



ALIEN PRINCE'S
MATCH

TAMMY WALSH

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PENNY

I THREW my arms over my head and emitted a high-pitched scream:

“ARRRRGGGHHHHHhhhhhhh....!”

My scream trailed off to silence as I realized the ball of flames I had expected to roll over me had suddenly disappeared only to be replaced by the ice-cold slap of metal against my arms.

I just lay there a moment, panting around deep lungfuls of panicking breaths.

I was relieved the flames no longer existed, knowing I should be chargrilled and served up with mayonnaise right about now...

But my brain still hadn't fully processed what had happened.

As I slowly raised my head, careful in case I accidentally put myself into that wall of flames that, in my mind's eye, was still present, I peered at my surroundings.

I found it was *not* in the same transport ship we had all been ushered into when someone attacked the Seeding Facility.

Confused? Join the line.

Let me go back to the start of all this madness.

At least, I *think* it's the start.

When your mind is as jumbled as mine, it's hard to figure out exactly *what* the start even is!

So, I'm from Earth, a small planet on the edge of nowhere.

When I was young, it'd seemed like Earth was the center of all things — the galaxy, the universe, of all creation...

And at the center of all that, was me (naturally).

I am a member of the last generation of children born *naturally* to a pair

of human parents.

After that, the world's population took a massive hit and we never recovered from it.

The finger of blame was pointed at everything you could think of...

Everything but the real cause.

Although I have my suspicions about what that thing was (as everyone does, it seems), I don't really have any evidence to back it up, so I won't bother you with it.

The point is, humans are unable to have kids naturally anymore.

Thankfully, some well-meaning (and entirely self-serving, in my opinion) alien species came to us with a solution to our problem:

Sleep with them and we'll become pregnant.

Now, if this sounds familiar, it's because *every human male* has used this chat-up line *every day* since virile human seed became the rarest substance in the known galaxy.

I've heard it over *a hundred and thirty times* (me and my buddies keep track to see who can get the most offers) and *not once* has it proven true.

I had assumed these alien males thought they saw an opportunity to get as much willing human pussy as they could ever dream of and were using the situation for their own selfish needs.

Then some human females — far more desperate than me — decided to take these alien males up on their offer.

And lo and behold, when they came back, they were pregnant!

For real!

The world was in shock.

These alien males had told the truth and *really did offer* a solution to our problem.

Best of all, the alien males offered *nothing but* their Seed — no parental rights, no weekend visits, nothing.

In exchange, all we had to do was offer up our bodies for them to use as they saw fit.

Naturally, they weren't doing it out of the kindness of their hearts — they're biological males too.

Many of these alien males have what they call the "Steyatt" — a week of the year when they *must* mate with a willing female or else terrible things happen.

(Imagine a guy with roaring testosterone levels, giving him the worst case

of blue balls you've ever seen, and then add the inability to relieve himself... *That is the Steyatt and I'm told it's quite something to behold.*)

To ensure everyone got what they bargained for, Seeding Facilities were set up throughout the galaxy to act as rendezvous points for both males and females.

Finally biting the bullet, and seeing my friends enjoy terrific success with the program, I decided to take part.

I enrolled only to find the waiting list was a ridiculous *two years!*

Finally, my number was called and I headed to the Seeding Facility.

I was lined up alongside the other females from countless other alien species with the same fertility problem as we humans.

The male aliens were racing down the hallway toward us, beating on the door that led into the Claiming Room...

I was nervous as hell.

And that's when an alarm went off and the door slammed shut.

The Facility was under attack and there was nothing for us to do but head to the transport ships!

Two years of waiting... *for this?*

I was *pissed*.

Initially, I refused to leave, but when we were ushered into the spaceport — and it was jammed in there with hardly any space to swing a miniature cat — I realized just how serious the situation was.

I had no choice but to follow the crowd and ended up on a transport ship swollen with horny males and females.

I was tempted to grab one of the males and have him Seed me right then and there — it wasn't exactly in my nature to give up so easily — but I figured it perhaps wasn't the wisest thing to do.

(Who needed an orgy to break out during an evacuation?)

We took off, and just when I thought we were safe, our ship was hit and began to implode in on itself.

Metal screamed and the darkness of space became visible through a hole torn into the hull of the ship.

A ball of flames rushed toward me, consuming one row of terrified aliens after another...

Until my turn had come.

The last thought that passed through my mind was just how I had managed to get myself into this situation.

As I screamed and threw my arms up around my face...

I woke up here.

In this room.

Perhaps now you can understand my intense confusion.

Now, I've woken up in my share of strange surroundings before (almost always after a heavy night of alcohol binging) but *this really takes the biscuit...*

This was clearly *not* the transport ship I had been sitting in.

It was shinier, newer, with perfectly white walls and shimmering metal surfaces — nothing like the worn transport ship's interior.

When I glanced left and right, I saw the seats that should have been on either side of me weren't there either.

Neither were their occupants.

I was *alone*.

The room was a decent size whereas the transport ship had housed *hundreds of seats* and most of them had been full.

It was like some amateur had edited a movie and made the mistake of splicing two scenes together from *totally different movies*.

Leaving the audience (me) totally and completely confused.

White mist floated from behind me, enveloping me with cold wet kisses.

I peered back over my shoulder and there, looming over me, huge and terrifying, was a glass tube.

Thick liquid ran from it and dripped through holes in the metal grating floor.

The tubes inside it were still retracting back.

One was attached to a mask that had, I felt certain, until a moment ago, been wrapped tightly about my face.

I placed my hand over my mouth where the mask had been just a moment ago and felt the indentations where it had pressed into my skin.

Yes, I thought. *I had been wearing it. It'd torn off when I fell forward...*

When I had been encased inside that glass box.

"What... What the fuck?"

I wasn't prone to swearing — having your father take you out behind the toolshed each time you "blasphemed" was bound to have that effect — but I felt the moment called for it.

My head was a jumbled mess of images and sounds... I felt dizzy like I was going to throw up.

In fact...

BLEH!

I projectile-vomited over the glass tube's base and the tiny lumps of carrot — *why was there always carrot in puke?* — slipped through the gaps in the metal grating, joining the thick bluish liquid I had been swimming in a moment earlier.

I moved to stand...

And couldn't rise by more than a few inches.

I tried again with the same result.

I rubbed my hands over my thighs and calves and felt my fingertips on them.

Relieved I could at least move my limbs a little — it meant they would return to normal before long, right? — I pressed my hands to the metal grating and my arms shook weakly as I attempted to force myself up onto my feet.

But it was no good.

I simply *could not* get up.

Whoosh!

A door hissed open and a figure stepped into the room.

I attempted to shuffle back and managed only to flap around like a helpless fish.

I gripped the grating, using my fingers to hook the metal holes and pull myself away...

My arms shivered and did *sweet FA*.

Shit!

I was *totally helpless* and at this dude's whim!

I flopped to the floor, playing dead...

But he had already seen me move and it would be *obvious* I was trying to escape!

A twin pair of boots stepped up to me and I slowly raised my eyes to peer up at him.

He was an odd-looking creature, his body long and thin like a whippet with stripey white and orange — no, green — no, red — no — and then I realized his skin was constantly changing color, warping like a magic-eye picture.

I felt sick again just looking at him, so I averted my gaze and focused on the wall.

He pressed something to my arm and it made a loud *hiss* noise.

I tugged my arm away — too slowly — and he ran a finger over where he had placed the object and seemed content with whatever he had just done.

“Fear not,” he said in an oddly deep voice. “The weakness will pass. You’ll be up and about in no time.”

He stood there a moment, looking at me, seeming to be waiting for me to reply.

I supposed my playing dead routine was already a failure — not that it was anywhere near to being a success anyway.

I decided to move my head toward him, immediately regretting it as I felt the contents of my stomach whirling at the sight of his oddly morphing skin.

“You’re probably suffering from some confusion right now,” the creature said. “But don’t worry. Everything will become clear in due course.”

“Due course?” I spat. “I *don’t want* due course. I want to know what’s going on here! *Right now!*”

The creature’s large bulbous eyes blinked and his morphing skin switched from red to blue to pink and yellow, setting my stomach to clenching in tight bursts.

The creature looked at his tablet and ran his single long finger over it. “According to your file, you were aboard a transport ship, evacuating a Seeding Facility on—”

“I know all that!” I snapped. “Tell me something I *don’t* know! Like, where am I right now? What is this place?”

The creature clutched his tablet close as if needing the support. “At the moment of your extermination from the galaxy, you were teleported to a cryo-facility. You were processed and held here until someone came for you.”

“Teleported? What are you talking about?”

The creature tapped at his tablet and presented me with a screen full of words written in the most unintelligible language in the entire galaxy — Legalese.

I shook my head. “Just tell me the gist of it.”

“The... gist of it?” the creature said, scratching his head.

“It means tell me the basics.”

“I understand the meaning. But this... this is beyond the understanding of a translation device.”

I rolled my eyes. “So tell me *what* it is then.”

“It’s the contract you signed with the Seeding Facility. In the unlikely event of a tragedy when your life is lost, your body and everything contained therein becomes the property of the Facility.”

My jaw hit the floor. “Excuse me?”

The creature waited for something and, as it didn’t materialize, he said: “Go on.”

“What?”

“You said ‘excuse me.’ I understand that to mean you’re going to do something unexpected, like leave, or perhaps to sneeze or cough—”

“No, ‘excuse me’ means *you* should be the one to go on.”

“Oh. Go on about what?”

I sighed with exasperation and shook my head. “I want my lawyer. He’ll sort this whole thing out. There’s no way it can be legal that a company can take possession of my life.”

“They can if you lose it.”

“Lose what?”

“Your life.”

Two little words.

They confounded me for a moment before I pieced together what he was telling me.

I had lost my life.

He had mentioned it earlier a few times in the conversation too but it was only now that it was beginning to permeate my consciousness.

I swallowed what little saliva remained in my mouth. “You’re telling me... Everyone thinks I’m dead?”

He nodded. “Not think. You *are* dead. Officially, anyway.”

Officially?

How could I be dead?

I mean, I was still *breathing* for heaven’s sake!

“You are dead in your time. All your possessions were sold and distributed to your loved ones.”

“All... my possessions?” I couldn’t process what he was telling me.

All I could manage was to repeat his words back to him.

“Oh, yes. But don’t worry, you’ll be well taken care of. You wouldn’t have been woken up if someone didn’t come to take possession of you.”

“Po.... possession?”

Nothing the creature was telling me was making any sense.

I attempted to push myself up onto my feet and this time met with some success.

I braced my weight on the pod.

My knees shook and I could barely stand but it was enough for what I wanted to do next:

“Thanks for the history lesson, but I have to get out of here.”

“You will certainly leave,” the creature said. “But not without your owner. And I’m not supposed to say this, but...” He checked over his shoulders and leaned in close. “You couldn’t have hoped for a better owner!”

“Owner?”

“I’ve heard of the Krev prophecies before, of course. *Everyone* has. But I never thought I would ever meet the Royal’s mate in person!”

He might as well have been talking in another language.

Nothing he said was making any sense. “No one *owns* me,” I informed him. “I own myself. And now... Now I have to leave.”

I stumbled toward the doorway the creature had entered through earlier and pressed my hands to it.

It didn’t open.

I searched for a handle, a button, anything that might make it slide open.

“I’m afraid you can’t leave,” the creature said, his morphing spiral patterns turning a sinister shade of black. “We have a one hundred percent delivery record and we don’t intend on breaking it now. You may leave... but only in the company of your owner.”

“You don’t understand,” I said. “I *have* to get out of here! I have friends to return to. Family. I have a job. *A life!*”

The creature shook his head. “You have no life. The time you know has passed. Everything you know is ancient history.”

A headache began poking at me from the back of my head. “Ancient history? What are you going on about?”

“You’ve been at this facility for the past one hundred and seven years.”

I froze and just stared at the wall. “One hundred and seven?”

“Things will seem quite different to you, I’m sure,” the creature said. “Now, if you’ll step this way, we’ll get you nice and cleaned up for when your owner arrives—”

I threw up over the creature’s pristine white jacket.

This time, it had nothing to do with his bizarre morphing skin.

THE NEXT HALF hour passed in a daze.

One hundred and seven years.

Everything I had known, everything I loved...

All gone.

My parents...

I wondered if they had graves and I could go see them...

And then shook my head at the idea.

I didn't *want* to see their graves.

I preferred to imagine they were still alive and happy somewhere, the way they had been when I had left for the Seeding Facility.

We celebrated my father's 75th birthday just last week!

I wasn't ready to admit they were gone.

Or my friends.

Or my old life.

No, they were all still alive, and always would be so long as they existed in my mind.

The creature had changed his jacket for a fresh one, a scowl temporarily blighting his brow.

He placed me in a small room that doused me with water, then some kind of sweet-smelling liquid, then another round of water, before a high-powered dryer blasted me from every direction all at once.

Through it all, just one thought passed through my mind:

One hundred and seven?

He dressed me in a clean robe and, as I caught the dizzying display of his skin once more, threw up again over his fresh jacket.

"Sorry," I said, wiping at the corners of my mouth.

If he'd been allowed to get angry at his charge, I bet he would have exploded, but instead, he controlled himself and deposited his soiled jacket and reached for another one.

When the door opened and a second creature turned up, my host up until that point bowed to him, then me, and hastily made his exit.

Now I was alone with this new creature, and he was an entirely different beast from the one earlier.

I pulled back my head to spit at him, to berate him and inform him in no uncertain terms that I was not — *and never would be* — owned by *him* or

anyone else!

Not by a man.

Not by my parents.

No one owned me but myself!

I was *my own person* and if he thought he could tell me what to do, he was in for a rude awakening!

Then the creature, who was strangely handsome with his square chin and gleaming golden eyes, smiled at me and, although it wasn't exactly the right place or time for such thoughts, I melted just a little bit.

His voice was deep and penetrating and when he focused his eyes on mine, they didn't so much as latch onto me but *drilled* into me.

I felt fixed firmly in place, as if he had pinned me there with spiritual nails.

Wow.

I realized that if I had been paired with this alien male at the Seeding Facility, I might have been very happy indeed.

He was muscular and strong, his scaly skin just the right shade of blue that was both alien and yet somehow still familiar.

The only real difference between him and a human male (besides his huge size, semi-blue skin, and golden irises, of course) were his horns.

They jutted from either side of his head and were as black as night.

They sent a shiver through me.

"My Master is waiting for you aboard his ship," he said, breaking any fantasy I might have had about him rescuing me.

"Master?" I said. "But I thought... You're not my owner?"

Even just referring to myself that way made me feel sick!

I folded my arms. "Well, *I don't have* any master. Or owner. I'm not going anywhere."

The creature ran his eyes over me as if ascertaining my frame of mind. "Please," he said in his dulcet tones. "The Master will be angry with me if I do not fetch you."

Fetch.

Like a dog.

I ground my teeth and turned my face away from him. "If your Master wants me, he's going to have to come and get me *himself!*"

The creature whined — and it was strange hearing that noise in such a big and powerful beast as he.

If *he* were so afraid of this Master, what chance did *I* have?

He took a step toward me. “If my Master must come to fetch you—” There was that *f* word again! “—I will have failed in my mission. He will be angry with *both* of us. Please. Come.”

I wished the creature who clutched his tablet computer to his chest was there to help me.

Then I realized he had been *zero* help so far, so why would he help with this situation?

As far as he — and this Facility — were concerned, I was no longer their problem.

They had delivered me and now my “owner” had come to pick me up.

Maybe I was thinking about this all wrong and there really wasn’t anything to worry about.

Maybe this “owner” was kind and gentle — although, judging by how this large creature had reacted at the idea of failing to bring me to him... I doubted it.

Still, I was a stranger in this time and knew no one and nothing.

This “owner” might be the only ally I had.

“All right,” I said, “I’ll go with you.”

The monster’s immense shoulders relaxed with relief. “Please follow me,” he said, turning to lead me through the door and out of the room.

I looked back at the room and watched as the cryo-chamber I had been asleep in for over a hundred years slid back down into the floor.

Part of me wished to return to it, to that infinite slumber.

But it was only a small part.

If I went back to sleep now, there was no telling when — or if I ever — would awaken again.

Better to be awake and live my life than sleep it away.

As we walked down the perfectly-white hallways, I focused on the whole ownership thing.

Why? Because I couldn’t even *begin* to comprehend what was happening to me.

I mean, I had slept for 107 years?

Did that make me 142 years old?

If so, I ought to sign up to become a skincare model because there wasn’t any other centenarian with skin like mine!

I began to wonder what might have happened to the world I was from.

My parents would now be gone, my friends, my home...

Everything.

My throat stung and I felt tears gather in my eyes.

I immediately shook my head to dislodge such thoughts of knowing I would never see them again, of knowing in my heart that even if I were to return to the streets I had grown up on, they would not be how I remembered them.

Everything from my time was gone.

Only I remained.

I couldn't process it — I doubted I could *ever* fully process or understand it — but I wouldn't allow myself to wallow in self-pity either.

Not right now, anyway.

Later, I would grab a tub of ice cream (did they still have ice cream in this time and place?) and a big bottle of Coke (was that even a thing now?) and watch some movies (all old classics now — even if they only came out, to my mind, last week!) and *only then* would I drown my sorrows.

But not right now.

Right now, I needed to focus.

I needed to get a handle on where I was and what I was going to do here.

I concentrated on the creature's muscular back as he limped his way down the corridor.

A final set of doors hissed open and a stiff breeze disturbed my robe.

Before us stood a huge ship that had the appearance of multiple shuttles having been welded together.

It was bulbous and round like it was made from bubbles on its lower sections and thick and square and angular higher up, before disappearing around the ridge that led to the top.

It wasn't the most attractive ship I had ever seen and resembled one of Dr. Frankenstein's creations.

As the creature approached the ship, a hatch whirred and sat down on the platform.

He turned to look back at me and held out a hand for me to take.

Instead, I drifted over to the platform's edge and immediately wished I hadn't.

We were on one of dozens of round platforms held out on long slender arms that protruded from the cryo-facility.

Hundreds of ships landed and disembarked at a dizzying rate, too many to

keep track of.

I had been hoping to find a fast-flowing river I could hurl myself into and use to escape...

But jumping from here would have been suicide — a *very painful* suicide as I would have struck every single platform on the way down and turned to mush long before I hit the red sand below.

I edged back to the middle of the platform, the blood having drained from my face, and approached the creature and the ship's open door.

Going to meet my "owner" wasn't exactly top of my list of things to do... but what other alternative was there?

I didn't take the creature's hand and instead took a deep breath and headed up the ramp.

And into whatever nightmare awaited me.

THE CREATURE LED me through the winding tunnels built like a metal rabbit warren.

I spotted other alien males as we rose higher in the ship's internal structure and although they glanced up and saw me, none paid me much attention.

I tugged the robe tighter around myself, feeling very self-conscious.

"You don't need to worry about them," the creature leading me said. "They know better than to do anything foolish with one of the Master's wives."

I came to a stop. "Wives?"

"That's where I'm taking you now," he said. "To meet them. There's no need for you to be alone. There are seven others to keep you company."

"Seven?" I said. "He wants to... marry me? But he doesn't even know me!"

The creature shrugged and turned to continue on down the tunnel. "He feels he knows enough about you already."

I didn't want to follow the creature.

I wanted to turn and run in the opposite direction...

But where would I go?

Where would I hide?

I could feel the ship already moving upward, fighting against gravity as it rose higher into the atmosphere.

Fat chance of escaping now!

The creature disappeared around a corner and I hurried to catch up to him.

He placed his hand on a large door and shoved it open. "Please wait inside."

"Listen," I said. "There must be some mistake. Your Master isn't going to be happy when he learns you've brought the wrong woman to him. Why don't you fly me back to the Facility on a shuttle and we can all forget this ever happened."

The creature rolled his eyes as if this wasn't the first time he'd heard this argument. "The Master will come by when everything is ready."

When I didn't move, he gently pushed me into the room and shut the door behind me.

The lock turned into place and sounded like something that might have been used to keep a bank's vault safe.

Seven faces looked up.

Most pursed their lips and bent back down over whatever they had been doing when I'd entered, totally disinterested in me.

A couple ran their eyes over me, smirking to each other and mumbling something under their breath.

Only one came up to me.

She had a nice open face and wore a broad grin. "Hi," she said. "I'm Cleyena. Don't worry about the others. You'll get used to them."

I looked them over, at the polished furniture and high-class surroundings.

They all wore smart dresses as if they were going to some kind of event.

I doubted I would *ever* get used to being somewhere like this.

"You're human, right?" Cleyena said, thrusting her hand at me. "This is how you say hello in your culture, right?"

I didn't take her hand. "I don't understand. What's going on here?"

Cleyena's eyes took on a distant and hazy look. "My wedding day was the best day of my life... Of course, it's all been downhill since then."

Her look wasn't just far and distant now, it was dark and pained.

She checked over her shoulders and leaned in close to me. "The wedding is the *least* of your problems. It's the life you lead *afterward* that really makes life unbearable..."

My throat felt dry as she leaned in even closer, her snake-like hair writhing in my face, and even their individual faces didn't look like they much relished the experience the female was sharing with me.

How bad did a situation have to be for even your hair to be afraid?

"He calls to each of us every night..." she said, her tone turning haunted and scared. "And he has a... strong desire for us. He opens our wedding photo album and goes through them, remembering every element of the celebration. Things we've long since forgotten. He points out all the things we did right on that day and..." She gulped. "All the things we did *wrong*."

"And then... then what happens?"

Cleyena wiped her sweaty palms over the front of her dress. "Then... Then he... licks you."

I blinked.

Okay, so *that* wasn't what I was expecting her to say. "Licks you?"

The female nodded her head, still appearing scared to be saying this to me. "His tongue... it's... He can taste how you're thinking, how you're really feeling... All it takes is for him to run his tongue over you... The other wives have all experienced it too. And if you've been thinking or feeling something he doesn't approve of... He's *extra* harsh with you."

I shook my head.

I couldn't believe this was really happening to me. "Why me? What am I doing here?"

Cleyena looked at me curiously. "For the same reason as the rest of us. For *power*."

I expected her to elaborate but when no more details were forthcoming, I asked her outright:

"What power? I don't have any power!"

"Not right now, but you *will* if you're allowed to marry your fated mate."

"My... fated mate? What's that?"

Cleyena smiled as if on the brink of laughter before catching onto the fact I was being totally honest and didn't know what fated mates were.

"They're a holy union between two creatures," she said. "Many believe it's when Fate herself chooses your mate and when you come together, you'll be happy forever."

"You're telling me *your* husband is *my* fated mate? How can he have so many?"

Cleyena shook her head. "No. That's the tragedy of it all. *None of us* were

meant to be with him as fated mates. He *took us* and married us *before we could fulfill our destinies* with our fated mates. By marrying us, the Master — and that's what he insists on being called — can stop us from being with the Princes of various tribes throughout the galaxy that might otherwise threaten him. You see, when a pair of fated mates come together, they form an unbreakable bond. We *complete* him just as he *completes* us. And our fated mates are all princes.”

She sighed. “What should have been a perfect match turned into a nightmare. The Master got hold of us first and married us, preventing us from ever being with our true fated mates.”

I felt heartbroken for her. “I'm... I'm sorry,” I said.

The female thumbed a tear from her eye. “It's okay. The worst part is when another female joins us, who has lost the chance to be with her true fated mate. It reminds us of the life we *should* have been living. That's why they're all so cold with you. Don't blame them. None of us should be here. It's all because of the Master's greed. He has compounded his power and exerts great influence. And he won't stop. Not until he has control over the whole galaxy.”

The door lock squealed as it was opened.

The females looked up from the games they were playing, and this time, the moment they spotted the figure that entered the room, they didn't bend back down over their activities but hastened over to stand in a straight line.

Cleyena grabbed me by the hand and dragged me over to join it so I stood beside her.

She hastily ran her hands over her dress to smooth it out and stood upright, eyes blinking and bright, a big false smile on her luscious lips.

The other females did the same as a huge behemoth eased around the door and peered in at us.

He peeked around the door with his black, shark-like eyes, his teeth similarly sharpened to needles. “I hope you're all decent!”

The females cooed and laughed... although for the life of me, I couldn't see what was so funny.

The Master eased his huge form around the door and approached the lineup, running his eyes approvingly over us one by one.

He took a lot of time checking each member.

Then he frowned, a single thick wedge of muscle drawing down over his black eyes.

The females instantly caught their breath and could only watch helplessly as he approached one of the females.

He snapped the handkerchief tucked in his front breast pocket — which made the females whimper with fear — and used it to dab at the female’s lipstick. “You smudged yourself.”

“I... I’m sorry...” the female said. “I... thought... I was going to... Please forgive me.”

She fell forward into his arms and he cooed softly after her. “It’s all right, it’s all right. I saw it before anyone else could see it. But in the future, you *must* be more careful. Remember that when my guests see you, they see *me*. And you don’t want them to think less of me because of you, do you?”

The female shook her head violently.

The Master grinned in what I thought was meant to be a smile of understanding... but it made him look even more like a shark than I had seen up to this point.

The female looked on the verge of collapse.

The Master turned from her and marched down the line until he came to me.

He towered over me, gargantuan and huge. “Now, please forgive me, my new lady wife. I know it’s human custom not to see each other before the big wedding but I *couldn’t resist* laying eyes on you before the event.”

