



SURVIVOR

A DARK ALIEN ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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SURVIVOR

A DARK ALIEN ENEMIES TO LOVERS
ROMANCE

LOKI RENARD

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Kail
She has a death wish.

So kill her.

That would be too merciful.

So let her live.

That would be wrong.

I argue with myself silently inside my head as a rustle in the forest behind me puts me on high alert. A stick cracks. There is silence. It is not the silence of nothing. It is the silence of something.

My senses are sharpened by solitude and hunger. I grip my spear and prepare to impale whatever has made the mistake of creeping up behind me. I am hungry, and I am angry, and I am yearning to kill.

Pivoting swiftly, I spot eyes that do not reflect in the night. They lurk low in the undergrowth, just barely discernible in the twin moons' glow. Wide eyes with round pupils rimmed with brown and blue, set in a flat face aside from gentle undulations of features which include a small snub nose.

I grip my spear tighter.

It is an animal.

I have killed hundreds of these things.

There is no reason not to kill this one too.

I smell blood. It is wounded. It is sickly and pathetic, and not worth the attention of my spear. Killing it might draw attention. Animals do not always die quietly, and I am trying to move stealthily.

Snarling, I shake my spear and make deep, guttural, threatening sounds. The eyes widen for a moment, then retreat into the undergrowth. I hear the uneven skittering of a wounded retreat.

I suspect it will be back. That animal has been following me for days, mistaking me for a savior. The irony of its mistake is intense. If only it knew what I do to its kind, it would not dare to be within a hundred miles of me.

Several days ago I made the mistake of dropping some dried meat on the ground and not stopping to pick it up. I have been moving as swiftly as possible, avoiding trackers. I suspect I am being hunted, though I have not seen any.

The animal picked up that food and has been on my trail ever since, hopeful of more easy nourishment. This is the way some beasts are domesticated, but there is no taming these animals.

Night is falling. I decide to make camp while the terrain is still relatively flat and the local fauna abundant. The wind is soft on this evening, and the land is bright under the glow of the two moons. On a night like this, I can pretend that recent horrors never happened, that I am on a hunt for a food beast for my family, and that they are waiting for me to return to them with smiling faces and hungry bellies.

If I had a better imagination, I might be able to sink into that fantasy, but the truth is my loved ones are waiting for me in the cold ground. The afterlife is the only place I will see them again. I am not ready to be reunited with them. I will not do that until every one of the invaders who came to our world and exterminated us like so many pests are brought to bloody justice.

I light a fire and ignore the crackling in the forest. The animal is back. It is persistent and perhaps stupid. There is something wrong with it besides merely being wounded. No matter how I

try to frighten it, it keeps returning. I may have to put it out of its misery.

If I concentrate, I can hear it now, breathing heavily several feet behind me, making louder noises than it should if it wants to be stealthy. I loathe these animals. They are not native to my world. They are invasive, they are dangerous, and they are cruel.

The one following me appears to be some kind of outcast. It has not tried to make direct contact with me, and if I approach it in any way, it draws back in fear. It is fortunate that my initial bloodlust has been sated. But my patience is not infinite.

Sitting before the fire, I eat my rations. I know that in the morning, any crumbs I leave will be hungrily consumed. The animal does not know how to hunt for itself. It is sick, wounded, and helpless. The wild will take it soon enough.

AIEE!

No sooner do I have that thought than a shriek pierces the night. It is a plaintive, awful, pitiful sound. I thought I had no feeling left in me, certainly not enough to feel pity for such an animal, but something about it reaches into my gut and twists an unseen knife.

I hear the rasping of a mantid from the bushes not far away. I know what has happened without needing to see it. The animal has been caught and is being consumed.

Mantids are hundred-pound exoskeletal beasts with wings, compound eyes, antennae, and an array of mouthparts designed for consuming almost any living thing. The animal will have no chance of survival.

Unlike hunters that dispatch a creature before consuming it, mantids simply pin their prey down and just start eating wherever they feel like eating. They quite often pick a little from one place, and then from another. Their sharp pincers are not the worst, either. They are at least effective at doing damage. They prefer to use their rasps, which are two serrated tongues that essentially grate their prey into slivers. It can take hours to be killed, sometimes days.

I cannot abide these shrieks for hours. I once would have reveled in those cries, drinking them in, but I am beginning to tire of revenge, and there will be no sleeping with that cacophony. So, I sigh, stand up, take my spear, and go to do what must be done.

The brilliant iridescent green and gold of the mantid shines through the undergrowth. It has pinned the animal with the sharp, clawed points of its feet, and it is in the process of rasping through the limited outer cladding the animal has managed to retain.

The mantid twitches its head around to me, mandibles extended in a protective hiss. Thousands of eyes look at me and find me wanting both as predator and prey. It does not acknowledge threat. All it can feel is hunger.

It turns back to its task of consumption, and as it does, I stab the mantid through its cerebral cavity and boot the twitching, long-limbed corpse off the prone animal.

She lies wounded in the dirt, leaking red blood. As I thought, it is a human female. A strange one, because she did not move like I am used to humans moving. Did not strut and bash through the world, did not open fire on anything that moved, did not shout and display herself and her damn flag. She was more like a beast, creeping, hiding, afraid.

I have killed So. Many. Humans.

This one should be no different from any of the others. This one should be another act of well-earned vengeance. I put my spear to the side and kneel beside her, taking her bloodied face in my hands. I whisper a quick prayer before snapping her neck.

Before I can finish dedicating her meat and soul to my family, she grinds out a word in my tongue through red-stained teeth clenched in a rictus of pain.

“Please.”

I still my hands.

“Help me.”

Help her? Does she not know what she asks? I should laugh in her face and sever her spinal cord. But I don't. My hands are still, more cradling her face than clenching it.

There is something about this woman. Something innocent and pure and wild. I see something in her eyes I did not see in the gaze of the many soldiers I slaughtered.

My tribe had a code, before they were destroyed. We swore to help others in distress. My tribe is gone, but the code persists, and reasserts itself now.

I curse, pick her up, and take her back to the fire. As careful as I am not to articulate her body in a way that might make her injuries worse, she whimpers almost constantly. So much for silent animal stoicism.

Her wounds are grievous. If she were truly an animal, they would be too bad to allow it to suffer. But she is a human animal and suffering is built into their pliable bodies. There is still some part of me that believes killing her is the right thing to do. The souls of my family demand it. Don't they?

I heard their voices strongly in my initial vengeance. I heard their cries and their cheers, the way they applauded when I crushed, broke, stabbed, and tore my way through the enemies of our people. They are silent now. Watching.

The human is small and weak and filthy, and wounded from previous encounters. I shouldn't truly call her an animal. Animals are survivors. This creature is not.

T *arni*
Three days ago....

My ship is on course to land at Colony Alpha. I have been dispatched from Colonial HQ with the brief to act as envoy. That means pretty dresses, expensive perfume, and very good makeup.

The autopilot is engaged in the mundane task of flying, and I am doing the much more interesting job of getting dressed up. There is a stunning golden gown I intend to wear down the gangway when I land. The first three days are scheduled to be a nonstop diplomatic party. I am being honored by the Colony, and by the Colonial organization as a whole.

The planet is currently known as *Savage Prime*. A better name will be decided when it is properly tamed. Savage refers to the species of alien that lives there. They are sentient, muscular, and sharp of fang, so I hear. As an envoy, I will not be expected to interact with them.

I look at myself in the mirror. The golden dress is gorgeous, clinging to every curve in just the right way, barely leaving anything to the imagination. I have made my face up with a truly astonishing amount of foundation and contour, cat-eye wings of eyeliner, and bright red lipstick. It's a very classic, very dramatic look.

The Colony, sometimes referred to as Colonial Forces, is a private organization of human settlers willing to go places others will not. The Colony has settled over a hundred planets

previously believed to be uninhabitable by humans due to hostile previous inhabitants. We have ways of subduing almost any kind of native creature. But sometimes, we just like to have fun.

I am too busy admiring myself in the mirror to notice when the ship first starts to fall. We entered orbit about three hours ago, and there should be ten or so more hours until I land, feather soft, at Colony Alpha.

It's a bright flash of light outside that alerts me to the fact that the ship and I just passed through an atmospheric boundary, which means we are no longer in orbit. Gravity has taken hold, and it is doing what gravity does best.

The instruments on the bridge confirm my suspicions. The ship is falling. Not crashing, because that would indicate that there was some apparent malfunction, and the ship would sound alerts and alarms. None of those have been activated. The ship seems quite happy to careen toward the ground. If not for the atmospheric flash, the first I would have known about it was when I was suddenly turned into human paste against the planet's face.

I hit the emergency button, a big red hexagon on the console. It does not seem to do anything.

I hit it three more times in quick succession.

The planet below is getting bigger by the second. I am about to crash nose-first at terminal fucking velocity.

There are manual controls on this ship. They are not designed to be used by the passenger, but are there for the techs to use when maneuvering the craft around for maintenance and repairs. The controls are nothing more than a flight stick and pedals tucked away underneath the base of the console.

I hike my gown up and slide into the pilot's seat. Grabbing the flight stick, I pull back hard, trying to bring the nose of the craft up and away from the ground. I have to break this momentum. I have to get this thing to fly rather than to fall. If we can get back into orbit around this planet, that will keep me safe until I can get help.

But we're already too low, way past orbital height. As the nose comes up, we go from a fall to a glide, passing over dense forest. I haven't averted disaster, but I have slowed it down slightly.

There is a life pod of sorts on the bridge. It's designed to withstand asteroidal impacts and weapons fire. It's basically a big ball of cotton wool for humans. I rush for it as the front and side windows of the ship reveal an uncomfortably close view of terrain, tops of trees whipping past the glass.

I belt myself in the safety zone with seconds to spare and brace for impact.

The feeling when the ship hits the ground is like no other. It is a jolt hard enough to make every single molecule in my body rattle. Fortunately, I managed to get it to slide rather than simply crash, coming in at a shallow enough angle that we are more like a stone skipping across water than a stone being smashed directly into my face.

I stay conscious. I don't know how. Bits of the ship are coming off, scattering into alien terrain. I can hear them being ripped off by rocks and other elements. When I open my eyes, I see the outer skin of the hull peeling off around me. The main structure is still intact as we hit something very large and hard, big enough to spin the ship around with its momentum. Now I am going sideways, my hair whipping across my face. The sound a ship makes when it is being deconstructed by force is enough to destroy all sense of hearing.

I don't hear it when we hit the mountain. I don't notice anything. One moment I am screaming along with the rest of the ship, and the next we are all completely silent.

An indeterminate amount of time later...

I open my eyes.

My dress is ripped almost completely off my body. My underwear is still in place, and my comfy, fuzzy white boots are still on my feet. My footwear has stayed on. That's the only bright sign so far.

There is almost nothing left of the ship, and absolutely nothing left of the supplies. I find myself suspended in the remnants of the framing of the fuselage. Most of the strapping and all of the padding has broken away or exploded in the crash. When I move, I tumble out of the harness and onto the rocky ground below.

“I’m alive,” I mumble to myself.

“I’M ALIVE!” I repeat it louder, defiantly. It does not feel like I am supposed to be alive. It feels like I’m supposed to be a smear across the planet. “HELL YEAH! You see that? You see what happens when you try to kill me with accidents? It doesn’t work! I’m a SURVIVOR, baby!”

This surge of energy is adrenaline, my body’s response to chaos and carnage. It’s another system designed to keep me alive, just like the straps and the padding, except it’s straps and padding for the inside of you.

I need food, I need water, and I need more clothing. I need shelter, and I need some way to communicate with the outside world. My mind is perfectly clear, but I can tell I am hungry, thirsty, sunburned, and cold. I’ve been exposed to the elements for some time. It must have taken me a while to come around.

Looking back, I can see wreckage strewn through a jungle broken by the ship. The trees and foliage of this planet did a good job of slowing us down. They’re almost certainly the reason I’m alive. I figure if I pick back through the wreckage, I’ll find supplies.

It’s going to be okay. I’m going to make it.

Twenty-four hours later...

It’s not okay. I’m not going to make it.

I have managed to drink a little water that I found in a puddle. I know you’re not supposed to drink raw water, but I have found no other source and I do not dare leave the wreckage. If I don’t stay here, there’s no way they’ll ever find me. I can only assume as an envoy, rescue is imminent.

I can’t find anything to eat. I am literally starving, in addition to being traumatized and wounded. The initial adrenaline

surge has long worn off, and it has left me aching and afraid.

And then I see him.

The Savage.

He has impressive horns emerging from thick, dark hair tied in a braid behind his head, and a big, bulky green body. Yes, he's probably going to be somewhat hostile to a human, but I am a damsel in distress and that has to count for something.

He looks big and strong. He is moving past the wreckage of the ship, paying it no mind, acting as if neither it nor me exists.

I immediately decide to throw myself on his mercy. There is a chance he will kill me, but there is a one hundred percent certainty that this planet is hostile and will kill me. He is my only chance to survive, and I cling to the very idea of him.

“HELLO!? HELP!”

He doesn't turn around. He doesn't even glance at me. He just keeps moving.

My cries don't really sound like words. My throat is dry, and my voice is hoarse, and it is traveling to him across the valley. I thought he was going through the wreckage, maybe a scavenger, but he's not interested in it or me.

His legs are long, and he is strong. I would have had trouble keeping up with him even if I was at full health, but in my wounded state I keep falling behind.

I can't give up. I have to follow him. He's a lifeline.

I keep crying out, keep gasping for aid, but my words are getting less and less coherent every time I cry out and eventually the sounds I make prove to be my downfall.

Finally, the alien male stops and turns toward me, spinning around with vicious gold eyes. He has two dark pupils, narrowed in a way that really feels like not a good thing for me.

He roars at me, displaying terrifying fangs, like those of a lion or an orc. He is green, a deep chlorophyll color. His muscles

trammel his body like massive snakes. There is something plantlike about him, but there is something more viciously, dangerously animal in his bearing. I don't know anything about the life on this planet, but I am learning quickly.

I retreat as hastily as I can, withdrawing back into the bushes. I don't have the strength to run, and I definitely have no way to fight a creature like him. If he comes after me, I'm done for.

But he doesn't.

He doesn't want to hurt me. He just wants me to leave him alone. Having snarled at me, he turns around and keeps walking.

I hesitate for all of thirty seconds, then keep following, but silently now. What else can I do? I have now left the shelter of the ship, and I know I will not be able to survive the open elements of this world. This much greenery suggests heavy rain showers. Just because they haven't happened yet, doesn't mean they won't.

I keep following him because I have to. Hour after hour, day after day. At one point, he drops a scrap of food, a thick chunk of dried meat. I fall upon it and devour it. It tastes like life. I don't know if he intended that kindness, but he just extended my potential survival time by several hours.

This was the right call, even if he is hostile. He just provided the only sustenance I have gotten on this planet since landing here.

With my decision to follow renewed, I stay on his trail. I keep back so he doesn't see me. He is moving at a steady walk, which is good for me, though it does mean I occasionally have to limp-sprint to keep up. He knows where he is going, and soon his path joins up with a stream, which means now I have water.

I watch him pluck various berries and leaves, and dig roots up from the ground, and I gather the same. There's no guaranteeing that they are safe for me as they are for him, but I don't have the luxury of a product label. All I can do is nibble a little and then wait to see if I feel sick or not.

I feel sick a lot over those first couple of days, but I am getting calories, and I am starting to realize that there are things I can eat. There are leafy vegetables with thick, starchy roots, and I can stomach them. They are better cooked, I learn when I quickly forage through his camp, which I do every morning after he leaves.

I start to get comfortable with this routine of being his shadow. I am being driven by very basic instincts now. I know he's hostile. I know he doesn't want me near him, but hunger is a powerful motivator.

One night, I simply cannot wait until the next day. I wait until he falls asleep and then I creep in and help myself to the little scraps of food he didn't finish. Probably the food he intended to eat for breakfast. It is the first cooked meal I have had since the crash, and it makes me feel happy and sleepy. Very sleepy.

I crawl away from him and the fire and into the bushes, curling up a few feet from him, very well fed. I tell myself I'll stay alert. I won't let myself sleep too long.



I wake up to the wet smell of an extinguished fire, alone. Oh no. I took his breakfast and now he has moved on without making any of the usual sounds that wake me.

It is with the greatest of relief that I see him going down a hill in the distance. He's quite a way ahead of me, so I run to catch up and stay in his wake.

I slept so close to him last night. There was every chance he might have seen me. The bushes that seemed to provide a lot of cover in the night did not do much in the light of day at all.

He didn't kill me. He didn't hurt me. He let me sleep. He also left me to die, but I don't know if he understands the stakes here. I don't know how sentient he is. They do call these creatures savages, after all. He is as much of a mystery to me as I am to him.



This goes on for several days. I stay out of his way, but I stay close. I become accustomed to crouching in the flickering camp light next to him, keeping an eye on him to make sure that he is still asleep. He's so large. At least six foot five tall, and twice as broad as any human man. The white tips of his lower fangs extend up over his upper lip in a way that's kind of cute.

He is handsome. He has the only face I have to look at here, and I find myself looking at it a lot. Gazing at it, really. I find myself imagining what conversations we might have if we spoke the same language. I even imagine what it might be like for him to smile at me.

None of that ever happens. His face is impassive in his sleep, and I am aware that I am to him like a stray kitten following a hostile hunter. I'm dependent and weak and an unwanted problem.

I make sure not to fall asleep near his fire again, and I make extra sure never to sleep later than him. I sleep after he sleeps, and I wake before he wakes. I follow his every breath, avoid his every glance, spare myself his every glare. I live distant from him, but with him.

Fssst fssst fssst...

I hear a light rubbing sound, gossamer wings rubbing together. It doesn't sound like a threat, but I sense a blur of motion, and I am knocked off my feet before I realize what is happening. Sharp fangs sink into my shoulder. I scream, because I am being eaten, and like all prey I am made to shriek that horror to the world.

Finally, he comes to my rescue.

Kail

The human animal is already losing consciousness as I pack her wounds with healing herbs and set her carefully next to the fire. She is unaware of my actions as I remove the scraps of fabric clinging to her. She might call them clothing. They are of no use in protecting her against the elements, and their filthy condition is likely to cause or spread infection.

Having cleaned and dressed her wounds, I turn my attention to washing her body. She has a soft and curvy frame, paler where the sun has not touched her. She is small, five foot six at the very most. Her hair is dark and curly and falls about her shoulders in a mass of ringlets. She is not very young, nor is she very old. Nothing about her is built to withstand heavy impacts or wild places, and yet until she met the mantid, she had done both.

I find myself admiring her strength of will, for that is all she has to protect her. She followed me doggedly, even when I was aggressive and hostile, having no sense of her as anything other than an animal among animals.

It might have been a greater kindness simply to put her out of her misery, but I have embarked on another course of action, and now it is too late to kill her. I've softened toward her enough to consider her more than an animal, and killing her now, even for mercy, would be murder. I am many things, but I am not a murderer.

I have a spare piece of clothing with me. It is too big for her, but I put it over her anyway, a shirt that fits like a dress, held in place with a belt corded from fibrous leaves.

She is insensate for days, entirely exhausted from her ordeal and also sedated with my herbal concoctions. The same leaves that stave off infection from her wounds send soothing sensations through her body.

In that time, I dress her like I would a doll, using the local flora and fauna to create shoes and a cloak. I fabricate leggings from remnants of my own supplies, and from what I reclaimed from what must have been her ship. I make sure she is covered and warm and fed, and I wait to see if she pulls through or if I have constructed a funerary outfit.

She is company, even though she is not conscious. I find myself telling her about the rigors of travel, the trials I have undergone to be here.

I feel a certain guilt as I do. She is of the same species as my enemies. She is one of them. My family is quiet inside my mind as I speak to her rather than them. Sometimes it feels as though I am dishonoring their memory, but then I remember talking to her is the same as talking to a rock.



“Hello.”

I nearly jump out of my skin when she suddenly speaks after days of being completely unconscious. I clutch my spear, which I had been in the process of sharpening, and look over at her. She has sat up, looking pale, but very grateful.

“Thank you for saving my life,” she says. “I’m Tarni.”

I do not know what to say in return. She is speaking my language, which means she was educated in the ways of my people. Only the colonists do that.

Saying nothing, I look at her. She fills the empty space with more words almost immediately.

“I was supposed to be an envoy to Colony Alpha,” she says. “But my ship crashed.”

Colony Alpha no longer exists. I do not tell her that. This animal is not only human. She is from an enemy faction. She is the enemy.

“I have no right to ask for your help. But will you take me there? I could make sure you are well compensated.”

“Yes,” I say. “I will take you.”

Colony Alpha is in ashes. Every person there has been slaughtered. They deserved it. If she was going there, she possibly deserves it too. If she wants to go there, I will take her there. Then we will see what fortune has in store, vengeance and fate being much the same thing.

“Thank you.” She smiles gratefully.

I am confused. She should recognize me as her enemy, but she seems to have absolutely no awareness of that. She speaks to me with a grateful tone.

“Why are you going to Colony Alpha?”

“Oh. I’m the envoy.” She smiles, bright and happy, as if that is a good thing.

“What does the envoy do?”

“I’m just generally fabulous.”

I stare at her, assuming it is some kind of joke. The smile remains on her face, a light of genuine response. She is either stupid or toying with me — or both, or more terrifyingly, neither.

“Colony Alpha needed someone generally fabulous?”

“For morale. I sing and I dance, and I tell stories. The men there need entertaining.”

That makes sense. They’ve sent this pretty young thing off to be used by the feral, brutal soldier males. I doubt they would have listened to her stories, and the only singing she would have done would have been more like screaming.

She is lost. A stray. I have no use for her, and I cannot take her home with me, for I no longer have a home. But I can let her stay for the moment, and I can show her the ashes of her colony, and I can tell her why they are ashes.

“What are you doing out here?” She turns her curiosity on me.

“I am surviving.”

Those three words tell her all she needs to know. Unlike this human, I do not blather my business to the first enemy I meet in the forest.

“Well,” she says, after a brief moment of awkwardness has extended between us. “I guess I am surviving too. Only just, though. I never took any courses or read any books about making it in the wild. I’m more of a civilized girl, you know? Baths, and perfumes, and make up. Thank you, by the way, for making me these clothes.”

I inspect her features. They appear different now she is awake and speaking. She has a round face, dark eyes and lashes, a cascade of curling brown hair into which golden streaks have been woven. I believe her when she says she knows nothing about making it in the wild.

“You don’t talk much,” she observes. “I probably talk too much. I tried to talk to you, but you growled at me, so I’ve been keeping my distance, do you want me to keep keeping my distance? I can stay back. Away from you.”

T *arni*

He looks at me with that intimidating golden gaze. He is very hard to read. Very taciturn, very self-contained. The jutting teeth of his lower jaw and the sharp of the upper visible when he curls his upper lip or opens his mouth tell me that he was crafted by nature to be a predator. I should be afraid, but I am so used to not being afraid when I should be that I think I might have forgotten how.

“Staying away from me is a good idea,” he says. “But if you are going to survive, you need to stay close. You were almost

consumed by a mantid. You are small enough and soft enough to be prey for most of this planet.”

I nod hurriedly, having experienced that firsthand.

“Colony Alpha is a bastion of civilization in the alien wild,” I tell him. “I was never meant to be out here.”

His upper lip curls with distaste when I mention Colony Alpha. As he is native to this planet, he sees me as an invader. I’m not a very good invader, but still.

I have to make him like me. If he decides he is tired of me, or if I annoy him, or worse, anger him, he could leave me here to die. I have to work out how to ingratiate myself to him.

