear from her for some time. “Some other day then,” she said, in a soft, hurt voice. “I have to go. I will talk to you tomorrow.”

He didn’t ask her to stay even though he wished he had. Wished more than anything.

Those next few days after were uncertain, but eventually she came around to him again, and they talked as they had before, as if nothing was amiss.

“We will be setting up for the festival soon,” she mentioned one stormy evening. She meant the harvest festival and the first day of autumn, the days leading up to Amarth’s Day. Or as she called it ‘Hallows Day.’ “Here’s hoping for another year of peace and quiet, I guess,” she said. “If there’s even anything to fear.”

He asked what she meant, and she only laughed softly to cover the nervous tone in her voice. “Oh, you know, everyone just gets so uptight around this time of year because of... him.”

Him. He shifted from his seat, getting up to peer out the window. Through the rain, he thought he could make out lights in the distance. “Do you mean... the Hollow King?”

“Yeah. Do you call him that too?” she asked. “Some give him different names, but that’s what my aunt says. Some even call him the Hollow God.”

He straightened at that. He didn’t think himself much a god, but he gathered, to the starlings, it was fitting since the vampyra convinced them of such. After all, he was the vampyra’s creator. Though funny enough, the vampyra did not call him that, but just their king. Maybe he needed to reassess that label.

“Are you afraid of him?” he asked, growing tense, anticipating her answer.

She didn’t respond at first, and he gathered she was thinking it over. “I don’t know,” she said after a moment. “I guess I should be. Except... no one has ever seen him, at least those still alive. He’s just stories. I guess he’d have to be real if the vampyra are real. For some, not seeing him makes him more terrifying. I can understand that. But for me, it’s hard to be afraid of what I’ve never encountered. Maybe if he did make an appearance someday, things would be different.”

“Maybe...” he said softly.

“Do you want to know a secret?”

He placed his hand on the glass pane, staring out into the dark.

“What’s that?”

“Promise not to judge me?”

He couldn’t help smiling. “Promise.”

She took a deep breath. “I don’t want to be afraid of him. I want to know who he really is. I want to understand him. If someone could talk to him without assuming they were going to be ripped to pieces, maybe we can know more. I guess, what I’m really saying is, I have hope that he’s not going to change his mind and wipe us out someday. That, Hallows Day or not, he’s giving us a chance.”

He bent his head. Oh, how she had no idea.

“Are you there?” she asked after he was silent for some time.

“I’m here,” he said. “And I think your hope is valid. I think he’s... most certainly willing to give people a chance.”

He heard her smile. “It’s a nice thought at least.”

After that night, he only wanted to listen to her, to hear her tell him more about the coming festival. Every so often, he would drop hints about the kind of gifts the Hollow God preferred according to “his settlement” and their “offerings.” Telling her how, if they sent the king duskeye flowers weaved into wreaths instead of the white sallows, they would have a much easier time hunting in the forests for game.

This wasn’t actually the case, but he always felt sorry when his vampyra found the offerings by the river between the forest and the mountains with the birds packed into cages. His scouts would bring the offerings to him, and every year he’d let the birds free as he never cared to see the poor beasts locked away.

She took note of this and said she would be happy to send the idea her father’s way tomorrow night after a special party.

“And you’ll tell me how it goes won’t you? If I don’t hear from you tomorrow, I’ll assume you’re having a good time,” he said.

“Or I’ll just be stuck with family and unable to get away,” she replied bitterly. “But if not tomorrow, the next day. And I will tell you all about it as long as you tell me more about your time in the lower caves out east.”

He smiled. “I will.”

He waited for her call and, as he had expected, it didn’t come that next day. Nor the day after that. It wasn’t until three days later that he finally heard from her, and he knew right away something was wrong.

“Do you ever just wish you could leave this place?” she asked suddenly. “Leave and make the life you always dreamed of?”

He frowned, not understanding where this line of thinking came from. “Sometimes,” he said carefully. He thought it when he was lonely at best. But, truly, he always wanted to have someone to spend this life with, not to change it entirely. “Is everything all right, Sara?” he asked.

He heard a muffled sound, almost like a whimper. “It’s not. Everything is changing so quickly. And now I think I’ll be more alone than ever. And I don’t know what to do.”

She sounded on the verge of tears. He looked down at the transceiver with sharp concern. “Has someone hurt you?” he said in a low, threatening voice. If someone had, by his own gods, he would track her down this instant, cover be damned.

“No, no, not physically, anyway.” She sniffed. “I just... I have no control, Elsyn. I have no say over my own life. And, honestly, all I want is to be free to see the world as you did. Even if only a fraction. I want to know what the world is like outside these walls. Outside the forest. I want to see it. I want to see you. And I can’t, and now I don’t think I ever will.”

He wished he had the ability to teleport at the moment, to gather her in his arms and tell her it would be all right. “Please, Sara, tell me what’s happened?” he asked softly.

She could hardly speak. “I...”

There was the sound of something banging open on her end followed by a sharp click. “I’ll tell you later, promise. I have to go,” she whispered.

“Wait, Sara!”

“Tomorrow,” she said. Then, in a quick intake of breath, she was gone.

He wanted to beg her to come back, to talk to him, tell him what he could do. But there was only silence on the other end.

He waited. He went about his daily routine, he attempted to be present, but all he could think of was her. When night finally came, he tried to call. But she never answered.

Two days passed. He had already begun to worry the first day. By the second, he was pacing his room. Then he heard the soft clicking of someone trying to call and he immediately brought the transceiver close.

“Sara?”

“Who is this?”

He was taken aback. It was not her. “Where is, Sara?” he growled.

There was a rush of noise like crackling.

“Hello?” he called.

“She’s not here,” said the stranger.

“Then where?”

“You’re the friend she’s been talking to, aren’t you? She mentioned she had some friend in another city, but I didn’t believe her.”

His hand clenched the little box tightly. “That I am.”

“Talking to strange men on random communicators. She’s in trouble now. Her new fiancé will flip if I tell him.”

He went deathly still. “Fiancé?”

“Yeah, you know, future husband?”

He went quiet, at a loss for words.

“She didn’t tell you?” the stranger said when he didn’t respond. They laughed. “Wow, I feel sorry for you. But guess this is a better time than any, she’s getting married, after Hallows Day. Dad made a deal and she’s House Barkrow’s now. Sorry to have to tell you, but there’s no way she’s gonna be able to talk to you anymore. In fact, I’ll make this easy for the both of you, and especially her, because she’ll get the whip if they even find this transceiver. So long.”

He hissed sharply. “Wait—”

He heard a loud crack. Then there was nothing. Nothing but a soft, insistent buzzing on the other end. Even pressing on the transceiver didn't change the sound.

He stood there in pure shock, his mind coming around to what had just happened.

The insolent human, whoever they were, had smashed the other communicator.

Stunned fury began to overtake him. She was gone. Just like that. Their way of communicating was severed.

She was gone and he had no way to reach her.



That was what brought him to the high terrace of the keep, to wallow in his despair and his rage. In his anger he had forced himself above, needing air so that he could properly grieve. And properly think.

He couldn't believe for a moment she would lie to him. Not about something so serious as being tied to another. And, even so, she was not his to claim...

Still, he felt the need to possess. The utter pain of losing her made him feel sick. If he were to allow this possessiveness to overtake him, he would be flying out of his keep this very night in search of her, letting the city cower in fear as he broke his way into every home, every haven. And when he found her, he would steal her away, fiancé be damned.

He covered his eyes with his hand, his head bowed. No. To do that would surely make her hate him, fear him. She didn't even know who he was.

He dropped his hand and glared up at Amara. He recalled the last conversation he and Sara had and remembered how upset she had been. Then he remembered her words.

I have no control, Elsyn. I have no say over my own life. And, honestly, all I want is to be free to see the world like you did. I want to know what the world is like outside these walls. Outside the forest. I want to see it. I want to see you. And I can't and now I don't think I ever will.

Those words haunted him. Then he remembered the stranger's words before they had broken the communicator.

Dad made a deal and she's House Barkrow's now.

He clenched his hands into fists. His rage now twisted into something more vicious. She was being forced to wed, which explained why she had been upset.

But what could he do? He knew which city she was in but not where. And though he could come down on them like some vengeful god to save her, he would terrify the starlings to the point of chaos or hysteria. And, in doing so, terrify Sara so much she might not want to be near him. He had to be careful how he handled this but, sadly, no matter how he acted, it involved breaking Sara's trust in some way. No matter what he did, she would be afraid or upset.

As he conspired, he recalled again words she had spoken to him.

“I don’t want to be afraid of him. I want to understand him. Maybe if someone could talk to him without assuming they were going to be ripped to pieces, maybe we can know more. I guess, what I’m really saying is I have hope that he’s not going to change his mind and wipe us out someday. That, Hallows Day or not, he’s giving us a chance.”

If she was willing to understand, then maybe she would give him a chance as well. He didn’t like what he had to consider to get her out of that city. To get her to him. But he could only hope she would hear him out after. That she could forgive him.

As Amara rose in the sky, he started to make his plan.

Autumntide

THE HARVEST FESTIVAL

Sara

Her tears spilled down her face, dropping from her chin and wetting her hands. She stared down at the broken transceiver before her, soft sobs coming in heaves, her dark hair spilling over her face to hide her despair.

She had been frantically searching for the communicator for the last day and a half, torn that she had somehow lost it. She found it the morning of the festival, in one of the garbage bins.

She was supposed to be ready to celebrate, but instead, she hid herself in one of the private gardens and wept beside her favorite pool.

Elsyn was gone. There was no way to fix the receiver according to one of their mechanics, after she had rushed to one of the workshops upon finding the communicator in pieces.

“Sorry, love,” Regin, the head mechanic, said. “There’s no saving this one. But it could be saved for scraps.”

She declined to give it yet, wanting to keep it as a reminder of her friend. But all it did was make her more upset as she sat staring down at it.

She would never speak to him again. She had no way to reestablish contact. As Regin mentioned, the transceiver was old, and they had no other spares of that kind. She didn’t know who had broken hers and why, but she wished she could scream at them. Someone had gone into her room and found it. She suspected her sister Alia, but she couldn’t be sure.

It didn’t matter either way. Her friend was gone.

She cried for who knows how long. When she finally was able to come to her senses, she wiped the remaining tears away angrily and tried instead to think.

He never told her which settlement he was in, but she knew it was near the mountains, and likely near to Greymoor to the east. Or so she hoped. She could hide away in the next trade carrier and then sneak out from there.

As long as Jason didn’t force her to stay in his house sooner than expected, she would be fine. Her so-called fiancé had left her alone to ready for the festival, but he would expect to see her tonight.

She hated him. And she hated her father now for making that awful deal. Ever since the night of his dinner party when it had been announced, she had refused to speak to him. And had

tried to avoid Jason in the process. But with the festival, it would be more difficult.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Exhaling, she rose from her seat and approached a nearby tree. Quickly, she dug a hole next to the tree trunk and then placed the broken transceiver inside. Carefully she buried it, covering it with dirt.

Someway somehow, she would find him again. No matter what it took.

She paused one more moment then slipped away, going to prepare herself for the festival.



As the red sun sunk below the horizon, the city guards walked the streets as people came out of their homes to place jack-o-lanterns by their doors, purple and green glass bulbs with yellow eyes and a yellow smile. They said back on their home world they were once carved from a vegetable called a pumpkin. But here they had no such thing, so they made the glass bulbs instead. Every night until Hallows Day, they would light the lanterns.

Sara watched them do so from her balcony. She'd cleaned and dressed herself in a little black dress some hours ago but hadn't participated in the day's festivities, telling her aunt she was feeling unwell and wanted to lay down. Now the night celebration would begin, dinner would be served, and the party would go on until midnight. Still torn from losing Elsyn, she wanted to remain in her room for the remainder of the night.

But she was hungry and thought maybe the party might take her mind off the situation, if only for a little while. Better than wallowing in her misery alone.

She slipped downstairs and saw the dining room had been made up for the occasion, with red flowers and dark leaves. Among them on the long table were dozens of different dishes to choose from. She picked up a plate and began to take some fruit when her Aunt Helen walked inside from the terrace where everyone was currently mingling, her face ashen, lips in a tight frown.

“There you are,” she said. “I was just about to come get you.”

“You were?” Sara said.

“We’ve been told to make for the capital square. Everyone must be present.” She looked tense, like something was scaring her. As she put a table sheet over the food, the lights flickered, and she froze. Sara looked around as the lights turned off then back on again, and she heard the hum of the generator.

“What’s going on?” she asked nervously.

Aunt Helen brushed her hands on her dress. “We have a visitor. We’re not sure what they want yet.”

A visitor?

Before she could open her mouth to ask who, Aunt Helen was walking out the door. “Come, Sara, the night is upon us, and our visitor will be here soon.”



Everyone was gathered at the capital. She saw her father with the rest of the council, standing along the steps. Behind her was the statue of Nath, the founder of their city, who'd died many years ago. He stood proud in his uniform, and below his feet were the last remnants of his ship.

Sara waited with her aunt, sister, and cousin on the square's edge, between Nath's statue and the capital building. Everyone talked in hushed whispers while the heads of the city stood silent and firm, waiting.

Then the visitor came. Down from the sky. A collective gasp rose among the crowd as the dark figure floated down, flapping their giant bat-like wings and landing by the steps of the capital. People who stood nearby stumbled back in fear.

Sara stared in shock at the cloaked creature, a mask covering their face. It was one of them. A vampyra.

Their red eyes scanned the crowd before they folded their wings and silently crept up the steps to the capital entrance then faced them. Sara could see by their broad shoulders and muscular build that it was a man.

"I come as a messenger," he said in a silky yet booming voice. "From the most powerful one. Our ruler, The Hollow King. He which you swear fealty to, and witness as your god-king."

Sara could sense the growing tension and terror in the air. She felt it herself. He wasn't just stories.

“It has been some fifty years now since you have settled and so, if you wish to have fifty more years of peace under his reign and be spared his wrath, you must give something much more valuable,” stated the vampyra. “Therefore, on this year’s Amarath’s Day, which you call Hallows Day, our king has demanded a new offering. He demands a bride sacrifice.”

A wave of shock took over the crowd. Some began to protest, and the vampyra put up his hand for silence. “This offering shall be among all available females not yet mated or wed to another. “

A few of the young women looked to their fiancés and boyfriends in horror. Sara caught Jason near his family on the opposite side of the square, his face turning red, speaking quickly to his mother beside him.

One of the councilmen stepped up timidly. “But how can you expect us to choose?” he said. “To give up one of our daughters?”

The vampyra glared over at him. “You will not choose. The Hollow King will decide.” The crowd began to panic. The vampyra silenced them again with a hiss. “You have until the day before the eve of Amarath’s Day to prepare. It is then he will choose.”

The vampyra spread his wings and took off. The crowd cowered and screamed as his shadow passed over them. With him gone, it was like a horrible disaster had befallen them, like an earthquake or an awful storm. Men shouted at the

councilmen to do something, and some of the women began to cry.

Sara only remained numb, her emotions running so wild she didn't know what to truly feel. But she knew she would have to be one of the selected to stand and be judged for the sacrifice.

Funny enough, all she could think about was Elsyn. And suddenly she, too, wanted to cry.



The weeks passed in a blur. Sara mostly stayed in her room or in the garden next to the house. The day after the harvest festival, she was forced into a meeting with her fiancé, along with his family and hers. There was arguing, some compromise, then more arguing. Jason fought tooth and nail to refuse her from being part of the selection for the king's bride. He and his family wanted to hide her in their basement on the day of the choosing.

Her family considered it but her father worried if the king did come, he would surely know through some secret power that they were keeping her from the selection, and that would put them in danger of his fury. It was too great a risk.

Eventually, her family convinced Jason's that the possibility of her being selected would likely be miniscule. And just to make it more unlikely, they would dress her poorly; even if she must be dressed decently, she could still be made to look less appealing.

Sara had sat there hardly saying a word, not able to argue for herself. It was either she would be forced to marry an arrogant prick, or a monster by most of the city folks' standards. He might be a god-king, but he was still alien.

Frankly, the idea of marrying the king felt a little less upsetting. At least she would be leaving the city, a place she felt stuck, like a gilded cage. Of course, nothing might change once in the Hollow King's keep. It could be worse. He might lock her away, only using her for... who knew what. Why did he need a bride? And why them? Would he not prefer someone like him?

It was all so bizarre, so surreal, it was hard to even comprehend. She was scared, yes, but she also couldn't help being intrigued.

When the meeting was over, she told Jason she wanted time with her family and, surprisingly, he agreed. The king wouldn't choose her, so why be worried?

As day after day drew them closer and closer to Hallows Day, the other families began to prepare. Not just the usual offerings, but preparing their unmarried women to be judged. Some thought it an honor and were putting in every effort to prepare their daughters. Others had the same idea as her own family, dress them simple so that they won't garner attraction.

Sara hardly cared, only feeling uneasy the closer to Hallows Day they got. She thought of Elsyn often and of whether she could find a way to escape. There wouldn't be another carrier

going out until after Hallows Day. She would just have to wait till then.



The day before Hallows Eve, everyone was frantic. As her father headed down to the capital to prepare everyone, and her aunt prepared her own daughter who was a little younger than Sara, her sister Alia helped her with her dress. It was one of their grandmother's, a simple, long black dress with some silver-threaded designs along the sleeves and collar. Sara thought it was lovely but because it was considered out of style, they deemed it simple and unnoticeable.

“What do they know about what a god likes,” she said aloud, as Alia fixed her hair.

Her sister shrugged. “Guess it doesn't matter, does it? As long as they think he won't like you. Personally, I think he'll choose Lenora. She looks like a beast. Maybe that's his type.”

Her sister was always so damn rude, she wondered where her father went wrong. Mother thankfully never had to put up with her, having died when Alia was very young. She was still too young to participate in the offering, and Sara was thankful for that.

When Alia fixed a few orange and purple flowers in her hair, Sara decided she was presentable enough and slipped out of her room with her sister trailing behind, down to wait in the family room. She was offered food by her father's cousin,

Michal, who cooked for the family, but she refused. Her stomach was too twisted in knots to hold anything down.

When the sun began to set and the night drew near, her aunt came down with her cousin, who wore an exquisite red gown.

“Aren’t you afraid she might be picked?” Sara asked.

“Of course I am,” said her aunt. “But I would see her looking nice if she must be chosen. If she must...” Her aunt seemed ready to burst into tears. She waved a hand over her face and took a few deep breaths. “Come. We need to go, it’s almost time.”

The streets were lined with glass jack-o-lanterns to light their way. One red moon and one yellow hung close in the sky. At the capital, they decorated the square with more lanterns and hung black and purple banners. Large wreaths were placed along the steps leading to the front.

Each eligible woman was lined up into three rows. Those that hoped not to be noticed were placed in the back while those who did were front and center.

Sara was placed in the back row, but she knew it was absolutely useless to hide her. Still, she kept her head down. Her dark hair, braided on the sides, fluttered across her back and along her neck. Her dress flowed along her legs, shaping them. She noticed the others in the front wore their best gowns and looked like princesses ready to become queens. She might look as good as a woodland witch and that was fine by her. Once the king passed her over, she would return home and start planning her escape.

When the last bit of sunlight disappeared along the horizon, they heard flapping above and saw figures flying past the moons. They dove down and seemed to float as they carefully landed in the square. It was a procession of vampyra. Between them was a massive, winged beast like a dragon, only with feathers instead of scales and a beak instead of a snout. Its dark feathers shined green in the moonlight and its red eyes, like gems, glared at them. On its back, a figure rode. He slid off with ease, and Sara caught her breath at the size of him. He towered over the vampyra who were not short of stature by any means. At least a foot taller than the tallest man in their city. Sara might stand just above the towering man's waist if lucky.

Besides his height, the only other attributes he revealed was the twisted black horns on his head. Two pair on each side that fit to his skull like a crown. And the large midnight-black wings folded behind his back that seemed to absorb the very light around them. The rest of him was covered. His face was masked, and his body was shrouded by a black robe, which reminded her of a kimono that she'd seen pictures of in books, lined with golden thread. The mask was also lined with a golden pattern that reminded her of the Dia de Los Muertos skulls she'd also seen in a book.

As he peered around at them beside his mount, she thought she caught the shine of his eyes. His gaze stopped on her for a moment before moving on to assess the others. She shivered at their unnatural glow.

One of the vampyra stepped forward. “The king will now choose,” he called. “Each eligible woman must step forward and give their name, age, and house which they serve.”

Sara’s brows furrowed. She could see the other women looking at each other nervously. What a strange request, why would the king care to know any of that?

Maybe he doesn’t want to judge on looks, she thought. Then quickly realized how silly that was. He wouldn’t know them just by that information alone.

Sara watched as Diana from House Rochelle stepped up first. She gave her name, age, and house with clarity and confidence and even bowed after, giving the king a little smile. Sara knew it was all an act. Diana was terrified too but her family demanded she make herself as appealing as possible, likely convincing her she would be a queen, and that she would bring her family great fortune, and that was all that mattered. Forget that the groom might eat his bride as a snack after the wedding.

Next was Beth, then Grace, each following the same act as Diana. They went down the row and then reached the second. The women here also did as requested, but with a little less finesse. They went down the row quickly and came to the third. Charlotte of House Keith could barely get out words, she was shaking so badly, and Maria spoke so quietly no one could hear. They got to Sara’s cousin Hailey, and she spoke her name and age clearly but then gave her anxiety away as her voice broke when she mentioned her house.

Finally, it was Sara's turn. She took a deep breath and clutched the skirts of her dress tight as she took two steps forward and spoke as clearly as she was able.

"I'm Sara of House Roslith and I am twenty-four years old."

She stepped back, glad her voice hadn't cracked. She let out her breath as Jamie stepped up beside her. Sara's heart was still hammering in her chest, but surely, he wouldn't pick her. And once he chose his bride, he would leave and it would be over, then she could go back to worrying about leaving the city to find Elsyn.

When the final girl stepped back, the vampyra once more spoke. "Our king will now decide. Whoever is given the flower of the Bleeding Heart will be his chosen bride."

Sara tensed as the king removed the flower from an inner pocket and revealed it to them. The same flower she had seen on the tree in the woods. Her heart leapt at the sight. Then sank when it made her think of Elsyn. Her throat tightened as the king moved forward and, with the flower in hand, slowly walked among them. To her shock as well as the others, he passed the first row and then the second, hardly looking any woman in the eye, not offering the flower to any of them. He came to the third row, and she thought for a moment he was going to pick her cousin. Then he passed her too.

He came to Sara and stood in front of her. Then presented her with the flower.

There was a collective sound among the people, but she hardly heard it, her pulse throbbing so loudly in her ears. All she

could see was that flower in front of her.

She stood frozen in stunned disbelief until her cousin hissed at her. “Sara, take the flower!”

Hesitantly, she took the blood-red flower from his hand and clutched it close to her chest. No, this couldn’t be happening, this couldn’t be real. It wasn’t supposed to be her.

“Come,” he commanded in a quiet voice. The tone was pleasant and seemed almost familiar. The king moved away, back to his mount, expecting her to follow.

She took one step then another until she forced herself past the other women. She turned and looked back at the capital and saw her father on the steps, his face pale. She saw Jason nearby being kept at bay by two guards.

“No,” he shouted. “No, she’s already called for!”

The king stopped and grew still. He glanced over at Jason and whatever look he must have given him was enough to make Jason clamp his mouth shut, his face going from red to ashen. Jason stepped back and hid himself in the crowd.

The king turned back to his mount and took hold of the reigns, then gestured for her to come. Sara slowly approached, realizing he meant to have her ride the beast with him. She looked back one more time at her family and saw her aunt in tears, uncertain if they were tears of sadness for her or joy that her daughter hadn’t been picked.

It didn’t matter. She was leaving, whether she wanted to or not.

The king sat on his mount and then offered his hand to her. She looked at it, knowing she couldn't refuse lest her family and people experience the full measure of his wrath. She took his hand and allowed herself to be placed in front of him, nesting herself between his legs, his stomach and chest at her back making her more alarmed by his size.

Without a signal, the mount spread its wings. The vampyra took off first, then the dragon-bird started to rise. The Hollow King wrapped one arm around her firmly to keep her in place, while his other kept on the reigns. With one great leap and flap of the beast's wings, they were above the city and rising into the night, flying to the north.



They passed over the city boundaries and the forest she had come to know and love. A fine blue mist settled below them, an eerie mist she was always warned never to go near. Monsters stalked in the mist, and it was a sign she was veering too close to the Hollow King's stronghold. Now, they passed over it like it was little more than just a part of the landscape. When it cleared, she saw the mountains come into view. Then, some way in the distance by the mountainside, she saw a city like nothing she'd seen before. And a fortress that rose above it.

They fell closer to the city, floating above the arched roofs of the buildings and the garden squares. She saw people down

below, walking along paths and beside a small riverway. When she looked closer, she could see they had wings. The vampyra.

Fear gripped her in seeing so many of them. She was being dropped into their city, feeling a lot like bait. She pressed her back into the king as if looking for shelter, and his arm quickly held her tighter in response.

They descended upon the fortress and landed in a large terrace courtyard overlooking the city. As the mount lowered itself to the ground, the king scooped her up in one clean swoop and then slid off. Sara didn't know what else to do but wrap her arms around his neck as he cradled her against him. He put distance between them and the winged beast before gently putting her back on her feet.

“Come,” he said softly. “Follow me.”

Sara stood there, uncertain whether she wanted to follow. But where else could she go? Even if she did try to run, he would easily catch her and overpower her. Hesitantly, she took one step then another, and followed him down an arched passage, further into the keep. The vampyra who had accompanied them disappeared somewhere else, leaving them alone.

Sara walked with him, not saying a word, wishing badly she could gather her courage to open her mouth. Why her? She wanted to ask. What did he want with her? What was he going to do with her?

Her mind swam with all the possibilities as her eyes scanned the ornate red lanterns above. The passage changed, leading along the side of a garden she could see between a row of

pillars. She peered around at the strange plants as they passed. Then she caught sight of the garden's center and froze.

A soft whimper spilled from her lips. Finally, the reality of what was happening to her, and what that entailed, came crashing down. Without thinking, she rushed into the garden, not considering the king might punish her for disobeying. She didn't care. Couldn't care. She approached the Bleeding Heart tree at the center and stared up at it with stunned awe. Then immediately burst into tears.

She crumbled before it, trying to quiet her muffled sobs with her hand, but they came spilling out. She would never find Elsyn again, never speak to him, and would be married to another. King or not, it didn't matter. She wouldn't be free, and she wouldn't be with the one she wanted.

She became so consumed by her despair that she didn't notice the shadow that fell upon her. A large, gentle hand rested on her shoulder, and she jumped at the sudden touch.

“Sara, my Sara, please don't cry. I'm so sorry.”

She gasped, her hand slipping to her throat.

She turned around and looked up and saw the king staring down at her. His eyes pierced through her, but they weren't cruel, they were deeply warm.

“Wh—who are you?” she said.

He knelt before her, taking her hands in his. “It's me, Sara. It's Elsyn.”

She stared at him, speechless. Then she began to shake her head. “No. That can’t be.”

Carefully, he drew something from an inner pocket and showed it to her. She stared down at a transceiver in his hand, identical to the one she had back home.

She took it and turned it in her hands, just to be sure, but there was no denying, it was the other communicator.

“I found it while walking the forest one night,” he explained. “I heard your voice, and I felt compelled to answer. I was intrigued at first, then grew to enjoy and anticipate our talks. But I couldn’t bring myself to tell you, as much as I wanted to, who I was. Too afraid you would never speak to me again.”

She stared at him, at her Elsyn. This was him. The Hollow King. She rose to stand before him, and he continued to kneel before her, his hand clenching the ends of her dress as if clinging for his life.

“Please, try not to be afraid, Sara.” Cautiously, he drew off his mask and set it on the ground beside him.

Sara’s heart leapt into her throat. By the gods, he was utterly—beautiful. Otherworldly. It was his eyes first that caught her, so hypnotic she thought she might fall into them. Blue-black eyes as deep as the dark sea or the night sky, with silver-white irises that were like two tiny eclipses reflecting in the dark. His eyes were large, set on a pale gray face. A face with a deep brow and a broad jaw. Ebony-black hair swept across his skull and down his back, styled around his curved horns and pointed ears. When his lips parted, she saw a set of fangs. When he

tilted his head up to her, she noticed the tightknit scales that made up his skin, some of which shimmered blue or green in light, as if translucent.

He was different from her in every way, and though some of his features were unnerving, she couldn't help being entranced.

He closed his eyes and then opened them slowly to peer up at her through his eyelashes. "I know I scare you," he said, sadly, "but please believe I meant no harm bringing you here. I admit it was for selfish reasons. I lost you when the communication between us was broken. It devastated me more than you could ever imagine. I was ready to come down on your city like a god of death to steal you away... but I didn't want to scare you more." His hand clenching her dress fell, letting the fabric slip from his taloned fingers. "You are safe here, I promise you. The vampyra are heavily instructed not to touch you." He rested his arm on his knee, his head bowed as if trying to keep himself from appearing more intimidating, but that was near impossible. He seemed to contemplate his next words before saying, "I would have you here with me. Tell me, Sara, will you stay?"

She watched him, still in disbelief he was Elsyn. Stunned he was here before her.

Even if he was not what she expected, her heart said it didn't matter. There was nowhere else she would rather be but by his side.

"I will," she heard herself say.

A fire sparked in his gaze. His expression was no longer shadowed. He rose, towering before her, and took her hand. “Come then. Tomorrow is the eve of Amarith’s Day. Hallows Eve.” He smiled. “But it will be ours.”



She stood staring at herself in the mirror. Dozens of thoughts and emotions ran through her head like a wave. It was almost too much to take.

Hallows Eve had come. After Elsyn had brought her into his keep, he had her taken to her rooms and had servants tending to her every need. He tried to leave her alone, but she didn’t want him to leave.

“We finally are here together,” she’d said. “Stay with me tonight. Talk to me and tell me everything you know.”

He smiled at her, his gaze on her so intense, so loving, it made her heart race. He brushed his talons gently across her jaw, tipping her head back. “In time. I promise. After the ceremony, we will have all the time in the world. But now, I must prepare.”

She looked at him, stunned. “You still want to make me your bride?”

His mouth brushed against her forehead. “I do. Will you still?”

She thought for a moment, then said, “There’s no one else I want to be with.”

That was answer enough. He bid her goodnight and left her. A dressmaker came to fit her, while another servant fixed her a bath. They fed her and clothed her and thought nothing of the fact that she was unlike them. She was Elsyn's, and that was all that mattered.

When she woke up on Hallows Day, they were quick to get her ready. By the time the sun was across the sky, she had been cleaned and dressed. The gown was unlike anything she'd ever worn, a deep blue-black like Elsyn's eyes, with tiny crystal gems along the hem and across her chest like little stars. They pinned her hair and placed a crown of blue and purple flowers into it. She studied herself in the mirror once they were done, hardly recognizing herself. But all she could think was she was going to be with Elsyn.

And she should be happier than she'd ever been in her life. But she couldn't stifle the unease that was like a thorn in her chest.

The vampyra servants talked carelessly as they fixed her up, as if she hadn't been there. And they had planted that seed of doubt in her head.

"Perhaps he is sick," one of them said as they pinned her hair while another fixed the hem of her dress.

"Never, never our king. No, he's hungry that is all. Hungry for her blood, her heart. Just like us," claimed the other. "Her heart's blood will sustain him for many years. He'll take her to his bed then eat her and be renewed."

"He's just bored," said another, putting away the lotions and perfumes into a box. "He found a new plaything and wants to

have his way until it breaks. He'll tire of this pet eventually."

Sara couldn't believe how cruel they were. But she couldn't move her tongue to say a word. She saw their sharp teeth as they laughed. Saw their sharp claws as they fixed her dress.

She didn't want to believe them. Not for a moment. Elsyn was true, he wouldn't have spent all that time talking with her, getting to know her. He wouldn't do that to her.

But a little voice in the back of her head couldn't help wondering otherwise. He was unlike her. He was a king. A god. He could do anything. He could make her think anything.

Even if she refused to believe he was toying with her, there was no doubt that she was just a human. How could she be anything more to him but something to amuse him for a little while?

She didn't want to believe it. Didn't want to lose her trust in him. But still, the doubt was there, festering inside, and that brought a new unease. A fear she couldn't quell.

When the sun was beginning to set, they finally brought her out of the room. With the vampyra surrounding her, they led her down the passages of the keep. As they passed through an arched hallway, a flash of light flickered across the windows, and a second later she heard the crackle of thunder. Heart leaping into her throat, she grew tense as the vampyra calmly lead her down a main set of stairs. The whole place was lit with silver and orange lanterns, whose light contrasted with the flash of lightning outside.

At a set of huge double doors, the vampyra pushed them aside, revealing the great hall before her. Sara stood in awe. The place was decorated from floor to ceiling. Colored lanterns hung high above and vines of red and velvet black leaves curled around the pillars to each side, with tiny golden flowers hidden among them. To either side were hundreds of people dressed in fine clothes and intricate masks. They watched her as she walked down the center, their curious eyes making her skin tingle. She looked around at them, wild-eyed. Then her focus came to the back of the hall where she saw Elsyn standing. He was wearing the same outfit and mask he'd worn when he came to take her away. He looked powerful and intimidating and, for a moment, her mind slipped again to the conversation the servants had in her room. She looked around at the vampyra and other folk she didn't recognize and saw their fangs, their claws, and their wings.

Fear began to grip her. She was alone here, among monsters. Even her beloved Elsyn was a monster.

Each step felt heavier the closer she got, her pace slowing until she found she couldn't move at all. She was frozen in the middle of the hall, unable to move.

The vampyra walking with her stopped and turned, confused why she wasn't following them.

"Come, girl, you keep the king waiting," said one, a fiery female with coal-black eyes. "You would anger him with your stubbornness? Move now." She reached out for Sara, her claws looking to wrap around her wrist.

Panic flooded Sara's body. She took a step back, then another, not allowing the vampyra to touch her. Her breath came in heaves as they seemed to move in on her. Closer and closer.

She turned, ready to bolt, but they blocked her way to the door. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she let out a scream and fell to her knees, covering her face both in shame and terror. She didn't want to be afraid, she wanted to understand. But here she was, overwhelmed, this was too much, too soon. And she wasn't prepared.

She felt a great presence against her back, towering over her, the light of the lanterns blinking out above. When she peered past her fingers, she saw a massive wing covering her like a shield.

"Stay back," came Elsyn's booming voice. From under his wing, she saw the people obey without hesitation. Elsyn leaned down but he didn't yet touch her. He ripped off his mask and let it fall to the ground. "Sara," he said, pain now etched in his voice. "It's all right." He reached out his hand slowly, so as not to scare her. "Let me take you out of here."

She wanted so badly to trust him. Finding the courage to face him, she took his hand and let him lift her up. As she stood on her feet, he brought her close to him, bringing her into a protective embrace. "I'm a fool," he hissed in her ear. "I shouldn't have assumed you were ready for all this. I should have listened to you the other night, not thinking of only my happiness. I'm sorry, Sara."

Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked them away. She buried her face in his chest, gripping the fabric of his robe.” I want to be with you, Elsyn,” and she meant it. But she couldn’t bring herself to say the rest. That she just wanted what they had before. She wanted just him and her together, with no one to break them apart. To make her doubt. She didn’t care about parties or celebrations or a kingdom of people who didn’t trust her. She wanted Elsyn, not the king.

Elsyn’s hold tightened as she felt his lips brush against her hair as if he knew and understood. “Let’s go. We have all the time in the world.”

She looked up at him, stunned. “Your people though. They’ll expect you to...”

He smiled. “I think I can do as I please. You are still mine. All I care about is having you by my side. And you are. They can still celebrate Amarth’s Day without me.” He turned to his kin and said aloud, “Keep on your celebrations. Until the light of dawn arrives.”

They cheered as he kept her under his wing, guiding her out of the hall.

“Where are we going then?” Sara asked as he brought her to the main stairs.

“I have an idea.”

He led her up to the tower, to a smaller set of double doors. Through them, she found a study with an extensive library.

“This is where I would come to talk with you,” Elsyn said.
“No one else is allowed here but me. And now you as well.”

Sara tipped her head back to the books and paintings on the second and third floors above her. She looked over to one corner, with a low-backed leather chair by the window and a little shelf of trinkets. On it, she saw his communicator. She walked over and touched the arm of the chair. Quickly, her fear began to ebb away, a calmness washing over her as she took in the cozy nook.

“I would wait here for you to call,” Elsyn said just behind her.
“I would sit in this chair and read until you did. I would spend hours in here just reading and sometimes waiting.”

She blinked, feeling tears prick her eyes again. “I didn’t know. I’d be out in the forest, thinking of you every time.”

His hand slipped to her arm, his thumb brushing along her skin. “I’m sorry I never told you who I was. I wanted to keep what we had. I longed to have you here. But I should have known I could never expect you to not be afraid.”

She rested her hand on his. “I don’t care who you are, I just want to believe you really mean to keep me with you. That nothing will change that. That you won’t... send me back when you’re done with me.”

He gently spun her around to face him. His hands cupped her jaw. His eyes were sharp, cutting into her. “I would not make you my bride if that were the case.”

“What does it entail, Elsyn? For you and others like you? For humans, it means together as a pair. Till death parts us.”

His fingers grazed her face lovingly. “For us, it means a bond forever.”

“I will die someday, Elsyn. I’m mortal.”

“No, Sara, you will not be just a mortal with me. You will not die as mortals do. Do you not think I can spare you from a shortened life? My own vampyra live for as long as they please. I can make it so for you.” He suddenly looked afraid. “Tell me you would have me do this for you, Sara.”

She closed her eyes. She never thought of her future. She assumed she would go on like the rest of humankind. But with Elsyn, she now saw a future where anything was possible. She peered back at him and knew he meant every word. He wanted her by his side, not just as some temporary companion, but a queen to his king. “In time,” she said in a breath. “But let me be human with you just for a little while.”

He seemed to relax, accepting her answer. He even smiled. “In whatever way you are, you are mine, Sara, and I am yours.”

She heard the soft rumble of thunder outside and thought of the party that was meant to be theirs, happening below. But he was willing to be with her here and, finally, it felt like nothing had changed. That they were, at this moment, who they had always been, even if it had been from a distance. She and Elsyn.

She took his hand, as inhuman as it was, and tied it with her own. And she knew then too that she loved him.



He called a pair of servants and had them bring in some plates of food and cups of wine from the party along with a thick blanket which he placed by the hearth of a low, white fire. He brought over his chair and another for her if she so desired, but she preferred to sit by his feet. Books were scattered around them, maps of Drak, anatomical illustrations of unimaginable beasts, and detailed stories of his people, of the wars fought and won, and of cities and kingdoms established. There was so much more than she could have ever imagined, and she absorbed everything Elsyn told her, hungry for more. He told her about his people and about his upbringing as she sipped at her wine, a dark, spiced liquor, with a hint of honey. It didn't affect her like the wine her people made. She didn't feel fuzzy in the head or tipsy. Her mind was clear, yet she felt giddy and warm and euphoric, her body tingling, yet relaxed. She also felt heat stir in her center, a soft growing ache between her thighs. She watched Elsyn carefully and felt the heat grow.

They were different, but she wanted to know that part of him too. She had imagined them together like lovers before when she had only known him as her faceless friend. She had thought of what it would be like if they had entangled together, his husky voice alone arousing her.

Alone in her room, she had done many things to herself over just his voice. Imagining him whispering both wicked and lovely things in her ear.

Now she had a face and body to put to it, and, as he spoke to her in that soft, deep voice, she imagined him again in that way, only this time she saw him as he was, and her body throbbed with excitement.

But what if he didn't feel that sort of physical attraction? What if it was purely emotional? Even some of her own people didn't feel sexual attraction to others. His kind might be the same. And even if he did, what if their differences kept them from having that sort of intimacy?

She knew she would be with Elsyn regardless and be happier with him than she could ever be with anyone else, but she couldn't help feeling the sting of disappointment if they were not to be together in that way. She wanted him, she knew that much by her body's reaction alone. But would he respond to her the same?

She was desperate to know. And she was willing to test it here and now, when she knew she had him to herself.

As he recalled to her his time in the eastern part of the black sea and about the monstrous sea creatures there, she cautiously crept her fingers up his leg, onto his thigh.

If he noticed, he didn't show it, nor did he seem to tense. Instead, he encased her hand in his large one, brushing his thumb over her wrist delicately. She liked the feel, but it wasn't what she was going for. She slipped her hand out from

under his and lifted her head, her eyes going to his wings folded behind his back.

“Your wings,” she said. “They’re so beautiful.”

He looked taken back at first by her sudden compliment. “You think so?”

She nodded. “May I touch them?”

He let his wings unfurl just a little. “Yes, if you like.” He smiled. “But know the ends and where they are connected to my back are very sensitive to touch.”

Ah, perfect.

She rose slowly and reached out, first letting her hand glide across the taut leather-like skin first. It was smooth and surprisingly soft. He opened his wings a little more to allow her access, and she took that chance to work her fingers along the skin, then up and along the muscular base of the wing. She carefully trailed downward then let her finger brush against the place connected at his shoulder blades.

She thought she heard a soft hiss and felt his wing tremble slightly. She did it again and a low moan escaped him. She looked down and saw his eyes fixed on her.

She bit her lip and took a chance. She lowered herself onto his lap and continued to gently caress him. His talons curled on the arm of the chair, and his eyes flickered with something feral. With snake-like speed, he caught her wrist and brought it out from behind his shoulder. She could feel his tension under her.

She watched him, then thought *to hell with it*. She let her other hand slide down his inner thigh. “I got off to your voice once,” she confessed. “I imagined you as just some shadowed, faceless man, but your voice was enough.”

He squeezed her wrist. She could almost feel his talons grazing her. “Got... off?”

She felt her face burn as she said, “You know, pleased myself.” She shifted against him. “Was that wrong? Do you not... feel that kind of way?”

A shadow passed over his gaze. “I have thought of that more times than you can imagine,” he whispered low.

She shivered. “Can we... is it possible?”

His hand clutched at her hip. “In truth, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been with one of your kind. But I am quick to learn.” This time his hand moved down her inner thigh. “I would have gladly taken you after the ceremony if you would have let me.”

Her body turned warm at the thought. She rose from his lap and took a few steps back onto the blanket by the fire. Soft thunder rolled outside as she reached behind her and untied her dress.

Elsyn watched her with an intense gaze, drinking her in, his talons still clutching his chair. Then, in one swift movement, he was up and helping her take off the dress, untying the back and peeling it down her body till it dropped to her feet. As she stepped out of it, he wrenched it away. She tugged the

underdress over her head, flinging it behind her, and stood naked before him, feeling cool air at her back and heat at her front.

Elsyn sank back in his chair. His large hand reached out to her and brushed lovingly across the side of her hip. “You are so beautiful, Sara.” His fingers trailed across her thigh, pulling her closer. “Show me how you did it. How you took yourself to the thought of my voice. Teach me.”

She flushed at the command. With trembling hands, she let her fingers move across her abdomen, then lower, between her legs. She curled her fingers there and showed him as he asked. “This place,” she brushed along her clit, “is sensitive to touch, like your wings but not exactly the same... if you touch it long enough and in the right way, I will...”

His fangs slipped from his upper lip. “I understand,” he said in that husky voice she remembered so well. He took hold of her hips then turned her around, bringing her back down onto his lap. He drew her legs apart as she sank against him. He let his hand fall down to her center, letting the pad of his thumb swirl around the spot she had shown him, careful not to let his talons touch her.

Sara’s breath caught in her lungs, her head rested on his chest, her back arching against him as he moved ever so slowly along her. Heat bloomed in her belly, swirling and growing as he pressed a little harder. His other hand slid up to her breast and cupped it gently, kneading.

“Sara,” he whispered against her ear. “When I saw you in that crowd and you spoke your name, I couldn’t wait to have you. Have you by my side, and just like this.” His fingers moved a little quicker. “All to myself, all mine,” he growled.

The heat in her spread and tightened, making her legs shake. A small whimper tore from her lips. “Yes, Elsyn, yours.”

“My bride, my queen,” he hissed.

He worked her till she shattered against his hand, the whimper turning into a low moaning cry as she bent forward. As she came, he lifted her with one arm, then pulled his robe aside with his other hand and untied whatever covered him. She saw he was ready for her; the shaft was a shade darker than his skin, with a thick bulge in the middle like a small knot. His shape was different than a human man’s but not so unlike that he couldn’t sheath himself in her. Carefully, he slid into her, digging his claws into her hips, moving her down. She threw her head back, gasping.

“You feel incredible,” she heard him say in a shaky voice. “You feel so right, my little starling. Take from me what you will. Show me.”

She moved her hips slowly, gliding along him, her legs still trembling, her hands now gripping the chair on either side. A breathless moan climbed up her throat.

He pushed in deep, his knot driving into and stretching her, making goosebumps rise on her skin. She loved the feel of him, so different yet so perfect, and she felt her heat building again with every stroke. When he moved his hips faster, she

braced herself and broke apart on top of him. He pulled her to him as she did, his hand gently cupping her throat and jaw possessively as he drove to his release. He bit her shoulder as a snarl ripped from him, as if he felt everything she did and more.

When it was finished, she unlatched herself carefully from him, the knot making her wince. She fell to her knees on the blanket before him, panting. When she turned around, she saw him untying the sash around his waist and unraveling his robe, letting each piece fall onto the chair.

He was so beautiful, he truly was a god. A god of starlight and darkness.

He sat on the ground with her and brought her to him, leaning his back against the chair as she leaned against his chest, his legs on either side of her.

He brushed away a lock of hair on her face, dampened a little with sweat. "You were so good, my queen," he whispered in a low voice. "So good. You were perfect."

She leaned her head against him and closed her eyes, listening to the soft beat of rain and thunder outside, soaking in this moment forever.



They slept curled into each other on the blanket, and when light began to break, Elsyn woke her, had clothes brought for her, and took her to the top of his keep, to the terrace, to watch

the sunrise. A tradition he always held on Amarith's day. Hallows Day. He wrapped his arms around her, his wings unfolding on either side of her as he kissed the top of her head.

"I can see the city from here," she said as they watched the light sweep over the land. "Maybe I'll go back and see them someday."

"If it is what you wish," he said softly against her neck. She could feel his fangs grazing across her skin. "Then it shall be so. But they must call you their queen."

She smiled. "That will take a lot for some of them, especially my sister."

He chuckled, his breath on her ear. "She will get used to it. As will you."

She squeezed his arm around her, thinking. "Will I be able to go with you to all those places you told me about? Will I get to see this world like you have?"

"Yes, all of it and more. And your people are mine now, they will be under my protection. We will make this world a better home. I will make this place a better home for you. With all my power."

She closed her eyes, feeling a warmth spread over her. She never would have believed she'd be with her Elsyn. She didn't say it aloud, but with him, she already felt more than home.

She looked back at him and smiled, then kissed him tenderly before whispering, "Happy Hallows Day, Elsyn."

He grinned back at her, stars alight in his eyes. “Happy Hallows Day.”

Note to the Reader

Check out more by Olivia Riley at
<https://oliviarileyauthor.com/>

The Twelve Nights of Halloheen

by RK Munin

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



MIX TOGETHER ONE PART SWEET CINNAMON ROLL, ONE PART HUMOR, TWO PARTS SEXY, AND THREE PARTS HOLIDAY AND YOU GET THE PERFECT MISADVENTURE.

Isla grew up in the impoverished human colony of Wimol with limited knowledge about Old Earth. One thing she did learn about was Halloheen. The ancient human holiday fell during the few times of year when they didn't have to work every day, all day, so her colony made it the yearly celebration. No detail was missed. They made cookies in the shape of hearts and gave them to the people they loved. They spun a top in a game no one knew the rules to, so rules changed from year to year. They dressed in costumes and judged each other's efforts. They hung green leafy plants from doorways, and every time two people passed under, they had to rub cheeks. Each night for twelve days they celebrated in different ways,

and on the last night, they stayed up to watch the sunrise while remembering deceased loved ones.

Wimol's Halloheen celebrations were Isla's most treasured memories. She now lives on Sorana along with Zia and a bunch of other humans, protected and cared for by Talins. Life is better here, but it's not the same. This small colony of humans and Talins isn't cohesive. The colony is new, and everyone is focused on completing tasks, which leaves no time for eating together or visiting. Isla longs for the tight-knit community she grew up in.

Tisuran has lived in close contact with humans for many solars, but Isla is the first human who's caught his attention. He can tell she isn't content, so he decides the best way to lift her spirits is to celebrate a Halloheen. None of the traditions make sense to him, but he hopes his efforts will make Isla happy, and perhaps even help her notice him.

After all, Isla told him Halloheen was a time for wishes to come true, and having her attention is his only wish.

Content Warnings: *A wild animal attacks a main character in the first chapter. There is talk about past sexual assault trauma, nothing happens on page. The characters discuss poverty and people dying due to poor conditions.*

Dear Reader,

Within this story you'll find a mishmash of all different holidays and traditions. This is not meant to be a catalog of holidays or a callous jab at one tradition or group, but rather a thought experiment of what might happen if people from different cultures mixed and melded over centuries on settlements far from Earth. The way we celebrate some holidays have changed even over my lifetime. What might happen after hundreds of years and lightyears of distance?

If you're so inclined, I encourage you to see if you can spot all the different holidays and practices I've blended together. Most will be familiar to my American and English speaking readers, but a few might be a surprise.

In the end, the most important aspect is that you enjoy this story that focuses on two individuals finding love while trying to bring their small community closer together through celebration. It's my strong belief that those are the most important aspects of our world independent of what traditions you favor: love and community.

All my best for every holiday you enjoy,

Rye

PS: When the Silent Tapping Language of the Norka is being used, you'll see 'single quotes' instead of "double quotes."

One

ISLA

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

The Twelve Nights of Halloheen are an opportunity to build community bonds. There might not be much food to share, but it will still be a feast. The presents we exchange will probably be inexpensive, but they'll be precious. The fires we circle around might be small, but they'll be warm and the night air will fill with our laughter.

Isla knew she was being dumb, but why stop the pattern of a lifetime now? When they'd been growing up, her best friend Zia had pulled her out of dangerous situations more times than she could count. When Zia brought her home with a new bruise, scrape, or torn clothing, her parents would sit her down and have a stern talk with her about making good choices.

With all the earnestness in her soul, Isla would promise to do better, and then she'd fail. It wasn't that she was self-destructive or had a death wish; the problem was simply that she had poor risk-assessment skills. Her brain didn't recognize

danger until she was in the thick of it. Her inability to identify imminent hazards, coupled with her tendency to become hyper-focused on a goal, meant the world around her disappeared as she went after what she wanted. The way her brain worked meant she excelled at her chosen profession, programming, but it also meant she didn't do well almost everywhere else.

Hyper-focusing on a non-essential task was the reason she was currently deep in the forest of Sorana, late at night, without a weapon, and holding a dying walking-torch. She should've turned back when the charge got so low the walking-torch started moving at a crawling pace. But no, she'd brushed aside the implication and started carrying it, instead of letting it walk on the ground and illuminate everything around her.

She'd also managed to ignore the dense fog forming around her until it got so bad the dimming, not-walking, walking-torch could barely illuminate the path a few yards ahead of her. Every few months, this kind of heavy mist would descend on Sorana. Wasn't it just her luck that tonight would be one of those nights?

Her friend Zia was fond of the proverb *luck favors the well prepared*. Sometimes Isla felt like she was the living embodiment of the opposite of that saying. If she had a motto it would probably be something along the lines of—*jump in with both feet and hope for the best*.

Sometimes her style worked, and sometimes she ended up in a dark forest filled with eerie thick mist and no back-up light

source.

A soft breeze rustled leaves and made the cold fog swirl around her. Her hair and clothes were getting damp. It wouldn't be long before she started shivering because of course she hadn't brought anything warm to wear.

This evening was turning out like something out of a gothic horror novel from Old Earth. All she needed was an Old Earth vampire to appear. Half the legends painted them as blood thirsty monsters, while the other half portrayed vampires as sexy, loyal protectors.

With the way things were going for her, any vampire that found her would be more interested in draining her body of blood than giving her sweet kisses.

A rustle in the vegetation to her right startled her. She awkwardly swung the walking-torch in the direction of the noise. The weak light it projected was barely enough to see the path at her feet. It had no chance to reveal what made the sound through the black night and dense, white vapor.

Going still, Isla focused on her hearing. There should be a soft symphony going on around her as all the small night creatures of the forest went about their business of digging in the ground, eating bugs, or scampering from spot to spot. But everything had gone quiet. There wasn't even a breeze moving the leaves now.

Was even the wind scared to move?

Choices—run home as fast as possible, or turn the light off and crouch down in an attempt to look like a rock instead of a tasty Isla-shaped meal.

Large red eyes coalesced in the misty darkness in front of her, their murky color reflecting the dim light of her walking-torch through the fog. The rest of the creature was still cloaked in fog and inky night. This meant the eyes looked like they floated in front of her, going sharp, then hazy, as the mist moved in the space between them.

Cringing, she held the walking-torch in front of her like a shield. Judging by the height of those floating eyes, she faced a nightmare incarnate, also known as a gorg. They were the largest and most deadly predator on Sorana. Tears pricked Isla's eyes as adrenalin flooded her system.

The disembodied eyes stalked closer in the silence.

“I know this seems like a good idea,” she babbled to the gorg as she backed away. “But I'd probably give you heartburn or a tummy ache. I promise it's not worth eating me.”

The gorg hesitated when she started talking, but not for long. Tears were streaming down her face now. Sobs lodged in her throat, making it hard to breathe. Her heel caught on something, tripping her backward.

With a distressed cry, she fell hard on her ample butt. All she could think was *this would never happen to Zia or Lakin*. They were even smaller than her five-foot-six height, but somehow they were never at a disadvantage. Why did she always end up doing everything wrong?

Oh, that's right, her stupid broken brain. She was going to die and it was all her own fault!

During the fall, the walking-torch had gone flying; now it was at least ten feet from her, lighting up a small patch of dense, rust-red forest. Without the light the glowing red eyes were gone, but Isla could feel the presence of the massive beast moving forward. It was as if a hulking shadow was pressing closer.

She wanted to scream. Run. Kick out. But she couldn't make herself move. Instead, she huddled on the hard ground, shuddering with fear and waited, unable to even pull air into her lungs.

A loud, violent sound broke through the silence. If she didn't know better, she'd think it was the sound of many feet pounding the ground as they ran. In truth, it was the roar rattle of a Talin. And it was by far the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard!

Before she could yell to whatever Talin was out there, the war rattle abruptly cut off when a shadow tackled the gorg. The beast sounded an angry screech as the two dark shapes went rolling into the underbrush.

Getting to her knees, she tried to see what was happening. She could barely make out any movement. She could hear the angry hissing and spitting of the gorg and sounds of intense roaring and war rattle as the two apex predators fought.

The faint sound of little feet running got her attention at the same time three walking-torches came trotting into the small

clearing on their three long, spindly legs. They were fully charged and illuminated the space with bright ferocity despite the thick white mist.

Their light revealed a familiar Talin, on his back with the gorg on top of him. The Talin was working his dagger between the armor plates surrounding the gorg's thick neck. It was the only place gorgs were vulnerable, but the Talin was forced to let the gorg chew on his other arm to get access to the spot. Not that the gorg was having much luck getting past the sharp quills bristling down the Talin's forearm.

Blasted by the light of three healthy walking-torches, the gorg screamed in pain and jumped off him. Before the Talin could even sit up, the dangerous beast disappeared into the dark, misty forest.

Unlike her, Talins were uniquely designed to combat gorgs, or any other deadly beast, with or without a walking torch. Except for a few spots, Talin's were covered in a natural armor made of overlapping keratin plates.

Along with their plated skin, they had claws on their hands and long, sharp quills on their forearms, several of which the gorg had broken off this warrior. Evolution had designed Talins to be tough and apparently gorg-resistant!

And somehow this male had found himself in this section of forest right when she needed him. Seeing the warrior examining the arm the gorg had tried to eat, Isla realized she needed to get moving. This was her fault and she had to do her best to fix it!

Two

ISLA

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

There is no right or perfect way to do any of the celebrations. If we're celebrating at all, it means we survived another year. Good for us!

Isla rushed to the Talin's side, easily recognizing this male now that he was illumined by the walking-torches. "Tisuran! That was amazing. I can't believe you went up against a fully grown gorg!"

"Are you injured, little Isla?" he asked, as he raked his gaze over her crouched form.

As with all Talins, Tisuran didn't smile or frown. His face wasn't designed to display emotions. Their species didn't have visible facial expressions. They lacked the muscles to move the corners of their thin-lipped mouths up or down, crinkle the edges of their eyes, or wrinkle their foreheads as a human might do. That wasn't where their differences with humans

ended. They also didn't have much of a nose, only a slight ridge with slits for nostrils, and they had small holes on either side of their head for ears.

Talins might not have developed facial expression to display emotions, but they'd evolved chestboxes they could rumble out of and armored back plates running down their spines they could slap together to make a rattling sound, like the deafening one Tisuran had sounded as he'd fearlessly attacked the gorg! Or the rumble he was making now that sounded a lot like the purr from an Old Earth cat.

"Are you too traumatized to answer me?" Tisuran asked, opening his arms for her as he purred. "Here, let me hold you until you feel better."

"Me?" she screeched, ignoring his invitation to hug. Instead, she grabbed his arm to examine where the gorg had tried to chew on him. The sight of the slight indentations in the keratin plates on Tisuran's arm and the broken quills swamped Isla with guilt. She'd caused that.

Tears filled her eyes, making her feel equally dumb and overly dramatic. She was quick to wipe them away with one arm as she pointed to his marred arm with the other.

"That's not nothing," she insisted, unable to look away from the marks left by the gorg.

"I'm uninjured," he answered. "The quills will grow back and the plates aren't permanently damaged."

“You could have internal injuries,” she argued. “We need to get back to the compound. Can you walk? You can lean on me.”

When she looked up, she found the bright, rich amber of his eyes focused on hers. While she wouldn't call the Talins pretty, Tisuran's eyes were definitely captivating. She could stare into them for ages and never truly figure out how to describe their color.

“I'm a better warrior than any gorg,” Tisuran scoffed. “A moment longer and my dagger would've been sunk deep into the beast's neck. It's too bad the walking-torches arrived and spoiled my fun.”

“Yup, sure, right,” Isla agreed, bobbling her head around, feeling the impulse to both laugh and cry at the same time. “Big warrior tough. Mighty warrior not need help. He fine.”

The clinking-marbles sound of amusement rumbled out of him, interrupting his purr. “Are you teasing me, little Isla?”

“Maybe a little,” she admitted. “You were the one on the bottom of the gorg-Talin pile! It's okay to admit you might have gotten a little hurt. For a moment you were a chew toy.” Okay, she might have sounded a little hysterical, but she'd never get the image out of her head of the gorg's mouth chomping down on Tisuran's arm.

“I would ask for help if there was an issue,” he answered. “The military teaches us that a warrior who won't admit to injuries is a danger to everyone.”

Enough moisture had gathered into her hair to cause rivulets down her face, making her realize the mist had gotten even thicker if that was possible. Rustling in the forest around them might be other gorgs or harmless little creatures.

Or vampires. She wasn't ready to rule out vampires.

Isla tugged at Tisuran's arm. "If you can walk, we should probably go."

"I agree, making our way back is an excellent idea," he murmured, his deep voice gentle as his purr got a little louder. But still, he didn't move. "You never answered my question. Are you hurt?"

Isla shook her head. That movement caused her long, ebony hair to come loose from the bun she'd put it in before setting off. Letting go of Tisuran's arm, she gathered the long tresses and re-secured them using a convenient twig, her hands shaking the entire time. Tisuran watched her move as if looking for injury.

When his gaze focused on her unsteady hands, she was quick to grasp them together. "I'm fine," she assured him, ignoring a last tear trickling down her cheek. "The gorg didn't get me. I only fell to the ground. My stupidity might be fatal someday, but not today."

He stopped his rumble for a moment to sound a harsh, negative rattle. "You're not a stupid human," he growled. "I won't hear you be unkind to yourself."

“Even if it’s true?” she asked, her humor falling flat when Tisuran only started up his soothing rumble again. She loved that purring rumble.

“It’s not true,” he insisted. “But I can see you’re in emotional distress. Come, clutch and cling to me for comfort.”

When humans had become popularized as pets among Talins hundreds of years ago, they’d been deemed emotionally needy and fragile. It was a common belief, even among the Talins who lived side-by-side with free humans, that humans constantly needed emotional support through hugging and cuddling. Tisuran was only trying to make her feel better. It didn’t mean anything.

“I don’t need a hug and you don’t have to pretend,” She gave him an apologetic look.

“Everyone knows I do things like this.”

Tisuran sounded a rumble reminiscent of wheels bumping over uneven ground. It was a questioning sound. “This?”

Wordlessly, she pointed to the forest around them and then at the stiff-legged, dead walking-torch laying on the ground.

“Gorgs have eyes designed for night hunting and bright light could easily drive them away, so I thought I’d be fine if I had a walking-torch. Except I didn’t check the charge,” she let out an aggravated sigh. “But why would I? No one checks charges on walking-torches because they’re always supposed to put themselves back on a charging station when they’re low. So of course I pick the one that decides to go rogue. Or is it suicidal

and decided today was the day it would end it all by not going back to a charging station?”

Her little speech had Tisuran making another marbles-clinking rumble of amusement. His marbles were pretty loud so he was really laughing at her now as he turned his attention to the possibly emotionally-unstable walking-torch.

The walking-torches Tisuran had brought had spaced themselves out to light up the forest, as they were programmed to do. One of them even stood over the dead walking-torch. Isla knew better than to anthropomorphize tech, but the working walking-torched looked like it was guarding a fallen comrade.

Rising to his knees, Tisuran grabbed the useless tech out from under the functioning one. Then he sat back on his heels and examined it. “Did you take this one from the front of Unit B?”

Isla blinked, surprised. “How did you know that?”

“Because that’s where Lysinian put it when he realized it wasn’t holding a charge anymore. Zia was supposed to look at it when she had a chance, to see if it could be repaired,” Tisuran explained. “You did the right thing bringing a walking-torch with you. If it had been fully functional, you would have been mostly safe. You were simply unlucky enough to take this one.”

Tisuran’s kindness didn’t make Isla feel any better. Tonight’s idiocy almost got her killed and Tisuran hurt. “I should have been suspicious when it wasn’t on a charging port.”

Tisuran sounded a rumble of amusement. “Yes, you should have read Lysinian’s mind and known his intentions.”

A reluctant smile formed on her face. “Even with a walking-torch I shouldn’t have gone so far from the compound.”

“That leads me to ask, why are you out here?” Tisuran asked, looking around the small clearing.

Isla’s smile vanished. It was a logical question but one she wished he hadn’t thought to ask. “I don’t want to say.”

The sound of a box of metal tools being upended onto the floor filled the space around them. She’d managed to force a rattle of surprise out of the Talin. “You don’t want to talk about something?”

The incredulity in his voice caused Isla enough annoyance to snap her spine straight and cross her arms. “I don’t tell everyone everything,” she retorted. “I have secrets.”

Remaining silent, Tisuran watched her. She held up for all of twenty seconds before cracking. “It’s embarrassing,” she admitted, feeling her face get hot.

“Were you meeting a human lover?” Tisuran asked with a rattle that sounded like a swarm of wasps. Oh, he was mad.

“Uh, no,” Isla said, embarrassment giving way to confusion. “I don’t have one of those.”

“Talin?” Tisuran roared, his angry rattle getting even louder. “Did a Talin let you wander out here by yourself? Who was it? I’ll—”

“It wasn’t anything like that!” Isla nearly shouted to be heard over Tisuran’s loud voice and noisy rattling. Her words made him quiet.

“If you weren’t meeting a lover, then why did you come out here?” he asked, starting up a soothing rumble again.

Isla bit her lip anxiously. “Do you promise not to laugh?”

“That is an easy promise to make,” Tisuran said. “Talins can’t laugh.”

Isla scowled. “Fine, do you promise not to make that laughing-rumble sound?”

Tisuran sounded a rumble of agreement which always made Isla think of stockinged feet running on a wood floor. “I promise not to make a single rumble or rattle in response to your explanation.”

“Right, so, uh, I was looking for some kind of green plant,” Isla answered. True to his word, Tisuran remained completely silent. No rattle. No rumble. No words even!

When the silence had continued for several minutes, Isla couldn’t take it any longer. “Are you fighting not to laugh at me?”

“I’m weighing my questions,” he said, standing up. Then he reversed course and crouched down on his heels, opening his arms up to her, “Let’s talk as we journey back to the settlement. I can I carry you.”

Ignoring his outstretched arms, she got to her feet. Without comment he stood up also, never taking his eyes off her. It was

tempting to accept the Talin's invitation. Not that she was incapable of walking, but she longed to be held.

But no. She still wasn't ready to be touched yet. Or probably ever.

"I'll walk," she answered, even though her legs felt a little wobbly. Tisuran kept his strides short and slow, making it easy for her to match his pace. The walking-torches were quick to fall in step with them, one in front, one next to her, and the last one behind them.

"Tell me if you become fatigued at any point," he commented.

"Just ask your questions." Her words came out sharper than she meant them to.

His purring rumbles continued to fill the surrounding air. "I'm curious, but I don't want to upset you."

The comment made Isla realize she was acting childish. He'd just rescued her from certain death, and she was being an overly sensitive brat. "I'm sorry, Tisuran. Please make any noise you wish and ask your questions."

"Why are you looking for a green plant?" he asked, casually glancing around at the purple, gold, and red foliage that made up the plant life on Sorana.

"To decorate with," she explained. When he interrupted his purring to sound a rumble of curiosity, she elaborated. "The Twelve Nights of Halloheen start tomorrow, and the tradition for the first night is to bring plants into the house."

“I remember you mentioned something about this celebration to Zia,” Tisuran commented with an encouraging rumble. Or it could be an understanding rumble. They sounded the same, like a bunch of people snapping their fingers. “It’s important to your group of humans.”

Isla felt a proper smile stretch her lips. “Yeah! We had so much fun during the Halloheen celebrations back on Wimol. The Twelve Nights always happened after the tooktuk harvest and before the planting, so we had free time to celebrate. Other than those days, we were always working, every day, all day.”

A deep rumble of sympathy came out of Tisuran. “Poor humans, forced to labor like beasts of burden on Wimol. I’m sorry this colony requires all of you to continue to work, but soon the infrastructure will be finished. Then everything will change.”

Isla scoffed. “Compared to Wimol, this place is a vacation.”

The progressive Talins of Sorana might not see humans as dumb, but they still considered humans far too fragile to do labor-intense jobs. Talins often tried to coddle the humans, to the extent that they often ended a work day before the task was even finished.

With the planet newly inhabited, there was always more work that needed to be done. Sorana didn’t even have half the necessary infrastructure up yet. And more humans and Talins were supposed to be arriving in a few short months. Talins and humans alike had been working frantically to make Sorana ready for the incoming group. It’d be easier if they could hire

proper Talin companies to come and do some of the bigger jobs, but they had to keep the true number of humans on Sorana a secret, along with the strictly forbidden human-Talin couples. As the timeline got shorter, tempers had started to fray.

That's why they needed a break and celebration!

"It's been so stressfully lately that everyone's gotten a bit grumpy," Isla continued. "And there've been a few fights. Tess and Ger still aren't talking. Celebrating the Twelve Nights of Halloheen would help everyone relax, have some fun, and come together as a community." The idea of celebrating made her want to skip a little. She resisted the urge but only because her legs felt a little shaky.

Tisuran sounded the snapping-fingers rumble of understanding again. "That's not a bad idea. Palforma commented earlier today that he believed the humans were unhappy."

"We aren't truly unhappy," Isla was quick to tell him. The last thing she wanted was any of the Talins to think the humans weren't content.

When Zia, Palforma, Derani, and Nalia had come to Wimol and offered everyone a place on Sorana, almost all the humans jumped at the chance for a better life. Living on Sorana might mean hard work and rough times during setup, but it came with the promise of an easier future.

A few years younger than Zia, Isla didn't hesitate to follow the woman she'd always idolized to a new planet. Even when her parents refused to leave, she packed up, said a tearful goodbye,

and boarded the ship, knowing she'd probably never see them again. It had been almost a year, and she still didn't regret her decision. But she did long for the laughter and comradery of Wimol.

"Not unhappy, but perhaps not as joyful as you could be," Tisuran murmured. "I believe your idea has a great deal of merit, and I'd like to help."

"Yeah?" Isla said with excitement. When she'd suggested doing some of the Halloheen traditions with Zia, her good friend didn't seem enthusiastic. The lackluster response made Isla reluctant to ask anyone for assistance. But Tisuran didn't think she was being frivolous, and he wanted to help!

"I'd be honored to be part of creating a full Twelve Nights of Halloheen celebration," Tisuran said with a formal tone and the single clang of a decisive rattle.

"This is going to be great," she declared, excitement making the last remnants of her earlier terror vanish. "I want to make this the best Twelve Nights of Halloheen we've ever had!"

"I swear to you it will be," Tisuran intoned.

For some reason his promise made a shiver run down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold mist coating her skin.

Three

TISURAN

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

The first night of Halloheen is called the Green Night and that's when we put up the bulk of the decorations. The most important decoration is the small tree brought into the domicile for everyone to decorate. There should also be small leafy green plants hung in doorways and other types of green plants draped over furniture. Think of it like bringing the outside to the inside.

“What are you doing?”

Tisuran turned sharply to find Dalt staring at him from the doorway of the communal building. Before answering, Tisuran carefully set down the little tree he'd dug up earlier that evening. The tree's small root ball was resting inside a hard edged, open top tool carrier and packed in with extra soil. The tree was the closest to green they could find; although if pressed, Tisuran would have described it as a very dark yellow.

After he was sure the tree wouldn't fall over, he turned to face Dalt. "It's a Halloheen tree," he explained.

"Halloheen?" Dalt murmured. Lakin, the human he was scent-bonded to, walked in at that moment. Without even looking at her, Dalt lifted his arms. She was quick to step into his space and snuggle her back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and lowered his face to her hair. She made a soft contented sound as Dalt swiped a cheek across the top of her head. Tisuran could smell Dalt's bonding oil as it soaked into Lakin's hair.

The two couldn't be more perfect for each other. Lakin was clever, and her indomitable spirit matched Dalt's skill to get them out of whatever trouble Lakin's plots and plans got them into. The love and comradery between them always made Tisuran jealous. Not that he wanted Lakin, but he wanted to find a partner to scent-bond that fit him as well as Lakin and Dalt fit together.

He was sure that could be Isla, but the last year had proven she was resistant to any of his efforts.

"Oh, I've heard about Halloheen," Lakin said. "We didn't celebrate any holidays in the colony I grew up in, but I heard Wimol did a big multi-day celebration every year."

"Yes," Tisuran said with an enthusiastic rattle. "Isla and I have only now returned from collecting items for the first night of Halloheen."

"That's tomorrow, right?" Lakin asked as she peered at the table holding the small tree and then down at the overflowing

bag of plant clippings Tisuran had dropped on the floor.
“What’s all this for?”

“We’re meant to decorate this room with those,” he explained, then pointed to the tree. “And everyone is expected to add colorful decorations to the tree.”

“I remember someone back home saying something about decorating a tree,” she murmured. “I think there’s supposed to be a star on the top.”

“How would we put a star on a tree?” Dalt asked her with a confused rumble and a glance out the door where the sun had long since set.

“Not a true star,” Lakin said with a laugh. “A stylized star. But it should be silver and reflective with five or more points.”

“I should be able to make a stylized star out of natic gel,” Tisuran murmured, thankful to Dalt for clarifying the type of star with Lakin.

“I’ll go talk to Zia about making some decorations,” Lakin said. Her growing enthusiasm was unmistakable. “I think everything is supposed to be super bright and glittery.”

That made Tisuran sound a brief rumble of amusement. “That will make Zia happy.”

Lakin grinned cheekily. “She does like all things sparkly. Is there a time set for decorating?”

Before Tisuran could answer, the main door to the communal building banged open to reveal Isla carrying several repurposed parts boxes stacked higher than her head. With a

distressed rattle, Tisuran rushed to take her burden, shocked at how much weight she'd been carrying. Isla was stronger than she looked.

“Hi guys!” Isla sang out in a cheerful voice.

Isla was always like this. Except for earlier in the evening, when she'd been scared and upset, Tisuran had never seen Isla act anything but merry. Zia had claimed Isla was happiness manifested. Tisuran was inclined to agree.

Isla's kindness was the reason it pained him so much every time she refused his comfort. Most humans on Sorana picked partners, either other humans or Talins. Except for Isla.

After proving his prowess in battle by taking on the gorg, Tisuran wanted more opportunities to impress Isla. Perhaps the Twelve Nights of Halloheen was the perfect time to showcase himself. This could be the turning point, and Isla would recognize his value.

“...I mean, that doesn't happen until the last night of Halloheen, but it's still my favorite part. That's when wishes are supposed to come true.”

Tisuran had been deep in his thoughts, so he only caught the last part of what Isla was saying. “I have a wish,” he mumbled.

Only Dalt heard him and his former military comrade and friend made a soft, sympathetic rumble that neither of the humans noticed.

“I have faith you can make your wish happen,” Dalt commented.

“What wish?” Lakin asked Dalt instead of responding to Isla’s last comment.

Tisuran was quick to redirect the conversation with another question. “Isla, when do we plan to decorate the tree?”

Dalt was quick to follow his lead. “We need to find Zia and ask her where the natic gel is kept. Then you need to show me how the humans like to draw stars.” He looked at Tisuran and said pointedly. “Everyone’s busy, so you’ll be here alone unless you ping someone’s Ident Cube or information square for assistance.”

With those parting words, Dalt guided Lakin out as she animatedly described the stars she’d drawn as a child. Tisuran was suddenly alone with Isla.

“Should we hang up the plants?” he asked, to draw her attention away from the departing couple. “Or does that happen tomorrow?”

“We should hang some items,” Isla mused. “But leave the rest for everyone to decorate together as part of Green Night.”

“Then let us complete this task,” Tisuran said, hefting the bag of plant clippings onto the table.

“Sure!” Isla skipped over. She stood next to him, pulling greenery out of the bag.

Tisuran gave himself a moment to inhale her unique scent. He longed to rub the scent glands in his cheeks into her hair. Their combined scent would be heady and addicting. He was so

entranced with her, it would probably only take once and he'd be scent-bonded to her for life.

The thought of touching Isla in any way made his mating shaft fill with blood and his flesh pouch grow tight.

This was going to be a long, torturous night. He wouldn't trade it for anything.



Isla

Zia's wide eyes and big, open-mouth smile clearly told Isla how impressed she was with the decorated communal building. She and Palforma arrived only moments ago and both of them had stopped in their tracks to admire everyone's efforts.

Yesterday evening Isla and Tisuran had hung a few items, moved all the bigger pieces of furniture into a storage area, and set the yellow-leaved tree up on a table in the center of the room. At least the tree wasn't red, like most of the other "greenery" they'd harvested.

This evening, the first of The Twelve Nights of Halloheen, everyone had gathered and cheerfully decorated with childlike abandon. The few humans that hadn't come from the Wimol human colony had enthusiastically joined the fun despite lacking experience with the tradition.

The result was a room embellished with every sparkly item, leafy plant, and bright fabric available. They'd made up for the lack of green plants by supplementing the decorations with green paper, paint, and fabric. The place looked better than any Green Night Isla had celebrated in the past.

As was tradition, both Zia and Palforma carried trays of food for the Green Night Feast. The couple unloaded their delectable offerings with the other potluck items on crowded warming tables.

Born deaf, Zia had the silent tapping language of the Norka downloaded into her Innercranial Translators. Everyone else had the same download, so they could all communicate, but Norka required a person's hands to be free to talk. The moment Zia set down her burden, she started tapping rapidly.

'This is amazing!' Zia exclaimed, eyes sparkling and her hand movements big to denote her excitement. 'I'm so glad you pushed to celebrate Halloheen. We have so much work to do, I wouldn't have thought to bother with it.'

Isla blushed a little. 'It's not that big of a deal,' she tapped back. 'It's not as important as organizing the domicile system's maintenance or fixing the comms relay.'

It was Zia's scent-bonded Talin, Palforma, that responded to Isla's comment. 'Don't downplay the importance of happiness,' he countered with precise hand movements. 'Most of us are too focused on building and maintaining this colony. We forget that our spirits need sustenance as well as our bodies.'

During his time in the Talin military, Palforma had suffered a brain injury, leaving him with an inability to find his words and a stutter when he did manage to talk. He'd been quick to adopt Norka when Zia had introduced the language to him, finding he could communicate far more eloquently with his hands. Many had considered him lacking intelligence until he learned Norka.

Isla was often jealous of Zia and Palforma's relationship. Palforma was a warrior who thought himself worthless until Zia. With her leading the way, he found his value, and the two of them had even foiled a plot to kill a member of the Talin royal family!

Isla might not be interested in living that kind of dangerous adventure, but she did long for a partner who saw her as an equal and not some dingbat who needed to be kept safe from her own follies.

But then she'd remember relationships weren't for her. Any male she partnered with would want *things* from her. She couldn't do those *things*. Never again.

‘...all the other nights?’

It took Isla a moment to realize Zia had asked her a question. She'd zoned out and missed most of her tapping. ‘I'm sorry, what?’

Zia grinned and repeated her question. ‘Will you do all the nights? Or only this one and the last one?’

Isla gave Zia a mock scowl. ‘We’re doing all the nights. What kind of celebration would it be if we only celebrated Green Night and Night of the Dead?’

‘Great! I’m looking forward to a full celebration!’ Zia said with her trademark soundless, huffing laugh. Isla loved that laugh, as it reminded her of their mischievous childhood adventures and pranks.

‘I think this is exactly what we’ve been missing,’ Palforma added with the clinking-marbles rumble. In this context he wasn’t expressing amusement but happiness. Even though Zia couldn’t hear the rumbles and rattles the Talins made, she had special implants in her eyes that used visual cues to keep her informed about the sounds going on around her.

‘You think we’ve been missing a room full of decorations where everyone is dressed in green clothing?’ Zia asked with a teasing expression.

‘No,’ Palforma answered. ‘We’ve been missing a community.’

‘Palforma gets it,’ Isla tapped triumphantly as she beamed at the Talin in question.

Before Zia could respond, several others joined their little group and claimed the couple’s attention. Stepping back to make room, Isla bumped into something behind her.

“Oh!” she gasped and bounced forward, worried she’d hurt someone. The rapid change in direction caused her to lose her balance. The ground was rushing up to meet her, but strong

Talin arms encircled her and pulled her flush against a hard, keratin-plated chest.

“Easy,” Tisuran breathed into her neck as he sounded a purring rumble. The moment she was stable on her feet and before she could get upset, he dropped his arms from around her. He wasn’t holding her, but he remained with his front pressed against her back. “I’m sorry, little Isla. That was my fault. I was in your way. I meant to speak before you stepped, but I was worried I’d startle you.”

“It’s the night to be startled and tickled,” Isla said. She relaxed against Tisuran, letting herself have a moment of physical contact before stepping away. Turning to face Tisuran, Isla fought to keep her smile in place when her body seemed to have heated up out of nowhere.

“Are we supposed to scare each other on the Green Night?” he asked.

“Not scare, but you’re supposed to tickle someone if they aren’t wearing green,” she explained, still slightly breathless from his closeness.

Tisuran examined the humans and Talins in the room, then sounded an amused rumble. “I believe everyone is wearing green.”

Isla shrugged and snickered. “Yeah, everyone remembered this year. Or were told by those who knew.”

“Interesting,” Tisuran mused. “When you sent out the messages to everyone’s information squares and Ident Cubes,

you didn't mention wearing green. Were you hoping people would have forgotten that part of the tradition?"

"Maybe?"

Tisuran sounded a rumble of amusement loud enough to have been several bags of clinking-marbles all being shaken at once. His version of a Talin laugh made Isla chuckle. Feelings of gentle intimacy filled her, pushing her to take his hand. He tangled his fingers with hers, but she didn't feel the need to pull away. Ignoring the strange feeling in her stomach at the sight of their linked fingers, she forced her eyes to focus on the table practically buckling under so many heaping containers of food.

"You did most of the work yesterday, and you were super busy today helping others finish their tasks, so no one missed Green Night. You must be starving."

"I'm hungry," he admitted. "Will you eat with me?"

Knowing Talins liked to feed humans by hand, she ignored the implication of his question.

"We could share a plate," she offered.

"That would...." His voice trailed off as something caught his attention. "What are they doing?"

Following his gaze, she saw Palforma holding Zia high against his chest, her legs wrapped around his waist. On Sorana, Talins and humans were free to show affection, unlike the rest of the Talin empire where these relationships weren't simply taboo, they were illegal.

It took Isla a moment to figure out that it wasn't the couple's intimate tangle Tisuran was questioning, it was that they were doing it under a decorated arch with some of the greenery almost touching the top of Palforma's head.

They were also engaged in a heated kiss that made Isla blush to watch. If she didn't know better, she'd think they'd forgotten they were in a room full of people. But she did know better because Zia and Palforma weren't shy with their affection on Sorana.

"Oh, that's one of the Green Night traditions," she explained. "But they're not doing it right."

"Demonstrate how it's supposed to be done," Tisuran insisted. "With me."

"Um, okay," Isla agreed and walked with him to stand under a different arch. Pointing up at some of the leafy plants they'd hung the night before, she explained the action first. "When two people find themselves under this, they're supposed to rub cheeks."

Without warning, Tisuran dropped to his knees in front of her and presented the side of his face.

"Show me," he requested. "Please."

Isla startled at his sudden movement, then giggled. Leaning closer to his warmth, she slid her cheek against his. Tisuran could have been a statue; he remained perfectly still as her silken cheek stroked his for the first time. The scent of sweet

maple hit Isla's nose as warmth remained on her skin even after she moved back.

Tisuran's hand became rigid in hers. A deep, thrumming rumble rolled from his chestbox, very different from his normal soothing purr. The lower pitch of this new rumble bypassed her ears and tugged at something deep inside her.

Isla froze in the warmth of Tisuran's proximity, afraid to move, to even breathe. She'd never experienced a sharp punch of lust before. Honestly, she never expected to desire anyone. He was in every part of her senses. The skin of his hand on hers. The sight of him filling her vision. His thrumming rumble making gooseflesh break out across her skin. Even his smell filled her nose, rich and mouthwatering.

"Maple."

"What's maple, *lorelina*?" His murmured question and the use of the Talin equivalent of sweetheart shocked her out of the moment.

"Uh, you smell like maple," she explained woodenly, suddenly realizing how close they were. If either of them moved a little, they'd be kissing.

Releasing his hand, she fiddled with the front closure of her garment. She should step away or at least break eye contact. She didn't do either. "Do you think there's enough ki? I know Ulanian and Jarnian could use up an entire shaker of it each."

Tisuran ignored her question and asked one of his own. "Do you like maple?"

“Yeah, it was my favorite candy growing up,” she said, then noticed the wetness glistening on his cheek. Without conscious thought, she reached out to run shaking fingers over the side of his face. Her fingers were quickly covered in an oily substance and the smell of maple grew even stronger.

She knew each of the Talins produced oil from the scent glands in their cheeks. Even if they weren't producing enough to make the sides of their face shiny, every Talin had a unique smell because of the oil. Usually it was faint and fleeting, but with her fingers coated in Tisuran's bonding oil, the smell hung heavy around them.

Unlike other Talins with their cloying scent of flowers or fruit, the smell of Tisuran's bonding oil made her mouth water. She wanted to rub the oil all over her body and let the heat warm her to her core.

The mental image made her heart pound with lust.

On the heels of the lust was fear. Unbidden, memories of being held down and hurt flashed through her mind. No, not tonight! She didn't want to think about those things ever, but especially on the first night of Halloheen.

Her vision went a little fuzzy. Shit, there were tears in her eyes. She was going to cry and have a meltdown right here in front of everyone.

“I need to go.” Panicked, she turned and fled.

Her small size was an advantage as she darted through the crowded building. Soon she was bursting out of one of the side

doors and into the cold darkness of Sorana's night.

Four

Isla's guide to Twelve Nights of Halloheen (excerpt)

The main goal of the Night of Fire is to remind us what it was like to live without modern technology. You're supposed to cook only on an open fire and use fire for light and warmth. Because fire is so dangerous, the Night of Fire is celebrated outside even though our ancestors probably used fire indoors. At the end of the evening, there should be a display where colorful substances are exploded high into the sky. That's how our ancestors told the Universe that we were on our way to the stars!

Tisuran immediately chased Isla through the crowd, but his human was fast. By the time he followed her into the night, she'd disappeared. Tracking her footprints, he caught up as she reached the fringe of the forest surrounding the settlement.

"Isla, no!" he shouted as he snatched her into his arms. She panted, terror and pain easily read in her expression. Concerned he'd caused her distress by restraining her, he was

quick to set her back on her feet. But still, he kept his body between Isla and the forest.

“Isla, please,” he begged. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Body shaking, she pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. It broke him to see her suffering and be helpless to even understand what was causing it.

“Not you,” she mumbled so softly he almost didn’t hear it.

He dropped to his knees to put himself in a vulnerable position, then sat back on his heels to see her face clearly.

“Will you explain what happened?” he requested.

She hugged her arms around herself as a violent shiver racked her body. Tisuran wasn’t sure if it was caused by the chilly night air or her turbulent emotions. As he watched, she pulled a deep breath into her lungs, held it, then released it slowly.

“You won’t like what I say,” she warned him.

“Nothing can wound me more than your silence,” he answered with a soothing rumble.

She shivered again. Now he thought it was caused more by the cold than her mental state. She’d run out of the communal building without an omnie. While it would need to be far colder to effect a Talin, the humans could quickly succumb to even the mildest change in temperature.

“You can take as long as you need to find your words, but while you search, we could go somewhere warmer,” he coaxed.

“No.” That one word was delivered with sharp finality. After another deep breath, she spoke again. “I can’t be inside right now. I just can’t.”

He refused to leave her alone, even for the short time it would take him to sprint back to the building and grab her an omnie. If he couldn’t take her inside, he needed to find a source of warmth out here.

Then he remembered the fire pits. He’d spend the early evening setting up the fire pits, flame lanterns, and fire stands for tomorrow’s Night of Fire. Everything was ready to light and some of the bigger fire pits had seating around them.

“Let me take care of you,” he soothed. “I won’t make you go inside or hold you without permission. But let me make you warm and comfortable.”

Isla blinked a few times as she processed his words. Finally, she nodded her head in agreement. Relief filled him as he interrupted his soothing cadence to rattle out a sound of encouragement.

Moving slowly, he rose to his feet. He had to fight the urge to take her hand in his. “Will you walk with me?”

She nodded but kept her eyes focused on the ground. He wished she’d look at him.

Walking side by side, he guided her to one of the many fire pits. Tisuran encouraged her to sit in one of the human-style chairs. It took him only a few sub-marks to start a roaring fire, then he sat next to her on the ground and watched the flames.

The crackling fire and rustling of the forest beyond was all they could hear.

To keep himself from pushing her to talk before she was ready, Tisuran mentally recited the components of a field-shock cannon. Even if it took all night, he'd sit at her feet and wait.

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but he'd finished with field-shock cannons, mounted swing arm guns, and was starting in on the triple-load strafers by the time Isla spoke.

"I haven't heard of a single human colony that's doing really well," she started. "It was hard for humans to find jobs in the universe before the Final Cataclysm, but after Old Earth couldn't support life anymore, we had to leave. That meant we had to take any job offered. There were people who basically ended up being indentured servants. They worked for room and board, you know?"

"I've been told this, yes," Tisuran agreed. "Was it like that on Wimol?"

"No, we were some of the lucky ones. The Ugarians were pretty fair. They let us build a village on one of their colony planets, Wimol, and set a minimum that the Ugarian farmers had to pay us for our labor. The minimum was way lower than what the average Ugarian would earn doing the same task, but it meant we always had jobs."

Tisuran had to fight an explosive war rattle. Wimol might not have been as bad as other places for humans, but they were still exploited. He took a few breaths to make sure he could speak calmly.

“Zia told me the work never stopped,” Tisuran observed gently.

“That’s true, but we didn’t all have to work. Unlike a lot of other human communities, we had elderly,” Isla mused. Her simple statement was significant—on Wimol humans had the luxury to grow old, but they couldn’t anywhere else.

A sad rumble sounded from Tisuran. “You’re all safe here,” he reminded her. “No one will be worked to death or neglected. If you’re worried because we’ve all been laboring so hard, let me reassure you, it’s temporary. Once basic infrastructure is established, the colony should sustain itself with minimal labor. Humans will have time to create, innovate, and prosper. We will have elders here too.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she rejoined, finally looking at him. The pain and fear were gone, but the tight line of her mouth indicated she was still dealing with anxiety. “I’m not worried you guys are going to work us into early graves. I wanted you to understand that, compared to other human enclaves, Wimol was pretty good but still poor.”

“Consider me informed,” Tisuran acknowledged with an upbeat, teasing rumble.

Isla grinned briefly, but it wasn’t a true smile. It didn’t reach her eyes and disappeared when she returned her gaze to the dancing orange flames.

“When Zia’s family moved to Wimol, I was super excited. Zia and her sister lived on a space station before Wimol. They’d seen so much already. I idolized and stalked them with the

ferocity of a bored adolescent. Zia was nicer to me, so I ended up focusing on her. She taught me so much, even before she got her first implants. We were all using a sign language we'd cobbled together from the few Old Earth information vids the colony shared. It wasn't great, but we made it work."

She went silent, prompting Tisuran's next question. "What happened?"

"Zia was developing too quickly," Isla said in a soft voice. "If we didn't get her a set of implants soon, her neural tissues might reject the hardware because of the hormonal changes in an adult. Even the cheapest implants would work because she could get them switched out later, but that was more than her family could pull together. Then the whole community saved to buy her implants. We were all so scared we'd miss the window."

A feeling of dread built in Tisuran's chest. "What did you do, Isla?"

"Ugarians are sexually compatible with humans," she whispered. "The males will go into a rut. Usually, it isn't an issue. Ugarians often form mating groups of up to two dozen individuals. That means there's always a willing partner available. But, um, this Ugarian named Yesith got caught stealing."

"And Ugarians use shunning as punishment," Tisuran concluded.

"Yup," Isla said. "His sentence wasn't even that long, but he was due to go into rut. He was scared he'd become so needful

he might commit a much worse crime. So, uh, he came to the human colony and offered money to anyone who would see him through his rut.” Her breathing got quicker. “It was a lot of money.”

It took all the willpower Tisuran possessed to keep from plucking Isla off her chair to settle her in his lap. He longed to hold her, sound a constant soothing rumble, and promise nothing would ever hurt her again.

Fighting his instincts, Tisuran kept silent and still. When Isla turned her face to his, her eyes were deep pools of unshed tears.

“I’d never done anything before,” her voice broke. “I mean, I’d messed around a little with Bennie, but nothing super serious. Mom had given me the sex talk. I knew basically what was going to happen. She’d said it might be a little uncomfortable the first time. But, um, it was way worse. It hurt. It hurt a lot.”

The tears started falling and her voice got a little unsteady. “Ugarian ruts last a few hours, or, um, I guess the equivalent of three or four marks. Mostly I just had to lay there and take it. He wore a muzzle to keep from mauling me, but he still held me too tight. When it was over, he thanked me and paid even more than we agreed into the account for Zia’s implants.”

“No one ever knew?” Tisuran asked, surprised at the grating quality of his voice. Maybe it was from having to get the words past the powerful emotions he was experiencing but trying to keep suppressed.

“I had to keep it a secret,” Isla explained. “Yesith would have been punished for hiring me and breaking his shunning. And... and... I didn’t want anyone to know. I mean, I didn’t feel ashamed or anything. So I don’t know why, but I didn’t want anyone to know. I felt different. Even after I healed up.” She bit her lip, probably to hold back her sobs.

“Healed up?” Tisuran croaked.

“I hurt so bad for a few days, and there was blood. More than Mom said there would be my first time. I was scared I was damaged,” she admitted. The tears flowed down her face more rapidly now. “I told everyone I was sick and stayed in my room. No one noticed because of the money. Everyone was celebrating that Zia could get her implants and guessing who made the big donation. Yesith paid anonymously so no one could trace it.”

“You could’ve had an internal injury,” Tisuran whispered, appalled at the danger Isla had subjected herself to. He’d been aware from the beginning that her love and loyalty knew no bounds, but this was a revelation. Everyone loved Isla, but they also saw her as impetuous and a little childlike. He didn’t think anyone would guess the steel core housed within her diminutive packaging.

A connection formed in his head. “Is that why you don’t like to be touched?”

She nodded her head and wiped at her tears. “I didn’t think it would be a big deal, but something changed inside me. My brain knows that my friends and family aren’t going to hurt

me, but I get scared anyway. It doesn't happen when I hug someone else. But if they try to hug me back, my body goes into panic mode.”

Tisuran was sure no one else had noticed Isla's condition because she covered it so well by always being quick to hug, let go, move away, then distract. Before he'd thought her incapable of being still, but now he could clearly see the pattern.

His poor human!

Drawing her legs up on the chair, Isla wrapped her arms around her shins and rested her chin on her knees. Going slow, Tisuran moved until he was sitting on the ground in front of the chair, facing her.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm not sure,” he answered. “I want to hold you and protect you from danger. I want to surround you with my body and promise my flesh will absorb all blows so none will ever touch you. But I don't want to be the reason you panic. I thought if I sat here, you could touch me instead, if you wanted to. To comfort us both.”

“You Talins are all so protective of us,” she huffed out. “I'll be fine. I have to be fine.”

He waited until she met his gaze, then spoke from the heart. “We might be protective, but I feel different about you than the other humans. This is about you and me, not anyone else. You're special to me, Isla.”

Her eyes widened briefly, then slid back to gaze at the fire over his shoulder. As if she was fighting her own muscles, she jerkily unwrapped her arms from around her legs and put her feet on the ground on either side of Tisuran. Close, but not touching. “I think you’re special too.”

“You’ve touched me before,” he reminded her. “And others. Touch me again. Take comfort from me.”