“W-wedding?” I managed.

“Now, let me take a closer look at you.”

He took my chin in his colossal hand and tilted my face up to him, then turned it left and right, tugging down my eyelids so he could check my heath like a doctor.

“Nice,” he said. “*Very* nice. I can see why Fate chose yet another beauty.”

He took my hand and placed it on his forearm. “Now, let’s see if we can live up to human wedding expectations and *surpass* them. I’ve been planning this event for some time and I just *know* you’re not going to be disappointed. Come.”

He led me toward the door and turned on his heel to look back at the females one more time. “Make sure you’re in *perfect* condition for the ceremony. Anyone out of line will be met with severe... consequences.”

I had never seen such masks of fear on anyone’s face as I did on those females when he ran his tongue over his lips and stepped from the room with

me at his side.

I was doomed.

THE MASTER WAS SO large his huge bulging girth could barely fit in the corridor we were walking down.

More than once he bumped into me and knocked me off balance.

“Our wedding will be one for the ages!” he announced to no one in particular. “No human shall ever have experienced anything like it! It will set tongues wagging for years to come!”

He skidded to a halt and leered at me. “That’s what you humans say, isn’t it? That *tongues will be wagging?*”

“Yes,” I said, afraid to say any different.

“Yes,” he said triumphantly. “I have had tongues removed from many throats and had them tied to the pagoda where we will be married. They will be wagging as we announce our love for each other!”

Oh my God...

I felt sick already and now he was threatening to make me hurl all over him.

And I knew the consequence for that would almost certainly be a good lashing with his disgusting tongue.

I had to explain to this monster that there had been some mistake.

But I had to be careful.

I also knew he was a touchy creature and wouldn’t take any kind of insult lightly.

“Do you ever think... someone — not you, of course — might have made a mistake when it comes to picking up your brides?”

“Impossible!” the Master announced in a loud bark that made me jump near out of my skin.

At this rate, he wasn’t going to have a bride to marry as I’d end up in A&E suffering from a heart attack.

It was something of a surprise I had even managed to *survive this long* with all the surprises I’d suffered thus far.

“How do you know it’s impossible?” I ventured cautiously.

He chuckled. “Because my men do not make mistakes. They do their jobs

and get them done. And they know the consequences if they displease me.”

I gulped. “But how can I be the fated mate of a prince?”

The Master came to a stop and fixed me with a look. “You need to accept that you are what you are, dear one.” He ran a thick callused finger along my cheek that made me shiver. “Fate herself has great plans for you. And the first of them is to marry not a lowly prince of some backwater kingdom but the future supreme leader of the galaxy!”

It only became deathly clear to me then that he had clearly lost his mind.

Worse still, he had lost his mind and *settled on me* being a part of his crazy delusions.

There was going to be *no escape* for me from him — not if I just sat back and let him do what he wanted with me and my future.

He motioned toward a nondescript door. “Your dress and makeup crew will be along any minute now,” he informed me. “Sit tight and they’ll be with you in a moment.”

Then he leaned forward and puckered his lips.

His greasy tongue — thicker than my arm — lashed his lips as he bent forward to press his lips against mine.

I leaned back and squealed with disgust.

He paused before straightening up, his scowl fierce and ferocious. “If you squeal now, then during our wedding night tonight, you will be positively *howling*. And that is something I can *promise* you.”

“It’s... It’s not that,” I stammered, before collecting myself and managing to force a smile on my face. “It’s just that... I... It’s tradition on Earth for the groom not to see the bride before the wedding. We’ve already broken that custom—”

His scowl grew even deeper.

“—and I’m *glad* we did as I *wanted* to see you, the husband and ruler for the rest of my life... But... it’s never a good idea to break too many traditions. It’s bad luck.”

“Bad luck?” he said, frowning and pursing his lips. “But it *is* tradition for the groom to kiss the bride at the ceremony, is it not?”

Oh God, please no.

I nodded. “Oh, yes. Very much so. A big, long, wet, slobbery kiss. But *not until the right moment.*”

His eyes sparkled at the idea and he clapped his hands — producing a loud thunderclap that made me jump again. “Then that is what we shall do!

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, after all!”

He opened the door for me and gently pushed me inside. “So long, my love,” he said with a broad grin. “See you at the wedding.”

As he shut the door, I heard the distinct click of the lock snapping into place.

I just stared at the door.

My heart thundered and a fresh layer of sweat broke across my whole body.

This can't be happening...

This can't be happening...

This can't be happening...

I paced back and forth, running my hands through my hair, close to tearing it out by the roots.

I rushed to the door, grabbed it, and yanked on it to pull it open...

But it was no good.

It was locked shut tight.

I put my foot to it and yanked hard but there was less chance of me pulling it open than tearing a hole in the ship's hull...

Although that was an idea...

Maybe I could take the Master down with me.

A bonus.

I was trapped in that room and there was no way out.

Then I realized with dawning horror that he wasn't going to let me get away, to escape and live my life...

Whatever that might be if I managed to get out of here...

But it would at least be *my life* and one *I could choose*.

I knew I wouldn't return to Earth, at least the parts of it I knew well and had grown up in.

But I could head to a *different part* of it — a different city or even continent...

I wonder what Europe is like this time of year?

The technology might be something far more advanced than anything I was used to, but it was easy enough to pretend I was heading to a more developed nation from my own sleepy hometown.

Yes, I thought. Even if the Earth was no longer the home I had known, it was *still the only home I knew*.

And I was still human.

That *had* to count for something, didn't it?

That is, so long as humans hadn't changed so much in the past century that I was now considered an alien species...

I felt confident they *had to* let me return home.

The Seeding Facility and cryo-facility had all the evidence I needed to back up my story so they knew I wasn't a security risk.

And I couldn't believe this bizarre situation could have *only* happened to me...

There had to be other humans who had gone through the same experience...

Yes, I was sure of it.

Even if they wouldn't let me back to Earth, they would at least help me find a new home.

A new colony even.

Anything was better than being forced to marry this Master monster...

Anything.

Which was when, in a sudden moment of perfect clarity, I realized if I was going to escape, I would have to do it soon.

Very soon.

And that meant avoiding this creature's clutches and having to pledge myself to him for the rest of my life.

If it came to it, it would have been done under duress, so I felt no compunction to keep my vow.

I was sure the other wives would almost certainly have attempted to escape him over the years and as there were seven of them, it was safe to assume many of them had been married to him for several years...

And if they hadn't managed to escape, what chance would I have?

No, I decided. I had to stay out of that room — *that ivory tower prison* — he kept them locked in.

I had to escape soon.

Right now.

Before the ceremony.

Before any kind of nightmare could occur.

It had to be *now*.

I turned and appraised the room and the tools for escape available to me.

There *had* to be something in here that would allow me to escape.

Long tables ran the length of two of the walls and half a dozen chairs sat

empty and idle.

I rushed to the window.

Outside was an incredible view of the cosmos as we slowly passed through it.

If I could get it open, could creep along it somehow...

I smacked my forehead with the palm of my hand.

Without a spacesuit? What are you thinking, you moron?

I wasn't a moron, I was *desperate*.

I *had* to get out of there.

Had to figure out some method to escape...

But how?

How?

"Uh, do you need a hand?"

I spun around.

I had been so focused on escaping that I hadn't heard the lock disengage.

Or the door open.

Or the fact it was standing wide open.

And there was only one thing between it and my escape...

The creature standing between us.

The very same creature that had come to "collect" me for his precious Master.

I narrowed my eyes.

I *was* getting past him.

And I didn't care what he tried to do to stop me.

TRIEC

HONOR BEFORE DESIRE.

That was the old G'kora motto.

A standard all Krev attempted to live up to.

Theirs was one of the eldest families in the Empire, stretching back as far as anyone could remember.

It was that kind of reliability that made them ideal for the job of rulers.

In over five thousand years, there hadn't been a single break in the line of succession of G'kora.

There had always been a G'kora on the throne but if the Prince wasn't careful, it was going to be a line that he would be the very first to break.

The motto Honor Before Desire was something the Prince would have done well to pay attention to.

It seemed he never paid much attention to honor — especially that of the willing (indeed, very willing) young maidens that came to court on a frequent basis.

The Prince took no more notice of defending their honor than he did his own.

He was gaining quite a reputation as a wayward Prince — a reputation that I was surprised had taken so long to catch up to him considering how he had been chasing women since he had discovered he had a cock and learned how to use it.

That wasn't to say he would make a bad ruler... only that he was easily led and increasingly distracted, so it was against the odds that he could ever become a great one.

His eye was always firmly fixed on a maiden's shapely ass or another's

crooked challenge of a smile that made him literally salivate (I'd had to offer him my handkerchief no less than a dozen times for him to wipe his slobbering maw with over the years).

This was the reason he had dispatched me — the Captain of his guard — to go fetch the female that was going to be his fated mate.

In typical G'kora tradition, the Crown Prince could not choose his mate and instead she would be chosen for him by Fate herself.

On his twenty-first name day — what had occurred just the day before and, upon discovering who his mate was to be, the Prince had, breaking with tradition, not rushed to discover her and perform the mating dance before her and wed her and bed her in the usual tradition, and had instead preferred to take his time, claim he was sick, and take three maidens to bed.

It was likely he feared he was going to lose access to his various mistresses and would have to be loyal to his new wife...

But there was no way he could be so naive as that.

Just because his fated mate had been chosen for him did not mean he had to stick solemnly to the vows.

He knew that, as did I.

But he would try his best — for tradition's sake, at least — and I thought he would last a few days, maybe a week at most... before his cock would find another willing moist hole to bury itself in.

No, the female Fate had chosen for the young Prince was not going to satisfy him at all.

Not a female human.

Not one that had been cryogenically frozen for a hundred years.

And that was where I was heading now, to claim her for the Prince, inform her of her destiny, and take her to the Prince so they could be wed.

I sighed.

This was no job for the Captain of the Royal Guard.

Little did I know that the mission was going to require every last one of my countless hours of training, that I was going to be taxed both physically and spiritually and, yes, even emotionally.

As I pulled into the upper atmosphere of Ajen and felt the intense heat wash over the hull and groan with relief as we entered the stratosphere, I checked myself in the mirror to make sure I was at least fairly presentable.

Whenever I presented myself in public, I was always a representation of the Prince himself...

Which, if it was to be completely accurate, meant I should probably strip naked and sport a raging hard-on and dip into every last female I came to.

But I had to remind myself that it was the idea of the Royal family I was portraying and not the Royal family itself.

The cryo-facility was huge and ships were taking off and docking with regular frequency.

The facility was known as the largest of its kind, and the spaceport alone was busier than most full-fledged transport hubs.

It was said that should the rest of the galaxy be swallowed by some unknown tragedy and those at the cryo-clinic were the only ones left to repopulate the universe, no less than 95% of all known intelligent species would be catered for and the galaxy could be repopulated only with those who had been frozen at this cryo-facility.

That was why they had been frozen in the first place, as a kind of guarantee in case of galaxy-wide armageddon.

But it wasn't the only reason creatures had been frozen.

Some had stored themselves.

They suffered from some rare and unknown disease that currently had no cure, and would wait, frozen, until there was one.

Some had been frozen for centuries.

Others would be frozen for millennia... or until their credit ran out.

Some were held for loftier purposes...

Like being the fated mate of a Krev Prince.

Such was the destiny of Penny, the human female frozen in a cryo-chamber inside the cryo-facility at this very moment.

I landed my ship and descended down the ramp.

I scratched my head, surprised there wasn't an Assistant on hand to welcome me and usher me toward the entrance.

They knew who I represented and ordinarily would have welcomed me with the same level of pomp a visiting member of the Royal Family would have demanded.

But I wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible and did not need any pointless ceremonies and traditions getting in the way.

Still, I thought they would at least give me some respect.

I shrugged and marched toward the entrance.

I peered up and down the long corridors that stretched in either direction.

The facility was the epitome of minimalism and I would usually have

commended them for the clean and clear appearance.

But there were no signs and I had no idea which direction to head in.

I cursed myself for not preparing better — I had assumed there would be someone to welcome me at the entrance — and decided to choose a random direction and head down it.

There was never any way to know who the Prince's mate was going to be.

It almost seemed random, although it wasn't always some unknown female from an unimportant species on the far side of the galaxy.

In the past, the mate had turned out to be someone the Prince already knew — in fact, sometimes it was someone right under their noses!

Sometimes the Prince knew of them, had even dated them, but most of the time, the numbers were against such occurrences and she was unknown to him.

With how many girls the Prince had laid with in the past, I thought the chances of him knowing her were extremely high.

It was said that behind every great king was a great woman... but that was inaccurate.

In truth, a great woman was chosen for every great king.

They worked together, with her complementing both his strengths and weaknesses in ways he could not achieve on his own.

She was his *fhora* to her *jola*.

They were a perfect match in every way — even if they didn't appear that way at the beginning — and would soon come to realize the wisdom of Fate.

I came to a desk where Assistants busily hurried from one station to another, scooping up tablets and marching away again.

"Excuse me," I said to a receptionist. "I'm here to pick up a female human. I expected there to be an Assistant to meet me at the entrance but there was none."

"What is your name, sir?"

"Trieç," I said. "Trieç Frin."

The secretary typed my name into her console.

What came up on her monitor made her frown. "You should have been met by Hormozar. She wasn't there when you arrived?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Please accept my apologies, sir." She turned to one of the other Assistants. "Klopmar. Can you show this gentleman to his female, please? She's in Defrosting Chamber 9."

The Assistant smiled prettily at me and led me back down the corridor I had just walked down.

I was irritated, disliking that I had to traverse the same route I had already walked down.

“It’s very unusual for an Assistant not to welcome a guest,” Klopmar said. “We do apologize for any inconvenience caused. We will investigate and ensure it never happens again.”

I nodded but didn’t say a word.

The Facility’s reputation was impeccable and I wouldn’t be the one to tarnish it.

This female human I was going to pick up was destined to be the future queen of the Krev, and that meant marrying the Prince.

I grimaced.

I did not envy her.

She would need to be the most patient creature in the universe, capable of understanding — and putting up with — the Prince’s constant desire to bed as many females as possible.

Perhaps she could overlook his past exploits... but surely she could not accept them going forward?

I tried to imagine the attributes of the perfect female for the Prince...

She would also be smart and make up for the Prince’s failures in many areas of his education.

She would have to be beautiful — nothing else could keep the Prince honorable — and I doubted even that would truly suffice.

Then there would be her ability to lead and take the helm when the Prince (inevitably) failed in his duties...

I shook my head.

No female human could possess all those attributes.

But then, perhaps, she didn’t need to.

After all, it didn’t just take a King and Queen to rule an Empire.

It took a team of highly-skilled and supremely qualified experts to do so.

One of those experts would be me.

I was not only the Captain of the Prince’s security detail.

I was also a decorated officer in His Majesty’s military.

I would ascend to the role of General when the Prince took the throne — a role I was trained and bred for.

I knew I would not let him — or the Empire — down.

The Assistant led me into a small room.

It was empty save for a puddle on the floor and a few lumps of something that smelled acrid.

The Assistant frowned. "That's strange. She ought to be here..."

She tapped on her tablet and, after a moment, the hole in the floor began to unfurl, bringing up a cryo-chamber.

It was misted up with condensation.

I approached it as the lock began to release.

I would collect the female and take her back to the palace where the wedding ceremony was to be held.

The future of the Krev line of succession would be fulfilled and I would help usher the Prince forward into a generation of peace and prosperity.

It was only possible thanks to the aid of the female locked in this chamber.

The doors hissed and the cords rattled.

Beads of water dropped to the floor at the juddering movement of the doors swinging open.

I loaded my smile, wanting a welcoming expression to be the very first thing she saw when she awoke.

The mist cleared and I looked up into her face...

Into the bedrest of the cryo-chamber that stood open...

And saw it was empty.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'she's not here'? She *has* to be here somewhere!"

I was frantic.

This was meant to be the easiest mission I had ever undertaken...

And now it had become an absolute and total *nightmare!*

The Assistant stabbed at his tablet, searching for the moment Penny had been taken.

He scrolled through it second by second, every bit as frantic as I was.

Not only was his career on the line but the cryo-facility's reputation.

I paced, turning in circles as I waited for him to identify the scumbag who had taken her.

The Prince was relying on me to bring Penny to him.

The Empire was relying on me to present them with their new queen.

The King was relying on me to complete my mission.

And that was the worst feeling of all.

The King had always been kind to me and the thought of disappointing him left a sour taste in my mouth and a twisting sensation in my gut.

He didn't need to be so generous with his time in speaking to me.

He put aside time each week to discuss topics with me — and not things related to running the Kingdom but any personal issues I might be going through.

Right before this mission, he had stepped away from his Council to take me to one side and walk around the palace gardens — his most favorite place in the entire building.

He had said:

“This duty the Prince has given you, to retrieve his fated mate... It should never have passed to you. It should be up to him to carry it out, as per tradition.”

I spoke in a low voice to ensure no one could overhear my words.

The King always encouraged me to be open and honest with him — even when it wasn't in the Prince's best interest.

And he never betrayed my trust when I conveyed important information to him concerning the Prince.

I suspected that was the real reason the King was always so patient with me — he wanted to get the lowdown on his son.

Being the heir to the throne could be a heavy crown to bear.

“I know,” I told him. “But the Prince is... busy with other things.”

The King flicked his eyes up into mine for just a moment, so quick it might not have happened, but a meaning passed between us as if he had yelled it at the top of his lungs:

“Mistresses are not important business.”

It was difficult to imagine a more different style of leadership than those between the King and his son.

Where the King could never — and I knew would never — bring himself to betray his wife, the Prince would do so with ease, feeling no qualms about betraying any oaths he might make to her.

The King was everything the Prince was not — patient, honorable, kind.

That wasn't to say the Prince didn't have strengths equal to those of his father, but they would never be the kind of things that would allow him to

become a truly great King.

The King ran his fingers along the petals of a human flower known as a rose and breathed in its luxurious scent.

A tiny ghit-ghat buzzed against his lips.

The King smiled and watched it fly away. “I have been too soft on him. I should have been firmer with teaching the value of duty.”

I didn’t nod but I couldn’t have agreed more.

The King placed a hand on my shoulder. “Everyone knows your sense of duty is surpassed by no other. We all depend on you to ensure the Prince makes good decisions that will ensure the Kingdom is prosperous when I am dead and gone.”

It made me sad to think of the King as no longer with us but I only nodded my head. “I will serve the Prince and the Kingdom to the utmost of my ability, sire.”

The King braced my shoulders with his hands. “The Prince relies on you for a great many things. I only hope your patience is never worn too thin for you to make hasty and rash decisions. Many important decisions may rest on your shoulders in the years to come. With you on one side and a good mate chosen by Fate on the other, perhaps the Kingdom might still stand a chance in ensuring the Prince does not make too many mistakes.”

With that, he embraced me, kissed me on the cheeks, and escorted me to my shuttle.

It had given me a lot to think about.

Duty.

Honor.

Love.

But at no point during my journey to the cryo-facility had I thought I would lose track of Penny before I had even met her!

I spun on the spot to face the Assistant. “This is taking too long!” I growled. “Where is she?”

“Sh-She was t-taken by an-another!” the Assistant said between shuddering breaths of fear.

I snatched the tablet from his hand.

The image on the screen showed two figures — the slender, shapely form of a female human, no doubt the Prince’s fated mate — and another...

I zoomed in on him and played the footage forward.

Finding it difficult to make out many of his features in the grainy image, I

pulled it from the tablet and into the real world where the holo-cameras brought the scene to life before me.

I moved in close to the figure — my new nemesis — the one who had taken Penny from me.

The closer I got to his face, the more obvious it became about what had happened for Penny to have been taken by this unknown enemy.

The Assistant gasped and pointed a shaking finger at the stranger's face. "I-It's y-you!"

There was no denying the similarity between us.

He was of the same species, the Krev, the same height, the same build.

Even his face had the same shape... although the expressions were a little off.

When the image played forward, I noticed the figure possessed a limp I did not.

I froze the image and pointed at it. "He's a Shifter! See there? His injury? He's not me. He's only pretending to be me! Bring up the visitor logs and cross-reference them with any ships known to belong to Shifters. With any luck, he won't have left just yet. Message me the moment you have the information!"

I turned and ran into the hallway, speeding toward the launchpads.

Letting down the Kingdom was one thing, but to let down the King that had put all his faith in me...

That was something I simply could not allow.

And when the message finally came over my communicator, informing me that the ship Penny had been taken to had not yet departed and was only preparing to launch, I sprinted even faster.

By the time I reached the ship's launchpad, the hatch door was already beginning to whir shut.

But it's not shut yet.

I ran across the launchpad.

As it began to take off, it left the platform and into the open air.

Without missing a beat, I leaped off the pad's edge and stretched...

Flying over the chasm...

(Falling would have been a fun ride... until I exploded on the sand that would be like striking solid concrete when my body hit it at a hundred miles an hour.)

My fingers felt something and I curled them shut tight.

I swung forward and pulled myself up onto the hatch door, ducking my head and rolling inside just as it snapped shut, dousing me in darkness.

I hadn't failed the King before and I sure as shit wasn't about to start now.

THE SHIP WAS SO ODDLY DESIGNED it led me to believe it hadn't been designed at all — at least not in its current layout.

I was almost certain it was constructed of *several ships* having been welded together and it took every crumb of my knowledge of the layout of various ships for me to traverse it effectively.

I came across crewmembers — and I was surprised to see they were similarly cobbled together from alien races far and wide — and had that focused and deliberate way of moving, forever in a constant state of motion.

They all wore smart suits and tuxedos and were very careful not to allow a single wrinkle to ruin their appearance, which made many acts of running the ship more difficult than they needed to be.

They kept their eyes down and concentrated on the tasks at hand but I could *smell* the sense of excitement and expectation in the air that *something special* was taking place.

I was proven correct when I came across a crowd of guests who were *clearly not* members of the crew as they wandered aimlessly through the tunnels that stretched through every inch of the ship.

They had that lost, useless look in their eyes, and allowed myself to be swept up along with them.

Then I came across it.

I knew *something* unusual was going to greet me but when I saw it, I was taken aback.

It was the *very last thing* I expected to see on a ship such as this:

A wedding ceremony.

A small orchestra practiced playing some kind of wedding entrance music that was as foreign as it was beautiful.

Guests mingled, making polite conversation while tattooed crewmembers doubled up as waiters and moved among them to dole out the food and drink.

At the top of the room was a large pagoda with...

Were those severed tongues nailed to it?

A tiny alien creature wiped at his brow as he turned a handle, making tiny little nubs turn within the tongues, making them wag.

Wagging tongues?

Was this some kind of devil-worshiping ceremony?

A marriage of devils?

Then it occurred to me...

I was there to find Penny.

Could it possibly be mere coincidence that this ceremony was happening at the same time?

No, I thought. It can't *possibly* be a coincidence.

My thoughts aligned with my sense of smell and I *knew* I was right.

Someone was going to marry Penny.

Someone had arranged for her to be kidnapped, pulling her from her destiny to wed the Prince...

I felt sick to my stomach that someone would attempt to use fated mates for their own purposes.

Fated mates were holy and sacrosanct in the Krev culture and *no one* ever came between them... *no matter their own desires*.

It made my mission to locate and bring her to the Prince all the more vital.

If I didn't hurry, she was going to be married and there would be no way to extricate her from it.

My mission would be a complete and total failure.

And the future of the Krev throne would likewise be put in jeopardy.

I moved past the wedding ceremony and down the tunnel, getting myself well and truly lost.

I heard a pair of voices call out.

They were crewmates heading in my direction.

I had already gotten some suspicious looks from other crewmates due to my obviously not being a high-class guest nor a member of the crew, it was only a matter of time before one finally looked up from his duties and questioned me.

I backed up and bumped against a door.

I spun the lock and eased it open, stepping inside.

I listened to the figures as they passed and released the breath I'd been holding out slowly.

In a moment, I would emerge back out of the room and figure out just where Penny was being held and—

“Who are you?” a soft voice said behind me.

Shit.

I SLOWLY TURNED and came face to face with half a dozen or so females.

They were each of a different species, and all stunningly gorgeous.

None of them was the female I was looking for.

But that was hardly much of a surprise.

For some reason, I always thought it inevitable I would recognize Penny the moment I set eyes on her.

I didn't know how I knew that, only that it wouldn't have anything to do with the way she looked — at least, *not only* the way she looked — but the way she *smelled*.

The Krev species relied much more on their superior sense of smell than vision.

It was superior in virtually every way.

The eyes could not see around corners and identify the enemy lying in wait for us there.

They also could only appraise a situation shallowly, not with the total depth of scent.

Using the eyes exclusively could only lead to problems that could only be allayed by relying on *the other senses*.

This room did not feel like a trap, at least, not for me.

These females did smell good — they just weren't the *correct smell*.

Still, the *situation*, although not directly dangerous to me, didn't *feel right*.

There was something wrong with it somehow, something *wrong*.

“What are you doing here?” an octagor said, crossing to me. “I haven't seen you here before...”

Another female came to my other side. “Yes. I think I would recognize you if I ever saw you before. You're not one of the Master's men, are you?”

I looked from one to another and wondered how I was meant to respond.

They knew a lot more about this situation than I did.

They were all dolled up and ready for an event...

The wedding maybe?