“Stay close,” he says. “Do as you are told.”

“Yes, sir.” I nod quickly, and glance away, making a show of submission. I get the vibe that is what he is into. I cannot risk annoying him in any way. My survival literally depends on his ability to tolerate me.



The next day, we move. My wounds are healed enough to allow me to walk, but it is hard to pretend every step does not hurt. I do my best to hide that fact. I do not want him becoming impatient with me, or worse, angry.

But he stops less than an hour into our march, and he turns to me. He is so much taller than I am, and when he looks down at me with those savage golden eyes, I feel a primal quiver run through every part of me.

“There is something wrong with you.”

“No,” I lie through my teeth, not wanting him to think me any weaker and inconvenient than he already does.

“Yes,” he replies, taking hold of me. One of his big hands closes around my upper arm. The other goes to work on my attire. He strips me out of my clothing as if I am a doll or a toy, not a creature with sentience, preference, or any kinds of rights at all.

I blush furiously as my naked body comes into his view. I know he must have seen me nude before. When I woke up in his camp, I had been washed, bandaged, and dressed. But it is different to find myself fully conscious, stripped, and being handled like a troublesome pet.

“Your wound is bleeding,” he growls.

“I’m sorry!”

The look he shoots me has a brief note of confusion in it, like he doesn’t know why I just apologized. Do I know why I just apologized? I feel like I have done something wrong. I feel small and insecure, and afraid.

“We will have to stop,” he says. “You should have told me you were in pain.”

“I didn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Leaving a trail of blood for predators to follow inconveniences me,” he says in return. “Sit down.”

I feel so fucking guilty. Tears start to prick my eyes, and as he starts to work on re-bandaging the wound on my side, they start to flow. I do my best to keep them silent and contained, but tears have a way of bursting their banks, and this is what these ones do, cascading down my cheeks and turning to sobs.

His hands still. He looks at me in confusion, or perhaps, with suspicion.

“Why are you crying? You did not cry when you were injured, or when you followed me through the bush, when I growled at you to leave me alone... why cry now?”

His way of phrasing the question is harsh, but I think he really wants to know.

“I feel bad. I know you want to move, and you told me... I had to stay close, and I can’t. I can barely keep up with you. I’m disappointing you.”

K *ail*

She cries because she feels she has let me down. Those tears are as sweet as they are unnecessary.

“You can’t let me down, Tarni,” I tell her. “I have no expectations of you. You’re small and weak, and...” I search for another word to aptly describe her innate lack of survival skills. “Human.”

She looks at me, and then she laughs, a smile breaking through the tears, making them stop.

“You, sir, are no diplomat.”

At least she is not crying any more. I do not like her tears. They make me feel a strange blend of angry and soft. Angry at whatever has made her cry. Soft toward her. I cannot afford these kinds of emotions. They do not belong to humans. They belong to family.

“Tell me if you are in pain,” I order. “I will not drag you through the forest.”

I cannot ask her to walk, and yet I want to keep moving. I want to get to Alpha Colony as much as she does, but for very different reasons. I want to show her the wreckage of her world. I want to make an example of her. I want to...

There is only one thing for it.

“I am going to carry you on my back,” I say, already swinging her around. Her arms wrap around my neck and shoulders, even as she protests.

“I’m too heavy!”

“You barely weigh anything.”

There’s a pause from her as I start walking. I can feel she has something else to say. Humans always have something to say.

“Uhm, sir?”

“What?”

“What is your name?”

I hesitate before giving it.

“Kail.”

T *arni*

I feel his powerful body moving beneath me. We are making much better time now, and as he predicted, my weight seems to make no difference to him at all.

He is dangerous. I know that. He can save my life, or he can end it, and it is at his whim. I have to watch myself, my every word, my every thought. If he so much as catches a wisp of something he does not like, he could easily turn from rescuer to destroyer.

For now, he has no interest in hurting me. He is saving me with every step, taking me closer to Colony Alpha. I close my eyes, relaxing against him and into him. The heat from his body soaks out of his frame, through the clothing he made me, and into my skin. We are moving over flat ground now, out of the forest and into the open plains. That makes his gait even and rolling and soothing. I relax against him and into him. I let him bear my weight. I fall asleep.

K *ail*

She is a pleasant weight on my back and shoulders.

I have been lonely for some time, as well as alone. Perhaps that is why I did not kill her when I should have. Perhaps I am softer than I imagine. Or maybe not all humans are monsters.

Maybe I could keep this one. Love this one. Maybe taking her would go some way toward making up for all the bloodshed

between our people. She seems innocent of it, but she bears some responsibility for the sin regardless.

She has turned my wandering into a journey. She has transformed my impotent rage into a mission. I have much to be grateful to her for, though she will likely pay the price for that gratitude in pain.

When I decide to make camp for the evening, I lie her down gently on the grass. She is still asleep, exhausted. Humans do not recover from wounds easily. They are not difficult to kill, at least, not physically. Their minds make them dangerous, their ability to strategize and deceive.

I tell myself I have to be careful, even as I look at the roundness of her face and the sweetness of her features. She exudes innocence.

I feel a pull of desire, simple animal lust. My tribe forbids us from mating with any creature that is not of our kind, but my tribe is not here, and she is. Soft and curled up in clothing of my making, completely vulnerable and utterly mine. I remember her body very well, the soft, generous curves, the curling hair surrounding a soft slit. I did not inspect further, but I know enough about humans to know that is her mating channel. I wonder how she would feel, stretched around my cock. I wonder if she would wail with pleasure or cry out in fear. I wonder which would be more satisfying to me. Both hold their allure.

Her eyes flutter open, and a small smile establishes itself on her face. She is happy to see me. Her reaction makes me happy in turn, though I do not smile easily.

“I must have fallen asleep.”

Humans enjoy stating the obvious by way of making conversation.

“Yes,” I say, joining in the fun. “You fell asleep.”

She is still smiling. I feel myself throbbing beneath my codpiece. Now that the thought of being inside her has established itself in my mind, I find it hard to let it go.

There is an answering glint in her eye, if I am not mistaken. She receives and echoes my desire. She must have been lonely too. Must have been frightened. Maybe she still is.

She looks around, seeing where we have stopped. A large boulder sits in the middle of grassland. There are many others like it, giant scree from an ancient flood.

“Where are we?”

“These are the boulder lands,” I tell her.

“Oh. Good name. Descriptive,” she says. “Where do they all come from?”

“My tribe says the gods hurled them at one another in the distant past.”

“Kind of like a snowball fight but with rocks? I’ve had one or two of those in my time. Don’t recommend them. High risk of concussion. And who needs a god with a concussion?”

She prattles happily, smiling at me as if she hopes I enjoy her commentary. I am very surprised to find that I actually do.

My first impression of this human was that she had no survival skills, that her ongoing existence was a matter of luck. I wonder if I wasn’t mistaken about that. She clings to life with such tenacity, doing what she must in spite of the relative frailty of her form.

“Stay here,” I tell her. “I must hunt for fresh protein. We need it.”

“Can I help?”

“You can help by staying still,” I tell her. “And doing as you are told.”

T *arni*

He leaves, disappearing among the boulders. This place is something like a maze of large circular stone walls. I wonder if he chose it because it is sheltered, or because it would be hard for me to run away here.

Does he care if I run? I have to keep reminding myself that I am not his prisoner. I came with him willingly, and I am staying with him by choice. He does not need to tell me to stay here. Or maybe he does. Maybe he is afraid I will try to follow him again. That is how we met, me traipsing after him, him growling at me to keep me away.

I decide to stay, to be obedient to his wishes. I want to earn his trust. I want him to see me as an ally, a friend. Maybe more.

My mind drifts to the powerful musculature of his body. He is terribly beautiful, and he is my rescuer. It would be more strange if I did not feel any amorous or romantic feelings for him, I tell myself. I don't have to fight my instincts. He's not going to hurt me. Is he?

He might hurt me.

That thought makes the desire hotter, fresher, more intense. There's something slightly broken inside me that thrills to the idea of a dangerous mate, someone literally inhuman. If Kail were to take me, to mate me, to *fuck* me, it would be wrong. On so many levels.

So why am I getting wet just thinking about it? Why am I squeezing my thighs together, sliding my hand underneath my shirt and down between my legs and finding the tight little bud of my sex.

It is already wet and slick, because my desire for Kail is nearly entirely insatiable. I've been thinking about him from the moment I first caught him as a flash of green muscle and hope through the wreckage of my ship.

Kail is life. Kail is everything. I must do what he says, I must follow in his footsteps, and I must obey him entirely.

These thoughts make arousal wind ever more intensely through my body. I imagine myself submitting to him in all ways, him taking me over and over, filling me with his alien seed. Using no protection.

I've always used barriers and drugs to tamp down my body's potential for pregnancy when sleeping with men. With Kail I

won't have to. There is no chance of conception between his species and mine. I know, because I checked before I came.

Was this dirty little fantasy hiding away in my psyche waiting to come out? I know I never consciously thought about fucking an alien before, but I am good at compartmentalizing. I only allow thoughts out when they're useful, when they make the right kind of expressions dash over my face. I know how to make myself be what I need to be, but when you fuck someone, those veils tend to slide away.

That's another reason sex with Kail would be dangerous.

It would also be incredibly hot.

I crave the vulnerability he makes me feel. My position is precarious, my safety far from guaranteed, but there are parts of me still holding back. I could sink lower. I could go deeper. I could let him see all of me, own all of me.

My fingers are strumming my pussy as I think these perverse, impossible thoughts. It's not just the idea of his dick inside me that makes me hot. It's the idea of his rough alien mind ripping mine apart too.

Kail is intelligent. I can tell by the way he searches my eyes with his, the way he anticipates my behavior and that of the predators and wild things that roam these lands. He has his own hidden thoughts. I can feel them as surely as I can feel my own.

I wonder what would happen if we were both open with each other. I wonder what chaos would unfold, what violence would ensue. I know it would be bad. I can imagine him, furious, primal....

I am so fucking close to coming, right on the very verge of release. I can feel the muscles in my legs starting to tremble with the buildup of lactic acid, my breath is coming in short gasps. I'm closed against the world, paying no attention to my surroundings. Everything is about me, the interior sensations demanding release. They are driving me now, my desire making me a puppet to my own libido.

Kail

There is a strange noise coming from the place I left my human. I pick up the pace, afraid she may have run into some kind of trouble. Perhaps a predator has located her. I should not have left her alone. She is not safe on her own.

There are little grunts, groans, even moans. Are these the sounds of consumption? Are the beasts already feeding on her?

Rounding the last large stone, I come face to face with the source of the grunts. There are no predators. There is just my human, playing with herself.

Her hand is working her sex with an urgency that leaves her face flushed pink, her head tilted back, her eyes half closed. It is a truly beautiful sight, one that makes me immediately rock hard.

It would be so easy to rush in, pick her up, spread her thighs and rut her. But this is a chance for true domination, a kind of control that will be lost if I fall into the same trap of lust.

I clear my throat. Her eyes fly open. I see pure humiliation and panic flash across her face.

“Oh my gosh!” She gasps, pulling her hand out of her pants and staring at me with an absolutely horrified expression.

“Don’t stop,” I order. “Keep going. Show me what you were doing.”

The blush becomes even more intensely red. “I... it’s... I was itchy...”

“You’re a better liar than that,” I tell her. “Show me how you were making your pretty little human cunt come.”

“Oh my...” She hesitates, but we have established our relative positions well by this point. I order, she obeys. Even in this. *Especially* in this.

She returns to the task of rubbing her pussy, but much more slowly and cautiously, without any of the reckless sexual abandon of earlier.

“Take the leggings off. I want to see what you are doing.”

I want to know how she pleasures her cunt. I want to know so I can try the same techniques later.

She blushes and obeys, because she wants me to think she is obedient, and the only way to make me think she is obedient in this case is to do as she is told.

She is wet. She is spread. Her lower lips swell and part naturally, welcoming in the cock her body craves. That will be my cock one day, but not now. Right now, I want her to feel like the filthy little animal she is.

Her orgasm is gasped and panted, squirming against a rock in the grass. Humans like to think they are separate from nature, but in this instant, she is absolutely one with it.

“Good girl.”

A smile graces her face. She is so pleased to have earned my praise I think I could make her make herself come and come again with no motivation other than the hope for my praise.

T arni

In the aftermath of my orgasm, I have no idea what to do with myself. Kail has now seen me in the filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest way possible. A veil has been swept away and it is not coming back. We’ve crossed a line.

Kail kneels, dropping two small rabbits on the ground. He sets about starting a fire, acting as if nothing special has happened. I am left to close my legs and pull my leggings up and try to compose myself.

“It’s good for you to climax,” he says as he works on the fire. “Burns negative energies in the body, clears the way for healthier ones.”

“So that was just about... health?”

He raises his head, catching my eyes with his golden gaze. “What did you want it to be about?”

“I don’t know,” I squeak, taking refuge in my blushes. I am glad for them, because they make it easy to hide my filthy thoughts and my less than stellar intentions. I lower my head and hide my face and hope like hell he didn’t see too much inside my head. I hope he was focused between my thighs.

He guts and skins the rabbit-like creatures with a practiced hand and a very sharp blade. It takes about fifteen minutes for the smell of cooking animal to fill the air and make my mouth water.

Kail is an excellent provider and protector. I am very lucky he found me. Had it been another of his kind, I might have been killed on sight. Or I might have been ravaged against my will and then killed. Or I might have been dragged across the country, being repeatedly ravaged. Point being, there’s not that much mercy in the universe, but Kail is showing me mercy and I know enough about life to be grateful for that.

Kail

I watch as the human eats the food I caught and cooked for her, making sounds and claims of gratitude. They are genuine. She is hungry, weak, and vulnerable.

I did not merely bring back rabbits. I also brought back a sturdy, straight sapling that I intend to turn into a spear. The area ahead is well known for large feline predators. I do not intend on becoming their prey.

“We are about to enter a dangerous region,” I tell her. “You must stay very close to me as we pass through it.”

She nods, more concerned with her ongoing embarrassment than the information I am imparting. In many ways, humans prefer death to humiliation. It shows in some of their brutal and perverse treatment of prisoners.

The humans have caught our kind before, charging them with crimes they believe to be valid. Crimes like living in our native lands and attempting to defend them from the colonizers. When it comes to humans, there is no crime greater than occupying territory they intend to steal.

Rage flashes through me. I work to suppress it. I do not want to frighten the one before me. She is human, but she did not come here with military intent. She is just a woman — not that the humans showed our women and children any mercy. Does she know that? Is she aware of the crimes her species has committed against mine? She does not seem to know anything at all.

My feelings toward this human are as complex as they are intense. I want to punish her for the sins of her people. I want her to make amends for their crimes. But I also want to protect her, even from my own brutish instincts.

Humans are animals, and that means they can be tamed and trained. If I make her mine, if I bend her to my will, then she will be absolved of the responsibility belonging to her people.

That is what I tell myself as I carve my spear into a sharp point, taking care not to weaken the tip too much by making it too small. This is an instrument to be used against an apex predator. I need to focus on the dangers that will assail us from the exterior. I cannot waste my time and energy being distracted by hating humans. Not if I want to survive. Certainly not if I want her to survive.



She sleeps near me that night, attempting to wriggle closer to me in the shadows of the evening. I can smell her arousal. The orgasm she strummed out in front of me is not enough to satisfy her. She needs cock, and like any female animal in heat, she has selected the cock she wants.

Mine.

It gives me some pleasure to deny her, though I do not enjoy denying myself. I remind myself that I am merely waiting until the time is right, until my flesh inside her has meaning beyond the sating of simple lust.

Tonight, I feel her squirm and wriggle and I take satisfaction. And sleep.

The next day, we travel through the boulder lands, right to the very edge of the next distinct biome. I feel a chill. My people believe this to be a cursed land. In distinct opposition to the boulder fields that grow with lush grass amid the rocks, my human and I now stare across a vast white plain.

“Is that sand?”

It is not sand.

“These are fields of bone.”

Bleached by the sun and crushed to powder with age and the passing of predators and prey alike, occasionally dotted with the great bone constructions of mega creatures long extinct, rib cages and leviathan skulls provide the only shelter along what was once a riverbed but is now bone dry.

“It’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” she breathes. “And the most dangerous. Are those...”

She points out into the bone fields, where a track of large, predatory paws is imprinted in the fine, calcium-rich ground.

“Do those belong to a predator?”

My human is quick to recognize danger.

“These lands are home to large cats. The cats are very large and very dangerous. Fortunately, they are also few and far between.”

“An environment can only handle so many apex predators,” she says, almost more to herself than me. Then she catches my eye, and as always when she is on the verge of saying something, she falls silent. This human does not want to be known.

“Yes. We will do our very best to avoid them. They hunt at night, so we will sleep during the day and move at night. It will be cold. We will not have a fire, nor will we be able to eat until the sun has risen. The smell of food will attract them.”

“How long will it take to cross the bone field?”

“Three days going at my speed. You will keep up as best you can, and when you can no longer follow, I will carry you. It is

best if I have my arms free, however.”

“I’ll keep up,” she promises.

It is a promise she will not be able to keep, but humans like to make such promises to signal their willingness to try. I do not respond.

“We will retreat to a safe distance and make one last camp among the boulders,” I tell her. “And we will eat well. We will need our energy.”

I do not tell her about the curse or the significance of this place to my people. She does not need to know these things. All she needs to know are the details of the physical danger.



When we have fed, I decide to hunt. Leaving Tarni on her own feels dangerous and wrong. She is so small, barely a mouthful for one of these giant cats. I cannot leave her without any protection.

“I will leave you my spear to protect you,” I say. “The sharp end goes into the attacker, if one should arrive.”

She nods, her eyes wide. She is afraid. She does not like to be away from me. She craves closeness. She takes comfort in my presence. I know these things and they make me both happy and furious.

“I am going to see what I can get for our dinner.”

Her light fingers wrap around the shaft of the staff, barely able to grip it properly. The odds of her being able to use it effectively are close to none.



I go and hunt, but I am tormented. We are getting ever closer to the location of Colony Alpha and the climax of this connection. When she sees the wreckage, she will know that her people have been routed and destroyed. She will feel pain,

deep emotional anguish. I will have revenge of a kind, but at what cost? And to what end?

Distracted by my thoughts of lust and revenge, each chasing the other and doing battle for the territory of my heart, I fail to notice that I am being tracked home.

The cat moves completely silently, large paws moving across the bone lands. I should feel its primal predatory gaze, but I feel nothing beside the inside of my head.

The beast flies at me. I see the shadow coming over me. I know in an instant that these are my final moments. The bones of my human and me will lie at the border of this bone field along with the many belonging to other unwary travelers.

SSCHWOOP!

A spear is thrust at the very last second, finding the throat of the creature with the accuracy of a seasoned hunter. It impales itself with the force of its own powerful leap. The same energy designed to kill me was his undoing. A gush of blood explodes from the spear wound, coating me from head to toe. It would be a great honor, if not for the fact that I have not claimed the creature's life. That honor belongs to a greater warrior than I.

I turn and see the human behind me, holding the spear in both hands. She did not bear the weight of the creature, because she had the sense to let the end of the spear slam against the bone ground. The weight of the creature was its own undoing.

For a brief, brilliant moment, I see the human as she has tried so hard to stop me from seeing her. I see her strong. I see her powerful. I see her ruthless and unafraid. I see an entirely different person.

She drops her gaze, lowers her head, and rounds her shoulders as soon as I make eye contact with her, hiding all those things.

“A... are you alright?”

“Yes,” I say. “You saved my life, human.”

She gives a little shrug. “I owed you. You've saved my life a hundred times at least.”

She is downplaying this moment, this glorious kill. I have never seen a single strike so perfectly placed. Perhaps it was chance, but I do not believe in chance. I think she is a warrior, whether she acknowledges it or not.

I do not press the issue, because I do not want to force her into the lies she will inevitably tell to try to hide her true nature from me, unaware that it shines through her in every breath she takes. The longer we spend together, the more I see of her.

I skin the creature and harvest as much of the meat as we can carry. This will nourish us all the way to alpha colony if dried. The big cat makes for a heavy pelt, and it will take many days of drying, but we are nearly out of the bone fields, and on the other side there are salt flats adjoining the ocean.

I had planned to rush toward Alpha Colony as fast as possible, but I intend to honor this kill and the hunter who brought it down. My feelings toward Tarni have been labile all this time, shifting, changing, deepening, and becoming more tender. Now they burst forth with gratitude.

“Tarni,” I say when she has finished the meal I prepared for the pair of us. “I would like to mate with you. Does that sound agreeable?”

She stares at me. “What does ‘mate with me’ mean?”

I need to be more clear. “I want to reward you and honor you. And I want to fuck you.”

“Oh,” she says. “Yes. I think I would like that.”

Our words are stiff and formal at first, but when I take her in my arms and press a careful kiss to her cheek, lips, and neck, and when I undo the bindings of the clothing I made for her when she was nothing but an animal to me, passion flares.

This has been between us from the beginning, a tension born in fear and hatred, now unleashed in physical passion. She tries to speak, but I cut her words off. I do not want to talk. When we talk we risk exposing ourselves, and I do not think either one of us is interested in the truth right now.

My clothing is removed, my body as naked as hers. She stares at me with incredulous eyes, running her tender fingers over

the large slabs of muscle. I am so much larger than her in every way, including my cock, which rises emerald green from the apex of my thighs in a thick and imposing erection.

“You are so big,” she marvels, wrapping both of her hands around my cock. She does not cover all of it even in a twin grasp. “You could kill me with this thing.”

“I will be careful,” I promise. “Is this what you imagined when you toyed with yourself yesterday? Did you imagine a big, savage cock to claim you?”

“Yes,” she admits, blushing furiously.

I can smell her arousal, and I know she is ready for me. She has been ready for some time, existing in a state of almost continuous desire. I have kept myself at a distance, not wanting to encourage this kind of bonding. After all, once we reach Colony Alpha...

She puts her lips to the head of my cock and all thoughts of the colony disappear.

She has ignited my mating fever, and I can no longer physically stand being without her. I need to be inside her body. I need to stretch her. I need to claim her.

I pick Tarni up and lay her down on the mossy ground beneath me. She spreads her legs, a dark and pretty down of hair failing to hide the pink chalice of her pussy. She is making this easy for me. Or perhaps she is just so eager to be mated, she does not care for displays of maidenly shame.

I can tell she is not a virgin. I can only imagine she has been used before. I will not only use her. I will take her. I lower my hips and let the imposing length of my cock press over her pussy lips, and up and over her belly, measuring the depth. It will not be possible to fully enter her. It would kill her. But I will be careful. I will give her everything she needs.

The way her eyes widen when the thick green head of my dick starts to stretch her is so beautiful I can barely stand to keep myself back. It is tempting to simply surge inside her. Every instinct I have demands I claim her. She is hotter and tighter than I imagined. But she can take me. She will take me.

I claim her in the mating press, her thighs bent back nearly double with her body, my cock surging inside her spread pussy with rough domination. She is mine. Mine with every tight squeezing motion of her slippery wet cunt.

She reaches up for me, holding onto my horns, using them as grips to keep herself in position as I fuck her with ruthless strokes, feeling her tight human walls gripping my savage cock with obvious eagerness.

I have wanted this since I first laid eyes on her broken body beneath the mantid. I loathed myself for the desire. I thought it was twisted, or perhaps even perverse. But this was the natural outcome of things. This was what destiny and instinct had in store for us.