Dropping her gaze to him, Isla reached out a tentative hand to touch the top of his head. “You didn’t pick me up earlier,” she remembered. “Palforma was holding Zia, but you didn’t do that. Why?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t realize until now that you didn’t like to be touched, but I knew instinctively not to pick you up,” he answered honestly.

She stroked her hand over the top of his head. “When I first saw you guys, I thought your skin would be rough. But it’s smooth. And you’re so warm. You guys throw off a lot of heat.”

Her touch made him hungry for more. That hunger gave him an idea.

“I want to demonstrate my *stellian*,” he said. “It will show you how trustworthy I am.”

“What’s a, uh, *stellian*?” she asked.

“It’s a way to show self-control and restraint,” he explained. “During my early years in military school, I wanted to distinguish myself, so I would perform a sustenance *stellian*

often. I wouldn't eat for several rotations. When I allowed myself food, I would consume a single-serving meal slowly and steadily over the course of several marks. No one could match my control."

Isla was silent for a few moments. "Willpower," she finally exclaimed. "*Stellian* is willpower. I don't think I could take a couple of hours to eat if I'd fasted for several days."

"Our basic needs are hard to deny," Tisuran agreed. "I did the same with water, allowing myself only small sips and never truly quenching my thirst."

"It would be easier not to have any at all," Isla observed. "Constantly denying myself a full drink would drive me crazy!"

"And that's the point of the *stellian*. To develop perfect control over even the most basic instincts," Tisuran concluded.

"This *stellian* means you won't touch me?" she clarified.

He sounded a soft rumble of agreement. "Not without your permission, ever." He paused, then added, "Except for danger."

"Yeah, but in some dangerous times you touch a nasty gorg, not me," Isla teased with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. He didn't rumble out an amused sound. He was focused on talking her into trusting him.

"You can rely on my *stellian*, Isla."

Her smile vanished, her expression turning serious. "I might never be okay with being touched." The hand petting his head

shook slightly at her words.

“When a bone is broken, does it go from separated to perfectly whole in an instant?” he asked.

She blinked in confusion, then snorted out a laugh. “Weird change of subject, but okay. Human bones don’t heal like that. A bone has to rebuild. Even with growth meds it takes days or even a week.”

“If that’s the case, why would you think you could easily heal trauma without help or in one interaction?” Tisuran asked pointedly. “We don’t make bones heal by themselves. Healers use medication, braces, and light therapy to aid healing. We don’t simply let an injury heal on its own. We help. You’ve been trying to heal your mind without any help. That’s not optimal.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Isla said, her hand resting on the armored plates at the back of his neck. Unlike the ones running down his spine, these only moved apart when he bent his head forward. “You want to help me? Be my medicine? Or, I guess, my treatment.”

“Yes, I do.” Bowing his head, he separated the plates to give Isla access to the soft, vulnerable flesh underneath. “Your mind isn’t broken. It’s injured.”

He shuddered when her little fingers moved between his neck plates, stroking the sensitive skin. No one had ever touched him there. He felt exposed and cherished.

“What do you plan to do?” she asked.

“Touch you,” he answered simply.

Her fingers went still. “I don’t think—”

“Only a little,” he said quickly, before she could voice her full refusal. “And I would stop the moment you showed any fear or discomfort. Remember, my *stellian* is exemplary.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” she asked as she withdrew her fingers from his neck. He mourned the loss of her touch.

“What if it does?” he countered gently, turning to catch the flickering shadows across her face. “May I give you an example of what I want to try? Will you let me hold your hand?”

She hesitated, but this was something he knew she could do.

“Sure, I guess,” she said, shoving her hand at him.

Tisuran didn’t take her hand in his. Instead he brought his face to her hand and nuzzled her palm. His scent glands ached, and when her hand slid over his cheek, oil slathered her flesh. The scent of his bonding oil filled the air. When she took a deep breath to pull the scent into her lungs, his heartbeat sped up a little. He focused on remaining still so she could explore him with her fingers.

When she moved her hand to cup his jaw, he went still. “This doesn’t count,” she whispered. “I’m touching you. You’re not touching me.”

He opened his eyes to see a half smile on her face. “It does,” he insisted. “I’m touching you with my face and my scent.”

Now she laughed. “I guess touching me with your face doesn’t make me feel panicked.”

Bowing his head, he pressed his lips to her palm. Humans called these lip presses kisses, and although it wasn’t a natural Talin act, many of them had grown familiar with and fond of kissing.

She gasped slightly. He rolled his eyes up to see her face. Tisuran worried he’d see distress. But it wasn’t fear; it was interest. Emboldened, he kissed her again, this time lower on her palm and closer to her wrist. Then another kiss on the pulse point of her wrist.

“I would like to touch you all over with my lips and mouth,” he whispered into her callused palm.

“I, uh, that doesn’t sound scary,” she stuttered out.

“Isla, what’s going on?” Vida called out, breaking the moment between them.

As Vida stepped into the ring of light produced by the fire, Isla jerked her hand away from Tisuran. He had to bite his tongue to keep from snapping at Vida for her bad timing. Vida was a motherly human originally from Wimol and was constantly trying to feed everyone her homemade nutrient bars. No one had the heart to tell her how horrible they tasted, and there was a small, growing pile of them deep in the forest. Not even the wild animals of Sorana would eat them!

Now she stood over Isla and Tisuran, looking curious.

Isla smiled up at Vida and gestured to the fire. “Tisuran wanted to give me a preview of the fire pits for tomorrow’s Night of Fire. Didn’t he do a good job?”

Vida nodded her head with approval. “It looks great. Much better than what we had on Wimol. But you need to come back inside! We’re about to put the star on the tree and everyone needs to be there or you’ll miss out on the good luck!”

“Of course,” Isla agreed as she stood up. Although it was subtle, Tisuran could tell she was reluctant. As much as Tisuran didn’t want to move, maybe this was a good time for them to have a break. Isla had been through a lot of emotions tonight.

“We can continue our discussion tomorrow,” he said to Isla as he stood to follow the humans back inside.

When she smiled up at him, it was full of anticipation instead of dread. “I think I’d like that.”

“I’ll make sure you do,” he promised.

Five

ISLA

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

The Night of Joy is all about laughter. It's about filling the room with the sounds of tangible happiness.

Isla stared at the information square in her hands, frowning at the blank screen. Tonight was the Night of Joy and she needed more jokes to make the King and Queen laugh, but no matter how hard she thought, she couldn't come up with a single thing.

It was the same problem she'd been dealing with for the last two days! Every time she gave herself a quiet moment to think, the only thing that popped into her head was Tisuran.

During the Night of Fire, he'd sat on a short stool next to her seat and fed her the food he carefully roasted over the open flame. As he fed her, he asked her questions about growing up on Wimol and all the hijinks she, Zia, Lasha, Nura, and Corin had gotten themselves involved in. The five of them had been

high-energy, creative children and teenagers, always finding ways to entertain and amuse the adults after long days of laboring. Then there'd been Alsi, the quiet one of them who preferred to stay inside reading but was always interested in hearing about their adventures.

She didn't realize until later that recounting all those stories had diminished the hold Yesith cast on her memories of Wimol. She hadn't considered that he had overshadowed all thoughts of the past; Tisuran's questions were pouring light onto her memories. He was helping to rekindle all the warm and enjoyable moments.

And then there was the touching.

He was so careful with her that, when he was feeding her during the Night of Fire, his only touch was when his fingers occasionally grazed her lips as he brought food to her mouth. That slight contact had been enough to make her skin buzz and her breath hitch. None of it in a bad way.

But to her disappointment, that's all he did! She'd expected him to pull her aside as everyone wandered home after the light display, but he hadn't. He'd escorted her to her domicile, then left her at the door with a purr and promise of fun for the Night of Sweets.

She'd been so eager to see him the next day, she'd gone searching for him. Again, he spent the day making sure she enjoyed herself, but he hadn't pressed her for anything except to hold hands. It got to where she'd taken his hand and placed it on her waist, silently inviting him closer.

Why wasn't he pushing her? What was his plan?

He helped her find some of her favorite candy hidden around the compound, and he'd gotten her a slice of brightly decorated cake with a small candle in it so she could make a wish before blowing out the candle. He'd done everything right, yet she wanted to scream with frustration by the end of the evening's festivities.

Could she make him touch her more? Would that trigger her fear or make her feel empowered?

The chime of her door display brought her out of her thoughts. "Open," she called to the door, and it slid back to reveal Tisuran standing there with several bags clutched in his clawed hands.

"Are you ready?" he asked eagerly. "I've collected many things that will cause a great deal of amusement."

Leaving the information square on the table, Isla hurried to the door. "I'm ready, but I don't think I'm going to be earning any beads tonight," she admitted.

Tisuran stepped aside to let her pass. "I doubt that. You're always making people laugh or smile. Why would tonight be any different?"

Walking close so her shoulder brushed his arm, Isla grinned. "Trust me, tonight is different."

She could hear the laughter of the humans and the marbles-clinking rumbles of amusement from the Talins before they

entered the communal building. Isla couldn't wait to see what Talins considered funny.

The first thing she saw after stepping inside was the tall dais set up with Zia and Palforma sitting on two brightly decorated chairs with a large container of beaded necklaces on a table between them. They were the King and Queen of Joy for the night, and every time someone made them laugh, they threw them beads. At the end of the night, the person with the most beads was declared the winner and given the title of Bringer of Joy.

Isla had never won, but she'd never tried very hard. She considered this the one night of the year she didn't have to make others happy. Tonight she got to sit back and enjoy herself.

“...and the second Volner said, ‘but that’s your job!’”

She couldn't see who told the joke, but the raucous laughter from the humans meant she wanted someone to repeat it to her. Both Palforma and Zia threw beads at the person. She and Tisuran moved deeper into the crowd as she saw Markos step up to tell a joke. Although Isla had heard the joke before, she still laughed and applauded with everyone else as the King and Queen threw Markos' beads.

The crowd shifted and she found herself pressed in on all sides. The panic hit her fast and hard. She knew she was surrounded by friends, but it didn't matter. She was hemmed in on all sides. She wasn't sure she could get her voice to work

enough to ask anyone to move, and more touching right now might send her into a full meltdown.

All she could feel was old terror building. It was getting hard to breathe. Was there even oxygen in the room?

“Isla, I need help with my props,” Tisuran said. He nudged people aside so she could follow him. “Come with me please.”

Gratefully, she followed him on wobbly legs. She knew Tisuran didn’t need any help but was doing this to help. Her observant warrior knew she was drowning and had been quick to get her out of the crowd without making a fuss.

No one paid them any attention, and soon the two of them were alone in an empty storage room. The moment the door slid shut behind them, she sagged against a wall as he dropped his bags to the ground, kneeled in front of her, and started up a soothing purr.

“*Loreline*, talk to me.”

Taking in big gulps of air, Isla held back her tears. “I’m sorry I’m so... broken.”

An angry rattle sounded briefly, overshadowing Tisuran’s purr. “You’re not broken, and I won’t have you saying such things about yourself.”

Tisuran inched a little closer. Isla moved her hand to rest it on his head; it was a familiar and comforting gesture. He leaned into her touch, his rumbling changing pitch slightly. Her hand slid down to his cheek and warm oil coated her skin. The smell of sweet maple filled the room.

“We can stay here for as long as you need,” he reassured her as he nuzzled her palm. As usual, when she touched him, he kept his hands resting on his thighs.

“Thank you, Tisuran,” she whispered.

“Would you like me to distract you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she agreed readily. She expected him to open the sacks he’d brought and try to make her laugh. Instead, he reached out to grab the bottom half of a leg broken off a walking-torch on the floor next to him. It was about the length of her forearm and as thick as her pinky finger.

“Hold that.”

Thoroughly confused, she took the leg from him, holding it straight up and down by the middle. “What am I doing with this?”

“If you drop it, everything stops,” he explained. “You don’t have to say anything or move. Just let go of the leg.”

As he spoke, he slowly lowered his body until his chin was so close to the top of her slipper that she could feel his warm breath ghosting over the flesh of her ankle. Knowing the communal room would be crowded and hot, she hadn’t put on a heavy omnie. All she wore was a light unisex wrap that was common attire for the humans during leisure times. Hers was a bright yellow because she adored cheerful, vivid colors. Most everyone else went with more muted blues, greens, or maroon-colored wraps.

As she watched, Tisuran nosed the hem of her wrap out of the way and laid his lips on her shin. “I’m going to touch you with my lips,” his voice warm on her skin. “Drop the leg now.”

She obeyed without thinking. The moment the leg hit the floor, Tisuran was moving. With speed that made her gasp, he put himself against the far wall. He was on his knees, bent at the waist, with his arms behind his back, and his head arched down.

This was a position of supplication. With his head down like that, his protective neck plates separated, making his spine vulnerable to attack. “Tisuran?”

“Ask me to come back,” he requested. “Or I’ll stay here all night. My *stellian* is strong, even faced with the pleasure of touching you.”

Oh, now she understood. Swooping down, she picked the leg back up. “Please come back,” she requested breathlessly. “I think, um, I want to do more of what you were doing.”

She expected him to rush back to her with the same speed he’d used to cross the room, but he didn’t. He was slow and deliberate, putting himself on his belly and his lips on her ankle.

“Remember,” he said. “You drop the leg, and I move away.”

She gripped the walking-torch leg tight. It didn’t feel like a piece of broken tech now; it felt like a powerful scepter. “I’ve got it.”

His kiss was feather light before he moved fractionally higher and placed another kiss. He kept doing this until he reached her knee, then he switched legs and worked his way from ankle to knee again.

Isla wasn't sure if she was disappointed or relieved that he hadn't gone higher.

When he repeated his kisses, she decided she was disappointed. She wanted to feel his kisses all over. His mouth set fire to every bit of skin he touched. When he reached her second knee, she bent her knees to sink down a little. He waited until she stopped moving, then he started kissing the middle of her thigh.

Her breath hitched as he moved higher. When he was close to the apex of her legs she stopped breathing all together, only to have him sit back and look up at her.

“Would you like to lie down?” he invited before she could wail out a protest. Her legs were shaking from the strain of half squatting against the wall. With a nod, she slid to the floor with a muffled thump.

Then she remembered the walking-torch leg in her hand—no, resting on the floor next to her. When she held it up so it could be dropped, he made a sound of protest. “That will become uncomfortable. Instead of dropping it, tap it on anything. The wall, the floor, even me. And you'll get the same result as dropping it.”

Mutely, she nodded her head.

“Would you still like to lie down?” he asked.

Again, she nodded her head. Where were her words? Her brain felt pleasantly foggy and all she could think about was getting his mouth on her skin again.

His deep, thrumming rumble filled the room as he moved back. The space he provided allowed her to scoot forward until she was lying on her back. She spread her legs shyly, and her wrap bunched at her waist. The cold floor made her shiver, and she was acutely aware of the heat radiating off of Tisuran.

Isla should be embarrassed, or at least a little self-conscious, right? No one had seen her naked since Yesith. What if she wasn't pretty enough? She'd eaten so well since coming to Sorana that she had curves and her thighs had gotten thicker. Would that disgust the muscled Tisuran?

“You're beautiful,” he breathed, washing away any doubt with his praise. “Don't forget, tap and I'll stop.”

“Right. Yes. Tapping stops everything.” Wow, she'd gotten an entire sentence out. Good for her!

Tisuran moved slowly, giving her plenty of time to tap. Rubbing his cheek against her thigh, he carefully hooked his teeth in the waistband of her panties. He dragged them down her legs and over her feet, leaving a trail of hot bonding oil on her skin. Her slippers ended up being pulled off with her panties, but she barely noticed.

Still only using his face, he nudged her legs further apart. Cool air hit her sex as she exposed the most intimate parts of

herself. She whimpered with anticipation and not a little trepidation. But the sensation of cold was quickly replaced by the heat of his tongue. Long swipes of his textured tongue left trails of pleasure from her back hole all the way to her clit. Her entire body tensed as he kept doing it, his licks getting more intense with every pass.

She expected him to start kissing her again, she hadn't thought he'd treat her like a lollipop!

When he focused his attention on her little bundle of nerves, she cried out and her entire body jerked, banging the walking-torch leg on the floor.

In a flash, Tisuran was across the room in the same position as before, his rumbling stopped as he became perfectly still. She wanted to weep for reasons that had nothing to do with fear!

“Did I hurt you?” His voice sounded close to panic.

“You didn't,” she gasped. “I banged the leg by accident.”

He looked up. “Truly?”

Clearing her throat, she tried for a little more composure. “Umm, you can keep doing that, if you want to. If I don't, you know, taste bad or anything.” Her words ended with an embarrassed squeak.

“You taste like perfection,” he assured her before returning to his previous position.

“Oh, uh, good?” She could swear his bright amber eyes darkened with lust. He licked his lips, his eyes focused on her sex. She forgot how to talk again.

When he started lowering his head between her legs, she carefully set the walking-torch leg aside. Her fear had long since been superseded by lust, and she wasn't going to have any accidental tapping interrupt them again!

As his textured tongue stroked over her sex, she moaned and found her hips moving of their own volition. When he sucked the little nub of nerves into his mouth, she gasped and stuffed her fist into her mouth to stem her cries. His tongue felt even better than when she rubbed herself with her own fingers.

Reaching down, she held his head in place, desperate for him to stay right *there*. A loud rumble of amusement came out of him before being replaced his deep, thrumming rumble. It was stronger than before and felt like the rumble was even vibrating in his mouth and onto her clit.

Oh god! So good! She whimpered as pleasure blasted through her.

She wanted his hands on her too, but couldn't make her brain form words. Every muscle felt unbelievably tight; she was a force waiting to be released.

And then it all unraveled.

Intense sensations caused her arms to flail. She didn't realize she'd let go of Tisuran's head until she felt her hands hit the wall. A wave of bliss hit her hard, sending electricity down her spine and making her back arch. She opened her mouth in a silent scream as her body shuddered. The pleasure kept going as he worked her with his mouth. She didn't know an orgasm could last this long.

It was only when she became too sensitive that she pushed at Tisuran to stop. He moved out from between her legs and sat up immediately, rattling out the repetitive whooshing-hatch sound of worry.

“Did I hurt you? You smelled and tasted so good, and you didn’t tap.” Then he saw the walking-torch leg on the floor and his voice was a combination of panic and pleading. “You let go and I didn’t hear it! I’ve failed!”

“No, no. I’m good,” she reassured him, her voice husky and her brain buzzing. “Really good.”

Good. What a horribly mundane word to describe experiencing pleasure so intense her body was twitching from aftershocks. But her brain was mush at the moment. She’d shower him with praise later, when she could think again. She clumsily patted the floor next to her.

“Lie down,” she requested. “Right here.”

“Anything you wish,” Tisuran vowed as he flopped down on his back. She pushed his arm out so she could snuggle up against his side. Throwing a leg over his belly, she rested her head against his shoulder and draped her arm over his chest.

“I can do that for you anytime you want,” Tisuran said after she’d gotten herself settled. He lifted his head and awkwardly leaned over to rub his cheek against the top of her head, purring loudly the entire time. Maple filled the air, making her sigh with contentment before he dropped his head back down to rest on the floor.

“I know I want to do that again,” she promised him.

Her leg was a little high for her hip joint, so she lowered it slightly and encountered Tisuran’s erection straining the front of his pants. Clumsily sitting up, she frowned down at his crotch.

“I’ve been selfish. I can use my hand or mouth on you,” she offered.

Tisuran placed a gentle hand on her arm and urged her to settle back down. “No, *loreline*. Don’t concern yourself with my wants and needs right now. This time and place is for you.”

“I think that’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

“You’ve already thanked me,” he responded with a gentle rumble. “By having faith in me.”



Much later, they returned to the party after a quick trip to a cleansing unit. Even with a wash up, Isla knew she smelled strongly of maple and got a few knowing looks. She didn’t care. They wouldn’t judge her, and some might even pat her on the back for picking one of the Talins. Besides, so many people were already partially or mostly drunk, they probably wouldn’t even remember the evening.

Everyone was encouraged to imbibe during the Night of Joy because everything’s funnier when you’re intoxicated!

Akra was standing in front of the dais, her neck covered in beads and being presented with an elaborate drinking cup. She was grinning from ear to ear and everyone was cheering.

“Looks like Akra won!” Isla said as she clapped. “I’m not surprised. She’s really clever!”

“Are you disappointed you didn’t get to compete?” Tisuran asked.

“Not even a little,” Isla said as the applause and rattling died down. She looked up at Tisuran. “In fact—”

“Isla!” The sound of Akra calling her name stopped her mid-sentence. She looked over to find everyone had cleared a path so she could see right to the dais.

The entire room was staring at her. “Uh, what?”

There was a tittering of laughter and a few amused rumbles as Zia motioned her forward. ‘The king and queen have something to give you,’ she tapped with an imperious expression.

Highly intrigued and only slightly nervous, she moved to stand next to Akra in front of the dais, Tisuran right behind her. Zia stood tall and tapped, addressing the entire room.

‘I wanted to take this opportunity, on the fourth night of Halloheen, to acknowledge someone important. Every human and Talin on Sorana brings important skills and knowledge to the colony. Every single one of you makes this place better, but sometimes we forget that a place isn’t buildings, roads, paths, and tech. Those things are important, but they are here

for the inhabitants, not the other way around. We've all been so busy building that we've forgotten why we're building—for each other. Every day, Isla makes sure there is laughter and love. She's the one who guards our hearts and happiness. It's because of her we're celebrating and reconnecting as families, friends, and a cohesive community. I'm afraid that most of her efforts have gone unnoticed until now.'

Tears filled Isla's eyes, and she blinked hard, trying to keep them at bay. She wasn't sure she deserved such praise, but Zia looked adamant and when she glanced around, everyone was nodding their agreement.

'I would like to start a new tradition on the Night of Joy,' Zia continued as Palforma reached under his seat to retrieve a box. With effortless grace, he jumped off the dais. Opening the box, he drew out a tiara, very similar to the one he'd gotten Zia not long after they'd arrived on Sorana. It was beautiful, filled with gold and amber colored gems that glittered in the room's artificial light.

'I declare you Princess of Joy!' Zia tapped, and everyone roared their approval.

Palforma placed the tiara on her head, and Zia spoke to the audience. 'I invite everyone here to speak up and show Isla that she's seen. Show her how she's impacted this community, both on Wimol and here on Sorana.'

Only seconds after Zia said this, someone stepped forward to speak. Then another person. Then another. It seemed everyone

had something to say, and all Isla could do was watch it all unfold because her powers of speech had completely fled.

Between her earth-shattering orgasm earlier and the tremendous amount of goodwill she was receiving now, Isla felt overwhelmed. But not in a bad way. She felt a little lightheaded, but she refused to find a seat.

A warm, solid presence was at her back. “Lean against me,” Tisuran whispered in her ear. “I won’t put my hands on you, but borrow my strength to enjoy the accolades. You deserve everything said about you!”

Isla didn’t think the evening could get any better, but Tisuran proved her wrong. How did a girl get so lucky?

Six

TISURAN

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

Although it's called the Night of Fears, it's really more about crafting skills than causing fright. Don't worry if your costume isn't scary. If it's clever, intricate, or beautiful, we'll love it and you have a chance to win the evening.

Standing outside Isla's door, Tisuran tried to shake off his tension. He was sure she'd approve of his costume. He'd dressed as the scariest thing he could think of—an ancient Talin warrior.

He was wearing what Talins wore before they had body armor and modern medicine. Back then, warriors died all the time of infection or blood loss. Going to war with nothing but steel and strength made ancient warfare the most frightening thing Tisuran could imagine. Of course, that was before the first Monarch unified the planet, creating one language, one government, and one power. His species had been unstoppable ever since.

Looking down, he readjusted the shield hanging off his belt yet again. It was an important part of the costume, but uncomfortable to wear walking around. How had his ancestors marched across vast land masses with this banging their legs with every other stride?

As he was shifting it a bit more to his left, Isla's door slid open. Looking up, he rattled in surprise before he could stop himself. The truth was, he couldn't understand what he was seeing.

Isla had taken some kind of creamy white substance and spread it all over her lightly tanned skin. Then she'd taken a darker substance and formed circles around her eyes and contoured her face so she looked pale and gaunt. She'd also found a garment that was all black and draped over her shoulders, hiding most of her body. It included a hood, which was pulled up to cover her hair and cast a shadow across half her face.

The entire effect was far too gruesome and confusing to be his sweet, joyful *lorelaine*!

"You look so shiny!" she exclaimed, examining his metal breastplate.

He tugged lightly on her hood. "What have you done to yourself?"

She beamed up at him. "What do you think? I'm a ghost!"

He sounded a rumble of confusion. "What's a ghost?"

“Humans have this idea that if someone dies and their soul doesn’t enter the afterlife, their souls turn into ghosts and haunt the living,” she explained cheerfully. “Talins don’t have ghosts?”

How could someone be so merry as they described something so horrific?

“No!” he exclaimed with a little more force than necessary. “When a Talin dies, they go to the Domicile of the Ancestors. They don’t remain behind.”

She wrinkled her nose. “And everyone goes to the same place, even those Talin who weren’t, um, honorable?”

“Yes, but if they didn’t live a good life, they’re doomed to stand in the outer ring of the domicile. They never enter the inner rings where the best of us reside,” he told her. “It’s all very orderly.”

For some reason that made her laugh. “That sounds like the kind of afterlife you guys would come up with. So, what’s your costume?”

He slapped his hastily made breastplate hard enough to make it ring out in the night. “I’m a *jorvian*, the most feared type of Talin warrior that ever existed. You said to dress as something scary, and *jorvians* were renowned for their prowess in battle. All feared the *jorvians*. They battled in a time before we could heal wounds or cure infections, so their lives were often short and painful.”

“You make a handsome *gorvian*,” she agreed with a solemn nod of her head. “And you’re right, it’s a scary costume too. Let’s get to the communal building. I want to see what everyone else looks like.”

She took his hand to lead him away. Since the Night of Joy, they’d taken advantage of every moment of downtime to be together. He’d gotten to pleasure her several more times with his mouth and looked forward to getting to do it again after the Night of Fear festivities were over. He had yet to find release himself, but he was patient. He refused to even take himself in hand; he would wait until Isla was ready for more of him.

He couldn’t think of anything more satisfying than having her small fingers exploring his body. She owned him. He was simply waiting for her to finish claiming her prize.

They entered the communal building to find everyone already eating, drinking, and laughing. Tonight was the seventh day of Halloheen and it was clear that everyone had taken time and effort to create their costumes. Even if he didn’t understand what they were supposed to be.

Tisuran recognized Palforma’s right away. He was dressed all in black, with a layer of glow-latch spread on his outline. It was obvious Palforma was a blackhole and the glow-latch was the event horizon.

Tisuran wanted to curse. He wished he’d thought of that! Blackholes were one of the most fearful things in the universe. Looking around, he noticed everyone had scarier costumes than his. Other Talins were dressed to represent disease, ship

malfuctions, or natural disasters. He had to admit, his *jorvian* costume paled compared to all those.

However, the human costumes were strange. One human had put on a formal black omnie covered in deep red embroidery and had two false teeth meant to look like fangs, but other than that she hadn't done anything to her appearance. Another human had covered himself in green pigment and had two sets of false teeth that extended far past his own lips up and down. He concluded that, like Isla's ghost, these must be terrifying creatures from human folklore.

The evening moved slowly for him. Isla flitted from group to group, admiring costumes and conversing with everyone. His human loved to talk. And she found a compliment to give every single Talin and human there. She practically gushed over the human baby dressed as a Tartin grub.

Personally, he couldn't understand why all the humans found the fake eyeballs mounted to the top of the baby's costume so humorous. Every time the infant moved his head, the eyes bobbed around, making the humans laugh. It was odd, but then again, humans could find the strangest things amusing.

Isla was enjoying herself so much it came as a surprise when she led him out of the building and to the area where they'd held the Night of Fire. The fire pits were still set up but empty. To his surprise, one of them was full of fresh fuel. There were also thick blankets and pillows on the ground next to it.

"Come sit with me," she implored, making him realize she'd set this up.

He let her guide him to sit and waited as she set the fire pit ablaze, warming the small area around them.

“I have a gift for you,” she said as she sat on the blankets facing him.

“You already gave me the spiner-tape,” he said with a confused rumble. “On the Night of Gifts when we all exchanged items in brightly wrapped paper. You gave me an entire case of spiner-tape. Remember? And when you found the hidden flat bread, you gave me the prize because you know I’m fond of pickled tolk.”

She waved a hand in the air dismissively. “Spiner-tape and pickled tolk aren’t very good gifts.”

“But they are,” he argued. “I’ve already used the spiner-tape twice and ate half the pickled tolk.”

“I want to give you something better,” she said, ignoring his protest. “You’ve been so patient with me. I can’t tell you how amazing the last few days have been. Then I realized something today; I’m not afraid of your touch.”

He sounded an enthusiastic rattle. “Those words are the best gift you could ever give me!”

Biting her lip, she gestured at the blankets and pillows. “Well, I want to go further than words tonight. I thought maybe I could give you some pleasure back.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” he insisted, worried that she was pushing herself because she felt obligated. The last thing he wanted to do was ruin the trust they’d built.

“I don’t feel obligated,” she assured him. “I want to go further. I think I’m ready for your hands. Not that your tongue isn’t talented, but I really want to feel your hands on me. Could we do that?”

Her words affected him so profoundly that the blood shot to his groin, making him slightly lightheaded for a sub-mark.

“I can’t think of anything I’d want to do more,” he answered, trying very hard not to growl.

Suddenly, she looked apprehensive. “But we might need to stop.”

“*Loreline*, all you have to do is make a single negative sound and I’ll stop. Remember the storage closet and the walking-torch leg?”

A confident smile unfurled across her face. “That’s right. You’re really good at the whole *stellian* thing.”

“You can tap on me, say no or stop, and everything halts,” he reminded her. The scent glands in his cheeks were full and aching. “But before we do anything, may I scent mark you?”

“I’d like that,” she murmured and climbed into his lap.

To Isla’s surprise, her heart wasn’t beating out of her chest. She felt calm and centered as she snuggled against Tisuran. As with all their previous intimate encounters, he kept his arms away from her, careful not to hold her in a way that would make her feel trapped.

Snuggling against his chest, she let contentment wash over her. “Okay,” she whispered.

He was sounding a strong, steady purr as he rubbed the scent glands in his cheeks into her hair. The air filled with the smell of sweet maple, causing her to take a deep breath. She'd never get tired of that smell.

Despite the cool evening air, she felt overly warm. Heat was radiating off Tisuran, making her feel like she was surrounded by her own personal furnace. Now that her hair was saturated with bonding oil, he nuzzled her neck and pushed the collar of her omnie out of the way so he could kiss her shoulder.

She kept expecting him to bring his hands up to help undress her, but he didn't. The spark of frustration surprised her. Was she annoyed that he was being so respectful?

No, that wasn't it. She was irritated because she wasn't being more adventurous.

Determined to make up for her earlier timidity, she wiggled around until she was kneeling between his legs and facing him. Her hands were shaking as she pulled at the ties to the omnie. The heavy garment fell open, revealing the thin wrap underneath.

After shrugging out of the omnie, she reached for the ties on the wrap, falling into a familiar rhythm of untying the ubiquitous garment. Everything stalled once the ties released. Gripping the front edges of the wrap, she froze in place. Her heart sped up and all she could hear was a roaring in her ears. Frustration hit her at the same time fear made her start swallowing compulsively.

She wanted this. She wanted to touch him and have him touch her. Wanted to see him naked, something she hadn't experienced yet. She wanted more than his mouth on her.

But her hands were locked tight. She couldn't get her fingers to release. Tears gathered in her eyes, obscuring her vision.

What was wrong with her?

“I have a suggestion, *lorelina*.”

She looked up to find Tisuran watching her with his knowing, bright amber eyes. She tilted her head. “What?”

“You tell me what to do. I'll only act with your instruction, nothing else. I'll be under your control at all times.”

His ceding control like that added a whole new facet to their intimacy that had never occurred to her. The thought of being in charge was appealing. She'd never been in charge of another person. She'd always been the worker bee or off doing projects on her own. She'd never had anyone answer to her.

A heady feeling of power blossomed in her chest, replacing the trepidation. “Take off your belt and pants,” she demanded, while still holding her wrap closed. “I want to see all of you.”

A brief rattle of excitement sounded alongside his constant purring. At least she thought that was what the windchimes-sounding rattle meant. “As my Isla commands.”

Confidence she didn't know she had filled her. She could do this!

Seven

ISLA

Isla's guide to the Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

Another aspect of the Night of Fears is facing what scares us the most and finding that we are stronger than we think.

Tisuran rose to his feet with the effortless grace most of the retired soldiers displayed. She could see that his hands were steady as he unlatched the belt holding his Ident cube, pouch, and shield and set the items gently on the ground away from the soft blankets. Then he pulled his pants down and stepped out, never breaking eye contact with her.

He stood before her, still and silent. It took effort, but she finally tore her eyes away from his captivating amber eyes. Dropping her gaze, she noted how the overlapping, hard keratin plates flowed over the contours of his muscled body and showed off his powerful physique.

Unlike humans, the genitals of a Talin male were safely hidden away in a flesh pouch. This taut piece of flesh was made up of

a combination of tough Talin skin and tiny “beads” of keratin plating.

Tisuran’s pouch was still covering him, but the prominent bulge told her that wouldn’t be the case for long. At least not if she had anything to say about it.

“Can I be allowed to touch you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he agreed readily. “And I won’t move until you command me.”

Rising up on her knees, she reached a hand towards him. Her fingers ached a little from how tightly she’d been holding her wrap closed. It was only a slight discomfort and completely forgotten as she rested her palm on Tisuran’s thigh. Her breath hitched as she put her hand on parts of his body she’d never seen before.

Slowly she ran her fingers up to his waistline, enjoying the smooth feeling of the keratin plates and the textured ridges between them. Next, she moved her hand over the place she’d been wanting to touch for days—his flesh pouch.

She could feel his rapidly engorging cock through the taut skin. Talins referred to their dicks as mating shafts and their balls as seed sacks. Well, seed sack, because they only had one ball. Would the skin of his dick and ball feel soft to the touch? Or would they be covered in the thick keratin coating? She only knew the basics, not all the details. Time to find out all Tisuran’s secrets!

Running her fingers along the opening of the flesh pouch, she tested the rigidity. She could squeeze her fingers in there, barely. As she watched, the bulbous head of Tisuran's cock peaked out.

Delighted, she ran her fingers over the tip. Tisuran moaned and his mating shaft twitched, but he didn't move.

She looked up to check in with him. "Is this okay?"

Tisuran sounded a soothing purr and then went back to his sexy thrumming rumble. "Your touch is a treasure. But you'll have to forgive my mating shaft and seed sack. I can't keep them encased if you're going to touch me like that. I might have perfect *stellian*, but they don't."

She giggled. "I want you to emerge. I want to see and touch."

"That will—" he began, then stopped and groaned a little when Isla tugged slightly at the edge of the flesh pouch, helping his cock fully emerge.

With her encouragement, the flesh pouch receded rapidly, spilling out his cock and ball into the cool air between them. He was so hot she could see literal steam coming off his skin.

The rapid release caused Tisuran to arch and then pant. "I will hold my pleasure back," he promised. "But I'll weep in your fingers if you touch me."

"Weep what..." she started to ask, then noticed a small bead of pre-cum on the tip of his cock. Ah, she'd heard Talins had copious amounts of pre-cum. What a nice bonus.

Entranced, she leaned forward and flicked her tongue across the head of his dick. He jerked slightly but didn't move otherwise. Sitting back, she relished his flavor. He was musky and slightly salty with a strong flavor of maple.

She wanted more!

Pointing at the ground in front of her, she gave an order. "Sit, please."

With less grace than earlier, Tisuran folded his legs to sit in front of her. As Isla shifted, her wrap fell open. It didn't make her feel vulnerable or exposed, so she left it.

"I want to do more than lick you," she warned him.

"I won't move," he promised.

She frowned. "That's not what I was worried about. You need to tell me if I hurt you."

He pulled in a deep breath of air. "I'll make you aware." He was lying. Somehow she just knew he wouldn't say something unless she caused him agony. She'd need to be careful.

Pushing his chest, she urged him to lie back, then straddled his legs. Leaning over, she took the very tip of him into her mouth. The skin of his cock was slightly textured from flat, smooth keratin "beads" about the size of hair follicles, unlike the larger ones on his flesh pouch. And it felt pleasant against her lips and tongue. The whole was intimidatingly large, but as she licked at him and the maple taste became stronger, she lost herself in the task of tasting him.

Getting bolder, she worked her mouth over the bulbous head. She could feel his shaft pulsing in her mouth while Tisuran groaned. Encouraged, she worked to fit more of him into her mouth.

“Isla,” he moaned. “I can’t... I don’t know if... dear Ancestors!”

She swallowed him down until her gag reflex got in the way. She was disappointed she couldn’t fit more of him. Backing off, she wrapped a hand around the remaining length and squeezed as she enjoyed the way his body twitched as she sucked and rubbed.

Tisuran was so tense he must’ve been flexing every muscle, but, as promised, he didn’t move. Occasionally his rumbles would alter pitch or rhythm and he kept calling her name or pleading to his ancestors. She found it both sexy and endearing that he couldn’t remain silent.

Wanting to run her lips over other parts of him, Isla pulled away from his tasty cock. Tisuran tried to sit up but a hand on his chest kept him down.

“I’m not done yet,” she told him.

He went still again. “I’m sorry I moved. Please, continue to touch me any way you wish.” Then he mumbled something about *the best kind of torment*.

Grinning at his quiet words, she kissed her way up his torso. As she got closer to his head, her nipples dragged against the plates of his chest and pleasure tingled through her. On the

Night of Joy, she'd wanted him touching her breasts. They had felt heavy and needy, but she'd been too wary to ask for it.

But everything was different now. She had all the power and he was willingly at her mercy. Sitting astride her mighty Talin made her feel formidable; his fierce cock jutting and weeping for her attention, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he panted, his bright eyes focused on her as if she was his entire world.

"I want you to touch my breasts," she ordered.

"With my hand or mouth?" he asked.

She was unprepared for that question. The mental image of him worshipping her breasts like he's suckled on her pussy made her lean forward eagerly. "Mouth!"

Going on all fours, she positioned her left breast over his face. He gently sucked her nipple into his mouth, kneading it with his lips and tongue. She felt each tug of his mouth like a direct pulse to her clit, making her gasp and push her breast harder against his mouth. He increased the pressure on her nipple, making her moan. She never thought this could feel so good!

She wished he had two mouths so both her nipples could be sucked up. That's when she remembered he had hands. They couldn't suck, but those thumbs and fingers would probably feel almost as good.

Balancing on one arm, she reached for his hand. "Touch the other one!"

He quickly obeyed and soon he was cupping both breasts, squeezing with his hand and gently pinching the nipple not in his mouth.

Her breath caught as sensations flooded her body. She was pretty sure she could orgasm from having him play with her breasts alone. When the edge of the wrap got in Tisuran's way, Isla reared up so she could strip off the troublesome garment. The night air felt good on her overheated skin as she bent over again to feed Tisuran her breast.

When she'd moved, his thick cock had slipped under her sex. Wanting more contact, she shifted until Tisuran's textured dick was trapped between her sex and his body. Empowered, she moved her hips a little, rubbing against him. Oh, the friction was delicious!

Moaning, she rocked her hips frantically. Tisuran groaned around her nipple. She went perfectly still, panting and fearful.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked, poised to move if he answered yes.

"By the Ancestors, no!" he replied, voice strained. "You're torturing me but not hurting me."

It took her a breathless moment to understand his answer; then she giggled. Her giggle moved her hips, sending delightful sensations through her. She shifted her hips again and pushed her chest at his face.

"In that case, I need more!" she demanded.

Tisuran filled his mouth and hands with her breasts as she ground against him. Between his mouth and hand on her breasts and rubbing against his delicious thick cock, she could feel her impending orgasm. She wished she had Tisuran's willpower to wait. To draw it out. But she was greedy for more pleasure. Panting from the effort, she chased her climax, grinding her clit against this cock. Tisuran's thrumming purring got louder and turned his dick into a vibrator.

Oh fuck, she'd found the perfect man!

Sweating and moaning, her nose filled with the smell of maple, she shattered. Sitting up, she threw her head back and cried out as her climax washed over her.

"Tisuran!" Pleasure filled her, bringing tears to her eyes and making the nearby flames blur.

She hung there for a moment, sobbing from the ecstasy. Now she knew what it felt like to be a bright spot in the night sky. Tisuran had set her on fire and launched her. She was a star, pulsing with pleasure.

Slowly, she collapsed down, first rolling her shoulders forward, then her upper back and finally drawing her legs up to curl into a ball on Tisuran's chest. Deep in the forest, she could hear night creatures calling out to each other, harmonizing as they looked for mates for the night. A soft breeze rustled leaves, and the sky above was moonless and bright with stars.

Everything about this moment was perfect, including her and Tisuran.

He remained quiet and still, not even bringing his hands up to touch her when he spoke. “Are you well, *lorelina*?”

“Mmm hmmm,” she hummed.

“That’s good,” he said with a purring rumble. “Rest on me for as long as you wish. Then I can take you back to your room to sleep.”

She could still feel his cock, hard and trapped between their bodies, reminding her he hadn’t had his fun yet. His purring rumble didn’t cause as much vibration as his sexier thrumming, but was still enough to make her sensitive clit wake back up. Time for round two. Or was it three? Who cared, counting was overrated anyway.

With leisurely movements, she sat back up and grinned down at him. “We aren’t done.”

“If you want more, I can use my mouth on your sex again,” he offered, his tone eager.

Her body felt loose and relaxed, so she didn’t even try for a graceful dismount. With muscles the consistency of jelly, she flopped to the side and stretched out on the blankets next to Tisuran.

“Isla?”

“I want more,” she announced. “But it’s your turn to do all the work.”

“Work?” he questioned, sounding the slow irregular rumble of confusion.

“Yup,” she answered and tapped a finger against her mons. “I want to feel you inside me, so get over here.”

He rose up on his knees but didn't move further, even when she opened her legs in invitation. His rumble of confusion gave way to his familiar purr.

“This can wait,” he insisted. “You've been so brave already. Nothing else needs to happen tonight.”

She met his eyes. “You're wrong. Two things are going to happen tonight. You're going to cum, and I'm going to find out what it feels like to have you inside me. Those things might not happen at the same time. I could panic and you'll have to show off your impressive *stellian* by stopping. But even if we have to stop, I still want to see you come using my hand and mouth.”

He was silent for a moment. Finally, he moved between her legs. “I won't insult you by questioning your determination. But thank you for your faith in me.”

“Gosh, you're so damn romantic!” she teased as she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him closer.

“I take both your pleasure and pain very seriously,” he countered.

His soft admonishment made her feel a little guilty. “I know you do. That's why I trust you so much.”

“I'll never betray your trust,” he vowed. With infinite care he worked his hand between their bodies and took his cock in hand. First, he ran the tip over her clit a few times, making her

moan and wiggle a little. When he positioned the tip at her entrance, she tensed up.

She half expected him to violently thrust forward, but of course he didn't. Taking his hand away, he ran fingers over his cheek, collecting bonding oil. Working his hand between them, he smeared the fragrant oil over both his shaft and her entrance. The oil tingled as it warmed her skin. Only after he did this several times did he brace both hands on the ground on either side of her head and ease forward.

Was it going to hurt now? Should she brace herself?

Levering herself up on her elbows, she watched as the head of his cock slowly disappeared inside her.

It wasn't painful! More than that, it was good.

"Oh! Keep going," she urged, dropping back down. Experimentally, she tilted her hips a little. That slid him in further, making both of them moan.

"You feel like you're clutching at me," he said, his voice strained. "Your body is trying to draw me in deeper."

"Then listen to her," Isla begged.

Isla might not be very experienced at sex, but she heard the other women talking openly. She knew having so many orgasms in one session shouldn't be possible, at least according to the Wimol women.

But none of those women had been with Talins and wasn't that a damn shame!

The sensations that had gripped her earlier throbbed to life. Tisuran's thick cock dragged against all the right places. He didn't feel too big. He felt like a perfect fit.

Greedy, Isla reared up to wrap one hand around the back of Tisuran's neck and dragged him down. His lips met hers and she found out he was as skilled at kissing her mouth as he was at kissing other parts of her body.

It didn't take long for her climax to build. She wanted that again, craved it. But as much as she was determined to cum again, she needed something else from Tisuran before it happened.

Ending the kiss, she cupped his face as their eyes met. "Now," she whispered. "Come with me."

Bonding oil flowed over her fingers as Tisuran gasped. "Anything my *lorelina* demands."

Isla felt so full of emotions she couldn't speak. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she nestled her face next to his. She could hear his ragged breathing in her ear as he whispered words of adoration, his hips pumping his thick cock in and out of her.

Her orgasm slammed into her. Tightening her thighs around him, she cried out with the sudden pleasure of it. Burying his face in the blankets under them, he roared. She felt his hot seed fill her, the rhythm of his hips stuttering as his body convulsed.

This last orgasm was so intense, tears started streaming down her face as her body trembled. She closed her eyes and let the smell of sweet maple fill her nose as this perfect moment washed over her, knowing there were many more to come.

Eight

ISLA

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

Try not to fall in love until Red Night. But if you can't hold out, then don't worry. It's considered good luck to start a relationship on any of the twelve nights.

“This is for you!” Marcel announced as he held out a small plate with both hands. “I decorated all my Red Night cookies all by myself. I colored each cookie to match the person I love. Yours is yellow because Mama said you're bright, like the sun.”

The cookie was so covered in yellow frosting that she couldn't see any of the red cookie underneath. The frosting wasn't a soft yellow, it was an obnoxiously bright chartreuse yellow. Isla didn't even know that color could be created by the simulator.

Her teeth would probably end up dyed yellow after she ate it. Hiding her grin at Marcel's excitement, she leaned over,

pretending to critically examine the cookie.

“I love it!” she declared, letting her mouth curve into a smile. Before he could thrust the plate at her and probably topple the cookie onto the ground, she accepted the Red Night token. “Mine isn’t as good as yours. I hope that’s okay.”

She handed him her second to last cookie to give out. Like Marcel, she’d hand decorated all her cookies but used less frosting. Instead of yellow, she’d mixed silvery dye in white frosting to make her cookies sparkle.

“It’s so shiny!” Marcel squealed with glee as he accepted the cookie and immediately pulled it out of the clear bag she’d put it in to take a big bite out of it. His actions added a layer of silver frosting to his face, covering some of the blue, purple, lavender, and pink frosting already there. She eyed all the different colors. How many cookies had little Marcel eaten so far tonight? And there were probably even more cookies waiting for him at home.

Unlike all the other nights of Halloheen, Red Night was meant to be spent with your most special people. Couples, thruples, poly-groups, and/or families were expected to go off and spend quality time together and pay close attention to those they loved the most.

To Isla’s delight, Tisuran had asked to spend Red Night alone with her. She’d eagerly accepted. She’d been waiting for him when Marcel had intercepted her.

“I wuv ou!” Marcel said with his mouth full of cookie.

Going down on one knee, Isla set down the box containing her last and most special cookie and opened her arms. “I love you too, Marcel! You’re the best six-year-old friend a girl could have!”

After a quick hug, Marcel giggled and ran off, leaving Isla to go back to waiting for Tisuran. Waiting with barely controlled impatience.

Yesterday’s Day of Fasting and Night of Feasting had been perfect. After eating their fill, they’d managed to find some more time alone. That night there’d been no fear for Isla. She’d been quick to strip down and demand Tisuran join her in her bed.

He hadn’t protested.

Tonight, Red Night, was the second to last of the Twelve Nights of Halloheen and Isla was anxious to see Tisuran. This would be the first time they could spend the whole evening together instead of sneaking away.

As the name implied, Red Night was all about the color red. Red for love. You were supposed to wear red. Decorate with red, and give those closest to you red cookies. The baked sweets were in the shape of circles for platonic love or heart-shaped cookies for romantic love.

Usually, the cookies weren’t very big because everyone expected to receive numerous cookies from friends and family. But Isla had feelings too strong to be represented by a single tiny confection. She’d made a cookie so big she had to hold it

in two hands when moving it around the large communal kitchen.

Everyone making cookies at the time had teased her, but they didn't bother her at all. This was the first time she was giving anyone a heart-shaped cookie, and she wanted it to be big and bold. She didn't want Tisuran to have any doubt about her feelings. She'd gone a step farther and put the cookie in a box wrapped in leftover, shiny paper from the Night of Gifts. She wanted it to be special.

She'd also dressed with care, wearing a deep red wrap and a gray omnie with red embroidery on the sleeves and down the center of the back. She didn't have any red underwear so she decided to go bare. She'd spent an hour styling her hair, and she never did that! It'd taken her forever to braid the sides then gather them up in a bun while the rest of her hair flowed down her back in a glossy mass. She'd even gone to the extra effort of weaving red ribbon into the braids then tying the base of the bun with the same ribbon. It was perfect and she couldn't wait for Tisuran to mess it up.

But where was he? She was so excited to see him that she felt as hyper as Marcel and kept shifting in place, unable to remain still.

“Isla, I—”

Tisuran didn't get to finish his sentence. Isla was too busy screeching and jumping so high she swore she could have cleared a domicile! Standing on shaking legs, Isla bent over

and put a hand to her sternum and worked on bringing her heartbeat back under control.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

Tisuran sounded a distant-bass-drum rumble of concern. “Sneak? I’ve been calling your name,” he protested. “You were turning in my direction, I thought you heard me. Did you hurt yourself?”

“Don’t pretend you and the rest of the retired soldiers from Kalor aren’t sneaky by nature,” she answered with a grin as she straightened up, her earlier fright all but gone.

“We don’t sneak,” Tisuran countered, this time with the marbles-clinking rumble of amusement. “We are trained to be stealthy, not sneaky.”

“Same thing,” Isla argued, then threw herself into his arms. “I’m so glad you finally got here! Even if you almost scared me into a heart attack.”

Tisuran folded his arms around her, his hold light and gentle. It felt so good to be held without any panic or fear invading the experience. It gave her the courage to think about letting other people hug her. But only after she’d practiced hugging with Tisuran. A lot.

He rubbed a cheek on the top of her head, saturating her braids with his bonding oil. “I missed you also, *loreline*.”

She made a contented sound as the smell of sweet maple filled her nose. “Same. And there’s something really important I want to tell you.”

“Before you say anything, there is something I want to show you,” Tisuran said as he stepped away.

She picked up the box with his cookie. “Is it very far?”

“It’s at my domicile,” he explained.

His domicile. Which was close by and had a big bed. “Yes, that’s a perfect place to show me,” she agreed and fell into step next to him.

They covered the short distance quickly, but to her surprise, Tisuran stopped at his door. He made a rattle she wasn’t familiar with. It sounded like the swarm-of-angry-wasps rattle, but muted, as if the swarm was far away. What did this rattle mean? He couldn’t be annoyed with her, could he?

“I might have done too much,” he admitted. “I’m not sure. I spent all day on it, and only recently saw what others were doing. I believe I might have made a mistake. But I also think you will understand. That you will see my intention instead of the only the results.”

“I’m sure I will,” Isla said, realizing Tisuran’s unfamiliar rattle was one of anxiety. Now she was intrigued to see behind the door.

Tisuran silently waved his door open, then he stepped aside so she could enter. She stumbled slightly as she crossed the threshold, a little overwhelmed by the sight that greeted her.

Every piece of wall was covered in images of red hearts, but not the stylized hearts everyone was giving each other as a sign of love.

No, these hearts were accurate and bloody. Some of them were recognizable as anatomically correct human hearts and others were wider with a few extra bumps. Isla guessed that the other hearts were Talin.

She turned slowly to take it all in. She couldn't even guess how long it took Tisuran to draw them. The hearts weren't even a uniform size, so he hadn't been tracing or using stencils. And they were all blood red. Hundreds of red, bleeding hearts covered the walls. One was even spurting blood from an artery, rendered in precise, anatomically gory detail. There was only one way for her to respond to all of this.

"I love it!" she declared. She turned to find Tisuran standing in the doorway. Setting the box on a nearby table, she flung herself into his arms. "I love it, I love it, I love it!"

Tisuran purred at the same time he sounded a windchimes rattle of excitement. "You do?"

"I do," she assured him. "It's amazing. It's perfect. It's wonderful." She grabbed his face with both hands, gently pressing her fingers over his sensitive scent glands. He purred loudly at her touch. "You're wonderful!"

"Everyone kept talking about hearts," he said. "I didn't realize they meant some kind of symbolic heart."

"Red Night is whatever we want it to be," she said. "And this is the best Red Night of my life. I can't imagine being anywhere else than with you and surrounded by these beautiful hearts."

“Truly?”

She brushed her lips across his. “By the way you’ve been so eager to rub your bonding oil on my hair, I’m guessing you’re scent-bonded to me. Right?”

“You guessed correctly, *lorelina*,” Tisuran agreed, sounding a regretful rumble. “I hope you’re not angry with me. I tried to hold off. I tried to fight my feelings and instincts, but I was weak willed and gave in.”

“I’m glad you did because I love you back,” Isla whispered. “I want to claim you as my Talin.”

He sounded a rattle like many hands clapping—triumph.

“There’s nothing that would make me happier!”

They spent the rest of the night entwined in each other’s arms, as befitting a Red Night.

Nine

TISURAN

Isla's guide to The Twelve Nights of Halloheen (Excerpt)

The most important thing to remember about the Night of the Dead is that it's a time when the veil between us and those we've lost is supposed to become thin and permeable. By the end of the night, it's so diaphanous that we might even get to visit with a relative or friend long passed. If you can't do any of the other traditions, this one is the most important: stay awake the whole night and greet the sun on the 13th day. Even if you don't get to see a lost loved one, at least you know you'll have good luck for an entire year.

Tisuran finished setting up his holo display as Isla talked to a few curious Talins at a nearby table. She was explaining the significance of the final celebration. The Night of the Dead was a time to remember those who had left this life. Celebrants thought about lost loved ones and hoped they were doing well in the afterlife, lit candles in their honor, and told stories about their humor, bravery, or kindness.

All the fire pits from the Night of Fire had been cleared away, replaced with small, squat tables holding images, holo displays, and candles. There were anywhere from two to ten people gathered around each table, drinking, talking, and cuddling. Isla explained that this wasn't the night for feasting but drinking warm, sweet beverages was part of the tradition.

The children were running around, laughing and giggling as they looked for the ghosts of loved ones who might cross the veil between worlds to visit. The adults seemed unconcerned about the idea, leading Tisuran to believe ghosts were probably a hope, not an expectation.

For their first Night of the Dead together, he and Isla had decided to have a table to themselves. There was plenty of space, so they weren't depriving anyone. After word of their relationship had spread, no one asked to share. He had received many knowing smiles from the humans and congratulations from his fellow Talins.

He had everything to look forward to, which made tonight bittersweet. He'd set up a holo display of all the soldiers he'd served with that hadn't made it home during the incursion. The same mission that ended his career. His wasn't the only display honoring the warriors. Palforma and Dalt had the same holos on their tables. They'd all served in the same unit and suffered the same loss.

"I need a little help here!" a human voice called out

Tisuran turned to see several humans struggling under armfuls of blankets. He was the closest, so he jumped to help them

with their burdens. After setting everything down next to their table, they smiled up at him.

“Is there more to bring out?” he asked.

“One more bundle we dropped between here and storage building six,” one of the humans replied and pointed to another table. “For them.”

“I’ll fetch it,” Tisuran offered, and both humans thanked him and started arranging blankets around their table.

He found the bundle near the front of the storage building. Bending over, he plucked it from the ground. Straightening up, he was startled to find Isla standing in front of him.

“Isla? What are you doing over here?” he asked as he brushed off the blankets.

Her expression was grave. “I need to ask you some questions.”

She didn’t sound like herself, making Tisuran sound a concerned rumble. “Are you well?” Then he noticed the state of her outfit. “And where is your omnie? Did you leave it at our table? And why are you wearing those garments?”

She ignored his questions and pressed a hand to her cheek, right over where she’d have scent glands if she was Talin.

“Have you ever scent-bonded with anyone before?”

“Of course not,” Tisuran answered with a confused rumble.

“If a Talin came to you begging to be scent-bonded, would you want to?”

Tisuran couldn't understand why she was asking him that. "Are you unhappy, *lorelina*? Have I done something wrong?"

Isla's expression never changed. "Please answer the question."

Using the same calm control that made him an effective soldier, Tisuran kept his back plates silent, even though he wanted to sound a harsh rattle of frustration. "There is no other for me. If you ever leave me, I will die a painful death from a broken scent-bond. But in truth, I wouldn't care about dying because I wouldn't want to live without you. You're my perfect Isla."

Isla's smile was beatific. "I just needed to make sure."

A loud shouting caught his attention. Turning his head, he saw several children swarming Palforma. The large Talin warrior pretended to crumble under the assault, dramatically crying out as he landed on his back on the ground. Assured that nothing was wrong, Tisuran turned his attention back to Isla only to find she was gone.

"Tisuran, are you okay?"

Swinging around he found Isla standing behind him. "Where did the omnie come from?" he asked, disconcerted.

Her expression showed confusion. "I've been wearing it all evening."

Had he been mistaken earlier? Brushing off all the bewilderment, he hefted the bundle of blankets onto his shoulder and held out his hand to her. "Let me drop this off and we can finish talking later."

She tangled her fingers with his, the reassuring smell of his bonding oil mixed with her scent filling the air. It was quick work to drop off the blankets, then settle the two of them down at their table.

Reaching into her omnie, Isla pulled out an old worn image of herself as a child and set it on the table next to his holos.

He grabbed it off the squat table. “Isla, you’re not dead,” he admonished her. “Only deceased people are to be put on the table, correct?”

Isla gave him a watery chuckle. “That’s not me,” she explained. “That’s my twin, Alsi. She died when we were fifteen.”

Tisuran went stock still. “Twin?”

“Oh, you guys probably don’t have that,” Isla said. “With humans, a fertilized egg will sometimes split in half in utero. The two halves form identical twins, like me and Alsi. I was devastated when she died, but thankfully Zia and my other friends were there to help me through. Every year I hope to see her during the Night of the Dead. I think that’s one of the reasons this is my favorite night. I’ve never seen her, but I always hope I will.” She bit her lip. “That’s probably stupid, isn’t it?”

“Not at all, *loreline*,” Tisuran assured her as he opened his arms and invited her onto his lap. “Because I think I might have met her.”



Isla

Isla was intrigued instead of shocked. “You did?”

“She asked me if I’d ever leave you,” he said.

Isla sounded a content sigh as she snuggled into his arms. “That sounds like her. She was always so worried about my happiness. She was the smart twin. The sensible one.”

“You’re not upset that I saw her and you didn’t?” Tisuran asked as he wrapped his arms around Isla’s small figure.

“Not even a little because maybe we’ll both get to see her next year.”

Tisuran started up a loving rumble. “You might call her the sensible twin, but you’re the twin with all the hope, and that’s just as necessary and valuable.”

“And you’re the Talin with all the gentleness and patience,” Isla stated firmly. She wanted to make sure Tisuran knew his value. “I can’t imagine trusting anyone as much as I trust you.”

In truth, Isla wasn’t surprised Alsi had made an appearance. Over the years there had been Nights of the Dead when she could’ve sworn she heard her twin or sensed her presence. But just like it was when she was alive, Alsi was everything

caring. She probably hadn't made an appearance because she didn't want to burden Isla with renewed grief.

But she didn't feel grief right now. She felt privileged to have gotten fifteen years with Alsi before an accident took her away.

I'll never stop loving you, she thought.

She could have sworn she heard Alsi's sweet laughter on the gentle breeze. A feeling of love washed over her. Love for her family, her community, and most of all, Tisuran.

"I don't regret any part of my life," she murmured to Tisuran as she snuggled into his warmth and watched the candle flame dance in the crisp night air. "Because it all brought me to this time and place."

"And I'll make sure our lives are full of happiness," Tisuran promised. "From this moment onward."

Note to the Reader

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading my humble contribution to this anthology, *The Twelve Nights of Halloheen: A Human Pets of Talin Story*. Your support for our cause is invaluable. As someone who interfaced with many tribes in San Diego County for over a decade as part of a former job, I can tell you the needs are great and the support is scarce. Consider also contributing to the Native American Rights Fund or the Native American Heritage Association.

If you enjoyed my story enough to want to read more, you can visit my author page on Amazon or my website: www.rk-munin.com

With Respect and Joy,

Rye

Himbos and Hormones by Rowan Merrick

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



THAT TIME I PEGGED AN OMEGA WEREWOLF... ALIEN

Content Warnings: *alcohol, animal death (not a pet), biting, discussion of pregnancy (no preg), emesis, knotting, omegaverse, pegging, pursuit, toys, unprotected sex, violence*

One

FAREKZI PROCESSING PLANT, OORANI SIX, VOL'DEBI SECTOR

I hate decontamination showers. I wiggled a finger into the tight braid crowning my head, trying and failing to scratch the itch there. The damned things made my skin feel like it'd shrunk two sizes. At least the plant finally upgraded from the ancient wet unit they'd had when I started.

Raw farekzi ore was toxic, and processing it required a delightful cocktail of caustic chemicals and radiation. Regulations stipulated only species with a level four or better hazmat resistance rating could be hired to deal with it—my species, the Nerenna, were rated at seven, although my human half downgraded me to a six—but decon was necessary for the safety of everyone else.

By my human father's measurement, I was 170 cm tall. Average for a human, I towered over my mother's family. I'd gotten his eyes as well, hazel irises in white sclera instead of her solid-hued orbs. But I was raised among the Nerenna, and I took after them in more ways than just my pastel pink skin and hair. I wore my hair long, as was the custom, so that it fell

in a thick curtain all the way to my ass when I wasn't working. Which wasn't often.

Going through wet decon five times a day—every time I stepped off the factory floor—had been awful. The machine wouldn't let you leave until you were dry, but with as much hair as I have, even the highest dryer setting meant I took twice as long as anyone else. Anyone stuck behind me in line tended to be pretty unhappy about it. Plus, the dryers turned my normally straight hair into a fuzzy pink puffball, making me look like an Old Earth cartoon dog I'd seen once.

The itching wasn't as bad as that. Emollient helped, but with the outrageous import fees to Oorani Six, a small bottle cost eighty-five units. A full day's pay for less than a week's relief. I bought a single bottle once a month and rationed it religiously. A capful in my bath at the end of the day didn't do much but keep me from clawing my skin off, but I'd deal with the itching if it got me off this miserable planet even a week sooner.

“Gwyn! Over here!” My roommate, Shorra, bounced in her seat, waving all six of her arms as if there was any possibility I'd miss her. I waved back, ignoring the bemused glances we earned as I walked across the cafeteria.

On the surface, we were about as different as two carbon-based lifeforms could be. Shorra was a Bilzu, a race usually known for their propriety and somber outlook on life. My roommate couldn't be further from the norm. Impetuous, irreverent, and incorrigible, Shorra was all bright, glittery

color, contagious laughter, and cheerful sensuality. She was constantly broke because units in the bank were never as attractive as the things she found in the market.

On the other hand, I wore loose, shapeless clothing in a thrilling rainbow of sad tans and muddy grays, and I wore them until they fell apart. I went to work, went home, ate, and slept. I didn't go out, and I didn't flirt. Ever.

Shorra didn't know it, but she'd saved my life. I'd been homeless and about to be deported when I found her ad for a roommate. I'd also been miserably depressed. Living vicariously through her sexual conquests and wild antics brought some much-needed joy into my life—enough that I dealt with the exasperation she also brought with only moderate complaint.

I'd finally gotten the chance to return the favor last year when she lost her job—again—for having sex with a coworker while on duty. And on camera. I'd leveraged what little influence my three years of excellent job performance gave me and gotten her a job in the office. The risk of impacting my livelihood tempered her behavior where nothing else had, and she was now six rotations past her previous “maintained job” record.

“Scuse me.” I slid past a couple of chatting Rixseths from sales, rolling my eyes when they sniffed and slithered away. Snobs.

Shorra started to stand, glaring at their retreating backs.

I put a hand on her closest arm. “Please don't make a scene. They're not worth it, and I'm tired. I just want to eat lunch in

peace.”

Shorra narrowed her eyes, considering, then she leaned forward, her expression cunning.

“I won’t if you come out with me tonight.”

I groaned and buried my head in my arms.

“It’s not right how you treat yourself. You’re a living person, Gwyn, not a robo unit. You need to interact with real people. Have conversations! Maybe even *kiss* somebody!” She gasped dramatically, hands pressed to her chest and forehead like an actress in an old drama.

I tuned her out and reached for my lunchbox. I’d heard this monolog more times than I could count.

“Gwyyyyn,” Shorra whined. “You’re not listening. You have to come to this party. It’s going to be epic. And besides, Parlek invited you specifically. He’s throwing it at his *mansion*, Gwyn. Can you believe it?”

I scrunched up my face, trying to put a face to the name. Not because I had any intention of going, but keeping a mental chart of Shorra’s trysts was a preferred hobby. Just about my only hobby really. Well, that and imagining the looks on Onkyx and Direa’s faces when I returned to Ay’enna, successful beyond their wildest dreams.

“Parlek... was he the Corbarian from the night before last?”

“No, that was Ilda. Parlek is the Zha’ket who came over after. He walked in on you in the bathroom, remember?”

Oh. Right. The one with the *eyes*.

Shorra leaned forward, lowering her voice to a smug whisper. “The Zha’ket can change their body to anything they want, did you know? Any part, Gwyn. To *anything*.” She waggled her eyebrows and licked her lips to really drive home the innuendo.

“Delightful.” I kept my voice dry, smothering the envy before it could spark into a flame.

“You have no idea,” Shorra purred. “But you can find out if you come with me. Parlek was very impressed by you.”

“What an honor,” I breathed, eyes wide in simulated excitement. “I’ll write it down in my diary. ‘Today I impressed a random guy by having a small bladder and good aim with a towel.’”

“Come on, Gwyn. You never have any fun.” Shorra pouted. She bent reality with the force of that pout, somehow managing to look up at me through the veil of her impossibly long eyelashes even though she was taller than me by a head.

“That’s because I don’t like fun,” I deadpanned.

She made a rude noise and gave up the coquette act. “Everybody likes fun! It’s... *fun*! Come with me Gwyn, pleeeeeease!”

“No. Thanks though.” I dipped a slice of synth protein into my latest attempt at *abarabi* sauce and chewed thoughtfully. It was bland, but that was a big step up from the revolting, gelatinous... *thing* I’d produced last time. Between my terrible

cooking skills and nonexistent budget, it was probably as good as it was going to get.

All sixty of Shorra's fingers drummed the table in frustration, making a sound like a small thunderstorm.

"There'll be music and dancing and an open bar! No cheapie portside knockoffs either. Parlek only serves the real stuff."

"Shorra, I don't drink. You know that." Drinking lowered your inhibitions. I couldn't afford to risk it—not with so much at stake.

"You're hopeless!" she groaned dramatically. Then, in the kind of lightning-fast mood shift I'd come to expect from her, she pushed forward, an alarming gleam in her eye.

I leaned back, suddenly nervous.

"I'm not giving up. I have a *feeling*. Tonight's the night I'm finally going to get you to let your tits down and live a little."

"Not going to happen." I folded my arms over my chest self-consciously. It's not that I disliked my boobs—although they were huge and heavy and got in the way a lot. It's just that they garnered a lot of attention. Going out without my binder meant dealing with propositions I wasn't in a position to entertain, and it just wasn't worth the headache. Plus, nobody here would take me seriously if I bopped around in all my pink, candy floss glory, with cleavage to my belly button and hair down to my ass. With my hair up and disguised by shapeless, ugly clothes, I could go about my day mostly unbothered. Besides, it was too cold on Oorani Six for my

heat-loving ass to consider going out without at least one extra layer.

I looked at Shorra in her lovely, brightly colored dress and vibrant makeup, and the desire to be back home among my own people nearly strangled me. There, I could wear pretty clothes without consequences. I could lounge in the sun and flirt, and finally wave farewell to celibacy. *And I would*, I promised myself. *Soon*.

“You know what? Maybe you’re right.”

“I am?!” Shorra sat bolt upright in her chair, disbelief widening her eyes.

“Yeah. I think I will let my tits down tonight.”

“Stardust, Gwyn, you’re not going to regret this! I know just what you should wear—”

“At home,” I interrupted, licking the last smudge of sauce from my thumb as her words stumbled to a halt. “In the bath. The bath that I’ll be taking as soon as I get home from work, after which, I’ll go directly to bed. So please, remember to refill the water reservoir after your primping this time.”

“You’re an ass.”

“And you’re pushy,” I replied blithely, giving her a little wave as I turned from the table.

“I’m not going to stop,” Shorra warned, her voice loud enough people at neighboring tables looked up curiously. “I’m committed now. You’re coming to the party, and I don’t care what I have to do to make it happen.”

I stretched out my arms in invitation, walking backwards. “Knock yourself out. But do try to be quiet when you come home. I’ll be sleeping.” Confident this would be the last we’d speak of it, I gave her a sassy wave, put the whole thing out of my mind, and went back to work.

There was money to be made.



A few hours later...

“Gwyn—” Shorra wheedled, sidling up beside me at third break.

“No.” Frowning, I propped an ankle on my knee and peered at my boot. Yep, just as I thought. The start of a hole, right on the ball of my foot. If I ever found the vendor who sold these to me, I’d make them regret it. Premium *karset*, my ass. I hadn’t had this pair for six months, and they were falling apart. My last set of *karset* soled boots lasted two years. Here’s hoping these ones didn’t disintegrate before I got a chance to go to the market.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“That’s my point. There’s nothing you could say that would change my mind. The promise of Pyrethian acrobats didn’t do it. Nor did offering to let me wear your favorite holographic minidress.” As if it would fit. Shorra had three boobs to my two, but hers were perky little handfuls, whereas either of mine could smother a small child.

“Accept it, Shorra. I’m not interested. I don’t care how many of your lovers you offer to set me up with.” Privately, I was impressed by her perseverance. She’d chased me down four times since lunch, each time with an offer more outlandish than the last. In between sneaking away from her desk to pester me, she’d kept up a barrage of pings on my communicator.

“Bet.”

“What?” My brow furrowed.

“Bet me,” Shorra said, enunciating each word with a snap. “If what I say next convinces you to go, you have to leave the binder at home *and* wear your hair down. If it doesn’t, I’ll quit pestering you about it. I swear.”

Was there a downside to this?

“Deal.” Nah, it was a sucker’s bet. Nothing she said would change my mind—

“Free. Gourmet. Food.”

Fuck.

“Ha!” she crowed. “I win! And don’t even try to pretend otherwise. I know that look.”

I groaned. It had been a sucker’s bet. But *I* was the sucker.

“Remember, you promised! Hair down, tits out! We’ll leave at 16:00. Oh, and unlike you, I do drink, so you’re driving us home.”

I shook my head, giving in to the inevitable. “Ping me the address. We got an extra-urgent shipment of ore and I agreed to stay late. I’ll take a transpo and meet you there.”

“Gwyn! You’re going to work yourself to death!”

“It’s nothing. I’ll probably only be an hour behind you. Two, tops.” Three, if I took my time getting ready, but I didn’t need to tell her that. Shorra would happily party all night and into the morning. My plan was to go, fill my belly and pockets with deliciousness, then drive us both home—spending as little time as possible at the party itself.

“Hopeless,” she mourned. Her communicator flashed, signaling the end of her break. “Gotta go. See you tonight! And remember, fun!” Shorra pointed at her own grinning mouth, sashaying away triumphantly when I rolled my eyes.

Fun. Right. I blew out a breath and shoved to my feet, toes wiggling in frayed boots. They’d have to last another day. The ore should be ready for its radiation bath, and I had a whole truck of hazmat to unload.

My life was so glamorous.

Two

A few hours later...

I stomped through the dark, scraggly forest in my stupid dress, cursing the scum who'd sold me shitty faux *karset* boots with every stone and stick that stabbed me. Anger was the only thing keeping me warm, so I let it run wild.

Damn the greedy shits in the conglomerate who ran this poor excuse for a planet. They only ever did the bare fucking minimum, and usually not even that. I dared someone to tell me why, when Diurnal species made up a measly thirty-five percent of the population on Oorani Six, the transpo lines only ran between 07:00 and 20:00. They were *automated*, for fuck's sake.

Damn rich idiots who invited half the planet to their stupid party and ran out of food in five minutes. Damn Parethians barely out of the egg—who had no business at a party like that—for not knowing when to back away from an open bar, and *especially* the one who'd returned that expensive, authentic alcohol in a sickening spray all over the coat room.

Damn inconsiderate roommates who couldn't be trusted not to leave a girl stranded just because a few pretty aliens wandered by. And finally, damn myself for expecting things to go any differently.

The anger driving me fizzled out, and my feet dragged to a stop. I stared up at the sky, letting my mind empty.

Stars twinkled and shone down at me, diamonds against inky velvet. Views like this were one of the few things that made life on this planet palatable. Uninhabited at the time of its discovery, Oorani Six became the property of the Vol'debi Sector Council, who categorized it as a nature preserve and forgot about it for decades, until some enterprising scavengers hit upon a wealth of rare minerals hidden beneath the surface.

The scavengers got away with their haul, but the Council sold limited mining rights and full oversight to a merchant conglomerate who shut down any further attempts at freelancing with brutal efficiency. So now the planet was hectares and hectares of untamed wilderness spotted here and there with little factory towns—none of them big enough to dim the starshine.

At night, if I ignored the cold, I could almost pretend I was back home on Ay'enna. My people hadn't fought our way to the stars. The stars had found us. A lot of cultures collapsed under the weight of "progress" when that happened, but our policy of isolation served us well. We had some fancy new tech, but we'd never embraced industrialization, nor did our population centers grow appreciably.

Nights on Ay'enna were glorious.

Something chittered a warning in the darkness, raising every hair on my body. I searched the shadows for whatever made it, but found only twisted, sparse trees wound around by a seriously creepy fog.

If the forest had looked like this when I left Parlek's disappointing pleasure palace, I'd never have come this way—no matter that it shortened the distance by more than a third.

The sound came again. It might have been my overactive imagination, but it sounded closer. I moved.

A few steps in, I started shivering. I should've found one of the droid staff and insisted they clean and sanitize my coat instead of stomping off mad. Probably nothing would've gotten the vomit stink out of it, but at least I wouldn't be freezing my tits off. My dress was long, but also sleek and sleeveless. It did nothing to keep me warm. Plus, the fog had grown so heavy, my skin was clammy with it. It was a really unsettling fog. It moved and twisted, the shifting shapes teasing me into seeing monsters where there were none.

I hoped.

The chittering sound came again, definitely closer this time. I spun to the left, crouching, fangs bared, in time to see... something... step out from behind a thorny bush.

Like some hybrid of a long-tailed rodent and an insect, it had a pointed muzzle and delicate, searching antennae. Green fur dripped from its thorax and spilled down the spindly legs

tipped incongruously with tiny paws, but the abdomen was smooth and chitinous.

It was about the size of my head, and it paid me no attention whatsoever.

Nerves rushed out of me in a laugh. The critter jumped, shooting me a reprovng glare.

“Sorry, little dude. You scared me, is all.”

I started walking again, taking strange comfort in it scurrying beside me. It moved in quick bursts, scuttling from one pile of debris to another. Looking for bugs, probably.

Something squealed in the leaves beneath it. There was a crunch, and the moonlight caught a tiny body flailing, caught between green, serrated jaws.

...Not bugs, then.

Unappetizing as the scene was, my stomach cramped in jealousy. I'd been looking forward to some real food dammit. Instead, I'd gotten no food!

A series of clouds rolled over the sky, blotting out the moon and making the forest around me seem even more sinister. Anything could be out there. Waiting. Watching.

Don't freak out, I cautioned myself. *Think about something else*. I imagined my route in my head, trying to remember if there was anywhere to grab a bite between here and the set of rooms I shared with Shorra. As hungry and tired as I was, I'd be willing to sacrifice the units to be able to just fall into bed when I got home. Unfortunately, the only place with food

between here and there was the employee cafeteria at the recycling plant. I hadn't worked there for years, so they wouldn't even let me past the gate.

I'd make Shorra go out and grab me something. Pay for it too. It was the least she could do after abandoning me like she did. And I didn't care what she and her playthings were doing when I got home. Nobody actually died of blue balls, but if I didn't get fed ASAP, I couldn't guarantee there wouldn't be a murder or four.

A bitter, cold wind cut through the night, scattering twigs and rattling branches. To my thoroughly spooked ears, it sounded like prowling footsteps. I caught my hair, twisting it over one shoulder, and rubbed my arms briskly. I couldn't seem to generate any heat.

The crunching sound came again. It was probably nothing to worry about. Just my overactive imagination. But I walked a little faster, just in case.

If I didn't find something to distract myself, I was going to give myself a heart attack jumping at shadows.

I pulled up the imaginary lover I'd been building for myself from old memories, new fantasies, and parts and pieces of Shorra's many partners. She'd been gravitating towards big burly types recently, which weren't generally my preference, but she'd brought home a sleepy-eyed musician a few weeks back who'd acted so meek I'd actually been concerned for them. That was, until I heard them through the wall, begging Shorra to tighten the clamps.

The lavender eyes of my fantasy grew soft, the curve of their neck submissive. A wicked, needy light kindled deep within them.

Oh yeah. I liked that.

I imagined coming home after work, finding them in the kitchen of our big house. I'd sneak up behind them, pull them close. They'd know I was there, of course, and melt into me. I'd ask how long it was going to be until dinner, breathing the words onto their skin between nibbling kisses. They'd shiver and tell me they just put it in the oven. I'd tell them I was hungry *now* and spin them around, lifting them onto the counter. I'd drop to my knees. They'd gasp, but spread their legs wide, and I'd...

My stomach growled, every part of me starving.

Above me, something screeched. It was a piercing, hair-raising sound that ripped me free of my fantasy and dropped me into the burning, endless cold of open space. For a single instant, I froze.

Then I heard the beat of wings, felt the rush of air, and sprinted. Five steps in, I dove to the side on pure instinct. The edge of a great, leathery wing clipped me, knocking me flat. I heard an agonized squeal and looked up in time to see the limp form of the little green critter hanging from claws the length of my hand, before my erstwhile friend and the beast whose dinner they now were disappeared into the fog.

I pushed up onto my knees, shaking, unsettled, and grateful. Maybe my luck was turning around. No, I still hadn't gotten

any dinner. But I also hadn't *been* dinner, and that felt like a pretty big deal under the circumstances.

A branch snapped somewhere in the swirling fog behind me, followed by a soft snuffling. Oh, now what?

It was probably the little green dude's cousin or something. I cleared my throat, dusting myself off as I got to my feet.

“Uh, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, buddy, but—”

Orange light flared. Eerie eyes like two ominous stars glared at me from the darkness. Too high. Too large. Definitely *not* a relative of the green dude.

Oh fuck.

A monster boiled from the night, rushing towards me with unimaginable speed.

I caught only the briefest impression of the creature: massive, furry, and dark, with a mouth full of snarling, snapping teeth. Then I was running, my lungs burning as I pushed myself to go faster. My tits punched the air out of me with each desperate stride, the bra I wore no match for their weight.

I felt hot breath on my neck. My fangs elongated, venom dripping from them as I pumped my legs harder. Ahead, a small tree beckoned. At the last second, I snapped out my hand, catching the trunk in my palm, and pivoted around it as the monster flashed by.

I didn't stop to gloat. I pushed from the tree, running perpendicular to my previous path in a back and forth, evasive sprint. At least, that's what I meant to do. Just as I hit my

stride, the sole of my boot tore, splitting open entirely. A few more steps and it caught on a root, sending me flying.

Then the monster was on me, pinning me to the ground with its bulk, bared teeth inches from my face. We fought, and the world became a blur of claws, fur, teeth, and drool. I got my legs together and kicked out, knocking the beast backwards. Taking advantage, I lunged forward and plowed my fist into the soft tissue under its jaw. It made a pained, choking noise, and I bared my teeth. *Weren't expecting that kind of strength, were you? Wait till you see this!*

I sank my fangs into its shoulder, biting down hard, pumping venom into the raw flesh. My mouth was full of fur, but I didn't care. I wanted to kill it. If I'd been full Nerenna, I probably would have, even as big as the fucker was. But my humanity robbed my venom of potency, so I worried the wound, pouring more and more in until I grew dizzy. I had to incapacitate it.

The monster roared. Its jaws clamped down on my shoulder, teeth scraping against bone, and I screamed. Blackness fluttered around me like so many small birds. My head fell back.

I felt the drag of a wide, wet tongue through the gore soaking me. *I guess I ended up as dinner after all.*

Three

LOCATION UNKNOWN

“Um, hey, do you think you can wake up? It’s okay if you need to sleep some more, it’s only that you’ve been unconscious for a while and I’m getting pretty worried.”

The voice drifted in and out, hazy like a mirage. Whoever they were, I didn’t want them to be upset. I tried to open my eyes, but it was like I kept slipping out of my body. It was hard to concentrate too. Something was pulling at me, something I needed to remember. But I was so *warm*. I just wanted to enjoy it a little while longer.

“Pretty lady? Can you hear me?”

Aww, the voice thought I was pretty.

“I’m really sorry about biting you. I fixed it all up and you don’t even have a scar, I promise. I’m so, so sorry though. Please wake up.”

It’s okay, I thought woozily. Don’t be sad. I forgive you.

The scattered pieces of my consciousness finally coalesced, and my eyes snapped open. Worried amber ones peered at me

from a canid face. The head was attached to a large, muscular body covered in dark blue fur and a pair of tight black pants that ended at the knee, behind which a tail waved hesitantly. The owner of the voice crouched over me, poised, like he was ready to scoop me up into his big furry arms. He was also sporting the kind of erection usually only seen on pleasure bots.

I punched him in the nose.

He fell back, howling, blood rushing between the fingers he clamped to his muzzle.

“You *bit* me!” I shouted. I felt oddly betrayed. Weird, since I didn’t know this guy at all. His voice had been so sad though. So sweet. I’d wanted to wrap him in my arms and keep him safe from the cruelties of the world. Finding out he was the monster who’d attacked me was an unpleasant shock on top of the pile of *rexp*at dung this night had turned into.

“You *chased* me! I thought you were going to *eat* me!” It might have been smarter to tone down the aggression a little, considering all that, but he did heal me and seemed genuinely remorseful. Plus, he wasn’t making any threatening moves, and I was still fully dressed—all the way down to my mostly disintegrated boot. It was inexplicable under the circumstances, but I felt safe. And pissed off. I stood and fisted my hands on my hips, glaring down at him.

“I’m *sorry*!” he wailed. His nose was swollen and bleeding, his eyes watering. But he didn’t move, just cupped his hands around his muzzle to catch the blood and looked up at me with

the biggest, saddest eyes. He was handsome for a giant hairy brute. His fur was a lovely shade of blue, and the face I'd seen before I swung had been graceful. Not really my type, not that it mattered.

I shook my hand, feeling the sting in my knuckles. He was solid, I'd say that much for him.

A tear slipped from one amber eye and he sniffled. Dammit. Drawing in a deep breath, I blew it out with measured slowness. Being mean to this guy was like kicking a kitten. Okay, yes, a kitten with great big teeth who'd mauled me not long ago. But still.

“Am I to understand that you have no intention of attacking me again? No more growling and pinning me to the floor? No more biting?”

He'd started off nodding, but stilled, his eyes going glassy. “I'll... try.”

Well, that filled me with confidence. I sighed.

“You have a med array around here somewhere, I presume?” Judging from my shoulder, which was scar-free as promised, he had an excellent one. The only new decoration my shoulder sported was a shiny black ribbon. He'd used it to tie my bra and dress back together. It wasn't pretty, but it worked. What a thoughtful attacker.

He nodded but stayed where he was, blood slowly dripping down his forearms.

I sighed again and made a *get up* gesture. “Well? Let's go.”

His med array was both good and fast. Neither of us tried to make conversation while it was working. I'd realized when I first looked around that we were on some kind of ship. Now, with a moment to process, I realized it was a relatively high-end personal cruiser. And it was moving. It'd been a while since I'd been off planet, but it felt to me like the lower frequency hum of orbit, rather than active spaceflight. The question was, where?

When his nose was no longer bleeding or broken, he led me to a set of soft, sack-like chairs. I took one and he took the other, hugging a loose cushion to himself. Seconds ticked by. I'd just opened my mouth to demand he tell me everything when words started flooding out of him.

"I really am so very, very sorry about all this. I don't know what happened. I mean, I *know*, I was there, but nothing like this ever happened to me before. It's never come on so fast or been so strong. It was like I couldn't control myself at all. Even now, I—" He broke off, fisting his hands in his lap. They trembled slightly.

I was going to have to calm him down if I wanted any kind of cogent explanation. "How about we start with you telling me where we are."

"Oh. Uh, still in the Vol'debi Sector." He picked at the weave of his pillow.

"*Where* in the Vol'debi Sector?" I pressed, keeping my tone light through sheer force of will. "Just how far from Oorani Six have you taken us?"

“Only about... seventeen light years. You slept for a long time. I was worried, but the med array said your body was recovering from an extended period of overextension.” He tilted his head, concern clear in his eyes. “You need to take better care of yourself.”

I gaped at him, unable to form a single response.

He shook his head as if clearing it and sent me a sheepish look. “I’m sorry. None of my business. Let me start over. Um, so... are you familiar with ABO reproduction?”

I nodded slowly, fighting the urge to pick him up and shake him until he gave me the answers I needed. He was keyed up, nervous. Pushing would probably make him more incoherent instead of less. I’d follow his lead for now.

My memories of Comparative Biology were rusty, but I dusted off the basics. ABO reproduction was found in something like fifteen percent of known sentient species. There was a lot of variation in how it presented, but generally the species was split between three designations: alpha, beta, and omega. Omegas were capable of an intense hormonal experience called a heat, which effected even non-ABO species in their vicinity, and triggered a rut—an intense sexual drive—in alphas. Was he an alpha? In my limited experience, alphas were more... alpha. Dominant, which was not a vibe this guy was giving off. Still, if he’d been in a rut and I got in the way somehow, it would explain some things.

“Good, that makes this easier.” He shifted his weight. He squeezed his pillow. He flicked his ears.

Nervousness wasn't a good sign.

“We—the E'zuil—are an ABO species. Which you probably guessed, since I brought it up.” He made a strained sound that was probably intended to be a laugh, but he was too tense to pull it off. “I'm between clients at the moment, so I wandered over to Oorani Six to do some exploring. It's a fascinating place. There are these bioluminescent organisms that burrow in the rocks, then at night they—not important. Sorry.”

I kept my hands firmly in my lap so I didn't do something ridiculous, like pat his head and tell him everything would be all right. If anyone should be doling out assurances right now it was him, dammit.

“I caught your scent. It triggered something in me. Well, two things. My heat hit me hard, instantaneously. It felt like a Kyrvidian compactor smashed into me, all of it full force at once, and that's *never* happened. I've been through dozens, probably hundreds of heats, and it's never been anything like that.”

Okay, I must have gotten the terms backwards. It'd been years since I'd studied this stuff, so that wasn't too surprising. But, *hundreds*? I thought most ABO species went through the heat/rut cycle one to four times a year. Was he exaggerating, older than he acted, or just extra, extra horny?

“I don't really know how to explain the other part. My best guess is some kind of instinctive predatory memory?” He lifted a lip, displaying impressively large teeth I was very happy to keep at this distance, and waved a clawed hand. “Our

roots are predators, after all. The only thing I remember is this burning, all-consuming need to get to you, to get closer to you.” He gulped, and whispered, “And when you bit me... all I could think about was biting you back.”

A terrible suspicion hit me and jumped out of my mouth.

“Are you trying to tell me we’re *mated*?!”

“No! Why would you think that?”

He looked hurt. Dammit. I could have sounded a little less horrified if I’d taken a second to think. The idea of being mated to this guy, granted I didn’t even know his name, wasn’t nearly as awful as it should be. It was even a little... nice? There was something wrong with my head. Maybe his fancy-dancy med scanner missed a concussion.

“Because of the biting! And the whole kidnapping thing!” *And because of the boner you’re trying so hard to hide behind that pillow. Not to mention the fact that I should hate you but find myself wanting to cuddle you instead.* I didn’t say that part out loud though. It was too confusing.

“We don’t mate just anybody we exchange bites with. Can you imagine how awkward fights would get? It has to be a mutual exchange during sex. And I didn’t kidnap you!”

I just looked at him.

“Okay, yes, I can see how it would look that way from your perspective.”

I folded my arms, but that just made his pillow jump as he stared at my boobs, smooshed high. He actually drooled a

little. I reached over and flicked him on the nose.

He shook himself and looked down at his hands, clearly chagrined. “I didn’t mean to kidnap you though. You were lying there, bleeding and unconscious. I still wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Part of that was my fault,” I admitted, urged by the inexplicable need to make him not be sad. “My venom tends to have a narcotic effect.”

“Venom?” he asked, surprise finally making him look up.

My satisfaction at distracting him from self-flagellation was entirely out of proportion to our non-relationship. I bared my teeth, letting my fangs extend, and licked a drop of venom from one delicate point.

“You’re not the only one who evolved from predators.”

He whimpered. Actually whimpered! All of a sudden, my desire to cuddle him gained a new, much sweeter friend.

Blinking rapidly, he visibly worked to pull himself back on track. “Right. Okay. So, you—bleeding. Me—out of my head. I remember thinking you weren’t safe, and I needed you to be safe. So I brought you to my ship. But there was this compliance cruiser, and by then my head had cleared enough to realize how bad it all looked, and I remembered they still have prison planets in this Sector... and I panicked. I’m sorry I accidentally kidnapped you.”

He looked so damned miserable, it was breaking my heart. After all, I rationalized, it hadn’t been malicious or anything. It

was his Alpha genetics. Plus, he was working pretty hard at making things right.

And my sudden generosity had nothing to do with my growing urge to throw away a lifetime of species solidarity and bang him like a dinner bell. Not at all. But speaking of dinner...

“Tell me you have food somewhere in this place, and I’ll consider forgiving you.”

“You’d let me cook for you?” He stilled, amber eyes staring at me with unsettling intensity.

“Uh... yeah. I mean, synth protein is fine.” At that, he looked like he might cry, so I rushed on, “But if you want to cook, I’d love that.”

Never in my life had anyone looked so thrilled at the idea of making me dinner. He jumped to his feet—dropping the pillow in the process and giving me an eyeful of one very happy E’zuil in exceptionally tight pants—and moved towards the door opposite to where we’d come in.

“Hey!” I called, waiting until he turned around. “I’m Gwyn. What’s your name?”

“Al’tun,” he said with a huge, toothy smile. His tail was wagging so hard I could almost feel the breeze from where I sat. “I’m so happy to have met you, Gwyn. I’ll have your food ready soon. If you’d like to shower, my room is just through there, help yourself to anything. The guest closet is on the left. Something in there should fit you.”

Al’tun actually skipped out of the room. *Humming.*

He was one strange Alpha. What really surprised me was that I wasn't entirely unhappy to have met him.

This had to be some kind of dream. My life had taken a sharp turn—starting with me agreeing to go to that awful party.

As exciting, terrifying, and strange as this chaos was, I needed to get back to normal. Back to Oorani Six and my job, if I still had one. Back to the plan.

I'd take advantage of Al'tun's hospitality since I'd paid for it in blood, but as soon as I'd eaten, he was turning this ship around. I had a future to pay for. I couldn't get distracted by some cute furry doofus with sharp teeth and a big... ship.

Four

“Al’tun, that was incredible.” I collapsed onto the cushion, utterly blissed out from what was by far the best meal of my life. Anything beat the synth protein I’d been living on the last seven years, but not even my mother’s cooking back on Ay’enna was this good. Not that I’d tell her that.

I couldn’t identify a single ingredient, but the spicy vegetables wrapped in thin, crispy, translucent pastry had melted in my mouth. Every bite brought a new burst of rich, complex flavors. I’d asked Al’tun what the dish was, but he just said, “nothing special.”

If the man ever made me something “special,” I might actually die. If not from the pleasure of the food itself, then from grief when the meal was over.

I was having a hard time remembering how I’d ended up on this ship. Sure, the memories were still there, fully intact, but between Al’tun’s sweetness, the unparalleled luxury of a truly hot shower that didn’t run out of water in three minutes, the feel of emerald-green silk wrapping around my pampered and

moisturized body, and that *food*... well, it was hard to focus on a silly little thing like almost being murdered.

“I’m sorry, Gwyn.”

I waved a hand limply at him, too satisfied to move otherwise.

“I said I’d forgive you if you fed me. After that meal, you’re pretty much in the clear for the foreseeable future. You can stop apologizing.”

“Not for that.”

Something in his voice finally pierced the happy tummy haze, and I looked up to find him trembling. “Al’tun? What’s wrong?”

He hung his head, shaggy fur falling over his eyes. “It’s my heat. It’s coming back.”

“What? How?”

“I don’t know! I thought I took care of it. I had some suppressants—in case there was a delay getting to a client, you know? They’re only meant to postpone a heat, not stop one, but I thought... if I took all of them... and it worked at first!”

Little snippets of information coalesced into a picture. Well, that explained what I found in the bedroom.

“But now it’s coming back,” Al’tun said, breathing hard. “And it’s coming back fast. I’m so sorry.”

I drew a breath, but whatever I meant to ask was washed away by a rush of scent. When did Al’tun start smelling like summertime? Warm and green and earthy, sweet like berry

juice dripping down your chin, bright as tree sap sparkling in the sun; the scent of him wrapped around me and made me want to purr.

I didn't even know I *could* purr.

"There's no way to stop it? No one who could help?" I forced myself to ask. Thinking was increasingly difficult. Every inhale saturated more of me with Al'tun's scent, and I found myself inching forward, wanting to pull him to me so I could bask in it and never be cold again.

He shook his head. "We're too far away. But you don't have to—I don't want to pressure you, if you don't want to—I can just—"

In that moment, anything but raw honesty was beyond me. "It's not that, Sunshine. I want to help. It's just... it's been seven years since I've been with anyone, okay? For everyone's safety. But even if that wasn't the case, I don't think I could take your knot. You're a big boy, and I'm pretty small."

"My... what?" Al'tun stared at me, confusion so strong even the throbbing pulse of his building heat seemed to pause.