I straightened up. "I'm a new addition. I'm here to check to make sure you're ready for the event."

Another of the females, a sultry Salsar with puckered red lips, sauntered over to me and ran a hand over my arm and chest. "I see the Master has chosen an *especially good* crewmember this time."

"Stop teasing him, Srila," another female said, rolling her big brown eyes. "If he's here, it means *the Master* sent him. He's probably testing him, making sure he can be trusted. You don't want his life on your conscience, do you?"

The sexy one called Srila puckered her lips and made a popping sound. "I suppose not. Not when he looks as good as this." Then she folded her arms and, although still sexy beyond words, I felt the intense cold frigidity come over her. "So, how can we help you, doll?"

I gave her a sheepish look and gritted my teeth as if I had made a big mistake. "I'm here to pick up Penny and take her to the wedding. He told me she would be here but clearly..."

I spread my hands and shrugged my shoulders.

Suddenly, the interest in the other women was lost and they returned to the games they had been playing when I first entered. "Oh, *her*," they muttered as one.

None seemed interested in helping me... save one.

She approached me and pulled me back toward the door and lowered her voice. "I'm Cleyena. She's just down the hall, in a plain room behind a nondescript door. That's where the makeup and dressing teams will be working on her, preparing her for the wedding."

The wedding...

So, I was right.

She *was* going to be married — to this "Master" figure.

I had heard of him before, as well as his antics in short-circuiting the fated mate bond and bending it to his own purposes.

But I had *never* thought his path would ever cross mine.

Perhaps I had been naive, but he had always seemed more like a character from a story than anything real.

"Thank you," I said to her. "I should get going or the Master will... well, you know what he's like."

“Yes,” Cleyena said, a glimmer in her eye. “I know *exactly* what he’s like, which is why I *know* he would *never* have given a job as important as fetching his bride to the wedding to a new recruit. And *even more* certain he would never allow you to pick her up without you knowing *precisely* where she was and drilled on the process so many times you could have done it in your sleep.”

Oh shit...

She knew I wasn’t who I claimed to be.

My earlier lie had been bought by the others, but not her.

Crap.

I was in for it now.

I considered how I could silence her before she could scream and raise the alarm...

She surprised me when she kept her knowing smile on me and didn’t raise all hell.

I realized she wasn’t going to mutter a word about me to anyone.

“Why are you helping me?” I asked.

“Because we all dreamed once of having our own happy ending. We might not get to enjoy one but that’s no reason Penny can’t.”

I was taken aback by her kindness, bravery, and certainty of her life’s outcome. “You know, I could leave this door open,” I said. “Give you and the others a chance of escape.”

Cleyena shook her head. “Look at us,” she said, nodding toward the others languishing around the room. “We’re too institutionalized, too used to living comfortably. We don’t have the fire inside us any more. We could never survive out in the real world. Not anymore. So, thank you for your kind thoughts but we’re here and there’s no leaving for us.”

“What about you?” I said, hesitating in case I was digging a hole for myself. “You seem to have your head on your shoulders. You have more fire than the others. I’m sure you could survive out there.”

“I might look like it on the outside, but in truth, these females are more than just wives-in-law... if that’s even a real thing. They’re my *sisters*. I couldn’t leave them any more than they could leave me. We’re a package deal now. We’ll just have to wait for our hero to rescue us some other time. Good luck, Penny’s fated mate. I wish you well.”

“Oh, I’m not her fated mate,” I told her.

She leveled a look at me. “Are you sure about that?”

Leaving me confused and scratching my head, she turned and marched back into the room.

I shut the door and then, not wanting any of them to get into trouble, spun the lock behind me.

I'd experienced some strange scenes in my life, but nothing quite so bizarre as what had just transpired in that room.

Cleyena was not a Krev and did not possess the superior sense of smell I did, and yet she had seen what I hadn't even yet *whiffed*.

Perhaps there were those who could see deeper even than the Krev.

I FOUND THE DOOR EASILY, as per Cleyena's instructions.

I twisted the handle, making the lock disengage.

I took a deep breath and entered, unsure of what situation would be on the other side of the door, but knowing I would have to rely on my wits to get me through it.

I was relieved to find a single figure in the room.

The moment I opened the door, the air sucked inward and the full blast of Penny's scent hit me full in the face.

And I knew without a shadow of a doubt she was the one.

Her scent rocked me back on my heels and made my temples throb.

Each creature in the cosmos possessed their own unique scent, much like a fingerprint.

Penny's was rich with earth, deep, and alive with blooming flowers.

She reminded me of my youth, playing and training in the palace's gardens.

Wild, carefree... and most of all, happy.

But happiness was not the emotion she was displaying right at that moment.

She rushed from the window to a chair, seizing it and raising it to smash something... before realizing she had nothing to smash.

Then she picked up some of the other items and attempted to come up with a plan of attack of what she might try next.

She looked frantic, lost, as if she didn't know what she was doing.

More than anything, she came across as desperate.

I realized she was attempting to escape and that perhaps my appearance would be all she needed to finally get her wish and get out of there.

“Uh, do you need a hand?” I said uncertainly.

Taken by surprise, she spun around.

Her eyes flicked up at me, before flashing with fear, and drifting to the door I’d left open behind me.

Then her brow lowered over her eyes, pressing down harshly into a deep expression of intense concentration.

She lowered her shoulder and began to run, picking up speed as she hurried toward me.

She’s a woman of action! I thought. *She was going to make a run for it whether I was coming with her or not!*

Then she slammed into me and almost knocked me off my feet. “Hey! I’m here to rescue you!”

“Sure you are!” she snapped over her shoulder. “Just like you were there to rescue me from the cryo-chamber!”

Huh?

I wanted her to escape but not for her to leave on her own!

She would end up getting caught sooner or later and that would make rescuing her even more difficult next time.

I spun around and slammed my foot against the door, slamming it shut.

She reached it an instant later.

Her attempt to skid to a halt failed and she ran hard into the door.

She might have been dazed but she recovered quickly and reached for the handle to open it once more.

I grabbed her from behind, scooping my arms around her, and lifted her off the floor.

She hollered and screamed, flailing with her legs for anything — preferably a part of me — to strike at.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she bellowed.

I glanced toward the door and knew first hand there were plenty of crewmates wandering about outside who might hear her and come to investigate the cause of the ruckus.

And then there were the twin makeup and dressing teams that could come at any moment.

“Quiet!” I snapped, relaxing one arm and reaching up to silence her.

She bit down on my finger and I yelled — more in anger and surprise

than pain — as I pulled my finger free and lowered her so her head was just under my chin and I could more easily wrap my hand over her mouth.

She flailed harder and slammed her heels into my shins.

Okay, so that *did* hurt and I bowed my legs so her feet waved but she couldn't strike me.

I pulled her in closer to my chest and whispered in her ear:

“Quiet! Do you want them to find us?”

She was silent a moment before she mumbled softly against the palm of my hand.

“Okay, I'm going to remove my hand. I'm going to trust you not to scream and shout. All right?”

She nodded and I did as I said.

She breathed heavily through her nose and glared at me over her shoulder.

Despite her obvious waves of immense anger, I couldn't deny the attractive quality of her powerful feminine scent.

It choked me and made it hard to breathe.

“What makes you think I can trust you?” she said.

Her voice was sultry and deep without her screeching at the top of her lungs. “Because I was sent to fetch you for—”

She flailed again, writhing in my grip.

Clearly, something I said had set her off — but at least she didn't scream this time.

“Let me go! Let me go! *I refuse* to marry that monster! *I refuse!*”

“Hold still!” I growled. “I'm not here to make you marry him!”

“Of course you are! You're one of his men!”

“No, I'm not!”

“Then why did you bring me to him earlier?”

Suddenly the reason she was confused about my appearance hit me.

“That wasn't me,” I informed her.

“It sure looked like you, asshole!”

“Of course it did!” I said. “That creature was a Shifter! It wasn't me! I'm a *genuine* Krev. He only *adopted my form*. Do you understand? He was *pretending* to be me so he could take possession of you and—”

She struggled again.

I had evidently said *another* keyword that set her off like a firework. “What?” I snapped, at a loss. “Why are you fighting like this?”

“Because no one owns me!”

“No one said anyone does!”

“Then what do you call somebody you can *possess* and *fetch*?”

And there it was.

All the information I needed to understand why she had reacted the way she had.

“I was sent by the Prince to fe— to *bring* you to him,” I said carefully. “I am the Captain of his security. *You* are my mission. To bring you somewhere safe.”

“Either I marry your Prince or this monster. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is, you *don’t have to* marry the Prince of the Krev kingdom. You have been chosen by fate, destined for that path, but there is always free will, even with prophecies.”

She stopped struggling and seemed to be open to at least listening to what I was telling her.

“No one owns anyone,” I said, repeating her own words back to her. “All I want is to get you somewhere safe. To the Prince. You can meet him and make your own decision. Now, can I put you down and get you out of here so I can complete my mission?”

She thought for a long moment before nodding her head.

That was a relief... but I wasn’t about to trust her completely just yet.

“I’m going to put your feet down and I don’t want you to run yet, okay?” I said. “I’m going to do my best to get you out of here but I need you to do as I say until then. Can you do that?”

She paused, thinking for a moment before again nodding her head.

Her eyes remained fixed on mine as I lowered her to the ground and released my grip around her tight little body.

One second passed, then two...

And she hadn’t yet made to escape.

But there were a *great many more seconds* before we could escape this place.

I only hoped she kept her cool head and allowed me to do what I had been trained to do.

I took her by the hand and she looked at me questioningly.

“So I won’t lose track of you again,” I told her. “Just hold my hand until we’re out of here. All right?”

I led her to the door and we left that room behind.

We headed down the tunnel, took a left, then a right, and I breathed in the air and let my nose direct me.

We passed a gibbering gaggle of designers as they headed in the opposite direction to us, toward the room we had just vacated.

And now I knew how much of a headstart we had...

Less than five minutes.

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PENNY

I HAD no intention of sticking around any longer than necessary.

This dude who had turned up might have claimed I was his mission and that he was going to try to get me out of there but there was still the chance he might turn on me the first chance he got.

The same way I would use *every opportunity* at my disposal to escape.

But even if his intentions toward me were less than honorable, for now at least, our goals aligned.

We were heading for the exit, and with no clear idea or plan in mind, there was simply nothing better I could think of to do than follow his lead.

He at least *had* a plan, some idea of where he was going and what he was doing.

When he stopped at each corner to check the coast was clear, I thought he put on a good show.

Except... he didn't really *peer* down the tunnels and instead breathed in deeply as if following *his nose* rather than trusting what *his eyes* were telling him.

Odd, I thought, but it made sense.

After all, he was a totally different species from me and there was no telling what skills and abilities he excelled at.

As a non-human, he might not need to rely on his eyes so much.

He nodded his head and led me around each corner while keeping a close eye on the tunnels we traversed.

I, in turn, kept my eyes closely on *him*, looking for any sign he might change his mind and hand me over to the Master.

At the very first sign he was going to betray me, I would be off like a

shot.

I did notice *one thing* about him that was not the same as the first guy that'd brought me to the Master — and that was the fact he had no limp.

But, really, how hard was *that* to fake?

So far as I was concerned, this whole “escape” was one of the Master’s traps to see how honest and reliable I was as a future wife.

I intended on *failing* his test completely and resolutely.

(I had seen how he treated his other wives and understood him to enjoy toying with them.)

If so, I would turn his trap on itself and use it for my own purposes and get out of there.

He might be able to plan a wedding to perfection but there was one variable he absolutely *did not* control — and that was me.

He *didn't know* how I would react, how I would use any chance I could identify to get out of there.

Although his other wives might be more conformist in nature, I most certainly *did not* need to be.

In fact, I was going to make it my life’s mission to be the most difficult wife in the history of marriage.

I would not stop trying to escape, to live my life on my own terms.

After all, if you couldn’t say you were making your own decision in life, what kind of life did you really have?

None I would ever want to entertain, that was for sure.

But if my skepticism was proven to be wrong and this *really was* an attempt to rescue me, I would benefit by having someone on my side.

I had to admit, there *was something* about this new character, something that made him different from the creature that had picked me up before.

Maybe it *had been* a Shifter, maybe not.

How could I know?

Until this creature showed me conclusive proof he was willing to protect me and ensure my escape, *I wouldn't believe a single thing he told me.*

Something about him did draw the eye and, although I might try to do otherwise, I couldn’t keep my eyes from drifting down to his tight ass as he led me down seemingly infinitely long tunnels toward the escape attempt we were carrying out.

Although he looked virtually identical to the creature I had encountered earlier in the cryo-facility, there was *an aura* about him that was somehow

different.

It felt strange using that kind of new-age terminology as I wasn't entirely sure what I meant by it but it was there all the same.

His *aura* was different — as if he truly was a different creature from the one that had “fetched” me to the Master earlier.

Triec froze only once as he led me through the tunnels.

I was so used to him pausing momentarily before turning on the spot and heading off down the next tunnel, I began to head around it, but he raised a hand, stopping me.

He held me back and pressed a finger to his lips, his ears twitching and turning toward something around the corner we were hiding behind.

He'd picked up on something he didn't like and decided to turn us back down the tunnel we'd just come down, checking each corner despite having checked the tunnels were clear earlier.

I recognized the shape he was taking us in — an angular circle, the long way around so we didn't bump into whatever it was that'd piqued his interest earlier.

I looked at him with new eyes after that.

Not that I trusted him completely just yet — after all, he could just as easily have done it to make me believe him, but I felt there was an element of honesty to it I hadn't expected.

I eased up on my distrust of him — a little — as he took us down more tunnels until my legs ached.

We came to a stop before a long tunnel that stretched off in either direction, a series of empty oval doorways carved into it.

He paused once more, listening and breathing in deeply through flared nostrils.

He hesitated before nodding his head and, instead of leading me into one of the oval doorways as I expected, turned down another tunnel and headed in another direction.

“Aren't we taking one of the escape pods?” I asked.

He didn't slow. “They're controlled by the main computer terminal. Even if I managed to get us away from here, it's too easy for them to commandeer it remotely and track us. If we're going to escape, we're going to need an independent ship that isn't so easily tracked.”

“And you happen to have one, I suppose?”

“No. But I can steal one. Come on.”

We raced even faster down this tunnel than we had earlier.

My lungs burned, making it virtually impossible for me to keep up with his strides that were at least twice the length of mine.

Our footsteps thundered on the hard metal grating and found myself thinking that if any of the Master's creatures were nearby, they couldn't help but hear us.

"Do we need... to run so... fast?" I said, gasping around each word, already short of breath. "And we're making so much noise... it's too easy for them to hear us."

"They already know you're missing," he informed me, having not even broken a sweat nor anywhere near gasping like I was.

They already know I'm missing? I thought.

I decided to ask the obvious question: "Then why aren't they chasing after us? Why is there no alarm?"

"Because they don't want us to know they know," he said dismissively.

I thought I'd poked a pretty good hole in his story but he'd come back with a good response that made sense.

"And they'll expect you to take an escape pod," he said, finally slowing down and taking his time to place his feet carefully so as not to make quite so much noise with his heavy, thundering footsteps. "But they don't know about me. Not yet, anyway. Which means they don't expect you to hijack one of the ships the wedding guests brought to get here."

The wedding guests!

Of course!

Why didn't I think of that?

Even if I had, he was right that I wouldn't know how to pilot a ship out of there.

I really *would* need outside help.

His help.

My trust level in him was growing stronger with each passing moment.

He came to a stop again at a doorway larger than any of the others we had come across up until that point.

He placed his back to it, looming huge over me with his heavily muscled frame.

I felt nervous standing there, as if the enemy could descend upon us any moment...

It was then that I became aware I had already shifted from "I" and to the

collective “we” and knew I now had almost total faith in him.

Almost.

We remained standing beside the doorway.

I really didn't know what we were waiting for.

I began to doubt him once more — perhaps we really were just waiting for *someone else* to come along — one of the Master's men, maybe?

Triec slid down the wall and into a crouched position, raising his arms out in front of himself.

I wondered if I should copy his stance when I heard the footsteps on the other side of the wall that he must have heard a lifetime earlier.

Before I could react, Triec roared and pivoted around the wall and fell upon those he knew he would find there.

I couldn't see the reaction on the creatures' faces as I remained where I was, frozen.

I listened to the pitiless pummeling of Triec's fists on his helpless victims' flesh...

Or maybe it was *him* that was receiving the beating of his life.

I just stood there, motionless.

Useless.

I wondered if I ought to be taking off at a run.

But my conviction was no longer there.

If I'd been given this opportunity earlier, I might have taken off already but I hadn't and I wasn't about to do so now.

The sound of vicious fighting died down and Triec's head popped around the wall, causing me to emit a small scream and my heart to almost leap from my chest.

“Let's go!” he said, disappearing around the corner again.

I took a moment to gather myself and followed him as he suggested, rounding the wall and finding myself in the ship's large dock.

Dozens of ships of varying sizes sat idle.

None were anywhere near big enough to be welded onto this huge Frankenstein-like ship.

Two unconscious bodies lay perfectly still, blood sprayed in either direction.

Someone sure had received the beating of their lives, I thought.

Two of them.

It was hard to feel sympathy for them.

Still, part of me searched the scene for any sign that this too was part of some kind of elaborate plan put together by the Master.

I recognized the sharp suits the crewmates wore, reducing even further any doubt I might have been harboring of who they truly were.

Triec ran from one shuttle to another, searching among them for the one that would best serve his purposes.

I hastily bent down and pressed my fingers to one of the unconscious creatures' throats and felt for his pulse.

It was weak.

Distant.

I glanced over at Triec, who had come to a stop beside a shuttle and began pressing his hands to its underside, looking for a way in.

I pressed my fingers to the second unconscious figure's throat and was surprised when I felt nothing.

I did it again on the other side of his throat and again found no pulse on that side either.

I looked at his face and saw the dried blood on either side of his mouth and realized the twin sprays of blood across the metal grating floor had to have come from him.

His eyes stared vacantly at the ceiling in an endless cold stare.

Either he was the best actor I had ever seen... or he *truly* was dead.

"Penny!" Triec bellowed from across the dock.

A hatch door stood open from where he'd managed to jimmy it open.

He waved a hand at me to hurry up and approach.

These men *had been* beaten to a pulp.

There was no doubt in my mind of that now.

Everything Triec had told me *was true*.

And now, looking over at him, his powerful frame and twin bodies lying on the grating at my feet...

I began, for the first time since coming in contact with Triec, to feel afraid.

If he could do this to two powerfully-built and likely highly-trained crewmates of a notorious criminal, what could he do to *someone like me*?

At the same time, if there was *one person* who could get me out of here, what kind of skills would he have to possess?

The answer was obvious.

The very same he had displayed up until now.

You are my mission.

And I for one did not want him to fail in it.

I ran toward him and hoped I wasn't making a huge mistake by handing myself over to someone *even worse* than the Master himself.

TRIEC LEAPED into the chair at the control desk at the front of the small capsule and pressed at the buttons.

The desk lit up and he told me:

“Strap yourself in! It might be a rough ride before we get free!”

I did as he said, opting to take a seat in the back of the capsule instead of the co-pilot chair in case I needed to make a quick evacuation in case he turned against me.

It was difficult to let myself fully trust him — or anyone in this odd world I had found myself in — even though I found it virtually impossible to come up with a plausible alternative explanation for the fight he'd had with the two crewmates.

The ship rose from the dock's platform just high enough to clear the ground.

He turned us in an arch until we faced the opposite direction and floated toward the outer hatch door where warning lights flashed and the door began to open.

My hands gripped the armrests so tight my knuckles turned white.

I stared, bulging-eyed and glaring, as the cosmos became broader like the widening screen at the cinema before the main presentation began.

This is it, I knew. This is the moment of truth.

Either we would pass through those huge gaping doors and out into the freedom of outer space...

Or we would be caught.

Only then would I learn if Triec could truly be trusted or not.

Triec watched, leg bouncing nervously the same way my *entire body* was.

What if this *did* turn out to be some elaborate trap?

What if there really was *no chance* I was going to escape?

What if this all *really was* a game?

The doors drifted open further...

And then stopped.

They'd frozen.

Then the unimaginable happened.

The door began to close!

Not fast, but it was still happening.

The dude slammed his fist on the console and barked a sharp: "Damn it!"

Not missing a beat, he growled over his shoulder at me:

"Hold on! We're going to make a dash for it!"

A dash for what? I wondered.

I wasn't sure until our ship leaned forward and the thrusters engaged at full power and we raced forward.

Toward that rapidly closing door.

My eyes bulged even further and my grip on the armrests grew even tighter, my knuckles even whiter, until I heard the reinforced plastic creak beneath the strain and the joints in my fingers hurt.

"*Are you crazy?*" I wanted to bellow at him but the words got stuck in my throat.

Because I *wanted* him to do this crazy thing.

I *wanted* him to make a dash for it.

I *wanted* to die trying — if I had to die at all!

I wanted to at least be *trying* for freedom when it was just on the other side of that narrow opening.

Do it! Do it! Do it!

The ship raced forward faster.

I really had *no idea* if our ship had any chance of squeezing through the opening or not.

Maybe it would... maybe it wouldn't.

I didn't know.

I just knew I wanted to try — even if we ended up slamming into it.

At least we would have tried.

I couldn't even let myself think about what the consequences of failure might be at the Master's vindictive hands — or, more accurately, his *tongue*.

The opening shrunk with each passing second.

"Hold on!"

Then my "rescuer" did a very strange thing and reached out an arm to the wall on his right and braced his weight on it.

Our shuttle twisted over at a ninety-degree angle to make the most of its

flat, almost blade-like shape.

I squeezed my eyes shut and at the same time found it impossible to close them completely, resulting in a strange half-squint half-gawking expression.

Our ship finally reached the opening and I squealed as the sliding doors on either side of us — top and bottom now and not left and right — passed us on either side.

There was a loud screeching noise as I realized we had passed so close that our hull we had scraped the doors

And miraculously, incredibly — *unbelievably!* — we emerged on the other side and into the dense darkness of open space.

The moment we were through, the alien male twisted the controls and took us under — or was it *over?* — the Master's ship.

I had long since lost track of the direction we were heading in.

The alien eased off the throttle, turning us in a sharp turn.

“Entering hyperspace now!” he announced.

The computer issued a warning about such a thing so close to another ship but he overrode it and the stars began to shiver, the unmistakable sign we were about to enter hyperspace.

The stars stretched on either side of us and we *jumped*.

For the first time since I had awoken in the cryo-chamber, I felt a tendril of hope that I was, at least for the time being, safe and better yet, on a trajectory that would mean I would get to have some say over the decisions affecting my life.

I owned me, no one else.

The alien stood before me before I even knew he was out of his chair, his hand extended toward me. “The name's Triec. Next stop, the palace.”

Maybe I spoke too soon...

THE NEXT STOP was indeed going to be the palace... but in order to get there, we had to take something called a Gateway.

I'd never heard of them before — which wasn't too surprising as they hadn't even been built until *after* my own time.

These Gateways made traversing larger distances much faster than even lightspeed — which was cutting-edge technology where (or rather, *when*) I

came from!

It seemed traveling at near the speed of light just wasn't fast enough for modern people, and so new technology had been developed.

It tore a hole in the fabric of space, allowing for a ship to pass through it.

Doing so meant we traveled *instantly* between two points that might have taken days, weeks, months... or even *centuries* to cover at even lightspeed.

We pulled up to a line waiting to pass through the Gateway.

As each ship had a different destination to go to, a different tear had to be made in space.

"Is cutting space like this *good* for the universe?" I asked.

"Sure. Why shouldn't it be?" Triec replied.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it's the word 'tear.' It makes me think it's damaging in some way."

"When you exercise, the tiny muscle fibers are torn. When they heal, they become even stronger than before. Think of it that way."

"Oh," I said. "So it gets *stronger* each time you make a hole?"

"I'm not an expert," Triec admitted. "But that's how I understand it works."

We were talking about creating wormholes because the alternative topics were too difficult to even *begin to process* at that moment.

The rush of adrenaline we each shared had been enough to bring us together.

Now that we had come to a relative stop, there was nothing to fill our time.

Or our conversation.

"So... what's this Prince of yours like?" I asked.

It wasn't really what was on my mind but it was as good a place to begin as any.

"He's the heir to the throne."

"As he's a prince, I assumed that much," I said, rolling my eyes. "What's he like? Do you know him? Or is he cold and distant?"

I was looking for reasons to dislike him already — funny, I thought, that I could travel a century into the future and yet I carried my personal foibles with me.

"He's not cold. He's very warm and welcoming. You'll like him. Everyone does. He's very amiable."

"Good," I said with a nod. "I wouldn't want my fated mate to be someone

I can't talk to."

Fated mate.

It even *felt* strange in my mouth.

Ahead, another ship passed through a wormhole and the line moved forward.

"I never got to thank you during all this," I said. "For getting me out from under the Master's clutches."

He nodded. "You're welcome. I know it must have been very confusing. I can't imagine waking up a hundred years in the future."

"Especially since I am officially dead. It was a bit of a shock, I admit," I said, beginning to relax in his presence. "I'm not sure if I will ever fully come to terms with it. Anyway, tell me more about yourself."

"Me?" he said, seemingly confused by the question.

"Sure. You're my rescuer after all. I should know *something* about you, right?"