Our first time is urgent and intense. I look deep into her eyes as I join with her, pinning her in place, my cock as deep as it can go inside her tight, squirming little hole. Her body is much weaker than mine, but she nevertheless grips me intensely, proving deep, satisfying stimulation.

Her breasts rise and fall with beautiful, soft undulations as she does her best to take me. I can see little moments of discomfort where her tightness gives her some pain, but she makes no effort to stop me. If anything, she spreads herself wider and offers herself even more deeply.

Before I know it, she is coming and I am following, two orgasms ripped from us by alien bodies. I pull free, sending arcs of emerald seed over her body and her stretched, sore pussy. I see her shudder as my seed splashes over her clit. She reaches down and rubs my cum into her pussy, and I feel my body react with another spurt of seed. It is the hottest, sweetest thing I have ever seen. She is ravenous for my cum in her pussy. She wants me. She needs me. And she will have me.



“I ’ll have to save your life more often,” Tarni says, flushed and satisfied. “Now what? Are we far from Colony Alpha?”

“Six weeks to tan this hide. We will stay here for six, perhaps seven weeks. When you arrive at Colony Alpha, it will be in the garb of the beast you slayed.”

I wonder for a moment if she plans to be impatient, but she smiles and seems happy enough to go along with my plan. I see the haunted expression in her gaze now, the woman behind the human. She is not ready to come out yet.



These are the last good, sunny days before we reach Colony Alpha. When that happens, our mutual pretense will fall away and we will have to be what we are. I am not looking forward to that day. It is better to be what we seem to be now, me, a savage, she a helpless stray.

We make love frequently. I avail myself of her body and she of mine. I use her and I know from the look in her eye that she is using me much the same.

Neither one of us has known much in the way of peace, I suspect. This trip in the wild is perhaps the last of our mutual journeys. Something important, special, and above all, rare, is coming to an end and neither one of us wants it to.

On these long days, Tarni amuses herself by playing in the sea, skimming her feet along the waves, flinging foam toward me occasionally in a rare display of playfulness. She has been so careful and so controlled with me, hiding herself all this time. There has been no room in her mind or heart for play. I love seeing this side of her. I will keep these memories forever.

Tarni

Kail smiles. His hair has been removed from its braid and hangs wet about his shoulders. He is naked. We both are. The salty tang of the sea hangs about my face, caught in my curls. Sun shines bright upon our skin, and the wind is at my back.

I am going to miss him when I get to Colony Alpha. I know he can't stay with me once we arrive. Everything will be different then. I will be human, he will be savage, and that will be all that anybody sees.

I want to tell him we don't have to go to Colony Alpha, but that isn't true. My journey ends there. I have to go. He has to go. We are drawn toward our final destination like two wind-up mechanical creatures scrambling along a preset path.

"Before we go," he says as we head out of the ocean as the day cools. "There is something I have made for you to replace your verdant clothes. Plants wither and die, but this will stay strong for the rest of your life. I hope you will keep it with you always and wear it now."

With that, he shows me what he has been working on, and keeping me away from. It is attire like his own, a tunic vest and a skirt, all made from the pelt of the giant cat. It is very finely made, stitched with obvious care, and tailored to fit my body. As I slide it on, I feel the hide snug against me like a second skin. He paid intimate attention to the shape of my body, and the clothing feels like an embrace.

He holds the beast's skull, similarly transformed and tanned with hide into the shape of a helmet.

"I have turned the head into a helmet, but it would be too large on you," he says. "Unfortunately, the size of a skull is the size of a skull."

"I want you to wear it," I say. "I want you to have something from this journey we've made together. I want you to remember me."

His expression softens. "I do not think I am capable of forgetting you, human."

He still won't use my name more often than not, but that's okay. His love language is skinned, tanned, and tailored prey. Kail is a savage, but in all the best ways.

"I mean I want you to remember me as I am now. When you... before I..."

I can't finish the sentence. I want to, but I know that doing so would be a betrayal of everything I have ever sworn to uphold.

"I just wish we could stay here forever. Like this."

"I want the same," Kail says. "But I promised to deliver you to Alpha Colony, and that is what I will do."

T *arni*

The journey to Colony Alpha is far too swift even with my dawdling and reluctance for what must surely be the end.

I smell the settlement before we arrive. It smells like death. I pretend not to notice it. I have to keep up the appearance of innocence. I thought I'd blown it when I killed the cat so it would not kill Kail. For a second, it was as though he saw all the way to the core of me.

We crest a ridge and there it is, laid out before us. The remnants of Colony Alpha. There is nothing left of the place besides the burned-out bones of structures that once stood proud, sheltering human colonists from the elements of an alien world.

I turn to Kail, misery pooling in my stomach. I knew this was how it all had to end, but I hoped in some secret corner of my being that there was another possible outcome.

“What happened?”

The words feel mechanical even as they fall out of my mouth. It is so obvious what happened. This place has been ransacked and destroyed by a savage. Kail himself moved through this place with spear and flame, rendering the high technology of my people completely impotent. He has studied our ways, finding methods to undermine our technologies. He rendered the soldiers entirely helpless with stick, stone, and fire. I feel a certain amount of admiration, as well as a sick realization that absolutely everything I was briefed about Kail was true.

Kail

“What happened?” I grind the words out. “Soldiers from this colony wiped out my entire family. So I returned and I brought the same destruction to them that they had brought to me.”

“Oh no.”

What an understatement that is, even gasped in horror, her hands clasped to her mouth.

“You did this all yourself? Nobody else?”

“There was nobody left to do it besides me. I am the last of my people. My line will die with me. First your species brought plague, then they brought war. I swear, as long as I draw breath, I will eradicate every single one of your kind. You call us savages. I call you animals. I am not solitary of my choosing. I am solitary because your people wiped out every one of mine, and because I returned the favor.”

“Are you going to kill me?” The question comes quivering out of her mouth.

“I should. It would be right.”

Tarni takes a deep, shuddering breath and closes her eyes.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

I cannot keep the surprise and incredulity out of my voice.

“I have owed my life to you since you saved me from the mantid. I have been dependent on you all this time. For shelter, for security, for protection. If you decide to end me, I can ask only that you do it swiftly. Anything else is too much to ask.”

I snarl, not because I intend to hurt her, but because I know I could never hurt her. She doesn't know or understand that. She throws herself on my mercy with the very real possibility of meeting her end, and she does it with grace and dignity.

She squeezes her eyes shut at the sound. She doesn't want to see me kill her.

"Open your eyes," I order. "I have no intention of hurting you."

"You don't?"

"My honor demands it, but my heart will not allow it. You said it yourself. You depend on me. To destroy a dependent is far less honorable than killing an enemy. You are helpless."

A very strange look passes over her features. She straightens her shoulders and looks at me with a new expression. One less innocent. One more determined.

"If I wasn't helpless? Would you kill me then?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if it turned out that I had been sent to track down an alien who had slaughtered Alpha Colony... and that I'd ingratiated myself to him, and allowed myself to be hurt and humiliated, so he might feel compelled to save me? So I could elicit a confession and bring him to justice?"

The emotional space between us opens up and the void we have been walking the border of swallows me whole.

I was so caught up in my own feelings of possible revenge, it never occurred to me that Tarni might have a motive just as ulterior as my own.

I feel in this moment the very same way I felt the second I felt the shadow of the cat pass over me. I have been in the presence of an apex predator, and I have been absolutely unaware. My life ticks away once more in a matter of seconds.

"You're surrounded, Kail."

She says it softly. Regretfully.

All hell breaks loose.

We were not alone. At least a hundred human soldiers emerge from various hiding places, beneath the ashes, and out of the burned out carcasses of buildings, from behind us in the trees,

seeming to come out of the clouds themselves as they are sent in on sheets of thin fabric and wind.

I look at Tarni.

“It’s okay if you kill me,” she says softly. “I’d understand. I don’t want to see what happens next.”

“HANDS ON YOUR HEAD, SAVAGE!”

There is no time to kill her, even if I wanted to. This trap was set perfectly and planned meticulously. She was the bait, and I fell for it.

T *arni*

The look Kail gave me when he was led away will stay with me forever. I am a Judas, the worst of the worst. What I just did was unforgivable on every human level — except the one that demanded I debase myself by betraying the creature I loved.

While Kail is taken away to die, I am marched off to be given praise. The destruction of Colony Alpha was not merely a tragic loss, it was also a shameful one. My commanders can handle tragedy, but embarrassment is completely intolerable.

I have not met any of these people before. I was deployed here from high command to hunt down a vicious savage and bring him to justice. I have been successful in that aim.

“Commander Rex,” a middle-aged man greets me with his name. He is nothing to look at, just a man. Humans seem very strange to me now, their faces lacking character and drama. I might have thought him handsome once. I might have found his power and rank attractive. Not anymore. His power is nothing compared to that of Kail, and his rank is absolutely meaningless to me.

“You are just as good as they said you would be.”

He opens with praise, praise I should be drinking in. I hope he mistakes my cool reaction for self-control, and not the complete indifference it actually represents.

“Thank you,” I say eventually, to avoid suspicious levels of awkwardness.

“Look at you,” Commander Rex laughs, looking me up and down. “Dressed up like a savage girl. He must have been so taken with you to create an outfit like that. Go and get cleaned up. Change into something civilized. And start writing up your report. Your testimony will be important in the trial. You have quarters in the officer’s section. Randolph will escort you.”



I am escorted to rooms. Rooms with electricity and hot water. Rooms with cupboards full of food, and refrigerators containing cool milks, cheeses, and meats. I have been in a state of almost perpetual hunger for many weeks now. I should be falling upon these supplies with reckless abandon — but I am not hungry.

The second the door closes behind me and I am certain I am alone, I burst into tears. Once they start, they will not stop.

I cannot. Stop. Crying.

I know that Kail will be tried and he will be put to death as an example to any other native aliens who attempt to stand in the way of human colonization. His death will not be easy. It will be documented, and it will be cruel.

The look he gave me as they led him away will stay with me forever.

A knock at the door interrupts my misery. Why can’t they leave me alone? I compose myself quickly before answering it.

“You have not had the chance to get changed yet,” Commander Rex observes with some displeasure. It’s bad enough that he has come to check on me, but he is not alone. A taller, broader, even more decorated man stands next to him, and is introduced as General Dupris.

“Excellent work, Tarni.” General Dupris is complimenting me, and it is all I can do to hold myself together. “You have avenged your fallen brothers and sisters and brought honor to

them, and to us all. I know you sacrificed much in this mission.”

He has no idea how much I have sacrificed. Not a fucking clue. His words do bring up something I have been mulling this entire time. My arrival on the planet was unnecessarily harsh.

“I was not made aware I would crash.”

Dupris and Rex glance at one another with a smug expression. They’re proud of themselves.

“No. Well. We wanted that to be real. Landing you on the surface would have alerted the enemy to our attempt. You needed to appear vulnerable and weak.”

“There was a better than average chance of me ending up dead,” I reply.

Rex smirks. “Not you, Tarni. You’re a survivor.”

He’s got that right.

“We will let you get cleaned up,” he says, repeating his earlier suggestion that is now clearly more of an order. “When you are properly attired, please join us in my quarters. We would like to celebrate your achievements.”

“Of course,” I say, bowing my head.

They leave me alone again, but not for long.

Once again, I do not bother to clean or change. I do not want to wash Kail off me. The filth he and I share might be the very last remnants of him I ever experience.



I do not go to my celebratory dinner. Not at first, anyway. At first, I go to the cell block. There are guards, but they do not think to stop me. After all, I am the agent who brought the prisoner to justice.

Kail is caged in an enclosure too small for him. They are keeping him like an animal, without food or water or a place to

toilet because they do not care about his needs. He is being kept worse than an animal. He is being kept like a thing.

The cage is locked not by key, but by pass. Only a high-ranking colonial officer can open his door. It is fortunate that I am a high-ranking officer.

Kail does not look at me as I approach, but his head lifts when he hears the door open.

I push a knife into his hand, and a gun. I don't think he needs the gun, but it feels fair to give him a sporting chance.

"Go," I tell him. "I'll cover for you."

Kail is too much of a natural survivor to ask questions in this moment. He nods and is gone, moving through the halls like a big green giant.

I hear the screams of the guards as he moves past them and off into the night.

"Good luck, Kail," I murmur to myself.



I don't leave the prison. I stay there, putting myself in the cage I just let him out of. I know how this will end for me. Kail left me alive, but the Colony does not show mercy to anybody, and certainly not to traitors.

It takes an hour for anybody to come to me. Kail did not go on a complete spree of obliteration, I gather. He did, however, lead them on a merry chase and murder quite a few soldiers. Serves them right. Serves us all right.

Eventually, Commander Rex comes to me, flanked with soldiers. He looks as unspeakably angry as one might imagine he would be. I have deprived him of his native prey, and also delivered another shameful humiliation of personnel loss.

The look he gives me is one of pure loathing.

"You were seen releasing the prisoner on camera," he says as an opening gambit.

I knew he would and that is part of the reason I am not trying to escape. I want to take the wrath they intend to unleash on Kail on myself instead.

There was no way to avoid the cameras. I knew that when I let Kail go. It was a him or me moment, and I chose him. After everything we have put him through, he deserves a chance at freedom.

I still don't understand why he brought me here and made a full confession to the hidden ears and eyes of my commanding officers. I kept handing him rope, and he kept taking it.

Did he plan to kill me when we arrived? I think so, at first. But something changed over the course of our journey to Colony Alpha. It changed for me. And it must have changed for him too.

I hope he is far, far away from here now. I hope he melts into the wilds, finds some remnants of his people, and is never seen or heard from again. I worry that he has too much of the spirit of a warrior to do that. But there's nothing left for him here. Nothing but a woman who betrayed him, and an occupying force who want him dead.

Officer Rex is saying something to me. I'm not listening. I don't care for their words anymore or their corruption. I know what we are. We are invaders, colonizers, we are the fucking bad guys. It doesn't matter to me what their opinions are. The Colony is dead to me, and soon I am sure I will be just as dead to them.

T *arni*

The interrogations go on for a long time. There is a good guy / bad guy dynamic being used on me as they attempt to get a more damning confession.

“It’s not your fault. You were left in a vulnerable position and you trauma-bonded with your captor.”

The sympathy I am being offered is not real. It’s another trap, a rope they mean for me to take and hang myself with — metaphorically, before they hang me for real. I know what happens to traitors. I know my life will end swinging on a rope.

“He wasn’t a captor. He was decent.”

“He is a murderer. He is responsible for the destruction of an entire colony.”

“In retaliation for our hostilities to his people.”

“What people?”

“Exactly. We wiped his entire tribe out.”

The officer’s face contorts in a rictus of villainous cruelty. “Not all of them. Not until he is executed. And he will be. Your betrayal will not stop us from recapturing him.”

I allow myself the first break in my otherwise stony expression, a small, sarcastic twist of my lips. “Good luck with that.”

He makes a dismissive gesture toward me, now speaking to my guards.

“Take her away. She’ll be hanged with the savage when we recapture him. Until then, she can think about what a traitorous bitch she is.”



I spend a long time in my cell. I do not know how many days or nights because the light is kept low and is continuously on. It’s a method to induce a quiet kind of madness and make one feel as though the grave has already claimed them.

I am fed once a day, or maybe twice. Again, it is hard to tell. I spend my days lying on my plastic bed with my eyes closed even when I am not asleep, playing my adventures with Kail out from the beginning. I try to remember every bit of them, every expression on his face. Every look. Every gesture. Every word. Every smell. I sink so deep into imagination that sometimes I am able to entirely forget that I am imprisoned and awaiting execution.

These daydreams allow me to investigate our relationship more closely, and marvel at the kindness he showed me when he did not need to. Even if he was conducting me to Colony Alpha to kill me there, he tried his best to make me comfortable along the way. He crafted me clothing.

I now wear a plain white jumpsuit with a barcode along the back and arms. I remember when I was a much younger woman, teenagers wore things like this in an attempt to be edgy. Now that it is my regular attire, it does not feel cool. It feels like the mark of a human organization that feeds on hope, joy, and freedom. The colony programs have their own momentum that has nothing to do with any of the individual people involved. If all the officers and soldiers and guards and settlers were to disappear today, they would inevitably be replaced because this is what our species does. We spread. We take. We consume. We are locusts upon this universe, and we will not stop until we have devoured every last part of it.

There's no point in feeling guilty about that. It is simply in our nature. For every one of us who comes to some enlightened revelation about living in balance with nature, a dozen more see nature as something to be claimed, harvested, and profited from.

I wonder what will happen a thousand, ten thousand, ten million years in the future. I wonder if we will succeed in the goal evolution gave us when it molded us from amino acids and set us on this path. Is this what the universe wants? Is this destiny? And if so, am I and everyone else like me wrong in attempting to stop progress?

There is plenty of time for deep thoughts like these in my captivity, but there are no answers. They will only come from the unfolding of the process, which I will never live to see if I lived a hundred lifetimes.



At some point, and there is no way of telling when, I hear a commotion outside. My cell has been very quiet for a long time. Nobody talks to me or talks outside it. The entire block is on a kind of lockdown to encourage the worst effects of sensory deprivation.

But I hear voices now.

More than voices. I hear *screams*.

Doors are thrown open. More screams. Are they executing the prisoners? I know I am not the only one here. There are others who similarly tried to stand against the colony's goals. I hear the banging and the shrieks and more banging and more shrieks and finally there are no doors left but mine.

I sit up in time to see my door thrown open, bright light streaming in behind a powerful figure.

It is Kail.

He is covered in blood, and most of it is not his own.

His expression is fierce, his posture aggressive. He has come in the same way an avenging angel comes, to destroy all things that deserve to be destroyed. I know I count among them.

It would be so nice to be brave in this moment, but bravery requires composure and seeing Kail again robs me of all semblance of that.

This is not the Kail who reluctantly rescued me in the wild. This is Kail the human destroyer. This is a savage so feared, literally no human on this planet has survived him. I see no reason why I should be any different. I betrayed him. I am just as bad, if not worse than everybody else he has killed. My having released him does not change that. It is the exception that proves the rule of my treachery, and I expect no kindness for it.

“Kail.” I say his name, hearing my voice for the first time in what must be a month.

I am so glad to see him, and I am so absolutely terrified of him I can barely express or even experience those feelings together. They come in waves, one after the other, terror and joy, joy and terror.

“Come here, human.”

He gives me an order, and my body moves to obey him. There is no escape here, so I have no choice but to go toward him, toward my doom.

As I approach, he turns, leading me away. I reach out to touch him but think better of it. I do not know that he would welcome my touch, even if I crave his, and there is no part of him that is not covered in the blood of his enemies. He is no longer a green alien. He is the red monster we made.

“How did you find me?”

“I killed everyone I met until I came to you.”

Simple, but effective.

I have no right to ask him for mercy, so I don't. I have no right to do anything except be grateful for every breath he allows me.

I follow him out of the prison block, working very hard to shield my eyes from the scores of bodies more or less piled at random. He has been indiscriminate in his rampage. Guards and soldiers died right alongside prisoners. He has truly killed everybody besides me.

“Kail...”

“Not yet,” he says. “Not until we are far from this cursed place.”

“Wait. Please.”

He stops and turns to me with an irritated expression, and I feel a sensible pang of fear, knowing that my life must surely still hang in the balance.

“Once word of this second massacre gets out, and it will, they will send an army to find you. It won’t be like it was, moving through these tight buildings and spaces, every corner a fresh ambush. It will be open season on this entire planet. They will burn it to the ground to get to you. Let me help you escape. We can take a ship. I assume it’s fueled, and we can gather supplies...”

“I have never left this world. This is my world.”

“Well, you’re about to,” I say, part of myself watching myself be inordinately, stupidly brave speaking this way. “Because Hades itself is about to be rained on this place. We have technology that turns forests into ashes in an instant. They will use that on this world. They will say it is to be careful, but it will be out of spite. They will burn you, and everything you have ever loved. The only way to draw them away from this planet now is to leave.”

“You mean, leave it to their colonies. They will come again too.”

“Is it better for a planet to be colonized, or is it better for it to be destroyed?”

Kail gives me a dark stare. “It is the same thing, one fast, one slow.”

He is right, of course.

“The slow option gives us time to do something. The fast option leaves no time for anything. Kail. Please. I don’t want to see you die. Let me help you get away from here. Let’s draw them away from this planet. Let’s lead them on an endless chase through the stars.”

“They will send mercenaries.”

“And you will kill them. But I promise you, missiles are coming, and those missiles leave nothing.” I have seen it before, too many times.

“I think we should take maybe an hour to recover what we can from this base, then take a ship and go,” I tell him. “I know you can’t trust me. I know I am still the enemy, but you have to see what I see too. The end is coming, and it will be worse for us if we are here.”

“Very well.”

To my surprise, Kail agrees. His plan was to disappear. I suppose it is not too much different if he disappears between trees or stars. He is connected enough with the rhythms of things to know when something is coming to an end. One way or another, our time on this planet is over.

It is not hard to select a ship and steal it. All the keys, all the codes, all the supplies are where they were before Kai's rampage began. I have to move among the bodies of my kind in order to recover what we will need. It is a solemn and sombre experience and I know it is writing itself on my soul.

I choose a ship halfway between a freighter and a fighter. It is large enough to have two berths, cargo space, and a rations generator. It is also fast enough to outrun most of the Colony ships.

Kail has prepared by washing off the blood and stacking what he considers to be valuable in the cargo hold. I am not so concerned with physical supplies because I have taken all the Colony credit tokens I could find, both from the bodies and from the offices. These are all loaded with crypto-credit currency stored on remote blockchains across the universe. They cannot be deactivated or tracked. I estimate we have several million credits to spend, more than enough to disappear with.

We are rich beyond my wildest dreams, in fact, but that does not feel like something to celebrate, given how we came into these riches. I am a traitor to everyone, and I am running away with a savage murderer.

"We will need to trade this ship as soon as we can at the nearest illicit docking station, and then we need to trade that ship out again," I tell Kail. I am thinking out loud, knowing that the ship will be the biggest liability, and the easiest thing

to track. “Or perhaps we should head to the badlands, scrap it ourselves, sell that scrap for...”

I meet his eyes and see bewilderment. He has no fucking clue what the hell I am talking about. He has never been off his world. He knows about the forests, and the prey, and the predators of his world. He knows absolutely nothing about the universe outside the big blue borders of his sky. It is going to be my responsibility to take care of us now. I am going to guide him through this strange new territory the same way he guided me through his.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “We’ve got this. Sit down and belt yourself in. The acceleration will knock you off your feet.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“I prefer you don’t crack your skull on the ship’s interior and bleed out before we get off the planet. Please, Kail. You saved my life. Let me save yours.”

I don’t think I have ever told him what to do before. There is a moment where we both realize that fact. I wonder if he is going to refuse just because of that. We have had no time to talk, no time to ascertain the other’s mental state or point of view. We are both acting on blind trust.

“I am losing track of who has saved who,” Kail rumbles, forcing his large form into the seat beside me. It will not be comfortable, but it will function. When we build our new ship, it will have to be constructed to hold his much larger frame.

“Alright. You’re going to feel a lot of force and acceleration,” I say. “The ship is going to rumble a lot and it’s going to feel strange. It is all perfectly normal. Once we hit outer space, the ride will be smooth. Ready?”

He nods curtly. I hit the ignition.

The acceleration jolts us both back into our seats. I hear a sound from Kain, a growl of fear. I wish I could reach out to console him, but I do not know if my touch would be consoling, and I cannot move my arms anyway. We are on autopilot until we leave the atmosphere, no more able to move than a pair of rocks.