"Your knot. Male alphas have knots, right?" Now *I* was confused.

The big idiot *laughed* at me! He threw back his head and howled until tears formed in his eyes!

I crossed my arms and waited for him to finish. It wasn't that funny. Besides, I knew more about his species than he knew about mine.

“Gwyn, I’m not an alpha,” Al’tun finally managed between bouts of gulping hilarity. “I’m an *omega*. I don’t need to rut you to break this heat—although that sounds amazing.” His giggles finally faded, his eyes darkening as they swept over me, lingering on my breasts barely contained in green silk. The bulge that was apparently his perfectly normal, knotless dick twitched. “Really amazing. But what I need is for *you* to fuck *me*.”

I stared at him, open mouthed. Everything I thought I understood just flipped upside down, and I felt like I should have glowing question marks flickering above my head.

“Al’tun... I don’t have a cock.” I felt ridiculous saying it, but it was an indisputable fact. “I mean, I’m not opposed to getting creative, but if what you need is an alpha’s knot...” I spread my arms, frowning. I didn’t like admitting that, not at all. For whatever reason, I *wanted* to be capable of easing him.

“That’s not a problem. I have plenty of toys, and I’m good at sharing.” He ducked his head, looking up at me mischievously before another wave of heat rolled through him, closing his eyes and pulling out a whine.

His summer forest scent filled the room now. It tightened my nipples and made my fangs ache with the need to bite. A heavy pulse pounded between my legs.

I shouldn’t do this. For the sake of my people, I should walk away. I barely knew Al’tun. It was foolish to think I could trust him.

“If I don’t help you, what happens?”

“I’ll have to lock myself in my room. You’ll need to call for help, unless you know how to pilot an S-class cruiser? Then, yeah. Ping the most recent contact and tell them about my heat. It’ll take them a few days to get here, but somebody will come.” There were more and more pauses between his words, a whine growing in the back of his throat with each panting breath.

“And for those days, you’ll be locked in your room? Suffering? Is it going to get worse?” My breathing wasn’t much steadier than his.

He nodded, wincing. “But you don’t have to—”

“What happens if I go in the room with you?” I interrupted.

Al’tun’s perfume thickened, so hot and sticky sweet I could feel it on my tongue. He twisted, graceful as a dancer, crawling to me with a slow, hand over hand sway until he reached the pooled edge of my too-long wrap dress. His eyes rolled up, meeting mine as he so delicately nosed the fabric aside and licked a hot line across the bared skin of my ankle.

I sucked in a breath.

Al’tun buried his head in my skirt, breathing his words into my thighs. “We’d fuck. Over and over again. For days. Until we were exhausted, and even then, we wouldn’t stop until it passed.”

A woman could only be so strong.

“If we’re going to do this, Al’tun, I have something I need to tell you, and you have to promise never to share it with

another soul.”

He whimpered and pushed closer.

I fisted my hand in the fur on the back of his head and pulled.

“Look at me, Al’tun. I need you to focus. Can you do that for me?”

His pupils were blown out with need, but they latched onto my face and he nodded.

I took a deep breath and hoped I wasn’t making the biggest mistake of my life.

“Nerenna don’t date outside our species. I only know of four mixed matings, and my parents are one of them. We don’t do it, because for other species, the sexual fluids of the Nerenna are a powerful aphrodisiac. Our first contact with another sentient species ended with us being hunted and farmed. A lot of people died to keep the knowledge from getting out.” I tightened my fist in Al’tun’s fur, bringing my face closer to his. “No one can know, do you understand?”

“Yes,” he breathed, eyes wide. “Gwyn, I—”

“And you realize, if we do this, it’s going to get a lot worse before it gets better? *If* it gets better? I’ll make your heat stronger, Al’tun. Neither of us can know for sure what that means.”

“I don’t care.”

I frowned.

“I want you, Gwyn. I need you. If you want me too, that’s all that matters.”

It really wasn’t, but I was done fighting.

“Up then, Sunshine. Show me your toybox.”

Five

“This one’s my favorite.” Al’tun ran to the illuminated shelves spanning the far wall of his room, pulling out a smooth pink dildo. He held it out to me, eyes shining, tail wagging.

This guy was just absurdly adorable.

The dildo was heavier than I expected. It was also incredibly simple. Given, well, everything else in this room, I’d expected something with more bells and whistles. There was some shaping to indicate a head at one end, but otherwise, it was a basic cylinder; albeit one wrapped in premium synth skin. I turned it over in my hands, frowning.

“It’s lovely. I especially like the color.” It was the same pink as my skin, just a shade or two darker. What were the chances, I wondered, that his favorite dildo would end up being the same color as my pussy lips? *Fate*, my heart whispered. I shushed it. I made my own fate. This was about easing Al’tun. “But don’t you need something with a knot? And I was kind of hoping for something more... strap-on... able. If we’re going to be going at it for days, my arms are going to get tired.”

“We can’t have that,” Al’tun said, his smile charmingly crooked beneath eyes that burned. He held up a remote I hadn’t noticed and pushed a button. A thick knot swelled the base of the dildo, just below my hand. “This model has built-in nanotech. It attaches without straps, has an ejaculation function, and assorted feedback levels. I can help you put it on if you want.”

The words were casual, even a little clinical, but the seams of his pants were close to full containment breach and his big body trembled as if it took all his will to hold himself in place.

I kept my eyes on his as I handed the dildo back and reached for the ribbons holding my dress in place. The silk hissed as it fell down my body. Al’tun’s pupils expanded, and the blast of heat that came from him was so intense I was surprised my hair didn’t blow back.

He jerked forward and froze, whimpering, his eyes everywhere at once. None of the underwear I’d found in his guest closet had been meant for someone with my proportions, so nothing hid me from his hungry gaze.

It roved over me, taking in everything. Pastel pink skin sheathed my strong, densely built form, dotted here and there with markings of darker mauve. My breasts pushed out from my ribs, full and soft, the thick nipples tight and flushed dark, betraying my desire. As if the wetness making my thighs slippery wasn’t proof enough.

My work and a diet of synth protein kept me thinner than I liked, but my pussy lips remained lush and fat, something

Al'tun clearly appreciated as he licked his lips, eyes trained on the small patch of hair that grew just above my split. Uncommon among the Nerenna, it grew smooth and straight in the same paler pink of my head hair.

I hooked a finger in the gap his erection made in the waist of his pants, pulling him a stumbling step closer.

“Kneel, Omega. Get me ready so I can fuck you.”

He crashed to the floor like a satellite falling from orbit. I wasn't sure if it was the touch, the dirty talk, or just natural progression, but the intensity of his need skyrocketed. Little whimpers slipped out of him with every breath, and he almost dropped the dildo, he was shaking so hard.

“Shh, it's ok. I'll take care of you,” I murmured, running my fingers through his fur.

Al'tun leaned into my touch, breathing raggedly. After a few seconds, he steadied enough to fit the dildo in place, holding it with one hand while he pressed a button on the little remote with the other.

I hissed. The base of the dildo warmed, softening. It flowed, matching itself to my contours, sealing to me so perfectly I could barely see the seam between my mound and its jutting length. Thin tendrils snaked out from the underside. I couldn't see them, but I felt them well enough. They surrounded my clit, fitting around it like a second skin with unclear intentions.

Al'tun placed the remote on my wrist and it, too, bonded with my skin.

I peered at the buttons, twisting my hips without conscious thought so the heavy weight of the strap-on slapped my thighs. The button that initiated the nano-bond was clear enough, it bore the galactic standard icon for linking. And the radiating circles overlaying the two vertical lines must be the knot. The squiggly lines bracketing the two straight lines had to be ejaculation, but how did you adjust the feedback? I couldn't find a dial or anything.

“How do I—” My thoughts crashed to a halt. Saliva filled my mouth. The thickness of Al'tun's perfume was suddenly a roaring, clawing beast, pushing aside everything but the need to fill him, claim him.

He lay on the bed, chest down, tail high. The crease of his ass shone with slick as he trembled, begging without words for me to ease him.

I'd figure the damned buttons out as I went.

The bed was soft beneath my knees. Al'tun whined at the first brush of my leg against his, arching his back and pressing his hips higher. Higher was a problem.

“Spread your legs for me,” I murmured, running my fingers down his inner thigh. They shook slightly.

Al'tun moaned, pushing back into my touch, but his knees stayed firmly planted. He wasn't hearing me at all.

No matter. I wrapped my hand around the base of his tail and kicked my knee sharply to the side. He yelped, but I held him steady until he got his legs—now spread wide—under him

again. Moving forward, I hummed in pleasure as the cradle of my hips cupped his ass. Perfect. The angle of the strap-on hanging between us put maddeningly soft pressure on my sex, and we both moaned as I circled my hips, bumping the thick knot against the velvety sack of his scrotum.

I pulled back and he whined, the sound rising higher as my fingers brushed his needy hole.

“You’re so wet for me,” I said, coating my fingers. Al’tun moaned as I slipped one inside. He was even wetter inside, his body hot and pulsing, seeming to suck me deeper. A second finger went in as easy as the first, then a third, and I wished desperately that the cock between my legs was real. His ass fluttered around my fingers as he fucked himself on them, and I just knew sinking into him would feel better than anything.

“Please fuck me,” he whined, pushing against my hand, trying to take me deeper. “I’m ready. Please, Gwyn!”

Mmm. I slid my fingers free, squeezing them around the flexing cheek of his ass. My other hand dipped between my legs, gathering the wetness there and slathering it over the pink shaft poised at his entrance. Time to turn up the heat.

“I love the way you beg, Sunshine,” I purred, and pushed the tip in. “Do it again.”

Al’tun shouted and jerked back, trying to impale himself. My muscles flexed as I held him in place.

“So hot,” he panted, writhing, clawing at the bed. “It’s so fucking hot. I’m burning up. Please, Gwyn. I need you to—I

can't stand it. Fuck me, oh god, please fuck me! Please, Alpha!"

I drove into him, not stopping until the swell of the knot crashed against his entrance. He howled, wanting it all, but my omega needed more than a quick bang. He needed to be fucked until he was sloppy and limp. I had seven years of pent-up sexual energy, and I'd use it all to see him satisfied.

"Yes!" His chest fell forward as I thrust deep again, and we moaned in unison.

The part of the dildo cupping my clit vibrated softly, suckling me in time with my strokes. I meant to hold back, to try and stay calm until I'd gotten him off a few times, but my head was already full of sunshine and berries and moans, and that was one thing too many.

I fucked him. I put my head down and railed him, grunting with each perfect, shuddering slap of the knot against his ass. His slick was everywhere and mine was too, mixing, splashing, adding an obscene counterpoint to our rutting.

My breasts were heavy, the nipples so tight and sensitive, just the brush of my hair over them made me shudder and pound Al'tun harder.

For a while, I lost myself. There was only Al'tun's sunshine, burning me from the inside out. The feel of his fur, thick between my fingers. The sound of his voice, ragged with need. The dance of his body, begging for more.

Then he stiffened and cried out, jerking beneath me. I smelled his release and snarled; unreasonably angry he'd wasted it on the blanket.

“Again,” I barked, not slowing the swing of my hips. “Come for me again.”

Al'tun whined and bit the blankets, shuddering with each stroke. His breathing picked up and he started to push back into me, grinding himself on the knot as he climbed towards another orgasm.

“That's it, just like that.” I leaned forward, almost forgetting my goal as his thick, silky fur rubbed across my breasts, and changed the rhythm of my strokes. I pulled out slowly, all the way to the tip, then snapped my hips forward, driving deep and letting him feel the stretch as I ground the knot against him. Then I did it again. And again. Until the pleas falling from his lips became incoherent gasps and he stilled beneath my fingers, trembling on that exquisite precipice.

I reached around, taking his throbbing cock in hand, and whispered in his ear.

“Now.”

Al'tun wailed. His release burst from him in hot pulses, drenching my hand. I milked him, stroking, squeezing, grinding the knot of my strap-on against him.

When he went limp, gasping for breath, I brought my hand to my mouth and sucked him from my fingers. A low thrumming purr started in my chest. I didn't know what the hell that was

about, but the tight pressure on my nipples increased to near pain, while Al'tun melted into a needy, whimpering puddle.

I couldn't wait any longer.

The knot was so big though. Al'tun was an omega, and logically I knew he was built to take it, but looking at him stretched so tight around the pink shaft sparked a flash of concern. Was it bigger now than when we'd started? He was putting out plenty of slick, but a little more wetness couldn't hurt...

I pushed the button with the squiggly lines, pulled my hips back... and almost passed out.

Hot. Wet. Tight. Squeezing me. Al'tun's ass gripped me in a silken vice, not wanting to let me go. I let out a strangled noise and pushed back in, almost weeping at the feel of his unbelievable wet heat around my cock.

"Fuck, Sunshine, I can feel you!" I choked out.

Al'tun keened and clamped around me.

"Oh shit. Do that again." The sensation of being inside him stole my breath. My head spun. A heavy pressure built in my groin, achingly familiar and unbearably new.

"You feel so fucking good," I moaned. "You're gonna make me come."

Al'tun exploded. He bucked, his ass bouncing so fast I could only hold on, squeezing down on me again and again. My eyes may have crossed.

“Come in meeee,” he wailed. “Fill me up! I need your knot, your cum, oh fuck, please, please—ahhhh!”

His ass gobbled up my knot with a blast of sensation so intense, for a moment it eclipsed everything else. I couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t feel anything except for the single, shining point where we connected.

I slammed back into my body to find Al’tun wriggling beneath me, hoarse cries forced out of him with every grind of my hips. My hand was gripping the base of his tail as I fucked my knot into him with short thrusts, an endless river of release spilling from me with each one. The bed beneath us was splattered with his cum, and the scent of sex and heat and summer drove me on.

Eventually, the pulsing release slowed, and we collapsed. I sprawled on Al’tun’s back like a sweaty blanket, trying to catch my breath. My abs were screaming. Damn, that was a lot of work.

Al’tun whined, circling his hips.

He couldn’t be serious. The wet spot wasn’t even cold yet!

He whined again, louder.

“Al’tun, is me fucking you the *only* thing that will help your heat?”

“I love you fucking me,” he panted. Clearly, nobody was home but the hormones. He did that fluttery thing with his ass again and this time *I* whined.

“I know you do. I do too. But can it be your turn while I catch my breath?”

“...what?”

I fisted my hand in his fur and pulled his head up, dragging a fang along the delicate edge of a pointed ear, and whispered, “Do you want to fuck me, Sunshine?”

“Yes! Fuck yes, yesyesyes!”

I giggled and braced myself on one arm, hissing as I deflated the knot and pulled out. We were both covered in a mess of slick and whatever my fancy aftermarket dick used for cum, and the sight of it made that weird vibration start in my chest again.

Still, it was a bit much.

I reached for the button to disconnect the strap-on, but Al'tun stopped me.

“Leave it.”

Before I could argue, a big, clawed hand pushed me backward and Al'tun prowled up my body, bracing his elbows on either side of my ribs. His big hands enveloped my breasts, pushing them together, and a long, agile tongue unfurled from his mouth, lapping at the hypersensitive tips.

“Oh fuck!”

He laughed into my boobs, then sucked both nipples into his mouth as his hands massaged the flesh around them.

Something whirred, and although I really didn't want to care about anything but how fucking good Al'tun was making me feel, I craned my head to see what it was.

Three little robots flew towards us. I opened my mouth to ask what they were doing, but a warm mist followed by gentle suction answered my question. The robots cleaned up the mess from our first round, spritzed me with something that felt like an oil of some kind, and flew off again.

Sex robot pit crew. Handy.

Al'tun sucked hard, pinching my other nipple between his claws, and I forgot all about the robots. I clamped my hands onto his, arching, and wrapped my legs around him.

I was short enough and he was tall enough that my groin only went to his stomach in this position, but I shamelessly humped the hard wall of his abdomen, coating him anew in my stimulating juices.

“Need inside you,” Al'tun panted, raising his head. His eyes were wild, feverish, and unfocused. “Need you, need you.”

“Take me.”

My sweet, submissive omega snarled, reared up onto his knees, grabbed me by the hips, and slammed me onto his cock in one powerful, unstoppable move. All the air punched out of my lungs. It felt like he split me in half.

His hands tightened and he pushed me forward, dragging me along his length, then snatched me back so hard my cock

bounced off his abs. He howled and hammered into me, jerking me back and forth, sliding me over the bed.

I'd started coming with his second thrust, and he didn't let me stop. My cunt was spasming around him—both from the shock of his sudden invasion and indescribable ecstasy. It was so much sensation all at once that all I could do was hang from his grip as my cum dripped down my ass and splattered on my belly.

My vision darkened. I tried to inhale but couldn't. A heavy weight was pressing on me. I slapped at Al'tun weakly and squeezed out a few words.

“Can't. Breathe. Boobs. Help.”

“Oh shit,” Al'tun huffed. Then his big hand cupped the back of my neck, lifting me, and I gratefully sucked in a lungful of precious, beautiful air.

“Fuck!” It rushed out of me in a scream as my weight settled on Al'tun's lap. Deep. He was so unbelievably deep like this. My hips moved, trying to make space for him, and he rubbed over a spot that made my whole body bow. My neck arched, my heavy, sweat-damp hair slid over my heels, and my pussy clamped onto Al'tun's cock like it would never let him go.

He howled and his arms closed around me, crushing me to him.

Then his teeth sank into my shoulder.

He froze immediately, his remorse-filled whimper vibrating through my flesh.

I didn't give him a chance to apologize. I clamped my hand to his head, holding him in place, and buried my fangs in the thick muscle of his chest.

Al'tun jerked like he'd been electrocuted. His cock bucked inside me, filling me with heat, and I purred into the bite. My sunshine whined, then his hand was around my cock, squeezing my knot, and my awareness blanked out in a wash of ecstasy.

Six

Four days later...

I sprawled on the floor, too exhausted to move. Al'tun curled beside me, finally sated. Above us on the bed, the busy little robots bundled up the wet, tangled blankets. They'd done their obligatory cleanup of us earlier, but I'd have to work up the energy to run us a bath soon. I rolled my head to the side, considering the distance to the bathroom.

A flicker of movement at the corner of my eye. Al'tun reached towards me, hesitated, and pulled his hand back, curling around it as if it hurt.

On second thought, bathing could wait. Talking needed to happen now.

It took a monumental effort, but I forced my tired body to roll onto its side, facing my suspiciously silent lover.

“We really are mated this time, huh?”

Al'tun flinched. “Yes. I'm so sorry. I did it again. I know you were just trying to help me, and—”

I pressed my mouth to his. I'd intentionally avoided kissing him while the heat rode us, and it succeeded in shocking him into silence.

"No more apologies between us, Sunshine." I kissed him again, enjoying the warm flush that had nothing to do with heat and everything to do with affection.

"So... you're not mad?"

"Do I seem mad?"

The smile that spread across his blue, furry face felt like coming home. We cuddled for a while, then Al'tun cleared his throat.

"What happens now?"

"I was considering a bath. Then food, then sleep. Although I could be convinced to go for sleep, then food if you'd rather."

"Gwyn..."

I grinned and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. Unbelievable, mind-altering, life-changing sex had really improved my mood.

"Whatever we want. Whatever *you* want. I hated my life on Oorani Six. I'd like to say goodbye to Shorra, my roommate, but there's nothing keeping me there. I've got a good nest egg set aside that I no longer have a use for, so I won't be a burden while we figure things out."

"You could never be a burden," Al'tun replied automatically. Then he frowned. "Why don't you need those units anymore?"

I don't want to keep you from your goals, Gwyn."

"You're not. You helped me see I didn't want them." He looked unconvinced, so I resigned myself to telling the whole, ridiculous story. "I never really had goals. That was the whole problem. Back on Ay'enna, I was comfortable. I had an okay job, my family, and Onkyx and Direa. We were in love. It was enough for me."

"It sounds nice," Al'tun offered hesitantly.

"It was. But Onkyx and Direa wanted more. They had ambition. They wanted to start a family. Thinking back on it now, all the signs were there. But I was nineteen, and I've always been stubborn. When they broke up with me, I was shocked and angry. When they got married and announced their pregnancy less than a rotation later, I lost my shit."

"What jerks!"

I brought his hand to my lips, letting my fingers smooth the baby-soft fur as I continued. "We were all young. They've got three kids now and are very happy, according to my family. But I couldn't let it go. I shipped off planet as soon as I heard the announcement. My big plan was to go out into the universe, make my fortune, and go home to rub their noses in it.

"It didn't quite work out that way. And honestly, I haven't cared about either of them in a long time. I just couldn't bear to return home as a failure."

“And now?” Al’tun’s warm eyes were steady, but he held very still.

“Now I have a gorgeous mate to satisfy. I don’t have time to worry about the judgement of nineteen-year-old me.”

Al’tun’s tail thumped. “Do you want to go back to Ay’enna?”

“I’d like to visit. Show you off, see my family. Ay’enna’s a beautiful planet. No glowy bug rocks, but there’s a lake with a waterfall that flows upwards I think you’ll like. But I’m not tied to it. You gave me that freedom. What do *you* want?” Al’tun wouldn’t meet my eyes, so I scooted down until we were face to face. “Tell me.”

“I want to keep working. I love my job.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “My job is—”

“Sex,” I finished.

He gaped at me. “How did you know?”

I looked behind him pointedly. The giant wall of sex toys stared back.

“Ah. Right. It doesn’t bother you?”

I shrugged. “If it makes you happy, it makes me happy. Will you tell me about it?”

He nodded, suddenly animated, and bounced into a sitting position. His tail wagged behind him, making me smile.

“My actual title is Conception Facilitator,” he said, with a proud tilt to his head that made my smile soften. “E’zuil

biology requires an Omega's heat in order for fertilization to occur, but we're the rarest designation. About one in a hundred. So a lot of us—unmated Omegas—work as facilitators.”

My heart sank, but I didn't interrupt.

“A pack will come to us, we'll take an injection that instigates the heat, share it, and then, if everything works out...” He stretched, pulling a small screen from the table beside the bed. A few taps, and a series of holo images popped up. Happy E'zuil in groups of two, three, sometimes as many as six, all with tiny babies bundled in their arms. Pictures of older babies: a tiny E'zuil child taking what might have been their first steps, another grinning with a plate of food tipped over on their head. Al'tun was in some of the pictures: playing with a toddler, kissing a baby, being hugged by a very pregnant, purple-furred E'zuil while her smiling pack looked on.

“That's beautiful,” I murmured. “They're beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

I forced my worn-out body to move, sitting up to face him and taking his hand in mine. How did I ask this delicately? “You said unmated omegas were facilitators. But you're not unmated anymore, Al'tun.”

His face fell. “I understand. I'm sorry, Alpha.” He looked like he might cry. Again.

“Hey, no,” I said, getting to my knees and cupping his face in my hands. “I don't know what you just heard, but I'm not

telling you anything. I'm trying to understand. Help me understand."

Al'tun was quiet for a few seconds. I waited, caressing his jaw with my thumb.

"It's rare for omegas to keep facilitating after we find a mate. It happens more often if our mate is a beta. Alphas tend to be more possessive." He looked away, then took a deep breath and met my eyes. "But mostly, omegas with alpha mates stop because our heats become tied to our mates."

"What does that mean?"

"It means only you will be able to ease me. If I keep working, the packs I facilitate for would come and go, leaving me still in heat. I'd need—"

"Me." That strange purr started in my chest again. Al'tun's eyes widened. "You'd need me." I slid a knee forward and Al'tun gave way before me, collapsing onto his back as I prowled over him. "You'd do your job. Help your people. Then you'd come to me. Hot." I kissed his chest. "Needy." His neck. "Feral." My teeth grazed his jaw. "Dripping with the pleasure you wrought." I reached between us, found him achingly erect, and brought his head to my entrance. His eyes went glassy as the aphrodisiac burned through his system.

"You'd come to me, begging for satisfaction." I slid down on him slowly, letting my battered body adjust.

Al'tun whined, his hands digging into the rug as he strained against me.

“Just like that,” I purred, as my thighs came to rest against his hips. I began to rock gently. “You’ll come to me, and I’ll give you what you need. You’re mine to take care of now. Mine.”

“Yes, Alpha,” he whispered, adoration shining from his eyes.

I leaned down and he met me halfway, both of us moaning into the kiss.

Shorra had been right back on Oorani Six, what felt like a lifetime ago. It was time to live a little.

Note to the Reader

Rowan writes all sorts of cozy, sexy, queer stories chock full of monsters, whether they hail from Earth or places beyond. For a complete list including content warnings, please visit rowanmerrick.com

Argurma Monster by S. J.
Sanders

MMF ♡♡

Synopsis



TALECH IS AN ARGURMA...

...made into a monster by experiments conducted by human scientists after crashing on Earth. After years of being in stasis, he has one desire—to claim the female scientist. He has no guilt over using his rival, the warrior Zoreth, to get his mate safely off Earth.

Zoreth is a warrior with a hole in his heart that he refuses to acknowledge or dwell upon, one that has been there since the death of his twin. Finding a compatible mate was an impossible dream made reality when he arrived on Earth. Her attachment to the damaged Talech is an inconvenience, but one he intends to triumph over until crashing on a world filled with zombies brings them all closer as a unit and a family in ways he never expected.

Beverly thought she finally had her one-way ticket into space, but she is forced to survive in a dangerous situation again. This time, however, she must rely on two males who both want to claim her while trying desperately not to be eaten by a zombie or foolishly lose her heart to both Argurmas.

Content Warnings: *none listed*

Prologue One

Talech Gerrivach Nunshula stared blankly at the small aliens as they talked excitedly over their newest modification. He was strapped to a mounting station that was capable of mechanically shifting backward to lie flat. It was a relief to be upright, though the pinch of the straps was an annoyance. Annoyance was all he felt anymore. That and the muted sensation of relief when he was finally turned loose to wander around the sparse habitat they provided him. There was no more privacy there than in the surgical room with its oversight station, but at least there he was free to move about as he liked. So he patiently waited through the pain and torture for the relief he knew would come.

His new appendages extending out behind his shoulders and down his spine twitched in response to the stimulation the scientists applied to them, and Talech gave them a curious glance as he felt the muscle respond in an unfamiliar way. It was strange and more than a little unsettling, but every modification he had undergone long before crashing on this

planet had been the same. He would become accustomed to it as he had any other. The sight of the slightly serrated metal legs did give him pause, however. Though they would be convenient enough weapons, and it was easy to accept them as such, he could not suppress his distaste for their insectoid appearance. Although he did not begrudge his capture or the experiments—as these were all things that Argurma would have carried out on an unknown species as well—in this particular case, he did not process their purpose.

He expressed his confusion with a soft chittering and click of his mandibles and silently scoffed when the scientists scurried away from him. He did not process the reason for their fear reaction any more than he could the purpose of this newest experiment. While it was true that they could not understand him since they had never allowed him anywhere near his ship, where he could have accessed the translator tech stored there, he had never reacted with hostility toward them either. Oh, he would kill every one of them if there were a clear opening for escape, but otherwise, he was cooperative as any Argurma drone reared to serve Argurumal.

He couldn't even dredge up any ill will for his captors when the brutality of the experiments caused significant pain or primal regressions within him. Talech had been considered something of a throwback anyway, which made him an ideal candidate to be an explorer for Argurumal, so it had not taken much, and he had been largely unconcerned with it. There were none of his kind present to mock his fallen state, nor mating-compatible females to whom he could potentially pose

a danger if caught within a fugue of primal lust. The fugue was one of many qualities they supposedly bred out of their people. Clearly those traits, like those brutal ones that had recently resurfaced in Talech, had merely gone dormant, only to return when the necessary conditions were applied.

As he watched the scientists circle around him, he wondered how the scientists of his own planet would greet such a discovery. Or his new modifications for that matter. Argurmas were a proud species—far too much to do extreme alterations to the physical appearance of their people, although it had been quietly speculated that the scientists chafed at their restrictions. He wondered if they would be gleeful if they had access to him as he was now. Given that he was already compromised, they would have little to stop them from studying his changes or trying to implement further ones.

Once he had told himself he would be rescued when the beacon from his crash site was intercepted, now he hoped that he would not. What these scientists did was minor compared to what those of his own people would do without constraints placed upon them. If he ever managed to free himself, he would have no other option than to remain in quadrants far from his home space.

Clicking his mandibles softly, Talech's head bent to meet the gaze of the human peering up at his new limbs speculatively. The male shrank back slightly when he noted Talech's gaze on him but cleared his throat to address the male standing to his left.

“What are his vitals?”

The other male looked down at his handheld. “They appear within normal range, Dr. Phillips.”

The scientist in question grimaced. “It would be helpful if we had an exact range of what would be normal for his species rather than guessing a baseline from a specimen that came to us injured.” He sighed and glanced back over at the other male. “I understand that Dr. Ryder is planning to oversee our study today?”

“She’s due on the observation deck within the hour.”

Dr. Phillips sighed deeply. “Well, we’d better get on with the electroshock study of the subject’s system with the new limbs in place before she arrives. I’ve already received communications that we are to discontinue the electroshock study on the biotech specimen along with several of our other standard tests. I told mainland that it was a mistake to put a woman in charge here. Because of their shortsightedness, we will now have to continue certain experiments in secret, outside of our authorized study,” he grumbled bitterly as he waved an assistant carrying a large rod with a broad, flat head, forward.

Electricity arched over it, and Talech threw back his head and roared as the electric pulse drove through him, disabling his systems.

A sweet scent rolled over him as he came to. Talech breathed it in deeply and shivered at the effect of it. Delectable. He could spend hours enjoying the perfume of some unknown

flower mingled with a feminine musk, spice, and a hint of something akin to the waxy dew produced by vansiks. It was muted, as if coming through shared airducts rather than a presence directly in the room with him. The scent poured through his veins like a drug, and his civix swelled and twitched so suddenly within his sheath, his eyes snapped open in surprise. He sucked in another eager breath and lifted his head, fully aware of the pain of his large body where it hung on the mounting station. There was a compatible female nearby—and she was seeing him like this.

Anger churned in his stomach at his sudden vulnerability as something clicked overhead and a husky, feminine voice fell on his ears.

“Dr. Phillips, it appears the subject is conscious. Please commence,” she ordered just before the intercom system clicked off.

The male nodded and moved forward, carrying a long syringe. “Experiment 1564, reproductive analysis. We will be withdrawing a semen sample to see if recent experiments have caused any reproductive side effects, and then we will be administering an experimental injection designed to boost sperm count and another to chemically trigger erection. The subject’s neurological and biological responses to various chemicals are similar to our own, and we’ve been greenlit to test both medicines before human trials begin. Although the subject appears to be a mature male, he has no outward genitalia present. If the latter is successful, we should have full extrusion.”

Talech's eyes closed, and he groaned inwardly as he felt the sharp prick of the needles being pressed into his sheath. The first lingered for a time before it was removed harmlessly, but the second pumped something within him that caused his civix to burn. It did nothing more than that for several heartbeats, but then it began to swell and twist violently, bringing with it the pleasure-pain of his civix breaching his sheath. He snarled with anger and in shame that he was breeching without preparation to mate. At least one of the numerous experiments had disabled the parts of his neural network that would have reported the incident to the council. He would suffer no further repercussions from the council for this transgression being committed against him.

"Fascinating," Dr. Phillips muttered. "I'm going to do a full examination while I have him. Our scans can only give so much information. AI set to record. I'm proceeding."

Something gripped and tightened around his civix like a band. Talech's gaze turned down to the scientist's hand gripping him in shock, and a loud hiss rattled from him when Dr. Phillip's opposite hand probed his sheath, dipping down inside of it and pressing brutally against his reproductive sacks as he began to make his observations aloud regarding the shape and placement of his reproductive system.

"Checking response to stimulation—"

A throat cleared overhead, interrupting him. "I don't think all of that will be necessary, Dr. Phillips," the female chided. "Move on, please."

“Of course, Dr. Ryder,” the male replied sourly as he released Talech’s civix and turned to another table while his breeding member retracted.

Several more tests were carried out that were more in line with the usual. He considered himself fortunate that they were not harvesting organ samples again. By the end of it all, Talech was wracked with pain, but his thoughts focused on one thing.

“The female... please. Let me see the female.”

“Did he just say something?” the voice overhead demanded.

Dr. Phillips regarded him with interest. “Yes, although we have no idea what. Our attempts to learn his language have been a failure, though he seems to understand us. Frankly, I’m surprised he spoke at all as this is the first time he’s attempted to communicate in months.”

Talech’s eyes slid shut, his resentment churning within him as he was wheeled to his prison and left there. The clamps from his mount only released him once he was alone within the chamber once more. An angry growl ripped through him as he stalked futilely around the room. His pacing was uninterrupted, his entire being demanding to find the female. His body demanded that he breed, but he wasn’t a complete beast. He wanted more than that from his mate. The rules of Argurumal would have him court her and win her favor so she would initiate breeding, but he wasn’t in Argurumal, and his awakened instinct demanded nothing short of claiming her. But she never came, and his bellowed demands went ignored.

With nightfall, Talech found himself incapacitated and the darker experiments began once again. So it went every night, and he endured the torture even as his anger turned to hatred for every passing day he was kept apart from her. Then, finally, one day she came, and it was the sweetest gift. She sat for hours in a safely sectioned-off partition of his cage and talked to him. Although he couldn't converse with her as he would have liked, he enjoyed the cadence of her voice as she talked nonsensically to him as if he were a violent animal to be tamed. As a male eager to exert his claim, he was insulted but also too intrigued to hold any grudge. When she began to talk about herself, he listened intently to every detail, wanting to know more about her and how he might go about what limited courtship he would be capable of.

Although her voice brought a certain peace to his mind, he found himself aroused continuously by her scent and beauty. She was small and dainty, with delicate features even for what he'd observed among her species, although also possessing abundant curves. The pelt on her head was pinned in a thick coil to the top of her head, but he was certain that, unpinned, it was long and, judging by the escaped strands, likely had curls to its warm brown and golden length. Her lips were plush and pink, and his fingers itched to remove her clothing to discover for himself what other color variation she possessed. But it was the intelligence and disarming compassion in her dark blue eyes that stole the last of his resistance completely.

He wanted Dr. Ryder. His need to claim her grew the longer he was in her company, and it even drew a few reluctant attempts

to communicate from him in his longing to express his desire, admiration, and need for her. He knew from past attempts it was useless, but for her he would try again even though he was certain that he would not see her again afterward, the thought of which filled him with an impotent fury.

Resolve filled his blood when he watched her walk out of his cage and mingled there with his hatred until he lashed out at his captors when they unleashed him for one of their late-night experiments. With the security disabled, he was determined to get through and destroy all of them to get to his mate. Dr. Phillips was the first to die as Talech ripped through his bowels. Then his assistants. Blood slicked the walls as the scientists and guards poured into the room and attempted to restrain him. It was only by a slight miscalculation that he found himself forced back into a stasis pod and bellowing his fury as a dying scientist slammed it closed over him and initiated stasis.

“Sleep well, bastard,” the male hissed, the blood on his hand smearing the pod when he finally fell from its side.

Talech’s final thoughts were in fugue, his need to destroy his captors and to claim his female roaring relentlessly through them until the icy cold took hold and pulled all senses from him.

Prologue Two

Sixty-five years later...

Talech glared at the ship, his mandibles clattering aggressively as it slowly lifted from the sand. He stood defiantly, legs braced wide as the metal insectoid limbs from his spine—spinal limbs—unfolded fully, their claws rising in silent threat toward the ship. His body was covered in wounds, but a sense of triumph filled him as he watched his rival and the other female depart. Part of him, the small piece that still clung to reason, queried whether he should be disturbed that he was being left behind on the same godsforsaken planet on which he had crashed, but instinct won out, and he roared his triumph to the skies.

It was that same instinct that, when he calmed, sent a bolt of relief through him that he was finally alone with his mate, without any other males who might attempt to take her away from him. He had a fragmented memory of being forced into stasis, but that memory had been nearly blotted out with rage and an overriding desire to get to his female. Those same

feelings were the ones with which he had awoken, his mind raging to get free so he could find and protect her.

He didn't know how long he'd been trapped there before the strangers freed him, but he now had everything he wanted... her.

Beverly, his mind hissed, supplying the name through the turmoil rioting through him. He latched onto it and purred happily. *Beverly*. His *Beverly*. His female. And soon, his mate. It was only a matter of time. Now that they were alone, he could win her trust and affection. They would have serenity while they began to communicate again. She would enjoy it. She seemed to take pleasure talking to him before. Furthermore, he was certain he could prove himself a worthy mate without the distraction of a rival.

Warmth curled through him at the thought of his female, and Talech purred softly with the rapid vibration of his mandibles. Although he knew technically she was not his mate yet, this was only a minor setback. She was not *Argurma*.

Argurma was what he was and what the stranger had been—he processed that much. She was soft and vulnerable. He was certain she would value his protection even more than a female of his own species. Nor was this his home. He blinked with a flood of awareness from his processors that sent a quiet warning through him. It reminded him that males who attempted to force a claim upon a female were exterminated and removed from the gene pool. Even in his current state, his

mind cast in shadows of instinct and need, and his memory fragmented, he processed that.

He processed that there, his impulse would be enough to see him detained if his mating drive triggered the primal output sensors in his internal systems. He cautiously tried to tap into his mainframe to heed some internal warning—that somehow his systems were being tracked—but found nothing. Had it been destroyed? He did not recall, and the thought sent a current of apprehension through him. It was followed shortly by a shocking rise of relief. If he could not access them, then he was certain he was safe. They could do nothing now. They had no power over him.

His vibrissae rattled and twisted around him in a reflection of his mood. He was certain he at least proved his ability to protect. The creature had not been easy to kill, and the warrior had seemed determined to take her despite already being mated. He protected his female from both threats, and Talech hissed softly in triumph before spinning toward his female with an eager click of his mandibles. He fell silent upon his approach, surprise registering through the murk of his thoughts as he noted that she was lying sprawled out on the sand exactly where he left her.

That surprise, quickly shifted to concern as he calculated her position and noted she was not only lying there but had not moved at all. He gave a staccato series of clicks and his vibrissae rattled with worry as he strode past the bloody remains of the monster that had attacked her. His gaze scanned her inert form as he came within range, and his optical sensors

began to take rudimentary lifeform readings. He had not processed that she had sustained any life-endangering injury from her attack, but it was possible that her species was even more delicate than he calculated. He grimaced as he acknowledged that the males he had killed had been easy to dispatch. That they had managed to trap him at all within the stasis unit, much less capture him, spoke more of their ingenuity and determination as a species than any particular speed or strength.

A pained moan ripped from his chest as Talech dropped to his knees, his spinal limbs folding back to scrape in the sand on either side of him. Although his sensors picked up her weak pulse, her body was covered in blood. He ignored the slashes from the creature's claws, his gaze going to the deep puncture in her back he had not seen before. He had felt nothing but panic and frenzy when he watched the creature attack her. Now he wanted to kill it all over again as he saw the true extent of the injuries done. Grief racked his large frame as he bent down and pulled her limp body into his arms and bellowed out his agony though there was none now to hear. None to offer help. His triumph turned to dust as his sorrow consumed him. Within that sorrow, his buried mind was somehow still operating and presented him with a solution—one from which he recoiled.

The lab.

Every part of him protested at the idea of returning, his instincts connecting the white halls with pain, but his eyes fell on his female's blood-splattered face and one of his spinal

limbs came forward and brushed a long claw gently along her cheek.

For her he would.

Holding Dr. Beverly Ryder's body close to his, Talech stood, her name humming through his systems with his resolve as he turned back to the forest. He was not a medic, but he would see to her repairs. He would care for his mate.



Beverly groaned loudly, and the sound echoed strangely around her. That was odd. Her last memory was of the beach and sand and the horrible pain that had consumed her when E302 attacked. The memory of being stabbed by something followed by the sharp rake of its claws and its fetid breath surrounding her was one that she would take to her grave.

But she wasn't there yet. Somehow, she was still alive. And in excruciating agony. She was sure that her skin felt feverish—perhaps due to an infection setting in. She would need antibiotics soon.

She was also certain that, aside from the gashes carved into her body, half her body would soon be covered in a massive bruise. Pain pulsed all through her side and back as she moved, and recognized the familiar pull of stitches.

Someone had sewn her up. How? Unless Kaylar and Meg ignored her and stayed behind to care for her. If they did, she was going to cuss them out for stupidly risking themselves

when she'd told them not to. She wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to punch them or kiss them for saving her and subjecting her to her current misery.

Blinking the grit out of her eyes, Beverly peered at the domed light above her, becoming aware of the smell of antiseptic spray. Was she in the lab or the adjacent medical station?

Her gaze shifted to the side and slid along a pale green wall before coming to rest on the bed railing directly parallel with her face. A soft sigh escaped her. She was in medical. Perfect. That meant everything she needed was nearby.

“Meg? Kaylar?” she croaked, and promptly winced at the dry ache in her throat.

Her words were greeted by the sound of someone shifting and standing at her other side, and Beverly turned her head toward one of her saviors with relief as a familiar rattling sound filled the room. She didn't recall Kaylar being so expressive except when he was truly pissed off, but she was glad to hear it.

“Kaylar, thank the gods. Where's Me—” Her words died on her lips and her eyes rounded with horror at the sight of the large male moving toward her bed.

Spidery legs unfolded around him and his mandibles clicked as the pale blue glow of his eyes burned into her. He appeared every inch a looming monster closing in to devour her. His lips parted, revealing his sharp teeth as a single word hissed from him.

“Mine.”

One

Zoreth Monushava Shangla's mission was a simple one. Arrive at the specified coordinates on Earth, retrieve Kaylar, and return to their clan fleet. He recalled stepping out from his ship, walking across the sand, making his way to the edge of a forest... and nothing.

Odd.

Blinking, he squinted at the bright sunlight cutting through the trees above him. He did not know what hit him, but some of his systems were still malfunctioning. Frowning, he attempted to establish contact with Veral and failed. He groaned and sat up, his hand going to his spinning head. It would take his microsystems a while to repair whatever damage he suffered. In the meantime, he could not process what exactly had happened to him. The island seemed pleasant enough, but then —

A shadow fell over him and he froze, his sensors sending a rush of information through him that made his scales prickle. Swinging around, he rolled to his feet, keeping his body

crouched low to the ground, only to see a monstrous creature looming over him, mandibles spread wide as its skeletal metallic limbs unfolded aggressively. Zoreth's vibrissae rose in response. Whoever this was, it was not Kaylar or anyone else from the clan. The modified Argurma registered as a threat across his systems as Zoreth prepared to defend himself and terminate the male if necessary.

If even possible, Zoreth recognized with a grimace. To his hasty calculations, the odds were not in his favor. The male would know that as well, and he could see that knowledge in the dangerous gaze staring down at him. Those eyes unnerved him, as much as he detested to acknowledge it. There was something feral within that gaze—as if all the advances that had refined Argurma civilization had been stripped away and then he had been given six deadly weapons attached to his spine. The long metal limbs arched, their metal claws poised over him. But the attack never came. Instead, the male vibrated with hostility... and warning.

“Mine!” he snarled.

“Oh, for fuck's sake, I keep telling you I'm not yours. And don't go hitting him again,” an infuriated female voice belted out as a small, pleasantly rounded figure pushed by the monstrous Argurma.

Zoreth dragged in a deep breath, unable to help himself as her tantalizing pheromones hit the receptors on the inside of his mandibles. Shock rolled through his system at the awareness of the one thing he had lost hope of finding—standing in front

of him was a compatible female. Just breathing in her pheromones brought a certain pleasure that drew him and inspired a longing within him in ways he had never calculated.

He now processed how it was that Veral, the first among their kind to find a human mate, had been lured by his instincts into keeping the human close and caring for her until the mating bond formed. Mating an obviously weaker, dependent species had seemed illogical, and he had privately pitied the male—until now. There was something so decadent about this female’s scent and flavor on his receptors, it was like sinking into the bliss of a sweet cup of yanili brew. A soft purr stirred from him as his mandibles instinctively vibrated for her, drawing a menacing growl from the male hovering above him. The female, however, made a sound of disgust as she moved away from them both.

“Oh, gods, not you too!”

Zoreth blinked as he registered surprise and then understanding as he became fully aware of what the other male’s words meant. His gaze cut toward the other Argurma, and he narrowed his eyes on him. He dared to make a mating claim? Such things were not permissible. On Argurumal, compatibility did not guarantee a mate. The choice belonged to the female. Unlike their distant ancestors, ruled by aggressive, primitive males staking their claim, Argurma society was ruled by mothers and queens. Males could refuse a female’s desire to mate, but otherwise had little power except to show his ability to protect and provide. Laws protected the female’s rights and were upheld by males of the clan. No clan

member would protest if he terminated this male if the female asked him to. He just needed her permission recorded—or proof of immediate danger and a forced mating. Though there were no signs of either.

All the male's potential for violence was aimed directly at Zoreth alone as he hissed and bared his teeth. The female huffed, promptly silencing the male who glanced over at her in confusion. With an unhappy grumble, he drew back, though his eyes never left Zoreth.

Despite his hostility, Zoreth felt the tension ease from him. The male's retreat at her silent command indicated that the broken Argurma was yielding entirely to her whim. Despite exhibiting signs of primal Argurma claiming behavior, he had instinctively begun courting. As such, Zoreth could not justify termination, but it also meant he was able to court the female, despite how much it infuriated the other male.

“A word of warning,” the female offered with a thin smile, “I wouldn't push Talech here too far. He *likes* me and is *very* protective of me. He won't be happy if you try something.”

Try something? Ah, she refers to forced mating.

Zoreth inclined his head to her respectfully. “I have no intention of inflicting harm.”

Her lips quirked, but he could clearly see the disbelief in her expression. “Right. As you can see, you aren't my first Argurma, buddy. I know what a purr means, and while that worked out for the last girl, and I'm sure Meg and Kaylar are

very happy, I'm not so sure I want to hitch my wagon to either of you.”

Kaylar? His vibrissae fanned out with interest. He did not entirely understand her words though inferred her meaning well enough. He was not concerned. He would prove himself, and she would not have to worry about the other male—Talech—because he was the only male who made a suitable mate. It would not be a matter of him “too.” Argurmas did not mate in groups. He would be the only one. But first, he would retrieve Kaylar and get off this backwater planet.

“Where is my cousin?”

She paused and gave him an amused look. “Your cousin, huh? Afraid you're a bit late. They left weeks ago thanks to Talech driving them away like a possessive monster.” She gave the male an annoyed but unmistakably fond look that made Zoreth's vibrissae rise in an instinctive territorial display that had the other male chuffing in brutal mockery as the long limbs fused to his spine wavered in the air with an unquestioning threat. “Don't ask me how long exactly,” she continued. “There's no point in keeping track of time when you aren't going anywhere.”

She paused and gave him a shrewd look. “If you are here for Kaylar, I assume that means you have a ship in working order?”

Zoreth cut Talech a smug look before inclining his head to the female. “If Kaylar left—with his mate I presume—” he paused and gave her a questioning look to which she nodded in the

affirmative, “then there is nothing else keeping me here. My ship is ready to depart.”

“Excellent!” A smile split her face, warming him until she patted the other male’s arm. “Hear that, Talech? We’re getting out of here.”

Zoreth wanted to object, but he calculated it would do no good in swaying her. Talech knew it too because the male chuffed again, this time with genuine amusement at his predicament. Zoreth had no choice but to bring his rival.

An impatient feminine sigh pulled him from his thoughts, and his gaze turned toward the female now also regarding him with amusement. “We’re just waiting on you, unless you need to lie down a little longer. As you can see, we don’t exactly have to pack.”

He shook his head. “I am ready to proceed.”

Casting a suspicious glance to the monstrosity that had once been an Argurma, Zoreth solidified his resolve as he pushed himself to his feet. He would follow the female, win her from the creature, and send out a comm to locate Kaylar all at the same time. And he would accomplish it in mere zecs.

Zoreth smiled to himself as he watched her turn away and strike out for the beach. This was turning out to be a most fortuitous assignment. He was eager to boast about it to his clan upon his returning with his mate and word of his cousin-kin.

“Zoreth Monushava Shangla requests your name, female,” he called after her.

“Beverly Ryder,” she grumbled, ducking between the trees.

His smile widened but quickly fell as the other male pushed by him with a snarl as he followed behind her.

“Mine,” Talech hissed again, the long, pointed limbs unfolding aggressively from his back as he passed.

Zoreth smirked and trailed after the pair. The male would find that was still to be determined. The game was active, and Zoreth would make sure he came out the victor in this contest. Soon they would be off the planet, and he would have nothing but time to woo Beverly. The monster would have nothing to offer her out there.

He did enjoy winning.

Two

Talech followed the male into the ship, craning his head to peer at it as his mandibles clicked. His vibrissae remained alert, twisting erratically with threatening hisses from the rattles at the end, but the other male—Zoreth—did not seem to pay them any mind, although Beverly cast him uncertain looks. He tried to reassure her with soft purrs, but it was difficult when his systems were entirely focused on protecting her from any potential threat or attack.

This was not his ship, *Vanesga*—although much of his memory was offline and disconnected from his current existence, he felt a small amount of relief when the name whispered from the dark depths of his memory. He cared little about the small details of kin and clan, but he understood having access to what he knew would help him more effectively protect and care for Beverly. Because he understood the difference between *Vanesga* and this ship, he knew to be wary and processed that he could not be certain of this vessel's operation or programming.

What if the idiot male tried to trick them and put Talech back in stasis? He did not believe the male would kill him. It teased the depths of his memory that he would not, or could not, but the exact reasoning eluded him. But he expected the male would attempt to remove him as a rival so he could win Beverly's favor.

Talech gnashed his mandibles, the angry clatter finally drawing Zoreth's gaze to him. The male tensed warily, and Talech could not resist giving a small, smug smile. The warrior was uncomfortable with his presence. He could not scent or taste it along his mandibles—his rival had better control over himself than that—but it was betrayed in the tiniest muscular movements as Zoreth regarded him.

"This way," Zoreth hissed. "*Garanga* is a standard model designed for traveling through deep space. The layout should be similar to the explorer vessel you operated."

An explorer? Was that what he was? Talech hummed to himself as he considered it and probed the seething mess of his mind. As usual, it did not yield any result, but it was probable. There was a vague sense he had traveled far. Constantly engaged on a wearying trek. And the endless march of loneliness.

A shiver ran through him as the yawning bleakness within the depths of his mind rushed through his processors. Alone was pain. Alone and strapped to a table. Alone and left broken and wounded in a small room. The terrible memories crowded his head until he shoved them back with a snarl.

Zoreth dropped his hand to his blaster, and Talech shook his head, vibrissae snapping as he instinctively stepped back and closer to the warm comfort of his female. His Beverly had become familiar with the monster and immediately reached for him, her hands coming to rest on the spurs of his jaw. She dragged his head down so he was forced to crouch—eagerly so—as she hummed comfortingly to him and ran her hands along the bony structure of his jaw, cheekbone, and brow as she had the first time he had awoken from a night terror.

“You don’t need that,” Beverly snapped. “Talech is in pain, you dick. Something in here, or something you said or did, set him off. His memory is a mess, so he doesn’t even know why he’s suffering the way he is. You don’t need to make it worse.”

Talech breathed her in as her voice dropped to whisper to him, reminding him to focus on his breathing. He did as he instructed, drawing her further into his system’s memory with every breath, reminding himself he was not alone now. He had Beverly. Zoreth would not trick him or separate him from her. He would not be alone again.

A disgruntled look crossed Zoreth’s face, but he relented with a sigh, dropping his hand from his weapon as he spun away. “It may be kinder to leave him,” he growled as he stalked down the corridor, expecting them to follow. He narrowed his eyes as he glanced back. “We cannot calculate the extent of the male’s damage or if he will even be able to adapt to the mental stress of being confined within a ship in space.”

Talech growled softly, but Beverly's sharp voice rose above it. "We are not leaving him. Yes, he needs help, but I won't abandon him here."

"Noted," Zoreth hissed, his displeasure evident in his bearing as he stormed down the corridor, taking them to the inner ship.

Crew cabins were there. The memory arose out of nowhere and slipped away just as fast, but Talech's tension eased a little from the familiarity some part of him recognized. It was enough that, when Zoreth suddenly stepped into a room, Talech knew they were entering a residential cabin. A place that promised rest. Exhaustion crawled through him. It had been difficult to rest on the island. Although there were no other predators like the creature he had killed, he was always on alert. It was that awareness, and the extra sensors that seemed new and overwhelming as they brought everything into such focus it nearly crippled his mind before he learned to control it, that had alerted him to Zoreth's arrival on the island.

Now he just looked forward to sleeping curled around his female.

His eyes impatiently tracked Zoreth as he demonstrated the operation of everything in the room. These things were also familiar, but Talech could not swear he would have recalled them before being shown so he did not complain, especially when Beverly was being so attentive to the instruction. Information was power, and he processed that she understood this as well and was quickly filing away everything she needed to know for her own safety and ability to live on the ship. He

could have told her he would help her and do what she required, just as he had on the beach, but he kept silent so she could learn what she wished to. Although he wanted the male out of the quarters so they could get some much-needed rest.

“That should be sufficient information,” Zoreth observed as he finally turned toward the door. “Beverly, come with me. I will key you into your quarters. Talech will remain here.”

Talech straightened with a snap, a loud hiss reverberating from his chest as he spun on the male and stepped protectively in front of his female. It was as he suspected! A trick! His spinal limbs and mandibles spread wide, the latter preparing to envenomate the male should he get any closer. He could feel the small, soft fingers of his mate on his forearm. It was only for her sake that he refrained from attacking. Instead, he swept her into his arms and closed his spinal limbs around her completely so she was shielded behind their metal cage. Although her words were lost beneath the fugue of his rage, he was distantly aware of her voice’s calming tone as she ran her hands along his chest and up to the dominating spines along his shoulders before trailing along his arms in gentle, repetitive sweeping motions.

Talech focused on her alone as he had done so many times when he had been lost in disorientation, fear, or rage. His sensors were reassured by the feel of her, the soft brush of her breath, fingertips, and palms. Her words grew distinct again and he purred as he curled around her, allowing them to wash over him.

She was his. The other male could not take her from him.

“Hey, big guy, it’s okay. I’m here, Talech. We’ll stay together,” she murmured over and over again until she felt him relax. She gave him a comforting pat before turning to address Zoreth who stood warily by the door. “You’re a fucking idiot,” she snapped. “What part of our current scenario made you think he would just let you separate us without warning? You saw for yourself how much he depends on having me nearby.”

Talech could hear Zoreth’s teeth grinding. He was certain that level of sensory input was unnatural and pushed it back from the forefront of his awareness as he had so many others his new additions had “gifted” him with.

“You are not mated,” the male protested. “Unmated females are always provided their own quarters. To allow you to remain here with him—”

“Is exactly how we’ve been living for months before you came,” Beverly finished.

Talech watched his rival stiffen with displeasure.

“He is not the only male here with an interest in courting you,” Zoreth bit out.

Talech could not fault him for that reasoning. Talech would have the preferential place at Beverly’s side, which would give him an unfair advantage. Did he care? Something deep within the recesses of his memory faintly whispered he should care and respect it. Unfortunately, the Talech of the now-time was not of any mind to do so.

Beverly let out a disgusted sound. “So what would be fair? Unless you have an extra-large bed that we can all cram into, I don’t know what to tell you.” She gestured to the bed Zoreth had pulled out earlier. “As huge as that is for a human, I’m pretty sure I don’t want to be flattened by two huge aliens who will both barely fit on one.”

Zoreth growled and Talech stiffened, his vibrissae whipping as the male stalked toward them... and right past to where the bed was mounted.

“*Garanga*, release the moorings on the bed in cabin three,” he snapped at the ship’s AI as he grabbed hold of the side.

The locks on the bed’s mounting came undone with a hiss, and Zoreth turned it as he shot Talech an annoyed look.

“Make yourself useful and assist me,” he growled.

Bemused, Talech slowly disengaged himself from his mate and cautiously approached. He did not like the idea of sharing a bed or cabin with Zoreth either, but Beverly suggested it and he would do as she wished. Grumbling quietly, Talech went to the bed and gently nudged the other male out of the way. Spreading his spinal limbs wide to support the weight, he hefted the bed up and glowered at Zoreth, who peered at him in surprise.

“Where do I put this?” he growled, and his gaze followed Zoreth as he quickly headed back toward the door and out to the primary cabin.

He might have growled the entire way if his female had not offered him a smile before she followed Zoreth into a cabin that was over twice the size of the crew cabins. There would not be a lot of excess room, but both beds and all three occupants would fit.

It only took a zec to secure the two beds together and Zoreth was heading out again. He cast a frustrated look to the chair and gestured to it.

“There is still only one flight chair and no additional room for a second. Someone will have to be secured in another area.”

“No,” Talech rebutted as he snatched Beverly up in his arms and dropped on the chair. The automated straps secured around them, pressing his mate firmly against his lap and torso. He grinned triumphantly at Zoreth. “We fit.”

The male did not reply other than to faintly tip his head in acknowledgment before storming out of the room. “We depart in ten,” he barked as the door slid shut behind him.

Talech purred as he curled his spinal limbs around his mate, and she laughed softly.

“You really should stop antagonizing him. I’ve told you before, I’m not yours. I can’t be your mate. It wouldn’t be right, all things considered,” she admonished him.

He did not understand, but they had this conversation many times and he never comprehended why her position at the lab hindered their mating. She was his light in the darkness of his mind and the most terrible memories that haunted him at night.

She had been a good companion on the island. Fun, patient, and understanding. She processed his needs just as he processed hers, even when she did not give voice to them.

“I have to admit this isn’t uncomfortable though,” she sighed as she settled more fully against him.

Talech hummed in agreement as he stroked her arms and sides. “Rest,” he purred as he folded himself around her, sinking into her comfort even as *Garanga’s* engines roared and the ship vibrated with impending takeoff.

Three

Beverly couldn't believe Zoreth tried to leave Talech in one room and put Beverly in her own room across the hall. If she'd known he was planning that, she could have warned him it wouldn't work and saved them all the headache and Talech additional trauma. He was infuriating at times with his tendency to hover, but she understood he needed her even though she'd barely been able to pee in peace without him nearby. Talech had been... displeased... at being separated from her.

Beverly grimaced. Displeased was an understatement. Especially when Zoreth suggested leaving him. How could she explain that she was just as much of a monster as Talech, despite outward appearances? She was responsible for him. Even though the majority of what was done to him happened before her time or without her knowledge, she still felt the weight of that responsibility. It only grew when he patiently and tenderly cared for her wounds and the sickness that followed.

The takeoff from Earth was nothing like Beverly imagined it would be, and not just because she'd spent it strapped to a big alien. Her dreams of experiencing life among aliens, off world, perhaps on one the secret colonies she'd heard about, didn't start with being confined to a room without windows during her only departure from Earth's atmosphere.

She chuckled quietly to herself as she cast a covert glance at the two males seated on either side of her. It was quite the turnaround from her earlier experience of trying to seduce an alien male—badly—for a one-way ticket off planet. Despite being understandably left for dead, she'd somehow managed to effortlessly accomplish her goal and was now the one being pursued.

It offered a new perspective and appreciation for the mating dynamic she hadn't been privy to before. Mating was clearly a very serious business for their species, one she'd come to learn was cherished because of how much difficulty Argurmas had finding compatible mates. Zoreth was happy to spell it out for her during their first meal, clearly suggesting she should jump for joy because she now had “options.”

Except she hadn't just fallen off the turnip truck. She'd always had options. She didn't have to accept any male who wanted her for his mate. If she did, she'd have been mated long before Zoreth had arrived. If it weren't for her guilt, she'd have given in long ago too. She found something alluring about Talech since the first time she met him. Unfortunately, she also felt a burgeoning attraction to Zoreth despite him being a bit of a dick.

She just wasn't sure what to think of her admirers or how she could choose between them since that's clearly what they were looking for.

Zoreth, from what she'd seen in their brief time together, was cocky and self-assured beyond the point of merely being confident. His features were finer than both Kaylar and Talech's. She wondered if he might be considered a "pretty boy" among the Argurmas. He reminded her of a few attractive colleagues she'd had who pretty much expected women to throw their panties at them if they so much as smiled at them. At least Zoreth seemed to put some effort into being charming instead of relying only on physical appeal. He was also genuinely helpful and considerate. At first she'd thought that was also just to get into her pants, until she'd seen him demonstrate it with Talech when he seemed confused on how to operate something on the ship.

That he clearly thought himself above Talech in some way rankled, however.

Sure, Talech looked different. He was covered in scars and had obvious prosthetics and augmentations, but the things that made the alien appear more monstrous made him more alluring to her. Especially when his arms and metal limbs surrounded her, holding her tightly to him so that she could feel every groove of his muscles and the thick bulge of a very inhuman package. At times he practically pinned her to him, and it took remarkable self-control not to shiver with pleasure. Of course, the reminder of her part in what he suffered always rose up from her subconscious to kill the mood.

She'd seen firsthand the toll those changes took on him. Not to mention the difficulties he had to overcome to master himself. He'd struggled with being overwhelmed with sensory information, as well as becoming accustomed to his extra limbs so they worked as a true extension of his body. Those things aside, she didn't see much difference between the males... or not enough. If she were honest, considering the procedures and testing done to him, she was surprised Talech still possessed both eyes, all his internal organs, and all his original She still had nightmares of watching him writhe on the floor in agony through the monitors when he had been dosed with a live strain of a horrific new virus.

Despite all that, he was sweet, gentle, and doting. Not at all what she'd expect from an alien who looked like a monstrous version of his species, one who was clearly highly traumatized. But from the first moment she'd awoken in pain, he'd been there, purring and caring for her. He didn't speak much, but his behavior and what he did always spoke volumes to her.

His hostility toward Zoreth had abated over the last couple of days. Although they still hissed at each other as she was sandwiched between them in bed at night, it had lost its vehement edge. She could even detect a subtle teasing in Talech's demonstrations that made her fight the urge to smile at his antics. As pleased as she was to see him relaxing around Zoreth, she didn't want to encourage antagonizing behavior, even if Zoreth was taking it more in stride now.

That only left her one problem—traveling in space was downright boring. She'd been so busy fantasizing about a fast-paced life in a space station somewhere or in an alien city when she'd met Kaylar and Meg that she hadn't even considered how boring space travel could be. The fascination with the unending landscape of stars wore off pretty damn fast when the view seldom changed.

Beverly sighed, and predictably, both males looked toward her. They were both so eager to prove themselves and “provide” for her that, though sweet, it had begun to make her feel self-conscious. She couldn't even shift in her chair without them looking for an opportunity to fetch a cushion or anything else she might need. Who would have thought being pampered to such a degree would become exhausting?

She gave them both a smile to reassure them nothing was wrong and she didn't need anything before addressing Zoreth.

“We've been traveling nonstop for a while now. How long before we need to refuel or resupply?”

Zoreth glanced away, his eyes brightening in a way that told her he was communicating with *Garanga's* systems. Finally, he blinked and looked over at her again. “We have about two spans of supplies remaining, and the power cells will last double that time. We will refuel the cells when we resupply.”

Two more weeks stuck on a small ship with all this attentiveness? Beverly swallowed back a groan. Wherever they were heading had to be really out of the way if it was

going to take that long just to stop and resupply. “Sounds... good. Where are we heading anyway?”

“We are meeting with the clan fleet. Last I heard, they requisitioned a major starship to make it into a clan ship,” he muttered as he suddenly frowned and keyed something into the station at his elbow.

Beverly chuckled at the way he curled his lip. A ship large enough to fit an entire clan was hard to imagine.

“Just how big is this ship?”

Zoreth lifted his head and grinned. “Large enough to hold several of your islands within its belly. Starships are meant to hold crews of several hundred and even more warriors. It has living facilities, a public meeting area, and a cantina. Anything you might need for your daily life and small pleasures is easily provided.”

Beverly whistled softly to herself. Now that sounded more like it! At her side, Talech clicked his mandibles enthusiastically and she grinned over at him in agreement.

“And about how long until we get there?”

Zoreth grimaced. “That is hard to say. I am still attempting to establish communication with the starship. Its last coordinates were a few standard lunars out from our present location.”

Beverly gaped at him. Months?

“Well, fuck,” she sighed.

Four

Zoreth deeply disliked delivering bad news. He disliked reporting it to Veral, the current head of their clan and disliked it even more when it came to the female he already had begun to consider his mate. That didn't matter when the information had to be shared so they could prepare to traverse a particularly dangerous asteroid belt in order to avoid detection. by an Argurma fleet traveling through that part of the sector.

He had already informed Talech who, though never far from Beverly's side, had been slowly venturing through the ship on his own.

The male was far more damaged than his outward appearance suggested. Although the outward changes took time to get accustomed to, Talech still appeared very much Argurma in every way that truly counted. The only significant difference had made itself known the moment they had stepped on board the ship and Zoreth had realized Talech could not tap into *Garanga* at all.

A quick scan in the med unit—which had taken all of Beverly’s considerable charm and reassurance to get the male to submit to—verified the portion of his brain that housed his cybernetic uplinks had been fried irreparably. Even his databases sustained considerable damage.

While Talech was strong, deadly, and possessed a sharp cunning, his condition was permanent. The tissue around the area was traumatized to a degree that the AI calculated a high probability of death if implant removal was attempted.

Zoreth had been conditioned to view malfunctions as inferior. The more significant the malfunction, the greater the risk to the clan. The council could terminate the entire clan as a faulty bloodline. With the damage Talech had undergone, he would have been marked for termination by the council regardless of past service or the reason for his malfunction.

Everything Zoreth had been raised to believe on Argurumal told him that he was better than the male, but he was conflicted. As much as he was conditioned to process pity and contempt for a male in Talech’s position, he envied the freedom it offered. Talech could not access Argurma tech but was wholly as the gods designed without need to disable communication uplink routes from the council or remain vigilant for new ones. He was free from the conditioning of their people and burdens that had seemingly been wiped clean and buried with his memories. If it was not something that Talech could see or kill, then he accepted events with an unwavering calm. He had greeted the news of the asteroid belt

as if it were merely an uncomfortable inconvenience and had said little other than to not frighten Beverly with the data.

He was mildly affronted that Talech believed he needed to be so cautioned. He did not enjoy frightening alien females of smaller, more vulnerable species as other warriors did. That said, Zoreth did not expect she would be frightened. Annoyed perhaps, but she did not appear to be a female who quaked with fear. He especially admired that her, which did not make his duty any more pleasant or easy. No calculation he could come up with offered another solution without taking them considerably out of the way—potentially far afield from any resupply station—and adding many more lunars to their travel.

Although there was a high probability of clearing the belt without issue, it would still be rough and could force them to land and make repairs depending on the damage *Garanga* took. He processed that Beverly was anxious to arrive at the clan ship and wanted to see her happily settled there, so the potential for delays did not please him.

Following Talech's instructions, Zoreth frowned as he stepped into the med unit. Seated at a station in the corner, Beverly intently peered down at a screen in front of her, only looking up at the sound of his footsteps entering the room. She smiled as she tapped the screen in front of her and tugged a small listening device from her ear.

“Zoreth, I figured you would still be on deck plotting our course.”

He grunted because that was a fair assumption. “I was,” he acknowledged as he drew closer. Stopping next to her station, he blinked down at her screen in surprise. “What are you doing?”

Beverly grinned and shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m in the medical field... or I was, at least. I figured there’s a whole lot for me to catch up on given the current situation.”

His gaze fastened on her. “You wish to be a medic?”

“Well, yes,” she laughed softly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “I’ve always loved medicine and research. It’s been years since I’ve done any practical work involving patients, but I’m looking forward to it.” Her lips twisted wryly. “I’ve seen more than enough of a research lab to suit me.”

He nodded, a feeling stirring within his chest that sent little bursts through him. “Our clan has a medic, but we have said before that we need more. Few Argurma aim to be medics when it is more profitable to work in research and cybernetics rather than our bodily needs.” His lips curled in satisfaction as he became increasingly comfortable with the thought. As a medic, she would always be in a position of safety within the clan, and that idea pleased him. “There is a high probability the medic will take you on to study beneath them if you truly wish to proceed with this.”

To his delight, her face lit up, sending a tingling warmth through him, and she nodded. “That would be perfect! I’ve been spending time here every day studying medical texts and digital demonstrations, and squeezing in language lessons

since I'm dependent on having the text read aloud and translated for me, but it's slow going. Not that I can say I've been bored once. Talech's been keeping me company. He still has an aversion to being around medical equipment, but pointedly ignores it back here and never seems to mind the hours I spend working. But an apprenticeship would be invaluable."

Zoreth inclined his head, disliking the idea of Talech entertaining and distracting Beverly while he worked. Talech was qualified for little else in his current condition. He could not even go over the system alerts and reduce Zoreth's workload. It was illogical to be resentful, yet he seethed despite his gratitude over Beverly having company. It was a frustrating conflict. At least Talech found a useful niche on the ship. It was a small task, meaningless to some, but one Zoreth would give anything to exchange places with his own.

"I am pleased to hear this," he rasped.

"Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

He suddenly stiffened, recalling his purpose, and shook his head in the negative. "It is not. I wished to inform you that we are coming upon an asteroid field."

She paled, a look of apprehension crossing her face. "Must we go through it?"

"If we wish to avoid the Argurma warship in this sector without losing lunars of travel time, the asteroid belt provides the best option."

Beverly expelled a long breath and gave him a grim smile. “Well, damn. I guess the asteroid belt it is. Just how rocky is this going to get... and when are we due to hit it?”

The ship suddenly jerked and vibrated violently, making Beverly shriek and grab for the console in front of her as Zoreth widened his stance and braced his feet against the turbulence.

“It appears we have arrived.”

“What? Already?” she yelled, jumping to her feet just as Talech barreled through the door. He nearly collided with Zoreth in his haste to scoop Beverly up and rushing back out the door. At least she would be safe with Talech cocooning her as the ship was hit by asteroids too small and fast to avoid.

“It seems I miscalculated,” Zoreth rumbled as he ran toward the flight deck.

Five

Beverly shrieked as she clung to Talech's bulky frame, grateful for the metal limbs caging her in as he raced to the safety of their quarters. Every jolt of the ship made him sway, and yet he was sure-footed enough to not break stride. The groan of the metal walls around them was terrifying, as if the ship were dying around them with every boom vibrating its structure. Every shudder and moan made her pulse hammer with terror.

"We're okay. Zoreth said this would happen. It's normal. Just baby asteroids," Beverly whispered to herself.

Talech rumbled and purred with agreement despite the tension in his large body. *Garanga* rocked violently with a loud blast that blew out a port in a burst of sparks as they passed. The ship wove erratically, nearly sending Talech off his feet as he ducked through the door of their room. Hissing quietly, he began to grab every pillow and small cushion he could find and tucked them between Beverly and his arching metal limbs which closed around her. Besides padding the unforgiving

metal, they also pushed her firmly against his chest and she felt the rapid beat of his heart as he dropped into the chair they had occupied during takeoff. His head tipped up, and Beverly followed his gaze to the comm system as a rush of static came through, followed by the clipped voice of *Garanga's* AI.

“Warning. The overdrive systems have sustained critical damage. Fires have been contained in sections two, three, and seven. Sections have been locked down for repair. The engine compartment in section one has sustained critical damage and is locked down for repair. Steering failure is imminent. Massive system-wide failure is imminent. Life support failure is—”

Garanga's AI cut off beneath a sharp growl from Zoreth on the overhead comms. “We are under attack and have sustained critical damage. An Argurma patrol ship was waiting just inside the belt where our sensors failed to pick it up,” he growled with a vehement curse that didn't translate. “We are nearly through the field, but we are going down. Prepare for emergency landing. Talech, secure Beverly *now!*”

With a forceful grunt, Talech initiated the straps of the chair and Beverly felt the familiar slither of the straps as they slid over her thighs, pinning her legs to his as other straps slipped between them, anchoring him fully to the chair. His mandibles flared, and she looked up as he raised an arm to his limbs and flicked a claw at a specific spot in each joint in his spinal limbs before curling his arms once more around her. Her heart stuttered as he met her eyes grimly.

“Beverly is secured,” he growled up to the comm. Drawing her closer, he pressed his brow against hers, his voice a soft whisper in her ears. “I have you, anastha. No harm will come to you. Never.”

Blinking back tears, she nodded and held tightly to him as Zoreth’s voice hissed over them.

“Acknowledged.” He let out a breath that crackled in a hiss of static. “Sensors have located a habitable planet. Coordinates are set. We have just exited the asteroid field and are on course.” The static rose again, briefly drowning out his words before receding just enough to hear him again. “Systems are going down one by one. Prepare for impact. Comms will—”

His voice was lost in another rush of static before the comms cut out completely, leaving them in silence except for the angry groan of *Garanga*.

That terrible sound seemed to last forever, until the groan suddenly became a violent roar of metal vibrating as if something were closing the ship within a tight fist. The temperature which had been cooling, shot up, getting warmer as the ship continued to quake all around them. Beverly could feel the prick of Talech’s claws against her skin as he held her to him, his heart galloping within his chest following the near bursting pace of hers. Her mouth opened and she screamed at the mounting pressure within the room, then the entire ship seemed to blast apart with a terrible shriek of metal and a shock that sent her spiraling into darkness.



The darkness receded slowly. Beverly didn't know how long she had been lost within its hold. It felt like an eternity before she gradually became aware of the scent of hot metal, debris, and a cool musky scent that smelled like soil after a rain. Talech's heart continued to beat reassuringly beneath her cheek, but his arms were slack around her despite the rigid hold of his spinal limbs still caging her in against him. Craning her head up, she peered at the relaxed lines of his face. Blood flowed freely from a cut on his cheek, and she frowned at it. It was likely the reason he was still unconscious.

She turned to take in as much of their surroundings as she could see within her limited view. Their cabin had been completely destroyed. It made her heart ache to see it. Although they had only used it for sleeping, it had still represented safety and a sense of belonging. All that was gone as she noted the crumpled and torn walls. A large gap halfway up one wall revealed a dark purple sky pinkening with the rise of dawn. The light was faint, and the clear sky of the distant horizon rapidly gave way to a blanket of clouds that crept in their direction.

Water dropped on her face, making her angle her head toward the ceiling—a ceiling that was no longer there. Dark clouds sprawled over them. Beverly shivered against Talech as she suddenly understood the implications of what she was seeing. The cabins were in the center of the ship, the most protected spot. *Garanga* had literally been ripped apart. That meant—

“Zoreth?” she croaked. Surely he was there somewhere in the wreckage—perhaps already looking for them. The flight deck would have even better protection... wouldn’t it? It had to. He had to be okay. He was out there, possibly searching for the wreckage of their cabin. When no response came, she screamed his name, feeling her voice shred painfully in her throat. “*Zoreth!*”

Beneath her, Talech hissed and groaned, and Beverly’s eyes snapped over to his face in relief as she reached up and smoothed her hands over his cheeks. Tears of relief streamed down her face as she felt the hesitant touch of his vibrissae against her fingers and the back of her hands.

“Talech?” His eyes fluttered, and she gasped a little with happiness. “That’s it. Wake up for me.”

“Beverly,” he rumbled in a faintly slurred voice, a tiny sigh escaping from between his lips as if relieved she was there too. His arms tightened, crushing her to him as his purr kicked up and vibrated through him.

“Yes, it’s me,” she whispered as she dropped her cheek against his chest. “Thank fuck we survived. I don’t even know how. The ship is destroyed, Talech. Zoreth—” her voice broke, unable to speak of the worry gripping her.

“Must be found,” Talech finished with a decisive click of his mandibles.

She blinked up at him and pressed her lips together as she nodded. The male grunted, lowering his head to run his mandibles through her hair as his vibrissae brushed against her

cheeks. He unwound an arm from around her, clawed fingers reaching for the spidery metal limbs holding her in place. With clever flicks of his fingers, he unlocked each one. They eased from around her as Talech hissed softly, pain racing across his features before they settled into a stoic firmness as he peered around them.

Beverly ran her hands along his shoulders, as close to his spine as she could reach, her lips twisting with concern. “Are you okay?”

His eyes dropped to her, their blue glow warming, and the corner of his mouth hitched. “I am well, anastha. The torn flesh will heal.” His smile fell as he studied their surroundings, mandibles parting as he scented the air. “The wreckage is spread far,” he grumbled as he heaved himself—and Beverly—from the chair.

Held tightly in his arms, Beverly eyed the wreckage of their cabin as Talech’s spinal limbs reached high to the torn edges of the ceiling and the claws split to grasp the metal. They shifted, adjusting like a spider walking on the threads of its web, as he pushed off from the wall and limberly climbed out. He growled unhappily at the light patter of rain on them, but Beverly gaped as she blinked the water from her eyes. Steaming parts of the ship were littered across the remains of what appeared to have once been a city. Several small structures were flattened and had caught fire from the parts of the broken ship falling through the atmosphere, the flames sputtering in the drizzle. She shivered as the wind rose,

causing scraps, loose wire, and metal to slap and clang lightly against the structures to which they were attached.

Everything appeared quiet, as if death had long settled over the city, and she wondered if this was how the cities of Earth looked. How was it she escaped one dying world only to crash on another? Surely the gods hated her.

Worse, the wreckage itself seemed to span for miles. How were they ever going to find Zoreth in all that?

Six

Zoreth growled as pain shocked his systems, and he pushed away the sheet of metal that had fallen over him. It creaked and squealed before falling back with a loud crash. Extricating himself from his seat, Zoreth stood and surveyed his surroundings. The flight deck was whole but dark except dim sunlight pouring through various gashes and cracks along the hull and the large navigation port at the front of the flight deck. The viewscreens hanging from the ceiling were dark, cracked, and their wires were exposed. Everywhere else was a mess of broken panels and control stations. He processed that if there was power at all, the entire flight deck would have been hazardous to navigate through.

He hissed softly. The lack of power sent a wave of concern through his systems and meant one thing: the flight deck had been severed completely from the central core of the ship. Even sustaining damage from the crash, the core would have still sent power through functional systems until the fuel cells died.

He could not calculate much else, including how far he was from the rest of the ship, until he was free of the flight deck. That could not happen soon enough. A frantic urgency, demanding he locate Beverly, was flooding his systems. He did not know her location or condition. Unacceptable. His vibrissae whipped and hissed with the vibration of the small rattles that tipped each one as he stalked toward the back of the flight deck. It would be useless to try and break through the frontal navigation port when it was tempered and made to withstand high impact—such as asteroids and crashing on a planet. The flight deck door was practically buried, but presented the only viable option.

Zoreth pushed and kicked the large pieces of fallen metal, mostly data and air filtration towers, out of his way, cursing them as he made his way through the mess.

There was only one tower that held any interest for him, the one housing *Garanga's* AI module, and Zoreth was able to locate it easily due to the pinprick of glow emanating from it. Lining himself up with the collapsed tower, he grabbed its front panel and wrenched the metal free, exposing the module for the first time since it was installed in his ship. It was of no use to the vessel now, but its ability to utilize his scanning systems and provide information on their surroundings outside of his own rudimentary capabilities would be useful.

The module itself was small enough that it could easily fit within Beverly's little human palm. The glowing light of its emergency power cell was no larger than her smallest fingernail. Zoreth turned his left arm until the implanted data

relay attachment points on his forearm were visible and pressed the module firmly onto the uplink. A shiver ran through him as he felt the module's nodes sink into the ports, followed by the electric pulse of the uplink drawing from his internal systems. So long as Zoreth's biological functions were sustained, the AI would continue to have power. He would simply need to compensate by increasing his caloric intake.

“Garanga, status report.”

“AI Status: online,” the AI replied through the comm system attached to the implant. “Vessel status: unknown. I do not detect the vessel systems.”

“We crashed,” he informed the AI as he approached the rear door and peered at it speculatively. He flexed his claws. It would take time to clear away the collapsed metal in front of it, and without power, it would not be easy to pry open. “Initiate planetary survey protocol.”

“Do you wish to activate the distress beacon?”

“Affirmative.”

“Be aware it will take additional energy output.”

“Acknowledged,” he replied, barely glancing at the tiny red light of the beacon switching on and pulsing as he gripped a crumpled mass of metal blocking the door and flung it out of his way.

Zoreth worked tirelessly until his muscles began to burn from the effort. He snarled with triumph when he was able to wedge the tips of his claws under the edge of the door and pull. His

muscles strained as the door gave way little by little until he could squeeze through and step out into a wet gray world. His mouth tightened in a grimace as the lightly falling rain slicked his skin. It was unpleasant but bearable. The gray shadows of a crumbling city lay stretched ahead, offering shelter, but he was more interested in the trail of sputtering fire that revealed the path of *Garanga's* wreckage and the route to finding Beverly. By his calculations, the crew cabins were far enough away from the combustible areas to negate any current risk from them, but it would take him hours to get to them.

Expanding his mandibles wide, he drew in air along his receptors and ran a quick chemical analysis. Air quality and rainwater were within a safe range for both Argurma and human life forms. He would have to conduct an analysis on running water and anything that they wished to eat, but for now, it appeared the planet would safely support them until someone from his clan arrived. He hoped it was Kaylar or one of his mated kin. He was not certain if he could bear to have yet another unmated—and potentially compatible if the gods had a sense of humor as he suspected they did—male sniffing around his Beverly.

The corner of his mouth inched upward. There was a ninety-nine-point-two percent probability that Talech would outright attempt to kill another male, likely even Zoreth if given the opportunity—except the AI's beacon was dependent on Zoreth remaining alive, and he knew they were of the same mind regarding Beverly's safety. With the state of his tech, there was a low probability Talech could host the AI. The male's sensors

could also be offline, making him useless to adequately care for something as fragile as a human who could sicken far too easily from things they ate and other environmental factors.

Despite the presence of the overbearing male, it was Zoreth upon who Beverly's welfare would depend. She would process then which male was the suitable mate. Afterward, Zoreth would see to it personally that Talech was well cared for. He had reluctantly come to enjoy his company and processed that it would please his mate.

He purred softly to himself as he imagined the gratitude lighting her eyes and the way her soft body would lean into his, taking refuge within the comfort and safety he provided. He kept this crafted image firmly in his mind as he made his way along the empty streets. At times he was forced to climb over debris and wreckage—whether from abandoned machines or parts of *Garanga*—but mostly the way was surprisingly clear and empty. Most of the obstacles appeared more like calculated and intentional barriers, which he filed away. All the while, he scanned his surroundings for signs of anything approaching. Small animals scampered away, local insects lingered. He found it odd there were no predators or larger animals coming to investigate an intruder within their territory. Wildlife always took over ruined cities, yet here it did not.

This city appeared to be nothing more than a yawning emptiness. It was too quiet and that unsettled his systems. A low growl rattled out of him, his vibrissae moving more frantically as he tried to pull more data from his surroundings.

There was a lingering imprint of death, though he saw no remains, and something else he could not define. Even the flames from the crash were dying, casting the city further back into gloom. Without the flames to direct his path, he found himself having to stop frequently and reorient himself. His lips pressed together, and he frowned as he peered down at the largest chunk of *Garanga's* wreckage. According to his calculations, the cabins should have been here.

He began to scan the horizon, searching for the next point of wreckage he had cataloged. Something shifted and rose along the side of a crumpled bridge. As the shadows condensed and elongated, a figure straightened, and long metal limbs arched up to find anchor points as a coiled mass whipped among them.

A loud breath expelled from Zoreth, and he picked up his pace, hurrying forward as Talech dropped to the ground and a shout of excitement came from the female bundled in his arms.

“Zoreth!” Beverly shouted.

She promptly began to wiggle hard enough that Zoreth felt his mouth curve in amusement when Talech relented with a growl and set her on the ground so she might sprint for him. Her small body raced across the distance, navigating the debris with a careless excitement that both warmed and concerned him. Opening his arms for her, he prepared to gather the soft warmth of her femininity close as she skirted a particularly large piece of infrastructure. Small pebbles tumbled from it, broken loose in her passing.

Zoreth's eyes sharpened upon them, and then everything within him stilled, his vibrissae rising threateningly as rocks shifted and Talech roared his warning. The alien that rose from behind the fallen rock and twisted metal was tall and slender, the tri-crested slope of its brow and long silver hair of a species of which he was familiar. Yet its appearance was at odds with what he knew of the species. With the wild tangle of its hair, tattered clothing, the wide, vacant set of its eyes, and gape of its mouth, it looked nothing like one of the gentle and peaceful Kaze whose settlements were welcome across multiple sectors. There was a feral viciousness with which it moved, gurgling as it lurched forward and lunged for Beverly.

Her scream filling his ears, Zoreth reacted, drawing up his blaster even as Talech raced forward, spinal limbs extending lethally from behind him. The Kaze jerked as the blaster fire struck its body and head before finally falling to the ground at Beverly's feet. She backed away from the fallen alien only to be hauled up against Talech's chest once more. A terrible growl rolled from the male's chest even as his mandibles vibrated in a soft purr for her. Zoreth regarded Beverly, assuring himself she was safe before stalking toward the alien. There had been no sign of the Kaze anywhere, and he wanted to know from where it had come.

Seven

Beverly stared down at the dead alien sprawled on the ground in front of her and swallowed back the bile that crawled up her throat. Possessing a bony crest plate extending up from the forehead like an Argurma, this alien's tapered to a teardrop point at the top and was layered with three crests stacked on top of each other. It complemented the alien's delicate, pointed facial structure. It had a lithe, delicate build as well, far taller than a human, with lavender skin that she could see peeking out from beneath the blood and grime covering it. She would have considered it attractive if the alien hadn't been trying to attack her.

"There are other beings living here... but how did we not hear or see any sign of them?" she whispered. She understood there were humans barely surviving in similar crumbling cities on Earth, but there were always signs of people living in a given area. "I didn't even know they were there."

Talech rumbled soothingly in her ear as he glared warily at the lifeless body as Zoreth slowly approached. Zoreth frowned at

her words as he considered the dead alien.

“A Kaze male,” he observed, and his vibrissae whipped as he shook his head. “You failed to hear him because he did not move until you passed his location. My sensors would have picked it up if he had moved sooner. I would have been aware of his presence.”

Beverly stared at the body, aghast. “That’s impossible. People don’t just not move. Even when we sleep, we move at least a little, enough that it would have been detectable if you were scanning for nearby movement. You’re telling me that he went from nothing to full out attack without any warning of his presence? It doesn’t make sense.”

“It does not,” Zoreth agreed, a note of displeasure in his voice as he inspected the male.

Behind her, Talech’s purr receded, and his growl grew louder as he shuffled back from the body, taking her with him. Craning her head, Beverly frowned back at him.

“What are you doing? I can’t see.”

His face was set in hard lines, unrelenting as his gaze dropped to meet hers. “It smells wrong. It is not safe for you to be so close.” He grunted. “Nothing to see but death.”

She could think of several arguments to counter his statement, one being a body could provide numerous important clues, but she was hung up on one word. He didn’t say that it smelled unpleasant or foul—both statements she heard from him numerous times on the island. He said wrong, which sent a

prickle of wariness through her. “What do you mean it smells wrong?”

She glanced back over at the body just as Zoreth stepped back from it, his vibrissae rising around him warily as something dark and long in several spots beneath the surface of the skin along the Kaze’s arms got larger and seemed to swell in thick black streaks. The skin suddenly split and several small insects rushed out, their wedge-shaped upper bodies followed by long, tapered tails that possessed small fine legs compared to the larger, grasping legs at the foreparts of their bodies. Like ticks to a warm body, they rushed directly for Zoreth who lowered his blaster and shot each of them, turning them into slimy black smears on the stone.

Mandibles widening warily, he dragged in a slow, deep breath as Talech did the same. Beverly knew they possessed additional taste and scent receptors there, so she remained silent as they studied the body. She jumped slightly when Zoreth’s voice suddenly broke the silence, talking to his ship.

“*Garanga*, scan body for abnormalities,” he growled.

She startled when a blue light shot from his forearm and slowly ran the length of the Kaze. Just as quickly, it snapped off, and a familiar voice spoke from around Zoreth.

“Abnormalities found: internal organs and subdermal skin affected by infestation. Parasitic colony detected, species unknown. Two hundred, fifty-seven juvenile parasites in colony clusters along the arms, legs, and genitals of the host. Thirty-five percent of parasites are developed enough to

survive the death of their host, and an estimated minimum of eighty percent of those surviving will reach maturity by consuming the corpse. These parasites are calculated to belong to the parental parasite attached to the host. Its head, mouth, and elongated hooks and feeding arms are imbedded into the brain while its reproductive center is burrowed into the host's back. As it reproduces asexually, it can deliver eggs into the host at sustainable intervals without interference."

Beverly shivered. "How would anyone survive that?"

"They did not," the AI responded. "Residually active areas of the brain following death indicate only those areas for core bodily functions were utilized. Parasitic feeding arms surrounding the hypothalamus and fine motor arms extending into the once active regions of the brain and throughout the major organs of the body indicate the parasite kept the host body alive following its death."

She felt sick. Leaning into Talech, Beverly pressed her nose against his neck, blocking out everything but his presence. She wanted to be anywhere but there. She wished they had never even left the cabin, though the structure had been useless in terms of keeping anything out. Even being back on Earth and facing a dwindling food supply was preferable to a planet full of... of... zombie-making parasites. The scientist in her wanted to laugh, recalling decades upon decades of references to a "zombie apocalypse," and yet what had seemed unlikely fiction had happened. They were on a planet filled with an incalculable number of potential zombies that had no thoughts

and nothing but a desire to feed and sustain the parasitic host colonizing them.

“Fuck. We are all going to die, aren’t we?”

“No.” Zoreth’s voice drew her attention, and she looked over at him as he stalked toward Talech. Ignoring the possessive Argurma’s growl, he gripped her chin and turned her head so she was looking fully at him. The burning blue light filling his eyes focused fully on her. “We will find a high spot away from habitable areas, better if it is a transmission location where I can boost the signal for the beacon. We will get off this planet,” he vowed.

She wished she were as confident.

Eight

Talech did not wish to allow Beverly to walk. Not when there were infected Kaze that would try and eat her or parasites searching for a host. The city sprawled in all directions, and any part could have the “zombies,” as Beverly called them. The female was stubborn, however, and he was forced to prowl closely behind her, his vibrissae churning in the air and his mandibles gaping every so often to detect the presence of anything nearby. Although the technology and sensors Zoreth depended on were useless in detecting the Kaze, Talech was more than happy to utilize what was familiar. They both knew that Argurma senses were sensitive enough they would still locate scent signatures if they were cautious.

Mandibles clicking warily, he scanned the city stretched out below the ridge they walked upon. Being upwind was foolish, yet it was the most unobstructed path through that he could see. After encountering the Kaze host, he had a sense as to why everything was torn down around them. From their vantage point, he could see the planned points of destruction

made in an attempt at containment. Efforts which had obviously failed. The aliens had fallen like prey to the infected.

His gaze snapped back over to Beverly, and he bristled anxiously. His female would not be prey. Her senses were dull and inferior in ways that alarmed him. She would not smell the approach of an infected until she was within range of attack just as she was before. If he were carrying her, there would be no such risk, but she wanted to be free so she could study their surroundings.

Although he normally loved her inquisitiveness when it was safe enough to enjoy it, he did not understand her current curiosity. Survival was what mattered. To kill before a threat could harm them. To eat and secure a safe place to sleep. His female was more interested in examining things as she passed them, at times stopping altogether, much to his frustration. At these times, she often directed rapid-fire questions to Zoreth, understanding he had the knowledge she required.

He grunted in displeasure. Zoreth did not know so much. His female looked to the male for answers that Talech's broken memory could not give, but Zoreth had little he could tell her. He did not know much of the Kaze or anything about the planet. The questions were useless. The only value the male had was bending his senses to search for enemies or prey, as Talech did. Anything else was a waste of time.

Beverly stopped short in front of him on a broken mass of concrete, hands braced against her lower back as she squinted

over the city. Talech gave her an inquiring click, and she glanced at him with a tired smile.

“I’m just trying to imagine the cities I’ve known on Earth looking like that,” she explained.

His brow furrowed as his gaze trailed over the broken remains of the city. From what she had heard and shared of Earth’s fate, it was nothing like what obviously befell the Kaze. “It would not. They did not evade mass predation.”

Zoreth glanced over at him, vibrissae twitching with subtle amusement at his words before looking at Beverly in an intimate way that made Talech seethe. “Talech is correct. There would not be high degrees of intentional destruction. Knocking down structures to create a protected area against calculated dangers is reasonable and within expectations for a crumbling civilization. This,” he tipped his head toward the destruction laid out below them, “is brash. It is the consequence of panic. Calculations based on the path of destruction indicate a high probability the Kaze unintentionally trapped themselves in their city with their enemy.”

Talech growled. Panicking was useless too. It was the instinct of prey. He would see to it that Beverly was safe from such affliction. She would survive where the Kaze did not. His gaze raked dismissively over fallen towers and bridges, and then overturned vehicles and equipment that completely blocked large portions of the roads throughout the city. “We are not Kaze. We will not panic.”

Zoreth's head briefly turned in his direction and grunted in agreement despite the incredulous look Beverly gave them.

"You can't just decree something and it magically be true. You don't know how you might feel if faced with a swarm of infected people bearing down on you."

Talech peered at her in confusion. "I would feel the desire to destroy and honor you with their heads," he replied.

"Not their heads," Zoreth countered with a rapid click of distaste. "Infestations do not make worthy trophies to honor a female."

Talech grunted in acknowledgment. He had a point. His eyes narrowed on a distant figure. No, it was three figures, not one. Three Kaze. They listlessly stood side by side, heads slightly hanging but close enough their hands grazed each other. His nostrils flared, his mandibles gaping, attempting to scent them as Zoreth's responses to Beverly's fascinated questions about mating trophies retreated from his awareness. Talech snarled. To his frustration, there was nothing in the zombies' scent that provided any information. There was nothing but sweat and the dirt that accumulated on their flesh. No detectable hormones, no fear, no excitement. Nothing that betrayed even the smallest hint as to their purpose for standing there as they did.

Puffing out his vibrissae with an annoyed huff, his gaze swept away from them and continued to scan the ground until it fell upon an even larger cluster. Some of these wore less than tatters and a few were completely naked. He frowned as their

stench seemed illogically stronger—closer. His vibrissae rose into the air, his mandibles flaring wide as he followed the layered scent. Only a fraction of it was coming from them. It was separating as the wind shifted, revealing a stronger imprint that was nearer and... different.