He nodded, but still seemed a little addled by my prying into his personal life. "Well, I was born in a small mining colony in the Morant Quadrant. I was chosen early due to my physical abilities."

"Physical abilities?"

"My strength," he said. "Every Krev is tested from a young age and then sorted depending on what they are best fitted for in life."

I frowned, disliking that way of doing things. "You don't have any say in what you get to do?"

"Of course we do. We don't *have to do* what is chosen for us. There's always an element of free will — in everything we choose to do with our lives. Nothing is ever completely assumed without proper consideration first."

I nodded.

"But the truth is, you tend to enjoy the things you're best at doing. From a young age, we are subjected to lots of different experiences. Our scores are taken into account but really, no matter how well we perform, we can choose to excel at whatever we wish. Our teachers know that if we have enough passion for something, there's no better way to excel. It's also possible to become world-class in any subject — so long as you're consistent, never give up, and continuously keep making progress each and every day."

I pursed my lips. "That's true. It's nice to know some things don't change, that hard work and effort still have their place in success."

The line shifted again and we moved forward.

Now, I could make out the wormhole.

It was not a hole at all but a kind of tunnel and was shimmering and bright like the surface of a lake on a summer day.

It was really quite beautiful.

When the next ship passed into it, it was like passing through the surface of a river and disappearing beneath it.

Once the ship had passed through, the hole collapsed in on itself, rapidly stitched itself back together again, closing up like a wound.

We moved forward once again and were now at the head of the line.

A robotic voice came over the ship's speakers:

"Please state your destination."

Triec said a bunch of words I couldn't understand.

After a moment, the voice at the Gateway Station said:

"Destination confirmed. Please stand by."

Within moments, my adventure would draw to a close.

We would appear on the other side of this tunnel and my new life would begin.

I had so many questions to ask, so many things I needed to get straight before I could even *consider* allowing this alien Prince anywhere near me.

Right now, I was exhausted and in need of rest.

At least that's something I could look forward to.

"What's taking so long?" Triec said impatiently. "Computer, send a message to the Gateway Station. We're still waiting. What's the hold-up?"

"Communication sent," the Computer announced. "Waiting for response now."

Triec looked concerned.

It didn't seem like we were waiting long to me, not considering the immense distance we would soon cover in barely the blink of an eye.

But then again, the other ships that had passed through the wormholes had gone through *much* faster than us.

The computer system bleeped and said:

"Message received from Gateway Station."

"Play it," Triec said.

"We apologize for the delay," the familiar robotic voice said. "There appears to be an issue with the destination Gateway. Please wait until the situation is resolved."

This did nothing to calm Triec's temper.

He tapped at the control panel, his fingers a flurry of activity.

I couldn't have understood what he was doing even if I'd had ten years of training.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know. It doesn't usually take this long... And considering our current situation with the Master... I just don't know."

He was trying not to scare me but he also could not deny the obvious concern he was harboring.

"New vessel detected," the Computer announced.

"Bring it up on the holo-monitor," Triec said.

Instantly, the image of the Master's ship loomed large in a holographic display before us.

It was so big it could hardly fit above the control panel.

"Shit!" Triec blurted. "Computer! Enter hyperspace *now!*"

"No destination has been selected."

"Anywhere!" Triec snapped. "Take us anywhere! Anywhere far from here!"

"Emergency hyperspace protocol enabled."

The stars shimmered as the holographic image of the Master's ship grew so large it swept over us.

"Tractor beam detected," the Computer said. "Attempting to lock onto us now."

"Enter hyperspace immediately!" Triec bellowed. "*Right now!*"

The engines thrummed and the ship shuddered.

The stars began to streak, and before I even knew it, we had come to a stop having come out of hyperspace and emerging elsewhere in the galaxy.

I never would have known we had moved... if it wasn't for the sudden shift in stars out the window.

We had escaped the Master for a second time.

I hoped there would be no need for a third.

TRIEC RELEASED HIS HARNESS, stood up, and began to pace back and forth.

"How did he find us?" I said. "Is it possible to track someone when they

enter hyperspace?”

Triec shook his head. “No. We would have Jumped beyond his sensors’ range. He shouldn’t have been able to pick up on our location.”

“Then maybe he just guessed where we were heading? How many of these Gateway Station things are there?”

“Many,” Triec said before coming to a stop and scratching his chin. “But maybe you’re right. We did Jump to the *nearest* Gateway Station. It would be the most obvious place we would go.”

Then he shook his head, uncertain he could bring himself to believe the words he had just muttered.

And he resumed his pacing, frantically moving back and forth. “Perhaps the Gateway Station is in allegiance with the Master,” he said, muttering to himself more than sharing his ideas with me.

“Does the Master have that much power?”

“He has a lot of money and influence. Each time he marries a new fated mate, he becomes the eventual leader of those tribes. Those he has married into aren’t particularly big or powerful but combined, and then maximizing trade between them, he has managed to amass a fortune.”

“Then couldn’t that be how he found us so fast? That he has deals with these Gateway Stations?”

Triec nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m sure that’s the most logical answer. Still, I don’t like it. I don’t like it one little bit. No matter where we go, he could appear anywhere in the galaxy.”

I hated that idea too.

It would be like having an ex-boyfriend who refused to let you go after you dumped him.

“And that poses us with another problem,” Triec said. “How do we return to the palace? It will take us far too long to make the journey directly. Even at lightspeed, it would take several weeks, maybe even months to get there. And that’s if we went direct. We would likely need to stay off the main trade routes in case they report our location. It could very well take months or even *years* for us to reach home!”

Years cooped up in this tiny shuttle?

I didn’t much like the idea of that.

“There must be some other way.” I said, beginning to grow desperate. “Maybe there are independent Gateway Stations? Some that aren’t corrupted by the Master?”

“Even if there were, how would we know which ones they are? I could reach out to our contacts in the region. We have some in the area... but even they are not reliable. After all, the only reason they report to us is because we bought their allegiance. How hard would it be for the Master to pay more than us and get an even greater level of allegiance?”

I began to panic, my breaths heated and hot in my chest.

Suddenly, just sitting there with the harness pressed against me made me feel claustrophobic.

I got up and marched back and forth, mimicking Triec.

I ran a hand through my hair and shook my head. “I can’t go back to him!” I wailed. “I can’t! I refuse! If he tries to lick me, if he comes anywhere near me...”

Sensing my panic, Triec braced my shoulders and told me to breathe, to take deep calming breaths.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You are my mission and I have not failed any of my missions yet. And I do not intend to begin now. You’re far too important. To the Prince, to the kingdom. *Everything* rests on you.”

His words were like gasoline cast onto the fire of my alarm. “What do you mean the kingdom is relying on me?”

“As the Prince’s fated mate, you complete him in ways no other can. You may not realize it now but your strengths complement his weaknesses. And vice versa. You’ll find hidden depths, and skills and abilities, that you never thought you had before. It is written in the prophecies. And the prophecies have never been wrong yet.”

My heart beat harder and I restarted my frantic pacing. “So you’re telling me that no matter what, I am doomed? That I can’t choose the normal, simple life I’ve always wanted? That *I have to* do this duty?”

Realizing he had only inflamed my fears, he shook his head and spoke calmly. “I’m only saying it is *one possible path* for you. You don’t have to choose it if you don’t want to. There are millions of others you might take. It is just one. It is the most likely, I admit, but it is not certain.”

To know I had at least some control of my destiny did provide me with some much-needed control.

My breaths calmed and I stopped pacing.

Triec was there, his big broad chest, his masculine features and square jaw, his presence somehow reassuring and commanding.

Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned forward and wrapped my arms

around him, burying my head into his chest.

No doubt taken aback, but not wishing to insult me, he wrapped his arms around me.

We stood there, calm riding over me soothingly.

It felt so right, somehow.

Like I was always meant to belong in his arms, that I was always meant to belong in his.

I liked the feel of him, the cool press of his blue scales against my cheek, his hips narrow enough for me to wrap my arms completely around them, whereas his broad chest gave me plenty of space to rest my head.

Although I was standing, I thought I could fall asleep in his embrace and shut my eyes to do just that.

It had been a long day and I needed rest.

Then I felt something.

Something hard and long pressing against my stomach.

I opened my eyes and knew immediately what it was.

His cock pressing against me.

I searched my feelings and realized I was aching for the same thing.

To feel him inside me, to touch him.

To give myself to him.

It was completely the wrong thing to do... and yet, my body wanted nothing more right at that moment.

“Incoming ship detected,” the Computer said.

So much for rest and relaxation!

My face was already turned towards the control desk, so I only had to glance up to see the holographic image of a ship looming into view.

“No...” I said in a breathy gasp, all sense of calm immediately draining from me. “It can’t be... It can’t be him!”

Triec rushed to the control desk and shook his head in disbelief. “Computer! Jump into hyperspace! Immediately! Any destination!”

“Command accepted,” the Computer said.

The stars began to shiver and shake.

I was too far from the seats in the back and decided to leap into the copolite chair instead.

I snapped the harness into place and prepared myself for Jumping yet again.

My stomach was already doing somersaults at the shock of seeing that

ship again and was about ready to hurl its meager contents.

Just when I expected the stars to begin to streak in that unmistakable sign we had entered hyperspace...

Nothing happened.

The stars continued to shiver... but nothing else occurred.

“What’s going on?” I said as Triec frantically pressed at the control desk’s buttons with more aggression than necessary.

“Tractor beam detected,” the Computer announced as if in response to my question.

“Tractor beam locked on,” the Computer said. “We have been captured.”

Captured!

That meant Triec *had failed in his mission.*

It meant there *could be no escape.*

The wedding was *going to happen* and I was going to become the Master’s *eighth wife.*

I whimpered, tears already blooming in my eyes.

“Computer, maximum power to warp engines,” Triec said. “Enter hyperspace immediately!”

“Negative. The tractor beam is too powerful. We cannot escape its pull.”

Triec growled at the back of his throat. “Computer. Engage evasive maneuvers. Escape the tractor beam’s hold.”

“Negative,” the Computer said resolutely. “The tractor beam is too strong to maneuver.”

Triec ground his teeth so hard I could hear them.

He was racking his brain for an idea, a way to escape.

His eyes lit up at an idea:

“Computer! What weapons do we have on board?”

“None,” the Computer said. “This is a Class II transport ship. Weapons are illegal.”

“Then what *do we have* on board that could be turned into a weapon?”

“The only combustible material is the antimatter in the fuel cells. But detonating them would damage our engines and may make Jumping into hyperspace impossible.”

“Then do it!” Triec commanded. “Eject one fuel-cell towards the tractor beam’s origin.”

“Doing so violates intergalactic law. The law clearly states—”

“We’re being hijacked!” Triec snapped. “Intergalactic law no longer

applies! Eject the fuel-cell *now!*”

“Ejecting now,” the Computer said.

There was no sound, no movement, nothing I could sense.

But Triec suddenly became quiet, pressing at the controls, monitoring something I could not.

“Computer,” Triec said. “The moment the tractor beam is disabled, enter hyperspace.”

“As previously stated, once the fuel-cell detonates—”

“Try anyway!”

“Chances of complete destruction are high.”

“Does it exceed one hundred percent?” Triec said. “Being captured by the Master *guarantees* total destruction. Enter hyperspace immediately upon detonation.”

“Command confirmed,” the Computer said.

The next few seconds seemed to stretch on forever.

I squinted my eyes in preparation for the explosion I knew would come at any moment.

But I saw nothing.

The explosion happened behind us and the only thing I felt was the sudden push forward as the tractor beam’s hold had been destroyed or at least reduced enough for us to escape.

We burst forward, the jittering stars immediately began to streak as we entered hyperspace.

I screamed, knowing the streaking lines of stars could well be the very last thing I saw as a living, breathing being.

Then the streaks slowed, becoming nothing but shaking shimmering dots once more.

I looked over at Triec, who jabbed at the console and informed the computer:

“Computer, Jump again to a random location as soon as possible.”

“Confirmed,” the Computer said.

I relaxed with relief but Triec clearly did not.

He leaned over me and drew up the robe I was wearing, checking my arms and calves.

“W-What are you d-doing?” I asked.

He held my shoulders and looked directly into my eyes. “I need you to think. At any point, did the Master — or any of his men — give you

something to wear? It could be a piece of jewelry, something in your pocket, anything.”

“No,” I said, thinking very carefully. “No. Nothing at all.”

He ran his hands over my body and checked my pockets.

“Then how about injecting something?” he asked. “Did the Master or one of his men inject something into your arm or your leg?”

“No,” I began to say before pausing.

Triec’s eyes froze. “Someone did, didn’t they?”

“At the cryo-facility,” I said, thinking back to the Assistant with his injection gun at my arm as I lay helpless on the floor and unable to fight him off. “Yes. They did.”

Triec straightened up. “Computer. Jump as many times as possible and save enough fuel for one last Jump to take us to the nearest Decontamination Facility. Confirm order.”

“Order confirmed.”

The stars shivered as we entered yet another Jump.

My stomach clenched once more. “What’s... What’s going on?” I said once the stars had stopped moving.

“We’re being tracked,” Triec said. “I don’t know how the Master is able to track us. It’s not this shuttle or the Gateway Station informing him where we are.”

He turned on me. “*It’s you.* They injected a tracker into your blood. If we want to stop them from tracking us, *we have to get it out.*”

Finally, unable to hold it in any longer, I hurled.

TRIEC

HER BLOOD!

Of course!

Why didn't I think of it before, I thought as I input the coordinates for the final jump to the nearest Decontamination Facility.

It was painfully obvious that injecting the tracking device was regular protocol at the cryo-facility when a client was awoken and Defrosted.

For the longest time, I was confused about how the Master had managed to track us down — not only once but *twice!*

Initially, the concept of the Gateway Station being under his employ seemed like a reasonable expectation.

He had a great deal of wealth and much of it had come from manipulating others.

It was only logical he would use the same tactics to maximize his reach throughout the galaxy.

Although my instincts were excellent when it came to situations such as this, I needed to be certain.

So, I ran a full health check on Penny and the readouts came back telling me she was in perfect condition... save for that anomalous blip in her blood.

Yes, it was there.

The tracker.

Any attempt I made at removing it would only end in disaster.

It required professional equipment, expert experience, and was not something to be trifled with.

Even though I was now certain the tracker was in her blood, I was still convinced that *at least some* of the Gateway Stations would be under his

thumb.

The tricky thing — in fact, the *impossible* thing — was to figure out exactly *which of the stations* those were.

Although our spy network was extensive, we had few operations in this Quadrant.

There was a very real likelihood the Master's network was far larger than our own.

That meant I would have to come up with an alternative plan if we wanted to use one of the Gateway Stations to return home.

One was already beginning to form in my mind.

Whether it would work or not, I had no clue, and if it was to have any chance of playing out at all, it would rely on Penny not having the tracker in her blood any longer.

It needed to be removed if we were to have any chance of escaping the Master's clutches for once and for all.

Based on the amount of time we had between Jumps when the Master had fallen upon us, I guessed we would have around twenty to thirty minutes maximum before he found us.

That was our window.

The time we had before the Master would show up, and this time, *ensure he caught us*.

We had gotten lucky the past two times.

We would not be so lucky a third.

The facility we were heading to was nestled within a larger city on a colony moon of the Pharic and, although not large, it was at least big enough to give us *some* leeway when it came to making our escape.

The Master would send out his men, who would search through the city streets and surrounding buildings in an attempt to corner us and snatch Penny.

And so, I thought our window could expand to perhaps forty or sixty minutes.

Perhaps longer, but I would not risk Penny's freedom on it.

Much better for the extra time to come as a bonus than to have to depend on it.

It was tight — very tight — but it was enough for our purposes...

If we are organized.

I glanced over at Penny sat in the copilot chair, picking at the skin of her

fingers nervously. “Is it an invasive procedure?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “They run a series of scans over you. They gradually break down the tracking device.”

“Can’t you just remove it?”

I shook my head. “It’s not a single device but spread throughout your bloodstream. They have to scan your whole body multiple times over a period of about twenty minutes. After that, you’ll be free and there will be no way for the Master to track you any longer.”

Penny nodded, still picking at the skin of her fingers. “And there’s no *other way* to remove it?”

I hesitated before answering.

There were only two known ways to remove a tracker from a person’s body.

The first was with the devices found in a Decontamination Facility and the other...

It made me queasy just to think of it.

“There is,” I said, hedging my words carefully. “But it’s not the best option. We should try the Decontamination Facility first. Don’t worry. It won’t hurt.”

There was a long pause before Penny spoke again:

“This second method... is it more invasive than the first?”

My mouth turned dry.

I swallowed what little saliva I had. “It can be. Yes.”

Far more invasive for her... *and for me.*

We made our final Jump and I glanced down at the fuel cell gauge on the control panel.

It was now virtually empty.

Once I took us down to the colony, I would have to find a replacement.

I didn’t like the idea of leaving Penny alone as she received the procedure but there was nothing else for it.

As soon as the process was over, the Master could be on top of us and we would be sitting *durak* without a fully charged fuel cell.

I sent messages to every fuel cell seller in the city, telling them I had enough credits to pay *whatever they asked* but that I needed the fuel cell installed on my ship within the next twenty minutes.

Whoever replied first — irrespective of their bid — would get my business.

As the offers began flooding in, I sent another message, this one to the Decontamination Facility.

As there was only one on this moon, there could be no attempt to get competing facilities to fight over the job, but I could still make the same offer:

I would pay them any amount they asked so long as my client could be decontaminated *within minutes of our arrival*.

As I took us through the atmosphere, zooming toward the city, Penny was too preoccupied with the upcoming procedure to notice the breakneck speed at which we approached.

I brought us down to the city and sweated bullets until I heard a *ping* on the ship's communication system.

MESSAGE RECEIVED. BAY THREE IS AVAILABLE FOR IMMEDIATE PREP AND DECONTAMINATION.

It then gave me the price they would charge — a huge number — which I ignored.

The funds would be coming directly from the Krev Royal Family's funds and it was of no concern to me as to how big that number was.

I sent payment immediately and received a notification and receipt a few seconds later.

I brought us down onto bay three where a team of assistants and nurses were already on hand and waiting.

Penny was slow to get up from her chair.

I released her harness, helped her up, and eased her towards the hatch door that whirred open.

"It's going to be all right," I said in my most comforting voice. "These people are going to take care of you and ensure the process goes off without a hitch. Trust me. You're in good hands."

Penny looked up at me with big broad eyes, her fear palpable. "You're not coming with me?"

"I have to get a fresh fuel cell. Without it, we have no chance of escaping the Master."

Penny nodded, not altogether convinced.

The afternoon sunlight caught her cheek and made her skin glow, making her appear like an angel.

The sight of her like that sent a shiver through me.

It was just about all I could do not to reach out and touch her, pull her in

close and press my lips against hers...

But I refrained.

My duty and loyalty to the Prince *had* to come first.

No matter how hard it was to control my inner urges.

The figure that approached Penny as she descended the ramp was a scrawny-looking Jila with tiny circular glasses perched on the tip of his long nose and glinted with the bright sunshine. "Please, come with me," he said in a silky — or was oily a better description? — voice. "Please don't be afraid. We'll ensure you get the very best treatment this side of the galaxy."

He shot me a grin, one that stretched across his entire broad face, revealing hundreds of teeth along either jaw.

They were the top Decontamination Facility in the galaxy... So why did I feel a deep twisting sensation in the pit of my stomach at the sight of his grin?

At the sight of them crowding around her like Pollia Sharks?

Of them pushing her toward the Facility entrance?

And her last lingering look as she cast me a glance over her shoulder?

Trust me, I had told her.

I only hoped I could live up to my word.

And I would...

If not quite in the way I was expecting.

I ENDED up not accepting the first fuel cell facilitator offer I received but instead the one closest to the Decontamination Facility.

I didn't have a second to waste, and although the price was twice as much as the first, I was grateful the number was of no concern.

ARRIVING IN TWO MINUTES, I wrote to them. ENSURE THE FUEL CELL IS PREPPED AND READY AS I EXPECT TO BE LEAVING WITHIN FIVE MINUTES THEREAFTER.

When I arrived, there was no one there to welcome me.

They clearly didn't have the same staff or income levels as the Decontamination Facility but it was of no consequence.

I refused to wait and spun my shuttle around, reversing directly into the receiving chamber.

A couple of workers waved their arms at me, shouting for me to stop, but I ignored them.

I was going to get this fuel cell installed in record time or I swear to the Creator him, I was going to blow this place apart.

Penny was alone, receiving her treatment in a far-flung facility, in a far-flung colony, out in the armpit of nowhere.

It was wrong of me to leave her but I had no other option.

I left the shuttle engine running, now barely subsisting on vapors.

I ran down the hatch door and dropped from it before it had even fully settled on the ground.

I yelled at the top of my voice:

“Replace the fuel cell!” I snapped at them. “*Now!*”

They jumped, shocked I had given them the order.

A couple bent over to get to work before a big fellow with broad shoulders emerged from a tiny office.

His hands were stained with what could only be antimatter juice and he wiped at them with a torn rag.

He was slow as he approached me, taking his sweet time.

I turned to his men and saw that they were just standing around, not working at all.

The big fellow drew up close to me and glared. “You don’t give the orders around here. *I do.*”

I did not back down and only squared up to him.

I was several inches taller than him, broader across the chest, and knew how to fight a great deal better than he ever would.

“We have an agreement,” I told him. “One minute has already passed and the empty fuel cell is still in my ship. I’m leaving in four minutes. If the new fuel cell is not installed on time, I can promise you I will be back to make another deposit. And next time, it will be a torpedo.”

With his business of trading combustible fuel cells, he had to know that meant his shop would become nothing more than a smoking crater.

His glare turned sharper. “Are you threatening me?”

“I’m promising you,” I said, not backing down. “My employer will not be impressed if you do not fulfill your promise.”

His glare must have been terrifying to those not used to witnessing worse.

I had seen *far worse* glares on *much scarier* faces than his.

His glare did not ease.

Instead, he folded his arms and spat to one side. “Then we’d best get a move on, hadn’t we?”

He bellowed orders and yanked the empty fuel cell from the ship with his bare hands.

His movements were quick — faster even than his coworkers, who hastily brought over the robot that was meant to do the work.

He waved the machine away, grabbed the new fuel cell, and jammed it into place and then, with his immense strength, twisted it, snapping it into place.

The shuttle’s engines immediately began to hum, losing the struggling wheezing it had adopted just a moment ago.

He snapped the cover back into place and clapped off his hands. “Done. *In record time.*”

“I’ll double the payment,” I said. “You just saved me two minutes.”

The big man shook his head. “What we agreed is enough. There’s no need for me to price gouge you twice on the same day.”

By the way he held himself, if I had not known any better, I would have said he’d once been a member of the Elite Krev Royal Guard.

Although his heritage would have denied him any chance of performing duties close to the Royal Family, he still could have risen high in the security team.

When he reached out and slammed his fist to his chest and nodded to me, I realized I was right.

He must have recognized me from somewhere, or else the way I carried myself, and had interacted with him.

For a moment, I was nervous.

After all, we were attempting to pass through this colony without anyone noticing us, but I felt confident in the respect he showed me.

I thumped my fist on my chest back to him.

Then he turned to his men and made a strange gesture with his finger, twirling it in a circle.

The entire building began to turn, allowing me to launch straight up into the atmosphere.

I climbed onto the hatch door, ran up it, and fell into the pilot’s chair.

The worker had given me the gift of valuable minutes, and it was thanks to him that what happened next didn’t turn out to be the disaster it could have been.

I RAN into the Decontamination Facility, the tinkling fountain noises and classical music over the speakers doing little to calm me.

“Penny,” I said to the secretary. “I’m here to pick up Penny.”

The secretary glanced up at me before bending over her terminal and typing in Penny’s name using the holo-keyboard floating above the desk. “She will complete her treatment within the next three minutes. Please take a seat. She will be with you shortly.”

I did not take a seat.

I stood, arms folded, staring at the clock on the wall, counting down as the seconds ticked by.

We were five seconds before the three minutes were up before I marched back toward the secretary’s desk when a side door opened.

Penny stood there, still in her robe — and I really needed to find something to replace that with — and a vacant expression on her face.

“How was the procedure?” I asked her. “Are you all right?”

She nodded her head in slow thoughtful movements. “I am fine. I am well.”

This was not the same fiery Penny I had dropped off earlier.

This was a muted version of her.

I turned to the doctor I had seen earlier with the rows of hundreds of gnashing teeth and twin glasses that always seemed to catch the light. “These are the common aftereffects of the treatment. Nothing to worry about. She will be a little distant for a few hours and will gradually return to her normal self. It’s a part of the process.”

I leaned forward and sniffed Penny.

Scenting nothing, I took her hair between my fingers and breathed it in too.

I fixed the doctor with a look. “She has no scent. Why has her scent been removed?”

“Please, trust us. It is part of the process. We are experts in the Decontamination procedure. The rays we use to disintegrate the tracking system also have an effect on the scent produced by her glands. It’s not dangerous and causes no harm. It will return to normal within the next few hours too.”

I didn’t trust this doctor, not as far as I could throw him — an odd human

expression, I thought, considering I could throw him *very far* — but time was against us.

Any minute now, the Master could descend upon our location.

We needed to get out of there as quickly as possible.

I took Penny by the arm and led her out.