It only lasts a few minutes, then comes the weightlessness of space. I switch on the gravity field, just in time. Kail leaps out of his chair and begins to pace. He is uncomfortable and contained. I am managing the flight controls and selecting a destination, but I hear him stalking back and forth behind me, going from the window on the port side to the window on the bow side.

“Are you okay?”

“These stars. I saw them from the ground. Now I stand among them, like the gods.” He turns to me. “This is no place for me.”

“You do get used to it,” I assure him. “It’s odd and disorienting at first, but over time it starts to feel peaceful.”

“It doesn’t seem peaceful. It seems empty and cold. I miss the forests of my home.”

“Yeah. You get used to missing home too.” I stand up from the console and controls. “I should teach you how to fly a ship, so you can make your way.”

He tilts his head to the side, golden eyes considering me. “Where do you think you will be?”

“I assume you’ll be getting rid of me. I betrayed you, Kail. I almost got you killed. And I was allied with the people that killed everybody you knew. I know you don’t want me, and I accept that. If you let me live, I’ll be grateful.”

There is a weight to the silence that follows. It’s a solemn, grave moment. The danger has passed and now we are floating in the void of space. Nothing to fight against, and nowhere for either of us to hide.

I wait for Kail to speak, knowing that what he says will set the stage for the rest of my life.

There is a slight shrug as his fanged mouth opens. “You intended to get me killed. I intended to kill you. We both changed our minds. You saved my life when you freed me. I returned the favor. We are even.”

“Even.” I repeat the word. It is not frightening, but it is also not encouraging.

“Even,” he repeats.

That is not a word lovers use with one another. That is the language of co-conspirators and criminals. We are now both those things.

I want to ask if we are romantically over, but I also do not want to ask that question. If I ask it, he might say yes, and then I would lose all hope. So I don't ask. I take the coward's way out and change the subject.

“We are going to have to learn a lot about the worlds we visit,” I say. “I've had some experience in illicit bases. I used to work undercover.”

“And you are very good at it.”

It's not a compliment, just a simple, damning statement of fact. I am good at being a liar. I am good at fooling everyone around me into thinking I am one thing when in truth I am another. I am dangerous in quite a different way than Kail is dangerous, but I am still dangerous. Treacherous might be a better word.

I feel all Kail's judgement as I berate myself inwardly for who I am and what I have chosen to do. I used to feel proud of how good I am at slipping into someone else's skin, at becoming someone else entirely. Now I feel like that same ability is a barrier to inhabiting my own skin, or having anybody I care about actually know me.

“Basically, we keep to ourselves as much as possible. That's how pretty much everybody operates. We do what we have to do, try not to be seen together, and we disguise ourselves. I'll cut and dye my hair. Probably red or something brash. It's fashionable now, and I won't stand out. Also, time to hit the cake and gain some pounds to change the shape of my face up a bit.”

“How can I be disguised?”

“Extra teeth, body paint. Blue instead of green. Maybe some tattoos also brushed on. Change of clothing. Armor instead of

a suit. Contacts to change the eye color..." I trail off as he looks at me with what I can only describe as growing horror. "Or none of those things."

Kail

I knew she had lied to me. I knew she had deceived me. I knew we were both playing a game of sorts, one born of loyalty to our respective species. But I had no idea just how very competent she really is. They sent a specialist to bring me in. Someone they must have trained and trusted for years, and she turned on them for me.

"You hate me, don't you," she says, her shoulders stooping, her head lowering. "I understand that, and I respect it. I don't deserve anything."

There is a brief moment in which I consider this might be a manipulation, but her actions speak louder than her words. She has given up everything to save me twice. There is no way she is going to ever be welcomed back into human society now. Humans are highly communicative creatures. The warrant for her execution has been through all their many unseen channels. She is a marked and wanted woman.

I cross the floor, impressed with how steady and solid it feels given there is nothing but the vastness of an eternal void below it. My stomach clenches at that realization, and I resolve immediately to never think of that again.

"Tarni," I say. "Is that your name?"

"Yes," she says.

I go down on one knee. She has always been shorter than me, and when trying to hide from me, she makes herself even smaller.

"Tarni," I growl softly. "I came to stop them from hurting you. I had every intention of taking you back to the forest and making you mine forever. My love for you is greater than my hatred for your kind. You have shown me your devotion, and

your strength. And even if none of that were true, we are on the run, my little animal. And self-pity will get us both killed.”

She lifts her head and looks at me with an expression that melts between multiple feelings all at once. “You’re right,” she says. “I need to get a grip.”

“And I love you.”

“And you love me... but, why?” She looks very much puzzled.

“We forged a bond in the wild. That was not a lie or a deception. You saved my life. That was not a matter of pretend. That cat was real, and it was not on your payroll. Your suffering before, that was not a lie. You were able to lure me into carrying out my own plan because you were all the things I thought you were. You were weak, you were sick, you were hurt. You were abandoned to the wild.”

“I don’t think I will ever forgive myself for what I did to you, and what my people did to yours.” Her eyes well with regret and shame. “It should not have taken a hundred days in the wild to teach me that your species has just as much value as mine. I should have known that as a simple and obvious truth.”

I have an idea. It was an idea I intended to execute regardless, because she is not completely wrong. She has done wrong, and she does need to pay for that wrongdoing. Not for me, but for herself.

“I can take some of your guilt away.”

“How?”

“Let me punish you. Let me bring you pain, and after the pain, let yourself experience forgiveness.”

She swallows. “Pain?”

“Yes. It’s what you need. You are harder on yourself than even I am. You need no judge to sentence you. You have already sentenced yourself. If they had opened your cell, and not I, you probably would have taken yourself to their gallows and strung yourself up in your eagerness to repent. You are infected by guilt, Tarni, and I will not allow it.”

Tarni

I argued my way into this position, and now I regret it. I know when Kail says there will be pain, it will truly hurt. And with the depth of the guilt I feel, it will have to hurt for quite a long time.

I swallow. “Uhm. I don’t know...”

“You don’t need to know, because I do,” he says with that calm, savage confidence. “I know what you need, Tarni, and I am going to look after you now, just as I looked after you before.”

He extends a hand to me, and I know that taking it means submitting to the pain he is talking about. I hesitate, and then I reach back. He guides me up from the pilot’s chair, and leads me back to one of the cabins, choosing the larger one, because he will need room to punish me.

I trail behind him, almost wanting to dig my feet in and make him pull me. I want to act as though this is against my will, and that I do not consent. But I asked for this. I practically begged for it. I am finally going to get what I have coming, and I know all too well what that is.

“Take that thing off,” he says, gesturing to the prison garb I still wear. “I do not like it on you. It does not suit you one bit.”

I am hesitant to make myself naked in front of him, which seems ridiculous given that I have been naked before him so many times.

I had not thought about how this attire feels on me. On consideration, it feels right, because it is the garb of a criminal and a traitor, and I am both those things.

“Off, Tarni.”

Hearing my name in his mouth in a stern tone jolts me into action. I obey his order, drawing down the zipper on the overalls and letting them peel off me like a second skin. His golden eyes fall on me.

“You have always been beautiful,” he says. “It is a great pity to have to mark you in punishment. Lie down on this bed and present yourself.”

Again, I obey. I asked for this, so disobeying now would be nothing more than another sign of deception and untrustworthiness. I lie down on the bed, closing my eyes as I do, which changes nothing because I couldn't see him anyway. All I can see is the cool linen of the bed, starched with military precision. It's comfortable, and I feel bad about that because it feels as though it shouldn't be. I don't deserve any comfort. I....

I scream as a blazing harsh lash lands across my ass. Kail has never purposefully caused me pain before, and the breaking of that barrier hurts almost as much as the physical blow, which is swiftly repeated again and again, lashing harshly. I cannot see what he is using, but the sensation suggests something thick, flexible, and strong.

I have to draw breath deeply to keep my composure. I don't want to thrash and scream. I don't want to beg for mercy, because I do not deserve mercy. I deserve this.

Eventually it is impossible to stop myself from crying out. Kail shows me no quarter. He whips me as I deserve to be whipped, hard, fast, and at a steady pace without ceasing.

I throw myself into the abyssal heat and pain. I feel my mind start to fuzz and my body begin to react in new ways, absorbing and accepting the pain, melting around it.

“More,” I sob when he lays down the lash. “I deserve more.”

“If I give you any more, you will bleed,” he says. “And that is something I am not prepared to do to you, no matter what you have done. We will resume your punishment later. For now you have taken all I will give.”

Kail

She would gladly let me kill her. In such a state, punishment is nothing but playing into her guilt. She loathes

herself to protect herself against my loathing. She wants me to hurt her, because she fears me hurting her. Animal instincts are twisted up in this lying human, woven in such a way as to make her crave what she should avoid.

I have reddened her rear, but it is not enough. I have to talk some sense into her as well. “I need you to get your self-preservation back, and quickly. If we are going to survive out here, we need to protect ourselves.”

“I didn’t protect you,” she whimpers with reddened eyes.

“Of course you did. I was barely captured before you released me. You suffered a longer imprisonment than I did, and that was because I had to develop a plan of attack. I understand you feel bad, but you feel much worse than I do.”

“You do? You don’t hate me?”

“I told you I did not hate you.”

“I thought you were just saying that to be polite.”

“I am not someone who says things to be polite.”

“That’s true.”

“I forgive you.” I try to reassure her, but she cannot process forgiveness.

“You’re only forgiving me because otherwise you’re afraid I’ll wallow in self-pity and get us both killed.”

I growl. “You are the most... I forgive you because we were enemy actors. Both of us. Have you forgiven me? I intended you harm.”

She makes a face. “But you didn’t, though.”

“Yes, I did.”

“No. I knew you didn’t.”

“Listen to me, animal, I intended you great harm.”

“You wanted to intend me harm,” she says. “But you could never have hurt me.”

She lives in a world of her own mental construction, navigating around obstacles that may or may not exist. It must

be part of her life of deception, to constantly imagine the thoughts and impulses of others. Perhaps she is right some of the time. Perhaps she is right now. Maybe I am retroactively claiming greater villainy than I was capable of...

“You make my head hurt, human.”

She gives a sad little smile. “I make my head hurt too.”

T *arni*

“It tickles, animal.” Kail shifts uncomfortably.

He used to call me animal to keep a separation between us, but now there is a certain affection in his tone when he uses the moniker. He said he forgives me, and I think I have to either believe him, or go straight up insane with guilt.

“Stay still, savage,” I rejoin. “Nope. Don’t like the way that sounds in my mouth. Sorry about that.”

“Don’t apologize for words. Be sorry for the torture.”

He’s being dramatic, which is very uncommon for him, but that is because what is happening is very uncommon too. He is sitting naked on a stool and I am painting his muscles with a yellow paint that turns his green skin blue. Color theory, baby. Everything is a weapon in my hands. I’ve never had so much free rein before to do whatever I need to do. Prior missions always had their boundaries, but now I am fighting for my life, and Kail’s. I’m pulling out all the stops. By the time I am done with Kail, he is going to be completely unrecognizable.

He really does not like the touch of the brush. It is too wet and too tickly for his liking, but Kail allows me to do this because he trusts me, and he trusts me because he loves me. Not because I deserve it, or because I’m manipulating him into it, but because he just fucking does. It’s quite a novel experience for me. I’m not sure what to do with it, or how to trust it.

Fortunately, we’re about to make our first stop at an illicit station, and I know my handlers have a decent chance of

anticipating this. If they're waiting for us, we're in trouble. I have to hope we get there first and manage to ditch the ship, blend into the crowds and pick up something that doesn't draw attention.

"Let's make sure we're all packed," I say, going over it for the umpteenth time. What we take off this ship is all we will have to start our lives over. My pants are stuffed with credit tokens, the most important element for our survival, at least until we go out beyond where Colonizer currency is expected.

I have the ship scanning the docks almost before we are in range to do so. We're not detecting any other Colonizer signals, but they could be running dark. We're not, because I have no idea how to make that happen. I know a lot of things, but I am not a Colony engineer.

"I have your pelts and my helmet," Kail says. I don't think he understands the point of what we're doing here, and there's not enough time to explain yet again. There's not really that much worth taking. Money, clothes, and tradable objects.

I start whipping out bits of ship that I know the scrappers will want, nothing that will affect the handling so we can still make a landing.

Kail stands by the door with his small bag over his shoulder. He keeps messing with the extra fangs I inserted over his teeth to help him pass as someone other than himself, sticking the base of his thumb up against the pointed bits.

"This feels dishonorable," he says.

"I know. But there's no honor when you're a fugitive. There's just survival or lack thereof. Our first job is to find another ship as quickly as possible. So we're going to stay on the docks, not wander, so on and so forth... I need you to stay with me."

"I will not be leaving your side," he says firmly.

"Maybe not that close. They will be looking for a big savage and a small human. We should leave the ship separately. You can keep an eye on me. I'll do the talking."



My first instinct is to look for a smuggler's vessel. They're usually equipped with stealth features and swift speed. But that might be too obvious, being my first impulse. A trader's ship might be a better bet. Or perhaps just one of the old jalopies. They'll be slow, and they'll have no stealth, but they'll also be overlooked by everyone looking for those who are fleeing.

"Slow and steady, or quick and flashy," I murmur to myself.

"Slow and steady," Kail says from behind me. "Part of a fleet, if possible, like picking out one fish from a shoal."

I turn around, surprised at how good his instincts are, both to understand what I am talking about when I'm only speaking in half-sentences.

"Yes," I say. "Perfect."

I have never had anybody on my side before like this. All the deceptive decisions I've had to make were my own. Now I have Kail on my side, and with his presence comes a new level of competence. We were good together when we were working in opposition. But now? Working in harmony? We are going to be absolutely fucking unstoppable.

"Perfect. There's a Persinian trader fleet over there. We'll see if any of the captains want to quietly cash out."

"Or we can just hide on one of their ships."

"Stow away! Another good idea. For a savage predator, you have incredible prey instincts."

"A good predator understands prey," Kail says. "In matters of survival, we are all prey."

Persinians are gilled aliens who breathe air, but only reluctantly. They very much prefer to be in water. It's not their fault so much of the universe has a tendency to be dry. Their ships are made in scaled fashion, and when new they would have glimmered with iridescence like the scales of their

bodies. After many years of exposure to solar winds and other universal influences they are dulled and no longer shine, but they are still colored in pink and purple and teal, silver and gold. They're flashy but weathered.

I like the idea of buying our own ship, but Kail has a good point. If we stow away, we leave this place without trace, and that is the best possible outcome. Nobody will have any idea where we went. Assuming, of course, no footage is being taken of the dock. This being a criminal outpost, the likelihood of Colony forces ever seeing that footage, if it exists, are low.

"They'll be loading cargo soon by the looks of things. We could try to take cover in a crate and hope they load us without noticing."

The docks are very busy. That might give us cover from being spotted, or it might mean we are spotted without noticing we've been spotted. Nothing about this is easy.

And then things get worse. I see a flash of white uniform marked with a red flag. It is the insignia of the Colony.

We have pulled up on the dock at almost exactly the same time as Colony forces, it's just that they chose another landing spot. They haven't seen us yet.

"Come here." I drag Kail down an alley, through a small set of stores, and then out the other side. We've evaded the troops for now, and the locals are not at all welcoming toward Colonizing forces, so we have that going for us.

The sheer nerve of the Colony is impressive. To barge onto a station of criminals, declare themselves the law, and then attempt to enforce that law against wild brigands, outlaws, and general scum, is borderline insane.

Chaos ensues immediately, with some trying to flee and others thrilling to battle. A lot of outlaws have beef with the Colony. Many of them are excited to take advantage of these free hits against the self-proclaimed authorities.

"We are trapped. We may have to fight our way out of this," Kail says.

I know very well that Kail is capable of killing an entire battalion. His savagery is without peer. But I also know that if we draw that kind of attention to ourselves here, the chatter will spread across not just Colony space, but Illicit space, and that means we put a massive target on our backs for mercenaries, bounty hunters, and general opportunists.

“We’re not going to fight,” I say. “We’re going to sneak. That’s what our disguises are for. They found the ship, and they’re going to look for us. So what we need to do is wait them out and not be found. That way, they go off with a cold trail, rather than the entire universe being alerted to our presence and our worth. We can only disappear if we stay in plain sight.”

I hope he listens to me. If he does not, it could mean disaster. This escape is going to take nerve and patience.

“We will try this your way. If it does not work, we will do it my way.”

K *ail*

My senses prick and my rage flares at the sight of Colonist uniforms. I want to tear them apart, but I promised Tarni we would play this her way.

I watch, stunned, as she walks right up to a soldier. She has dyed her hair a red color and cut it much shorter, and also made her face up with bright colors in such a way as to change her appearance, but still.

“So yannow, how long’s it going to be? We got places to be. We got things to do. We got stuff to sell. We got.”

The soldier looks directly at her, the very woman he is trying to capture, and gives her a dismissive wave.

“Leave us to our business, criminal scum.”

She is brave beyond my wildest conception, and reckless as well. I watch, realizing slowly that it is not recklessness at all. It is strategy. She planned this. Every bit of this. She knew

precisely who she would go to and what she would say. And she somehow knew what they would say in return.

When she fooled me, I assumed it was because I am a hulking savage, incapable of understanding many of the machinations of colonists. Now I realize this woman could be anything to anybody. Now I see why her guilt is so deep. Nobody has ever seen her for who she is. She may not even know who she is.

Tarni looks over her shoulder at me and flashes a wide, proud grin.

“Listen, I think I saw these two guys. They paid a Paragon for his ship and took off at light speed toward the Dexter nebula, maybe twenty minutes ago. Not long before you colonists landed.”

The soldier’s eyes widen. He takes off to inform his commander.

“Alright. That will keep them busy trying to verify. Let’s stow away now.”

T *arni*

We creep into some crates and are loaded into the belly of a ship without issue. Curled up in darkness, this feels exciting and quite romantic. I feel the hardness of him rising against me as he wraps his arms around me.

“Is this as hot to you as it is to me?” I whisper to Kail in the darkness.

He is much more cramped than I am, curled up inside the crate, but the throbbing of his cock against the curve of my ass tells me that the answer is yes.

Tight spaces make for human-alien Tetris as we work ourselves one bit at a time until my pants are down and his great big cock is at an angle where my cunt can take it. The motion is very restricted. I can barely move an inch or two back and forth on his cock, but that is all we need.

“Oh fuck... oh god...”

I am moaning more loudly than I should, being indiscreet and less than careful. There’s something about sex with Kail that makes me reckless.

We soon pay for that carelessness.

The side of the crate is suddenly opened, and we are subjected to the unimpressed stares of a Persinian captain and his heavily armed crew. They stand before us in coats of blue and gold, fins flattened against their heads, scaled hands firmly on an array of weapons.

The captain is clearly less than pleased to see us. He gurgles and puffs his fins and regards us with both sides of his beady-eyed head.

“Come out of there,” he commands.

I slide off Kail’s cock, glad for the cat skin skirt which means I do not have to fix myself up too much. Kail takes his time stowing his cock before emerging from the crate. His stature and general appearance causes great consternation among the crew.

“Who are you?”

“People who need passage,” I say. “People who need discreet passage, who can pay their way.” I reach into my bag slowly and show them my credit tokens. “We apologize for our unorthodox method of boarding, but as I said, discretion was important.”

A smart fellow would take some of the cards and welcome us aboard, but the captain is a stickler, and that means he has to make sure we know how bad we’ve been.

“The penalty for stowing away on a Persinian ship is...”

“Don’t say death. That’s going to trigger this guy,” I make a thumb jerky motion at Kail over my shoulder. “And when this guy gets triggered, it’s a whole thing.”

“Forced labor,” the captain says.

“Forced anything is not going to go down well.”

“Labor then,” the captain sighs.

“How about money? Say, a lot of money?”

“Money,” he agrees.

“See? Easy,” I smile broadly. “Do you have anywhere more comfortable to sleep? I’m absolutely exhausted.”

T *arni*

I am exhausted. That was no lie. It feels so good to finally be away from danger, or at least the feeling of danger. The ship feels safe and warm, and the hammock we've been allocated fits me, if not Kail.

I am rocked to sleep by the gentle motion of the ship. Most ships don't move constantly, but Persinian vessels contain great stores of water, and the movement of that water creates a Persinian wobble. It almost makes me feel as though I am at sea.

With fingers curled in the netting for what feels like safety, I drift off, anticipating our future.

...

"You slept a very long time."

I wake up to see Kail's face in front of me. I smile, glad he's here. He is another element of safety in what seems to be a very unsafe universe.

"You changed your disguise," I notice. He's gone from blue to red. Dark maroon slashes cover parts of his face, some of his shoulders and torso, and all of his hands and forearms.

I am sleepy, and the fact that I am just waking up makes me slow. Realization creeps through me one little bit at a time, confusing me and horrifying me as I fight to reject what my eyes show me.

"Kail," I whisper. "What have you done?"

“I’ve cleared our passage and kept us safe. The ship is yours to captain.”

“No!” I sit up and would have fallen out of the hammock but for bloody hands catching me.

I squirm out of Kail’s grip, cursing him.

“Why!?”

The word is raw in my throat. I could understand him killing humans. He has great hatred for my kind, understandably. But the Persinians never did anything to him or to me.

The mark of slaughter is upon him, and now on me.

“WHY!?” I make the demand, harsh and furious.

He looks at me with those golden eyes and does not seem to register my anger. He’s not in a rage. I don’t think he acted out of emotion. I think this was colder and much more practical.

“I had to kill them. They were going to radio our position in.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I heard the captain discussing it with his second-in-command. Once I had killed them, the others inevitably had to be destroyed, for they would have liked to make the same decision. I will not allow any threat, whether you like it or not.”

I do not like what I hear. “And even if they were going to call it in, we can’t murder our way across the universe.”

“We can, and we will if that is what it takes to save our lives. I don’t care who you are, or on what world you exist, you must act to preserve yourself. It is a basic law of nature.”

“I’m starting to feel like we’re the bad guys,” I sigh. “And I don’t want to be the bad guys.”

His expression suggests confusion for a moment. “I don’t understand what that means, except, maybe, that you need to feel as though you are a good person. The irony being that you have never, since I’ve known you, seemed to feel that way. Your guilt will get us killed. And my lack of it will preserve us.”

He's right. Logically, I know he's right. We shouldn't have stowed away. We should have bought a ship. We should stay far away from anybody I'd like to remain alive, because Kail is ruthless in his protection of me.

"We're going to take the escape pod and make for the next station," I tell him. "We'll let this ship drift and hope the universe swallows our sins."

Kail nods, agreeing with that plan.

"And at the next station, we won't be pursued, so we'll buy a ship. And we'll stop killing absolutely fucking everybody we encounter."

"I didn't kill *everyone*."

Those words should make me feel better, but something about them gives me the worst sense of creeping horror, even though I really do not know what he has or hasn't done. I should be glad that he hasn't killed someone. Instead, I am wondering who he wouldn't kill.

"Who didn't you kill?"

"I will have to show you. I don't want to touch it."

It? What is going on?

He leads me into a small room. It seems empty to me, until he leads me to a protrusion in the wall. I am confused until I lean over it and see that it does contain someone. Someone fast asleep.

I draw in a deep gasp of awe and horror.

"*A baby!?*"

There is a little baby Persinian sleeping in a crib. It looks big enough to eat solid food, mostly because Persinians don't make milk. I am guessing he is a boy, because he is wearing trident pajamas, and that tends to be a male insignia among his people. He has proportions similar to a year-old human infant, all chubby and big-headed and so devastatingly innocent I can barely stand to look at him.

