



# THEIRS TO FOREVER

AN ALIEN OVERLORDS NOVEL

TAYLOR VAUGHN

THEIRS TO FOREVER

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THEIRS TO MATE DUET, BOOK 2

ALIEN OVERLORDS

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# PART 1

# HYPOTHESES



## THE ZOOKEEPER

*Hello, I am a Xalthurian female in hope of amnesty.  
My father wishes me to marry a—*

*Delete.* Already got more Xalthurian cunt than we need.

*Hello, I am a Xalthurian male in hope of amnesty. I  
am in love with a human from New Terrhan, but my  
father wishes me to marry...*

The majority of our hunters are males who prefer females. And even the ones who like other males tend to prefer them young—especially since the Generations War. Let the sun ice over before I arrange for a male to be transported all the way here, only to have to kill him on sight when I see he has warrior enhancements.

Our hunters only *think* they want a fair fight. No doubt, they would squeal and demand their credits back if any of them were ever to actually get overpowered by their prey.

*Delete.*

I swipe the voice-only distress hail system to the last and final call of the eve.

*Hello, I hope this message finds you well. I am a princess from the planet of Anlusia in need of amnesty. My father wishes to marry me to an unworthy male not of my choosing—*

*Anlusia? Anlusia? Enh, where have I heard of that planet?*

I pause the hail and swipe open another holoscreen to do a search and locate on the planet.

*Graah!* I let out a disappointed grunt when I find it a few systems over from the Kaidorian Alley.

Water planet. Means she's of no use to us.

No place to house her. And none of our hunters want to swim for their cunt. Even if it's princess cunt. Probably would have to use a voice modulator on top of her translator just to be understood over all the bubbles.

Ice my sun. *Delete.*

What's the point of running a fake Amnesty Station when none of the seekers are fit for The Zoo?

*Graah!* I push my mane back over the flat circular nubs where my horns used to be. What is that? More than three lunars without a delivery of fresh cunt?

Another screen swipe to check the logs to confirm my grim statistic. Aye, been about 102 days since N'Ure shipped us his last girl.

Holding up fine so far. But huhmaans are as fragile as they are popular. We lost four of them on the last hunt. And who knows how many on the next one?

With another grunt, I swipe over the depressing zoo log to make a new hail.

"I told you never to hail me," The Benefactor says without any other greeting when he appears on my screen.

"When can I expect the delivery? Running out of huhmaan cunt."

The Benefactor stills. “There has been an... unfortunate delay?”

A delay. Several star ticks pass before I can reply without yelling. Xals are a cold, stiff species. They can’t handle it when Kaidos go off.

“The next hunt is in less than a lunar cycle,” I point out through clenched teeth. “And we promised our clients a rare jewel.”

By *we*, I mean The Benefactor. And by *promised*, I mean charged them triple the usual price.

Main point: “We’re both graahed if you don’t get that huhmaan to me like you promised—over two other delays ago.”

“I am aware of the stakes.” He looks bored. “And yes, acquiring huhmaans has been challenging since N’Ure was found out and I was forced to end the orphanage program.”

And by *end*, he means murdered the old huhmaan female who ran “the orphanage” that provided most of the huhmaan cunt before burning her hidden brothel down.

“My last plan was unexpectedly thwarted,” The Benefactor admits. “But I will come up with a new plan to acquire our jewel. Make no mistake.”

The Benefactor’s diamond-shaped eyes burn like stars as he assures me, “Elle Garrett will be added to my zoo before the next hunt. On this, you have my vow.”

ONE

## L'THAN

“This is a disaster!”

These are the first words I hear when I enter the palace’s meeting hall flanked by my alliance of fellow hybrid Elites.

We still. Of course, we had expected to get a reaction when we showed up as a group at the quarterly Council Meeting.

But “disaster” seems like an odd way to label our unexpected arrival.

“What will you do about this blatant disregard?” another angry voice clicks.

And that is when I realize...

“*They speak not of us,*” I sign to the rest of the alliance in our Qel’s secret language before pointing toward the raised dais where the Kel, Qel, and many of the Council Members sit in an arc facing the hall with a large, blank holo screen floating above them.

The meeting has not officially started yet, but several older males without warrior modifications stand before the stage. Even from behind, I recognize them as the fathers of the Elite Daughters who fled to New Terrhan.

“I demand a contingent be sent to that wretched planet at once to collect our daughters!” the father of E’Maa, a pink jewel-toned beauty who used to flirt shamelessly with me, yells. He is loud enough for the entire meeting hall to hear without any amplification—perhaps the entire kingdom beyond the palace walls.

*“Your cousin has caused more of a stir than we ever could,”* my longtime friend J’Hsen, a blue hybrid with pale-pink swirls, signs in our Qel’s secret language.

I nearly sign, *“Which one?”*

But it is obvious he speaks of L’Nel. J’Hsen knows nothing of what passed between L’Gon, Elle, and me two eves prior to this meeting.

And even if he did, it is doubtful he would understand my humor. As of late, it has become what the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would refer to as *dry*.

So, instead of replying, I motion J’Hsen and the rest of our alliance forward to take our rightful seats.

Many of the wives, daughters, and consorts turn to stare at us when we pass by the rows they are relegated to toward the back of the hall. They immediately begin to click behind their claws at our presence.

But our fathers are so focused on the action toward the front of the stage that none of them notice when we slip into the normally empty row behind theirs. The one reserved for sons.

Well, *most* of our fathers do not notice.

On the dais, my own sire’s matching silver gaze narrows when he spots me. His ridges flap open, and a sneer curls his lips as he glances over at the Kel, who sits upon his throne beside the Qel, steadfastly ignoring the Elite fathers’ questions until the official start of the meeting.

I can tell my father did not expect me to dare to show my face here today. Most likely, that is why he chose a quarterly meeting, over which the Kel would be presiding, to present his unfounded anti-hybrid measure.

As the Elite fathers continue to make demands, their angry emotion clicks getting louder and louder, my own father leans over to talk with M’Ren Vanath, the head of the Council. Unfortunately, he is also the sire of a hybrid and decidedly anti-hu’man.

Vanath nods at whatever my father is saying, his expression grave.

Are they talking about the Daughters' Rebellion? Or what they might do to quell ours?

I suspect the latter. And a new terrible idea rises in my head.

Was my father a participant in my kidnapping? The one N'Ure referred to as *The Benefactor* in his reports?

Of late, his contempt for me seems to have grown—metastasized, like the Extinction Virus. He does not even attempt to hide his disdain in public anymore. Much less form a civil word in my presence.

Someone taps me on the shoulder, cutting off my suspicious thoughts. I turn to find M'Yk, the orange hybrid with light-tan swirls, whose father is head of the Council and whose full-Xalthurian sister left with L'Nel to New Terrhan.

*"What will the Council do about the Daughter's Rebellion?"* he signs in our Qel's secret language. He stares at me expectantly, along with quite a few of the other hybrid sons sitting beside him.

*"I do not know,"* I answer, carefully setting my ridges in a neutral position so as not to alarm them with the possibilities swirling around my head.

*"But what do you think they will do?"* another hybrid asks. His ridges flap anxiously.

And though I have no more answers than they, I feel compelled to assure them. *"Whatever it is, we will make our move as planned. Nothing will stop us this day."*

For some reason, all of the hybrids sink back into their seats after my reply, their ridges opening into a relaxed position. As if my reassurance was all they needed to calm themselves. As if I am their leader—not merely the male who suggested they join me in allyship for this meeting.

Before I can wonder too long at their response, L'Gon steps into the hall from a special side door with his father right behind him.

Of course, he does not sit with us in the sons' row. He heads straight to the Council Members' table and takes the empty chair beside my father. The one Uncle L'Rzo ceded him—as the hybrids' fathers should have started doing solars ago.

I keep my ridges in their neutral position, but rage tugs at my nose as I watch my cousin greet my father before taking his inherited seat. Meanwhile, Uncle L'Rzo makes his way to the front row directly in front of the Council table, where the very few retired Council Members with full-Xalthurian sons sit.

Only when L'Gon takes his seat does the meeting officially commence.

The Kel comes to stand behind the podium, his ridges also set to a grave neutral. But only to announce that Xar T'Kan will be running today's meeting and taking questions.

With that short introduction, the large gold Xalthurian—who we still refer to by his martial title, even though he is Kel Regent of New Terrhan—blinks onto the overhead holoscreen above the Council Members' heads.

“What is the first order of business?” he asks without preamble.

Vanath, the father of M'Yk and the elderly head of the Council, stands and briefly taps his ridges in salute to T'Kan. “Xar, as you know, several daughters in Elite houses have absconded to New Terrhan on a mission of utter nonsense. We wish to discuss how they can be safely returned to their families here on Xalthuria.”

An orange male in a rope sash to denote his past military experience angrily clicks from the front of the dais. “The best course of action is to deploy a Collection Force and bring them all back. The solution is simple enough.”

“You forget your place, Roq F'Reez,” T'Kan hisses.

The orange Xal immediately lowers his head and places his hand on his ridges. “Forgive me, Xar. But surely, you can understand why we are so upset. Our daughters have absconded to a barely habitable planet after being brainwashed by your prisoner, that traitor N'Maryah.”



Is Roq F'Reez labeling N'Maryah a traitor because of what N'Maryah did to our Qel or because of what she convinced his daughter to do?

Again, I have the feeling it is the latter.

In either case, Xar T'Kan orders him and the rest of the Elite fathers to take their proper seats.

He watches them with stern eyes until they return to the Elite Elders' row.

Then he states, "Your daughters have arrived safely and have formerly requested *refugee* status."

My eyes widen. Having received a New Terrhan download, I am aware what *refugee* means. But a collective questioning click goes up from the Elite fathers.

And their clicks soon become angry when Xar T'Kan explains that their daughters are claiming Xalthuria is no longer a place they can live due to "rampant disregard, unfair rules, and discrimination against females."

"They cannot be serious!" the E'ma's father shouts, once again jumping to his feet. "Our Kel, you must order Xar T'Kan to send our daughters back to Xalthuria on his personal ship!"

"I will not be ordered by anyone to do anything," the Kel answers from the podium. "You are fortunate your Qel has convinced me to give *democracy* a chance, or you would be removed from this meeting hall and punished for your temerity."

The word "punishment" sends a shiver of memory up my back, and my eyes go to the only hu'man on stage.

Qel Ki'Ra sits upon her slightly smaller throne, her eyes straight forward and her expression aggressively blank as the Kel speaks.

It is possible neither she nor the Kel knows I am here. There are much larger matters than my attendance at this meeting to occupy their attention.

"And as for Xar T'Kan ordering their return," Kel D'Rek continues. "It has been pointed out that while there is a motion

to keep New Terrhans from immigrating to Xalthuria, and another motion to deny Xalthurian fathers of hybrid girls the right to move to New Terrhan, there is no such motion governing the actions of Xalthurian females. They are, in fact, free to come and go as they please. Even if Xar T'Kan decides to deny them refugee status, he does not have the right to order them back to Xalthuria.”

A click of shocked silence—then the Elite fathers jump back out of their chairs to address the Council Members with a noisy fervor.

“You must make a motion then!” one hisses at the Head Council Member with a series of screeching anger clicks. “You must make it law that they cannot do this!”

The Head Council Member startles at the Elite father’s demand, and my father immediately leans over to speak to my cousin, cupping his hand around his ear.

An old pain burns inside me, watching L’Gon and my sire. They look more like father and son in this moment than L’Rmie and I ever did.

“Even if the Head of Council does file a motion, it will be lunars until it passes into law,” another Elite father points out. “The next official Council Meeting is not until the end of the solar, and it takes at least four meetings for a motion to be passed into law—even with unanimous support.”

“We will file an emergency motion,” L’Gon says, rising to his feet.

He is not the Head of Council, yet everyone turns to him like he is in charge of Xalthuria’s most powerful governing body.

“There is an allowance to do so among the Generations War Amendments. With a majority vote, we may pass an emergency motion in two meetings instead of four.”

I roll my eyes in the hu’man way. Now I know what my father was talking to him about behind his hand. He was supplying L’Gon with yet another Generations War Amendment to further their anti-hu’man agenda.

*Essh!* That amendment was meant to ensure orders for emergency supplies would not get held up in Council, not to appease the Elite fathers.

“Meanwhile, I implore you to code your interstellar rovers so your daughters do not have access to them,” L’Gon calls out, talking directly to the Elite fathers. “You might also consider lowering their allowance so they are not able to purchase such a conveyance on their own.”

The suggestions L’Gon gives the Elite fathers are met with approving clicks. From the very front rows surrounding the stage.

The rows of females sitting behind us, though, have fallen into a dead silence. And our Qel no longer looks so purposefully serene upon her throne.

A terrible expression comes over her face as she leans forward to address L’Gon. “Oh, my *freaking* moons. Are you serious? So now you are trying to block your own sisters and daughters from driving?”

Save for the one hu’man word, Ki’Ra speaks in Xalthurian. But her tone is outraged in the way of a hu’man.

“Yes, I am serious,” L’Gon answers. “Though, of course, I cannot block my own sister from driving an interstellar rover because she is already on New Terrhan. And who knows how long it will be until she catches a case of Mind Rot before lying with one of your race’s craven males.”

“Mind Rot?” Ki’Ra squints at him. “Are you talking about the *love* so many of us feel for our partners?”

“You will note that the Kel’s mate uses a New Terrhan word to convey this concept because our own language has no equivalent,” L’Gon says, addressing the audience in front of him without looking at the Qel.

And to think, L’Gon claims himself to be not nearly as talented of a diplomat as his father. His actions convey disrespect for our Qel without actually formally conveying disrespect.

Unlike me, he manages to avoid inviting the Kel’s wrath by addressing his words only to the audience below his feet.

“My sister was lied to and manipulated by duplicitous females, who filled her head with nonsense about the appeal of New Terrhan males.”

He does not name the duplicitous females in his speech, but an image of the Council Guards grabbing Elle by the arms fills my mind.

“I propose we file an emergency motion, not only against the migration of Xalthurian females, but also against custody trips,” L’Gon continues on the dais with the same cold expression he wore when he ordered Elle removed from Xalthuria. “Unless we stop the flow of traffic between Xalthuria and New Terrhan, we will continue to lose our males, and now our females, to the Mind Rot that these hu’mans transmit through their sex. Only then will we be able to completely sever our ties with that unworthy population.”

To think, two day cycles ago, my hearts were filled with hope.

Now they tighten as I seethe at my cousin’s vision of the future. Does his hatred for hu’mans truly run that deep?

I jump to my feet.

“Or we can solve the problem of the Daughters’ Rebellion by solving the problem of Xalthurian infertility,” I call out before L’Gon can finish his hateful speech.

The Elite fathers, the other audience members, and everyone upon the stage turn to face me.

Including the Kel. If he was unaware of my presence before, that no longer holds true. His eyes slit in the same manner as my father’s while our Qel’s eyes go wide behind him.

L’Gon also stares at me from the dais. And though his expression remains cold, his burning gaze clearly conveys, *What are you doing?*

Ignoring all of what the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would refer to as *my haters*, I turn to address the assembly at large—not the Elite fathers, but the general population in the meeting hall.

“What if I told you our own Mal L’Gon has a cure for Xalthurian fertility in the works as we speak? He is so close, in fact, he is about to enter the trial phase of his experimental fertilization process, for which he will need volunteers?”

A hissed gasp goes up from the crowd. Then the room erupts with shouted clicks.

*“Is it true?”*

*“Stars in the sky!”*

*“I volunteer!”*

*“Me, too!”*

*“And me!”*

“Quiet! Quiet!” T’Kan commands from the stage, reminding us all that he—not L’Gon—is the one who is supposed to be in charge of this Council Meeting.

He then directs his censoring gaze toward my cousin. “You will tell us if this is true.”

“It is...” L’Gon throws me a furious look before admitting to T’Kan, “an experiment—more like a theory—actually, less than that. A hypothesis.”

“Do not be so humble, dear Cousin,” I call out, still addressing the general assembly. “L’Gon is playing his cards *close to his vest*, as they call keeping one’s plans secret in the New Terrhan idiom speak. But, in truth, there is no need for emergency motions that will grossly prohibit our females’ freedoms. For certain, the Elite daughters will eagerly return to their home planet after they learn they can start a family with a mate here. Mal L’Gon is closer than anyone has ever been to solving Xalthurian female infertility. None of his other theories have ever made it this far, to patient trials. Is that not true, Cousin?”

“Technically, yes,” L’Gon admits. “But—”

“Yes, yes, we all understand you still need volunteers,” I call out before he can finish explaining. “I am sure many of the people in our general assembly are willing to help finally end

this global crisis. They have only to find you after this Council Meeting to make their interest known. But first...”

I finally turn to address the Council with a wide smile. “I have an emergency motion of my own to file.”

TWO

## L'GON

After fighting my way through a crowd of eager “volunteers,” I catch up to my insolent cousin in the palace gardens.

He appears to have replaced his usual entourage of fawning females with a no less idolatrous group of his fellow Elite hybrids. They have crowded around him to clap him on his back and congratulate him on a job well done.

“Did you see the look upon my father’s face when you proposed term limits for Council Members above a certain age?” M’Yk throws his head back with a loud chortle. “He appeared upset. I wondered if he would expire right there upon the stage and finally cede me his seat through expiration!”

All the hybrids laugh along with M’Yk in the foreign hu’man way that grates on my nerves.

“How about my father comparing us to produce?” J’Hsen asks before drawing himself up to do a staid impression of his father, J’Rmi Ostosp. “The current crop of sons is not ready.”

“Or how about mine?” A purple- and pale-pink-swirled hybrid whose name I cannot remember jumps into the conversation with his own impersonation, pointing his index claw in the air to intone, “These are tumultuous times that require experienced hands. With such pressing matters before us, how could we even think of ceding our seats?”

The purple hybrid breaks off from his impression to ask the group, “Could their arguments against our measure have been any weaker?”



“I assure you, they could not have been.” L’Than performs that strange hu’man eye-roll motion. “My own father remained seated and quiet because he knew there was no true argument against our measure outside of emotional protests.”

I can listen to no more of this.

“My sister is stranded on New Terrhan, and this is how you respond?” I stride up to L’Than and jab a talon into his chest, too enraged to care about our audience of his fellow hybrids. “By deciding to hijack our Council Meeting with some ridiculous measure?”

The other hybrids draw back like they are afraid of me.

Typical spoiled children. They have warrior modifications but have never seen a day of battle. So here they stand, giggling in the garden over their little insurgence with no idea how to handle actual confrontation.

However, L’Than simply blinks at me in that bored way of his before turning to the rest of the group. He makes a series of hand motions I do not understand, and they scatter like *fortune* birds in separate directions.

“What are those hand motions?” I demand. “Some kind of secret language?”

L’Than deliberately cast his ridges into an amused setting. “I thought you wished to yell at me about my behavior at the Council Meeting. Would you rather talk about secret languages instead?”

No, I suppose I do not. I return to the main subject.

“Whatever your plan is, you will abandon it now. You give those hybrid friends of yours false cheer. There is no way your measure will pass even the first vote of the three it needs for hybrids to inherit their father’s seats through your so-called term limits.”

I am right. Of course, I am right. But L’Than continues to regard me in a way that makes it appear as if he is attempting not to laugh. “We shall see who is correct at the end of the solar. Until then, I suggest you make yourself useful to Elle. From what I understood while drawing up your latest set of

contracts, this trial of hers will take quite a bit of set-up and work.”

For some reason, his dismissive words enflame me even more than his nonsensical measure proposal.

“What do you care about her doomed trials?” I hiss. “She is nothing but a duplicitous female who I will personally make sure is shipped back to her home planet as soon as I prove her ridiculous hypothesis wrong. I am aware you are a hybrid, but you should not have raised the hopes of our fellow full-Xalthurians. You are callous to have done so.”

“Not callous, Cousin. Determined.” His expression goes from amused to hard with a click. “I tried to play by your rules. Tried to ease you into this situation. But you betrayed my trust.”

“I did not betray your trust, she did. If your mind were not so riddled with Ceremonial Mind Rot, you would be able to see she is the guilty party, not me. I am only trying to protect you. From her.”

“I do not need your protection!” L’Than speaks to me in Xalthurian, but a strange hu’man tone has crept into his words—one that reminds me of the ice floating in the rivers on the other side of the planet. “You need mine. So that is what you will get. I will protect you from your bad judgment, and I will ensure your happiness no matter how determined you are to remain a miserable husk of the male you could be if you would only cease listening to my father and lead with your hearts.”

“Lead with my hearts?” I shake my head. “What does that even mean, Cousin? You speak senseless words. You propose measures that cannot possibly pass. You plan for a future that will never happen. Can you not see that you have gone absolutely mad with Ceremonial Mind Rot?”

“Mad,” L’Than repeats.

He tilts his head and very deliberately returns his nose ridge to an amused cast again before saying, “We shall see. I look forward to you voting in favor of my measure at the next

Council Meeting. And even more forward to everything I have planned for afterward. You and Elle have, as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would say, *fucked around*. And now, it is necessary for you to find out.”

“Find out?” Now it is my turn to repeat his words with a disbelieving click. “Find out what? Can you not hear how mad you sound? I have no idea what you are talking about!”

“No, no, no, Cousin.” L’Than wags his finger like I am a naughty xalling. “As they say on New Terrhan, no spoilers. And besides...”

He leans forward and lowers his voice to tell me, “You will find out what I am talking about soon enough.”

His words are calm and delivered without any emotional clicks. Yet they feel like a threat.

My nose vibrates with so much outrage, it takes several moments before I am able to calm my voice enough to reply. “You will never have my votes. Or my cooperation for anything else you have planned.”

I speak the most fervent truth. But my cousin’s expression remains placid. “As I said, we shall see.”

Before I can respond, L’Than turns and walks away, his white robe jacket and dark hair whipping in the wind as he leaves.

“Mal L’Gon?” a voice asks behind me. “Mal L’Gon, is it true?”

I turn to see A’Rhon heading toward me. He is flanked by quite a few other members of my Health Ministry staff.

“Is it true you have finally found a cure for our female’s infertility?” A’Rhon asks.

“We are receiving several requests at the office from couples who want to take part in your rumored trial,” another member of my staff informs me, pointing at the holoscreen floating beside his head. “What should we tell them?”

*Essh!* I had planned to choose and interview potential trial subjects myself and then have them all sign contracts, vowing to keep their participation in the experiment secret.

My hope had been to quietly prove Elle wrong, then ship her back to New Terrhan without anyone on my staff ever having to know what I had agreed to in order to be free of the hybrid's birth vessel once and for all.

The only being I hate more than L'Than right now is the duplicitous female who convinced me to sign a binding contract before she explained her truly unhinged hypothesis for curing Xalthurian infertility.

I take a big breath through my nose ridges, then turn around to explain to my staff that my supposed "trial" is more like a hypothesis—one that will quickly be disproven.

The sooner I can disprove Elle's insane hypothesis, the sooner I can be rid of that insufferable female.

Forever, this time.

THREE

## ELLE

“You will tell me why you are out here and where you are going with that sleeping mat.”

The command comes just when I’m about halfway to dragging a shockingly heavy mattress to the garden shed on the other side of the berry vineyards.

*Crap.*

I can’t see who’s talking, bent over as I am. But I would recognize that imperious monotone anywhere.

Again, not a believer, but I send a little prayer up to my parents’ sky god for patience before dropping the sleeping mat I stole from the trial space BRO had the staff set up in the East House receiving room.

Predicting an argument in my near future, I place my hands on my knees and take the time to catch my breath before straightening up into a full standing position.

Sure enough, I find the Big Red Obstacle staring down his ridged nose at me. Imperious as an emperor, even though, the last time I checked, my brother-in-law is still the ruler of Xalthuria.

L’Gon isn’t wearing his usual formal robes with his long silver locks parted over each shoulder like twin waterfalls tonight, though.

Instead, he’s pulled his hair into a warrior’s braid, which hangs nearly to his waist, despite being draped over his broad

shoulder. Also, his usual crisp robe ensemble has been replaced by a simple pair of loose black pants.

A pair of pants and nothing else.

My stomach flips.

I've never seen L'Gon look so casual. Or so shirtless.

Wait, that's not true.

Memories flood my mind.

My dark hands on his scaled chest. His silver gaze boring into mine underneath the moonlight. The sweet pain of his talons gripping my hips as I rode his—

*Don't think about that night!*

It's been nearly a week since BRO and I last spoke—after signing our final contract, when I told him exactly what I would need for my fertility trials. But apparently, a week wasn't long enough.

My stomach does all sorts of backflips as I raise my eyes to the three crescent moons in the sky to keep from looking at him. “What—what are you doing out here?”

A long tick of silence settles. Then: “I asked you first.”

That he did.

Thanking my parents' sky god that I came up with a cover story for my real mission, I launch into my prepared explanation. “Well, when you said you wanted to conduct the trials here as opposed to at the Health Ministry, it occurred to me that running them out of a house would be... ah... awkward for both your household staff and the trial participants. All those gigantic windows? Seriously, that space was *no bueno*.”

I shake my head, like I'm some kind of huge authority on appropriate fertility trial arrangements. “So, I decided to set up an alternative space to give us and everybody involved with the trial way more privacy. *You're welcome*.”

I finish my cover story with a little flourish and bow like the colony troupe who puts on plays during festival days often do

after delivering a monologue.

However, The Big Red Obstacle does not respond to my performance with applause.

“You are setting up an alternative trial space,” he repeats. “In the middle of the eve?”

I swallow hard but stick with my story. “Yep, that’s what I’m doing. Figured middle of the night would be the best time to avoid all those nosy servants.”

*And you.* But obviously, that part of the plan was a bust.

Another long tick of silence falls. His eyes scan me up and down like the light-based lie detectors from that old planet sci-fi series *Space Sheriffs*.

But then he says, “Actually, your idea is not terrible.”

“Really?” I jolt, and my eyes drop back down, I’m so surprised.

But then I remember I’m supposed to be playing it cool. “I mean, *thanks!* Yeah, thanks, anything to make our trial subjects more comfortable, right?”

He nods with a solemn bow of his head. “Also, this action will afford us less shame when your unconventional experiment fails.”

*Wow.*

“*Aaand* he’s back.” I shake my head. “There’s The Big Red Obstacle we know and love.”

“*Love.*” He repeats the word in New Terrhan with a severe hiss, like it’s something he’s spitting out. “This is sarcasm because I have offended you with my assessment of your trial’s poor chances of succeeding.”

“Oh, hey, you learn fast for someone who’s only had his translator in for a couple of weeks.”

He frowns. “Your reply is not sarcasm. But it is also not truly a compliment.”



“Okay, as much fun as all this wordplay is, I have a lot to do before tomorrow morning if I want to get the outbuilding set up, so if you’ll excuse me....”

I bend down to resume my mat-dragging task, but he picks it up before I can.

Just picks it up and raises the whole mat over his head, like it weighs nothing. “I will help you in your efforts to cut down on the excruciating amounts of embarrassment your trial will heap upon us.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say, leading the way to the outbuilding.

“More sarcasm,” he guesses behind me.

“Yes, more sarcasm,” I confirm on a mutter.

It took me at least twenty minutes to drag the sleeping mat halfway to the closest outbuilding.

But what feels like an incredibly rude two minutes later, I’m opening the door for L’Gon to carry the sleeping mat into the space I designated for the trials.

The motion-sensing lights blink on overhead as he walks into the large one-room building.

“You can set it over by that pile of electronics,” I call out to L’Gon from outside the doorway.

“You have already begun preparing the room,” he notes right before setting down the mattress with a plop that echoes throughout the industrial space.

Darn that Xalthurian monotone. I can’t tell if he’s suspicious or not. But what did the acting troupe teach us during our afternoon extracurricular hour? *Commit!*

“Yep, yep, I’ve been clearing it out since I put the baby down.”

And by “clearing out” I mean searching to no avail. Yet. I just have to get rid of The Big Red Obstacle, who’s really living up to his nickname right now.

“Anyway, thanks so much for your help with that mat.” I flash him a bright smile. “I’ll take it from here.”

He folds his thick arms across his bare red chest with a heavy frown. “You are being suspiciously polite.”

*Craaap.*

I wipe the smile off my face and replace it with a more appropriate scowl. “You’re right. I should have said, forget you. This doesn’t even begin to make up for all the assholery you’re putting me through to get full custody of Jack. But it’s late, and I’ve got a lot more to do to make this place cozy for the trials, so I’m kind of in a rush.”

In response to my urgent tone, L’Gon slowly walks over to the pile of electronics and other gadgets I made on the floor near the rows of shelves where the orchard staff keeps their garden tools.

“How did you come to know about this outbuilding in the first place? And why have you removed so many high-level orchard tools from their proper place on the shelves.”

*Crap.* I was hoping he wouldn’t notice that.

“Ah well...” I scratch the back of my neck as I struggle to come up with a plausible explanation. “I came in here to find a small shovel Jack and I could use to build sandcastles. I mean, sandcastling ain’t sandcastling without a good moat, right?”

BRO doesn’t answer. Just waits like a huge red mountain for me to finish explaining.

“Anyway, after I found the shovel, I realized this would be the perfect place to carry out my fertility trials. Like I said, it’s quiet, out of the way from prying eyes. And I figured if I cleared out those shelves, there would be plenty of room to conduct the experiment.”

“Another not bad idea. Most of these things can be stored at East House.” He bends down over a black obelisk gadget that nearly threw out my back when I lugged it down from its shelf.

“But not this,” he says, picking it up. With one hand.

My heart freezes. *Oh, no.* Did he figure out my real plan?

“This is the outside power generator.” He sets the sleek black obelisk back on its shelf. “I will not be able to run a holoscreen feed or power my equipment without it.”

So, it’s a generator, not the object I was looking for. I let out a breath. Should I be relieved or frustrated? Not sure.

“I will carry the rest back to the house and also bring over the medical scanners I had delivered. Then I will turn one of the walls into a readout interface, like the one in my home office.”

He nods, coming to a firm decision. “Yes, this is not a terrible idea. Clear the rest of the shelves while I carry out this first pile.”

An order, not a request. I don’t know if The Big Red Obstacle is even capable of asking questions like, “May I help you?”

Not that I’m great at requesting help, even when I need it. I let my eyes wander over to the mattress he delivered with less than five minutes of work.

His much stronger assistance might have felt like an unexpected win—if he wasn’t totally getting in the way of my real mission.

“Um, actually. I was hoping to finish the job by myself.” My eyes can’t help but dart under the circumstances. But I do my best to keep them off the pile of electronics I so badly want to sort through tonight. “I prefer to work alone.”

BRO gives me a long, hard look. “If you wished for your preferences to matter, then you should not have helped my sister in her decampment to New Terrhan.”

“I didn’t—” I break off because what’s the use?

It’s not like I didn’t tell him several times before we signed our do-or-die fertility solution contract that I didn’t help his sister with her escape beyond the inspirational quote—which I really, *deeply* wish she hadn’t literally quoted in her getaway letter.

None of my denials mattered. L’Gon insisted on believing the worst in me. He was the opposite of L’Than.

At least, he used to be the opposite of L’Than.

*“Here you go, Elle. Sign your name here and here.”*

My stomach turns with the memory of L’Than swiping the air in front of us with the new contract for me to sign. The one that guaranteed my return to New Terrhan, whether my fertility trial was successful or not.

No more calling me “Gift.” No more wicked smiles.

Just a ripple of hurt up his half-ridge when I signed the holo contract without hesitation.

Of course I chose Jack over the future he was offering me. I have no regrets.

But guilt? Well, that isn’t nearly so simple. I can’t stop thinking about that last disappointed look he gave me before walking out of East House—and my life—for good.

Late at night, I’ve been woken up several times. Not by nightmares of falling off a cliff but by the memory of him moving between my legs, his body heavy on top of mine as L’Gon watched.

*“Your body was made for us to take you this way. To worship. To adore. To claim.”*

The soreness from our *ju’li* berries-incited sex has faded from my muscles. But everything inside of me aches whenever I think of him.

L’Than is why I can’t sleep, the real reason why I decided to go on this mission when I should have been resting up for tomorrow’s trial.

And now, here L’Gon is, a walking, hissing reminder of that night—not to mention shirtless and unfairly hot.

“Are you afraid to be alone with me?” he asks when I just stand there instead of finishing my denial about the L’Nel situation.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

I mean, what am I going to say? *Yes, I’m absolutely afraid to be alone with you. But not for the reasons you think. Not for the reasons I should be afraid of you.*

His expression softens. “No matter your duplicity, you should know I am an honorable male. I would never hurt—”

I cut him off there.

“Fine, you can help,” I grumble. “I don’t care either way.”

I quickly turn away to cover up that whopper of a lie and proceed to ignore him the best I can. I guess I really will be spending the rest of my night performing what was only meant to be a credible cover story.

To my surprise, we work quietly and efficiently together.

He handles the big stuff while I concentrate on separating everything into two piles—one “Out” pile for temporary storage in the main house and one “Keep” pile for items that can be repurposed to make the space more inviting for my fertility trials.

Seeming to read my mind, The Big Red Obstacle brings back something from the house each time he returns from a storage trip. More sleeping mats, chairs, and other items that make the outbuilding feel less like an industrial work and storage space.

“Thanks,” I find myself telling him when I realize we have enough chairs to make a little waiting area. “All this extra furniture will really help the trial subjects feel more comfortable with what we’re asking them to do.”

BRO’s shoulders stiffen, as if he’s embarrassed to have done something thoughtful. “Yes, these doomed trials will be awkward enough without the added element of discomfort.”

*This fucking jerk....*

“They’ll work,” I insist between clenched teeth. To both him and myself. “I can’t—I won’t lose Jack.”

He regards me with a weird look that I can’t quite read.

“What?” I ask, bracing for another command to call him L’Eondris, despite L’Gon potentially signing away all of his rights to see Jack again.

“I find your behavior strange.” He averts his eyes back to the shelves. “Xalthurian mothers do not act in the way you do in

regard to their progeny.”

I tilt my head, confused. “Are you saying Xalthurian mothers don’t love their sons?”

“Yes, that is what I am saying.... Actually, that may not be true.” He shifts uncomfortably. “My aunt I’Na, the mother of L’Than, has always been very indulgent of her adopted son—perhaps to make up for my uncle’s antipathy toward him. But my own mother died from the Extinction Virus when I was only a xalling, so I must admit I do not know how any Xalthurian mother truly feels about her offspring. I would not wish to be accused of bad science again.”

I do not like The Big Red Obstacle. He is, for the record, the absolute worst.

But a grudging pity worms its way into my chest, thinking of him growing up without a mother. That would explain why he’s been so callous about separating me from Jack.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I tell him. “And I don’t think it’s bad science to assume your mother would have loved you like I love Jack. A mother’s love is the most natural thing in the universe—no matter what species you hail from.”

“I do not understand or believe in this condition you call *love*.” A frown flickers across his face. “But thank you for your attempt to reassure me. I sense you do so out of kindness. Not your usual duplicity.”

“And we’re back to working in silence,” I declare, walking over to the sleeping mat area to finish setting up for tomorrow’s main event.

I go back to the house for blankets—the only thing I can carry without much effort. On the way back, some non-fruiting flowers catch my eye, and I end up spreading their petals in between the mats.

Meanwhile, BRO sets the overhead gamma ray room cleaning system on a less harsh setting and moves the now empty shelves to create a sort of wall between the trial space and the small waiting area he fashions with the chairs he brought over from the house.

By the time we're done, the outbuilding looks downright cozy. The perfect space for my fertility trials.

"Look at us with our trial space and little waiting room." I plop down in one of the chairs as the sun rises outside the open door, casting the space in a pretty light. "I'm weirdly proud of us."

"There is no reason for your pride to feel weird," he says, sitting down in the chair next to mine. He gives the waiting area a satisfied nod. "We have accomplished much this eve."

Yes, we have. A cozy warmth fills my chest to match the vibe of the outbuilding.

Until he says, "Now, before the trial subjects arrive, you will tell me why you truly came out to the garden outbuilding."

FOUR



## L'GON

It matters not that when I close my eyes I often find myself back under the three moons, being ridden by this female. Or that it was avoidance of such dreams that drove me to stare sightlessly out my orchard-facing office window this eve—until I spied her dragging the mat through the East vineyard.

My mind might continue to suffer the ravages of Ceremonial Mind Rot, but I know the true nature of the female sitting in the chair next to me.

Elle Garrett, as she signed her name upon our latest and last contract, is duplicitous to her very core. That has been well-established.

As the sun rises beyond the outbuilding's open door, I regard her closely, waiting for her next lie.

Perhaps she senses this.

Instead of making up another project, she throws up her hands with a noisy huff of mouth air. "Fine, I came down here in search of something."

"Looking for something." I regard her with a shrewd click. "You will tell me what this something you wished to steal from my work building is."

To her credit, she does not deny my translation of her true intentions.

"I'm not even sure the thing I wanted to steal exists. Look..."

She turns to face me in our side-by-side chairs. "I couldn't sleep, so I was staring at the ocean outside of the nursery, and I

got to thinking about your family's huge orchard on the other side of the house. That's when it occurred to me."

A bit of the defensiveness fades from her expression. "An orchard probably isn't something you can just install with a huge planet-terraformer. And even if you could, there are a lot of reasons why your founding ancestors wouldn't have placed an orchard in the middle of a kingdom city—right next to saltwater. Like, that doesn't make any sense, right?"

Apparently, this is not a true question. She presses on with her explanation without giving me time to answer. "So that got me wondering if there was such a thing as a little terraformer. Something that could transform the estate between your compounds into the big-ass orchard right outside East House's back door. And I thought, wow, if I could find something like that for Xalthuria, and figure out how it worked, it would transform our colony."

She has proven herself duplicitous, but her eager expression makes me sense that she is most likely telling me the truth.

Not for the first time that night, I find myself frowning at her.

Which causes the excited look to dissolve from her round eyes.

"Anyway, yeah, that was probably a silly hypothesis. I can see that now." She ducks her head, and though my translator cannot read hu'man tone as well as L'Than, I sense embarrassment in her words. "If there was a way to terraform smaller pieces of land, then T'Kan would have requested one for New Terrhan as soon as he took over, right?"

She stares at her hands, her shoulders hunched in a dejected manner. "I guess I was hoping that if I brought back something to prove I was a real scientist when I returned to New Terrhan, then I wouldn't have to go back to the Field Worker position they assigned me when I graduated from colony school."

Her words send an unexpected ripple of memory up my nose. "When I was a boy, I desired to work in the orchards more than anything else. I found great fun in shadowing our Agricultural Designer while he planned each season's produce.

I have especially fond memories of the quarterly harvest, when we were allowed to sample all manner of new fruit and vegetables. But when I approached my father about taking over for the Agricultural Designer after his retirement, my sire informed me he had already designated a place for me in the medical program. He told me it was necessary for the future head of the Louxos Line to have a career that garnered respect—not one that made others think of rain and dirt. So, I became a doctor and eventually the Minister of Health. This is a title suited for the head of the Louxos Line.”

She looks up from her hands and shakes her head. “Is this your way of telling me I need to stick to my Field Worker lane?”

“I have no idea what that idiom means.” I rise to my feet. “But no. I am not advising you to stick to your Field Worker lane. I am telling you that you are right.”

I walk over to a small door hidden in the wall on the other side of the sleeping mats. “As I told you a week ago, most Xalthurians are not aware this planet was terraformed to support our tropical way of life. And Xar T’Kan is a warrior from an Elite family that made its fortune in shipping design and parts. It would not have occurred to him—or even the Kel—to ask how our produce is created during the annual negotiation of our contracts. Your fertility hypothesis is outrageous. That is certain, but...”

I find the item I am looking for and close the small door. “You are proving yourself to be quite adept at deductive reasoning in other areas.”

I come back to where she is still sitting and unfold my hand to reveal one of the Louxos Line’s official terraformers, a raindrop-shaped piece of Xalthurian steel with a red ruby button on top. “I believe this is the item you came down here to steal.”

“Oh, my moons!” She jumps to her feet to get a better look at the terraformer. “I wasn’t expecting for it to be so small! This is *amazing*! Please, please, please, you have got to tell me how it works!”

Her obvious delight and curiosity infect me with the desire to grant her request. “Every four lunar cycles, the Agricultural Designer programs the terraformer with a new set of crops. Then we bury it in the ground, and in the space of three lunar cycles, we have a new set of fruit crops ready to be harvested for the new season’s wines and preferred fruit varieties.”

“That is wild!” The little hu’man grasps her head like she can barely contain the information I have imparted to her. “I have so many questions. Like how do you decide what new crops to plant and when? Is it in coordination with the planet’s controlled weather patterns? Oh, moons, do the trees also get replaced? No, of course they don’t!”

Once again she does not allow me to answer her questions.

“And *that’s why* you keep the *buli* trees and the *ju’li* berries in a special remote part of the orchard, away from everything else! Your so-called ‘domestic delicacies’ line is your way of saying ‘fruit that’s available to your planet year-round.’ Right? Right?”

Yes, right. All of her suppositions are correct. But before I can tell her that, she grabs my forearm with both hands.

“Wait a minute, you said every four lunar cycles. And I’ve been here for nearly two. When’s the next big terraforming and harvest?”

Sensing she does not truly wish for me to wait a unit of sixty clicks, I answer her last question right away. “The harvest will begin at the end of this current lunar cycle, in time for our end of solar celebration days. The orchard will then lie fallow until the beginning of the next solar, and at that time, we will terraform the orchard for the next season’s produce.”

Her eyes switch back and forth as she processes my time calculations in her head. “So, I’ll be here for the harvest, but we’ll definitely know if my solution has worked before the seasonal terraform. No matter what, I’ll be back on New Terrhan.”

Disappointment drops her shoulders, and her hands fall away from my arm.

Yes, she will be on New Terrhan. Leaving me to work out the real solution to the Xalthurian infertility issue in peace. Just as I wished it when I agreed to run this ludicrous trial.

But for some reason, I find myself missing her light touch.

And her prior enthusiasm.

There comes a sudden stab of longing in my stomach when I think of her working in the fields on that desolate planet, over two hundred thousand lengths away from Xalthuria. Away from me.

“You care about your people as passionately as I do mine. You wish to make their lives better. That is why you plotted to steal from me,” I realize out loud. “But you are also truly curious to know how the world around you works. I admire these qualities of yours.”

“Wait...” She smiles and rounds her eyes in a way I find unnecessarily dramatic. “Did The Big Red Obstacle just pay me a *compliment*?”

“Do not call me that.” I stiffen, my ridges snapping all the way back. “I have done nothing to impede your trial or your curiosity today—only helped you as best I could, despite your initial wish to steal from me.”

She jerks back, and the teasing smile falls away from her lips. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Thank you for helping me clean this place out. It’s hard for me to ask for help. But I know that without you, I never would have been able to run this fertility trial or learn about this terraformer business—which I’m definitely going to talk with T’Kan about when I return to New Terrhan. So, thank you...*L’Gon*.”

She puts visible effort into pronouncing my name in Xalthurian and even adds the name syllable click. Her effort makes the irritation that rose up inside of me ebb away like an ocean tide.

“Thank you for your efforts as well,” I answer with a slight inclination of my head. “Even though this hypothesis of yours will most likely yield nothing outside of shame and

humiliation, you are attempting to help my people with the same fervency you apply to helping yours.”

I lower and raise my nose ridges, making the decision at the same time I announce it. “For this reason, I will program four terraformers for you to take back with you to New Terrhan.”

“Seriously?” Her eyes once again go dramatically wide. But this time, not in a mocking way. “You’d do that for New Terrhan, despite being so anti-human?”