I glanced over my shoulder at the doctor one last time and saw what appeared to be an exaggerated look of relief on his face as he turned and headed back down the corridor.

I looked down at Penny again, her expression still distant.

There was no way the Prince would accept her like this — no matter what the prophecy foretold.

We ascended the hatch door ramp and I placed her in the copilot chair, carefully strapping her in.

She blinked — and even that was done slowly — and stared out of the windscreen.

She seemed to have no emotional thoughts going through her mind at all.

And still, the absence of her scent plagued me.

Even if her glands had stopped producing their scent, there should still have been something there... even if it was only on her robe.

But I smelled nothing.

It was almost as if she wasn't even there.

With no history, no past.

Even rocks and water and wood had a scent.

She might have just been born, freshly made and brand new.

Newly created.

The thought came to me out of nowhere.

I couldn't ascertain exactly where it had issued from, only that, to my senses, something about this situation was not right.

This was not Penny.

Something had been done to her.

Or else...

This was not her at all.

Sensing the seconds trickling through my fingers, I leaned forward and ran my fingers through her hair.

It was so thick and dense, so luxurious and shiny, it had taken my breath away the first moment I had seen her.

In truth, *every aspect of her* had taken my breath away.

It was only my sense of duty that suppressed such wayward thoughts or feelings.

But even then, when I lost my train of thought, when my mind was allowed to roam free, my eyes naturally drifted to her tender body and the swells beneath her robe, the flimsy piece of cloth doing little to conceal her nakedness from me.

Her dark mesmerizing eyes bore down on me and would have crippled me if I had only let myself fall into them.

The long silk skin of her legs were so unlike the mottled-blue scales of the Krev skin as to be at completely opposite ends of the alien spectrum.

She was so alluring, so captivating.

So mesmerizing.

She was gorgeous — far more beautiful than any of the creatures the Prince often associated with.

They had their charms, to be certain, but they each had an easy way about them, so used to being offered up to the elite that it had become a way of life.

A shortcut to the kind of lifestyle they could only dream of.

Many of them were kind and polite, even with those they did not need to be.

But I never gave any of them a second look.

They were true beauties, to be sure, shipped in from every corner of the galaxy, but they were not alluring the same way Penny was.

Which was what made her so dangerous.

What made her so attractive to me, what would undeniably force me over the edge and take action if I only succumbed to it, to her.

But I did not see that when I looked upon this girl.

All of that passion and fire I had seen in her over the past twenty or so hours was no longer there in her expressionless face.

Perhaps Penny really had succumbed to the treatment and what was happening to her really was only to be expected.

But I don't think so.

Something compelled me, drove me forward, to lean over her and reach down.

I hesitated just a moment as my fingers reached towards those luscious red lips of hers.

Not to kiss them — although to do so was a surefire way for me to lose every ounce of my sense of duty — but to gently peel them open and peer at

the spot where her inner lip met her teeth, looking for the thing I sensed, like a heavy weight pressing into the pit of my stomach, would be there.

And when I saw those manufactured lines, the barcode identifying her for what she was, my insides turned to water and I backed away.

I fell into the control panel, accidentally tipping the ship to one side.

I righted it and turned back to Penny.

Only now I knew with cold, hard certainty that this figure sitting on the copilot seat *was not Penny* at all.

She was a clone!

I KICKED the Decontamination Facility door open, smashing into a set of waiting room chairs and sending them sprawling across the floor.

I marched toward the secretary's desk.

Her eyes lit wide with fear and hastily backed away, slamming her fist against a large red button on the wall.

"She is a clone!" I bellowed, tossing Penny's clone onto the laps of a pair of creatures in the waiting room.

"You gave me a clone!" I bellowed at the top of my lungs. *"I want Penny back! Now! I want her now!"*

Heavy footsteps thundered behind me and I turned just in time to catch a pair of large Graar armed with shock rifles aimed at the base of my back.

I rolled to one side and, using the momentum, swung my leg around and caught the back of one of their legs.

I heard the sickening *crunch* of his knee ligaments giving way as he fell beneath his weight.

I snatched up his shock rifle, which he released as he attempted to catch himself before crashing into the floor.

I pulled the trigger and threw it toward the second security officer's throat.

His arms and legs threw out to either side, his entire body shuddering from the powerful electric shock.

His tongue protruded from his mouth and his teeth snapped down on it with wild abandon.

Blood sprayed down his front as he collapsed to the floor.

I was already up, racing toward the door where the fake Penny had been handed to me.

“Stay back!” the secretary yelled. “You’re not allowed through there!”

I was surprised at her level of bravery in confronting me before realizing she was simply reacting, her training over the years coming to the fore.

Her eyes were bulbous with terror.

I slammed my fist against the door and it swung inward.

I bolted down the corridor, peering left and right, and saw various other species sitting on chairs with a circular arm rolling around them, emitting waves I could not see into their bodies and decontaminating them.

Some looked up as I ran past but most paid me no attention.

I peered into each room looking for the one figure I held most responsible for Penny’s disappearance.

I caught sight of two other doctors before I came upon the one I was looking for.

He whispered something into a nurse’s ear, causing her to titter playfully behind her hand.

His eyes flicked up to me and his brash toothy smile instantly faded upon seeing me. “Oh no...”

He bolted for the door at the back of the room but did not reach it.

I snatched up a tray from a trolley and hurled it at him.

It caught the air and slammed to the ground, sending a clutch of empty syringes that had been resting on it flying across the floor.

As the doctor braced his weight to yank the door open, his foot stepped on the silver tray and slipped, falling hard.

I picked him up, blood already seeping from the corners of his mouth.

The nurse screamed, her hands rising to her face, her eyes as wide as the secretary’s had been earlier.

“You gave me *a clone!*” I spat. “Give me Penny. Give me Penny now or you will die!”

The doctor, still delirious and barely conscious from his fall, mumbled unintelligible words, saliva drooling out the corners of his mouth.

He’d lost two teeth from his fall and it ruined the appearance of his toothy grin.

I grabbed his hand, twisted it, and snapped two of his six fingers.

It took a moment for the pain to register, but once it did, he threw back his head and bellowed.

I placed my hand over his mouth, his green blood trickling between my fingers. “Penny!” I snapped. “Where is she?”

Heavy footsteps thundered down the corridor.

I turned in time to see three security officers squeeze through the doorway and run toward me.

The nurse screamed once more, providing the punctuation mark to their sudden arrival.

I tossed the doctor’s body at the first officer, who hesitated and dropped his shock rifle, catching the doctor.

I ran at him and threw myself forward, my entire body leaving the ground as I put every pound of my weight into my fist as I slammed it into his chin.

The big fellow — and he was *very* large — spun around on the spot, his eyes already rolling into the back of his head.

His limbs lost all their strength and he collapsed beneath my shuddering blow.

The doctor let out another wail as his arm, trapped beneath the larger figure’s body, bent at an unnatural angle.

The two remaining figures launched themselves at me in unison.

I ducked and launched myself upward, knocking the shock rifles skyward.

One lost his grip immediately and the rifle flew into the ceiling, shattering into a thousand pieces.

The other figure still had his hand on his weapon, his trigger finger tensed, firing a hold of electricity into the ceiling that would otherwise have disabled and incapacitated any assailant.

It bounced off the ceiling and came streaking back down, striking the doctor’s foot.

He shuddered, foaming at the mouth as if he were having a fit.

I slammed the palm of my fist into the second security guard’s chin, snapping his head back.

In the same movement, I kicked the third security officer in the balls.

I felt them crunch beneath my hardened boot.

His hands immediately dropped to them as he fell to the floor on his knees.

I slipped behind the second officer’s back, wrapped my arm about his neck, and snapped his neck with a single fierce jerk.

He fell to the ground, now a useless mass of muscle and bone.

The third officer looked up at me, his lips shivering as he formed the words to beg for his life.

I pulled my leg back and unleashed it at his head, snapping it to one side, knocking him unconscious.

I wasn't sure if the blow had killed him or not and I didn't care.

They had pledged their lives and allegiance to this facility, just as I had pledged mine to my Prince and the Royal Family.

We all accepted what that might entail.

They were obstacles in my way and had to be treated as such.

The doctor, body beaten, bloody, and still shuddering from the shock rifle, managed to crawl along the floor on his single working arm toward the exit.

I seized him by the throat and picked him up, his legs dangling in midair.

I squeezed until I heard something in his throat begin to crack.

The nurse, unable to scream any louder or any longer, fainted.

"Penny," I said calmly. "Where is the real Penny?"

As real words began to spill from the doctor's mouth, I eased my grip on his neck and only released him altogether once he had told me what I wished to know.

I dropped him on the floor and marched toward the door, stopping only to grab one of the monitors and snap it from its holder.

"If anything you told me is not true, I will return," I told him. "And next time, I will not be so gentle."

I turned and left.

THE MOMENT I had left Penny with these cretins, they had not performed the Decontamination procedure to remove the tracker from her blood.

Instead, they had taken her to a separate area of the facility, scanned her, and then used the information to create a hastily manufactured clone.

Ordinarily, a basic program would have been implanted inside her mind upon which more advanced settings could be added, but due to the lack of time, they had just gone with the basic model.

If it wasn't for the extra two minutes the fuel cell technician had bought me, they might have had enough time to make a more convincing clone.

I would have fallen for it — at least for a few hours — and by that time, Penny would have already been taken.

A loud alarm blared, echoing down the facility's empty hallways, chasing me as I raced down one corridor after another, following the tracker still in Penny's blood.

I found her sitting in a chair asleep, or at least unconscious, with no machine working on her.

I considered turning the machine on and having it remove the decontamination in her blood but I lacked both the time and the expertise to even *consider* doing something like that.

It was just too risky and I would not risk Penny's health for anything.

I scooped her up and she mumbled something under her breath, possessing just enough wherewithal to wrap her arms around my neck.

I carried her through the corridors and paused at each corner and listened intently for any hint of security officers racing toward us.

I avoided them with each turn and sometimes had to wait a few seconds for them to pass us before then heading back down the way that they had come.

I glimpsed the doctor I had mutilated earlier, the secretary on her knees beside him, gently tapping his face in an attempt to keep him awake.

Beside them was the nurse who had fainted, now blinking awake.

She looked up, saw me, and what little blood had managed to return to her face suddenly drained from it again.

She opened her mouth to scream and attempted to point a finger at our departing figures... but she instead fainted again from the effort.

I hurried past, marching into the waiting room where the security officers' bodies remained prone on the floor.

I hurried into my ship and checked the interior to ensure no one was lying in wait for us there.

Finding the ship empty, I deposited Penny in the copilot chair and wrapped the harness about her, locking her into place, before returning to the pilot seat and immediately inputting the coordinates to rise into the atmosphere.

I received several warnings from the colony's security system to stop but I paid them no heed.

If they wanted me, they were going to have to face me themselves.

I doubted anyone was *that stupid* right at that moment.

The moment we got into outer space, we Jumped from the moon, away from the paid informants controlled by the Master, away from any chance the Master might have of locking on to our location once again.

The Master was going to be pissed when he discovered the Decontamination Facility had allowed us to slip through their fingers.

Especially since they had Penny in their grasp.

But that was not something I concerned myself with.

I was worried only about ensuring Penny's safety.

She began to wake up as I entered more Jump coordinates and we came out of hyperspace once more.

"What... what happened?" she asked. "Is it over? Is the process complete? Is the tracker... Is it gone?"

I ground my teeth at the bad news I was being forced to tell her. "It was a trap. The Master has informants everywhere, it seems. There is no Decontamination Facility we can use in this Quadrant. We're going to have to take the long way round if we want to ensure he doesn't catch us. Perhaps in the next Quadrant we might have better luck."

Although, as fast as we might travel, we were no match for a Gateway Station or the speed a message could travel.

The Master could already be garnering support and buying influence in neighboring Quadrants as we spoke.

I had assumed this mission would be an easy one.

How wrong I was.

"That will take too long," Penny said, shaking her head to come fully awake. "Before, you said there are two ways to remove a tracker from my blood. What is it?"

I focused on the course we were taking and prepared us for another Jump within the next couple of minutes.

But really, my mind was on Penny's question.

Or, rather, *the answer.*

The answer that I had, previously, refused to share.

The reason I didn't want to tell her was because although I knew it would work, I also knew it was not something I wished to do.

My sense of duty butted against my need to complete the mission.

I racked my brain for an alternative, for some other way I could achieve the same thing without having to make the same sacrifice.

But nothing came to mind.

Worse still was the fear I might just lose myself to it.

That, by succumbing to it, I would have to give up my honor, and later, beg forgiveness from the Prince.

I knew he would forgive me... and that made the situation even worse.

“What is it?” Penny asked again, peering over at me with her bright eyes.

To think I might be allowed to fall into them, to allow them to wash over me, to take command of me...

It might almost be enough to heal the tortured pain I would have to endure.

Almost.

“There is a second method,” I said with a nod. “It’s guaranteed to work. It requires no specialist equipment or complicated machines... but it’s also not something to take lightly.”

“What? What is it?”

I glanced over at her once more before shaking my head. “Something no honorable Krev should ever contemplate.”

Penny leaned forward and placed her hand on my arm.

Her touch gave me the strength I needed to say the words out loud:

“Mating with a Krev,” I said, letting the words fall from my lips and drip into her ears. “Ideally, it would be your fated mate. But as he’s very far from here...”

I left the rest of my meaning hang between us.

Penny’s hand remained on my arm for the longest time and she didn’t say a word, but I could see the thoughts playing out behind her eyes:

Are you serious?

Tell me this is some sick joke.

But just as I could see her thoughts behind her expression, doubtless she could also see my own behind mine.

I frowned deeply, the lines etched into my skin on my forehead and at the corners of my eyes.

I didn’t want this to be true any more than she did.

But it *was* the truth.

“And it’s guaranteed to work?” she said in an even voice.

“Yes. Guaranteed.”

I realized I was terrified of her reaction, that I feared most of all that she would reject me and be repelled at such an idea.

She surprised me when she said in her studied voice:

“I don’t want the Master to be able to track me for the rest of my life, to force me to marry him, to give myself to him — and his tongue — anytime he pleases.”

She straightened up and looked me in the eye. “Let’s do it.”

I COULDN’T BELIEVE the words that had formed on her lips — the words I had been certain I would never hear in her voice.

I had thought she would consider the idea of giving herself to me to be equal to having to hand herself over to the Master or even the Prince.

Of course, it wasn’t the same.

The Prince was a good and just ruler, even if he was a little wayward, while the Master was evil, corrupt, and obsessed with power.

Whereas me...

I was just the lowly Captain of the Prince’s security team.

I had no special claim to her, her body, or anything else to do with her.

I had no right to corrupt the fated mate bond that belonged exclusively between the Prince and Penny.

And yet, what I had proposed did exactly that, didn’t it?

It amounted to the same thing.

Although Penny had accepted the idea, I could not bring myself to agree to it quite so easily.

Penny reached for the rope tied about her robe and began to unfurl it.

She loosened and opened it, exposing the soft skin down the center of her chest.

Her breasts were splayed out to either side, still concealed beneath the robe’s fabric, and for the first time, I witnessed the gentle wetness of her mound between her legs...

I got to my feet and turned away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“It’s... It’s this whole situation,” I said. “It’s not right. You should not have to do this. *Neither of us* should have to do this. I have failed my Prince. I cannot allow myself to fail him further. I cannot take you. Not under these circumstances.”

I felt something soft touch the palm of my hand.

I turned to find Penny standing before me, her robe lying spread across the copilot's chair.

She was naked and she had never been more beautiful.

My eyes were fastened on her face, admiring her luxurious eyes, the thick thatch of hair on her head, the smooth curves of her magnificent body, and the thick swell of her breasts standing apart and alert.

"You're not taking me," she said. "I'm *giving* myself to you."

Her scent consumed me, filling my nostrils to bursting.

She raised my hand in hers and gently placed my palm to the swell of her breast.

I ran my finger over the hard nub of her nipple and gently squeezed it.

I kept my eyes firmly on her face as she kept hers on mine.

Her head was cocked to one side, a playful smile on her lips.

What she was thinking at that moment, I had no idea.

In all honesty, I wasn't even sure what *I* was thinking.

I wasn't *thinking*.

I was *acting*.

Acting on my basest instincts, my deepest desires, and my need to consume her, to fill her and feel myself surrounded by her, cocooned within her warm wetness.

In that instant, the scent of her and my desire proved overwhelming and I descended upon her.

I wrapped my arms about her, feeling her soft, warm body against mine.

My lips were on hers, pressing hard, and, if initially surprised at my sudden reaction, she was quick to react in her own way.

Her lips caressed mine and her hands reached up and touched my face and horns, the same way mine were exploring every inch of her body.

I hadn't even allowed myself to *dream* about it up until this moment, and had repressed it and felt extreme anxiety at my desire to have her.

Our lips broke apart and she admitted a deep gasp, sucking in another lungful of air, as I buried my lips at the nape of her neck.

Her scent was strong here and took me over.

She stepped backward, her eyes fastened on mine, my hands still clutching her broad hips.

She lay down on the copilot chair and spread her legs wide.

Perched there, at the perfect height, my aching cock pressed against the front of my pants.

I reached down and released it, and it sprang forth with excitement.

Mere inches from her sex that sang to me in deep dulcet tones.

She looked up at me, no doubt sensing my hesitancy.

She parted her lips and spoke firmly but clearly:

“We need you to do this. No one else can do this. *Only you.*”

Mating with any Krev could remove the tracker from her blood and the one who ought to do it — the one who was *ordained* to do it — was the Prince himself.

But he was too far from us now.

I really was the only one who could do it.

Seeing her beneath me, naked and hungry, asking me to do this, was almost too much for me to bear.

To fail my Prince was one thing but to fail the Kingdom and the King...

That was quite another.

And so I leaned forward, pressed the head of my cock against her entrance.

Her hands rested on my upper thighs, pulling me toward her.

I entered her and our holy union began.

She moaned as her body took me.

I was so much larger than her sex and I was concerned she would not be able to take me.

She astounded me when I sank into her depths.

As I pulled out of her, our juices coated my entire cock, allowing me to dive even deeper inside her.

Penny turned her face to one side and moaned joyfully as I slowly drew in and out.

The tracker would not be removed until I had filled her with my seed.

As I strummed her by moving back and forth, her breasts bounced.

I could not help but reach out and touch them.

I leaned forward and took the hardened buds between my lips, pinching them between my teeth, as I drove deeper inside her.

That was when the real lovemaking began.

I grabbed hold of her hips and pulled her onto me as I hammered her hard.

Her legs shuddered and she wrapped them around my waist, challenging me to ride her harder.

I rested my weight on my forearms as I fucked her hard, pressing my lips

against hers, catching the groans of satisfaction birthed on her lips, sending reverberations down my throat and pulses across the beads of my scales.

I felt her tightening around me as her hips bucked in time with my thrusts, matching with perfect synchronicity.

She threw back her head and screamed as I went to town, rolling her onto her side to attack her from another angle.

She bit down on her screams as she grasped my forearm, using the leverage to pull me harder into her.

With her pussy tightening against me, I slowed down a little to gather my strength, my nostrils flared with exhaustion after a long and draining day.

Penny placed a hand to my chest and gently eased me back.

For a moment, I thought I had done something wrong.

Then she said:

“My turn.”

She placed me on the copilot chair and climbed on top of me.

A more majestic sight I had never seen as the most gorgeous creature in the known galaxy slid me inside her and began to ride me like the Dolaar Dragon she was.

For the briefest of moments, I allowed myself to fall into her, to believe that, just for a moment, for a minuscule instant, *we were the truly ordained fated mates*, and not she with the Prince.

It was but an instant but it would be one I'd remember for the rest of my days.

PENNY

I HAD BITTEN THE BULLET.

I had taken the step he wouldn't.

Perhaps it was because I had more on the line or the fact he clearly couldn't bring himself to overcome his sense of duty...

Not without a little push, at least.

In either case, what happened happened *because of me*.

Although terrified of what might occur next, he had responded exactly the way I had hoped he would.

Initially, when he informed me of the *second way* to remove the tracker from my blood, I had looked at him askance.

I had not believed him because I had heard the same line countless times from many men back on Earth.

A cheap trick to get me into their bed.

But when I looked across at him and saw the expression on his face, his thoughts and emotions might as well have been written in ink, they were so clear.

I knew he was telling me the truth.

What he was telling me *was not* a trap — how could it be after everything we had been through together?

Despite my initial reaction, I had to accept it for what it was:

The honest truth.

How sleeping with him was supposed to remove the tracker, I had no idea.

And I had no interest in knowing either.

It seemed many things associated with the Krev were more spiritual in

nature and defied explanation like many things back home.

But when I thought about it, it wasn't really all that different from my not knowing how complicated machines worked.

How did the metal hoops work in the Decontamination Facility operation, for example?

No idea.

Or, for that matter, how did *shuttle engines* work?

Or the shields that protected them?

I mean, I didn't even really know how refrigerators worked!

I wasn't an engineer (clearly!) and didn't understand how *any of that stuff* worked.

So how was removing the tracker via the second method any different?

I decided it wasn't.

I would have to leave everything up to fate.

Fate!

That unknown quantity that had brought me into this strange new world in the first place, provided me with a prophecy I neither understood nor fully believed but nonetheless undergirded my life and future all the same.

On the surface, I might have appeared confident, self-possessed, as if I knew precisely what I wanted from Triec and what he expected from me.

But underneath it all, I was *an anxious wreck*.

Reaching for the cord holding my robe together had required me to switch off my brain and *act without thinking*.

To let him see me at my most vulnerable.

Naked!

I had made up my mind and believed what he had told me.

To take action, I had to turn my brain off.

As I uncoiled that rope, I saw the hungry expression grow in his eyes.

Desperate and full of desire.

A look I had not seen on his face since the first moment we had met.

Except...

I realized I *had* seen it on him before.

It had only ever been there for an instant before he immediately wiped it from his face and replaced it with a stony-faced coldness that I had come to think of as his *duty expression*.

When he lowered his defenses and allowed himself to look upon me without restriction, without control, I witnessed the physical impact I was

having on his body.

And all my concerns drifted on the wind.

That was when he took control, pressing his lips against mine.

I was surprised at how soft they were, expecting them to be as hard as his scales appeared to be.

I had only touched him a handful of occasions, but each time, I was taken aback by how tough the bubbled scales were, like naturally occurring reinforced armor.

But his lips were soft and gentle and explored my skin with a keen urgency that I suddenly felt keen to reciprocate.

My heart fluttered.

When he finally entered me, it was with an expression of shock.

I had gone to the Seeding Facility for just this purpose... but never in my wildest dreams had I ever imagined it would happen under *these circumstances*.

How could I have?

How could *anyone* have predicted what had transpired?

Goosebumps spread across my entire body, a fresh layer of sweat dimpling the surface.

With my dimpled skin, I might have looked like a human reflection of his own scaly skin — even if I lacked the hard shell his species had evolved.

He worked me hard, tearing one orgasm from me after another.

No sooner had one erupted on my lips than a second occurred immediately on its heels, chasing after it like it was some kind of sports race.

I was relieved when he slowed down and pulled back, even if he did not fully remove himself from me.

He was clearly exhausted — as well as he should be from his long, difficult day of having to rescue me no fewer than two times!

Now, he found himself with a fresh challenge, only this time, I was not a drag but able to aid him.

I eased him back and turned him around to sit on the copilot chair.

I pressed him down, feeling at the hard powerful muscles of his torso, so tight they might have been chiseled from rock.

And this was the only available way for us to remove the tracker? I wondered.

It was a shame such things weren't required more often!

A virile male all to myself, with not a single female for many light-years

in any direction, drifting in a random spot in space finally managing to escape the Master's grip.

I climbed on top and lowered myself onto him.

He was so hard, I didn't even have to use my hands.

He eased himself inside me with all the accuracy of a self-guided missile.

I gasped, my breath catching in my throat as I took him, head and stem.

I looked upon him, peering into his luscious golden eyes with those mesmerizing purple-river irises, and allowed myself to fall headfirst into them.

I rose and fell, neither one of us taking our eyes from the other.

I luxuriated at the feel of him inside me, squeezing my thighs on either side of his narrow waist, my hands perched on his broad muscular chest.

I moaned with joy as I rose and fell, rolling my head back and gazing up at the ceiling.

Slowly, I built up the pace, moving faster, harder, deeper, and felt his hips tighten and rise slightly off the cushion so I could ride the full length of him.

I hissed through my teeth as I felt another orgasm begin to stir deep inside and was relieved when I felt his cock harden — impossibly! — even further.

His legs shook with his own approaching orgasm.

Sweat ran down either side of my neck and between my breasts that bounced with each powerful thrust.

The tips of my hair were damp with sweat, and a tributary river formation formed between each of his bulging abs.

His hands reached up, gripped my waist, helping me bounce on him.

He thrust deep into me from beneath, hammering at me as I admitted his every blow.

Any minute now, I thought he was going to blow...

But each moment that passed was when another rolling cascade of orgasms tore through me.

I grabbed at a breast, pinching the nipple as I ran the other through my hair, drenched wet now, and screamed as he pummeled me from below.

Finally, I felt it — that hard, powerful gush pumping into me with each forceful thrust.

He stabbed at me a few dozen more times before finally coming to a stop.

I flopped down on top of him, our sweat co-mingling.