“I do not think the infant will tell on us,” Kail says. “Killing him seemed unfair.”

I turn and whisper at him furiously. “You orphaned a baby, Kail!”

He gives a shrug.

“We need to get to a station immediately. We need to get this kid to safety, and then we need to talk about what it means to kill.”

“Will an illicit station be a safe place for a baby?”

“I....”

I am speechless. Things were bad enough before, but now we have a tiny little life depending on us to make good decisions for it, and we are not good at making decisions.

As if sensing a disturbance, the baby opens big blue eyes. Seeing my stricken face, his lips nevertheless part in a big, gummy smile. He lets out a little gurgle and reaches for me with chubby scaled hands.

In that moment, I am done. Completely and utterly. I reach out and pick him up. He is warm, and smells faintly of the beach. He lets his head fall against my shoulder and I hold him tight, feeling an immediate wave of protectiveness that far exceeds any feeling I have ever felt on my own account.

Kail

She’s going to keep the baby. I know that the moment I see her pick him up. She does not know it yet, because she operates by thoughts and ideas, and they do not always work with emotions.

“He’s so friendly,” she says, confused. “Shouldn’t he be wondering where his mom is?”

“Infants of some species bond with whoever is looking after them, a survival strategy. Or maybe he’s just a baby with a cheerful disposition.”

“Where are his parents? I don’t want him seeing what you did to them.”

“I don’t know. Nobody seemed to be interested in him. Nobody begged for the life of their baby, and that is the first thing a parent does when they sense danger.”

Tarni has the sense not to ask me how I know that. Or, more likely, she’s not thinking of anything besides the baby. Infants have a way of entirely capturing the attention of those who are unbroken enough to enjoy them.

“I don’t understand. They have to be somewhere.”

“Well,” I shrug. “It’s possible his parents aren’t here. It’s possible they already died. It’s possible he was kidnapped. It’s possible he was being sold. It’s possible...”

“Stop,” Tarni says. “I don’t need to hear every possibility. I know enough about the universe to know bad things can happen to anyone. But Kail. I don’t want to be one of those bad things anymore. I don’t think I can stand being one of those bad things. So. Please. No more killing.”

T *arni*

I don't wait for Kail's response, because I know it's not going to be what I want to hear. Kail is never going to promise to stop killing, and if I am to be honest, I don't really want him to.

We take the baby, get into the escape pod and leave the ship of the Persinians to drift among the stars. I look out of the escape pod's bulbous window at the floating ship left to drift. It is a somber moment, somewhat alleviated by the fact my hair is being tugged by surprisingly strong scaled hands. The baby must be hungry, but he's not crying for food. He just wants me to look back at him. As soon as I do, he breaks into a broad, gummy smile. When he blinks, his eyelids move horizontally rather than vertically.

Kail is quiet and solemn. He does not seem to take any interest or joy in the baby. Maybe he's not a baby kind of guy. I wouldn't have thought I was a baby kind of girl, either, but here we are.

"He really likes attention, doesn't he," I observe out loud.

Kail makes a noncommittal noise.

"Looks like the station is up ahead," he says. "Where should we dock?"

"Just wherever," I say, hiding my face from the baby behind a piece of paper, then dropping the paper. The baby freakin' loves this shit. He laughs with a watery burbling sound. It's the best sound ever.

“We should get a room at the space-tavern,” I say. “It would be good to have a bath, take stock, and get some supplies for this little dude.”

“You don’t want to buy another ship immediately and continue fleeing?”

“We should be far enough away that the Colony can’t find us. Stowing away was a good idea. And you killed everybody before they sent a message, right?”

“I hope so,” he says.

“Cover the baby up before we disembark,” he says. “We don’t want it being seen by strangers.”

“Why not?”

“Just do as I say, Tarni,” he says, an edge in his voice.

I frown at him over the scaled head. “Excuse me? Since when did you become the boss of me?”

“Since you became distracted by that baby,” he says. “You’re not thinking straight. Keep it hidden. If they find a massacred Persinian ship soon, the two people with a Persinian baby are going to be the first people they look at.”

Damn. He’s right.

“Okay. Good.”

I use the skirt of the predatory cat pelt that Kail made for me to make a baby shroud and covering for the Persinian. His face is well hidden from onlookers. If anybody sees us, they’ll see a blue savage, a biped female, and an infant presumably of their lineage.

We take a room at one of the cozier and more upmarket taverns. I usually would have wanted to go for another ship right away, or a scuzzy tavern where the law would be afraid to look, but things change when you have a little one to worry about.

The room we have is nice, comfortable, and clean. There’s a bath there. I bathe the baby first, feed him, and change him, then put him down to sleep.

Kail watches but doesn't make any effort to help or interact with the baby at all. I wonder if he feels guilty for what he did back on the ship. The Persinians did nothing except encounter us.

I know I'm going to have to find a home for this baby. A better home than he could have with us. He must have family out there somewhere. Family worried about him. Family who will mourn the loss of him and his parents.

"Don't worry," I tell the sleeping baby. "I'm going to get you home."

"Yes," Kail agrees. "The sooner we move the infant elsewhere, the better."

I notice a certain edge to his tone again. Is it jealousy? Kail doesn't strike me as the type to be so fragile as to be jealous of a helpless baby.

"I am going to get some food, some supplies, and gather what news I can," he says. "We will talk when I return."

I should go and scout the docks for a suitable ship, but I don't want to wake the baby, and I can't leave him alone. I feel cozy shackles slip over my wrists and ankles, manacles of obligation and care.

"Thank you."

For the first time since I was in prison, I sit and I wait for something to happen. The baby sleeps and I feel myself start to relax again, though I know that there is an even chance Kail is out there right now killing everybody in his path. He is savage, adjective, not noun. He is death incarnate.

I think about what he said, about a parent begging for the life of their child. I have an impossibly dark feeling that he was once that parent.

I only just met this baby. I do not know his name. I know nothing about him besides the fact that he exists, and that alone is enough to make me dedicate myself to his survival in an instant. I cannot fathom how it must feel to have given birth to a baby and to know that he is in mortal danger, in the possession of two dangerous, violent fugitives.

It was ridiculous for me to complain about Kail making me the bad guy. I have always been the bad guy. From the beginning, I set out to be the bad guy. I just thought I was being the bad guy for the good guys. But good guys don't use bad guys.

That also means the good guys don't last very long, not in the company of bad guys. The universe isn't fair, in short, and I suppose we're all just doing what we think we should in order to get by. For the Colony, that means massacring native populations, and for me it now apparently means abducting babies from ships of the dead.

Crrrrrreeakkkk....

The door complains as it opens. It's Kail, returning with a pot of fish paste for the baby, and some supplies for us. He does not appear to be covered in even a speck of blood, which heartens me.

He places arm loads of things onto the table.

"Wow, all that?"

"I got some cloth material, some soap, cups with lids so they don't spill, changes of clothes..."

He got everything the baby needs, including so many things I didn't even think about needing.

"How did..."

The question dies on my tongue because I know how he knew. He was a father once.

"Thank you," I say.

"I also found this." He slaps the station paper down on top of the pile of supplies. These rags are half-heresy, half-rumor, and an extra undetermined percentage of terribly important local information found nowhere else.

"Anything useful?"

"Yes."

He starts to strip. I know the disguise I painted him with several days ago is starting to get uncomfortable. He's no doubt itchy under all that paint.

There is a bath in the room, which is nice because it means we can stay together. I was nervous while he was away. I tried to push my concerns to the back of my brain, but they remained. Now he's back with me, and all is well.

He runs the bath, water coming out immediately hot. What a luxury. I think about joining him, but not yet. Not until the paint and the last scraps of blood are gone. He cleaned most of it off with a towel before we left the Persinian ship, but I can still see where it marks his skin with flecks of the innocent. I may share his sins, but I will not bathe in them.

I pick up the paper, but my eyes aren't on the words. They're on the absolute magnificence of his body. The green skin of his natural, undisguised flesh hidden beneath his clothes was never decorated.

"You're supposed to be reading," he says, giving me a sly grin.

"I know, but you're so distracting."

Steam rises from the bath, obscuring him slightly, but not nearly enough to stop me being hungry for him. I watch as he steps into the bath, picking up a thick bar of soap. He bought a lot of cleaning supplies. That makes me suspect that having a baby is a fairly filthy affair.

I wait until he settles into the bath and is obscured by the increasingly soapy water, then I manage to look at the paper.

"Sixty percent off Meaty Treaties?" I read off the paper. "Do we need meaty treaties?"

"Other side of the paper," he says, extending a big green foot out of the bath.

I turn the paper over and see the headline he intended me to read.

PERSINIAN ROYAL COURT IN CHAOS

There is a picture of the same baby sleeping next to me being held by a beautiful Persinian woman in elegant robes and a crown. She is Queen Alan of Persinia, and they are both being embraced by the large King Roland. I know this because the

caption reads: *The royal family in happier times, Queen Alan, King Roland, and heir to the throne, Prince Porthos.*

“Prince Porthos, infant son of the King and Queen of Persinia,” I paraphrase aloud. “Well, that tells us who he is. We have to take him to his home or give him to someone close enough to the royal house of Persinia to be trusted to deliver him.”

Kail reaches out of the bath and puts his hand on my shoulder in a comforting manner. “Don’t be sad. I will get you another.”

“Another what?”

“Another baby.”

“Please don’t,” I say. “Our lifestyle is not conducive to infants, and we really need a moratorium on parent killing.”

“May I see the article again?”

I push it over to him, hiding the fact that there are tears in my eyes. I know I can’t keep the baby, but everything in me, everything good, wants to. It feels like the baby unlocks the last good part of me, the only part that hasn’t been fucked up and twisted around from a lifetime of lies.

He looks at it and grunts.

“We’re not giving that baby back.”

“We have to...”

Kail slips the article back to me.

“Keep reading,” he says. “According to this, the prince is already dead, killed along with his parents. His cousin, Rochefort, has sadly taken the throne.”

“So... wait... what?”

“So that baby was being spirited away in the wake of a coup. Maybe to save his life. It seems likely to me that this baby is doing the same thing we are. Seeking a new life in the wake of the ruins of the old one.”

I read the article, not just the words, but what’s between the lines. Kail is right. It is very clear in the careful wording of the

article that the royal family has been assassinated.

“Politics,” I sigh, putting the paper down. “It’s not fair that a baby had to deal with that. His poor parents.”

“Terrible things happen to creatures of all ages in this great universe,” Kail says.

Before I can reply, the baby wakes up with a shriek of joy. He’s just so happy about everything. That’s because he can’t read the papers. I pick him up and reach for the fish paste, hoping it meets his approval.

“Porthos,” I murmur softly as I maneuver a spoonful of fish toward his mouth. He pushes the spoon aside and reaches for the container with his hands. He’s not interested in being fed. He wants to feed himself.

“Porthos...” I try saying his name in a sing-song tone.

He doesn’t respond to the name. He stuffs a fistful of fish into his face and makes a faint burbling sound.

We can’t use his real name. But I don’t want to change it. That feels wrong. It’s his heritage. But his heritage could get him killed.

“What do we call him?”

“I don’t think it matters at this point,” Kail says, splashing gently as he washes himself off, drains the tub, and refills it. The baby particularly enjoys the gurgling sound of the water going down the hole and stops gnawing on his fish-fist long enough to laugh at it.

“If we’re going to keep him, we’re going to have to pose as a biological family. People are going to ask us what our baby’s name is. We’re going to have to be able to tell them. It’s going to be hard enough to hide him, this little fish baby.”

“Nemo,” Kail suggests.

“Tarni, Kail, and Nemo. Yes. That sounds like a family,” I say, satisfied with the name. It seems to fit perfectly. “Nemo it is.”

Nemo makes a happy little sound as I sing the name to him in up and down cheerful tones. I want him to respond to it. That

could be very important one day.

“This kid’s seen more action before six months than most people see in a lifetime if they are lucky.”

“If they are very lucky,” Kail agrees.

We spend the evening in relative peace and calm. Nemo is awake for a little bit, but after being fed and changed, he’s ready for another sleep. Maybe Persianian babies sleep a lot. Or maybe he’s exhausted from all he’s been through.

Kail has vacated the bath by this time and is sitting in a chair, eating in a towel. It’s a very pleasant sight. I strip down and run the bath in turn, which is no easy task while holding a squirming infant.

Now I am the one receiving a hungry gaze.

“I have missed you,” Kail growls. “You are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I smile. “Here, mind holding him for a second?”

“I would rather not,” he says, lifting his hands up in a refusal.

“Why not?” I frown, immediately irritated.

He speaks softly, in a sorrowful gravel that on its own would warn me I have unintentionally hit a nerve.

“The last baby I held was my own.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“I will look after you and Nemo,” Kail says. “But I cannot be a father to him. I have had my chance at fatherhood, and I failed.”

“You didn’t fail,” I say softly. “It was taken from you.”

The heavy moment is broken by Nemo’s excited squeal. He has spotted the water and wants to swim. He has no time for the trauma of those who are acting as his guardians. He is dedicated solely to joy.

We spend most of our credits on the best ship we can find from an illicit dealer, and then most of the rest of them on a little corner of the universe where we can live simply, a small planet, lightly inhabited, with a great deal of open land for sale to settlers like ourselves. We buy a hundred-acre farm with a lake where Nemo can swim. Kail hunts in our forests and those adjoining our land, and I forage. We both farm what we can and raise Nemo as best we can. Kail still avoids the baby where he can, but he can't help himself from time to time. I have caught him smiling at Nemo when he does not know I am watching, and he insists on making Nemo's fish and vegetable mash.

We are wounded, inside and out, and just as we will always bear the physical scars of our exploits, the mental and emotional ones will similarly remain. Kail has lost more than I can fathom. I do not understand how he can look at me as a human and not be consumed with rage, but he manages to tolerate me.

We are happy.

It is the simple kind of happy, the kind none of us have ever experienced before, and truth be told we are not good at it. It takes many weeks for us to stop looking to the skies with suspicion.

"It's okay," I tell Kail after I find him posted as sentry outside the cabin for the umpteenth night in a row. He is watching the sky with determined eyes. "I think we got away."

“That’s when they come,” he says. “When you least expect it. When you think you are safe. We can never afford to let our guard down.”

I don’t want to argue with him, largely because I think there’s a chance he’s not wrong. The Colony might forget about us or decide that we’re not worth the bother of tracking. But with the way the Colony works, that’s unlikely in the short term. The Department of Justice will have us on their radar, and they have no other function than to seek justice, or their twisted version of it.

“We have to rest. We cannot always look over our shoulders.”

He gives me a sad stare. “I’m sorry, Tarni, but that is not true. We will be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives. There is no way to avoid it. And the second we stop looking is the second we are dead.”

“Then let me take a shift,” I say. “You’re exhausted. You need sleep. I can watch the stars for a while.”

He must be absolutely exhausted, because he takes me up on the offer. I am left to the cool night and the thoughts that accompany it.

The two of us are alone out here, which we both thought would be a good thing. Safety in isolation. But that leaves the two of us to do absolutely everything, including keep a constant watch. It’s not going to be possible and one day, sooner or later, we will fail.

I don’t want to say that to Kail. He knows that already, and there’s no point in dwelling. Maybe my plan worked. Maybe our journey here was so stealthy and untraceable there’s no way we’ll ever be found. Maybe we’ll stay hidden for long enough that there are personnel changes at the Colony, and nobody left remembers, let alone cares about us. Maybe. Maybe. All lives are based on maybes. I used to be comfortable with that. Now I’m much less so.



Morning comes and the maybes evaporate into the hustle of handling a baby. Nemo is growing fast. He's about six months old now, and twice the size he was when we first found him. Kail has clothed him in animal pelts harvested from around the countryside. He's feeding him a fish mash made from fish caught in our lake. It's so satisfying to be able to provide for a family this way, to not be beholden to anyone for anything.

It does, however, mean our resources are vanishingly limited. I stocked the ship with common medicines and long-lasting foodstuffs before we came here, and most of the stocks remain on the vessel. I don't know why, but I'm not comfortable loading them into the house. Maybe it's because a construction of wood, mud, and stone doesn't feel as safe as a vessel with an alloy hull. Or maybe it's because I've spent my life moving from one mark to another and I'm not really all that comfortable living in one place.

This style of life is natural to Kail but not to me.

"Dada," Nemo says, pointing at Kail with one hand, his other hand wrapped around a spoon.

"Kail," Kail says.

"Kaw," Nemo says.

"Close enough," Kail says approvingly.

"Kawkaw," Nemo burbles happily.

I smile at the pair of them. Nemo is just a baby, but he shares life experience with us. He knows the loss of family, and he is currently learning to make a new one. There's a part of me still afraid we won't really be able to keep him, that Persinians will come and claim him, and that we will let him go because those are his people, and he is their king. He has a past, just the same as we all do. Sometimes, I feel that past creeping up behind us, sniffing over our shoulders.

But you can't live in paranoia. You have to live in the moment. So that is what I do. I try to be happy with where I am, and what I have. And what I have is a family. Or at least, all the elements of a family.

Kail loves Nemo. That is clear. The joy in his eyes when he plays with him, the way he is already teaching Nemo how to hunt, strapping the baby to his body and explaining all the ways of the wild to him.

But he will not refer to Nemo as his son, which I understand. I wish I knew more about his family, the ones he lost when the Colony came, but he does not speak of them, and to ask him to do so feels like I would be intruding on the one part of his life that was not taken by them. I am a human, and a colonist. I am still in some way the enemy behind his greatest loss. The guilt I bear for being even some small part of it stays with me no matter how long we spend together, playing house in fresh alien wilds.



Another six months after finding our little slice of paradise, with Nemo learning to walk, the Colony finds us.

Their presence is heralded as a bright light in the sky, a star brighter than any other. It is so pretty I actually pause for a moment and enjoy it. In the few seconds I take to enjoy it, it grows multiple times larger. Enjoyment turns to dread.

“KAIL!”

I run to him. He already has his armaments ready. He has not been idle. He has prepared these lands for invaders, and he has run drills each and every day since our arrival to ensure his readiness. He plans to stand and fight. I do not like this plan, but now is not the time to argue about it.

Kail had been feeding the baby. At my appearance, he puts Nemo in my arms. “Go,” he says. “Get in the ship and go. I will deal with them.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“You have to. I will not lose another wife and child.”

We have never formalized any of our relationships. I do not think we dare, neither to risk the emotional vulnerability of

staking claim of family, or to risk those bonds being known to the universe at large.

There is no time for goodbye. There is no time for anything.

“Kawkaw,” Nemo says as I belt him into his ship’s seat. He’s almost too big for it. We are going to have to upgrade this.

“That’s right, little buddy. We’re doing this for Kawkaw.”

I take the captain’s chair beside him. Nemo has his own little console controls. They don’t do anything, but he’s pretty good at mirroring my actions on his control pad. He’s going to be a very good pilot one day.

Today, I have to be a very good pilot.

We take off in less than sixty seconds after I initially spotted the Colony ship. I pass them on the way up as they head down. I hope, for a brief and stupid second, that they turn around and follow me. I really don’t want Kail to face them alone.

They are in a landing mode, and they can’t stop. We are now all caught in the motion of our own momentum. Decisions have been made. Consequences will be brutal.

Kail

I stand to face my enemy, the enemy who has cost me one family, and who now comes for another. It feels as though they will hunt me to the end of the galaxy to take away what I love most. There is a brief temptation to wonder what I did to deserve this, but the truth is I was just another object in their way. Now they come for me with vengeance in their hearts.

Memories come rushing back from when these animals first took everything away from me.

We knew the animals had landed, but we were not concerned about them. They seemed content building their shelters, and we were happy to share the lands, which were bountiful.

Then came the stories of animal raiding parties, of weapons that could not be countered by spears and stone-tipped arrows. The animals could kill at great distances, many at a time.

I did not believe the stories until I saw their destruction firsthand, visited on my family in my absence.

I returned from the hunt, a kill over my shoulder. I had been gone three days tracking the deer, and I was more than ready to see my home, my mate, my children. The entire tribe would feast on my efforts. I felt pride, anticipation and most of all, love.

Blood greeted me as I stepped through the clearing, the scent of it thick and grotesque mixed with the stench of rotting entrails. They had been dead for at least two days already, corpses swelling, becoming unrecognizable, partly consumed by rodents.

The animals left my family where they had fallen, as if the ones I loved most in all the world were nothing.

Instead of providing them a meal, I dug them graves. I buried my family, my friends, my tribe. And I went on the warpath.

The animals were soft. Their hides thin, their bones weak. Their weapons were fearsome, but they themselves were nothing to be afraid of. The answer was obvious. Do to them as they had done to me. Kill them in their homes and bases where they least expected it. Eradicate them from the world.

I had no idea then how many there were, how world upon world was covered in these creatures. Killing them all is not an option. Neither, it seems, is evading them.



The Colony ship lands nearby, and a small platoon of officers and soldiers disembarks, stepping on our land with their booted feet.

I have not met these humans before, but they speak as if they know me, arrogance dripping from their tongues. They have heard of me, but they do not believe what they have heard. I can tell, because they are far too close to me, and they believe their weapons will stop me.

Nothing will stop me from killing them.

“Savage, you are under arrest for the murder of the inhabitants of Colony Alpha. Come along peacefully and nobody need be hurt.”

Until they hang me.

The sheer nerve of these human creatures is astounding. They believe they can make the entirety of the inhabitable universe in their image, and so far it seems as though they are not wrong.

They have their weapons trained on me, threatening me with death. They are wanting me to submit to them because they want to make a scene of this. It is not enough to kill me. I must be seen to be killed. Their vengeance will not be done until it is seen to be done.

That hesitation, that arrogant assumption that time is on their side is their undoing.

In direct disobedience of my last order to her, Tarni’s ship is not disappearing into the distance. Instead, it returns in a violent, swooping curve, passing low overhead like a massive bird of prey.

She opens fire on the soldiers, laser bolts hurtling down from the sky, obliterating practically everything in their path. Our crops, our farm, our peace is ripped up under her fury.

I do not know if it is skill or luck that leaves me unscathed while obliterating everybody else, but I am grateful for it. Tarni takes another loop around, putting the ship into an inverted 360 roll to come back to me, pulling the thing to a hover-halt less than a foot off the ground.

“Get in,” she says, her voice broadcasting from the helm. I hear Nemo’s giggle as well. She pops the rear door. “We need to go.”

I do not need any further invitation. As I board the ship, I realize we are on the run again. Another home has been taken from me.

I make my way to the helm, where Tarni is already inputting coordinates for our escape path.

“We need allies,” Tarni says, frowning in concentration. “That’s our problem. We need to go somewhere the Colony dares not go. Distance is not enough. We need to be somewhere they cannot or will not go.”

We’ve talked about this before, but there are no good options for such a plan. My people never escaped the planet of their birth, and so there are no natural allies for me. And Tarni is human, so all her natural allies are against her.

“I think we need to become outlaws,” she says. “I think we need to head deep into illicit space. We tried a peaceful life. It didn’t work. I don’t want to have to shoot my own damn house into oblivion every time the Colony shows up. It’s not good for Nemo.”

None of this is good for Nemo. Us becoming ruthless outlaws is not such a great leap. We are essentially already ruthless outlaws. But Nemo is not. He’s innocent, and he deserves to have what I have never been able to give any child, or wife, for that matter: safety.

“I’m heading for contested territory. We won’t stop there. We’re not going to stop until we get to outright lawless territory. Arm yourself, Kail.”

She gives orders as naturally as she ignores them, but unlike Tarni, I listen.