“Not for New Terrhan. Not for hu’mans.” I stare down, letting my gaze roam over the alien features of her oddly beautiful face. “For you. A fellow being of science. Also, the thought of you suffering unnecessary field work upon your return to New Terrhan does not elate me.”

“If both the fertility trials and the terraformers work, it would render the Accord between our races completely unnecessary. And if that’s the case, I—we...” She stares up at me, and suddenly, we are back on New Terrhan. I am once again drowning in the two brown pools of her eyes as I wait for her to finish speaking.

If that were the case, there would be no further reason for either of our races to ever have to interact again, much less breed. But instead of stating that obvious conclusion, an aromatic burst erupts between us.

A smell I recognize. From that eve I cannot scrub out of my head, no matter how much I try.

The memory of her voice fills my head like a distorted echo. *It hurts. Please take the pain away. Fuck me ....I need you again.*

Is she...?

I ask the question out loud. “Are you—?”

“Yes, I believe she is ready,” a voice interrupts me, speaking in New Terrhan.

We both jump. Then turn to see L’Than, standing between the open door and the shelf wall we created.

“L’Than!” Elle steps back from me like she has been caught in the midst of another crime. “What are you doing here?”

L'Than glances between the two of us, his gaze sharp and shrewd, as if he is calculating his next words carefully.

In the end, he answers, "Perhaps I should not be surprised that L'Gon did not inform you about his request for help with guiding your trials. It was, after all, the very essence of the New Terrhan idiom *last-minute*."

"What?" Now Elle looks between L'Than and me, but her gaze is not nearly as sharp and knowing as my cousin's. "Why would you do that?"

My answer comes out on an irritated click. "Because I have no wish to sabotage your experiment. But it is doubtful that I can run it by myself, and L'Than has proven himself adept at the kind of instructional dialogue that will be needed to guide the trial subjects."

She shakes her head. "Why do you think you'll be running the trial on your own? I'm right here. I wrote a script and everything. We don't..."

She glances at L'Than with a guilty look in her round eyes, but nevertheless insists, "We don't need L'Than."

L'Than stares at Elle, the amused light fading from his gaze.

But instead of confronting her as he did me in the palace garden a couple of day cycles prior, he asks me, "Do you wish to tell her, or should I?"

"Tell me what?" Elle asks.

## PART 2



# TRIALS

## **URGENT ENCRYPTED MESSAGE**

**FROM: THE BENEFACTOR**

**TO: THE ZOOKEEPER**

*I have been presented with another opportunity to acquire the desired zoo addition. Standby. You will receive Elle Garrett at our facility within five to seven day cycles.*

FIVE

## L'GON

*“I’m weirdly proud of us!”*

Elle’s words echo through my head, and I cannot help but feel a twinge of guilt as L’Than escorts the three pairings into the area of chairs she called our “little waiting room.”

Of course, I had to send her away before the first session began.

The number of eager volunteers had drastically reduced when I explained exactly what this “fertility opportunity” would entail. If it ever got out that a hu’man was let anywhere near these trials, the very few couples I was able to recruit would dwindle to zero.

Hu’mans are only known on Xalthuria for serving as breeding vessels. Also, for being so fragile and weak they nearly starved to death before we found them crash-landed on our nearest barely habitable planet.

Even if I told the trial subjects about Elle’s superior deductive reasoning and her scientific curiosity, they would not understand why I agreed to let her design and run an experimental fertility trial with all Xalthurian test subjects.

If anything, excluding her from the proceedings is an honorable action on my part. I am saving her added humiliation when her ridiculous trial fails.

Unfair though this may seem to her, this is the only way.

Still, the memory of Elle’s disappointed expression as I explained why it was imperative she not show her face while I

conducted the trial with my cousin's—not her—  
assistance lingers upon my mind.

My hearts twist as I close the door she stormed out of when I told her she could not actually take part in her own experimental trial.

“L’Gon? L’Gon?”

I bring my gaze back to the waiting area, where L’Than stands in front of this morn’s trial subjects, looking at me expectantly.

“If you are ready, I will make the introductions,” he offers. Perhaps for a second time. “Unless you would prefer to introduce everyone.”

“No, you may have the honor,” I answer without hesitation. Unlike Elle, I have no desire to do more than the bare minimum for this trial.

“This is M’Rgn and Y’Naa Aeros,” L’Than tells the group, waving his hand at a purple female and a green male with warrior modifications who step forward.

“We are pleased to help, Mal L’Gon.” M’Rgn lightly taps his ridges. “You may not remember me, but I served in your unit during the war. You gave me a new left limb after the Kaidorians took it.”

He raises his pants leg to reveal one of the many chrome prosthetics I issued during my time in medical bay.

“Also, you helped me to forget how I lost it.” He lets the fabric drop back down over his prosthetic and touches his ridge in the reverent way usually reserved for commanders. “It is my deepest honor to be one of the first couples allowed to participate in your trials.”

I nod and salute, even though his gratitude makes me uncomfortable.

These trials do not truly belong to me, and my time in battle is not something I wish to dwell on right now.

More spouts of guilt join the large pool in my stomach at the reminder of the drug that helped so many of my patients but

also left them with large gaps in their memory. Including mine. But this is neither the time nor the place for ethical dilemmas.

“You may have the first choice of mats,” I tell the warrior, waving a hand toward the trial area Elle spent the entire eve making pretty.

M’Rgn taps his nose one more time and then ushers his female to the directed spot.

L’Than gestures to the next pair. “R’Ex and Tr’Ca Norleus.”

The orange female clings to her blue mate and offers a shy smile. “Thank you for having us. It is a dream come true for us to have a xalling of our own.”

Her blue mate does not look nearly as enthusiastic. “We were shocked, to say the least, when we found out how this trial of yours would work. But you are Mal L’Gon, a Generations War hero, and the Minister of Health, so we decided to trust you.”

I despise that it was necessary to put my good name on this radical trial. But I push down my conscience and invite them, too, to choose a bed.

Once they take their places, the final subjects step forward, a triad consisting of two identical gold males and a pink female.

My nose ridge claps back.

Triads have become a popular trend in the decades since the Extinction Virus. So common, I rarely give their existence any thought.

But at the sight of these three, memories of the night beneath the three full moons flood my mind.

My pulse races, and I have to fight the rise of my *diijo* as I sputter, “This is not the third couple I chose for this day’s trial.”

The triad looks to L’Than, their nose ridges rippling with confusion.

“Sadly, your last couple failed to present themselves at the appointed click of the sun,” L’Than explains, laying his hand on one of the male’s shoulders. “Perhaps they acquired a case

of that New Terrhan idiom *cold feet*. But D'En and D'Aryn Mylous are the ones who oversaw the work on my house. They and their mate K'Ena were happy to provide a *last-minute* replacement for the other couple.”

I squint at L'Than. I cannot blame the last couple for not showing up. The female was desperate for a xalling, but the male was understandably disconcerted by what would be required of him to take part in the trial.

However, a triad? My cousin's *last-minute* replacement seems a bit too coincidental—a wicked joke meant to remind of that night I would rather forget.

“I should like to have twins,” K'Ena says, breaking into my suspicious thoughts. “I know that it is a very rare occurrence, but perhaps my chances will be greater, considering.”

She glances between her mates with a proud flap of her nose ridge.

*Stars in the sky.* I grit my nose ridge and give them the improbable odds information that L'Than obviously failed to impart before recruiting them for this trial. “This is an experimental trial, statistically unlikely to yield a successful result. You should detach your emotions from this process and desist from future projections of a viable pregnancy.”

The triad once again looks to L'Than. This time like they are in need of translation.

“We will do our best,” L'Than assures them. “Come, let us ensure the mat is large enough for your comfort.”

He hastily escorts them out of the waiting area before I can say anything else. And I reluctantly follow them into the trial space.

But I pull L'Than aside as soon as he is finished showing the triad to the last available mat, speaking in a low tone only he can hear. “You have given these recruits hope of a successful outcome!”

He smiles with infuriating nonchalance. “Of course I did.”

“Do you not understand? The last thing you should do is give any of these trial subjects false hope. We must set realistic expectations before we begin.”

L’Than places his hand on my shoulder. “Hope is the first step. Without that, there is no point to proceed. That is a direct quote from the script Elle gave me after I escorted her back to East House.”

A new wave of guilt washes over me.

But then I hear the orange female proclaim, “I was thinking upon what K’Ena said about wanting twins. I would like my xalling to be a great scholar and hold a high-ranking position. What desires do you have for your future progeny, Y’Naa?”

“I will have two xallings, first a son and then a daughter,” the purple female answers with several excited clicks.

*Essh.* The triad’s unfounded hope is spreading to the other test subjects.

I press my fingers against my nose ridge. “What exactly did you promise your construction workers, L’Than?”

L’Than shrugs. “I simply told them you have found a cure for female infertility and are conducting an experiment to test your theory.”

A ripple of irritation makes its way up my ridge. “But you did not tell them this may not work?”

“If I did that, they would not have volunteered,” he replies with a logic click. As if we are talking about why he set one of the thermometers lower in the vineyards to replicate a frost.

“You have given them false hope, Cousin! What will you tell them when this experiment fails?”

L’Than tilts his head, as if he is considering this important question for the first time.

“If this trial fails, then I suppose I will simply apologize to my construction workers and their mate for wrongly predicting the outcome.”

Proving how little he has come to care for his good reputation, L'Than dismisses that possibility with another shrug.

“The much more important question is, what will you do if this trial *does not* fail?” He punctuates his question with an expectant click. “For me?”

“For you?” First came confusion. Then sudden understanding.

Yes, L'Than had answered my *last-minute* holo for help and even replaced the trial subjects that failed to show up.

However, his assistance would come at a price.

For so long I have viewed my cousin as someone who did not take much seriously. But now I can see the naked ambition behind his easy charm.

No matter his hu'man half, he has become more of a Louxos merchant than I bargained for when I sent him that holo.

I suppose I should not be surprised. Still, I let loose an irritated click before saying, “Fine. What do you want in exchange for your help?”



SIX

## L'THAN

“If this trial results in a viable pregnancy, you will give me your two votes on my proposed term limits measure, along with partial credit for solving Xalthurian infertility.”

In truth, I threw the partial credit request in so I would have negotiation room. Even Elle will not receive any credit for her trial design, so I am prepared to negotiate down to just his two votes.

But L’Gon simply raises his entire nose ridge and says, “Fine.”

A smug feeling begins to wash over me—until he adds, “However, if the trial does not work, you will withdraw your measure from consideration and give me your vow that you will never again present yourself at a Council Meeting.”

I hesitate. L’Gon is playing what the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would refer to as *hardball*. He is *raising the stakes*. Making me bet everything against my *Hail Mary* to gain his votes.

Forcing me to lose my chance at a Council Seat if I place all of my faith in Elle’s hypothesis.

“We do not have time for lengthy negotiations on this matter.” Like a true Louxos merchant, L’Gon does not give me much time to think about his counter. “You will either accept my terms or leave me so that I might clumsily attempt to conduct this ridiculous trial myself.”

“You have a deal.” I give my cousin a smile to cover up my unease.

More than ever, this trial *must* work. If I cannot garner those two votes, I will let down all the hybrid sons who believe in me. Even worse, my long-term plan will never reach fruition.

I turn to face the trial participants.

The couples and triad are now all sitting upon the sleeping mats strategically placed around the room, but they continue to converse with each other excitedly.

“When I have my xalling, my friends will be so jealous. I will have my son first. Then I will have a daughter for whom I will commission matching robes,” the one called Tr’Ca declares.

“I would be happy with one, but if we can have two, I wish to have one of each. One green and one purple,” Y’Naa replies. “But if we are given a moonstone blend for either, I will count myself most fortunate.”

Full-blood xallings are born with a solid color from one parent. But on some occasions, the colors of each parent blend to create a pale, shimmery tone. Moonstone blends like N’Maryah are rare indeed and often praised for their beauty.

A rumble of misgiving. *Essh*. Perhaps my cousin was right about the imprudence of overexaggerating their chances.

Stars in the sky, I hope this works.

“Please be silent so we can begin the trial,” L’Gon says behind me, bringing the chatter to an end. “First, I would like to thank you all for your participation. I shall document this first session while my cousin, L’Than Louxos, provides instructions.”

“Does this require an injection?” R’Ex, the wary blue male interjects. “I do not like gamma lasers.”

His question brings back my hu’man sense of humor.

“The females will be receiving an injection,” I answer. “But not the kind that requires gamma lasers.”

R’Ex and Tr’Ca look up at me in a confused manner, and one of the golden Xals raises his hand.

“Let us proceed,” L’Gon says before he can ask any more questions.

“Who here knows what *kissing* is?” I ask the group after L’Gon commands the holo monitor hovering above the mats to record.

Tr’Ca tentatively raises her hand. “Is this the hu’man mouth speak custom whereupon they touch lips?”

“Yes.” I confirm her guess with a nod. “But be aware that you are not actually speaking, only moving your mouth and entangling your tongues as if you are conversing. Silently.”

My clarification is met with seven sets of dubious looks.

“I have seen it done with a friend who has a hu’man mate,” R’Ex says with a confused click. “But I do not understand the point of it.”

“It is a way to express your attraction to your mate,” I patiently explain.

“Why can we not just tell our female with our words? That is the most efficient way,” one of the twins asks. But I cannot tell which one it is, dressed as they are in matching casual robes, as opposed to their usual work uniforms upon which their names are embroidered.

“Yes, of course you can,” I counter whichever Mylous twin asked the question. “But when it comes to the procreation act, kissing leads to a pleasurable experience for all parties involved.”

The twins’ ridges ripple with matching confusion at my answer.

“Do we have to kiss each other?” one of them asks.

“I do not wish to converse in this manner with my brother,” the other one adds.

I can almost feel L’Gon behind me. Silently judging.

*Essh.* This so-called experiment has barely begun, and it seems like a brewing disaster already.

But I hold on to my patience. “No. No. No. It is only necessary to kiss your mate.”

One of the twins starts to ask another question, but copying my cousin, I briskly move on with my next set of instructions.

“Now, I would like you all to kiss your mates. D’En and D’Aryn, you may take turns kissing K’Ena. But remember, go slow. Start with simply pressing your lips against hers. Once you all get accustomed to that, you can truly explore her mouth and taste her.”

The couples and the triad do as I instruct.

There are several frustrated clicks and hisses at first. One mate set bumps their ridge plates, and another cannot figure out how to turn their heads so as not to block their nasal passages. But eventually, their awkward endeavors evolve into true kissing, punctuated by low clicks and hisses of pleasure.

“Oh!” Y’Naa suddenly pulls away from her mate, clutching her stomach.

“Did I mouth speak her in an incorrect manner?” M’Rgn rears away from his mate, looking to me for further instruction.

“I do not believe so,” I answer, observing the heightened color in his purple mate’s face. “How do you feel, Y’Naa?”

“There is a warm sensation in my belly... and in between my legs. Am I ill?” Y’Naa flaps her nose ridge up and down in her distress.

K’Ena raises her hand. “I feel that way, too. I am unfamiliar with these sensations.”

I cannot help but think about how it felt to press my lips into Elle’s for the first time and how my *diijo* nearly exploded from something so simple as a kiss. My entire body became enflamed from her touch, and I suspect these test subjects have experienced a similar sensation.

“And you, Tr’Ca?” I ask.

The orange female ducks her head and answers with an embarrassed, “It is as the others say. But I wish he would keep his lips closed when we kiss. R’Ex consumed much *cu’gy*

wine for courage before coming here, and it always makes his breath so very unpleasant.”

“You have never said this before,” R’Ex clicks. His nose ridges flap open and closed.

“We have never kissed!” Tr’Ca counters.

R’Ex hisses. “Do you wish to shame me, mate?”

Tr’Ca raises her hands in supplication. “I thought it might be needed information.”

R’Ex folds his arms across his chest, reminding me of a sullen xalling. “Why would they need to know you find my breath unpleasant?”

“Enough,” L’Gon hisses from behind me. “You are all now familiar with the kissing phase. You will allow L’Than to continue with his instruction without further interruption so we may move into the next phase.”

The participants immediately quiet, lowering their heads in contrition as they await further instruction.

I cannot help but note what a team L’Gon and I make. We appear to fall into the dynamic the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary refers to as *good cop, bad cop*.

“What the females experienced was pleasure,” I explain to the group, pushing forward with my instructions. “Now that you have become familiar with kissing, we will proceed to the next step. Get as close to each other as possible. I require you to truly look into each other’s eyes.”

“Like this?” Either D’En or D’Aryn asks.

“No,” I answer. “Stare at your female, not each other. She should have all of your attention. Now, I want all the males to explore your females’ bodies. Focus on her mammary glands, the nipples in particular. Use your fingers and mouths. Alternatively, you can kiss her while you lavish her in intimate touch.”

Tr’Ca once again raises her hand.

“Tr’Ca, you and R’Ex do not have to kiss while he touches you,” I answer before she can speak her question aloud.

She lowers her hand.

“Should we disrobe?” M’Rgn asks.

“Yes, but make the disrobement of your female an intimate act....”

I continue to answer their questions, and soon, there are no more raised hands as the males truly attend to giving their females pleasure.

The scene reminds me of the pleasure stations I visited when my life consisted of little more than *goji* wine-fueled parties and fun races. On pleasure stations, males rutted with their chosen sex workers without regard for anyone watching.

However, this scene is also the opposite of that. On pleasure stations, only males derived pleasure from these interactions.

Xalthurian females feel neither pain nor pleasure when taken for sex. According to our sexual biology downloads, only males have pleasure sensors in their genitalia. And thus, Xalthurian males have always been taught that females are simply available to see to our needs. Not the other way around.

But the scene before me is proving those biology downloads grossly inaccurate. It makes me wonder what else the medical downloads have gotten wrong.

Feminine clicks of satisfaction fill the room as the males kiss their mates while rubbing upon their bodies.

They are obviously experiencing pleasure. Just as Elle predicted!

I exchange a look with my cousin, whose ridges are clapped back in equal surprise. I sense he is asking the same question as me.

*Have Xalthurian females always had this ability to feel such pleasure?*

A shrieking click cuts off our silent exchange.

“I am leaking!” Y’Naa sits up, abruptly pushing away her green mate. “I am leaking! I do not understand. I do not have to use the toilet.”

“This is not waste fluid.” I smile to smother my sudden inappropriate rise of hu’man humor. “This is arousal.”

Her purple ridges ripple as she considers my words. “I do not understand.”

“Me, too! I am also leaking! Am I dying?” Tr’Ca’s ridges ripple up and down.

“I as well!” K’Ena pushes away her golden mates.

And the room erupts with panicked clicks.

“Do not fear!” I hold up my hands. “This liquid is a sign the experiment is working. It is the female’s way of announcing she is aroused and nearing readiness for your penetration.”

“This liquid leaking from her breeding slit—the scent calls to me.” M’Rgn dips his head towards his mate’s sex, his nose ridges opening wide for an audible sniff. “I wish to taste it for some reason I cannot fathom.”

M’Rgn issues several confused clicks but does not wait for any further instruction from me before diving his head between his mate’s legs.

“I, too, wish to taste this delicacy!” one of the golden twins calls out. He repositions himself between his mate’s legs, and her knees buckle over his broad shoulders as he devours her breeding slit.

I look to R’Ex, the only male who did not announce an intention to taste his mate’s arousal. But this, as it turns out, is because he is already slurping away at her sex.

Cries of “Stars in the sky!” fill the air as the males lick and slurp in earnest while the females loudly hiss and click.

This was not in the list of predictions Elle made for L’Gon. But surely it cannot be a bad thing. Memories of my time with Elle in the cage and how I desperately wanted to taste her race through my mind.



Brain stuttering, I rush to catch my instructions up with the spontaneous action on the sleeping mats.

“Do not be afraid to slip your tongue as deep as you can inside of your female’s breeding slit,” I tell the males. “The hypothesis is that there are many pleasure nerves that will produce more arousal fluid.”

This is in concordance with Elle’s hypothesis, which I explain to them as the males work between their mates’ legs. “L’Gon believes the female pleasure center is located deep within her genitalia and that it must be stimulated in order for her ovaries to release—and in some cases, produce—an egg for reproduction.”

I can feel my cousin’s disapproving gaze on my back. No doubt, L’Gon wishes for me to state Elle’s hypothesis in a way that does not link it to him. Or issue cold scientific caveats to the hypothesis that will set a low bar of expectation.

But I refuse to allow his *unsexy* attitude to ruin this experiment.

For the sake of the trial, I call out, “The more aroused you make her, the more likely you are to achieve a viable pregnancy.”

The males appear to, as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would term it, *understand the assignment*.

They feast upon their mates, and the females begin to make low sounds I have never heard before, something between a click and the rattle of a *xurani*.

However, the twins soon begin to argue over taking turns.

“You have had enough, Brother! There will be no juices left for me,” one of them clicks, his ridges flattening.

The other twin slurps away, seeming unaffected by his brother’s wishes.

In the meantime, their mate flings her head from side to side. “I believe I am dying. But do not stop. Do not stop. I am dying. I am.... *Essh!*”

“You are killing her!” the twin who is not between her legs declares with an alarmed click. “You are killing our mate!”

“No, no, he is not harming her,” I answer the upset twin.

I cannot be sure, but I believe this is how Elle must feel when she begins to find her female joy.

“Now!” I call out to everyone. “Now is the best time for penetrative action! But instead of flipping your female over into the normal mating position, please mount her from the top so she may continue to feel aroused by your kisses and touches as you penetrate her.”

Not a single hand goes up in the air as R’Ex and M’Rgn rise to get into the position Elle referred to as *missionary* in her script.

It is all going so well.

Until suddenly, it is not.

The two couples easily transition into the final phase of the session.

But the triad—well, as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would put it...

All hell breaks loose.

SEVEN

## ELLE

“Mother, you sad? You need food? Sleep? Warm hug?”

I’d laugh at Jack’s questions—if I hadn’t passed most of the morning building a castle on the white sand beach in front of East House instead of running the trial in the outbuilding I’d set up for the first session’s subjects.

“Not sad. Bitter.” I put the last touches on the moat with the little shovel I did end up grabbing from the outbuilding after all. “Also, frustrated. This is basically bio-engineering corn all over again. Except this time, I’m not even allowed in the field to plant the seeds.”

“Yes, I agree.” Jack nods sagely on the other side of the glittering white sandcastle. “Your sad emotion will become much better if you bury me in big pile sand.”

I snort at his response and the now-familiar situation of Jack translating my words into whatever he wants to hear.

I can understand everything Jack clicks and hisses, thanks to the translator chip. However, he still has to undergo years of human language development to comprehend my “throatbox language.”

There’s no definitive proof that personality traits are heritable, as opposed to nurtured or randomly designated at birth. But over the last week, I’ve gathered some pretty conclusive evidence that Xalthurian imperiousness is definitely passed down—no nurturing contact required.

“There you are, Elle and L’Eondris! I have been looking for the two of you since my arrival,” a voice says.

I cringe when I see the pretty orange, blue-haired servant we've been depending on for my throatbox language translation ever since I found out she received a translator at her previous job. But Jack rises to his feet and jumps up and down as she walks toward us from the house.

"G'Lya!" Jack clicks happily. "Pick me up! Pick me up! Mother is too weak and sad. No carry me all morning."

"Also, he's now a walking, talking, dense sixty pounds—at least, maybe more," I explain to G'Lya while also rising to my feet. "I had to nope out of carrying him anywhere a couple of days ago."

"I understand," G'Lya says. Even as she picks up Jack with insulting ease.

"But did I mistake my days and times?" Her nose ripples with worry. "I thought you wished me to care for the xalling while you and Mal L'Gon conducted your—what did you call it? Experimental trial?"

Embarrassment flushes my entire face as I remember what L'Gon told me earlier in the morning.

*"I understand your scientific curiosity. But this trial of yours will already be hard enough to execute, and our subjects are rather wary. It is best for you to remain hidden, as they might flee if they find out it is you rather than me behind this peculiar hypothesis."*

"Did Mal L'Gon change his mind?" G'Lya asks. "Does he no longer need your assistance for his work? Is that why L'Than Louxos was here earlier?"

Good guess.

I want to rail against being replaced by someone who would be "less upsetting" to the Xalthurians I'm trying to help.

But I bite back my rage. It's not G'Lya's fault I was kicked out of my own trial.

"Yes, the plan changed, so I brought Jack to the beach myself instead." I give her an apologetic wince. "I should have let you know."

“I am not angry. I am disappointed,” G’Lya says in that straightforward way of Xalthurians. “I was looking forward to a beach day instead of performing my usual household services. But I will return to my regular duties if you have no need of me.”

“No! No! You stay beach with me!” Jack protest. “Mother sad. You not sad. And Mother no let me swim.”

“Because I’m afraid I’m not strong enough to fight that three-moon current of yours and pull Jack to shore if anything happens,” I explain to G’Lya.

“Oh, I am a very strong swimmer,” the orange Xal informs me with a ripple of pride up her nose. “My parents are Swim-Fishers, and I grew up helping them hunt fish before moving to the kingdom city. Perhaps Jack and I can catch a few for our midday meal.”

“Yes! Yes! Please!” Jack begs.

Well, if I needed any more evidence of how truly bummed out I am, there it is.

Instead of grilling G’Lya with questions about how the Xalthurian fishing industry worked and what exactly hunting fish entailed, I leave her and Jack to their beach day with a simple, “Have fun.”

Maybe it’s for the best. As optimistic as I need to be about my experiment’s viability for my own sanity, even I have to acknowledge there’s a reason L’Gon keeps referring to them as the “doomed trials.”

And if there’s a chance of me losing Jack forever, I want to make sure there’s someone in place to take over for me.

However, as I walk back into East House, I curse my choice of the windowless garden shed to conduct the trial. I can’t even sneak over there to take a peek at what’s happening.

“Not a terrible idea my ass.” I’ve basically ensured his run at my hypothesis stays hidden—even from me.

But there’s no way I’m letting L’Gon slip past me into his office. I plop myself down, crisscross applesauce, on the

second-floor landing with its view of both the front foyer and the stairs, and I wait.

And wait. And wait some more.

By midafternoon, my resolve begins to degrade into insecure questions.

Did it not work? What if the setup is so against the Xalthurian social norm they weren't even able to conduct the trial?

L'Than seemed capable enough, judging from the confident way he showed up to assist with the trial—and the night of the moonlight picnic. But for all I know, L'Gon didn't give him all the information he'd need to successfully conduct the first session.

Maybe it was too confusing of a concept for L'Than and the trial participants to grasp.

The whooshing sound of the foyer's front doors sliding open interrupts my spiral into doubt, and I scramble to my feet just as L'Gon walks through the door.

To my surprise, L'Than is right beside him, saying something with big gestures that put me in mind of a human. "I will need you to intervene on my behalf to the Kel yourself about allowing me to sit on the Council Board."

"That still remains to be seen," L'Gon answers. His ridges open wide, then close in a way that lets me know he's heaving one of those Xalthurian nose sighs.

"It is important we begin laying the groundwork now," L'Than insists.

Are they seriously talking about some Council Seat L'Than hopes to obtain instead of my experiment?

My stomach drops with another much more terrible possibility.

What if L'Gon called off the "doomed trial" before it could even start so he could save face?

For all I know, that is the real reason he exiled me to the house. And I can't be sure anymore that L'Than is on my side.

I remember the way the hybrid male's eyes shuttered when I named the terms of our deal.

Maybe L'Than and L'Gon have been over there the entire time, sharing a bottle of one of their family's fruity wines and laughing about me actually expecting them to conduct my trial.

"Elle, you awaited our return." L'Than abruptly cuts off his argument with L'Gon to address me in New Terrhan.

Both he and L'Gon raise their eyes to where I'm sitting on the landing above them.

Those beautiful moon-colored eyes. My breath catches in my throat for reasons that have nothing to do with the fertility trial.

Still, I take a deep, brave breath and ask, "How did it go?"



EIGHT

## ELLE

So that's how I come to find myself sitting opposite L'Gon and L'Than in the large house's "last meal" room.

Most New Terrhan families sleep, eat, and hang out in the same one room that composes our red-mud huts. But this house has an entire beach-facing room reserved exclusively for dining and what L'Than referred to as "conference" when he invited me to share the midday meal with him and L'Gon.

A very late midday meal.

Jack came through the foyer earlier with G'Lya, holding a still-wriggling fish in his clawed hands. The last of many he'd eaten raw while swimming in the ocean.

"For you!" he declared.

I'd politely declined his, ah... present, choosing instead to continue my long wait while G'Lya returned him to the nursery for his after-lunch nap.

But now I'm starving. For both food and information.

I tap my fingers somewhat impatiently as a couple of servants place food on the table for us to eat. Bowls and plates filled with the usual loose meats, cheeses, and berries.

However, my heart stops and my whole body freezes over when a female Xal sets down a large bowl of yellow berries. Right in front of me.

"What is wrong?" L'Than asks. "You have no wish to partake of the treat I asked the servants to prepare especially for you?"

My face burns hot with rage inside the ice sculpture I've become.

But I wait for all the servants to leave the dining room before answering L'Than. "How can you ask me what's wrong? Do you actually think I'd want to eat the berries that made me lose my mind and all my pride that night?"

L'Gon slits his eyes at me. But L'Than tilts his head—like he's holding back laughter.

"If I remember correctly, you are the one who ate the *ju'li* berries and begged us to give you satisfaction. All eve long."

L'Than flaps his ridges up and down in a way that reminds me of humans wagging their eyebrows for specific innuendo. "You truly believe we would endeavor to repeat that event? In the middle of the day? Inside a house filled with servants?"

Well, no. Not when he puts it like that....

Why does L'Than always have to make everything I think is clear-cut so confusing? My face burn lowers in temp, and I'm not sure whether to lie, deny, defend myself, or apologize.

"Those are not the *ju'li* berries you gobbled down at our moonlight picnic," L'Gon adds before I can come up with an answer for L'Than.

Unlike L'Than, his nose ridge remains in a neutral position as he informs me, "We call this kind of berry ta'ri. And it will be harvested soon to create the next solar's batch of special edition Louxos sparkling wine. It poses no threat to hu'mans. In fact, your sister has commissioned several bottles for an upcoming event she has dubbed the Winter Holiday Festival, even though this side of the planet does not have the season of winter."

*Oh.*

Now I'm super-clear on how I want to respond.

By sinking into a hole in the floor.

I clear my throat and focus on the bowl of berries in front of me so as not to have to look either of them in the eye.

And yes, upon closer inspection, I can see now that these berries are actually a few shades lighter than the ones I accidentally ingested the night of the moonlight picnic. A pale yellow—not golden, like the *ju'li* berries.

“Do you truly think we would purposefully drug you?” L’Gon asks as I realize the enormity of my mistake. “Put you in an arousal state you did not wish for?”

Mortification washes over me, stronger than the ocean’s three-moon tide.

No. I don’t believe that.

L’Than hadn’t even tried to get in contact with me since I signed the contract that would guarantee me leaving New Terrhan forever.

But my ever-present need to know won’t let me not ask, “Then why did you have these berries made special for me?”

L’Than, not L’Gon, answers this time. “It is our family’s tradition to mark remarkable achievements with the consumption of a small bowl of *ta’ri* berries.”

*Special achievements?*

The embarrassment disappears in an instant, and I whip my head up to ask, “Is this your way of telling me the trial went to plan? My idea actually worked?”

L’Gon and L’Than exchange another look I can’t read.

Then L’Gon stiffens his shoulders, like he drew the short stick in their mental negotiation.

“I recorded the proceedings, as I do all experiments—no matter how...” He pauses and seems to pick his next word like one of the berries in the orchard. “Unconventional. Would you like for L’Than to give you an account of what happened or watch it for yourself?”

“Watch it!” I answer without a moment of hesitation.

My first night at the palace, my sister apologized about the Xals not having any entertainments to take my mind off of Jack still being in stasis. She explained that all of their screens

were employed solely for communication and the relaying of important news. Even their so-called literature was composed mostly of manuals and straightforward accounts of their history—without so much as an embellished detail.

I'm pretty sure they don't have music, either. Before Nova's wedding, T'Kan, the husband of my sister's best friend Zinnia, asked me if I also had a talent for "worded bird song"—which I assumed was the label he'd come up with for singing.

I, however, grew up on a planet where visits to our crashed colony ship's viewing room were the center of all leisure. And no offense to L'Than, but I don't trust him to give as colorful a report of the procedures as even the most boring New Terrhan colonist would. So, of course, I opt to watch what happened for myself on a screen. "Let me see it!"

"Very well, then." With what sounds like an uncomfortable click, L'Gon swipes a holo screen into the air between us, then expands it so that it's hovering in a large rectangle over the table.

Meanwhile, I grab the bowl of celebration berries, ready to pop them into my mouth like the fluffed foodstuff my people started making to eat in front of entertainments after I figured out how to bioengineer corn.

I become almost giddy as I eat *ta'ri* berries and watch the experiment go exactly to plan, with some truly comical moments in between.

However, all the laughter dies in my throat when the holoscreen focuses on the triad.

By this point, the other two females are well on their way to the orgasm point I required before penetrative sex occurred.

The pink female called K'Ena also appears to be in a state of rapture as she lies on her back in the unplanned oral phase, with one of her golden mate's head between her legs. However, her other golden mate does not appear at all happy about that.

Surely, they've taken turns with their Xalthurian wife before agreeing to participate in this trial. But on screen, they

squabble.

And when it comes time for the penetration step, the one twin who did not get his turn at oral foreplay pushes the other one out of the way and falls on top of their mate.

Like a demon possessed.

The golden Xal soon comes inside his wife. But instead of ceding her to her other golden husband, he continues thrusting into his wife with renewed vigor.

The wife lengthens her back, letting out a long-drawn-out hiss—one of pleasure, I assume, remembering how it felt to be taken like this.

At this point, the first gold male gets loud enough for me to hear him over the others. “Please, Second, let me have her. My *diijo* has come to such an aroused state, I fear it will explode.”

That’s not a biological thing that can actually happen, but I can see why the golden twin would fear that. His ridged dick strains at a ninety-degree angle, with visible drops of blue semen leaking from its tip.

It’s painful to look at—I can only imagine how he’s feeling at the moment. And for some reason, my empathy forms a pool of desire between my legs.

The other couples were all finished with the breeding stage and were lying on their mats in various states of repose before the left-out golden husband started yelling.

But they all sit up to stare at him. Him and the twin, who continues to thrust in and out of their mate. Like a very large, very unhinged gold lizard.

“I am unable to stop, First! You cannot imagine how wonderful it feels inside her in comparison to how it was before. She is not dry but warm and wet. I never want to leave.”

“But I might die if I do not have her!” his twin pleads. His ridges flap up and down in obvious distress.

“You will cease your action now, Second Mylous,” a monotone voice tells the rutting male from off-camera. “You

must allow her First to have his turn.”

I can only assume it's L'Gon speaking. L'Than goes with the flow, but Mr. There Are Rules would not be okay with this.

A moment later, L'Than appears in front of the holo screen and grabs the still-thrusting Xal by the shoulders, forcing him to a stop.

“D'Aryn, position yourself underneath your wife.”

“Like this?” He eagerly complies and lies on his back, using his elbows to support his upper body.

“That is correct,” L'Than acknowledges. “And K'Ena, lower yourself onto D'Aryn's *diijo* before D'En can take his claim of you again.

The female's lust-filled expression clears with a confused click. “You want me to lie on him? On top of him?”

“Yes. There are many positions one can take for sex,” L'Than explains, straining to hold the first twin back. “You must comply quickly.”

The pink female still looks confused, but the twin, who was referred to as her First, wastes no time getting into position. In the end, there's no need for L'Than to convince the pink female to comply with his instructions. D'Aryn pulls her hips forward, sheathing him with her sex.

“My stars!” he hisses out. “You are so very wet. I can feel Second's seed along with your pulsing heat.”

“You are even deeper inside of me than my second mate.” The pink female arches her back, her taloned hands scrabbling at his plated chest.

And *oh moons...* I can't help but remember how L'Than's heavily plated chest felt under my fingers as he took me in his lap. Filling me so good.

My pussy clenches with the memory, a wave of red-hot desire washing over me like flood waters that can't be held back.

I should look away. I need to look away.

L’Gon and L’Than are watching me now. I can feel both sets of their eyes on me.

But I can’t tear my gaze from the screen, where the golden mate they called Second is straining against L’Than’s hold on his arms.

“I must have her again!” he clicks at an ear-shattering high decibel. “Let me go. I must be with my mate.”

L’Than shoots him a sympathetic look and says, “D’En, if you still wish to be inside of her, she has another hole in her backside that might be used to—”

If the old planet phrase “Say less” were an alien, it would be D’En breaking free of his captor’s loosened hold and once again falling on top of his mate—this time lining himself up at the hole on her backside, which sits much higher and therefore much less hidden than the one buried inside my butt cheeks.

The female’s eyes widen when he sticks it in. “You are in my waste disposal hole! Oh no, you are in my waste disposal hole!”

But then D’En strokes into her a few careful times while D’Aryn pumps into her from below. And suddenly, her expression loosens like someone who’s smoked too much of the precious medicinal plants our doctor dispenses to help terminally ill colonists manage their pain.

“You are in my waste disposal hole,” she repeats. But her pointed tongue is hanging out now, and she lets out heavy pants as she tells him, “Oh, first husband, it feels so good to have you there. Do not stop. Either of you.”

She doesn’t have to worry about that. Like, at all. None of them are stopping. And I can’t stop watching.

No more popping berries. I’m frozen in place with a *ta’ri* berry halfway to my mouth, unable to look away as the two golden males take their mate in a combined frenzy.

They thrust into her with the brutal, uncaring strokes of male animals in the throes of a female’s heat. But the ecstatic expression on the pink female’s face tells me she doesn’t mind their lack of care.



“I’m quickening,” she clicks out. “Stars in the sky, I’m quickening again.”

And with that, she achieves the orgasm state that Xalthurian males assumed their females could not reach with an echoing rattle.

As if detonated by her orgasm, both of her mates begin to quake on either side of her.

If there’s any doubt about what’s happening, blue semen drools down her pink thighs, letting me know she has definitely been seeded during her second orgasm cycle.

It worked. My plan actually worked for not one but all three trial participant females.

I should be jumping up and down with excitement. But another kind of excitement steals over me without warning. Below my waist.

It’s the similarity of the situation. Three, not two, people taking part in the mating session. Two males and one female rutting in sync until they all come.

Watching their triple orgasm does something to me. Something that I wasn’t quite ready for—something I can feel pooling between my thighs.

*Oh no... oh no...*

I squeeze my legs together and try not to panic.

I’m not standing directly in front of either of the males, as I was earlier in the day when L’Gon basically sniffed out my body’s traitorous thoughts.

Maybe they won’t notice my reaction to the triad scene. Maybe I can sneak away to a toilet before I embarrass my—

“Elle, are you alright?” L’Than asks on the other side of the table before I can finish that thought. “You have eaten no *ju’li* berries, but you are emitting an incredibly strong arousal scent.”

“Again,” L’Gon adds, disappearing the screen with a single blink.

*Crap!*

NINE

## ELLE

“I’m fine,” I insist to L’Than.

Even as I suddenly recall the time a few of my friends and I snuck into one of the colony ship’s special screening rooms right before the Breeding ceremony. These rooms stood behind locked doors and could only be accessed after a certain age—males when they turned eighteen and females after they had completed their Breeding Ceremony duty.

The rumor was that the things in the door-protected screening rooms made girls want to have sex with boys before the Breeding Ceremony—which was dangerous and could lead to non-sanctioned pregnancies.

However, it had almost become a rite of passage for us girls to sneak into the screening rooms shortly before the Breeding Ceremony season to research what we might expect.

What I watched on the screen back then hadn’t made me want to take part in anything similar.

But what I saw on the screen before L’Than and L’Gon asked me about my arousal state makes me cross my legs underneath my uniform shift.

However, there’s no way I’m going to talk about my obvious arousal with L’Than. Or L’Gon, whose eyes I can still feel boring into me.

I hear, rather than see, a chair scrape back. Heavy steps. Then, the next thing I know, one of them is standing directly behind me.

“Elle, we are waiting for your answer.”

L’Than speaks to me in New Terrhan before taking the berries from me and setting them aside.

I gulp.

I’m not sure whether to apologize for my carnal response to the experiment they ran without me or rail at them for not warning me that it would be so incredibly hot.

“I should... I should go,” I decide in the end.

“No, no, no, Gift.”

Before I can rise, L’Than turns my entire chair around to face him.

“You will not run away from us,” he explains. “Like I am your enemy. You will let me give you relief, as the trial males did for their females.”

I stare up at him, mute with... I want it to be horror at the prospect.

But it’s not. It’s really not.

He falls to his knees before me and tears away my shift like it’s made of tissue paper.

For a moment, we both stare at my exposed sex. Glistening with arousal, even though I haven’t touched a *ju’li* berry.

“Yes, you have much need,” L’Than hisses out. “I will attend to you.”

I should tell him no, push him away.

Instead, my legs fall open, and someone lets out a helpless, very human-sounding moan.

That someone is me, giving in before I even have a chance to think about the many good reasons not to do so.

L’Than surges forward, his mouth latching on to my sex in a ravenous instant.

His broad shoulders lift my hips in the air as his pointed tongue delves into my already wet folds and does horrible things between my legs.

Things I can't bring myself to resist.

Things that soon have me moaning. How did N'Maryah and the female Xals describe it?

*Quickening.*

Yes, quickening is the right word. Everything in my body rushes forward to meet the incoming wave of pleasure.

I scream out as L'Than's tongue slithers inside my sex, climaxing me without an ounce of mercy.

He ruthlessly licks me through my throes of pleasure, and he doesn't lift his head until I'm fully wrung out. Just a quivering sack of jelly in the dining room's fine chair.

"Are the *ju'li* berries still in effect? She is still so responsive to your ministrations," L'Gon observes to the left of us.

My face heats at his observation, but I can't blame him for commenting on how ridiculously hard I came.

I suddenly understand the word *wanton*—a term I used to come across often when I went through a phase of reading old planet novels set in ancient times. Even worse, despite my embarrassment, my body once again quickens when I look up to see him standing above my chair.

"Do you smell that, L'Gon?" L'Than blatantly sniffs the air. "How her arousal state heightened when you joined the conversation?"

L'Than wipes my essence off his mouth and gives me a knowing smile while continuing to speak to L'Gon. "Her body knows the things her mind has yet to accept."

"I... I..." I try and fail to come up with an excuse.

And L'Than smirks. "Yes, I, too, would like to continue our banter. But alas, we have pushed L'Gon to his very limit. Now he is the one in need of relief. Look, Elle..."

L'Than takes me by the chin and turns my head toward L'Gon, who's now sitting in the chair beside me with his teeth bared. And a tent underneath his previously smooth tunic. A large, pulsing tent.

There are also deep scratch marks on the chair's arms that weren't there before. Claw marks, I realize when I see the light red his knuckles have turned as he grips the chair.

Everything inside of me turns into storm wind.

"Get her out of here," L'Gon hisses at L'Than. "The Ceremonial Mind Rot... I am not sure how long I can hold on...."

Earlier, his expression had remained cold and removed as he observed me watching the holo.

But now he looks like a feral animal. A feral animal who's trying to hold himself back. From me.

I don't realize how much this turns me on until L'Than lets out an all-too-human chuckle. "Oh, I can smell how much you like that, Elle. He has need of your sweet hot as you had need of my tongue, and that heightens your arousal two-fold."

*Yes... moons, damn me. Yes, it does.* I sit in my own chair, frozen, not knowing what to do with myself or my treacherous body.

Until L'Than tells me.

"Take him." L'Than's voice is a hissing whisper in my ear. "You will not leave as he has directed. You will not hide in your room from this passion we share. You will sit upon his *diijo* as you did the night of our picnic."