I didn't have the energy to reach down and extract him from me.

Every few seconds, I felt another small pulse inside me, sending tingling

sensations through my body.

We lay there, both gasping for air, luxuriating in the sensuousness of each other's presence, in a way I had never experienced before.

I suppose it came with the knowledge that his Seed, unlike the others back on Earth, was *truly virile* and there was every chance it might take.

It wasn't just for fun, for pleasure, for temporary relief of a craving, but potentially for something much longer term.

I didn't know if I would become pregnant with his Seed or if it was even reasonable to think it might — or even, come to think of it, if it was in either of our best interests if it did.

After all, he was meant to be the Prince's dutiful servant...

And I had just laid with him.

If the truth of what happened between us ever got out, I could not imagine it would end well for him.

It might not even end well for me either...

As I gazed up at him, his eyes closed, his arms wrapped tightly around me, I said softly:

"This has to always remain a secret between us, doesn't it?"

He looked down at me, and in his expression, I saw true sadness, but that was instantly wiped away by that sense of duty he always seemed to carry with him.

He nodded. "Yes. No one can ever know."

I nodded and lowered my head back to his chest, knowing I could not conceal my sadness as well as he could, and needed to turn my face from him.

No one can ever know...

Only us.

But I would carry it for the rest of my days.

"Computer," Triec said, "run a full checkup on Penny and cross-reference the result with the scan from earlier."

"Command received," the Computer said.

It made a soft beeping noise and, after a moment, it said:

"Scan complete. Results are clean. Cross-reference results: no anomaly detected in the patient's blood. Everything else remains the same."

"Well," Triec said, kissing me on the forehead, "it looks like it worked. The Master can no longer track you." Then he gazed up at the ceiling once more. "Computer, Jump to a random place in this Quadrant."

“Jumping now,” the Computer said.

I felt the subtle shift in my stomach, feeling like my body was being pulled in one direction, while something held my stomach firmly in place.

It reminded me a lot of riding a roller coaster ride, only it lasted a good deal shorter.

Triec sat up, his arms still wrapped around me.

I suspected he didn’t want this moment to end any sooner than I did. “Now, you’re free. The Master cannot track you and neither can anyone else.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

He snorted and shook his head. “I think it should be *me thanking you!*”

We shared a look and burst into laughter.

I climbed off him and began putting on my robe. “So what happens now the tracker has been removed?”

“We need to pass through a Gateway Station while riding someone else’s ship.”

“How do we do that?”

Triec fixed me with his warm golden orbs. “Tell me, are you any good at singing or dancing?”

“Huh?”

IT WASN’T until much later that he finally got around to describing the plan in detail.

By then, we were already arriving at the Entertainment Hub.

These Hubs were not around in my time either, but by the way he described them, they sounded very much like American Indian casinos.

They rested just beyond established borders, out of reach of intergalactic law, and had become a law unto themselves.

They catered to every kind of taste — and by the way Triec’s face twisted as he described it, I suspected the “taste” he was referring to wasn’t always of the cleanest variety.

The plan involved us *selling ourselves* at an auction for a rich merchant to purchase.

“Why a merchant?” I asked him.

“Only the richest and most powerful are offered invitations to the Prince’s wedding,” he said.

It took a moment for me to understand what wedding he was referring to. “My wedding? I thought I had a choice about whether or not I want to be with the Prince?”

Triec nodded. “You do. It’s not set in stone. You can delay or cancel the wedding if you wish.”

I could see he didn’t like talking about this subject — how could he, after we had just mated?

“By getting him to purchase us, we can cross through the Gateway Station on his ship, enter Krev space, hijack a ship, and race towards the Capital where we will be safe from harm. At least, that’s the plan.”

All this... so I could marry a guy I didn’t even know!

“The only difficulty is making sure the merchant actually wants to buy us. We have to give him something he can’t easily get elsewhere. That’s why I asked if you have a latent talent like singing or dancing. Anything that will make us stand out.”

I had *no latent talents!*

The closest I had ever come was second in a talent competition — and that was when I was ten!

And there had only been *three contestants!*

Triec shrugged. “Then we’ll just have to wing it.”

“What if we fail to get bought by a merchant?”

Triec shook his head. “Then it’s going to be a *long journey* back home. And there will be no chance you’ll make it to your wedding.”

AFTER WE LANDED at the Entertainment Hub, Triec was quick to purchase us some new clothes.

He gave me a costume before pointing out that it was what *all* entertainers wore.

“It looks like something a fool would wear!” I said, slipping it on over my head. “See?”

Triec frowned at me. “You’re no fool. You’re very intelligent.”

I sighed. “Never mind.”

The costume was garish and brightly colored.

With any luck, anyone looking at me would focus more on the costume than me.

Triec was similarly dressed, only as he was much larger, his costume didn't have the same look of ridiculousness I did.

He wore a serious expression and carried himself with obvious danger, and when juxtaposed with the ridiculous nature of the costume...

He looked sinister.

Triec spent ten minutes watching the entrance before clocking someone he recognized.

"What is it?" I said. "Is it someone who will buy us?"

Buy us!

Even now, it sounded ridiculous!

"Possibly. He's the only merchant here rich enough to have garnered an invite. If not him, we don't want to be bought by anyone else."

I wanted to point out to him that *I didn't want to be bought by anybody* but he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me across the street.

"Come on!" he said.

We entered beneath a large doorway with a garish yellow AUCTIONEER'S DELIGHT sign perched across the top.

The moment we emerged inside, I was assaulted by the low growl of conversation between countless people huddled at hundreds of tables.

At the front was a large stage where a pair of aliens — dressed similarly to us in the same ridiculous costumes — played live music.

One instrument was a strangely-shaped guitar, its strings long and standing ten feet tall like a double bass but with an invisible body, while the other tapped at a drum.

Together they made, to my ears, beautiful music.

But within seconds of starting, the crowd roared with derision and hurled jelly-like food at the performers.

They shouted strange foreign words I didn't understand but were loosely translated by my translator as "Boo!"

I felt terrified.

I had always suffered from stage fright and couldn't even *begin* to imagine what it must be like to be on a dais before all these people.

"There he is," Triec said in a low voice, pointing out a tall, overweight creature that more closely resembled a slug than anything else I had ever

seen.

His eyes were large and yellow, much like a cat's with slit-like pupils.

His body was green and slithered along the floor, leaving a trail of gunk in his wake, where two servants hastily mopped up after it.

Occasionally, they missed a spot and someone tripped on it.

They got up, dusted themselves off and, although angry, chilled the moment they saw who had caused the spillage.

Clearly, the Merchant held considerable sway as he slithered up to the front row, where another pair of guests were hastily shooed away for him to take up their table.

We moved to a set of stairs that led up to the stage.

Triec hastily approached a figure armed with a tablet computer.

"Name?" the worker asked in a bored voice.

"Plumar," Triec said. "And Seclumar."

"Act?" the worker asked once again in his disinterested tone.

"Music," Triec said.

"And dancing," I hastily added.

The worker looked us over. "Music and dance acts haven't been doing well lately. I suggest you choose something else."

"They haven't seen an act like ours before," Triec bluffed.

The worker sighed before shaking his head. "It's your funeral. Go on up. You're number three in the lineup."

As we ascended the steps, I saw another duo move onto the stage.

The audience was already listless and disinterested.

That heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach began to grow heavier with nerves.

Sure, being bought by the Merchant and hopping through to the other side of a Gateway Station was going to shave weeks — maybe even months — off our journey time, but was it really worth all this?

Earlier, I had thought spending all that time in the small, cramped space of the shuttle a nightmare, with only Triec as company...

Suddenly, after our recent experience, it didn't seem so bad after all!

With nothing else to do to keep ourselves entertained, why not just hump our way across the galaxy?

We could stop off at some places, have adventures, experience a little of the alien worlds we came across before arriving at the Capital.

I was about to broach the subject with Triec when he suddenly turned on

me:

“Okay. Are you going to sing or dance?”

“I don’t know!” I said in full-scale panic. “What are you going to do?”

He picked up one of the ten-foot guitars and began strumming it. “I’m going to play the Mjar.”

I stared at him in shock. “You can play the alien guitar thingy?”

He wet his fingertips and ran them over the guitar’s strings. “Not much else to do on a battlefield. Think of something special, something that will get the Merchant’s attention.”

“Tell me something about him,” I said. “What does he like? What does he enjoy?”

“Well, he—”

Triec was cut short as a loud voice booed and hissed.

Anger erupted from the audience and the duo that had taken to the stage came running backstage, faces covered with jelly, hair spattered and a mess.

“I swear, I’ll never go out there again!” one of the performers said. “I swear! This is so unprofessional!”

“Get yourself cleaned up,” his partner told him. “If we don’t get bought tonight, we don’t eat.”

Dragging a thick globule of jelly — maybe it was a live jellyfish as it was still wriggling — from his hair, he let it splatter to the floor and walked, body limp, toward the showers where he would get washed up and be forced to try again.

“Why does anyone even *want* to sell themselves?” I asked. “Where I come from, slavery no longer exists... At least, not officially. But no one would happily sell themselves into slavery, would they?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew better.

Back on Earth, slavery *did* still exist if you bothered to look.

Most people just turned a blind eye, busy with dealing with *their own form of slavery* to not care about anyone else.

“So, the Merchant,” Triec said, returning to our former topic of conversation before we were interrupted. “He *loves* to be entertained. He loves great singers, dancers. And women. He *loves* females of every shape and size.”

I placed my hands on my hips and glared at him. “If you think I’m handing myself over to him, you’ve got another thing coming, Buster!”

He shook his head. “Of course that’s not what I meant. We need to do

something he'd never seen before. Is there something that's really popular on Earth you can do?"

"On Earth, a hundred years ago? Sure. But I doubt there's anything the species on this planet hasn't seen before!"

Boos and hisses erupted once more from the belligerent audience.

Another pair of performers — this time, strangely dressed like clowns from back on earth with their frizzy hair and big red noses and white faces came running off.

"Nice clown costumes," I said with a warm smile.

The male of the pair glared at me. "What costume?"

Oops...

They weren't wearing costumes and that was what they *actually looked like*.

I would have to remind Triec later to *never* take me to their home planet — not unless he wanted to hear me scream every moment I was there.

I'd always had a fear of clowns.

Almost as powerful as my stage fright.

An assistant pressed something to the front of our jackets — what I assumed was a microphone too small to see — and nodded at us. "You're up. Good luck."

Triec took me by the hand and led me onto the stage.

With no planning or practice and no idea of what we were doing, I was *absolutely horrified*.

When we stepped out onto the stage, the audience took no notice of us, and continued jabbering amongst themselves.

The lights were bright and I could hardly see anything.

As my eyes grew accustomed to it, I began to make out the vast sea of audience members.

"I'm going to play a song," Triec said. "You can dance or play this drum."

He handed me a tambourine and, scared shitless the way I was, there was *no way* I was going to be able to dance.

He strummed the guitar loudly.

The audience — for the most part — quietened down, momentarily distracted from their conversations.

Triec played a beautiful song.

It began low, before swinging high.

It was partially ruined by my translator mistiming the lyrics but I got the basic gist of it.

He sang about love and loss, of how, in this fictional story — at least, I thought it was fictional — the singer had lost his love, his heart, and his will to live.

He fell in love with a dancer who mesmerized him with her seductive gyrations, and he became obsessed.

But she was popular with the rich men and he could never get her to be with him.

By the time he finished, the audience was still quiet, listening, but none were particularly excited, and turned back to their conversations.

“Well,” Triec said, shoulders falling. “At least they didn’t throw jelly at us.”

His song had relaxed me, making me realize there were far more important things in life than being afraid to be on stage.

I had an idea and decided to act on impulse.

“Play that riff again,” I said to him. “That bass part on your alien guitar thingy.”

“Don’t you want to leave the stage first? We can plan something else.”

“No,” I said. “If I don’t do it now, I probably never will.”

He stepped back into the spotlight and thrashed his alien guitar, getting the audience’s attention once more.

This time, he turned to me, nodded, and played the tune again, singing.

And I began to dance.

Although, to be fair, dancing *wasn’t quite* what I was doing.

As the Merchant liked females, liked dancing and music, I figured that by combining them all perhaps we could give him something he might actually want to pay for.

“Slower,” I told Triec, “and make the base note louder.”

Triec did as I asked and watched, mesmerized, as I fell into a deep hypnotic routine.

No one paid much attention until I slowly began removing parts of my costume.

The audience perked up, growing enthralled.

The males were staring open-mouthed as I gradually stripped off.

And each time I popped my hips to one side and ran my hands over my body, a few howls issued up.

Soon, *the entire audience* was getting to their feet.

The Merchant, who until that point had been embroiled in a deep conversation with someone at his table, heard the commotion and blinked his big yellow eyes that glowed like the Cheshire Cat's, peering up at me.

His hands were steepled together, his lips pursed, his eyes watching me intensely.

Turning my back on the audience, and looking at Triec, who had a big grin on his face, I reached for my pants and, shutting my eyes and refusing to believe I was actually doing this, pulled them off.

I bent over, peering back from between my legs, and performed some — very painful! — squats.

The creatures in the audience howled even louder, banging their table with their fists.

Perhaps some of the residue from our earlier love-making could still be picked up by those with a superior sense of smell, or they had just been in space for too long...

Whatever it was, they hooted up a storm.

I got down to my underwear but decided not to go any further.

Always best to leave the audience wanting more, I thought.

Then, with my eyes fixed on the Merchant's disgusting face, I sauntered over to Triec and ground against him.

Now, the males in the audience had completely lost it.

They crowded around the front row, the Merchant hissing when someone bumped into him, spilling his drink.

He lashed out at them, growling angrily.

"All right," I said. "Let's call it a day."

"Are you sure?" Triec said, strumming a little harder to begin another verse. "I think you have enough clothes left for one last round..."

He arched his eyebrow suggestively and I slapped him good-naturedly on the arm as I swung myself around in a circle and threw myself to the floor on my hands and knees, looking back over my shoulder at the audience.

Triec performed one last strum of his guitar, and it was, thankfully, over.

They screamed and screeched and howled, raising their fists full to bursting with dirty credits.

It looked like we had done our job well, getting a lot of interest from the other merchants but, watching the Merchant just sit there staring at me, I wasn't sure if we would end up being bought by the *one merchant* we wished

to be.

We hustled off the stage, hoots and howls and whistles nipping at our heels.

“Congratulations!” the official with the tablet computer said. “Fantastic show! Perhaps you might be interested in performing here every night for the next few weeks...?”

“I’m afraid they’ve already been purchased,” a tall figure said, approaching from the side stage.

I recognized him as the figure the Merchant had been talking with earlier.

“The Merchant wishes to purchase them,” he said.

I looked at Triec, who could barely keep his grin in check. “How much?” he asked.

It really didn’t matter how much, I knew.

The only thing that mattered was that we would be bought and on his ship, allowing us to pass through the Gateway Station.

Once the price was accepted, the Merchant’s associate said:

“The Merchant has only one condition.”

“What’s that?” Triec asked.

“A personal performance with the female.”

Hope had quickly passed into despair.

A DEAL WAS STRUCK.

The Merchant had purchased us but as for our new “owner’s” condition, as hard as Triec tried, he simply could not get the Merchant’s associate to remove it.

Instead, I was to give him a “personal” performance on the night of the Krev Prince’s wedding.

And that was due to happen the following day.

The Merchant’s associate was loath to accept this agreement but with few other options, there was nothing else he could do.

We shook on it, signed the contract, all the while knowing we had *zero intention* of ever following through with it.

Thirty minutes later, I had taken up residence in our quarters on the Merchant’s huge ship.

It was almost as large as the Master's ship but was not cobbled together but instead tastefully — and I suspected, expensively — designed specifically for high-class consumption.

I shared my quarters with Triec, who was currently out completing some reconnaissance work.

I fell onto the bed and ran my fingers through my hair, barely able to believe what I had done on that stage.

I was even more shocked *that it had actually worked!*

In my mind, I had not been the one on stage — at least not before a large audience.

My audience, I had told myself, consisted of one.

Triec, as he strummed his alien guitar, beating a sensual rhythm for me to dance to.

The rhythm he played was the very same I had heard the entire time we had made love.

A natural, powerful beat you could not help but feel sexy to.

The first part of Triec's plan had been achieved.

We were on the ship.

Now all we needed was to wait until we passed through the Gateway Station, hijack a ship, and never have to see the Merchant or the Master *ever again*.

As I was to be married to the Prince, the next time the Merchant saw me would be on a member of the Royal Family's arm.

I doubted he would recognize me then, and even if he did, he was unlikely to admit he had bought me at a slave auction!

It would be the ultimate insult to his host.

I hopped in the shower and rinsed off the past day's worth of grime and dirt.

I was shocked to see the water turning brown in the bottom of the shower stall.

Even worse was when I rinsed out my hair.

It seemed to change through several shades of brown until it became my natural hue.

I emerged back into the room wearing a fresh robe, cotton soft and luxurious.

I seemed to be wearing *a lot* of robes lately.

I sat in front of the dressing table and began looking for the hairdryer.

I found a strange helmet-shaped object and realized it was the hairdryer!
I put it on my head and it instantly booted up, drying my hair within seconds.

When I removed it, I noticed my hair had been fashioned into a high-class style.

On the side of the helmet were a bunch of settings and styles to choose from.

I selected the one that most closely matched my preferred one and put the helmet back on.

This time, within seconds, it beeped, and when I removed it, it was done once again.

“Well,” I said. “Where have *you* been my whole life?”

The door flew open and Triec hastily shut it behind himself.

“I did it!” he announced. “I found the escape pods! They won’t be difficult to hack. We have similar ones onboard the palace ships. I also managed to send a message to the palace informing them of our location and plan.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Surely they can pick up on the signal and read it?”

“I didn’t tell them directly,” Triec said. “I used an encrypted code so the palace can understand what I’m saying from the context. I’ve no doubt they will understand. The Prince and the Royal Family will know we will soon arrive.”

He grinned at me broadly but I couldn’t help but feel a little sad.

“Will we see each other again after we get to the palace?” I asked, doing my best to keep my sadness from my voice.

The grin faltered on Triec’s face and he took the seat on the bed and took my hands in his. “We’ll see each other often. In the halls of the palace, at special events.... Most days, really. But what happened between us... It has to stay between us. I will achieve my mission and you will be free to live your life the way fate intended.”

I nodded but couldn’t help but feel sad anyway. “I understand.” Still, I didn’t like it. “I suppose this will be the last time we’ll be together like this.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “I’m afraid so.”

“Then we ought to make the most of it while we can, shouldn’t we?”

I reached down and loosened the rope about my waist, easing my robe off and shrugging it from my shoulders.

Triec just stared, the familiar curtain of desire washing over his face once more.

He reached toward me but hesitated before touching me.

“I don’t belong to the Prince yet,” I found myself saying. “Until then, I am yours.”

They were the magic words he needed to hear, and once again, I was blown away by his insatiable hunger for me.

He took me in his arms and we made mad passionate love once again.

This time was different from the first.

There were no expectations, no end goals in mind, and we could simply lie back and enjoy each other’s company.

I gave myself to him in ways I had never given myself to anyone.

In a dark recess of my mind, I hoped the plan would fail.

That way, we could be together a little longer.

I was to get my wish.

THE MERCHANT’S ship waited in the line for our turn to pass through the Gateway Station.

Triec had already checked the coordinates were correct — the ship would be arriving at the closest Gateway Station to the Krev Capital where the Prince’s wedding was due to take place the following day.

Within minutes of taking a shower together and getting dressed, a knock came at the door calling us to work at the Merchant’s special dinner.

I wondered if they expected me to dance the same way I had at the auction but when we arrived, we found we were not expected to perform on stage at all but as servants.

The waiters were understaffed and required two extra pairs of hands.

As we were the most recent purchase, we were considered the lowest rank on the ship and therefore expected to step in for such duties.

I was relieved I wouldn’t have to carry out such duties for long as I suspected they would not only stretch to serving, but all manner of other duties too.

One of which, as I found myself constantly grimacing about, was the need for me to offer “personal” performances to the disgusting Merchant.

That alone made it necessary for me to leave this ship by tonight!

There was *no way* I was going to offer any kind of “personal” performance to the Merchant and his slimy sluggish features!

Triec and I stood on opposite ends of the dining room where soft music was being played on a small stage.

It reminded me of something upper-class elites might have listened to back on Earth in my time, and I wondered if such events were still common.

I suspected they were as such traditions died hard.

The dress I was given fit me perfectly and had been tailor-made.

I wondered how they had managed to do that considering I had only been aboard a few hours!

It was a deep satin red, a little too tight for my liking, not that I had much choice in the matter.

I wore red lipstick to match the dress and burgundy heels that made me feel more confident than I really was.

We waited for a long ten minutes before the Merchant came in.

As he entered, he came in talking with a friend at his shoulder.

His friend was big and broad, in far better shape than the Merchant himself.

He also had legs — another far more attractive quality than the slug juice that flowed freely from behind the Merchant — and a deep voice and throaty laugh that boomed every time he threw back his head.

There was something else about his voice and appearance though that shocked me...

The fact I recognized it.

The blood drained from my face and I peered over at the opposite end of the room where Triec stood, his own surprise evident in his eyes.

I took a step forward to run to him but he shook his head and held up his hands to stop me.

I instantly froze and resumed my previous position, lowering my face and eyes at the floor.

My heart raced at a mile a minute.

The Master entered the room as the Merchant’s special guest.

The creature we had spent so long escaping, now in our midst.

Trapped in a room with him.

All it would take for all our plans to fail was for him to raise his eyes to my face.

He would recognize me for who I was.

No doubt his men had given him a description of Triec too.

They might even have footage of him, but at least he hadn't had the misfortune of meeting the creature in person.

As for me, he had *touched* me, had almost brushed his thick disgusting tongue across me.

As they took their seats, the musicians sat back down and continued playing from where they had left off.

The Merchant clapped his hands — what were really two-foot-long eel-like appendages that flapped together like battling walruses.

The food filtered into the room.

I was handed a pewter and ushered toward the table where I leaned over and filled the glasses with wine.

I kept my eyes on the glasses, my hands shaking, the pewter barely within my grasp.

I focused entirely on pouring that red liquid.

If I did a good job, if I kept my eyes down, perhaps the Master *wouldn't* recognize me.

Or maybe he already had.

I knew he liked playing games, and it occurred to me that *this whole thing* could be one of them.

This entire time, it could have all been one elaborate trap!

Maybe Triec was in on it too—

No.

Triec could not be in on it.

And I did not believe the Master, as cruel as he was, would allow another male to touch his wife — much less make love to her.

Especially when I had seen how he protected his other wives.

I didn't need to panic.

This was not some elaborate plan orchestrated by the Master's devious mind.

This was just an obstacle, something we needed to overcome to escape his clutches once more.

I kept glancing out the window, checking to see how much longer we needed to wait before it was our turn to pass through the Gateway Station.

But even after we were on the safe side, we couldn't simply get up and leave!

We had to be dismissed, and they weren't going to do that until the dinner was over.

Only then could we head to the escape pods.

We could not create any sense of suspicion or else we might never escape here alive.

I dutifully poured each cup of wine, keeping my head low, never making direct eye contact with those around the table.

They would raise their hand, motioning for me to refill their cup, and I did as suggested.

“So, I hear you've been invited to the Royal wedding too,” the Master said.

“Naturally,” the Merchant said, throwing back his head and swallowing flailing worms that did not look like they wanted to be eaten. “As the largest merchant in the quadrant, how could they *not* invite me?”

He slurped down the worms but one had managed to hook its tail around his lip and he bit down with what few teeth he had, causing the worm to squeal and let go, sliding down his gullet.

He dabbed at his lips with a napkin.

“I have it on good authority that the Prince is not going to be wed tomorrow,” the Master announced magnanimously.

“And what do you know that the palace does not?” the Merchant retorted.

“I happen to know the female fated mate is betrothed to another.”

He winked at the merchant, who rubbed his belly with his tiny arms. “You're incorrigible! Aren't seven wives enough?”

“Enough is never enough, I always find,” the Master said. “I assume you agree, as that can be the only way you amassed your own fortune. You become successful, then discover it's not enough, so you grow a larger fortune, and then discover that is not enough either. So, you keep on growing, knowing it will never be large enough to fill that hole you have inside.”

The Merchant shrugged. “Not all of us are motivated by power.”

“Money, then. Money is power in a different guise.”

The Merchant pursed his thick lips. “If this female fated mate is betrothed to you, why does the palace think they're going to have her as their next queen?”

The Master shrugged. “They are misguided. They believe they have her within their grasp, when they do not.”

“Then she is within yours, I take it? If she were, I doubt you would be

sitting across the table from me. As much as you enjoy my company, I suspect you would be using that tongue of yours to its full effect.”

I stumbled and accidentally overfilled the Merchant’s wineglass, spilling it across the pristine white fabric of the dining table sheet.

The Merchant hissed through his thick lips at me before waving a hand: “Begone!”

The Master’s eyes flicked over me before returning back to the Merchant. I rushed over to the chief servant who snapped at me:

“Get a cloth and some salt! You must clean the stain from the tablecloth immediately!”

“Y-Yes, sir,” I stuttered.

I had hoped I could leave the room so I could gather myself and take a deep breath, but instead the salt and cloth were brought to me.