At that moment, the baby lets out a cry we both know very well, accompanied by a pungent smell. Tarni barely glances at me as she issues another order.

“Change Nemo, please.”

She will not take her hands off the controls. I see a grim determination on her face. She is as angry as I have ever seen her be. A taste of peace torn away along with this being the very first time we have encountered Colony forces with Nemo depending on us has made her fierce indeed.

I do not want to get attached, though deep down I know that has already happened. Nemo does not feel like my children did. He is not green. He does not have sharp little teeth

protruding from his lower lip. His eyes do not burn with my golden fire. And yet I would die for him.

And that means I will change him too.

Tarni

We zip through contested space without issue. The advantage of space is that it is vast, and though it might be possible to track people down given enough time, finding them at any given point in space while they are running is practically impossible.

I consider the possibility of simply becoming nomadic, but even nomads adopt routes, and a route is too close to being a routine, and a routine can be figured out and intercepted. We would have to move according to a random generator...

"Nemo is asleep," Kail says. He then says something else, something I don't hear, or rather, am not interested in hearing.

"Tarni," he says.

"Hmm?"

"You need to rest."

"No. I'm fine. You get some sleep."

"I am not asking, Tarni. The ship is on autopilot. You need to sleep. You haven't rested in over twenty-four hours."

I turn my head and snap at him. "I said no, Kail! Leave me be and stop fussing over me."

I know immediately that using that particular tone was a huge mistake. I've never spoken to him that way before. Kail's eyes narrow at me, and he cocks his head slightly in an *excuse me* expression.

"I'm fine," I say. "Hey!"

Kail has picked me up out of my chair and is carrying me off to our private bedchamber over his shoulder. He takes advantage of that and slaps my ass hard enough to make me squeal.

“You have never been obedient out of anything besides necessity,” he says. “And it has only gotten worse since Nemo. You act as if you are the only line of defense. You are wrong. I am here.”

He proves his presence by whipping my ass, taking me off his shoulder and putting me over his thick thigh where I am immediately further punished, his powerful palm landing harsh slaps against my increasingly bare ass. Kail is stripping me as he goes, until I am naked, and very sore.

“When I tell you it is time to rest, it is time to rest,” he growls. “I am here, Tarni. And we are on the same side. I will not allow you to hurt yourself by working yourself so tirelessly.”

I get no chance to respond as he unleashes a fresh flurry of harsh slaps against my ass. I can’t believe he is doing this. I am trying to save everybody’s life. I did save his life. I suppose saving each other’s lives is just what we do now, but still.

“I just saved your life! Again! That doesn’t get me a discount on whatever the fuck this is?”

“I am showing you mercy,” Kail growls. “You think a paddling over my knee is even close to my worst after taking that tone with me?”

“I think you should let me up.”

“You’re not getting up. You’re going to bed and you’re going to get some sleep.”

I try to get up, but I am quickly shown the extent of his strength and the relative intensity of my weakness. Kail pins me in place and spanks me even harder for the audacity of having tried to escape his rare but stern discipline.

“Tarni,” he says, his tone deep, resonant, and very warning. “Don’t push this.”

I want to push it.

I am not feeling much in the way of self-preservation at the moment. I am frustrated and angry at having lost our peaceful home. I should be better than this. I should be able to keep my

family safe. And there's some part of me that wants this pain, because I think I deserve it and worse.

I make another squirming effort to get away, forcing Kail to pin my arm behind my back to keep me in place.

"I warned you," he growls, not understanding that his warning was more of an invitation.

He is no longer using his hand. Instead, he uses a brush, my very own hairbrush taken from the nightstand. This ship was always kept stocked with necessary items.

The moment the brush lands, I make a silent vow to throw it out of the airlock. The blaze of heat is intense, followed by a punitive ache.

"I don't know what has gotten into you, but I intend to get it out of you," he vows. "I need you sensible and safe, not some wild thing making reckless decisions."

What I need is a strong, dominant Kail keeping me sane, because I really think when the Colony came for us again, I lost the last bit of sanity I had been holding onto. I am tired of being hunted. I am tired of running. I am tired of being vigilant. I am ready to throw all caution to the wind.

But Kail isn't ready to let me go. He keeps me firmly in place and he reminds me with every stern swat of the brush that what I do does matter, and that there is hope. Weird message to take away from an ass whipping, I guess, but that's what I get.

"Are we done?" he asks me the question, putting the control back in my hands. If I say yes, I can feel this will end. If I run my mouth...

My ass is burning. It feels swollen and aching and I know that I'm going to feel this for a long time. But there's a devil inside me that's not done. I'm not ready to be comforted. I'm still angry, and frustrated. I'm still in fight mode.

"Sure, if your arm is tired," I fire back.

I hear him exhale in a sharp snort. He tosses the hairbrush down on the bed beside me, abandoning that implement in

favor of another.

I tighten my body, anticipating worse pain.

He slides me onto the bed and pulls both hands behind my back, securing them with the fuzzy cord of my dressing gown. I make small grunting noises that I hope he thinks are of complaint. I couldn't stand it if he knew that I wanted this.

Kail moves me as if I do not weigh anything at all, hefting my hips over pillows to keep my ass up, bared and vulnerable for this next round. I can feel my sex being exposed, and I know that he can see the thing I've been denying this whole time: my arousal.

He picks a belt from the closet, one of my leather belts designed to keep my pants up. I already know what that will feel like. A slapping sensation, more shallow than the brush of his hand, less damaging, but more painful. I know this because there were times in the past where I used that very same belt he's now holding on myself.

I did it alone, in between missions, when guilt started to get on top of me, when I felt like there would never be anybody in the universe for me.

It's different when he uses it. It's harsher and snappier and much more sore. It's also warmer and much more loving. Every time that belt connects with my ass, I contract and then expand, toes curling and then relaxing. Behind my back, my fingers flex. I hiss between my teeth, and I squirm, though the squirm is more like an undulation.

Kail whips the belt down a good dozen times before pausing to observe the effects of his work. I cannot see my ass, but I can imagine how it must look, bright red and marked with fresh belt swats, my thighs parted enough to allow the tip of the leather to intermittently lick between my legs.

"I've realized something," he says. "You're up to your old tricks. Trying to manipulate me rather than simply asking for what you want."

"No," I deny in a whine.

That is a mistake.

“We agreed not to deceive one another, Tarni. We promised to stop playing games.”

“Right,” I say. “But I’m a liar.”

“You haven’t lied to me in months. Not since we escaped my world. You have reverted with the return of the Colony, and I will not have it.”

“What are you going to do? Spank me?”

“No,” he says. “I am going to leave you there and let you think about what you have done. I know what you are afraid of, Tarni. It’s not pain. It has never been pain. I’m going to check on the baby. Don’t you dare think about moving.”

With that, he leaves me, shutting the door of the cabin firmly behind him. My indiscreet position is not exactly uncomfortable, nor is it inescapable. I’ve escaped a lot more difficult situations than a dressing gown wrist tie. I am bound quite securely, but it’s not really the ties that are keeping me where I am. It’s the sheer weight of Kail’s very real disappointment. This stopped being fun when he got genuinely upset.

I’ve failed him. And I guess I’ve failed myself, though I care a lot less about that.

I can hear Kail moving down the passage and opening the door to the baby’s room. The sounds are very muffled, just barely audible until they step out into the hall again.

“Hey, little buddy,” Kail says through the wall.

He’s getting Nemo up and feeding him. He’s a good father, even though he denies being one. I know how frightened he is of what he considers failing another family. I know he’d probably rather never have dealt with Nemo at all. Our life was complicated enough before adding a baby to the mix. But he’s stepping up, and I can hear how happy Nemo is to see him.

“Kawkaw!”

“Yep. Kawkaw,” Kail says. “How about some fish and potato?”

“Ish n tato,” Nemo repeats.

This is a much worse punishment than any physical one. I’m being left to not only think about what I’ve done and how much I’ve disappointed Kail, I’m also shut out of getting to see Kail and Nemo together.

Kail takes Nemo to the galley, and I am left entirely and completely alone. I wonder what would happen if the Colony caught up with us right now, but only briefly because that’s a distraction from what I am supposed to be thinking about.

Kail wants me to be sorry for lying to him, for eroding our relationship by tricking him into beating me. He wants my honesty. That shouldn’t be so much to ask, but I’ve never shared these proclivities of mine with anyone before, not even him.



“I ’m sorry,” I say when Kail returns about an hour later.
“But these parts of me, they’re top secret. Need-to-know only. I barely know about them. It was just easier to... do what I did than think about everything I wanted and needed and why and then express that to you. I know it’s fucked up to want to be beaten.”

“I don’t think that is fucked up. You need strong stimulation to allow you to connect with your feelings, because you have buried them so deeply they are barely able to be found. I will gladly punish you, Tarni. It brings me satisfaction to do so. But you will ask me for it, with your words.”

I feel my face flush almost as hot as my ass at the idea of asking for punishment. How fucking embarrassing. Even the thought sets off an internal chemical cascade. I can’t imagine what actually doing it would be like. I’d probably faint.

He runs the pad of his finger down the slit of my lips, gathering the wetness of my sex before bringing it to my mouth.

“Suck,” he orders.

I clean myself from his fingers. I taste... desperate.

“Ask me to punish you, Tarni,” he commands softly.

“Please,” I whisper. “Hurt me.”

He picks up the belt and goes back to work, using it not only on my ass, but on my thighs as well. The sound of the leather cracking against my skin fills the room,

Tears leap to my eyes as I try to compose myself, but Kail is determined to overwhelm me, and I can't stop them from coming.

When I am openly crying, Kail drops the belt and climbs up on the bed behind me. I am still tied, still propped up on pillows and still lying with my legs spread, sex exposed.

His cock entering me feels like forgiveness. My body puts up no resistance as it is stretched wide, my inner walls submitting to him with sweet eagerness. This is what I have needed for a long time. This is what I have needed forever. Kail isn't just strong or dominant. He is keenly aware of who I am and what I need. He sees through my pretenses, and the instinct to manipulate that is how I have come to survive. He makes me naked more than physically. He strips me bare mentally and emotionally as well.

I am safe with him, because I am known by him, and I would let him do anything to me. I am his. What I feel for him is deeper than love, it is a soul connection. I would sacrifice myself a thousand times over for Kail, and I hope he never has to sacrifice himself for me ever again.

The heat in my ass, the absolute joy of the shame I feel, knowing I can feel shame, knowing he can draw me out of my darkness, the rough thrusting of powerful green hips, it all drives me toward an orgasm I know I do not deserve.

“Don't you dare come,” he growls in my ear.

I know he can feel my pussy gripping his cock. He knows how close I am to orgasm, and how much I need it. This is fresh punishment. This is absolutely perverted.

Kail pulls his cock free of me, leaving me empty and whining, right on the verge of release.

“Why?” I moan.

“Why?” Kail laughs. “You are so spoiled to even begin to form that question, let alone ask it. You don’t deserve to orgasm. You deserve to pleasure me. And me alone.”

He moves around the bed, takes me by the hair, and draws me around so he can slide his cock down my throat. Kail is impossibly thick and though he takes care not to choke me, my mouth is immediately very, very full. I cannot suck him as much as I might want, and my tongue can barely move with his girth.

Kail is not bothered by this, because Kail intends to fuck my mouth, using that hole the same way he used my pussy. I feel my cunt clenching, dripping desire. Kail’s big hands are on either side of my head, keeping me in place, using me the way I now feel I was made to be used.

His grunts and the intense need of my pussy to be filled intensify at the same time. I hope against hope he does not come in my mouth. I whimper as coherently as I can, begging for his cock in my pussy.

I don’t deserve his mercy, but Kail has always shown me mercy when I least deserve it, and now is no different. He pulls out of my mouth, leaving my jaw aching, and tosses me up and over onto my back, pushing my thighs back and open, claiming me in the mating press, going deep and powerful above and inside me.

My yowls and cries are unfettered as he finishes us both in this powerful embrace, his muscular green body poised above mine, his cock descending near vertically inside me, bottoming out deep until he fills me with his alien seed, his thrusts ensuring that the foaming of his cum and my desire are both spread inside and out of me.

“I know I have not made a dent in your disobedient nature,” he says, keeling over to lie next to me, wrapping a strong arm around me. “But that felt good.”

“Yes,” I agree, aching at both ends of my body and knowing I deserve it. “Yes, it fucking did.”

We cross from lawful territory to illicit territory without incident. Well, almost without incident. The ship issues several dire warnings as we pass the final bastions of law and order, informing us that we are forfeiting the rights of good citizens simply by entering lawless space.

WARNING! You are leaving governed and charted space! Risk of disorientation and death is extreme. Ship will automatically resume course to charted space in 5...4...

“No, you won’t,” I tell it firmly, cancelling the homing sequence. The ship resists, actively fighting my efforts to continue. We slow to a crawl as I wrestle with a very stubborn craft who wants to go home with all its might.

WARNING! Ungoverned space is not subject to laws, which means anything could happen and nobody could do anything about it.

“Yes, that’s the idea,” I mutter.

WARNING! Friends and family may find your disappearance into illicit space distressing, as you are wiped from civilization in one fell swoop.

Whoever recorded these messages really felt free to get dramatic with them. They are not broadcasting in the ship’s usual soothing monotone. Instead, they are booming in the officious voice of an annoyed man.

“No friends, and all the family I have is right here,” I reply. It takes a lot to disable these warnings without turning navigation off entirely. I’d look up the process, but the

information web doesn't extend to illicit space. There are no web towers here. There is an illicit web, but we don't have a log on for that, and I have no interest in tugging at those strands just yet.

Kail is letting me handle this, as he has little experience in matters of interplanetary politics, and I have no intention of letting him down. I am going to be careful, as careful as anybody can be in this dark space.

This is not my first foray into illicit territory. I've worked here before on behalf of the Colony. It did not go well, and the Colony did not renew any contracts in illicit space. I'm now grateful for that experience, though it almost killed me at the time.

"There are a lot of raiders and pirates," I warn Kail. "It's important, if they manage to board, we don't fight. They have no qualms about slaughter. We're playing by a whole new set of rules now. To survive, you have to negotiate. Some pirates are outright killers, but most want to make a deal that sees them uninjured."

Kail listens, but doesn't say much in return, and I have the distinct feeling all my warnings are going to go right out the airlock if such a conflict ever eventuates. That means I need to do what I can to stop it from happening.

I set the ship's scanners to their most sensitive setting, turn all the external lights off, and run as low power as we can.

"We are sneaking," Kail says. "I thought our reason for coming here was to seek allies."

"Not allies in general, one ally in particular. I made her acquaintance when I worked for the Colony. She showed me mercy once, I am hoping she will do so twice."

"It is a woman," he says.

"It is the strongest woman I know. She's not human, though. She's more of a matriarchal type. If we can get to her, we'll be safe. But she's nomadic, and a pirate, and we're likely to encounter her fleet first. That's why I'm saying we don't kill

anybody. We don't want to kill her friends or family before we ask her for help."

"So we are hiding, knowing that we will be intercepted, but hoping we are intercepted by the right people."

"Actually, I am hoping we come across one of their outposts, or perhaps a ship. It would be much better if we were the ones to initiate contact. What we don't want is..."

"SURPRISE!"

There is a yowl of glee as three heavily-armed, very furry pirates appear on the bridge behind us. This is what I was afraid of. They must have spotted us a while ago, followed us under stealth, and transported here. There are only three of them because there's only room for three of them on the bridge.

It has just gotten very, very crowded in here, and their booming voices risk waking the baby.

"YER HAVING THE PLEASURE OF BEING ROBBED!"

Their announcement is lost in Kail's reaction, as he roars and turns about, fists clenched, teeth bared. I have to leap around in front of him.

"Parlay! Parlay!" I hiss-shout the word over and over. As I suspected, Kail is having a very hard time taming his aggressive instincts. If he puts his hands on them and a fight breaks out, it would be very, very bad.

I turn to Kail, putting my hands on his chest.

"Let me do the talking, please," I say to Kail. "Remember, we're here to make friends."

There is snickering of laughter at my comment about making friends.

"I invoke parlay," I say, turning around. "And I beg audience with Siryn Iyengar."

At the mention of Siryn's name, at least half the hostility leaves their eyes. These are Peltbars, a very furry and very powerful species known as being capable of surviving in

hostile circumstances. They have been eradicated from lawful lands because they are also known to be absolutely ungovernable.

Not a single one of them is dressed the same. Pirates do not have a uniform. They are wearing disparate clothing, though they are all wearing thick boots with rubber soles. I know those boots well; they are designed to resist shocks from anti-pirate repellent systems. Other than that, the one who has spoken is wearing a velvet and gold velour jacket, while the one behind him is wearing nothing but a white vest, through which great puffs of dark fur are visible. The third is only wearing pants, but those pants are bright red. They are not dressed for stealth. All of them are festooned liberally in gold and silver jewelry, rings and earrings and bracelets. None of them are the slightest bit feminine. If only their fashionable attire ended there, but it does not.

All of them wear necklaces strung with bits of enemies encountered. Ears, noses, and other pieces are displayed very proudly. I intend to do everything to stop any of our parts from ending up that way.

“Who demands audience with Siryn?” the leader asks the question, his ear collection jiggling underneath his sharp, bearded muzzle.

“My name is Tarni,” I say. “She knows me as the Colonial.”

All three Peltbars draw back from us as if I just became electrically charged. They look at one another in confusion.

“You are the Colonial?” The leader asks me, guarded and suspicious, but also very ready to believe me.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“You make an impression wherever you go,” Kail mutters behind me.

He has no idea just how true that statement is.

There is a low muttering among the Peltbears, a sort of subsonic hum. I can't make out any words, but they are having a conversation. It is punctuated by growls and the occasional yelp and whimper.

Finally, they come to a conclusion.

“Set your ship to follow us, Colonial,” the leader says. He has not introduced himself. So rude.

“It might be better if you put a tow lock on us. I’m not certain this bucket can keep up, and I’d hate to lose you.”

“As you wish.”

They are speaking with respect now, and caution. I have to wonder how many stories they’ve heard about the Colonial. It’s quite common for my reputation to ferment in my absence in instances where my identity becomes known.

The pirates seem quite happy to leave the ship, relieved, even. They back away, patting their transport nodes with a hurried pace. It’s funny what a name can do. Changes the whole vibe of a room.

They disappear in a bright vibration, leaving a few wisps of fur in their wake, along with a faint scent of beast.

I let out the breath I had been holding even while speaking, releasing some of the tension. Thankfully, Nemo slept through it all. He’s still far too young to have his first hostile interaction with pirates.

“Alright.” I smile at Kail. “That went really well, I thought.”

He fixes me with that penetrating golden gaze of his. “What did you do when you were last here?”

“I ran some missions for the Colony. They thought I could infiltrate a pirate ring that was making incursions into lawful space and bring their fearless leader to justice. Spoiler: I did not bring her to justice.”

“But you survived.”

“I always survive,” I smile lightly, being a little flippant given all that has happened of late. It is true, so far, I do always survive. So far.

It takes three days for us to reach Siryn. It is a peaceful trip, though I know Kail is worried. There's a real chance we are flying into a trap. When we arrive, we will be outnumbered. We are no longer under our own power, adding to the feeling of helplessness.

"We don't have enough weapons," he says. Kail is going to wear a rut into the floor of the bridge with the way he paces.

"Since when have you ever needed weapons, Kail?"

"Nemo can barely support his own head," Kail growls. "He's not ready for battle."

The first part is not true. The second part is. Nemo has been able to sit up on his own for some time now, but he is surely not ready for battle. I hope he never has to do a day of battle in his life. He's earned the right to some peace after an entire infancy in chaos.

"Siryn is not going to allow any harm to come to a baby," I say. "You and I, we might be at risk, but Nemo is golden. This is probably the safest place for him in the entire universe."

"You might think that, but I do not know this pirate woman, and I cannot trust anyone I do not know."

"I know it's hard to trust me, but please, trust me," I say. "Not her. Not them. Me."

Kail looks me in the eye and his shoulders drop. "I will do my best."



Siryn has a small outpost built under a dome. It is built out of old-fashioned materials, a lot of wood and rope, though I know from experience that the internal construction will be solid and modern. Siryn has a certain aesthetic she likes to keep up. She likes to appear rustic and simple, but the truth is she is an extremely sophisticated creature.

We are pulled into dock alongside her ships. Her fleet does not have coherence of appearance, because a pirate must be able to hide themselves no matter what.

“I don’t think I should hold Nemo,” I say as Kail and I prepare to leave the ship. “And I won’t leave him here.”

“I’ll hold him,” Kail says, without hesitation.

I am glad to hear that, both because it further indicates the erosion of his reluctance to take on a fatherly role, but because it means his hands will be full of baby and he will not be inclined to resort to violence.



Captain Siryn is waiting for us on the dock. I make eye contact with her as we come down the gangplank of our ship, letting my features assume what I hope to all gods looks like a submissive smile. She will see through it, but I hope she’ll appreciate the effort.

“You have some nerve coming back here, Colonial.” Her tone is icy and stern as she looks down her muzzle at me.

The lady Siryn is a tall Peltbar with flowing golden hair. The closest human familiar animal I can name is the coat of an Afghan hound. She is quite beautiful and highly intimidating, with sharp brown eyes and a muzzle full of sharp teeth. She stands well over six feet tall, slightly taller than Kail in her heels. She is wearing a long beige coat with dark trim, and a matching hat. Pirate, but make it fashion.

Siryn regards us with an inscrutable expression, her eyes glancing over Nemo, brows rising as she sees his smiling face. He is attempting to reach for some of the dismembered ears attached to the necklace of a nearby pirate guard. Thankfully, his arms are still short and Kail is careful to keep him from taking hold.

“It is good to see you, Siryn,” I reply. I haven’t been entirely forthcoming with Kail as to how I left here and why I was allowed to leave alive. Siryn isn’t known for mercy, especially not to Colony operatives.

“Is it?” One brow remains raised at me. I feel a bubbling of nervousness. It is very possible she has changed her mind since I last saw her. All fondness for me could easily have evaporated. If that is the case, I have led my family to their doom.

“I am no longer affiliated with the Colony.”

“You said that last time.”

“Yes, but this time it is true.”

She takes me by the chin and looks deep into my eyes. “I never could do to you what you deserved to have done to you. Explain the savage and the prince.”

“Prince?” My voice squeaks in surprise.

“Without lying to me.” She drops my chin and stands back, her eyes roaming over Kail and Nemo. They interest her greatly.

“This is Kail, my mate, and Nemo, my son,” I say. “I have brought them to your territory for safekeeping. I have become an enemy of the Colony, as has Kail. We throw ourselves on your mercy.”

Her expression becomes cynical as she moves her eyes back to me. “You left here and you returned to work for the Colony, and now you have this male, you have forsaken it, finally? Do I understand that correctly?”

“It’s complicated, but yes, that is the essence of it. I was sent to bring Kail to justice...”

“Just as you were once sent to bring me to justice.”

“Yes.”

“And you seduced him, as is your habit.”

“Well... seduced is... we...”

“Habit?” Kail rumbles the question.

“Oh, she did not tell you?” Siryn smiles too brightly at Kail.

“This little human was my lover.”

“One of your lovers,” I remind her. “Not a girlfriend. I just... We just...”

I am blushing and feeling very guilty. I probably should have told Kail about that aspect of things, but I really thought that would be a distraction. He might have refused to come, and my reason for being here is truly that Siryn rules the most stable lawless society I am aware of. I could not bring her down, no matter how many of her affections I garnered. She can keep Nemo safe.