At L'Than's words, L'Gon's hands dig deeper into the chair's arms, extending the marks even farther with his talons.

"He is not as immune to you as you believe. And he will not be able to hold himself back much longer," L'Than tells me. "You must make a choice now. What will you do?"

I swallow.

But it's not really a choice.

Then I crawl into his lap and...

Jerk awake to the sound of the ocean crashing outside my window.

*What in the moons?*

I sit up on my sleeping mat, my body hot and sticky from the dream that was nowhere close to the truth of what happened the day before.

Yesterday, when L’Gon and L’Than asked me about my arousal scent, I didn’t deny it.

I took off.

Just straight up ran out of that room designated specifically for eating and conference without a word of explanation.

*Coward.*

As eager as I had been to discuss the first trials with L’Gon and L’Than all morning, I ended up spending the rest of the day in Jack’s nursery.

Basically, hiding until dinnertime, when I snuck out of the room for my usual backyard pee and to grab some berries and meats from the thankfully empty kitchen.

But there is no hiding from my body, it seems.

It takes several minutes and a long gamma ray shower to calm myself down from the dream of things that never happened.

And when I emerge from the nursery’s facilities, someone’s knocking on the door.

*Crap.*

That’s probably L’Gon and L’Than, wanting to go over the plan for our second day of trials.

With a bracing breath, I open the door. But it’s not the red Xals I’m dreading most.

“G’Lya! What are you doing here?” I ask the pretty orange servant.

“The rest of the household staff was dismissed for the day, so I thought I, too, would not be required to serve. But I came to the house to enquire with you, just in case. L’Than Louxos assured me my care would once again be needed today.”



“What?” It feels like I’m still somewhere in that dream, struggling to catch up. “Why would he ask you to stay to care for Jack?”

“I am not certain.” G’Lya shyly looks away. “L’Than Louxos is much too handsome. I could barely answer when he spoke to me. Much less ask him any questions. But he was adamant about L’Eondris needing to be removed from the household until he alerted me otherwise. I am to take him to the beach again and, if necessary, escort him to his grandfather’s house.”

“What in the moons? Why would L’Than...?”

My question trails off when I see the sight beyond the helpful orange servant’s shoulder.

The door to L’Gon’s office. Open.

“So, I will take L’Eondris, as instructed?”

I don’t realize I’ve pushed past G’Lya until her voice sounds behind me.

“Just down to the beach,” I mumble without looking back as I make my way to the open office door. “I’ll join you down there later.”

L’Gon is sitting behind his large steel desk. But it’s not just him in the office. L’Than, that one green traitor who revived Jack, and several Xals I don’t recognize stand on the other side of the desk. Everyone but L’Than is dressed in a non-embroidered version of the long white tunics L’Gon always wears to work.

L’Gon appears to be giving them instructions.

But he breaks off when he sees me peeping in from the landing.

“I must have a word with the hu’man who will be assisting me during the second-day trials.”

He nods toward L’Than, and they both come to join me outside the door.

*Wait, L’Gon does want me around now? And why did he say trials instead of trial?*

As curious as I am, heat flushes my cheeks as the door closes behind them. I take a step back from the two Xals towering over me. Neither of them has the right to be so attractive, causing beads of sweat to dot my brow.

“About yesterday...” I start to say.

“Yes, do explain why you ran from us yesterday.” L’Than tilts his head, and his entire nose ridge shifts sideways, which I’ve learned from my time with L’Nel is how the Xals express their amusement. “In exact detail.”

“There is no time for teasing this morn,” L’Gon says with a click. I’m still not great at interpreting emotion clicks outside of Jack’s usual happy ones. But this one sounds like impatience. “As I was explaining to the staff I called in to assist us today, unintentional feelings of arousal might occur while observing the trials. It means nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

*Absolutely nothing?*

More proof the dream I woke up from this morning wasn’t at all reflective of reality.

*He is not as immune to you as you believe.*

But I can see from the stern set of L’Gon’s ridges that Dream L’Than’s claim is the opposite of true.

Absolutely nothing. My subconscious is completely wrecked, but yesterday means *absolutely nothing* to L’Gon.

*Fine.*

I swallow down the weird, crushed feeling in my throat and return to the business at hand.

“Why did you call in extra staff?” I ask. “I thought you wanted to keep the trial as secret as possible. And why would we need that many people for three couples?”

L’Gon shifts uncomfortably. “It seems the trial subjects did not take their contracted requirement for silence seriously. We have a few more volunteers for the second-day trials than yesterday.”

“A few more?” I look between him and L’Than. “How many more? And why do you keep saying trials instead of trial?”

L’Than crinkles his way-too-handsome face at me. “Have you not seen the foyer yet?”

The foyer. I find myself returning to the same spot on the landing where I staunchly waited until L’Gon returned from the first trial.

My heart stops at the scene below my feet.

Instead of an empty space, the foyer is now filled with Xals, some of whom are sitting in the waiting area chairs that L’Gon must have had brought back over from the garden outbuilding.

Not three couples willing to take part in the fertility trial, as we expected.

There are now at least thirty.

And they all look up with a questioning collective click when they see me standing at the rail with L’Gon and L’Than.

TEN

## L'RMIE

“It would seem our sons work well together,” my brother observes as we approach East House from the back orchard path.

As a Louxos, I was trained from birth to keep my true thoughts to myself. Otherwise, my mouth might have dropped open as I took in the scene before us.

There are four Council Guards at the house’s sliding back doors. Two stand directly in front of the steel doors, their incapacitation spears blinking an ominous red. Farther ahead, the other two guards talk to the several couples and triads demanding entry.

“Let us in!” a blue male demands. He sports the shorn hair and short brown tunic of a farmer. “We came all the way from the Grain Region to be here today, only to be refused entrance at the front door.”

“He came all that way to take part in my son’s trial!” L’Rzo murmurs beside me with a proud click.

I cannot begrudge him his pride. The Grain Region is about as far from the kingdom city as one can get without entering into the cold lands on the other side of the planet.

However, the guard is not nearly as impressed at the distance the farmer traversed as my brother.

“Apologies,” he answers with a cold click. “Many citizens from many regions have come here. Without appointments. But all the shifts for the trials this day have already been filled.”

“But today is the last trial,” the farmer’s orange mate shouts. “What are we to do? I was so hoping to find my ecstatic female joy this day.”

“Me, too! And me!” several of the other females join her protest with disappointed clicks.

“And more importantly, possibly seed a xalling,” the blue Grain Region farmer reminds his orange mate with a censorious hiss.

“Yes, yes, that, too,” the farmer’s orange mate adds hastily.

There comes a moment of short contrite silence from her and the other disappointed female mates.

Then another female asks, “Is there opportunity to enter our names upon some manner of waiting list?”

The face of the farmer’s mate lights with enthusiasm for that idea. “Yes, we are quite willing to make another trip from the Grain Region!”

Before the guard can answer, my brother breaks through the crowd.

“Apologies, apologies,” he says to the desperate citizens. “But we must get through to see my son, Mal L’Gon Louxos.”

I can tell, it is taking much effort for him not to punctuate his announcement with another prideful click.

“L’Rzo and L’Rmie Louxos!” a bare-chested male in fine robes calls out when he sees us. “Perhaps you could talk with Mal L’Gon about extending his trials for his fellow Elites.”

“What? That would not be fair!” the farmer and his wife click in unison.

“I will talk to L’Gon about extending the trials,” L’Rzo answers as the guards stand aside to let us walk through the back entrance’s sliding doors. “But, of course, we must give equal opportunity to all of our citizens.”

I say nothing. Unlike my retired brother, I still hold a Council Seat, and I refuse to make the Grain Region agricultural workers any promises. Of course, we will use our influence

with L'Gon. But not for a couple of farmers without the power to return the favor.

It is much quieter inside the back hallway, which leads directly to the East House Entertaining Room, but no less busy.

Waiting couples and triads fill the space, clicking excitedly about "the last session." Meanwhile, males dressed in long white ministry tunics move through the crowd, swiping holoscreens into the air for the trial participants to sign.

"This says we are to undergo the special breeding process in a group setting," a purple female wearing a kingdom palace servant dress says to one of the Health Ministry workers. "Does that mean we will be required to make sex acts in front of all of these other citizens?"

"Are you uncomfortable with the group environment?" the Health Ministry worker asks. "If so, do not fear withdrawing your names from the roster. We have a long waiting list of participants hoping to gain a spot in the last session."

His words could be taken as reassuring, but I sense an underlying threat in them.

Apparently, the palace servant does as well. "No, no, do not remove us from the list. We are ever so joyful at the prospect of having a xalling."

"I do not understand," I say in a low voice to L'Rzo. "L'Gon told us this was a doomed experiment. A blown-up bid for attention from L'Than."

"Well, your son has certainly achieved his goal if this is the result," L'Rzo says. "Perhaps you should cease your habit of underestimating him."

*Essh.* He is always chastising me about L'Than. I am a Louxos. But even I struggle to keep my resentment off my nose.

"I suffer from hunger," a bare-chested male with warrior modifications complains to another Ministry worker. "If I had known we would be made to wait so long, I would have had our staff pack us a midday meal."

“Oh, look, there is the birth vessel of Mal L’Gon,” his green mate says. “Perhaps she can bring us some food and drink.”

The Elite female clicks her talons together in a noisy servant hail. “Girl! Hu’man girl! Over here! We require food and water!”

I turn my head in the direction of the green female’s clicking talons to see that infernal hu’man L’Than became so obsessed with when he first returned to the planet.

The hu’man looks directly at the green female. Then rolls her eyes before yanking open the side entrance door, which is meant to provide one-way outside access from the house in case of emergency.

“Why, the insolence!” The green Elite huffs through her nose ridge after the birth vessel departs the house without acknowledgment of her hail. “That hu’man looked straight at me without response. How dare she?”

“The birth vessel is only here to provide service to Mal L’Gon,” the Health Ministry worker explains with an apologetic click. “In any case, you would be unable to understand without a translator. Unlike our Qel, she has not received a Xalthurian download.”

“Download or no, I would never let any member of my household staff treat a guest in this manner.” The green female glances around the crowded hallway with a distasteful click. “Perhaps we should forget this tedious trial and go home to our properly trained household staff for the midday meal.”

The Health Ministry worker swipes a screen into the air without a moment of hesitation. “If that is your wish, could you sign here? That way we can officially cede your mat to the next couple on the list.”

Both members of the Elite couple let out offended clicks, but L’Rzo steps in between them and the holoscreen before they can either sign or protest.

“I’Dra and K’Yar Delus, how lovely to see you both here. I’Dra, I was just speaking to your father about how fortunate he was you did not choose to run off to New Terrhan with my



own daughter. And now I see you will do him the further honor of volunteering for my son's fertility trial."

Of course, my brother somehow knows the names of these minor Elites. And, of course, they preen under his attention instead of signing away their spot.

But unlike my brother, I do not care about putting inconsequential Elites at ease.

My eyes go to the side access door through which the birth vessel departed.

Without consulting my brother, I walk away from the inane conversation and follow her into the side yard.

Just in time to catch a glimpse of her bright-orange shift right before she disappears behind the outbuilding.

I follow her path, only to stop short when I come around the corner to find her in a squatted position.

*Is she...?*

I quickly step back onto the vineyard path. But I do not go back to the house.

Thus, this is where the birth vessel finds me waiting when she returns to the path.

She lets out a clearly irritated mouth huff. "Sorry, contrary to what it looks like, I'm not one of the house servants—wait!"

She breaks off, suddenly squinting at me. "You're the guy who picked L'Than up when our ship landed. You and your wife."

Not my wife. My brother. Hu'mans apparently have trouble telling the difference between females and males without warrior enhancements, especially when they wear their hair long, as L'Rzo does.

I do not correct her, though. Only stare. This is the first hu'man outside of the Qel I have talked to since my Breeding Ceremony trip.

Flashes of the hu'man birth vessel I chose on New Terrhan fill my mind. Her soft, golden-brown skin. The way her long,

silky black hair whispered over my arms when I turned her around to take my seed.

*No! No!*

I ruthlessly suppress those thoughts, and though my possession of a translator is a secret I have no wish to advertise, I say to the birth vessel of L'Gon, "We must talk."

ELEVEN

## L'GON

“To think, a few day cycles ago, we could barely find three couples to partake in Elle’s fertility trial,” L’Than says as we watch the industrial gamma rays clean the mats left behind by the last session’s participants.

All ninety of them.

Needless to say, my attempt at discretion has been a complete failure. Not only did the first trial subjects share their experience with their friends, but news of the “female quickening” has also spread faster than the Extinction Virus.

Males have shown up at East House from far and wide, proclaiming their desire to mouth speak with their females until they “leak happy invitation.” And the females want to find out if they, too, can “quicken,” like their friends.

It is almost as if having a xalling has become a secondary aim. This might explain why, despite my many disclaimers, we have more volunteers than we can accept into the trials. We had to not only lay down many more mats but also split the last day of the trial into three shifts to even partially begin to accommodate the many Xalthurians who arrived at East House.

“There is still no guarantee these trials will work,” I remind L’Than as we watch the gamma lights scan the entire room a second time. “Proving that Xalthurian females are capable of sexual joy does not prove the rest of Ell—”

I stop myself and glance at the other Ministry workers standing close by before substituting “the hypothesis.”

“If the hypothesis does yield the desired outcome, perhaps you will come to work for us at the Ministry of Health.” A’Rhon, the loyal green staff member I promoted into the Special Medical Team lead position formerly held by W’Rn—who turned out to be one of The Benefactor’s operatives—leans forward to speak with L’Than. “While watching your instructions has been edifying, I am not sure any of us could replicate your inspiring words.”

“Sorry, A’Rhon, but as they say in New Terrhan slang, *no can do*,” L’Than answers. “If this works, I have much bigger plans that will keep me busy for the rest of my life.”

“And, if it does not work?” I find myself asking before I can think better of it.

L’Than turns his head and tilts it at me in that hu’man way of his. “I am not sure of your meaning?”

Of course he is not. I think of the cocky male I confronted in the gardens. “What will you do if the hypothesis does not end in any viable pregnancies? I am wondering if your so-called plans have a consideration for that statistically probable possibility.”

“You are wondering.” L’Than looks back to the mats, giving me a perfect profile view of the amused ripple traveling up his nose. “Day cycles of working side by side, and suddenly you are concerned about my plans?”

“There you two are!” a voice calls out before I can answer. “With this crowd, I was afraid we would not receive the chance to speak with you before the moons rise.”

L’Than and I both look up to see my father walking past the Council Guards through the sliding doors.

I set my ridges back to neutral to greet my father with a reverent touch to my nose ridge.

“Father, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, L’Rmie and I heard so many rumors about your popular fertility trials, he insisted we come and see for ourselves,” my father answers, looking around the repurposed Entertaining Room with mild curiosity. “But it seems the many rumors

were actually understated. This effort of yours appears to be a resounding success.”

“There is no true success until we achieve a viable birth,” I remind my father and seemingly everyone else in the room.

Meanwhile, L’Than stiffens beside me. “My father is here, too?”

“Well, he was here with me.” My own father looks over both his shoulders. “I am not sure to where he disappeared. Perhaps he had need of the facilities after our walk from West House.”

As if to affirm his guess about my uncle’s whereabouts, the doors once again slide open.

But instead of Uncle L’Rmie, Elle enters with several floating trays of water.

“Moons, it’s a total zoo out there,” she says, widening her round eyes in the dramatic way that has become so familiar over the past few days. “I figured you all would need water after that intense last session, but you have no idea how many toilet boxes I had to dodge to get it here!”

My hearts fill with a strange warmth as she escorts the float trays into the room with a device she must have found in the kitchen’s supply closet.

Speaking of people who could be an asset if we hired them at the Ministry of Health. Elle has been a fount of many not terrible ideas over the last day cycles—including sending every female from the final few sessions home with a medical toilet we can monitor from the Ministry of Health.

Although there is no guarantee her hypothesis will result in a successful outcome, one thing L’Than said at the last Council Meeting rings in my ears as I watch Elle dispense goblets of water to my grateful staff. Indeed, this is the closest I have ever come to testing a hypothesis for the Xalthurian fertility crisis that was not a complete failure from the start. Also, her discovery of Xalthurian female sexual joy has been more than well-received by our trial participants.

Both Elle’s and my cousin’s assistance with the trials has been invaluable. The thought of her leaving makes my chest tighten.

And I cannot help but wonder what the three of us could achieve if she did not head back to New Terrhan.

“You make a good team. You should keep working together.”

My father’s words draw my gaze away from Elle. “Excuse me?”

“You and L’Than should continue working together after this,” my father says. “You remind me much of L’Rmie and I after we inherited our seats on the Council Board.”

“I believe you mean we will remind you of yourself and my sire,” L’Than corrects, “after I gain my own seat on the Council Board.”

“Ah, yes, Nephew!” My father lets out a cheerful click as he switches his gaze from me to L’Than. “L’Rmie might continue to underestimate you. But if anyone can become the first hybrid Council Member, it is you, L’Than.”

I have the urge to roll my own eyes in the way my cousin and Elle often do.

No, my father has no idea about the deal I have made with L’Than in exchange for his assistance. But in his retirement, it appears my father has become diplomatic to the point of indulgence.

However, L’Than touches his ridges with grateful reverence. “Thank you, Uncle. I appreciate your support.”

The Entertaining Room’s doors slide open again, this time revealing my uncle.

“L’Rmie, there you are!” my father calls out to him. “Come congratulate your progeny on their successful efforts.”

“Their efforts will not be proven successful until they announce a viable pregnancy,” L’Rmie calls back as he crosses the room to join us.

My words, almost exactly.

However, I do not like his version of my usual disclaimer. Nor do I like the disgusted ripple he lets roll up his nose ridges as

he passes by where Elle is handing out goblets of water to the staff.

She gives him a wary glance before pasting on a smile for the next worker in the line that has formed in front of her.

“I can see you lack household staff this day,” he says after closing the distance between us. “But is it a good idea to let a hu’man anywhere near your trials? It discredits you as a male of science.”

If only he knew.

L’Than ripples his nose ridge defensively, but I find myself replying to his father before he can. “You will not speak of Elle in this manner. She has been a valuable resource to us during this endeavor.”

Uncle L’Rmie lowers his brow at my words. “I do not like this defense of the hu’man birth vessel. This trial is meant to clear the way for a full-Xalthurian mate, who will then bear a true heir to the Line of Louxos. Or have your intentions changed?”

Both he and my father regard me with curiosity in their eyes.

“Of course, my intentions have not changed,” I begin to say.

Only to be cut off by a collective hiss of surprise.

I look up from my uncle and father to see the hu’man birth vessel I am about to deny collapse upon a mat.

“Elle!” L’Than clicks her name beside me, and we both run over to where she lies passed out on the mat.

With my hearts beating in my ears, I begin to check her waist to take her pulse—only to remember hu’mans’ hearts are so high up in their bodies that their pulse must be taken in their necks.

I check there and find it. But it is weak.

L’Than’s nose ridge flaps, making his distress obvious to everyone in the room. “Her breathing is shallow.”

“We must transfer her to the Ministry of Health,” one of my staff members calls out behind me. “Step aside, Mal L’Gon. I will take her!”



I almost move out of the way to let the usual medical protocol play out. But then, I remember several solars ago when I received a late eve notification that our Kel had brought a hu'man back with him from his Breeding Ceremony trip. My staff and I had to severely modify one of our medical diagnostic and repair machines in order to fix the many things wrong with the Kel's intended birth vessel—including her myopia.

That retrofitted pod was never returned to the Ministry of Health. And I had never considered its current location. Until now.

“No, that is the wrong response,” I tell the staff member, trying to get past me to Elle. “We do not have the correct equipment to help her or any other hu'man in medical crisis at the Ministry of Health.”

“Then where?” L'Than demands. He grips a fistful of my robe with an exasperated hiss. “We have to help her!”

I raise my head to look him in the eyes, knowing he will not like my answer. “We must take her to the one place in Xalthuria where you are not allowed.”

# PART 3

# OUTCOMES

## THE ZOOKEEPER

*Zookeeper—*

*I hope this third message finds you well.*

Translation: Graah you for not answering my other two messages.

*Considering the premium on the end-of-solar hunt, I thought you might have provided video and images of your latest acquisition prior to the event, as you have in the past.*

Translation: Graah you for charging me three times the price and not providing me with material to envision while I spit my cock seed into dead-eyed pleasure station whores!

*I highly advise sending the other eager hunters and me images of the brown hu'man you have acquired to reassure us you will deliver upon your promise.*

Translation: Send us some nudie holos, you log of feces. Or else!

*Graaah!*

I swipe a new encrypted holoscreen into the air and call The Benefactor.

It takes several waiting beeps before he appears on the screen with a sneer on his red face. “What?”

He knows what. But sure, I’ll play along.

“Checking to make sure the delivery is still on for the morrow. Our hunters are eager.” This time I provide my translation out loud. “And by eager, I mean gonna start asking for their money back if we don’t send them some nudie holos in advance.”

Several moments of silence. Then: “There has been yet another delay to my acquisition.”

“Another delay?” I rub my hands over both my cut horns. *This is a catastrophe!* “I thought you had a plan all set to grab her.”

“I did. Everything was in place. However, I did not factor in one component, and that failure in strategy cost me. The acquisition was diverted to another facility.”

“Then break her out of this other place!” I demand. “I thought you had operatives everywhere.”

The Benefactor grinds his nose ridges. “Yes, I have operatives everywhere—everywhere but here.”

Which makes me wonder aloud, “Where’s here?”

TWELVE

## ELLE

The sickness comes on without warning. Swirling my thoughts and melting my bones so fast, I collapse to the ground. And then...

Then, I wake up with a gasp.

Inside a glass box.

*What in the moons?*

All the New Terrhan funerals in which clear-topped transfer pods were repurposed as coffins flash through my mind. *Did I die?* Is this the transfer pod coffin my parents requested to bury me beneath the red dirt of my home planet?

*But I'm not dead!*

Panic fists my heart as I bang against the clear top of my coffin. But it refuses to give.

“Let me out!” I scream.

“She’s awake!” a muffled voice says in New Terrhan from outside. Then, in Xalthurian: “Holo Dr. J’Hsen!”

My sister’s face appears above the glass, and her shoulders sag with relief when she finds me staring back at her.

The coffin’s top lifts with a whoosh of compressed air, and then suddenly, I’m free—at least until my heavily pregnant sister pulls me into a fierce hug. “Oh, thank the moons, you woke up!”

I look all around as best I can from inside her tight hug.

So, I'm not in the colony ship's morgue room back on New Terrhan. I've woken up in what appears to be some kind of medical facility, with several white exam tables and two other glass cases that put me in mind of Jack's care pod, except they're long enough to house a full-grown Xalthurian.

"What happened?" I ask Kira.

"Actually, we're still not sure," another voice answers in New Terrhan before Kira can.

A blue hybrid with pale pink swirls comes to stand beside Kira at my medical pod. "The diagnostic machine wasn't able to come up with anything—at least nothing that would render you unconscious for so long. There was an unidentified agent in your bloodstream, but the chemical components are not anything we have on file."

"Okay, okay," I say, trying to process all this new information. It then occurs to me to squint at the hybrid and ask, "And who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. I am still working on what our Qel calls *bedside manner*. I am J'Hsen Droulox, the lead doctor here at the Palace Medical Clinic, but there is no need to call me Mal J'Hsen. I prefer the human title term Doctor J'Hsen." He finishes his explanation with a brief touch to his nose ridge. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Um, you, too," I say as politely as I can, considering my mind is racing to catch up. "But other than the passing out—possibly due to being drugged—I'm fine?"

"Perfectly healthy. You are in good condition, and there is no need to worry about—"

He breaks off and glances at my sister. "I apologize, our Qel."

He raises his hands to say something to Kira in a language I recognize as the one she used to speak with the colony ship head mechanic, who had been rendered hard of hearing during the crash.

"Why are you speaking to my sister in NTSL?" I demand.



“Oh, I...” J’Hsen flaps his nose ridges in the same way L’Nel did whenever she was embarrassed. Then he asks my sister, “Is NTSL the abbreviation for your secret language?”

“Sorry.” My sister throws me a sheepish cringe. “We all fell into the habit of speaking in sign language with each other after L’Than formed our hybrid-human alliance. It was an easy language for the hybrids to pick up for some reason, and we can speak it without fear of being overheard or diverted.”

“Overheard or diverted by whom?”

“The Benefactor.” Kira quickly glances over her shoulders. “We still haven’t figured out who he is, but we have reason to believe his operatives are everywhere. We’ve even caught a few trying to poach women off New Terrhan after the Breeding Ceremony. But they always disintegrate themselves before we can capture them to find out who their boss is. I swear, it’s just like that arc in season three of *Space Sheriffs*, when the Big Bad turned out to be the President of the Galactic Force.”

“Though, to be clear, our Kel is not The Benefactor. Also, we were not speaking of The Benefactor,” Dr. J’Hsen rushes to explain. “I was simply telling our Qel that she should depart so I might finish our diagnostics discussion without further violation of the palace clinic’s special privacy laws.”

“And I was telling him there is no need for me to go because I’m your sister and his Qel.”

Wow, apparently, imperiousness is catching on this planet.

“Back to me possibly being drugged,” I say, needing to get to the bottom of how I’d become incapacitated. “You’re sure it’s not something I ate? Like, an herb or fruit that has a weird effect on humans—one we don’t know about yet.”

“It is highly doubtful,” Dr. J’Hsen says, matching my professional tone. “However, our Qel requested special transport from Xar T’Kan so we might send your blood sample to New Terrhan. It is possible they can identify the substance in their database computer if they do a search for

something that is capable of rendering a hu'man unconscious for three day cycles.”

“Three day cycles!” I repeat. “That’s how long I’ve been out?! Oh moons. How about Jack?”

“Jack is fine,” my sister answers. “Your red savior assured me some orange servant named G’Lya would oversee his care until we figured out what was going on with you.”

She shakes her head at me. “By the way, what in the moons is going on there? He was crazy distraught when he brought you in—I mean, ready to camp out beside your medical pod. It took Dr. J’Hsen and me basically threatening him to get him to go home. And before he did, he kept making me promise to tell him as soon as you woke up. Care to explain all that? Because I thought he hated you.”

“I thought he hated me now, too,” I answer. “But L’Than is a good guy at his core. He wouldn’t just leave me here without wanting to know I’d be all right.”

Kira squints. “No, I’m not talking about L’Than. L’Than would never bring you here. He’s lucky my husband lets him attend Council Meetings. D’Rek would probably have him beheaded if he tried to set foot in the palace proper.”

“What?” I ask. “Why would D’Rek hate L’Than? I thought your husband was pro-hybrid, considering he’s the father of two of them, with another on the way.”

“Um...” Kira freezes. “Well, that’s old stuff. Not really my story to tell.”

Now it’s my turn to squint. Okay, I know she’s changed because the Kira I knew was never afraid to relay what our mother referred to as “other folks’ business”—with impressions of everyone involved.

Why is this beef between L’Than and her husband any different?”

I open my mouth to ask her just that. But then, another question occurs to me. “Wait, if L’Than didn’t bring me in, who did?”

THIRTEEN

## L'GON

“Wake up! Wake up now!” a small voice instructs, jolting me from my sleep.

Despite the many solars that have passed since my time in the Generations War, I spring up in bed, every modified muscle braced for either battle or medical assistance.

However, I unbrace when I spy the small being who instructed me to wake up. “L'Eondris? What are you doing in here?”

Instead of answering my reasonable question, his face crumples, and water begins to spurt from his eyes. “I miss Mother! I miss her so much!”

I am immediately transported back to his first day at the house, when neither L'Nel nor I could figure out how to soothe him.

He is much larger now, and his vocabulary has advanced, so at the very least, I know why he is upset. Yet I still feel just as helpless as I did that first day as I observe his torrent of hu'man emotion.

“G'Lya will return in the morn,” I tell him. “Perhaps you can tell her then of your sorrow.”

“G'Lya not Mother!” he screech-clicks before plopping onto the bed to repeat over and over again with a loud hu'man wail, “G'Lya not Mother!!!”

This screech-click/wail is not a combination my nervous system likes. Strange, opposing urges to both cover my ears and do whatever is required to make it stop overtake me.

Perhaps this nervous system confusion combined with the late time of eve is why I confess, “I do not know how to soothe you or why you have chosen to come in here.”

He abruptly breaks off his screech-wail to frown at me in a way that reminds me of—me, actually. When I suspect I am conversing with an idiot.

“You my father. You hug me! Like Mother.”

“Like Mother?” I repeat. Clearly, he has been coddled more than is normal for a typical xalling. “I am not a hu’man female.”

L’Eondris might be half hu’man, but he huffs through his nose exactly as I do when I am frustrated.

“You my father,” he repeats—this time while lying down in front of me. He positions himself against my torso and presses his little swirled face into my scaled chest. “You hug me! Like Mother. Now!”

Like Mother....

Remembering that first day in the nursery, I wrap my arms around the much smaller body of my hybrid son.

And as soon as I do, a surprising warmth washes over me, like the ocean at its lowest tide.

Both L’Eondris and I sigh into the hug, and soon, all of his tears have dried.

But he does not fall asleep.

“You miss Mother, too?” he asks.

*No*, I wish to answer. Because I should not miss that infuriating hu’man.

However, I do not impart my conflicted feelings to L’Eondris.

“Your aunt assured me she would call if—” I stop. I am not L’Than. I do not deal in faith. Only cold, hard facts. But some desperate feeling makes me swap out the word “if” when talking to L’Eondris. My hybrid child.

“When your mother wakes up, your aunt promised to let me know.”

“Aunt L’Nel go bye-bye to New Terrhan. I miss her! Like I miss Mother! But longer!”

“I miss L’Nel, too,” I find myself confessing, realizing I feel the same way for the first time since her departure.

This is the longest I have been away from my sister since I took up residence in East House. Fond, bittersweet memories invade my mind as I remember her many arrivals in the East House foyer to accompany me to whatever party we were required to attend that eve as Louxos Elites.

Unlike my father and uncle, she never questioned why I refused to pursue marriage with a Xalthurian female before I found a cure for the planet-wide fertility issue.

“I am happy to have you as company at all of these parties, and I admire you for your dedication, Brother,” she once told me as we left a party full of pompous Elites who were more concerned with complaining about no longer having special access to Breeding Ceremony spots than meeting the eligible Xalthurian females right in front of them. “Unlike the males at the party, you actually care about something other than your own limited self-interest.”

Yes, I miss L’Nel, too. But I have to correct L’Eondris.

“I speak not of L’Nel, but your other aunt.” I release a click in the back of my throat, and for the first time, I call the Kel’s mate by her title. “Qel Ki’Ra has access to hu’man medicine that I do not, and she has hired special doctors to tend to the hu’mans in the palace clinic’s care. If anyone will be able to help your mother, it is she.”

“But what if she no help? Mother been bye-bye for many meals. Too long! What if Mother go bye-bye forever and I no see her no more?”

Yes, she has been gone for too long. Three day cycles without any sign of waking up from whatever caused her collapse.

Full-blood Xalthurians are not emotionally fragile. We do not release tears from our eyes after developing the language to

form words.

But my hybrid son's question fills me with a strange melancholy that makes me see the design wisdom of this biological system for emotional release.

"We must have hope. It starts with that," I say, paraphrasing what L'Than told me those first days of the trials. "And we must continue to hope for the best."

My words offer no real solution.

But for some reason, they appear to soothe L'Eondris. His latest wave of human tears ceases with a shuddering sigh. And soon he falls asleep inside my arms as a full Xalthurian baby never would.

I should return him to his pod. That is where xallings are meant to sleep.

That is the last thing I remember thinking before I wake to a knock at my door and my arms still filled with my warm hybrid son.

"Mal L'Gon, it is G'Lya," a voice calls out on the other side of my door. "L'Eondris is not in his pod. Is he in there with you?"

I look down at L'Eondris, who appears so peaceful in his sleep. No, I will not wake him. Yet.

I begin to answer that G'Lya should wait downstairs and I will bring him to her when he awakes. But then I see the emergency holo floating above my bed.

*Elle.*

*She is awake!*

After handing L'Eondris to G'Lya, I rush over to the palace straightaway.

Only to find Qel Ki'Ra speaking outside the medical bay doors with L'Than's good friend, the blue-and-pink-swirled hybrid she refers to as Dr. J'Hsen, and a male whose messages I have been avoiding for nearly two lunar cycles.

"...in a deep sleep right now," J'Hsen appears to be explaining to Xar T'Kan. "A perfectly safe one, though."

“You should have gotten here sooner if you wanted to talk to her,” the Qel interrupts, speaking in New Terrhan.

“Zinnia and I slept in,” the T’Kan explains, also in New Terrhan. “I did not see your message until early this morn.”

“Well, during your sleep-in”—for some reason, the Qel collapses the index and middle fingers of both hands after the word “sleep-in” before continuing with, “Elle asked Dr. J’Hsen to put her under again.”

“Why would she ask you to do that?” T’Kan turns to the pink-and-blue hybrid with an irritated click.

“Actually, I cannot say. The clinic has special privacy rules, you see—”

Ki’Ra cuts her medic off with an eye roll. “Anyway, I was going to try to sneak you in there, but you might be too late. The Big Red Obstacle will be here any...”

She trails off, and she, J’Hsen, and the golden male all turn to face me when they finally see me approaching from the other end of the hallway.

Ki’Ra mutters a word that my translator repeats as “Feces!”

“My Qel, with respect, that is not an appropriate way to greet a member of Council,” J’Hsen says in the soft hu’man tone Elle often used to give me further guidance on the trials without being overheard by my staff.

I ignore them both to demand, “Xar T’Kan! What are you doing here?”



FOURTEEN

## ELLE

I awake to the sound of voices outside the room Dr. J'Hsen assigned me to after I made my special request. They're arguing quietly in Xalthurian with muted, angry emotion clicks.

"You will stand aside so I may speak with her!"

"Not until you tell me what this matter is about!"

"You two have got to quiet down. Dr. J'Hsen said you could stand out here to *wait* for her to wake up—not just wake her up."

The last voice is also speaking Xalthurian. But with angry human tones that let me know it belongs to my formerly younger sister.

*What in the moons?*

With a groggy blink, I sit up in the clinic bed usually reserved for laboring mothers and croak out, "Kira? Is that you?"

"See! I told you!" Kira hisses at whomever she's talking to outside the door. Then she enters the room with a cheery: "Hey, sis! You're awake!"

Kira comes through the room's sliding door with a huge smile on her face, and that makes me feel even more uneasy.

When I was living at the palace, I dubbed this Kira's "queen smile." The almost manic expression she wore when she was anything but happy.

Also, there's the fact that L'Gon and Xar T'Kan himself have burst into the room right behind her.

"Elle Garrett, we must talk upon an important matter of life and state!" T'Kan declares in booming New Terrhan. "Quick, before this fool forces me to return to New Terrhan empty-handed in order to further his own political agenda."

"You will tell me what this is about, Xar T'Kan!" L'Gon demands with an extended series of irritated clicks. "As my uncle told you, you cannot simply flout Xalthuria's employment contract with laws meant for wartime."

"No, only *you* are allowed to do that when you want to ban Xalthurian females from moving to New Terrhan!" Kira makes a string of irritated emotion clicks even longer than his. "Just let him have a few moments alone with my sister, for moons' sake. He is the *freaking* Kel Regent. If he says it is important, then best believe it is important."

"What's important?" I wade through confusion and residual sleep, struggling to catch up. "What are you all even talking about?"

L'Gon answers me while glaring at T'Kan. "That is exactly what I wish to know before I grant any interview requests for you."

"Who are you to say who my sister can and cannot talk to?" Kira demands. Apparently, the hotheaded sister I once knew hasn't completely disappeared behind her queenly façade.

"You seem to have forgotten, so I will remind you." L'Gon sets his nose ridges to neutral. "Your sister is only allowed to live here under a caretaker contract allowance. And her employment contract clearly states she cannot be contacted by anyone without my permission."

"See, this is why Xalthuria can't have nice things! Those caretaker contracts are the worst!" Kira shakes her head exactly like the animated SMDH emoji we often used to punctuate opinion essays in colony school. "Elle's basically hightailing it back to New Terrhan because you're treating her and Jack like you own them."

Yep, looks like Kira and L’Gon have only grown closer in the short time since I woke up in the medical pod.

“You may insult me as much as you please.” L’Gon folds his arms over his massive chest. “But I will not allow this interview request until T’Kan tells me what this matter of life and state is about.”

“Corn!” T’Kan yells out in New Terrhan. “OK? I must converse with our Qel’s sister about corn!”

I clap my hands over my mouth.

And Kira turns to me with a gasp. “Oh, my moons! This is about corn, sis!”

However, my employer’s nose ridge goes from coldly resolute to rippling with confusion. “Corn? That botanical fruit crop I saw when I visited New Terrhan? What does that have to do with Elle?”

“Everything!” Kira practically shouts. “Corn has everything to do with my sister, and it’s time people knew.

“Kira...” I warn.

“Yeah, yeah, I know you promised Leader Hank, but I didn’t.”

With a defiant flash in her eyes, she turns to the large golden Xal and says, “Tell us *all about* this *corn* issue of yours, T’Kan.”

She’s speaking in New Terrhan now. Either to access the tonal variety that comes with our mother tongue or to annoy a confused L’Gon that much more.

Who am I kidding? It’s definitely the second one.

T’Kan flexes his ridges uncomfortably. “Well, as you may or may not know, we experienced a terrible flash flood a few lunar cycles ago.”

Kira nods along. “Un-huh, un-huh. Right after The Big Red Obstacle ruined poor Nova’s wedding by straight-up snatching Elle before the reception could even begin. I remember when.”

“Yes, a few day cycles after that.” T’Kan glances at L’Gon, then back to me. “Unfortunately, our entire corn field was lost,

along with the small silo where we stored the seed. Of course, I wanted to replenish our corn supply as soon as we could. But when I met with High Leader Wang-Lei, the son of the hu'man male credited with bio-engineering corn, he said his father died before passing his corn design code down to him. And though he gave me access to his father's experiment notes, I was alarmed to find out they were merely recipes for corn that Former Leader Henry Huang had copied off the colony database."

"Gaaahh!!!" Kira claps her hands together, cackling with delight. "Oh, I bet you *shit your pants* when you found out High Leader Hank didn't have anything to do with growing that corn."

"I still do not understand." L'Gon shakes his head with an angry swipe. "What does any of this have to do with Elle?"

"Yeah, tell us, T'Kan." Kira bats her eyes. "Tell all of us what this has to do with my brilliant sister."

"Actually, I am not quite sure. During the year before her supposed death, there were several notes to ask "EG" about various aspects of growing corn. After a colony-wide database search, we finally determined that EG must be Elle Garrett."

T'Kan turns back to me. "We also tracked down a set of storage files entitled 'Experiment Notes' on the colony ship, but unfortunately, they were encrypted. And, unlike Xalthuria, I was informed by our hu'man techs that New Terrhan has extremely strict privacy laws. This would not have been an issue if you were expired, like High Leader Huang, but you are not expired—at least not anymore."

Kira turns back to me with a proud cackle. "And now he's made a special trip all the way to Xalthuria because, fuck a promise, Kel Regent T'Kan wants his corn."

T'Kan lowers his nose ridge and sheepishly hangs his head. "Our Qel exaggerated about me releasing my fecal waste into my pants—but yes, I was deeply disturbed to discover that no one else in the colony actually knows how to bioengineer this crop. Of course, I commissioned a team to attempt replication on the handful of corn seed that survived the flood. But so far,

we have not been able to replicate a viable replacement, and the colony will not react well to the news if we are unable to come up with a replacement crop. Not well at all.”

A ripple of actual fear makes its way up the war-hardened commander’s nose, and his gaze goes a bit glassy before he turns back to me. “This is why I have been desperately trying to contact you ever since discovering it was perhaps you who —”

Kira cuts him off right there. “Not *perhaps*. My sister most definitely bioengineered corn! I’m testifying right now on that.”

“Yes, my Qel.” T’Kan quickly corrects himself. “I have come here to beg the hu’man who *most definitely* bioengineered the corn seed that has become a crop staple on New Terrhan to let us into her experiment notes.”

“Wow!” As weirded out as I am to wake up to this big scene in my hospital room, I also can’t help but preen. “I never break my promises. Ever. But letting you into my experiment notes doesn’t violate the agreement I made with Leader Hank, so, of course—”

“Of course, she will consider your request.” L’Gon holds up a hand to cut me off. “After she talks to my cousin, L’Than Louxos. Her lawyer, who will help her negotiate terms for the release of this information. Terms that will certainly include a special job title and housing worthy of her status as the true inventor of corn. There will be no more Field Work for Elle when she returns to New Terrhan.”

I blink at L’Gon. *Is he...? Is he seriously negotiating on my behalf?*

“No! No! You will not hold up this matter with one of your Louxos merchant deal negotiations!” T’Kan turns on L’Gon like the male who used to fight under him is now his enemy in war. “You do not understand how vital it is for this corn matter to be resolved expeditiously. You have never tasted cornbread or birthday cake! There is a substance called corn syrup that relies on the starch made from this botanical fruit as its base.

That means, without a new crop, our colony will lose *candy* for all of the next solar. *CANDY!*”

L’Gon looks to the side and takes a careful step back before asking, “Now, what is this *candy* you speak of? Is it a delicacy? Something L’Than should also consider for the upcoming contract negotiation?”

T’Kan bares his teeth and emits one of those primal rattles from inside his torso. But unlike the holos I’ve been reviewing all week, his rattle is way more violent than indicative of pleasure.

“Wait! Wait! Tell him about the terraformers!” I say before T’Kan can lunge at L’Gon.



I’M STILL LAUGHING on the flyer ride back to East House.

“I’m pretty sure that terraformer sweetener saved your life,” I tell L’Gon as he lifts his sleek flyer off the palace pad. “It sounds like T’Kan has developed one hell of a sweet tooth since becoming Kel Regent of New Terrhan.”

“Is *sweet tooth* your idiomatic way of saying he has become unnecessarily addicted to the sweetened bread and gum products of New Terrhan when Xalthurian fruit was fine for him before?”

Despite how Kira described my employment agreement, I find myself laughing—like, actually laughing—as The Big Red Obstacle flies me back to my work prison.

“Yes, yes, Xalthurian fruit is beyond delicious. But I’ve gotta admit, I could murder a birthday cake right now. My mom made me one about a month before...” I stop and scrape my mind for a way to describe the insane amount of drama that followed my small twenty-second birthday dinner celebration. I can only come up with a vague “...all of this.”

“So then, this solar’s birthday has already passed for you.” L’Gon smoothly veers right into a new lane of northbound flyer traffic directly over the ocean.

“Technically, yes.” I’m immediately fascinated by all the vehicles in the southbound lane, shiny and sleek underneath the purple sky. It’s like something out of *Space Sheriffs*. Minus all the car chases. “But I spent it in stasis. Not sure it counts as a birthday when your cells are frozen at a molecular level.”

L’Gon lets out an untranslatable sound—something between a click and a hum.

It makes me turn back from the real-life sci-fi scene outside the flyer’s window to ask, “What?”

“In the interest of becoming better at science, I am no longer in the habit of dismissing anything a patient says.”

I jerk my head back. “I’m not your patient.”

“You became my patient the moment you collapsed in front of me.” L’Gon lets out yet another irritated click. “I was the one who made the decision to take you to the palace clinic instead of the Ministry of Health.”

“Thank you for that. Wow, those words feel weird coming out my mouth.” I shake my head. “Can’t believe I’m having to thank you two times in one week.”