Talech jerked his head as he spun around, his spinal limbs drawing up lethally around him just as something large flung itself at him. Beverly's shouted curse filled his ears as jaws snapped dangerously close to his face, sharp black teeth flashing. Powerful limbs slammed into him as it tried to gain purchase, its claws slashing against his armor. Talech roared as he flung the creature away from him, his top pair of spinal limbs stabbing forward and squelching as they found the meat of his attacker.

The animal did not cry out in pain. Its body twisted, and he could see evidence of the parasite at the base of its skull as it jerked against his grasp, skewering itself further upon the metal limbs as its spiked tail whipped through the air. Ripping one of his metal limbs free from where it was imbedded, Talech brought it down again, driving it through the throat. Blood sprayed and the animal dropped to the ground with a wet *thunk*. Talech did not stop however. He twisted the claw deeper and opened it so the meat of the neck tore and severed completely as he yanked it free again; the severed parasite left twitching among the broken bits of stone and building compound.

A blaster fired and several parasites that wriggled from the body dropped, half-emerged, against their host as Zoreth drew

nearer. Talech glanced at him and then at Beverly. She stared at the animal in horror, her chest heaving.

“What the fuck is that?” she demanded.

“An ambrek, a popular companion animal for the Kaze,” Zoreth remarked as he drew back, his eyes scanning the rocks from where it emerged. “For the health of the breed, my systems indicate they are raised in packs of no fewer than two,” he remarked as another growl rose in the air, followed by a third and a fourth.

Talech hissed warily and whipped around, his vibrissae rising. They had drawn too close to a pack of the creatures and alerted them to their presence.

Three ambreks emerged from over the broken rock. Hairless and boasting a thick, leathery skin with a pebbled surface created by numerous hard scutes, they had four long limbs, each with hooks that extended from the back of the legs. The spined tails were long and slender, almost as threatening as the broad muzzles filled with overlapping teeth. Talech could not see their eyes, but he knew they were looking at them. He heard metal striking stone as Beverly dragged a short metal pole from the pile of rubble beside her, drawing the animals' attention to her until Zoreth kicked over a pile of stone, drawing their attention his way as his blaster snapped to them.

The ambreks charged, their bodies moving quickly as they raced down the short incline. The blaster fire slowed them, but they twisted at the last zec so the shots went wide of their heads, plowing into their shoulders instead. With their thicker

skin, they did not immediately drop but slowed as they closed the distance. Talech bellowed as he raised his spinal limbs in defense. Beside him, he could hear the frantic beat of Beverly's heart and the sharp, fearful drag of her breath as she lifted her pipe. He would not let harm come to her—but still she stood with them, and admiration for her rose within him as he darted a look of approval at her.

His limbs collided with the nearest ambrek, jerking it out of the air and pinning it roughly to the stone. The animal jerked, attempting to get away, but she jabbed the jagged end of the pipe down into its head. It caught the creature in the soft tissue above the muzzle, driving deep as the ambrek thrashed—bone crunched when Beverly pushed forward on her weapon with all her weight. Talech observed her, his mandibles vibrating in a purr as he lifted a limb and stabbed in through the chest of another of the beasts jumping directly for her neck. Its blood sprayed everywhere, and Beverly made a sound of disgust as she dropped away as the blaster fired again, making a meaty mess of the creature's head. Zoreth stormed forward as he fired on the fallen creatures, killing the parasites that wriggled free before holstering his weapon, his eyes narrowing on the dead ambrek as the third lay discarded on the ground behind him.

“Fuck, fuck!” Beverly cried out as she began to desperately wipe the blood splatter from her face and arms.

Talech made to go to her, but Zoreth raised a hand, stopping him as the male's concerned gaze turned toward Beverly. “*Garanga*, scan for any sign of parasitic larvae in the blood.”

A blue light ran over the female who stood steadily, eyes wide with fear.

“Negative. No detection of parasitic life form.”

“Thank fuck.” Beverly sagged as Zoreth and Talech reached out to steady her.

Talech growled at the other male, infuriated he had dared to stop him, and even angrier he had paused to listen for reasons he did not understand. Zoreth lifted his head with an unapologetic glare, but the moment was broken, and they both startled when Beverly clung to each of their arms and gave both a grateful smile.

“Hey, we’re okay.” She squeezed Talech’s hand reassuringly. “Talech, relax. He had to stop you to make sure you didn’t get infected. As freaked out as I was, I wouldn’t have wanted you to risk contaminating yourself.”

Talech’s head whipped around, and he regarded Zoreth who inclined his head in acknowledgment. Talech slowly dipped his chin in response, acknowledging that the male had safeguarded his life and demonstrated the value he placed within it. Zoreth’s mandibles clicked softly in a gentle rebuke that made the corner of Talech’s mouth curl.

Beverly laughed weakly. “This is sweet, guys, but we’d better keep moving just in case we just accidentally woke anything else up.” She glanced at herself. “Maybe find somewhere to clean up?”

Grunting in acknowledgment, they turned away from the bodies and gore littering the stones, their heavy feet scattering stones as they continued on course. It was unlikely that the blaster had been loud enough to draw the Kaze from where they had huddled together at such a distance away, but Beverly was right. It was not safe to linger. Not there or anywhere that he could not personally see to fortifications.

Nine

Beverly's feet were killing her. After surviving on the island for so many weeks, she'd begun to consider herself in relatively good shape—or better anyway. Now it was simply laughable. She didn't even have the energy to try to run anymore if they needed to.

Probably a good thing anyway since the sun had set and the only light they had was the soft glow from the Argurmas walking on either side of her. She cursed softly as she stumbled, rocks scattering beneath her feet, and slipped down a short incline. The drop was startling, knocking the breath from her when she landed on her back, but not hard enough to hurt. She blinked up at the starry sky, listening to the crunch of the males' feet as they hurried down the incline after her.

Wincing, she sat up gingerly, her hand rubbing at the back of her head as she pushed to her feet. She squinted ahead as the soft light from the males lit up what looked like something fleshy. That expanse grew as they got closer until she saw that she was looking at a bare back, the spine visible through the

skin, and a pair of narrow shoulders. Biting back a scream, she reared back, stumbling into Zoreth and sending more rocks scattering out from under her feet so that several of the aliens turned in her direction. Talech gripped her arm, tension running noticeably through him as all three of them stiffened.

That tension slowly drained from them when they noticed that the Kaze didn't move other than to sway a little before leaning into one another once more. The zombies were practically looking right at them, yet appeared to be completely blind to their presence.

The Argurmas exchanged a look, clicking softly as Talech drew her between them. Beverly glanced over at the zombies and swallowed, not at all mad about being tucked safely between the two large males. There was something especially eerie about the way the Kaze stood there, heads slightly bowed. Other than being dirty and shabby looking in general, they looked like any other person except for those vacant, downturned eyes that clearly shouted that no one was home.

It was more how she imagined the dead might appear to people who have claimed to see them—although too solid to pass for a ghostly apparition. In any case, she found them a lot more frightening because they looked like actual people... not animated decaying flesh. Logically she knew that was because the parasite was keeping their bodily functions going, but it still sent a shiver up her spine.

Zoreth took a step back, and Talech followed. Together, they shuffled her slowly between them as they gained ground. It

wasn't until they had lost sight of the zombies altogether that Talech dared to scoop her up into his arms, his lower two spinal limbs curling protectively around her. Zoreth didn't miss the movement, but she saw his glowing eyes and cybernetics bob so that she got the idea he was nodding his head in approval. He didn't waste time speaking, instead silently setting course down another road.

Beverly shifted in Talech's arms as she peered into the surrounding darkness. "As long as we keep an eye out for any congregation sites, we should be okay," she whispered, knowing both males would be fully capable of hearing her. "They seem to have an acute lack of night vision. If they can't see or hear us, they seem unaware of our presence. I can't even say if they possess a sense of smell. It seems debatable given I was right there, and they only twitched in reaction to the sound of my arrival."

Zoreth grunted in what she assumed was agreement. "We will move at night so we do not attract attention."

Beverly grimaced. It was logical, but she hated being so completely night blind and dependent on them.

"I can't see in the dark," she hissed. "Your cybernetics may not be bright enough for them to notice, but I guarantee if I start walking around with a flashlight or something, that would be enough."

"You do not require it," Talech grumbled. "I will carry you."

She scoffed. As strong as he was, it was impractical for him to carry her throughout the night. Even if an inappropriately

timed curl of heat descended through her belly at the thought of being pressed up against him for hours and the subtle friction of his body against hers. Fuck, with his sense of smell, there would be no hiding her arousal. Nor would she have a reprieve to cool down.

“A division of labor is wise,” Zoreth put in with a distracted note in his voice as he peered ahead into the darkness.

Talech seemed to silently mull that over for a moment before he grunted, and his eyes briefly dropped to her. “We will carry you,” he rumbled, correcting himself.

Beverly’s eyebrows flew up, her surprise interrupting her thoughts. That was quite a concession. It wasn’t too long ago that Talech would have been hissing at Zoreth for even daring to offer to carry her—or touch her at all for that matter. Something had changed enough for him to stopped seeing Zoreth as a means to safety to a trustworthy male to share her care with. It was sweet, in a way—if she didn’t feel like she was being passed around between two males dictating her life. That heat pooled deeper and a pleasant tingle moved through her in anticipation of being carried by both males was concerning.

This wasn’t quite the direction she’d imagined her life off Earth would take. She’d pictured a no-nonsense life dedicated to research, increasing her education, and perhaps eventually gaining respect from intergalactic peers. She’d imagined she would be the one taking care of Talech in every way. She would have put her demons to rest and been happy to do that

for him too. It had been painted so vividly in her mind—helping him find his way around the space station and adapting to civilization once again despite his memory loss and the torture that had scarred him in more ways than one.

And Zoreth? Despite her best intentions, she'd begun spinning fantasies in which he refused to leave her side. She imagined them continuing as they had on the ship but with more comforts and all her dreams ready to be handed to her, where she could rub shoulders with scientists during the day and enjoy her evenings with the Argurmas who were oddly devoted to her. What she'd initially seen as an inconvenience that would hinder her pursuits had quickly become something she enjoyed while sequestered on *Garanga*. On the ship, they had almost seemed to exist to make her happy, and she'd been content to enjoy it. She'd been haughty with her newfound control over her fate and new life.

But she had no control. She was completely dependent on them, unable to do as little as walking safely on her own. She did not feel like a brilliant addition to the universe who simply needed to update her education—someone with something to offer who was an attractive and desirable option for a partner or mate. She felt... *less*, infantile even in her dependency on Zoreth and Talech. She had proved that much when she had failed to kill an ambrek by herself. She could do nothing against a horde of Kaze. Beverly snorted quietly to herself. She didn't even have the basic survival skills of human women who had been forced to live on Earth while she had slept in stasis.

Her mood sank, her arousal vanishing with the realization she was, in fact, a burden. Worse, she had come close to getting them all killed with her carelessness by nearly blundering into the nest of zombies. Talech and Zoreth wouldn't have been able to save themselves, much less her, from a triggered attack—not with a nest that size. The truth was they were better off without her.

Beverly winced at the thought as she sank into Talech's arms. She didn't try to peer around for clues or information. It was the middle of the night. She wouldn't be able to see anything anyway. It didn't even matter. Her curiosity about the world wouldn't help them get off the planet or survive. As things currently stood, she was more likely to get both males killed as they tried to protect her.

They walked throughout the night with one of the males carrying her at all times and the other on guard. They stopped every few hours to trade her between them, slowing only when proximity to the zombies forced them to proceed with more care. Their combined cybernetics gave off just enough of a faint glow for her to make out the bodies standing clustered together, unmoving, as they stared vacantly at the ground.

It was only toward the end of the night when the faintest streak of color lit the horizon that the males began to look earnestly for a safe, defensible place where they could rest. Beverly was pressed against Zoreth's chest when he came to a stop in front of a sturdy little building with few windows and gestured to it. Talech gave an affirmative click of his mandibles and in short order, Beverly found herself being laid in a strange oblong bed

while Talech fussed with blocking out as much of the light as possible from the windows. Beverly just curled on her side as the males fortified the room. She felt absolutely useless.

A heavy sigh escaped her.

All her goals and plans felt... pointless.

Ten

ZORETH

There was something amiss with Beverly. Her bold and unshakeable spirit was one of the things that drew him to her, and yet she was now withdrawn for reasons he could not decipher. She was curled between them on the bedding they had found and piled together into the large sleeping nest.

It was a good thing that Kaze tended to not only mate in groups of three or more but also tended to be communal sleepers or else their larger Argurma frames would have failed to fit properly. There was still little room for movement. Talech did not appear to mind. The male was curled on his side, his spinal limbs spread wide against the wall his back was to. It was aberrant compared to his normal sleeping behavior on *Garanga*, but with the way his claws twitched occasionally, Zoreth processed it was likely a defensive position that allowed him to feel the vibrations through the walls and the floors adjoining them. His body was otherwise stretched out peacefully beside Beverly, his glowing eyes slitted as he watched her with a concerned expression.

Concern that matched what Zoreth was currently experiencing.

Divesting himself of his weapons and piling them on a small table beside the nest, Zoreth carefully slipped into the bed on Beverly's other side. As she was facing him, her eyes followed him, and she held his gaze when his face lay nearly parallel to hers. There was an emotion in her eyes he did not understand, and his mandibles spread lightly to collect scent data in hope that would help him decipher it. There was a faint taste of something akin to despair in her scent that filled his receptors, and his vibrissae twitched in distaste.

He did not like that emotion on his female. It made his chest tighten painfully, and his mandibles began to vibrate in a soft purr. Talech lifted his head, and the male's gaze settled on him thoughtfully. Zoreth tensed, sensors taking in the situation. It had been some time since they had an issue sharing a bed with Beverly, but she had never been in such need of comforting either. She had always met everything with a smile and eagerness that made her exceptionally adaptable to anything new she faced on board the ship.

His mouth quirked as he recalled her bold insistence that they would simply share a bed if he was going to insist she part from Talech. It had concerned him at the time how attached she was to the damaged male, but now it warmed something within him. She was loyal and accepting of everyone's needs in ways he had failed to process or appreciate. He knew well enough from studying the human mated to Veral that humans customarily mated in pair bonds in the manner that was common among Argurmas. The arrangements they were

forced to adapt to had been as new for her as it had been for them, yet she had never complained or demonstrated a hint of discomfort sleeping between two large males who each equally desired her.

He processed now that she had actually enjoyed it. She always smiled when they joined her in bed and would fling a leg or an arm over each so neither felt ignored in favor of the other. And every night he caught the delicate flavor of her arousal that flooded his systems with his own desire. Despite that, he had processed that her decision to share a bed with them had been in part because she was trying to humor them without committing to a mate bond with either of them. He did not complain. He respected the fact that she consciously did not show preferential treatment toward Talech, even though he had the prior claim.

His processors therefore struggled even more with his female's unhappiness.

“Relay your concerns, Beverly,” he rumbled.

Her brow furrowed slightly at him. “My concerns? You mean other than being trapped on a planet filled with zombie parasites?”

He dipped his head and made a conscious effort to keep his vibrissae from streaking across the supports toward her. She never objected to the way their vibrissae sought her out, but this moment was about her comfort—not theirs.

“You did not scent of mild despair once while we walked, even though you were tired and aching. Why do you scent of it

now?”

“She is sad. Never breed, Zoreth. You will be endlessly puzzled by your offspring,” Talech growled with just enough venom that Zoreth’s eyes snapped up until Beverly chuckled softly, drawing their attention to her.

“I’m all right, guys. Just tired, I think.”

Zoreth’s mandibles clicked in understanding. “You did travel for many hours through the day and night. You need rest.”

An apathetic snort escaped her, startling him. “You mean I walked most of the day and none of the night. You guys carried me, passing me between you like a toddler.”

Zoreth frowned. That was not his recollection of events. He glanced over Beverly’s head at Talech and found him wearing a puzzled expression. A toddler was a young offspring. He understood that much as he heard Veral’s mate use the term regarding their small female. Beverly was a prized female—a mate—and was cared for as such.

Talech’s hand settled on her side, his mandibles vibrating in a soft purr that drained some of the tension from her shoulders.

“No dishonor or disrespect meant, anastha. Only care.”

To Zoreth’s surprise, the male met his eyes, his gaze moving from his hand to Zoreth’s before rising again to meet his eyes meaningfully. His purr halted to deliver a few even clicks of encouragement before resuming. Zoreth blinked uncertainly but lifted his hand and settled it on Beverly’s side just under Talech’s. An approving expression crossed Talech face as she

relaxed further, and his own mandibles instinctively picked up the purr.

“Talech is correct. Your weakness is not held against you. You are strong in many other ways. It is an honor to be your strength when you require it.”

She squinted at him. “That’s quite a line, but I’ll take it.” Sighing, she shifted so she nestled deeper into the bedding between them.

“It is the truth,” Talech rumbled appreciatively. His head lowered to scrape his mandibles gently through her hair as his vibrissae began to sift through the length. “Love my anastha.”

A soft sound escaped from between her lips, and she turned her head to glance back at him, her face soft and her scent welcoming as she settled into him, her eyes drifting closed as she surrendered to slumber. Zoreth swallowed as he watched, a thickness in his throat, and Talech chuffed and bent down, his voice rasping in a whisper over her ear.

“Zoreth loves you too. He just does not process it yet.”

Zoreth regarded the male for a long moment, completely frozen and alert. Although he had, like all his clan, disabled the uplinks the council were able to access, those words inspired only dread. He would be disabled and sent in for reprogramming for taking an alien for a mate, but emotions of devotion and love would see him terminated on sight. Talech’s eyes glinted, and his lip curled in subtle challenge as he waited.

Was Talech trying to bait him for an excuse to tear him apart? He studied the male. Talech had called her anastha. That was a clear claim that was universal among their species and warned other males away.

He narrowed his eyes. “What you are attempting to provoke is unattainable. I will not be trapped into a mating challenge.”

Those were rare on Argurumal but were not unheard of when a female refused to choose forced males into a challenge to win her affections by disposing of their rival. Zoreth had no intention of subjecting Beverly to that, especially not in such dangerous surroundings. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed Talech’s help to protect her.

He shook his head. Talech’s internal operations were fractured, but he clearly had a strong awareness of Beverly’s emotional needs and safeguarded her with a quick, unfailing instinct Zoreth had lacked. Perhaps his functioning systems dulled that instinct a little. That line of query was dangerous on Argurumal, but he was not on his mother world. Nor was Talech.

What if the male wasn’t broken? What if he was simply liberated from the constraints of his cybernetics? Talech clearly had several operational cybernetic implants, but Zoreth calculated those which controlled and regulated his hormonal and reactive states were no longer online. He suspected Beverly would be interested in exploring their differences firsthand, which was even more reason to deny Talech an opportunity for challenge.

Talech suddenly chuffed, startling him anew.

“Idiot male,” he rumbled in a distinctly good-natured tone of voice few Argurma possessed. “I do not desire a challenge. You protect and love her. You take care of her. You are a worthy male. Your claim is no less than mine.” The male’s lips twisted in a grimace. “And my Beverly enjoys talking with you—learning from you. You give her what I cannot.”

“And you give her what *I* cannot?” Zoreth could not help the offended bite of his words at the suggestion there was anything he could not do equally as well as Talech.

The male grinned, his purr growing louder as he nestled in close to Beverly. “I make my anastha happy. And I will give her great pleasure.” He lifted a shoulder in a shrug that he had often seen from Beverly, his smile growing sharper. “You will please her too, but not the same.” He lightly scraped his teeth against Beverly’s shoulder, and Zoreth’s eyes dropped to her as she squirmed with a tiny sigh at the contact.

Zoreth grunted. That sounded like a challenge he would be happy to disprove—if they could agree to get Beverly to accept them both. He would be happy to show the male what his systems were capable of when it came to mating. Even now, his civix was struggling to escape its sheath, eager to slip into the female nestled between them as her arousal bloomed in reaction to the scrape of Talech’s teeth.

Talech’s eyes brightened, and he chuffed again, the sound of his laughter rasping in Zoreth’s ears as he buried his face in

the soft hair on Beverly's head and allowed her sweet scent to carry him into slumber.

Tomorrow they would leave at sunset and take care with their route to give Beverly some freedom. He processed that she might desire an opportunity to walk until it became too dark. She had a ravenous curiosity about everything that he enjoyed. It would please him to see her enjoy something amid all the danger before she was forced to submit to their caring once more.

He would do that for her because Talech was right, and he knew it straight down to the depths of his systems—he loved her.

Eleven

BEVERLY

Beverly's eyebrows climbed as she followed Zoreth and Talech out of the housing complex. The sun was sinking in the sky, but aside from the long shadows it cast it was still technically daylight. They were taking her out in the light? A part of her was petrified knowing those things out there would be able to see her, but the rest of her was actually... relieved.

There was an undeniable spring in her step as she stepped out of the building. Perhaps there was something to what they said. So she couldn't see well at night like they could, and they had to compensate by carrying her since she was virtually blind. That was fair. She would just look for other ways to contribute while it was light. It helped knowing they didn't resent her as a burden. Unless she missed her guess, they almost seemed pleased about it.

She shook her head, bemused as she fell in step behind Zoreth, her skin prickling with a welcome awareness as Talech took position behind her. She felt safe sandwiched between them while retaining her independent mobility. It was nice. It gave

her some sense of control. Her lips pursed. A pity she hadn't held on to the metal pipe. It had been pretty gross with the gore hanging off it, but being armed would be nice.

Her gaze casually fell on Zoreth—which wasn't difficult since he was right in front of her—and slowly skimmed over his body. Although he was powerfully built, with wide shoulders and a body sculpted with muscle under his armor—including a very nice ass, but every Argurma she'd met seemed spectacularly blessed in that area, and she'd spent considerable time admiring Talech's—it was the weapons strapped to him that drew her eye. Her tongue slid over her bottom lip nervously as she worked up her courage only for him to stop so suddenly Beverly stumbled to keep from running into him.

Vibrissae fanning out as they began to lift and twist, Zoreth glanced back at her. “Is there something that you desire, anastha?”

Beverly blinked and flushed at the heat in his words despite how innocuous his question was. It wasn't what he said but *how* he said it that took her mind straight from the blasters and blades adorning him to an entirely different part of his body. One she'd felt pressed up against her from both males, bulging and subtly writhing, every night as they slept.

Like a snake caught in a sack.

Heat rose into her cheeks, and she cleared her throat. It wasn't as if she hadn't wondered what it would be like. Meg always made enough noise when she was alone with Kaylar to convince her the woman had enjoyed it. Hell, she'd even been

envious because when was the last time she'd gotten good dick, much less great dick that made her scream the walls down? They had only walked a few steps from the shelter. All she had to do was give the word. But she was also abundantly aware that having that dick came with a hefty price tag—her freedom. Argurmas didn't just fuck. They mated. Even in an unusual situation where an Argurma fucked without mating right away, such as in the case of Kaylar and Meg, it was still obviously the intended result. It was never casual. She knew mating with either of the Argurmas would not only mean sacrifice, it would also be forever.

Was that something she was ready for or even wanted? She wanted to be with them, but she had imagined it on her terms. Mating was a commitment that frightened her.

She needed to focus.

“I was wondering if I could have a weapon—a blaster maybe?” She rushed to get the words out, and his head cocked in curiosity.

Was there a flash of disappointment there as well? If there was, it was gone too quickly to be certain.

Beverly jumped when he spun toward her, drawing a blaster from his thigh. The weapon was held out to her, the nose pointed toward the ground. With a cautious glance to his face to make certain he wasn't going to suddenly withdraw it, she reached out, her hands closing just above his on the handgrip. He grunted softly and let go, and her arm dropped, unprepared for the weight. She immediately lifted it when he made to grab

it again, and his mandibles clicked softly in approval. It was heavy, but she would manage. With a blaster like this, she could take out enemies with them. She certainly felt dangerous and impressive holding it.

Behind her, Talech rumbled with uncertainty, making her aware of the weight of his eyes on her.

“Do you know how to use it?” he asked.

She winced, suddenly feeling like an idiot as his query brought her right back to reality.

“No.” She sighed, lowered the pistol, and held it out to Zoreth. “Blasters weren’t exactly new tech when I was stationed at the island, but they weren’t licensed to private citizens.”

Zoreth’s hand closed over hers, but he didn’t take the blaster. Instead, he pulled her against his body and positioned her so her back was to his chest so she was in place for him to reach around her comfortably to readjust her grip on the weapon.

“Firing a blaster requires knowing two important mechanisms on the weapon and refining one’s aim. The first will not be difficult, the latter will take practice.” He ran her forefinger over a large impression on the side and pressed down, drawing out a hum from the blaster. “You must initiate the firing system.”

He then dragged her finger down to the broad trigger. It seemed the location and design of a trigger was common regardless of species, distance, or even time.

“This is where you will command the blaster to fire after you are certain you have adequately aimed.” His voice was practically a purr in her ear now, and Beverly quashed the urge to shiver in response as his body cradled hers.

They lifted the blaster toward a mass of debris, and from the corner of her eye, she could see the faint smile of approval on Talech’s face. She bit back a smile of her own at the realization that, while neither of them had an issue with her not knowing how to fire the weapon, they also weren’t going to coddle her or insist she didn’t need to know because they would protect her. Instead, they were pleased to teach her how to protect herself.

It meant so much to have her independence and capability respected and honored. They would continue to protect her—she had no doubt about that—but they were supporting her in what she wished to do too. Perhaps that would extend to more areas in her relationship with them beyond killing zombies. It made her cautiously optimistic about giving more thought to the whole mating business.

“Line up the mark along the center of the blaster. There is a nodule there, do you see it?”

“Yes.” The nodule was small, but with the blaster lined up with her vision, it jutted out obviously.

He grunted and lowered his arms from around her. “Good. Fire when you are ready.”

She licked her lips and cast a cautious glance around. “Are you certain this won’t bring zombies down on our heads?”

Talech chuffed softly from where he stood. “Best learn fast then.”

Her eyes shot to him in a panic, and she pressed her lips together to smother her own laugh as Zoreth chuffed behind her.

“All right,” she murmured as she sighted down the barrel of the blaster.

She squeezed the trigger.

The blaster didn't kick. In fact, she didn't feel any reaction from within it and wouldn't have known it fired at all if not for the crackling hiss of energy that burned a hole through the fallen boards and building materials and blackened the stone beneath it. She blinked in surprise. Zoreth was right. Firing it wasn't difficult at all. Her aim wasn't bad, and she felt the beginning of a smug smile curling her lips as both males began to purr with obvious pleasure. If that weren't telling enough, the sharp-toothed grin Talech gave her contained so much pride, she felt a warmth curl from her chest down into her belly as she returned it.

Zoreth's arms closed around her, and his cheek and mandible brushed the side of her face. The embrace and show of affection were brief, and he stepped back again far too soon for her liking, but it helped to further ignite that warmth of happiness rushing through her. It didn't hurt that zombies weren't bursting out of the woodworks to spoil the moment.

She was tempted to drag them back into the complex and say fuck it to her doubts, but the moment passed and Zoreth

kneeled before her with the holster in hand. He had removed it from his thigh and expanded the strap. She eyed it curiously as he wrapped the modified length around her hips and secured it in place. He tugged on it gently, then grunted with approval before standing again. She knew all she had to do was say what she wanted, but her tongue remained fixed to the roof of her mouth as she watched him turn and proceed down the road again.

Beverly fumed at herself as she followed him. What was wrong with her? Was she that afraid of sacrificing some of her freedom, or was it something else? After all, if she was going to study under their clan medic, her plans wouldn't change. Mating would just make a true member of the clan. Or was she simply afraid of a fundamental change to her life more than she thought she was? She'd happily embraced a future in space that she'd already been dreaming about, but she had to acknowledge her decision, in part, had been motivated by her fear of what Earth had become. Perhaps she was simply afraid of becoming emotionally dependent on them. That was one fear she wasn't certain how to conquer.

Twelve

TALECH

He was glad Beverly's mood had improved. Although she was quiet, as if brooding over something, she no longer seemed weighed down by the sadness that had filled her the night before. Zoreth's decision to show her how to use the blaster had noticeably renewed her self-confidence. That, in turn, made him ache for her even more. He was desperate to finally claim Beverly for his mate.

For their mate.

He looked from Beverly to Zoreth. He had initially very much disliked that another Argurma had felt the same mating compatibility. Had even resented the fact it was Zoreth who made it possible for them to leave Earth... or that Beverly seemed to enjoy conversing with him about things Talech could no longer recall. His sense of rivalry with Zoreth only increased in response to the situation on the ship, though he had gradually come to respect and like Zoreth.

Crashing on this planet had changed everything. They worked well as a unit—as a family. Talech liked this. It was like he

was re-establishing a connection he did not even know was missing by bonding with another of his kind. Just being with Zoreth gave him a sense of stability and settled the confusion that rushed through his mind. As a result, although he loved Beverly, he was also developing a different sort of affection for Zoreth that he now clung to as well. Perhaps it was only his struggle with confusion within his system that made him attach so strongly, but it did not matter. He wanted the three of them to be so united he was never parted from either of them.

Naturally, he had put it to a test. Inviting the other male to touch Beverly as he touched her. It was something new, and from Zoreth's hesitation and Talech's earlier feelings on the matter, he knew it was something that was not commonly welcome among their species. It had been uncomfortable enough when they first began to sleep with her, becoming accustomed to another male's body so close, and that his arm often curled around her. But they never had intentionally touched her together in the same spot with common intent before.

He still felt the aftereffects of the relief he experienced when Zoreth's hand rested just above his as they soothed their mate together. Zoreth had been surprised but they relaxed into it quickly, working as two parts of a single unit. It could work. He was certain they would both be able to mate with her without more than an initial discomfort when it began.

Talech considered how he might react to Zoreth's civix breaching and driving into their female. Zoreth would likely pin in her in place to mount her once he earned the privilege,

the inky length of his civix burrowing into her cunt. Talech's mandibles clicked at the image his mind conjured, but he did not feel any hostility or even a hint of aggression. Instead, arousal swept through him, making his civix swell and twist within its sheath, attempting escape as he imagined the pleasure on Beverly's face as Zoreth rutted her. Perhaps they would even take her together. Zoreth might hold her locked in place while Talech planted himself deep within her, their civixes plunging into her with the same accord he experienced when they worked together to soothe her. The possibilities made his civix press forward harder, his mandibles flared wide, and he struggled to contain his breach.

He could not breach now, not when he could not rut her as they were vulnerable to attack. He fought the sensation off when Zoreth paused and turned to look back at him. The male appeared in control of himself, but Talech knew it was an illusion. He had noted the way Zoreth's civix often swelled and shifted as it pressed forward, though it was subtle beneath his armored flight suit. He knew the moment Zoreth caught a hint of his arousal within the pheromones he released on the air because the male's mandibles widened as if drawing the scent over his palate rather than expressing aggression.

Zoreth's vibrissae writhed with interest, his eyes shifting over to where Beverly had strayed to a display flickering with images over screens. Although there was no power in much of the city, Talech had noted it still ran in some places, such as this one that stank of rotten food left to spoil. The entire street they walked down was lined with various interconnected

buildings filled with supplies rather than dwellings. Amid the dust and dirt that coated everything, there were hints of the bright colors that once filled the area.

“This must be a market area,” Beverly observed as she inched closer to the display in one of the windows, completely unaware of the aroused state of the males standing behind her. “Possibly why it still has some power if residential and business areas were kept on different power grids. The worst of the destruction didn’t seem to make it over here either.”

Talech twitched apprehensively as she reached into the display, her fingers grazing along a small screen. Nothing jumped out at her. Instead, the fuzzy image bounced as she seemed to move something and then it suddenly cleared, though the image filling the screen continued to waver. The male staring out from the screen addressed the viewer solemnly, his voice crackling in and out.

“Evacuate immediately. Due to a deadly parasite infestation that has been introduced into our city from the vast swamps, a mandatory evacuation alert has been issued. Please head to the nearest collection center. All those who are not showing signs of infestation will be transported to the spaceport. This message will continue to be looped with the hope that we can save as many colonists as possible.” The male’s eyes dropped with an expression of sadness crossing his face. “May the gods have pity on us all.”

Beverly shook her head morosely. “Poor bastards. I wonder how many people were turned away and how many even made

it off the planet.” She glanced over at Zoreth. “The spaceport should have a strong enough relay to boost the beacon’s transmission, right?”

Zoreth nodded. “It is the most logical solution.”

Another image replaced that of the Kaze, and Beverly smiled as she trailed her finger over a bold red line that ran along several other intersecting lines. Something about it teased Talech’s memory as if he should know what it was. He squinted at it and his memory begrudgingly identified roads for him.

“Look, we’re just a couple of streets down from one of the collection centers. The red line marks the collection route. This would have been the last stop, and then it’s straight on to here.” She tapped the red dot at the top of the red line. “The spaceport. Has to be. We could walk this in about an hour.”

“Or less,” Zoreth rumbled as he made a quick inspection of his blaster. He glanced up and met Talech’s eyes. “Prepare yourself. I calculate a high probability of infestation—of zombies—on that route.” His eyes flicked over to Beverly. “Be prepared, anastha.”

Beverly nodded as Talech dipped his head in agreement and stretched his spinal limbs out. They had been curled inward and at rest for the most part, only occasionally stretching out to tap along a wall or push something out of the way. Now they spread around him defensively, the extensive reach providing extra protection for his family. They were not his only defense, however, just the most suitable for any that

might get close to them. Otherwise, he had the blaster that Zoreth gave him, and Talech pulled it out of its holster with a practiced ease that he did not remember acquiring.

Lips thinning anxiously, Beverly pushed up from where she kneeled in front of the display. Concern flared through Talech as she began to stand. She reached out instinctively to steady herself, resting her hand atop the screen only for it to go careening out from under her. It fell back with a crash as Beverly toppled forward, taking down several more screens as she fell into the display.

The resounding crash echoed down the street, and Talech bristled warily, his vibrissae flaring out around him as he slowly turned. Zoreth likewise rotated slowly where he stood, his blaster held out in front of him.

“Fuck!” Beverly hissed as she backed away from the display, her own blaster raised.

It was the gurgling moan of air pushed uselessly past vocal cords that made his vibrissae coil and lash furiously as a zombie suddenly rushed forward from the back of the building, its vacant eyes latched onto their mate. Its fingers were black from scraping against filth and gore that had long since dried, its mouth gaping wide in its frenzy as its throat worked and produced a feverish series of gurgling moans and higher-pitched shrieks as it lunged for Beverly.

Without even drawing a breath, Talech raised his blaster. He took satisfaction in the mangled destruction of the zombie’s head as it dropped to the ground. That satisfaction did not last

for long before another appeared and another, all of them streaming from the same street that Beverly called the collection route. Growling, Talech spun on them as Beverly raised her own blaster and took aim.

The sounds of their shots mingled with the creatures' vocalizations and the wet sounds of flesh hitting the ground and the spray of blood. But it was just the beginning.

Thirteen

BEVERLY

Beverly's muscles screamed as she fired repeatedly, exhaustion making them feel leaden as she dodged those zombies that managed to get closer to her before they were downed, usually by either Talech or Zoreth, either by blaster or being speared through the head by one of Talech's metal limbs. She could admit that her aim wasn't as good as the Argurmas', her shots seldom blasting apart their heads like so many melons like those of Zoreth and Talech. Even body shots that should have induced incredible amounts of pain and at least slowed them down didn't seem to have any effect.

"Fucking parasites probably don't bother with the pain receptors of the brain," she grumbled as she fired another shot. She took several of them down on her own, which made her immensely proud. It may have taken her a few more shots, but she did it and was wearing the bloody badges of her victories as it splattered everywhere along her clothes and body.

Reminding herself that the parasites weren't blood born was the mantra that kept her sanity intact with every spray of blood

that hit her. And there were copious amounts of that! She was beginning to look as if she were bathed in blood, and the guys didn't look any better.

They inched their way onto the central line on the collection route, battling for every bit of ground. Beverly took strength from having them by her sides—her mates. They couldn't be called anything less. They trusted her to fight with them and had her back. They covered each other, suffered the same horrors together, as mangled bodies fell and parasites wriggled from the dead flesh, reaching for them. It would rise from the corpse like a nightmare as it sprang toward them, dozens of thin tentacles whipping as its claws spread wide to grab its prey. Sometimes the mother parasite would detach if they didn't destroy the head adequately enough. Her males faced all this unflinchingly with her. They would face anything head on with her.

She couldn't ask for anything more.

A zombie burst from a building in front of her, the rot of its breath fanning her face. Its clawed fingers reached for her, broken and blackened practically down to the wrists, stinking of foul things she didn't want to think of. Beverly brought her blaster up between its eyes and squeezed the trigger. Brain matter flew, but she didn't try to dodge it. She'd found out quickly that she was never able to get out of the way fast enough.

She closed her eyes just briefly to protect them from the spray of blood and gore, but when she opened them again another

zombie was lurching over the first, its mouth gaping wide. Beverly shrieked and snapped her blaster up, firing. The top of its head came off in a rain of fragmented bone and brains. She barely had time to squeeze her eyes shut for a heartbeat, but even that wasn't enough to save her. Her eyes were blurry when they snapped open, a sharp pain in one from some grit that she tried to blink away, but then *it* sprung up from the back of the broken skull far too close to be evaded.

The long legs on the mother parasite's wedge-shaped forebody were stretched wide as it sailed toward her, as were the numerous thin legs and its whipping tail, all eager to embrace her. It wasn't that at which she stared with dread as she attempted to raise her blaster again. It was the gaping maw of the alien. Taking up the entire bottom of their head and half of their abdomen, the round mouth was a horrific, sucking void filled with teeth that filled her vision and all her reality.

A bellow of rage filled her ears, followed by another as darkness eclipsed the world—and then there was nothing.

Awareness returned slowly. First with the sensation of something warm pressed close around her, and then scent. She didn't smell the blood and filth that had last filled her nose. She didn't even smell the dust and debris that she had smelled every waking minute since crash landing on the planet. There was a stale quality to the air that she breathed that made her think it was recycled, but over that was a crispness of some sort of spice and fruit she didn't recognize.

Though it took more effort than she liked, Beverly's eyes slowly cracked open and then squinted against the overhead light shining down on her face. Her brow furrowed slightly. It looked familiar.

"Oh thank goodness you're awake," a woman's voice whispered, and Beverly turned her head and wanted to cry when she saw Meg's familiar smile. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see it, especially since I thought you had died on Earth. I think I would be quite mad if you died now."

Her eyebrows flew up at the sight of the woman cautiously hovering over her between the two Argurmas. Although Zoreth and Talech were seated in chairs pulled up beside her bed, both males had collapsed forward to pillow their heads on their arms draped on the side of the mattress. They lay so close to each other it was a marvel that Meg could find any room at all between them, especially since their vibrissae twined together as they slept. It made for an adorable picture as Meg gave them a sheepish look.

Beverly frowned. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure on all the details, but Kaylar intercepted the beacon. Thankfully we were still pretty close to this area, so it didn't take us long to get to you because all three of you were in rough shape. You worst of all. They had cut the parasite from you before it could begin to burrow, but there was still a lot of damage from imbedded segments of legs and... well, you don't want to know," she finished with a wince.

“No, I’m certain I can live without that memory,” Beverly muttered, which earned her a sympathetic smile. “What about them?”

“They mostly suffered from mild bite wounds and cuts. Kaze teeth are close to those of an Argurma, but thankfully the ‘zombies’—as Zoreth called them—don’t transmit the parasite through bites. He explained it once we got them patched up, but they otherwise haven’t moved from your side while the med unit has been working on you.”

Neither male showed any sign of being bitten or even cut. Beverly ran her fingers over her face and neck experimentally. She didn’t even feel a scar from what Meg had described. “The med unit was able to do all of that?”

Meg grinned knowingly. “Pretty neat, huh?”

Hope rose, tightening Beverly’s chest. “If it can reverse what was done to Talech, then we have to tell him!”

Meg’s smile dropped and she shook her head. “I’m afraid not. I suggested it to Kaylar when he was being mended, but apparently Argurma tech fuses too quickly to their internal system grafts... or some such technological stuff that went right over my head. The gist is, it would have been possible if the implants were only a few days old, but he’s had them for a long time.”

Beverly closed her eyes in disappointment. It had been too long. He had them for weeks before he even went under stasis.

“How do you feel?” Meg murmured, her hand swiping over Beverly’s brow.

“Like I was run over by a bus,” she groaned. Her brow furrowed. “A bus is—”

“I know what a bus is,” Meg chuckled. “They may not have been operational by my time, but I’ve seen more than a few abandoned buses. That good, huh?”

“Could be better,” Beverly groaned. “But at least we’re all alive, and that’s the important part. I don’t know what I would’ve done if anything happened to either one of them.”

The other woman nodded and cast a glance toward the sleeping males. “They are quite devoted. It would make it hard choosing a mate between them, I imagine, if at all.”

Beverly nodded miserably. “And damned if I don’t love both of them.”

How would she ever choose and risk breaking the heart of the other?

Fourteen

ZORETH

Zoreth surveyed the room he would be sharing with Talech and Beverly. Meg had refused to allow their female to leave the med unit at all until she was convinced that Beverly had fully recovered. Although Zoreth processed the reasoning behind it, the separation had been difficult. Not only did he struggle to sleep, he found it difficult to maintain any sort of focus or calm. Emotions he once swore he suffered little affliction from rose to the fore, drowning him in their chaos. If not for Talech, he would have been lost. He found some measure of peace with the male, their vibrissae tangling as they instinctively sought comfort from each other as they suffered from the absence of their female.

It was not made any easier that their request to share a cabin had been met with incredulity from Kaylar, but it had been granted. His systems screamed with the wrongness of it all as he lay night after night with Talech without their mate safely wedged between them. It increased the stress on his systems knowing Talech suffered on a deeper level. Every evening and

morning when they were locked out of the med unit, Zoreth was vigilant in his attempts to soothe Talech to keep him from losing his grip on sanity and destroying the ship when he was refused access to Beverly.

Seeing Talech in such pain plagued his systems, enough so that Zoreth came close to attempting to wrestle control of the ship from Kaylar, just so he could unlock the med unit to give the male some relief. It was only the knowledge that Beverly required the time to heal completely within the med unit's operating bed, and that uninterrupted sleep was a necessary part of that healing, which kept him from acting.

And now, finally, Beverly was being released.

He processed that relief was flooding his systems at finally being reunited with her, but it was also making him edgy. He desired perfection for their coming night together. He was forced to acknowledge that part of that was due to Kaylar's announcement they would soon be joining the clan fleet. Things would change then, and it was not knowing precisely what impact that change would have that made him anxious. The biggest of which was whether the clan would separate him from his small family. He was unable to calculate whether they would even allow Talech to live without the male at least tethered to a mate to assure some degree of stability. For the first time since meeting Beverly, he felt their time together winding down, and it alarmed him.

He had erroneously assumed he would have more time. Of course, he had also made the mistake of assuming that it was a

simple matter of proving himself a pleasing mate and waiting for Beverly to decide. And he had been certain she would pick him. He had grievously miscalculated, unable to comprehend at the time how much she obviously loved the Talech. She had hidden it well—or perhaps had not been aware of the emotions she was experiencing—but the signs had been evident to anyone who was observant. If he had clearly processed the situation, he would have found a way to make Talech receptive to his presence much sooner.

It was rare for a female to accept more than one male. It was done only among clanless females who desired the additional protection of more males, or in cases where males had to pool their resources to care for a mate and offspring. Because of that, it was discouraged as a mark of poverty and undesirability among both males and females alike for somewhat different reasons. Beverly was not Argurma, but he could not guarantee that no one within his clan would casually remark upon such a mating where she might hear it.

His jaw clenched. Anyone who spoke unwisely would have to deal with him. He would not have anyone bringing his mate pain and embarrassment... or Talech for that matter.

If it even came to pass. Though he clearly processed Beverly's feelings for Talech, he was unable to calculate whether she had come to love him as well. Or the probability she would accept them both as her mates.

They needed to make their first night reunited together as close to perfection as possible. It could take everything he had

to secure his mate.

Zoreth rearranged the pillows, testing them for softness before placing the best ones in the center where she would lay between them. Unless she only lay there to humor them. It was possible she might wish to lie in another spot. His gaze roamed over the bed disconcertedly as he tried to calculate the likelihood of where she might prefer to sleep, all the while feeling Talech's amused gaze boring into him. Zoreth glanced over at him in annoyance.

The very least he could do was help.

Talech appeared to be unaware of his obligations. He sat on the other side of the room, arms crossed over his chest and his spinal limbs relaxed in a manner suggesting he lacked any concerns. Even the small smile that teased the corners of his mouth contained so little anxiety Zoreth was forced to marvel at it.

"You worry too much," Talech rumbled, and Zoreth shot him a hot glare.

"And you do not concern yourself enough," he replied with a bite to his voice. Straightening, he swept his arm around the room in frustration. "Do you not process that we risk everything if she does not choose? If we arrive unmated, the clan will separate her from us to give equal opportunity to all the males who might wish to court her. We have little time to convince her to set aside her fear and agree."

Talech's shoulders lifted as he shrugged, the gesture causing his upper spinal limbs to bob faintly. "If she does not say yes,

we have done a poor job of being the males she wants and needs. The room makes no difference. The clan makes no difference. Just us.”

Zoreth’s eyes narrowed, but in the next moment he sighed, and the tension drained from him. Talech’s observation was sound.

“My heart will not know how to go on without her. She is all that truly brings me joy,” Zoreth rasped morosely, his eyes falling upon the bed.

“Then we give our hearts to her and let her do what she will. She will either keep them or crush them.”

With those words, Talech turned away, his gaze fastening entirely on the door. Zoreth was not fooled. Though Talech spoke pragmatically and had been quick to make a second sound observation, he recognized that the soft growl that accompanied Talech’s words that revealed his emotional distress. Zoreth was also forced to recognize that his own anxious behavior was adding to that distress.

In the end, he had to acknowledge Talech was correct. They could only offer their love and hope it was enough. Still, that did not stop him from eagerly turning toward the door as it opened to admit a very whole and healthy Beverly inside. Clean of the dust and grime of the planet from her recent bath, she wore nothing but a simple, thick robe that was crafted from the replicator, but in his mind, she never looked more beautiful. His mate’s cautious smile lit something within him and threatened to destroy his systems.

In her own fashion, she processed that the time had come to settle things between them and was experiencing an equally nervous reaction.

Surprise filled her face in the next moment when Talech dropped to his knees before her. Taking the other male's actions in, Zoreth slowly sank to his knees as well. They had no heads of her enemies to offer her as trophies to prove their dedication and love for her. All they had was themselves.

He prayed to the gods it would be enough.

Fifteen

BEVERLY

Kneeling? Why were they kneeling? Beverly felt as if she were missing something she should know but scrambled to understand. All she had done was step through the door and they both dropped to their knees. Panic filled her as she stared at them, having no clue what she was supposed to do.

“Wow, umm, this is different,” Meg muttered at her side as she cast a curious glance toward the males and began to ease her way back out the door. “Perhaps I should just give you guys some privacy.”

Beverly turned a panicked look on her, but Meg merely smiled apologetically as she slipped out the door, leaving Beverly alone with whatever *this* was. Both males watched her expectantly. Lovingly even. Were they expecting her to choose... now? Panic filled her at the thought. That was impossible!

Zoreth frowned and stood. “Beverly, is all well?”

She shook her head mutely, tears of frustration filling her eyes. She thought she would have more time to convince them they all needed to be together. After all, they still had a few days before they reached the clan ship. It wasn't much time, but she would have done her best to convince them. Kaylar had warned her, in his blunt fashion. She needed to resolve matters before they arrived at the clan starship if she didn't want to be housed separately from them and risk being surrounded by other potential suitors vying for her attention.

Apparently, word had reached them as well.

Talech clicked in concern and stood also. Their large bodies filled the room as they reached for her at once. Surprisingly they did not hiss or show any sign of aggression toward each other as they drew her between them.

"Tell us," Talech rumbled. "We will destroy whatever harmed you."

She choked back a sound that was half-laugh and half-sob. "I don't think brute force is going to solve this problem, honey."

A look of pleasure crossed the male's formidable face. "You refer to me as sweet emissions from an insect... This is a term of endearment."

She choked back another laugh and Zoreth frowned.

"I wish for an endearment. A different one. I do not wish to be referred to in terms of emissions."

A chuckle escaped her. "All right, sweetie, you got it."

The hard corners of his mouth curved, his glowing eyes taking on a brightness she'd come to understand as happiness. "I thank you, anastha."

Anastha. Fierce one. It was a strange love word, but it fit the Argurma. She blinked, realization flooding her that it was not the first time Zoreth had called her that—she just hadn't paid close enough attention to notice it until now. Delight coiled within her and yet she wanted to cry now that she was presented with verbal evidence of Zoreth's love.

His happiness dimmed as she battled back another wave of tears. "Anastha?"

"Oh, I can't do this," she bit out brokenly. "I don't know how I'm supposed to choose when I love both of you."

Surprise registered on their faces for only a second before delight took its place. Even Zoreth grinned broadly, his sharp teeth bared in an uncustomary real smile as his mandibles purred. Talech took up the purr as well, but not until he yanked Beverly up in his arms with an ear-piercingly happy shout as Zoreth closed in quickly on the other side.

She laughed again and brushed the tears from her cheeks as she looked back and forth between the two males hugging her between them. "Wait, did I miss something important here?"

Talech brushed his mandible against one side of her cheek, and Zoreth repeated the gesture, brushing mandible and cheek against her hair.

"Only if you missed that we love you," Talech rumbled.

“And we both offer you our love and devotion,” Zoreth filled in with a deep sigh. “We desire that you accept us as your mates.”

Her eyes widened, and she turned awkwardly in their arms to look at both of them. “Wait... I can have you both as my mates?”

Zoreth hesitated, a shadow of pain and disappointment passing over his face. “Do you not desire to have us both?”

A joyous laugh burst from her as she flung her arms the best she could around both of their necks and hugged them to her. “Yes! Fuck yes! A thousand times, yes!”

Zoreth pulled back just enough to squint down at her. “Two yeses is enough. We do not wish to share you with even more males.”

Giggling with abandon, she pulled his head down and pressed her lips against his, catching him by surprise. His two tongues swept into her mouth, startling her, but her gasp soon turned into a moan as she quickly discovered just how exquisite they felt. When they finally broke apart for air, she was practically lightheaded but grinning from ear to ear.

“Two sounds perfect to me,” she agreed, and sighed lustfully again when Talech tipped her head toward him and claimed her mouth in turn.

Two would quite possibly ruin her for life—and she couldn’t wait.

Sixteen

TALECH

Talech growled against Beverly's mouth. His civix pressed harder and more insistently against the inside of his sheath. This time he welcomed the pressure instead of fighting it back. Finally, he would have his mate and a bond brother as well. He would have a family to share his new life. He did not recall what his life was like before, but he decided it mattered little to him. This was his happiness, it was all that he cared about. His rumble of pleasure and the soft purr of his mandibles didn't stop even when Beverly finally pulled her mouth free from his to meet his eyes. Guilt flashed within their depths.

"Are you sure?" she whispered. "What happened in the past ___"

"Does not matter," he assured her. "I process that you took over the lab that held me. You explained this. But when I woke, there was only you. You are all that is important. Nothing from before means anything."

She bit her lip. "You could have a family you don't remember."

He chuffed. Of all his terrible memories obscured by the darkness, that one remained with him. It was muddled, but he remembered the pain without pleasure to ease the way and the shame and sorrow that had engulfed him. “I had not yet breached when I arrived on your world. I have no mate.”

“He would have no living clan who would truly remember and grieve his loss,” Zoreth added, his mandibles sliding through her hair lovingly as he spoke. “That he recalls his name means we may contact his clan and inform them of his life among us to satisfy those who remain. Talech was clearly an explorer class Argurma, which means his clan would not have expected him to return. This is the way of explorers,” he explained.

“That’s so sad,” she murmured, her eyes misting in sympathy.

“I do not miss what I do not remember,” Talech pointed out firmly, disliking that she implied that he was lacking or suffering. “I dislike struggling because I do not remember, but this new life is all that is important. You are my family,” Talech’s eyes turned to Zoreth, including him as their vibrissae sifted through her hair and wound around each other. “Both of you.”

Zoreth’s mandibles clicked in agreement and his eyes dropped back to their mate between them. “It is time to unify our family.”

Talech’s purr rose a notch with excitement as he watched Zoreth carefully draw apart the robe covering their mate, revealing the swells of her breasts and the darker dusk of the pebbled nipples tipping them. He was eager to bare the rest of

her but kept his system focused on Zoreth's movements, taking his cues from the other male as he bared every inch of her glorious body.

It was not the first time he had seen her nude, since he had cared for her and tended to her injuries when she had been damaged on the island, but it was different now. She was not terribly wounded but whole and receptive to them. His lust raged freely through him as he watched the robe part the rest of the way as Zoreth dragged it down her arms and tossed it away. There was a softness to her belly that drew him and a delightful curve to her hips that was more pronounced without the concealment of the flight suit. But it was the enticing thatch of hair between her legs that drew his attention, and he was unable to tear his gaze away when Zoreth suddenly lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

Talech followed eagerly, his eyes following along as Zoreth laid her on top of it, his hands brushing worshipfully down her sides and sliding down her thighs before gently pushing them apart to expose the flower of sex to them. It was wet and slick and so inviting that Talech was unable to stop his civix as it extruded fully, thick lubrication pumping out from the porous channels that ran down its sides. It writhed in its demands, jerking and thrusting against his flight suit to the point of pain.

With a hiss, he stripped it from his body, pleasure filling him all the while at the way their mate's eyes roamed over him appreciatively. Her gaze lingered on his sex, first in awe, and then in desire as her cheeks reddened and her scent thickened sweetly with her arousal. As much as he appreciated her desire

for him, at that moment, he was more interested in the way she was presented before him. Especially that tight center of her that beckoned him.

When Zoreth dropped to her side and began to run his tongues along her nipples, lapping at them and tugging them between the two dexterous organs, Talech did not bother to rein in his desire any further. He dropped to his knees between her thighs and fastened his mouth to her cunt. His tongues filled her and slicked through her folds ravenously. No matter how much her body wept for him, he could not get enough. She tasted perfect, especially when his tongues flicked and pulled at the little bud at the top of her sex and made her cream for him. He experimentally drove a vibrissae into her, and then another, and growled with pleasure when she cried out and spasmed around him, releasing more of her decadent sweetness.

Beverly was the finest thing he had ever tasted. He did not know if he would ever have the will to be parted from her again.



Zoreth

Zoreth toyed with her breasts, his vibrissae slipping over her as he learned every inch and flavor of her. His gaze slanted down to where Talech feasted upon her, and he smirked around the breast gently caught between his lips, held in place

exactly where he wanted it while his tongues danced along the nipple. Talech appeared to be experiencing a moment of ecstasy. It had lasted long enough. He would have his turn there now.

Releasing the nipple from his mouth with a soft pop, he slid down her side, clattering his mandibles as he moved so Talech was not caught by surprise. Talech's eyes met his and narrowed for a moment, but he gave up his prize with a soft rumble before turning an interested gaze to the breasts Zoreth had abandoned. Hiding a grin, Zoreth dropped down between Beverly's legs, fully aware of her watchful eyes upon him. He glanced up the length of her body and met her passion-glazed gaze, watched her pant between reddened lips as she gasped and arched as Talech mercilessly latched onto her breast.

Zoreth chuffed softly and slowly lowered his head, his tongues snaking from between his lips as she watched him. She was so beautiful. Her cheeks were redder than her lips, and the blush stained her neck and chest, so the tops of her breasts were likewise reddened beneath the light sheen that covered her body. His tongues slipped along her sex and burrowed into her, and Zoreth's eyes rolled back as her body arched and shuddered beneath him. The taste of her cunt sent a fire through him and pain as his civix finally breached violently, extruding in a rush, weeping lubricant from its sides and copious amounts of precum from its tip from the pleasure that rode close on the heels of the pain.

He surrendered himself to her in that moment. His mate. His goddess. His everything.

Seventeen

BEVERLY

They were trying to kill her. The way they were toying with her body between them had pleasure shooting through her from multiple points. Her nipples felt over sensitized and her pussy spasmed as yet another orgasm kicked through her, and that wasn't even counting the way she shivered with pleasure at every gentle scrape of their claws or teeth against her. She was hot and needy in a way she'd never experienced as she squirmed beneath them, heady from the pleasure and yet needing more. As incredible as their tongues were, she desperately needed to be filled. She was impatient to the point that she was gripping the vibrissae and tugging on them.

It didn't do a whole lot of good. In fact, it seemed to get them off a little because more vibrissae twined around her fingers and hands as if begging to be brutalized while they attacked her erogenous zones fervently. Every so often whichever male was at her breasts would lift his head and claim her mouth, kissing her deeply as he flicked her nipple with the side of a claw or pinched and tugged on it. They never eased up. Never

relented. It was no wonder she felt like she was being consumed by them and the raw, aching need that was filling her.

She was ready to make her damn demands if they didn't get down to business and stop playing with her.

Winding her fingers tightly in Talech's vibrissae, she gave a hard jerk. He moaned against her mouth, but to her relief, he relented and withdrew his tongues from between her lips as his mouth parted from hers.

"I want your cocks in me now," she hissed.

His eyes dropped to where Zoreth was still firmly attached to her pussy before meeting her gaze again. "Where?"

"Fuck, anywhere. My mouth, my ass, my pussy. Just put them in me."

Interest brightened his gaze, and he straightened to shift the bulk of his body around so his thighs were firmly planted on the bed behind her head. His spinal limbs settled on the bed around him in a way that would have been eerie if she hadn't become so accustomed to their presence. Now they just looked as if he were anchoring himself in place for her pleasure. The position also had the advantage of giving her a good look at what he was packing.

It was nothing like a human cock. Not only did he lack external testicles, but it was long, tapered, the color of soot, and writhed as if it were another one of his vibrissae, but shorter and fatter with two porous tube-like structures that ran

down both sides of it. The tip was flexible but had a slightly hooked appearance that would have been at least a little alarming if she hadn't already been sold on the sex.

Gripping it in her hand, she was instantly fascinated with the hot length as it pressed into her hand, precum and lubrication smearing her palm. She gave it a few long strokes to get familiar with the bumpy surface, drawing ragged moans from the large Argurma behind her, before finally sucking it into her mouth. She barely had the tip in before the rest pressed in. There was a brief sense of panic that filled her, but she fought it off and relaxed against the invasion once she discovered he wasn't going to gag her with it. Since it had considerable flexibility, rather than simply going down her throat, it slid rapturously over her tongue, coating it with his flavor.

Beverly moaned around it. She couldn't place the taste of him, but it sent a renewed desire coiling hotly through her. Distantly she was aware of Zoreth lifting his head with a purr. She craned her neck slightly so she could see the heat in his eyes as he watched her sucking Talech's dick.

Then his body moved over hers as Talech's purr grew louder in greeting. Zoreth's cock twisted and slid over her pussy for just a moment before driving deep into her. It writhed against her inner walls as he began to thrust, his body moving over hers. He didn't settle fully over her, perhaps in respect for Talech's personal space, but pulled her bottom up over his thighs as he remained in a kneeling position while he worked himself in and out of her. His cock wriggled in protest every time he pulled out only to promptly screw back into her with

every forward rock of his hips. It stoked a gradually building fire within her as it rubbed against her—sometimes gently, sometimes roughly. But always at that slow, measured pace that was driving her insane.

And there was nothing she could do to hurry it on and make him take her harder and deeper like she wanted. He held her hips firmly between his clawed hands, keeping perfect control over their rhythm as he watched her mouth move on Talech with rapt fascination.

Groaning softly in frustration, Beverly began to work Talech quicker, sucking harder while stroking his remaining length faster, trying to goad the males into doing what she wanted. Talech's body jerked in response, his thighs tensing as his cock swelled with his rising lust. He clearly loved what she was doing to him. She was, therefore, unprepared when he growled and moved away, pulling his cock from her mouth.

Beverly made a sound of confused protest at his withdrawal, but she squeaked in the next moment when she was suddenly yanked upright in Zoreth's arms. Her confusion dissipated quickly when the bed shifted as Talech moved in behind her. His spinal limbs promptly rose all around her like a cage after he settled into place, and Zoreth grinned when they curled around him as well, locking the three of them together.

Zoreth tugged himself free from her and the tip of it flicked against her clit, sending a thunderous bolt of pleasure through her before he let the writhing length of his cock settle against her clit, rubbing in ways that made her shiver and arch against

the two sets of hands now holding onto her hips and flanks. He chuffed softly in amusement and looked down, his vibrissae wriggling with excitement as a look of naked desire crossed his face as Beverly felt something tease her entrance.

She whined softly as Talech filled her pussy from behind, setting it in motion against Zoreth's cock as Talech rocked her up against it with his every thrust. Pleasure exploded through her, taking her breath away, before breaking her apart with its shattering orgasm. She was still riding the first wave of pleasure when Zoreth shifted lower and pressed forward, pushing his cock in with Talech's. Their twisting cocks seemed to hit every nerve at once, and Beverly was helpless as another, harder orgasm swept over her, and she squeezed around them like a vice as he battled his way deeper inside of her.

The dual groans from the males filled her ears and she smiled at the sound. If sex was this incredible for her, she knew that it had to feel just as amazing to them as they writhed against each other, stimulating each other as her internal walls gripped and squeezed them.

Talech's metal limbs tightened around Zoreth, pressing him forward so he sank the rest of the way in, until every inch of her was stuffed with them. She watched as Zoreth's eyes closed with rapture, and he began to move once again as the weight of their combined bodies appeared to immobilize Talech beneath him. He couldn't do more than rock, working his cock in small amounts in and out of her. Talech growled, but a look of satisfaction crossed Zoreth's face, and he picked

up his pace, his cock slamming into her and against Talech, his body and hers arching upward together to meet each stroke.

Talech's hips rocked faster despite his limited range of motion, his breath hissing in her ear with the effort. He was restrained from plunging wildly into her, but that made his cock a continuous sliding friction against her inner walls for the few inches of its mobility. That set her ablaze as Zoreth rutted into her, his cock slapping wildly as it screwed in and out. Talech growled and arched his hips, thrusting so deep Beverly gasped as he buried himself and pressed forward just as Zoreth groaned and gave one final deep thrust. Beverly felt completely pinned, both cocks whipping strangely within her, tugging at some hidden inner part that sent bolts of pleasure sliding through her one after the other, raising her on a dangerous tide of pleasure.

She cried out as she crested and then again in shock as teeth bore down on opposite sides of her neck, piercing deep as their release sprayed within her. Their mandibles descended, the tips digging into her flesh and releasing something hot into her bloodstream that caused another orgasm to sweep over her, pulling her beneath its wave. She was barely aware of their tongues on her neck through the haze of her passion as she surrendered completely to the unique connection that was now theirs.

Her mates.

She smiled as she lay between them, their happiness surrounding her as assuredly as Talech's limbs keeping them

locked together.

They would always be together. They would never let her go, and she would never give them up. She had her family, a new clan, and their future together stretched out before them with all the potential she ever dreamed about. It had finally happened for her. She had found her happiness.



Zoreth

Zoreth smiled as he nestled against his mate's belly. He could still feel Talech's civix pumping against his as they found their release with each other. It was a strange feeling but pleasurable. He was certain that his civix was releasing extra semen for his egg in reaction to it. He was not concerned about the implantation itself and whether it bore fruit. The act itself was pure pleasure, and it seemed endless as their civixes moved against each other.

He had a mate. He had doubted it would ever happen to him. The odds had not seemed in his favor, and yet now that he had it, he knew he would never let it go. Beverly and Talech were his, his mate and bond brother healing something within him that he did not even know was broken. The death of his twin had left a hole in his heart that suddenly felt a little more filled, more so than he suspected it would have been with a mate alone.

A happy sigh fell from his lips as he pillowed his head on Talech's shoulder and he smiled at the brush of the other male's vibrissae against his. Love was a simple language, one he thought he would never understand, even less so after his twin left him alone in the world. Now he understood.



Talech

Talech rumbled happily as he watched his family sleeping in his embrace. Although they had changed positions so Zoreth was no longer crushing her while they were engaged in the implantation hold, Zoreth had not been able to escape Talech's embrace. This was good as far as he was concerned. He felt secure now. The fugue of his desire while mating had not injured his mate thanks to Zoreth's tight control. The male had understood and had controlled it. Zoreth was now as much a part of him and his happiness as Beverly was. The darkness that yawned within him from the pit of his damaged systems was settled entirely with contentment. Gods save anyone who tried to take his family from him.

Note to the Reader

Argurma Monster is book 2 of the Argurma Chronicles.

To see where it all begins, pick up Broken Earth, book 1 of the Argurma Salvager Trilogy.

Destiny's Mate by Trish Heinrich

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



ANTONY DRAKE CARRIES A DARK SECRET
BEHIND HIS DEVIL-MAY-CARE GRIN.

A secret that ripped him out of his destiny in the Galactic Exploration Corps and has had him wandering for a year. But when a week of debauchery with an old friend comes to an abrupt and bloody halt, old memories start to awaken, and the destiny he's run from is now nipping at his heels.

Destiny's Mate takes place twenty years before the events in Sinful Mate, book one of the Infinite Unions: Intrepid Alien Mates series. You do not need to have read Sinful Mate to enjoy this story.

Content Warnings: *gore, zombies, references to torture*

One

“Right there... oh, Goddess!” Thalia gasped.

I grinned against her cunt as I sucked the end of her three-headed bud into my mouth and fucked her with two fingers. Her hands clutched my horns, shorter than most Zorestran’s due to my human mother, and I groaned at the sensation that shot straight to my cock. She steered me as her hips flexed and she began to fuck my face.

“Oh... oh fuck... Antonyyyyyy!” she squealed as her release coated my fingers.

She rode the waves of it out against my face, her grip becoming so tight that I could no longer hold back my phallus from extruding from its sheath. The cool air of the shuttle hit the sensitive skin and I gasped against her.

“I just... why aren’t you in the Gex-corps?” she breathed as she let go of me. “I could have that every morning if we were serving together.”

Gex-corps was short for Galactic Exploration Corps, the military and exploration branch of the Galactic Union of Planets. It had once been my dream to serve there, now the mention of it brought the threat of panic, which I quickly stifled, and I distracted myself by licking my lips free of her spend.

“I have my reasons, *cheja*. Besides, this is what makes shore leave special, isn't it?”

“Oh, I love it when you speak Zorestran to me,” she chuckled and pulled me to her. “Now, did I see your cock extrude?”

I took in a sharp breath as her hand seized me. Her fingers ran along the ridged skin and down to the knot my sheath became when I was fully erect and extruded. Just the barest brush of her fingertips against me had my head rolling back as a long string of precum dripped off me.

“I love it when you make that face,” she whispered as her *riju* caressed my face and her sharp incisors nipped against my throat. “I can sense your arousal, but *seeing* it is another thing.”

Thalia's species, the Valtoshans, were empathic and when her *riju*, the two dozen long, smooth tendrils that flowed from her scalp, brushed up against someone, her empathic skills were heightened. With six of them caressing my face and neck, I'd imagine that Thalia didn't just sense how turned on I was, she was feeling it.

Which would explain the rush of wet from her nethers as she ran the tip of my dick through her.

“Where haven’t we fucked yet?” she panted as I nibbled on her breasts.

We’d spent most of her shore leave on my luxury shuttle, making a game out of seeing if we could fuck on every surface.

“The... ah, *relsh va!* Thalia, you-you keep doing that and I...”

She’d gone to her knees and was running her tongue along the base of my cock while her *riju* flicked against my knot. My knees were going weak from the burst of electric sensation through my body. Everything was over sensitized suddenly, and I didn’t realize that I’d seized Thalia’s chin to open her mouth until my dick was halfway into her hot mouth.

“You like that?” I hissed down at her, the primal part of my Zorestran heritage coming out to play as my mating instincts started to rouse. “You want me to fuck this pretty mouth until you’re weeping?”

Thalia moaned, eyes rolling back into her head.

I growled low in my throat and bared my teeth. Her *riju* retreated into a subservient curl at the base of her neck and her hands went behind her back. Thalia had grown up in one of the seven holy houses of pleasure on her home planet. Instead of becoming a sacred concubine though, she’d chosen to join the Gex-corps. We’d met when we were both first year cadets and had been fuck buddies ever since. Only, once I left right after graduation, things had shifted between us. Our stolen time together had taken on a different feel, one of desperation and something sharper; something I wasn’t ready to examine yet.

My forearm muscles bunched and my thighs tightened as I restrained myself from fucking her mouth like the brutal beast that was currently trying to escape within me. Inch by tortured inch, I fed my cock between her gray lips until I hit the back of her throat. Tears welled in her dark eyes as she stared up at me, waiting like the good little concubine she'd trained to be for me to retreat. After five years of playing together, we knew one another's limits, but I still paid close attention to her face, the subtle change in her white skin as her air was cut off by my cock. Finally, I withdrew, the tip still between her lips. Tears fell down her cheeks as I shallowly thrust into her mouth.

Then I repeated it all, again and again until her supple body shuddered, her *riju* trembled in their submissive state at the back of her neck and Thalia's face was wet with tears and saliva.

"So beautiful," I thumbed away her tears as she stared up at me, my cock still in her mouth. "I want to make a mess of you. See my cum running down those tits? Use it to finger fuck yourself until you're screaming."

Her breath came out on a whimper, and I grinned down at her.

I knew the picture we made as I held us both on a razor's edge with those tiny thrusts into her mouth.

Me looming above her with my horns and salt-and-pepper hair that hung down my back. My light blue skin illuminated by the low lights in my quarters, which also cast a shadow over Thalia's much shorter and delicate form, her white and gray

skin dotted with sweat as she trembled, waiting for me to give her permission to touch herself as slick ran down her parted thighs.

The smell was delicious, and I found my mouth watering, even though I'd just feasted on her cunt.

"You like it when I use you like my own fuck doll, don't you?" I hissed.

She moaned around me.

"You want me to let you come, don't you?"

Thalia's dark eyes pleaded with me.

I grinned down at her, remembering the one place we hadn't defiled yet. The one I'd purposely saved for last.

"Command deck, now."

Her lips came off me with a pop and she tried to run past me when my arm snaked around her and lifted her off her feet.

"You still wearing the special gift I got you?" I asked as I carried her to the front of the shuttle.

"Yes," she rasped.

I reached between her perfect ass cheeks and pressed on the plug I'd bought her. We'd been playing with different sizes all week, and now the thought of taking her ass was an obsession. She squealed and wiggled, more wetness dripped from her cunt.

"I'm going to plunder your ass before you leave me," I bit her shoulder. "And you're going to come as many times as I tell

you to.”

“Yes!” she grunted.

I snagged the gold vibrator off a nearby table as we passed the completely destroyed dining room.

When we got into the spotless command room with the glittering control panel and two chairs, I couldn't help grinning.

The ship *Thalia* served on was in view, and we would be contacted for docking information soon. Hopefully while I was pounding her ass and stimulating her with the vibrator. She loved it when we were semipublic, and this was something I'd been wanting to try for a while.

“You bastard,” she said as I set her on her feet and she saw the ship.

“What's the matter? Don't think you can be quiet while I talk to your shipmates?”

“Oh, I know I can, but can you *not* sound like you're balls deep in my ass?”

I pushed her down until her hands were braced on the console and gathered her slick on my hand.

“We'll see, won't we?”

I kissed down her back as I rubbed her arousal all over my cock.

“Are you ready?” I asked, playing with the plug.

Thalia arched her back, head up and *riju* writhing with excitement.

“Please, Antony,” she begged, “I’ve been waiting all week for this.”

“Me too, *cheja*.”

I pulled it out slowly and threw it onto one of the chairs. Then I ran my fingers through Thalia’s soaked folds, relishing the guttural groan she let out before taking more of her slick and massaging it around her tight rosebud.

The ship was getting closer by the minute, and a thrill shot through me at the thought of someone hearing Thalia’s breathy moans. She may have sold her soul to the Gex-corps, but her body belonged to me in this moment.

I notched myself at her back entrance and slowly breached her. The sound that rolled up from her throat was obscene and matched the one I gritted out through my teeth.

“You’re so tight, Thalia,” I grunted. “You feel so perfect.”

“More... fill me, Antony, pleeaasse!”

Not one to deny a lady when she asked so nicely, I worked a little more into her before pulling out. Back and forth, I filled her more with each pass until my knot kissed her ass cheeks. Thalia was so turned on that her cunt was dripping; the clear liquid ran down her legs and was beginning to pool on the floor. Valtoshan females didn’t produce that much slick for just anyone. It was only those that they trusted, that they had the deepest feelings for. And all week she’d been producing

more and more. It activated an odd sensation in me, and I had a sudden vision of her belly swollen with our young, of filling her over and over with my seed.

No! She's a member of the Gex-corps. She belongs to them, not me.

I squashed the instinct to breed her and focused on the vibrator in my hand. When I switched it on, Thalia moaned in anticipation. At least, until I pressed it to her sensitive bud.

“Oh, oh, oh... yeeeessss!”

I was not at all surprised that the orgasm hit her that fast. She'd been panting for it since I first cut off her air with my dick. But now, watching her come apart was like a drug. I wanted as much of it as she could possibly give me.

I started to fuck her ass faster, not giving her a moment's reprieve from the pleasure of the vibrator.

“Again,” I ordered, my knot slapping against her butt.

She cried out as another hit her. By now I was hanging on by a thread, longing to unleash, but I held back.

The ship was now in range. They should be hailing us any second.

I couldn't speak as I picked up my pace, the sounds of our panting and the slap of skin deafening in the small space.

Another orgasm hit her so strong that Thalia's body sagged. I wrapped one arm around her waist as I reached the end of my restraint.

Still, she didn't tell me to stop, so I kept it up until I was ready to explode inside of her. At the last possible moment, I pulled out and emptied streams of white cum all over her back, shocked that it just kept pouring out of me. The sensation ripped right through my body until I was snarling and roughly jacking myself to expel every last drop. I was so lost in the feral pleasure of painting her body with my release that I didn't notice that I was still pressing the vibrator to her cunt.

“Antony... no more... please...”

The sound of her voice cut through enough for me to drop it to the floor, where it landed in a puddle of her slick. I roared as I unloaded another stream onto her. This one pooled between her ass and ran down her legs. The perfume of our mixed release was intoxicating, and it made my knot pulse. If we hadn't been about to receive a hail from her ship, if this wasn't the last moment of her shore leave, I would've knotted Thalia for the first time and locked her in my arms for hours as I filled her with my seed.

The instinct was so strong that I was terrified of losing control, and I stumbled back, desperate to get a hold of myself.

My mind was clouded in the haze of a mating instinct I didn't even think I possessed roaring to life along with the strongest orgasm my life. It was for this reason, I suspected, that it didn't occur to me to worry that we hadn't been contacted by Thalia's ship.

“Antony,” she panted, “something is wrong.”

The thick sound of worry in her voice pulled me back from the edge of the mating frenzy and I swung my gaze to her.

Thalia was still bent over where I'd pinned her, covered in my spend. We were both breathing heavy, but the glint of passion had faded from her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked.

"They haven't contacted us, there's been no attempt at a tractor beam or offer to dock alongside."

I may have dropped out of the Gex-corps a year ago, but I remembered protocol enough to know that this was indeed a strange situation.

"You go get cleaned up," I said, snagging a robe from a nearby closet. "I'll hail them and see what's going on."

Thalia began to stand and gasped as thick, cooling spend fell down her back and legs. Her eyes widened in shock when she looked at me and I turned away. She'd been taught the sexual habits of every alien species that she might come across when she'd been training as a concubine. And even if she hadn't, Thalia had been with me enough to know that this was unusual.

"Antony," she whispered.

"Later." My voice was too sharp, but I couldn't help it.

If she asked me, I might just unravel, and we couldn't afford that right now.

“We need to figure this out,” I nodded at the ship as we slowed alongside it.

She stared at me a moment longer. Thalia didn’t need to touch me with her *riju* to know what I was feeling. I’d always been an open book to her. But this time, I needed to be a mystery. So I closed myself off and refused to look her in the eye, busying myself with getting the coms up and running.

“Right. Of course,” she finally said before walking away.

I closed my eyes and shoved away the storm of emotions that was threatening to tear down the walls I’d built over the last year. Every instinct had told me that seeing Thalia again was dangerous, that it would bring up things I had been running from ever since I’d walked out of the cave on Zorestra. But I’d missed her, more than I cared to admit. So I’d agreed to the rendezvous and until now, I hadn’t regretted a single moment of it.

This has to be the last time.

My chest burned and twisted at the thought, and I clenched my jaw.

Having a mate wasn’t in the plan any more than returning to the Gex-corps. I was suddenly grateful for the excuse of trying to figure out why the ship hadn’t contacted us. I could focus on that and get everything under control before saying good-bye to Thalia.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and hailed the ship.

“Science Frigate Galileo, this is the shuttle Rembros, come in?”

There was static on the other end and a strange high-pitched whine that came and went.

I tried again with the same results.

We were close enough that there shouldn't have been any sub space interference to the coms, and if their communications were down, there should've been a beacon saying so. I studied the outside of the hull that I could see and didn't notice any damage. The ship appeared a little darker than I would've thought it should, but nothing that indicated distress.

I need more intel.

My shuttle was mostly a pleasure cruiser, but I couldn't help splurging on a few upgrades. Some of which weren't exactly legal.

Like my scanning array.

I brought it up and proceeded to scan the ship for life signs.

“What the...?” I breathed. “That can't be right.”

I ran the scan again and the same results came up.

One life sign.

That was it.

A science vessel like this one should've had at least one hundred crew and researchers aboard, give or take a few. But this was showing only one living being on the ship.

I piloted my shuttle around the ship, slow enough to allow me to examine it for any signs of attack. There was nothing. No torpedo damage, no blast burns. I couldn't see any hull breaches or debris.

The frigate was simply there, orbiting an unknown planet with half of the outside lights dimmed, no distress beacon, no attempt by the computer emergency systems to hail us. It was as if I were looking at a ghost ship.

So much for dropping her off and getting the hell out of here.

There was running from a destiny I didn't want, and there was running from people who may need help. I was fine with the former, but I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did the latter.

Two

After confirming the scans one more time, I hurriedly cleaned up and dressed in the atmo suit I had stashed. It was the newest version, with nanotech built in to monitor vitals and whatever kind of atmosphere we'd find on the Galileo. The nanites would adapt the suit to about a hundred different kinds of hostile environments if necessary, I just hoped that we wouldn't have to use that feature. I had an extra that I made Thalia, who had been shell shocked to hear the report, wear.

Now we were waiting for the emergency air lock that I'd secured between my shuttle and the Galileo. I glanced over at her, my protective helmet made the turn of my head clumsy and all I wanted to do was hold her.

"You okay?" I asked through the connected coms.

"No. I wasn't okay when you asked five minutes ago, and I'm not okay now."

"Right. Sorry."

She paused while checking the settings on her pulse rifle, a somewhat cumbersome weapon that had a limited number of charges, but packed a variety of punches from ‘here’s a headache’ to ‘here’s a hole in your sternum.’

“I’m scared,” she admitted. “There was something off about the mood on the ship when I went on leave.”

“You never found out what?”

She shook her head.

“When I asked my direct CO, she simply said that they were going to explore a new planet and the crew had a lot on their mind.”

“Was it that one?” I asked, pointing at the white and green planet below us.

“I don’t know. They told me to meet them at these coordinates when my shore leave was over, but that was it. Honestly, I was disappointed to be missing the mission to a new planet. I hadn’t even requested shore leave, they’d just given it to me, and I was so tired I didn’t even think to question it.”

“Hey,” I put my hand on her slight shoulder and squeezed, “that’s not your fault. If your own CO wouldn’t tell you what’s going on, what were you supposed to do?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

Thalia was the kind to torment herself over something like this for ages, and I worried about how she’d react to what lay within her ship. I’d gotten a bad feeling the moment the scans showed only one life form. And now, as we watched the

emergency hatch seal release, that feeling had grown teeth and was digging itself into my gut.

A second later the emergency hatch popped open. Thalia and I clicked on the power source of our pulse rifles and made sure they were set to stun.

She looked over at me, breath flaring fast and hard on the face plate of her helmet.

“Hey, you’ve got this,” I said, forcing strength into my voice.

“I scored average on my combat training,” her laugh was nervous. “I’m a scientist with a specialty in xeno psychology, not a soldier.”

“Well *today*, you are a soldier. So take a breath and get your ass through that air lock. I’ll be right behind you.”

Her head whipped back to the door, which showed a corridor bathed in shadows. Emergency lights flashed on and off in quick jolts, showing glimpses of...

Blood. There’re blood smears on the wall and floor.

Thalia must’ve seen them at the same time I did because she took a step back and shook her head.

“I don’t—”

I took her shoulders in my hands and spun her to look at me.

“You’re a member of the Gex-corps, you did the same training as I did, and if memory serves, you scored higher than me on threat assessment and strategic thinking. Right?”

She nodded.

“Okay then. You may not have anticipated doing this, but you *can* do it. And I’ll be right beside you, just like at the academy. The two of us, together.”

She licked her lips and let out a long breath.

“Together. Yes... I can do this.”

“Damn right. Now lead on Ensign...”

It took a long moment of staring out into the dark before she put one foot in front of the other and stepped onto the ship. I was hard on her heels, trying not to crowd her, but wanting Thalia to know that I was right there with her. It probably didn’t matter if she took lead or not; it wasn’t like they would censure her for letting me go first. But she was the officer here, not me. This was her ship, her mission, and something told me it had to be her that did this. It had been a long time since I’d needed to listen to my gut, and the sensation was odd. Like coming back to a part of myself that was all at once foreign and precious.

Our boots thudded on the floor of the ship and my suit immediately took atmospheric readings. The blue lights on our weapons illuminated the blood on the walls and floor in garish detail. There were dark red and green smears, as well as some blue. Scorch marks from blaster fire were mixed in with the fluids, and I started to wonder if the one life sign I’d detected was the one who’d done this.

“The atmosphere is breathable,” Thalia said as the indicators in the helmet went green. “Let’s lower the helms for better visibility.”

I grinned at how in command she sounded and obeyed the order.

“These blood smears indicate a dragged body.” She pointed to a particularly thick one on the floor.

“Maybe someone trying to help a fellow crew mate.”

“Sick bay is this way.”

I followed her at a slow, steady pace. I could tell that she wanted to run and that she was scared by the way her *riju* quivered around her head, but that was now the only sign as she led us down the corridor. A science frigate like the Galileo had wide hallways that should've been brightly lit under normal circumstances. The ship should've smelled clean, fresh from the air filters and cleaning bots, but instead, there was a nauseating tang of blood from several different species hanging in air, which was stale and warm. It didn't take long after stepping foot on the ship for us to begin to see bodies.

Two human men were slumped against the wall with dried blood on their faces, throats, and down the front of their uniforms where it had run from their eye sockets. Thalia mumbled a word in her tongue that I vaguely recognized as a swear word. I crouched down to examine them further, hoping for clues as to what did this. Blood was also evident from their ears, but I saw no other wounds to indicate a struggle or other types of injury. It appeared that the injuries were likely sustained internally, which made my stomach coil tight. What kind of alien or weapon could do this?

I took a med scanner out of the small first aid kit at my waist and scanned the first man. The readings were minimal but still confusing as hell.

I scanned the other one and got the same information.

“What’s wrong?” Thalia asked.

“These readings make no sense.”

“Why not?”

“Well, according to this, they died of cardiac arrest brought on by acute trauma to the brain. There’s no outer wound, nothing to indicate head trauma, but the scan says that both of them have had their anterior insular cortex fried, along with the surrounding tissue. Like something got into their brain and killed them.”

“Your shuttle didn’t detect any kind of airborne entity, correct?”

“Correct, but Thalia, what else could it be?”

I was holding panic back by the thinnest of margins as we both looked around the dark corridor. It wasn’t as if we’d be able to *see* an airborne entity or parasite, and if this was an undiscovered virus or life form, it could be undetectable by the scanners in our suits. Not that it really mattered; at this point we’d likely been exposed. Still, I desperately wanted proof that I wasn’t going to die with blood pouring from my ears, nose, and eye sockets because my brain was burned out.

“Wait a minute,” Thalia said, taking the scanner from me.

“The part of the brain that was burned out is the area that

processes empathy on humans.”

She ran over to an Atavarian crew mate laying against the wall, his hands coated in green blood.

“Same area on the Atavarian,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“I have no idea, but they were bringing samples up from the planet below, maybe something got out?”

We both looked around at the carnage, and I was trying to process how samples could kill an entire crew, when a groan echoed down the dark hall and I jumped.

“Defensive position,” Thalia ordered.

The instincts I’d honed in the academy snapped into place and I turned my body so my back was to hers. I’d taken every combat training class and seminar they’d offered, but standing here, with the flashing lights making it difficult to see and dead bodies all around, it hit me that there was no level of training that could replicate the terror of a real life or death situation.

I swallowed down the ball in my throat and checked the settings on my rifle. These weren’t military issue, and as such, they had a limited amount of power for the pulses. I sent up a silent hope that whatever was coming at us wouldn’t need much to bring down.

I blinked in an attempt to get my eyes to stop reacting poorly to the strobing effect of the lights when another long moan

reached us. Only this time, there was a dragging sound too, like something heavy and cumbersome being pulled slowly.

“It’s coming from ahead of me,” Thalia whispered, the ends of her *riju* curled in on themselves.

“Adjust your setting to maximum stun.”

“What if it’s a survivor?”

“What if it’s the thing that did this?”

“Ungh! Uuuungh!”

Now the moan sounded more like a garbled yell.

“Oh Goddess, help us,” Thalia whispered.

I spun around in time to see the source of the strange noises and Thalia’s shock. Around the bend of the corridor came a lumbering figure in a torn uniform. The flickering lights gave their movements an odd sort of jerkiness that was as nearly as horrifying as the blood coming from their eyes and dripping off their chin. Their feet weren’t quite working, so they dragged them along the floor, smearing blood in their wake.

“That’s Commander Chelsea,” Thalia said.

“Has she always been a zombie?”

Thalia ignored my question and started to move forward.

“I need to see if she needs help.”

I gripped her arm and yanked her back just before she got too far.

“Are you nuts? We have no idea what’s wrong with her. It could be a disease that’s transferred by touch or proximity. We have to find the lone survivor and get out of here!”

“It might be her!”

“Have you *seen* her? The way she’s moving, the blood on her face? Whatever is going on, she’s not going to last long, and the life sign I found was a bit on the weak side, but it wasn’t half dead.”

“She might still be in there! You have to let me reach out empathically, at the very least.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. There was no way I could convince Thalia to let this go, and while it made my skin crawl to think of her touching that woman even empathically, I nodded all the same.

“I’ll cover you, but the first sign of trouble, I’m shooting and dragging you out of here.”

“No arguments here.”

I stationed myself beside her at an angle where I could see Thalia but also have a clear shot of the commander. I needed to be able to tell if something went wrong with the empathic link as well as make sure that thing didn’t get too close.

Thalia’s dark eyes went completely white and the ends of her *riju* began to glow. The commander stopped her shuffling walk toward us and went stock still, causing a shiver to run up my spine. Her chest didn’t move, there was no sound of breathing

or even the smallest flicker of a finger. She looked like an upright corpse.

Most people thought Valtoshans could just see anyone's emotions and thoughts, like reading a book or looking at a picture. But the truth was that most Valtoshans got impressions; like feeling an item with their fingers but not being able to see it. They could see the outlines of everyday emotions, and stronger Valtoshans could telegraph things about the one feeling it, but most trained hard to turn off the natural gifts that allowed them to do this, so they didn't cross boundaries with anyone.

What Thalia was doing right now was rare, and only done in emergencies or with express permission because it was intrusive in the extreme. Strong empaths like Thalia had the ability to plumb the depths of someone's emotions and memories, to see moments in time through their eyes, even walk among their memories. Valtoshans with this ability couldn't do it for too long because their consciousness could get lost in someone else's, and for that reason, I was counting the seconds that Thalia was connected to Commander Chelsea. If I had to, I'd stun Thalia to get her back to her own mind and damn the consequences for the commander.

No one, not a single person on this ship, was worth Thalia.

It shocked me to realize just how much I meant that and tried to lock it away. But the way my heart tightened at the thought of losing her, the possessive growl that I barely stifled, all told me that I was a hairsbreadth away from dragging Thalia out of

here and running away. It was ridiculous; I had nothing to offer other than a life of lazy indulgence.

Unless I rejoined the Gex-corps... No, I've already been down that path and I saw how it ended. I'm not doing it.

I shifted my focus from my worry back to Thalia, preparing to sting her in a few more seconds. The silence around us was absolute yet filled with questions and blood. I glanced at the commander and jumped back as tendrils of white fog started to collect at her feet.

I blinked hard, thinking it was a trick of the weird light, but the fog was still there.

“What the hell?”

Beside me, Thalia took in a sharp inhale, her eyes came back, and her *riju* fell flat to her head. Her head swung in my direction, a look of abject terror and grief on her face, right before she screamed, “*Run!*”

She didn't need to tell me twice.

We took off like a shot in the opposite direction just as I caught a glimpse of the commander's mouth opening so wide I wondered if her jaw unhinged, and then an ear-splitting metallic screeching sound poured from her.

I jumped over a body in the middle of our path, while Thalia nearly fell on her ass from a puddle of green blood. I caught her just in time and pulled her up.

“Down there, the lab,” her voice trembled.

The screech sounded again, further behind us but still loud and terrifying.

I swung around, intending on shooting whatever it was that pursued us, and saw the commander coming directly at us. She moved like a marionette with half her strings cut, motions fast but jerky. Her arms were outstretched, mouth gaping open, and her eyes were now completely red from the blood pouring out of them. A thick white fog surrounded her, getting denser by the second.

I froze at the sight, my mind caught in a net of horror as I tried to process just what the hell I was seeing.

”Antony, move!” Thalia screamed.

A tendril of the fog separated from the cloud surrounding the commander and looked like it was about to come at me when a blue blast from Thalia’s gun collided with the tendril. It reared back, and I swear that faceless mass of white looked *furios*. The commander let loose that metallic screech again, and it jolted me out of my dazed state.

Thalia yanked on the neck of my atmo suit and got me moving again on shaky legs.

After that, I didn’t dare slow down or stop, despite the fact that the closer we got to the labs, the more bodies there were, and the thicker the blood was on the walls and floor. The lights in the corridor where the labs were had a different emergency system, and as such, the lights here weren’t flickering but they were low and red. Now, instead of everything being lit up in a

momentary flash of white, the gore was cast in a thick, amber light that somehow made it all worse.

Bodies were everywhere; some bloodied, others with heads at odd angles. This was the first place I'd seen any outward injuries that indicated death by a different means than the person's brains being fried.

"The door is locked," Thalia said. "I need to manually override the security."

"I'll cover you."

"Setting four. It's the only thing that will work."

I wanted to ask how she knew that but wasn't about to waste time. I switched the settings on my gun to an unusually high power output in the stun spectrum and readied myself.

The commander didn't appear, though the fog was definitely starting to move in, low to the ground and imperceptible unless you were looking for it. It was painted in the color of the lights, a mist of blood-red death. My body tensed, while my heart jolted painfully behind my ribs, but I fired anyway. The fog reared back, only to curl as if it were going to come at me, so I shot it again.

Again it retreated and I started to think that maybe I could hold this thing at bay, when suddenly it shot out in six different directions, down into the open mouths of six of the crew.

No... no way, that's...

The bodies twitched, and right before my eyes, all six of them sat up and struggled to their feet.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” I exhaled.

“What?”

“Get that door unlocked. I’ll handle this.”

Thalia let out a scream when she caught one of the cadavers out of the corner of her eye and let loose a wide shot, followed by one dead center.

“The door, Thalia!” I yelled as I took down another.

“There’s more over here!” she screamed. “I almost have the door, but I can’t do both.”

I took her rifle and stepped out into the corridor so my back was once again to hers. Being half Zorestran, I was stronger than a full-blooded human so I could hold both rifles and fire them with accuracy. When I’d been training in the academy, it would’ve been nothing to keep this up as long as necessary. But the quick-building burn in my shoulder muscles had me realizing just how lazy I’d become.

“Almost!” she shouted.

I didn’t speak because I was gritting my teeth in an attempt to keep my arms up. The possessed corpses were going down fast, but the fog was getting thicker the more I shot, as if it were expelled from the bodies to linger on the ground. By the time I heard the hiss of the lab door opening, I couldn’t see the floor because of the mist, which lay silent and softly

undulating. It reminded me of the chest of a great monster, rising and falling in slumber.

But I didn't take time to examine it; I ducked into the lab with Thalia.

She locked the door immediately, and we both slid down onto the floor, breathing heavily. I closed my eyes, trying to get my bearings as my mind spun out of control with fear and questions.

The door behind me was cool to the touch, but when I sat my hand down on the floor, it came away sticky with green blood.

That's when I opened my eyes enough to get a look at the lab, but what I saw made me start to think that we weren't going to get out of here alive. It was obviously the main lab, due to its sheer size. The room was easily as large as the bridge, maybe bigger. There were 3D printers and various bio tubes to grow tissues, though all were smashed and covered in limbs and chunks of flesh. What I assumed had once been chemical processors and various other delicate equipment, used for analyzing, extracting, and duplicating bio matter, were shattered, parts strewn throughout and coated in viscera. The smell of death was thick in here, and it was the first time I ever remembered feeling sick at the sight of blood because there was just so much of it. On the walls, the floor, coating every bit of equipment. All the shades of different species mixed into a sickening kind of paint. And among it all were the bodies of the dead, torn apart and left to rot by that *thing* out there.

"What happened here?" I gasped as I got to my feet.

Thalia stood beside me, her eyes wide.

“I knew this happened but... I just hadn't expected...”

“Knew what happened? Thalia, what the hell is going on? What is that thing and why did we need to come to the lab?”

Instead of answering me she made her way to the computer console to our left. Her feet slid on the slick blood on the floor, and she used her sleeve to wipe away more viscera before she could access the buttons.

I tried not to be annoyed that she'd ignored my very reasonable questions, and I double checked the lock on the door.

“That thing,” she said as her fingers worked on the wet buttons and keys, “is a new species of alien called a Vil'rahn. It's from the planet below us.”