“Give it to me,” Triec said, reaching for the items.

“I... I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s all right,” he said softly. “Stand by the wall behind the Master and keep your eyes on the floor at all times.”

I did as he commanded as he went over and rubbed at the tablecloth.

“I will have her in my grasp soon enough,” the Master said, throwing his head back and downing his wine.

He raised his glass for it to be refilled.

The pewter was handed to me once more by the chief servant who grumbled:

“*Careful* this time.”

I approached the Master from behind.

He waved the wineglass around, too fast for me to fill.

He placed the glass down on the table, so I moved up beside him.

“Try not to spill it, my dear,” he said. “This is a *very rare* vintage.”

I nodded, daring not to mutter a single word.

I began to pour the wine into the glass, glancing over only at Triec, who continued to dab at the tablecloth.

“You do not have her within your grasp,” the Merchant announced. “This is just wishful thinking. The Royal Family are the ones with the wedding planned. They’re the ones who always follow through with their promises.”

The Master nodded. “Yes, but they don’t know something I do.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

The Master’s hand snapped out so fast, wrapping around my wrist, that I

dropped the pewter, and the wine lashed the entire dining tablecloth.

“I know where she *really is!*”

He opened his mouth, his fat tongue stretching toward me.

I screamed, pulling my arm away from his hand but he held on so tight I couldn't get free.

Smash!

Triec dropped the empty pewter, a large dent on one side after having bashed the Master over the head with it.

He bellowed at the top of his voice:

“Run!”

I did not need to be told twice, and bolted.

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TRIEC

PENNY TOOK off like a fhuria chased by a laktar.

She sprinted through the doorway without casting a single look over her shoulder at me.

I soon caught up to her, knocking aside a pair of servants carrying the next food course on silver platters.

“Don’t just stand there!” the Master yelled at the top of his voice and clutched his head where I had struck him. “Get them!”

Initially, I had not recognized him.

But when I saw the expression on Penny’s face, the look of horror, how her blood had fallen from her face, it became all too obvious who he was.

Then, like an unwanted vision, I *did recognize* him.

He was the loud, boisterous figure in the crowd of wedding guests I had seen on his ship — what felt like a *lifetime* ago.

Big and broad across the chest, powerfully built, he had the exact appearance of someone capable of locking his wives away in a room far from prying eyes.

The kind of figure who had no scruples when it came to denying the holy fated mate bond between two individuals.

If only I had a little more time with him, I could have shut him down for good.

But our escape was on the line, Penny’s safety.

And I dare not risk it.

Especially since she didn’t know where the escape pods were, where she needed to run.

Although, as she took one corner after another heading in roughly the

right direction, I thought she must have pretty good instincts for the ship's layout.

Then she shifted her weight to bolt down another corridor — the wrong one — and I grabbed her by the arm and yanked her the right way.

I kept her beside me and opted not to sprint ahead in case she got left behind.

Servant workers leapt back as we sprinted down one hallway after another.

Twice we came across the Master's and Merchant's guards, and each time, I forged ahead of Penny, slamming my shoulder into them, knocking them to the floor and stamping on their legs to ensure they wouldn't follow us.

"This way!" I bellowed.

An alarm blared and the lights switched to red.

A warning was issued over the speaker system that two fugitives were running through the ship and that everyone was to do everything within their power to stop us.

It meant our time was limited and had none to waste.

Still, the workers, unsure of the situation and clearly confused, leapt back each time we bolted past them, flattening themselves against the wall.

Finally, we came to the escape pods and, as expected, they had been locked down.

I skidded to a halt before the closest pod, drew up the control panel, yanked it off, grabbed the wires, and bit off the protective casing.

I crossed them and braced myself to absorb the explosive shock that would ripple through my body.

I ensured to keep my feet firmly planted on the ground, grateful for the rubber-buttoned soles of the boots they had provided me.

The door shunted open.

The interior of the pod was the only part of the ship without a blazing red light.

I ran inside and Penny, sensing she needed to strap herself in, did so without me having to tell her.

I jumped into the pilot's chair, input the codes, and heard the heavy marching footsteps of the Merchant's — or perhaps it was the Master's? (And did it really matter?) — guards' boots trudging toward us.

"They're coming!" Penny cried, growing fearful. "Shut the door! Shut the

door!”

“I’m trying...” I said between gritted teeth.

I hacked the system, typed in the correct code but had no time to double-check the command before hitting the activation button.

The door hissed closed, mere moments before the guards slammed into it.

I turned back to the control desk and hacked the launch system.

This was more complicated than simply shutting the outer hatch door.

Penny gave me (and I wished she did not) a running commentary as I hastened to complete my mission:

“They have a blowtorch! No, it’s not a blowtorch. It’s some kind of laser! They’re trying to cut through the door!”

I tried my best to block the sound of the laser slicing through the outer door and focused on what I was doing.

Finally, I managed it.

The launch sequence began and, as there was no way for me to speed it up, the countdown began from ten.

I grabbed my harness, slipped it over my shoulders, and snapped it into place.

The countdown reached zero and the escape pod launched.

The initial velocity forced me back into my seat as we ejected into outer space.

I was dismayed to find we were not heading in the right direction.

The Merchant’s ship had not yet passed through the Gateway but it had been opened.

I saw it ahead — light blinking off its surface.

The Merchant’s ship was already heading toward it.

I took hold of the controls, aborted the initial emergency launch system, and turned the craft toward the Gateway.

We were still building up speed, increasing in acceleration as the ion thrusters did their work.

The whole point of an escape pod was to launch from the ship as quickly as possible as it was the thing we were racing from in the first place.

An escape pod was not designed for long-distance travel but the Gateway Station on the other side of this one in the Krev Quadrant was not a great distance.

With any luck, the palace would pick up on our coordinates the moment we appeared.

They would send a reconnaissance mission to us immediately to investigate, even if they did not know who was on board.

But first, we have to get through that Gateway!

It loomed large, massive before us due to having to cater for the Merchant's much larger ship.

The shimmering surface became clearer and yet fuzzy at our approach.

The tunnel just beyond it throbbed and writhed like a giant worm.

"Come on... Come on..." I murmured under my breath as we inched closer and closer.

Penny screamed as the increasing velocity pressed hard on our bodies, burying us in the hard upholstery of our chairs.

I had *no idea* what kind of weaponry the Merchant's ship possessed but I was certain it would have enough to stop us — even if that meant blowing us to pieces.

If the Master had any say in the matter, he would not allow his eighth wife to be obliterated that way.

Still, I was keenly aware it wasn't beyond him to spite his enemies.

If he couldn't have her then *no one* would.

Now, less than a few hundred miles from the Gateway's shimmering surface, I thought we were going to make it.

I began to hope that I would finally fulfill my mission and get Penny somewhere safe.

We flew so close I could see nothing beyond the Gateway's edges.

The moment we entered it, we would be on autopilot, the tunnel's internal gravity would seize us and ease us through the tunnel at a steady speed.

Peering out to either side, over the flat surface of the Gateway, space reigned supreme.

If the escape pod had been upside down, it would have looked like we were floating just above a lake, with space stretching out into the far distance in all directions.

Then we began to slow.

I glanced down at the gauges.

They were all telling me the same thing.

We were no longer accelerating at the same rate.

We were slowing down.

I checked the fuel cell, tapping the gauge as it occasionally got stuck.

But it too was telling me the same story.

There was *plenty* of fuel.

That wasn't the problem.

The problem was that *something else was tugging on us*.

With dawning horror, I came to realize the obviousness of the truth:

“A tractor beam... A tractor beam is on us...”

Penny whimpered but I remained calm.

I had two options.

Either I did not touch the controls and hoped whatever inertia we had pushing us forward would be enough to overpower the tractor beam exerted upon us or seized the controls and attempted to avoid the tractor beam's pull.

We just needed to cover the remaining few hundred miles but if the tractor beam successfully locked onto us...

There could be no escape.

“Computer,” I said, “calculate our current speed and trajectory toward the Gateway versus the tractor beam's pull on us.”

“Calculating...” the Computer said. “At our current velocity and increasing strength of the tractor beam, we will not reach the Gateway before we begin to reverse.”

The moment I heard the word “not,” I seized the controls and turned us in an arc.

But no matter how hard I turned, how fast, the tractor beam was there, dragging on us, slowing down our race toward the Gateway.

Until, finally, we had not only slowed but *stopped*.

“No!” I bellowed, slamming my fist on the console. “No!”

Through the main monitor, I spied the shimmering surface of the Gateway...

So close I could virtually touch it.

And if I could have reached out, I would have.

“What's happening?” Penny cried.

The hardest thing I ever had to do was tell her:

“We're not going to enter it. I'm sorry. I have failed you.”

As I hung my head, Penny let out a weeping cry and tears streamed down her cheeks.

I got off the pilot chair, crossed to her, and wrapped her in my arms.

The escape pod had meant to be our salvation.

Now, it was our tomb.

BEFORE WE RETURNED to the Merchant's ship, I had considered ending both our lives.

It was an easy decision to end my own life — I had been trained to accept death in the face of failure that might otherwise cost the kingdom more than my life was worth.

But Penny...

Penny.

I could not bring myself to harm her, to end her life, even if it meant avoiding the treatment I was certain she would receive at the Master's — or the Merchant's — hand.

There was still a chance, a distant hope, that some miracle might happen.

What that might be, I had no idea.

Hope was not rational.

When the escape pod's damaged outer door was pried open, the Merchant's men reached inside and dragged us out.

They didn't need to be so aggressive as I already dropped to my knees and placed my hands on the back of my head for them to take me away.

Still, I had caused them great embarrassment, managing to snatch Penny out from under their noses and escape.

They were in no mood to show me any kind of mercy.

With Penny, they were much softer, and simply picked her up and carried her out.

The twin streaks of tears down her cheeks were still visible from her weeping.

They threw me to the floor and snapped magnetic restraints around my wrists and ankles.

As vicious as they were, contorting my limbs in directions they were not meant to go, I ignored the pain and had eyes only for Penny.

I hated the sight of her hanging head, only able to stand thanks to the guards holding her upright.

I hated even more the sight of the two large figures standing over her, each hideous and disgusting in their own way.

"Thank you for returning her to her rightful place," the Master said, reaching toward her.

The Merchant stepped forward and raised a hand and tucked his tongue-

like arms behind his back. “She is not yours. She belongs to *me*. I bought her, along with the male. They are my entertainment. And she is yet to give me my private performance.”

The Master scowled at him, brow drawing down like a lead weight. “You would deny me *my wife*?”

The Merchant sniffed. “As you yourself admitted earlier, she is not yet your wife. I will not give her up.”

The Master, far more physically powerful than the Merchant, strode toward him.

“Ah,” the Merchant added hastily, “at least, not for free.”

The grin that spread across the Master’s face was hideous.

His body relaxed realizing they had now entered into negotiations.

Penny was going to be his, no matter the price he had to pay.

“Very well,” the Master said. “What is it of mine that you desire in exchange for her?”

Although Penny did her best to maintain her stony calm, I could see the fresh set of tears peeling down her cheeks.

I saw my opportunity to take advantage of the situation.

“Whatever he offers,” I yelled, “the Prince will *double*!”

After all, if he was willing to sell to the Master, why not the Prince?

I could not guarantee he would escape with his life after payment was made but at the very least, it was worth a try.

The Merchant made no sign he had heard me, save for his grin that grin broadened. “Perhaps I ought to open this up to an auction. The highest bidder wins.”

The Master ground his teeth. “Name your price! You know these Krevs cannot be trusted!”

I snorted at hearing *that* from him of all creatures! “The Royal Family will stand by any agreement I make!”

Heavy black boots stepped in front of me as one of the Master’s heavily-armed guards stood over me.

He angled a look toward his boss, who nodded his head.

The guard slammed the butt of his plasma rifle in my face.

It was a hard blow but did not lay me out cold.

I spat out the tooth he had knocked free and held my tongue.

If I was unconscious, I could be of *no help* to Penny.

“Very well,” the Merchant said, perhaps growing wary of the larger

contingent of the Master's guards on board his ship at that very moment.

With a single order, the Master could take what he wanted and then destroy whatever remained.

"Here is my price," the Merchant said. "Your mining facility on Jiza Moon."

The Master pursed his lips. "I don't have a mining facility on Jiza Moon."

The Merchant gave him a flat look. "Perhaps not *officially*, but we both know you have a facility owned by one of your many subsidiaries. Now don't play coy. We each know the assets the other possesses."

The Master smiled approvingly. "Very well. The mining facility is yours."

The Merchant nodded to the guards holding Penny.

They stepped forward to hand her over to the Master when a message came over the speaker system:

"Ship approaching," the Computer said.

"A ship?" the Merchant said, taken unaware. "From the Gateway Station? Inform them we will soon pass through the Gateway and—"

"Negative," the Computer said. "The ship is coming from the Gateway."

I had never seen such clear expressions of shock as those decorating the Master and Merchant's faces at that moment.

I could understand why.

If a ship was coming through the Gateway, it could only be from one location:

The Krev Quadrant.

Hope soared in my chest and was confirmed a moment later when I heard a very familiar voice over the speaker system:

"Stand down," the Krev Prince said. "You have something that belongs to me. And unless you wish to declare war against the entire Krev kingdom, I suggest you stand down *immediately*."

The Master, sensing an unwanted end to the negotiations, growled and turned on his heel, marching toward the cargo hold's exit.

"Wait!" the Merchant said. "We have a deal! Penny belongs to you, not me!"

The Master did not slow in his retreat. "Nothing was signed, therefore there was no deal. Good luck dealing with the Krev. This has nothing to do with me."

With that, he was gone, along with his contingent of heavily-armed

guards.

Taking a moment to gather himself, the Merchant ordered for me to be released.

Although the guards were not ordered to release Penny, she slipped free and ran toward me, flying into my arms.

We embraced and now, there were tears in *both* our eyes — not out of fear but hope.

I NEVER SAW what happened when the Merchant greeted the Prince and his armed soldiers.

I never saw him again.

When the Prince entered the dock, finding Penny and me standing side-by-side, I immediately dropped to my knees before him.

The Prince waved his hands for me to rise and embraced me as a brother. He pulled back to look me over and ensure I was in good shape.

Despite my bleeding mouth, I was.

“I hope this whole ordeal hasn’t been too much for you,” he said.

“You know how it goes...” I said as his eyes shifted over my shoulder to Penny.

His chest swelled as he took a deep breath. “And you, my dear, must be my fated mate.”

Penny, unsure how to react, dropped to her knees the same way I had.

The Prince shook his head and bent down to help her up. “My future wife, you never need to bow to me. *Ever.*”

He took her hand in his and embraced her.

I couldn’t help but feel a thick twinge of jealousy and had to avert my gaze.

They were ordained to be together, I had to remind myself.

Still, that didn’t make it sting any less.

“Come,” the Prince said, wrapping his arm about her shoulders. “Let’s get you to your new home. No doubt you will want to rest tonight before the wedding tomorrow.”

Penny glanced up at me before nodding her head uncertainly.

“And in case my friend did not make it clear already, let me do so now,”

the Prince explained. “You do not have to marry me. You do not have to marry anyone. Yes, we are fated mates, and yes, we are destined to become one, but *only your heart* can tell you who you truly belong to. So, take this evening to think it over. Your future depends on the decision you make.”

Penny turned to me.

A secret existed between us.

Something that should *never* have happened, *had* happened.

It had been the only method to escape available to us, but still, a war raged between my head and my heart.

An eternal battle I wasn't sure I would ever see the end of.

I wished to tell the Prince everything but the words would not come.

In Penny's eyes, I could see the same battle taking place within her.

Finally, she extended her hand to me. “Thank you for completing your mission,” she said in a cold and sterile tone.

I nodded back and shook her hand.

The feel of her skin against mine sent shivers through my body.

“So formal!” the Prince said with a broad grin.

Then he turned and led Penny away, regaling her with stories of their wedding plans, how big it was going to be, how exciting, and how it would be remembered forever in the minds of every Krev everywhere.

I watched their departing backs and looked down at my hand.

Where she had touched me.

For the last time.

And I wondered how I was meant to live without ever experiencing her touch again.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I awoke to the news the wedding would go ahead as planned.

A part of me had hoped Penny would change her mind.

But such things only happened in fairytales and this was *not* a fairytale.

Returning home to my quarters had been like returning to the scene of a crime.

It seems wrong, *incomplete* somehow.

Without Penny there, it was deathly quiet in a way I had never

experienced before.

I missed her and realized I always would.

One day, perhaps, I would come to terms with the fact Fate had chosen a different path for me.

One of duty and honor, not love.

How I was supposed to live with seeing her each and every day was beyond me.

Even now, imagining her before me, I could picture the time we had spent together, our bodies entwined, warm and close, hot and heavy.

She would be a constant reminder of the sacrifice I had willingly made to carry out my duty.

More than once, I considered shifting roles, to taking up a post elsewhere.

At least somewhere else I would not have to be reminded so often of her.

And the loss of her.

Except, as our new future Queen (after the current king had sadly passed away, of course), I would see her image *everywhere*.

So long as I remained in the Krev kingdom, she would always be there.

But I was not yet ready to give up my home, my culture, and everything I had ever known.

Not just yet, at least.

Humans said time was the greatest healer and I wondered if that was true of all things or only the physical.

It was while I was adding the finishing touches to the suit the palace had given me to wear for the wedding that there was a knock at the door.

“Come,” I said out of habit.

Being the Captain of the Prince’s guard meant I often received visitors, but the one I received this morning was not someone I was expecting.

I glanced in the mirror as I fiddled with the intricate bow at my neck and had to double-take to ensure I was seeing who I thought I was.

I immediately spun around and dropped to one knee. “I apologize, Your Highness. I did not expect you.”

“That’s the benefit of being the king,” he said. “Nobody *ever* expects anything. Or perhaps more accurately, *always* expects too much. Unless you need to tie your shoelaces, rise.”

The king turned and nodded to his own Captain of the guard, who drew the door closed so the two of us were alone.

The king was wearing his most decorative ensemble — including a long

cloak that stretched behind him, deep red shimmering silk.

On his fingers, across his neck, and at his head, jewels from all four corners of the galaxy shimmered.

“I see you still have not mastered tying the pialla bow.” He reached up to tie it for me. “I can’t blame you. It’s not something I ever put much effort into either — until after I got married to my fated mate, of course. Then it became the most important act I had to master. There. What do you think?”

It didn’t matter what I thought.

The king could have tied my bow into a hangman’s noose and I would feel compelled to complement it.

Thankfully, it was tied in the traditional style and I nodded my thanks. “It’s perfect, thank you.”

“Let’s sit down,” the king said. “I have much to discuss with you and these jewels do wear you down after a while.”

He fell into the least comfortable chair, leaving me to feel awkward in the leather-bound one he had left for me.

The king removed his crown and half the rings on his fingers and deposited them on a side table.

He leaned back and sighed with relief. “That’s better. Why we have to have these ridiculous over-the-top customs, I will never understand.”

I didn’t point out to him that it was well within his power to change or remove the customs completely.

“So, how was the mission?” he asked.

“It was... difficult.”

“I’ll say! I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a fated mate being so hard to bring to the palace! Usually, it’s the easiest mission there is! Which is why I’m glad the Prince did not go and do it himself. If you struggled, his best guardsman, there is virtually zero percent chance he would have returned with his life intact.”

I agreed but didn’t say anything.

“You’ve been through quite an ordeal, so far as I can tell,” the king said.

“Yes, but it’s over now.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There was one part of your report in particular that caught my attention. When you were forced to return to the Decontamination Facility after discovering they had given you a clone.”

He shook his head. “I still cannot believe they attempted such a thing. Your senses must be extremely sharp to have picked up on that.”

I nodded, remembering it well. “It was a shock all right.”

“I can imagine. There’s one part in particular that caught my eye. In your report, you said that when you found Penny — and what a *lovely female* she is, by the way — you found her in a Decontamination chair. The procedure had been fully carried out and the tracker removed from her blood. This... is something I find quite puzzling.”

I had been truthful with every last detail of our adventure.

Everything... *but one*.

I had decided to change one aspect.

To protect Penny — as well as myself for my indiscretion — I had not revealed how we had truly managed to remove the tracker from her blood.

Instead, I had insisted her blood had been cleansed by the Decontamination Facility.

I figured it was only a small lie and one that no one would take much interest in.

Clearly, I was wrong.

“Oh?” I said innocently. “Why is that?”

“I can’t imagine the Master wanting to have the tracker removed from Penny’s blood. I’m sure he has similar devices installed in *all* of his wives. As a fiery creature such as Penny, it’s only a matter of time before she slips through his fingers and escapes. Best to have the tracker in her blood so she can always be tracked, don’t you think?”

He was right, of course.

But I could not betray Penny now.

I shrug my shoulders. “Maybe he has some other tracking device he planned to keep on her. Or maybe there was a mistake at the facility and they were never meant to remove it from her blood.”

“Yes,” the king said, nodding uncertainly. “I suppose that does explain it. The whole thing just... tickled me, that’s all.”

I moved to stand up, considering the conversation over but the king did not move.

I leaned back into my chair and waited as clearly there was something else on his mind.

“Tell me,” he said, “have you ever heard the story of how I met my fated mate the first time?”

I nodded. “Of course. Everyone knows that story. You went out to retrieve her yourself, got into a few difficulties, but managed to bring her

back safe and sound.”

The king nodded. “And the story is true. The only... small detail that was left out is the fact it turned out I was not her fated mate after all.”

It took a moment for his words to filter into my consciousness.

I just stared at him, eyes blinking rapidly.

I replayed what he had just told me over and over again in my mind.

I must have misheard him, I thought.

He just sat there, hands clasped together pensively in his lap, the very image of innocence.

“She’s not your fated mate?” I said.

He shook his head. “Yes, she is. But it turned out there was another. And when I tell you this, I wish for it to remain just between the two of us, you understand.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

The king leaned forward, sitting perched on the edge of his chair. “There are some... echoes between your story and mine. You see, I *did* go to find my fated mate... but not alone. I went with my Captain. When we found my fated mate, it quickly became obvious she was not attracted to me at all but attracted to my Captain. Initially, I found this confusing. He was not a particularly handsome fellow, nor was he particularly smart. He was good with weapons and fighting, just as you are, but he had no great wealth, no great power. And more than that, he was prophesied to be her fated mate.

“Then one day, it became clear to me. I was reading some old books in the Ancient section when I discovered the truth. The fated mate of the Prince is not chosen, but the person *she chooses* is the one foretold by Fate to become the Prince. To become king. Do you see? All this time, we’ve had it backwards. The fated female’s chosen mate is the next king.”

He paused, letting the meaning wash over me.

Again, I just stared at him, replaying his words over and over again in my mind. “But then that means...?”

The king nodded. “When the female fated mate chose her partner, it turned out not to be the Prince at all, but the Captain of his guard!”

His eyes glinted playfully, the way I had seen a thousand times before.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

How kind he was to me, how much he seemed to know about my position at the palace.

Because he had been the Captain of the Prince’s guard in the past.

Because he had been *me* in a previous life.

He had not been the Prince but the Captain.

I glanced toward the door, to where the king's Captain — the *true* king — was now standing.

The king was now protecting his Captain of the guard!

Their positions had reversed.

I was glad I was sitting, otherwise I would have fallen down. “But... But why would he give up the throne?”

“The very same question I have asked him many times,” the king said. “The answer is this: because he knows he would not be a good ruler. Because he knows I would make a better king than he could ever hope to be. And for all of his flaws — of which we all have many — one of them is certainly not his ego. He stepped aside so I could take his place and marry my fated mate and rule the kingdom.”

“But G’kora hasn’t broken its line of succession in thousands of years...”

The king shook his head. “We do not know how many rulers have been true G’kora. Perhaps some, perhaps none. I imagine we will never know.”

“But the people... The workers at the palace... They would all know the truth.”

“The people know what we tell them. Some might have suspicions but they were labeled crackpots and crazies. Not by me, by the way. I would never denigrate those who can see beyond what their eyes tell them. But what difference does it make what the truth is? It’s only what people *believe* that truly matters.”

He sighed as he reached over for his rings and crown, sliding them back onto his fingers and head. “Well, I suppose we have to get this show on the road. The wedding is not going to wait — even if I am the king.”

He got up before helping me up onto my feet as I was incapable of doing so on my own.

“I realize this might have come as a shock,” he said. “But I felt it was necessary for you to know. After all, we are cut from the same cloth, are we not? Our sense of duty and self-sacrifice define us. But sometimes our duty lies elsewhere to what we thought it did. I leave it up to you as to what you will do next. Whatever fate has stitched into the pattern of life, it will ultimately be up to you to decide whether or not to follow it... or pick it apart.”

He opened the door, where his Captain — *the real king!* — waited.

He glanced up at me, a grin plastered across his face and a twinkling glint in his eye.

By giving up the throne, he had chosen his own fate and accepted a happier existence for them both.

He shut the door, leaving me in absolute and total shock.

IT TOOK me ten minutes before I was able to emerge from my room after the bombshell the king had exploded at my feet.

The king is not really the king...

That is, he *was* the king but he was *never* the Prince.

Except, he *was* the Prince *after* finding his fated mate, before they got married...

I shook my head, still dizzy from the revelation.

Did it really change anything?

No, nothing at all.

The king was still the greatest king of the past few generations and the Prince was still his son.

