



ALIEN PRINCE'S

SEED

TAMMY WALSH

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PART I

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THE FROZEN FEMALE

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ELLA

“YOU’LL ENJOY IT!” they had told me.

“Go to a Seeding Facility and all your problems are solved!” the helpful advertisements informed me.

“When you get to the Claiming Room, a virile alien male will snatch you within minutes, drag you to one of the suites in the back, and make mad vicious love to you, pumping you full of his Seed in a way you’ve *never* experienced before!” my best friend said amidst wild squeals of joy.

But what no one told me about was the slutty *négligée* I was forced to wear, that I would be in a room full of *other* females vying for the males’ attention, how we were treated like meat to be tossed to any male that showed even a modicum of interest in us, with us having *zero say* in the matter.

As *I* was the one being impregnated, wasn’t it only fair *I* get to choose my partner?

Even if I was desperate to have my own kid, I *didn’t* want an octopus-like creature for a baby!

And as the male would depart soon after planting his Seed in me, leaving me to take care of and raise the ensuing child that would result from our encounter, shouldn’t *I* be the one who got to choose my mate?

I stood in the Claiming Room on the little notch attached to a long painted line with tons of other females lined up.

It was faded from where the countless females had stood to attention over the years.

Right here *on this very spot*.

Females!

I even hated the term!

There was no hint of individuality about me or any of the others that had come from all four corners of the galaxy.

We were holes to be filled and nothing more to these creatures.

Scrrreeeeeeee!

Roooooaaarrrrrrrrr!

Haaaaaaak!

The males screamed as they rushed down the hallway, coming to the beaten-up reinforced door on the other side of the room.

They banged on it with their fists, scratched at it with their claws, driven wild at our scent.

I glanced over at the other females and met a variety of reactions:

Apprehension.

Excitement.

But mostly... *fear*.

I knew that was *exactly* what I was feeling at that very moment.

I was a librarian back on Earth, and after dating many men who never managed to fulfill the one task I asked of them—Seeding me with good old-fashioned human sperm—I resorted to coming to this place.

Seven days at an alien male's whim wasn't exactly my idea of a fun time—no matter how much friends had insisted it was the case.

I'd asked the organizers if there was an alien male who would donate his Seed so I could have it *artificially* inserted and was politely rebuffed.

These alien males did not *donate*.

They only *injected*.

I gnawed at my bottom lip and wondered what I had let myself in for.

I had believed the hype and advertisements and recommendations from friends and well-wishers who'd attended such places and allowed myself to hope.

If it worked for them... why not for me?

Not for the first time since arriving here, I asked myself if having a child was really worth all this.

I raised my eyes to the squeals and grunts and groans of excitement on the other side of the dented door.

It will all be over soon, I told myself.

Then I could go back to Earth, return to my lovely library, and let this week pass into the mists of time and forget all about it.

A lifetime of joy in raising a child was surely worth seven meager days of

my time?

The door squealed as it began to creep open.

Huge arms reached through the gap, reaching out for us, some big and hairy, others smaller, slimmer, and covered with some kind of slimy skin.

Some had scales, others were almost translucent.

Some had hands, others claws, others strange crab-like appendages.

But they were all reaching for the same thing:

Us.

The females.

My mouth felt dry and I swallowed.

I rubbed my legs together, already feeling nervous that the past year of living like a nun might have been a terrible mistake.

These beasts didn't look like the type to take it gentle on a girl the first time.

I should have found a fuck buddy, even if it was just to keep myself warm and ready for what was about to happen.

Yellow-slitted eyes blinked through the gap as it slowly wound further open.

It was like a scene from a nightmare.

And the worst part of it was I had been the one to put myself in it!

I had been the one to come here.

I had been the one to sign up for this.

Seriously, what had I been thinking?

The door screeched to a stop, buying me another moment of temporary respite.

Some of the males attempted to squeeze through the gap but it simply wasn't large enough.

One male would make the attempt, then another would shove him aside, just as a third creature turned sideways to squeeze his horns through... but could barely even get *one* of them through.

Horns!

Hooves!

Tails!

I'm in a dark fantasy porno movie!

And I'm the main event!

Then a commotion broke out among the Assistants.

Up until now, they'd been standing dutifully in the room's corners,

clutching their tablets close.