He glances over to me. “There is no need to thank me. This incident has alerted me to how woefully underprepared the Ministry is for any type of hu’man health emergency.”

“So, then you’re thanking *me*.” I grin sideways at him.

Another irritated click. “I am informing you we will be retrofitting at least one of our units to receive hu’man patients at the Ministry of Health. Our office will never be dependent on the palace to help any patient again.”

“But I thought you were anti any human coming here at all.”

“I can believe it is against our long-term interests to fashion our immigration policies around the hu’man birthing vessels. And I can also believe the hu’mans who reside here deserve proper care in times of medical need. Both are true.”

I find myself... unable to argue. I’ll admit, after all the custody stuff with Jack, I didn’t think L’Gon was capable of that kind of nuance.



He takes my silence as an invitation to continue with his original point. “You are my patient. And as a better scientist than I used to be, it occurs to me that the symptoms you displayed—rapidly progressing sedation, slowing of all organ function nearly to the stopping point, an unconscious state we could not rouse you from—does that not sound like stasis to you?”

“Well, it doesn’t *not* sound like stasis,” I agree with a frown. “And that would explain why the medical diagnosis machine couldn’t identify the substance in my bloodstream. From what I understand, N’Ure used stasis solution from the colony ship to transport and keep all of his human subjects for his sick experiments. That means he probably had access to the medicine the old planet scientists used to put us under without aging for the years-long trip. And Kira’s people never found the guy N’Ure called The Benefactor.”

L’Gon nods. “There were many people in the house the day of your collapse. Any one of them could have been an agent contracted by The Benefactor.”

A chill runs up my spine. “You’re right. Someone could have slipped just enough stasis medicine into something I drank to cause me to fall asleep for a few days. But why? Stasis medicine is so safe, it can even be used on pregnant women. The only reason to drug somebody with it would be to ship them somewhere without their consent. And the only one who’d want to do that to me is you.”

L’Gon claps his entire ridge plate back. “I would not do that to you.”

I stare at him suspiciously. But only for a moment.

Yes, he’s made it clear how determined he is to ship me back to New Terrhan. But he’s also the one who rushed me to the palace clinic as soon as I fell out.

Plus, if he had drugged me, it would have been stupid for him to introduce the mystery of my illness on the ride back to East House.

And L’Gon might not be the best scientist—especially when it comes to considering all possibilities without prejudice. But he isn’t stupid.

If it wasn’t him, though. Who could it have been?

I think of my run-in with L’Than’s father after I came back from my much-needed outside pee break.

*“Stay away from my son!”* he told me after I figured out who he was. *“You have no idea how dangerous this game you are playing with him will become if you do not cease influencing him like you did L’Nel.”*

“We are here.”

L’Gon’s announcement interrupts that disturbing memory.

And all thoughts of the irate Xal who confronted me about his hybrid son disappear when I see my own.

G’Lya is standing on the rooftop landing pad, holding Jack in her arms.

The flyer barely has time to set down before I’m pushing open the door and running to my baby.

I pull him into my arms with magical strength I didn’t have a couple of weeks ago when I asked G’Lya to explain to him why I could no longer pick him up.

“Mother! Mother! You no bye-bye forever!” Jack clicks and hisses, hugging me just as fiercely as I am him. “You hello-hello now!”

“Yes, hello! Hello!” I click and hiss back. “I missed you so much, my xalling.”

His eyes widen. “You speak, I understand now!”

“Yes! Yes!” I answer happily. “I got a Xalthurian language download today!”

I’m just glad it took since my medically induced sleep was interrupted by T’Kan and L’Gon arguing outside my room.

But before I can explain all of this the best I can to Jack, he says, “Father! Father! This special surprise you say you bring

home?”

*What in the moons?* Jack doesn't just look at L'Gon. He doesn't just give him credit for the Xalthurian download I requested myself. He stretches his chubby arms out to L'Gon in the human way he always does when he's ready to be transferred into someone else's arms.

And that's how I end up watching with open-mouth shock as Jack nearly jumps into his birth father's much stronger arms.

“Father! Father! Thank you for my special surprise!”

“Your mother is the surprise,” L'Gon answers. He cants his nose ridges to the side, which I now know indicates amusement. “I had no idea she received a Xalthurian language download during her hospital stay. I am surprised, too!”

They both stare at me with matching confused looks.

“It was a last-minute request!” I explain. “You know, so I'd still be able to communicate with Jack after we...”

I trail off, realizing that everyone knows about my plans to return to New Terrhan.

Everyone but Jack. Who's looking mighty comfy in his father's arms right now.

“After we what?” my hybrid asks.

FIFTEEN

## ELLE

So, that is an awkward question.

Which I totally avoid with a claim about being in desperate need of a gamma ray shower.

G'Lya takes Jack from L'Gon and walks back downstairs with me through a hidden staircase I wouldn't have known about if I hadn't just taken my first flyer trip. It opens up into a downstairs side entrance that leads directly onto the beach.

Which Jack begs G'Lya to take him to as soon as he spots the pristine white sand.

"If you wish, you can meet us down here when you are done," G'Lya offers as Jack tugs her toward the sand.

She's so good with him. I think about everything I learned about Xalthurian coloring during the trials. If not for Jack's swirls, it would be easy to believe he was the product of a pairing between her and a dark-red Xalthurian.

A red Xalthurian like L'Gon.

If none of the trials work, then maybe she will become his mother after L'Gon ships me off. Maybe L'Gon will see how good she is with Jack and decide...

*Don't go there.*

Instead of hyper-fixating on a future that hasn't come to pass yet, I take a gamma ray shower and practically fall face first onto my mat in Jack's nursery.

I guess the medically induced sleep didn't like getting cut short.

When I wake up, there are even more Xalthurian words bouncing around my head, complete with click and hiss patterns and more nose ridge emotional indicators than I would have ever suspected.

The three half-moons rising over the ocean let me know I slept much later than I originally intended when I lay down to catch what I now know would be called a "quick 20 rejuvenation clicks" in Xalthurian.

My earlier jealousy evaporates into a *Oh no! Poor G'Lya!* as I rush downstairs to relieve the caretaker I was supposed to join on the beach hours ago.

But first, I have to take a quick moment to relieve my bladder.

The medical pod emptied my bowels and only fed me fluids for the last few days. All I have to do is pee, so no need for my usual trip to behind the outbuilding, where I keep a shovel to bury my poop.

Since I'm in a rush, I cop a squat behind the first set of bushes I find before I reach the beach.

Huge mistake.

*"...him down, but do not tell her what we have planned. Can you do that for me?"*

*"Of course I can. You can trust in me."*

*"I know I can trust in you. L'Gon is incredibly lucky to have you on his staff."*

*Oh no!* I startle when I hear the voices, speaking in now crystal-clear Xalthurian.

Scrambling to cut off midstream and pull down my shift, I curse myself for being in such a rush. I should have gone to the outbuilding, like I always do when I know people are in the house.

*"There is something I have been wanting to ask you. And I am aware this question might feel a bit fast, considering the short*

*time we have known each other—Elle, is that you?”*

The voice, now directly above the bush I was squatting behind, switches to New Terrhan to ask, “What are you doing?”

*Crap.* I didn’t scramble fast enough.

With a few silent curses, I pull my shift dress the rest of the way down and awkwardly turn around. “I was just, um...”

I trail off when I see L’Than standing there with G’Lya, who has Jack in her arms. *Whoa.*

The dissipated jealousy swoops back in, even stronger than before.

Did I think earlier that G’Lya and L’Gon would make a good couple? L’Than and G’Lya put that imagined pairing to shame.

With L’Than’s red-and-golden-swirl coloring and her pretty orange, they looked like a beautiful, completely complementary match—like an ad for tropical life on Xalthuria.

The memory of L’Than talking to L’Gon about a possible Council Seat after the first trial session floats back into my head.

A Council Seat he’d have to be married to secure under his adopted mother’s family name.

“She go waste water!” Jack announces into my awkward silence. “She always go waste water and feces outside.”

*Wow, thanks, Jack.* As my mom used to say when Kira and I were younger, *It be your own kids.*

“That’s what I’m used to back on New Terrhan,” I rush to explain with burning cheeks as I pull out the small gamma ray hand cleaner I always keep in my shift pocket and guide it over both my palms. “Xalthurian toilets kind of freak me out with all of the talking and medical readouts.”

A long, uncomfortable silence.

Then L’Than turns to G’Lya to say in Xalthurian, “You will take the xalling inside now, as we discussed.”

G'Lya happily switches her gaze from me back to L'Than. "Of course! And the other matter you wished to talk to me about?"

"It can wait until the morrow," he tells her with a charming smile.

Jealousy stabs through me like a knife before I even have a chance to remind myself about all the reasons I don't have any right to feel that way.

*But it's never too late to start acting like a not-insane adult.*

"You know what, I can take Jack upstairs," I say to G'Lya. "You've already done so much for me today—for the last four days, really. I can totally take over from here so you and L'Than can talk."

"As I said, we can talk tomorrow," L'Than answers with a smooth smile for G'Lya.

But then that smile disappears when he turns back to me. "L'Gon and I need to conference with you in the last meal room."

The last meal room.

My stomach drops with the realization that it's been four days since the final trial—just enough time for the pregnancy hormone to appear in the urine stream of the female test subjects, according to their fourteen-month gestation period.

No more protesting. G'Lya goes off with Jack, and L'Than takes me by the elbow to guide me to the ocean-facing entrance of the dining room.

*Do not tell her.*

L'Than's earlier words float through my mind as I glance at my escort's grim face.

"All those trial subjects. Please, tell me one of them took." I'm so distraught, I can't even practice with my new Xalthurian language download. "At least one. *Please.*"

He sighs through his nose and answers in New Terrhan. "L'Gon wishes to impart the news to you. But perhaps you



should brace yourself. Your trials did not yield one pregnancy.”

“Oh, no!” My entire body goes cold as my heart sinks all the way down to my feet.

But L’Than just walks me through the glass door, like my complete devastation doesn’t matter at—

*Wait, what?*

I blink after entering a dark dining room decorated with crescent-moon-shaped sparkle lights.

L’Gon stands next to the table covered in food.

No, not food.

Bowls.

Bowls upon bowls of celebration berries.

“I don’t... I don’t understand.” I look from L’Gon to L’Than, who is now smiling behind me. “You said the trial wasn’t a go!”

“L’Than! I thought we discussed saving the trial results explanation for me to tell her,” L’Gon says with what I can now comprehend clearly as a confused-irritated combo emotion click. “What did you tell her?”

“Only a bit of the truth,” L’Than answers behind me with a defensive click. “I said her trial did not yield one viable pregnancy.”

“That is correct.” L’Gon nods at L’Than.

Then returns his gaze to me to say, “It yielded fifty-two.”

*Fifty-two?*

*Fifty-two viable pregnancies.*

The ocean is no longer crashing outside the windowed wall. It’s inside my ears.

Muffling everything L’Gon says after that.

“These are only the reports my team has gathered from the toilets sent home with the Day 3 subjects. On the morrow,

staffers will administer tests to the trial's first- and second-day participants. But as of this moment, fifty-two pregnancies have been confirmed with follow-up tests."

*Fifty-two viable pregnancies.*

"The fifty-two bowls of celebration berries were my cousin's idea, not mine," L'Gon explains with a somewhat embarrassed flex of his nose ridges. "He likes dramatic displays. As a hu'man, I am sure you understand...."

Yes, yes, I understand.

That means I've not only solved the biggest medical problem in the galaxy, but I've also won custody of Jack.

I was right.

I was *right!*

"Elle? Elle? Did you hear what L'Gon said?" L'Than asks in New Terrhan. "Say something."

He lays a gentle hand on my shoulder.

And I surge onto my toes to kiss him.

SIXTEEN

## ELLE

I was right. I was *right!* And now I'm all over L'Than.

Like when we were in space prison and he slammed me into the wall.

Only it's the other way around. I'm the one attacking L'Than with my kiss.

And L'Than is the one just standing there, stiff with shock.

I'm kissing him. But he's not kissing me back.

My racing heart stutters, and a sudden realization breaks through my spontaneous show of passion.

We're not in space prison anymore.

Maybe he doesn't—

Suddenly, his body surges into mine. I'm tossed backward with so much force that my feet catch air. I have to wrap my legs around his waist in order to keep holding on while he kisses me with a passion that robs the air from my lungs and ignites a flame that shoots straight to my core.

I feel his arm sweep underneath me, and a cacophony of sound follows. Bowls upon bowls of celebration berries crashing to the ground.

L'Than releases me from the kiss, and my back hits the freshly cleared table.

His hands follow me down and rip the fabric from my body, leaving most of me exposed to his hungry gaze. Then, he pulls himself out, revealing a flash of pulsing red.

Our eyes meet. Right before he pushes my thighs apart and slams into me with the force of a wild beast. Stretching my walls to their very limits.

L'Than has been talking all week, but there are no words now.

Just the sweet burn of his ridged cock as he takes me, his heavy hips pinning me to the table with forceful strokes.

Maybe he's punishing me for denying him when I signed the contract, guaranteeing my return to New Terrhan.

Maybe he's rewarding me for finally re-losing my senses.

It doesn't matter. My legs wrap around his waist again with the desire to pull him in deeper. *Yes, punish me. Reward me. I don't care! This feels so good.*

I am doing something wicked and totally out of character. But there is no confusion this time. Only desire. Only pleasure.

Even when—actually, if I'm being honest, *especially* when—his clawed hand wraps around my throat.

He squeezes ever so slightly, just enough to close my windpipe but not to crush it.

Dominating me. Possessing me.

My eyes roll back from the heady sensation of being stuffed with ridged cock without access to air.

*So full. So good.* My walls are impossibly stretched, and yet a craven part of me wants more.

The need to touch him overwhelms me. I reach out and graze his red-swirled skin with the tips of my fingers. Reveling in the feel of his hardness beneath my fingertips. He's so beautiful.

It boggles my mind how I've managed to resist him for so long. My brief exploration is cut short with an abrupt hiss.

"*Essh.*" He lets go of my neck, captures both of my wrists in one of his hands, and pins them above my head.

Our gazes lock. A fiery intensity blazes in his silver eyes. "You have denied me for too long, Gift."

“You.” *Thrust.*

“Are.” *Thrust.*

“Mine!” *Thrust.*

His possessiveness does something to my heart. It pounds hard, beating a tattoo within my chest, and a whimper escapes my lips as he resumes his animalistic assault on my sex. Thrusting so deep he touches my very soul.

I lift my hips to meet each of his powerful strokes, moving with him in a frenzied synchronization that sends me hurtling to my peak.

I seize under his final thrust, the orgasm consuming me whole. This is so much better than when I was crazed on *ju'li* berries. Pure ecstasy without the clawing hunger of knowing it will not be enough.

The orgasm washes over me, then sets me down on the shore, completely satisfied.

Until...

I look to my left to find L’Gon. Still standing next to the table. Watching us with an expression on his face that I cannot read.

Why didn’t he leave?

*Take him*, Dream L’Than whispers into my ear.

Real-life L’Than says nothing. But he pulls out slowly, leaving me empty.

Leaving me free.

This is just like the dream.

But it is nothing like the dream.

L’Than remains silent while I flip over onto my hands and knees. I crawl toward L’Gon, freshly fucked by his cousin. Like we’re back on the picnic blanket.

L’Gon just stands there. I’m out of my mind with burning lust. But he’s a statue, watching me crawl.

*He’s not as immune to you as you think*, Dream L’Than reminds me.

*Is that true?*

I rise to my knees before him on the table, the edges of the ruined orange shift falling away like a robe to reveal my breasts and his cousin's blue semen now dribbling down my thighs.

“Do not.” L’Gon’s command comes out on a long hiss. “Do not tempt me. I do not wish to engage in this madness with you again.”

*Madness.*

I glance over my shoulder at L’Than, still standing at the end of the table. But he remains silent, his ridges set to neutral as he watches the two of us.

However, Dream L’Than continues to whisper inside my head.  
*Take him.*

And an idea sprouts like the first shoots of corn after a long Growing Season.

“You may or may not be aware of how much we humans love our rituals.” I pick up one of the bowls of celebration berries that survived L’Than’s big arm sweep. “When New Terrhan lost much of our technology outside of entertainment after our crash landing, we reverted back to ritual. Gratitude festivals for every stage of our agricultural year. Weddings sealed with pinky swears of lifelong commitment and fidelity. Food—not lawyers—to negotiate our contracts.”

With some goddess energy I would have never guessed I possessed, I eat three celebration berries while looking him straight in the eye. “We solved Xalthurian infertility. Now, the three of us get to celebrate that until I return to New Terrhan. Just until I return to New Terrhan. After that, we’ll all be freed. That is the vow I make with these berries. If you agree to this new contract, you can signify that by eating three berries yourself, too.”

I extend the bowl to him.

He does not say anything. For several moments on end, we just stare at each other, the sexual tension pulsing between us like a heavy fog.

Then he spears three berries on the tips of three claws. His pointed tongue whips out, and they are gone.

There's a song Zinnia won't sing without a band accompanying her, banging their sticks against water buckets lined with metal.

Something about white wing doves and being on the edge of seventeen.

Truth talk, I have no idea what it means. Poetry isn't my thing.

But I swear that bucket band intro pops off in my head as I smile and set the berries to the side.

Then I grab onto the big red alien in front of me, and I...

Jerk awake from the erotic dream I'm having.

*What in the moons?* Once again, I find myself sitting up, hot and clammy, on the sleeping mat. *Seriously, what is wrong with—*

I break off when I see L'Gon sleeping on my left.

And on my right...

L'Than. Wide awake and staring back at me. As if he's been watching me sleep all night.

His nose ridge audibly opens and closes. Then he says in Xalthurian: "Wake up, Cousin. Our gift has need again."

Flashes of memory flood my brain.

L'Gon eating the berries, then commanding me to turn around.

"I will claim you in the Xalthurian way for the commencement of this Three-Berry Compact."

I came again. This time, with L'Than kissing me deeply on the side of the table while L'Gon took me with even deeper strokes on the other.

Afterward, L'Gon carried me up the stairs to his suite while L'Than followed. And we concluded our contract negotiations with a mind-blowing session of each of them taking turns inside of me as the other touched me all over.



Then, without discussing it, we all settled in for a night of sleep.

In L’Gon’s suite. I’m actually lying between my two Xalthurian lovers in the only room in the house I hadn’t seen.

Until we made the Three-Berry Compact.

And now, the sun has begun to rise over the ocean outside the suite’s floor-to-ceiling exterior windows.

I need to take care of my morning pee and slip back into Jack’s room before he notices I’m missing.

But L’Than disarms all my plans to be good and responsible with a wicked smile.

“Turn around,” he instructs. “Let your Second watch as I take you.”

*My Second...*

I don’t realize L’Gon is also awake until I turn around to find his moon-colored eyes on me as I lie back down in front of his cousin.

I can’t look away. Even when L’Than raises my leg and fills me up from behind, causing me to moan.

“Touch her,” L’Than commands his cousin in Xalthurian. “Make her value her decision to welcome both of us back into her sweet hot.”

L’Gon opens and closes his ridges in a way that makes me suspect he’s both fighting himself and losing control.

“Only until you return to New Terrhan.”

I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or himself. But I repeat, “Only until I return to New Terrhan. And, as you now know, I always keep my promises.”

That’s all the assurance L’Gon needs. As L’Than thrusts into me from behind, he claims my mouth. His tongue snakes around mine, and with his thumb, he finds the bundle of nerves that we humans have placed much more obviously within our sex than our Xal counterparts.

And his mouth on mine is the only thing that keeps me from screaming out as we seal the deal on the Three-Berry Compact.

# PART 4

# LONG-TERM RISKS

## AND BENEFITS

ZOOKEEPER: Got a date for me?

THE BENEFACTOR: How did you find me on this channel?

ZOOKEEPER: Did some research, based on your image. Nothing else to do without the new delivery.

THE BENEFACTOR: There are plenty of specimens to maintain until the next hunt. Surely, you are aware there will be consequences for this insolence.

ZOOKEEPER: Not as bad as what's facing me when all those hunters find out the new game we promised them is not here. Also, pretty sure my job is safe now the Kaidorian fleet left for another galaxy. Good luck finding another cut horn to do your dirty work when the hunters have me killed for not delivering on your promise.

THE BENEFACTOR: That will not come to pass.

ZOOKEEPER: How do I know that?

THE BENEFACTOR: My last plan did not work, but my new one is foolproof. You will have the new acquisition before the end of solar hunt. Do not contact me on this channel again.

ZOOKEEPER: Would love to have an exact date...

**TRANSMISSION ENDED**  
**CHANNEL DELETED**

SEVENTEEN

## L'THAN

My house is ready for inhabitants. Furniture has been picked and placed in each room, including an extra-large sleeping mat for the main orchard-facing suite. The golden Mylous twins holoed me to let me know that despite my fear of my father's interference, they have received all the inspection clearances for me to move into the residence I have dubbed *Ju'Li* House, given its positioning halfway between my uncle's North House and West House, where I grew up.

I have even acquired a household staff person to attend to care for the place.

Everything is ready for the life I envisioned when I commissioned a new primary residence on the lands that became part of the Louxos orchards as part of the deal my mother's father made with L'Rmie Louxos after they finished the negotiations for her hand in marriage—right before the Extinction Virus hit.

Yet, the night after the twins holoed me, I gathered a half lunar cycle's worth of clothing and toiletries from North House and moved my things—not into the residence I have commissioned, but into my preferred guest suite in East House.

“Only until Elle returns to New Terrhan,” L'Gon repeated as he helped me guide my floating luggage up the stairs to the guest room, where I plan to spend very little time outside of personal sanitization and dressing for work.



I knew how he would like me to reply, but I repeated my final statement from our conversation in the palace garden without a single emotion click. “We will see.”

An uncomfortable silence followed my answer. Most likely, L’Gon was telling himself whatever lie he needed to enjoy this dynamic. Both he and Elle were stubbornly insisting it is only short-term.

But Elle offered me those berries, too, that fateful eve, holding them out to me after L’Gon plunged into her from behind.

Did she really believe I was as delusional as my cousin? That there was any circumstance under which I would agree to let her go?

She still did not understand. *But she will*, I vowed to myself as I took the yellow berries from her.

And set them aside.

“Hello again, Gift,” I murmured, thumbing her plump bottom lip before claiming her mouth as L’Gon continue to thrust into her from behind.

I yearned to speak my hearts to her. But...

*Not yet. Not yet*, I told myself as I swallowed down her intoxicating moans. This new balance was too precarious. I had to, as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would term it, *hold my tongue*.

Then I sat back in a chair, my *diijo* regaining life as I watched my gift’s Second Mate claim her from behind.

His strokes soon took on an agonized quality. As if he were in grave need, and the relief of her sweet hot was not coming fast enough. He pushed Elle back down, pressing the side of her face into the table and pinning her there with one taloned hand at the back of her neck. The position opened her wider so she had no choice but to take even more of his *diijo*.

It was not a position she seemed to mind, however.

“Oh. So deep. So very deep....”

The look on my gift's face was a thing of beauty. Full lips parted, face flushed, and brown skin glowing with beads of perspiration.

"Mine." L'Gon thrust even harder into her. "Mine until you return to New Terrhan."

Elle cried out so plaintively underneath his merciless strokes. If I had not known any better, I would have thought he was hurting her.

But, no, her sweet hot was made for this. Made for us.

"I'm going to come!" Elle began to convulse beneath my cousin's forceful thrusts.

L'Gon continued to plow into her like some unknown force had taken him over for several more strokes. And then he froze.

"Essssshhh!" His long hiss signaled his own release.

And his commitment to this new version of our triad. Then we all went up to his suite to "commit" to each other for the rest of the eve.

So, no, we do not converse upon the agreement Elle has made with L'Gon, but not with me.

However, we do fall into a new mutually agreed-upon routine.

We pass the nights conversing with our bodies under my carnal instruction.

Elle always slips away slightly before sunrise and then pretends to be seeing us for the first time since the prior day cycle when she comes downstairs with Jack.

"Me too big sit table but too little sit chair," Jack lamented the first morning after I moved into East House. "I sit here!"

That was all the warning L'Gon received before his xalling hefted himself into his father's lap.

L'Gon widened his eyes, his nose rippling with consternation.

"I am sure we can figure out another solution!" Elle spoke in her newly acquired Xalthurian, but her alarm was, as the New

Terrhan idiom would term it, *written plainly across* her face. “Perhaps we could stack a few pillows on the chairs? Yes, I will go get some more pillows.”

“This is fine,” L’Gon told her before she could rush out of the room. “You will sit now and consume your first meal.”

“But—” Elle began to protest.

“Have you tried *trufli* meat?” he asked Jack before she could finish. “It is my favorite.”

“My favorite, too!” Jack answered. “But Mother hate it!”

That declared, the xalling scooped up the plate and upended all the *trufli* upon it into his mouth.

“Jack!” Elle screeched.

“Mother angry,” Jack observed to L’Gon, like they were having a private conversation no one else could hear. “Why Mother angry?”

To our surprise, L’Gon answered with a chest-chortling laugh. “I used to do the same thing, and my mother would become angry, too. It has to do with a formal system of table manners.”

“Also, with making sure everyone else who might want to eat that dish gets some as well!” Elle added, flaring her round eyes.

Jack stared at her for a contrite moment. Then turned to me and asked, “Cousin L’Than. Did you want some?”

It was then necessary for him to ask, “Why everybody but me laughing now?”

It took several moments for the laughter to cease, and when it finally stopped, I was nearly overcome with the urge to ask Elle and L’Gon, *Can you not see it? What we could be if you would only give up your stubborn notions?*

But somehow, I managed to *hold my tongue*.

And L’Gon continued to not only consume first meal with us, but he also let Jack sit on his lap while doing so.

After first meal, we hand Jack off to G'Lya and spend the day cycles leading up to the end of solar Council Meeting helping L'Gon to prepare for his big announcement.

We carry out this task in the orchard's outbuilding, which Elle has cleverly dubbed in her hu'man way "the satellite office."

There, we can comb over all of the footage from the trials and, with Elle's help, put together everything L'Gon will need to formally present the fertility trial's successful outcomes.

By taking on this project in the satellite office, we avoid both the prying eyes of the East House household staff and any questions L'Gon would receive about actually bringing his hu'man birth vessel into the Ministry of Health building to work with him on this presentation.

After seeing the dismissive way the trial participants treated Elle while she pretended to be assisting L'Gon, even she agrees it is better for L'Gon to take full credit for the trial and its outcome.

Still, she must explain her observations, conclusions, and new hypotheses based on the data to L'Gon in a way he can present before the council. For some reason, they find this mutual activity an enjoyable way to pass the workday cycle hours.

L'Gon, who has always appeared to me to be more honor-bound than eager to do his job, has become a new type of scientist as of late.

He and Elle delight in the New Terrhan idiomatic practice of *bouncing questions off* each other, and they keep falling into new *rabbit holes* of where to go next with the research upon this topic and how to connect it to a consistent theory of science.

Often, excited conversational strands end with L'Gon saying, "We will talk about this when you return to New Terrhan."

"Maybe." As excited as she is about her successful trials, Elle always responds to his holo invites with vague, non-committal answers. "I am not sure how much holo access I will have on the planet. And the time differences can be extreme. I mean,

that is probably the biggest reason L'Nel has not put in a holo request to call you yet.”

“Perhaps,” L'Gon answers with a heavy frown. Because of Elle's vague response or because of his sister's lack of communication, I am not sure.

But by day cycle two of our new arrangement, they have had some version of this conversation so many times that I am tempted to loudly point out, *Or Elle could stay on here, and you could give up your silly notion about replacing her with a Xalthurian bride.*

But, no. *Not yet. Not yet.* I continue to *hold my tongue.*

Though, another good reason for preparing for the Council speech hidden from the view of others became apparent during one of these conversations on what was supposed to be the last day of my required presence for the speech preparation.

“Do you believe the oral stimulation many of the males spontaneously performed upon their mates had anything to do with the results?” L'Gon asked Elle on the third day cycle of our new arrangement. “It is one of the things N'Maryah mentioned in her original report.”

“That is a good point,” Elle replied with a Xalthurian consideration click. “Is there any way to cross-reference...”

L'Gon started waving his hands over the holoscreen before she had even finished. “Yes, I will run a comparison report of the viable pregnancies and the females who received oral stimulation.”

Elle nodded at the new numbers. “Seventy-three percent of the pregnant females received oral stimulation. That could be indicative of a better result data point. Maybe we should put that...”

Elle trailed off, but she no longer appeared to need to finish her thoughts. L'Gon immediately answered, “Yes, I will add that to the scripts L'Than will have to record for us.”

“Where is your staff with finding a kingdom city space for the next round of trials, by the way?” she asked, glancing between

where L’Gon was standing and where I was sitting in a nearby chair.

“It is not going well. A’Rhon has scouted many locations. But L’Than keeps saying none of them are *sssexy* enough.”

Elle and I exchanged an amused look. My cousin’s pronunciation of the hu’man word never failed to secretly *crack us up*, as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would term it.

“He has a point,” Elle answered L’Gon. “East House is the perfect setup. I think. I mean, only the triad from the first trial in this satellite office reported a viable pregnancy, right? Oh hey, by the way, can you...?”

“Check the data on the triads?” L’Gon guessed, already swiping.

Elle continued talking as he swiped new calculations into the enlarged holoscreen. “To be safe, we—I mean, you—should run a trial where oral stimulation is not allowed and one where it is, and that way we can—wait! Are you seeing what I am seeing?”

“Yes!” L’Gon let out a shocked click. “One hundred percent of the pregnant triad females received oral stimulation.”

“Perhaps there is an enzyme in the male saliva that creates a booster for the sperm, which makes it easier to fertilize the egg,” Elle reasoned.

“Or,” L’Gon countered, “it could have something to do with the female’s heightened pleasure reaction to this kind of stimuli.”

*Stars in the sky.* I rolled my eyes. They had somehow rendered even this sexy subject boring with all of their science talk.

“I have a theory,” I said, rising to my feet behind them.

Either they did not hear me or they were too focused on the new topic to respond.

“But if heightened pleasure is driving the result, why did not all of the couples who received oral stimulation become

pregnant?” she asked. “For the next round of treatments, we—I mean, you—should... eek!”

Elle let out the cutest sound when I lifted her off the ground by the waist and planted her on top of the table we brought in to take our midday meals.

“L’Than, what are you doing?” she and L’Gon asked at the same time in two separate languages.

A smile curved my lips. “Testing my own theory since the two of yours are so boring.”

“We are not working on theories yet, only suppo—” Elle once again cut off, and her eyes flared wide when I dropped down to my knees before her. “Oh, we cannot do that here. We are supposed to be working! Right, L’Gon?”

She glanced at my much more serious cousin, who suddenly did not seem as eager to *bounce questions* as he was before I plopped our gift upon the table.

“I *am* working,” I assured Elle, pushing her knees apart.

“For instance...” I pressed my face between her thighs. “Your scent is making me hypothesize that you would like to hear more about my new theory. I will now perform a visual observation.”

I used the talon of my index finger to cut away her undergarment, then chortled low at what I saw. “Your breeding slit is already wet. Did discussing oral stimulation with your Second secretly excite you?”

There was no need for her to answer. Her shy look toward L’Gon was the only reply it took for me to rip the remainder of her undergarments away and shove my face into her sweet hot.

I found her so warm. Wet and ready for me, her First.

“Mm, why does that feel so good?” She dug her fingers through my hair, holding me against her as I ran my tongue along her breeding slit, lapping juices from her hot hole.

“L’Than, yes, please. Keep going. Feels so good,” she moaned.

The sound of my name on her lips drove my insatiable need for her even further. I licked, nibbled, and sucked the swollen button peeking out from her slit.

Her taste was beyond compare, more intoxicating than a fine glass of *ta'ri* berry wine.

And my gift moaned so sweetly, grinding her slit against my face as I greedily took all she had to offer. I doubted I would ever tire of this female. Tasting her. Wanting her. Needing her.

I shoved my tongue deep inside her sweet hot as I rubbed her swollen button with the pad of my thumb, knowing I would feel this way forever.

Her grip soon tightened in my hair. “Oh, moons! I am going to come!”

I slipped my tongue in and out of her, mimicking the intensity of a *diijo*, and her thighs began to shake.

“L’Than! L’Than!” Her hold on my hair suddenly released as a gush of her sweet juices filled my mouth.

I sucked and supped from her until her body finally stopped quaking. Reluctantly, I pulled back from my treat. I could have feasted upon her for hours, but my *diijo* was hard as steel and demanding relief.

But then I looked up to find L’Gon watching us. His expression was unreadable, but the rapid rise and fall of his nose ridge told me what my serious cousin wanted. What he needed.

“Cousin.” I rose to my feet and nobly waved toward our mate, still panting upon the table with her sweet hot exposed and glistening. “I believe it is your turn to test my new theory....”

This turned out to be a mistake.

L’Gon fell to his knees between her legs, his mouth crashing into her breeding slit as his tongue delved deep into her sweet hot. The sight of him devouring her caused my *diijo* to ache too painfully as I watched.

I could barely hold myself back long enough to let L’Gon lick and suck her to a second round of female joy before I was



pushing him aside like a Mylous twin and sheathing my aching length in her sweet hot.

Then, of course, L’Gon was in even more pain by the time we were done.

So it went with the testing of my theory all afternoon.

Afterward, L’Gon said to me, “I know we only requested your presence here for three day cycles...”

Now it was my turn to finish his sentence.

“I will come back tomorrow and the next day,” I answered. Then I switched to New Terrhan to solemnly assure the female lying between us, “I will *come* as many times as I am needed.”

“Why was the vow my cousin made funny?” L’Gon asked when Elle threw her head back and filled the air with her melodic laughter.

Then he, too, released a chortling laugh after Elle explained my *double entendre*.

Since returning from the war, L’Gon has always been my most serious cousin, but he laughs so often over the day cycles leading up to the Council Meeting that the sound becomes familiar. And I begin to recall why I considered him my best friend when I was a child.

But not yet. *Not yet*. I continue to *hold my tongue*.

After workdays filled with presentation prep for Elle and L’Gon, scriptwriting for me, and... other things for all of us, we often required a shower before joining G’Lya and Jack for last meal. We usually dine at the round kitchen table, which Elle prefers to the long one in the formal consumption room.

“Why always change clothes before last meal now?” Jack asks the night before the Council Meeting.

The three of us still at the question, but Elle says, “Actually, there is a long history of hu’mans changing before the last meal of the day. Sometimes it is for hygienic reasons of cleanliness after a long day’s work. And sometimes it is to mark your last meal of the day as a formal occasion.”

Jack nods, seeming to understand. “Me change clothes, too. G’Lya, you will, too.”

G’Lya ruffles her nose ridge, clearly embarrassed. “No, thank you. It already feels strange to me to take the last meal with you. But since Elle wishes for me to do so, I will go against custom—at least until it is time for me to take my last meal with someone else.”

She glances at me with a secretive smile.

And I grin back.

Yes, my plans have been put on hold, but I am happy.

I glance around the table. *We are happy.*

Not yet. *Not yet.* I must continue to *hold my tongue.*

EIGHTEEN

## L'THAN

That eve, after G'Lya puts Jack down and departs for her own shared residence in the kingdom city, we take our now usual walk around the orchard as L'Gon likes to do until Jack has safely fallen asleep in his care pod.

However, Elle is unusually quiet.

“Is something bothering you, Gift?” I ask.

“No, I'm fine,” she answers in New Terrhan. “Just great!”

However, she does so with a hu'man tone the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would describe as *snippy*.

I exchange a look with L'Gon over her head and wriggle my ridges in a way that says, *She is lying*.

L'Gon nods and looks down at Elle with a heavy frown. “You do not appear fine. You will tell us what has put you in a poor mood this eve.”

“Nothing. It's nothing. I'm just being stupid. I don't know why.”

“Then you will tell us what this nothing is.” L'Gon places a hand on her shoulder to bring our walk to a stop. “So our minds will cease wondering about the preoccupation of your mind.”

“Fine.” She lets out a little mouth huff. Then turns to ask me, “What was that all about in there? Between you and G'Lya?”

“Between G'Lya and me?” I repeat. Not understanding her meaning.

Until I see her angry expression under the moonlight. And suddenly, I do understand her meaning.

“Oh, you fear I have acquired another groupie!” It takes much effort to keep my ridges from canting to the side.

I look over her head at L’Gon.

“Cousin, have you ever heard of the human concept of jealousy?”

“I’m not—” Elle crosses her arms over her chest in the same manner she did the night of our moonlight picnic. “I’m just saying that if we’re hiding what we’re temporarily doing from Jack, maybe you should hide whatever you’ve got going on with G’Lya from him, too. You know, instead of making eyes with her across the table and talking about all the private dinners you’ll be having together when I’m gone.”

“*Making eyes*. I like this human idiom.” It is impossible to keep my ridges from canting to the side, though, as I add, “However, I fear the intended mate of G’Lya will not, especially if you keep on refusing to let her affianced recuse herself from eating last meal with us every eve after she moves to the kingdom city to work for me.”

“Wait.” Elle’s face comically squinches up. “What?”

“I have hired the fiancée of G’Lya to keep my household,” I explain. “I am assured by G’Lya that she is most capable, despite her lack of experience. She mentioned something about her catching more octopi than any other female in the small Fish Region village from which they hail.”

Now L’Gon, too, has canted his nose to the side, trying to hold back his own amusement.

“I don’t... I don’t understand.” Elle shakes her head at me. “If she already has an intended mate, why was she going on about how hard it was to talk to you because you were so handsome the first time you met? And why were you smiling at G’Lya at dinner?”

To my surprise, L’Gon answers for me. “L’Than has large amounts of aesthetic appeal. That is indisputable, no matter the status of one’s relationship. G’Lya is a fairly new employee in

my household. Of course, conversing with him for the first time would dysregulate her nervous system. It is how most people respond to biological beauty.”

He finishes his explanation with a Xalthurian logic click. As if we are talking about the state of the rigidly regulated weather.

“And as for our smiling at each other,” I continue. “We did so because when her fiancée arrives in less than a lunar cycle’s time, she will be able to pardon herself from eating last meal with us for the reason that she hopes to share that time with her mate.”

“That’s—” A delighted look comes over Elle’s face. “That’s wonderfully romantic. Oh, my moons, I’m so happy for G’Lya. I can’t wait to congratulate her!”

She claps her hands together and pantomimes a swoon.

But then she looks back up at me with an apologetic wince. “And I’m sorry I accused you of acting inappropriately with her. That was truly inexcusable of me.”

“You accused me because of the intense jealousy you experience whenever you think of me with another,” I answer with a wide grin. “It is easy to forgive you for this human emotion. In truth, I much like it.”

“Why?” she asks. “Why would you like me acting like a jealous psycho every time another female smiles at you?”

She is not ready for the true answer to that question.

So, I reply with a deep kiss before employing a New Terrhan idiom to tell her, “Because I have several ideas about how you can *make it up to me*.”

That eve, I instruct her through the necessary reparations for her bout of jealousy.

“Yes, like that. Your mouth is a *miracle*.” This is supposed to be her way of apologizing for her irrational thoughts. But it is I who am driven to the edge of insanity.

Elle grips the base of my *diijo* and releases me. She looks up at me with wide brown eyes and, without wavering her gaze, runs her tongue along my length. “Does this please you?”

I fist her hair. “*Essh!* You will be the death of me, my beautiful gift.”

She uses her tongue to circle my tip. “But this is what you wanted, isn’t it?” She does not allow me to respond before taking my *diijo* into her mouth again, this time until she nearly reaches my hilt.

I desperately fight to restrain myself from thrusting deeper into her throat and exploding. I want this moment to last as long as possible. But she suckles me with such intensity that I can no longer fight my primal urge.

I grit my teeth and hiss as I release into her mouth. I wanted to last longer, but her mouth felt too good.

A string of my blue seed dribbles down the side of her mouth as she raises to her knees from my lap with a wide grin of her own.

If not for my spent *diijo*, I would toss Elle on her back and rut her until I made her cry out my name.

But I am not ready yet, and L’Gon is waiting impatiently for his turn. He tries to keep his expression impassive, but I see the tenseness in his stance.

I cup her face, forcing her to look up at him. “Gift, you will attend to your Second and do not finish until he has seeded in your mouth.”

She sits on the heels of her feet and pouts. “I need you.” Her fingers lightly graze her leaking breeding slit as she looks between L’Gon and me. “Both of you.”

She is so beautiful and needy, part of me wants to give in to the temptation she offers, but I *stay the course*. I caress her cheek. “You will give L’Gon his relief now. You will not receive your female joy until you have satisfied both of us. You will wait until I rise again. Now go to him.”

She wipes the blue line from the side of her mouth with her thumb and licks it off.

My body tightens again. I am forced to hold back. I watch as she crawls toward my cousin and disrobes him.

He is already steel-hard when she eagerly takes him into her mouth.

I have always believed that L’Gon has considerably more patience than me. But that is clearly not the case when it comes to Elle. He grabs the sides of her head and thrusts in and out of her mouth.

“Be careful, L’Gon. You must be careful with our gift so as not to hurt her.”

My words seem to go unnoticed as he ruts in her mouth like he is in a trance, and soon I realize my warning is unneeded. Elle moves her head in timing with L’Gon’s thrust. Her saliva glands appear to be working overtime as his *diijo* slides in and out of her mouth.

Her scent floats toward me. My gift’s excitement is palatable. One of her fists is wrapped around the base of L’Gon’s *diijo* while she uses her other hand to finger her breeding slit.

Some punishment.

She is enjoying this just as much as L’Gon and I.

I had told her she would have to wait before I was hard again, but the wait is over. I am extremely hard. Painfully so. I am ready to take her, but I hold myself back.

I must wait for L’Gon to finish. Judging from the shaking of his shoulders, I am certain it will not be long before he reaches completion.

The sight of her head bobbing back and forth on my cousin’s *diijo* is an arousing sight, yet aggravating at the same time. My need to be inside of her claws at me until I can barely think clearly.

At the very point when I do not think I can take another second of waiting and not touching L’Gon shouts, “Elle! I am seeding!” His body seizes, and like before, Elle greedily slurps his seed.

She runs her tongue along his ridges before sitting back on her heels.



I can no longer hold back. With impatient strides, I close the distance between us and toss her onto the sleeping mat.

I immediately fall on top of her, slide into her breeding slit, and release a hiss of pure relief.

“*Essshhh*. You will indeed be the death of me,” I repeat my earlier lament.

She wraps her arms around me and laughs. “But what a way to go.”

I frantically thrust in and out of her until I reach my climax.

L’Gon then takes Elle, plowing into her from behind.

And so it goes until I find her special bundle of nerves with the pads of my fingers and give her the release she so desperately wants as L’Gon empties into her from behind.

Finally, L’Gon calls a stop to things. “The Council Meeting is tomorrow. We must sleep.”

“Your Second is correct,” I tell Elle, pulling her into my arms for our new normal position for falling asleep.

Which we all do. Quite quickly.

However, I am awoken just a short time later by Elle’s screams.

NINETEEN

## L'GON

“No, no! Please don't! Please!!!”

I come awake to the sound of Elle pleading with someone. Screaming in her throatbox language, “Don't take him. Please! Please!”

I spring up on the mat, ready to fight whatever enemy has invaded our space, but then I see Elle still lying upon the mat. With her eyes closed.

“She is making poor sleep again.” L'Than rises up onto his arm on the other side of her. “This happened once before, when we were in the spacelab prison together.”

“Oh, I see. She makes bad sleep over your time in space prison.”

“No, she was only there a very short time. Less than a day cycle before N'Thn led us in overtaking the ship.”

“Then what causes her such distress?” I start to ask.