The Prince...

I wondered if he knew the truth.

I assumed not, but there was every chance he might.

I stumbled down the hallways toward the Grand Hall where the wedding was to be held.

It was tastefully decorated with rows of flowers along each wall and wooden benches.

It did not resemble a traditional Krev wedding and I supposed must have more of a human design aesthetic to it.

No doubt done in an effort to make Penny feel like at least *part* of the celebration was in her honor.

The assembled guests were abuzz with excitement.

As I moved between the two rows of benches, I found an empty space near the front and fell into it.

The king had told me the truth and said he would leave it up to me to decide what I would do with it.

I could think of one thing:

Tell the Prince everything.

To admit to him I loved Penny, that we had mated, breaking the sacred bond between fated mates...

But did this even mean they were true fated mates?

Didn't the fact Penny and I had joined in holy union make us *the true fated mates*?

Wasn't that what had happened with the king and his future queen?

He had given up his honor and duty... for love?

I leaned forward and ran my fingers through my hair.

I felt with Penny, emotions I had never felt with any other.

I could not picture my future without her.

I felt as if she were *a part of me*.

The same way I could not willingly remove an arm or a leg.

Now, as I thought of it, imagining Penny with the Prince... I realized just how incompatible they really were.

Penny was fiery and hot, the Prince laid back and cool.

Where she would be honorable and stick to their vows, never finding comfort in another male's arms, I could not say the same about the Prince.

But that wasn't all there was to being fated mates, was there?

It was *deeper* than that.

The bond that existed between them.

It was entirely possible they didn't suit each other but yet they could still be fated mates...

Couldn't they?

I didn't know.

I had *no idea*.

All I knew about the subject was what I had been educated as a young student.

That it was a *perfect union*.

"Sir?" a voice said at my shoulder, making me jump near out of my scales.

It was a young messenger boy, dressed in his own sharp pageboy suit.

"What is it?" I growled.

"It's the Prince, sir," he said. "He wishes to speak with you."

The Prince?

I got up and followed him as he led me to the dais at the front of the room and then hung a right.

He stood at a door and motioned for me to enter.
I did so, easing the door open slowly.
It creaked on rusty hinges in much need of oil.
Inside was a small anteroom with the Prince marching back and forth.
Glancing up and seeing me, a weight visibly dropped from his shoulders.
“Trie! There you are!”

I wondered if the king had conveyed the truth of his situation to him too, and if his mind was frazzled with his own ultimatum.

I shut the door behind myself.

He approached me, his entire body shuddering. “I *can’t* get married!” he said outright. “I *can’t* marry this woman! I don’t even know her!”

I took him to one side and pushed him down so he sat on the sofa.

He immediately attempted to get to his feet but I pulled him back down.
“Calm down. Why can’t you marry her?”

My heart was in my throat.

“Because of who I am!” he said, running his fingers through his hair and catching his crown. “I’m not ready to get married! I know Fate seems to think I am but I’m just not! I *know* I won’t be faithful to her. It’s not because she’s not beautiful or smart or sophisticated... I’m sure she’s *all* those things. It’s just... I know in the pit of my gut one woman is never going to be enough for me. In forcing myself to marry her, I’m going to make myself miserable! And then I’ll do the same to her! What kind of ruler am I going to be if I can’t even make *my wife* happy?”

His breaths came fast, his heart pounding, a thick layer of sweat breaking across his forehead.

I realized from the fragments he had shared with me that the king had not yet shared the truth of his origins with his son.

I supposed he was hoping I would do it for him.

A knock came at the door, causing the Prince to whimper.

The pageboy peeked his head around the doorframe. “Sir, the bride is on her way. You need to be waiting for her when she arrives.”

I nodded and waved the pageboy away.

He shut the door as I turned back to the Prince.

His breaths were panicked once more, coming in rushed hurried gasps.
“The wedding! It’s starting! What am I supposed to do? Trie! What am I supposed *to do*?”

“Take deep breaths,” I told him. “Forget the wedding. Forget what

everybody thinks. Just think about what you want. What do you *need*?”

The Prince’s breaths were shuddering at first before becoming smoother and more controlled. “I need... I need... women! *Lots and lots* of them!”

It was my turn now to take a deep breath and steady myself. “Maybe it would be easier for you to make a decision if you had all the information...”

“What information?”

The Prince wasn’t only a member of the Royal Family.

In truth, he was my best friend.

And I had betrayed him.

But by not telling the truth, I was betraying my own heart.

There was no one I respected more than the king, and for him to have made the difficult decision in my place gave me courage.

I had made my decision.

And perhaps by making my decision, I could help the Prince make his own...

I wet my lips, “The truth is... when Penny and I went to the Decontamination Facility, it didn’t go quite as smoothly as I wrote in my report...”

“What are you saying?” he said. “Why are you telling me about this now?”

“The Decontamination Facility did not remove the tracker from Penny’s blood. Because of that, we only had one other option left open to us... And we decided to sleep—”

A scream erupted outside.

Yells followed swiftly on its heels, then the unmistakable burst of plasma fire.

I bolted to my feet, the Prince doing likewise.

“Everybody stay in your seat!” deep growling voices said from behind the door. “Everybody stay in your seat!”

“What’s going on?” the Prince said. “They’re starting the wedding without me?”

“I don’t think this is part of the wedding ceremony,” I said. “Stay here. Don’t show yourself. Hide behind the sofa. Don’t come out until I say it is safe.”

The Prince — never the type to rush into conflict — did as I said.

I approached the door but before I even reached it, it flew open and gnarled hands snapped out and dragged me into the wedding ceremony.

THEY THREW me to the floor, dumping me before a broad pair of shiny black shoes I had thought I had seen for the last time.

I glared up at the wear of the shoes:

The Master.

He threw back his head and barked a laugh that rose higher and higher in tone.

It became clear to me then that, in his pursuit of Penny at any cost, he had driven himself insane.

Perhaps he had always only ever existed on the edge, the threat of tipping and falling over the side into true madness but a tiny thread's thickness away.

Now it was clear for all to see.

The guests were being held at rifle-point, loved ones clutching each other close, staring at the Master as if he were the spawn of Shaitar himself.

And in many ways, they were right.

"*This time*, there will be no escape for you, or Penny," the Master said, a triumphant grin on his face. "And where is the Prince? It is his marriage day, after all."

When no one responded, he shrugged his shoulders and turned to the head guard and issued an order:

"Have the palace searched and bring the Prince to me. I do not wish for him to miss his own wedding."

The head guard barked orders and a dozen guards broke away from the main group and left the Grand Hall.

Two guards pointed their weapons at the king, who stood before his queen — his fated mate — blocking them in case they opened fire.

It was only symbolic as nothing — even the heavily-muscled king — could stop plasma.

It would pass through him as easily as a hot blade through burlak, straight into his beloved.

"What is the meaning of this?" the king bellowed, displaying a rare depiction of fury.

"Isn't it obvious?" the Master said, hopping over to him with a surprising level of agility and giggling at the top of his voice. "I'm taking over this ceremony! And claiming the female fated mate for myself! She will become my wife and stop your line of succession dead in its tracks!"

“You won’t get away with this!” the king spat. “What were you thinking, attacking the palace of the Krev? All you’re doing is triggering a war. There will be no end to it.”

The Master leaned in closer to the king and whispered in his ear — although still loud enough for everyone present to hear — “And who’s going to give the order after your *entire family* is riddled with plasma?”

As he straightened up, the king lashed out, but the Master was ready for his reaction and hopped back.

“I suspect your military is on its way right now, mobilizing as we speak. But of course, by the time they arrive, the ceremony will be over, the marriage complete. And they are not likely to open fire on the king’s palace — not while the king is still inside.”

He giggled as he skipped over to the front of the Grand Hall before the High Septon, who looked bedraggled and afraid.

“Begin the ceremony!” the Master commanded.

After a momentary pause, the music started.

It was music I recognized from the Master’s arranged wedding ceremony when I had boarded his ship to retrieve Penny.

“Let me go!” Penny screamed, fighting with the guards that dragged her into the Grand Hall.

I rose to my feet at the sight of the guards manhandling her, triggering my protective response.

A guard slammed the butt of his plasma rifle into my gut, sending me doubling over and gasping for air.

“There will be no more theatrics,” the Master announced. “Everything has turned out the way it should!”

The guard wrapped his rifle under my chin and yanked it back.

I choked, and try as I might to escape, I was pinned in place.

Penny screamed my name, “Trie!” and sprinted down the aisle toward me.

But she never reached me.

A guard caught her and, although flailing like a wild poptal, couldn’t get free either.

“I do believe you were supposed to *walk* down the aisle,” the Master said, raising his chin. “But as you’re so excited to marry me, I will let it pass.”

Then he raised his eyes to the back of the Grand Hall and nodded his head.

His seven wives walked down the aisle, sharing fearful glances at the assembled.

Cleyena tossed flower petals from a small basket, giving the event more of a funeral feel than one for celebration.

The ceremony had become surreal.

Judging by the wary expressions of the wives, they did not want to be there any more than the other guests.

This was *not* what they had expected at a wedding — at *any* of the Master's weddings — which only went to validate my earlier supposition that the Master had truly lost his mind.

Penny just watched them, eyes wide and fearful and bursting with tears.

Even now, she looked gorgeous in her flowing white dress, her hair pinned on top of her head, a shimmering tiara holding it together.

Cleyena bowed her head in sorrow to her, clearly sorry for what was happening.

No doubt this threw up terrible memories for each of the other wives as they'd had to go through similar experiences during their own weddings.

They lined up on either side of the bride and groom.

Then the Master turned to the High Septon. "Begin."

The Septon cast an eye over the king's guests but there was nothing they could do. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of the Creator, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Lias'k and this Woman in holy matrimony..."

Somewhere a child broke into tears.

None of the guests dared murmur a word of disapproval.

"Do you..." the High Septon said before pausing and glancing at the groom.

"You may call me Master," he said.

"Do you... Master take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?"

"I do."

Penny struggled, screaming, and more than half of the congregation turned away in disgust.

The High Septon asked Penny the same question.

She shook her head and muffled around the guard's hand that clutched her lips shut tight, and tears streamed down her face.

"She said 'I do,'" the Master told the High Septon helpfully.

The blood in the priest's face drained. "Unless there is anyone here who

thinks these two should not wed, may he speak now or forever hold his peace.”

I struggled as hard as I could, my feet scuffling the floor, growling and angry.

The two guards holding me struggled to keep me under control, so a third joined them.

I still could not break free, could not come to Penny’s rescue.

The Master grinned at me as he reached over and tore Penny’s veil off and tossed it to the floor.

He extended his tongue — a slithering, slimy mass, toward her.

“Finally,” he said. “I get to *taste*.”

“By the power invested in me by the Creator, I now pronounce you husband and—”

“I object!”

Taken by surprise, the Master turned to glare at the guests.

Whispers broke out amongst the congregation and they peered at one another to identify the brave speaker.

But the one who had spoken up was not among them.

A figure had just stepped into the Grand Hall.

The Prince.

Any hope I might have had of him raising a plasma rifle and unleashing holy hell upon these creatures was short-lived as he was unarmed and a pair of guards easily grabbed and restrained him.

“Ah, the Prince...” the Master said, leaving his bride’s side. “I’m *so glad* you could make it. It is a momentous occasion and one you would regret if you had missed—”

“You’re a monster!” the Prince spat.

The Master tucked his hands behind himself and patiently waited for the Prince’s tirade to come to an end.

“You dare defile the holiest union in the galaxy?” the Prince bellowed. “Between fated mates?”

“As you can see,” the Master said, motioning toward his seven other wives. “It is something I have become quite adept at. And if your beloved Fate was bothered by it, don’t you think she would have done something to stop me?”

The Prince’s glare became harder. “You’ll get your comeuppance. People like you always do in the end.”

The Master turned to the congregation. “Well? Where is it, then? I am *one kiss away* from taking your fated mate for my own. What are you going to do to stop me?”

“Nothing,” the Prince admitted. “But then, I am not her fated mate.”

An eruption of gasps and whispers spread throughout the assembled.

The Prince’s eyes flicked up to me — for just an instant — and away again.

He knew...

Somehow he had figured it out...

It must have been my earlier explanation, short as it was, that had given him enough pieces of the puzzle for him to put together.

But that hardly helped us now.

Without an army at his back, there was nothing he could do to stop the ceremony from taking place.

“One day, someone is going to stop you and put you in your place,” the Prince said. “Someone is going to step up and perform the action *we all wish* we could take. You *should never* have been allowed to take one wife, never mind seven, or eight. You thought you were amassing power, but really, you are amassing negative karma that Fate will use against you. Of that, I’m sure.”

The Master’s scowl was a ferocious thing, drilling into the Prince.

I realized his words *really did have* an effect.

“Put him with the others,” the Master snapped. “Give him a good seat. I wish him to see how a *real male* claims his fated mate.”

He sauntered back to the front of the Grand Hall. “Now,” he said, slathering his lips with saliva, “where were we?”

There was movement to my left, and a guard grunted, dropping his weapon.

Using the Prince’s earlier distraction, Cleyena had crept over to a guard and snatched up his plasma rifle, aiming it at the Master.

Everyone was agog, watching in disbelief at this sudden act of defiance.

None more so than the other wives, who shook their heads forlornly and muttered in desperate tones:

“Cleyena! No...”

The Master, at first taken aback, then allowed a grin to spread across his face. “What do you think you’re doing, my love?”

“What I should have done many years — and *many marriages* — ago.”

She pumped the plasma rifle. “The Prince is right. But he’s wrong about one thing: it’s not Fate that decides our future. *It is us*. She may weave a pattern she expects us to follow but ultimately *it is us* that must take the first step, must make the leap of faith.

“Years ago, I chose the *easy* way and did not fight for my fated mate. None of us did.” She turned to her fellow wives-in-law. “We handed him our happiness because we were too cowardly to act. But this Prince, this Triec, *they* have done what *we refused to do*. They stood and they fought! They lost... but not through inaction.

“We are in this situation *because of our actions*. We put ourselves here. We imprison ourselves every day. We allow *him* to treat us this way, to lash us with his disgusting tongue. We put up with it because we think this is somehow part of Fate’s plan. But it’s not. Our fate is in our hands *each and every moment* and what we allow to happen to us.”

She returned her focus to the Master. “Well, I choose *a new path*. Perhaps I have lost my fated mate but I need not lose my future!”

“Stop all the silliness—” the Master growled, taking a step toward her.

A bolt of plasma spat from the tip of the rifle barrel and sliced through the Master’s arm.

A splurge of green blood streamed across the High Septon and his holy book.

The Master clamped his hand over his wounded arm and stared, bewildered, at Cleyena. “You *dare* shoot me? You *dare* harm me?”

“Yes,” she said, raising her chin. “I do.”

She opened fire, the bolts of plasma slicing through his other arm and both his legs.

The Master’s guards raised their rifles at her.

“Stand down!” the head guard snapped to his officers. “Do not fire! I repeat! Do not fire! *We do not harm* the Master’s wives.”

Hesitating for only a moment, they lowered their weapons.

They were under strict orders to *never* harm nor so much as touch or even *look at* the Master’s wives.

For years, they had obeyed that order and now, with it so ingrained within them, they did so now too.

“What are you doing?” the Master snapped. “Shoot h—”

He didn’t finish his order as another of his wives kicked him hard across the face, and now that he was lying on the floor, it was now *very easy* to do.

The other wives moved to the guards arranged around the Grand Hall.

Without needing to resort to violence, they simply took their weapons from them and ordered the guards to get on the ground, face first, with their hands behind their backs.

The guard pinning me in place released me and followed suit.

Now that we were both released, Penny and I ran into each other's arms, squeezing each other tight.

I breathed her in, savored her, kissed her.

The palace guards flooded the Grand Hall and took command of the situation, escorting the Master's guards out.

The guests burst into fits of conversation.

The older members collapsed in their chairs, fanning themselves.

The Master scowled at me, the realization of what was happening slowly coming over him.

The madness that had swept over him was dissipating.

Bewildered, he had a winning hand just a moment ago and now possessed *nothing at all*.

The Prince approached and I lowered Penny back down.

He glanced from me to Penny and back again. "I wondered where your sense of duty's limits were. I was beginning to grow afraid it was limitless."

"I'm sorry," I said earnestly. "I have shamed myself. Will you forgive me?"

The Prince's studied scowl broke into a broad grin and he let out a laugh of triumph. "Forgive you?" He wrapped his arms around me. "There's nothing to forgive when it comes to matters of the heart! I of all people know that!"

He turned to Penny and took her hand in his. "If, at any point, Triec fails to satisfy you, please remember my bed is always open."

He kissed her fingers and Penny shook her head. "That will *never* be necessary."

The Prince threw back his head and barked a roar of laughter. "A girl after my own heart!"

"But you know what this means, don't you?" I said to the Prince in all seriousness. "If Penny selects me as her fated mate?"

The Prince nodded.

He removed his crown and handed it to me. "The female chooses her fated mate... and the heir to the throne."

I realize then that perhaps *he had known* the truth of his father's heritage — or, at least, an inkling of it.

"We both know my duty lies elsewhere," he said. "And you should know, I *will always* be on your side to support and defend you, whatever your future decisions are as king."

He beamed broadly and sauntered over to the Master's seven wives, and began flirting with each and every one of them in turn.

I saw them falling for his charms as every female he had ever set his sights on had done.

"Well done," a deep voice behind me said.

I turned to find the king, and he embraced me as a son. "I wasn't sure there for a moment how things would turn out but I am pleased with the outcome... even if it was a little more... dramatic than my own wedding day. Now, how about we get on with this wedding?"

He clapped his hands and began issuing orders for everything to be reset.

For a moment, I was confused. "What do you mean? The Prince knows he isn't Penny's fated mate—"

"We have a wedding, we have guests, we've certainly already had the entertainment! Now, we just need the *real* exchange of vows!"

The guests roared with approval, clapping their hands.

I looked over at Penny, who looked back at me.

"Penny, are you ready for this?" I asked her.

She clutched my arm in hers, squeezing tight and kissing me on the cheek. "I've been ready for this since the very first moment I met you."

My chest swelled with pride as I led her to the front of the Grand Hall.

Palace guards bent down to pick the Master up but I shook my head. "No," I told them. "Let him watch. He *loves* a good wedding."

The Master scowled at me but was too weak to protest any other way.

The High Septon peeled the dried blood from his holy book and beckoned us forward.

This time when he gave the sermon, it was with newfound energy — energy that had sorely been missing from his earlier performance. "Dearly beloved, we are all gathered together here today..."

I glanced at Penny out of the corner of my eye, just as she was glancing at me out of the corner of hers.

I reached over and took her hand.

She squeezed mine back.

“I promise, that for as long as I live, I will make it my life’s mission to *always* make you happy,” I said.

Her smile was crooked, disturbed by tears that had leapt into her eyes. “I know you will,” she said. “I know you will.”

The Master was forced to watch the ceremony from his prostrate position on the floor, his blood still puddling around him.

Each of the Master’s former wives burst into tears.

Cleyena cried out loud:

“I love a happy ending!”

And it was a very, very happy ending.

And Triec and Penny weren’t the only ones...

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OWNED BY THE ALIEN SNEAK PEEK

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ALICE

A FUNNY THING happens when you smash through a barrier and descend into a ravine two hundred feet below.

Gravity ceases to exist. You float up out of your seat, held in place only by a flimsy seatbelt. Time slows and you have eons to think, knowing your end is approaching, and you can't do a damn thing to prevent it.

Death waits patiently below, skeletal arms outstretched, ready to catch you the moment the minivan's whining engine explodes and what had been your innards suddenly become your outards.

Even sound slows. In the passenger seats, your friends' screams could be the mating call of distant whales.

What they told you about your life flashing before your eyes? It's true. The only part they got wrong was it's not the past that catches up to you but the life you *could* have had.

Believe me, that's a good thing. My life had been flaccid and dull up til now. Getting chased over the edge of a cliff by a UFO is easily the most interesting thing to have ever happened to me.

I see all the things I could have done, all the things that might have happened.

That hot guy I spoke to at that bar that time who gave me the cold shoulder? He could leave me a message on my cellphone that I'll read the moment I get home.

Oh, and that job I applied for last month? They could want me to start next Monday at a salary ten times what I currently earn writing.

And that upper-class private school I dreamed of sending my as-yet-unborn children to if only I had the money? Now, I can afford it.

A million avenues of possibility I could have taken, none of which can ever happen. Because in less than thirty seconds of real time, I'm going to be dead.

I find myself wondering if my girlfriends in the other seats are thinking the same thing.

Hazel in the front passenger seat beside me, whose wedding tomorrow we've been celebrating all weekend, will no doubt be thinking about her fiancé and the future she'll now miss out on.

Sirena and Bianca, immediately behind us. They'll be thinking about boys and—

Oh dear. The huge black rocks in the front windshield have grown so large they're all I can see. I send my best wishes to all four girls in the back, held my breath, and stupidly raised my arms over my head—as if that's going to help cushion the blow.

Out of nowhere, a bright light filled every inch of the minivan and I jerked forward in my seat, hanging suspended, my arms and legs and hair hanging down as if God pushed the Pause button.

We're no more than a few yards from the rocks and certain death. I wonder if this was what happened the instant you died. Heaven—*God, I sure hope it's heaven!*—sends a spotlight to vacuum up your soul. I've seen the movie, *Ghost*. Why couldn't that happen?

Any second now, we'll sail up into that light, zooming up faster and faster until we're standing on fluffy cloud shores and basking in warm sunlight. I hope they serve alcohol up there.

Then the moment stretched a little too long, and I turned my head to peer at Hazel...

Except, I can't. My head is frozen, trapped in place. I peered out the corner of my eyes at her, floating like a fat gob of oil in a lava lamp. Her fingers gripped the dashboard so tight they'd embedded themselves in the plastic.

Good luck getting the deposit back, I thought idly before recalling our situation.

A stray tube of lipstick hit me in the face. I tried to speak but my lips won't move either. I can only grunt at the back of my throat:

"Id... ederybody... okay?"

"No..." Hazel and the girls in the back said.

"Why... are... ve... flotting... here?" Hazel said.

“I... don’t... know,” I said. “Why... can’t... we... talk... properly?”

The doors creaked, groaning loudly, then snapped open, the bolts pinging outside. We squealed in terror and struggled against our invisible bonds, but it was no use. We couldn’t move a muscle.

Hazel’s head bumped on the ceiling and she turned toward me. Her eyes were wide with fear. Even in her frozen state, I could tell she was terrified. I wanted to reach for her, wanted to grab her by the hand and keep her safe. But it was okay, I thought. The seatbelts would hold us firmly in place.

Click.

Our seatbelts unfastened and the metal lock slipped free.

Oh, shit.

Hazel screamed dully in the back of her throat as something grabbed her and pulled her out the door and up into the light, disappearing in an instant. Sirena went next, then Victoria, as they were closest to the doors on that side.

Sensing it would be our turn next, I focused all my effort into looping my arm around my seatbelt. It was already halfway there. I just needed to tense my finger a fraction, and I would hold on.

If I could hold on long enough, maybe these people, these things, whatever had grabbed us, would let us go...

It made no logical sense but when you were desperate you grasped at whatever straws you could find.

I felt the same tug that’d taken Hazel, pulling me back. The seatbelt tightened around my arm, locking it tight.

Yes!

The force pulled on me, like gravity on overdrive, and my legs floated out behind me, but I still wouldn’t let go. Bianca squealed as she was tugged out of the minivan, with Maddy on her heels.

It was just me now, floating there like an ice cube in a forgotten drink. The pressure grew stronger as the force pulled harder, working to get me free. It felt like a giant had wrapped its hand around me and was growing irritated that I wouldn’t let go.

I had to hold on. The guys were counting on me!

Of course, they weren’t really. I had no idea where they went or what they were doing. But the mission became the goal. Achieving it became the only thing that mattered.

The force shifted, banging me against the ceiling and then forcing me down. My head thudded against the steering wheel. And still, I kept my

finger cocked, holding the seatbelt in place.

But it was slipping. One inch, and then another...

The force swung me left to right and then twisted me around.

And that's when I lost my grip.

No!

The instant I left the safe confines of the minivan, it immediately dropped and exploded, and the yellow flames chased me up, licking my boots, almost as fast as I was traveling, a million miles an hour, into the sky.

The light grew brighter and more intense until it burned my vision and I couldn't see anything but white.

Hard. Callous. Cruel.

That's how the crew describe their captain.

After their attempted mutiny, he comes to me for aid.

Help him recover from their poison and he'll return me to Earth.

There's just one catch.

Healing requires the use of my body for one whole night.

If I give him what he needs, will he keep his word?

And will sleeping with him make me his fated mate for all time?

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ABOUT TAMMY

**In space, no one can hear you scream...
And where's the fun in that?**

I've been reading romance and science fiction my whole life. I always wondered why those genres hadn't been a mash-up years ago and now I'm super excited I get to combine them into a single steamy encounter!

Come with me as we journey through space and time... and the most gorgeous set of hunks this side of the galaxy!

I wrote the #1 bestselling FATED MATES OF THE TITAN EMPIRE and FATED MATES OF BREEDER PRISON series. I write science fiction romances set on far-flung planets and ships traveling at the speed of light.

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ALIEN PRINCE'S MATCH

by Tammy Walsh

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