“What's it doing here?”

“That's an excellent question.”

The screen came up with the face of the commander who was now bleeding out of her eye sockets out in the corridor. Without all that blood, she was a fairly attractive human female with pale skin and bright blue eyes.

“Mission log, Commander Chelsea at Vil Prime. We arrived without incident once again and after extensive scans of the planet have discovered that the ion storms that made large craft landing difficult in the past are still raging. This could indicate a permanent weather system which means that future teams will need to be sure they have sufficient atmo suits and

small shuttle craft. Our previous trips down to the surface have given us enough good data that I believe we will be able to extract a specimen this time. While other attempts at containment have resulted in crew casualties, we have learned from those experiences, and I am confident that we will have the first specimen in the lab by end of day. We have been instructed by the Galactic Union to ascertain whether or not the life form on the planet can be contained and controlled. All previous interactions indicate that this is not an intelligent species, but more like an animal in its ability to interact, but preliminary tests and information gleaned from previous crew casualties indicate it is also a formidable adversary. It could be a very powerful tool in the hands of the Galactic Union if we can get enough data to train it to serve. We will know more once we get it to the lab. End of log.”

I stared at the screen, frozen on the commander’s face as my mind reeled.

“I thought you said no one had been to this planet before,” I said.

“I did,” her voice was rough and strained, “because that’s what I was told.”

Thalia’s shoulders slumped and for a moment I thought she would silently take it in. Then she slammed her fist down onto the console and screamed.

“How could they...? I don’t understand!”

“Don’t understand what?” I asked.

“This whole thing! The log, what that Vil’rahn said to me. The entire senior crew and research team had been acting funny around me for weeks before my leave, but I just thought it was them being *them*.”

“You think they were trying to hide this trip from you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? And now this,” she waved her hand at the screen, “combined with what that the alien told me... Antony, it’s not good. Not good at all.”

I put my hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

“Talk to me, what’s going on?”

She swallowed, a sick twist to her lips, like she was holding back vomit. Her *riju* were writhing and curling behind her and I let two of them coil around my hand, sharing what little emotional equilibrium I had with her.

After a minute, her shoulders relaxed a bit, and she took in a deep breath before meeting my gaze.

“I saw everything they put it through. The glee on their faces when they’d captured it, the cold indifference to its pain and fear. The Vil’rahn are a collective consciousness type of species, and this one has been cut off from its collective family group. It’s in constant pain, and it is slowly dying in this environment. The only way it has survived this long is by taking possession of hosts.”

“That explains the zombies.”

“Yes, and the burned out empathy centers of the brains because it was trying to communicate. Now it’s just trying to

survive but the hosts are incompatible and it can't stay in them very long before it has to find a new one."

"So it needs to go home. How do we do that?"

She looked away from me, biting her lip, and I could tell she was holding back.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Thalia, what aren't you telling me?"

More of her *riju* wound around my wrist, and her hand went to the back of my neck, her deft fingers massaging my tense muscles there. This was something she'd done since our early days together, the touches helping to ground her when Thalia would feel overwhelmed by any number of things.

I leaned forward until our foreheads touched and breathed her in. I didn't want to like this, much less find my own comfort in it, but I didn't have the strength to stop myself. Thalia had always been my port in a storm, and I hers. It was just who we were to one another, and I was beginning to suspect there might be more to it that I would not be able to fight very long.

"It needs me," she whispered.

My eyes flew open, and I jerked back. There was no way I heard what I thought did. No way that she was saying...

But with one look into her eyes, I knew the truth like a jagged stab to the heart.

"No," I said, shaking my head, "you can't... Thalia, no!"

“It needs someone whose brain can handle the interface, and that’s me.”

“Just because you’re Valtoshan? That’s a very thin basis for this hypothesis.”

She gave me a wobbly smile and straightened her shoulders.

“Maybe, but this is why I joined the Gex-corps, to help all species.”

White hot fury shot through me, and I paced away from her, ignoring the squish of flesh and blood under my boots as I did. I knew more than most about the dirty dealings that went on behind the scenes with both the Galactic Union and Gex-corps, but in spite of that, I’d once shared Thalia’s belief that more good than bad resulted from their actions. That both groups were more than the sum of their parts.

But then I had my *kohmen*, the ritual that every Zorestran went through so the ancestors could reveal our cosmic destiny. What I’d seen in that cave, forever changed me and my view of Gex-corps. I resigned the very next day and proceeded to travel through the universe to every pleasure destination that would take Universal Credits, and a few that didn’t.

I had been raised to believe that our ancestors showed us the path that would lead to what we were most meant to do. We all vowed to follow the vision, no matter what the ancestors told us. Arrogantly, I’d assumed greatness waited for me. After all, I’d been raised to believe it from my first breath. I was from the best of humanity and Zorestran—how could I not have a glowing destiny?

The truth had been full of fear and pain, nothing glorious. I could still taste the grit of the atmosphere as I bled out, the bitter terror of being alone in my final moments. So I ran, and I'd been running ever since, even though I knew it was only a matter of time before it all caught up with me. One way or another, that was where I would end up.

I clenched my jaw and shook my head. Maybe my destiny couldn't be avoided, but what Thalia was about to do sure as hell could be.

"No," I said again, turning around and marching toward Thalia. "We are going to find another way, and we will get that thing home, but you're not playing host."

"Antony—"

"I'm not losing you."

"This is my choice."

"No!"

She took my face between her hands and kissed me. It was soft and gentle, it was every moment we'd ever shared and every one I'd once hoped we would. It was hello, and good-bye, it was her refusing to allow someone to suffer when she could soothe them, even me.

"I *want* to do this," she whispered, still holding my face in her hands. "I want to help them, to fix what my crewmates broke."

"You can't though, there's nothing that will ever really heal it."

“Maybe not, but I have to try. And I need you to help me.”

“Help you kill yourself?”

“Give me a little credit,” she said with a chuckle. “This is my area of expertise.”

“Being possessed by sentient mist?”

“Empathic joining. But, if you prefer, possession by mist.”

“I can’t stop you, can I?”

She shook her head.

It had been a foolish hope. Thalia had always gone her own way, no matter the cost. She was ten times braver than me and even more kind.

Maybe I can still protect her. If she starts to show signs of trouble, I can use the stun setting four and get that thing out of her. Then we leave. I don’t give a damn if she’s angry about it.

“Alright,” I said, “what do you need?”

“The Vil’rahn is scared and angry, I don’t think we will be able to get through to it reasonably. When I was probing its emotions, it saw you as the prime threat, so it will try to hurt you before it will consider joining with me.”

“So we need to entice it to take you before it kills me.”

“Correct.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Well,” she took a deep breath and brought up the schematics of the ship, “the lift is close. We take it down to the shuttle bay

and get the shuttle the crew used to capture it up and running. Because the Vil'rahn is empathic, it will sense us and follow."

I nodded. It all sounded simple, but I braced myself for the catch.

"Then you're going to lock me in the cargo bay of the shuttle and let it take me."

I sucked in a sharp breath and turned away, trying and failing to calm my furious heartbeat.

"It'll be fine," she soothed, and I didn't miss the hitch in her voice.

I would need to lock myself away in safety while that *thing* took her over, leaving her to face it alone and frightened.

"And then?" I asked, my voice strained.

She let out a shaky breath and painted a tight smile on her face.

"You'll need to pilot the ship that the crew used to capture the Vil'rahn and get us to the surface. Then I should have enough time to expel the mist before the environment starts to affect me."

"Should?"

"I don't have all the answers here. This is new and I just need you to trust me."

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back to me, until our bodies met, and I captured her lips once more. This time, I pushed all my fear and longing into it as our mouths moved in a familiar

symphony together. Without hesitation, I opened myself to her, my feelings, my thoughts. The need for her to understand why I was being so obstinate was suddenly the most important thing, even if I was still trying to process it myself.

When I finally released her, Thalia was trembling in my arms, her *riju* curled and glowing at the back of her head.

“Antony,” she breathed, “I... you...”

“Just a little incentive for you to fight like hell to come back to me.”

Three

Both of the pulse rifles were nearly depleted, and the emergency power settings wouldn't let us charge them up in the lab. Not that I really wanted to try and clean bone fragments from the charging station anyway.

The lift was right around the corner from the lab, an easy distance when there wasn't killer mist after us and dead bodies lying in our way. I took point this time and led us at a quick pace to the doors, which refused to open.

"Lock down," Thalia said, her fingers flying over the lock pad.

A wheezing sound reached us in a few seconds and Thalia's shoulders stiffened.

"I've got this, just get it open," I said.

"Not too many bolts, it's already weak."

I said nothing, because I could not promise her that.

The wheezing was getting louder and just as the doors to the lift opened, a very tall human male came around the corner.

We ducked into the lift before it could get close enough to do anything, though I saw the white fog start to spill out of the corpse.

“Why isn’t it moving?” I asked, my palms slick on the rifle.

“It’s the lock down,” Thalia said with a growl. “Give me—”

Something heavy banged against the door and made us both jump.

“It can’t get in here, can it?” I asked.

“It shouldn’t be able to but—”

Another bang, and this one came from above us then against the door again. I had seen it split itself up, but I hadn’t thought it would do it at a distance like this.

“How did it travel into the maintenance tunnels?” I murmured as I kept an eye on the ceiling and the door.

“Air vents possibly?”

It was then that the same thought occurred to both of us as we slowly looked in abject terror at the one above us. It was entirely possible that it hadn’t discovered this one yet, which was why it was using dead bodies to try and break in. But how long before it figured it out?

“Thalia?” I asked as the banging got worse.

“This door is more difficult. It’s meant to keep diseased persons contained so it’s not easy!” she snapped through gritted teeth.

The banging up top stopped abruptly, and a second later thin, white fog began to filter through the vent at the roof. I fired without hesitation and the mist stopped pouring out. But I knew it would be temporary.

“I got it!” she said, and the lift dropped.

We both screamed in shock as it began to plummet.

“What the hell?!” I yelled.

Thalia shot at the wall below the control panel, creating a hole, and began ripping wires out as I braced myself against the wall, my stomach in my throat. It felt like forever before she was able to get the lift to slow.

When she did, the velocity was normal, but I couldn't seem to get my hands to stop shaking.

“Well,” she said with a long exhale, “that was bracing.”

“Something like that.”

We both looked up at where the Vil'rahn had been trying to come in through the vents, but it was all clear. The fog didn't even remain on the floor like it had in the corridor.

It must be getting weaker. Maybe it won't need her to be a host after all.

Shame burned through me at the thought. I may have been raised with privilege and wealth, but one of the core tenants every Zorestran was taught was to value life and serve those weaker than you. And wishing an alien dead just because I didn't want to risk a woman I may or may not want to be my

mate wasn't service. It was selfish. It was beneath everything I'd been taught.

So is running from my destiny though. What would the ancestors think of what I'd allowed my life to become?

I didn't need another vision to know that they were likely not pleased with me at all. Regret mixed with the shame like a sour medicine. This was why I didn't allow myself to think of these things, why I'd been running. Because I knew the moment I stopped and let myself feel anything but pleasure and escape, I'd have to face who I really was.

Not all the exterior identities I'd crafted over the years. Not who everyone thought I was.

But who the vision had shown me—a leader that would stand in the breach between the weak and the strong.

A destiny like that didn't come with safety or assurances of glory. It came with exactly what I was shown. Sacrifice.

For the first time since I ran out of the cave, I longed to turn around and take it all back. To surrender all of my fear and anger at the feet of my ancestors and accept what they'd given me.

But the jagged barriers I'd constructed within me weren't that easy to scale and I grasped at the one thing that could buy me more time: the job at hand.

There's more important things at stake. Now isn't the time for an existential awakening.

The lift stopped and the doors opened into another dark corridor, lit once again with the flashing lights from before. Luckily, the door to the shuttle bay was in front of us and open.

Just as I was about to step out of the lift, Thalia's hand gripped my wrist and pulled.

"Are you alright?" her *riju* lifted toward me, her forehead wrinkled in a frown of concern.

"No, I'm about to trap you in a shuttle with a psychotic alien so it can take possession of you."

She cocked her head to the side and rolled her eyes.

"Not what I meant, and I think you know that."

My shoulders relaxed a little and I covered her hand with mine where it still rested on my wrist.

"I'm scared of losing you."

It might've been a truth, but it wasn't *the* truth she was searching for. But instead of pushing, she just planted a soft kiss to my lips and smiled at me.

"You're going to owe me a very expensive bottle of wine when this is over," she said.

I chuckled as I stepped out of the lift and checked the hallway.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, because I'll have proved that I know what I'm doing and that your fears were unfounded."

"That's one bet I wouldn't mind losing, *cheja*."

We made it into the shuttle bay without encountering any zombies or the Vil'rahn, but I couldn't relax. Every second brought us closer to Thalia letting herself be used like a taxi for this thing, and it made every instinct I owned roar in resistance.

Still, she was her own person, with her own choices and her own path. It wasn't right of me to take that from her. All I could do was help her and hope that I could protect her if things went sideways.

"Which one is it?" I asked.

"I'm guessing that one," she pointed.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach when I saw the battered shuttle in front of us. There were scorch marks on the sides, and the blast shield was up over the front, which indicated possible structural damage.

I would've asked if she was really sure about this, but I already knew the answer.

"Let's fire it up and see what we're dealing with."

A screeching yell, like metal scraping against metal, echoed toward us and we both jumped.

"I'll stay out here and lure it in," Thalia said, handing me her rifle.

"Don't let it get you until you're in the shuttle. I don't want to have to wrestle possessed you."

"Yeah, we both know I'm slippery when I want to be."

I laughed in spite of the fear trying to claw at my mind and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead before running off to the shuttle.

The screeching was closer now, the sound caused my heart to jump and pound behind my ribs. I needed to have this up and ready quickly so that I could get that damn thing home and out of Thalia as soon as possible.

She's going to be fine... she's going to be fine.

I jumped as another screech echoed through the shuttle bay and I didn't need the scanners to know that we had company.

The shuttle engines came online fast, which was a good sign, but initial diagnostics showed hull compromise and sensor damage. It also showed that several proton bolts were missing, and I wondered if that was because some of this alien's collective had fought back to keep them. Had they lost family down there? Was that one reason they were alright with just running through the crew?

And would that be a strike against Thalia?

There was a plasma screen that had been rigged up originally to hold the Vil'rahn. It took up most of the cargo bay of the shuttle and was still functional. I turned on the coms and projected out into the shuttle bay.

“When you get into the cargo bay, go to the back right corner or as close to that as you can,” I said to Thalia. “I can trap you both in there.”

“Okay,” her voice shook, and scans indicated that her hearts were beating so fast that it looked like she’d been jogging.

“Thalia?”

“I’m fine... I’m fine.”

Visuals were off due to the blast screen in front of me, and fuel was good, but I didn’t want to waste it on activating the external cameras.

“Yell when you’re—”

“Here we come!”

I flipped on the sensors for the cargo bay and picked up her heat signature the second she was in there. There was an infrared setting and I flipped it on, hoping that was the right one to detect the Vil’rahn. My finger hovered over the button that would activate the plasma screen, sweat dripping down my back under the atmo suit, and I swear I could feel my pulse in my head.

The infrared flared extremely cold, and Thalia stepped back. I triggered the plasma screen and then bolted to the cargo bay at the back of the shuttle.

The plasma screen was clear enough for me to see into the bay, though I wished it hadn’t been. The sight that met me would be something I’d have nightmares about for years to come.

Thalia’s body was convulsing violently as the mist descended into her open mouth. Her eyes were rolling back, and her *riju* were glowing bright, spasming around her head like I’d never

seen. It seemed to go on for ages, my heart squeezing in terror at the thought that I was watching her die.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended. Her tendrils went dark and she fell with a thump to the floor.

“Thalia! Thalia, say something!”

I pressed my hand to the plasma screen. A zapping buzz flared up my arm, but I couldn’t have cared less.

Was I imagining it or was her chest rising and falling? Were her *riju* moving? Did her hand twitch?

“Thalia!” I screamed, pounding my hand on the screen.

Her eyes snapped open, but instead of the rich, dark pools I was used to, her eyes had become a crystalline blue, multifaceted and faintly glowing.

She stood with an unnatural grace, tendrils curled and undulated around her head, the tips pulsed with light. Thalia/Vil’rahn cocked its head at me, a cruel smile slashed across her face.

“You,” Thalia’s voice hissed and popped. “You... will take me... hooooommmme!”

“You’re damn right.”

I pivoted on my heel and started to run for the cock pit when I heard something that stopped me cold.

“Captain... Drake,” the voice crackled. “You... will save us... you will save many... Captain Drake.”

“I’m not a captain,” I snapped, my voice wavering.

“Not yet.”

I whipped around, fury raced through my blood.

“I’ve had enough of you!” I screamed through gritted teeth.

“You massacred an entire ship, Thalia’s colleagues and friends, and yet she’s willing to risk everything to help you. Now you stand there and think you can scare me? I’ve seen far scarier things than you!”

Thalia’s/Vil’rahn’s smile widened, and it took everything I had not to cower at how unnatural it was.

“She knows,” it hissed at me, “she knows... Captain Drake. The man who runs... selfish... spoiled.”

It was nothing I hadn’t been thinking about myself not a half hour ago. But it was different to hear those words spoken in that horrifying voice through someone I...

Loved. I think that I love her. And if I don’t get this shuttle going, this thing is going to melt her brain.

“You don’t know me,” I pointed my finger at it, “and I don’t give two *shans* what you think of me.”

“You’re afraid of the end,” it went on as if I hadn’t spoken, “but you never considered... what lay in between. How many will owe you their lives... how many will have their existence enriched by knowing you. So much good at your fingertips... and you *run*.”

“What do you know of good? You’re a murderer.”

I turned away again and stalked toward the cockpit.

“This, Captain Drake. This is good... you saving me... this is good.”

Those words were an energy bolt right to my chest and I nearly stopped again. It was right, this was good. Saving this thing, when all I wanted to do was keep running, was good and right.

And just like that, *crack* went the walls around my heart.

Because as scared as I was, as furious as I was with this Vil’rahn, this was the first time since I ran that I felt like I was right where I belonged.

Four

It turned out that the shuttle was in worse shape than I'd thought. The moment we entered the atmosphere, it was near impossible to control. We dipped and veered to port and starboard so wildly that I worried for Thalia's/Vil'rahn's safety in the empty cargo bay. If I had trusted that thing inside of her, I would've had it strap into a seat in the compartment behind me. But no matter what it had said to me, no matter the face it currently wore, I could not bring myself to trust that it wouldn't kill us both if given the chance.

So I prayed to the ancestors that Thalia was alright as the ship shuddered through the atmosphere.

Breaching the upper layer was a bit better, but the controls still fought me as wind and ionic interference began to mess with the navigation. I was following the last trajectory in the computer, hoping that it was the correct place to drop this thing off. In all honesty though, I didn't care if it wasn't. I'd get it out of Thalia one way or another.

All around me sensors were thrown off, and I didn't see the ground until we nearly smashed into it. As it was, we hit the rocky landscape far harder than we should have and red warning lights went off all over the console. We'd lost some more navigation, and the undercarriage shields were now down to twenty percent.

We better be able to make it back to my ship.

Once I'd secured the shuttle, I went back to the cargo bay to find Thalia/Vil'rahn staring at the door.

"Hooooommmme!" it moaned.

"When I open that door, you'll release her," I said.

My hand stalled halfway to the control panel when Thalia/Vil'rahn turned toward me. There was a trickle of blue blood falling from Thalia's nose, her breathing was erratic, and a sheen of sweat coated her face.

"You're killing her! Get out, now!"

"Not... yet..."

"You're home, you don't need her!" I roared. "She willingly put herself in harm's way to help you, and this is how you repay her?"

"I... wish to repay... you."

"Relsh toh!!"

A wheezing laugh came from Thalia's mouth as the blue blood dripped off her lips.

“I look forward... to sharing your vulgarities... with my collective, Captain Drake.”

“Let. Her. Go!”

“Your destiny does not end... on that planet,” it said.

My heart stopped in my chest and my blood ran cold.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do... it is... my gift. The death on that planet...is only the end of the beginning of your journey. But... you will not get there... if you don’t stop... running. Good-bye, Captain Drake.”

I hit the door release for the cargo bay, keeping the plasma screen in place just in case. Thalia’s mouth opened wide, and the white fog poured out of her, thick and sparkling like stardust. I was mesmerized by the revolting sight, and it wasn’t until the Vil’rahn was out of her and Thalia fell to the floor in a heap that I closed the cargo bay door.

I may have imagined it, but I swear the thing looked back at me, the hint of a face very much like Thalia’s within the brilliant white. And then it flew out of the ship. I glimpsed a barren landscape of white and green, pockets of clouds hanging low to the ground, before the door snapped shut behind it.

I couldn’t get the plasma barrier down fast enough and ended up grazing the top of my horns against the last of it in my haste to get to Thalia.

”*Cheja*, open your eyes,” I begged as I held her to me. “Please don’t go, stay with me.”

The terror of losing her was a weight crushing me from the inside out, and I started to cry.

“Please, Thalia!”

My chest heaved with broken sobs as I pressed kisses to her forehead and the base of her front *riju*. Our story couldn’t end this way, it *couldn’t*.

I cradled her body against mine, willing her to open her eyes, to breathe more than the few shallow movements I could sense. It was forever before I felt something soft brush against one of my horns. It slid from there to my hair and then to my cheek. More of her tendrils joined the first one, and I breathed out a jagged sigh of relief.

“Antony...?” she croaked.

My throat was closed with tears and all I could do was hold her and sob.

Her head tilted to the side, and her eyes, now back to their beautiful dark pools, slowly looked around. Every movement was sluggish, weak. She licked her lips several times and I glimpsed more blood on her tongue.

“We have to get out of here,” she whispered. “It told me that their collective will hold back for a little while, but others may not. We have to go before they attack.”

I nodded and scooped her up in my arms. Thalia didn’t protest at all; not a good sign with someone as headstrong as she

usually was.

Once I'd gotten her strapped into the co-pilot's chair, I transferred some auxiliary power to the lower hull heat shields and the guidance systems. The shuttle groaned to life and heaved itself off the ground with a rattle. My arms ached from holding the ship steady on arrival, now they screamed at me as I forced the yoke into a climbing position.

Red lights and alarms blared the higher we went, the ion storms batting us around like a giant with a ball.

I wanted to reassure Thalia, but all of my energy and focus had to be on getting us out of this atmosphere, or we were goners.

The muscles in my neck and shoulders strained as I tried to keep the shuttle steady. More alarms went off and I reached over to move the last of the auxiliary power to the heat shields.

"We aren't going to make it," she breathed.

"Come on now," I said through gritted teeth. "Don't you know I'm too pretty to die?"

She laughed, and I caught a glimpse of her *riju* out of the corner of my eye as they reached for me. The tendrils were telling me that she needed reassurance, connection, but I needed both hands to steer.

"It's going to be okay," I said instead. "I've got this."

"You're a very good pilot."

"Damn right I am. Best at the academy."

The ship listed to port and Thalia hissed in fear.

“Except for—”

“Do not bring up Monroe, I will turn this shuttle around right now.”

She huffed out a tired laugh and the tightness in my chest started to loosen when beeping and a buzzing sound precluded the popping bang of an explosion to starboard, and the ship began to slow. We were losing the engines and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Come on... just a little more...

Suddenly, we were free of the storms and aggressive atmosphere. The alarms still blared, and the shuttle trembled as I guided us back to the science vessel, but now the engines didn't have to fight against the weather and gravity of the planet. We were going to make it.

“Well done... Captain,” she said.

My head whipped around at that title and my stomach turned over. Was that thing still inside of her? But all I saw was Thalia, giving me a sad grin as tears coursed down her cheeks.

“I'm sorry, Antony,” she said. “I couldn't regulate my empathy while it was inside. I saw everything it did, felt everything. Including what it knew about you.”

I looked away, not knowing quite what to say. What happened in the ritual was supposed to be private. I was well within my rights to tell no one what I'd seen. But that's not why I'd kept this from Thalia.

I'd kept my secrets from her because I feared she'd be so disappointed in me, that she'd judge and not understand the brutal truth I'd seen and what it had done to me.

But now I realized my foolishness.

Of anyone in my life, Thalia was the one that could understand.

I set the shuttle to autopilot as it limped toward the Galileo and knelt at her feet. Thalia's tendrils reached for me once more and I let them wind around my fingers and wrist.

"I won't begin to understand how that thing knew my secrets," I said. "But it was right. I *have* been running."

"I used to be so hurt and angry by what you did," she whispered. "When you left the Gex-corps, it felt like you'd left me too. I couldn't explain why until... until our time together, but I realize now that I care for you, very deeply."

My heart lurched and a tremble went through me. She felt the same way I did, that we were something more than casual fuck buddies. But what did that mean? What did she want?

She gave me a breathy chuckle and shook her head.

"I am very weak, and you are very loud with your emotions. It's like you're screaming them at me."

"Sorry," I started to pull my hand out of her *riju* when they tightened around me.

"No, it's alright. I like it, this new honesty between us."

She cupped my cheek against her cool palm, and I nuzzled it before turning to press a kiss there.

“You’ve carried such a heavy burden all alone,” Thalia whispered. “Will you let me help you? Let me understand?”

Even a week ago, this question would’ve had me closing off and pushing her away. But now, I longed to share this with someone I could trust to put me first above whatever supposed destiny I had.

“Here,” I whispered in her ear, “because I trust you and because... I need you to know why.”

Like a river bursting its banks, the memories flooded me, one after another, in a quick succession that had pain shooting from behind my eyes. It was the same pain I’d felt when I’d seen the vision the first time and every time after. It was my future, apparently unavoidable.

Profoundly alone, dying and branded a traitor by the GUP for doing the right thing, for not allowing an entire planet to die. That’s my future. Court martialed for saving lives, hunted through the galaxy until I die on a gray, windswept planet.

I relived the fear and betrayal. It seared my bones and left me gasping for breath as it all caved in around me.

I would rise so high, only to fall, utterly alone.

Or at least that’s what I once thought.

The words the Vil’rahn had said to me before it had left were like a ghost, peeking around the corner of my memories. What

it meant I couldn't even begin to guess, but I grudgingly let it give me hope.

I'd never shared myself with Thalia like this before—nothing withheld, nothing masked.

And she took it all.

She drank the bitter poison that I'd numbed myself with all this time and gave me freedom to see the wound I'd inflicted on myself.

When the memories faded, Thalia let out a shattered sob and pulled my mouth to hers, the sweet tang of her tears a welcome balm.

"Thank you," I sighed. "I didn't realize how much I needed to share that with someone."

"I will keep this close and never breathe a word, I swear by the Goddess."

We stayed like that, holding one another, her empathic abilities soothing the jagged edges of my fears and resistance until I could admit that I knew what came next. It was time to stop running.

Five

“Cadet Drake,” said the stuffy admiral in the middle of the tribunal, “you took it upon yourself to go against the orders given by the Commander of the Science frigate, Galileo, and allowed a dangerous alien species to endanger Ensign Thalia Malik. You claim that the damage done to the frigate by said alien caused catastrophic damage to the engine core, resulting in the destruction of the Galileo and the convenient loss of any data that would prove your story.”

I swallowed down the words I wanted to spit at the self-righteous ass. Admiral Lawrence had never liked me and was downright gleeful when I’d resigned. But now I was back, seeking reinstatement based on my previous performance at the academy and my actions during the incident on the Galileo. Thalia had made a statement to the tribunal, but he’d discounted most of it as either her attempt to help her ‘boyfriend’ or delusions due to her interaction with the Vil’rahn. I’d been tempted to publicly decry the admiral as the

misogynistic, xenophobic asshole he was, but Thalia talked me down.

She and I had agreed to rig an ‘accident’ on the ship to destroy it and any data that had been collected about the Vil’rahn. We knew that there was a chance that the previous missions had already sent on their findings, but at least this way, no one would have the information about how the Vil’rahn operated or if they had any weaknesses.

Nothing I said was going to make a difference to the admiral, so I had to play to the other two on the tribunal.

One was an ambassador from Atavar, named Gav’Ahn. He was over seven feet tall with jet-black hair, inky black eyes and dark red skin. When he spoke, I could see his sharp incisors, once used to drink the blood of their prey and those they conquered. Now, Atavarians were renowned for their cool logic and unemotional demeanor, both apparently the remedy to their once literally blood-thirsty history.

“We have Ensign Malik’s testimony that confirms what happened,” Gav’Ahn said, his deep voice rumbling, “and I have confirmed the truth of it with my telepathy just this morning.”

Admiral Lawrence’s thin lips became thinner as he pressed them together.

“And the records recovered from previous missions to the planet in question, along with the results of the research from those missions, make what the cadet has said very plausible,” said Professor Kosh, an Ordnach.

Tiny aliens no more than two feet tall, with huge eyes and covered in red and black fur, they were mostly seen in their Ord Suits, as most of us called them. Large robots with long thin limbs, a round head with eyes and the semblance of a mouth, and a transparent torso where the Ordnachs sat in an environmentally controlled space. This helped them live outside of their planetary atmosphere, as well as be able to serve in a variety of places, including a starship. Each Ord Suit was programmed specifically to an individual Ordnach and controlled by neuro links. Most considered their suits to be extensions of themselves. They even felt pain if the suit came under damage. The Ord Suit also acted as a kind of microphone for the Ordnach, especially helpful since most of them had voices as small as they were, and it was damn near impossible to hear them without the suit.

This particular Ordnach was showing her age with white fur around her eyes. She had her tiny paws folded in front of her and the suit, a beautiful bronze color that matched her fur, was mirroring her.

“Yes,” Gav’Ahn said, “the cadet’s story makes logical sense when taken with the information we have previously obtained.”

“But his record of behavior unbecoming a cadet, his constant flaunting of authority, and the fact that he left a year ago, but suddenly finds himself in the middle of a classified research mission, all add up to someone who should not be trusted,” Admiral Lawrence insisted.

“If I may?” I said.

Admiral Lawrence opened his mouth, but Professor Kosh cut him off.

“Proceed, Cadet.”

“Admiral Lawrence is correct.” It took every ounce of self-control to say that in a calm, self-deprecating tone. “I was a terrible cadet when it came to my behavior. I was arrogant, rebellious, and I did resign right after my *kohman*. I think I needed time to process what I’d seen. It changed me, as only something like that could.”

Professor Kosh’s expression softened, and I was pleased to discover that she knew about the *kohman*.

Point for me. Now to get the Atavarian on my side.

“Helping the Vil’rahn return home reminded me of why I had wanted to join the Galactic Exploration Corps. I didn’t take any of it lightly, not the risk to Ensign Malik’s safety, not the loss of life on the Galileo, or the subsequent tragedy of losing that knowledge. It all helped me see that, to keep running, would be the most selfish thing I could do. To serve, when the capacity is within me and the opportunity presents itself, is the highest act one can do.”

Ambassador Gav’Ahn’s eyebrow flicked slightly, and I hoped that meant he was impressed with my understanding and recitation of the Atavarian Prophet, Fidd’Aern’s treatise on service.

“I just want a chance,” I continued. “A chance to prove that I have changed and that I can serve the Union Exploration Corps. I am asking the tribunal to please look at everything when deciding my fate. Not only the behavioral history that Admiral Lawrence has mentioned, but also my performance elsewhere in the academy and with the Galileo.”

“Thank you, Cadet,” Professor Kosh said with a smile. “Would you please leave us so we may deliberate your request?”

I nodded and walked out, the high collar of the cadet’s uniform I’d been issued scratching against my neck.

My salt-and-pepper hair had been trimmed to Gex-corps requirements, and I’d agreed to retake all my final exams last week, which I passed with flying colors. This was the last thing standing in the way of my return to the GUP. In any other circumstance, I might’ve been afraid of being rejected. But my *kohman* was a blessing in this case. I knew I would be reinstated. The question was, in what way? Would they force me to repeat my final year in the academy? Would they assign me to the worst ship in the fleet?

When I stepped out into the wide hall, my parents were sitting off to the left. The tribunal room was on the third floor of the Academy Main Hall, a gold and brown building with tall winding staircase, and imposing doors that led to even more imposing rooms, where the business of the academy took place. Most were here because they genuinely cared about the Gex-corps and the cadets. Then there were those like the

admiral who resented being shunted here when they really wanted to still be relevant to the GUP.

The thick carpet absorbed my steps as I made my way to my parents. A massive sculpture of earth hung in the open space around which the staircase curled to my right, and the soft sounds of people talking in hushed tones came from the other side of this floor. I wondered if any of them were talking about me and my family. I'd had a colorful reputation when I was a cadet here, and my parents' mating was still a source of fascination to most. A bona fide love story like some of the classic Earth vids, they had hated one another at first. Their marriage had been purely political to cement the entry of Zorestra into the GUP. But somehow, they'd fallen in love. Now they split their time between their duty to both planets and as such, I'd grown up with a healthy dose of both Earth and Zorestra.

"Antony," my mother said, giving me a relieved smile. "You were in there a while, I was starting to worry."

She had a few more wrinkles around her green eyes than I remembered, and her jet-black hair had started to go gray around the temples. When I first saw her on my return to Earth, it had shocked me how much older she seemed to me than the last time I'd seen her at my *kohman*. I still hadn't shaken the guilt of that, so I gave her a hug.

"Everything alright?" she asked.

"Of course, can't I hug my beautiful mother?"

She giggled at that and hugged me tighter before releasing me.

I turned to my father, who was around my height and had the white hair of most all Zorestrans. His horns rose high from his head to points that were starting to fade to white, a sign of age. His dark blue skin was mottled with scars on one side of his face and arms, a result of an accident in his youth.

He gave me a sharp grin and placed his palm to my heart as I did the same to him.

“Hello, son,” his voice was soft and deep, almost gentle. “I am so very proud of you for doing this.”

I knew he was hurt by my actions after my *kohman*, but he’d never once pressed for details or made me feel guilty for any of it. A fact I was immensely grateful for.

“Thank you,” I said with a bow of my head.

He also bowed his head and we both stood there, counting the beats of one another’s heart for five beats before stepping back.

“They’re deliberating now, so we just need to—”

The doors opened and I spun around in shock.

“That’s curious,” my mother said behind me.

Admiral Lawrence stormed from the room and toward us. His wrinkled face was red, and if steam could come out of his ears, I was sure it would have.

“You don’t fool me,” he hissed with his finger in my face.

“You will ruin the Galactic Exploration Corps, and one day,

everyone will tell me I was right about you. I just hope you don't do too much damage until then."

"I think you need to excuse yourself before you say something you will regret," my father said behind me, the barest hint of a growl at the end.

The Admiral's eyes widened for a moment before spinning on his heel and marching away.

"Well, that could be a good sign," my mother said.

Next came Professor Kosh and Gav'Ahn.

"Ambassador," my father said, greeting Gav'Ahn, with a nod.

The ambassador returned the greeting, and I did the same as he turned his attention to me. Atavarians generally did not touch those outside of their family. Though they did understand that sometimes touching was necessary due to cultural differences, I had never pushed the issue with any Atavarian I'd ever met.

"I do not doubt you quoted the Prophet to sway me," Ambassador Gav'Ahn's deep resonance skittered over my skin, and I barely suppressed a shiver. "But you also understood it, didn't you?"

That sobered me, because I truly did.

"Yes, Ambassador."

He nodded.

"Continue on the path of service then, Cadet Drake. I look forward to seeing what your career will hold."

Memories of my *kohman* tried to smother me in that moment and I fought to resist them. If the Vil'Rahn was correct, and I wasn't sure it was, what I saw would lead to something else. I just had to trust that it was something good and, until then, try to build a life I could be proud of.

Next was Professor Kosh, who shook all of our hands in turn. The metal of her suit was cool but not unpleasant. The Ord Suit was the same height as the ambassador, but etiquette required us to look at the torso where Kosh herself sat. It always took some adjusting for me not to stare into the suit's eyes.

"I was impressed by you, Cadet," she said. "Your humility was an unexpected surprise. I will be watching your career with interest."

"Thank you, Professor. I assume this means I'm reinstated?"

"Indeed," she said with a smile, "and advanced to the rank of Ensign for your bravery on the Galileo. Your assignment is forthcoming as there are a few wrinkles to work out. But I would advise not getting too comfortable on Earth."

Relief washed through me, and I let out a long breath.

"Thank you both for the chance."

"Don't thank us," Gav'Ahn said. "Show us you deserve it."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded at me and my parents before turning around and walking toward the stairs. Though Atavarians were the first to make contact with Earth, they were still an intimidating sight

to most humans, with their impressive height, black eyes, and red skin. As such, most people skittered out of the way of the ambassador and stared in awe at his back.

“Will you join us for dinner, Professor?” my mother asked. “I think this calls for a celebration.”

“I would be delighted,” Kosh replied with a smile.

My wrist com beeped, and my stomach flipped like a youth with a crush when I saw Thalia’s name.

“Um, may I join you later? Thalia is wanting to know what the decision was.”

My mother gave me a knowing grin.

“Of course, have fun.”

I wanted to tell her that it wasn’t anything, that Thalia and I might be finished before we even started if I get an assignment that makes it too difficult to see her. But I didn’t because the last thing I wanted was to admit any of that to anyone. Especially myself.

I waited until they’d left to call Thalia back, wanting a little privacy.

“Hey,” I said, my pulse racing as her face illuminated the small screen on my wrist. “I just got out of my hearing.”

“I heard. You would not believe how fast gossip about you travels around here.”

I grinned at her.

“Oh, I would.”

Thalia shook her head, dark eyes filled with mirth.

“Congratulations, Ensign Drake.”

“Thank you, Ensign Malik.”

“Actually,” she bit her lip, *riju* spiraling around her head, “it’s Lieutenant now.”

“What? That’s great! We should go celebrate. Is that throwback bar still on campus? I’m craving that crappy beer they had, what was it called... Bud Classic?”

“I wish I could, but I’m on a dinner break and then I have to get back to it. But, if you want to meet me here, I could always use a dinner partner.”

“Science building?”

“Yes, classroom Five-A. And hurry, I’m hungry,” she said with a salacious grin.

She didn’t have to tell me twice.

I took a shortcut through the First Contact Memorial courtyard and then through the maintenance tunnels, shaking my head that the code from three years ago still worked. By the time I was knocking on the classroom door, only ten minutes had passed, but it felt like a lifetime.

The door opened and Thalia’s white and gray tipped head darted out, pulling me in by the front of my uniform. Before I could say hello, she’d pinned me against the door and was devouring my mouth with hers.

Her taste, the slide of her tongue against mine, was like a homecoming. I let her tendrils wrap around one hand while the other kneaded the plump flesh of her ass.

“I missed you,” she panted, undoing the clasps on my uniform jacket.

“Isn’t it a breach of conduct to seduce an officer of lower station?” I asked, unbuttoning her pants.

“Do you mind being fucked by a Lieutenant?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Oh,” she bit her way down my neck, “I like that. I may have to tie you up a bit.”

“Promises, promises.”

My phallus stirred in its sheath and soon my pants would be decidedly uncomfortable. I spied a desk that wasn’t covered in papers and holo tablets and began to back her over to it.

“I want you at least twice before the rest of the team comes back,” I said, shedding my jacket and shirt.

Thalia’s hands ran along my stomach to find the buttons at my pants while I tore off the green shirt of her uniform, exposing her breasts and pert nipples. I took one into my mouth and sucked hard. She gasped and arched her back so I could take it deeper. My hands skated over her skin, every inch beloved and known, yet exciting all the same.

She would have dark gray lines on her skin from the hard press of my fingers, and a primal part of me reveled in it. I

wanted her marked so that if we were separated, everyone would see that she belonged to someone, to *me*.

“I want that too,” she breathed.

I wasn't at all surprised that she'd picked up on my desires. Ever since that moment in the shuttle, it had been as if a string tied us to one another in the most intimate of ways. I knew when she was mad or upset, when she was wanting me, and she knew the same. It wasn't intrusive like I always assumed such a thing might be. Instead, I was comforted at being so completely known and embraced.

“I want to belong to you, Antony,” she continued as I nipped my way up her chest to her throat. “I want to wear your scent on my skin, to hold the taste of your emotions on my tongue and know that I am yours too.”

Her ass hit the table and I spun her around so her hips hit the edge instead. My hands cupped her from behind and I rolled her stiff buds between my fingers. Thalia whimpered as she ground her ass against where my phallus was starting to extrude. Her body was so pliant, so responsive. I started to slip my pants down, and a moment later I fully extruded. My sheath rolled back to form my knot and I took myself in hand, imagining what it would be like to bury myself fully inside of her wet heat.

“Pull down your pants,” I demanded.

She hurriedly obeyed and the moment her scent hit my nose I groaned, my phallus throbbing. Unable to help myself, I dipped my fingers between her legs and ran them through the

arousal already building there. Just like on my shuttle, it was unusually copious and thick. Perfect for allowing me full entrance into her.

“I want to knot you.” The words slipped out before I could consider the implications of them.

Even though we both had confessed that we cared for one another, even though we both wanted to mark the other, this was something else entirely. Zorestrans don't knot someone unless they are serious, sometimes not even until they are formally mated. And even though my stomach dipped with nerves, wondering if this was too much, too fast, I couldn't find it in me to regret saying it.

Thalia turned just enough to cup my cheek with her palm and press a kiss to my chin.

“Yes, Antony,” she smiled at me, “whatever happens, I am yours. And if we are separated, then we will have this. No regrets.”

Her *riju* caressed my face and neck, wrapping around where they could, and I saw the faint glow of the tips. She was giving me her emotions now, in all their raw, vibrant glory. Love so profound and simple that it stole my breath. I didn't need to ask if she was sure. I could feel it, like an extra heart beat in my chest, nestled deep and precious.

I now understood why her arousal had changed, why there was so much of it. Her feelings for me had triggered a kind of heat. And even though she was on birth suppressors, her instincts were pushing her to fuck me around the clock.

“Bend over,” I whispered.

She did with a seductive smirk and spread her legs wide. Her nethers were on full display to me, hairless and dark with the flush of her blood there. I knelt down, my aching phallus tight in my fist, and ran my tongue through her wetness. We both groaned, long and loud, just before I began to feast on her. Her slick filled my mouth, and I drank deep, my tongue fucking her while my finger ran in tight circles on her three headed pearl. Her cries of pleasure built to a crescendo as I worked her mercilessly. When she'd shuddered out her release, I planted a kiss to the inside of each thigh and stood, my chin wet from her.

“I may lose a bit of control,” I warned as I ran the black tip of my cock through her.

“I know, I want you to.”

I let out a long breath and pressed kisses up her spine.

“You're going to undo me, Thalia.”

“Good,” she grinned over her shoulder. “Let me see what you've been holding back from me.”

A growl escaped my throat as I scraped my teeth against her flesh, leaving dark trails in my wake. She hissed and arched her spine, sticking her ass out more. With a feral snarl, I notched myself at her entrance and took rough possession of her hips.

With another ferocious growl, I pulled her onto me at the same time I thrust deep. My knot slammed against the outside of her

opening, and I panted out a breath of anticipation.

Not yet... I want to enjoy this.

She let out a rolling scream as I pushed her off and pulled out at the same time, the black tip of my cock barely within her.

“More...” She tried to roll her ass toward me as slick wetness fell in drips.

“You’re so anxious to be fucked senseless?” I pulled and thrust again, faster this time. “To be knotted and filled?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

I ground my knot against her outer lips and sensitive three headed bud.

“Please... please, Antony,” she begged. “I want your knot, your cum, I want it all.”

“Be careful what you wish for *cheja*.”

“I don’t want care, I want to be fucked.”

Those words broke the thin restraints on my control, and I let loose a roar. I snapped my hips to hers, the room filling with the sound of flesh slapping against flesh, of her cries and my snarls. I was unhinged, yanking on her hips as I hammered into her. She was so wet, the arousal slid down her thighs and onto the floor. Several times my knot slipped just past her cunt; I was tempted to push it the rest of the way, but I needed her to come again.

“Touch yourself,” I demanded.

Her hand went between her thighs, and within moments she was writhing and milking my cock. I couldn't stop myself this time, and my knot slipped into her. The tight clamp of her around me, the pulse of her orgasm, it undid me. I saw stars, I lost the ability to breathe as I emptied myself into her. Wave after wave took me under, and I wasn't at all sure how long it lasted. But when I could think again, she was pulsing her hips as mewling cries fell from her lips. I realized distantly that she was coming again. My knotting her had triggered a third orgasm on the heels of the second.

Pride made me grin down at her as she wiggled in desperation.

"You want more?" I teased and thrust my hips.

She let out a trilling yell and milked me. I hadn't expected to come again so soon but here I was, spilling more into her.

I fell forward onto her this time; my entire body was hot, and I was out of breath. My legs shook and I needed to move us to a better position, but in this moment, I was afraid to trigger another orgasm that would likely lay me out.

"Oh... my... Goddess," she gasped.

"Yeah."

"That... Antony... you fucking fuck god."

I laughed at that and pressed a soft kiss to her spine.

"I need to sit but..."

"I'm not sure I can survive another one," she admitted. "But I need to sit too."

Just then, a chime sounded on the desk and we both looked up to see her discarded holo-com signaling an incoming message. Then, a second later, mine did too, although it was on the floor behind me.

“Worst timing ever.” She snagged it off the desk and flicked off the video option. “Yes?”

“Lieutenant Malik?” said a woman’s voice.

I stood up slightly and accidentally rubbed my knot inside of her. Her muscles tensed and she shivered.

“Yes,” Thalia answered through gritted teeth.

“Is this a bad time?”

“N-no, Commander Morgan.”

I was trying to stand still, but it felt so damn good, and the slightest movement had my knot pulsing.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself as I nudged just a little inside of her.

Warmth began to build at the base of my spine, and she whimpered.

“Are you alright, Lieutenant?”

“I-I’m fine,” her hand curled into a fist as she tried to hold herself still.

“Should we play a game?” I whispered into her skin.

Thalia reached back to swat me and accidentally shifted enough to rub her inner walls against my knot.

Her mouth opened in a silent scream as the commander chattered on the coms.

“Well, I have good news. Your next assignment has come in.”

“Oooh?”

“Yes, it is exciting,” the commander continued.

I couldn't help laughing as a small orgasm shook me.

“You'll be happy to know that you'll be serving on an exploration Command-class ship with a former classmate of yours. One Ensign Drake.”

That made us both stop moving as the news washed over us.

“Lieutenant, are you there?” the commander asked.

“Y-yes, I am. That's wonderful news.”

“I thought you'd be pleased. You'll be under the command of the current ship's counselor and assisting the medical personnel as well. Please report to my office in the morning for a briefing.”

“I will, Commander.”

“Morgan out,” she said.

I gathered Thalia against me and picked her up. More sensation ripped through us both, but we rode it out together just as I sat us in a nearby chair. I cuddled her against me as best I could with my knot still nestled inside of her and noticed the way her belly was slightly distended.

Ancestors! Did I come that much?

Thalia chuckled as she ran a hand over her stomach.

“I’d heard of this growing up in the Sacred Houses, but I thought it was a myth.”

“I-I don’t know what to say. Sorry?”

She laughed again, her *riju* tickled my throat as they lazily explored my chest and shoulders.

“No, I wanted it. And now we both know that it’s not a one-and-done.”

“Which is good, since we’ll be doing this again.”

When she didn’t speak, fear sank its claws into me, and I held her tighter.

“Shhh,” she soothed me, her fingers twining with mine. “Of course I want that. But on the ship, we will have to be more careful. You’re an Ensign. It would be seen as taking advantage.”

She was right, and I hadn’t really thought of that. I pressed a kiss to the base of one tendril and then another before leaning down and whispering in her ear, “Well then, I guess I’ll have to make Lieutenant really fast then, won’t I?”

Thalia turned and fixed sparkling eyes on me, the fingers of her other hand joining her tendrils in caressing my cheek.

“If anyone could do it, Antony, it would be you. But there’s one thing we haven’t talked about.”

“Which is?”

“Your *kohman*. How are you feeling about it?”

“Take a look.”

A dark flush rose to her cheeks just before her eyes went white and the ends of her *riju* lit up. Once again, I felt her in the landscape of my emotions, a visitor that I now welcomed. I opened myself to her and let her see the fear that still lived there, but also the hope. The belief that I was meant for something greater than that vision, and that I chose the courage to find out what that was.

How I wanted her there with me, the two of us marching into the future, both known and unknown, but not nearly as dark as it had once been.

She released me and took my mouth in a soft kiss as tears coursed down her cheeks.

“I’ll be there,” she promised. “For as long as the Goddess allows me. I’ll be your partner on this journey.”

“And I’ll be yours.”

“Together then.”

I smiled down at her and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Together.”

Note to the Reader

Thanks for reading the prequel short story for the series Infinite Unions: Intrepid Alien Mates. If you'd like to read *Sinful Mate*, book one in the series, please click here or copy and paste this into your browser:
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Stay naughty, my friend!

Rescued by My Brother's Best
Friend by V.C. Lancaster

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



LOST IN THE FOG WITH ONLY ONE CHANCE OF
ESCAPE...

Gem has been in love with her brother's best friend, Racer, since they were kids, but two weeks ago he broke her heart. Now, he has to rescue her when she's trapped outside during his people's annual mating season. The fog of pollen doesn't affect humans like her, but it drives locals like him into a frenzy. Even so, he's the only one with a chance of finding her. She might hate him, but he'll risk everything to bring her home.

Content Warnings: *sex pollen with distant threat of sexual assault, a past hurt, and reconciliation*

One

GEM

I always know when Racer is in the house. Boys are loud.

I shut the front door behind me, kick off my shoes, a sinking feeling in my chest. I wish he didn't make me feel this way, but he does. I wish I could just get over him and move on to someone else... but I can't.

Our house has a short hall, with the bedrooms and bathroom on a left turn, and the living room on the right. You have to walk through the living room to get to the kitchen, and no matter what, you have to walk past the door to the living room.

I go left, and I try not to look.

I drop my bag in my room and sit on my bed. I don't have the energy to sigh. I know I have to go out there. Racer is staying for the holiday, he always does. He's nineteen now and working at the mine, just like Jack, but he's still too young to be outside when the fog comes down. His parents go out, so every year, they leave him with us. He's old enough to stay home alone, but it's become tradition for him to join us.

I can't stay in my room for three days, especially not over the holiday when I'll be expected to sit at the table for meals and spend quality time as a family.

And Racer will be there.

Besides. I need to show him I don't care.

The worst possible thing would be if I stay in my room and Jack notices and makes a big deal out of it. As far as I know, he hasn't noticed anything's changed between Racer and me. He knows what happened of course, everyone does, but his stupid little boy brain doesn't get that it actually hurt me – that I'd rather sit a three-day algebra exam than spend the holiday with Racer.

Showing them that I don't care starts now. I force myself to my feet, unable to stop myself from checking my reflection before I leave my room, tidying my hair with my fingers and biting my lips to redden them, and head for the kitchen. I don't *want* to want to look pretty for him, but I do. I want him to regret what he did. I want him to see me and want me and realise the mistake he made.

As if that would ever happen.

The boys are sitting on the floor, their backs against the couch, playing vid-games as usual. When I first came home, I could hear them through the walls, the blasts and gunfire from the screen, Jack's yelling and Racer's jeers. Now, the screen still makes as much noise, but Jack only grunts as he fires, and Racer is silent. I stare at the back of his head as I walk down

the hall, and I can tell he's listening for me, his head turned ever so slightly to point his tufted ear in my direction.

I turn my face away as I walk in, but I catch his head jerking to look at me in my peripheral. I don't say hi. I don't ask what they're playing or go over to sit with them and pester Jack to give me a turn. I'm not going to bring them snacks. I go into the kitchen on my own, ignoring them.

I went to a friend's house after school, trying to put this off as long as possible, but it's basically Christmas Eve. If I'd stayed any longer, I'd have had to crash their family dinner, so I'm starving now. My parents will be home soon and then we'll eat, but it won't be fancy, not until tomorrow. My parents are both supervisors at the mine, and they have to stay late any time production is stopped, to make sure it's all powered down safely. They'll have to go in early after the holiday too, to get it powered up again. That's why this holiday is so important; it's the only time that *everyone* gets off. Otherwise the mine is always, always running.

I'm opening drawers, looking for snacks that aren't earmarked for the holiday that I can have now, when Racer comes in behind me.

"Hey, Gem," he says.

I consider saying nothing. I'm still angry, still hurt, and I *want* him to know that. I want him to feel bad. But ultimately, I don't want to make a scene. I don't want Jack getting involved. I don't want my brother to have to choose between us, or worse, give me a lecture about how stupid I was in front

of Racer. And I can't trust Jack to stop talking when my parents come home.

So I mumble a quiet reply. "Hey." I left it too long to be smooth though.

Racer knows something is up, because unlike Jack, he's not an idiot, and he does actually pay attention to me. Maybe that's what got me into trouble in the first place. Or maybe it was his overall gorgeousness. His kindness. The way his little bifurcated cat mouth scrunches when he laughs.

But Racer is still a boy, so while maybe he can tell something is wrong and he might even have an idea what it is, he doesn't know what to do about it.

"Were you at school?"

"A friend's house."

"Oh. Cool. Who?"

"You don't know her." I find a snack bar, a really old healthy one, and open it. At this point I'll do anything to stop this conversation. It tastes like plywood, but I make out I'm super into it.

I don't look at Racer. He's across the room, facing me, leaning against the wall with the dining table between us. I stand sideways-on, staring at the stove and the ornamental plate-thing with flowers on that my mom uses as a heat-mat when she's cooking. In the corner of my eye, he's a heart-breakingly gorgeous black and purple streak.

Racer is one of the local aliens here – well, we're the aliens, the humans. This is their planet. About thirty years ago, a mining company discovered a crazy-rich metal deposit here and sunk a mine, funding a human colony to dig it all out. My family is one of dozens settling here. We have a little town, a school, a doctor's clinic, a post office, everything we need.

The locals mostly stay down by the river, but of course, after thirty years, there's been a fair bit of mingling. Some human kids prefer to hang out with them, and some of their kids prefer to hang out with us. Racer's parents work construction for the town, so he's pretty much human in how he acts, except for a few things.

In looks, he's tall, thin, the muscles in his arms defined and stringy when he wears T-shirts. He likes to wear all black: jeans and T-shirts and big construction boots. His skin is purple, somewhere between lavender and lilac. He has dark purple, almost black, hair in innumerable twist braids that touch his shoulders, and he wears the top fistful pulled back, freeing his face. When you see him from the side, he looks a bit fierce, because his jaw and cheekbones and temples are so sharp and defined, and you expect him to be cold and an arrogant asshole. But when you see him from the front, his eyes are just too big and round, his little cat nose too small, his pointy teeth too delicate... He's a deadly combination of hot and cute, and it's really just too unfair that I was expected to grow up with him and escape scot-free. I never stood a chance.

His jeans have rips in them, exposing more lavender skin and making me wonder, making me ache. Not fair.

My chest hurts. These days, he doesn't make me swoon so much as wilt. I look at him and I know there'll never be anything between us. At best, he sees me as an annoying little sister. At worst... some kind of deviant freak with delusions about the gulf between us, a gulf he has made clear he doesn't want to cross.

“Are you looking forward to the holiday?” he asks me, squeezing his hands into his pockets. He only has two fingers and a thumb, and I know, in his boots, he has two big toes for each foot and a vestigial, flexible thumb-thing on his ankles. I know that because when we were kids, we used to go swimming together in the river in the summer. He used to line our feet up and stretch out his ankle-toe to touch the bone of my ankle, and I would holler and shriek like I was being electrocuted, convinced it was magic somehow, like being touched by a fairy.

These days I only see it first thing in the morning, when he walks around in nothing but pyjama pants, but I can't bear to think about that now.

I shrug. If he wasn't standing right next to the doorway, I'd have gone back to my room already. I don't want to be having this conversation. I don't want to stand here, feeling like a bug under a microscope, angry but still hurt, hating him and wanting him despite myself, while I know he's staring at me trying to figure out why I'm so weird.

I eye the back door. I could slip out that way. It would be even weirder, since there's nothing out there, and the fog is coming

down this evening so I shouldn't be going outside, but at least I could escape this awkwardness.

"I died," Jack announces, joining us in the kitchen, doubling my nerves. Will he notice the tension in the air? How long until Racer confronts my brother about me?

Jack spots the snack-bar in my hand and frowns, and I almost laugh. He wants one. Maybe just because I have one, or maybe he's as hungry as I am, waiting for our late dinner. But some things never change, and the little proof of that is a relief. No matter how Racer feels about me, or whatever happens between the three of us, at least I can count on my brother to want my snacks.

I snap off the end I took my bite from and hold the rest out to him, but he waves me off. Now that he can have it, it's lost its appeal – or maybe he just saw the spray of dust when I broke it.

"When are Moms getting back?" he says, opening the fridge and closing it again. There's not much left now that isn't specifically for Christmas.

"Dunno," I tell him.

He grunts, then he slaps Racer in the arm with the game controller. "Your go."

Racer doesn't take it. He jerks his head at me instead. "Give it to Gem."

I used to play games with them. I used to bring them snacks and join in, and fall asleep with my head on Racer's shoulder,

or my legs across his lap. I'm not going to do that anymore.

I shake my head. "I have homework."

Jack frowns again. "What? It's the holiday, do it later."

"I want to get it done so I can enjoy the time off."

"Nerd."

He's baiting me. He wants me to play. Racer is his best friend, and he's happy with just his company, but... we used to hang out. It's Christmas. By avoiding Racer, I've had to cut Jack out too, and maybe he's starting to notice, and he won't understand why.

"I'll play later." The homework is just an excuse anyway. Maybe I can catch Jack when Racer's in the shower or something.

With Jack as a barrier between me and Racer, I scoot out of the kitchen and hurry back to my room. When my parents get home, I'll have to eat at the table with all of them, and I need some time to myself to recover from my encounter and fortify myself for the next.

I let out a breath and flop down on my bed, staring at the ceiling. What exactly *is* my plan here? After I graduate in a couple months, I'll start at the mine's technical college. Like everyone else here, that mine will be my career, and Racer works there too. I might be able to avoid him, but I can't escape him, not really.

I want a crush on someone else. After the dance three weeks ago, I considered every boy I know, picking them up in my

mind and looking them over for potential, but none of them make me feel anything. Racer is it. I have girl friends, but Racer... We grew up together. He's in my house. Any other boy, human or otherwise, just can't compete. They're not as cute or kind or funny, they haven't been there for me the way he has. Racer is so big in my mind, I can't see past him to any other boy.

I just have to have faith that either lightning will strike and I'll find someone even better, or my love will die a slow strangled death of starvation. Racer will get a girlfriend for sure in the next couple of years. He's never had one before but he's not in school anymore. He has a job, so he's going to want a real adult life, same as Jack. And while I don't expect my feelings to wither to death within two years, I have hope that they will in five years. It seems impossible that I'll still feel this way in ten years, and then I'll be twenty-eight, still young. I can get married at twenty-eight. I just have to resign myself to a lot of pain first.

I drag my backpack over and start taking out my books, unpacking it, thinking about the homework I do actually have but have no intention of doing now. That's when I realise I have too many books. Chui and I were discussing a project when I was at her house, and I've put her books in with mine. If I don't get them back to her now, she won't be able to do the assignment and it's due the day after we go back to school. This is the last break before final exams. She needs these books to study.

The fog's coming down, so I have to go now or we'll both be trapped inside.

I look out the window quickly. The air is still clear, and while the light is dim, it's still plenty to see by.

I have to go out *now*. Chui's house is less than fifteen minutes away. I can make it there and back before the fog comes down. I might even make it back before dinner.

After my run-in with Racer, I'm desperate to get out. I'm going to be trapped in here with him for three days. This is my last chance for some freedom.

My mind is made up. I zip Chui's books into my backpack and hurry out of my room, yelling to Jack as I stomp into my shoes. "I'm going out!"

"Where?!" he bellows from the living room. He doesn't get up to check on me, but Racer does, appearing in the doorway and watching me get my shoes on.

"I stole Chui's books, I have to give them back!" I call back to Jack, ignoring Racer.

"What about dinner?"

"Don't wait for me! Just save me some!"

Racer's brow is drawn with concern. "Gem, you can't go out now."

I don't answer, I just leave.

I don't run, but I walk quickly to Chui's house. I'm the only person out on the streets, but the shuttle bus from the mine

passes me going the other way. My parents will be on it, so I won't beat them home. Damn. I'll get a lecture for this. I hurry a bit more, passing the neat bungalows that make up our small colony.

It's eerily quiet without the noise from the mine. There's only three days a year that it stops completely.

What we call Christmas or the holidays is a local event when a thick fog blooms and covers everything. We call it fog, but it's actually spores from all the plant life. At the same time every year, everything here spurts out pollen in a cloud so dense it becomes hard to see. A couple of days afterwards, every inch of everything is just carpeted in beautiful, multicoloured flowers. It's amazing. Magical. You have to sweep them off your house walls and windows. They get crushed flat in the road. If they're undisturbed though, then they put down roots and grow.

It's also mating season for all the animal-life here, including the people. Humans aren't affected by the fog, but the locals are. It sends them into a mating frenzy, so for three days every year, humans just hole-up inside and don't go out.

It's the only thing that shuts down the mine, so regardless of season or culture, everyone takes the opportunity to celebrate their biggest holiday during those three days. We celebrate Christmas, Chui celebrates Lunar New Year. Some people celebrate Yom Kippur, others use it to start or finish Ramadan. We're on an alien planet after all, so Earth calendars don't

really hold up. It's just a time for getting family together, feasting, playing games, and relaxing, at least in my house.

I grew up knowing I wasn't to go outside when it was foggy, that it was dangerous, because the locals might attack me or anyone looking for me, because they weren't thinking straight. I never cared, I was happy to stay in for three days of stuffing my face and wrestling the boys. Now, the back of my neck feels cold as I hurry to Chui's house.

When I get there, her dad answers the door, and I hand over the books quickly. He looks appalled to see me out and I quickly reassure him I'm going straight home. I dash away. The air is still clear in town, but I can see the mountains are turning from green to white, and the lawns are looking a little frothy.

I hurry, but if I'm honest, I'm more scared of the reaction I'm going to get from my parents when I come in this late than I am of running into anyone in a frenzy. There aren't that many locals in town, and the odds of bumping into one between here and my house feel really slim.

It's darker than I expected though.

I'm a street away from home when, through the fog, I see something. A shambling silhouette in the twilight, the fog already up to their knees. I can't tell if they're human or not, but they're not moving like they're okay. They're leaning forward, their arms swinging, and they're kind of... shuffling. Every few steps, they pause and swing their head left and

right, pausing at each extreme as if trying to sense something, hear or smell something.

I'm not a hundred percent scared. This could just be a drunk. A miner who's come down late and is trying to find their way home in low light and rising fog. Still, I'm not an idiot, so I risk stepping off the sidewalk to hide between two houses. I can go round the back. The town is small and mostly residential, and all the houses are built together to be nearest the mine, so people can walk to work. I've gone this way before, but I'll just stay out of sight until I'm alone again, then get back on the sidewalk.

I've gone a few steps when a voice stops me.

“Girl?”

I can tell immediately from the accent that it's not a human man, but one of the locals. I freeze and turn my head slowly like I'm in a horror movie, gripping the shoulder straps of my almost empty rucksack in case I have to make a run for it.

The man is frowning at me. “You should not be out here. Not safe.”

He's clearly not okay, but not all gone either. He's holding himself up against the wall of the house, but he's talking and I don't sense any threat from him.

“Yes, sir,” I nod, and move to continue on my way.

“Get home,” he warns me again, and again I nod.

“Yes, thank you.” I turn, ready to jog across this backyard and hop whatever fences I need to to get home, but there's

someone else there. Emerging from the forest that this property backs onto, wreathed in the fog so it trails off her limbs as she steps out of the treeline into the yard, is a local woman. She looks from me to the man behind me, and her dreamy attitude transforms. She lunges forward, baring her teeth with a violent hiss.

“Amarin, *no!*” the man behind me yells, but when the woman shrieks an ululating war cry, I scream.

Two

RACER

Gem's parents are *not* happy when she's still not home fifteen minutes after they are. I'm getting itchy too. She's been gone too long. I don't say anything though. It's not my place here. I'm not technically family.

I don't know why I always feel a little guilty when En'khoa comes and I stay with Jack and his family. It's not my fault. I don't ask for it. It's a natural phenomenon, nothing to do with me. Still, it feels like I should apologise for my planet having this thing that shuts down the mine and traps all the humans inside.

They like it, they get time off with their families. I must just be weird.

Jack's hungry, he wants to eat, hovering around the dining table with one hand on his usual chair, watching his parents for permission. I'm hungry too, but it's not my main concern.

Gem probably just stopped to chat with her friend for five minutes. Ten minutes. She'll walk in any second now.

Mimi and Jez, Jack and Gem's mothers, are still in the sturdy clothes everyone wears to the mine, but they've taken their boots off. Mimi stands at the living room window, staring out, trying to see Gem coming down the street. Jez is pacing between her and the kitchen window, looking out the back. The mist outside is hip height, high enough to affect anyone who goes out in it. Well, anyone like me. At most, it makes a human cough.

Gem will be fine. Humans aren't affected by En'khoa. Her friend doesn't live far away – no one lives far away – this town is small and the residences are clustered as close to the mine as possible for an easy commute. Sure, some of my people live in town, but not many. The odds of Gem running into any are slim... and if she does, they only have half a chance of being male. She'll be home soon.

The table is set with fabric place mats, but the spaghetti is sitting in the big pan on the switched-off stove, the plates cooling on the counter.

I love this family. I love their comfortable home, I love them for feeding me all the time and taking me in every year. Jack and Gem *are* my family, as far as I'm concerned.

Jez has gone to stand beside Mimi, her hand on her shoulder. Mimi's arms are folded, tense.

"What should we do?" she asks her wife quietly. She doesn't want Jack and I to hear and worry, but she doesn't realise what close attention I'm paying. "It's going to get worse."

“I don’t know,” Jez replies. “We can’t go out. Maybe I could call the bus, drive around, maybe that would be safe?”

“If she’s on the street, why hasn’t she come home?”

“Chui’s dad said she left twenty minutes ago when I rang.”

“Something must have happened.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Then where is she?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart.”

“We have to go look for her. She must have got hurt, or lost. Jez, what if...”

Mimi gives Jez a long, meaningful, pleading look, and I know what that means. What if she’s been attacked? What if a male has found her, raped her, carried her off somewhere?

I should be offended on behalf of my people. I’d like to say we wouldn’t do that. In all the years of the humans living here, nothing like that has ever happened, especially not to someone as young as Gem.

But.

I know it could happen, under the right – or wrong – circumstances. The humans have been very good about staying inside, out of the way during En’khoa, but every two or three years, a careless man who thinks he can risk it might get charged by a male in frenzy. Before I was old enough to really pay attention, there was a story circulating of a male who had detected a woman inside a shed and trapped her there for a day

and a half as he tried to get in. One year, a man stumbled on a couple in the woods and was knocked unconscious.

The humans stay inside for good reason. Just because no one's been raped or carried off yet doesn't mean it couldn't happen. I've never worried about Gem before, because until recently, she was a child. We all were. But I'm not sure anymore if one of my kind would still see her that way. She's past the age to be considered an adult by my people, and a male in a frenzy could make a mistake.

The thought of someone getting to her... makes me twitchy.

She's not allowed to belong to someone else.

Jez turns worried, beseeching eyes on me, but I don't get it right away.

"Racer, do you think... Is there anything *you* can do?"

"Huh? Uh..."

Jack comes to stand beside me, frowning, backing me up without really knowing what's going on. He's got loyal instincts. If he didn't treat me like a brother, maybe I wouldn't be who I am now.

Jez holds up her hand, as if interrupting me. "I know it's dangerous. I'm not suggesting... But can you call anyone? Do your people have any kind of procedure for things like this?"

The short answer is no. If there were provisions to care for children during En'khoa, I wouldn't spend it here with a human family. As I understand it, before the humans arrived, children who were too young to feed themselves were left with

people too elderly to be a threat, and if one wandered off then... Tough luck. You just hoped they survived until En'khoa was over and the parents regained enough sense to go out looking for them.

My people don't have emergency services who are somehow immune and can go out looking for Gem.

"No, sorry. I can't think of anything," I tell Jez, feeling like shit.

She looks at her wife, and then they both look out the window, craning their necks to try to see down the street.

If I wasn't here, they could open the front door, wait on the front path, stand outside with a beacon so Gem can find her way home. Because of me, they can't let the air in.

Beside me, Jack makes an annoyed cluck. He won't say anything in front of their parents, but he's angry at Gem for doing this.

"I have to go out looking for her," Mimi announces suddenly.

"No, then we'll just have two people lost out there," says Jez.

"She's our *daughter*, and she could be hurt."

"What about Jack?"

"You stay here with Jack."

Jez catches Mimi's arm, and they share another look. "You're at just as much risk as Gem is out there."

"Someone's got to do something."

“If she’s not in town, then... We won’t find her with this visibility. We don’t know the area, the woods. If she’s down by the river...”

Down by the river, where my people live. Yeah, they’d have to be insane to walk into my village now and start trying to talk to people. They’d be ripped to shreds.

I feel sick. I feel like this is my fault. Gem’s been acting weird around me; she practically ran out of here after being in the same room as me for two minutes. I’m not welcome here anymore, not as far as she’s concerned, but I’m the only one who seems to have realised.

But I can’t do anything. I can’t go out there. I might be only nineteen and not quite a man yet in my people’s eyes, but my body is old enough to lose all sense if I start breathing in that shit out there. I’ve never done it and I don’t want to, but I’m not dumb enough to think I haven’t gone through puberty and my cock doesn’t get hard. Ten minutes out there, and I’ll be the one putting Gem in danger.

“Maybe she’s at someone else’s house. Maybe she thought she couldn’t make it home in time, and her phone’s dead?” I suggest.

“Jack, do you know if she has any other friends between here and Chui’s house?” Mimi asks.

He shrugs. “I don’t think so, but anyone would have let her in. Or maybe she found somewhere empty. Do you want me to go out and look for her?”

He says this with a big sigh of resignation, as if the hero has been roused to action, as if this is going to fix everything, but Jez barks “No!” She controls herself. “Thank you, but no, we don’t need both of our kids lost out there. You stay here.”

Jack frowns again. He doesn’t like being called a kid.

“You could get the phone list and call everyone and see if you can find her?” Mimi suggests to soothe him, and he grunts and heads for the landline in the hall, leaving me with his parents like a spare part.

Mimi turns back to Jez and mutters quietly, trying to keep it from me. “We could take some tools for weapons. We could walk every street in half an hour, less if we jog. We need to at least look, Jez. We can’t leave her out there. And if we don’t find her, then maybe we could- we could get one of the crawlers from the mine, drive around the mountains in that.”

These people are like a second family to me, and I feel like I’m watching them start a war on my species. If they take one of the huge, tank-like mine crawlers into the woods to look for Gem, they are guaranteed to come across some of my own people who, while maybe not exactly on their best behaviour, don’t deserve this. What kind of incident is this going to cause? We’ve lived side by side in peace until now, I don’t want anyone to get hurt.

But I don’t know what I can do. If I went out there, I’d become part of the problem. I know the woods around the town and the area, I’ve explored much more than the humans have, and my people keep me informed. I can speak the

language, and if I came across anyone looking for a fight... Well, I might get my ass kicked, but I stand more of a chance of de-escalating the situation than a couple of panicked moms in a tank.

But I can't go out there without losing my mind.

Jez grips Mimi, and whispers something so quietly I almost don't catch it. "I have some spare breathers in the garage," and then she cuts her eyes to me for a second.

Holy shit.

I've only worked at the mine for a year or so. I don't go deep enough to require a breather, but I know what they are. They're ventilation masks that filter out the dust from the drilling and explosives and identify harmful gasses.

I immediately realise where Jez is going with this.

If I had one of those...

Mimi argues though. "We can't ask that of him."

"I'll do it," I announce firmly. "If you give me a breather, I should be alright." I hope. "I can find Gem and bring her back."

The two women stare at me, conflicted, but too worried about their daughter to protect a kid that isn't even theirs. They know I'm the best choice. They don't want to orphan their son if things go really bad. They don't want to lose a family member.

"It's okay," I reassure them. "I know what I'm doing."

Jez breaks first. Mimi isn't ready to sacrifice anyone but herself, but Jez will do anything to protect her family. "Okay. I'll get it." She rushes from the room.

Mimi stands frozen, running her palms over her thighs. "Honey, you don't have to do this."

"It's fine." I try to act casual, though I am secretly freaking out. There is a really good chance I'll run into one of my own kind first and have to run for my life. Who knows if I'll even find Gem? But it's been long enough now that it's clear she's not coming home on her own.

What if I run into one of my mother's friends and she tries to put the moves on me? I can't stop my nose curling in disgust at that thought. Luckily there aren't too many unmated females who are that much older than me.

Mimi comes and squeezes my hands. "*Thank* you," she says so emphatically, I don't know what to do with it. Luckily, Jez comes back in with the black breather and I take it off her. Suddenly this is real.

Before I put my boots on, I dig Jack's old school bag out of his room and start filling it. Two bottles of water. Packs of cookies and snacks from the kitchen drawers. A knife and a rolling pin, just in case. A flashlight. My phone. A blanket. When I can't fit anything else, I go to the door. Jack's seen me going back and forth, but he's been on the phone. As I lace my boots, he finishes his call, the other person not having seen Gem.

"Where are you going?"

I hold up the breather. “To find Gem.”

“I’ll go with you.”

I shake my head. “Your moms don’t want to risk both kids.”

“That’s bullshit. No one’s getting killed.” It almost sounds like a question, so I look up at him and smile.

“Of course not. Just, you know. One twisted ankle is better than two.”

He seems to accept that. “Do you need any help?”

“Nah. I know what I’m doing.” I finish with my shoes and stand. “Back before you know it.” I slap him on the arm, close to his shoulder. I don’t bullshit Jack very often, usually just about cultural stuff that he doesn’t need to know about, that would be too hard to explain, but I don’t have time to be honest with him. I can’t tell him I’m scared of what’s out there, or what might happen to me, or what might have happened to Gem. I can’t tell him I don’t know how I’ll ever show my face again if I can’t find her. “Just call me if she comes back, okay?”

“Yeah, sure thing.” He’s still looking at me funny, kind of squirmy and doubtful. As I strap the breather on, covering my nose, mouth, and chin, he tries to say whatever it is. “Don’t... Not that you would, but just, y’know... she’s my little sister. So just, don’t...”

Jack and I have talked about girls before. We’ve talked about crushes and sex. It was a big deal when Jack lost his virginity. He knows it’s different for my people and he doesn’t push, but

as his best friend, I've heard all the gory details of his love life. But I've always somehow known Gem is an exception, off-limits, an honorary male almost, genderless and sexless. Like he says, she's his little sister.

So I say, "Gross. Come on. No way. I wouldn't."

He looks relieved, telling me that was the right thing to say. He doesn't need to know that I totally would, that I've been thinking about it since I hit puberty and have been making tentative plans for the last two years.

I open the door, throw my hand up in a wave, and try not to breathe too deep as I head out into the fog.

Three

GEM

When we were kids, we used to play a game where two of us would pair up and try to defend a 'home' from the third. Jack and I were always brother and sister, of course. When it was him and Racer, it turned into boys versus girls. And when it was Racer and I... I always made sure we were husband and wife, Mommy and Daddy.

The 'home' was this hollowed out dead tree in the woods. When we were kids, it could fit two of us. Now, it's a tight squeeze as I ball myself up inside it, trying to turn my feet inwards so they don't stick out. The air around me is white and thick, and the mist is coating my clothes, my hair, my skin. I'm worried about breathing it in, but there's not much I can do about that.

I couldn't have outrun the woman if her mate hadn't interfered. He bought me time by trying to stop her. Now I can hear them, but I can't tell how far away they are or what they're doing. The fog makes everything sound strange. The normal small sounds of the forest, like wind and leaves, are

completely silenced. There are no echoes anymore. I'm terrified if I stick my head out, they'll be right there, and it doesn't sound like the guy is in any state to help me anymore. They're speaking the local language, which I don't understand, but there's a growl to it that I haven't heard before.

I'm hoping they're fucking and not hunting me.

The warnings I've grown up with crowd my head and psych me out. Am I going to get killed if I move? Am I going to get beaten to a pulp by someone in a frenzy? Am I going to get raped? I'm suddenly grateful I'm in jeans and good shoes for running. I can't spend three days in this tree.

I know my family must know something's happened by now. I wish really, really hard that Jack doesn't go into protective brother mode and try to come and get me. I prefer to picture him just frustrated and annoyed I'm holding up dinner. I tell myself my moms aren't scared, that they know I'm a big girl.

I can't predict anymore how Racer will react. Before, when we were still friends, I would have thought he might talk Jack into mounting a rescue mission for me, that he would want to save me. Now though... Now I know he doesn't care about me as much as I thought he did.

I snap out of my thoughts when I hear a footstep nearby, too close. My heart is suddenly sprinting even though I'm holding my breath, and the adrenaline makes me dizzy, my vision hyperfocused and spinning at the same time. I can't see anything beyond the opening of my hiding space, just a white, fluffy world, and I tense up, trying to make myself smaller, but

I'm already as bunched up as I can be. I strain to hear more footsteps and the seconds stretch like minutes.

A hand grabs my ankle and I scream, louder than I ever knew I could. "No!" I'm already flailing and kicking out at their ankles.

"Ow, shit! Gem, shut up!" a muffled voice hisses at me. The body thumps down to its knees, bending down to look into the hole, purple face too close. "It's me, it's me!"

I still for an instant, taut like a bow-string, ready to fight some more, but I recognise the boy talking to me, and he's not a monster.

Racer has come to get me.

Without thinking, I launch myself at him, throwing my arms around his neck. My hug knocks him over and he hits the ground with a thump that I feel through his chest. White plumes of pollen billow up around us, and he makes an inhuman chirp as the air is forced out of him.

In this moment, I'm not mad at him. I'm not hurt. I'm so, so glad to know him. It's like everything is going to be alright now he's here. I burrow my face into his shoulder and take him in. His chest is hard against mine, everything bony and firm. His braids are cool against my arms. I can't smell him, all I can smell is the pollen, which has a chilly, fresh, plant smell, like cold laundry, but his warmth is familiar, distinct from everyone else's somehow.

I'm squeezing him way too tight, I realise, but I can't stop. I'm embarrassing myself; he's going to know I still feel too much for him, but now I know I'm not in danger, I've started to shake. I can't make myself move. Suddenly I'm freezing, and he's warm. I just need to hold him a little bit longer.

He puts his hands on my back. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt?" he pants in my ear, and I realise he's wearing a mask, a breather from the mine. The filter is hard against my temple.

I can't find it in me to talk, so I shake my head as much as I'm able, which is not much. I feel it when he sighs, his chest deflating under me. He squeezes me a bit tighter.

"We gotta go."

I don't want to. I want to stay here, pressed against him where it's safe, but we're exposed and I'm putting him at risk. It's that thought that gets me to move, pushing off him reluctantly. I struggle to my feet and he gets up after me, a big backpack on his shoulders. It looks like he came loaded for bear, and that reminds me to worry about the situation again, and wonder how it is that he's out here.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him as he looks around, scanning the forest carefully, but visibility is low. I can't hear the couple anymore. Maybe my screaming scared them off.

"Came to get you."

"But... I thought you couldn't go outside when it's foggy like this?"

He finally looks at me, but he doesn't answer. He fumbles in his pocket then pulls out his phone, speaking into it to send someone a message. "I found her. She's fine. I'm bringing her back now."

A message to my family, I'm guessing, and my stomach twists. I dropped my phone when the woman was chasing me.

Then he strides past me, grabbing my hand on the way, and starts walking. I try not to choke. I don't try to take my hand back. I just stare at it in his, studying the feel of it.

In many ways, Racer is a boy I grew up with. We're both still young. I know neither of us look like adults. But there's a part of me, an adult woman part, that can't get over the feel of his hand. Big. Strong. Different. A miner's hand; an alien's hand with two fingers and velvety texture; a man's hand. My girlhood crush is flipping somersaults at the fact that we're holding hands, and something more mature is flushing hot at the feel of him.

I don't need to let him know any of this though.

"Did my moms send you? Is Jack out here somewhere?"

"Jack's not here. He stayed at the house to call around, see if you were holed up with someone. And yeah."

My heart sinks a little bit. He didn't want to come. "Sorry, they shouldn't have done that."

"S'fine. They were right to. I told them I know the area, I know how to handle my people if we run into any."

I told them....

“How did you know where to find me?”

“Town’s pretty small, didn’t take long to search the streets. Then I just had to think of where you could hide.”

We haven’t played by the tree in years. He remembers.

Our hands tie us together, but I would stay close to him anyway. We wouldn’t have to get separated by much to become invisible to each other. Everything is white. Trees swim towards us from five feet away and disappear as they pass. It would normally be a thirty-minute walk back to my house, but we have to move slowly, and stay quiet. We don’t want to walk into anything, or attract attention.

Racer glances back at me over his shoulder. “Why were you hiding anyway? Why didn’t you come home?”

“I was coming back from Chui’s when I saw a man ahead of me. I got off the sidewalk, but then the woman he was with chased me into the woods.” I don’t say they were locals, I don’t have to. Racer makes a small noise but turns away again.

I don’t want the conversation to end. I know I’m supposed to be mad at him, and I probably will be once we get home and I’m safe, but for now, my safety depends on making nice with him, which is just so much easier than trying to distance myself has been. It’s an excuse.

“Are you... going to be okay? Out here?” I ask.

He lifts his other hand and taps one of the filters on the mask, slowing enough to bring us side by side. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to lose it.”

His black T-shirt is grey with the pollen, and there's enough in his hair to make him look prematurely aged. What if it works through his skin?

My body does strange things at the thought of Racer 'losing it' with me. What would I do if he did suddenly turn on me, push me against a tree or down to the ground? The thought doesn't scare me. I can't imagine him hurting me, even in a mating frenzy. Probably because I know I wouldn't resist. He wouldn't have to force me at all. It's just the thought of what would happen afterwards that I don't like. He'd regret it. He'd hate it. He'd be grossed out and ashamed, because he doesn't feel that way about me.

I can't stop myself from saying "Are you sure?"

His expression is hard to read, the mask covers everything under his eyes, but he says "I'm sure," and I believe him. There's a note in his muffled voice that suggests he's going to *make* sure.

I squeeze his hand, then instantly look away, mortified at what I just did. This isn't a date, and I'm not that girl anymore, the one who loved him and thought he was a good a person.

"We need to be quiet," he says, and I don't say anything else as we creep through the white woods, listening.

It's spooky as hell. I've never heard it this quiet. No matter where you go, you can always hear the mine, but now it's silent and everything is being pillowed in pollen. Racer's breathing is heavier than normal because of the mask, and it's making me hyperaware of my own breathing. It's all I can

hear, and the more I think about it, the louder it gets in my head.

I have to remind myself. I can't let myself forget what he did, how he made me feel, how he humiliated me, because otherwise, I'm going to get swept up in the soft grip of his hand and his breathing pounding in my ear, tangling with mine. So I force myself to go back.

Back to the dance. To waiting by the door, next to a bin, for him. My face burning under makeup, everyone looking at me, turning other boys down when they asked me to dance out of pity. The dress I spent all my money on. The hair my mom did for me, teary-eyed.

The text message: *I would never go to the dance with you.*

The broken heart.

Racer looks over his shoulder at me, a questioning frown on his face. He holds up the hand signal for "Ok?" and I realise the bad memories have made my grip tighten on his hand in anger. Suddenly, I decide I don't need to hold his hand anymore, and I take mine back, not looking at him.

"I'm fine." I fold my hands under my arms, curling my shoulders in to protect myself, and trudge ahead of him. I can feel his confusion, but he doesn't say anything. He knows I'm avoiding him.

I just need to convince myself to actually do it.

Four

RACER

I don't know why Gem suddenly turns on me. I was so relieved to find her unhurt that I guess I forgot she's pissed at me. She must have forgotten too, because she held my hand and hugged me. Maybe she was just that scared, and now that we're heading back to town, she's not. It felt like it used to for a minute there though. No, it felt better.

I immediately feel guilty for being glad Jack's not here, and I get to be alone with her.

I was worried the situation would make her afraid of me, but she must have more faith in the breather than I do. Only a few minutes after I left Jack's house, I started to feel sweaty and itchy, but I can't be sure it's the pollen, and not just my own mind playing tricks on me. My whole life I've been told what would happen if I went out in the fog, and now I have, I'm paranoid the breather's not going to work. What if I'm so scared of that happening that I hallucinate it into reality?

But I can't. I have to get Gem home. There's no way, *no way*, I'm going to lose myself on her. If I think it's happening for

real, I'm going to run as fast as I can in the other direction, headfirst into a tree if I have to.

Even her turning away from me now doesn't cut as deep as it usually does, because I'm just so glad I found her.

I know why she acts like she hates me now, or at least what started it. We were talking about the annual dance the humans throw, and how my people never go. Jack went inside for a drink, and she said we could go together, she and I.

I laughed because I thought she was joking, and said "Sure," to play along. We'd literally just talked about how my people don't attend, and I thought it was obvious Jack would never allow it. As if he'd let me take his precious little sister on a date. I thought she was only suggesting it out of pity, like if I wanted to go so bad, she would chaperone me. I thought she'd be able to read me. I didn't think she'd take me seriously.

I didn't think she'd actually *go*. She never mentioned it again. The night in question, Jack and I spent all day going round the festival, and she knew that. I only found out afterwards that she'd stayed home to get ready instead of being with her girlfriends like I'd assumed. Jack didn't tell me she was going to the dance.

I don't know what I would have done if he had told me. Would I have rushed home, tried to throw an outfit together? Would I have messaged her, told her we weren't going?

I don't know what I could have done differently.

And I don't know why it's ruined everything between us.

She went to the dance by herself and everyone saw her. I don't get why that's embarrassing. There were other people there, kids from her school even. She could have hung out with them. She could have had a good time. She didn't need me.

Even if it *was* embarrassing, I've seen her embarrassed more times than I even remember. When she was twelve, Jack pushed her over and she fell on her butt on the riverbank and had to walk home with the seat of her pants all brown with mud. She still hung out with us. She wasn't even that mad at Jack.

So why she's avoiding me now... I don't get it. I just hope it's not permanent. I don't know what I'll do if it is, because I have plans for us. I guess I'd have to win her back somehow. It's strange that, even though I grew up with her, I don't know how to do that.

Even though she's mad at me, I can't let us get separated. By now, every adult in my village still spry enough to walk will be out and out of their minds. As weird as my skin feels as the pollen settles in a thin layer over my whole body, if I can just get her home safely, then I'll be happy. I'll deal with how to safely clean this stuff off later, and any effect it has on me. Gem first.

I walk faster to keep her close. She walks faster to get away from me. I'm listening as hard as I can, looking left and right, but it's hard to do it all at once. If I pause to focus on a shape in the mist or a sound, she'll disappear.

“Gem,” I hiss. “Slow down!”

She stops and lets me catch up, but she keeps her arms folded and her face turned forwards, scowling off into the distance.

Maybe... Maybe I should take this opportunity to talk to her? I'll be living in her house for the next three days, but that doesn't mean I'll ever get a private moment with her. Not unless I sneak into her bedroom when Jack's asleep... which I probably shouldn't do.

"What did I do?" I ask, and her face reflects a flash of alarm.

She drops her arms, putting her hands in her pockets, trying to look casual, but she takes way too long to answer, like the truth is a piece of candy in her mouth that she has to work into her cheek before she can speak around it.

"What do you mean?" From the way she glances around at the fog, I'm guessing it's only the danger that's keeping her civil, and biting her tongue is killing her. Normally, she'd let me have it.

"Why are you mad at me?"

Another flash, this time of outrage, telling me she thinks I should already know. "Who said I'm mad at you?" She can barely prise her teeth apart to talk.

"You're avoiding me."

"Do we have to have this conversation here? Now? I thought it was supposed to be dangerous."

"Jack's always around in the house, or you hide in your room."

"So?"

“So why? Don’t you want to hang out anymore?” My heart starts to race, and I can feel the beat of my pulse ticking against the edge of the mask. I don’t know what I’ll do if she says no.

She looks pained, still staring off away from me, and crosses her arms again, holding herself together. I’m reminded of the time she got stung by a tep. Jack raced off to get their moms, and I stayed with Gem while she cried. I put my arms around her and let her cry on my chest. At the time, I thought I was just performing replacement big brother duties, but the feel of her warm, bony, girl body fitting awkwardly against me has stayed with me all these years. Her sobs made the air hot and damp, and we couldn’t quite hold each other right, sat on the ground, but she clung to me so tightly.

I’m sure I could do a better job now, if she’d let me. I want to try. She’s hurt, and I want to put my arms around her and let her cry on my chest. I’m different now. I’d fit her better than I did then.

She’s still holding back, chewing the words instead of letting them out. It couldn’t be more obvious that there *is* something, she’s just not saying it.

“I thought we were friends,” I push. Another flash of pain.
“Do you hate me now?”

“Racer...” she groans, begging me to stop. Whatever she’s feeling, it’s real, and it might be bigger than anything else I’ve seen from her. Why won’t she just say it? If she would just say it, I could fix it.

When she doesn't deny anything, my stomach clenches, acidic. "What, do you? Do you hate me? Gem?"

"Can't we just go home?" She walks a few steps away but I grab her arm, terrified.

"You don't, do you? You don't hate me. Right, Gem? Right? Come on, tell me you don't hate me."

"I- Why'd you-?" she huffs. "Do we have to talk about this here? What if someone comes? Let's just go home."

"Say you don't hate me," I beg her.

She glances up at me for just an instant, our eyes meeting, and I see that she can't do it. Maybe she wants to, but the impression I get is that she doesn't know. She wants to say it to stop me bothering her, but she doesn't want me to think it's true. She doesn't want to lie.

Stunned, I let my hand slip from her arm, and she walks slowly away from me. I recover enough after a few seconds to go after her.

"But I didn't do anything." I hate how much like a child I sound, but I can't help it. I literally didn't do anything. I didn't go to the dance. How can she be mad when I didn't even go?

"It doesn't matter," she says, defeated, but I don't want that. I don't want her to give in to whatever this is.

"It does! I didn't go to the dance," I acknowledge, starting with what I know, where I think it all started.

She cringes away from me.

“I said I would but that was a joke-”

“Stop!” she cries, too loud for where we are, though the fog muffles it in a strange way. She whirls on me, her hands in fists by her sides, her eyes wet and her lip wobbling, and all I want to do is hold her. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay?!”

Talking is making it worse, I can see that, but I’m scared. This isn’t like the time I pulled the head off her doll, before I knew what a doll was. She’s making this sound like the end. “But Gem... please...”

“I just want to go home.”

She stands, hugging herself, waiting for me to take her, and I realise maybe I don’t need the fog to be dangerous to her. Maybe the breather isn’t enough. Maybe as far as she’s concerned, I can hurt her as much as any of my people who are out here, looking to claim a mate.

She has to rely on me, but everything about her screams she’d rather be running away. It’s like she has to fight herself just to stand near me.

I’ve never felt this cut off from her before. We’ve always been a unit, the three of us. Now she’s like a stranger. No, she makes *me* feel like a stranger, a person I don’t know, someone she doesn’t like, who hurt her.

“But...” I know if I take her home, she’ll disappear into her room and we won’t ever have this conversation. She doesn’t *want* to talk to me. She doesn’t *want* to fix things. She doesn’t *want me*.

And I don't know why.

I stumble forward into the fog, letting her follow behind, my world rocked at its foundations. The thought that she's turned against me permanently, for real, chokes me. For a moment, I consider ripping the breather off and losing myself to however En'khoa feels because the delirium has to be better than this, but I don't. I know even if I ran away, I'd only come back to her.

I know, and have known for a long time, that she's the only woman for me. I'd track her wherever she went. It's why I've spent every En'khoa at their house, inside. I'm old enough to take part, but I don't want any other female. If Gem is inside, then that's where I want to be too. I don't want to get high and rub my erection on her kitchen door, scratching for her to come out and join me, which is probably what would happen if I did ever let myself breathe in the fog. Now *that* would be embarrassing, and cost me Jack's friendship as well as hers.

A vision of next year swims in my mind, of me spending En'khoa outside, taking a girl from my village as my mate, because Gem has rejected me and it's never going to happen, and in the intervening year we've grown apart... I can't let that happen.

Maybe I can enlist Jack's help. Even if I'm missing some sort of crucial human custom here, she can't hold out against both of us, not over a year. We can be friends again, or at least friendly. Enough that I don't have to give up hope.

I'm so lost in those thoughts that when she grabs my arm, I startle and stumble a step. When I've righted myself and look at her, I see that she's staring out at the fog, but her fingers dig hard into my arm, and she's holding her breath. She's scared. I immediately scan the woods like I should have been doing all along.

"I think someone's following us," she whispers, so quietly it's more like I'm reading her lips.

"Who?" If anyone is out there, hearing us talk won't make them any more or less aggressive.

"I don't know." She leans closer to me.

"Male or female?"

"I think... male..."

I swallow. That's bad. A female might try to fight Gem to claim me for her own, but I would get between them and fight her off. The female wouldn't hurt me, it wouldn't be what she wanted. A male on the other hand, would be after Gem. He would want to put me down.

I don't care if Gem is mad at me, I put my arm over shoulders, pulling her into me, broadcasting my claim. It might be enough to make the male hesitate. "We need to move."

She nods, and we move together. She looks left and over her shoulder behind us. I look right and ahead.

"Don't look at him, look at me," I say. "It will encourage him if he thinks you haven't made up your mind."

She obligingly glues her eyes to my face, and in the cold fog, I can feel warmth radiating from her skin to mine. “What, um... I mean, if there is someone there, he wouldn’t really...”

I know what she’s asking and I don’t know what to tell her. Would a strange male she’s never met really beat me to death in front of her then fuck her next to my corpse?

Yeah, he would.

I would too, if another male had her.

But I’m not going to tell her that.

“What’s going to happen?” she whispers.

“If we *are* being followed,” I begin, trying to keep my tone educational. “If it *is* a male of my kind, and if he *does* approach and *does* challenge me or try to take you, then I’ll fight him. Obviously.” I need a deep breath for this next bit. “And if it looks like I’m losing, you will run home. You will not look back. You will scream for help as soon as you see a house.”