Now, they looked concerned.

The Chief Assistant hurried over to the door, checked it, and raised the communicator strapped to her forearm before whispering something into it.

Then the room's lights cut out and were quickly replaced with flashing red beams and a screaming alarm.

The thick door feeding onto the alien male corridor began to reverse, closing shut.

Sensing something amiss, the Assistants sprung into action, eyes wide and alert, racing towards us.

They shouted at the top of their voices:

“Please return to the Changing Room! Please go now! Please return to the Changing Room!”

Some of the females barked refusals and cursed in their alien tongues, asking what was going on.

The same questions were vying for attention in my mind too, but as I watched that door slowly close, the arms retracting back before they got trapped and crushed, I couldn't deny a small strain of relief.

I would later regret that feeling, I knew, as I had come there for a very specific reason and those plans had now been interrupted.

But right then, it felt good to get a little alone time to consider this whole situation over from scratch.

I allowed the Assistants to usher me out of the room, back into the Changing Room.

I reached for my locker where my clothes were stored, desperate to change back into my original comforting wear but the Assistants were insistent that we keep on moving.

“Please continue forward!” they yelled. “Please return to the dock!”

The dock?

Now my interest really was piqued!

If we were heading back to the dock—to the place we had only just arrived at—did that mean the whole Seeding thing was off?

I had never heard of a Seeding Facility failing to meet its contractual responsibilities and ensure we females were fully Seeded but I supposed they could argue they could carry it out at a later date.

“Does anyone have any idea what the fuck is going on here?” a tall, lithe, green-skinned female built like the queen Amazonian growled.

I caught her eyes and shrugged my shoulders. “No idea.”

We emerged into the hallway, joining a flood of other females from other Claiming Rooms who were being herded in the same direction.

The lines of shock were drawn clearly on their faces too.

No one has any idea what's going on here!

They were terrified even more than witnessing the alien males fighting to get through the doorway earlier.

We were being herded like cattle and, for a moment, I wondered if some huge alien creature the size of a house was going to Seed all of us at the same time...

My librarian imagination was doing circuits around the crazy part of town.

The docks were even busier than the corridors, crowded with writhing female bodies jammed in shoulder to shoulder.

Assistants pushed us forward onto waiting transport ships.

The managers might have wanted to prevent a panic by not sharing information and telling us what was going on but in doing so, they had only succeeded in scaring us even further.

Then I caught a whisper that gradually grew in volume, spreading like a wave through the crowd.

“The facility! It's under attack! The facility is under attack!”

Suddenly, it all made sense.

It explained why the alarms were blaring, why the lights had shifted red and began blinking intermittently, why the doors had been slid shut, and why we were being forced into these transport ships that were rapidly blasting off.

This was an *evacuation!*

Soon, it came to my turn.

We were squeezed onto the ship until every last seat was taken.

Some females even didn't get a seat and sat crouched with their arms wrapped about their knees on the floor, rocking backwards and forwards, terrified beyond words.

I wasn't the only human female, but as I approached them, they were swiftly shunted away, out of sight.

But not out of mind.

You could be surrounded by all manner of alien creatures but you *always* desired and felt more comfortable with those of your own species.

I supposed that would never change.

A holographic projection formed above our heads.

The face of a giant Captain played in a prerecorded message, smiling confidently, welcoming us on board.

“We’re experiencing some technical issues at the moment,” he said. “We’re taking every practical precaution to ensure your safety in escorting you from the Facility. Please do not panic. Everything is under control. Please put on your harness and prepare for takeoff.”

The holo-video blinked off and was replaced by calming, hypnotic natural surroundings.

Some reminded me of Earth, while others were decidedly alien—including a *huge* alien moon with a cleft in it, where huge waterfalls spilled over the edge and floated off into space.

Calming music played over the speakers, but it again, was a little jarring to my senses.

I supposed it was difficult to create a calming atmosphere with so many creatures from a diaspora of species that associated calmness and relaxation in entirely *different* ways.

The final few females barely got into their seats before the hatch doors were shut and automatically locked into place.

The ship’s engines whirred, working up to full power and taking off—skipping all the usual preliminary safety checks, I noticed—and rose into the atmosphere.

We rose ever higher and faster than any ship I had ever taken before.