Only to be interrupted when she yells out, “Don't take my baby. Please. I love him so much!”

My hearts twist. She is dreaming not of her imprisonment but of the time she ran away with L'Eondris.

Guilt assails me. Until now, I had seen her and hu'mankind as dishonorable and duplicitous—especially when it comes to relinquishing custody of our hybrid sons. I have even been dismissive of the *love* emotion they use to justify their behavior. But seeing the real terror in Elle's expression hits me in an unexpected way.

“You need to let me be his mother,” she screams out, confirming my guess. “Please don’t take him. I’ll do anything. No! No!”

She breaks off with a long scream.

And L’Than moves to shake her awake. But I pause his actions with a raised hand.

As a former military medic, I know the protocol for this situation well. Do not wake the warrior who is suffering bad sleep. Protocol states we should begin a count to 1,000 in the hope the bad sleep will cycle away. If it does not, then we are authorized to administer enough sedative to turn the patient’s sleep black.

But I do not have sedative at East House, and I cannot abide the sound of her terror. I do not let a count of ten pass by, much less a number greater than 1,000, before shaking her awake myself.

“Elle, wake. You will wake now.”

“I’m falling!” Elle screams out as her eyes pop open. “I’m fall —!”

She cuts off with a hiccupping choke when she sees us.

“You are safe, Elle,” L’Than tells her in gentle New Terrhan. “You are here, safe with us in East House.”

She looks between us in a way that makes me fear my cousin’s words did not break through her terrified brain.

But then her face crumbles and her eyes fill with the emotional water hu’mans emit, even past their adolescence. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Ssh! Ssh!” L’Than draws her into his arms. Not for the first time since we began this Three-Berry Compact, I marvel at how well he handles Elle, even when she is filled to the brim with hu’man emotion. “It is fine. When you calm, we will simply return to sleep.”

“It’s not fine. And it’s not simple,” she insists, sobbing into his chest. “I don’t know why I cannot shake this dream. Even though I won back full custody of Jack.”

My hearts seize at the reminder that I will not see L'Eondris again after Elle leaves with him to New Terrhan. My mind flashes to the xalling who I have grown... fond of. My xalling. And though I made that agreement for the possibility of gaining a full-Xalthurian heir, a hollow feeling appears between my hearts.

"Some things cannot be explained," L'Than answers Elle, cupping her brown face in his red hand. "And I am not fully familiar with human psychology. But I am sure it has something to do with that."

"So, you never have nightmares?" she asks him. "About anything?"

"I would not know what a nightmare is if not for the New Terrhan Dictionary inside my head," he confesses with the same gentle tone. "But I am sure, if you just lie back—"

"I have suffered these *nightmares* you speak of," I say without thinking first.

"You have?" they both say.

L'Than stares at me as if I have told him the sky is some color other than purple. And Elle turns her head from my cousin's chest to regard me with wide eyes.

"Yes," I answer. Something in her still-upset gaze makes me continue on with my confession. "And the last thing I ever want to do after experiencing one is return to sleep."

L'Than continues to stare at me. But Elle pulls away from him and sits all the way up to ask, "What... what are your nightmares about?"

I tighten and release my nose ridge. "About a solar and a half after siring L'Eondris, I was on a ship that was boarded by the Kaidorians, and soon the medical bay was inundated with wounded patients. Eventually, a Kaidorian squad also gained access to the medical bay. Their commander came directly toward me and demanded all of our sedative discs. I could only assume he wanted these discs to use on my fellow warriors. More weapons for their arsenal. So, of course, I was duty-bound to engage him in defensive combat."

I remember but do not recount the grueling battle that followed with the commander of the Kaidorian squad. The next part was all Elle and L'Than needed to know to understand. “Kaidorians are particularly nasty in combat. To them, simply killing your enemy is not enough. They have lasers but often force hand-to-hand engagement with the aim of slicing off their enemy’s limbs with a technique that makes it impossible for them to generate a new one, even with medical assistance. I managed to avoid such a fate and secure the sedative discs, but by the time I did...”

My nose ridges collapse downward at the memory of the scene I found in the medical bay after my fight with the Kaidorian commander was finished.

“It’s okay.” Elle wraps both of her small hu’man hands around my large red one. “It’s okay. You can tell us. We’re right here, and we’ve got you. You’re safe, too.”

She fell off a cliff to maintain her relationship with our son. She suffers *nightmares* from it. I can revisit this terrible memory if it means providing her some solace.

“Kaidorians are known to be a unit-based species. Even before the Extinction Virus, they mated in groups of four because they preferred to do everything as a quad. So, killing the commander sent the rest of his squad into retreat—but not before they had hacked up most of my staff and all the wounded warriors waiting for medical attention. Some were maimed so badly, I was forced to give them a quick death. The others were dispensed *millio*, a drug that makes you forget your recent trauma. And I made it my mission to fabricate limbs for everyone who needed one on the way back to Xalthuria.”

I think of R’Ex lifting his pants leg to show me the limb I had apparently made him. “There were so many, I could not remember all of their names or faces. The war ended soon after, but in the solars that followed, I lost count of the times I returned to that ship to find myself once again engaged in battle with the Kaidorian commander. Often, I would spend most of my wake cycle working at the Ministry of Health and the entirety of my sleep cycle restoring limbs in that medical bay.”

“I’m so sorry you went through that. Anybody would have all the nightmares after that. Thank you for sharing that with us.” Elle squeezes my hand in both of hers. “Did it ever get better?”

Her question brings me back from the edge of the ugly memory. “It did, actually. I knew I could not make a proper marriage if I continued to be plagued by this bad sleep, so I approached the problem as a sickness of mind that must be cured. It occurred to me that I could reprogram my sleep cycle during my wake cycle. While awake, I reminded myself oft that I was not in the ship’s medical bay. In fact, if I was, then I was most certainly not in the real world but in the sleeping one. No Kaidorians lived on Xalthuria, I told myself. If I saw one, then I was certainly dreaming. Eventually, this reasoning followed me into sleep. If I found myself working in the medical bay instead of my office, my dream self knew this could not be reality. If a Kaidorian commander tried to engage me in a fight, I would simply tell him no and sit on the ground until I woke up.”

The smile I have grown so used to over the day cycles we have worked and played together returns to Elle’s face. “That’s a great tactic. I bet you could even change the course of events. Like, win the fight and save all of those people.”

“Yes, I did do that a few times, but I would not recommend it.” I briefly dig my talons into the sleeping mat. “It was not as satisfying as I thought it would be. Sometimes the only way to win the fight with bad sleep is to accept what happened and to understand this was an event that cannot be changed.”

She looks at me for several beats, her face tight with pain and some other emotion I cannot label. Until she says, “I regret running with Jack. I regret the fall. I know why I did it. And I know it cannot be changed. But it haunts me. *It haunts me.*”

She turns her face away from me and admits, “If N’Ure hadn’t saved us for his sick experiment, then we’d just be dead because of a decision I can’t even remember actually making. I don’t think I can ever forgive myself for that.”

She begins crying again. But this time in a way that makes it feel as if my own hearts are suffering as I observe her emotional pain.

I am about to suggest L'Than draw her into his arms again when her body suddenly collapses into mine. She cries quietly, digging her brown face into my chest as she wets it with her eye water.

At first, I have no idea how to respond to this unexpected touch without sexual intention. But then I remember the night L'Eondris came to my room.

Silently thanking my hybrid for his unwitting instruction, I tentatively enclose her in my arms until her shoulders stop shaking with sobs.

When they do, L'Than makes a motion with his hand that I interpret as a command to lie back down upon the mats. With her in my arms.

It feels... I suddenly recall the strange phrasing Elle used when she looked over the finished satellite office. It feels *weirdly* good to hold her in my arms like this.

There is a warm ocean current flowing between my two hearts, and despite the lack of sexual engagement, pleasure sensations alight across my body.

In any case, I would not wish for copulation to end this moment of closeness, I realize. In this moment, I only wish to soothe her and hold her close.

*Always.*

The word whispers across my mind. And fear spikes my hearts. *What madness is this?*

“Only until you return to New Terrhan,” I remind myself out loud.

But apparently, she needs the reminder as well.

“Only until I return to New Terrhan,” she murmurs sleepily into my chest. “And I never break my promises. Ever.”

She soon falls asleep, but I do not.



And neither does L'Than.

“You two are the bravest cowards I have ever met,” he hisses in the dark.

“What does that mean?”

A long silence. Then: “Nothing. It means nothing. I am holding my tongue. Until.”

“Until what?” I ask.

No answer.

And for some reason, his silence aggravates me. “Until what?” I ask again.

“The Council Meeting is tomorrow,” he says, mimicking my earlier words in a way that strikes me as mocking. “We should all get back to sleep.”

That is true.

But for many clicks of the hidden sun after that, my cousin's *Until* continues to echo in my head.

TWENTY

## L'GON

When I wake again, I am the only one lying upon my mat.

Elle has left, as she always does before sunrise, to tend to L'Eondris, and apparently, I have slept so late that L'Than has already gone to his room to complete his morn personal hygiene regimen.

A bad feeling hollows out the space between my hearts at the sight of the empty mat. A feeling I suspect might bear the label of *loneliness*, even though I will see them both soon at first meal.

Alone. This is how I used to wake up before my agreement to the Three-Berry Compact. And this is how I will once again wake up after Elle leaves for New Terrhan.

An ache appears above my hearts at the thought of that. Sudden, but not new.

How often did I find myself rubbing that ache, especially during the solars when both Elle and L'Than were being held in that spacelab prison?

What will happen when Elle returns to New Terrhan and L'Than to the residence he commissioned?

*No, I will not poke at it!* Today is the Council Meeting, and there is no time to indulge the mad thoughts spurred by Ceremonial Mind Rot. Squashing that thought like a rotten *gu'gi* melon under my foot, I push back the sheets to attend to my own hygiene.

I am not nearly as vain as L'Than when it comes to my appearance. But after my gamma shower, I command the wall in my facilities so I can check my appearance in the special set of robes I am wearing for the occasion.

I have foregone my normal white tunic for a floor-length black robe with matching pants. They have golden borders along the hems. It is woven from the elusive *mo'lo* worm and shivers like a prism in the light.

I had them made especially for this day—several solars ago, after Kel D'Rek officially appointed me to the position of Mal L'Gon under his reign.

I knew even then that I would one day be making this speech. I just had no idea how long it would take. Or that the solution to the Xalthurian fertility crisis would come from someone other than me.

I think of Elle in the clinic's bed, still refusing to take full credit for her corn idea, despite the Leader she made the promise to being many solars dead.

The words she murmured into my chest last eve blow like wind through my mind. *I never break my promises. Ever.*

I have already spoken with L'Than about ensuring Elle receives the remuneration she deserves for her bioengineered corn when she returns to New Terrhan. Still, my stomach tightens, and my appetite for beholding myself in the mirror disappears.

*Perhaps you should endeavor to become more civil toward your birth vessel, Brother. She has had a difficult life. Much more difficult than yours.*

The tentative advice my sister gave me shortly after acquiring what I thought was only a mere translator echoes through my head.

*L'Nel!* She does not yet know about the breakthrough we have made.

I bid the wall opaque again and head into my long-neglected office with an idea of what might make me feel better about taking all the credit for Elle's trial.

Determined to rid myself of this feeling, I order the office's wall screen to interface with the wall screen code T'Kan gave me—the one that belongs to my sister.

According to T'Kan, the scientists he brought with him as part of his Kel Regent contingent to New Terrhan still have not figured out a way to set up a holo system outside of their ships, as the planet is prone to unpredictable tower-destroying flash floods and, even worse, red dust storms.

So, this wall interface-to-interface solution is the only way to contact people on New Terrhan without arranging for them to come to his large “palace ship” at an appointed time.

L'Nel, however, has not requested a holo time. Neither I nor my father have heard from her. Most likely because she hugely regrets her decision to decamp to New Terrhan and is afraid to face us.

Surely, there is no better time to reach out to her than now. But the hailing beep of the wall-to-wall system goes on for such an extended time I begin to fear she will not answer. *Is she that ashamed of her actions?*

I might have to convey a message of my wish for our renewed contact through other means. I am just about to cancel my hail request when the screen suddenly opens on an interior shot of a room with red mud walls.

But instead of L'Nel, a little green hybrid with nearly black swirls blinks back at me.

“Uh-oh!” she says. Her huge eyes flare so wide that I can see she has inherited her hu'man birth vessel's round pupils and brown eye color.

“Annie, what did you do?” a voice screeches offscreen.

Then, a taller orange hybrid appears on the screen next to the little girl. She has golden-brown swirls, like my cousin's, but her hair is a shimmery white, like mine and my sister's.

She, too, looks directly into the screen's camera. She has diamond-shaped green pupils but the same non-creased eye folds as High Leader Wang-Lei, the hu'man mate of N'Maryah.

“Why did you do that? We told you to just ignore it, like Papa Clyde said.”

“I’m sorry, Chun-Hua! I’m sorry!” The little green hybrid appears on the verge of releasing water from her eyes.

The red entrance door behind them opens, and yet another hybrid appears. She is purple with pale-pink swirls and even taller than the orange one.

“Oh no! What did you two do?” She rushes up to the screen as well. “I was only gone to the latrine for a minute.”

Having only ever seen one female hybrid in my life, it is hard not to stare at the three of them. Given their coloring, they are obviously not sisters, but they appear to be some kind of family unit.

Still, none of them are L’Nel. I swipe up T’Kan’s holo with the wall interface address to see if it is possible I entered the wrong code.

Meanwhile, the hybrid younglings fall into argument.

“It’s all Annie’s stupid fault!” the one called Chun-Hua tells the taller purple one. “She couldn’t keep her dirty claws off the wall interface!”

Chun-Hua finishes her reporting with a slap across the back of little Annie’s head.

“Ow!” Annie’s eyes fill with water as she screams, “I’m going to tell Mommy!”

“Now you’ve done it, Chun-Hua!” the tallest youngling says, pulling the little green hybrid into her arms. “You know how Nellie feels about hitting!”

“What’s she gonna be more pissed about?” Chun-Hua asks with a glare I suspect might be her default expression. “Me hitting Annie or Annie messing with the wall screen after Papa Clyde kept telling her to leave it alone after he installed it.”

“You hitting me!” Annie yells back from her protector’s waist. “Mommy loves me, and you’re a bad sister.”

“Stop this! Let’s just figure out how to turn it off, okay?” I still do not know the purple one’s name, but she is proving herself to be the most mature and reasonable of the three. “We’ll just turn it off, and Nellie will never have to know.”

“Are you referring to my sister, L’Nel?” I demand.

The three younglings all jump at my voice and release hu’man screams over a series of Xalthurian shock clicks.

The combined sound is rendered at such an alarming decibel, I cover my ears and deeply regret the discovery of hu’man and Xalthurian DNA being compatible for offspring.

“Oh, moons! Oh, moons!” The one called Chun-Hua shrieks after the screams and shock clicks finally abate. “There’s a voice inside the static speaking that click-and-hiss Xal talk.”

I realize then that though I have picture, my side of the screen must not have resolved for them.

“Push the Resolution button to receive my image,” I instruct them.

“What’s he saying? What’s he saying?” Chun-Hua’s eyes widen with panic. “Mama Nell is going to be so mad. She’s going to send us back to the orphanage for sure!”

“No, she won’t,” the purple one assures Chun-Hua, tightening her arms around Annie.

“Mommy and Daddy love us!” The little green one yells at Chun-Hua. “They won’t send us nowhere.”

“We just have to figure out how to turn it off,” the purple one insists.

“There’s a Xal inside that screen, Shuv!” Chun-Hua shouts. “Even if we turn it off, he’ll just call Mama Nell back and tell her what we did. We’re dead as a flood victim when she finds out about this.”

The purple one’s eyes widen with new fright. But then she says, “Maybe he won’t tell her. Maybe he’s a nice Xal.”

“Like King T’Kan!” Annie yells.

“Yes, like King T’Kan,” Shuv says, rubbing her little sister’s back.

I made this call to assuage my guilt, but a new one takes its place. If only I spoke even a few words of New Terrhan, maybe I could ease their obvious distress.

It has been a very long time since I interacted with a female youngling, and I find I like their distress even less than my own hybrid’s.

“What are you three up to?” a male voice asks behind them in New Terrhan.

The hybrids gasp and turn as a group to reveal a hu’man male with short hair and a beard that falls nearly to his waist, carrying two buckets of water. He is large by hu’man standards and taller than the purple one, but I doubt he reaches my sister’s height.

“I thought I told you three not to touch that wall interface!” he says, setting down the water buckets.

“I’m sorry. It’s all my fault!” To my surprise, Chun-Hua steps forward to take the blame before the other two can. “It kept beeping, and I accidentally turned it on when I was trying to get it to stop.”

“No, she’s trying to protect me, Clyde,” the purple one called Shuv tells the male. “If anyone is getting sent back to the orphanage, it should be me.”

“No, I’m the one who did it. And now there’s a Xal in the static!” The little green hybrid runs past her loyal sisters and wraps herself around the hu’man male’s leg. “I love you and Mommy. Please don’t send me away!”

“Oh, Lordy. How many times I got to tell you?” He peels Annie off his leg and squats down to look her in the eye. “Nellie and I have no intention of sending you back to the orphanage.”

He shakes his head at all three younglings. “*Any* of you, for any reason.”



“Even though you only meant to adopt one hybrid when you came to look at us?” Chun-Hua asks him.

“Three-for-the-price-of-one! That was considered a deal back on the old planet,” he answers them with a wide grin. “Plus, Nellie has too much love in her heart for just one kid. I don’t even know what we were thinking, setting out to come home from the orphanage with just one. We love the three of you already, and there’s nothing you can do that’s going to make us stop.”

“We love you, too,” the younglings cry, falling into his open arms.

My hearts stir as I watch their family hug. Acts of physical affection are not common on Xalthuria—especially among the Elite. But watching them, I am reminded of how it felt to hold L’Eondris, and I decide that not all hu’man rituals are completely senseless.

But then Clyde rises back into a stand to ask Annie, “Now, what’s this about there being a talking Xal in the static?”

“I believe the youngling was referring to me.”

Clyde jumps. But to my great gratitude, he does not scream or release any high-decibel clicks.

“Oh, there sure is a Xal inside there!” Now, he comes directly up to the screen. “Sorry about that, whoever you are. You know kids—sometimes they ain’t exactly reliable narrators. Give me a sec.”

A couple of clicks later, Clyde and the three little hybrids gasp, letting me know their side of the image interface must be working.

“Oh wow, he’s huge!” Chun-Hua cries.

“You look just like Nellie,” says the male with a large grin. “So, I’m assuming you’re the brother she’s been putting off calling because she says you’ll be mad at her.”

“You have correctly assessed my identity,” I answer warily since I do not know who he is. Or if he can understand me. “I am L’Gon Louxos, the brother L’Nel Louxos.”

He answers my question about his comprehension with a huge human smile. “Well, look there, I called it right. Girls, this here is your Uncle L’Gon—hey, is it okay if we call you Gone? That name click’s a little hard for us to wrap our tongues around—especially kids, you know.

“No, I do not know,” I answer. “But yes, Gone is allowable.”

Clyde laughs. “You take everything serious, like Nellie. I love it. Say hi to your Uncle Gone, kids.”

“Hi, Uncle Gone!” they say dutifully. With radiant smiles of their own.

“Hello,” I answer.

“He’s saying ‘Hello’ in Xalthurian,” Clyde translates for the younglings.

Confusion ripples my nose. Even with the translators in place, I am finding all of this too hard to understand.

“L’Nel has only been gone from our planet a lunar cycle. Are you saying she has already acquired a mate and started a family?”

“Believe me, I’m surprised about it, too!” Clyde answers me with a big smile. Then he explains to the girls, “Your Uncle Gone thinks this is all kind of fast. Remember what Nellie said about how long formal courtships can get back on her home planet?”

“Ooh! Tell him the story!” Chun-Hua tugs on his arm, her nose ridges flapping with excitement. “Tell him the story of how you and Mama Nell met after your first wife left you when she discovered you couldn’t have kids.”

“Well, yeah, yep, um...” Clyde grips the back of his neck in the same embarrassed way Elle does when she’s feeling uneasy. “My ex was disappointed, to say the least, when the doc told us that males who survived Radiation Fever when they were kids grew up to not ever be able to have ones of their own. Left me the very same day we got the news, like our pinky swear didn’t mean nothing.”

He shakes his head. “You should have seen me after that. I was so bitter and surly, everybody in the colony started calling me Clyde the Grump. I figured I was going to live and die on this red planet alone. But then Nellie came up to me on the first day of the Harvest Fest and asked me if I was interested in the metal she brought to New Terrhan with her. We got to talking, and we never stopped. By the last day of the festival, I knew I wanted to be with her forever. But I had to tell her about me not being able to father children.”

Shuv smiles and claps her hands, as if this is the best part of the story. “And tell Gone what Nellie said.”

“She said...” Clyde’s chest heaves up and down, and he covers his hu’man heart with one hand to finish. “She asked me if there was a rule at the orphanage about men adopting children. I told her there wasn’t. And she said she didn’t see what the problem was then—but you know, not like that. More Xalthurian, with a bunch of ten-dollar words. Anyway, I asked her right then and there if she’d pinkie finger marry me at the big Harvest Festival Group Marriage Ceremony, thinking she’d say no.”

“She didn’t say no,” Chun-Hua whispers to me dramatically behind her hand.

“She didn’t say no,” Clyde repeats with a laughing shake of his head. “Still can’t believe it. And, let me tell you, nobody’s called me Clyde the Grump since. Cuz Nellie and these three angels have made me the happiest guy in the universe.”

“We are not truly mystical creatures,” Shuv explains. “This is a human term of endearment.”

“I understand the hu’man male’s meaning,” I tell her.

Clyde chuckles. “Wow, it didn’t take nearly as long for you to get that concept as Nellie. You must really be as smart as she says you are. She’s always bragging about her brother, the dedicated doctor and scientist.”

*She is?* A feeling I cannot quite label rises inside of me. It contains a warm wind of gratitude for the sisterly pride. But

the wind also cuts me with regret that I took L'Nel for granted before she left.

“Hey, Nellie met up with her friends—you know, it’s romcom night on the colony ship,” Clyde says, interrupting my thoughts on my relationship with my sister. “But is it important for you to talk to her now?”

“If so, I can go get her!” Chun-Hua eagerly raises her hand. “I run real fast.”

*Is it important?*

A few moments ago, I felt the information I wished to impart to L'Nel was of utmost import. A matter of her future happiness.

But I can see now what I could not when my sister first requested permission to travel to Xalthuria.

She did not need me or even her own biological child to be happy. Without even talking to L'Nel, I can tell she is now happier as a normal citizen on New Terrhan than she ever was as an Elite on Xalthuria.

“No, that is not necessary,” I reply to her pinky-sworn hu’man mate. “Please relay that I attempted to interface with her and would be grateful if she could request a holo appointment to hail me back.”



“FATHER! FATHER!” my own hybrid clicks happily when I finally enter the kitchen.

Without me there, L'Eondris chose L'Than as this day’s biological chair for his first meal. But he throws his arms in the air to be picked up as soon as he sees me.

“There you are!” L'Than says when I lift my hybrid xalling from his lap. “I was just going to come looking for you. I was afraid you had *cold feet*, that is—”

“I am aware that it is New Terrhan slang,” I tell him as I take the seat next to him and settle L'Eondris in my lap.

“Are you ready?” Elle asks, eyeing me worriedly over the head of our son. “Do you want to go over the part about the Extinction Virus possibly being a viral agent of evolution one more time? That’s going to be the hardest bit for people to wrap their heads around, considering its name.”

“This science talk boring,” L’Eondris says with a huge nose sigh. “I will go with G’Lya.”

“Moons, we have got to start working on your manner—” Elle starts to say. Only to cut off when L’Eondris hops down from my lap and starts yelling, “G’Lya! G’Lya! Where you at? Me ready go beach now!”

“He is going to be in for the biggest culture shock when he sees how things work on New Terrhan,” Elle says, shaking her head after G’Lya appears in an instant to pick her little charge up and ferry him to the beach.

I believe Elle means this as a joke of commiseration. However, L’Than, who laughs at everything, fails to do so much as cant his nose ridge at this.

“I do not need to go over the speech again,” I assure her, bringing us back to the original subject. “But I will tell you about why I was late to first meal. It is a very good story!”

“L’Gon Louxos!” she says with an unnecessarily dramatic gasp. “Are you trying on entertainment? I love it.”

She waggles her clawless index finger up and down in the air in front of me. “This is a good look on you.”

“I comprehend nearly none of your highly idiomatic response to my words,” I answer. “But I am glad my offer of a story has made you happy.”

“I can explain!” L’Than returns his nose ridge to its usual cant of amusement. “According to the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary—”

“Can we do this later?” Elle asks, cutting him off with a laugh. “As much as I love hearing you explain my strange language to L’Gon, I need a ride to the palace. I’ve got a few things I need to talk with my sister about before the big Council Meeting, including arranging transport back to New Terrhan.”

L'Than stiffens, and his ridges return in an instant to the front of his nose.

“I cannot drop you off at the palace,” he tells her in a toneless voice, despite speaking New Terrhan.

“Why not?” she asks. “Wait, does this have something to do with your beef with Kira’s husband? I keep on meaning to ask you, what’s up with that?”

*What’s up with that?* Another New Terrhan idiom.

But my cousin does not need an explanation for this one.

L’Gon and I exchange a look.

“Okay, why not?” Elle demands again, her eyes flashing with alarm. “Tell me. Tell me right now what’s going on between you and Kel D’Rek.”

TWENTY-ONE

## ELLE

“Our Qel, your sister, Elle Garrett, has arrived to speak with you.” Kira’s personal assistant servant gives my sister a deep bow over her reverent nose touch after escorting me into my sister’s “closet.” This is where I find Kira standing on a raised dais, being dressed in a gorgeous pale-blue robe by another servant.

I manage to hold what the Xals would call my neutral nose through the announcement, but it cost my sister the standing vase I kick over as soon as she looks up at me.

“When were you planning on telling me?” I demand as the glass shatters at the foot of the round dais.

“Hey, Sis!” Kira looks to both sides nervously—before quickly dismissing all of the servants from the huge closet room.

Only after they’re gone does she paste on her queen smile to ask, “Tell you about what?”

*Is she serious?* “Your husband making L’Than watch you and him have sex!”

“Oh, *that*.” Kira has the nerve to sound surprised.

I jut my chin forward. “What did you think I was talking about?”

My sister shakes her head wearily. “Not trying to say I regret introducing Democracy to Xalthuria, but I’m neck-deep in political intrigue and secret side plots like you wouldn’t



believe. Plus, I'm cooking a third big-ass Xal in my womb—but yeah, Elizabeth, let's talk about your thing."

"My thing?" I take a step forward with balled fists before I halt, remembering my sister is pregnant. "I know you are not standing up there, trying to dismiss what your husband did to L'Than. You two are the reason he got mixed up in N'Ure's Amnesty Station escape plot in the first place!"

"Oh, I'm not standing up here dismissing anything," Kira assures me, placing both hands on her chest. "Believe me, I apologized profusely to your boy after he got out of a space prison. And believe me, nobody was more surprised than me when L'Than volunteered to run interference as your legal counsel after The Big Red Obstacle threw you underneath the Ministry of Health. I'm just surprised you're so mad about something that has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me?" I slam the side of my fist against the palm of my hand. "Has it ever occurred to you that the reason your cold war started with The Big Red Obstacle—the cold war Jack and I have been caught up in for months—was because of what Kel D'Rek did to his cousin?"

"I mean, yeah. Of course, I considered it." Kira squints at me, even though her vision's perfect now. "But are you saying you wanted me to explain that to you?"

"Yes!" I explode. "Because of you and D'Rek, Jack and I got caught up in all this unnecessary drama. Because of *you*, I had to do things to get L'Gon to agree to let me go back to New Terrhan with full custody of Jack. And because of you, I'm caught up in this weird temporary Three-Berry three-way with L'Gon and L'Than—because he was basically fucked in the mind after what you put him through."

"Oh, my moons! You three are hooking up?" Kira's mouth falls open. "So that's what was going on when The Big Red Obstacle brought you into the clinic romcom hero style."

"Don't call him The Big Red Obstacle!" I scream at her. "You don't get to call him that when you're the one who made him that way!"

“Oh no, Elle!” Kira shuffles down from the dais. “Did L’Gon and L’Than make you sleep with them in exchange for full custody of Jack? Both of them?”

“No!” I answer.

Before just vomiting out everything I’ve been holding inside of me: “The first time was an accident. I ate, like, two fistfuls of *ju’li* berries, and we went at it all night.”

“Been there,” Kira interjects with a wry shake of her head.

“But then L’Nel ran away, and L’Gon blamed me. So, we ended up making this contract for me to help him with the Xalthurian fertility trials. And it worked, and that means I get to take Jack back to New Terrhan. And I was, like, *yay, let’s celebrate with more three-way sex* because L’Than is—I cannot stress this enough—ridiculously good at it. But it was better than I thought it would be, and now I find out he was keeping this secret all along! And I’m freaking out, like, *See, Elle? You were right! You were exactly right!* It doesn’t matter how good this feels. You cannot trust him. You have got to take your ass back to New Terrhan. Like, post haste! So that’s why I came here.”

“To um... get passage for you and Jack back to New Terrhan?” she asks with a confused shake of her head after my wide-ranging monologue.

“Yes! *Obviously!*” I yell back. “Also, to inform you you’re the worst for not telling me your freaking husband forced L’Than to watch you two have sex! I mean, how messed up is that? Are all these crazy feelings I’m having even based on anything real?”

“Aw, moons, Elle...” Kira gingerly steps around the glass to wrap an arm around my shoulders and guide me over to a settee in the humongous room she has the nerve to call a closet. “For someone who got everything she wanted from this new deal you made with ah... *L’Gon*, including what sounds like some crazy-hot three-way sex, you seem awfully upset with the outcome.”

“I am happy with the outcome,” I insist to both my sister and myself. “This is the best outcome I could have imagined for Jack and me. We’re finally returning to New Terrhan. Everything has gone to plan.”

“*Buuutttt?*” Kira translates the next unspoken word, both her expression and her tone knowing.

*Crap.* Little sisters are the worst—especially when they become your big sister thanks to a stasis-induced age flip.

“There shouldn’t be any buts...” I answer, my voice as stubborn as hers is knowing.

“Oh, sis...” Kira’s new older, wiser sister tone takes on a shade of pity. “I found out the extremely hard way a few solars ago that ‘shoulds’ have nothing to do with reality when it comes to getting mixed up with a Xal—especially two Xals. And I’m sure it can’t be easy getting absolutely none of the credit for solving Xalthuria’s biggest public health crisis.”

“How did you know I...?”

“Please!” Kira rolls her eyes. “No advancement whatsoever on the issue for the entire time L’Gon Louxos has been in office? Then you move in, and he’s suddenly got it solved within a few months with the discovery of this ‘female joy’ my palace servants won’t stop talking about on top? Imagine me, Qel *fucking* Kira, actually believing The Big Red Obstacle would figure out that Xal females can have orgasms, too, on his own. *Please.* This is bioengineered corn all over again.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. They’ve got it from here. L’Gon doesn’t need me.”

Kira screws up her face. “Do they, though? I mean, what happens when they run into another fertility problem and can’t even conceive of a solution from a female’s point of view?”

I can’t say I haven’t worried about the exact same thing. But...

“That’s a Xalthurian problem,” I insist. I dutifully recite the old planet saying, “Not my monkeys. Not my circus. Plus, I’m needed on New Terrhan. Corn and the terraforming program, you know?”

Kira purses her lips at me. “You mean the one you and T’Kan can probably get up and running within a few weeks—unlike a decades-old fertility issue?” Kira shoots back. “Sis, they do not need you nearly as much on New Terrhan as we do here.”

“You’re wrong.” I shake my head stubbornly. “I mean, maybe you’re wrong.”

My shoulders sag. “I’m so confused, Kira. I don’t know what to believe anymore. I mean, my goal has always been to get back to New Terrhan. I can’t just change that. Can I?”

“Look, I get missing home,” Kira says into my conflicted silence. “But don’t run away from all of the amazing things you’ve kicked off here just because you’re upset about falling in love.”

I jolt. “What? I didn’t fall in love with anybody. Who told you that?”

“You did, *Elizabeth*, when you stomped in here, kicking over vases and screaming at me because Kel D’Rek did something very messed up to the guy you *love*.”

I blink at her, shocked—and not because she used my full name. She and my mom always do that when they’re trying to make a point. But because I think she might be right.

I shake my head. “I can’t be. I can’t be in love with two Xals—neither of which I can trust.”

My stomach roils. It feels like I am going to throw up.

Actually... it really, *really* feels like I’m going to throw up. I run to the facilities adjoining her suite.

No goggling at her state-of-the-art bathroom like I did the first time I visited her here at the palace. Nope, I run right on past the soaking bath and the gigantic gamma ray shower to empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

The sleek toilet’s screen immediately lights up with a series of Xalthurian messages I can now understand, thanks to my recent language download.

A special notification that a foreign user has launched food ejecta into its bowl.

An offer to call the palace doctor.

And most disturbing of all:

*Cause of gastrointestinal discharge, according to analysis of saliva in biological ejecta: Fetus Gestation. Female.*

My entire chest squeezes as the sleek waste disposal unit flashes and practically screams the secret I've been hiding for months before inviting me to urinate so the toilet can say for sure whether I'm pregnant or not.

I push the off-power symbol on this one, just like I did the one at L'Gon's house after he pressed that translator into my neck and it shocked the shit out of me soon after with the announcement that I was pregnant with a female child. But not soon enough.

"So, you're not in love, but you are pregnant." I look up over my shoulder to see Kira standing over me.

"Yeah, yeah," I wearily admit for only the second time out loud. "I'm pregnant."

But then I tell Kira what I told myself when I pre-emptively turned off the toilet in Jack's bathroom. "Being pregnant doesn't change anything."

I turn to rest the back of my head against the toilet's main collection container, which looks more like a bowl-shaped computer screen than the porcelain contraptions I'd seen in old planet entertainments. "This is just one more reason to return to New Terrhan. Where I have rights and can easily keep the baby since it's a girl without even having to register her. Where she'll be surrounded by mostly humans—not Xals, who I hate after what they did to our people."

"Yes, you hate Xals. So much you fell into a threesome and got pregnant," Kira says, her voice drier than the New Terrhan desert.

"I *should* hate them. But you're right, I don't." My eyes well up—probably because of all of these damn hormones now rushing through my body. "And for the record, I was pregnant before the night of the *ju'li* berries."

Kira gasps. “Wait, did you and L’Than do it on the space prison ship?”

“No! But yes, kind of. We pretended to have sex. But the humping wasn’t exactly dry, if you know what I mean. And for someone who was sure he was shooting blanks, it was like his swimmers were just waiting for an opportunity!”

“Run tell that.” Kira shakes her head and rubs a hand over her own distended belly. “Honestly, I think the Xals’ sperm turn super when they like you. I swear, all D’Rek has to do is look at me, and bam! I’m pregnant!”

I laugh and shake my head.

However, the thought of what all of this could mean sobers me up. “I don’t want to feel this way about either of them. I’ve obviously lost my mind.”

“Join the club, girl.” Kira squats down to regard me with a sympathetic look. “Nova, Zinnia, and I could tell you how you *should* feel gets tossed right out the window when it comes to falling in love with a Xal. And you’ve got *two* of those sexy aliens worming their way into your chest.”

Kira chuckles at her own observation. But I don’t.

“Listen, Sis, they’re not as bad as they first appear—even The Big Red Obstacle, maybe.” She sighs and lowers herself down to sit next to me on the floor. “They’re strong and loyal, and they love with an intensity that’s no-holds-barred. And they tend to surprise their mates and themselves with just how emotional they can get when a human shows them love.”

“I’m not in love with them,” I insist. Because no matter what Kira says, I shouldn’t be. “It’s just my hormones going crazy.”

My words sound weak, even to my own ears. But it doesn’t matter.

“L’Than became a lawyer, like, first thing when he returned to Xalthuria. What do you think he’ll do when he finds out I’m carrying his kid, even if it’s a girl.” I point out to my sister. “I can’t risk another custody battle. I can’t. And now I’m throwing up. I need to get out of here. ASAP.”

I turn my head to look at my sister. “Can you help me do that?”

Kira thinks about it. “Actually, there are a bunch of ships coming in from New Terrhan in two days for the kick-off party for my Winter Holiday. I’ll make sure you and Jack have passage on one of the ships heading back.”

“Thank you,” I say, ignoring the wave of sadness that passes over me at the thought of leaving Xalthuria behind. Instead of relief.

Two more days... Two more days until my ship leaves, and one thing’s for certain.

I’ve got to get out of here before the two Xals I refuse to fall in love with figure out I’m pregnant with the first hu’man-hybrid xalling.

But there’s one more thing I have to do before that.

“Sis,” I say, laying my head on Kira’s shoulder. “I need to ask you and your husband for a huge favor.”

TWENTY-TWO



## ELLE

“Elle, good you are here!” a green Xalthurian female with blue hair says when I walk into the huge meeting hall with my sister. She’s waiting just inside the doors. “I was beginning to think you had gotten lost—”

She breaks off with a sudden frown. “Have you been crying? Your eyes are red. Oh no, is everything in order with your well-being today?”

“I...” I have no idea who this female is. Or how to answer her question about my well-being.

I inwardly curse. I cleaned my mouth with a gamma ray flash before coming down here. But it didn’t occur to me to check my eyes for signs of distress.

“Yes, she was crying—*happy* tears,” Kira smoothly answers for me. She lowers her voice. “We were waiting until the Winter Holiday Festival kick-off party to announce this. But there will be a third child for me on the way soon—a second male.”

The green female flaps her ridges back.

Most likely because Kira is so obviously pregnant, no announcement would be required.

“It has been a long time since we saw each other,” I quickly lie. “And may I ask who you are?”

“Oh, I am I’Na, the mother of L’Than. Forgive me, I should have introduced myself upon our first meet.”

She touches her shoulder in the respectful way that elders greet those who are younger but closely connected to them.

And I flip through my mental download frantically with no idea of how I should greet her back. “Oh, wow...”

Kira saves me by patting her own shoulder. “Yes, let us not be formal with each other. It is so lovely to meet you, I’Na, mother of L’Than.”

I quickly follow suit with my own tentative shoulder pat.

But that seems to be enough for I’Na. Her nose ripples with approval before informing me, “I have already designated our seats. Follow me. We will speak and come to know each other a bit better before the start of the Council Meeting.”

Proving she really must be L’Than’s mother, she doesn’t wait for my reply before taking me by the elbow and leading me away from my sister.

I look back at Kira helplessly as the older female practically drags me down the aisle. My sister just gives me a little wave goodbye, obviously suppressing laughter.

“Here we are,” I’Na says, stopping beside the empty aisle seats in the very first row of the female’s section.

I can’t help but notice that the female section is way in the back of the chamber, almost as far away from the stage as you can get. It tells me everything I need to know about how much say the Xalthurian females get during these Council Meetings. Will we even be able to hear the announcement when L’Gon tells them it’s now possible for them to have children again?

However, I’Na’s ridges vibrate with delight as we settle into our seats. “I am so happy we can finally meet and talk. I have been pleading with L’Than to bring you to West House. He has told me so much about you, I have been jealous to miss out on being able to make conversation with such a brilliant mind and brave mother.”

Exactly how many nice things has L’Than been telling his mom about me behind my back?

My stomach twists, and I feel nauseous again. Leaving L'Than would be so much easier if he didn't keep on giving me reasons to already miss him.

"Do not be afraid to lean into the aisle if you are unable to see," I'Na says, mistaking my consternated look. She eyes my much shorter frame with a concerned click. "Perhaps I should lift you in the air so you can have a better view of the stage."

Okay, an offer of getting lifted into the air by my hybrid lover's mother was definitely not on today's Bingo card.

"I can see just fine," I rush to assure her when she reaches out like she just might do it.

"In that case, then, I would like you to direct your eyes toward my son's father, L'Rmie." I'Na points to the sour-faced Xal I met a few days ago. He's sitting at an arc table, with the Head of Council on one side of him and L'Gon on the other. "Do you see him there on stage?"

"Yes, I do. No worries," I assure her before she can reach out to try to lift me again. "I can definitely see the stage."

I'Na lowers her pointing talon. "He never looks at me with any fondness—much less speaks fondly of me to anyone else. I believe he resents me for not bearing him a full-Xalthurian son, as my father promised him I would when he bargained for my hand."

She lets out a sad nose sigh. "However, L'Than—my beautiful hybrid son—he talks about you constantly. And, though I have not seen you together, I would bet all the jewels in my wardrobe closet that he looks at you in the same manner our Kel looks at his hu'man Qel."

"Um... thank you?" I say, shifting uncomfortably. Why is she telling me all of this? And how in the moons am I supposed to respond?"

"I wonder if you feel the same about him." I'Na abruptly shifts her nose ridges from pleasant to business neutral. "I would like a grandxalling."

"Um..." I nearly choke on my own spit, and panic rises inside of me. This was definitely not the conversation I was

expecting to have so soon after confessing to my sister that I actually am pregnant—with I’Na’s apparently extremely beloved son’s child.

Maybe... hopefully, this is a rhetorical question. Something she’s wondering out loud and doesn’t expect me to ans—

“You may reply to me in your hu’man language if you are having trouble with your answer. I ordered a New Terrhan download a few days ago in anticipation of this meeting,” his mother says, disabusing me of that hope.

*Crap.*

“I... um...”

Lucky for me, a low-key klaxon sound interrupts our very uncomfortable conversation.

“Everyone, halt your speaking. Our Kel has arrived,” the orange Council Leader says onstage.

*Oh, thank the moons!* Saved by the call to order.

I turn my entire body toward the aisle so L’Than’s mother won’t see the silent but huge sigh of relief I let out.

Also, she was right. Leaning into the aisle is the only way for me to get a good view of D’Rek taking the stage with my sister right beside him.

Kel D’Rek does all the talking, but Kira beams out into the audience as he tells them, “I am supremely glad all of the planet delegates from far and wide were able to join us for this Council Meeting. I am sure the rumors over what Mal L’Gon is about to announce have already begun circulating. Therefore, I will not take too much of your time before ceding the floor to our Minister of Health.”

There comes polite clicking. I can only assume this is the Xalthurian version of applause.

Then L’Gon rises from his chair at the arced Council Board table. My breath catches, even though I just saw him this morning when he—not L’Than—dropped me off at the palace.

He looks so distinguished and put together, I somehow want to start applauding him before he even says a word and tear off his stately black robes at the same time.

*Damn pregnancy hormones.*

I force down all sexual urges and double down on looking impressed as L’Gon steps to the front of the stage to make his big speech.

“I, too, will not take too much of your time,” he tells the audience with a respectful nose salute toward the Kel.

“My announcement is simple. We recently ran experimental trials of a radical new fertility treatment, and we have confirmed that one hundred and eighty-three of the nearly three hundred females who participated in our special fertility treatment are now gestating pregnancies.”

Forget polite clicking. The crowd goes insane.

They jump to their feet, and though the Xals don’t applaud, their tongues and talons are just as thunderous. The Xalthurian definition of applause goes on for what feels like minutes on end. Even L’Rmie rises to his feet and leads the rest of the Council in clicking for his nephew.

Several members of the audience start calling out questions with loud interrogative clicks.

*“How soon can my mate get impregnated?”*

*“What does this mean for our Accord with New Terrhan?”*

*“How did you come up with the solution?”*

L’Gon signals for the excited audience to quiet down so he can start answering their questions.