“I almost kept her for myself, you know,” Siryn says conversationally to Kail. “But she was too wily, and too loyal to the Colony. I cannot imagine the kind of love that would break her of that sick attachment.”

She is paying him a compliment and throwing me under the space bus at the same time. I feel my cheeks absolutely flaming with embarrassment. Kail is going to want to talk about this. He’s going to have a lot of questions.

At that moment, Nemo starts to whimper and then cry. He’s upset that he is not allowed to play with dead ears, and his frustration has peaked.

“The child needs food. As does the baby,” Siryn says, giving me a cutting look. “Come in.”

She leads us from the docks and into the largest of the many houses ranged along the other side. I remember this place. I remember the carvings inside the front door. They are in the shape of fish, which pleases Nemo instantly and stops him crying. There is a scent of home cooking floating in the air, roasted fish and potatoes and other alien vegetables.

I feel myself relaxing in a way I didn't even when we lived on our little peaceful farm. That had the feeling of remoteness and a certain solitary angst. Here we are enveloped by domesticity.

"Sit down," Siryn orders in a stern, yet hospitable fashion.

We all do as we are told, Kail setting Nemo on his knee. Siryn ladles the stew bubbling over the fire into wooden bowls and slides them to us with warm bread slices. It is a hearty, soothing meal.

Siryn does not eat. She sits at the head of the table, her back to the fire, and she regards us all with an openly calculating stare that only softens when she catches Nemo's gaze. I knew she'd like him. No matter what happens to Kail and me, Nemo will be safe here.

"Thank you," I say when I am full. "That was delicious, and your hospitality..."

"Quiet," she grinds out. "The problem with you, is that whenever you are talking, the words cover your meaning. You are such a liar you cannot help but fail to tell the truth."

Kail lets out a soft snort. "I have been working to break her of that trait."

"You will not succeed. It is as ingrained in her as her very bones," Siryn replies.

Caught between Siryn and a Kail place, I decide that silence might very well be the best approach. When I first came here, I earned myself the reputation she is now sharing. I cannot tell her I have changed, because that is precisely the sort of lie past me would have told.

"I almost gave my boys the order to hurl your ship into the nearest sun," she says. "But they told me there was an infant on board. They didn't mention that he was also a dead prince."

Of course she clocked him right away. Siryn is nothing if not informed.

"That baby is very alive for an unfortunately murdered prince," she says. "How did you come by him?"

“By chance,” I say, knowing she will not believe me. “Kail, tell her.”

“We found him on a Persinian trader ship. We do not know how he came to be there, or what they had planned to do with him, because I killed them all.”

“Ah,” Siryn says. “So you took custody of the mite and...”

“We tried to go straight,” I explain. “Found a little farm on a remote planet, right at the edge of lawful space. It was okay for a few months, but then the Colony found us.”

“And the Colony was looking for you because...”

“Because I was supposed to bring Kail down, and instead I let him go,” I say. “I left the Colony. There’s a price on my head, and there was already one on his after he took vengeance for the destruction of his family.”

“And they call your kind the savages,” Siryn says to Kail.

“I do not care what they call me,” Kail replies.

“So you have come here seeking refuge.”

“Yes, please, Siryn. I know I do not deserve your mercy. I didn’t deserve it then, and, well, nothing has changed. But Kail and Nemo have done nothing wrong. I need to know they are safe.”

“I don’t run a refuge for wanted savages,” she says bluntly. “What I run is a pirate operation. Anybody who wants to be part of this society needs to contribute. Kail. Give the human lie the baby. You and I need to test one another’s mettle.”

Kail is not one to back down from a challenge, and though I wish this was not happening, I know there is no way to avoid it. Everybody who joins Siryn must prove themselves. She whipped my ass around the docks for a good hour before taking mercy on me.

“Can we not rest first?” I try to delay the inevitable.

Siryn looks at me, a frown creasing her furred face. “The absolute nerve,” she says. “You have not had enough beatings. Come, Kail. My men are looking forward to this

entertainment, and you look sturdy enough to be a worthy opponent.”

“I do not fight females,” Kail says.

“That’s good to hear,” Siryn replies. “It will make it very easy to kill you. Come along.”

Kail hands Nemo to me, and we follow Siryn out the back of her home, which leads to a roped off arena, something like a round boxing ring.

With that, she unsheathes her electric rapier and rushes at Kail.

He is not given a choice. He is forced to fight or be run through with a blade of pure energy.

Kail ducks and dives under her outstretched arm, grabbing her by the ankles as he goes, and taking her off her feet. Siryn lands heavily on her ass, and I have to hide a snort of laughter behind Nemo, who is laughing and clapping his hands at this sight. I have to hope his presence will keep this from becoming truly bloody, though I know there is a chance Siryn will try to take out her frustration and anger at me out on Kail.

“Are we done?” He asks the question while standing over her. He extends a gallant hand to help her get up.

“In one exchange? No, we are not done,” Siryn laughs, ignoring his hand and rolling backward away from him before kipping up to her feet. “Take up a weapon, savage.”

“I don’t use weapons.”

“You can’t kill everything with your bare hands.”

“History shows otherwise,” he replies.

I can see a grudging respect in Siryn’s eyes.

“I do not have beef with you, savage,” she says. “And it is not you I truly need to test.”

K *ail*

The sentiment is well and good, but the language must change.

“My name is Kail. Savage is what the Colony calls my kind, and I am the last of my kind.”

“Kail,” she says. “I am sorry. What the Colony does to the species it meets is unforgivable.”

I nod in agreement, feeling no need to elaborate even in agreement. The sorrows of my past are mine to bear, and I have no wish to bring them fresh life by recounting them. I find Siryn’s presence comfortable, and though her port is strange to me, there is a certain homeyness to it that carries through into this house. It feels like a safe place. For the first time since the Colony came into my life, I feel myself relax thoroughly and properly, tension I had forgotten I was holding flowing out of my muscles.

I am home.

I cast a glance over at Tarni, who does not look so relaxed. She is very nervous in Siryn’s company, and perhaps in mine.

I am not pleased that she did not tell me where we were going, or that we were going to someone who she had previously worked on under the Colony’s rule. This situation could have been, and still could be unspeakably dangerous. Tarni does well to avoid my gaze.

“That,” Siryn says, gesturing to Tarni with the point of her blade, “is trouble.”

“I know,” I agree. There is no point claiming otherwise. These two clearly have a longstanding association.

“Let me see you handle her,” Siryn says. “I trust your prowess in battle, but even the strongest warrior can be undone by that human. I want to see some sign she is under control, her natural treachery moderated by submission.”

Tarni

Kail looks at me with an expression that does not bode well at fucking all.

“I had planned to deal with her for not telling me the truth of where we were going,” Kail says. “Or who we were going to

see. It may as well be before you, we won't be exposing anything you haven't already seen."

"No. Come on. Guys. Please..." I back away from them both, my hands raised.

"Don't even think about it," Siryn says. She caught my glance toward the window. Unfortunately for her, I have already thought about it. Not only have I thought about it, but I've planned it. I know exactly how many steps I need to get to it, and how fast I need to move to leap out of it.

Pirates scatter in surprise as I come out the window like a missile, tucking into a tight ball before scampering along the docks.

Kail

"I should have anticipated that," Siryn says with a half-shrug as Tarni disappears out the window. "She used to do that a lot. She is an expert at deserving punishment, and an even greater expert at escaping that punishment. Shall we go find her?"

"I don't think we need to hunt her," I reply. "We are here. Nemo is here. She is not going anywhere. She will have to come home soon enough, and when she does, she will submit obediently."

I almost believe myself as I say those words. Maybe Tarni is changing me. I don't believe for a second she intends to come and submit obediently. I do think she will eventually return, likely by stealth, and I think when she does she will expect the trouble to have passed.

"You're not as good a liar as she is," Siryn says. "Tarni has no shame."

"I think she has a lot of shame," I reply. "I think she is ashamed of every breath she takes."

Siryn cocks her head at me. "You're quite intelligent, aren't you. And you know her well. I am glad she found someone

like you. I do not know what fate had in store for her otherwise. The Colony used her like a whore.”

She sits down in one of her fine armchairs and gestures to me, indicating that I should also take a seat.

“They crashed her ship without warning so I would take pity on her. They nearly killed her in the attempt to get my confession,” I say. “I have never encountered such a survivor.”

“She has fortitude and fortune on her side,” Siryn says. “Would you like some port?”

“I do not know what that is.”

“Try some,” she pours some thick red liquid into a goblet and hands it to me.

I take it from her and take a small sip. It tastes like fire and riches. It is good.

“I am grateful for your hospitality,” I say. “But you do not owe it to us, and if you wish for us to move on, we will do so.”

“There are not many places you could move to that are not either contested, or run by someone worse than I,” Siryn says. “I welcome strong warriors such as yourself, and the baby has my protection as a matter of course. It is the human that gives me pause. She cannot be trusted. Even now, about to earn a small fraction of her comeuppance, she fled.”

“I have trusted her with my life on several occasions,” I reply. “She has given up everything, lost everything to leave the Colony. I know she never showed you her honor, but she does possess it.”

“I need to see it.”

T *arni*

I sit underneath the window and listen to them talk about me. Siryn’s words are unerringly accurate. I can’t be offended by them, because they’re true. Kail’s belief in me is sweet, but Siryn has no way of knowing if he truly has me in hand, or if I am playing him the same way I played her.

This is all my fault. Self-pity makes me seriously consider getting in my ship and flying away. They'd all be better off without me. Siryn is right. I am a liar, and a manipulator, and even if I went in there right now and agreed to let Kail thrash me, it wouldn't be because I think I deserve it. It would be because I know that's what I need to do in order to gain their trust. That's the thought process of a spy, not a lover.

How am I supposed to teach Nemo to be a half-decent person when I'm so fucked up? I'm going to ruin him, like I ruined parts of Siryn. She's not over me. Or, more accurately, she's not over what I did to her. I think she's very much over me. The way she looks at me has no affection at all.

I love Kail, and I love Nemo, but coming here has reminded me of the worst parts of myself. I thought all I had to do was physically escape the Colony, but the Colony is inside me. It is part of me, and I take it with me wherever I go. There's a very real chance that the best thing I could do is to leave Kail and Nemo here where they will be safe and remove myself from the situation.



Our ship has been moved to one of the smaller side docks. I pace back and forth there, thinking about my options, quietly hating myself, wishing I was better. Wishing I had made different decisions. But if I had, Kail would be a dead savage and nobody knows what would have happened to Nemo. We've heard rumors that the baby survived and that Persinian agents have been searching for him. There aren't many who can hide him as well as we can, and even fewer prepared to protect him the way we will.

Maybe I'm not the worst person in the entire universe. Maybe I do have a past, but who doesn't? Nobody becomes a pirate because they made good decisions. Everybody, Siryn included, has made their fair share of mistakes.

I keep turning the matter over and over in my mind. Am I good? Am I bad? Am I some toxic combination of both?

A gruff clearing of the throat comes from behind me. I turn around to see Kail standing behind me. I don't see Siryn, thankfully.

"Come to beat me?"

He snorts. "Come to talk to you."

I nod, then notice someone is missing. "Wait. Where's Nemo?"

"Siryn is looking after him. She seems to like babies."

I owe him an explanation of that too, I guess. "She wanted to have her own, but she couldn't have any, because she'd rather die than touch a dick. Besides, pirates don't usually have families. The lifestyle isn't very family friendly. I knew she'd like him. I thought maybe, if I wasn't... If I'm not..."

I feel my lower lip quivering and try to will it to stop.

I look into Kail's face, and I remember Siryn's words, and I just crumble back into that void of self-pity and despair.

"Maybe I should go away," I sniff. "Somewhere I won't hurt anybody anymore. Somewhere my lies can't ruin you and Nemo and everyone else."

"First," he growls. "You are not going anywhere. Second, you are going to face your shortcomings, because that is the only way to overcome them."

"What are my shortcomings? They're the same as my gifts. What makes me good is the same thing that makes me bad. I don't want to give that all up just to be acceptable. If Siryn doesn't trust me, fine. I don't care."

"It seems as though you care very much."

"I care because it's making it hard for you to be here."

"This would not have been an easy journey no matter what. We have arrived at a port of outlaws, deep beyond the space either one of us might call home, and put ourselves at the mercy of a ruthless captain."

"She likes you," I say. "She loves Nemo. I'm the problem. She doesn't like me, and that is going to make the entire situation

almost impossible. She wants you to beat me, but that won't be the end of it."

"What did you do to her, exactly?"

I lean back against the ship. "I was supposed to befriend her and lure her into a Colonial trap. But I tipped her off before they could catch her, and instead of her and her men being hanged, there was a small massacre of Colonial troops. I caught some flak for it from my superiors, but she survived."

"So I'm not the first mark you've taken pity on."

"You're the second. I never liked doing bad things to good people. Fortunately for me, most of the people the Colony had me go after were awful. It was a good job, and I was good at it. But Siryn hates me, and that makes sense. Before I tipped her off, there was... entanglement. I think I broke her heart. The mission here was the last mission before I came to your world."

"Maybe she broke you as much as you broke her, if after a lifetime of serving the Colony, your first betrayal was for her." His eyes narrow slightly, not with malice, but with interest. "Are you in love with her?"

I sigh. "That's... Siryn is one of the most astonishing people I have ever met. She was strong in ways I never even understood you could be strong. I saved her because she deserved to be saved. She was too damn good to die in a Colony noose. And yes, I formed a bond with her. There was love. I'm not going to deny that. I..." I bite my lower lip. "I worshipped her. It was an admiration that went all the way to the core of me. She was everything I never knew I wanted to be, and getting to be close to her felt like more than intimacy. It felt like an honor."

I don't know if he can understand any of that. Most people I've encountered think sexuality is about dicks and vaginas. Even advanced aliens come down to that most of the time.

"I understand," he says.

"Really?"

“I’ve met Siryn,” he reminds me. “I see how impressive she is. And I see how like you she is in many ways, but without the cunning. She is bold instead of sneaky.”

“Good description,” I say. “Anyway, I don’t know what she saw in me. But she was fond of me. She had several lovers. I wasn’t her one and only, or even close. But it was still a betrayal. Siryn does not trust easily, and once you fail her, that’s it. She’s not going to forgive me. What I did to her was unforgivable. Like I said. I brought you and Nemo here, because, aside from when I met you, this is the place I’ve felt the most safe. But it’s not a place for me anymore...”

I break off as I hear a gurgle and a cry. Baby sounds. I turn around to see Siryn standing not far away, well within earshot. My face flames as I wonder how much of that she heard. I mouth *what the fuck* at Kail. He must have known she was there but didn’t see fit to warn me.

I wish the dock would just open up and let me fall into unboundaried space. That would be so much less humiliating than what is currently happening.

Siryn switches Nemo from one hip to the other.

“I don’t know why you can’t say these things to my face,” she says, deceptively casually.

“Because I lied to your face once and they wouldn’t mean anything. They probably don’t mean anything to you now.”

“Good point, well made,” she says dryly. “For what it is worth, Tarni, I do believe you. And it is good to see you again, though you come here like a feral queen cat, bringing her baby and mate to the last place she got a good meal. It’s sweet, in a way.”

“You can do what you want to me,” I say, gathering as much bravery as I can muster. “I just want a safe space for Kail and Nemo. They deserve it.”

“You are right about one thing,” Siryn says, leaning down slightly, her dark eyes piercing mine. “I can do what I want to you.”

There is a slight gruff cough from Kail behind me. Siryn's lips draw back in a smirk, baring sharp white teeth and canines almost as impressive as Kail's fangs. I would not like to see the two of them fight. Fortunately, I do not think either of them would like to see the two of them fight either. They have a natural mutual respect, alpha to alpha.

"Within reason, of course," she amends. "With the understanding you have come back here well and truly owned."

Owned. The word feels right.

I get the feeling I am going to be tolerated. I know that's probably all I deserve, but there is some small part of me with some incredible nerve that wants some credit for the limited good I have done her and Kail.

If I were a better person, a more enlightened and progressive soul, I would have just thanked her profusely for her generosity and told her I am grateful for her mercy. Instead, I open my mouth and completely different words emerge, almost as if my thoughts and my actions come from two separate and disconnected parts of my skull's interior.

"I owe you an apology. I know that. But you also owe me thanks. I betrayed you, but I saved you."

Siryn looks at me, brows raised, lip curled in just the hint of the beginning of a snarl. Every bit of her being resonates with warning, prompting another quick outburst from me.

"If you want me to leave, I will. I'll even leave Nemo with you. I know you've always wanted a baby, and I have no right to be anybody's mom."

Kail walks to Siryn and takes Nemo from her. "That's not how this works. Nemo is your son. It's not about right. It's about responsibility. You've always looked after him. And me. And yes, probably Siryn too."

"You showed me mercy at the very last moment," Siryn says, begrudgingly giving me my due.

I turn to Kail and gesticulate. "She hates me, and she has every right to. What I don't have the right to do is show up here and

expect hospitality. Fuck it. I'm..."

"Ow!" I gasp as Siryn catches me with a slap across my ass with the flat of her cutlass.

"That makes me feel better," she comments as I leap and grab my rear. Cold steel does not feel good against my light attire. "I think if I could just see you properly brought to justice, I would be much more inclined to trust you. But, in spite of my own need for revenge, I know you well enough to say that there is nobody better, smarter, and more ruthless to take care of this little guy. You're his mother, because you will do whatever you need to do to keep him safe. I don't want you to leave Port Refuge. I want you to stay here, just under control."

"I'm never under control."

"She's never under control."

Kail and I speak at much the same time.

"I suppose we will have to see about that," Siryn says, her smile thin. "For now, I invite you to stay in my home. You can construct your own when you have earned some currency."

That's the other problem. We're broke. Colony credits mean nothing to Siryn and her people. Anything we have here we will have to earn on our own, starting completely from scratch, and at the mercy of divvies decided by Siryn.

"I am eager to begin work," Kail says. "It has been too long since I hunted."

"You will be making Colony ships your prey."

Kail smirks broadly, all muscle and teeth. "Good."

Siryn's demeanor changes completely as she addresses Kail. She speaks to him like an equal and with immediate respect he didn't have to do a damn thing to earn. "You will be a powerful asset to us, Kail. I look forward to a long and powerful alliance between us. You are very welcome here, savage."

She reaches out with a furry finger and tickles Nemo under his chin. "And you, of course, would be welcome anywhere."

Nemo lets out a chortle and stuffs his fist into his mouth.

Her eyes slide to me. “You’re on probation. You haven’t shown a single sign of true sorrow besides the fact that you don’t like being in trouble with me, you refuse punishment, and frankly, I have no interest in chasing you around the port day and night attempting to see justice done. You will not board any ship. You will stay here, grounded. You will tend to the needs of your son. And you will be watched day and night by my most trusted lieutenants.”

I shrug. “Fine. If that’s what makes you comfortable and keeps my family safe. I don’t mind suffering.”

“You just jumped out a window to avoid punishment,” she says, not buying my words for a second. “And it seems you have been successful. Once again, the inimitable Tarni escapes discipline.”

“Oh no she doesn’t,” Kail rumbles. “I’m not done with my mate.”

“I don’t?”

He looks down at me with golden eyes full of determination. “No,” he says. “You do not.”

Siryn waves a woman over. I recognize her from the last time I was here. Her name is Gabrielle, and she is a humble and faithful servant.

“Do you mind if Gabrielle takes the baby?” Siryn asks. “I think it is time we handled Tarni. Sometimes the needs of mothers get so overlooked, and that would be a true pity.”

Her eyes are narrowed with punitive intensity. I realize that all I did by leaping out the window was turn a semi-public punishment into a completely public one.

I give permission, and Gabrielle takes Nemo back to Siryn’s home. I am left on the dock, nervously squirming before Kail and Siryn. She’s right. He’s right. I can’t keep running from this. It’s going to happen, and not for them, but for me.

Kail takes the lead.

“I am going to spank you, because that’s what you deserve. You’re going to be spanked, because you need it. Simple as that.”

“Is it? Simple? Is anything simple?”

“Yes,” he says, soft and fond. “That’s my gift. Making things simple for you.”

I start to cry, feeling so guilty, so broken, so used. Not by him, but by the Colony. I want so badly to be trustworthy, but I don’t trust myself, and I don’t think spanking is going to make any fucking difference.

Kail gathers me in his arms and holds me close in the warmest and tenderest of hugs that one hundred percent, definitely is going to end in punishment.

“I know what you are, Tarni, and I love you. I am going to make an honest woman of you.”

He sits down on a docking point and pulls me over his thighs. My pants pull tight over my ass, but only for a moment before he peels them down, baring me completely. I close my eyes tight, as if to avoid embarrassment, but I know how I look. I look like someone finally getting some of her comeuppance.

He spansks me, and I cry almost immediately from the relatively gentle impact of his palm. He’s not trying to hurt me. He’s trying to show me that I will always have a place with him, and that he can handle me, not just physically, but in every possible way.

I am sobbing over his knee before I know it, releasing tension with every firm pat of his big, strong palm. This is a creature who intended on killing me once, who wanted to make an example of me, who chased me when I was wounded and broken and afraid. Now he holds me like I am the most precious thing in the world. Our love is a love that has survived mutual betrayal, vast distances, and the care of an orphan.

He is everything to me, and I hope I am everything to him. As my tears fall, they are tears of joy and hope. He’s not hurting me, and he won’t, not while Siryn commands it. He’s making

a different kind of demonstration, one far deeper and more transformative than simple discipline.

“She’s had enough pain,” Kail declares. “Her life has been pain, a life hidden in shadows, never being known and only rarely being seen. I know you want revenge for her treachery, Siryn, but this is not the way. I have walked the path of bloody vengeance more than once. There is nothing wrong with that, but it has to be tempered with mercy, or it is nothing but becoming the thing you hate.”

He picks me up, sits me on his lap, and holds me close. Depending on what Siryn says next, we will either have a home or be nomads once more.

“I never saw her cry an honest tear before. And I never saw her so easily handled,” Siryn says. If I am not mistaken, there is a slight catch in her voice. Perhaps she is not as unaffected by this display as she would like to be. “Kail, as long as the human remains under your command, you are all welcome here.”

EPILOGUE

K *ail*

Under Captain Siryn's flag, I raid and destroy Colony ships along the border, taking revenge. I will never tire of this work. I have my own crew, a new family, and a mate and son waiting for me at home when I return from our raiding parties. I will never stop mourning the family I lost. Their names remain known to me and me alone, quiet and safe in my breast. I think of their faces, their voices, their wishes, their dreams, their joys daily.

“Kawkaw!”

The name bestowed on me by my son of destiny is shouted across space. I can't hear him through the window physically, but his voice rings in my heart as clear as day.

Nemo waits for me on the dock. He can walk and he can talk in short sentences. His fins are beginning to grow, and his scales are starting to become shinier and more iridescent. He is a fine boy, and he will be an even finer man. He is waving eagerly, both with a finned hand, and with a wooden cutlass made by his aunt Siryn.

T *arni*

I pause from my task of washing the port's laundry. Yes, all of it. Siryn has me attending to menial tasks while Nemo is being watched by others. I would say she is working me to the

bone, but the truth is she is only expecting of me the same thing she would expect of anyone else: hard graft.

Kail has been away raiding for several weeks, but the word is that his fleet of pirates will be returning today. After his first handful of missions, Siryn gave him his first command, and then another, and then another. The higher Kail rises in the ranks, the lower I seem to go.