“Without you?”

“Yes.”

“Racer-”

“Gem. I won’t let him hurt you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

As I make that vow, I see the grey silhouette in the white fog. She’s right. He’s too close to be uninterested. He’s definitely walking with us.

I don't know what to do. If I was also under the pollen's influence, I would have instincts for this sort of thing. As it is, I'm not territorial enough to launch myself into a fight I might not survive before I even see the male's face. If only we had shelter. If only I could convince him Gem was a lost cause.

"Gem." I don't take my eyes off him. "Would you-" I cut myself off. There's no way I can actually suggest what I'm thinking.

"What?"

The male continues to hover, watching, evaluating. He's not committed to this yet. Shit. There's a chance. "Would you be alright if I kissed you?"

"...What?"

"He'll leave us alone if he thinks you're already mine."

Her breathing changes, short and shallow. I can feel it in her shoulders under my arm, and where her breast presses against my ribs. She whimpers quietly.

"I'm sorry, I know you don't want to, but it's that or a fight-"

"Okay," she interrupts quickly, her voice small. "But what about your breather? You can't take it off."

Oh, crap. She's right. "We can fake it."

"Okay."

I nod, and without taking my eyes off the male, guide her towards the nearest sturdy tree. We're going to be blind while we do this. It's a huge risk. I just have to bank on the hope that

he'll pull me off her before pummelling me. "Take your bag off."

After she slips it off, I push her back against the tree. Then, my instincts screaming at me not to, I put my back to the other male, folding my body against hers. I tuck my face into her neck, hiding the mask, and press my hips into her stomach, my knee going between her thighs, lifting her a few inches and pinning her where I want her. She gasps and grabs me, gripping my biceps.

"Don't look at him," I remind her.

"Racer," she whimpers, and I can't believe I'm doing this. It's like something from my fantasies. If I wasn't braced for a blow to the back of my head, I'd probably enjoy it.

Now that I'm here, I realise I can't just hold this static position. That wouldn't fool anybody. I need to look like I'm claiming Gem for real, like she's already my mate, willing and needy for me.

I rock my hips into her, and her hands tighten on my arms. "Sorry," I mumble, quietly thankful I'm not hard at least, though my jeans are suddenly too stiff and constricting.

"God, don't apologise," she says. "I should join in, right?"

I nod into her neck, so she slowly brings one shaky thigh up to my hip.

"I'm sorry," I warn her before sliding my hand under her T-shirt, exposing her stomach to the chill. Her skin is almost boiling against my cold hand, and she trembles with every

breath. I divert to her ribs, my fingertips settling against her bra where it runs under her arm.

“Don’t apologise,” she breathes again, and then she mirrors me, burying her face in my neck, her breath hot against my skin. I swallow, and I wonder if she felt the mask bob. I knew we’d fit together better now than we used to.

Most of me is focused on the male watching us somewhere behind me, my senses straining that way, trying to anticipate an attack if it comes, because I’m doing this to protect Gem. I’m trying to ignore how she feels. I don’t want to remember this later when there’s a real risk of me jerking off to it. Not if she hates it. Not if she hates *me*. It’s difficult, but I’m trying really hard not to catalogue how soft her skin is against my fingertips, how tantalisingly close her breast is, how plush her thigh is in my grip, how my fingers sink into her flesh. I’m grateful for – and furious at – the breather that mutes her sweet smell and creates a barrier between her cheek and mine, keeping me from feeling everything where she pants against my neck, her mouth so close to my skin.

She moves her arms around my shoulders instead. This position must be hard for her, almost up on her toes. “Should I... do more? To sell it?”

I know she doesn’t want this, that she probably hates it, but I’m intrigued by what she might do, and if it’s her choice, then I’m not a scumbag, right? I want to feel it. She can use me if she wants. I gulp again. “Yeah.”

One of her hands slides slowly across my shoulder to the back of my neck, the skin-on-skin contact making me shiver. She threads her fingers through my braids, tipping me the way she wants, and then she's nuzzling at my neck. I can feel how she's shaking as she runs the tip of her nose from my collarbone to my ear.

And then she kisses me, right there, on the thin, fluttering skin of my neck.

I feel like I've turned to stone, I'm working so hard on not giving away how she's affecting me. Her lips are so different and strange compared to how my mouth is structured, I've wondered for years how they work, what they would feel like – a curiosity I've never felt about Jack, or any other human. Humans kiss. My people lick. The dexterity of her lips would be freaky if I wasn't totally obsessed. I hold perfectly still as she brushes her lips against my throat, then does it again, testing and experimenting with movements and pressures and suction. She flicks her tongue against the soft vulnerable spot.

The other male will have no idea what she's doing, but I don't tell her to stop. I'd rather never speak again than do that. I appreciate her efforts to 'sell' this, but we have to go bigger.

I roll my hips against her again, trying to make it look like I really am inside her, like I really am going *in* and *up*. With her leg around me, we almost line up. My zipper grates against the button of her jeans. It's not like before when I was just pushing into her soft stomach.

With a little bounce, she wraps her other leg around me, and locks her ankles behind me. I catch her and put more of my weight against her, pinning her to the tree, holding her up. She's higher now, and I realise we really are lined up, exactly how we should be. Am I imagining the furnace heat building between her groin and mine? Is it coming from her or from me? I don't want her to realise what this is doing to me, but I don't know how long I have before that becomes impossible to hide in this position.

I groan.

To sell it, of course.

Did I need to know how her thighs feel clenching around me?
Or am I being tortured?

"Racer..." she says into the gap between us, her voice small and tight. I'm overdoing it. I'm making her uncomfortable.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise."

"I have to keep moving."

"Okay."

"If you could, um, moan, that might help. To sell it."

"Uh, right."

I brush my zipper against the seam of her jeans, and she tenses, but stays silent. "Gem?"

"Oh, uh, *ungh*," she calls out, louder than she has to. Under different circumstances, I might laugh at how fake that

sounded. Right now, I find it too convincing. My body thrills at the sound, even as my rational mind – what’s left of it – knows it’s fake.

I settle into a rhythm, trying not to grind too hard into her, trying to recall what I’ve pieced together from allusions Jack has made to human female anatomy. Is pressing against her there hurting her? Could it feel good? Can she feel my dick? Will she be disgusted?

Her legs are so tight around me, she must be getting tired, afraid of falling. I take over the moaning to give her a break, and she goes rigid, forcing my face into her shoulder.

“Wh- Was that- Did you just... *purr*?”

“What?”

“That noise you just made.”

“I’m just... trying to help.”

“...Right. Can you... do it again?”

I do. Obviously I’ve never made sex noises around her. I don’t know if I ever have. She seems to like it, because she relaxes against me again, and even starts stroking my back.

“I didn’t know you could make that noise,” she whispers.

“Why would you?” I whisper back, filling my lungs for another one.

She doesn’t answer, but a few seconds later, she pats my shoulder. “I think he’s gone.”

I risk lifting my head and looking around. I see no sign of the male. Without the breather, I might have been able to smell him, but I have to rely on my other senses.

I'm sure he bought it. Even if he wasn't convinced we were actually mating, he couldn't think he had a chance with Gem if she was doing that with me.

I probably could have stopped sooner. I got carried away.

I gently pull her legs off me, and she puts her feet on the ground, her legs unstable. I step back and she adjusts her clothing, pulling her shirt back into place and tugging down the legs of her jeans where they've ridden up. She won't look at me, but that just means I can look at her as much as I like.

Does she understand that was a show, to keep her safe? Or could she tell how much I liked it?

She picks up her bag and slings it over her shoulder. "Should we keep going?"

Tongue-tied, I nod and lead the way.

Five

GEM

Does Racer think that was all for show? Or could he tell how much I liked it?

I wonder that over and over as we pick our way across rocks and tree roots, staring at his shoulders, which are thoroughly coated by the pollen now, but still show where my arms were, my handprints. I definitely got some in my mouth when I was kissing his neck earlier. Fuck, guess I'm an idiot in two different ways. One for really testing this 'humans aren't affected by the fog' thing, and two for torturing myself with knowledge of something I can never have.

Put the alien sex-pollen in my mouth? Sure, why not?

Grind on and lick the guy I've been in love with for most of my life, who just broke my heart, who will always be there because he's my brother's best friend? Sign. Me. Up.

I don't even regret it. Does it make it worse to know what I'm missing? Maybe. But I'd never done anything like that before and I just can't be upset that my first physical experience was

with Racer. I *wanted* it to be with him. I always have. It's just a shame that he couldn't kiss me. I think if I'd done that with someone else first, then I'd be sad that it wasn't Racer. Now I can move on, maybe.

It does suck a little that Racer seems totally unaffected though, like it didn't even happen. Maybe he gets so much action that what we did doesn't even rank, but I find that hard to believe. He spends all his time with Jack and, before the dance, me. He'd have to be a complete ninja to be a secret playboy while also spending three or four nights a week playing vid-games at my house.

The thin sheen of sweat that bloomed on my skin when Racer had me pinned to that tree is chilled now, cold and unpleasant in the fog. Between my legs still feels hot and wet and inviting though, holding out hope. *He's not going to turn around*, I tell it. *Give up*.

A little lance of pain goes through my chest, and my thoughts turn to the conversation he tried to have before our little spectacle.

I didn't go to the dance.

I said I would but that was a joke.

I didn't need to hear it a second time. I didn't need to hear him confirm it, straight from the horse's mouth. I didn't know part of me had been holding out some kind of hope, giving him the benefit of the doubt, like maybe it hadn't been *malicious*, just a stupid mistake. Like maybe he'd lost track of time or misunderstood because he's not human.

Yeah, he'd said *I would never go to the dance with you*, which still lived on my phone if I scrolled up past the more recent messages he's sent me, innocent and normal at first, turning into *What's wrong?* And *What did I do?* And *Why are you avoiding me?* That message is there for me to reread any time I feel tempted to reply to him, to explain. It fortifies me, because really, there's no other way to interpret *I would never go to the dance with you*. It wasn't *I would never go to the dance*. It was *I would never go to the dance **with you***.

Still, it seemed there'd been some tiny shred of hope in me, because it was that little bit that took the blow when he said "It was a joke." It wasn't a mistake or a misunderstanding, it was a *joke*. A trick. A prank. Something for him to laugh about at my expense, laugh at me.

I don't understand how he could be so *mean*. Like he said, weren't we friends? Has he hated me all along? Maybe all these years, he wished it was just him and Jack, just the boys, without a girl tagging along that they had to watch over, getting them in trouble every time she got an owie.

That thought hurts, but I put it out of my mind. I'm done with him, so what does it matter? He got what he wanted.

Even if he *was* just begging me to tell him I don't hate him.

I bite the inside of my cheek. That part doesn't quite fit. Unless he just wants to make sure I won't badmouth him to Jack?

He didn't look like that was it though.

Doesn't matter. I'm done with him. Bye bye firm waist between my legs, thick fingers digging into my thighs, strong arms for me to grab, cool braids slipping over my fingers. I don't need you.

The fog cuts my field of vision so much that when we breach the treeline, it comes as a total surprise. Suddenly, there aren't trunks creating shadows around us, it's just pure white. When I look behind me, I can't see anything. Everything has disappeared in a white cloud.

I know the town isn't far ahead of us, but I can't see it. All I can see is Racer, and thankfully he's stopped and turned back to me, waiting for me to catch up. When I reach his side, I wish he'd take my hand again.

"Nearly there," he says, as if he can read my mind.

"We shouldn't meet anyone else right?"

"There should be fewer people in town, yeah." Fewer, not none. We both know we're talking about *his* people, not mine. Mine are all locked up safe indoors. We won't meet any of them.

"I can't see anything," I admit.

"Me neither. Just... look down and watch for the path."

And that's what we do. We go downhill to take us away from the mine, and scan the ground for any paving or worn dirt. The town should be impossible to miss.

I take his hand and try not to think about it.

Maybe it's not very brave of me to use this situation as a cover for touching him, but it's the last chance I'm going to get, and his fingers curl around my hand without hesitation.

Finally we find it, the flattened dirt at the edge of the paved road that runs from the mine into the town. I squeeze his hand. We're nearly safe. I'm almost jaunty as we walk down the middle of the road, taking advantage of the lack of traffic. As we get closer to my house, Racer pulls us onto the sidewalk, so we can recognise the fences and yards.

We're three houses away from mine when I can't keep it in anymore. "Thanks for coming to get me." It needs saying, even if it does make me awkward and shy.

He squeezes my hand. "Of course. I wouldn't-"

He cuts off suddenly, looking out into the fog, jerking us to a stop. I didn't hear anything. All I can see are the eery golden glows of lights from house windows, families celebrating cosy inside, the houses themselves invisible. It's like walking through a world of miniature dawns.

Then, in front of us, the fog parts around a woman, a girl from Racer's village. She's about my age – our age – but she's not dressed in human clothes. She's barely dressed at all, in a thin little skirt and matching crop top. Her braids are longer than Racer's and lighter in colour, with decorative beads woven through them. She looks like she's dressed up for the occasion, and my stomach turns. She could be looking for a mate – a mate like Racer.

She doesn't seem aggressive. She just walks casually up to us, blinking curiously between me and him. It's obvious that Racer is where she's heading, but she can't tell how I fit in here.

I don't want to fight.

Racer pushes me gently away, his eyes never leaving the girl. "Gem, get home."

As if I needed telling.

Still, I feel a spike of hurt, a spike of anger at him. Did he really need to *push* me away? I wasn't going to get in his way.

I tug on my bag and step away, giving them a wide berth, and I hear the girl start to speak to Racer in their language. I don't watch to see what happens. I don't want to know. I want my memories to be of us against the tree, when he was pretending to be mine. I don't want them to be of him and this girl, of her touching him.

Of him... What? Having sex in the middle of the road?

I hesitate. He's been wearing a breather this whole time. He's not affected by the pollen, and showed no sign of wanting to be. No one in their right mind would want to have sex on a sidewalk, no matter how attractive their partner might be.

I admit, I dither. I've gone too far to see them, but I can still hear them talking. I know my house is only seconds away though, if that. I'm so close to this ordeal being over. I could be safe.

I could leave him behind, and be safe.

Racer isn't really in any danger, I tell myself. Not from a girl my size. He can fight her off if he wants and get to the house. And if I turn around and try to intervene, I might see something I really, really don't want to see. I might embarrass myself even more if I try to get between them and Racer has to tell me to leave, that this is what he wants. He did tell me to go home.

Groaning in frustration and no small measure of self-recrimination, I turn on my heel and head back the few feet that will allow me to make them out in the fog. I'm just going to check. He would do the same for me.

I'm so stupid.

He's going to tell me to leave.

He's going to think I'm weird.

Why wouldn't he want the hot bikini babe? She's his species.

He's going to know I'm in love with him.

He's going to laugh at me.

Their shapes in the fog are dancing, circling. Racer's taller silhouette is walking backwards, dodging to one side, then the other, leading her with him, holding her. She's chattering pleasantly, and his deeper voice pitches in now and then.

I hesitate again, but creep closer. I have to be sure. I have to be sure he wants this, even if it crushes me. *He* didn't leave *me* behind.

No matter how close I get, it's difficult to make them out. We're all white with pollen now. I have to stand almost beside them to see, and they keep moving. Why do they keep moving? What are they doing?

Racer makes another sudden turn, and they sweep right past me, not seeing me in the fog.

They're not dancing.

She's trying to pull his breather off.

I see it, and then they're gone, obscured by the mist.

I don't know what to do.

Yes, I do.

I have to help.

I turn and follow. Am I going to get into a physical fight with a girl dressed in napkins and strings? If I have to.

Racer's tone of voice makes sense now. He's telling her no, stop, go away, and she keeps interrupting him.

"Racer!" I shout for him, to let him know I'm coming.

"Gem! No, stay back!"

His voice is too clear, not muffled enough by the breather. I jog after them, arriving beside them and grabbing the girl's arms. He's holding her wrists, leaning as far away from her as he can, but she has her fingers curled around the top of the mask, and there's a gap.

In the same instant that he sees me and pulls hard on her wrists, jerking his head to try to wrench the mask out of her

grip, I pull too, and the girl gives a shriek of affront at my interference. Her hands tighten on the mask, and in that single second, the three of us rip the mask off.

Racer stumbles back, suddenly free. I stand frozen, staring. The lower half of his face is shockingly purple, the only part of him that's clear of the pollen. His eyes bug out, and he claps his hand over his mouth and nose. He lifts his face, and our gazes catch. He looks horrified and terrified.

The girl, successful, tosses the breather into the fog and starts towards him.

“No,” I bark at her, placing myself between them.

She stops, giving me a startled once-over, but then she curls her top lip, the two rounded cat-like halves separating as a thin growl trickles out, and she shows me all her dainty, needle-like teeth. Behind me, I'm aware of Racer throwing himself down and searching one-handed for the mask.

He doesn't want to be affected by the pollen. He doesn't want this girl.

Don't ask me why, but I raise my hackles and bare my teeth at her right back, giving her my best growl, which is not very intimidating, but I like to think it gets my message across. *I will not back down.*

She glances at Racer, still fumbling around on the ground behind me. Her face doesn't look that smitten, but maybe it's the pollen, because she turns her attention back to me and shifts her stance. She's going to come at me.

Having a big brother has taught me a thing or two. One of them is how to recognise when an attack is coming. The other is how to hit first.

I don't hesitate or think, I just stomp down on her foot with everything I have. I'm wearing shoes. She's not.

She howls and hobbles back a few steps.

She's going to gather herself for another charge, but I don't give her time. I run her down, screaming, swinging off my rucksack and swiping it at her, missing her head by an inch.

Her eyes widen and she runs away into the fog.

I don't fool myself that I could have won that fight normally, but she wasn't thinking straight, and I had the advantage.

When I turn back to Racer, he's on his knees, trying to use his T-shirt to clean the inside of the breather, which now has pollen on it. His shirt does too though, so he's just swiping it around. His face is straining. He's holding his breath and he's about to reach his limit.

"Stop, stop, let me." I take the breather from his panicked hands, and blow into the inside, chasing out most of the pollen. Not all, but most. Then I touch my fingertips to his jaw, tipping his face up to me. His eyes search mine, and as his face turns darker and darker, he throws out his finger in the direction of the house, telling me to go.

"Shh," I soothe, and then I purse my lips and blow gently over his mouth and nose.

He sits and lets me, his purple eyes flicking over my face. I watch what I'm doing. It's not easy. His skin has a super-short down all over it, and the pollen is sticking to it and the dampness on his nostrils and his mouth. The inverted triangle of his nose is almost pink, and it twitches when I blow on it. The fluff on the flat bridge ruffles slightly. I can see the deep follicles on his bifurcated top lip where he could grow a moustache of whiskers if he didn't pluck them out. His mouth trembles as he strains to keep an airtight seal.

I love him. I still love him. I always have. I don't know how I'm supposed to be around him and not have him.

I lift the breather to his face, and he seizes it against his skin, his whole upper body rocking as he gasps, catching his breath.

“We need to get to the house.” I pick up my bag.

He grabs my trouser leg as I stand. “I don't know – if I'm safe –”

I look down at him. He looks so scared, but it's a non-issue for me. He's Racer. He's one of the family. The idea of him going nuts and attacking me, my brother, my moms? No way. Not in this universe.

I bend down and grab his arm, pulling him up. “Come on, you need to rinse off.”

I don't give him a choice. I just drag him back to the house.

Six

RACER

When we get to the front door, it opens before Gem can unlock it, and her moms pull her inside, into their arms. They're hugging and fussing over her, dusting the pollen from her, checking for injuries, quizzing her over why she didn't call, why she didn't come home, what happened. I stand in the doorway, desperate to get this door closed behind me and the pollen off my skin. I know it's going to get in the house from our clothes, but I can only pray it won't be enough to affect me.

I have to get to the bathroom and lock the door behind me. My vision is swimming. I don't think I'm okay.

The girl outside was my neighbour. I didn't want to hurt her.

Jack checks out the huddle of his female relatives, then squeezes past them to get to me. "Jesus," he exclaims, slapping pollen off my shirt, sending it into the air in plumes. "Are you okay?"

I love Jack for asking about me. It's selfish, but true.

I keep the breather held to my face. “Maybe. I need to wash all this off.”

“Racer, honey, you just dump your clothes outside the bathroom door and we’ll stick them in the wash for you. Jack will give you some of his.” Mimi tells me, waking up to my presence and shuffling out of the way, making a path for me.

“Gem, you can use the kitchen sink.”

“You might want to vacuum too,” I warn her.

“Of course, honey. We’ll get it all.”

“Thank you for finding Gem,” Jez says. They’re all watching me solemnly. Mimi and Jez like I just risked my life to save their daughter, Gem like she’s back to being poisoned by something she won’t say, and Jack like he doesn’t want to cause a scene but he’s not insensitive to what I risked either.

I’ll accept their thanks later. First, I have to do everything I can to make sure I don’t start humping Gem’s leg in front of them. With a nod, I make for the bathroom.

Undressing while holding the broken breather to my face is difficult, but I do it, then I kick the pile outside. Normally I might spare a thought for making sure my underwear isn’t anywhere Gem can see, or that she doesn’t glimpse my naked body through the open door, but now all I can think about is how much pollen is in this bathroom with me. How much is floating off my skin right now? How much came off my clothes? I climb in the shower and let the water run, keeping it tepid, because I can’t bear it cold but hot feels like a risk. I don’t want any steam carrying anything around.

I watch the purple of my skin reappear in rivulets, and shiver and hope. I stick my head under the spray, mourning how it's going to mess up my braids and I won't be able to get them redone until after En'khoa. I let the water run over me good and long before I dare remove the breather and start soaping.

I definitely got a dose of the pollen, but was it enough? I can kind of smell it in my nose, a current under everything. My skin feels alive, every sensation fresh when I wash my face, zips of energy pinging through me when I rub soap over my chest. I do my best to ignore it and think unsexy thoughts. The mining machinery. Sugar cookies. Jack.

Damn, I'm hungry.

I wash and wash again, and again. I listen to the vacuum outside. I wait to start drooling or feeling violent, but it feels like something I can fight off. My cock is half hard, and my thoughts keep returning to pinning Gem against the tree, rubbing against her, her moans in my ear, and I have to keep pulling myself out of it. It's like there's a demon in my ear wondering what her pussy looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like, and I have to tune him out. I turn the water temperature down a little, then again, and aim my face up to the flow, imagining it's washing every speck of pollen away.

When I can't justify staying in the shower any longer, I get out and dry myself off, my braids now annoyingly fuzzy after I squeeze the water out with the towel. I open the bathroom door, planning to just step across the hall to Jack's room where I can raid his closet, but there's a squeak as Gem almost walks

right into me and we both have to pull up short to avoid a collision.

She's changed her clothes to a baggy T-shirt and sweatpants, bare feet. Her hair is wet and scraped back into a bun, and her skin is flushed, scrubbed.

Her wide eyes dance over my naked chest and stomach.

The demon crows in victory.

This isn't the first time she's seen me partially undressed. I sleep over a lot. But it's different now. We've done things.

I'm not wearing the breather. I could kiss her. I wonder if she'd press her lips to my mouth the same way she pressed them to my neck.

Her cheeks bloom pink. "Sorry!"

I open my mouth to say something, but she's already gone, darting around me so fast I'm surprised the displaced air doesn't make me lose my towel. I grit my teeth, irritated that she ran from me, but I'm good. I behave. I step through into Jack's room, where he's piling pyjama options for me on the bed.

He looks me up and down with a hint of suspicion. "You alright?"

"Yeah." No. Maybe not. I don't want to hurt him, or anyone else in the house... But I do want to follow Gem to her room and kiss her. Lean into her, flatten her against something and just see how it feels. Her curves make her so... pillowy.

But I can't really say that's a new feeling. The only new part is right now I don't care what Jack would think about it.

He turns to me. "Look... If you ever feel like maybe you're not alright, just let me know, okay? You can take this room. We're not gonna throw you out. And Gem won't... think any less of you. It's not like we don't all know when she's PMSing. So don't worry about being embarrassed or anything like that."

I can tell my face goes on a real journey as I try to follow what he's saying. I feel like I'm getting a strangely Jack-ified version of 'the talk', like he's prepping me for having a wet dream in his sleeping bag. Is he telling me I can come in here to jerk off? Or is he offering to barricade my raving, ravaging self in here until it's out of my system?

I feel like an asshole.

In the end, I can only meet his sincerity with some of my own. "Thanks," I offer simply, puzzling over what he meant by bringing up Gem. Does he know how I feel about her? Was it a subtle endorsement? No way, right?

He taps me in the bicep with his fist as he passes, leaving me alone so I can dress, and I hear the shower come on again. Gem will be taking her turn washing the pollen off, and I'm immediately trying not to picture her naked again.

When I step out of Jack's room, there's a pile of her clothes outside the door. No underwear though, at least not on top. I look.

I reach the living room and fold myself into the corner of the sofa. Luckily, it's harder to get an erection in another man's clothes, so I take a small measure of comfort in that. Mimi brings me dinner and cutlery so I can eat in front of the TV, and I settle down, only a little twitchy.

Gem doesn't join us. I hear her go from the bathroom to her room, and she doesn't come out again. I eat, and I start to get a headache, as if the day is catching up to me. Clean and fed and safe, I'm crashing hard.

I get up, tell Jack I'm going to bed, and stumble to his room to lie down on the futon he puts beside his bed for me. I pass out a second later.

I wake in the middle of the night, everything dark, my headache gone. Gem is a dark shape crouched beside me, one hand on my shoulder, the other holding her finger to her lips for silence. She gestures for me to follow her, and picks her way across the cluttered floor to sneak out the door. I get up slowly, not wanting to wake Jack, who I can see asleep in bed, a lumpy shape under the covers facing the other way. Hopefully, if he does wake up and realise I'm gone, he'll think I'm in the bathroom.

I let myself out, and Gem is waiting for me in her doorway, waving me on.

What is happening here? Is something wrong?

I go to her and she shuts us in together. I've seen her room before, but this feels different. Private and secret. I'm

awkwardly aware that all I'm wearing is a T-shirt and pyjama pants. All she's wearing is a loose top and shorts.

She looks nervous, but she's not turning away from me anymore. She meets my eyes as we study each other for a moment. There's something making her eyes bigger than usual. I grew taller than her without really noticing, but now the way she has to look up at me is striking.

"Sorry. I couldn't sleep," she says. "Are you okay?"

I swallow. "Fine, I think. Are you?"

"Yeah." She walks past me to sit on her bed and I wonder if I should do the same. From the way she's looking at me, I think I should, so I do, folding my fingers over the edge of the mattress so I don't do anything stupid. "Thanks again for coming to get me."

I shrug. "Of course."

"I'm just thinking... I can't stop thinking... I want to ask you something, and I don't know if I'll get another chance. Sorry."

"It's okay," I breathe. She's keeping her voice soft and low. Her bedroom doesn't share any walls with the rest of her family, but anyone walking by the door would hear voices inside if we aren't quiet. "What do you want to... ask me?" I'm glad my voice doesn't break anymore, because this is definitely a situation in which it would if I was a few years younger.

"Do you *really* not know why I'm mad at you?" She turns incredulous, watery eyes on me. She's left the lights off, so her

pupils are huge. Everything is blue in the dark.

“I... didn’t go to the dance.”

She nods, but honestly, I’m none the wiser. “Why didn’t you?” she whispers, and I realise she’s gripping the edge of the mattress too, her arms braced at her sides.

“I never do.” All of this feels so obvious to me and so obscure at the same time, like we’re trying to have a conversation in two different languages. I have to try harder. “We always hang out with Jack, at the fair. We think it’s lame. You said so yourself, it’s just for try-hards and awkward nerds with no game. You said it’s a sweaty gym that smells like old rubber, and you wouldn’t be caught dead in a dress and heels and make-up, and we should shoot you if you ever turn into one of those girls.”

She faces forward again. “I did say that,” she answers hollowly. “But that was...!” She leans forward and puts her face in her hands, her elbows on her knees. “That was years ago. I said that because I wanted to hang out with you, and I didn’t want you to get suspicious.”

Sometimes I hate the English language for using the same word for the singular and plural ‘you.’ Is she talking about me? Or me and Jack?

“It’s always too close to En’khoa,” I offer her instead. “My people... My parents would never... It’s a cultural thing. There’s stuff we have to do before the fog comes. If I went to a dance...” I struggle to explain because is that the real reason? I’m an adult now, I can do what I like. I don’t take part in

En'khoa and everyone stopped expecting me to years ago. My parents work with humans, and I know I'm known as someone who has assimilated with them, more human in my behaviour than my own culture. If I wanted to go to the dance, I totally could. I just hadn't realised it until now. I never had a reason to want to. Gem always hung out with us at the fair.

"I wanted to go," Gem says, her voice small, as if she didn't hear my weak excuses. "I asked you to go, and you said *yes*."

"That was a joke though," I remind her.

Her lip wobbles. "Why would you trick me? That's so *mean*. I thought we were friends."

"Oh, Gem, no," I moan, putting my hand to her shoulder blade, unable to keep my hands to myself. I lean my face against her shoulder, nuzzling the top of her arm, staring at her face while she ignores me.

I'm in pain, I realise. Hurting her emotionally actually hurts me physically.

This *sucks*.

"We *are* friends. I thought you were joking when you said it. I didn't think you meant it. I just said yes like... '*haha, right?*' I never wanted to *hurt* you. I would *never* want that."

"Then why did you text me '*I would never go to the dance with you?*'?"

"What?" I don't remember this. I mean, I do, I've spent enough time staring at our message chain, desperately trying

to come up with something that will get a reply. But I don't know why it's relevant.

“You said ‘*I would never go to the dance with you.*’”

She's scaring me a little with how much she emphasises every word.

I don't know how to explain this to her. “Gem... Jack... would never...” I'm struggling. I can't explain this part without explaining *everything*.

“Jack would never *what?*”

“He'd never let me.”

“What?”

“He'd never let me take you to the dance.”

“*What?*” she says again, shaking her head and screwing up her face like it's so incomprehensible.

Is now the time to tell her the truth? Tell her how I feel about her?

“He's my best friend. You're his little sister. You don't know it, but he cares about you, y'know? He's protective. It would be weird for him if we... hung out together.” I catch myself before I say that fateful word: *date*.

She looks away from me, staring across the gloomy room at the opposite wall, and I wait for what she says next.

“It was really hard to ask you to go,” she mumbles, forging on against her will it seems. “And then you said yes as a joke and

left me there. You tricked me. I was afraid you'd say no but what you actually did was worse."

"Don't say it like that. I didn't do it on purpose." I can't take my eyes off her. "Why was it such a big deal anyway?"

"Because," she says, taking a big bracing breath. "It was meant to be our first date."

The fact that she says it first, that she says what I'm thinking, makes me feel like I've been punched in the ear, and suddenly I'm worried this is a dream. I'm overtaken by the urge to kiss her, but I know talking is more important right now.

"Huh?"

She cringes away from me, looking over her opposite shoulder, hunching up.

"You... want me?"

She gives a little shrug. "Sorry."

"Don't apologise."

"I've had a crush on you for as long as I can remember. You're the first boy I ever..." Her face flames, even in the dark, and I really, really wish she'd finish that sentence, but it's clear she won't. Whatever she's referring to though, it's like I can feel that boy, the younger version of me, standing over my shoulder, cheering. There's no demon anymore.

I can't really do or say anything, other than to make some involuntary noise and lean in to kiss her. I turn her face to mine. I'm inches away, but I want to see it in her eyes, this

want. I want to see my welcome before I kiss her, because every time I've imagined this moment, she hasn't wanted me back.

"What are you...?" she whispers, and she's so close I can feel her breath against my lips, like when she was saving me out in the street and I fell in love all over again. I can also feel her lean into my hand, see how her eyes half close, staring at my mouth as she tries to close the gap.

"You're my *terencho'ka*," I tell her. My mate, my wife, my heart, my soul.

"What does that mean?"

"Kiss me."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Gem, I want to kiss you. Can I?"

She glances up at my eyes but her gaze returns immediately to what she really wants. She nods, and I press our mouths together.

I've dreamed of this moment for years, but I don't really know what to do. I need her to show me. After a second of feeling her lips soft against me, they twitch into action. This time I can smell her. She has to tilt her head, and her nose still nudges my cheek, but this angle is better. My nostrils face forward instead of down, and I realise tilting my head as well keeps me from being smothered.

Her lips are seeking, and I try to give them what they want. When I try to kiss her back, the two halves of my top lip

flexing, she gives a tiny gasp I immediately want to hear again. Then she's climbing into my lap, her lips apart, and she's opening my mouth with hers and licking inside.

Fuck.

I grab her waist, accidentally dragging her down my thighs to sit on my cock and she whimpers. I hope there's enough bunched fabric there – no, I actually don't care. I don't care if my cock grows as big as a tree and she knows it. It's all for her. Just as all the heat I feel coming through her thin shorts is for me, because she *said so*.

We're both panting but I won't let our kiss end. I cup the back of her head and she has both hands on my neck, her fingers laced across my nape and her thumbs keeping my jaw tilted up to her as she squirms.

I try to tell her everything I've been hiding, all my plans. "I love you-" *Kiss* "I always have-" *Kiss* "I was going to ask, soon-"

"Why didn't you?" and then she swallows any answer I could have made, kissing me hard enough to rock me backwards.

I groan, and when she lets me speak, I explain. "My people, we can't claim a mate until we're adults, and we're not adults unless we go through *En'khoa*, but I didn't want to do that because I knew..."

"What?"

It seems she's letting me speak, at least until we catch our breath, so I force my eyes to focus again and find hers. "I

knew you were here, not out there.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve been trying to think of a way to fix that.”

She smiles. “You kind of did. You went out in the fog and got me. Doesn’t that count?”

I feel like my brain is opening up to a new dimension as the realisation hits me that she’s *right*. Even if I didn’t let the pollen affect me, I still went outside in it, found a female, and brought her home. My neighbour can confirm it, as can whoever the male was we tricked into thinking she was already mine. As far as they know, we belong to each other.

We *do* belong to each other.

She *was* already mine.

I growl and lift her, laying her on her back on the bed, stretching out on top of her. There is nothing stopping us now. In the eyes of my people, not only *can* I claim a mate, I *should* claim her, the female I found in the fog.

Gem.

She giggles sweetly, and I kiss her again, then nuzzle her cheek and begin attacking her neck.

“Do you really like me?” she asks, a bit shyly for a woman who just kissed me like that.

I lift my mouth long enough to correct her. “I said love.”

“Racer...” she sighs dreamily, her hands moving over my back, her thighs falling open either side of my hips, obvious

permission to do whatever I want.

I don't know where to start.

Then the door bangs open and I hear Jack snarl, "Racer, *no!*"

Then I am pulled off Gem and punched in the face.

Still blinking from this sudden shift in events, I snarl back at him and kick out at his ankles. I won't let another man interrupt me with my female.

He tumbles down on top of me and we start grappling on the bedroom floor in our pyjamas. He's trying to get me in a headlock while I am clawing his exposed arms and trying to roll him off me.

Gem is screaming at him to stop.

Their moms arrive in the open door.

"He's gone crazy!" Jack yells to them.

"No, he's not!" Gem yells back, throwing herself to her knees beside us to try to pull his hands off my neck.

"He was all over you!" he argues, red all over from brotherly outrage.

"I- I-" Gem looks like she'd rather be anywhere else, but to save me, she'll do it. "I wanted it," she confesses with as much certainty as she can, loud enough for her moms to hear.

Jack looks back at me, and his flush starts to fade to a sickly pallor instead. He's disgusted, as I always knew he would be, so I pull out the biggest weapon I have. I cross my eyes, wiggle my nose, and stick out my tongue.

Since the day we first met, that has never failed me.

And true, Jack doesn't exactly laugh, but his next exhale catches a couple of times, and he climbs off my windpipe.

I sit up.

Gem is trying very hard not to meet anyone's eyes, but she doesn't retreat from me.

"Uh... You're not crazy?" Jack asks me.

"No more than usual."

"Oh." There's a pause. "You fucking my sister?"

"Jack!" Mimi chastises him from the doorway, but he takes no notice.

"No. But I want to, someday. I love her and I always have. Sorry for not telling you but I thought you'd hit me." I roll my jaw and rub the spot where he did, in fact, hit me.

Jack is frowning, looking like he's doing some heavy thinking.

"Gem?"

"I like him," she squeaks, glancing at me. "Sorry, I mean love. I always have. He's... the only one." She's trying not to fiddle with the carpet fluff while exposing what we have only just shared ourselves.

Jack gives his verdict. "Gross." He stands and goes back to his room, slamming the door.

Mimi comes to give Gem a hug. "I'm happy for you, sweetheart." She pins me with a less gentle look. "You're not

sleeping in here, Racer. You can go back to Jack's room or sleep on the couch."

Knowing this is a fight I won't win, I pull myself to my feet and head out, choosing the couch. I'm not worried about Jack. I can win him over with a couple of rounds at the bar after work. Instead, what occupies my thoughts is how and when I'm going to get Gem alone again.

"Wait!"

I pause in the hall and turn as Gem follows me out. Behind her, Mimi and Jez watch, but all she does is give me a shy hug. Still, the feeling of her soft body plastered down my front does things to me that will make it hard to sleep.

I'm not embarrassed to hug her back, squeezing her tight and bending over her.

She whispers to me. "I wish you could sleep in my room."

I pull back enough to reply, but the look on her face steals my words.

"I'll be thinking of you." And with that promise, she slips out of my arms and closes herself back in her room.

Mimi and Jez stare me down. Jez points at her eyes, then at me. They're clearly not going to move until they've confirmed I'm in the living room, and they'll be leaving their door open tonight, I just know it.

I make my retreat, even as my body burns to get back to my woman. I've waited this long though, I can make it through the holiday.

As I lie down on the couch and stare at the ceiling, I mentally adjust to the next phase of my plan for making Gem my mate.

Getting my own place.

Note to the Reader

Thank you for reading *Rescued By My Brother's Best Friend*.
If you enjoyed this story, you can follow V.C. Lancaster on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, or sign up to her newsletter.
If you want more of Racer and Gem, a sexy epilogue may come out in due time...

Blessings of Violence by Vera
Valentine and J. L. Logosz

MNBi ♡♡

Synopsis



Blessings of Violence is a Sci-Fi romance short intended for readers 18 and up. Set in the same world as **Planet Oster Fertility Fusion**, this story takes place between a male fight promoter alien named Rama and a non-binary fighter alien named Kin-Daza-Daza. This story contains multiple references to an illegal pit-fighting operation, sports betting, disgusting vending-area snacks, amorous fluids, a double-headed alien wangdoodle (the wangdoodle, not the alien), an ungendered orifice, unprotected sex, surprise (but still consensual) backdoor action, some sleep-banging alien-on-cocoon action that I'm gonna call poor man's somnophilia, pheromone-induced coupling (both between the main characters and also between a WHOLE LOT of other ~~people~~ aliens at once in an enclosed area), ostensible-vomit-that's-actually-cocoon-fluid, and blatant misuse of a storage area for evolutionary purposes.

We dedicate this story to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, which is, oddly enough, the reason we

became friends in the first place, as well as all of our Holiday Hedonism / Oster fans out there. Enjoy the story, beloved weirdos - this one's for you!

- J.L. & Vera

A Love Story in Five Fraction-Cycles

The Scrum was like a swift punch in the mouth—which was ironic, really. Once you got over the ungainly aesthetics of the planetoid-hulk of ship hulls, there was something begrudgingly enduring about the sketchy orb some of the galaxy's worst scum and villainy called home. They were, collectively, a bit of cosmic spit in the eye of the endless galaxy, if galactic saliva also hosted underground bare knuckle fighting rings.

In the center of this unlikely metallic cyst of commerce, Rama sat its reluctant sovereign. Tall and lanky, his fractal branching horns were always impeccably maintained, even if the rest of him looked like he hadn't slept in cycles. Perpetually surrounded by an air of exasperation and exhaustion, his constant vaping habit surrounded his body in a heady combination of ethereal wisps and unusual fragrances.

While his expertise extended primarily to the fighting pit far below his office, most of the action in the massive knot of ship hulls started right in front of his desk. You didn't come to the

Scrum for kicks—you came here to fight for Rama, or because you had to. The Imperium-approved megastations, with their *attentive guards*, and *cargo examinations*, and *hand soap in the bathroom* were several galaxies off, after all. In this sector, that meant if you wanted interstellar brawls or a disconcertingly warm cup of extra-chunky titbeast juice on the sly, you were Scrum-bound.

Every five fraction-cycles, Rama marked the turning of his holy calendar with a Big Weld, expanding the Scrum as surely as he expanded his own wealth. Rama would work tirelessly to organize *the* fight. The one that added to the scrum both physically—the losers' collateral ships welded onto the Scrum itself—and financially, as crowds flooded the stands to indulge in all manner of profitable vices. It was only a few days of frenetic activity, but it kept places like Tentacles! Tentacles! Tentacles!—T3 to the locals—going strong when business tapered off after.

The massive underground fight event brought hopefuls from across the quadrant and beyond, willing to put their ships up for collateral for a shot at the title. Misplaced hubris was rewarded with the blinding flash of a welding ray, adding losers' ships to the ever-expanding walls of the Scrum.

The time for the next Weld was fast approaching, which meant that Rama was vaping more anxiously than usual. Curls of blue-white vapor wound around his fractal horns, spreading into a nearly permanent layer of faux clouds overhead in his office. The vapor tangled like languid snakes through the maze of tiny bells hung from every square inch of his ceiling, each

tiny, cheerful chime a solemn offering to the God of Violence. As one of the God's last living adherents, Rama's ongoing worship was quiet but steadfast.

Rama's God didn't have a name or face. Instead, it was less a deity and more of a collection of paths, one that mapped the route to the center and the way through all things. *Rama's* path had washed him up at the Scrum, holding court over the teeming masses of deep space flotsam and jetsam. But hey, it was a living.

Countless eons ago, Rama's race had been scattered to the stars because no matter where—or what—you were in the galaxy, laziness was a universal constant. Most beings didn't want to expend the effort to understand it wasn't pain or suffering or subjugation that Rama's God demanded, despite the God's official title. They simply couldn't understand that violence, given freely and consensually, could weave and wind so purely through the ether that its blessings were given back a hundredfold.

What they did understand, however, was sports betting. That was fairly straightforward.

Even the most judgmental of beings wanted to gamble their ill-earned fortunes on the matches, it turned out, even with a violence adherent like Rama at the helm. Laying down credits was easy compared to comprehending the blessings that flowed from the fivefold spokes to Rama's opened horns.

The blessings of violence before me, behind me, above me, beneath me, beside me.

Prosperity. Longevity. Wisdom. Strength. Love.

Well, most of them anyway.

And so Rama strung the bells and kept the rites and flourished in his own lonely way, keeping his faith in the quiet dim of his vapor-clouded office, as he did now. He wouldn't have gone so far as to say that he had been *enjoying* the day, but he hadn't disliked it specifically. It was just another interminable afternoon behind his desk, squinting at attendance projections from the last Weld. He hadn't deviated from the norm.

He certainly hadn't nearly ripped his own door off its hinges. And he *definitely* didn't stagger into his own storage closet as if it were sending out a siren song for drunk, vomiting idiots.

Grimacing at the viscous liquid already dripping from what passed for his intruder's mouth, Rama clambered to his feet, angrily sputtering. "Kin-Daza-Daza! What in the holy pulsars are you doing?!"

An unattractive collection of angles on their best days, the being that was Kin-Daza-Daza at that moment looked closer to a steaming pile of titbeast shit. The iridescent feathers around their neck flared out, oily and ragged, a response that was unfortunately all too familiar to Rama. He'd seen it only last night, when he was called to collect the wayward fighter from one of the poorly lit bars and cantinas that dotted the Scrum.

"No!" Rama shrieked as Kin bent in a mockery of a courtly bow, emitting a nauseating squelching noise. Fearing for the sanctity of his office floor, Rama held up his hands

desperately, as if he could halt his visitor's biological processes by sheer force of will.

Realizing the inevitable, he had just enough time to haul another collection of boxes out of the way—*his* boxes, of *his* stuff, that had been safely stored in *his* closet up until mere moments ago. He'd barely gotten the boxes clear before Kin groaned and shuddered, hurling up another translucent white mess all over their body.

The whole process had become bafflingly familiar to the overworked promoter, as this was the third or fourth time that his least-favorite heavyweight fighter had gone through the whole thing in the last week. This time was, unfortunately, the most he'd ever seen Kin regurgitate, and considering last night, that was saying something.

“Are you fucking drunk again?” he sniped irritably at his sticky interloper.

“I'm not drunk, you idiot. Never was.” Kin rolled all four of their bleary, bloodshot eyes at Rama, slurring through the moisture on their mouth hole as they sneered at him. As if *Rama* was the one who was being an unreasonable asshole.

Rama scowled as he dropped heavily back into his desk chair, thumping a fist on the desktop and stabbing a finger at the door. “Then get out of my office!”

Kin huffed a laugh as a wet squelch of liquid plopped off their chest to the floor. “No.”

Rama shuddered, pointedly looking away from the puddle and focusing his fury back where it belonged, struggling to figure out which pair of eyes to glare at. “*Excuse you?*”

They pulled a string of glimmering liquid from the corner of their mouth, flicking their tongue and scrunching their nasal flares as they dislodged it. “I said no. I’m making a cocoon.”

Rama gaped, suppressing another shudder as Kin wiped their sick-streaked hand back across their body. Disgusting. He was so revolted that he almost forgot his tirade. Then he followed his fighter’s eyes—the two he wasn’t trying to glare at—as they looked at the small door beside Rama’s desk with longing.

Rama hissed in irritation, slapping a palm on his desktop again. “Not in my *pulsars-damned storage closet*, you’re not.”

The sticky fighter soldiered on as if they hadn’t clocked the obvious refusal. “So yeah, I’m going to be metamorphosing in there for a while.”

That had Rama back on his feet and attempting to shove himself between his oddly determined fighter and what little sanctity remained of his meager storage space. “What the fuck? The pulsars you are, go rent a room at T3 or something! You’re sucking void if you think for one fraction-!”

“Too late.” Kin smirked as they swayed past Rama, right into the closet he’d been trying so hard to keep them from.

Covered almost up to their waist now, Kin seemed strangely peaceful, all four of their eyes fluttering closed. Rama didn’t

know what a *koh-koon* was, but it didn't sound tidy, nor did it sound small. His storage space was going to be severely compromised for the foreseeable future if he didn't do something soon.

Rama grimaced. He could clean his hands later.

"I said *no*. Absolutely not. Get out!" Rama grabbed one of Kin's vomit-streaked arms and pulled, attempting to pull them back out.

But they didn't budge. They even had the gall to look on with smug superiority at Rama's growing horror.

Wherever the viscous substance touched Kin's skin, it had begun to solidify into something as hard as tiramite. A web of bright, glowing fractal patterns raced through the layer underneath the smooth, translucent shell, crawling further upward as its molecular structure shifted, condensing almost instantaneously. It was oddly beautiful, and for a moment, Rama's grip went slack as his eyes chased the strangely compelling pattern of lights.

No. *No*. Definitely not. Rama gave himself a thorough mental shake as he saw Kin's neck feathers flare again. He snatched his hand back, relinquishing the immovable arm. He started to pace back and forth, fuming both literally and figuratively as he furiously sucked on his vape.

So there it was: Kin-Daza-Daza had literally stuck themselves in Rama's storage closet, seemingly just to inconvenience him. The strange milky-white tube had completely encased their torso now, effectively welding them to the floor, ceiling, and

whichever unfortunate crates that Rama hadn't been able to move in time.

As if he needed any more bullshit to deal with. Irritated vapor streamed out of his nostrils like a pluming comet. "Kin, you *asshole!* I swear to the pulsars—am I going to have to get the Juicers to blast you out of there?"

"Not if you don't want to depressurize the entire Scrum." Their voice rich with humor, Kin was hardly visible now, almost entirely encased in their cocoon.

"Why me?" Rama despaired, his eyes swinging up to the smoke-wreathed ceiling as if it would cough up a response.

The only answer that came was Kin's deep, muffled voice through the final layer of the cocoon—the last words they'd speak for a long, long while.

"Because I needed someplace safe. And I like your bells."

The First Path of Prosperity

Oovooa

Strike fast, strike first: the greatest wealth is opportunity.

The Big Weld was an event that drew a substantial number of less-than-reputables from across the quadrant. And when a teeming crowd of ethics-negligible space pirates gathered, you needed a void-whale-sized presence in the tank to keep them in line. That task, for some reason, fell to Oovooa.

A massive pressure suit housed whatever species Oovooa was, a subject of considerable debate among Scrum residents over the cycles. No one was sure if she was actually that shape or had simply morphed to fit in the only thing that could reasonably contain her. Regardless of her actual genetic parentage, one thing was certain: the cold, deadly violence of a predator surrounded her like a physical accessory.

Most of the rampant, whispered speculation revolved around Oovooa's species being telepathic, because everyone that encountered her agreed that, scientifically speaking, she absolutely gave them the *willies*. No one had ever actually seen her disembowel anyone, but she was unerringly considered the Scrum's biggest threat by old hands and newcomers alike.

That was precisely why she was in charge of the collateral docks.

Rama trusted no one else to act as a living deterrent when it came to the ships put up for hock. The last thing he needed was some upstart getting skittish when they got an eyeful—or a dozen eyes full, depending on the species—of their competition. Rama, for all his obvious command of the pits and well-kept antlers, didn't cut a figure imposing enough to convince a sobered-up fighter not to cut and run with their doomed ship.

But Oovooa? With her huge, heavy-metal pressure suit crowned with a massive eye-filled viewport? She struck more terror in the rabble than anything that had ever oozed into the sand of the fighting pits. No one dared to take a ship from the collateral docks when Oovooa held their registrations in her three-fingered grasps.

“I have come for my payment!” Oovooa's unsettlingly loud and cheerful tone never wavered, even when she was offering blunt threats. It was all part of her... well, it was part of *her*, leave it at that.

Rama nodded briefly to a crumpled brown paper sack on the edge of his desk. Inside, wrapped in many layers of X-ray-thwarting silver-shot fabric, was a porcelain figure. It depicted a grey-striped Kymber killing-beast, curled up in hiber-stasis, tucked into a basket that appeared to be made of woven wood. The physical propaganda was shockingly scarce in the quadrant, the last remnants of a hundred-cycle campaign that lured countless unsuspecting prey to the Kymber beasts' dens before someone got wise. The incredibly illegal and frustratingly delicate figurines were the only payment Oovooa was ever interested in, and Rama knew better than to ask why.

One every Weld. That was their agreement. One figurine, and Rama holding his tongue as his massive, ungainly enforcer set off an absolute cacophony of bells and tangles with every movement in the too-small office.

”How long until your next large fight!”

Rama didn't need to pull up his holodisplay to check, but he did it anyway just so that he could have something to do with his hands that wasn't fussing over his poor tangled bells.

“Five fraction-cycles,” Rama sighed, already feeling crushed beneath the weight of how much he had left to do to organize the event. “Including this one.”

Oovooa waved one of her four arms in a jerky approximation of casual gesturing, heavy pressure suit glove crashing through two boughs of bells without notice. Or, more likely, just without care.

”That is not long!”

Was that... was she rubbing it in? It was impossible to tell with Oovooa, but that sure seemed like a dig.

“No,” Rama agreed cautiously. “It’s not long at all.”

”Good! I am very bored by your big fight, but I love to go on the ships and touch all of their things!”

Rama sighed, setting his vape down on the desk to rub the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, Oovooa. I know. And speaking of, I had more than a few complaints after the last tournament. So if you could please refrain from doing that...”

“I am going to do that!”

“But—why?” It was times like these, he considered as he picked his vape up again, that he really missed the fjords of his homeworld. “What’s so interesting about a bunch of scumbags’ junkheaps?”

“They are my junkheaps! When the ships are in my collateral docks, they belong to me!”

Rama exhaled an exasperated cloud of vape mist at the non-answer, antlers slicing through the transparent wisps as he shook his head. It was, technically, true—temporary reassignment of registration was required as part of the tournament entry. He could already feel a headache forming, even five fraction-cycles out. “Yes, of course, I know that, but —”

“You can not stop me! No one can stop me!” Oovooa’s suit twisted suddenly at the waist, a lightning fast complete

rotation that would have snapped any chordate creature's spinal column in an instant.

Rama had learned, throughout the seemingly endless cycles of their acquaintance, that a whole-body twist was the closest approximation Oovooa had to jumping for joy.

"Damn it, Oovooa," Rama muttered, forgetting for a moment the presence that filled his office with barely leashed lethality. He exhaled another cloud of Super Slush Slime-flavored vapor, almost choking on it when Oovooa turned her unflinching eye to him.

"No! Damn you!"

The temperature in Rama's office seemed to drop so precipitously, he expected the cloyingly sweet mist in his mouth to solidify into ice crystals. Rama *hated* ice crystals. Almost as much as he hated having his skull crushed, which hadn't happened yet, but had become a very immediate threat.

Oovooa clomped across the distance quicker than should have been possible for a suit that size. The sheer moving mass of her rattled the bulkheads so harshly that Rama already knew he'd get complaint hails about it later. If he lived long enough to view them, that was.

Rama raised his hands in a universal plea for peace, ears laid flat and twitching under his antlers.

"Whoa, hey, Oovooa you know I wasn't... I was just joking!"

The viewport of the pressure suit was directly in front of Rama's face now, and on the slick surface he could see his

own reflection—*pulsars*, had he always looked so exhausted? —before his vision focused down through the thick layer of polycarbonate to Oovooa’s own eye.

“A joke! I have heard of those!” Her I-shaped iris, a mottled red and black flecked with shimmering gold, narrowed between two thick lids of slick, bumpy skin. **“Your joke was not good!”**

“S-sorry,” he choked out, cool mist curdling in his throat.

Was this how Rama was going to die? With his lungs full of Super Slush Slime? Rama didn’t even like this flavor. *Of all the indignities.*

“Now I will tell a joke!”

Well, at least she wasn’t murdering him. Wait, would she still? Rama knew better than to ask, and yet the question jumped from his mouth before he could quell the impulse. “Does it end with you killing me?”

“No! Probably not! Rama you are very bad at comedy!”

“Oh.” Some slight relief flooded through him, though the ‘probably’ left more to chance than Rama would have liked.

“Why is your closet glowing!”

A quick, concerned glance found that Oovooa had noticed what Rama discovered shortly after Kin-Daza-Daza was fully cocooned: the edge of the door frame glowed with an unearthly illumination.

“Oh, is it?” He did his best to sound casual at the scrutiny, feeling strangely protective of the closet’s contents. Oovooa, however, seized on his upswing in tone as a question to be answered.

“Yes!”

A more menacing assent had never been uttered. Rama closed his eyes, sending a quick quiet prayer to his God before he looked at Oovooa again.

“Ha... ha?” Rama ventured cautiously, completely unsure of what was expected of him.

“See! I am funny! You are not!”

Oovooa raised one heavy gauntleted hand, the three fingers tangling in the last of Rama’s undisturbed bells, sending them tinkling to the floor as she waved at him.

Miraculously, Oovooa’s fleeting wave didn’t end with her popping his head like an overripe grub. She simply turned her back on him and shuffled away, squeezing out through Rama’s door, and only denting the metal slightly more than expected. Rama always budgeted to have it repaired after his meetings with the notorious broker.

The silence that followed Oovooa’s departure was so loud that it almost hurt Rama’s brain, but he willed himself to simply sit at his desk until he stopped shaking. Finally, after sucking the Super Slush Slime cartridge dry, he let his head fall back against his chair’s headrest.

Before he could close his eyes, Rama's terminal lit up with a cavalcade of annoying beeps; the expected neighborly noise complaints were flooding in. Then, and only then, did he rise from his hoverchair to set about reordering his trashed office: it would be more productive than the bland apologies he'd send to the complainants.

"I guess, in a way, I'm lucky, Kin," Rama sighed as he gracefully bent his head, keeping his antlers clear of the bell strand he was pinning back up.

He'd had to knot two of the cords where Oovooa had snapped them clean through, but it had by no means been her most destructive visit. "If I had to pay credits for an independent collateral broker—pulsars, probably several, with this lot—I'd be broke."

Rama had taken to talking to Kin when he was alone, consigning himself to what some considered the first signs of insanity. The companion in his closet, however, was a stellar listener, and also left his bells alone. Both were very large points in the cocoon's favor.

And so what if the endless stacks of clutter on his desk now included a book on metamorphosis? Rama needed to know what he'd eventually be cleaning up, after all. And if a little seed of worry had planted in his chest that his second-least-favorite fighter wouldn't emerge alive? It was easy to ignore with so much paperwork to do. And bribes to offer. And bells to fix.

The Second Path of Longevity

AUKS

A wound avoided is as important as a wound delivered.

The kid was always so... energetic. Rama was used to energetic fighters, even that maniac Lapann that seemed to actually *like* getting hit, but Auks could give Jau a run for his credits.

Not in the pit of course. Jau would murder the happy little drug dealer in the blink of his single eye. But for sheer energy? Definitely.

Very little was considered off limits at the Scrum, which meant that substances from across the galaxy were injected, absorbed, snorted, or penetrated with gleeful abandon as spectators took in the fights. Rama tried his best to keep it out of the ring, but ultimately it was their space-funeral if a fighter wanted to head in swinging while higher than a comet.

With acceptance so readily available, substances needed to be too, which made the bidding for Official Weld Alteration Vendor brisk even on a slow day. Auks, thanks to a staggering infusion of credits from a lucky trade deal, was the current OWAV favorite in Rama's ledgers. That did not, however, endear the chatty, hyperactive Avann to him outside that holy book of illicit sums.

Rama took a deep draw on his vape—Void Blast flavor today, in an overly obvious allegory for his evaporating patience—and exhaled, willing more calm than he had to spare. “Auks. For the last time, fights don't need a DJ.”

Auks widened his eyes, pupils flaring in response to whatever recreational chemistry was currently swimming through the slender, feathered bipedal. “But *imagine* it, Rama—”

“No. I have little imagination and even less time. Are you here to up your credit stake? If not, get out.” Rama tapped his ledger meaningfully. “Also, your taste in music is shit.”

“Aww, man. That's harsh.” Auks' scaly hands patted down the sides of his bulky trench coat, feeling for something. Rama felt his livers curdle with dread.

The garment was standard dealer fashion, adorned with bright advertisements for the various drugs that Auks had on offer. It gave Rama a headache, but the garish garment definitely seemed like something Kin would have loved. Not to wear, of course, since they didn't really believe in clothing, but they would have loved to strip it off of Auks as a trophy piece for their nest, equally littered with bright bits and bobs.

That would have been nice, if Kin would have roughed up the Avann a bit. It would have gotten Auks out of his antlers, for a while at least. Too bad the fighter in question was too busy apparently—*hopefully?*—dissolving and reforming in that glowing cocoon.

Something thumped on Rama's desk, rudely startling him out of his reverie. He looked up to find Auks setting out a variety of vape cartridges on the edge of the abused tabletop.

"Maybe a little Peekaboo Plimbus will change your mind?" Auks canted his head to the side with the bright, jerky movements native to his species.

"A little *what* now?" Rama gave the oddly colored cylinders a suspicious glare. "Sex acts aren't accepted for OWAV consideration, I thought I'd made that clear last time."

"Peekaboo Plimbus! Hottest new flavor from the Goff Sector!" Auks mimicked sucking on a vape, which only ended up looking like a lewd gesture.

"No." Rama flattened his tone, turning his attention back to the ledger open under his palms.

"Listen though. I have four full cartridges, and all four can be yours for—" Auks had already fluffed his feathers, preparing to launch into his sales script that conveniently omitted deadly side effects and hinted far too strongly at imaginary benefits.

"No, Auks. I said no. I don't want any of your Peekaboo Plimbus."

"Well, then what about—"

“We’ve been over this, Auks. I don’t accept goods or services as part of Vendor bid packages. Not sex, not cartridges.”

“Nah, nah, nah, this isn’t about the OWAV! This is about me bringing the tunes to your next tournament! I know you’re a hater but maybe a little Shroomtastic Magic could thaw your cold black heart?” Auks held out another cartridge, adorned with cheap, garish stickers.

Was Rama a hater? Perhaps. He didn’t like to think of himself that way. Rama wanted to be a being that saw the bright white beauty of violent creation woven through every facet of existence. But, then again, he had lived a long life already. He was tired on a spiritual level, and he certainly hated the looks of that vape flavor Auks was offering him.

To be fair, he also hated that Auks was still there at all, trying to have this conversation with him.

“No,” Rama finally repeated, more firmly this time. “No music at my tournament.”

Auks sighed dramatically. “C’mon Rama! If you just tried listening to it—”

“I have! Remember when you invited me to that rave you hosted in Sublevel Six?”

“Stellar, man! I didn’t realize you made it!” Auks grinned manically, holding up his palm for a high-five, which Rama ignored.

“I made it in the door. Then I made it right back out with my ears bleeding.” Rama tugged one of his ears reflexively,

suppressing a shudder.

“Aww.” Auks seemed genuinely dejected. “That’s hurtful.”

Rama closed his ledger with an audible slap of pages, hoping Auks would take the hint he’d overstayed his welcome. “Yes, I know it was painful. My eardrums almost burst. Please take your stuff and go, Auks. I’ve got work to do.”

With a grumpy flash of his tail feathers, Auks swept his failed bribe cartridges off of Rama’s desk and back into the voluminous pockets of his trench coat. It seemed to take an eternity for Auks to leave, but once he was actually gone, Rama dared to finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Once again, he rose from his hover chair to lock the door, just in case Auks tried to come back and continue the conversation. It had happened before. Several times.

“I’m too old for this shit,” Rama lamented in the direction of his closet. He doubted that he would have been thrilled to deal with the likes of Auks even in the most energetic years of his prime, but that was beside the point.

He caught sight of the pulsating glow spilling out around the edges of his closet door and scoffed, the memory of Auks’ dejected expression lingering in his mind’s eye.

“No, I don’t think I was too harsh with him,” Rama said, as if Kin had addressed him directly.

The storage closet glowed.

Rama made his way back to his desk, vaping irately. He had to step around the stacks of boxes that had yet to find a new

home after being evicted from his storage closet. And, after all, whose fault was *that*? Kin had a lot of nerve.

He sneered, opening the ledger to flick through it with agitation. “Besides, that idiot only plays Flarxian Speed Greeble cover songs.”

The storage closet glowed.

Rama threw his hands up in exasperation. “Okay, fine, *you* want to listen to two hours of electric harps and irrational time signatures? Be my guest.”

The storage closet glowed.

Rama’s resolve crumpled, letting his head fall into his palms to hang above the ledger pages. “Yeah, I was just joking too... I think I’d have to tie you down to get you to one of his shows.”

The storage closet glowed.

Flustered, Rama flapped his hands as if he could wave away the words as easily as his trails of vape smoke.

“Wait, not like that! I didn’t mean it like that, geez!” he babbled, vaping away as the storage closet glowed with judgment.

Or maybe Rama was just projecting.

“I’m more of a, uh. Well. You don’t care about any of that, I’m sure. I just meant... I like a little romance first, you know?”

The glow of the storage closet radiated no such understanding, but Rama soldiered on.

“Back on my home planet, courting couples would go for walks along the fjords together. There were flowers that grew everywhere, little white ones with purple edges. And if a buck came back with flowers in his antlers, everyone would know that he and his beau had...” Rama trailed off with a nervous, trilling laugh. “Well. No one ever wanted to go on a courting walk with me. And then the Imperium destroyed my planet. And that was that.”

Rama sighed. Why did he have to be such a sad sack? He didn't want Kin to pity him. He wanted... well, he wasn't exactly sure what he wanted, but it wasn't pity.

“Well! Enough ancient history. What about you?” Rama asked, cringing before he even finished the question. God, how embarrassing. Rama really was lucky that Kin couldn't hear him in there. Probably. Hopefully.

Kin-Daza-Daza had been a staple of the fighting ring since the first ship was welded on, but Rama had never bothered getting to know them. He didn't know what sector Kin hailed from, much less which particular homeworld. He didn't know what species they were, and hadn't *that* made his efforts at cocoon research entirely futile?

All that Rama really knew about Kin was that they usually hosted something called FLIFF NIGHT twice each fraction-cycle. He knew this because Kin had always made a point to invite everyone... except for Rama.

There was a reason that they were Rama's third-least-favorite fighter, after all. That was why it was only now that he was

attempting to get to know them, now that they were a captive audience, cocooned in his closet. Some fight coordinator he'd turned out to be.

Maybe Oovooa was right. Maybe his entire life was just one flat joke with no punchline. *Emergency station alert: sad sack proximity*. Ugh.

Rama's chest roiled with guilt as he turned his back on his glowing storage closet. It would be better if he just stopped talking to Kin, but that resolution evaporated before he could even vow to keep it.

The blankets crumpled up at the end of Rama's office couch said what he hadn't been able to admit to himself. He just *slept better* in here, that was all. It just made it easy to get right to work in the mornings.

And yes, he'd gone to Kin's nest to get a few of what seemed to be their favorite belongings and placed them in the closet beside the cocoon. But that was just prudent: theft happened all the time in the Scrum. If they'd emerged to find an empty nest, Rama would have to lend them credits to replace their belongings, and how annoying would that be?

It was just easier this way.

The Third Path of Wisdom

SKALA PLOS'VI

Don't taunt things larger than yourself.

Skala Plos'vi was the worst the quadrant had to offer. She was as sleek and polished as a corporate cruiseliner, not a single strand of purple hair out of place, her teeth a glimmering celestial white. Skala even *smelled* suspicious, a faint, pleasant odor that Rama couldn't quite place. He shouldn't have been able to smell her at all, not over the bright synthetic scent of the Circuit Breaquer vape he had been sucking on since he woke up. Skala, however, wouldn't be sidelined by something as pedestrian as faux space citrus.

The worst part of it all was that her pathological confidence was not unearned.

Her professional looks, insufferable administrative efficiency, and clipped, formal tone reeked of her former career as an Imperium inquisitor. In a station full of pirates and

mercenaries and general lawbreakers, her highly official background made everyone restless. Skala didn't care.

No one knew why she'd originally come to the Scrum, much less how she had gotten her hands on its coveted location codes. Upon arrival, she had voluntarily welded her own ship to the mass, effectively declaring herself a permanent resident before the shockwaves of gossip had even finished reverberating across the station. Then, while other inhabitants had still been debating the best way to eject her into the vacuum of space, Skala had renounced her Imperium resume in favor of ruthlessly consolidating the entire hospitality sector crime ring of the Scrum—under her leadership naturally.

A few short fraction-cycles later, there wasn't a single life form selling food or drink on the station that didn't answer to Skala Plos'vi. From what Rama gathered, most beings paid their tithes to her gladly—no matter how high a percentage of their profits she demanded, it was a bargain to stay off of her radar, one rivaled only by Oovooa for deadly threat.

Rama tended to agree with the overarching sentiment, but the luxury of avoiding Skala was not his to purchase, as her change in fortunes carried the dubious title of official lead wrangler for the Scrum's titbeasts. Not having fresh Titbeast Juice at the fights was unimaginable; the riots that would ensue might have pleased the God of Violence, but they also would have bankrupted Rama before he could blink.

Every last drop of bafflingly popular juice milked from those ghastly creatures was within Skala's domain, so she tended to

act as if *everything* was. Even Rama's personal effects seemed to be fair game for Skala to scrutinize.

Rama shuffled through the holodisc decks in his desk, vainly attempting to locate the correct one while keeping an eye on Skala at all times. She had been staring up at his bells for a while without comment, her crisp diction snapping through the silence unexpectedly.

"It's a maze," she declared without an ounce of self-doubt.

Startled, Rama nearly fumbled a handful of his holodisc decks onto the riveted metal floor, snatching them back from certain destruction at the last moment. "What?"

"The bells." Her perfect nose wrinkled a fraction of an inch, even her condescending sneer of indication polished. "The way that you have them hung up there. It's a maze."

"Oh. Yes." Rama redoubled his efforts shuffling the discs, eager to find his quarry and get the woman the fuck out of his office.

She made a dismissive noise. "Not a particularly clever one."

Rama clenched his jaw at the underhanded dig, taking a deep breath instead. It was the fraction-cycle of wisdom, and that meant taking sacred reflection before striking out or speaking.

And she also wasn't wrong, Rama reminded himself as he watched tinkling bells slip through her perfectly manicured fingers.

He looked back down, sifting through the clutter of data drives on his desk. He just needed to find the one with the little dent

on the upper edge. He swore he'd seen it only yesterday.

Skala's hum of judgment skittered down his spine. "You know, you can put all of your information on a single device."

"It won't all fit." Rama replied tersely, careful to remain civil even as he fought not to grind his teeth even flatter than they already were. "I have to deal with a lot for these events, and —"

"They sell memory chip expansions."

"I don't need memory chip expansions."

Skala's lip curled derisively. "Surely, Rama, you could—"

Rama made an aggrieved noise and waved away her words. "This is just the way I do it, alright? It's easier this way. I have one holodisc deck for each thing so I can keep it organized. I have one holodisc deck for security. One holodisc deck for fighter registrations. One holodisc deck for accounting. And one holodisc deck for... vendors! Ha! Here it is!"

He stabbed one finger at the screen of the deck, the information that he had been so frantically searching for flickering to life between them.

Skala did not look impressed. It was a mild enough expression, given the wide variety of physical threats Rama faced on a daily basis, but he knew better.

Just because she didn't have claws or fangs or a concerning number of reverse-jointed limbs, it didn't mean she wasn't top of the food chain here, literally and figuratively. He knew that Skala's flat, unamused stare was the same one she would have

turned on debris that had the temerity to stick to the heel of her polished boot.

Or maybe Rama was just projecting. Again.

After a brief, vicious *discussion* about territory that Rama was almost certain would lead to the mysterious disappearance of a mouthy upstart vendor, Skala took a copy of the holodisc data and left, briskly citing an important meeting elsewhere.

Shaken more than he liked to admit, Rama got up and locked the door after she had departed. He seemed to be doing that a lot, he reflected, ever since Kin had cocooned in his closet. Rama got cagey whenever anything got too close to the closed, faintly glowing door frame.

With Skala, however, his protective instincts extended to himself as well. There were rumors about Skala's *extracurricular* activities on late nights down at T3, her tendencies to select partners that resembled Rama a little too closely for comfort. Her tastes also ran towards inflicting pain, based on what a wide-eyed Plink had muttered to him once.

Rama sagged in his chair, listlessly spinning his vape on the small circle of clear space in the clutter. His voice was quiet and small, an unexpected sensation of vulnerability surfacing in the wake of the focused storm that was Skala Plos'vi.

“But you'd never hurt me, would you, Kin?”

His fourth-least-favorite fighter still didn't have anything to say, but if Rama squinted towards his storage closet, it almost seemed the glow was warmer and softer now.

Rama shook his head and took a deep drag of his vape, nearly choking on the flood of artificial celestial citrus. It was noxious at this volume, but still less bitter than misplaced hope.

The Fourth Path of Strength

FRIZBEE

The first strike is painful, the last strike is victorious.

Floydrite had been complaining about the structural integrity of another outcropping over the concessions area when Rama's office door swung open heavily, propelled by three clenched fists.

"Rama, what the fuck was that? You *owe* me! You *set me up* with that maniac fucking Lapann!" Frizbee, fluid still dripping down his clavicle from the healing vats, fixed wild eyes at Rama from the doorway.

Sighing quietly, Rama tilted his head towards Floydrite, indicating he should leave. The Scrum's resident construction foreman, or the closest approximation of one, frowned but gathered up his data chips and holocharts all the same. He tossed them into a satchel and slipped around the hulking,

asymmetrical fighter in the doorway, not even sparing him a glance as he retreated.

Rama exhaled a cloud of swirling purple vapor, his left eye twitching with frustration. Of *course* Frizbee would show up and interrupt him in the middle of matters concerning the structural integrity of the Scrum. Now Floydrite was going to go back and share his memory with the other Floydrites, and soon Rama would have to meet with the entire hive of them to smooth over the insult. All because the thick-necked idiot in front of him had no patience, in or out of the pit.

“I needed that money, Rama!” Frizbee slammed a closed fist into an open one in emphasis, using a third hand to swipe an errant drop of healing fluid off his temple.

Rama managed to keep his sigh internal, albeit with great effort. “Well then, you shouldn’t have lost, Frizbee. You know the rules, this wasn’t your first fight. If you need money that badly, you can always stake your ship for the Big Weld next fraction-cycle...”

Frizbee leaned forward over Rama’s desk, a fourth hand coming dangerously close to crushing the holodeck disc that contained the contact information for all of Rama’s outer sector acquaintances.

“I can’t wait until next fraction-cycle!” Frizbee rumbled, his white compound eyes glinting through the vape haze. “Lemme be clear. If you don’t make this right, the Scrum’s gonna be down one fight promoter.”

Rama snorted in amusement. It was funny that Frizbee thought he could intimidate Rama at this point in the season. With everything on his endless to-do list, it felt much more like being threatened with a good time.

“Oh *no*. Please don’t make it so someone else has to handle the absolutely *endless* nova-fucked fight scheduling. Just make it quick, will you?” Rama stood abruptly, fixing Frizbee with eyes that felt irritated, exhausted, and afflicted with a permanent anxious twitch.

He took a long pull on his vape, stretching his head side to side with a resolute nod, looking up towards the hidden speaker in the ceiling. “Computer, begin recording. Rama voiceprint authorization tinger woh’lper four. Legal note. I hereby request my antlers be ceremonially removed and presented to Kin-Daza-Daza upon such time as they emerge from cocooning. Further, I absolve one Frizbee of any charges related to my violent death. Finally, upon official death confirmation, forward all files related to Scrum infrastructure, including folder 497, to the Floydrite Consortium with my sincere apologies that I will be unable to make our next meeting.”

Frizbee backed up a step, releasing his fists from their sockets in opposing palms, holding them up like he was being mugged. His expression had shifted from a canny sort of menace to outright fear, eyes bugged at Rama’s ready embrace of obliteration. “Whoa, Rama, man, it’s—I didn’t mean—“

Rama took another resolute inhale from his vape, exhaling so forcefully a low-slung bell chimed overhead, slamming a fist down on his desktop with an audible clap. “If you’re not going to kill me, then *get out of here*, you pulsars-damned coward. Leave me to my misery, and if you *ever* interrupt a meeting like that again” Rama stabbed his vape towards Frisbee in emphasis, “by the bloodied benevolent hands of my God, I’ll have Prink drown you in the healing vats, because we *both* know how often you lose.”

Frisbee, a pile of muscle built like a titbeast transport next to Rama’s whip-thin physique, somehow managed to look hurt at the barb. “Hey, I *try* out there, okay? That psychotic *Lapann* doesn’t go down for anything...”

Rama snapped irritably, jabbing a finger at his door frame, recently repaired from the tender mercies of Oovooa’s visit. “His mates would disagree. Get out, Friz. We’re done here, and I don’t want to see you until the Weld weigh-in.”

Although Rama had half-expected the freshly healed-up fighter to smash him into an antler-studded pulp for his hubris, his visitor merely slunk away, closing the door quietly behind him. Was this how Skala managed it? Just erupting in unsolicited displays of wild, unearned confidence? Interesting.

As he headed back to his desk, the glow from the closet seemed more harsh: an accusatory spotlight, rather than a comforting illumination. Rama dropped into his hoverchair heavily, letting the anti-grav servos whine in protest. “I suppose *you* wouldn’t have lost your cool, huh? Wouldn’t have

evoked the name of the God in vengeance because an *objectively bad* fighter doesn't like to lose?"

Rama snarled, a twisted expression that reflected warped and hazy from his ledger's powered-down screen. He looked wrung-out and tired, he realized with irritation, the dark rings under his eyes making his normally shiny golden pupils look dull and animalistic. "Well you're not the one behind this desk practically *bleeding* credits and patience and everything else just trying to get a damned Weld together, so how about you save your judgment for someone that *cares*?"

The office around him danced and blurred as tears formed in Rama's burning eyes. He shoved his hoverchair back, sending it crashing into the wall behind him, servos whining uselessly as they failed to keep it upright.

Rama slammed an angry palm against the closet door, his voice rising to a desperate screech. "*Get out of my storage closet, Kin-Daza-Daza!*"

With one last slam of a closed fist on the light-limned door, he stormed out of his own office, taking a heavy pull on his vape, loaded to the circuits with Cherman Frit: a melancholy flavor for an appropriately frustrating day.

As the office door slammed heavily behind him, the words that didn't make it into Rama's tirade hung in the air, as silent as the bells strung overhead.

...because I need you.

The Fifth Path of Love

KIN-DAZA-DAZA

***Violence may bring death but love alone
brings suffering.***

Despite his intentions to go home and sleep off his frustration, Rama had found his way right to T3. While the establishment was a brothel first and foremost, it also served as one of the most popular bars at the Scrum. Two frosty Pg'gbs later, guilt was resting as heavily in his stomach as the Pg'gb, a truly awful cordial that tasted like it had turned even when it was fresh but reminded Rama of *home*. He stared at the dregs of his second glass as the booming voice of the digi-barker coaxed in the carnally curious from the neon glitter of the streets.

***Tentacles! Tentacles! Tentacles! We got all sorts of tentacles!
Wet ones, dry ones, big ones, giant ones! We personally
guar-an-tee we have every possible color and morphology of
tentacle right here for your personal enjoyment! You want a***

tentacle dick? What type? We got 'em all! You want a tentacle pussy? We got that too! Now you want TWO tentacle pussies? Yessir! How do they work? Fuck if I know. Or better yet, fuck and you'll know!

As the intoxicant warmed the tips of Rama's horns and he tuned out the digi-barker, regret set in. He should really go back to his office and apologize to Kin. They didn't deserve the absolute tantrum he'd thrown at them. They'd been a kind and patient listener for four fraction-cycles.

Rama's mood had lifted, and he had just about talked himself into heading back when the portal-door swished open. Skala sidled in like T3 had opened just for her, the crowd parting wordlessly as she tugged some poor sap that could have passed for Rama's brother after her on a decorative, lighted leash. Even worse, he was wearing a pair of cheap antler prosthetics that clearly had too many fractal branches; a grotesque mockery of Rama's own well-balanced pair.

Pulsars. Rama hunched over the bar, his shoulders nearly up to his ears, bowing his head forward to hide the silhouette of his antlers. Holding his breath until the click of Skala's heels descended the steps to the basement, he got somewhat unsteadily to his feet and stumbled out before she could snare her actual quarry, pre-impaired with a pair of extra-juiced Pg'gbs.

By the time Rama blearily found his way back to his office, realization had caught up with him: he didn't like being away from his office, but he *really* didn't like being away from his

storage closet. His eyes were also watering again, turning the neon haze of the Scrum into a blur that only sharpened once the door scanner read his antler fractal biometrics. Resolutely pushing the door open, he swiped a sleeve across his eyes. He didn't even have the dignity of blaming it on the Haxxian Daze in his vape today; it was the mildest flavor in his entire collection.

Antlers warm and inhibitions neutered from the cordials, Rama didn't bother with a palatable excuse for tugging the couch in front of the closet, forming a nest that let him rest a hand against the closet door. The soft glow soothed his frazzled nerves, even through heavy eyelids, and it was only moments before sleep hit him like a comet.

Deep in dreams, erotic pleasure cascaded through Rama, a rhythmic thumping sounding as he rocked his body into a sensation so amazing, all he could do was chase it. It was perfect, beautiful, and deliciously dirty, all the things he longed to do and never could centered on his bifurcated cockhead like it owed them money.

Beneath his palms in the dream, the smooth, periodically ridged shell that surrounded Kin was silky and warm, pulsing with light in time with Rama's thrusts.

Oh.

In the hazy vision of his dream, Rama slowly realized that he had somehow wedged himself in between the couch and the half-open closet door and was enthusiastically *fucking Kin-Daza-Daza*.

The fighter had emerged from their cocoon from the waist up, and Rama's cock was gradually cracking through the formerly tiramite-hard shell below their waist. As each thrust penetrated the delicate, brittle outer layer of the cocoon, his cock pierced through something thin and rubbery that clung to him like a lover's mouth. A moan slipped out of Rama's mouth as Kin raised their hands to stroke the tips of his horns.

"More. Harder, Rama. I need you. I've needed you for so long, please..." Kin pleaded, their voice cracking like their cocoon, thumbs sliding over Rama's antler-buds exactly the way he liked. He returned the favor by grabbing his unexpected lover around the waist tightly, anchoring as much as moving them. Rama's ecstatically flexing fingers grasped and peeled away pieces of iridescent, glowing shell with unbridled enthusiasm as he fucked helplessly into the gorgeous mess that was his emerging fighter. Glittering shards fell away and tinkled like tiny crystal bells as they cascaded down the fumbling lovers' bodies and haphazard tower of file boxes.

"Kin—Kin, I can't... I'm going to..." Rama groaned against his fighter's small, flat mouth as they frantically kissed, mournful that his traitorous, pleasure-wracked body was going to end the best experience of his entire life far too soon.

"Yes, Rama. I need you—give me everything. Fuck me as deep as you can, boss. Make me yours..." Kin whined sweetly, their fingers wrapping the highest branches of Rama's horns, stroking them in a hungry, encouraging rhythm. With the top of their thighs now mostly free of rubbery-lined cocoon shell, they'd begun to thrust back at Rama, clutching him eagerly.

“Ah-Ahhh... *Gods...*” Rama whimpered as his double-headed cock suddenly plunged through the last membrane of resistance, straight through both layers of Kin’s shell. He rooted forward until their bodies were pressed tightly together, burying his fractal cock deep into a warm, wet pocket lined with soft, clinging nodules. It squeezed him tight, refusing to let him withdraw, pulsing tightly around him as Kin gasped in climax. As pleasure overwhelmed them, the last of the cocoon shattered in the wake of a trilling, purring noise that immediately pulled Rama over the edge with them.

Rama bucked happily in Kin’s grip, cum jetting into the warm haven of his fighter’s body as he tensed, bowstring-tight, in their antler-gripping hands. Kin’s orifice milked him with lazy undulations, soft and sweet, never oversensitizing his still-twitching cock. It was actually soothing, even more so when Kin gently guided them out of their uncomfortable position, half in and half out of the closet. Carefully positioning their still-connected bodies to splay across the couch, Rama startled as Kin cupped his cheeks and bent their head down to tenderly kiss Rama’s uppermost antler-tips. It was a species-specific intimacy, a tender ritual he’d consigned himself to never experiencing when his world was destroyed, his chance at a first courting with one of his own kind gone with it.

Kin leaned back and gave him a sly look, leaning in to press their smaller mouth orifice against Rama’s again. “Don’t look so surprised, boss. You read up on me, what makes you think I never read up on you?” They nodded to the glowing, colorful mess of their former cocoon, crumbled on the floor. “Before I

metamorphosed, obviously. Back when you were being oblivious.”

“But...” Rama shook his head gently, confused, gradually realizing this wasn’t a dream at all. “Why in the pulsars didn’t you... change? Everything I read—well, *tried* to read, information on your kind is scarce—said you’d emerge looking completely different. It’s been five fraction-cycles and you look exactly the same.”

Except I never noticed how beautiful you were before. Rama silently added.

Both Kin and Rama winced a little as Kin eased their bodies apart with a lewd, wet noise. A small, steady dribble of pearly, glowing liquid flowed out of their orifice, the little beads hovering in thin threads that draped from Rama’s divided cock tip as they drifted lazily up towards the ceiling.

This was precisely why Rama didn’t jerk off in his office: no one wanted to chase after gravity-defying semen when they were blissed out and drowsy. This was absolutely worth the bell-cleaning he’d have to do later though.

Kin laughed softly. “I did change, you obstinate bulkhead. I grew a heart.”

Rama blanched, anxiety skittering over his relaxed satisfaction like an overclocked hull-scrubber. “Oh no. You heard *everything*, didn’t you? I mean, I always knew there was a chance, but I just... oh *pulsars* you must think I’m so stupid, Kin...”

They grinned, reaching up to tweak Rama's soft ear-edge, pulling him out of his meltdown spiral. "Yes, but I mean that literally too. I grew another heart to replace the one that got damaged in the fight last Weld. This one's all for you, if you'll have it." They winked, a genuine warmth in their eyes that made Rama's single, albeit overworked, heart flutter with emotion.

Rama was notoriously bad at this sort of communication, so his *I love you* sounded a little different than a more seasoned species' might have. "I'm sorry that you were my least-favorite fighter."

Kin, far more adept at communication, but kind enough to hobble themselves for the sake of their freshly minted lover, responded wryly.

"That's alright, you were always my least favorite fight promoter."

The Blessings of Violence

THE SCRUM

***The greatest transformations come not
from order, but chaos.***

Epilogue

Once Rama had composed himself and gotten into his ceremonial robe, all the peace he'd just shot into Kin faded with a hasty look at his schedule. Yes, there was still time before the Weld officially started, but he liked to be early, anticipating any number of things going wrong in the interim. Kin merely smirked as Rama rushed around, grabbing the ledger holodisc decks, and fumbling with an overflowing drawer of vape cartridges all at once, knocking several to the floor in his haste.

“Boss, they’ll wait for you. You know damn well the fights aren’t going to start without you.” Kin crouched, their iridescent neck-feathers fluttering so beautifully, Rama almost

considered skipping the Weld altogether in favor of another round with Kin. He shook it off as they simply picked up a cartridge and handed it to him. *They were just being helpful. Stop acting like a rutting titbeast.*

From the heat in Kin's eyes though, Rama had no doubt there *would* be another round, they were just thoughtfully letting him get on with his life's work first. Surprising him yet again, Kin opened the storage closet, gently nudging aside some of the spent pieces of their cocoon as they plucked a golden box off of the top shelf.

"I know it isn't courting-flowers, but would you give me the honor of decorating your horns?" They smiled softly as they flipped the box lid open with their thumbs, revealing the careful pile of delicate golden foil Rama always painstakingly applied before spectating fights.

Overcome with emotion, tears pricked at Rama's eyes, and he could only manage a nod. Kin smiled in that knowing way of theirs, righting the tipped-over hoverchair and pressing on Rama's shoulder until he sat down. A soft, sweet overtone humming filled the room around them as the papery crinkle of the foil closed around the first branch of his antlers. Rama stifled a moan at the pleasurable sensation, recalling all too easily the way Kin had gripped them there last night—or had that been early this morning?

All too soon, Kin's hands slid over his shoulders with warm familiarity, closing and setting the foil-box neatly on the desk in front of them. Rama opened a slender drawer and pulled out

a hand-mirror, dazzled by the intricate striping and twisting patterns Kin had managed—it was far more decoration than he usually applied, but it was also a pain in the ass to do by oneself. A curious ache plucked at the corners of his mouth, and, touching his fingertips to it, he realized he was *smiling*. A full-on, genuine, unconscious *smile*. Wonder of wonders.

Kin sighed softly, rotating the hover-chair until Rama faced them, crouching until all four of their eyes met both of his. “Boss, I have a confession to make. You should know, before—well, you know how gossip travels in the Scrum. Isn’t going to take them long to figure out why we’re side-by-side when I’m not even entered in this Weld. I don’t want to compel you into something you aren’t comfortable with.”

Rama shook his head, delighted to hear the delicate tinkle of a bell. Another glance in the mirror confirmed Kin had suspended a small ceiling bell from one topmost antler-tip, and foil-wrapped a tiny, shimmering piece of their own cocoon against the other. Satisfying the arousal he felt from being marked like that would have to wait, sadly. “Kin, what happened was... well, I can safely say I didn’t expect it, but I’m perfectly happy it happened. Is this—are you regretting what we did?” A nervous lump formed in his throat at the thought.

“No!” Kin breathed their denial vehemently. “No, Gods, no. I meant—it’s just that, there’s a reason you may have been so attracted to me, physically anyway. You didn’t find much about my kind’s metamorphosing process because we’ve painstakingly kept the knowledge secret. I shouldn’t even be

telling you this, honestly, but you have a right to know. We can't emerge from our own cocoons, Rama. We've evolved to transmit pheromones that attract compatible mates. When there's a chemical match, well, they... well those potentials get an overwhelming urge to, how shall I put this, *help us out* of the cocoon, like you did for me. It's probably a little underhanded, but it's the genetic hand we were dealt."

Rama simply stared at them, gaze darting from the closet floor up to meet their quartet of orbs. "So wait, you're telling me that I- I sleep-fucked you out of your cocoon be- because you *smelled good?*"

Kin laughed, squeezing Rama's thigh in a loving gesture as they got to their feet. "A little crude, but accurate. I'd also add that the pheromones from my inner shell die off on contact with air unless they're bound to a solvent, so if you're still feeling something, well, maybe..." The vulnerability in their eyes rocked Rama to the core, and he instantly reached for their hands, lacing their fingers together and squeezing.

"This isn't pheromones. Maybe *that* was," Rama nodded towards the closet with a soft tinkle of the antler-bell, "but *this* isn't. It may be a conflict of interest, but you can find another promoter if that part worries you, because *I'm* not going anywhere."

Rama stood, gathering Kin in his arms and kissing them until their rigid, fearful posture softened against his forearms, their body relaxing into his. He didn't like them feeling insecure, and thankfully he seemed to have fixed it. Kin murmured in

his ear, nuzzling it until he shivered in response. “Then let’s get you to your Weld, boss, because I intend to sit so close to you that no one will need flowers to know what we did.”

Rama blushed, the bell tinkling as he ducked his head in a shy nod. Kin reached over for the ledger and discs, letting Rama manage his own impressive travel collection of vape cartridges. Knowing he would be trapped pit-side for most of the day during a Weld, he always brought several for variety’s sake.

They walked hand-in-hand to the pit, gathering no small number of sly glances and whispers, along with several smiles and nods of approval. Rama got situated in his usual pseudo-throne, running through the finalized fight lists and ensuring Plink was staggering healing vat assignments properly between rounds. Across the arena, Auks was moving up and down the bleachers, his coat flashing obnoxiously; Rama smirked as he noticed Kin’s four eyes following it closely. He’d been right, his lover—and wasn’t *that* a head trip, calling Kin his lover—was enamored of the colors and lights that decked the Avann, who’d been crowned OWAV just before the crowds started filtering in.

Curiously enough, Auks kept shooting nervous glances towards Rama, even as he made his sales rounds. This certainly wasn’t Auks’ first Weld, and he was a seasoned pro at hawking substances to the debauched masses, so what on earth was he looking to Rama for? Approval? Once a life form was declared OWAV, Rama’s part in the matter was done. Who knew? Maybe Auks had sampled too many of his wares that

morning. Rama shrugged and focused on the first pairing, a species absolutely covered in horns put up against another that seemed to be largely made of some sort of viscous liquid. It would be a mess, but this crowd *loved* messes.

Rama reached to load his vape again as his current cartridge ran dry, enjoying the warmth of Kin's arm against his own as they leaned together, watching the fight. A heavy slam of viscous liquid rattled the protective barriers, sending most of Rama's cartridges tumbling through a crack in the bleachers.

With a bleating snarl in his native tongue, Rama gestured for a point-penalty to be applied to the liquid alien, who'd slunk back to gather themselves, literally, for the next round. No direct contact was supposed to be made with the barriers: even in the lawless wasteland of the Scrum, there was still some etiquette. Sighing, he picked up one of the two remaining cartridges, one of which was a soft periwinkle color he didn't remember in his travel stash. A deep pull revealed a floral flavor profile, which immediately set off alarm bells. Rama only vaped fruit and food flavors, florals weren't anywhere in his regular rotation. He exhaled slowly, trying to place the flavor more distinctly, turning his vape to read the label.

Peekaboo Plimbus. Why did that name sound familiar?

Kin stiffened beside him, inhaling deeply, staring at his vape. Rama raised an eyebrow, offering it to him—an extremely rare gesture, considering how integral the beloved inhalation technology was to his daily life.

They shook their head, peering at the label suspiciously. “No, thank you, it just smells... familiar. Like *home*, somehow. Wait a minute... does that say...?”

Rama shrugged lightly. “Peekaboo Plimbus. I don’t remember buying it, but it actually kind of grows on you, and the colored mist feature is actually really intriguing.” He reached up to run his fingers through the oddly thick, soft pink mist as it tumbled from his mouth and nose. As his fingertips cut a swath in the mist, a lighted coat caught his eyes. He locked eyes with an extremely *guilty-looking* Auks and memory sparked.

“Pulsars! This was the sketchy offworld cartridge Auks tried to bribe me with!” Rama coughed, tossing the vape on the table in front of him, slowly realizing the mist had continued to spread without his continual pulls. Rama was a vape purist, he didn’t dabble in experimental flavors and formulas, and certainly not from unidentified sources. He felt ill knowing something unknown was currently roiling in his lungs and in the air around him.

Kin thumped Rama’s back until his breathing evened out. Frowning, they followed his gaze to pin Auks with a predatory stare. Before Rama could protest, they were launching themselves onto the catwalk overhead to cross the pit and drop down on the skittish OWAV, who frantically tried to get away. Hauling Auks back up on the catwalk with a resolute grip on his flashing, garish trench coat, Kin dropped him in front of Rama, fist clenched in the back of Auks’ trench collar to prevent an escape.

“Care to explain why you slipped a laboratory sample into his pulsars-damned vape cartridges, Avann?” Kin’s voice was dangerously close to a growl, their hand shaking Auks by the back of the neck. The mist around them continued to roil and expand, racing through the stands as if it was actively seeking out life forms. Rama stared at his furious new lover, confused, but also irate at whatever part of this nonsense Auks was responsible for.

“Sample? Man, I don’t know about a sample! It’s just something my Goff connection hooked me up with! I just slipped it in his drawer when he wasn’t paying attention—I thought it might mellow him out and he’d give me a chance to play my tunes.” Auks reached into one of his pockets and produced a glittering holodisc, presumably of his terrible music. Kin grabbed the disc and flung it end-over-end into the fluid-soaked floor of the pit, huffing over the complaining whine it produced from Auks.