“My cousin, L’Than Louxos, who facilitated the trials quite adeptly, is currently in the process of recruiting personnel to train on this novel fertility protocol. We hope to be able to sign up at least a thousand more couples and triads by the next lunar cycle,” he calls out to the audience.

“Our Kel is in talks with Xar T’Kan and the New Terrhan human council, but for now, the Accord remains. And as for

how I arrived at this unique hypothesis...”

I clasp my hands in anticipation of him launching into the speech we prepared.

But instead, L’Gon looks out into the audience.

To where I’m sitting.

And that’s all the warning I get before he says, “A hu’man is the mastermind behind this solution. Our Qel’s sister, in fact. Elle Garrett of New Terrhan.”

I gasp. Right along with I’Na and everybody else in the audience. And it’s not just because this is the first time any of us have ever heard L’Gon refer to the human queen with the proper honorific of “our.”

L’Gon doesn’t give anyone in the audience the chance to ask any questions this time. He launches right into a speech I definitely didn’t help him write.

“This brilliant hu’man scientist, Elle Garrett, deduced something essential about the Xalthurian female anatomy and impregnation process,” he explains into our shocked silence. “Something I could not see. Something none of the Xalthurians serving on our all-male staff could see. And thus, she—not me—is the reason our planet’s long, terrible fertility crisis has finally come to an end. And for that reason, I am inviting her to the stage to explain her fertility treatment and take your respectful questions.”

He says this. Then everyone in the chamber turns, seemingly as one. To stare at me.

Xalthurians have been conditioned for so long to believe that human females are only valuable as incubators. I can tell they have no idea what to do with this information.

This is pretty much the equivalent of me telling my fellow villagers a pigeon came up with the answers to the biggest problem plaguing our colony.

Luckily, Kira’s there to guide her chosen people. She starts clapping for me—like, human applauding me.

At first, it's just her in a sea of awkward silence. But then her husband joins in, carefully turning his palms so he doesn't scratch himself while making the human clapping motion.

L'Gon joins in, too. L'Gon and no one else on stage.

L'Rmie just sits there glowering, face puckered like he just ate something tart and covered in feces. But someone in the front row—someone I can only assume is L'Than—starts clapping as well. Then L'Than's mother stands beside me and does the same.

And soon the room is filled with a sound I never thought I'd hear outside New Terrhan: thunderous applause.

The females in our sequestered seating section are especially excited. They click “thank yous” at me. And give me the kind of reverent looks I've only ever seen Kira receive as their Qel.

So, this is what it feels like to be publicly acknowledged for your hard work. A wave of unexpected joy washes over me.

My heart swells with gratification, even as my face heats with embarrassment. Everyone's looking at me. And I'm not sure what to do with myself.

I oddly wish L'Than was here beside me instead of his mother. I could use the grounding squeeze of his taloned hand around my trembling one.

“Are you ready, Elle?” a smooth voice asks above me. In New Terrhan so perfectly toned, you'd think the line was being uttered by that old planet black-and-white entertainment star Cary Grant.

But it's not Cary Grant.

I look up—way up—to see L'Than standing over my seat with his hand extended.

The female section around me erupts in furtive clicks and hisses.

*“Is L'Than Louxos helping that small hu'man with her speaking fear? How gallant!”*

*“He is even more good-looking than when he was kidnapped from the planet by that evil N’Ure.”*

*“Now that I might bear xallings, perhaps we should invite him to share last meal with us, Mother. He is from the line Louxos, after all.”*

“It would seem there are many females willing to replace you,” I’Na leans over to click-hiss low in my ear. “I am sure they would love to bestow grandxallings upon me if you do not wish to return my son’s regard.”

Dark-green flames of jealousy leap in my chest.

But *two more days*.

I remind myself this isn’t real. This can’t be real.

Then I rise from my seat and let L’Than escort me up to the stage to give the presentation I’ve been planning with L’Gon all week.



TWENTY-THREE

## L'THAN

Louxos are taught from xallinghood to hide how they truly feel behind their noses. L'Gon prefers to keep his ridge neutral, and I can count on my hands the number of times I have seen L'Nel flex her ridge from out of its usual pleasant setting. I prefer to keep my own ridge canted to the side in permanent amusement.

But there is no hiding how I feel as I watch my gift give a flawless presentation about her revolutionary fertility treatment upon the stage of the Council Meeting.

Though I nearly laugh when my long-time friend J'Hsen announces to the row of Elite hybrid sons in our Qel's secret language, *"Do not tell our Qel I violated the Palace Medical Clinic's privacy policy, but I am the one who dispensed her Xalthurian Language Download."*

"Any questions?" Elle asks the audience from the stage.

Many hands shoot up in the air. And Elle begins to answer queries in her cutely accented Xalthurian.

Some of the questions are aggressive quizzes meant to expose her as a fraud.

"What is your educational background?" the Head of the Council demands.

He does not like her answer to that question.

"We are truly expected to believe that someone without any advanced education came up with this solution?" he asks her

with his body turned toward the audience. “Is this some manner of jest?”

“Hu’mans without formal education have a long and storied history of becoming some of our best innovators,” Elle informs the Head of Council. “In fact, many of our most renowned old planet corporations were founded by people who either chose to forego or did not have access to advanced education.”

She turns to back to the audience. “But, of course, anyone who has any doubts about my credentials is free to not undergo the fertility training I designed. There is, from what I understand, an extremely long waiting list. So, there will be plenty of time for people with such reservations to wait until the full solar to see how the first live births turn out.”

Elle regards the Head of Council with the same kind of smile Qel Ki’Ra employs when she is speaking with someone she is rumored to detest. “In fact, I will ask the Ministry of Health staff to make a special note regarding your wish to ensure your eligible family members be kept off that list.”

The Head of Council’s nose ridge immediately drops with regret. “Oh, I did not mean to...”

His daughter is rumored to be returning, along with quite a few—but not all—of the other Elite daughters, on a ship to Xalthuria in two days. No doubt they were tipped off to the possibility of being able to procreate with eligible males on their own planet. I can tell the Head of Council did not factor in the prospect of his own progeny possibly being excluded from the fertility trainings before asking his antagonistic question.

Elle turns back to the audience with a “Next question!” before the Head of Council can finish his protest.

The next query is delivered with several shy clicks from the back of the meeting hall.

“What made you suspect Xalthurian females were capable of sexual joy?” one Elite female dares to ask.

“Great question!” Elle beams at the brave female from the stage. “Your species is much more technologically advanced than ours. But understand, technological advancement does not equal cultural advancement—or even medical advancement. After our own scientific revolution, it took my species centuries to actually consider on a scientific level how women experience sexual joy. And that was directly due to the advancement of women in the sciences—a cultural advance which your species has not enjoyed yet.”

She paces the length of the stage and then back again. “Invention is often born out of necessity. For example, you genetically modified a whole generation of males for your war with the Kaidorians. We human females also had to be genetically modified—not for war, but to be able to travel far distances and thrive and reproduce on a new planet. For example, does anyone know why the original Accord put the Breeding Ceremony age at twenty-one?”

She waits for an answer, but everyone shakes their heads.

“It is because all of the non-gestating human females on the ship were genetically modified not to start releasing eggs until the age of twenty-three—which works out to about twenty-one in New Terrhan solars. By the time we started launching multi-decade ships into space, our scientists had put centuries of study into the issue of our fragile race’s procreation beyond the stars.”

She claps her hands together and offers the audience an excited smile. “So, note, much of your scientific advancement is war-based, and you had only put a couple of decades of study into this fertility issue by the time I came along. As a comparison, when our race was only twenty solars into an official mission to eradicate a devastating disease we called cancer, it had not even occurred to us to study the actual disease to figure out what it was. We spent quite a few decades of this mission only treating the symptoms and trying to poison and cut it out of our bodies. You could say that learning how to science was a big part of our education as an incredibly fragile race, who wished to not only rid ourselves of this disease but also travel through the stars.”

*“She is so smart!”* J’Hsen signs to me. *“It makes me wonder what she could do with an extended medical download training, like the ones your cousin and I received.”*

*“Me, too,”* I answer before quickly returning my eyes to the stage, where Elle is still speaking.

*“...when it occurred to me the Extinction Virus, which only targeted females, might have been an agent of evolution—an evolution that made your pleasure a necessity for procreation.”*

Elle once again smiles at the Elite female who asked the question. *“So, I will admit that, no, my hypothesis was not purely scientific. It was more of what we humans would call a hunch. I suspected that when it comes to procreation in this new post-Extinction Virus era, you matter. Your joy matters. And it is my belief your bodies were mutated—or some might even say, were evolved—by the Extinction Virus as a reflection of that. Does that make sense?”*

Her question is met with another round of palm applause by those in the female section.

It grows so loud, the Head of Council makes a quieting motion before announcing, *“There is only enough time left for one more quest—”*

*“I have a query! I have a query!”* A Council Guard standing upon the stage steps forward before anyone else has the chance to claim the last question.

I recognize him as one of the males who tried to forcibly remove Elle from East House just over a lunar cycle ago. Now, he has the temerity to ask, *“How will it be decided who gets to take part in the fertility trials next? My mate is eager to have a xalling. And I, too, would like to become a father. Will those of us who do not already have hybrids get priority?”*

*“I would... hmm... actually...”* Elle’s bold-speaking cadence falters a bit. But then she straightens up to say, *“Actually, yes, I would highly suggest throwing away the current waiting list and implementing an impartial lottery system for deciding who receives the next round of fertility training. But ultimately, that is not for me to decide. I will be returning to*

New Terrhan soon and leaving this treatment in the now very capable hands of Mal L'Gon.”

This answer to the Council Guard's question does not please me at all. As if to punctuate my inner feelings, a collective hiss of alarm goes up from the female section and many more hands raise in the air.

*“She is leaving for New Terrhan?”* J'Hsen signs beside me. *“Even though she is—”*

He abruptly stops signing, and his nose ridge lowers to neutral, as if he is thinking better of what he is about to say.

*“Even though she is what?”* I sign insistently.

“You will lower your question hands,” Kel D'Rek says, rising from his throne seat before J'Hsen can answer me. “The sister of our Qel has been on the stage long past this Council Meeting's allotted time. All further questions and votes will have to be pushed to the Council Meeting at the beginning of next solar.”

*The beginning of next solar?* My hearts seize. That gives my father even more time to figure out how to ensure my term limits measure does not pass.

I look to the Council Board table to find my sire once again leaned over and speaking in my cousin's ear. Was this the plan all along—to give Elle the floor in order to distract from the vote?

The dark suspicion swirls in my mind before the Kel calls my attention back to his side of the stage. “Before we finish, I have an announcement about my end-of-the-solar decree.”

Under the new rules of Democracy for Xalthuria, every solar the Kel is allowed to pass one order, which does not have to be voted on by the Council. Every other solar it has been something pro-hu'man, like visitation rights to Xalthuria for mothers and the introduction of Caretaker Residency contracts.

The crowd dutifully quiets down to hear what this solar's decree will be. Including me.

“After discussion with my Qel, I have decided to create a special seat on the Council Board with full voting rights for a Hybrid Representative.”

Everyone in my row gasps. Including me.

But the Kel continues like he did not hear us. “Until a proper election can be held, I am appointing L’Than Louxos to Council Member status as the representative of the hybrid sons.”

Unable to hold on to my usual cant, my ridges ripple along the bridge of my nose.

This is news. Even to me. *However did this happen?*

The last time I signed with Qel Ki’Ra, she still could not even convince her mate to let me set foot in the palace proper. How did this *miracle* come to be?

I receive my answer when I look toward Elle, whose face is lit up with happiness. For me.

Her words from this morn float through my head. *“I want to talk with my sister about a few things before the big Council Meeting, including passage back to New Terrhan.”*

I only heard the part about Elle needing to be dropped off somewhere I could not go for a reason I despised.

But now I can see this is Elle’s doing.

Because of Elle, I now have a Council vote. And that means, with my cousin’s two votes and those of our more hybrid and hu’man-friendly council members, I have the numbers I need to get term limits passed.

I no longer need my father’s approval to gain a Council Seat. But most importantly, I can prove to my gift that I am worthy now. Worthy of being her mate and a second father to Jack.

The Kel’s announcement is greeted with what the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang dictionary would refer to as *dead silence*.

Then the room explodes with emotion clicks and urgently hissed questions.

To which the Kel—no, *our* Kel. I can hold no anger at him anymore. To which *our* Kel responds, “That is all for this day. We will see you for the Council Meeting at the beginning of next solar!”

He makes a hand motion that abruptly cuts off all amplification in the meeting hall.

And I am immediately surrounded by the clicks and good wishes of my fellow hybrids.

It takes nearly as long as the meeting lasted to free myself from their congratulations and the questions of my now-fellow Council Board Members, many of whom are suddenly eager to make my acquaintance.

My father is noticeably missing from that contingent.

And a guard in palace robes pulls me aside to deliver a special message. “Our Kel says congratulations. Also, you are still not allowed in the palace. Do not even think of attending the Winter Holidays kick-off celebration.”

*Message received*, as they would say in New Terrhan.

I’m so excited about my prospects. Even notification of my palace ban does not *get me down*.

After finally extricating myself from the crowd of well-wishers, I race to East House in my ground auto, lamenting the fact I cannot fly as my cousin does due to the palace ban.

I screech to a stop in front of East House—only to falter upon the steps leading up to the sliding doors.

I have achieved the seat I have coveted for so long, but will it be enough to convince Elle not to return to New Terrhan?

The doors suddenly open, interrupting my moment of self-doubt. And to my surprise, Jack comes running out. With a bowl raised above his head.

A bowl of *ta’ri* berries I find out when he stops on the step right above me.

“Cousin L’Than! Congratulations! Congratulations!” he says, offering me the bowl. “Mother and me pick berries for you!”



“Berries you were supposed to wait to present until all of us could do it with you!” Elle’s voice chimes in from above in her cutely accented Xalthurian.

*All of us.*

I look up to see not just Elle but also L’Gon standing at the top of the steps.

“Congratulations!” Elle says, jumping up and down in a way that reminds me of Jack.

“Thank you.” I want so badly to kiss her for her thoughtful gesture. But Jack is here. And he does not know about our special relationship.

Not yet, at least.

Instead of kissing her, I look to L’Gon. And the reason why hits me *like a ton of bricks*.

I know I should not expect anything from him, knowing where he has always stood on most political issues involving hybrids and hu’mans. But as the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary would say, *I cannot help it*.

I want him to also be proud of me.

He looks away from me, his nose at a rigid neutral.

Leaving me with my answer.

Until he seems to decide to say, “Congratulations, Council Member Louxos.”

He gives his nose a respectful touch. “Welcome to the Council Board.”

I raise my arms in the air to mimic Jack and Elle’s celebratory gestures. “Thank you!”

I did it. I have my house and Council Seat.

Now, I must convince the two people in front of me to make our temporary triad into a forever one. And then my plan will be complete.

# PART 5

# TRIBULATIONS

THE BENEFACTOR: Is everything ready for the big package?

THE ZOOKEEPER: So yer talking to me now.

THE BENEFACTOR: Is The Zoo ready or not?

THE ZOOKEEPER: Yeah. Fine, it is.

THE BENEFACTOR: Good. Standby.

TWENTY-FOUR

## L'THAN

The entire night is spent celebrating our victories, and I soon lose track of how much time has gone by as L'Gon and I take turns inside of Elle, claiming and reclaiming her with our bodies.

Neither L'Gon nor I are high on aphrodisiac, but we cannot get enough.

We give her so little rest, Elle gives up on speaking any more Xalthurian and begins to refer to our activities as a “nonstop fuck fest.”

But she does not seem to mind this manner of festival. In fact, after a short bout of sleep, I wake up to the warm sensations of my gift's lips wrapped around my *diijo* and her small hands stroking up and down its length.

*Essh!* Her mouth is just as incredible as her breeding slit. I grip the sheet. It takes every bit of my willpower not to grab my gift by the head and raise my hips as her mouth devours me.

“Yes, Gift, just like that,” I hiss as her tongue glides along my sensitive ridges.

She practically inhales my *diijo*, pulling it so deep I nearly spill my seed down her throat.

But then I catch L'Gon watching from the corner of my eye. He has also awakened from his brief rest.

His gaze falls on Elle's eager ministrations, and he slowly rises to a sitting position, his hand finding his *diijo*, which is now so

erect, it points to the ceiling. He wraps his fist around it and slowly strokes his length, his eyes never leaving her.

“Look what you have done to your poor Second, Gift. Are you trying to make him jealous? Wicked *k’vani*.”

She raises her head to meet my gaze, those beautiful brown eyes of hers twinkling with mischief. “Do you want me to stop?”

Elle swirls her tongue around the tip of my *diijo*, lapping up the beads of my blue seed.

“No!” Reaching out to the hair she’s pulled to the top of her head in a big puff. I grip the soft mass, clenching it in my fist. “Do. Not. Dare.”

A smile curves her lips. “That’s what I thought.”

With one hand still wrapped around my *diijo*, she climbs over my leg and resettles on her knees to the side of me, with her bottom facing up. Directly in L’Gon’s face.

I hear my cousin’s sharp hiss. “You are blatantly attempting to make me lose my control, female.”

“And if I am?” She briefly glances over her shoulder at L’Gon and wiggles her bottom. “What are you going to do about it?”

L’Gon narrows his eyes, and his ridges flatten. “You will not tempt me so unless you wish the consequences.”

“Talk, talk, talk,” Elle taunts him. “Where’s my action? This pussy isn’t going to fuck itself, *Mal L’Gon*.”

Elle is in a strange mood tonight. Intoxicated—not by *ju’li* berries but by the power she clearly wields over us.

L’Gon hisses. “You will not tease me, female. I will make you cease speaking to me in this manner.”

That is the only warning our gift receives before L’Gon grabs her hips and buries his face in the folds of her bottom.

“Oh!” Elle’s grip tightens on my *diijo* as L’Gon’s tongue delves deep into the one place it has not gone before on her body.

Just when I was beginning to think we had taken Elle in every position imaginable.

My nose opens with anticipation. I find the bundle of nerves between her breeding slit with one hand and guide her mouth back to my aching shaft with the other.

“Yes, Gift. Take your punishment for your insolence as you attend to me.”

She continues to suck, growing more aggressive in her movements as L’Gon does things she definitely likes to her behind.

I know because she is leaking heavily into my hand as her arousal scent fills the air. I get drunker off her aroma than several glasses of *ta’ri* wine.

“Tell me how much you like what your Second is doing to you,” I command, despite her mouth being full. Of me.

But she finds the most delightful way to answer, making low vibrations as she sucks me deeper, past the barrier of her throat.

It feels so good, I begin to leak, and soon I am so weak with the aching sensations her mouth produces, my hand falls away from her sex.

I will not be able to hold on much longer.

“Elle, stop,” I tell her. “I want your breeding slit. I have no wish to spill in your mouth.”

She just giggles in a way that lets me know she has no intention of following my instruction.

“I am near completion,” I hiss. “Stop.”

She does not stop. She firms her hold, and her mouth becomes even more persistent. Leaving me no choice.

“Elle!” I click her name angrily as I helplessly empty into her throat.

To my surprise, she still does not release me. She swallows as strings of blue dribble down both sides of her mouth. But still her fist holds me tight. She proceeds to lick me until she laps

up every bit of seed that has spilled on her hand, on my seed sac, on my thighs. She is insatiable.

And drunk on her power over me.

“Wicked *k’vani*,” I hiss before wrapping my hand around her throat to bring her mouth up to mine for a kiss.

Then I return my hand to the breeding slit I neglected, despite how hard L’Gon is working between her plump behind.

Soon, she starts to shake under both our ministrations, and her mouth falls away from mine. “Oh, my moons! L’Gon! Oh moons, it feels so weird. But so good. I’m, I’m...”

I suddenly pull my hand away and command L’Gon to stop in a low hiss.

To his credit, he immediately ceases attending to her bottom and sits back on his knees. Like a warrior at rest between training exercises.

“Wha...?” Elle looks helplessly between us both. “Why did you stop? I was almost there.”

“Are you familiar with the human concept of *edging*?” I ask her. “There is a fascinating entry on it in the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary.”

“No, I am not familiar with that term,” she answers with an exasperated look. “Unlike you, I don’t read the New Terrhan Idiom and Slang Dictionary for funsies.”

“*Funsies*,” I repeat, looking at L’Gon as Elle looked at me when he called her proposed threesome “madness”—after avidly watching us rut like animals on the last meal room’s table.

“She must be punished for her insolence,” L’Gon says, interpreting my look out loud.

“Yes,” I agree. “And *edging* is a punishment of sexual withholding often used on *brats* who fail to comply with commands.”

I bring my gaze back to Elle. “Are you aware of what a *brat* is? Or shall I explain that to you as well?”



“Oh, c’mon,” she says, giggling with that same mischievous look in her eye. “It was just a little joke—”

Her cute little giggles come to an abrupt end, however, when L’Gon grabs onto her hips and slides into her back hole.

Elle’s eyes widen, and she lets out one of those hu’man gasps I have become so familiar with since the eve when we agreed to become a triad.

Perhaps sensing I want to savor this moment while my *diijo* regains life, L’Gon uses his superior height to plant a knee on either side of her and pull her up so her front side is facing me while impaled on his *diijo*. Her knees hover just above the mat, her pleasure button so engorged that it shamelessly peaks out from her breeding slit as her wanting fluids leak, leaving streaks of moisture on her inner thighs.

I derive much pleasure from watching Elle’s hips writhe in this position, seeking the climax she has been denied.

“Touch her,” I coldly instruct L’Than. “But do not allow her to find her female joy. Not yet.”

With a warrior’s solemn nod, L’Gon reaches around her body to rub at her pleasure button with one hand while cupping her mammary gland with the other.

“Please...” Elle’s head falls back on his shoulder as he mercilessly rolls the hardened tip.

“Please. I need more,” she quietly pleads.

L’Gon catches my gaze again.

And removes his hand from her sweet hot.

“You are not allowed to climax just yet, Gift.”

Her body writhes in frustration against my cousin’s chest. “Please, L’Gon, it hurts.”

With a pained look, L’Gon reaches for her breeding slit.

But I shake my head. “Not yet.”

And he withdraws his hand. Ever the obedient warrior, even under the most enticing of circumstances.

“Please,” she begs.

Her heady scent intensifies, tempting me to end her torture. But I wait several more heartsbeats before nodding to L’Gon to continue.

Once again, he captures her pleasure button between his thumb and forefinger as he buries his face against her neck.

“I can’t take much more of this,” she moans.

He rubs and squeezes the swollen nub. But just as she begins to stiffen, he pulls his hand away.

“Nooo!” Her eyes well with water, and she desperately reaches her hand down to rub at her own sex.

“L’Gon,” I say.

And he captures her wrists, pinning her pleasure-seeking hands inside the valley of her ample mammary glands.

“I was so close,” she cries pitifully. “Please, I need to come so bad. It hurts to want like this. *Please.*”

Her tears tell me my game has gone too far. But I cannot stop.

I snake my palm around her neck over the hands L’Gon has pinned to her chest. “Do you understand why you are receiving this punishment, Gift?”

She nods with tears streaming down her face. “I was bad.”

“You were bad,” I confirm. “Your First wanted to empty inside your sweet hot, and you did not let him. Now what do you say?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. Her eyes glazed over with helpless lust. “I’m sorry.”

“You are sssorry,” I repeat in New Terrhan with a Xalthurian hiss. “What are you sssorry for? Tell me.”

“I’m sorry for making you cum in my mouth,” she says.

I nod. But suddenly, I am the one who wants more. “What else?”

“I’m sorry for being a brat?”

I reward her with another nod. But insist, “*What else?*”

She looks to both sides in that confused way of hu'mans.

But she should not be confused.

“You know what I am waiting for, Gift,” I whisper in her language. “You know why you are truly here in this position.”

“I’m sorry for making the deal with L’Gon. I’m sorry I couldn’t choose you. I know I hurt you. And I’m sorry.”

L’Gon frowns at me over her head, the duteous warrior look fading from his eyes.

This is no longer a game, and I am getting too close to things neither of them wish to address.

I open my nose. Once. Twice to release my caught breath.

Then I say, “Lay her down. We must reward our gift for her newfound acquiescence.”

Needing no further encouragement, L’Gon positions our still-impaled gift on her side, and I waste no time inserting myself into her welcoming heat, which clings to me like a tight fist.

“*Essh*,” I hiss as her walls squeeze my *diijo* tightly.

“Your back hole feels amazing,” L’Gon whispers.

“So full... so good.” Elle sighs with audible relief.

“Do you feel that?” I whisper in New Terrhan. Not only to Elle, but also to L’Gon. “Do you feel how natural this is? How well we fit? We are mates meant to be, and we will never fit like this with anyone else.”

I kiss Elle deeply, then declare. “You are *ours*.”

“*Yours*,” she repeats on a heady moan.

“*Ours. Forever.*” I am so emotional, I can barely squeeze the New Terrhan words out of my throat. “Show her, L’Gon.”

He begins to move first, almost frantically, and I follow his movements until we find a rhythm that syncs.

Elle shakes her head from side to side. “I’m coming. Too soon! Too soon! Feels like I’m coming apart. Like I’ll lose my

mind. Too soon!”

At one point, a statement like this would have alarmed me, but now I understand her perfectly.

The torture has been agony. But it has also been sweet. None of us want it to end.

To my surprise, L’Gon answers before I can. “It is okay, our gift. We are here, keeping you safe. Let go if you need to. We will join you soon.”

It is as if L’Gon has pushed some manner of button with his reassurance. Elle grabs my shoulders and releases a high-pitched scream that reverberates throughout the suite.

More juices gush from her slit, and though I have only just slipped into her sweet hot, my body tightens as my own release follows shortly after.

Stars dance before my eyes. My hearts beat fast. Only this female has that effect on me.

“*Essh!*” L’Gon hisses from behind her, signaling his completion.

We lie there, joined together as one.

I am not sure for how long. But when the sun begins its rise into the sky, L’Gon also rises from the mat.

“I wish to clean myself,” he tells us. “But I also wish for you both to still be here when I return. I will ask G’Lya to come in early, and this morn, we will continue our celebration.”

Elle murmurs her assent to his plan, and I pull out of her breeding slit. But only to gather her into my arms as we wait for her Second’s return.

Despite no longer being inside of her sweet hot, a warm, deep pleasure continues to wash over me as I hold her in this manner.

At the same time, images we have not yet created together flicker through my mind.

And suddenly, I can no longer *hold my tongue*.

“It could always be this way between us,” I tell Elle in her language. “It never has to end.”

Elle stills in my arms.

But before she can speak, I issue my final command. “Do not return to New Terrhan. Stay. Stay with us. Forever.”

TWENTY-FIVE

## ELLE

*“Do not return to New Terrhan. Stay. Stay with us. Forever.”*

I had just been thinking how wonderful this last time had been. What a perfect way to end the Three-Berry Compact.

But all those warm feelings dissipate as I sit up on the mat with my heart pounding in my chest. “L’Than, don’t do this. We had a deal.”

“*You and L’Gon* had a deal because he is a coward who has let himself be brainwashed by my father,” L’Than answers, practically bathing his words in bitter human tones. “I would never have made such a deal. If you were the mother of my xalling, I would never have let you go. I would do whatever it takes to make you stay.”

“Exactly.” My heart cracks. He doesn’t understand that his argument against me going proves my point. “So, if you were L’Gon, you would keep me here? Against my will?”

“Against your will?” L’Than claps back his ridge in a way I’ve only ever seen on L’Gon. With rage, not shock. “How could we be against your will? How can you not see how good the three of us are together?”

Just a couple of questions, but they feel like a one-two punch that leaves my chest sore and aching.

I climb to my feet. “I’m needed on New Terrhan. I have a life there I want to build with Jack.”

“You have a life you want to build with Jack?” L’Than jumps to his feet to block my access to the shift he pulled off my

body and tossed earlier.

With a panicked breath, I also realize I can't get by him to reach the door that will allow me to leave this room. Leave this conversation.

“Build that life with us!”

His words enrage me for reasons I've tried to keep buried. Until now. “So, you want me to stay here and build a life with you. And then what? Both of us get to stand by and watch L'Gon marry some perfect Xalthurian bride? Maybe they'll even invite us to the wedding! That sounds like so much fun.”

“You will cease with your sarcasm.” L'Than makes a cutting motion with his arm. “You have only to convince L'Gon of my plan. Tell him you want us all to stay together. Tell him I will be your First, and he will be your Second. He is not as immune to you as you think he is. He will not be able to resist you if you tell him this is what you want! You saw him that night you made the Three-Berry Compact. With just a few kisses, you could make him do anything.”

The words spill out at the same time I realize the truth of them. “I don't want him to find me irresistible. I want him to not want to resist me. I want him to make a choice without me having to convince him of anything.”

L'Than shakes his head. “Your words make no sense.”

*Of course they don't.*

My heart feels like it's churning inside my chest. “Look, L'Than. I am so glad you don't suffer mentally from what happened to you, but it means you don't understand how it feels to be me. If you did, you would never ask me to manipulate another person into entering into a relationship. He either wants this or he doesn't. I wouldn't ever make him do anything he doesn't really want. Just like you shouldn't make me stay here—even hypothetically. The answer to your request is no. I'm going back to New Terrhan.”

L'Than looks at me. His expression hurt, so hurt in the human way.



But then it shutters, and his nose ridge lowers into a cold neutral. “In that case, it is not a request. You cannot return to New Terrhan.”

“What?” I shake my head.

“Your employment contract still stands, and the solar is not up. Technically, you cannot leave the planet without my cousin’s permission. The second contract did not make the first one null and void. And G’Lya will not agree to caretake Jack if she knows her mate’s much more lucrative contract to work in the kingdom city depends on her refusal to work for you.”

“Oh, my moons.” I realize at the same time I say it out loud, “This was your plan all along. To keep me here. You were never going to let me go home. And what about after my year is up? Then what would you have done?”

L’Than regards me with a look that is all ice and arrogance. “An entire solar is all I would need. If you spent that long with us, then this conversation would not be necessary. You would never want to leave.”

“What has come to pass here?”

We both turn to see L’Gon, now standing halfway between the mats and the door to the facilities. We’d both been so focused on our argument, neither of us had heard him return from his gamma ray shower.

“Tell her, Cousin,” L’Than hisses. “Tell her she cannot leave under Section 3 of your employment contract.”

L’Gon looks between L’Than and me in a way that tells me he never considered he could use my employment contract as a reason to keep me here.

His eyes scan my naked body, his gaze blazing with heat. And my heart leaps into my throat. This is what I feared. Why I knew I had to get off this planet and back to New Terrhan.

But then L’Gon says to me, “How soon can you have everything packed? For both you and L’Eon—I mean, Jack. Now that you have fulfilled your part of our second agreement and the Three-Berry Compact, I should call him Jack.”

He once again looks to L'Than, then back to me before adding, "And perhaps you should consider staying with your sister at the palace until it is time for you to leave."

The palace proper. The one place on Xalthuria where L'Than is not allowed to go.

It is a wise decision. The best decision as the three of us stand in our imperfect triangle, naked and raw. So why does it feel like my heart is shattering into tiny pieces?

"Okay," I say, nonetheless, my voice quiet and small.

L'Than explodes. "No! No!" he yells. "You cannot leave. I will not let—"

That's when I find out that all of L'Gon's warrior talk wasn't just that. One moment, he's just standing there. The next, he's pinned L'Than to the nearest wall with an arm in his cousin's neck, cutting off his breath.

However, unlike humans, Xals don't need breath to keep on speaking.

"Can you not see this is the only way? Do not do this to me, Cousin!"

Fear for L'Than immediately replaces fear for myself.

"Don't hurt him!" I cry out, running over to tug on the warrior's shoulder.

L'Gon flicks his eyes at me. "He is already hurt. I am only incapacitating him."

That said, he clamps the side of his index finger and thumb over the mid-point of his cousin's waist.

And just like that, L'Than immediately slumps against the wall, completely unconscious.

"This is an old medical trick," L'Gon explains as he switches his hands to guide his unconscious cousin to the ground. "Used to incapacitate wounded warriors who have lost their ability to reason in the midst of their pain."

My hands fly to my mouth. *Oh, moons.* L'Than had to be incapacitated. Because of me!

“Go. Go now,” L’Gon says. “Pack. I will meet you at the flyer.”

So, I do.

It is a quiet trip to the palace. Even Jack’s happy reaction to the air traffic stream over the ocean isn’t enough to jog a pulse from my numb heart.

However, the sight of the palace decorated for my sister’s much-promoted Winter Holidays Festival widens my eyes.

All of the royal residence’s pillars and sleek turrets are wrapped with strings of colorful lights. Ever-red trees decorated with charms dot nearly every flat surface like sparkling jewels. And the entire flyer parking pad is covered in a fluffy white substance that gives the appearance of snow—a substance I’ve only ever seen in old planet entertainments on the colony ship.

The flyer lowers toward the fake snow, and I jolt with surprise when I see Kira and Kel D’Rek himself waiting for us as we set down on the palace’s landing pad.

“You told them we were coming?”

“Yes.” L’Gon flicks off the flyer’s engine on that response, then says, “You will stay here while I converse with Jack.”

With that, he scoops our son from the back passenger seat and carries him to a point halfway between my sister and her husband.

I watch them talk quietly from the front passenger seat.

The mother in me wants to run up to them to overhear what they’re saying. But the human in me knows that L’Gon deserves to have this last moment with his son on his terms.

Still, that tearing sensation in my heart has returned. Tenfold. I briefly clutch my chest. And my eyes well up when Jack throws his arms around his father’s neck and gives him the hugest human hug.

Nonetheless, I make myself stay in my seat until L’Gon has handed him off to Kira and D’Rek, who shows me the practical reason he was invited to this handoff when he takes

my son from L’Gon. A feat Kira could never have pulled off in her heavily pregnant state.

“Thank you,” I say to L’Gon when he comes back to the flyer.  
“Thank you for keeping your promise.”

He nods.

And I stand there awkwardly with no idea how to handle this goodbye.

A wave of my hand doesn’t feel significant enough, but a kiss goodbye—especially in public—would be too dangerous for the reputation of the Head of the Louxos Line.

Who will be taking a Xalthurian bride now that I solved his race’s infertility issue.

*Moons, what a mess.*

This is the way it must be. L’Than proved that this morning. But confusion and sorrow swirl in my chest as I look up at L’Gon Louxos, now the opposite of The Big Red Obstacle, for the very last time.

I’m just about to settle for a hug when he asks, “When do you plan to tell L’Than you are pregnant with his xalling?”

TWENTY-SIX

## ELLE

“Ready to go?” My sister comes into the guest room I’m sharing with Jack just a couple of hours before her Winter Holidays kick-off celebration.

I’m almost done packing the two cases of floating luggage Kira gifted us. It didn’t take much time. Jack and I had everything we needed at East House. Other than clothing, which didn’t take up much space, I don’t think I added one thing to our list of possessions.

No, that isn’t true. I look at the little beach shovel I used as an excuse to cover up my terraformer search.

Then I look at the actual terraformer L’Gon pressed into my hand after our conversation yesterday.

Our very last.



“WHEN DO you plan to tell L’Than you are pregnant with his xalling?”

My heart stopped. “How... how did you know?”

“I was taught to be a better scientist by a certain hu’man who upended my life a few lunar cycles ago,” L’Gon answered in that way of his. With a coldly neutral nose. “So, when L’Than mentioned your preference for disposing of your waste outside, I followed a *hunch*.”

If we had been talking about anything else—anything else at all—I would have laughed at him using the same New Terrhan idiom I did to explain my huge discovery at the Council Meeting.

But he *knew*. My stomach bottomed out as he explained his subsequent decision to have a gander at the East House quarterly waste reports.

L’Gon finished the backstory of his discovery with, “Imagine my surprise when I discovered the first baby fathered by a hybrid was on the way.”

It felt like I was about to throw up for reasons that had nothing to do with my recent bout of morning sickness. “If you knew, why are you just now asking me about this?”

The ugly answer to my own question popped into my head before he could reply. “That’s why you didn’t fight L’Than on me leaving. You’re withholding this information until I’m back on my home planet because you’re banking on him finding out before the vote for hybrid rights, then following me to New Terrhan—therefore giving up his Council Seat.”

L’Gon kept his nose in that same cold neutral position, but to his credit, he didn’t lie.

“Yes, that was my plan exactly,” he admitted.

But then, he added, “Until this morning. Now I am not so certain. I did not enjoy seeing my cousin in such a distraught state.”

Finally, he lowered his nose ridges. “You truly wish to be free of him? Of me? You have no desire to stay here with us—at least until I find a bride?”

What did I truly want? Truly desire?

I stared up at him, knowing that nuance had no place here. There was truth, and there was the best thing to say under the circumstances.

“I just want to live my life on New Terrhan,” I answered in the coldest tone I could manage. “I want to be free to mother Jack

and this child I'm carrying without a bunch of custody battles and drama.”

I am only about twenty-three non-stasis years, but in that moment, I felt the technical 208 years old I am after leaving the old planet behind. “It’s been a hard, crazy few years since you pulled me out of that haystack. All I want is freedom now.”

For once, L’Gon didn’t hide how he was feeling from me. He considered me for the longest time as ripples of confusion and sadness traveled up his nose ridge.

But in the end, he stilled his nose to say, “You are correct. And I am sorry I have brought such harm to your life.”

His eyes found mine, just like they did that night when he pulled me out of the pile of straw. “I care about L’Than more than I care about my agenda. I care about what you want more than I care about wishing to keep you here longer.”

L’Gon opened his nose wide, releasing an audible sigh of air.

Then he pressed one of the sloped devices he’d showed me before the first trial into my palm. “This is a terraformer, programmed by me to create the perfect ground conditions for a berry vineyard exactly like the one in front of East House. You may take it back to New Terrhan without any interference from me. Ever. I will give L’Than my two votes, and I will not divulge your secret.”

L’Gon was going to keep my secret and let his cousin be great.

I knew I should have felt relieved. But I didn’t.

I knew I should have thanked him for the terraformer he gave me. And his discretion. But I couldn’t.

All I could do was watch him walk away without another word and fly out of my life.

Forever.





YES, I'm technically ready to go.

But I don't dare turn around to tell my sister that. I barely manage to keep the tears out of my voice as I answer, "Almost. I'm just making sure Jack didn't pack his cousin D'Lea. I heard them conspiring this morning."

Kira laughs. "That would explain why D'Lea added a large floating case to her Winter Holiday present list. I'll make sure to put a palace guard on her so we don't have to fly out to New Terrhan tomorrow to get her."

"Well, even though Mom and Dad are getting back their first grandson, you know they wouldn't mind a visit from their only granddaughter."

I swipe away my tears and put on a "I'm perfectly fine with the decision I made" face to finally turn around and talk to my sister.

However, all joking ends when I find Kira, resplendent in the shimmering green-and-red gown she had made special for her first Winter Holidays Festival kick-off party on Xalthuria. "Oh, my moons, Sis, you look beautiful. Like some kind of abundance goddess from an old planet myth."

"Aw, thanks! That's so much lovelier than what my husband said." She switches to Xalthurian to do her impression of Kel D'Rek. "You will remove yourself from my sight, *k'vani*, lest you wish to wear another dress to your inaugural event after I rip this one from your body."

"Aww, he calls you *k'vani*, too?"

I want to laugh, but tears unexpectedly well in my eyes. *So much for the brave face.*

"Aw, Sis!" Kira draws me into her arms as best she can with her hugely pregnant belly. "You know, I don't think it's supposed to hurt this much."

"What do you mean?" I ask, sniffing into her shoulder.

"I mean, you've been walking around like a grieving ghost ever since L'Gon Louxos dropped you off," Kira answers with a tough tone, even as she gently rubs my back. "I know you

have your reasons for leaving. Possibly good reasons. But if it's a good decision, it feels right. And I don't think you're feeling right about going back to New Terrhan. Are you?"

"No, I'm not." I shake my head sorrowfully on her shoulder. "But if L'Than finds out I'm pregnant..."

"He'll be overjoyed," Kira finishes before I can. "And he'll put the same energy he applied to advancing hybrid social justice into being the best father ever to the first hybrid-fathered daughter. Think about what you're denying him. What you're denying yourself if you don't stay."



*"I CARE about L'Than more than I care about my agenda. I care about what you want more than I care about wishing to keep you here longer."*

The last words L'Gon said to me ring in my ears as Jack and I get into the palace flyer less than an hour after my talk with Kira.

"Are you secure in your seat for our short flight to the New Terrhan transport ship?" the pilot asks.

"Actually," I answer. "There's been a change of plan."

TWENTY-SEVEN

## L'GON

I have been staring at the blank holo screen meant to contain my speech to my staff about L'Than Louxos's immediate resignation for quite some time when my door announces, "*G'Lya Rui requests an audience.*"

Oddly enough, G'Lya had fallen into the hu'man habit of knocking when she had been charged with Jack's daily care. I suppose her utilization of that hu'man custom was done now. Just like the Three-Berry Compact.

The ache over my right heart is back. Even worse than before. I rub at it before answering the door request with a sharply clicked, "Enter!

"Yes, you may leave work early for our Qel's Winter Fest kick-off party," I say after I hear the office door open and close.

I should turn around to address G'Lya, but the thought of looking at the pretty orange servant who attended to Jack makes the ache even worse.

I keep my back to her as I add, "In fact, tell the entire staff they may go home early."

"Oh, thank you, Mal L'Gon, but that is not why I requested entrance to your office," G'Lya answers behind me. "My mate Wa'Kyri is so very grateful to have the job as your cousin's sole household staff, but she has become quite concerned about his well-being of late. She says he has not eaten anything since his sudden return to *Ju'Li* House last morn or

attended to his hygiene. Only requested bottle upon bottle of *goji* berry wine.”

Inside, I cannot say I blame him. If not for my work, I might have attempted to clear this terrible feeling inside of me by consuming too much wine myself.

But out loud, I ask G’Lya, “And you are relaying this servant gossip to me because...?”

A moment of hesitation. “I thought you two were... close. That you might consider doing something to help him.”

My stomach twists at the thought of how little help I provided L’Than the morn of Elle’s departure.

“Something like what?” I all but spit out the question.

“I... I...” G’Lya makes a series of confusion clicks before admitting, “I do not know.”

I let the inanity of her answer rest there for a few cold beats before once again commanding, “You will tell the staff they are free to go home early.”

*“I just want to be free.”*

Elle’s words echo in my mind as G’Lya says behind me, “Yes, Mal L’Gon. Right away. I am sorry to have bothered you.”

I hear the door open, but instead of leaving without another word, I hear G’Lya say, “Oh, hello, sir. I did not know you were waiting to speak with Mal L’Gon. Apologies. May I get you something to eat or any refreshment before I leave for the day?”

I finally turn around just in time to see my father answer G’Lya with a cheery click, “There is no need for that. I am sure you and the rest of the staff are eager to depart for our Qel’s Winter Fest.”

“We are.” G’Lya glances over her shoulder at me before bidding my father a good eve.

“I am glad I was able to catch you before you left for the Fest,” my father says, walking over to the chair in front of the

desk he gave me when I took over as the head of the Louxos Line.

“I have no plan to attend that party,” I inform him. “Or any other Festival activity.”

“Come now, Son. I know you and L’Rmie are upset by our Kel’s decision to reward L’Than with his own Council Seat. But that is no reason to pass up this significant opportunity!” my father answers with his usual cheery click. “Our most important business partners are flying in from all over the planet. Along with their eligible daughters.”

My father is owed the respect of an elder, but I can only stare at him blankly.