My hands are red and wrinkled from the water, my back is aching from the work, and my temper is fraying. Sometimes I think Siryn wants me to break and to lash out so she has reason to punish me while Kail is away. I do not give her the satisfaction. I am not afraid of work, and I am accustomed to being tormented. It's going to take a lot more than laundry to make me snap.

“Mama! Kawkaw is coming!” Nemo shrieks as he runs for me with the still slightly unsteady gait of a toddler not quite yet a child.

My smile matches his as I rise from my chores and go to meet Kail. Nemo is ahead of me and of course he gets to Kail first. I stay back, watching with real joy as Nemo and Kail reunite. Their bond is special. I do not know what future the Persinians had in mind for Nemo, but I know fate has had him land on his feet. He is growing up smart and strong with a healthy disregard for authority. Perhaps one day he will reclaim his throne. I have no doubt that great things await him in the future.

Kail gives him a good amount of attention before gently handing Nemo off to Siryn, who sweeps him off to go and look at the many riches inside Kail's vessel. Kail strides over to greet me more privately under the eaves of Siryn's house. We still cannot afford our own home, quelle surprise.

“Have you been good for me?” Kail murmurs the question against my lips, as he lifts me off my feet and begins to strip me of my wet washerwoman's clothes.

“Not here!” I squeal. “Upstairs!”

He has yet to do anything too untoward, but that is certainly only a matter of time. Kail takes me into the house and up the stairs, all the way to the room we share in the attic.

“Hold onto the rafter,” he urges me, lifting me up so I can grip the beams that run horizontally across the room. I do as I am told, as curious as I am aroused. The rest of my clothing is removed in swift order, anything that won’t slide off being torn from me. I don’t care at all. I am just so glad to be back in my savage lover’s arms.

He grins as he reaches into his pocket, drawing out a new set of toys. They are leather and fur clad shackles, which he wraps around my wrists and the rafter, securing me in place. It would hurt like hell if he dropped me now, but he won’t drop me. If there is one thing Kail will never do, it is let me go.

“I missed you,” he growls. “Every day I was raiding Colony ships, I wished you were there beside me.”

“I wish I was there too, but I’m still grounded.”

“My bad girl, grounded and punished,” he smirks. He has learned a lot of human and other alien expressions in the time he has spent off his planet of origin. He is becoming increasingly cultured and ever more intriguing.

He spreads my thighs with his big green hands and wastes no time in unnecessary foreplay. My body is well trained to get wet when I see him. I know what I am for and what he wants from me. I want the same thing from him. I want intimacy and release. I want pleasure, and yes, I want pain.

Kail’s cock stretches me wide, opening me up deep and thoroughly. When he is inside my pussy, there is no doubt about who is in charge. My cunt belongs to him. My body is his.

I grip the bar and hold myself in place even though it is unnecessary. The shackles would do that anyway, but I am giving myself an increased level of captivity by holding fast as Kail surges inside me from behind, his deep green cock stretching me lewdly wide.

“Fuck me,” I moan, giving into the pleasure. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do,” he growls back. “You deserve everything you get.”

What I get are powerful alien thrusts deep inside me, loving me, absolving me, pleasuring me, worshipping me, leaving me used and drained and filled all at the same time.

When Kail is finished with me, I drip his seed from my aching sex, dangling from the rafter by my hands. His big alien paws grip my ass, kneading my flesh gently, encouraging the flow of his cum down my thighs.

“I like seeing you drip with me,” he says. “I love the smell of it, me and you, mixed together, the two of us. That is why I fuck you every time I leave, so I can keep the scent of you on my cock as a memory.”

He is sweet and filthy at the same time, and all mine.

A tap at the door reminds me Siryn is never far away. She speaks through the wood, sensible not to come in. She would not like this sight, I am sure of that.

“Are the two of you going to eat? Or should I join Nemo at Gabrielle’s house so I don’t have to hear the sounds of his parents acting like animals?”

“I am hungry,” Kail says gruffly.

“Me too,” I agree.

“We’re having a feast,” she says. “Come down to the dock if you want to partake.”

She leaves us to our own devices then, which I am glad for. Kail unhooks me from my shackles and draws me down to the bed.

“I thought you said you were hungry?”

“I want to hold you longer,” he says. “And be inside you again. Once was not enough. A lifetime would not be enough with you.”



We are very late to the feast, to the extent most of the pirates have either collapsed drunk or gone to bed like sensible people. Siryn is still holding court among the last people present, trusted advisors and old friends, not to mention several girlfriends. She has no shortage of lovers or admirers, and I am glad for that.

She calls Kail over, and we join them. Nemo is fast asleep in a cot nearby. He is always looked over here. There is not a person in the port who does not consider him family.

“I have good news for you,” she says, addressing Kail rather than me. “You’ve brought in enough raw materials and riches to extend the port,” she says. “I think it is time you two got your own home. Kail has earned it.”

“Congratulations, Kail,” I say, my smile only half-forced. “That’s exciting news.”

“Yes, you’ll have plenty of privacy for your fornication,” she says, drawing a huge laugh from everybody present.

“Yes,” I agree, catching her eye. “We will. Thank you so much for your generosity in allowing us to keep a small portion of the proceeds Kail has earned in his many weeks away from home.”

“Do you have a problem, Tarni?”

That’s my cue to submit, be sweet, and shut up. Maybe it’s the whole day of washing that has done it. Or maybe I’m just tired of being made to pay for a mistake I made a long time ago.

“Do you want me to have a problem?”

“Tarni...” Kail says warningly.

“What? Everybody knows my talents are being wasted washing clothes. Everybody knows I’m being punished persistently. Everybody knows that every hour of every day here is another opportunity for her to fuck with me. So what’s the catch? I’m not actually allowed in Kail’s house? I have to

scrub every inch of the dock with a toothbrush before we can move in? What? I know there's something, because she's not happy unless I am unhappy. But you know what, Siryn? I am happy. So suck on that."

There's a lull in the wake of my outburst, a sort of stunned silence. I made a scene, and not in a good way. Even to my own ears I sounded like a petulant teenager.

"Your talents are not being wasted here, Tarni. It is just that we have no need for treacherous spies."

There's a gasp from the pirates, followed by mocking laughter. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to make my way here. The resentment coming from all those around me is palpable, but I did think it would improve over time. Instead, I am the port punching bag.

"Enough."

Kail says the word quietly, but firmly.

I fall silent, sucking up the humiliation yet again.

Kail looks around all the pirates before his golden gaze settles on Siryn. "Tarni is my mate, and only I have the right to punish her. She will do her fair share of labor here, as we all must, but there is no doubt she is being wasted. She knows the Colony inside and out. We could make use of her in our incursions. The only reason I do not want her on the ships is because I want her here, safe. I also want her to be respected. I think I have earned that, and I think she has earned it too. I am not interested in houses or riches. I am here for the happiness of my family."

Another silence, followed by a nod from Siryn. "Fair enough. Laundry every other Tuesday. And perhaps a consulting role, though I have trouble trusting anything she says."

Kail is unexpectedly harsh in his response. "That's your failing. Not hers. She changed long ago, and she has proved that at every turn. If you cannot see that, then you are not as perceptive as I imagined."

"I can see it," Siryn admits. "I'm just petty, I suppose."

“We all have our failings,” Kail says. “I think we’ll take our leave for the night, Captain Siryn.”

Now they are the ones who look like guilty, petulant, bullying children. I try not to look too smug. That would ruin things. I want them just as they are now, scolded by Kail, from the lowest of the low all the way up to the port Captain herself.

Siryn nods. We barely got to eat a bite, so I grab a plate and load it up with everything I can under the skeptical gazes of the other pirates. With enough food stashed, I give a sarcastic curtsy and head into the night with Kail.

We find somewhere private and sit down, letting our legs dangle off the dock into what looks like empty space. We share the plate. When it is empty, I say what I probably should have said when it was full.

“Thank you for standing up for me.”

“I will always defend you. That is what I am doing out there, raiding Colony ships. I do not do it to destroy them. I do it because it keeps you and Nemo safe.”

“And I’d do laundry every day if it meant that you and Nemo were safe. I hate that you’re out there, at risk of being killed by a Colony fighter. It would make all of this such a waste of fucking time.”

He wraps an arm around my shoulders. “It wouldn’t be a waste. We are living a life, Tarni. We are raising Nemo. We are loving one another. That is all anybody can ask for in any life.”

“You two are so sweet it is sickening,” Siryn comments as she walks past us, her arms around two pretty female pirates, both of whom are beaming with carnal anticipation. Her guilt has clearly been short-lived, as one might expect a ruthless pirate captain’s guilt to be. “Go get your baby from Gabrielle. She needs to sleep. You are parents, remember?”

“We are parents, remember?” I repeat Siryn’s words in a smart ass tone to Kail.

“Yes,” he surprises me by saying. “We are. Let’s go get our son.”

I cry tears of joy, not just for Nemo who has a father, but for Kail, who has a son. A family. And finally, a happily ever after.

The End



Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed *Survivor*. If you did, **please leave a rating or review, it's much appreciated!**

If you're in the mood for more from me, I have excellent news, there is a lot more from me, and some of them even come in big, thick... series.

If you'd like a good dozen plus alien romances written all in a row, I'd have to recommend these series in which I carefully stowed each and every one of the words:

Loki's Standalone Alien Romances

All my previously released sci-fi standalones in one smexy row.

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Alien kings with a dominant streak and a thing for human mates.

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Ransom Preview

Astaria

“Filthy alien scum! Let me go! Unhand me at once, you unworthy dirty brute!”

I hope I sound suitably surprised and outraged. They expect it, you know. A good abductor is not easy to find, especially not one who can be bothered getting through the many layers of near impenetrable security around my chamber.



A woman of a long royal lineage knows very well that she will likely be kidnapped in her lifetime. I am twenty-five years of age, and though I initially took fright when my bedroom chamber wall was turned to splinters by the rough intrusion of an atomic ram, and I was made to endure the forceful intrusion of an oversized alien who now has me in his massive arms, I am now more or less resigned to the entire situation. A common girl might panic and become hysterical, but that is hardly becoming, is it? My father has always said you can tell how well-bred someone is by how much they beg for their lives. A commoner will go on and on, whereas a princess like

myself knows full well that her life is more or less an inconvenience she is likely to be relieved of with very little in the way of notice.

He has put a black cloth over my eyes, treating me the way they treat frightened horses. He has made a mistake. I am no timid filly. I am Astaria Grace, crown princess of the Pleiades and I am afraid of very little. So little, in fact, that other people become afraid of how much I am not afraid.

My abductor smells like other worlds and rare minerals. I expected him to smell like a filthy animal, but the thick hair which I can feel as it whips around the uncovered parts of my face is perfumed with musk and ornate smoked wood. He has long hair, and a lot of it. I use that to my advantage, grabbing at his locks and pulling as hard as I can. Just to make things convincing, of course.

He cannot easily return the favor. I have short silvery hair cut close to my head so that when I wear the jeweled wigs of royal office that extend over a foot all around and gleam with all the colors of creation, my natural hair does not interfere with the spun threads. My hair is cut every two weeks while I am suitably restrained. They don't trust me around scissors, even when someone else has them.

No matter how unpopular a royal I may be, appearances have to be kept up. Since birth I have been presented as an ethereal incarnation of pure royalty. Tens of thousands of girls have wanted to be like me, poor things.

My tugging seems to have little effect on the alien. I can feel him heft me over the edge of something or other and then I am dumped onto a soft surface. There is a sense of motion as the ship I presume I have been taken on accelerates away from my tower like an impish page boy running from a bag of steaming dog dirt.

"Easy," the voice says, speaking fluent Intergalactic with a sexy accent. There are only two types of beings who speak Intergalactic. Royals and those in power, because they must be able to negotiate, and warmongers, because they need to be able to accept surrender from the former.

I feel myself shifted into the lap of the beast. He is large and his thighs are broad and hard. I wonder who has taken me. Many have tried over the years. All of them have regretted it, and most have perished. Actually, all of them have perished, now I think about it. That thought makes me let out a little giggle that turns to a laugh no matter how much I try to stop it.

“And what is so funny, princess?” The voice is deep and gruff with authority. From the moment he laid hands on me I felt the dominance running through him. He, like so many before him, has come to me with the masculine impulse to claim and own. It will be his undoing and his downfall, but there is no telling him that.

I do not answer. I couldn't explain it if I wanted to, and I do not want to.

Moments later the fabric over my face is removed. I see my captor's face for the first time. I draw my breath in with a shocked gasp. This is no mere brute! This is a famous alien! This is my father's greatest enemy. His image hangs on the wall of every soldier's barracks and is pinned on every wanted board in our territories.

I clap my hands together with involuntary excitement.

“I know you! You're Blackmane!”

Blackmane is a xenovork known for his great plume of dark hair. One would think he'd be known for being the first of his kind to kill ten thousand human soldiers in battle, but it is his hair that we know him by. It is the envy of every noblewoman I know. It is glossy and lustrous and when he stands over his fallen enemies it blows in the wind like a glorious banner.

I have actively fantasized about this creature, this great alien beast who makes every human colonist and king shudder at the mere sight of his picture. I imagined that if I were in his presence, I might somehow make sense. He hated humanity, and so did I.

He has no idea that I stole one of the wanted posters and secreted it about my person, looking at it in the evenings when they all left me alone and I was able to enjoy myself in

solitude. I used to imagine having conversations with him over a nice spot of carnage and then engaging in acts too filthy to put words to. I literally don't know how to explain some of the things I have imagined him doing to me.

He is even more incredible in person than I imagined him to be based on the pictures. He is a rough green hue, with a fearsome face of absolute masculinity. Every feature that could mark him as male, does. A heavy brow, narrowed eyes, strong jaw containing teeth designed for tearing and chewing. An omnivore like our own species but much more powerful. The bite strength of a fabled creature known as pit bull is attributed to his kind.

"Your kind know me as Blackmane," he agrees. "You will call me lord and master."

"I can call you lord or master, but not both. It is impractical and unseemly."

He shifts me slightly on his lap, moves my skirts up a little and slaps my thigh. The strike still shocks me. Everybody who knows me even in passing knows that hitting me is a very bad idea.

"I have no interest in tolerating your human sass. You will speak when you are spoken to, and you will speak with respect."

I say nothing, but I remain very, very angry. He knows nothing of propriety, or the conventions of honorifics. He is a filthy alien brute with no education whatsoever and he is beneath me in every way possible. All my giddy thoughts evaporate with that slap, my imaginings swept away and replaced with the flat of his big palm.

"Arrogant wretch," he growls, though I have not spoken a single word of my thoughts to him. I have already resolved not to bother to grace him with a word again. I will be liberated, of that I am certain, and this brute who just took the liberty of striking me, he will suffer greatly for it.

lackmane

B This is a triumph unlike any other — and I have experienced a great many in my time. I have crushed worlds and made entire populations bow before me. I am feared because I deserve to be. This princess is perhaps the rarest jewel in all the Pleiades. Few have ever seen her in person. Her existence has been questioned as perhaps being nothing more than a rumor, a lie told by her father Arthas of the Pleiades. But images have been widely spread, portraits and videos in which she appears to be the prettiest, most ethereal creature ever to have sprung into creation. One image of this young woman can change the course of fashion across many hundreds of planets.

It did not take long for her to require some punishment. That fact does not surprise me. She is likely spoiled. Princesses always are. Being declared special at birth destroys any attempt at proper character development.

What does surprise me is the fact that she is not horrified or frightened. Instead, she has a very strange little smile on her face, a smile that does not match her eyes. Her reaction to being abducted is not what I expected. Where is the begging? The crying? She does seem unbalanced, but not in the way most captives are. They usually either withdraw into themselves and pretend with all their might that they are not being kidnapped, or they melt down completely with begging and pleading. I find both fairly tedious and at this point, boring.

This princess looks me dead in the eye and smiles, as if a thought has just occurred to her that really amuses her very much. She says nothing, obeying my order. I should be pleased that I have already made an impression on her. Instead, I have the feeling I am missing something.

“You will obey me,” I tell her. “Any disobedience, verbal or physical, will be met with harsh punishment. You may have been a princess where you came from. In my realm, you are no more and no less than any other prisoner.”

“That’s clearly untrue,” she says, pert again. “How many prisoners do you cradle in your lap?”

She has a wicked sense of humor, I think. And a brave one too, given the warning I have just given her, and the way she must be stinging from the slap. I was not gentle. I do not want her to think that she will receive special treatment. I want her to be humbled.

“Not many,” I admit. “You are more fragile than most.”

I almost said precious.

Her eyes glint with some unexpressed emotion. I have spent some time around humans before, and I usually find their feelings fairly simple to interpret. Most of them are incapable of hiding anything. Even if they keep their mouths shut, they cannot help but give their thoughts away with glances, blushes, twitches, and grimaces. Astaria is better bred than most and has no such tells.

“What do you intend to do with me?”

“I intend to hold you for ransom. When I am paid, you will be returned. I do not intend to harm you.”

“How charming,” she says, still with the air of someone who is about to burst out laughing. It may simply be nervousness. Humans have significant trouble regulating their emotions in times of stress. They can display many inappropriate reactions. I know this because humans are my enemies, and I take great pains to know my enemy.



We retreat to the *Dawnhammer*, my vessel. This ship contains a fleet of fighters in the thousands, and a crew of more than ten thousand. It is a space-faring city in its own right, and when we cast a shadow over a planet, everything trapped in the dark shade trembles.

It is said that there are more riches stored aboard my vessel than exist anywhere else in the Pleiades. If this is not true now, it will be soon enough. I intend to strip all creation of her jewels, dominate every corner of the universe I can reach. I

intend to leave a mark so deep that for generations to come my influence may be felt.

I have not been entirely forthright with my pretty prisoner. I told her I would not harm her, and that much is true. That does not mean she will go untouched. Before her father pays the ransom, I intend to put a baby in her belly. She will surrender to my seduction as so many have before her. My seed will travel with her back to her world, and my genetic legacy will emerge between those milky thighs to rule again. By my reckoning, my genetic code sits in the houses of more than a thousand ruling classes. I am everywhere. I am become everyone.

The princess has been quiet since I told her to be. This pleases me. Usually I have to gag them to stop the whining and put them in the hold. She has sat with us, poised and perfect without need for restraints of any kind. I see her pretty eyes taking everything in but dashing away from my gaze whenever they have the misfortune to meet. She will blush so prettily for me when I plough her.

She is an innocent, and innocents always secretly want to be ravaged. I imagine her seduction will be swift. There is something inside that pretty package just begging to be released, a wild animal who will howl betwixt my sheets as I plunder the territory between her legs.

“Take her to the chamber prepared for her,” I order the guards as we disembark into the welcoming embrace of the warship.

“You’re not coming with me?” She fakes a little pout. “What a pity.”

I cannot tell if this is bravado or flirtation. What I do know is that I will soon be turning those skirts up and laying a lash to her cheeks to teach her a measure of respect. I want her soft and demure and for some reason, contrite. Strange that I already feel she has much to atone for, when in truth she has done nothing to warrant it. She has the vibe of a female in need of taming, though I cannot fault her behavior as she flounces off in the company of guards without any means of

external control. No chains. No cuffs. No ropes. She does as she is told. Perhaps this will be easier than I imagined.

I will go to her in time, but I have matters to attend to and she will be a better prospect when she has had time to come to terms with her situation. I find a day or so to rest and relax puts my captives in better, more receptive frames of mind.

I return to the helm. By now her father will know she has been taken. I can only imagine the panicked and aggressive messages that will be waiting for me.

“Are we on full alert?” I ask the question though I do not need to. Of course we are on alert. We just broke into the most highly defended construction in perhaps the entire galaxy. We took one ship, the smallest we could, because of the many vicious security measures designed to keep Astaria out of the clutches of creatures like me. This incursion has been planned for several months, every detail and angle worked out to perfection. We made it look easy in the end, but there was nothing easy about what I just did. When this story gets out, every bard and tale-teller will repeat it for the rest of their lives.

“HURRAH!” A cry comes up from all those manning the bridge. They have all been party to this mission. Indeed, every soul on the *Dawnhammer* has been aware of the great risks we have taken and the dangers we have braved to claim this princess. I raise my arms, hands in fists to acknowledge their cheers.

My second in command, Bluebrow, has the bridge. He is a beast after my own heart, though cast in different shades. His hair and his eyes, even the very hue of his skin is blue. He is popular with females, many of whom find his rough, curling locks to be particularly appealing.

“We have a thousand fighters manned and waiting if we are to suffer an attack. So far there is no activity whatsoever on sensors. Strange. Very strange,” Bluebrow answers my questions without cheering. He is focused on the mission, which is not truly over. Stealing the princess is the first part of the mission; turning her into riches, that is the second part.

“They may not yet be able to believe what has happened.”

“I can barely believe it myself,” he laughs. “What a triumph! A human princess snatched from the clutches of their greatest technologies. The news must already be spreading far and wide.”

We all enjoy the idea of our fame growing. I would like to say that I warlord only for the riches and the power, but I do enjoy the notoriety as well. It often leads to surrender before we lift an aggressive finger. Sometimes the mere appearance of the *Dawnhammer* in new territory is enough to have vessels of riches sent to us in the hopes the inhabitants will be spared.

“What is the princess like? Is she as beautiful as they say?” Bluebrow is curious.

“Even more beautiful,” I confirm. “She’s a very pretty little thing, and brave too. She did not shed so much as a tear as we took her. She barely seemed surprised.”

“Passive? Some are trained that way. They’re taught to obey in all things. Sounds boring to me, but I guess it makes them easier to sell off.”

“Marry off,” I correct the term. “Humans don’t sell their offspring. They do, however, decide their romantic fates many years before they are in any position to have preferences. Astaria has been promised many times...”

“Then why does her father still own her?”

“No suitor has ever claimed her. He promises her, collects the dowry, and still keeps her for himself.”

“That trick can’t work too many times.”

“It has worked several times as far as I am aware, and that means we have a great many chances to potentially ransom her to others. The king is but one entity with an interest.”

The energy at the helm is jubilant. Though I have not made any official announcement, all my officers know already. It is important to share the spoils of our captures and pillaging for morale. There is only one of Astaria and she will certainly not be shared, but there will be a grand banquet to celebrate our

triumph as soon as can be arranged. I am sure the chefs are planning a massive menu of at least a dozen courses as we speak.

“Let the drums sing!” I order. “Announce our victory over.... difficulty.”

Drums begin to emanate through the ship’s hull. Their sound harkens back to our deepest history when we used to live in dense forests. Drums were how our ancestors communicated. Now they are how we celebrate. The hull throbs with triumph.

I take my seat in the captain’s chair, a great green and gold construction made with the insignia of my line. I did not come from a powerful family, but I have made my line powerful through my efforts and my deeds. I feel a great sense of satisfaction and achievement as I rest knowing I have a fresh princess in my brig, no doubt nervously awaiting her defloration.

“A small repast to replenish your energy, sir?” Chef Peach is at my elbow before I realize it. He moves with a heavy tray weighted down with a massive repast. Meat and brew, berries and whipped fats. It is a meal fit for a king, and I enjoy every bite of it, ensuring that the other officers also eat their fill.

“Blackmane! Blackmane!”

My meal is interrupted by the arrival of a springing messenger. I do not know his name, and I barely take his appearance in, except to note that he did not follow any of the proper and respectful protocol around knocking and waiting to be told to enter. He speaks without being given permission too. Sometimes the officers grumble that the lower ranks are forgetting their place. I usually ignore it, but as of now I am tempted to agree.

“Sir, it’s the princess. I mean, the prisoner. I mean...”

“Yes. I know who you mean. What is it?”

“She killed a guard.”

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