Wet squelching noises and chittering began to ratchet in volume all around them, the mist so thick now it made it difficult to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. Kin’s four eyes widened as they whispered to Rama. “Peekaboo Plimbus is the name of my species’ foremost genetic researcher. They’ve been working on a way to isolate our cocoon pheromones to study, and if that sample’s been aerosolized—”

A loud, ecstatic moan interrupted Kin, and a slow, rhythmic shaking disturbed the stands around them. All three of them jumped when the viscous liquid alien once again hit the

transparent barrier, a soupy tendril vanishing between the four legs of the horned alien, who currently had their face mashed against the barrier and did *not* look upset about it.

Rama turned a look of sheer panic to Kin. “How—when is this going to wear off? It *is* going to wear off, right?” He looked frantically around the pit and the stands, which had rapidly transformed into a pile of wet, pulsing, thrusting bodies and discarded clothing as half of the entire audience fucked the other half in every position known to the cosmos. Rama had never been more glad he’d insisted on a spectator waiver for attendees.

“Without the continual presence of a cocoon, as long as you stop vaping it, I would think it’ll clear in time for the third round.” Kin frowned at the mist, which had already begun to thin above the stands.

“But why,” Rama raised his voice to be heard above some concerningly loud grunting to their left, “aren’t we affected? Shouldn’t Auks be trying to fuck everything that moves? Shouldn’t I be all over you, considering...?”

Guilt dripped off of Auks like a physical thing, pinned in Kin’s grip, literally crestfallen as his head-feathers drooped. Kin rolled their eyes, continuing. “This little shit’s likely fine because he’s more recreational chemicals than Avann right now—it’d take more than pheromones to punch through that. You and I—well, I didn’t mention it because I already laid a lot on you this morning—once you—uh—*help* one of my kind out of a cocoon, you’re sort of imprinted on who emerges

from it. Whatever pheromone soup is floating around us right now, it's not mine, so your brain has no interest. And, of course, my kind doesn't inter-mate beyond fertilizing external eggs in breeding season, so I'm good."

"Ah." Rama sat back, staring sightlessly into the violence-tinged orgy as a whole lot of aliens enthusiastically banged a whole lot of other aliens regardless of size difference, inherent biological compatibility, and political leanings.

Auks had begun to gently bob his head and move his fingers frantically in the air. It took Rama and Kin a moment to register the Avann had somehow slipped headphones in, turned the volume up to levels that the Imperium would classify as a sonic war-weapon, and was cheerfully playing electric speed greeble air-harp. Rama rolled his eyes and gestured for Kin to drop the flashy OWAV, which they did reluctantly. Auks wandered off and immediately began trying to sell some sort of magnetized pills to an athletically copulating threesome, leaving Rama and Kin to their own company.

Rama sighed. "I'll find him after the fights and make him destroy any other cartridges. Can you get in touch with Plimbus and let them know there's a smuggling issue with their lab?"

Kin nodded, suddenly straddling Rama's lap and playfully flicking the bell hanging from his antlers as they grinned. "Mhm. So, boss, it appears we're in the middle of an orgy with a round or two to kill."

“O-oh. Yes. That’s true,” Rama agreed cautiously, both cockheads perking with interest under his robe, even as he struggled to follow the change in subject and a lap full of warm, pliant Kin-Daza-Daza.

They captured Rama’s hand, pulling it up to their lips to kiss his palm before gliding it boldly down their body, pressing a little harder to dip his captive fingertips into the very edge of their orifice. Rama caught the hint and slid two inside, stroking and marveling at the texture that had driven him mindless only this morning. “Pulsars, Kin, you feel so good...”

They smirked, bending back to brace themselves against the observation railing, impatiently tugging Rama’s pants open and sinking down on his straining cockheads without preamble. Rama groaned, rutting upwards with a whine, but Kin placidly pinned him to the seat with a hand on his chest, riding him. “Nuh uh. It’s my turn to fuck *you* now. Enjoy the ride.”

Rama nodded breathlessly, eyes glued to where their bodies joined, the feather-edged oval opening in Kin’s lower abdomen undulating until they were practically adhered together. Even though he couldn’t see beneath the connection, Rama felt something curved and blunt-ended nudge out from the bottom of Kin’s orifice, sliding underneath him and firmly but gently pushing into his ass.

He bucked with a surprised yelp that Kin swallowed with a deep kiss. “Kin, what is—what are you...”

“Shhh. Relax. I told you, I’m in charge this time.” Kin’s expression was serene as their body locked into Rama’s, hooking firmly into his ass and suctioning tightly around the base of his cock, milking him in muscled waves inside their body. “Your... pleasure... helps my body shed the last of the membrane residue, so make sure you fill me up again.”

Rama attempted words three times before he eventually expressed his agreement with a howling, twitching orgasm instead, his lover’s demanding body pulling in every drop he offered as he clutched helplessly at them.

Kin undulated in Rama’s lap, pushing their bottom protrusion deeper before keening with a kick of their hips, sending jets of thick fluid into Rama to slosh out messily between them. Rama, normally fastidious, was starting to suspect he had a new fetish as he lazily fucked through the moisture, enjoying the glide as much as the source.

“Thanks, boss,” Kin whispered, craning their neck up to kiss the tip of Rama’s antler adorned with their cocoon-piece.

Rama smiled in return, brushing his cheek against Kin’s neck feathers as he held them close. The pit—pulsars, maybe the entire Weld—may have been in shambles at the moment, but he’d never felt more whole. “Anytime.”

Note to the Reader

Thanks so much for joining us on this weird, wild trip to the Scrum! If you'd like to explore this strange and wonderful world we've created, be sure to check out **Planet Oster: Fertility Fusion**, an MMMF why choose about pastel Easter bunny aliens (one of which happens to be that *maniac lapann* Frizbee's so afraid of).

To see the full list of Vera's books, as well as her cowrites with J.L. Logosz, just hop on over to her website at **ValentineVerse.com!**

Breaking the Alien Love Curse
by Veronica Scott

MF ♡♡

Synopsis



A CURSE, A CURE, AND A HARROWING DEADLINE...

Amellia Taneek loved her job as the office manager for a group of Sectors agents from various organizations, all based out of her central location. She enjoyed the challenges of handling administrative details for them and the excitement of constantly meeting new offworlders. She was especially intrigued by Hagan Rajjarr, seven feet of green, scaled, muscular SCIA agent, and more than a little curious about his tail. Hey, she was a healthy unmarried, unattached female and there was no rule against dating a co-worker.

But so far he'd shown confusing signs of reciprocating her interest.

Hagan was an honorable warrior and before he could pursue his definite interest in Amellia, who might even be his fated

mate, he had to clear up one little detail – the engagement contract he'd been entered into as a child with a female from his own planet. They barely knew each other and she was highly ambitious. Surely in this modern day and age she'd be happy for him to sever the contract and set her free, right? Leaving him in the perfect position to begin courting the lovely human.

But the jilted fiancée sends a mysterious box across the galaxy to him and when he unwisely opens it, a powerful love curse is activated, striking both him and Amellia. They'll die at dawn if the curse isn't broken. With help from Amellia's aunt, who is said to have magic powers, the pair set out on a desperate quest for three special ingredients needed to break the spell. Over the course of a very long night, will Hagan and Amellia find their way to a relationship, break the curse in time and survive? Is such a thing even possible?

Content Warnings: *none listed*

Dedication: To my daughters Valerie and Elizabeth and my brother David for all their encouragement and support!

One

Amellia loved her job at the Beneficio Two spaceport, working as the office manager for the Sectors consolidated agencies station. The planet was a Sector Hub, true enough, but the Sector was sparsely populated and not on most major shipping routes, so the various government agencies each had only one or two agents located there and shared a facility. She enjoyed the exposure to interstellar commerce and activities, while remaining safely planted on her own planet. She had no desire to go off traveling all over the galaxy but the nature of her job provided welcome glimpses of the wider world.

She'd enjoyed her job even more for the last few months, ever since Agent Hagan was assigned to the Sectors Criminal Investigation Agency Field Office. He was ex-military and made her feel safer somehow just by being in the office, when he wasn't out in the field on a case. The fact he wasn't human but a Zackmarune was an added bonus. Amellia found she didn't mind his green skin, the glimmer of scales, or his elegant, prehensile tail.

Glancing at the door to his currently empty office, Amellia repressed a sigh. He'd been gone all week, on the trail of smugglers or so she'd gleaned from the limited files available to her as office manager. He'd requisitioned a few odd items which she'd located for him on short notice and thanked her profusely before he departed.

He'd also lingered in her workspace for what seemed like a long time, asking her questions about the planet and she'd hoped maybe he was going to ask her out. He was so handsome and his scent, which was barely discernible, was like a fresh breeze, Amellia thought, carrying a hint of exotic spices. Usually she avoided any personal entanglements at the office, after several disastrous relationship mistakes early in her career, as she'd been working her way up the ladder in the Sectors Administrative Support Agency.

But Hagan was different than anyone she'd ever met and she might take a risk with him. *But do I want to ask him out, if he never makes a move? What if he has a mate or a significant other on his home planet? Awkward!*

As if conjured from thin air by her thoughts, the man walked into the office, tall and commanding as always, headed for her desk.

Amellia sat up straighter and wished she'd worn her new tunic but at least she'd tried a cute hairstyle today. "Welcome back," she said as he got closer. "I hope the mission went well?"

His smile was more of a grimace. "About as expected but it's a pure pleasure to come back here and see you, Ms. Taneek."

“I did give you permission to call me Amellia,” she said demurely.

“I brought you something.” As she stared, heart beating faster, he fumbled with unsealing one of the many pockets on his cargo pants and brought out a small wooden box, which he set on the counter in front of her workstation.

Wondering what he might have picked out for her, hoping she wouldn't have to refuse the item, Amellia made quick work of opening the container and pulled out a tiny stone statue of a pombatt, which was an adorable fluffy local wild animal. She set it on her palm and moved the carving this way and that, admiring the skill with which the artist used the natural veins in the stone to highlight the body of the creature and suggest the patterns in its fur. There were flakes of glittery quartz in the shiny purple and white stone which caught the lights and sparkled.

“I love it,” she said with genuine enthusiasm. “It'll go perfectly with my collection.” Doing a half spin with her chair, she gestured at the modest wooden curio cabinet on the wall behind her, where a dozen other small animal figurines were arranged, along with other keepsakes and her various awards. Amellia liked personalizing her official workspace to make the area feel more like home in the rather stark Sectors office architecture. “Thank you!”

“I noticed you collected these and when I saw the pombatt, I knew it was for you,” he said with a grin.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said, although there was a warm flush of satisfaction and a bit of tingling at her core, knowing he’d been thinking of her.

Head tilted, he studied her briefly. “Oh yes, I think I did. I like your hair by the way.”

Amellia patted the flippant curl. “My cousin persuaded me to try a new stylist.”

He squared his shoulders and straightened his back. Socializing time was clearly over. The pleasant interlude was concluded as clearly as if he’d said so and yet again he hadn’t asked her out. “Was anything delivered for me while I was gone?”

Amellia had been a bit tongue tied, tempted to ask him for a date and yet reluctant, so it was a relief to slide into the normal, routine office chitchat. “Yes, actually there was. I accepted the delivery and put the container in your office, on the desk.”

Blinking, he did seem startled. “Container? I was expecting a document, not a box.”

“No documents, no letters, just the one item.” She realized she was rubbing her fingers on the edge of her jacket and made herself stop. The package had been quite odd and she’d actually been queasy for a few minutes after handling it. Of course the box had been fully screened at the spaceport before the office robo took it for delivery so more likely she’d been noticing the effects of the unusually greasy fast food she’d had for lunch.

“I’d better go deal with it then.” He gave her a nod and headed for his office, stopping along the way to exchange greetings with one or two of the other Sectors agents who had offices here.

Forcing herself to stop watching him, lest he catch her in the act, Amellia shuffled a pile of input disks on her desk and checked the time on her chrono. She was supposed to meet several of her cousins and other friends for dinner after work and then catch a show in the entertainment district, so she hastily grabbed her purse and rushed out, eager for the evening’s events.



Hagan Rajarr studied the package sitting so innocently on his desk, foreboding roiling his gut. His tail twitched and he could feel his talons preparing to emerge. Taking a deep breath, he got himself under control again. Surely Sharshanna wouldn’t have done anything rash after getting his message. She should have been pleased at what he’d communicated.

Yet he couldn’t quite make himself believe the comforting assumption. When had anything he’d done made her happy?

Stalling for time, he removed his shoulder holster and stowed his weapon in the gun safe, rubbing his aching muscles where a near miss from a blaster had left a long sear. The operation to take down the interstellar antiquities smugglers had ultimately been a success but not without a hell of a firefight. He’d been lucky to only receive a glancing wound, already healing. He

glanced at the office door, now closed, and wished he'd given into temptation and asked Amellia out to dinner. But this strange box from his home world might be what he needed to go forward on an attempt to build more than a casually friendly relationship with her.

Flicking out his longest talon, he unsealed the outer container and assessed the inner wrappings. Moglal leaves woven tightly together and secured by a twisted red thorn vine enclosed the contents. He crossed the office in four steps and closed the door tight before returning to the desk and reluctantly bending over the package. Taking a careful sniff, he nudged the box with the tip of his tail and nothing happened. Uneasy, he slashed the thorn vine, which came loose in a convulsive motion, spooling itself up on the desk and rolling onto the floor. Transfixed by the contents now revealed, Hagan made no move to catch the vine because the leaves were unfurling one by one, their dark maroon veins gleaming in the office lights. He heard the sound of ceremonial drums and a shiver ran through his body as the lid of the plain wooden box inside began to rise.

A shower of sparks spiraled into the air, glittering jet black, red and orange and he recoiled, deploying his tail to slam the box shut but the move was too late. The cloud of motes encircled him and he knew he was breathing them in, although there was no scent or taste. Desperately he batted his arms seeking to dispel the miasma and sank into his chair as weakness overcame him and his legs failed. His body went numb from the ankles up, as if he was being encased in ice.

The last thing he saw before passing out was a small stream of the sparkling droplets floating out through the vents, seeking another target. Dread squeezed icy fingers around his heart and he prayed to the Ancestor of All to protect their intended victim.



An indeterminate time later he came to, groggy and with a headache. Gingerly he sat up and checked to make sure he was in one piece and recognizably a Zackmarune. With a spell as powerful as the one contained in the damn box, anything could happen. His heart rate was elevated but otherwise he seemed fine. *Maybe she only meant to scare me.* There could be no more humiliating situation than for a proud Zackmarune warrior like himself to lose self-control and consciousness. Luckily there was no audience present. He'd have to either kill them or become a total hermit on a holy mountain on his home planet to erase the shame.

Checking the door, which was still closed and the window at the top, he noticed the outer office had gone dark while he was unconscious, which meant everyone else was gone for the day, which was a relief in the present situation.

Taking a deep breath, he pivoted to see what had happened to the box and froze. A holo of Sharshanna stood silently beside the desk. As if his movement had released her to speak, she raised one arm and pointed a ruby red claw, the effect muted somewhat by the fact she was pointing in the wrong direction.

“Unworthy one, slime of the primordial ooze, how dare you dishonor me by dissolving the agreement of our families for us to wed?” Her beautiful voice was venomous and he had no doubt if she was here in the office she’d be launching poison darts at him, which certain females of his species could do. “I’ll be the laughingstock of the entire city,” she wailed, pearlescent tears trailing down her cheeks like jewels, accenting her gorgeous bone structure and facial frills. Eyes narrowed, she fisted her hands on her hips and literally spat in disdain. “Now I have no choice but to wed Prince Maldvon, who begs me daily to accept his suit and bear his eggs. He may be a prince but you—you were the scion of the most venerated House on Zackmarune. A hero, a warrior, a man all the other women envied me for possessing.”

As she ranted on, Hagan remembered vividly one of the reasons he’d enlisted in the Sectors military and sought assignments far away from his home planet. Sharshanna was incomparably lovely on the outside and undeniably nasty on the inside. Well, at least it was over now and they were both free. He had no doubt she’d make her weakling prince from a minor kingdom into a puppet and end up ruling the damn planet herself. Good thing he never planned to go home.

Drawing a deep breath, generous bosom heaving, she drew herself up to the best height she could manage. As if she’d heard his thoughts, she said, “This isn’t over, fool. If you’re viewing this holo it’s too late for you and for the strumpet who stole you from my arms. The box contained the most powerful love curse money and blood could buy. I sought out the elderly

high priestess of the devil snake's own temple—you're doomed. Better make a cozy nest quickly and seek your lover's arms because you're both going to die at the next dawn as the sun rises. I've been assured the Curse of Love Unrequited never fails to take its intended victims into the underworld."

Laughing, the holo faded away, although the echoes of her evil mirth lingered in his mind.

"What have I done?" he said out loud, rubbing his aching head. With the clarity of hindsight, he could see he should have flown home to sever their egg match in person and to allow Sharshanna to maneuver the situation to her best advantage, no doubt making it appear *she* had dumped him. She'd have used the whole affair to leverage herself into marriage with a much more important member of the monarchy and been content. As he considered what to do next, he felt a tiny pinprick of pain on his arm and there was a small click as something fell to the floor. Bending over, he retrieved one of his scales, staring at it in disbelief. A Zackmarune male stopped shedding scales once he'd attained full maturity. Losing them in adulthood was an extremely ominous sign. Even as the stark realization crossed his mind, another scale fell.

The curse is working. If he'd had any doubts or entertained hope the dark magic was impotent here on this planet, they were now erased. There was only one honorable thing to do and he couldn't afford to lose any more time. Grimly he gathered up the leaves and the vine and stuffed them into the

box, taking note of the official certificate of no-fault egg match abrogation tucked into the corner. Clutching the package under his arm, he headed out the door, turning for one final look at the office where he'd been so content and had entertained such high hopes for the future.

All destroyed now, by the love curse.

Two

Amellia wasn't enjoying her evening out as much as she'd expected to. About halfway through dinner she got a sudden raging headache and her stomach cramped ominously. "I think I'd better go home," she said to her friends.

"Your cheeks have gone terribly pale," said one.

"Let me get you a groundcar," said another.

The group gathered around her, escorting her outside the restaurant, finding her a taxi, exhorting her to rest, suggesting various folk remedies in a cacophony that made her head hurt even more and issuing exhortations to call them in the morning. Then as her vehicle pulled away from the curb, her friends rushed inside to continue their night of merrymaking. Amellia sank against the groundcar's cushions with a sigh of regret and gritted her teeth against the headache, praying to make it home before her dinner reappeared in embarrassing fashion.

Once safely in her apartment, she took several over-the-counter remedies, changed into her coziest pajamas and curled up on her couch with her cat. Idly she keyed up the latest episode of 'Planet of Entwined Lives' and let the trideo play, in hopes the convoluted plot would distract her. "I guess it's a good thing Hagan didn't ask me out tonight after all," she said to the cat, stroking its soft ears. "It would have been so embarrassing."

Thoughts of him made her feel better so she indulged in a few daydreams about what it might be like to spend time with him out of the office. She wasn't up to her steamier fantasies, not tonight, but there was no denying Hagan was a gorgeous guy and so considerate. "He's always so nice to me," she told the cat, who purred serenely. "He even brought me a present today."

The trideo adventure story was moving into total unreality, and her head was spinning too much to follow all the twists of who was betraying who and why, so she flicked the holo off and decided to go to bed.

The notification panel for her front door chimed and she glanced at the clock in disbelief. Who would call on her at this late hour? Her friends were all off enjoying themselves, where she should have been.

The door chimed again, longer and more insistently.

Maybe one of the neighbors needs help. Shoving her feet into her fluffy faux pombatt slippers because the floor was cold, Amellia made it to the door and checked the vid. "Hagan?!"

Hastily she opened the portal. “What are you doing here? How do you even know where I live?”

“I apologize for disturbing your peaceful evening,” he said with a formal air. “May I come in? I’ll explain everything but I’m afraid I have bad news to impart.”

He did look a bit peaked she noticed as she retreated and he moved into the light in the living room. His usually bright green skin with the iridescent scales was faded and a few scales were missing. One popped up on his forearm and fell to the floor as she watched. “Are you all right?” she asked. “Do you need a glass of water or anything?”

“How do *you* feel is the more important question.” His emerald-green eyes glowed a little as he scanned her up and down.

Blushing because she was wearing her pajamas with the anime characters and the big slippers, she held her robe closely around her and mentally said goodbye to any hopes she’d ever had of dating this man, much less going to bed together. “I know I must look a mess. I have a migraine and an upset stomach.”

“Oh no.” For a moment Hagan doubled over as if he’d taken a blow to the gut and then stepped forward to grab her arm so suddenly she was flooded with adrenalin and uttered a squeak. “When?” he asked urgently. “When did this start?”

She twisted awkwardly in the direction of the chrono. “I don’t know, maybe three hours ago? What does it matter? What is going on with you tonight?”

He slid his hand down her arm and clasped her fingers. “Don’t be alarmed—I’d never hurt you. But I do have bad news to impart. May we sit?”

“Of course.” She drew him to the couch and the cat departed with a hiss, making room for them to sit.

“I had so much I wanted to say to you at the proper time,” he said, holding her hand a bit desperately. “You’re special, Amellia. I’d never met any woman like you before and I was—am—so powerfully attracted to you. I think we’re fated mates—”

“Like—like instalove?” She let out a gasp, wondering how to handle this revelation. “I mean, I find you attractive and I won’t deny I’d love to go out with you but we barely know each other outside the office.”

He nodded, his face set in serious lines. “My people believe on occasion a fated mate will be granted to a fortunate individual by the gods. I never heard of it happening with a human but I knew the instant we were introduced you were a woman I could so easily fall in love with. And while we were working together, I did. But now in my attempt to do the honorable thing, I’ve brought utter disaster upon both of us.”

“Does this discussion have to do with the box you’re holding?” She pointed at the container gripped tightly in the coils of his tail.

He set the box on her coffee table as she watched in fascination. “Did you know my people are born of eggs?”

She blushed. “I might have done a bit of research when you were assigned to the office.” Nervously she ran her hand through her hair and focused on the box, licking her lips. “To make sure I could provide you the best support.”

“Of course. Your thoroughness is an attribute I admire greatly,” he said but his involuntary assessment of her other, more physical attributes was highly appreciative. With a self-conscious cough, he averted his eyes and straightened. “When clutches are laid at high born Houses, there’s a ceremony known as egg matching, whereby certain individuals are entered into alliances by their parents—”

Amellia hadn’t seen any references to this ritual. Actually she’d stopped doing research after discovering the Zackmarune were egg layers. She’d done a little checking on whether human women could mate with a male from the alien planet, got discouraged by all the scientific mumbo jumbo and checked it out on an interstellar chat board, where she’d learned they could, and could even have children with a bit of medical intervention. None of the information helped tonight with this bizarre conversation. “Before they hatch? How do the parents know who to put with whom?”

“There are subtle markers on the eggs, which skilled priests can interpret through the use of sacred lanterns. The thing is, I was egg matched with one who became Sharshanna, a beautiful but spoiled daughter of another House.” He flicked a glance at her and smiled ruefully. “I fled my planet at adulthood and joined the Sectors military to escape our match truthfully. We’re long lived and there was plenty of time to be

tail fasted. Honestly, she was such a schemer and climber, I hoped she'd manage an alliance with royalty and jilt me.”

Watching his face, Amellia was struck by the tension in his clenched jaw and the pulse beating hard at his temple. “But she didn't?”

“Oh, she schemed and maneuvered with the best of them no doubt but hadn't quite achieved her goals. I must explain in these modern times it's common and quite accepted to sever the egg match once adulthood arrives. My taking the course of action carries no shame or dishonor for either of us. I think many people were probably surprised I'd waited so long to take the step. She'd certainly provided enough provocation.”

Reassurance seemed necessary so Amellia patted his hand. “I believe you.”

Hagan responded earnestly. “I wanted to be free to court you with honor.”

There was silence. Hoping to advance the conversation and get to the meat of whatever Hagan believed he needed to tell her, Amellia pointed at the box. “Is this what was delivered to the office while you were out in the field?”

“Yes.” He stirred the leaves with the tip of his tail, pulled out a coil of red vine and dropped it distastefully. “She took my actions badly.”

“How badly?”

“She's cast a curse on us.”

Jaw dropping, Amellia couldn't help herself and burst into laughter. "I'm sorry," she gasped, trying to smother her amusement as Hagan blinked. "A curse? Really? And that's what has you so worried? In this day and age I hardly think we need to give it a second thought, even if she did send you a funky old box full of rodent skulls or dead flowers or whatever. Unless she hired D'nvannae assassins too, we're probably going to be fine."

Hagan remained serious. "I could handle the assassins—let them try to get past me to harm you. But this curse—there's nothing to be done. At dawn we'll both die."

An awkward silence fell. Amellia took a deep breath and rose from the couch. "I'm going to make us some coffee. I'll even break out the good stuff, none of the synthetic caff beans, and then we can go over the details of this problem again. Are you hungry? I could throw together sandwiches."

"Without fail you're so kind and considerate," he said. "I wish I'd gone ahead and courted you from the moment I first arrived."

"I wish you had too," she said before she could stop the words. "But cheer up, I'm sure we'll be joking about this tomorrow night. I'll treat you to dinner to celebrate."

He shook his head, dislodging two more of the beautiful scales. Her cat emerged from under the couch to chase the shiny octagons as they bounced on the carpet. "We're doomed. By this time tomorrow our families will be mourning us."

Slamming his fist on the table, he made her jump in surprise. “I wish I’d never brought this curse on your head.”

Amellia escaped into the kitchen, unsure what she could say to bolster his confidence. It was unsettling to see this imposing warrior so defeated. As she went mechanically about the effort of brewing real coffee, drawn from her tiny, expensive hoard, and making sandwiches, she turned the problem over and over in her mind. She vaguely recalled hearing once if a person believed strongly enough in a curse, they would die whether there was true magic involved or not.

He’s not well already or his scales wouldn’t be molting and he’s so shook up over this. She had no fear of black magic from another planet striking her down at the behest of a spiteful, jealous female.

But even as the thought crossed her mind, she remembered how handling the box had made her nauseous and the fact she’d become ill herself earlier in the evening, about the time Hagan was opening the box. *No, no, no, I’m not going to think like this. I simply have to convince Hagan he’ll be okay and then wait for dawn to come and go without incident.*

Amellia checked the situation in the living room and saw Hagan with his head in his hands, his tail uncurled and limp across the arm of the couch and realized no words from her were going to suffice. The sight broke her heart, as he was plainly in such black despair. Falling back on her organizational strengths, she decided to make a mental list of their options, starting with a trip to the emergency room.

Maybe if Hagan could find out a medical reason for his flaking scales, he'd be able to relax.

Or we could go see Auntie Cheline.

Bracing herself on the counter, Amellia considered the option. Her mother's oldest sister was a self-styled witch, claiming to have studied in the far-off mountains with ancient masters of the craft and certainly she excelled at making up herbal concoctions for minor ailments. Amellia had heard it said her aunt also dabbled in love spells and the like.

Taking out her handheld, she made a call.

"What in the name of the spirits are you calling me at this hour for?" said her aunt grumpily as the com link opened. From the tiny hologram, Amellia could see the elderly woman had obviously been asleep. "Is something wrong with your mother?"

"No, she's fine. I uh I need your help, Auntie."

"Take two headclear and meet me at my shop in the morning. I'll help you then."

As her aunt was reaching to disconnect the com, Amellia said, "I'm under an alien love curse and I'm going to die at dawn."

Eyes narrowed, brows drawn together in a frown, Cheline studied her. "Would you repeat that astonishing statement?"

Sighing, Amellia plunged ahead. "There's this guy—"

"Of course there is," Cheline laughed. "If all you need is a love potion, again I'll see you tomorrow at the shop."

“No, wait, let me explain. He broke it off with a girl on his home planet and she cursed him. And me. Well, she doesn’t actually know me but whoever it was he was involved with or attracted to here got added to the spell. Which was me. Now I’m not worried about this at all but he’s here right now and he’s convinced we’re going to die at dawn and I’ve got to do something to cheer him up. So I thought if you could stage kind of a ceremony or an exorcism or whatever for us, he’d feel better.” Her aunt’s expression was unreadable and Amellia swallowed hard, hoping she hadn’t offended her relative. “He’s normally solid as a rock being ex-military and a special agent and all but this has him shook. He’s actually shedding scales from the stress.”

“Scales?”

“Yes, I did mention he’s not from our planet, didn’t I? He’s from Zackmarune.”

Brow furrowed, Aunt Cherline ran one elegant hand through her already tousled white-and-pink hair. “All right. You’ll have to come to the shop because I can’t diagnose this via comlink. If dawn is the deadline we’d better hurry because you don’t have any time to waste. Meet me there as fast as you can.”

“Should we bring the box?” Amellia asked, a bit stunned by her aunt’s quick agreement to help.

“Definitely and anything that was inside the box, especially anything written.”

“I appreciate this, Auntie.”

“Never let it be said I walked away from a family member in distress. Besides you’re my favorite niece but don’t tell the others. Now hurry!” Cheline closed the comlink.

Carrying the mugs of hot coffee and the sandwiches into the living room on a small lacquered tray, she set her burden on the table and began explaining her plan to Hagan. “Since you’re so worried about this curse thing, I’m calling in an expert, my Auntie Cheline. She’s a—a world famous sorceress on this planet and I’m sure she can defeat or block any spell. We have to meet her at her shop right away, so while you eat, I’ll get dressed.”

Mug halfway to his lips, Hagan paused and stared at her. “Does she think she can help us? Did you tell her the curse isn’t of this world?”

“I did and she’s confident.” *Not a lie—Auntie is always confident.* Amellia took her coffee, sipping it as she hastened down the hall to her bedroom, reflecting on what a weird evening this was turning out to be. *I guess it’s our first date and we can laugh about it for the rest of our lives.* With a chuckle she examined her closet and selected one of her best sweaters, which tended to emphasize her generous curves, and a pair of black jeans. She layered the sweater over a bright pink T shirt, added thick socks and boots, ran a brush through her hair and hastened to the living room.

Hagan rose as she entered. “The sandwiches were excellent, exactly what the inner man needed after a long day. We can take my groundcar—I’m parked fairly close.”

“Cheline said to bring the box and any contents,” Amellia said as she headed toward the door.

“Of course.” Without looking back, he scooped up the item in question with his tail without breaking stride, managing to get to the portal first and opening it for her courteously. “After you.”

Three

Cheline's shop was in a trendy area adjacent to the downtown mainstream and Hagan drove there at a fairly high rate of speed, which made Amellia nervous about getting pulled over by the police but she supposed he could avoid a ticket if he flashed his own badge and he was a consummate driver.

"Spells, spices and sundries." He read the sign, which blinked on and off in vivid violet and red.

"She has a wide variety of merchandise—you'll see. She must be here already because there are a lot of lights inside." Leaving the groundcar, Amellia stepped to the doorway, Hagan right behind her and as she approached the portal opened.

Amellia did a doubletake. Her aunt was attired in a slinky, sparkly black gown, spiked heels adorned with gemstones on the straps and a deep purple cape with mystical signs embroidered in gold thread. The collar of the cape framed her face, which retained the striking beauty of her youth, although undeniably lined and softened. Her white-and-pink hair was in

an elaborate updo, held in place by a circlet studded with gems and the effect was overwhelming. She was leaning on an elaborately carved staff, topped with a dark stone. Light flickered in the depths of the massive gem.

The overall effect was astonishing. She either resembled an ancient sorceress, all powerful...or a character in a fantasy trideo. Or maybe a person dressed up for a costume party. Amellia stifled a nervous giggle at the vision her aunt presented but behind her she felt Hagan relax the slightest bit. She made a hasty introduction. "This is my um friend, Agent Hagan Raljarr of the SCIA. He's one of the Sectors officers I support at the office. We really appreciate this, aunt Cheline."

"Yes, well, you said the matter was urgent. Come in quickly before we attract attention." Her aunt stepped aside to allow them to pass and gestured imperiously with the staff, as if herding a flock of recalcitrant woolbearers.

Once inside, Hagan bowed low. "I'm honored to meet you, Lady Cheline. I regret bringing this trouble to your family."

"How much trouble remains to be seen," Chelina said as she locked the door. "Come this way. I have a private room where I usually do individual readings and host small groups. I've set up there." Walking quickly on her improbably high heeled shoes, she led them out of the dim store and into a separate annex. The room in question was fairly spacious, with a large round wooden table in the center. An embroidered black satin cloth took up the center.

The symbols embroidered and beaded on the tablecloth glowed in the lights as Amellia entered the room but she dismissed the idea as a fantasy. It was beautifully made—her aunt only dealt with the best artisans on the planet. A trick of the lighting.

“Set whatever you’ve brought me of the remnants from the spell in the exact center of the table,” Cheline said. “I’ve established a warded space so the evil can’t do any further harm. I must examine the objects and study the aura.”

Hagan complied and neatly recoiled his tail after setting the box down. He moved closer to Amellia as if to protect her. “There was a holo at the end, after I’d opened the box but I didn’t see a trigger for the message so it may have been one time only.”

Cheline nodded and murmured a few ‘hmm’ sounds as she circled the table. She rapped her staff on the floor, startling Amellia into flinching violently and asked, “What came out of the box when it was opened?”

“A cloud of sparkling glittery stuff,” Hagan said with distaste. “I breathed some of it in and a portion of it fled the room, going to find Amellia, I fear.”

“I didn’t see anything,” she said as her aunt turned to her and raised her penciled-on elegant eyebrows in silent query. “I was out with friends and fell ill at about the same time though, as near as we can pinpoint it.”

“Open the box for me,” Cheline said to Hagan.

He obliged, and then removed the leaves and the vine, spreading them out as per her orders, being careful not to allow any of the items to stray off the edge of the cloth onto the wood. Amellia's aunt studied the array for a few minutes, rocking back and forth on her heels, chewing her lip and moving to assess the pile from various angles.

“Powerful indeed,” Cheline said at length, straightening her spine with obvious effort. Resting one hand on the small of her back and rubbing gently, she added, “I’m going to have to study potential remedies for a bit before we can continue.” She gestured at the far wall and Amellia pivoted to see a huge bookcase stuffed with old fashioned paper books and even assorted scrolls tied with ribbons.

“But do you think you can help us?” Hagan asked. “How can your magic have any effect on a curse cast at a temple on my planet?”

Eyes narrowed, Cheline stared at him. “Magic is magic, my friend. There are rules, bargains, prices to be paid, loopholes to be negotiated. The fact this isn’t the planet of origin helps a bit with neutralizing the curse but time is short and I need to concentrate. I have a task for the two of you, which will also conveniently get you out of my hair for a few minutes. I need to think, not answer endless questions.” Her voice had a snap of annoyance. “Go into the shop, to the bracelet display on the western wall. There’s an entire section of braided ones. I want you to each select one and it must be whichever attracts your eye first.” She shook her finger at them. “No second guessing. Allow yourselves to be drawn to the right one. Bring what you

select here to me and hopefully by then I'll be ready to proceed.”

“And this nightmare will be over,” Hagan said with relief, flicking a loose scale off his forearm.

“Oh no, this is merely the beginning.” Cheline made a shooing motion with her hand. “You’re wasting time—go on.”

Amellia stepped into the hallway with Hagan but then paused, saying, “I need to ask her something. You can go ahead into the shop if you want.”

“I’ll wait for you right inside the entrance.” Shoulders squared he strode away.

Smiling broadly, Amellia hurried into the conference room. Voice low, she said, “You’re doing a great job, Auntie. I can’t thank you enough. He’s definitely relaxing and he hasn’t shed any more scales since we got here. Well, except for the one which just fell and it was loose when we were at my apartment. I’m grateful for all this stuff you’ve done, to make things look official, real I mean, not fake.”

With a frown, Cheline glanced up from the ancient, dusty book she was perusing. “Child, this is all real. You’re both in grave peril and dawn will bring your deaths if we don’t succeed. Lucky for you I *am* a wielder of old and sacred powers and knowledge or lost scales would be the least of his problems. Now scoot—I’m busy and you have a task to accomplish.”

Blinking hard, astonished by the severity and seriousness of her aunt’s tone, Amellia retreated from the room and staggered

to lean against the wall, her stomach churning and her head spinning. *Real? Auntie thought this was all real? Could it possibly be true?* Cold chills ran up and down her spine.

She jumped at a touch on her arm. Hagan had come in search of her. “Are you all right?” he asked, assessing her from head to toe.

“It’s starting to sink in how much trouble we’re in,” she admitted. “My aunt is pretty persuasive.”

“Fortunately for us she appears to be a woman of great wisdom and power.” He took her elbow and gently guided her steps toward the store. “Let’s go pick out bracelets, shall we?”

Amellia was familiar with the layout of the store, having worked for her aunt when she was in school. Nothing much ever changed inside Spices, Spells and Sundries. As she led the way through the aisles, she took a deep breath of the scented air. “I used to love it here when I was a kid and then I was a part-time clerk when I worked my way through school. She doesn’t do much obvious business during the day but she’s rumored in the family to be rich. I suspect she does a lot of those private readings and other consultations after hours.”

“I like it here,” he said. “The atmosphere is welcoming and the aroma reminds me of temples on my home planet, with spice and incense. Even though I’m counted as a warrior not a mage, I feel at ease here.”

As she approached the display they’d been ordered to find, Amellia stopped. “All right, the bracelets are around the next

corner. She said not to hesitate and to pick the first one that catches our eye so I think we should go separately. You first.”

Without another word he made a right turn around the end of the shelves, moving out of Amellia’s sight. Moments later he returned and she held up her hand. “Don’t show me—I don’t want to be influenced.” Hagan stepped aside and Amellia made the short distance to the wildly colorful woven bracelet rack. She remembered her aunt bought these from a tribeswoman who lived in the mountains and came to trade twice a year. It was always the same elderly woman, accompanied by a changing cast of grandchildren and then great grandchildren but the weaver herself never seemed to grow any older. Idly she wondered if there was a new weaver by now, it having been years since Amellia worked here. As she walked up to the cascade of colors and patterns, she found her attention drawn to a section where green and purple dominated. Taking her last two steps to close the distance, she found herself reaching for a bracelet so high up on the hooks she had to balance on her tiptoes to snag it.

Driven by a sense of urgency she couldn’t explain, Amellia ran to rejoin Hagan, grabbing his hand as she darted past him. “Come on!”

He jogged easily beside her and allowed her to re-enter the private room first.

Cheline was seated in a large, elaborately carved blackwood chair which Amelia couldn’t remember having been in the room before but which was surely too heavy for her aunt to

have moved from somewhere else. She was leaning her chin on her hand, her shoulders were slumped and her voice was weary. “You’ve made your choices?”

“We have.” Hagan stepped forward and held out the one he’d chosen, which Amellia saw was purple-red-and-white, with tiny golden bead accents.

“And yours?” Cheline pointed at Amellia.

She displayed the green one which had drawn her attention. “This doesn’t mean we’re engaged or anything, does it?” she joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Cheline shook her head, unamused. “I suggest you think twice before joking about such serious matters. The choices you made are excellent and bode well for success. Now I want you to tie the bracelet you selected onto your partner’s wrist, signifying you accept the bond and are in this combat together, as a team,” Cheline said, rising and reaching for her staff. “The curse wants to separate you—there’s a lot of hatred woven into this black magic we’re dealing with.”

Hagan held out his arm and Amellia laid the bracelet over his wrist, tying a knot in the strings with trembling fingers. This was all so much more real and scary than it had seemed when she first heard about it earlier in her apartment. Efficiently Hagan returned the favor and Amellia had to admit she liked the pattern he’d picked for her unknowingly.

Cheline stood in front of them. “Cross your wrists together.” As soon as they’d complied, she waved the tip of the staff over their embrace, the great stone glowing fiercely. “None may put

you asunder now until this task is completed. The power each of you holds has been amplified by that of the other. Truly you're one in this quest tonight." She added words in a language Amellia didn't recognize, almost singing, and then stepped away, sinking into her chair.

Hagan uttered a pithy phrase in what Amellia assumed was his own language and her aunt nodded approval. "Yes, entirely proper to call upon your deities at this juncture. Well done."

While Amellia was pondering where her aunt had learned Zackmarune, Cheline set aside the staff and rubbed her hands together.

"You need to bring me three essential ingredients for the spell I must weave to break the curse. I have most of the recipe but these will represent Earth, Air and Water, which will help to bind the curse to this world and prevent it from activating."

"Not Fire?" Hagan asked. "On my world those are the four elements."

"Here as well," Cheline said. "I'll provide the fire at the right time. Now you must procure the egg of a mawkhen, the pearl of a satin sea clam and the root knot of a mandrajoo pine."

Amellia's mind raced as she tried to decide where they could find such things at this hour of the night. "And get them to you here by dawn, right?"

"Absolutely or this will all be for naught. Time to be on your way." Leaning heavily on her staff, Cheline rose and all but pushed them out of the room, through the store and out the

door. “Hurry,” she said as she closed the door behind them with a definitive thump. Amellia heard the locks engaging.

She headed for the groundcar with Hagan and stopped abruptly, so he nearly ran into her. “What in the name of space is that?”

Drifting down the deserted street toward them was fog, but not like any other such phenomenon she’d ever seen. The cloud was gray with a green tinge and the wispy tentacles roiled as they extended, as if something behind them was breathing. She heard garbled sounds, like voices and thought she saw movement inside the fog bank, a few blocks away.

Hagan grabbed her hand and pulled her to the car. “I don’t know but we’re not waiting around to find out either. Get in.” He stood guard while she scrambled into her seat and closed the door practically on her heels. He did another quick recon of the approaching fog, which had covered quite a bit of ground in a short time, and then vaulted over the front of the groundcar, yanked open the door and threw himself into the driver’s seat while Amellia gaped at him.

“Quite a show. How did you—”

He gunned the motor to the redline, reversed and made a U turn with assurance, accelerating away from the vicinity. “My people have extra muscular abilities we can call upon. Please tell me we don’t have to drive into the fog to get the items your aunt wants.”

“You think the fog has to do with the curse?” she asked, voice shaking a bit.

He glanced at her and flicked the switch to increase the interior heat level. “Unless you’re going to tell me the miasma is typical weather for this planet, then yes, I think the whole situation has stirred up forces we’d rather avoid. Where am I going? I doubt we can procure these odd ingredients at a market.”

“Hardly.” She turned awkwardly in her seat to check behind her. The store was dark inside but surrounded by a bright violet glow and the fog swirled around the building as if seeking a way inside. “I hope Auntie will be all right.”

“As do I but she seems powerful and knowledgeable. We have to achieve our part of the mission and we can’t waste time—we only have a few hours until dawn.”

Settling into her seat, Amellia bit her lip and considered. “Fortunately for us there’s a bird sanctuary quite close by. Get onto the main road and head east. I’ll give you more directions when we get closer.”

Hagan complied and the groundcar made a sweeping turn. He frowned. “These aren’t an endangered species are they?”

“No of course not. Just ordinary birds. They migrate though and this area we’re going to is one of the stops along their annual path. Fortunately for us, the flocks are in residence now.” She gave him a smile. “I might have gone on a few mawkhen egg gathering expeditions when I was a kid. They’re considered a delicacy when made into omelets with local spices and we used to sell them to the restaurants. The fact it wasn’t strictly legal appealed to us then and we had strict rules

how many eggs we could take. It won't do us any good to be stopped by a game warden tonight.”

“I'll flash my badge and spout impenetrable interstellar legal nonsense,” he said with an answering smile. “While you climb the tree and snatch an egg.”

“I'll try to get two, if the clutch is big enough. We might want a backup.”

He put the groundcar on autopilot and reached across her to open a small compartment, withdrawing a holstered service blaster.

“You're not planning to shoot the game warden if we meet one, are you?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light.

“No but I didn't like the suddenness or the appearance of the fog bank rolling in at your aunt's store and who knows what or who might have been lurking under cover. Old-fashioned blaster fire might not work on black magic but it'll sure make me more comfortable, having it handy.” He studied her. “Does the weapon bother you?”

“No, I'm fine with it. We probably won't have any trouble getting the egg but we have two more stops to make afterward and the mandrajoo pines are in a dicey area of the national forest.”

“Define dicey.”

“Umm, it's rumored there are drug runners using the forest as cover for their operations, as well as other types of smuggling going on. The planetary police haven't done a sweep in years

and again rumors only but it's said some of the local authorities might be on the cartel's payroll." Amellia wasn't happy about driving into the forest in the middle of the night but she couldn't think of anywhere else to obtain a root knot. "You probably know more about the area than I do, being an enforcement agent."

He considered the issue while he drove. "I can tell you none of my current cases involves a forest location. I can't confirm or deny anything else."

"I understand," she said, unbothered. "I wouldn't expect you to divulge any details. I'm trying to warn you this curse of your ex-girlfriend's might be sending us into a danger zone."

"Sharshanna and I were never in a relationship as you humans define it," he said, jaw clenched. "We were egg matched before we'd even hatched. We played together in a big group as children and attended certain classes and ceremonies together. But we were *not* a couple."

"Then why is she mad enough to curse you? And me? Simply because of unpleasant gossip she might endure?"

"Her whole life has been pointed toward joining the royal family and using my family's connections to do so," Hagan said. "I wasn't a person to her, certainly not a man she loved or even cared for as a friend. I was a prop in her political maneuverings."

The whole arrangement sounded sad to Amellia, although she couldn't muster up much sympathy for the woman who'd cursed them. They drove in silence for a few minutes before

Hagan asked, “And this pearl we have to procure? Where will we find it?”

She pulled out her handheld and did furious research while he drove. “The best place to try is about an hour’s drive further east of the mawkhen colony. But then the mandrajoo grove is in the entirely opposite direction.”

“We’re committed to this plan now,” he said philosophically, although his fingers were tight on the manual controls and the tips of his claws edged out. “I’ll take to the air after we have the pearl and fly us directly. This vehicle has a limited capacity for flight. There certainly wasn’t time for us to divert to the spaceport garage and check out anything more capable.”

“The turnoff is coming up fast,” Amellia said. “We’re going to have to walk a little bit, I’m afraid.”

“My night vision is excellent and I have a handlamp in my go bag in the trunk which you can use.”

Hagan parked in the visitors’ lot at the edge of the nature preserve and Amellia led the way, handlamp in hand. She’d never been here at night but the trail was clearly marked and after a brisk fifteen minutes or so they were in the grove of trees she remembered from her younger days. “The trees look bigger in the dark,” she said in a hushed voice, feeling silly the next minute when she realized they *were* bigger after a decade or so of growing since her last foray here with her cousins. “We should keep our voices down so we don’t startle the birds. The flock should be asleep on the nests right now and we want them to stay that way, not attack us.”

“Would they? You didn’t show me a holo of these birds.” Hands on his hips, he was surveying the dense growth above them. “Which tree is our best bet?”

Amellia slung the handlamp at her side and headed for a medium-sized tree on the edge of the grove. “I’m thinking this one.”

Hagan hastened after her, catching her gently by the elbow to swing her around. “You aren’t climbing.”

“Yes, I am,” she said in astonishment, retreating a step. “I’ve done this dozens of times.”

“In the daylight. And I have a tail to assist me in climbing.”

“And have you ever gathered mawkhen eggs before? Slid the egg out from under the bird so she doesn’t notice, doesn’t attack? I know what I’m doing. Now give me a boost up to the first good-breakablesized branch. I have a ways to climb.”

He stared at her for a moment.

Nervously she checked her pocket, making sure she could safely carry an egg or two in the depths of her overcoat and then raised an eyebrow at him. “Well? Time’s wasting here.”

“I don’t like it but will accept you have the necessary expertise.” Hagan made a stirrup with his hands and steadied her with his tail as she stepped up and reached for the branch she’d chosen.

Puffing with exertion, Amellia hauled herself up and got a secure footing on the branch, which bent a bit disconcertingly. The night was damp and the tree bark was slick. Not wanting

to give herself time to reconsider, she reached for the next handhold and then progressed to the one above it. The task was a lot harder than she remembered as a kid, scarier, and *why* had she been neglecting to make her scheduled visits to the gym where she had her expensive membership? Or gone jogging more often or something. She leaned on the broad tree trunk and took in deep breaths.

“Are you all right?” Hagan’s voice drifted up to her from far below and holding onto a smaller branch, she leaned over to see him far below.

Putting a finger to her lips, hoping he could see it since he’d boasted of his night vision, she continued upward without answering the question. She really didn’t want to disturb the birds. One of her cousins had been attacked by a small flock during a childhood egg snatching expedition and had required stitches and nearly lost an eye. He’d worn the patch as a symbol of his courage for months until the eye healed. *Yeah, we were crazy as kids.*

Finally she began to hear the soft cooing of the drowsing birds as she reached the loftier branches and was able to make out a set of the big, messy nests a few feet above her current perch. She waited for a wind gust to subside, clutching desperately at the tree so she wouldn’t get blown off, nails digging into the bark, then crept carefully to the next level of intertwined branches and crawled toward the nests an inch at a time.

The birds’ white head plumage glinted in the occasional moonlight as clouds scudded past in the night sky. As far as

she could tell they weren't disturbed by her presence. Amellia hummed a song she dredged up from her childhood memories, which was supposed to hypnotize the mawkhens. She had no idea if the folklore was true or not but she'd take any help she could get.

Carefully, hand trembling, she reached under the lush tail feathers of the mawkhen on the nearest nest, gliding along the soft fluff which lined the structure of twigs and vines and other materials, until her fingertips brushed against a warm, smooth, solid surface which rocked a bit in response to her touch. Amellia locked her fingers around the egg and withdrew it as slowly as she'd probed initially, until she freed her hand and slid the egg into her pocket in one gesture. She backed away on the branch, nearly slipping off and sat briefly, head on her knees as she panted. *Do I dare try for a second one?*

There was no denying eggs were a fragile commodity, unlike a pearl or a root knot, which were their other two assigned commodities on this weird scavenger hunt. Taking a deep breath and squaring her shoulders, she forced herself to climb to the next set of nests, rather than leave the first mawkhen seriously short of eggs. Performing the delicate maneuver required to extract the egg from under the bird, she tucked it in the other pocket and took a moment to wrap a scarf around one egg and a pair of gloves around the other before sealing the closures.

When she went to descend, vertigo struck with a vengeance and Amellia thought she was going to throw up. She couldn't even see the ground clearly but she knew it was a long way

down. With a stifled moan she leaned against the sturdy tree trunk and gathered her courage. She made it past the level where the first nest was and kept going, afraid if she paused for any reason she'd never be able to make herself resume the challenge. It was harder to find the right foot-and-handholds now, she was exhausted and terrified she'd slip.

Maybe she moved too fast, trying to end the ordeal, or perhaps her foot slipped on a slick branch but she screamed and grabbed frantically at branches as she fell, clinging onto one for a heart stopping instant before it bent and slid out of her fingers. Above her the tree shook as the mawkhens launched themselves from their nests, screeching loudly and flying in disturbed patterns.

Amellia had no time to do more than scream and she landed hard, caught in a pair of sturdy arms as Hagan broke her fall and they both collapsed onto the soft, mossy ground. "Mind the eggs," she said, not making much sense but terrified they'd broken. No way could she get more tonight. The flock wouldn't settle in time. Dazed, she stared into his deep green eyes. "You—you caught me."

"Of course I did. Are you all right?" Effortlessly he rose, carrying her in his arms and headed for the groundcar park.

"I have to catch my breath but I think I'm okay. A few bumps and bruises no doubt." She closed her eyes and laid her head on his rock-solid chest, overwhelmed now the task was over. "I got two eggs. We'll have to check and make sure they aren't broken." She could still hear the birds calling and bugling

challenges behind them. “Good thing the flock didn’t attack us.”

“One or two did while you were disoriented from your fall but I flicked them away with my tail,” he said calmly. “It’s a powerful weapon.”

“I’m sure. I can walk now, I think.” Much as she enjoyed being in his arms, it was an awkward situation. They weren’t a couple, they weren’t even dating and the intimacy of Hagan carrying her as if she was the breakable object, instead of the eggs, was embarrassing.

“Let me get you to the comfort of the car.”

True to his word, he activated the groundcar’s passenger side door and set her on the edge of the seat.

Immediately Amellia checked the two eggs, relieved to find them in pristine condition. “We should make a container for them, rather than keep them in my pocket, since we have two more errands to go.”

He rummaged in the cargo carrier while she sat and worked on regulating her breathing and her racing pulse. Eventually he brought her a small box and hovered close by while she transferred the eggs and the makeshift packing materials to the container.

“I’ll put it in the back,” he said, taking the box from her after she closed the lid. “I have to tell you looking at plain birds’ eggs and reflecting on how they’re supposed to help us break a

curse isn't exactly confidence inducing. I blame myself for allowing you to risk your life getting them."

She waited to respond while he walked around the groundcar and slid into his own seat, initiating the drive mechanism. "Remember we're both supposed to die at dawn, according to the curse, so taking a risk here and there is the only thing we can do. And Cheline explained the symbolic nature of the egg and the other things we're to bring her. Didn't what she said all make sense?"

"In her chamber of sorcery, surrounded by the incense and the glowing gems and in her presence?" He raised one eyebrow and grinned. "Yes. Indubitably. Out here in the forest in the night, with a box of ordinary eggs, not so much."

Amellia wanted to rest her head on the cushions and fall asleep but there was too much to do. At least her stomach had settled down in the cold night air. She fished out her handheld. "I'm going to research the pearl. Drive generally south for now. I think we might be going to one of the large lagoons. And the mawkhen is no ordinary bird, you know. They're a creature in many folktales on this planet."

"For good or for evil?" he asked with every evidence of genuine interest.

"Kind of neutral, I think. The birds can serve both sides but there are a few legends where people rode giant mawkhens into battle."

"Good thing we didn't face any such creatures tonight. Did you find the lagoon?"

“Yes. I think our best bet would be the Carlbidian Lagoon—it’s the largest and according to this reference site, is known to have a sizable population of the satin sea clams.”

The groundcar accelerated as Hagan programmed in the definite destination.

“We’ll have to swim out to the sand bar,” she said.

“I. *I* will swim. *You* are not swimming.” His tone was flat and final. “You’ve risked enough. It’s my turn and swimming and diving are strong skills for my people.” Leaning back from the console now the autopilot was engaged, he said, “Show me a holo of these clams?”

Amellia triggered the proper link and a large whorled shell floated in the air between them. “Says here the bivalve muscle is incredibly strong and hard to open while the creature is alive. Wow, the muscle material can stretch to 200 times its normal length and remain five times stronger than a major human tendon. The shells cling to their rocky homes with a web of filaments which also filter the water for nutrients.”

Hagan held out one hand and dramatically unsheathed his claws with an audible snap. “I will place my faith in these. My people were born to be efficient and lethal.”

“I can see that.” Amellia blinked.

“Is there more information to be gleaned? We’re nearly there.”

“Nothing good. Apparently the pearls are pretty rare, occurring in only about one in a hundred clams.”

Frowning, Hagan flexed his hands and took control of the groundcar again. “I have no desire to kill needlessly, not even sea creatures. Is there a way to tell which ones might contain a pearl?”

Amellia checked the site again and shook her head. “No.”

“We’ll see.” He sounded confident. “It may be that my senses, being different from yours, can detect a difference, no matter how tiny. A creature gestating a pearl has to be distinct from its peers.”

“When you explain the logic the idea makes sense.”

Four

Standing on the beach a few minutes later, holding her coat against the stiff breeze off the water, doubts assailed her again. *This had better be worth it*, she thought savagely in Aunt Cheline's direction. Hagan strode out from behind the groundcar, completely naked except for a tiny pair of black briefs. She ought to politely avert her eyes but he was a riveting sight, well over six feet of sculpted muscle, scales gleaming in the moonlight, tail curled in the air over his head. His sharply defined hipbones drew her eyes to the bulge behind the inadequate trunks and there was an answering pulse of heat at her core.

He cleared his throat and she raised her eyes to his face. Gesturing at his unclothed body, he said, "I need to be unencumbered in the water."

"Of—of course. Well, the clams await." She gestured toward the water, where rough waves were breaking on the shore and against the rocks.

“Did you find any new information?” he asked, coming to stand beside her. His body heat radiated to her and Amellia swallowed hard, trying to keep her wits about her. On the beach at night with the hottest man she’d ever seen and she had to concentrate on muddy old clams.

“No, just more old legends and fairy tales about the power of the pearls. They seem to be quite useful in the hands of a sorcerer or mage.”

“Which your aunt appears to be, luckily for us.” He gazed at her with concern. “Are you sure you won’t take refuge in the groundcar while I’m gone? It’s freezing out here.”

“I’ll be fine and I’m going to stay here on watch while you’re gone. It’s the only thing I can do, the least I can do.”

“The water will be warmer so don’t worry about me. I’m not a reptile, to be stunned into immobility by cold. We of Zackmarune have an entirely different metabolism.” He handed her his blaster, which she hadn’t even noticed him carrying, being so distracted by his physique. “Do you know how to shoot?”

“I had a basic class when I came to work for the interagency authority.” She checked the power level and flicked the safety off and back on. “The one I had at the class was a toy compared to this.” Already her hand was tired from holding the heavy-duty weapon. “Are we expecting trouble? Did you see someone following us?”

“A precaution in case—I can’t leave you defenseless here on the beach.” Hagan leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

“But no, quiet your fears, I don’t think we’ll run into trouble of the humanoid kind. I finished a big case before returning to the office and I’m not assigned to anything else yet. I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

He sprinted away from her, into the water, diving under an incoming wave and Amellia held her breath until she saw his head break the surface as he stroked hard toward the area where the clams were to be found.

Hagan’s head was full of thoughts about Amellia, starting with profound regret he’d taken off all his clothes and had to go swimming in the ocean instead of taking her into a cozy bed and whiling away the night with passion. *If only I’d taken the risk and courted her sooner. But no, I wanted to have all the proper details of etiquette carried out first and end the egg match. I was an idiot.* He swam smoothly, his tail providing extra propulsion. This far below the surface there was no turbulence and with his excellent Zackmarune vision he could see the details of the seabed below him. He anticipated arriving at the clam location in short order and indeed was soon circling above them, studying the large bivalves. The shells were pretty, with a pattern reminiscent of whorls, although they didn’t represent true spiral growth. He sampled the water, hoping for a scent or a taste or other subtle clue as to which of the creatures might contain a pearl. The largest ones? The smallest ones?

He was reaching for one whose sparkly pink and green iridescence drew his eye when slimy ropes wrapped around both of his ankles and dragged him abruptly in the direction of

the open sea. His captor was moving at immense speed and Hagan struggled to contort his body to see what had captured him. Although he could hold his breath for a long time, air was going to become a problem. Exerting all his strength, he managed to bend against the current created by their passing and slash through the coils on his ankles and legs. It took several tries and once the bonds released, he shot toward the surface.

Sucking in a massive volume of precious air as he emerged from the water, he had only a few seconds before he was recaptured, new tentacles weaving around his feet and lower legs to pull him into the dark depths.

This time he was ready for the attack and lunged forward toward the enemy, to be met with more, thicker arms, which attempted to enfold him and pull him close to a vicious black beak in the center of the thicket of tentacles. The water around him suddenly clouded with a black substance which made him nauseous and dizzy as it surrounded him. He slashed and cut, using the claws on his hands and feet, and even his fangs, twisting and turning to keep the creature from gaining a secure hold. He cracked his tail like a whip, trying to strike one of the eight beady eyes glaring at him. The water around them churned. He was bleeding from a variety of wounds, as was the creature. He prayed the gore wasn't going to attract any more predators.

Air was becoming a problem again but he knew his opponent was weakening. He hoped the animal was smart enough to know he wasn't a good bet for an easy meal. Breaking free,

Hagan rose to the surface, sucking in air and waiting for the combat to resume.

Nothing happened.

He dove and scanned in all directions but other than a lingering faint cloud of the black ink, there was no sign of the beast.

Wasting no time, Hagan swam to the clam bed, all his senses on alert since he was bleeding and would look like prey. He was sure he wasn't seriously injured although he was in pain but there was no point to any of this if he didn't find the damn pearl. He scooped up a clam, cut the shell open and wasn't too surprised there wasn't a pearl. He made careful note of the shell pattern and the scent of the one he'd selected and tried to pick the most opposite specimen he could for his next attempt.

Please, he prayed to his own sea gods, I don't want to waste these creatures' lives. Point me to the pearl I seek.

Realizing he was becoming a bit delirious and lightheaded, Hagan opened the second shell and again found nothing. Casting it aside with regret, he surfaced for more air and glanced toward the shore. Amellia was waiting right where he'd left her and he waved vigorously, hoping to reassure her. *She's such a calm, capable, beautiful woman—I'm lucky to have found a prospective mate of her caliber. If only I hadn't brought this curse to her.*

She waved and as he slid under the water again, he said another prayer. Descending to the clam bed, he identified the one which had caught his eye before he was taken by the sea

monster and swam to it. The colors reminded him of the bracelet he'd selected for Amellia, which had to be a good omen. Slicing the shell open, he was gratified to find a large, marble-sized pearl sitting cushioned in the center. Carefully he closed the shell around the gem again and headed for shore, clutching the shell with its precious cargo inside.



It was hard to wait, not knowing how things were going with Hagan out in the water. She supposed it had been the same for him when she was way up in the tree. Playing with the bracelet he'd picked out for her at Cheline's shop, she admired the sparkly bits in the moonlight. He'd certainly selected one she would have chosen for herself, even if he hadn't known he was choosing for her. Anxiously she scanned the waves again. Except for the brief moment when he'd surfaced and waved, she could only worry. *I certainly couldn't rescue him if he got into trouble.* She could swim a little bit but she'd never be able to tow him to shore, even if she could locate him.

With a gasp, she ran forward as Hagan emerged from the ocean, a shell in one fist. Even from a distance she could see he was bleeding and moving judiciously. "What happened?"

"A sizable and unfriendly denizen of your ocean decided I was its dinner," he said with a lopsided grin and visible effort. "Took me a while to dissuade the beast."

"Lords of Space, you're bleeding in more than one place—we should get you to the hospital." She ducked under his arm and

took some of his weight, helping him plod toward the groundcar.

He shook his head emphatically. “No hospital. I’m not badly injured and we have no time. I’ve had worse, in combat. We have to keep moving.” He raised his fist and showed her the shell. “I got our pearl.”

“I hope it was worth the sacrifice. Do you have a first aid kit in the car?” She’d have to rip up her T shirt if he didn’t because the wounds needed bandaging.

“Even better,” he said. “I keep a fully stocked go bag in the cargo compartment and I have a regulation medic’s field kit. Let me get there and sit and we can do a quick assessment and apply dressings. I can do it by myself.”

“You most certainly will not be doing it by yourself,” she said indignantly. “We’re a team. I’ve had basic first aid, maybe not for wounds like this but we’ll manage. I have a lot of cousins who were always getting into scrapes when we were kids so the sight of blood or even broken bones doesn’t faze me.”

When they reached the car, he handed her the shell and allowed himself to slump to the ground beside the rear, leaning against the vehicle. Amellia rushed to open the car, deposited the shell next to the eggs after gawking at the pearl briefly and then searched his huge go bag in the cargo compartment for the promised first aid kit.

“Wow, this is like a mini hospital,” she said, kneeling beside him and unfastening the satchel. “We could do surgery.”

“Fortunately I’m not in such dire shape,” he said, reaching across her to pluck out the antiseptic. “We’ll have to wash these cuts out and then apply the healing patches. The damn creature emitted a nasty ink and I wouldn’t want to leave any residue on the wounds.”

Amellia had to take deep breaths a few times as she worked to take care of him. Several of the injuries were deep and especially nasty. Hagan bore her ministrations stoically, only wincing when she poured a second bottle of water over the worst cut before applying antiseptic and the pretreated healing patch. The nanos imbued in the pad should start working immediately to repair the damage and reknit the tissues.

“Let me get your clothes—you’re shivering,” she said as she shoved the supplies into the kit.

“There’s a med blanket in the go bag,” he said, making no move to rise yet.

“You should have told me.”

He shrugged “You had to have access to the wounds.” Flexing the arm which had been the most severely torn up, he made a sound of appreciation. “You did a good job. I notice an improvement already. Thank you.”

Amellia handed him the blanket, which expanded immediately and he tugged it over his shoulders.

“Now for your clothes.” She assessed his feet and ankles, where the marks of the sea beast’s tentacles showed in angry red. “Will you be able to wear your boots?”

“I’ll leave them off for now,” he said, wiggling his toes a bit. “By the time we get to wherever our third task is, I should be able to manage them.”

He caught her wrist as she turned to go to the car and tugged her closer. “I’m lucky to have you as my partner.”

She was off balance and he caught her close, kissing her full on the lips. Surprised, Amellia kissed him back and as he sought to deepen the caress, she willingly parted her lips for him. She looped her arms around his neck, attempting to be mindful of the wounds she’d recently dealt with and they clung together. Hagan tasted like the best dessert she’d ever had, or maybe the most delectable drink, she couldn’t decide which. There were spices and flavors she had no name for acting like a drug on her system and she couldn’t get enough of him. Any embarrassment over sitting on his lap fully clothed while he was basically naked fled immediately in the face of the emotion and attraction they shared.

The kiss ended and he rested his forehead against hers. “I’ve gone about this all wrong, Amellia Taneek, but I swear to you if we survive the dawn and you’ll give me a second chance, I’ll never stop trying to please and cherish you.”

“We do seem to have skipped right over a number of steps,” she said with a shaky laugh. “I guess that’s what an alien love curse can do to a couple, but I’m not sorry.” His body felt so good pressed against hers and she hated to move but the clock was ticking. He slid his tail around her waist and helped her to stand.

“We must go,” he said regretfully, releasing her and struggling to his feet, making a fresh grab for the med blanket, which had slipped off during their little interlude.

“I’ll drive if you want.” She pulled his clothing from the groundcar’s driver seat where he’d left the garments folded and handed them over.

“It might be a good idea if you don’t mind. I can rest and regain my strength for our last effort.” Hastily he yanked his shirt over his head and put on his pants. “Digging up roots, right?”

“Right. And driving is no hassle, not with the autopilot.” Amellia slid into the driver’s seat as he made his way to the passenger side and as soon as he was seated, she initiated the drive. Retracing their route away from the beach was a simple matter and then she let the autopilot handle navigating to the forest where they hoped to harvest the last item. At his suggestion she allowed the autopilot to go airborne and increase the speed substantially.

“Tell me about the mandrajoo pines,” he said.

“I’m checking the databases now.” Amellia frowned as she watched the tiny holos scroll past. “Wow, there are a ton of legends and superstitions about these. I had no idea. Oh this is pleasant—one tale says if you touch the root knot you die. Since we’re already under a curse maybe we can catch a break on the prohibition.”

His laugh was good natured. “I mean, fair is fair, right? Assuming the gods are watching over us tonight. How is a

person expected to harvest these things?”

“Tie a living animal to the root knot and then walk away—”
She broke off. “Nope, nope, nope I’m not going there. It’s all ridiculous and disgusting nonsense. We’re going to assume we can dig this piece of wood up and cart it off barehanded.” She flicked away the information flow.

“Maybe with gloves. I have a pair in the go bag.”

“Of course you do. I like a man who’s prepared for every eventuality.”

“I honestly wasn’t prepared for this,” he said. “Not the curse, not the challenges your aunt laid out for us—”

“And not prepared for us to be an instant couple?” she asked with a sideways glance.

Awkwardly he leaned over and kissed her. “Oh I was hoping for that development. Not under these circumstances, however. Were there any other useful tidbits?”

“Leaving out a bunch of superstitions, the root knots are usually a foot or so underground and each tree may have dozens, which is good because it means us cutting one out shouldn’t damage the tree.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw him checking his wrist chrono. “How are we doing for time?”

“Not good.” He shook his head. “My battle with the sea creature delayed us badly.”

“We’re close to the mandrajoo grove now and then we can go straight to Cheline’s shop.”

“And I’ll be redlining the engines all the way, I give you my word.”

“I wonder what kind of ceremony she has to do once we get back to her,” Amellia said. “Does she throw it all in a pot and say a few words and we’re done and off to breakfast?”

“Somehow I doubt it, although I like the sound of breakfast.” He grinned. “May I take it we have our first actual date then, for breakfast?”

“Assuming we survive, sure.” Blush rising in her cheeks, she fought to conquer her reaction to going on a date with him. They were way beyond first date jitters by now.

As if he was reading her mind, Hagan reached over and squeezed her hand. “We’re an excellent team.”

“Maybe now is a good time to tell you the special set of narcotics detectors you requisitioned still hasn’t come in? They’re only six weeks overdue now.” She tried for a lighthearted note. “I did get the extra refills on the antigrav pulsors and Maintenance will be coming to paint your office next week. Two out of three isn’t bad, right?”

“Two out of three is amazing,” he said promptly. “I’ll be filing new requisitions and work requests later in the week though. I borrowed specialized equipment on the joint task force I was working with that I want for my own armory. I have the budget.”

“Sole source or can I run a competition? I like getting multiple bids.” She enjoyed talking business although it felt a bit unreal

in the midst of all this alien love curse situation.

He took her seriously. “Let me think about it. I need to call my buddies on the task force and ask them a few more questions.”

“Are you planning to stay on Beneficio Two?” she asked.

“When your tour is done, I mean? I’ve had a few agents with different agencies who made their entire career here.”

“What about you?” he replied. “Are you staying on Beneficio? What if we become a couple and I decide to take a promotion elsewhere?”

“Whoa, I guess it’s way too soon to be discussing this kind of decision,” she said.

They drove in silence for a few miles.

“I never really considered leaving Beneficio Two,” she said quietly. “I have a huge family here and I’m not adventurous by nature, despite tonight. I love my home and I’m happy.”

“But?”

“But if I was with a man I loved enough to marry, then I’d love him enough to follow him.”

“And leave your career here?”

“There are transfer possibilities within the agency. Moving isn’t a topic I ever looked into before but I know the opportunities exist. I get occasional coms with listings of openings all over the Sectors.” Panicked, she stared at him. “But you have almost a year left in your rotation—you’re not transferring out early, are you?”

“Wild Shemdylann mutants couldn’t drag me away from this place, not while you’re here. And as for the future, I can request permanent status here or I could explore taking a position with your local planetary forces. I’ve had feelers already. I have certain skills.”

“So modest.” She laughed, relieved he was committed to remaining firmly tied to her home world. “We’re nearly at the edge of the forest. I’ll have to park on the side of the road as there’s no visitor access in this area.”

He nodded agreement with her choice and Amellia allowed the autopilot to select a likely spot.

Five

As soon as the groundcar was safely parked, they exited the vehicle, Hagan belting the blaster at his hip again immediately. He pulled on his socks and boots while Amellia pulled a few necessary items from the go bag. By the time he'd fastened his footwear, she was ready to go. "I'll take the lead," she said. "I've got the co-ordinates on my handheld."

Following the holo markers her device projected for her, Amellia headed into the dense forest, reassured by Hagan's bulk at her back. They wove through the trees for a good ten minutes before arriving at the edge of a clearing. Hagan prevented her from stepping into the open.

"We're going to be exposed out there while we dig. One of us needs to stand guard while the other brings up the root knot we need."

"I don't disagree but let's find the damn things first." Amellia walked away from the sheltering canopy of branches and headed for the closest mandrajoo tree, which was a towering giant. "This one should have root knots galore, judging by its

size and health. It won't miss one." She went to the base of the trunk while Hagan stood guard. Tracing a big root from the spot where it led away from the base of the tree, she stopped after a yard or two. "Try here maybe?" Unslinging her backpack, she said, "I brought the excavation tool from your go bag."

He handed her the blaster and knelt on the mossy ground at the spot she indicated. Running one hand over the surface, he said, "I'll dig myself but the tool will be useful for cutting the knot from the rest of the root." Deploying his talons, Hagan dug into the turf, carving giant gashes with each stroke. "A foot or two deep you said, right?"

Scanning the perimeter of the glade and feeling exposed, as Hagan had pointed out they were, Amellia nodded. "And hurry it up. This place is spooky at night." The trees loomed over her, branches shifting and rustling as if about to snatch her up and there were concerning noises in the underbrush all around. "I think we may have company."

Coming to his feet in one smooth motion, he checked out the situation. "I don't sense any other humanoids."

"Animals probably. These woods are protected so there's quite a healthy population of predators."

When he knelt to continue the digging, there was an unearthly howl from the depths of the forest. Fortunately the sound seemed far away to Amellia but she clutched the blaster more tightly. There had been a legend the root knots would scream when anyone tried to remove them and this was close enough

to the old folklore to be unsettling. As Hagan carried out his task with high energy, she heard more howling. The animal voices ululated as if mourning a loss and she took note of the fact there was now more than one. “A pack,” she said out loud.

“Tell me again what kind of creatures roam this forest?” He didn’t look up from the hole he’d dug but his voice was tense.

“I mean, there are gunnaks, which I think the closest term in Basic would be bears and then there are packs of ninighants, or wolves. The vocalizations do sound canine, don’t they?”

He grunted and changed position. “I’ve found a knot, I think. I’ll have to proceed with more delicacy to avoid ruining it in any way.” She leaned over to get a better look and saw a portion of a strangely shaped, gleaming white root.

“Like a faceless doll,” she said, repulsed. All her life she’d had a phobia about anything lacking distinct facial features.

Hagan worked with the excavating tool, attempting to cut the knot free from the larger root. Finally he swore a long and lurid oath in his own language and tossed the tool aside. As Amellia stared, he tore at the root with his claws. “The damn thing reseals itself almost immediately.”

“I can’t believe it,” she said. “What kind of a plant does that?”

He made a grand gesture of invitation, eyes gleaming in the beam of her handlamp. “See for yourself.”

“Let me try it.” She handed him the blaster and knelt beside the small hole, reaching for the tool. Using the sharp edge like a knife, she sawed at the knot, picking a spot about three

inches away from the extremities. With a gasp she sat back as a stream of pure white light was revealed in the small cut she'd managed to make. The illumination moved like water would, pulsing into the knot on one side and flowing out the other, into the bigger root system. She had to take in these details fast because the root did indeed seal itself up again. "There was nothing about this in the research I did."

"Maybe it has to do with the curse but unless we can figure out a solution, we're sunk."

"Could we burn its connections to the tree with the blaster?" she asked.

Hagan gave his weapon a cursory once over. "It's not a needler. I couldn't make the beam narrow enough. I guess I can give it a try though but it'll mean destroying a large section of root around the knot."

Above them the tree shivered despite the lack of wind, needles falling on them in a shower of prickly impacts.

Placing her hand on the root knot as if to comfort the tree, Amellia said, "We won't do that, I promise. We need this one knot, to break an evil curse."

"Who are you talking to?" Hagan asked.

"The tree." Catching his expression of utter disbelief, she added, "Hey, it's no weirder than anything else about this night. We're caught up in magic more powerful than I understood before."

“And screwed.” His voice was flat. “We have to have the knot to give your aunt.”

“I know.” Amellia sank onto her heels and tried to come up with an idea. As she fretted, she played with the bracelet Cheline had tied around her wrist, the one Hagan had picked for her and inspiration struck. “I think we have to do this together.” As he regarded her, eyes narrowed, she went on. “I had a task assigned to me alone and so did you but the whole point is we’re in this situation together, right? So the third task requires both of us.”

“You may be on to something.” His grudging agreement was overridden by another chorus of howls. “We may as well make the effort.”

They clasped hands and then awkwardly leaned over the root knot again, one on either side.

“Slide your free hand underneath,” she said, tunneling her fingers through the loose soil as she spoke.

Without hesitation Hagan transferred the blaster to his prehensile tail, which was clearly a move he’d made before and an instant later his fingers met hers below the root.

“Now lift,” she said. “I think the darn thing is coming loose.”

Using their joined hands they raised the knot away from the root to which it was attached. At first there was resistance but then with an audible pop the growth released itself from the other vegetation and rose into the air on their palms as dirt dribbled away. The root flared white like a small star for a

blinding moment and then when Amellia could see again, she and Hagan were holding an ordinary piece of wood.

“Lords of Space, talk about uncanny.” She let Hagan balance the knot while she took a filmy scarf from her pocket and wrapped the precious talisman in the silken folds. Rising, she bowed to the tree. “Thank you for your generosity.”

“Now to get out of here.” Hagan had his blaster in his hand again and he took her elbow with his other. With his tail he picked up the excavating tool and dropped it into the backpack, then looped his handy extra appendage through the handle of the bag and hefted it easily, bringing it through the air to Amellia. “If you don’t mind. I think I’d better keep myself unencumbered in case we run into more trouble.”

“Since you have the blaster, I agree.” Amellia pivoted to where they’d entered the grove and stopped abruptly with a gasp.

The way forward was blocked by three large canine-like animals, which she recognized as the ninighants she’d warned Hagan about. The largest stood in the center, eyes gleaming red in the dark night and teeth bared. Growling a challenge, the beast glared at them. Amellia realized the entire glade was surrounded by the pack of these animals and her heart sank. Hagan could never kill them all if the alpha decided to launch an attack.

He echoed her thoughts. “I’ll do my best but if they all come at us at once we’ll be overwhelmed. I’ll keep them busy but you have to promise me to run and don’t look back.”

“I’ll do no such thing—I’m not leaving you alone in a gallant last stand out of an action trideo. Besides I need you to complete the ceremony with me at Cheline’s and save me from the curse.” She made the last comment as lighthearted as she could. Moving with excruciating care, she got the root knot out of the backpack and let the scarf drift to the ground. She held it out toward the alpha, who was watching her with interest and no diminution of implied threat. “The tree agreed to let us have this,” she said quietly. “We need to be on our way or this gift will be for nothing.”

“Amellia—” Hagan sounded more tired than angry but he cut off whatever he was going to say as the lead wolf threw back its head and howled.

The cry sounded more like a command than anything else to Amellia and she hoped he was going to let them pass.

Next minute the alpha shook his head and stepped aside, crowding the other two animals out of the way. There was a narrow path between them and the trees. Amellia gulped and reached for Hagan’s hand. “I think we can go now.”

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it myself,” he said, clasping her fingers tightly. “We’re not out of the literal woods yet.”

Hand in hand they walked forward and past the trio of huge predators, who growled menacingly but made no move to attack. Amellia felt as if she was trudging through thick mud as she started down the trail, dimly visible in the waning moonlight. The three wolves followed them and she dimly

sensed others slipping through the trees in their vicinity, but there was no kind of overt threat. They'd been walking for maybe ten minutes when she heard the alpha growl behind her and when she checked over her shoulder she saw his hackles were up and his fangs bared.

“Why now?” she asked, her voice quaking.

Hagan swept her off the path and behind the nearest large tree. Pressing her to the trunk and standing protectively in front of her, he curled his tail comfortably around her ankle and calf and held a finger to his lips.

Now she heard the voices of other people and shivered at what the group was casually discussing, which seemed to be planning for a major drug heist, including the killing of other drug dealers and suspected snitches. The voices were cold, unemotional and evil to her mind. Amellia held her breath, afraid to breathe in case the tiny sound would reveal their presence so close to the trail. Hagan had his blaster ready but just as the weapon wouldn't have sufficed against the wolf pack, she knew it wouldn't be enough against this humanoid pack.

The wolf brushed past, giving her a level glance, his eyes glowing red, as if to say *you'll be all right*.

She realized the pack was on the move away from where she and Hagan were hidden, following the other humans.

Suddenly the alpha gave voice to a throat splitting roar and the cry was taken up by many other voices scattered in the woods.

Hagan took her hand again and dragged her away from the tree. “*Run!*”

She ran mindlessly, unable to do anything else. They fled toward where they’d left the car and behind her she heard more howling, the sound of shots and men screaming. Hagan came behind her, guarding her back. When she reached the groundcar, she clawed the door open on her side and basically fell into the vehicle while Hagan vaulted over it and slid into the driver’s seat. He put the car into motion even before she’d closed the panel on her side again. He sent the car hurtling into the sky and then rushing toward the city.

“Are you all right?” he asked. Although he was scanning the vids and instruments intently to see if there was any pursuit, he spared a quick glance for her.

“Scared out of my mind but yes, I’m fine. And I have the root.” She displayed the precious object in her hand.

“We’re headed for Cheline’s shop at top speed but while we’re on the way I’m going to call in a tip on those drug dealers,” Hagan said. “I’m going to make it anonymous though. We don’t need to be answering questions for the rest of the night on what we were doing way out there.” He proceeded to use his personal com and left a message which Amellia found incomprehensible but she assumed he was using special code words the law enforcement personnel would pick up on.

When he was done, she said, “The whole thing with the wolves was astonishing, beginning to end. If we did try to explain this night of ours to anyone but Cheline they’d never

believe us. I'm starting to doubt my own eyes as to what I saw." She poked at the root, which was very much a plain old piece of vegetation covered in dirt.

He reached over to clasp her hand. "Magic takes many forms. Perhaps Cheline is right and there are forces on this world to counterbalance the spell Sharshanna paid for. I have more hope now than at any time since I opened the damn box."

Amellia rested her head against the cushions of his groundcar and breathed deep, trying to slow the crazy beat of her heart.

"We'll be there in five minutes," Hagan said.

"How long till the dawn?" She could find the information on her handheld but she was too tired and wrung out to make the effort.

"Cutting it tight, less than an hour. I hope whatever she plans to do for us can be done on an expedited basis and still be effective," he said.

"We're going to get stopped for speeding," she said anxiously, scanning the readouts.

"I'm broadcasting a law enforcement signal which warns off all other authorities." He grimaced. "Strictly speaking I shouldn't use it but this is life and death for us so to hell with rules."

Suddenly he took the controls and rose high into the sky, hovering.

"What is it? What's going on?" Amellia checked wildly in all directions, expecting to see a ring of enforcement vehicles

closing in on them. “Why aren’t we landing and parking? We must be almost there.”

“We’re right on top of the place,” he said, jaw clenched. “See for yourself.”

Her heart sank and she gasped as she checked the vids. The store was a small, brightly glowing oasis of purple illumination in the midst of the uncanny, roiling fog or mist which had been approaching as they left, so many hours ago. “It’s concentrated around her store and nowhere else.”

“She must be doing something to hold it at bay,” he said.

“How are we going to get through that? When it was coming at us before I—I saw things and heard things. I’m scared,” she admitted.

“Com your aunt and get her advice but hurry.”

Glancing at the chrono on the control panel, she fumbled for her handheld and placed the call to Cheline.

“Sweetheart, where in the seven hells are you?” her aunt demanded to know before Amellia could say anything. “I sense you’re close but there is no time left. We have a ritual to get through so hurry it up.”

“We’re hovering at about ten thousand feet above the shop right now,” she said once she could get a word in edgewise.

“Tell us what to do to get through the fog safely.”

“Damn. I warded the shop so it can’t affect us here,” Cheline said. “But I forgot you had to get through the gauntlet. Land as close to the door as you can but don’t get out of the car until

you see me open it. I'll cast a temporary spell to shield you as you run inside but be careful because the damn alien magic is angry and determined.”

“We got—”

“Tell me later,” Cheline said, cutting Amellia off abruptly.

“Land the damn groundcar.”

“Coming in now,” Hagan said, taking the vehicle in a deep dive.

Amellia clung to her seat and the safety restraints as the groundcar screamed through the sky. At some point Hagan had wrapped his tail around her waist as an additional precaution to hold her in her seat. As they got closer to the surface, the fog began reaching up for them like a living thing, tentacles of wispy, writhing gray-and-yellow rising into the night sky. She closed her eyes, not sure if she was more afraid of crashing the groundcar or the sinister fog.

The vehicle landed with a jarring thump, so unlike all the other smooth landings Hagan had made and the safety harness retracted. She opened her eyes to see they were literally at the door of the shop, off the pavement. There was about ten feet of open space to cover and the mist swirled in lazy eddies as if waiting.

“Slide over to my side,” Hagan said, using his tail to grab the container with the eggs and the pearl from the backseat. “Once she opens the door, we’re on the move. Are you ready?”

Swallowing hard, Amellia nodded, unsure she could speak.

He reached out with one hand to caress her cheek and leaned to give her a kiss on the lips. “We’ll be all right,” he said in a soft voice. “I give you my word.”

Amellia leaned into him briefly, soaking up his warmth and the reassurance he was broadcasting. She heard a bell ringing sonorous slow tones and straightened to see her aunt in the now open doorway, a bell raised high in one hand and her staff clutched in the other. Each time the bell sounded the fog retreated, as if the sound repulsed it.

Hand on the door release, Hagan gave her a stern look. “On my count of three.”

“I’m good.” She got a firm grip on the root knot as he counted.

The door slid open and Amellia gasped as she was hit with a blast of cold air which stank of rotten vegetation and putrid meat and other, worse odors. A thin tentacle of the fog wormed its way into the groundcar and she ducked under it as she exited. Hagan had an unbreakable grip on her hand, pulling her with him toward the door. Cheline was chanting but Amellia felt dizzy and faint as the noxious air hit her lungs. Her knees buckled and she lost consciousness.

When she awoke, she was lying on the couch in Cheline’s conference room, with her aunt and Hagan hovering anxiously over her. “The eggs! Tell me I didn’t drop the eggs.”

Patting her shoulder, Cheline said, “The eggs are fine and so are the other two ingredients. You and Hagan did a good job. If you can stand, we need to go into the garden and perform

the suppression and banishment ritual—there isn't much time.”

Amellia reached for Hagan, who took her hand and eased her to her feet, bracing her as she wavered. “Outside? Are you sure it's a good idea?”

“The garden is covered by my protection spell,” her aunt said. Handing her a silver goblet brimming with a steaming pink liquid, she added, “Drink this, all of it, to replenish your strength.”

As Amellia sniffed the drink suspiciously, Hagan laughed. “You missed me making faces as I downed mine. It tastes all right, sort of vaguely like berries. Hold your breath.”

She made a face at him. “Thanks for the advice.” She did as he suggested, however, and sucked in a deep breath to hold while she chugged the elixir. Warmth spread through her body and she did indeed feel a resurgence of energy. “I probably don't want to know what was in the cup,” she said as she allowed Hagan to lead her outside in Cheline's wake.

She'd been in the tiny garden before, but tonight the place seemed different, unearthly, with the bordering trees whispering in the breeze and the fountain babbling secrets as its waters ran through the flower beds. There was a birdbath in the exact center although as she drew closer, she realized the object was actually a carved altar with a huge silver bowl set on top. Small branches were laid underneath the bowl as if ready for a campfire and Amellia remembered Cheline had said she would add the element of fire to the spellcasting. The

sky directly overhead was clear of the frightening mist and the stars twinkled high above, indifferent to the life and death struggle going on here. Far off to the east there was a lightening of the sky as dawn approached. Icy fear prickled along Amellia's nerve endings—they were cutting this close indeed.

Cheline took her place on the other side of the small alter. “Hold hands, don't speak unless I request you to do so and pray this works.”

Silently Amellia reached for Hagan's hand and the instant their fingers entwined, she felt the bracelet on her wrist tingling, although it was merely woven fiber with no embedded tech. She reached with her free hand to massage the area a little, although the sensation wasn't unpleasant, merely unexpected. Questions for Cheline crowded her mind but she remained silent. Emotions she wished she'd expressed to Hagan brought tears to her eyes but again she held her tongue. He gave her a hug, maintaining their physical bond and coiled his tail around her leg for extra contact.

“We implore the spirits of this world to repel and defeat the curse sent here from another planet, intended to harm your daughter Amellia and her friend Hagan,” Cheline said, raising her staff and gazing into the heavens. “The couple has gathered gifts to invoke the elements and power the curse breaking tonight.” She broke into song, in one of the old languages of Beneficio, which Amellia didn't know well. She caught a word here and there but not enough to know what her aunt was communicating. Shivers ran through her entire body

and Hagan pulled her closer in response. His warmth was a comfort.

Cheline handed her the staff, which was surprisingly heavy and unwieldy and Amellia wondered how her aged aunt could manage it. The dark stone at the top flared with purple light as their hands met during the transfer and remained aglow as Amellia took sole possession. Item by item Cheline deposited the mawkhen egg, the satin sea clam pearl and the root knot in the silver bowl and then poured a thick oily substance over it, from a small flask she withdrew from the voluminous folds of her cloak. The stuff reminded Amellia of honey and she caught a whiff of an exotic floral scent.

Tracing a symbol in the air, which sparked and glowed, Cheline dropped into Basic. “The woman who requested this evil spell has no right, no claim on which to base her demands.” She pointed at Hagan. “Speak more of this.”

He stood tall and proud. “I terminated our egg match in accordance with the laws and tenets of my people because I’d met the woman who is my fated mate, who I treasure beyond all others and with whom I hope to spend my life. She stands beside me now, united with me in this quest. And if it be the will of those who decide that I must perish regardless, strike me down but leave Amellia untouched. She’s totally innocent in this matter.”

Cheline stared at Amellia. “What do you wish to tell the spirits considering your case?”

“Hagan is a good and honorable man and I’m thrilled to be his partner in this quest. I pray we’re both spared but especially Hagan because he shouldn’t be punished to serve our adversary’s ego.” She took a deep breath. “Love can’t be forced. It’s a gift and I’m honored beyond words to accept.” *Was that enough? Were there better words? Why wasn’t there a ritual with set speeches for this kind of thing?* Disjointed thoughts filled her head, chief among them the sheer unreality of the entire evening and this scene in particular. *Believe, I have to believe for this to work.* As Cheline reverted to chanting in whatever the archaic language was, Amellia stole a glance at Hagan. He was grim, jaw clenched, muscle twitching but turned to brush a kiss across her lips.

Imperiously Cheline held out her hand for the staff which Amellia passed back, nearly dropping the massive piece of wood. Voice rising, holding the staff up to the heavens, her aunt shouted, “I call for the element of fire to join the others which have been gathered this night. Let the magic rise to the skies and do battle with the evil forces overshadowing my friends.”

Thunder rumbled and lightning jumped from cloud to cloud above.

Cheline pointed the jewel atop her staff at the contents of the makeshift altar now and a miniature bolt of lightning arced from the gem to the bowl, setting the liquid ablaze. The flames were transparent sheets of color—green, ocean blue, pearlescent—rising several feet from the container and burning fiercely.

Amellia caught a whiff of the rancid smell from the fog and checked the perimeter of the garden. Sure enough tendrils were drifting into the space like snakes seeking prey. She clung to Hagan, not at all confident this ad hoc ceremony was going to work, terrified now. Cheline was tense and on edge as if waiting for something although she kept eyeing the flames. She drew complicated patterns in the air with her staff, the jewel emitting light more brilliant than any handlamp and forcing the fog to recoil where it came too close.

Overhead the thunder increased in intensity and suddenly a bolt of pure energy flowed from the sky, striking the altar. Amellia was thrown to the ground, Hagan landing on top of her, shielding her. She couldn't see what had happened to Cheline. Wind spiraled like a cyclone in the small space and Hagan dug in with his claws, holding tight to Amellia with his tail.

Mawkhens screamed and Amellia squirmed against his hold until she had a clear view of the altar. A flock of giant birds was pouring from the silver bowl as if it had become a portal, rising into the sky like avenging furies and driving the encroaching fog back with their powerful wings. Like a multicolored fountain a column of water rose from the center of the silver bowl. Amellia caught the fresh salt scent of the ocean even though they were many miles inland and filled her lungs with the clean air gratefully. A pearl easily a hundred times the size of the one Hagan had harvested was poised in the exact center of the water as if resting on a pedestal.

“The sun is up,” Hagan said directly into her ear. “I love you, Amellia.”

“I love you too,” she said, kissing him. If they were going to die, she was going to pass from the world with a peaceful heart, surrounded by love.

The pearl had stopped rising, being now above the trees in the garden. As the sun’s first rays touched the iridescent surface, the gem exploded, light and music pouring from it, swirling like a centrifuge and spreading. The illumination was blinding, as if the sun had come to the planet’s surface. Amellia had to close her eyes against the power of the elements and felt herself being lifted into the air, wrapped in Hagan’s arms.

“Hang on tight,” he said.

As if they were wearing antigrav gear, they rose together until they were directly over the altar, standing on thin air in the middle of the water.

“You are free,” said a voice emanating from everywhere and nowhere and maybe just in Amellia’s head. “The curse is broken.”

While the echoes faded, she and Hagan tumbled to the lawn, which felt as soft as a pillow underneath her and she experienced no pain. Sitting up, leaning on Hagan, she gawked at the altar, which was now a twisted, blackened remnant.

Dazed, she rubbed her forehead and pushed her disheveled hair off her face. *I might think I’d dreamed the whole thing except for the ashes in front of me.*

The day had dawned, rosy and full of promise and she and Hagan were still alive.

There was no sign of the fog and the air was clean and fresh. Amellia's clothes were soaking wet but dampness was the least of her worries. Throwing her arms around Hagan's neck, she kissed him with pent-up urgency and he responded with equal fervor and passion.

She broke the kiss off and surveyed the garden frantically. "Where's Cheline? What happened to my aunt?"

Hagan clambered to his feet and pulled her up. "I pray she's taken no harm in the course of all this curse breaking. She was magnificent."

"Thank you very much. It's been a long time since I had to dig so deep and call upon the powers to such an extent."

Her aunt's voice was as strong as ever and carried a triumphant note. Amellia wheeled to find Cheline standing on the patio at the edge of the grass. *When did she find time to change?* Gone were the elaborate robes, there was no sign of the heavy staff and her aunt was her everyday self in a neat denim skirt and tunic.

"Unless you're planning to stay in the garden all day, come inside and have a cup of coffee before you leave," Cheline invited, adding a beckoning gesture. "I do have a shop to open and appointments to keep. Can't lie around and be lazy like some people."

“I’m calling in sick today,” Amellia said defiantly as she and Hagan made their way to where her aunt stood. “There’s no way I’m going to deal with Maintenance and messages and meetings after the night we had.”

“As you please, none of my business.” Cheline led them inside, taking them to a cozy kitchenette at the rear of the store, where she already had the rare and expensive beverage brewing. She set out three heavy mugs and poured them each a generous serving.

Hagan took a deep breath of the aroma from his cup. “I can’t thank you enough for what you did last night,” he said to Cheline. “I owe you not only my thanks but any payment you choose to levy. My House is among the oldest and richest on Zackmarune.”

Tilting her head, Cheline sipped her coffee as she plopped down on a stool. “No, I think I’m good. It was a grand battle and I thoroughly enjoyed wading into it. I’ve kept my access to the power. Besides, Amellia is my favorite relative so in the future if you can avoid embroiling her in any more curses, I’ll be satisfied. Take good care of my girl.”