“Here, I have put together a dossier of the eligible Elite females expected to attend the *kick-off* party to make your decision easier.” He swipes a holoscreen into the air. “There is even a moonstone blend from the Silks Region amongst your choices. It is said her beauty makes that N’Maryah N’Vaise look like a dull rock.”

Father pulls up an image of a moonstone Xalthurian with shimmering green hair. It is true, she is aesthetically pleasing in a way that outshines N’Maryah N’Vaise.

Yet, her beauty feels like nothing compared to that of the matte-brown jewel I shared with my cousin.

“Yes, I believe you could be very happy with this one,” my father says, mistaking my look of painful realization for one of interest. “Her sire deals in both silks and metals, so he currently holds the uniform contracts for both the palace and the Xalthurian Military. This would be an ideal match between our two lines, and your progeny would enjoy...”

*Happy. I could be happy with her.*

The rest of my father’s words fade underneath a sudden onslaught of memories.

Elle and I laughing in the satellite office.

My cousin’s face when we presented him with celebration berries on the steps.

The way my hearts thundered when he insisted to her, “You are ours!”

“Happy. I was happy.”

“Excuse me, Son?”

I do not realize I have spoken out loud until my father looks up from the screen to regard me with a frown. “What did you just say?”

I stare at him. But instead of issuing a denial, I say it again. “I was happy. With them. This last lunar cycle, I was the happiest I have ever been. Not because of a merchant alliance. But because we fit. Because we belonged together.”

My father shakes his head. “Who is ‘them’?”

His nose ridge collapses before I can answer. “Oh, L’Gon. Does this have something to do with that terrible case of Ceremonial Mind Rot you suffered solars ago? Has it come back?”

I slam my fists against my desk with an angry click. “You only call it that because you have never experienced anything like these emotions I am feeling. Not with my mother, who was chosen for her family name and wealth. Or anyone else, from what I can tell.”

I realize at the same time I inform my father, “This is not Ceremonial Mind Rot. It never was. I knew from the start how I felt about her, and even that *millo* you forced upon me to erase my memories could not erase my true feelings. This is *love*. I am *in love* with Elle.”

“The hu’man birth vessel?” My father’s nose becomes completely neutral—the way it does when he is confused and wishes no one to know.

I used to respect his ever-dignified composure. But now it strikes me as false. A male who operates on old rules and assumptions without any curiosity.

“I am sorry for confusing you, Father. I know the concept of me prioritizing my happiness over Louxos ambition must be hard for you to comprehend. But I will not marry a Xalthurian

bride. I will form a triad with L'Than and Elle, with whom I have found true happiness.”

My father continues to stare at me like I am speaking another language. And my impatience to go to Elle overtakes my last shreds of filial respect. “I am sorry, Father, but I must go.”

“Hold, L'Gon.” My father grabs on to my arm. “Of course, I want you to be happy. And if I impeded that with my decision to give you *millo*, I am sorry. I was not aware you carried such deep feelings for the hu'man birth vessel.”

My hearts fill with relief. His validation of my feelings could not have been more unexpected. Still, I must correct him. “Her name is Elle. Elle Garrett. But hopefully, it will become Elle Garrett Louxos after we talk. I must go!”

I do not give my father the chance to ask any more questions.

It was not Ceremonial Mind Rot. It was love! And I must let Elle know how I feel before she leaves to New Terrhan.

I am not sure what to expect after I set down on the palace's large landing pad, now filled with flyers with regional plaques from all over the planet.

But it is certainly not my cousin, arguing with several palace guards at the halfway point between the pad spaces and the palace access doors.

My usually well-put-together cousin appears crazed and unkempt. His unbound black hair is in disarray, and his golden robes are disheveled, as if he has slept in them. Though, judging from his appearance, he has not rested since I have last seen him.

“Let me in!” he shouts as I approach the group. “I do not care if the Kel arrests me and beats me again. You must let me in to see Elle—Cousin, what are you doing here?”

Before I can answer, another voice says, “That was the same question I came to put to you.”

We all turn to see Kel D'Rek approaching from the palace doors, flanked by more guards. “How dare you disobey my ban by appearing here, L'Than Louxos?!”



“How dare I?” L’Than shouts back with no regard for his life whatsoever. “I dare because I was never in love—or even attracted—to your mate! My hearts, my body, my entire soul belongs to Elle Garrett. Everything I have done since returning to New Terrhan has been for her. And her alone!”

L’Than pounds his fists over his hearts, never breaking eye contact with our Kel. “It is an insult to my *love* for my future mate to ban me from the palace for something that happened solars ago—something that has nothing to do with how I feel about Elle now. I should have told her that, instead of threatening her. I should have just told her how I feel. Please, my Kel.”

L’Than suddenly melts from a defiant stance to a prostrate bow on his knees. “Let me into the palace so I may tell my gift what I just told you.”

The palace guards advance, as if they plan to use my cousin’s prone position to haul him off.

But I get between them to say, “And I feel the same way, my Kel. I, too, would like to tell Elle Garrett how I—no...”

I turn back to help L’Than to his feet. And for the first time, we face down an obstacle together as I edit my previous words. “We must tell Elle how *we* truly feel about her. Please, my Kel. Allow us to do so.”

Kel D’Rek regards us for a long, hard beat.

Then his nose ridges abruptly soften. “Your pleas produce the hu’man emotion of *empathy* within me. I remember feeling the same desperate way after I realized I carried such *love* for our Qel.”

He switches his sharp gaze from me to my cousin. “L’Than Louxos, you are no longer banned from the palace.”

My hearts leap, and beside me, L’Than lets out an audible nose sigh of relief.

But before we can advance forward, Kel D’Rek says, “However, the sister of our Qel is no longer on these premises. She and Jack were flown to an interstellar ship, along with several other females who wished to visit their home planet for

the New Terrhan Winter Holiday Festival. And that vessel is set to depart any moment now.”

As if to confirm what the Kel is saying, the sonic boom of an interstellar vehicle launching suddenly hits our ears from several lengths away.

We all turn to see a vapor trail streaking behind the New Terrhan ship as it makes its way into the stratosphere.

“Do not become upset again, First,” I tell my cousin, clamping a hand onto his shoulder. “We will follow her to New Terrhan. Together.”

L’Than smiles at my first-time use of the titles we are now both determined to claim. “You are right, Second,” he says with a determined click. “We will go after her. Together.”

We nod at each other, sealing our new resolution.

Then look back at the departing ship we will soon follow in our own interstellar vehicle.

Just in time to see it explode in a fiery burst right before it reaches the upper atmosphere.

# PART 6

FOREVERS

## THE ZOOKEEPER

Not sure what to expect when I finally walk out to the loading bay to meet the interstellar delivery drone ship with our latest zoo acquisition.

*All this fuss over one female. Better be worth it.*

I release the airlock on the drone ship's door.

Then I grab onto my cut horns when I see what is inside.

Not just our first brown acquisition, but several more huhmaans besides. They lie unconscious in a pile of naked bodies.

I cannot believe this. Our end-of-solar hunters will be filled to their horns with excitement.

One of the pale pink ones has a message lasered onto her chest in Xalthurian squiggles. Unsigned, but I know immediately that it comes from The Benefactor when I step closer to read it: **YOU ARE WELCOME.**

TWENTY-EIGHT

## ELLE

Somebody slaps my face.

And I wake up to find myself in a grassy field filled with berry bushes and orchard trees underneath a soft blue sky. It looks almost exactly like the orchard on L’Gon’s estate. But bigger, with rolling hills and way more trees filled with fruit hanging low enough for even a human to pick from its branches.

There are also a lot more topless females.

I sit up to blink at the sight of females from several different species loping around drowsily, picking fruit, and taking lazy naps in the soft grass.

“Oh, good. You’re finally awake,” a voice says behind me.

I startle and turn to see a gorgeous blonde woman standing directly behind me, wearing nothing more than a satiny loincloth over her soft curves. I recognize her as an orphanage girl from my same Breeding Ceremony year. But I can’t remember her name.

“Sara,” she supplies, reading my confusion. “And you’re Elle, right—the one with the nearly blind sister? I saw you in the stasis tanks before they shipped me out to The Zoo.”

*Sara? Blind sister? The Zoo?*

I blink some more, trying to catch up. But there’s some kind of heavy fog in my head that won’t let me. *Am I...?*

“Am I dead?” I ask her. “Is this the alien version of heaven?”

Sara gazes down at me with a soft, angelic look—then snorts with laughter.

“Nope. Definitely not heaven. Though death might be better than here.” She sticks out her hand to help me up. “Welcome to The Zoo.”

I’m grateful for the assistance. My legs feel so weak. But I become even more confused when I get to my feet.

The beautiful glade is even larger than it appeared when I was lying down, but I can see now that it’s surrounded by glass.

I look down my body to find my breasts bare. I’m only wearing a loincloth, too.

*Welcome to The Zoo.* Suddenly, Sara’s greeting takes on more meaning as I look around the space. It strikes me less as an orchard now and more like some kind of habitat.

The area is mostly a wide-open space of bright-green grass scattered with groups of multi-colored females. Large trees with sprouted leaves are strategically planted all over, giving the appearance of a magical forest. They offer shade from the blaring light shining through like simulated sun.

And there are even more napping humans than I perceived while I was lying down—at least twenty of them, passed out in the grass with their arms and legs akimbo and completely naked, save for their loincloths.

For some reason, the palest one lying closest to me has a message scrawled in Xalthurian across her stomach.

“*You are welcome,*” I mumble, reading out loud.

“You can read that squiggly shit?” Sara asks beside me. “That’s a first.”

Her voice sounds somehow both far away and too loud.

*What is happening?*

I feel... weird. Woozy, like everything’s happening at the speed of hazy smoke.

“Where am I?” I ask Sara.



Then, before I can answer, an even more urgent question takes root in my foggy mind. “Where’s Jack?”

Pieces of memory flash through my brain.

Deciding to go to L’Than instead of the ship departing for New Terrhan.

Telling the purple palace driver there was a change of plans.

“Take us to *Ju’Li* House at the Louxos Orchards, please!” I said as I strapped Jack into the passenger seat beside me. “Do you know where that is?”

“Oh, yes, I know exactly where *Ju’Li* House is,” the pilot answered, turning around in the driver’s seat. “Let me help you secure your xalling.”

He reached out toward me and Jack, and I noticed the glint of something in his hand. A circular disc.

I wondered what it was. I even opened my mouth to ask him about it.

And then...

Nothing. That’s the last thing I remember before waking up in this place Sara was calling The Zoo. Loincloth naked. Without my son.

Panic claws its way through the weird, hazy fog. *Oh, moons! Oh, moons! This is spacelab all over again.*

“Jack! Where’s Jack?!” I scream.

“Calm yourself, hu’man. We do not want a repeat of what happened at my spacelab,” a voice from overhead commands. Just like the one in the space prison I found myself in the last time I woke up in a glass cage.

But not *just* like that one.

N’Ure is dead. I saw the body myself. So, this must be someone else.

I think back to my many conversations with Nova on the ride to Xalthuria after we seized the ship. I had been too concerned about Jack still being in stasis to wonder too much about the

mad scientist who had put the both of us there. But she and her Xalthurian mate had believed there was someone pulling the mad scientist's strings and funding his terrible lab.

Someone both she and my sister kept referring to as *The Benefactor*, even though they were never able to identify the person behind the dead Prime Minister's evil schemes.

A terrible, gut-wrenching feeling comes over me as I remember what L'Rmie said when he warned me against getting involved with L'Than.

Then I raise my eyes to what looks like an observation deck high above the space.

There, I find a slender red alien staring back at me. One I recognize.

He smiles, his ridges curling back with pure arrogance. Then he speaks into what must be some sort of amplification system.

His voice echoes through the habitat as he says, "*Let us give welcome to the newest member of our menagerie!*"

TWENTY-NINE

## L'RMIE

In my home office, I watch the news of the Louxos cargo and passenger ship explosion upon the planet-wide holofeed with racing hearts.

*He has gone too far!*

Then I swipe open another holoscreen to type that thought as a message to The Benefactor on his encrypted channel.

---

*You have gone too far! Killing all of those innocents. How could you???*

---

There is a long delay, which gives me plenty of time—too much time to think about the hu'man female I tried to warn at East House. The one who reminded me of Lakshmi, the golden-brown hu'man woman I secretly visited for solars until The Benefactor found out.

“I’m pregnant,” the birth vessel called Elle told me in response to my warning about staying away from L’Than.

“I’m pregnant, and I desperately don’t want L’Than to know. But if you insist on using your sterility excuse to keep him and the other hybrids off the Council Board, I’ll be forced to announce it to everyone. So, I’m really going to need you to withdraw your anti-hybrid measure at the next Council Meeting.”

I had been so shocked to be threatened by such a fragile creature. With the news of my first grandxalling!

But even as my hearts had leapt with secret joy, I knew how dangerous this news was. That it would make her a target—just as it did the hu'man mother of L'Than when The Benefactor found out about my many visits to her on New Terrhan.

A blinking system response message interrupts my terrible memories of the hu'man I lost in a “Field Work accident.”

---

*THE PARTY YOU ARE TRYING TO CONNECT WITH IS  
CURRENTLY OFF-PLANET.*

---

But why would he be off-planet?

The possible answer to that question drops down into my head with a sickening thud.

Just as the door of my office chimes. “*Entrance request from L'Than Louxos.*”

*L'Than is here.* My nose darts from side to side. I must compose myself.

If L'Than finds out about any of this, then The Benefactor will hurt him as he has been threatening to do all of these years.

I fix my nose in its usual sour sneer before saying, “Enter!”

To my shock, L'Than does not come into the office alone. L'Gon charges in right beside him.

“What did you do?” L'Gon—not L'Than—demands, grabbing on to the collar of my casual robes. “What did you do to our mate and my son?”

There is no keeping my nose in a sneer then. I shake my head, my ridges clapping back in fear. “I did nothing!”

“Deceit! I do not believe you!” L'Than clicks behind his cousin.

L'Gon lets out a hiss of agreement. “That was a self-automated Louxos ship that exploded, which conveniently only had hu'man passengers—and Jack! No one but you would have had the access and the gall to blow it up.”

L'Than shakes his head at me. "You truly hate me this much? That you would kill our mate and your nephew. Also, my unborn daughter."

"You know about the xalling?" I ask him over L'Gon's broad shoulder.

"I do now." L'Than glances at L'Gon, his ridge crumpling. But then, he resets it into a cold neutral. "And you will pay for what you have done."

He pushes up his robe sleeves. "What I have planned for you, Father, will make the beating our Kel gave me look like a gentle slap."

I have tried to protect L'Than. All these solars, I have tried to protect my son.

But the rage in his eyes, so similar to what I felt when I learned of his birth mother's demise, tells me the time of protection is done.

"I did not do it!" I shout as he advances on me. "But I am now ready to tell you who did. And where you might find the hu'man you *love*."

*Love*. For the first time ever, I allow myself not to just feel that word for the beautiful hu'man woman who was taken from me. But say it out loud.

L'Than is so incensed, he does not seem to hear me, but L'Gon stops his cousin's forward movement with an arm across his chest.

"Hold!" he says to both L'Than and me. "Are you telling us that Elle is still alive?"

THIRTY

## ELLE

*What in the entire...?*

L’Gon’s father, L’Rzo, is The Benefactor. L’Rzo, not the human and hybrid hating L’Rmie, is the mysterious Xalthurian behind all the bad shit that happened to my sister, Nova, and me after my fall from that cliff!

Just like in the spacelab, the announcement repeats. But this time it’s not just Xalthurian and Kaidorian. The list goes on and on, making me wonder how many species of alien female are being kept in this horror-house zoo.

I also do not like the overhead voice’s use of the word of “menagerie.”

I want to ask L’Gon’s father why. Why did he kidnap me and bring me to... wherever this is?

But before I can, Sara says, “Come with me. I’ll take you to your son.”

Worry for Jack eclipses any need to figure out where I am or why I was brought here.

I follow her without protest, and a few technically short but emotionally long minutes later we reach what appears to be the center of the habitat.

A glass cage sits in a meadow, surrounded by fruit trees. It looks exactly like the one I was kept in with L’Than, but it’s made up of five glass walls instead of three. One for each side of the square and a ceiling made of the same material. It would be a perfect cube if not for the grass floor.



Several more human women have gathered around the cube, blocking my view.

But a voice clicks out, “Mother? Mother, where you at? I no see you! Where you at, Mother?”

And that’s when I realize...

*Jack...* My Jack is inside that glass cage.

“Jack! Jack!” I push the women aside and drop to my knees in front of the glass wall.

Sure enough, there’s my baby boy, sitting naked in the grass.

As soon as I appear in front of him, he immediately bursts into tears. In that way human babies do when they see the parent they’re searching for and can safely lose their shit.

I’m about ready to lose mine, too. A cage. That bastard put my baby in *a cage*! And I know Jack’s got to be hungry on top of his wailing need for comfort.

I can’t stand to see him trapped on the other side of that glass. After my lab station imprisonment, I know how futile it is to beat on the unbreakable material, but I do it anyway. I’ve got to get him out of there!

Without warning, all the human females, save for Sara, suddenly dash away—like birds freaked out by the sudden appearance of a predator. And that “being watched” feeling comes back over me.

I’m not surprised when I look up to find L’Gon’s father staring down at me from another part of the observation deck.

“How could you do this?” I demand in Xalthurian. “To your own grandson?”

“I care no more for that xalling than my son used to before you warped his thinking,” L’Rzo answers. This time the system doesn’t amplify farther than the space I occupy with Jack or translate into several languages.

L’Rzo shakes his head from his high above perch. “I still find it incomprehensible that he chose you over all the other eligible Xalthurians he could have had.”

I jolt. “What? You think L’Gon chose me?”

I keep one hand on the glass to comfort Jack the best I can. But I turn the rest of my body toward our captor to inform him. “He let me go. I was on my way to *Ju’Li* House to tell L’Than I wanted to make a life with him.”

L’Gon’s father stares at me. “Is that what you think? That my son would have allowed the two of you to create a life without him?”

Yes, that is what I believe. And I’m right. Aren’t I?

Between the groggy feeling in my head and the arrogant reproach in the slender red alien’s expression, I have to question everything I assumed.

“My son actually had the temerity to tell me all about his plan to form a triad with you, L’Than, and that disgusting hybrid. Along with a bunch of nonsensical words about you making him happier than a Xalthurian bride ever could.”

*He said that?* My heart soars with the knowledge that L’Gon wanted us to stay together, too.

But then L’Rzo says, “Apparently, I played my role of harmless ex-Council Member much too well. He actually believed I would allow that. Fortunately, I was able to acquire you for my menagerie before he made his decision public.”

And just like that, my stomach craters.

L’Gon loves me and wants to create a triad family with Jack and the baby I have on the way.

But I never told him how I feel. And now it’s too late. I’m trapped with our son, moons know where—maybe millions of miles away from Xalthuria.

I bow my head and curse myself for running away to the palace instead of standing up to my fears and letting the two males who love me know that I love them back.

I give myself a moment to grieve. But then I lift my chin right back up. I’ll be damned if I give this human-hater an excuse to think he’s won.

“So, you’re saying he loves me, just like I love him. What makes you think he won’t come looking for me when I don’t land in New Terrhan?”

“Look around you.” L’Gon’s father turns his taloned palm up to wave a proud hand over the glass-enclosed space. “You are not my first acquisition. I know how to disappear a quality specimen. And in your case, I arranged to have a perfectly good interstellar transport cargo ship of berries blown up to make those besotted fools believe you and every other hu’man female on that ship are dead. No loss, really. It was a monthly shipment our line is still required to make to that wretched planet you call home.”

L’Gon’s father lowers his hand and tilts his head thoughtfully. “It is a masterpiece of planning on my part, when one considers it. L’Than, I am told, was so distraught when you left for the palace that he had all but opted out of leaving his house. And he has not been heard from in the day cycles since your supposed death. I doubt he will be in any kind of condition to take a Council Seat at the next solar. Much less lead that hybrid alliance of his toward any real change. And as for my son...”

L’Rzo flaps down his ridges with a satisfied click. “The death of you and that hybrid spawn has brought him back to his senses. According to my operatives, he has already returned to working with my brother to ensure that inane term limits measure does not pass. There is no doubt he will be wed to a proper Xalthurian female before the end of the next solar.”

The hazy feeling refuses to let up for some reason, no matter how many villainous reveals L’Rzo makes. But I fight through it to say, “I don’t understand. If you wanted me dead so badly, why didn’t you just kill me as opposed to bringing me here?”

He shifts uncomfortably, his high-and-mighty air dissipating a bit. “Sadly, the demise of my protégé’s feeder lab has put The Zoo in a precarious situation. Hu’man females are our most popular attraction. But their weak bodies make them unfortunately prone to death during tourist interactions. As much as I wish to be rid of you, I could not ignore the business opportunity.”

*Popular attraction? Business opportunity?* The offense those two words bring on is only overshadowed by the fear of another word in his villain speech.

“*Death?*” I repeat out loud. “What exactly are these tourists doing to these poor females?”

The fretful air of the merchant whose seriously fucked-up zoo has fallen on difficult times gives way to a sinister smile. “I am sure your fellow hu’mans will fill you in on all the details when they finish cowering behind their trees. I will leave you with this simple warning, though. If you do not comply, I will lift that glass cage during the next tourist interaction.”

“What does that mean?” I ask. My heart thunders in my chest, despite the heavy fog clouding my mind.

L’Rzo just smiles. And walks away without answering.

Leaving me there alone with the baby I can’t reach.

“What did he mean by *tourist interactions?*” I ask Sara, the only female who remained behind when L’Rzo appeared. “Ones that can apparently lead to human deaths?”

“You can understand him?” she asks, her voice wondrous but hesitant and slow. “None of us humans have translator chips. And he removes them from any of the aliens who show up here with one.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, looking around again. “As many females as there are here versus him and his staff, making sure his interspecies *menagerie* can’t communicate is probably just one of the ways he keeps you docile.”

But then I remember my original question and ask again. “What does he mean by *tourist interactions?*”

THIRTY-ONE

## ELLE

The answer to that question is not good.

I don't know how many hours later, I can still be found sitting in a near catatonic state outside Jack's cage.

Jack has long since stopped crying—or asking for me to pick him up. Perhaps, even at his baby age, he understands how futile the request is, how bad our future prospects are.

Sara was right. This isn't some form of Xalthurian heaven. Just the opposite.

It's a new version of hell.

And the tourist interaction isn't as bad as what I was imagining. It's way, *way* worse.

In a voice nearly as monotone as our captors', Sara explained to me that "tourists" are let into The Zoo once a month to play with the all-female menagerie—however they please.

"Some of the aliens are able to successfully hide behind trees and shit, but that makes it even worse," Sara told me. "Turns it into a hunt. Which those sick fucks actually like. And us humans stand out the most, so there's no chance we won't get caught. It's better just to lie down in the grass and let them have at you."

The thought of doing anything of the sort upsets me, even through the persistent haze.

"Could we maybe hide in the trees?" I started to ask, the old problem-solving habit finally kicking back into gear.

“Strictly forbidden,” she answered before I could even fully get the question out. “That’s why they built the cage. Putting a new prisoner’s baby in there is a good way to make their mother comply.” She looked toward the glass cube, where Jack was pitifully scratching his tiny talons against the glass, trying to get to me. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen a hybrid boy in there, though. Usually it’s some alien baby—or a hybrid girl.”

I didn’t have the stomach to ask what happened to the babies left in the cage if the mother refused to cooperate.

But Sara answered the question anyway. “The tourists can do anything—*anything* they want with us. And there are species that make the Xalthurians look like kittens. Species that don’t care how young someone in The Zoo is.”

And that was when I shut down.

It’s the Breeding Ceremony all over again. Except this time if I didn’t comply, they’d lift the cage. Let those damn tourists hurt Jack.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear the sounds of the other newly captured humans waking up. They cry and scream.

And I continue to sit there numbly with my hands wrapped around my knees.

More time passes. I can’t tell how much. But the screams and crying in the distance have died down.

I can’t say anything else has gotten better. There is no gentle path to acceptance. Just numb survival, with a big dose of haziness on top.

However, when Sara once again shows up at the glass cube with her arms full of fruit for us to share, I’m reminded that it’s my duty to eat.

If I can’t eat, I can’t plan. And if I can’t plan, I can’t figure out a way to get Jack out of this situation.

*Gotta stay alive. For Jack.*

“Do you think you can peel these for us?” Sara asks at the next meal. She hands me four pieces of a fruit with a thick purple

rind you have to peel off to get to its insides. “The inside is delicious, but my nails aren’t good for shit anymore.”

I easily peel the fruit.

Not that it matters. The sweet pulpy flesh tastes like bitter dirt thanks to our hopeless situation, and I can’t imagine any other food appealing to me in my current mental state.

Still, some small shred of my old curiosity makes me ask, “Do they ever feed us other kinds of food?”

“No meat, no grains, no dairy.” Sara takes a seat in front of me and crisscrosses her legs before adding, “And there’s not enough fruit in the world to make up for what’s missing.”

I frown. “How do they deal with malnourishment then?”

Sara shrugs. “The tourists are the main cause of death for us humans. But gum disease, broken bones, heart attacks—we got a lot of stupid shit putting us in the ground. Not to mention we’re anemic as fuck under this zoo diet. My smile ain’t nearly as pretty as it was on New Terrhan.”

Sara grins to show me all the dark holes where teeth used to be. “Plus, my hands and feet are always cold. I’m going to admit, I’m not just bringing you fruit to eat out of the kindness of my heart. Those purple citruses are the best, but there’s no way I could have opened it myself with these brittle nails.”

As bad as my situation is, I feel way worse for Sara.

We talk a little about our lives before The Zoo and get as far as figuring out that I was the human who got put into L’Than’s cage after her.

“He had a name?” she asks, her face crumpling a little.

But then, before I can answer, she says, “I don’t want to talk about it. Speaking on the past only makes what’s happening in the now that much worse.”

Still, I glean enough over our shared meal of fruit to know she isn’t sure how long she’s been in here. And she doesn’t want to know.



She tells me she treasures all the sleep she gets here because when she's dreaming, she gets to return to New Terrhan and live her life out with the High Leader's son—the boy she never had the chance to marry.

I don't have the heart to tell her he's married to a Xalthurian and technically the man whose bedroom technique helped me with my breakthrough on Xalthurian infertility.

Luckily, Sara doesn't want to know anyway.

“And before you go asking about eating leaves of the trees or the grass, that's a no-go, too,” Sara says after we're done with our fruit. “As pretty as all this green grass is—it's full of chemicals to keep us docile and in line. Trust, it makes you throw up bad if you try to eat it.”

So that explains the drugged-out, hazy feeling that's dogged me ever since I woke up here.

*Wow*, L'Gon's father really did think of everything when it came to designing this nightmare zoo.

Just as I'm thinking about pushing some rinds through the airholes of Jack's cage in the hope that maybe his teeth are sharp enough to mash them down without choking, another captive unexpectedly comes stomping over.

A tetradactyly-looking female with razor-sharp claws drops several pieces of sliced-up fruit into my hands. With a little heart leap, I realize the slices are small enough to push through the glass of Jack's air holes.

“She arrived here with a baby, too,” Sara explains after I thank her the best I can. “She always comes through for the other moms.”

Then all three of us start pushing fruit through the breathing holes.

I don't know whether to be grateful or horrified that there's an established protocol in place for our nightmare situation. How many babies have been put through this before mine? Kept in a cage and used as leverage against their mothers?

Enough that other species join in to help. I often wake up from naps to find the other humans playing with Jack on the other side of the glass. All sorts of aliens—not just the ones with razor-sharp claws—show up with fruit to poke through the holes.

We never exchange names, though. Sara even tells me to stop calling her by hers. “It’s never a good idea to get too connected to anybody you meet here.”

I can see why.

The doomed feeling surrounding all the acts of kindness makes the thought of what’s coming even worse.

I want to scream with frustration. Or cry forever. But neither action will change anything.

So, I just manage as best I can. Trying not to think about the two males I left behind. Or what might have happened if I’d just let L’Than love me the way he wanted to. Forever.

More time passes. And more females come over to visit with Jack.

I’m half-listening to a group of Xalthurian females tell Jack how handsome he is when a noisy klaxon blares overhead.

My heart stills.

It’s the same one that sounds right before the Breeding Ceremony ship is about to land.

No announcement is made, like when I was imprisoned on the spacelab, but somehow, I know what this means without having to be told.

The tourists are here.

They’re coming in to hunt us.

As if to confirm my guess, Sara suddenly appears with a handful of yellow berries. “Here, eat these quick. We only have about an hour to prepare ourselves before they open the door to the tourists.”

*An hour...*

That's about the same amount of time I had to hide before L'Gon showed up at the door of my house on New Terrhan.

I look down at the berries in her hand and recognize them immediately. They're golden, not bright yellow. Not the celebration berries used to make the special wine I never got to taste, but the deeply hued ones that led to the most shocking night of my life.

"Go away from the cage and take as many of these as you can get down before the tourists come in. Then just lie down somewhere and wait," Sara advises. "That's the only way to get through it without losing your mind."

The Xalthurian female is telling Jack that we all have to leave him alone but we'll be back in a few hours. And even though the tetradactyl creature can't understand what the Xalthurians are saying, she shoves as much food as she can through the breathing holes, so he won't starve while we're gone.

"Go away from the cage as soon as the doors open!" Sara yells out to any other humans who might be in the vicinity. "We don't want the baby to see this."

I can't believe how much they're helping Jack and me, despite their own terrible situations. It reminds me that regardless of our differences, we're all in this together.

*All in this together...*

Suddenly, my problem-solving instinct I thought had died a sad death returns, breaking through the chemical haze with a forceful kick.

"Wait!" I say, grabbing on to Sara's wrist before she can shove the yellow berries into her mouth. "I have an idea!"

THIRTY-TWO

## L'THAN

This may have been a bad idea.

My face itches in a primal way that has nothing to do with the arid air circulating through what the cut horn Kaidorian guiding our tour calls the *observation deck*.

Neither Elle nor Jack is anywhere to be seen in the front half of The Zoo we are being allowed to preview before the start of our official hunt.

I have lost track of the many times I have needed to adjust the mask on my face that currently suffocates me. Standing in a crowded ship with similarly masked males from all different species, I struggled not to rip the ridiculous contraption off to scratch off my face.

L'Gon and I have temporarily reconstructed our faces with a melding machine to look like the Jabbari, a race of aliens who are of similar build and height to Xalthurians. They are, however, all one color and have ear holes on the sides of their heads, instead of actual lobes.

Changing our appearance was a point in futility because of these blasted masks. Everyone is wearing them, and I cannot tell who is who—or even if all the other hunters are, like us, pretending to be from another race.

The mission we undertook ourselves—without going to the Kel, so as not to alert my uncle—is turning out to be more complicated than we calculated.

Still, a spark of hope burns inside of me, and that keeps me from giving in to the urge to rip off my false face.

After paying a considerable fee, we managed to secure last-minute spots in the end-of-solar hunt my father told us about.

But I can barely contain my rage as the cut horn Kaidorian tour guide rattles off instructions concerning our conduct.

“You may do whatever you want to the females. However, there will be charges if they are scarred or killed,” he says into a speaking device that translates his words into whatever language we chose on the small ear cubes we were given, along with boots and gloves, at the beginning of the tour. “Take particular care with the hu’man females as they are fragile and break easily. We were able to secure a large batch for our special hunt, but be aware that they are extremely hard and extremely expensive to replace.”

He lets out a growly laugh and bangs on the glass of the observation deck with the side of his fist.

The bang explodes in my ears like the familiar pounding on a cell while I was a helpless captive.

My nose claps closed so that I cannot breathe, and my hearts race as I stumble into the closest wall.

I am suddenly back in the lab’s glass prison! With some nameless hu’man female. A cut horn is banging on my cage. She is crying—begging me to save her with my compliance. And I cannot breathe!

*I cannot breathe!*

“You there,” the tour guide points to me. “You all in order? You got a problem with my rules?”

“No, no,” L’Gon takes my arm and leads me to a corner as he speaks Jabbarian courtesy of the download we both underwent as we traveled to the coordinates my father provided us. “He is having an anticipation attack—a common ailment for our species when we get too excited about a future event.”

“That is true! I am fighting off an anticipation attack myself,” another masked hunter, who must truly be a Jabbari, affirms.

“I will take care of him,” L’Gon says to the cut horn, pulling a vial out of his pocket. “You will—”

He stops himself before launching into the usual Xalthurian command grammar. “You may please continue your tour. We will catch up before the hunt begins.”

The tour guide nods. “Just remember, if your friend ain’t right by ten clicks after the hunt’s start time, your sun is iced. Doors close, and we don’t re-open them for nobody.”

“I understand,” L’Gon affirms as he holds the vial up to my false nose.

The smell is wretched, but it re-opens the real ridges underneath my disguise.

Once the other males are led away, I apologize with panting breaths. “I am sorry, Second! It looks like Elle was wrong about me being completely unaffected by what happened while I was in the spacelab prison.”

L’Gon answers with an apologetic click of his own. “No, I am sorry for bringing you here, First. In my need to save Elle and Jack, I did not consider that this trip could be triggering for you. But we only have this opportunity, and I fear I cannot take advantage of it without you. Especially if the rumors about The Benefactor being here on the station are true.”

I fear he will need my assistance, too. We have already discussed that I must be the one to incapacitate L’Rzo if L’Gon falters.

However, my hearts will not stop racing. My view of L’Gon becomes blurry, and black begins to creep into the sides of my vision.

“First?” L’Gon sounds far away, even though he is right in front of me. “First?”

“I cannot carry out this mission....” I confess as the black consumes me.

THIRTY-THREE



## ELLE

I hold my breath when the doors open to admit the tourists into The Zoo.

A group of us are standing on top of Jack's glass cage, our eyes fixed on the entrance door.

For what feels like hours—but is probably only a few minutes—aliens of several different species come spilling into the enclosed glade. But the tiny shred of hope I've been holding onto fizzles out when the doors close behind them.

They are no red or hybrid Xalthurian among the new arrivals. *L'Gon and L'Than must truly believe Jack and me dead.*

I take a moment to grieve the loss of that rescue wish.

But just a moment.

After that, I harden my voice to whisper to the others. "Hold the line. We got this!"

Most of the other species don't speak New Terrhan or Xalthurian. But I somehow understand the chitters, murmurs, and clicks that greet my proclamation.

They're on board with my plan, and we're all in this together.

Even though our prospects are incredibly grim.

There are a thousand ways this encounter could end and almost none of them involve my plan going off without a hitch.

But I think all the other zoo females who agreed to my plan have come to the same conclusion I did when I made the pitch

as best I could to my fellow prisoners in a mix of New Terrhan, Xalthurian, and frantic hand gestures.

We're done playing their game. It's time for us to free ourselves from this zoo habitat.

Or die trying.

I look down at Jack and silently apologize for not being able to protect him from seeing what comes next.

Then I whisper again, "We got this!" as we watch the tourists fan out through the glade.

The tourists hail from wildly varied species, from upright walkers to jellied blobs. But I notice that everyone but the blobs are wearing some form of heavy boot as they prowl like animals, searching for us amongst the trees and bushes.

And eventually, a few of them start cutting through the middle of the glade, straight toward the meadow with Jack's cage.

I sense several of my comrades tightening their muscles around me.

"Not yet," I whisper with a hand in the air as the tourists come creeping into the meadow, only to stop and frown when they find the hybrid baby, sitting on the ground and staring at them solemnly from inside a glass cage.

They stand up straighter, their eyes searching the meadow for the females they were promised. Their confusion might be comical if they hadn't entered this zoo with plans to do the unimaginable to us.

But as it is, I have to push down my fear of the even more unimaginable things they might do to us if this doesn't work. I can't think about that. Or consider how high the odds are stacked against Jack and me getting out of here alive.

L'Than and L'Gon aren't busting through that door to save me. It's up to me—up to all of us—to save ourselves.

So, I swallow down the throat-clogging fear and grip my homemade weapon tighter as I watch the so-called tourists stalk around, searching for us.

Until it finally occurs to one of them—a slime-covered creature with a face covered in tentacles—to look up.

Way up to the top of the glass cage.

Which is where he finds a whole gang of us humans, plus the heaviest other kind of aliens we could recruit for the front line, standing on top of the glass cage.

Tentacle Face immediately tries to suction onto the slippery glass. And I'm tempted to send out the call earlier than planned. But I wait with everything inside of me braced, and I'm rewarded for my patience when the revolting creature goes tumbling right back down onto the druggy grass.

Apparently, those face tentacles aren't strong enough to lift their owner more than a few inches off the ground. *Thank goodness.*

However, a few of his cohorts have spotted us. They click and clatter in their various languages but point up at us as they do so, speaking to each other in the universal body language of "What the fuck?"

*Valid question.* But we don't give them a chance to answer it.

"Now!" I yell out when enough of their heads are finally upturned toward us.

And all those confused looks come to a swift end when the spears start flying. Branches wrenched from trees and hastily sharpened in a desperate display of interspecies teamwork.

Sara's right about the humans being anemic and weak.

Several years of stasis followed by months of no exercise outside of picking fruit wasn't exactly a muscle-building workout plan. But there's still some of that Field Worker spirit left inside of our ragtag crew. A lot of our homemade spears miss, but enough hit their marks to make an impact—pun totally intended.

Maniacal laughter rises inside of me when quite a few of our targets go down with spears sticking out of their heads, necks, chests, and limbs. Blood of different colors spurts from their wounds.

The tourists who manage to escape our first shower of overhead spears go from stalking us to running to the trees for cover.

*“Menagerie, we will not abide this dissension!”* A growling voice suddenly booms out from overhead. *“Come down from there, or you will be severely disciplined.”*

This announcement definitely gets the multi-language translation treatment since this is an interspecies rebellion.

“Bet you’re regretting removing all our translator chips now!” I yell back at the overhead voice. “It doesn’t matter if we understand each other anyway. We’re all in agreement about this.”

I pick up another sharpened stick from the pile and scream, “We’re not going anywhere!”

A tense pause. Then the cage starts rumbling underneath our feet.

“Knees!” I yell out while also demonstrating the command with my own physical action.

Just like we agreed, we all hunker down and hope with all our might that whatever technology they use to lift up the cage won’t be able to operate with all our additional weight.

The glass screeches and shakes underneath us. I grab onto Sara’s wrist when she almost goes sliding over the edge.

But in the end, the unseen technology gives up with a hiss of compressed air.

Then...

Silence.

The other humans cheer. They weren’t able to lift the cage, and we’ve successfully staved off the horde.

But I just stand back up and wait. We’ve won the first couple of rounds, but the battle isn’t nearly done.

As if to prove my point, the outside doors open again.

And this time, L’Gon’s father enters, followed by a Kaidorian with nubbed horns and a bunch of Xalthurians dressed in the same sleek armor as the Reapers who tried to take Jack from me back on New Terrhan.

And just like those Reapers, they have immobilization spears. Plus guns strapped to their waists.

Sara rises to her feet beside me.

“Boss Level,” she says.

This scenario does not even remotely resemble any of the video games we grew up playing on the colony ship. But the effects of the grass have obviously worn off. Her voice is sharper and clearer than I’ve ever heard it.

“You will come down from there,” L’Gon’s father tells me. “And you will tell the other hu’mans to come down, too. I will not abide anymore dissent from any of you.”

“No, it’s *us* who aren’t going to be putting up with anymore of your crap!” I yell down to him on all our behalves. “We are not animals. You do not own us. You hold no power over us anymore.”

L’Rzo claps his ridges back. “You think we hold no power over you?”

He lets out a click I don’t understand, even with my download.

But I decipher it as a special military one soon enough when his soldiers point their guns—not at me, but at all the people around me, including Jack.

“I believe you will change your mind about my lack of power when we start killing your friends,” L’Gon’s father says. “And you should know, these are special prison glass lasers, designed for us to kill what we keep in our cages without having to risk our personal safety.”

I guessed something like this might happen, but nothing can stop the primal cry that falls out of my mouth at the thought of him killing Jack.

“Yes, think about the hybrid you hold so dear,” L’Rzo advises. Like a parasite feeding on my fear. “If you persist with this

foolish action, the xalling will be murdered with just enough of your conspirators to make good example. And, of course, I will leave you alive so you may carry the guilt of your actions for the rest of your days. Also, it is always good for the others to witness a breaking. It makes them think twice before trying any such thing again.”

All around me, my fellow humans shift nervously.

“What’s he saying?” one of the humans asks behind me, her voice a lot less brave than it was when she agreed to take part in my crazy plan.

I swallow down my fear to answer, “It doesn’t matter.”

Out loud, I say in Xalthurian, “You are right, L’Rzo. We are no match for your guns. I will come down—but only if you agree not to hurt anyone else.”

Like L’Gon, he considers my negotiation with a cold neutral nose. But in the end, he agrees with a short nod. “Fine.”

“What the hell is happening?” Sara shouts out in confusion, followed by the upset mutters and clicks of my fellow rebels.

I ignore them and go toward the back of the glass case. Then, without a word of explanation, I simply grab onto a Xalthurian ally’s wrist and jump, trusting that she’ll bear my load so I don’t break my neck falling to the ground.

She holds me steady, which allows me to scamper down the glass with just a short drop. But she hisses at me from above, “You should not give in to his demands. What happened to your words about death being better than this imprisonment?”

Oh, I meant every word of my rallying speech.

But this last leg of the plan is something I didn’t share with them.

Then or now. There’s no time to explain.

The drugs seep into my bare feet almost as soon as I touch the ground, and my unspoken plan becomes a bit woozy in my head.

No wonder all of the tourists are wearing boots. They must have doubled down on the amount of drugs in the grass. The lethargy that's plagued me for days quickly fogs over my mind. But I remind myself this is all part of my ultimate plan as I push through the haze.

Doing the best I can to keep my body turned straight forward so the head of this terrible hydra doesn't see the stake tucked into the back of my loincloth, I walk toward L'Rzo Louxos.

It feels like I'm dragging myself through mud. But I focus on the mission. *Must stake this bitch like a vampire hunter in an old planet entertainment.*

This is why I didn't share this part of the plan with anyone but Sara.

If it doesn't work, I am dead.

If it does work, and I manage to get the stake plunged through his neck or eye, well... I'm still dead.

There's a chance Sara can take advantage of the hydra's loss of its head and lead the rebellion out of here as we planned. And the Xalthurians promised me they would get Jack out of the cage and take him back to Xalthuria. Back to L'Gon.

But there is now absolutely zero chance of me walking out of here with them.

*Ah well...*

It was a good life. Short. But good.

*Goodbye, Jack. Goodbye, L'Than. Goodbye, L'Gon.*

I silently make my farewells as I surrender to L'Rzo.

*I love you.*

*Forever.*

THIRTY-FOUR



## L'GON

“I cannot carry out this mission....”

That is the last thing L'Than utters before going limp against the wall of the observation deck. The same as when I rendered him unconscious the morn Elle left for the palace.

And though I did not squeeze a vital artery in order to render him into this state, once again, the fault lies with me.

I chose L'Than for this secret quest. Over my best friend, Roq N'Thn, and even my highly adept former commander, Xar T'Kan.

After much suffering, N'Thn is finally in a good mental state, with a xalling on the way. And Xar T'Kan would have felt duty bound to relay what we discovered to our Kel and his grieving mate.

Our Kel would have responded with a battalion of warriors—at least a few of which would have been part of my father's force of secret operatives.

Once again, The Benefactor would have been alerted ahead of the raid and, like N'Ure, allowed to hide someplace our military forces could not find him while hatching yet another nefarious plan.

I chose L'Than because what he lacked in war experience, he made up for in resolution. Because he was our gift's First.