“There will be no more curses, I can assure both of you ladies on that point. I’ll be sending several messages to my home world today and will be most emphatic.” The tip of Hagan’s tail tapped on the floor, echoing his emotion.

“The curse may have rebounded on the one who purchased it,” Cheline said mildly, opening a container full of donuts. “Care for one?”

“The magic could affect her all the way from here?” Amellia asked in disbelief. “I mean, the curse she launched at us had to be delivered in a box.”

Looking smug, Cheline brushed powdered sugar off her lip. “I believe the spirits of this world were highly insulted anyone would dare such a thing. By the way, we need to set up appointments for you to take lessons.”

“Lessons?” Amellia knew she sometimes changed subjects dramatically in the course of one breath but her aunt far outdid her on tangential conversation gambits.

“The staff recognized power in you—didn’t you feel it? I’ve been waiting decades for one of my blood to manifest an aptitude with magic and now you have. Congratulations!”

Not sure she shared her aunt’s enthusiasm, Amellia swallowed hard. “I’ll uh check my calendar and we can set something up.”

“Soon.” Cheline was adamant. She rose from the stool, placing her mug in the sink and it was plain the visit was over.

Amellia gulped the rest of her coffee, too rare and precious to waste, and she and Hagan headed toward the store’s front door, shepherded by Cheline.

“Let me go first,” Hagan said when they reached the door, moving ahead of the ladies.

“I assure you there’s no threat.” Cheline sounded affronted and her forehead was creased in a fearsome frown.

Courteous but undaunted, Hagan placed his hand on the control panel. “Nonetheless, I was trained to be a prudent warrior and will reconnoiter before allowing either of you to come to any harm.”

Amellia found she was holding her breath as the door opened but only bright sunshine poured in. Hagan eased cautiously outside and a moment later he was back.

“I think we tore up your landscaping,” he said with a rueful grin. “But otherwise there’s no more fog and the coast is clear.”

“I’ll send you a bill for the damage,” Cheline replied, standing on her threshold and surveying the deep ruts left by the groundcar as it landed in the flowerbed. “I’m not upset but I have to present a professional and inviting façade for my customers.”

“No problem, as I said earlier, I’m good for it.” Hagan took Amellia’s hand and bent over to kiss Cheline on the cheek. “Thank you again for all you’ve done. I feel as if we’re family now—I hope I see you again, Amellia’s aunt.”

Giving her niece a wink, Cheline said, “Oh, I suspect we might be seeing you at the family gatherings from now on.”

“Any parting word of advice?” Amellia asked, reluctant to leave the sanctuary of her aunt’s store.

“Don’t open any more mysterious boxes from offplanet.” Cheline shook her finger at Hagan but even as she scolded him, she was smiling. “All right, be off, the two of you, I’ve

got work to do.” She stepped back and the next instant the door closed with a thump as the lock engaged.

“I like your aunt,” Hagan said as he escorted Amellia to the groundcar and helped her over the torn-up earth and broken planters. “She’s a fine mixture of common sense and powerful magic.”

“Which apparently I might inherit.” Amellia sat in the passenger seat and grimaced. “I didn’t see that development coming. She sounded so smug about it.”

“I’ll drive you home,” he said as he took his place behind the controls and maneuvered the vehicle off the lawn and onto the road, where he proceeded to sedately drive.

Six

“Would you like to come inside for breakfast?” she asked, heart beating faster as they approached her neighborhood. “You aren’t going to work today either, are you?”

“After a night of fighting black magic? No way. And I’d love to have something more substantial in my stomach than coffee so yes, thanks, I accept your offer.”

“Okay then. Good.” Flustered, she made herself more comfortable and stared straight ahead. An odd silence fell between them. It wasn’t exactly uncomfortable but there was tension in the air. Amellia tried to decide if this was a good omen or a bad one. Her alleged nascent magical abilities were no help.

When they reached her apartment building she directed Hagan where to park and then once he’d found the space and turned off the groundcar, she hopped out without waiting for him to come and open her door.

“Lead the way,” he said with a smile.

Together they trudged up the old-fashioned stairs. Her building was equipped with a gravlift but she wasn't in a rush to run into any of her nice-but-nosy neighbors today, especially not wearing her less than fresh clothes or leading a handsome man to her place. Most people avoided the stairway.

As soon as she got inside the apartment, her cat was winding around her ankles, yowling as only he could do. "You're not starving," Amellia assured the pet, stopping to scratch behind his ears. She headed for the kitchen. "I'd better feed this spoiled beast or we won't be able to hear ourselves think. He lacks a volume control."

"Cute cat."

"I found him as a stray at the spaceport a couple of years ago," she said. "People tend to dump unwanted cats and kittens there because they know spacers like to have a cat for their ship, to control vermin or just for good luck. It gets to be quite a problem for the port authority." *And why am I running on about cats?* What in the seven hells was she nervous about? Hagan spent the entire night proving how much he cared about her so he wasn't exactly likely to eat and run. Or kiss and run.

Hagan followed her and she was acutely conscious of his presence in the small area as she served up the cat food. Putting the bowl on the floor for her pet, she pivoted to find Hagan right behind her and it was the most natural thing in the world to go straight into his arms and be kissed with flattering intent and passion. Hagan licked the seam of her lips and she gave him access to all of her, which he took like a pirate

plundering a treasure. She was pressed so tightly against him she could feel his arousal against her body, hot and hard and ground her hips, seeking to soothe the ache deep inside. His tail traced its way up her leg in a sensuous tickling movement and stopped at the edge of her soaked panties.

Amellia made a sound of protest, wanting him to continue what he was doing but Hagan released her instantly.

“Must I apologize?” he asked. “Have I misread the signals? I thought—after the events of the night I was sure we had the same feelings—”

She leaned against the counter in a sultry pose, finding his confusion a bit adorable. “I know one thing,” she said, sliding her hand firmly over the impressive bulge in his cargo pants, “Neither one of us is hungry for anything I can cook in this kitchen.”

With a laugh he caught her to him again. “I’m starved, woman, for you. I want to devour every inch of this beautiful body and make love to you all day.”

“We’d better make those sick day calls to the office then.” He was so much taller than she was so Amellia made a little jump and wrapped her legs around his waist. Hagan caught her and held her with ease. “The bedroom is straight down the hall,” she said, nibbling at his earlobe.

Hagan carried her through the hall, careful not to bump her head, and laid her on the bed. “You’re right about the need to let the office know we aren’t coming in today.” Raising his

eyebrows, he fished his handheld from his pocket and made a quick call.

Amellia used her bedside com unit to do the same, being careful to leave the vid off and to mute the ambient noise, which included Hagan's voice in the background. A girl couldn't be too careful about her privacy. No need to broadcast the relationship between the two of them until she was sure there was more than one night of curse breaking to go on.

He turned to her with a grin. "All set. Anything urgent will get routed to my handheld which I *don't* plan to check today."

She patted the bed beside her. "You're too far away."

"Oh really?" His tail snaked out and twined around her thigh and this time the tip slid under her panties and stroked the soft folds underneath. Amellia gasped and laid back as Hagan continued to explore while also removing his shirt and then his pants.

"Your tail is uh quite useful," she said, breathing hard as he eyed her with male satisfaction while she lay splayed out and trying not to give in to the orgasm Hagan was working so hard to give her. "I had no idea."

"I'm full of surprises," he said. Hands on his hips and a broad smile on his face, he watched her lose her battle against pleasure.

Amellia grabbed the pillows and held on tight as the erotic stimulation pushed her over the edge into one of the best orgasms she'd ever had, bar none.

Withdrawing his tail, Hagan lay on his side next to her. “You have too many layers on.” Skillfully he removed her tunic and spent a moment admiring her breasts, cupped by the lacy underwear and ready for his attention. Her chest was heaving as she recovered her composure and Amellia found his rapt attention to her curvy build a turn-on.

Of course having seven feet of hard muscled, naked, extremely well-hung alien lying right there demanding to be touched was also a massive incentive to shed the rest of her clothes and get as close to him as humanly possible. Distracted by his activities, Amellia clutched his broad shoulders and hung on as he lowered his head to tease one nipple with his tongue, while thumbing the other until both were hard pebbled buds at which point he suckled avidly. Keeping her pinned beneath him with ease he appeared fully engaged in savoring her breasts but the sneaky tail was still busy between her legs, stroking and teasing.

“No fair,” she said, running her fingers through his hair and stroking his back. “I need a tail to keep up with you. I can’t reach the parts *I’m* most interested in right now.”

Raising his head, he stared at her, his eyes gleaming with passion. “We have all day—I give you my word you’ll have your opportunity to explore what I bring to this bed but right now *I* am celebrating our mutual victory. Are you not enjoying the festivities?”

“No complaints from me,” she said in a squeaky voice as his prehensile appendage moved to touch the tiny but powerful

pearl of nerves hidden at the vee of her body. “I’ve had fantasies about you and what I’d like to do with you if we ever came to this point.”

“Really?” Intrigued, he raised himself on one elbow and traced a line from her belly button south. “You’re going to have to describe these fantasies to me and I’ll see what I can do.”

His long, thick cock was pushing against her folds and Amellia was so aroused and wet already, she felt the tip slide easily inside. Instinctively she adjusted her hips to draw him deeper and with a groan Hagan came fully on top of her, responding to the wordless invitation. Amellia grasped his heavily muscled butt, digging in with her fingernails and encouraged him to pound harder because her need was so great. Hagan filled her as no other man had ever done, stretching and stimulating her almost beyond bearing. She was barely conscious of his busy tail tweaking her nipples although the tiny flickers of sensual pain pushed her to a new level of arousal.

Hagan held her so tight drawing a breath was a challenge but she craved even more from him. Locking her legs around his butt, she pushed against his force, wanting him as deep as he could possibly go. She felt him shuddering and knew he was going over the edge. Dragging her fingernails over his back like claws, scraping over the fine scales, Amellia was overtaken by wild and feral desires, knowing herself to be thoroughly loved and allowed herself to ride the crest of her own climax. Clamping down on his shoulder with her teeth in an instinctive move she’d be shocked by later, she marked him

as hers and then lost conscious thought as the bright white light of orgasm spread over her world. Did she scream his name? She might have. All she was sure about was the two of them together combusted like the magical flames earlier in the morning and she'd never have enough of Hagan.

They lay together exhausted and Hagan kissed her tenderly. "I feel as if I've known you forever, my *anaghila*, yet our time together till now has been so brief. We've been cheated of so much."

She raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar term and he clarified.

"It means my love, my heart, my everything."

"What a hard-working word. Basic doesn't have an equivalent," she said regretfully. "But we've been associates in the office together for over a year now so surely we're more than acquaintances. I mean, we do know each other." She gave a shaky laugh and gestured at their intertwined bodies. "Outside the bedroom."

"It's not the same." His voice was firm. "We should have become true friends, then more than friends and then lovers. We should have had shared experiences outside the office. I should have courted you. The damn curse forced us to accelerate our bond to full bloom and we were cheated of all the delights of getting to know each other and building a relationship. We had to do it in one crazy night."

Amellia shifted her hips, tensing her internal muscles to hold him and his cock lengthened again in response. "I feel as if I know you pretty well today," she said in a teasing tone. "I

know who you are at your core—an honorable, brave, loving man. I can find out the other prosaic things like your favorite color and your most hated food later.”

“Red. Pickled caminore lips,” he said promptly. “Caminore are a cattlike domesticated animal on my planet and the dish is disgusting.”

“See how easy that was?” She chuckled, rocking against him.

Hagan pulled back and thrust himself deeper. “Did you know the men of my people recover rapidly?”

“Another thing I’m finding out and which I approve of.” She paused and he stilled, although she could tell it was a challenge for him to quell his instinct to bury himself in her warmth. “Hagan, I think we can’t regret anything we did or didn’t do prior to sunset last night. We lived a lifetime in those few hours and now we’re here thankfully. I’m not sorry about my choices and I like the level we’re at in the relationship right now. We can only build from here. This—us—isn’t a flash in the pan, one night stand. Not for me anyway.”

“Nor for me,” he said fiercely, holding her close. “I’m here for life, for all the challenges ahead.”

“Nothing will be as bad as the damn curse.” She kissed him.

“Now can we stop all this worrying and enjoy ourselves?”

“I’m certainly enjoying myself.” His grin was devilish and deep inside her core his shaft twitched for emphasis.

Amellia gave in and allowed him to proceed with his intentions, although she made a mental note they needed to

have good, open communications at all times. Just because they were now committed to each other and deeply in love, they had a lot of relationship building ahead to underpin the future she wanted and dreamed about with Hagan.



Much later they had a late afternoon snack in bed, feeding each other bites of the meal she'd ordered in, not having anything special enough on hand to feed her lusty boyfriend.

“Dessert?” Hagan asked, eyeing the box off to the side on the bedside table, which contained pastries and cupcakes.

Amellia set her plate on the floor and pulled the covers from his lap, taking him by surprise. “You’re going to be my dessert. So far today you’ve set the agenda and although I’ve got absolutely no complaints, I warned you I’d take my turn.” She fondled his sac, which held three testicles and stoked his cock root to tip, doing her best to get her fingers around the massive shaft, which was growing more rigid by the moment. Lowering her head, she took as much of his length into her mouth as she could, licking and sucking. Hagan tasted good to her, spicy and intense, and she worked to please him. He’d grabbed the headboard above him and was struggling not to move as she continued her determined seduction. Of course there came a point where he couldn’t fight the pleasure any longer and he pulled her away.

“I want to be inside you,” he said desperately. “Your body is paradise to me, so hot, so wet, so tight. I want us to be one

again.”

“No argument from me but I intend to enjoy the view,” she said, flipping her hair out of the way. She straddled him, sinking slowly onto his erect cock an inch at a time, watching his face which held an expression of pure love. His eyes glowed as he pumped in and out, pushing against what she was allowing in her desire to prolong the anticipation but it was a game they were both enjoying.

She threw back her head and seated herself all the way to the balls as he cupped her hips with his hands and set a fast rhythm, working to bring him to the edge. Amellia found she couldn't deny herself any longer either and they climaxed together in a rush of feelings and emotion and pure sensation. At the end Hagan rolled them over and brought her to a second orgasm which outdid all the previous ones of the day.

Sated, she lay against the pillows, taking deep breaths and savoring the fading sensations running through her body. “Now that was truly dessert.”

“Even I may have to rest for a while before we encounter each other intimately again tonight,” he said with a laugh, stroking her stomach idly. He used his tail to open the lid of the bakery box on the floor and brought two frosted cupcakes up to eye level. “Do you care about crumbs in the sheets?”

“Ordinarily yes but you're keeping me so pleasantly occupied I won't even notice,” she said, snuggling close. Reaching out she took one of the offerings and unwrapped the paper. “We

have a lot of decisions to make in a short time, like where we're going to live, what we say at the office—”

“When we get married,” he interrupted. “I want to be hand fasted as soon as possible.”

“I think you'd better meet my family first and I warn you, there'll be an expectation for a huge ceremony, big guest list, all the trimmings. Our weddings can last for three days, with all the special side events and celebrations.” Amellia loved planning major events and although she'd never admit it to him, she'd planned her own wedding many times when she was younger, although of course she hadn't been able to picture a groom at the center of the mental hologram. She knew exactly how she wanted it to go and what her dress would be like, who would be her maid of honor—all the details. “I advise immersing yourself in my family slowly. Let me set up a dinner with my parents and siblings first and we can go from there. Will any of your relatives want to attend?”

“Most likely.” He hugged her close. “This is going to be a complicated affair but nothing like what we accomplished last night, breaking the curse.”

Unable to help herself she giggled as she licked frosting off her fingers. “We're going to cause a sensation on two planets and in the office all right. People are going to be astonished and figure either we've been dating all this time and hidden it well, or else we've taken leave of our senses, mistaken hot sex for love and will regret this later.”

“I don’t care what people think,” he said. “We know the truth we share. We have a true bond, tested and approved by the elements.”

“And Aunt Cheline, don’t forget her.” Amellia shook her finger in his face.

Hagan leaned forward to kiss her, which became a much more involved caress and the subject of weddings and dessert were forgotten yet again.

Time enough for all of that much, *much* later.

Note to the Reader

Thank you for reading *BREAKING THE ALIEN LOVE
CURSE!*

I've written a large number of scifi romances set in my Sectors universe so I hope you might check some of them out too!

[Author Page on Amazon](#)

Alien's Trick or Treat by Vicky Holt

MF ♡♡☠

Synopsis



IN 1950s MAIN STREET AMERICA...

...Martians are all the rage until one almost dies on schoolteacher Barbara's kitchen floor. Masril brought a mysterious fog and unnamed danger to her safe little town, but more importantly, he brought her unexpected treats over the Halloween weekend.

Homecooked meals, even if he got some of the ingredients wrong.

Slippers after a long day at work.

A particularly *hot* bath.

Coffee and the newspaper at breakfast.

Except the morning headline declares Barbara's town is under quarantine, and her own personal Martian is to blame! Will the alien's awful trick thrust the town into endless isolation, or can

he and his friends give the town what it so desperately needs after so many tragic losses: good men who uplift and support women, and lovers who know how to treat them right?

Alien Trick or Treat has funny misunderstandings, near insta-love, abduction, scenting, alien castaways, small-town romance, role reversal, women supporting women, feminist hero, historical romance, a heroine who rescues herself and others, a fish-out-of-water alien hero, and one super graphic steamy scene.

Content Warnings: *vague reference to racism in Mississippi in a side character's past, reference to racism/prejudice between side characters' parents, reference to MFC's brother's death, reference to several deaths related to WWII and a so-named Big Storm*

One

“Aren’t you the cutest little ghostie ever?” Barbara said and dropped the NECCO candy in the trick-or-treater’s pillowcase that matched the one they were wearing—minus the eyeholes. Barbara looked up at the floral ghost’s parents as they waved from the sidewalk. She smiled and waved back then looked down the street to see if there were any stragglers. Trick-or-treating should have ended twenty minutes ago, but this last knock had roused her from the davenport where she was having a much-needed rest.

No school holiday just because it was Halloween, her feet were killing her from standing all day. The little ghostie hopscotched their way back in worn saddle shoes, and Barbara’s glance slid past the doting parents and down the dark street again. No more kids that she could see, but it looked like a late evening fog was rolling in from Castor Lake. The streetlights dimmed out one by one as the mist flowed up the street like a slow river.

Shivering at the eerie sight, Barbara closed the door and locked it.

Snagging a package of NECCO satellite wafers, she padded to the back of her house where she stood by the trash can to toss the wrapper and looked out the kitchen window of her tidy bungalow on Center Street toward the backyard. The fog had already cloaked her house, and she frowned as she popped a chalky sweet disk into her mouth. “Guess it wasn’t that slow, after all,” she said.

She pushed the black button to shut off the kitchen light, checked that the back door was locked, and went to her room, pulling the bedside lamp’s string. The warm yellow glow soothed any passing concern about the thick fog, and she readied for bed.

Curtains shut against the fall chill and spooky mist, counterpane pulled up around her waist, and novel opened to her bookmark, she was as cozy as a bug in a rug when she heard a clatter from out back. It sounded like the metal lid to her rubbish bin being thrown about. Supposing a stiff wind caused the fog to arrive so fast, she decided to let it keep until the morning. She’d been thinking about her book all day; her students had caught her woolgathering more than once.

Another clatter.

“That confounded raccoon,” she said and threw her blanket to the side. Sliding her feet into her slippers, she snatched her housecoat off the back of her door and pulled it on, grabbing her rolling pin off the counter on her way to the backdoor.

Fumbling with the sticking lock in the dark, she finally pulled it open and peered out to the cans. She couldn't see them for the pea soup swirling in coiled eddies around her house's foundation and the back step. The whorls of gray mist seemed to sway and beckon, and she blinked away the sensation of hypnosis, squinting instead toward the corner where her cans stood.

Thick fog blanketed her yard. She couldn't see the cans or the raccoon. Biting her lip, she tried to decide if it was worth it. Her slippers would get soggy in the wet grass, and the raccoon would have already done its damage. Shaking her head, she turned to go back in when movement flickered in her peripheral vision. Raising her rolling pin, she crouched and waited for the raccoon to spring at her.

Instead, a huge man stepped from the fog and into the small pool of light cast from her back porchlight. Naked as the day he was born, he cocked his head and looked at her.

Confused, she looked at him and realized he couldn't be naked because he didn't have any man parts. He must be wearing one of those body suits that circus performers wore. Her grip tightened on the rolling pin, and she avoided looking at his nether region, because that would just be rude, and instead stared at his navy-blue eyes. His skin was teal and mottled with large spots like a giraffe, and she frowned. "Is this some kind of a Halloween prank?" she said and lowered the rolling pin while standing straighter. She had about had it with the ridiculous pranking that went on during Halloween. Every

year it was something else. “You’d better cover yourself up and leave my yard before I call the police.”

The man didn’t need to know that the police force consisted of geriatric Mr. Bentley and his beagle Fido, nor that it would take at least two separate phone calls to wake him up and a good hour for him to drive the Studebaker over in this fog.

She tossed her head and turned to go back in when a large hand gripped her arm. He’d moved five feet in one second. Yanking her arm out of his grip, she spun to face the prankster, but he was too close for her to brandish her weapon. Gasping when he grabbed her other arm, she tried to twist out of his hands, but he pulled her close and buried his nose in her hair; she could feel him draw a deep breath into himself, and then she noticed the wound when he sank against her.

He wasn’t attacking her; he was about to collapse from blood loss. The cut started just behind his neck and reached past his shoulder blade; it wept dark blood.

“Good Lord, what happened to you?” she said and anchored her elbows under his shoulders. Backing into her house, she dragged him inside and laid him on the linoleum; he was too heavy for her to make it through the kitchen and into the living room.

Closing and locking the door for the second time tonight, she pressed the light switch and raced to her kitchen towel drawer, grabbing several and wadding them up beneath his shoulder.

“I’ll get you fixed up,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

He still hadn't said a word.

Running to her bathroom, she found a roll of gauze and grabbed the bottle of iodine. Racing back, she saw the man shaking his head back and forth and murmuring but couldn't make out any words. Bathed in the kitchen light, his skin color deepened to a rich teal, and she blinked a couple times when she knelt beside him.

He wasn't wearing a body suit or a costume. When she pressed her finger against his nearest arm and swiped, nothing came off on her finger. But another gush of blood seeped from under his back, and her mouth pressed into a thin line.

Soaking the gauze in iodine first, she wound it beneath his armpit and covered as much of the laceration as she could.

"How did this happen?" she murmured. With his wound cleaned and covered, she sat back on her heels and stared at the neutered green man laying out on her kitchen floor. Slipping a tea towel over his waist for propriety's sake, she sat against the cupboard and studied him.

Silky black hair swept off his forehead in the style preferred by today's men, but his hair didn't feel greasy with Brylcreem.

Strong brow, elegant nose, angular jaw, full lips: he was a teal Cary Grant, but she needed to face the music. She had a Martian in her kitchen.

Two

Groaning, Barbara winced with the crick in her neck. She'd had the craziest dream. Maybe eating NECCOs right before bed wasn't such a good idea. But opening her eyes and registering the ache in her bottom and the sight of blue-soaked towels on the floor in front of her snapped her back to reality in an instant.

But where was the Martian? Black gauze sat discarded, but there wasn't a trail of blood except for what she'd dragged behind him when she brought him in the back door. At least the bleeding had stopped. Had he left? Grimacing, she stood with effort and saw the door remained closed.

Her little kitchen was at the back of the house with a central wall between the kitchen and her bathroom. Her bedroom was on the other side of the bathroom. At the front of the house was a second bedroom adjacent to hers and the living room in front of the kitchen. He would be easy to find.

Looking down at herself, she realized the entire front of her pale pink pajamas and part of her housecoat were soaked in

the Martian's blue blood.

Shock started to set in at the new reality.

The radio shows loved to talk about UFOs and Martians, but most everyone she knew thought it was all a bunch of hooey. She had a real live Martian wandering around her bungalow as naked as a jay bird.

“Hello?” she called out. No answer. Taking a deep breath, she padded through the doorway into the living room where her front door was still closed and locked. He wouldn't have locked it if he left. She would question her relief that he must still be here later.

The davenport was empty, as was the easy chair. The rug hadn't been chafed out of place, the throw pillows hadn't been tossed or rumped. The lamp was dark, and the curtains were closed. Only a thin stripe of weak light severed the oriental rug in half.

Floorboards creaking under her steps, she poked her head in the spare bedroom, but it was empty except for her deceased brother's bed, dresser, and chair. Steps away from her own room, she took a deep breath and looked in, but her bed was unoccupied and unmade, just like she left it.

She had doubted a nude Martian would understand the workings of a bathroom, but the door was closed, and it was the only place he could be. She pressed her ear against the door.

“Mr. Martian?” she said, rapping softly with a knuckle.

The door sprang open, and she jumped back.

Alien Cary Grant stood before her, eyeing her with a curious expression. He gestured to her pajamas, and she looked down.

“Yes, I need to change,” she said and looked back up at him. This was a different dynamic than her caregiving him. He was taller than the doorframe, taller than her at 5’ 9”. “How’s your wound?” she said and pointed to his shoulder.

He turned, allowing her to see it had completely closed up, only a faint line indicating its location. She gasped and reached to touch it before catching herself and holding herself in check. How did he understand her? Was this an elaborate prank? Why was his behind so... appealing? She glanced in the mirror and saw he was watching her reflection; he’d seen her staring at his rump.

Clearing her throat, she ignored the flames licking her cheeks and stepped the few paces into her bedroom. “I’ll just, um, clean up,” she said, and closed and locked the door.

Pressing her back to it, she closed her eyes and breathed. Everything was wrong. He hadn’t spoken a word to her. He wasn’t wearing clothes. He’d been injured but now was perfectly healed. He didn’t have man parts. His skin was teal, for God’s sake. Who was he?

She thought he was a space man, but what if he was the victim of radioactivity? She’d told her students not to pay attention to those silly reports about mutated monsters coming out of the desert because of nuclear testing. But what if there was truth to it?

She rushed to change into her Saturday outfit: pedal pushers, button up blouse, and flats, then wadded up the stained clothing and exited her room, tension tightening in her neck and shoulders when she saw the empty bathroom.

Turning the corner, she saw Mr. Martian squatting on the kitchen floor and wiping up the blood smears with the remaining towels.

He must not be a Martian, she decided. He must be an American who happened to be terribly injured from a nuclear accident. How he ended up hundreds of miles from the nearest nuclear testing facility and in her backyard was beyond her.

She dropped her laundry into her machine and bent to pick up the box of detergent. Warmth at her back caused her hand to tremble when she stood. Daring to look, she saw the man at her side with his pile of towels. He dropped them in but didn't move away, close enough she could smell her own shampoo and soap on his skin. He'd bathed.

Dumping the powder in her machine, she watched the agitator work the clothes and water into a foam and tried to think what to say. It was hard to think with this giant of a man standing so close. So naked and so neutered.

"Let's get you some clothes," she finally said, stepping back from the washer and away from his powerful body. When she peeked at his face, she saw he cocked his head. "Follow me," she said and beckoned.

She didn't avoid her brother's room anymore, she just seldom had cause to enter it. A casualty of the Second World War, his

clothes remained pressed and folded neatly in his dresser, waiting for him to come back. Glancing at her strange houseguest, she was pleased to think of her brother's clothes going to a good cause. They would fit.

Pulling out trousers, boxers and undershirt, blouse and socks, she handed him the pile and pointed to Ben's shoes, polished and at attention beneath the single chair in Ben's room.

"Why don't you try these things on?" she said and left the room, closing the door behind her.

She put on the coffee and pulled her half loaf of bread out of the breadbox for toast.

The strangest sensation of homecoming flooded her when she set the table for two and filled two mugs with hot coffee and slid fried eggs and bacon onto two plates next to two slices of buttered toast.

Alien Cary Grant, or Mr. Radioactive, or whoever he was, stepped out of Ben's room and met her astonished gaze.

He was even more handsome with clothes on, or maybe it made him look more human.

She was staring so hard she noticed his nostrils flare.

"I made food," she said needlessly and tucked her hair behind her ear with a nervous gesture. Sitting down, she started to eat, trying to find her equilibrium. Some sense in the awkward silence.

His chair scraped across the linoleum with a squeak, and he sat down.

Watching her scoop her bite with the fork, he mirrored her actions and ate.

She spied the moment the flavor hit his tongue and felt inner glee that he liked the food.

“What’s your name?” she asked, sipping her coffee. “I’m Barbara.”

Tilting his head, he worked his mouth a second before speaking. “Barbara.” His voice was rich and deep. He had a slight accent she couldn’t place. “I am Masril.”

“Masril,” she repeated. “Where are you from?”

“Not here,” he said. He looked at her with his intense dark blue eyes, then went back to his meal.

Frowning, Barbara sat her fork beside her plate and clasped her hands in her lap. She cleared her throat.

“You gave me a fright last night,” she said. “Nearly dying on my kitchen floor. I’d like to know who I’m dressing and feeding. And why.”

“Your kindness will not be forgotten,” Masril said. “But I’m not free to tell you anything. It’s for your own safety.”

“Does it have to do with nuclear testing? Were you exposed to radiation? Am I in danger?” she asked her questions rapid-fire, like when she did speed quizzes in her class.

“No. No, and I don’t know,” he said. “Thank you for the nourishment and disguise. It is because of my ignorance of the

latter that I will be leaving. It is my hope you and your little village will be safe in spite of our presence.”

At that, he stood, picked up his dishes, and placed them in her refrigerator.

He was leaving? She shook her head. Of course, he should leave. What would the neighbors think if a man left her home this morning? Her job at the school would be jeopardized.

Standing abruptly, her chair tipped but she caught it. Fleeting admiration crossed Masril’s features, but he turned away and walked toward the front door.

“No, wait!” she said. He stopped. She raced to the hall closet and pulled out her brother’s hat. Placing the fedora on his head, she realized her arms were poised to embrace his wide shoulders and pulled them away quickly. “Please leave out the back door,” she said, embarrassment flooding her cheeks. “Whatever danger you’re in, I have my own kind to avoid.”

Cocking his head, he roved his gaze over her expression and up and down her body.

“You’re a single female in a small community,” he said. “Subject to speculation and curiosity in a society built upon a male-centric foundation of power imbalance and oppression.”

It was her turn to cock her head.

“That’s not something we talk about in polite company, but yes,” she said. His knowing gaze did something to her insides. Made her feel stirrings and heat and something not entirely unpleasant low in her belly. Very low.

“I’ll leave the back way,” he said, his deep voice softer. He reached out to her cheek and brushed her jawline with his thumb. “I’ve marked you with my blood. Stay inside today and tomorrow. It is for the best.”

Heat sizzled her skin where his thumb caressed her, but he was gone. Her back door stood ajar. How did he move so fast? She closed and locked the door and fed wet clothes through the wringer. If it weren’t for the rich color of the dirty wash water, she’d still think she’d had a strange candy-induced dream.



She found the dried blood on her face Masril referred to when he touched her this morning and washed her face, disgusted at the part of herself that wanted to leave the stain. She was being silly. She would never see him again, never know what strange happenstance brought him wounded to her door, and never know what possessed him to put his dirty dishes in the refrigerator.

He’d said not to go outside, but she could hardly consider her backyard to be dangerous. She had to put the washing on the line to dry. Stepping outside with the basket under her arm, she stopped cold at the sight of the thick fog blanketing the area.

Checking her wristwatch, she saw it was eleven in the morning. Plenty of time for the fog to have lifted by now, surely?

The image of Masril collapsing into her last night flashed across her mind. But it was her own yard. Her own wet clothes

that needed dried.

She hung them one by one, pushing the pins over the fabric and the line, musing the strange blood had washed out better than human blood. Shaking her head, she chided herself. He still had human blood even if he'd been in a serious accident.

Clipping the last towel to the line, a sound caught her attention. Standing still, she closed her eyes and listened, arms still poised at the clothespins. Not a clatter. Not a barking dog or bicycle bell. Not the drone of the mail plane flying overhead.

It had been the sound of stealth. Like stepping on a branch and pausing. Like fabric brushing against the bark of a tree.

There were woods behind the houses on this side of Center Street. A thick band that stretched between here and Old Man Jenkins' property, a now defunct corn-producing farm. He would have passed it on to his sons, but they'd both died in the War.

Barbara opened her eyes, half-expecting the sight of a nuclear-waste-eating mutation to loom over her clothesline, but there was nothing, just the fog and the faint outlines of the sun trying to penetrate it. But the air felt off; the silence unsettling. This close to noon on a Saturday, there *should* be barking dogs and bicycle bells.

Taking a slow look toward her open back door, she calculated she could reach it in seven running strides. Humming as if to sound relaxed, she turned on her flats and sprinted to the back

door, flinging herself inside and closing and locking it with a resounding thud and click.

Heart pounding in her throat, she turned to peer into the yard through her chintz curtains, but nothing could be seen of the clothesline. Her toppled empty basket lay between her door and the line, and the mist swirled around and through the basket holes, mocking her.

Three

“Number please,” the operator said.

“M-26,” Barbara said, feeling silly as she always did when she spoke to Mary, the town’s operator. As if Mary didn’t know her or who she was calling, and as if she wouldn’t be listening in. Which was why Barbara wouldn’t be telling her friend Linda about Masril. Not over the phone anyway.

“I’ve been waiting for you to call me!” Linda said, effusive as ever. “This fog is cockeyed, isn’t it?”

“So it’s foggy at your end of town too?” Barbara asked. “I would have expected it to be gone by now. It’s Sunday.”

“I know! I already called Betty and LouLou. They said the same thing,” Linda said. “Isn’t that right, Mary?”

“Can’t talk right now; the switchboard is busy,” Mary said.

Barbara could hear other voices and realized everyone was calling everyone else in Main Street.

“Linda, meet me at the library, won’t you?” Barbara asked, speaking over the party line.

“Same time as always?” Linda said.

“Yes.” They didn’t say goodbye; Mary must be doing the jitterbug with this many calls coming through at once. Barbara looked at her watch. She had enough time for a light lunch and then she could bike to the Main Street Library.



“What’s buzzin’, cousin?” Barbara said, dismounting her bike and gripping LouLou in a tight squeeze.

Linda and Betty smiled and leaned against the brick exterior of their favorite meet-up place. Bikes standing in a row, the ladies all looked at each other.

“Well, I’ll go first,” Linda said after cracking her gum. “I met someone.” She waggled her black eyebrows while the others kept stoic expressions. Barbara raised an eyebrow.

“I thought we were meeting to talk about this fog,” Betty said, folding her arms and jutting her hip. Her natural hair was styled to frame her warm black face, and she’d traded her apron for a ruffled floral top and green pedal pushers, since the general store was closed on Sundays.

“I think the fog and the man I met are related,” Linda said with a secretive smile. Her angled dark eyes crinkled when she smiled, and she searched everyone’s faces for curiosity or skepticism.

Barbara frowned and tugged the corner of her lip into her mouth. She hadn't considered that until Linda said something.

"Explain," she said and folded her arms, mirroring both Betty's and LouLou's mannerisms.

"As you know," Linda began, "the fog rolled in right around 7:30pm. I'd just finished tuning up the tractor when I stepped outside the barn and could barely see my hand in front of my face!"

All the girls nodded, and Linda continued.

"I whistled for Charlie, but he didn't come," she said, a crease forming on her forehead. "I knew the sheep were in their pen; I'd locked it myself. When I whistled again, I thought I heard him whimper from behind the chicken coop."

"Foxes again?" LouLou said, her voice tinged with concern. Barbara smiled at her friend's rosy complexion as she cocked her head, springy mouse-brown curls circling her heart-shaped face. LouLou was Main Street's veterinarian and had patched Charlie up more than once after altercations with wild animals.

"That's what I was worried about," Linda said, pointing at LouLou. "I paused before I rounded the corner of the coop. All I had was Jimmy's baseball bat, so I got ready to use it."

Barbara noticed all of them leaned forward and caught their breath in anticipation of Linda's encounter.

"I raised the bat, deepened my voice, and said, 'you'd better git, you rascal!', and I jumped so I was facing whatever might

have Charlie in its teeth,” she said. “I almost flipped my wig when I saw who had Charlie!”

Barbara’s throat dried. Was it Masril? Had Charlie wounded him? But no, Masril had shown up within minutes of the fog. He couldn’t have traveled from Linda’s farm, across town, and into her backyard that quickly.

“First of all,” Linda said, standing tall and thrusting her chin, her dark eyes snapping at each of the women. “You’re going to think I’m a knucklehead or worse, but you know me. I don’t play pranks. I’ve never pulled your leg. Remember that.”

Barbara and the others nodded, a silent solemn promise that they would at least listen to what Linda Kapoor had to say before they ribbed her.

“A huge man with bright green skin and *very* odd hair had Charlie gripped like he was trying to decide where to take his first bite!”

LouLou gasped, Betty cussed, and Barbara tapped her lips.

“Would you say teal is more accurate?” Barbara asked.

Linda zeroed her gaze on Barbara. “No, I wouldn’t,” she said. “Bright green, like fresh shoots when my crops start coming up.”

Taken aback, Barbara nodded and pursed her lips.

“What did you do?” LouLou asked, wringing her hands.

“Luckily, once I appeared with the bat, the green man dropped Charlie who ran up to me and humped my leg.”

LouLou's face turned red; Betty pinched the bridge of her nose and muttered under her breath.

"So Charlie was fine then," Barbara said with a small smile.

"Yes," Linda said with a nod. "But the man was not."

LouLou's mouth dropped open, and Barbara considered she could have used her help last night. Then again, Masril healed up well enough on his own.

"He had cuts and scrapes all over, and he was naked as a jaybird," Linda said. If Charlie humping Linda's leg made LouLou blush, then naked man talk had her trying to pull her head into her sweater like a turtle.

"He apologized for trying to eat my dog and asked if he could sleep with the chickens," Linda said. She stood still and avoided eye contact, apparently waiting for ridicule or arguments.

"Where is he now?" Barbara asked, not willing to share her own story just yet.

"Well, I couldn't let him sleep with the chickens," Linda said.

"I put him up in the bunk in the barn where Hal used to stay before the war. I assume he's still there."

"You trusted a strange man on your farm?" Betty said.

"You believe me?" Linda said, a pleased expression settling across her features.

"I have no choice," Betty said. "Barbara's white face went even paler when you mentioned your alien's skin color, and

mine has big giraffe-like spots on his sage-green skin. I'm waiting to see how much longer LouLou can stay silent about hers, the way she's been fidgeting and shuffling her feet the last twenty minutes!"

Barbara had to take a couple breaths to calm down, and poor LouLou looked like a fish out of water.

"Why do you think the fog is related?" Barbara asked Linda, casting a sideways glance at Betty and her deductive reasoning skills. She should be a private investigator.

"What would you do if you wanted to hide your arrival and you had the means?" Linda asked with a shrug and the splay of her graceful hands.

"Betty, how are you so sure these men aren't victims of a nuclear accident?" Barbara asked.

"Is that what you thought?" Betty said. "Maybe at first glance," she said and nodded, tilting her head. She looked Barbara in the eye. "I asked Jakel if he came from outer space, and he said yes."

"Let me get this straight," Barbara said and met each of her friends' gazes in turn. "Minutes after this fog rolled in, we all met naked greenish alien men? LouLou?"

Biting her lip, LouLou nodded. "Bando is definitely teal. And all marked up. And, um, naked."

"Are they all at home waiting for you?" Barbara asked, a little miffed, if she was honest with herself, that hers wasn't.

“Mine said he had to check on one of his friends,” LouLou volunteered.

“Mine left at dawn,” Betty said.

Linda frowned. “Well, I guess I don’t know.”

“Mine left after breakfast,” Barbara said. “His wound healed overnight. Were the others injured?” She looked at LouLou and Betty.

LouLou shook her head, but Betty nodded. “And this morning, the cuts and bruises were gone like it never happened. I wondered if the iodine had a favorable reaction with his skin.”

“I’m guessing it was a crash landing,” Linda said. “With all the injuries.”

“Crash or not, we know one thing,” Barbara said. “Main Street, Iowa, survived an alien invasion.”

Four

“Mary said the switchboard was busy,” Linda said. “How many of these Martians do you think there are?”

“No one mentioned Little Green Men, as far as I could tell,” Barbara said. “But our town isn’t that big. If there are more aliens, shouldn’t we be worried? Should we call the governor? Or the newspaper?”

“None of them threatened anyone, except maybe for Charlie,” LouLou said, her quiet voice insistent. “We should let them alone.”

“But what if they bring trouble?” Betty said. “I found mine trying to break into the barbershop next door. Once I realized he was injured and naked, it was a simple matter to fix him up, but have you seen the muscles on these men? If he wanted to, he could have put up a fight!”

“Masril does look strong,” Barbara said, wistfulness leaking out of her voice. She frowned when Betty scowled at her.

“Don’t get attached,” Betty said. “I’m sure they’re just passin’ through. If we keep to ourselves and no one makes a fuss, it will all be over soon.”

“What if we don’t want it to be over?” LouLou said. “Look at our town. More than half the men are gone! Betty, sure your Jakel was trying to break into the barbershop, but no one would have noticed because Main Street hasn’t had a barber since Tom left.”

“LouLou, I love you like my own sister,” Betty said. “But don’t let a pretty alien face distract you from reality. They could have put Main Street in the path of danger.”

“Oh hogwash,” Linda said. “Hauk was as gentle as a lamb once he understood Charlie was a pet. He wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“Maybe not,” Barbara said before biting her lip. “But Masril said something the other night. That he didn’t know if I was in danger, and that’s why he was leaving.”

“See?” Betty said. “They know something we don’t.”

“With space travel and the ability to control the weather,” Linda said, “they know a lot more than something. I’m with LouLou though. I think our town needs these men.”

“I think Main Street is doing fine without them,” Betty said, walking to her bike. “I don’t need a man or a Martian telling me how to live.”

“That’s fair,” Linda said. “My farm is doing much better since—well, since before.”

Barbara tilted her head and watched the play of emotions skip across Linda's face.

"Guess I'd better head back," Barbara said. "I put some clothes on the line. Maybe they're finally dry."

"If anyone does make contact with one of these Martians again, why don't you ask them to lift the fog," Betty said. "I almost ran over a cat on the way over."

Barbara pushed off with one foot and pedaled her way home, keeping her eyes peeled for cats, dogs, or aliens.

Thick pea soup swirled around her bicycle tires, and if possible, it was even thicker than this morning. Even her bell sounded muted when she rang it as she approached every crosswalk. She made it home without event and parked her bike against the back wall.

Picking up her tipped laundry basket, she had to chuckle. Sound traveled differently in the mist; she'd probably heard a squirrel yesterday and overreacted. Pulling the towels and her pajamas off the line, she filled the basket and walked to her back step, fiddling with the key that stuck in the lock.

Hot breath caressed the nape of her neck, and she squealed, spinning so her basket would knock him off-kilter. But no one was there.

Perspiration prickled her skin and she reached behind her, fumbling for the doorknob. With a quick twist, she opened the door and backed her way in, eyes darting in search of a trespasser.

Slamming the door shut, she dropped the basket and collapsed onto a kitchen chair, breathing hard.

She treasured the stolen minutes of chatting with her girlfriends; it felt normal, even if the topic was anything but. Now she was holed up in her house, shaking like a leaf at every noise, quaking in her shoes at every imagined sensation. It was no longer funny that she'd "overreacted" yesterday. It made perfect sense.

Picking at a stubborn bit of old oatmeal on her table with her thumbnail, she frowned. She wished Masril hadn't left. She'd feel a whole lot safer if he was here.

Sighing, she pushed away from the table and folded and put away laundry, thinking about her lesson plans for the coming week.

As much as her students could be a challenge, she needed to be around people. Even if they were only fifth graders.

Hours later, she sat in front of the television set grading papers. Her phone hadn't rung once. She'd scrubbed the sinks, changed her bed linens, and dusted Ben's bedroom furniture. Pausing in front of his portrait, she'd admired his smile as he posed in front of the bomber he flew. Her brother had loved flying. Loved the Navy. Loved danger and adventure and risk.

He was everything she was not. Brave, adventurous, willing to take chances and make change.

She chose to become a schoolteacher because it was safe, expected, respectable, and normal.

So what if she secretly wondered if she'd have the smarts to run a farm like Linda or own the general store like Betty? LouLou had gone to college and become an animal doctor to the surprise of everyone in town. Of course, that was all before the war and before the Big Storm. Who knew these enterprising women had chosen a path that would benefit their entire city after tragedy struck?

Now Main Street was a quiet, genteel place run mostly by women for women. Most men were elderly or schoolboys. The odd middle-aged man around town wasn't much to speak of or was already married. Rumors said Mr. Hays hit his wife and took to the bottle too much. And Mr. Gonzales came and went, as unpredictable as the weather. The Principal, Mr. Kendrick, was handsy and disliked by the teachers, but he held everyone hostage with his bizarre rules and government contacts.

As the actors sweated bullets in the latest episode of *Out There* on the TV set, Barbara screwed up her face and tried to imagine Main Street as it had been when she was a child. Bustling Center Street with dozens of busy shops. Men, young and old, standing outside their stores greeting pedestrians, haggling over prices, carrying children on their backs.

The War had taken more than its share from her town, and when the Big Storm hit in '48, Mother Nature had taken almost all the rest.

Betty was right to mistrust strangers, but Barbara couldn't stop thinking about what Linda said. What if their town did need the aliens? Would they agree to stay? Could they fill the void

created by global events—could they fill the void in their hearts?

The turn of Barbara's thoughts alarmed her, and she jolted from the davenport and switched off the TV, its buzzing haunting glow taking a minute to settle.

Padding to her bedroom, she glanced at the backdoor and tried to remember if she'd locked it. Even as she stared at the knob, she saw it turn. The key!

It was still in the knob outside the door!

Heart in her throat, all she could do was watch in horror, her feet frozen in place, her voice stuck in her throat. Masril had questioned her safety. She guessed she knew the answer now. He and his companions had brought trouble, and now she was going to pay for it.

Five

Masril stepped through the door, pulling the key out of the knob and holding it out for her; she had to walk ten steps to reach him, but when she did, her hand shook so much she could scarcely grab it. He grasped her wrist, fingers at her pulse, and cocked his head. He looked dashing in the brown fedora.

“Of course you would be frightened,” he said. “I warned you of danger but never specified from what. I apologize for startling you.”

Barbara couldn't speak, so she nodded and placed the key on the kitchen table after he let go.

“I surmise it didn't help that I breathed on your neck earlier today,” he said, trying to catch her eye. That got her attention.

“That was you?” Fear, fury, and fire tumbled together in her belly. She wanted to lash out or yell, but that wouldn't be ladylike.

“I couldn’t deny—never mind,” he said. “You know about my companions,” he said, raising a brow.

“Yes, but how did you—?” she clutched at her blouse, trying to calm her racing heart.

“It seems my companions and I have formed attachments to all of you,” he said. “I’ve not gone far since I left, unable to leave you defenseless. We spied the moment your friend-group met and discussed us.”

“I’m not defenseless,” she stammered, but looked away; his dark blue eyes pierced to her center, and she knew that he knew she *was*. She’d taken Ben’s rifle to the big city to pawn it a year after his death. She didn’t have a boy who played baseball like Linda did; there were no bats lying around. The worst she could manage was the rolling pin or her broom, but its handle was wobbly.

She peeked up at his chiseled, smooth-shaven, teal face and frowned.

“You’re what I heard in the woods!” she accused.

“Yes.”

She scoffed and turned away.

“If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have been scared at all,” she said. “I’m miffed that you made me afraid of my own backyard.” She stormed to her bedroom but stopped in the doorway and turned. “You can sleep in Ben’s room. Take your shoes off before you climb into bed.” She put that last bit in when she remembered the dishes in the fridge. She might have

to explain how some things worked if he was going to be staying here. And she was mad. But she smiled when she closed her door behind her. He came back!

She expected to toss and turn, what with a strange Martian in the other room, but she slept like a baby. When her alarm rang, she swatted the button down with her hand and stretched, missing the warmth of the sun. The dull glow from the edges of her window curtains suggested the fog had yet to lift. She should ask Masril about it before she went to school.

Dressing with care, she convinced herself she wanted to impress upon her students the need to always look ladylike and professional, and that it had nothing whatsoever to do with the Martian sleeping on the other side of her bedroom wall.

She clipped on her pearl cluster earrings and stepped into the hall to the smell of bacon and strong coffee.

After her toilette, she walked into the kitchen to see Masril wearing another set of Ben's clothes, but now he had her frilly apron on as well.

He turned to look at her, and his somber face relaxed into a small smile.

“You're up! I've fixed you a plate of breakfast, dear, and a nice cup of hot coffee.”

Barbara cocked her head and really looked at him. His cadence reminded her of something, but it was his voice, his face, saying the words.

“How did you learn English?” she asked and sat at the table. Looking down, she saw the bright yellow ball of a cooked egg yolk sitting on blackened toast in lieu of a plate. The bacon was cooked to perfection, but flanked either side of her burned toast plate, in place of silverware.

Blinking twice, she looked back up at Masril, who now pulled the chair opposite of hers and sat. He sipped his own cup of coffee.

“My colleagues and I have learned.”

Not wishing to be ungrateful, Barbara popped the yolk in her mouth and took a bite of bacon. “It was very kind of you to fix my breakfast,” she said after finishing her bite. She eyed her coffee with suspicion and took a tentative sip. Hot, bitter and —salty.

Eyes watering, she got up and attempted to smile without letting the mouthful of coffee dribble out of her mouth. She made it to the kitchen sink before she had to spit, and grabbed the nearby dishtowel to wipe her chin.

She filled a jelly jar to the brim with tap water and sucked it down before turning to see Masril studying her with a curious expression.

“I apologize,” he said with the dip of his coiffed hair. “I may have misremembered all of the steps to cooking your traditional morning meal.”

“Um, thank you,” she said. “I suppose you did, but no harm done, right? I need to go to work now.”

“You have no need of reading the morning paper?” Masril slid the folded paper to the edge of the table where she could grab it if she wished.

Glancing at the headline, she snatched it up with a gasp.

“Rural Town in Southwest Iowa Quarantined Indefinitely Due to Nuclear Radiation: Residents Cautioned to Stay Put or Risk Being Shot to Death.”

Barbara read it twice more, then scanned the article itself, mumbling as she did so.

“Twenty-mile perimeter established. No traveling in or out. Special mail and newspaper service drop-off arranged. Experts estimate a fifty-year quarantine.”

Barbara sank to the floor, her dress pooling around her in a poofy nest of fabric.

Eyes filling with tears, she looked up at Masril whose face had reverted to its earlier stoicism.

“Did you—did you all do this?” she asked, her voice wavering.

“It was our best idea to protect your community from the imminent threat of destruction,” he said.

“Imminent threat of—what are you even talking about?” Barbara’s voice rose as her pulse quickened. Racing thoughts of her students, her friends, the broader world out there she’d always expected to visit some day sped through her mind.

“We were chased to your solar system by an alien race called Zorghata,” he said. “Unfortunately, one of their scouts slipped through the refraction-portal before it closed.”

Barbara’s mouth hung open as he explained, understanding very little of what he was saying.

“We manufactured the hydro-shield as a two-step defense against the Zorghat’s penetration suit and in hopes of disguising our presence from your planet’s sentient population.”

Barbara frowned. “Well if it didn’t work in hiding you from us, did it work on the Zontar person?”

Masril mirrored Barbara’s frown. “Zorghat,” he said. “They will have perished after a single rotation of your planet due to their inability to process water.”

“There was more than one?” she asked, confusion giving her a headache. She helped herself back up and dumped the coffee down the sink in order to make a fresh pot. She was going to be late, but something told her today would not be a normal day regardless of the time she showed up to school.

“I don’t understand your question,” Masril said. “The Zorghat who slipped through the portal is a single entity.”

“But you said *they*?” she said. “That’s plural.”

“Ah,” Masril said, tension leaving his voice. “Your language is inadequate to express the gender of the Zorghata aliens. They was the only appropriate term.”

Mouth agape, Barbara's mind shot immediately to Masril's crotch as she remembered it. He must have seen the questions flit across her face. She turned the tap on and filled the pot, avoiding his penetrating gaze.

"You must ask your questions, or you will forever burn in curiosity," he said, his voice calm and steady.

Taking a deep breath, Barbara slid her gaze to his face for a moment before speaking.

"Does our language adequately describe your gender?" she asked and held her breath, cursing herself as she did so.

"I am a male by your race's definitions," he said, and she exhaled.

"This pleases you?" he asked.

She felt her face go hot. "Of course not," she said. Then made some oddball noises. "I don't know. I mean, yes." Turning to face him, she looked at him with a helpless expression.

"Don't be troubled," Masril said and rose, his height once again imposing in her small kitchen. "I am pleased as well. But only because it appears you feel a similar attraction to me as this gender. Do you normally prefer males?" He stepped closer, and she backed up a step.

What a strange question. She nodded, her hair brushing her cheeks with its bounce.

He took another step closer, and she bumped the counter.

“Your people have much to learn,” he said. “But we will be with you every step of the course.”

Barbara’s breathing accelerated, and she leaned back as Masril drew closer and leaned down as if to smell her.

“Are you frightened of me, Barbara?” he asked.

“Not even the tiniest bit,” she whispered, the aroma of coffee and salt air and something foreign invading her nose.

“Perhaps you should be,” he said, closing his eyes and dipping his mouth to the hollow at her throat.

She felt his tongue flick against her skin, and she yelped. He growled but stepped back and pushed his hands into his pockets, once more looking like a Hollywood actor that a makeup artist chose to turn teal. Everyone knew Martians were supposed to be green.

When her heart slowed, she swallowed and grabbed a clean mug from the cupboard. She saw Masril had put the ice cube tray in it. Shaking her head, she returned that to the freezer and poured herself a fresh cup, adding a pour of cream and two sugar cubes.

Masril’s smile was wolfish, but not unkind.

Her hand trembled when she stirred her coffee.

“Why—how—is Main Street, Iowa, now under a fifty-year quarantine? Are we going to die? They can’t do this!” What was she going to tell her students? Ricky wanted to be an cosmonaut[CJ1] . Sally Mae wanted to be a senator.

“My colleague posed as a human scientist and provided false information that indicated dangerous levels of radiation,” he said. “Working in tandem with a human scientist outside your province, he was able to convince your government to lock it down without taking any further actions. Your town will be able to function normally, and anything it cannot produce on its own will be delivered at the designated checkpoint to be arranged later this week.”

Barbara swilled her coffee and slammed her mug on the counter.

“I have to go to work,” she said. “It’s safe?”

Masril nodded, and she swiped her bag and the key to the backdoor.

“I’d like you to read my cookbooks, and don’t change anything until you’ve studied where I put it first,” she said, her voice thick with unreleased emotion. “I’ll be back at five.”

“Have a nice day at work, dear!” Masril said.

Barbara winced. She may have figured out where the Martians learned English.

Six

Main Street Elementary School was a madhouse.

The staff hadn't even tried to rein in the mayhem as students ran up and down the halls pretending to be mutated monsters while parents shouted at the principal.

Barbara found her clutch of teacher friends and ran up to them.

"Can you believe it?" Natalia asked, her thick accent pronounced with her elevated emotion.

"This won't stand," Jerome said. "The United States citizens will rise up against this Communist action!"

"The same citizens who had your back in Mississippi?" Martina quipped with the roll of her eyes.

Jerome frowned and folded his arms. "If we weren't in public, I'd take you over my knee, Mrs. Jackson."

Barbara blushed when Martina winked at her husband and mouthed, "Maybe later." Barbara cleared her throat. "Let's try

to harness the students' energy," she said. "We can't solve the big problems, but we can take care of the little ones."

Her friends chuckled, and the group broke up, clapping their hands and calling their students to join them in class.

Once in her classroom with the door closed, she turned her back to her fifth graders and wrote on the chalkboard in huge letters: WHAT WE CAN CONTROL and WHAT WE CAN'T CONTROL.

Other than shuffling in chairs and the clatter of a pencil, her students quieted.

She turned and smiled at them, and they immediately raised their hands with insightful comments, questions, and suggestions.

After an hour they were ready to return to regular schoolwork, and they had a productive and cheerful day. At the 2:30pm bell, Sally Mae stopped at her desk.

"If I can't grow up to be a senator, maybe I could grow up to be like you," she said with a resigned smile.

"Oh honey," Barbara said and scooted away from her desk. She looked into Sally Mae's eyes. "One of the things you students reminded me of today is that we can't control time. So the government chose this arbitrary number, but they can't control it." She brushed a lock of Sally Mae's hair from her eyes and smiled. "Don't give up on your dream just yet. Our country is going to need smart and caring people just like you."

Sally Mae gave her a hug and then skipped out the door. Barbara heard her high-pitched voice scream: “Did you just shoot me with a laser gun, Billy Castor? I’m going to kick your butt!”

Barbara sighed with a chuckle and gathered up her work.

They hadn’t called for fear of making Mary suspicious, but Barbara suspected she would find her friends parked outside the library again, and she was not disappointed.

“I told you they brought danger to our doorstep,” Betty said, kissing her teeth and shaking her head.

“Your Martians explained what they did, right?” Barbara asked her friends.

“I haven’t seen mine,” LouLou said with a pout. “But I had a sneaking suspicion the radiation story was just a cover-up. It seems I was right!”

“You were, LouLou,” Barbara said. “And I hope your Martian is okay.”

LouLou nodded but didn’t reply.

“I think we need to introduce our new friends to the town,” Linda said.

“What?” Barbara and the others exclaimed in disbelief.

A library patron walked out of the library and glared at them, and they all apologized and waited for the old lady to get across the parking lot before whisper-shouting their questions.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Just listen,” Linda said, her gleaming smile contrasting with her rich tan skin. “The town is already in an uproar. The nation will already be bonkers about the news and churning out rumors and fake stories. Why not bring the Martians out into the open? Make a clean break with tradition and the stereotypical American Dream, and instead, make a statement!”

“What do you mean, ‘make a statement?’” Betty asked with a pointed stare.

“We’re already an odd town,” Linda said. “Barbara, you and Ben raised yourselves since your parents died in that accident. What did you two do when the Jacksons moved in next door to you?”

“We baked them cookies and welcomed them to the neighborhood,” Barbara said with a frown and a shrug.

“Right. And LouLou, how did you treat my *pita* when he brought you the injured lamb?”

“You mean the first time we met? I asked him to bring the lamb to the exam room,” she said. “I don’t know where you’re going with this.”

Linda and Betty exchanged a glance.

“You’re young and sheltered,” Linda said to Barbara and LouLou. “You’re white. No one has ever questioned your presence anywhere. But the Jacksons, the Ivanovs, my family, the Kapoors, the Gonzales’s, and the Bellecourts have all lived

in other places. We haven't always been treated like we belonged. Together," Linda said and grabbed LouLou's hand on her left and Barbara's on her right. Betty rolled her eyes but grabbed LouLou's and her other hand. "Together, we've been making this town a nice place to live. My father treated your father with prejudice," Linda said to Betty. Betty dipped her head in acknowledgement. "Think of that! A brown person trying to cheat a darker brown person for a bulk price on eggs."

"You and Betty have a great relationship," Barbara said.

"Exactly," Linda said with a smile. "We had to make our own choices. And we chose tolerance and friendship."

Betty whispered amen as if she was in church.

"What does this have to do with the Martians though?" Barbara asked. She felt silly that they were all still holding hands, but no one wanted to be the first to let go.

"Main Street has been working to accept all of its residents without bigotry or prejudice ever since the Big Storm of '48," Linda said. "I think we're ready to accept the Martians as our own."

A strange but giddy thrill bloomed in Barbara's abdomen and bubbled all the way up into her heart. She could imagine Masril, her alien Cary Grant, walking up and down the main street of their town, tipping his hat to everyone and saying hello. She hadn't seen the other girls' aliens but imagined them similarly dressed in dashing men's attire and populating the businesses in various professions.

“Linda, you’re right!” Barbara gushed. She wanted her students to see Masril. She wanted to be able to talk about him, not only with her friends, but to tell her coworkers she’d met someone. She wanted to take walks on the sidewalk and hold hands. If he wanted to.

She remembered him licking her neck, and she let go of Betty’s hand and brushed her fingers against the hollow of her throat, swallowing with a self-conscious glance at her friends before folding her arms.

“Betty?” Linda asked. She knew LouLou was already on board.

“I see your point,” Betty said. “But it’s not right that their actions have given some of us a lifetime sentence!”

Betty shook her head and released LouLou’s hand with a squeeze. “Do what you want,” Betty said. “I’ve got a Martian to kick out of my store.”

She rode away into the fog, and they heard the sudden yowl of an angry cat followed by a shrill bicycle bell ringing. Barbara bit her tongue to keep from laughing but as soon as she made eye contact with Linda and LouLou, they all three burst into laughter.

Wiping tears, LouLou spoke, “I think Betty will come around. I spotted her smiling shyly when she looked into the storage room as she came out to ring up my order last night. I’m pretty sure she wasn’t smiling at the apple crates.”

“The only thing left to do is ask the Martians what they think,”
Barbara said.

They hugged their goodbyes, and Barbara looked around the library grounds wondering if she would spot Masril or any of the others. He’d admitted to following her and eavesdropping on their conversation yesterday.

But while the mist swirled and thinned in places, no manly aliens were to be seen.

Seven

She wished Main Street had a mechanic. Walking to the school wasn't too difficult; it was only two blocks away from her house.

But Betty's general store and drug counter were two blocks away from the library (one block south of the school) in the other direction, and her feet were killing her. The teachers at Main Street Elementary were required to wear heels or dress shoes for the men.

Her car needed repairs, but Main Street hadn't had a mechanic since the end of World War II. And she was out of cream, but there hadn't been a milkman since Linda fired Hal a couple years ago. With all her talk of tolerance, she'd tolerated that bastard for far too long, and Barbara was glad she'd finally given him the boot. Linda and Jimmy were much better off without that louse trying to worm his way out of the barn bunk and into Linda's bed.

Betty's door bell jingled when Barbara stepped inside, and she waved at Clara, Betty's shop assistant. Barbara headed for the

dairy case but stopped to gather items along the way, wondering what sorts of food Masril was used to eating. He didn't seem to have any trouble eating human food. Might he prefer homecooked meals or TV dinners? Pausing in front of the TV dinners, Barbara chewed her bottom lip. Was the US government going to limit what supplies could enter the designated checkpoint? Where would that even be?

Barbara turned on her heels and headed for the chocolate and candy aisle.

At the register, she refused to make eye contact with Clara when Clara keyed in the prices for all sixteen chocolate bars and the last four NECCO packages that had been in the display case.

“Betty said she'd have no problem keeping all of our usual supplies stocked,” Clara finally said, catching Barbara's nervous glance. “She said she knows who's in charge at the checkpoint and she would be calling in favors. In case you didn't want to buy all this chocolate right now,” Clara added with a gesture toward the chocolate bars.

“Oh, it's fine,” Barbara said. “They're not for me.”

Clara looked suspicious but didn't argue. As she shouldn't, Barbara thought. The customer is always right.

Carrying her bags, Barbara missed her Bel Air even more as she clumped down the sidewalk headed home.

Masril appeared on the walk ten steps away, just appearing as if made from the very mist he and his companions had

somehow spirited with their Martian technology.

“Oh!” Barbara gasped.

Masril took her bags with ease after placing her slippers on the ground in front of her.

“It seemed you might prefer footwear that didn’t extend your natural musculature in an unnatural way after wearing such shoes for several hours,” he said.

Barbara started to cry.

“What is it, my darling?” he asked in the strange lilting way he sometimes adopted.

“Oh, Masril,” she said as she balanced to take off one shoe and step into a slipper and then switched. “You’re too perfect for this crazy world,” she said. “And you have to stop mimicking Ricky Ricardo when you talk.”

“Ricky who?” he said.

“The TV celebrity husband on that Lucy show,” Barbara said.

“Hm,” Masril said as he held Barbara’s elbow when she teetered. “My colleagues and I have not patterned our English after specific fictional programs, but rather created an amalgam of them. I can’t speak for my compatriots, but my fondness for you does replicate what is seen on many televised fictional play-acts depicting male and female pairings.”

Her feet relaxing into her favorite house slippers, Barbara could digest what Masril was saying without focusing on her aching bones.

“F-fondness?” Barbara stammered.

“That is the most accurate word in this case,” he said as they began walking to her home. “Over time, I should like to create a family unit consisting of a child or two and a household pet that emits dander and fur of varying abundance. I imagine my fondness will mature into the affection known on your world as love.”

Barbara stopped walking, her foot planted firmly on a crack, cursing her dead mother to an afterlife of broken-backedness and looked at Masril, debonair in his fedora and walking coat, shoes shined and slacks pressed.

“Over time you expect to feel fondness for the household pet? Or to fall in love with me?” she repeated, just to make sure she’d heard him right.

“It is not dissimilar to what occurs on our homeworld,” Masril said with a simple shrug. Had the Martians studied human mannerisms too? “We cannot reverse the refraction-portal,” he said. “We didn’t plan to find a world and reproduce with its inhabitants, but once I fell into your arms, I couldn’t imagine being in anyone else’s.”

“But you were at death’s door,” Barbara pointed out, then looked around, remembering they were located somewhere on Center Street with houses lining it on both sides, a mere twenty paces up each small walkway. She resumed their walk and lowered her voice. “That’s hardly the time to make snap decisions about who you want to spend the rest of your life with.”

“It wasn’t a decision, Barbara,” Masril said. She could hear the smile in his voice. “It was merely the feeling of my—there isn’t an equivalent word. The organ in my chest that regulates emotion.”

“Heart,” Barbara said.

“No, the muscle that performs circulation resides in my inner thigh,” he said. “We possess an organ in the center of our chest responsible for emotional discernment. It’s called *konst nikta* in our language.”

“What if I don’t feel any fondness for you in return?” she asked. She recognized the sidewalk square jutting up from a tree root as the one in front of her bungalow and turned up the walk.

“I know that isn’t true, but for curiosity’s sake, I will answer,” he said.

Once inside her house, she dropped her heels in front of the davenport and watched him place the grocery bags on the table and remove the items one by one, sorting them into neat stacks.

“In the circumstance where one’s fondness is not returned, it behooves one to court the other’s interest with increasingly graduated efforts that simultaneously respect the other’s wishes for space but show one’s dedication in the belief of their affection’s strength and ability to overcome any doubts.”

“How do you know if I feel fondness for you?” Barbara said, taking the TV dinners out of the cupboard and putting them in

the freezer, and taking the canned soups out of the freezer and putting them in the pantry cupboard.

“I smell it on your skin,” he said, stacking the chocolate bars and placing them in the breadbox.

For once, Barbara noticed he refused to look at her. Instead, he put the fresh loaf of bread in the cookie jar, pushing it down to make the lid fit.

With a racing heart, Barbara stepped closer to Masril and took the chocolate bars out of the bread box and put the squashed bread in instead. She separated the chocolate bars into four stacks and put hers in the cookie jar.

“The rest of these are for my friends,” she said, her voice low. Masril’s skin might not radiate nuclear energy, but he radiated something. The aroma of homecoming and safety, of promises and rocking chairs, of sunsets and canned tomatoes. Her hand trembled on the jelly jar. Her throat was dry. Her eyes were wet.

“I would be your friend as well,” Masril whispered and closed his hand around hers. He moved behind her and raised the glass to her lips, resting his chin on her head and moving with her as she gulped the water and swallowed, closing her eyes in wonder at the sensation of his warmth enveloping her from behind and above. His other hand pressed against her belly and massaged slightly, and her knees shook, and chills raced up and down her arms. He tickled her neck, or maybe that was his breath stirring her hair, no—his lips pressed against her nape—his other hand released hers and the jar fell on the counter

and bounced and rolled to a stop, and then the fingers of his right hand traced her jaw, trailed down her neck, dipped in her throat's hollow, and slid down her buttons between her breasts and stopped at her belt where his other hand rested.

He swayed with her, and her body responded in ways she hadn't felt since Bobby snuck her behind the bleachers in high school and tried to cop a feel while they kissed. It wasn't that she hadn't liked how Bobby made her feel, it was more the fact that she'd heard her brother calling her name and hadn't wanted to get caught.

Now she closed her eyes and swayed with Masril, and part of her wished he would slide his hand up—and the other one down—and part of her felt very confused and afraid of the future but also like she'd been taking care of Ben for half of her life and then her friends and students, and wouldn't it be nice to have someone care for her the way Masril had been?

Heat and wetness pooled down low, and emotions stirred heat and tears on her face, and damn, she wished the radio was on so they could have a proper dance. She turned in his arms and looked up at his face. He clasped his hands behind her and pulled her close enough that she could feel hardness between his legs, and her brows shot up.

“I told you; I'm the male gender,” he said with a growl and seized her lips in a fierce kiss.

She'd forgotten what it was like to kiss.

But muscle memory returned with a vengeance, and she kissed him back well past “fondness” and solidly into “desire”

territory, and their hands went everywhere.

His lips were warm and pliant; his tongue was curious and dexterous, and she could feel his muscles under his shirt when she slipped her hands between his coat and his button-down, and surely he was feeling the back of her bra through her dress, and the curve of her bum, and she couldn't keep track of what her hands were tracing and sensing and where his were and keep track of all the thoughts in her head at the same time.

She was unmarried, unchaperoned, their town was quarantined, Masril and his companions were stuck here forever, and with a fifty-year lockdown, she was too. She'd always thought she'd get to see the Statue of Liberty or the Grand Canyon. What if the US government forgot about their entire town; what if they blasted it with an atom bomb? Could she and Masril have babies? Did she want to?

Masril pulled her bottom lip gently with his teeth and pulled her so close her breasts smashed against his powerful chest. He cupped her bum with both hands and growled into her neck beneath her ear.

"I want to show you the way of my people when they declare love," he said. "I want your body laid bare to me, Barbara, that I might look at you, touch you. Taste you."

"T-taste me?" she whimpered. That sounded—dangerous.

He pulled away and looked into her eyes with his bottomless navy-blue irises.

"Your body is untried?" he said, his voice quiet but graveled.

“What do you mean?” she said before fully understanding the question. “Oh! Um.” Her pulse quickened and face flushed. “I don’t want to answer that.”

His deep chuckle curled her toes, and he rested his forehead against hers.

“In a society built upon a male-centric foundation with the imbalance of power and frequent oppression—you wish to conceal your body’s state from me,” he said. “A powerful male with the strength to weaken your will or break it altogether with the stroke of my tongue or the caress of my words.”

Barbara shivered in his arms and nodded. He could seduce her so easily. And she wanted him to. Didn’t she?

Masril pressed his groin against her body and clamped her bum tight with both hands, then rubbed her against himself with a long groan of pleasure.

She weakened in the knees and felt the shudder of warming heat build between her legs, but he stepped back and gave her a chaste kiss on her flaming cheek.

“I smell your desire and your hesitance in the same breath,” he said. “I won’t press you before you’re ready.”

Barbara nodded again, powerless to speak, and perhaps that was why his decision to pull back was wise. She could pursue it if she wished. She knew he wouldn’t turn her away. But speaking could be important. For lots of reasons.

He strode out of the kitchen and hung his coat and hat up in the coat closet, then unfastened his suspenders and tie as he walked into Ben's room and closed the door behind him.

Barbara leaned against the cabinet and caught her breath before registering the smell of pot roast and hearing the timer buzz. Startled, she opened the oven door to see a beautiful beef roast with vegetables as well as a tray with browning rolls.

She grabbed the oven mitts and pulled them out, amused and befuddled to see apples cut up with the potatoes and carrots.

Placing the plates and cutlery on the table, Masril returned to the kitchen with his shirt sleeves rolled up and his own pair of slippers donned on his feet.

"Thank you for preparing this," she said, composed from before, but only just. Her voice sounded breathless in her ears. "I can't tell you how long it's been since I came home to a meal."

"It gives me pleasure to cook food for you," he said with a smile and sat.

They looked across the table at one another, and Barbara's sense of rightness and belonging intensified.

"Tell me of your nest-mate," Masril said and speared a bite of food with his table knife.

Barbara hid her smile behind her napkin and gave a delicate cough.

"Only if you tell me about your family as well."

Eight

Swatting her alarm clock, Barbara groaned. Was it worth it? Yes. Was she bone-tired? Also yes. She dragged herself out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom, so tired she forgot to close the door.

She and Masril had stayed up half the night talking about their families, their childhoods, their greatest losses and greatest triumphs. She shared her fear of cockroaches, he his fear of falling.

Cuddling on the couch, she told him all she knew about space, which was precious little, and he told her everything he knew, which was a lot—most of it incomprehensible in fact.

With crusty eyes and oily hair, she undressed and turned on the faucet, leaning over the tub to test the water with her hand and yawning.

A cool breeze wafted across her rump and she squealed, grabbing the nearest fabric and holding it over her breasts. The wash cloth covered almost nothing, and her left hand obscured

most of her curls, but not all, as Masril stood at the door and stared.

“I—I apologize,” he said and gave her a formal bow before standing and staring again.

“You should probably close the door,” she said, finding her voice. “Or at least walk away.”

“I find I cannot,” he said, still staring.

Feeling emboldened, Barbara dropped the useless cloth into the tub where it floated on top of the hot water and sashayed to the bathroom door. She pressed against his white T-shirt with her finger and pushed.

“I’ll be out in a bit,” she said, and closed the door, but not fast. There was something powerful and arousing about letting him see her. *Baring her body* to him, as he had said yesterday.

His eyes roved over her unapologetically, but in the end, they fixated on her eyes before she shut the door to his view.

Palm spread across the wood of her door, she bowed her head and exhaled. What had she been thinking? Words like “brazen” and “wanton” echoed in her head, but she felt no shame.

Looking down at her skin, at her parts, at the places peaked with chill and arousal, she marveled that her body held the power it did over the male on the other side of the door.

He talked about the “male-centric foundation” and “imbalance of power”, and those things were true. Only think of the principal, Mr. Kendrick, and how he’d mandated heels of a

certain height and hairstyles a certain way, and the casual disregard of personal space on any day ending in Y.

Masril had power too. The power to harness the clouds. Power to heal impossibly fast. Speed. Intelligence. But he brought her slippers. Made her roast beef with apples and cooked an egg yolk all by itself. He cleaned up after himself, but most importantly, he looked after *her*. He held so much power but never used it to oppress or punish her, nor to manipulate or control. He gave her choices.

Splashing behind her alerted her to the overfilling tub and she squeaked, slipping to the tub and turning off the water. More water splashed out when she reached down to pull the plug, but her feet and hand slipped, and she fell in, a tidal wave of hot water flowing over the sides of the clawfoot tub and sending waves crashing across the floor and under the door.

She came up for air and found Masril once again at her door, but now looking at his sodden slippers as the water lapped against them before seeping into the hardwood floor.

“Do you need assistance?” he asked, and their eyes met.

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

Wiping her hair out of her eyes, she watched with painful gasps as her desire warred with the societal expectations she'd grown up with. Courtship. A ring. A ceremony and a certificate. Announcing before friends and family the promise of being someone's all. Those things flowed toward the drain as the water lowered by degrees, and then Masril was naked and climbing into the tub with her.

More water splashed out, but Barbara stared as his manhood extruded from a fold of skin at his groin, and she moaned.

“Your eyes enslave me, Precious One,” he murmured and drew her to him, their legs spreading so they could slide together and join.

Her eyes widened as he found her secret place with a finger and probed it with gentle curiosity, growling her name and commanding a kiss.

She shivered in delicious torment, experiencing heightened senses and burning curiosity.

“May I—?” She reached into the water for his burgeoning dick, and he murmured yes over and over again when she filled her hand with it.

Reaching behind herself, she felt around for the plug and stopped the water from emptying, and then she focused more on exploring the teal-skinned Martian in all of his raw glory.

Breaking away from his kisses, she looked down between them, wanting to see his wedge-shaped dick and the bulge at the base that found its way out of the fold. Grasping it with both hands, she watched his face contort into a shadow play of delight and torturous need.

“What should I do?” she whispered and squeezed his length with one hand, and he shuddered and croaked, inhuman sounds that, when mixed with his insistent lips and hands, meant he loved her hands on him wherever they fell.

She'd heard of oral sex and remembered Masril said he wanted to taste her—could she taste him? Was it dangerous? Trusting he would stop her if necessary, she took a breath and scooted out of the way enough to dip her head and close her mouth around the head of his dick.

He gasped and lurched up into her mouth, and she swirled her tongue around until she needed more air.

“I’ll do that again when we’re in bed,” she said, her voice low and promising.

“Please,” he murmured and slid her toward him again. “I want this.” He wiggled his finger inside her channel. “I want in.”

Barbara’s insides melted as she nodded and held his dick down and pointed at her entrance. Together, they guided it to her opening, and she grunted at his first push. Catching his eye, she saw his gaze had darkened, and his jaw clenched.

“I want in,” he repeated with a growl, and her nipples peaked with instantaneous arousal.

Grunting, he pushed the rest of the way, but his dick slid inside, her excitement easing his passage, and she arched her back and clamped her hands on either side of the tub, pushing forward while he angled in, and she wrapped her legs around his back.

He roared in satisfaction when he finally sat home, and his hands tightened around her waist while he stared with open hunger at her breasts.

“Mine,” he uttered with hooded eyes and then lifted her toward him so he could lave his tongue around her dark nipples.

Sinking into the sensation, Barbara let her head fall back while he devoured her by inches, and every once in a while, she felt a jolt inside her, as if he were swelling and bursting. He moved lazily with the water, punctuating small movements with grunts but noticing her own mewls of pleasure and accenting them with pronounced tweaks and pinches. He read her body like a book, and traced and tickled her curves and hollows, often joining his fingers with his tongue wherever he tasted or licked or nipped, and soon, the bathroom echoed with her escalating hitches of breath and cries of peaking pleasure.

“I—I need—” She couldn’t finish. She didn’t know what she needed. Something.

His warm chuckle preceded his finger dipping into her channel alongside his dick, but then he brought it out and swirled the nub, the clit—she remembered now—and played with it while turning his attention to one of her tits again. The double sensations spun up her desire like a record out of control, and she couldn’t speak, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, for the pleasure of it.

She felt him sucking, she felt him twirling, she felt him thrusting, and it was too much and it was not enough and then she was in freefall: tumbling and rocketing all at once. A climax breaking over her skin and from deep inside, like she was the tidal wave, and she screamed until she was hoarse, all

while rocking into his hand like the wanton woman she knew herself now to be.

Masril's smile widened as he grasped her hip with his free hand and began thrusting in earnest. His grin turned to a grimace; his easy expression turned to a pained one, and languid in the hot water, she lolled and moaned, loving the ferocity as he grabbed her other hip and pulled her against him, driving himself deeper and faster, pumping with abandon as he watched her tits jiggle and sway.

His energy enlivened her post-orgasmic haze, and she found herself once more engaged, nails digging into his hips while she rode his desire.

“Barbara!” he shouted and pistoned, arching his neck and snapping his teeth together. He groaned and released inside her. She felt a final swelling, an inner pop, a flooding, and she felt hot and good and warm and shivery—and when he gathered her up in his arms and buried his nose in her shoulder, she felt loved.

Nine

“Oh, gee willikers!” Barbara said, head shooting up to look into Masril’s languid eyes. “School!”

Chuckling, he helped her out of the tub and steadied her so she wouldn’t slip on the wet floor.

“I’ll clean up,” he said, and she turned and kissed him, inhaling his unique scent before dashing to her room to yank out a clean outfit.

Running between her room and the bathroom, she found earrings, put on lipstick, snatched her stockings, pulled them on, slid on her slip, all the things, and when she looked down at herself and smoothed her skirt, she took a deep breath and smelled coffee.

Masril had used his Martian powers to clean up the floor and make coffee and toast, and she grabbed her mug and took a sip, crooking her brow at the flavor.

“Strawberry jam?” she asked, and he smiled, pointing to the knife sticking up out of the jam jar.

“I’ll allow it this time,” she said with a wink and finished her coffee. Snatching her toast off the pancake plate, she grinned at her alien lover.

“I like the apron,” she said. “It’s a good look.”

He wore her frilly apron and nothing else.

“I’ll see you at five,” she said and dashed out the door.

“Have a lovely day, darling!” followed her out into the misty swirl circling her bungalow.

She’d forgotten to ask him about that. She’d also forgotten to ask him about coming out into the open in front of the townspeople. She didn’t want to do anything without his consent or advice. There might be contingencies she and her friends weren’t considering.

Glancing at her watch, she picked up her pace, her heels striking the pavement in a loud clicking pattern. Even in low visibility, people—and cats—could hear her coming.

Thoughts roaming over the morning they’d had, she couldn’t help but feel a lightness and promise of a beautiful future. She never expected falling in love to feel this buoyant. Joyful. Giddy.

So maybe the Zorghat thought it strange she had a big dopey grin on her face when he—wait—they threw the dark cloth over her head and picked her up like a sack of potatoes.

It took a minute for her to realize what was going on, and then she screamed for all she was worth.

She knew it was the Zorghat because of the smell, and their size, and the wheezy breathing that sounded like they were saying “zoar GOT, zoar GOT.”

Kicking her feet, she managed to dislodge one shoe, but she wanted to keep the other one on as a possible weapon later. Was the Zorghat taking her to their ship? Was it going to hurt or kill her? She pounded on its back, but her fists had no effect.

“Help!” she screamed again, but she had the disappointing thought that the dark cloth was somehow muffling her shouts. If Masril couldn’t hear her, if no one could hear her, then help wasn’t coming. She would be missed at the school, and the phone might even ring, but would Masril know how to answer it? “Think, Barbara,” she scolded herself. Masril said he and his companions had watched a lot of television shows. He would know how to answer the phone.

And she’d dropped her shoe, so he would be able to find it. She just had to stay alive. That was it.

Calming, she sagged over the Zorghat shoulder and pretended to sleep. But its odd, boat-like gait made that a breeze, and she fell asleep, to her dismay, only realizing when she woke up on a cold, hard, floor with the dark cloth over her head.

She dared not to make a noise, but instead listened for the telltale “zoar GOT” noise or movement or beeping or buzzing like electronics on a space ship, but she heard nothing.

Sliding her foot along the ground, she waited again. Would movement alert them? Still nothing. She reached for her shoe

and pulled it off, then cradled the heel under her bosom.

If that thing came back to move her, she'd hack at it with her stiletto. Maybe the handsy Mr. Kendrick was good for something after all.

With oppressive silence enshrouding her, she tried to find the opening to the cloth, but when she patted her neck, she couldn't feel a tie or bunched fabric. She felt her face, and it was also free of fabric. She could blink her eyes and feel her eyelashes with her fingertips, so she wasn't blindfolded.

What was this sorcery? She had no vision, and the sound of her own voice was muffled, but she couldn't feel anything physically covering her head.

Sitting up, she smoothed her palms across the floor. It felt solid and cold, like cement. She rapped it once with a knuckle, and only a dull thunk met her ears. Clicking her nails along it had no effect either. It didn't seem to be metal.

Hooking the heel of her shoe in her dress belt, she crawled, patting her hands this way and that, feeling for a wall or a door. She hadn't found a wall or a corner, just smooth flat surface, but the longer she crawled, she noticed the strangest sensation: the weight of her dress changing. If she turned and crawled that way, her dress skirt hung down to the floor. If she changed direction and crawled this way, it started to hang the other way, as if a stiff breeze blew it behind her. Almost like she was crawling upside down, which was obviously impossible.

Then again.

Martians were impossible. A rural town in the middle of nowhere being quarantined by the US government was impossible. A fog that never lifted was impossible.

Horror and confusion wracked her mind. She crawled faster and pictured herself in her mind's eye, crawling inside a fish bowl or a glass tree ornament. Yes. Her dress would drape and hang just like that as she crawled around inside.

Stopping, she reached between her legs and grabbed fabric from the back of her skirt and brought it forward to tie up with the fabric in the front. Making a huge knot, she gingerly stood, knees bent and hands poised to land on the floor if she fell, and rose higher. Stretching her hands above her, she could feel the roundness.

She was inside a sphere!

Her body remained rooted to the surface, as if the surface was gravity-bound Earth, and yet the fabric of her dress shifted as if less affected. Her fifth-grade science wasn't sufficient for explaining the phenomenon, but it didn't matter if she understood it. She needed a way out!

She sat with a huff and tried to remember everything Masril had said about the Zorghat. Something about a suit. And something about hydro. Hydro, hydra... hydrogen.

Frowning, she rubbed her forehead where her thinking crease always showed up. Her mother used to tell her she could see Barbara thinking.

Masril said the Zorghat couldn't process... water. And yet one had managed to snatch her from the sidewalk with ease, and thanks to the Martians' mist, or rather, *hydro-shield*, no one saw a thing.

What else? Her alien had said the Zorghat had a penetration suit. Something that protected it from a planet that was full of water.

With that thing walking around Main Street unchecked, Barbara figured it had something a little better than just a suit. It must have a whole ship keeping it safe. And if it had a ship, it could be taking her on it. They could be in space right now, speeding away from Earth and everyone she loved.

Heart racing, she collapsed against the surface and pounded it with her fists.

"Let me out! I can't go with you! Take me back to Earth!" She screamed and cried, then sat on her haunches. She had to calm down. She needed to think some more.

What if....

She slipped her shoe out of her belt, felt for the heel, and took several deep breaths. She had no idea what the consequences were if this worked, but if an object was meant to keep something in, then it could only be good for her if she could get out, right?

She wound up like pitcher Dizzy Trout and then thwacked her pointed heel against the side. She heard an ominous cracking noise and felt for the surface. Sure enough, she could feel the

place her heel had struck. With care, she backed up only enough to get another good wind-up going, then hit again with all her might.

Light pierced her eyes and her brain with stunning heat, and she felt herself tumbling until she hit spongy ground. Wet grass chilled her fingers and arms, and she blinked, looking around the field. She was in the wood that stretched between Center Street and Old Man Jenkins' farm. She recognized the clearing as one where she and Ben used to play as kids.

Standing up, she shook water droplets off her hands and looked at the massive black spheres dotting the clearing. A mess of black shards lay at her feet, and they disappeared before her eyes, disintegrating into the wet grass.

There were three other orbs, and she could only assume her friends were inside. Shivering from her sopping wet hose, she shuffled to the first one and pressed her ear against it. She couldn't hear anything, and she doubted anyone would hear her if she shouted from the outside, but she tried anyway.

“Keep away from the edge!” she shouted. “I'm going to get you out!”

She flexed her shoe-weapon arm and swung at the black sphere with all her might. It shattered with one blow, and spiky shards collapsed to the ground, leaving a furious Betty standing in the middle. Wearing her shop apron and a gingham dress with sensible flat shoes, she stood with arms akimbo and a scowl on her face.

“When I find that filthy alien, I’m going to rip its arms off!” she yelled.

“Are you okay?” Barbara asked and pulled her away from the wreckage.

“I am now,” Betty said. “Jakel is going to get an earful about this. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Barbara said, walking up to the next black orb. “Come here and help me catch her if she falls.”

When LouLou and Linda stood safe and sound next to Betty and Barbara, Barbara clapped her hands.

“We don’t know when that thing is coming back, but we need to defend ourselves, and maybe our whole town,” she said. “Masril told me they can’t tolerate water, so we need to collect buckets, pitchers, cups, and bowls, whatever we can, and fill them with water. Are you with me?”

“Hell yes,” they said together, and Barbara led the way.

“Sneak into everyone’s back yards and grab what you need,” Barbara said. “Let’s meet at Castor Lake. If you run into anyone, warn them and tell them to get more water and where to meet us.”

“We’re on it,” Linda said. “I’m going to the school first though. I need to make sure Jimmy and the other kids are okay.”

Barbara nodded, and they all split up.

She found herself at the picket gate behind Mrs. Rose's house. Lucky for her, there was already a bucket half-filled with water, so she picked it up and kept going, moving fast in the trees where the mist wasn't as dense. In fact, it seemed the mist was fading and the warmth of the sun seeped through it.

Thirty minutes later had Barbara standing by the wooden sign welcoming folks to Castor Lake, the Playground for the Adventurous. Wincing with every step, she cursed the Zorghat for the hundredth time. Hopefully Masril and the others were on its tail, but until then, she and her human fellows were going to defend themselves.

She could hear the murmur of a crowd of voices and looked up the road. She could see the first group breaking free of the mist; they carried all kinds of vessels, as well as some weapons like bats or pitchforks. She waved, and the group waved back, and they headed down the gravel path to the wide parking lot and the sloped sandy beach.

Everyone surged forward and filled their containers, and then they all lined up at the shore facing the parking lot and the entrance to the park.

Murmuring quieted when they heard a low moan that vibrated in their chests.

Barbara gasped when the alien creature appeared from out of the mist, larger and fiercer than she had imagined.

Ten feet tall if it was an inch, it shuffled on three wide legs. It was encased in a metallic suit but the suit joints were rusty and corroded. The gray metal suit capped at the Zorghat head with

a big bubble helmet, and inside the helmet, the Zorghat's head rippled and flowed like pond slime.

"It's hideous!" someone shouted.

"Get your water ready!" Barbara yelled and held her bucket up.

The Zorghat moaned again and waved its three arms as if trying to decide who to snatch and throw first. They came closer and closer, and Barbara waited, her breaths coming in rapid gusts.

"Hold steady!" she shouted.

Right before the Zorghat took another step, the Martians came running from behind, brandishing strange guns and weapons. They spoke in a harsh guttural language, and the Zorghat spun to face them, shooting flashes of a hot substance from its suit fingers.

With its back to everyone, Barbara strode forward and screamed, "NOW!" She tossed the water toward the Zorghat, and everyone else did as well, until its suit corroded through and fell off its body in pieces. The greenish slime-blob collapsed without its suit to give it form, and townspeople continued to dump water on the frightening goo until it sizzled and steamed and dissolved into the gravel without a trace.

Barbara and her fellow humans cheered, and then Masril strode up to her and dipped her in a romantic kiss. When they came up for air, the town clapped and whistled.

Barbara's smile beamed, and she caressed Masril's cheek.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet Masril the Martian, and his friends Hauk, Jakel and Bando,” she said. “And they’re going to be living with us from now on.”

“What about the quarantine?” the mayor asked, stepping forward.

“What about it?” Barbara said and reached her hand to shake Mayor Jane Tuppit’s hand.

“Do they understand they can’t leave? That they’re as stuck here as we are?” the mayor asked.

Barbara turned to Masril.

“We understand,” Masril said and offered his hand for the mayor to shake as well.

Barbara bit her lip, wondering why Masril didn’t admit that they were the ones who inspired the quarantine to begin with. But she wouldn’t worry about that right now.

The entire town knew about the aliens; they’d defeated the bad one and seemed to accept the good ones without question.

“Did you check the school?” Barbara asked Masril and he nodded. “That’s where we went first,” he said. “We drew the Zorghat away and herded them out here. We had no idea you were all prepared to take them down so easily! You’re a remarkable group of humans, and we are honored to live and work among you.”

“Hear, hear!” Mary, the operator, shouted.

“Hip, hip!” Jerome Jackson shouted.

“Hooray!” the townspeople joined in.

They continued the cheer as they marched back toward Main Street and the school, collecting their friends along the way.

Barbara reunited with LouLou, Betty, and Linda outside the library where they hugged.

Masril, Jakel, Hauk, and Bando stood just behind their group until they finished, and then the males stood beside their women.

Barbara noted each one wore clothing as if it was tailored for them specifically, but she especially admired Masril in his dignified trousers, crisp white button-down shirt with suspenders and the classy fedora.

She leaned into him, and he wrapped his arm around her.

“I don’t suppose you brought my slippers this time,” she said, looking up into his dark blue eyes.

“Unfortunately, your slippers are still quite wet from...” he stopped and looked at the others. “From current events. I’ll have to carry you home.”

“I can handle that,” Barbara said.

“Tell me about this strange custom we observed a few nights ago,” Masril said. “We noticed giant hollowed-out vegetables glowing while lit from within, and your young were all disguised as races from the Infinite Galaxy Coalition. Do your people know of the Coalition?”

“I observed many adults bribing the young to leave their premises,” Jakel said. “Is it common that the young extort the old? Perhaps your town is too dangerous for our kind.”

LouLou giggled and Bando smiled down at her.

“It’s a holiday we call Halloween,” Barbara said. “It has a rich history, but sometimes adolescents take the pranks too far. I thought *you* were pranking me that first night,” she said to Masril and punched his arm.

“I did too,” Betty said. “When I caught Jakel breaking into the barbershop, I thought you were a teenager trying to vandalize the place. Who knew Main Street had been besieged by Martians?”

“Why do you keep calling us Martians?” Hauk asked. “We’re not from Mars. We’re not even from your galaxy!”

“Oh,” Barbara said with a sheepish grin. “It’s a good thing we have our very own aliens to teach us the difference.”

“I want to know what items were being used to bribe the youth,” Jakel said.

“Candy,” Betty said in a dry tone. “It was just candy.”

“Is candy also known as a treat?” Bando asked.

“Yes,” Linda answered.

“So if we want a treat, all we have to do is...?” Hauk asked.

“Empty the bowels of a vegetable, set its innards on fire, and demand a treat in exchange for not tricking you!” Jakel said with pride. “I like this custom. Betty,” he said and knelt before

her, tugging her apron. “I lack the flaming vegetable, but I desire you to give me a treat from the candy counter. In exchange, I promise not to vandalize any empty shops on Main Street.”

Betty rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“Come on, Masril,” Barbara said with a small smile. “You’ve saved us all from a lot of trickery; you deserve a special treat.”

“As if you didn’t give him one already,” Linda said not quite under her breath.

“Hey!” Barbara said in a huff.

“Maybe it’s the sunlight breaking through the mist,” Linda said. “But it looks like we all have a kind of special glow this afternoon.”

The aliens chuckled and took their respective women in their arms with little resistance.

Main Street, Iowa, was properly and thoroughly invaded by aliens after all.

Note to the Reader

More Treats!

If you enjoyed “Alien Trick or Treat”, drop me an email and let me know! Unlike my Predator Planet series, the Main Street Aliens series would be low-angst, high heat, and fun and playful alien romance with a small-town feel. I can be reached at vicky@lovevickyholt.com.

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Check out my Predator Planet series for slow burn, intense alien worldbuilding, and epic-level romance between STEM expert heroines and cinnamon roll alien heroes! More info on my website, lovevickyholt.com.