However, I failed to account for his past when judging his ability to take on this mission. He had only shared bits and pieces of his time on the spacelab prison, so I never realized

the extent of his trauma until this moment, when his panic from interacting with a Kaidorian rendered him unconscious.

Yes, I carry all fault for this outcome. But there is no time to lament my short-sightedness.

With guilt twisting my hearts, I look around for something to cover him up until I can return from my mission, hopefully with Elle and Jack in tow.

There is nothing, though.

I think of that Kaidorian cut horn who called himself The Zookeeper. If he finds L'Than lying out in the open before I can get back to him...

My hearts race with the thought of L'Than being killed or permanently maimed because I failed to correctly assess his ability to carry out this mission.

But what other choice do I have. *Essh!* I will have to risk his life in order to save Elle's and Jack's.

Knowing this is what L'Than would want me to do, I push through my guilt and make my way to the doors just as another klaxon sounds overhead.

The hunt has begun.

The observation deck is farther than I anticipated when I told the cut horn we would catch up to the group. I also must stop a few lengths before the door to retrieve the communication devices and military-grade photon guns L'Than and I tossed behind a bulkhead right before The Zookeeper scanned us with a handheld threat detection wand at the start of the tour.

But I am not fast enough. The doors to the habitat slam closed just as I strap on the last photon gun.

*Essh!* My hearts plummet to my feet—then jump when a hand clamps down on my shoulder.

I spin around in a martial stance to find...

*L'Than!*

However, he is no longer in the Jabbari disguise. My red-and-golden-brown-swirled cousin grins back at me from

underneath the half mask all the hunters were given.

“Why did you leave me on the observation deck?” he asks with an outraged click. “I nearly *freaked out*, as Elle would say, when I woke up there alone.”

My joy at seeing him upright quickly evaporates into annoyance.

“You said you could not carry out this mission,” I remind him.

“I meant, I cannot carry out this mission in that infernal Jabbari disguise. My hu’man nerve endings could not bear the facial reconstruction tech. I am fine now.”

“You could have made your meaning much clearer,” I begin to say, only to cut off when the sound of approaching boots fill up the corridor.

“Hide!” L’Than pulls me behind the bulkhead just a few moments before the Kaidorian cut horn and a group of Xalthurian males in Generations War armor come around the bend.

They all carry immobilization spears, but they also have small lasers in their weapons belts—the kind security personnel use when they want several options, from simply stunning to killing with precision.

The potentially murderous squad is led by a male without genetic warrior modifications. He wears one of the masks the hunters were given to obscure our identities. But I would recognize the proud set of my father’s shoulders anywhere.

This is how he used to lead his family into gatherings and meetings when he ruled over the Louxos Line with absolute authority.

He looks neither left nor right as the habitat’s doors open again and he leads his squad of warriors inside.

L’Than begins to follow directly after them, but I throw out my hand to stop him.

“Hold,” I order in a lowered voice as I pass him one of the lasers and communication devices I retrieved. “We are

outnumbered and will need the element of surprise when we sneak up behind them.”

Proving he would have made a good warrior if he had been given the chance to fight in the Generations War, L'Than stows the communication device in his boot and sets the photon gun to kill. Then he holds, as instructed.

Until the doors begin to slide closed.

My command changes in an instant.

“Run!” I click loudly.

No more holding, we sprint toward the doors and slide through the opening just as they slam shut behind us.

Breathing out through our noses, we hold our photon guns at the ready, prepared to face down...

I frown at the eerily quiet space with rolling hills and a glittering lake. My father and his contingent are nowhere to be seen. Nor are any of the multi-species females we spied earlier on the observation deck.

“Where did they go?” L'Than asks beside me as he presses a button on the communication device in his boot. One that allows him to swipe open a holoscreen with a live feed patched directly to Xar T'Kan's encrypted channel.

This is another essential part of our plan. Whether or not we fail in our mission, Xalthuria will be made aware of this false Amnesty Station and what is happening here.

I do the same. Only my live holoscreen feed is opened to our Kel's private channel.

“We will try that forest,” I say once both our screens are transmitting. I nod toward the collection of trees beside the lake.

The forest, however, turns out to be a large grove of fruit trees. It reminds me much of the part of the orchard leading to the picnic meadow. There are even *ju'li* berry bushes dotted among the trees. And my father's refusal to let me take over as the orchard's Agricultural Designer takes on a new sinister meaning.

Soon after we enter the grove, the sound of a commotion draws our attention to a path we did not sight before.

We turn just in time to see a group of now maskless males run past, screaming in pain and terror. Like they were being chased by a pack of wild *k'vani*.

I lower my photon gun, wondering if my eyes are deceiving me.

“Are those sticks and tree branches protruding from their necks and arms?” L’Than asks, echoing my silent question.

“We do not have enough intel,” I decide, motioning my cousin toward the path. “We must figure out what has passed before we go any farther.”

We make it to the path just as the Jabbari who backed up my diagnosis earlier comes screaming toward us. There is a gash on his head that is oozing green blood.

“What has happened?” I demand in his language, grabbing on to him. “Why are you running?”

“The females have gone mad!” the real Jabbari answers, trying to free himself from my hold. “I did not pay for this. Unhand me!”

I release him, and he runs off holding his injured head.

“Guess we know which direction we should head in now,” L’Than says with a determined click.

I nod, and together we jog along the path in the opposite direction from where the males are fleeing, ignoring all of their warnings about hostile females.

However, we stop short when we enter a large grassy meadow. To find a topless Elle, along with what appears to be an interspecies female army, on top of a glass cage. A glass cage which contains my hybrid son.

My father stands with his squad at his back, making threats toward the defiant females. Threats so vile my blood chills.

There had been a small part of me that still believed my uncle had not told us the truth. That he had mistaken my sire’s

actions. I could not believe the male who greeted all with a cheery click could be so nefarious and cruel.

But as he threatens Elle and our son with unimaginable atrocities, the truth of his character crashes over me like a full-moon tide.

How many times had I called Elle duplicitous? Privately and to her face. But Elle is not the duplicitous one. She never had been.

My father is completely to blame.

All these solars after the current Kel's ascent to the throne, he played the affable neutral party while funding these heinous ventures. He had his nephew kidnapped and tortured. And now he is threatening his own grandson.

As I watch from afar, everything I thought about my father turns into a falsehood before my eyes.

Underneath his gentle demeanor, there has always been a manipulation I failed to fully see.

*"It is a shame hu'mans are not managing to thrive after so many years, despite all the assistance we have given them,"* he often said to me before Council Meetings after ceding his seat.

He also managed to tut about every Breeding Ceremony. *"How sad that the hu'man females continue to dishonor the Accord when the Collector comes to gather our hybrid males."*

Even his optimistic decision to support the new Qel did not come without manipulative caveats. *"Of course, we should respect our new hu'man Qel. Perhaps she will prove herself different from the rest of her species."*

He never outwardly commanded me after I took over as the Head of the Louxos Line. But somehow, between him and Uncle L'Rmie, who he was controlling in ways I could not see, I always ended up doing exactly what he wanted.

And the very first time I failed to act as he wished, he had my memories of my Breeding Ceremony with Elle completely eradicated.

He made me forget how I felt about her from the start.

And now this.

“Elle! Jack!” L’Than hisses, ripping me out of my silent recollections.

He begins to surge forward, and I once again stop him.

“Not yet,” I command. Just like I began to finish Elle’s sentences when we worked together on the presentation, I sense a plan at play. Something tells me it is not yet time to make our move.

“Fine, I will come down!” Elle yells back to my father.

For some reason I cannot discern, she goes to the far back of the cube to jump down to the ground.

My hearts stop when I notice her bare feet as she comes around the side of the glass cube.

*“You uprights want to keep on your boots and gloves, since the grass is chalked with drugs,” the Kaidorian cut horn told us earlier. “But if you like spitting your seed in an altered state, feel free to put both your hands in the grass as you fuck your cunt. Can tell you from experience, it’s a real nice high.”*

Whatever Elle has planned, the drugged grass is working against her. She stumbles as she approaches my father.

And he chortles with a series of cheery clicks that now sound menacing to my ears.

“Look at her,” he says to the Kaidorian cut horn. “See how the grass makes her come to me like an obedient pet?”

She now slowly walks toward him, her movements jerky.

“You will kill the cut horn and immobilize my father, as planned,” I tell L’Than. “And I will secure Elle and Jack after dealing with The Benefactor’s Xalthurian squad.”

Both L’Than and I brace, prepared to leap forward as Elle comes to a stop in front of my father, her head hung in surrender.

But then, Elle attempts a move that immediately causes me to regret waiting to make ours.

THIRTY-FIVE



## ELLE

*Forever.*

I pull the sharp object from behind my back with a battle cry.

But my reflexes are slow, even by human standards. L'Rzo catches my arm in midair with a cheery click. With lethal ease.

“What is this?” he asks, chortles of laughter rumbling in his chest.

He removes the sharpened stick from my hand and snaps it in half between his fingers. “You could not have possibly believed you—a weak, inferior hu'man—could outsmart *me*? Now come, female, let us show your comrades you have been put in your place.”

With that, he grabs me by my hair and turns me around to face the other females standing on top of the glass cube.

“Do you see your leader?” the Kaidorian growls into some kind of microphone that repeats and translates his words into several different languages. “This little rebellion ends now, or I will give the next group of tourists instructions to snap your necks when they are done with you. Now drop your weapons!”

Defeated, one by one, my multi-species army drops their makeshift weapons after hearing the announcement/threat in their language.

As my formerly fierce army caves to his threat, helping each other down from the glass cage, L'Rzo asks me, “Did you think your little plan would work? My son's and his filthy

hybrid cousin's treatment of you truly made you believe yourself so special?"

He releases my hair, but only to turn me back around to grip my face between his palms as he lifts me off the ground. Pressing so hard, it feels like my cheeks will cave in. Pain screams through my face as he says, "I can assure you that you are not. And you will learn your lesson this day."

He lets out a tutting sigh through his nose. "I had no plans to let your abomination out of the cage for this hunt. But now it is time you learn what happens to the infants of females who get out of line."

"No! No!" Furious tears streak down my cheeks as my feet dangle in the air.

"Yessss!" L'Rzo insists on a long hiss, switching his hold to one hand wrapped about my neck. "I will remove that abomination myself. Make you watch as the hunters do with him what they will. Then, I myself will turn you into an example for the other females."

He rubs at his crotch with his other hand, letting me know that he's excited about handling my retribution himself.

Behind him, the Kaidorian makes a worried sound. He begins in growling Xalthurian, "But the other hunters hoped to claim her as a prize. That was the whole promise of the—"

"Forget the other hunters!" L'Rzo declares without looking away from me. "I will take you in ways that will cause you the utmost pain, and then I will—"

He stops abruptly when the head of his Kaidorian guard explodes.

Like, literally.

One moment he has a face. And the next his headless body falls to the ground.

L'Rzo's eyes widen, and he releases a surprised hiss. "What has passed?"

Poor, confused L'Rzo. He's soon taken by surprise again.

This time when I do the one thing I couldn't when he had me turned away from him and completely weakened from the grass. I bring both dangling feet up and kick them out with all my might.

Right into his crotch.

Praying to my parent's sky god, *Please let alien junk work the same way human guy's do in old planet entertainments!*

And guess what...

It doesn't matter if you're Xalthurian or human. Turns out, if you kick-punch a male as hard as you can in his package, he's going down like a sack of potatoes.

My hastily made army cheers above me as L'Rzo lets go of me with a high-pitched scream-click of pain, and we both tumble backward into the grass.

But I can't cheer along with them. Despite the pain in my tailbone, I know I have to get right back up if there's any chance of me—

*Too late.* A hand grabs my left arm before I can even make it all the way to my feet.

But I won't go down without a fight. I bunch my fists to swing on...

"L'Than?" I cry out when I see the male who has grabbed ahold of me.

"Yes, Gift," he answers in perfect Cary Grant New Terrhan as he lifts me from the ground into his arms. "As we have established, I have a hard time letting go of you. Even when you try to run away."

"Oh, my moons!" I throw my arms around his lean shoulders and press my face into his swirled chest as L'Than dusts the residual grass drug pollen from my bare feet. "I have never been so happy to see someone in my life!"

Then another voice says in Xalthurian, "Turn this way as you climb to your feet after my mate's felling blow, Father! I want to ensure our Kel has a full view of you."

I look up from hugging L'Than to see a masked alien with a walrus-like head addressing L'Rzo. The alien has a large holoscreen hovering above his head. And several headless bodies at his feet.

The walrus looks nothing like L'Gon, but somehow, I know who he is, and my heart gives another leap of joy.

L'Rzo doesn't look nearly as arrogant now as he rises to his feet and glares at his son.

"How did you...?" he begins to ask. Only to break off and reset his nose with another cheery click. "It matters not. As my fellow Xalthurians will understand when I undergo my *democratic* trial, everything I did was for Xalthuria. Xalthuria First!"

"You have no compunction whatsoever?" L'Than hisses over my head. "For the lives you took? For all the people you hurt?"

L'Rzo just stares back at him with the calm nose of a Xal who fears no repercussions. "I will say it again in New Terrhan, so even a half-breed like you might understand."

He lets out a contemptuous hiss before repeating in my language, "Xalthuria *First*."

L'Than shakes his head. "He will never show remorse. But he will be tried for his crimes. L'Gon, come here so I may place our gift in your arms while I immobilize your father so we might transport him back to Xalthuria."

If L'Gon heard his cousin's command, it does not show. He does not move. Only continues to stare at L'Rzo.

"You are right, Father," he says. "A jury will understand why you did what you did."

L'Gon glances at me being held in L'Than's arms without a speck of emotion in his walrus eyes.

Then he removes his mask and presses some unseen button that turns him back into the big, red Xal I know and love.

However, his eyes stay dead and his nose a cold neutral as he says, "L'Than, I have changed my mind about arresting my

father.”

My heart stops.

Did he really just come all this way with L’Than to save me, only to change his mind after a few “Xalthuria First!” from his father?

L’Than agitates, and my heart catches with the possibility of him and L’Gon fighting again.

“No, don’t—” I start to say.

But then, instead of reaching for his photon gun, L’Than swipes his hand in the air. The way everyone on Xalthuria does when they’re closing a holoscreen.

And that’s when I realize something I didn’t before when L’Gon spoke.

There is no longer a holoscreen hovering above L’Gon’s head.

“A democratic jury will completely understand what you did,” he repeats to his father.

L’Rzo lets out a series of happy clicks at L’Gon’s announcement. “I knew the son I raised would eventually see reason. You are my progeny, the head of Line of Louxos, and you would never let a hu’man come between us.”

L’Gon smiles and nods. But then, his nose ridges drop down into a cold neutral as he finishes, “Because you will once again use our Qel’s good intentions against her to make sure it is stacked with your cronies and operatives.”

L’Rzo stops smiling. His nose falters, and his eyes dart. First to above his son’s head, then to above his nephew’s as he realizes the same thing I did before his joyful response to L’Gon’s “change of heart.”

“Son,” he begins to say with a consoling click. “Listen to me —”

“No,” L’Gon answers before he can finish, raising his photon gun. “You imprisoned my cousin and threatened my mate and son. I believe I am done listening to you. This is how your precious legacy ends. Forever.”

L'Rzo opens his mouth, but apparently L'Gon was serious about being done with this listening stuff.

He shoots before L'Rzo can utter a word. And after his father's headless body falls to the ground, L'Gon walks over to it with a cold nose and a dead-eyed stare and shoots again.

And again.

And again.

And then several more times until there's nothing left of his father on the ground but a mound of black meat that may or may not be one of his hearts.

L'Gon stares down at his father, then he looks up at me still being held in his cousin's arms.

"Now you are truly free," he says to me.

I can only stare back at him with my heart in my throat.

Then L'Gon command into my absolute silence, "Now you will tell us where you wish to go from here. To New Terrhan, as originally intended? Or back to Xalthuria with us?"

# EPILOGUE

## 20 YEARS LATER

“Why do you look so sad on such a festive day, Sister of our Qel?”

I have many regrets, but none of them ring as hollow in my chest as choosing New Terrhan over returning to Xalthuria with L’Gon and L’Than.

Which is why T’Kan finds me on the steps of my little red-mud hut the first morning of the Winter Holiday Festival, looking sadder than a pigeon in a freshly gamma rayed cafeteria.

I stand up and glare at him. “You’re nearly an hour late.”

“Apologies.” T’Kan drops his nose ridge into a sheepish wince. “Zinnia and I...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you two *slept in* and lost track of time.” I start walking toward the terraformed potato fields I’m supposed to be showing him for day one of his Quarterly Royal Inspections without waiting for him to follow.

“Are Jack and Diane home?” he asks, jogging to catch up with me. “Zinnia and our progeny wanted me to drop off these presents.”

I don’t notice the two boxes wrapped in shiny red-and-green fabric until he falls into step beside me. “I thought we said no presents this year.”

“For the adults. But the kids...”

“Are also adults,” I finish for him. “Diane’s turning twenty-one in a little over a year.”



The Breeding Ceremony is no longer a thing now that Xalthurian fertility is all solved, but the thought of my little girl turning twenty-one still makes my heart pang. I remember how scared I was in the months leading up to that pivotal age.

“I apologize for the misunderstanding,” T’Kan says with another nose wince. “If you do not mind waiting, I will simply knock on the door of your home and drop these gifts off for them.”

*Gift...*

Every variation of that word still fills my heart with such pain, even after twenty years.

“Jack and Diane aren’t home,” I spit out. “Ever again.”

T’Kan slows beside me. “I do not understand.”

My stomach twists with bitter bile. “Yeah, that’s what I said when they interfaced to tell me they weren’t coming home on the holiday ferry back from Xalthuria. They’ve both decided to live with their fathers and perfect stepmothers for a while and look for jobs. Apparently, they found the lack of career options here on their home planet too limiting.”

“Oh, Elle.” Pity creeps into the Kel Regent’s human tones. “I am very sorry. Perhaps, after the inspection, you should come to our Winter Holidays Fest Celebration. Do not tell anyone, but Tel D’Rek and our Vel Regent Stevie will be announcing their engagement.”

“I definitely won’t be telling anyone because I’m not going. I...” *don’t want everyone to see how lonely and pathetic I am when I’m supposed to be cheering for the happily ever after of the Prince of Xalthuria and the Princess of New Terrhan.*

But out loud I insist, “I’m fine with spending the holidays alone.”

“Are you certain about that...?” T’Kan starts to ask.

“Here we are.” I stop at the side of the potato field before he can finish. “As you can see from the brown, papery quality of the large leaves, we’ll be yielding a great crop soon.”

T'Kan nods, impressed. "Stars in sky, the terraformers Mal L'Gon sends keep getting better and better. I can already taste the fried potato sticks."

Hearing the name of my former lover slices through my heart. But I made my sleeping mat. On New Terrhan. Now I must lie in it.

"Anyway," I say, changing the subject, "the demand for potatoes has become so large with the population explosions on both planets, I suggest tripling the order for next year during your negotiations with the Louxos Orchards."

"Yes!" T'Kan nods enthusiastically. "Good idea, I will holo —"

Whatever he was going to say next is cut off by the sound of a shrill klaxon overhead.

Suddenly, I'm standing in a red field beside my little sister, Kira.

"Oh no!" she cries. "The Reapers are here. They're going to take Jack!"

To my horror, a squad of Xal Reapers appear right in front of us. With their guns raised.

"Run!" Kira screams.

And I...

Roll my eyes. "Oh, my moons, are you guys serious with this? It's been twenty years. I think I know by now, when you Xals show up, it's definitely a dream."

Holding a hand up, I poke my index finger through my palm. And sure enough, it goes right through the other side. "See? Same ol' nightmare."

"Give us the xalling!" one of them yells. "Or else!"

"Stop," I say with a shake of my head. "You're embarrassing yourselves."

"Also, you have an algebra test today you have not studied for," another one calls out. "Nor have you ever attended the

class. And if you do not pass it, you will not be able to graduate from the colony school.”

I snort. “Seriously? Okay, this is ridiculous. I’m going to wake up now.”

“And you have to catch the ferry to Xalthuria, but you still have not packed!” another Reaper cries out desperately.

“Bye-bye!” I answer with a wave.

Then I open my eyes to find myself safely tucked in between the two males I love the most.

They’re both asleep beside me, looking as content as can be—until I slap my hand as hard as I can on L’Gon’s chest. Then on L’Than’s shoulder.

They both startle awake.

L’Than rubs at his shoulder, and L’Gon springs up into a sitting position with, “Where is the emergency?”

“How could you let me leave to New Terrhan,” I demand, “and then just move on without me?”

“Oh.” L’Than lowers his hand from his shoulder to explain to L’Gon over my head, “She has had the *It Is a Wonderful Life* nightmare again.”

That’s what L’Than started calling the dreams I keep having where instead of pinky-swear marrying the both of them on the last day of my sister’s inaugural Winter Holiday Festival, as I did in real life, I choose to go back to New Terrhan—and they both happily take Xalthurian brides who our kids like way more than me.

L’Than pulls me into his chest and hugs me close to remind me, “That is not what happened. You chose us, and we are all living happily ever after.”

“It felt so real!” I whine, rubbing my face against his leathery scales. “It was the first day of the Winter Holiday Fest, and Jack and Diane were the exact right age. But we never had our wonderful twins after Diane, and I was so bitter and sad, and I missed you so much. If the Reapers hadn’t come to collect

baby Jack, I might have never realized it was a dream and woken myself up.”

L’Than rubs my back. “You and Sara have talked about this. It is your brain’s way of processing all of the happiness that came after your great trauma. And, of course, it will be worse during this time of the solar.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. Thank the moons, when she finally returned to New Terrhan, Sara decided to mine her own trauma to help us other human females with ours. I don’t know how I would have managed the past couple of decades without our bi-weekly mental well-being appointments.

“You are safe.” L’Gon lays his hand solemnly on my arm and also strokes me in a soothing manner. “And you did wake yourself up. That is all that matters.”

“If it makes you feel any better, only your Second gave you the choice to stay with us or go,” L’Than says. “I, your First, remained, as Sara would describe it, ‘a highly co-dependent partner incapable of respecting your boundaries.’ And of all the future plans I hold for our triad, none of them involve *working on that*. I never would have allowed you to leave me.”

“In truth, I would not have either,” L’Gon tells me with an overly sincere click. “That offer was more symbolic. I vow that I, too, would have resorted to dastardly action to keep you with us.”

Who would have thought, back in my twenties, that the idea of my two husbands refusing to let me go would bring me such comfort as we navigate our forties? I laugh at their solemn disavowal of the choice L’Gon offered after their dramatic rescue of me from The Zoo, and soon they join in my amusement.

*These two.* I’m reminded of the song Zinnia’s second daughter, McVie, sang at the engagement party for her older sister, Vel Regent Stevie, and Kira’s oldest son, Tel D’Rek. Yes, my husbands definitely *make loving fun*.

Until L’Than abruptly breaks off laughing with a serious click. “However, Mal L’Zabeth, your assault upon us for things that

happened during your unconscious processing of trauma cannot go unpunished.”

My First never calls me by the official title I received when I became the first female and human Minister of Health shortly after L’Gon handed in his resignation. Not unless we’re at a Council Meeting, when L’Than is in official Head of Council mode.

And the main suite of *Ju’Li* House is definitely not where Council Meetings take place.

So, I know he means business, even before he coldly clicks, “L’Gon, prepare our gift for her punishment.”

Without having to be told anything else, my Second drags me up into a seated position against his chest. The pads of his fingers—now heavily calloused from all the physical work he does as the Louxos Orchard’s Agricultural Designer—find the front of my sex.

At the same time, L’Than goes flat on his belly between my freshly spread legs. His shoulders dip under my knees as his tongue snakes into my folds, mercilessly “preparing me” for what comes next.

“L’Than!” My fingers find his silky dark hair, now peppered with white. “Feels so good. Please, don’t stop.”

But, of course, he stops. So does L’Gon.

Just as I’m getting close to the edge, L’Than pulls away and switches to just watch as L’Gon shifts to massaging my breasts with both his arms locked over mine so I can’t reach for my own sex.

His rough hands on my breasts feel so good, too, and his calloused thumbs send sparks of pleasure all the way to my core every time they graze over my nipples. It’s enough to make me squirm and moan my way into a mini-orgasm—that they both know damn well isn’t enough when they’ve worked me up into this state.

“Please, L’Than, I’m sorry!” I cry out without him even having to go into his usual “Do you know why you’re here?”

routine. My sex quivers with the not-enough orgasm as I plead. “Please, forgive me.”

L’Than doesn’t answer. Just watches my pussy desperately clench air.

I can tell he’s in a mood. Plus, it’s the first day of the Winter Festival, which is now a two-planet-wide holiday. So none of us have to go into work at the offices we share at East House.

We could be here all morning.

But I’ve learned a few tricks of my own over the twenty years I’ve been married to my husbands, who occasionally turn cruel in bed.

“Please, Daddy,” I say on a breathy plea. “I promise I’ll be a good girl if you fuck me.”

And that’s all it takes. Using this particular kind of New Terrhan slang on my First always turns him into an unthinking animal.

He yanks me out of my Second’s arms and falls on top of me before my back even hits the mat.

“How many times are you going to make me teach you this lesson,” he asks in Xalthurian, a savage rattle sounding inside his chest. “You belong to us.”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I pant. “I’m sorry I was bad again.”

“Sorry is not enough,” L’Gon says from above us. “First, do not let her redirect you from the punishment.”

Again, no words have to be exchanged.

With a huge surge of his hips, L’Than flips us onto our sides. Then pulls my top leg over his swirled thigh. Sliding me down deeper on his cock and opening another part of me wider.

There comes a small gushing sound. And the cold smear against my backhole—the lube I decided to re-invent and offer for sale through Louxos Enterprises during year two of our relationship—lets me know what L’Gon just squirted into my First’s hand.

L'Than is no longer thrusting into me, but I squirm and moan as he works the lube into my backhole. Even after twenty years, I still get so helplessly turned on when he does this. Prepares me for my Second.

Then he fans his taloned hands over my ass to part and hold my back cheeks open to L'Gon in brazen invitation.

An invitation my Second doesn't fail to take. In an instant, I am filled from behind.

"It does not matter whether you are in a wake cycle or a dream," L'Gon hisses into my ear as he begins moving inside of me with achingly slow thrusts. "We love you, and you belong to us."

"You are ours," L'Than hisses into my mouth, stroking into my core with the same slow intensity. "That will never change until the day cycle we all pass. You are ours."

"Forever!" L'Gon yells, his thrust becoming more frantic.

"Forever!" L'Than agrees as he begins to spill inside me.

"Forever!" I promise as I come apart between them.

We cling to each other, their excited clicks filling the air as they shoot their seed into my body, intensifying my own climax.

We breathe out the nightmare of being apart and breathe in our twenty years of real-life love.

Then L'Gon quietly pulls me off my First's spent cock and starts teasing me all over again.

This time he uses the blue load of seed L'Than released inside of me, rubbing it over my pleasure button and my sensitive breasts.

I'm moaning and nearing another Winter Fest morning orgasm when a knock sounds on the door.

"Uncles, Aunt, it is Shuv," comes our oldest niece's voice on the other side of the door. "I am aware you are perhaps wishing to *sleep in*."

We all smother laughter at the piece of slang Kel Regent T'Kan unwittingly created for morning sex.

“But you asked to be present when your grandnieces and nephews opened their Winter Holiday presents,” Shuv continues in the careful Xalthurian she started speaking exclusively after marrying two Xal members of Xar T'Kan's personal security detail. “And they are eager to begin the unwrapping of their gifts.”

L'Than smirks and ask us in a low voice, “Should we tell her we are also unwrapping our gift.”

I giggle, but L'Gon pulls out with a stern click. “No! Now that our xallings are too old for such things, I do not wish to miss the Winter Holiday magic!”

L'Than and I are left to watch him run to the facilities as he calls out to Shuv, “Give us fifteen clicks, dear Niece, and we will meet you downstairs.”

My First and I look at each other, then burst out laughing.

Nope, L'Gon becoming the biggest softie in our triad after coldly ending his father's life was not on my Bingo card. For that solar twenty years ago—or the rest of my life.

“He's right, though.” I peck L'Than on the lips. “Rain check for tonight?”

“*Rain check* for tonight,” he agrees, pecking my lips back. “We have our entire lives to convince you of our fidelity.”

Yes, they do.

But as we make our way to join L'Gon in the facilities, which has enough room in the gamma ray shower to hold all three of us, I know I won't need any further convincing.

They belong to me. And there's no doubt in my mind who I belong to.

I'm *theirs*.

Theirs for Forever.





*Thank you so, so much for reading the last book in the Aliens Overlord series.*

*Due to conflicting schedules and shifting priorities, this will be the last Taylor Vaughn book. But Eve and I thank you ever so much for going along on this journey with us, and we hope the Alien Overlords found a special place in your heart.*

*Want one more Winter Holiday scene with the entire Louxos family and their dear friends?*

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to the rest of the Alien Overlords series!

[His to Claim](#)

[His to Steal](#)

[His to Keep](#)

*P. S. - Keep on reading for an excerpt of HIS TO CLAIM!*

## HIS TO CLAIM EXCERPT

“No! *Noooooo!* Don’t take my baby! Please...I’ll do anything!”

The anguish in the young mother’s voice tears at my soul. It’s not the first time I’ve heard a girl screaming and begging during the Xalthurians’ annual Breed and Reap. I can’t remember a time before the screams, though I’m told it exists...existed.

But this scream is different.

This time the voice belongs to my sister, Elle. With my poor eyesight and a wall of Xalthurian soldiers between us, I can’t see her. But I can clearly hear her, begging the reaping force for mercy.

We’d been working in the community potato field when the Xalthurians appeared in the sky with one short electronic blast of sound. Their way of ringing our planet’s doorbell, before landing their bright silver ship in one of our settlement’s many barren red clay fields.

The Xalthurians always came in the same way, and at the same time of year, during the month of what the New Terrhans called May, even though a year in this solar system was made up of fourteen months, not twelve like on the old planet. But the Xalthurians almost never come on the same day or even the same time of day for that matter. Last year, when Elle was twenty-one they came in the very early morning. But this year it was late in the afternoon.

Before the ship appeared, Elle and I had been debating about whether to keep pushing in the community fields until sunset or take a break. Elle was tired after working the fields all morning with the red and ebony swirled hybrid infant she hadn't been allowed to name perched on her back in a sling. She'd wanted us to go home to curl up for a nap with the baby tucked between us.

I was bone tired, too, not to mention hot—that afternoon, the sun seemed really eager to remind us that scorching season was right around the corner. But I wasn't on full rations like her, and I worried we'd both get punished with an even smaller share tonight if any of the leaders saw us cutting out early.

To nap or not to nap, that had been the question. Until the Xalthurians showed up, dressed in three distinct ways, as they came bounding out of the ship.

From experience, I knew those dressed in leather loin cloths were here to grab the twenty-one year-old females and drag them back to the ship for the Breeding Ceremony. While the ones wearing silver uniforms with a diamond-eyed insignia stamped into the back, were here for last year's crop of babies.

Breeders and Reapers, that's what we called them. And as always, they were accompanied by a few green Xals, dressed in flowing white robes. From what I could tell, these green guys were the only Xals who could actually understand and speak our language. That's why we called them Diplomats, even though they rarely try to negotiate anything with our settlement. They only instruct us in what the other Xalthurians wanted us to do.

I had given my sister a sympathetic look. Though she hadn't named the little hybrid boy, I knew it wouldn't be easy for her to let him go. Most of the mothers with baby boys went directly to their red clay houses, so that they could grab a few things to send back in the blankets of the babies they'd never see again: drawings and trinkets and sometimes little notes written in the New Terrhan language, even though they knew the babies would most likely never be able to understand it.

It's always been like this. For as long as I can remember, and maybe for as long as Elle can remember, too.

But Elle hadn't gone back to the house like the other mothers of hybrid boys when the Xalthurians set down. Instead she'd stood there frozen, her short curly black hair almost seeming to stand on end as her dark eyes darted back and forth.

At first I thought she was afraid of encountering another Xalthurian. She was still pretty traumatized by the Breeding Ceremony. However, when a group of Xalthurians in silver uniforms had approached her, she'd taken the baby out of the sling she'd made for it, and instead of handing the squalling child over, she'd hugged it close and ran. Ran and ran until she reached a cliff and couldn't run any more.

And now here she stood, surrounded by Xalthurian Reapers at the precipice of a cliff with a fifty foot drop down to a dry red clay bed that might have been a river a few millennia ago. On the other side of the Reaper wall, my parents and just about every human not getting bred or reaped had gathered to watch the scene unfold.

I still can't make out much, but I hear Elle and her half-Xal baby sobbing wildly as she begs the Reapers not to tear them apart. And I can tell they're ignoring her pleas, when all but two of the Xalthurians start advancing on her in a precise arc.

"Elle!" I scream, squinting into the blur of Xalthurian uniforms.

My gut cramps in fear. I've seen a few last minute tug of wars over baby boys before. But no one, and I mean no one has ever defied the Reapers this badly, not just by running but refusing to hand the baby over.

I can't imagine what they'll do to my sister. Maybe shoot her dead, like the hot-headed young men who futilely try to save their girlfriends from the Breeding Ceremony. I've got to help her—that's all I know. It doesn't matter if they punish me, too.

I lunge forward, but my parents grab onto my arms, holding me back with all their might. "Don't," my mother whispers on

the right side of me. “I told her not to get attached to that thing.”

I recoil at her dismissive tone. “It’s not a thing, Mama. It’s her baby!”

“A baby she knew from the start she wasn’t ever going to be able to keep.” Mama stares back at me with a bitter expression on her haggard face, which is a used-to-be-pretty version of my sister’s. “It’s like the leaders keep telling you girls. You can’t treat the boys like real babies. She knew that. We all know that!”

Then Mama yells out, “Elizabeth, just give them the baby! Don’t make it any harder than it has to be, girl.” Her voice is aggrieved, as if the only one responsible for this precipice stand-off is my sister.

My throat clogs with tears. I, too, hadn’t been able to harden my heart against the unnamed swirled baby. This very morning while Elle warmed up water to give him a bucket bath, I’d cooed at him and marveled at how his little clawed hand folded around my index finger with a stronger grip than any human baby I’d ever encountered.

They were really going to take him and never let us see him again. No, I had to help her. But my parents held strong, my father insisting in a hard voice, “If you interfere, they’ll snap your neck. Without even thinking about it. I saw them do it to folks plenty of times during the first few breedings and reapings before we learned to stay back. You can’t help her, Kira. They’ll kill you before you even get close. Look at them!”

I do ... I do look at them. And he’s right. Even in blurry vision, the Reaping Force soldiers are huger than huge. The tallest full human in our village stands a little over six feet, but I’ve never encountered a Reaper who stood shorter than seven.

I’m close enough to the wall of soldiers surrounding my sister to tell this multi-colored Reaping Force is heavily muscled on top of being tall, without even an ounce of fat that I can see underneath the sleeveless silver jumpsuits they wear.

Their uniforms gleam underneath the sun, like they're made of some kind of metal. But unlike the few metals New Terrhans have managed to make down here on our scraggly planet, the uniform material molds over their thick bodies like a second skin.

At least, most of them wear silver uniforms. One of the Xalthurians who hadn't advanced with the rest of the Reaping Force has on a gold jumpsuit. He has deep dark blue skin, white hair tied back in a top knot, and a commanding air. I sense his importance, even before he turns his head with a predatory grace to address one of the jade green diplomats in those strange clicking, back-of-throat scratching sounds that the Xalthurians called their language. Maybe he has some kind of authority here?

As if confirming my guess, the jade Xalthurian calls out to Elle in a smoky accent, "Hand over the Xalling. Hand him over now and our Tel promises, you will not be made to suffer for what you have done here today."

My blood boils with rage. Once they take away Elle's baby, that would be suffering. A lifetime of suffering that my sensitive sister will most likely never get over.

I can hear Elle weeping uncontrollably on the cliff's edge, and I easily imagine her holding her baby close, as if her dark brown arms could possibly provide any kind of defense against eight huge Xalthurians.

"Somebody help me, please!" she cries out to her fellow humans. "Please don't let them do this. Please don't let them take my baby!"

A few of the humans answer her like our mother did. Reminding her she knew this day would come. That she shouldn't be upset and should hand the hybrid over before the Xals shoot her or worse.

But I strain against my parents' hold, wanting to help her. Needing to go to her, even if that means my own death. The Xalthurians are closing in, and any second now they'll—

It happens so fast, it takes me many, many moments to process what has occurred.

Elle is screaming and sobbing and then suddenly...she's not. Her voice and the baby's crying cut off without warning.

Then the next thing I hear is my mother screaming and wailing, "Elle, no, nooooo! My girl, nooo!!!!"

My father's hands fall away from my arm, just as the soldiers step back...to reveal nothing on the cliff's edge. Nothing but an empty space where Elle was standing.

She's gone ... Elle took another step back and now she's gone. I can't even be sure if she did it on purpose or if she didn't know ... didn't know she had nothing left to step back to, except air. Either way, the result is the same.

A moment ago she was there, begging the Xalthurian Reapers not to take her baby, and now, she's just...not.

The pain.

It's like the time I broke my wrist. How I felt the snap, but somehow didn't get it. Didn't feel the pain until I raised my arm and saw the way my hand was hanging at a funny angle. Only then did I understand. Only then did I rush over to my older sister, crying out, "Libeth! Libeth! It's broken! It's broken!"

*It's broken.*

Libeth ... Elizabeth ... Elle ... my sister. She's gone. *She's gone.* And so is her baby. Because of the Xalthurians. Because of the Reapers who kept on advancing on a mother who didn't want to lose her baby.

The world becomes a scream.

And I can no longer be held back.

I fly forward and shove the Xalthurian in the gold uniform—the Tel who made her such a *magnanimous* offer. Up close I see that he's got to be at least seven-five. So tall, it feels like he could step on me. I don't care. I want to fight him. I have to fight him. For Elle, who never had a chance.

When he turns around to see who's shoved him, I swing on him, morphing into a hitting and slapping fury, until he pushes me back, the tips of his dark blue fingers pressing into my chest.

It's just his fingers, just the tip of his fingers, but I go flying backwards and land butt first in the red clay dirt.

I don't stay down for long. Not because I quickly leap back up. I wish. But jumping to your feet is kind of hard to do when you're wheezing from having all the breath finger shoved out of you.

No, it's the overlarge Xalthurian who quickly helps me back up...with a huge hand wrapped around my neck.

My inner rage scream cuts off abruptly and the sound of the real world comes back in. Suddenly, I can hear the crowd murmuring and my parents yelling in the background. Begging the Xalthurian with his hand around my neck for mercy on my behalf.

"Please, please..." my mother says. "Don't make me lose two daughters today!"

The dark blue Xalthurian ignores her, his gaze lasering in on me. His eyes are red where mine are white, with a pair of black diamonds where a human's pupils would be. He glares at me, the ridges on his nose bristling, but other than that... nothing. After a few moments of being almost but not quite choked, I realize he's waiting, probably expecting me to beg for my life like my mother did.

But I don't beg. I stare the huge alien in his red diamond shaped eyes. And I refuse to flinch. "She was my sister," I tell him. "She wasn't just a womb."

Then, I spit at him.

Because if I'm going to die today. Hell, if I'll go out begging this Xal for anything.

When my spitball lands square in the alien's face, the human crowd goes deathly silent. And so do the Xalthurians.



But only for a moment. Then an enormous golden yellow Xal with a long black braid, click roars and comes charging forward with the rest of the reapers right behind him.

They advance on me, the way they advanced on my sister.

Still, I'm not scared. The pain and hollowness of loss dominates my spirit. There is no room for fear. I refuse to look away from the blue alien, who still has his clawed hand wrapped around my extremely fragile neck. As it turns out, my father was pretty damned right about how easy it would be for one of the Xals to snap it. Only a matter of flicking his wrist, I suspect for a Xalthurian as large as this blue one.

But then, instead of flicking his wrist, the Xal brings his free hand up, holding it in the air. This one action stops the yellow Xalthurian and the rest of the advancing force cold, as if they're machines who've been powered down with the motion of a hand.

Then, to my total surprise, instead of snapping the fragile column that connects my head to the rest of my body, he tilts my head to the right, baring the left side of my neck, like a vampire in one of the old entertainments we still watch on our wrecked colony ship.

I only know what he's doing because of what happened during last year's Breeding Ceremony, when one of the loin cloth Xalthurians burst into our house, looking for eligible 21-year-olds to drag onto their circular ship. In accord with the agreement between our two species, each New Terrhan girl must be given a birth year stamp in the weird Xalthurian number system of dots and lines. It can only be seen under UV lights by human eyes.

But the Xals don't have human eyes. The loin cloth Xal easily checked my age before moving on to assessing Elle and dragging her out of the house. And now I can feel the golden uniformed Xal's red eyes on the side of my neck. I'm nineteen now, not eighteen like I was when they took Elle. Still not twenty-one.

However, that fact brings no relief. Looking at the huge blue alien, I have to wonder if my too young age even matters. This

Xal stopped those Silver Uniforms with just a raise of one hand. He could probably do anything he wanted to me. Right now. Right here. Including breeding me before I reached the contracted age.

His minions wouldn't stop him. And though I love my fellow New Terrhans, I had a bad feeling they wouldn't either.

We've been living on severe rations for months now. Would any of the nearly starved humans really risk the huge shipment of meat, seedstock, and supplies the Xalthurians always brought with them as a "gift" for allowing them to enact the Breeding Ceremony on one girl who dared to spit in an alien overlord's face?

His eyes still locked on mine, the Xal's other hand goes up again, this time with a beckoning motion.

A green alien comes forward. His eyes carefully lowered.

The Xal in the golden uniform says something to him, throat clicking and scratching.

The green Xal's diamond-shaped eyes raise to meet mine, his expression almost carefully neutral. "Tel D'Rek wishes for me to translate what he's saying to you. Word for word."

"Just kill me already, no speech needed," I answer hotly.

But Tel D'Rek starts speaking anyway, the jade Diplomat translating during his pauses. "I will be back ... I will make it a special point to come back for you, little hu'man ... in two solars."

My eyes shift from the Diplomat to the alien who'd been addressed as Tel D'Rek. He stares back at me, his eyes burning. Then he leans his head forward and before I can even think to jerk back, I feel his tongue on my neck, licking up my birth code in one intense swipe.

My entire body shivers with a sensation unlike anything I've ever felt. Not disgust though. Dear moons, it's definitely not disgust. A strange heat appears between my legs, burning as red as his eyes. Overshadowing the anguish seething through my bones.

But before I can even process what's happening to me...to my body...he sets me down. Then with a deliberate turn, he walks back to the ship, the rest of the uniformed Xalthurians falling in behind him. Leaving me to stand there with my heart thundering in my chest and wondering if he was serious about coming back after I turned twenty-one. *Oh moons...*

Even as my parents fall all over me, hugging me and crying, I continue to wonder at this.

And fail to convince myself the answer to that question is anything but yes.

[Click here to find out why this crazy hot alien romance became an Amazon Top 100 Bestseller...](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Theodora Taylor** writes hot books with heart. When not reading, writing, or reviewing, she enjoys spending time with her amazing family, going on date nights with her wonderful husband, and attending parties thrown by others. She now lives in Los Angeles, California, and she LOVES to hear from readers. So....

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New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author **Eve Vaughn** has always enjoyed creating characters and stories from an early age. As a child she was always getting into mischief, so when she lost her television privileges (which was often), writing served as her outlet. Her stories have gotten quite a bit spicier since then! When she's not writing or spending time her family, Eve is reading, baking, traveling or kicking butt in 80's trivia. She loves hearing from her readers.

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