Whatever was attacking the Facility—if that really is what was happening—they were clearly very dangerous and something we needed to get away from as quickly as possible.

The ship rose ever higher, the gorgeous blue sky morphing into the darkness of space.

Then we broke through the upper reaches of the atmosphere.

I began to float up against my harness before the gravity generators kicked in and I floated back down in my seat.

Ordinarily, with a standard launch, that kind of weightlessness would *never* have been felt but clearly, this was no ordinary launch.

We’d left as quickly as humanly—or whatever species was in charge of this whole operation—was capable of.

Out the windows, I spotted the darkness of space and the blinking lights of distant stars, as cold as God’s love.

For years, I had attempted to become pregnant and only come to the Seeding Facility as a last resort.

And now, this happened.

I wondered if I would *ever* get pregnant, if I would *ever* have a child.

It seemed that every time I made the attempt, fate pushed even harder against me and my desired destiny, ensuring I would *never* have a child.

Perhaps it was Fate's way of telling me I was simply not mother material.

But I didn't buy that.

I knew in my soul I would make a *wonderful* mother—but then, didn't *every* woman?

Each time I saw a woman with a bulging belly back on Earth—after always having attended a Facility such as the one I had just been evacuated from—I felt a pang in my stomach and a deep desire consumed me to pursue and achieve the very same thing for myself.

The ship shuddered and I gripped hold of the armrests, accidentally squeezing the female's hand on my right.

She took no notice, gripping the armrest just as tightly as I was.

She had her eyes shut, her body tense and hard.

I'm pleased I'm not the only nervous flyer here!

The ship shuddered again, harder this time.

A soft—and completely out of place—dingdong like a sing-song doorbell rang and the holographic image formed once more, morphing into the Captain's visage.

That same ever-present smile was on his face.

It had never looked more fake.

"We're experiencing difficulties at the moment," he cooed.

Tell me something we don't know, asshole!

"Please remain in your seats," he continued. "The situation will be resolved shortly. I repeat, please remain in your seats. I repeat—"

The image froze and the sound skipped before the same noise repeated itself endlessly:

"Re-Repeat... Re-Repeat... Re-Repeat..."

Then even that cut out as the lights went off, casting us into near-darkness.

The only light source came from the nearest sun out the porthole windows running along one side of the cabin.

A scream went up, rising like a tsunami.

“We’re under attack!” that same voice from earlier screamed.
It came from someone on my left but I couldn’t make her out.

“Look! Over there!”

I had no idea what she was seeing or the direction she was pointing in.

I cast around, trying to see what it might be.

But there was nothing.

No alien ships opening fire, no lasers locking on...

Nothing but endless darkness.

Then my blood turned cold.

Darkness.

Just a moment ago, there had been pinpricks of light from distant stars...

Now, they were gone.

But of course, they weren’t really gone.

They were still there.

I just couldn’t see them.

Because something is in the way.

A huge ship had approached on one side.

Then came a bright glowing light that throbbed like the heart of a dying star.

I immediately shut my eyes and turned away from it.

Phiiii-baaaang!

The explosion was intense and knocked me to one side, almost from my seat.

The harness groaned, struggling to keep me in place.

My hair lashed my face, stinging my cheeks.

The first three rows of seats disappeared in an instant.

The shock of it didn’t fully register, and I doubted it would for some time to come.

Boy, am I not looking forward to those therapy session bills!

The entire ship shunted to one side, metal screaming under the pressure.

I managed to peer through squinting eyes at a ball of flame given birth on the far side of the transport ship.

The roaring scream of the females filled my ears as that huge glowing orb of fire crept slowly over one row after another.

It was only a matter of time before it enveloped me too.

That knowledge that my impending doom was fast approaching and I had less than a few minutes left to live—perhaps even mere *seconds*—overrode

any fear I might have felt.

Fire is a liquid in space, and because of that, even more dangerous.

Like water, once it makes contact, it remains on the surface and is near-impossible to remove.

The ship slowly began to crush itself, caving inward beneath some unseen source of gravity, tearing apart at the seams atom by atom.

It was a beautiful sight to behold... if it wasn't going to destroy me the very same way.

My scream joined the others, defying my usual reserved nature, the fact that death not only had my number but was calling my number, began to permeate my consciousness.

So much for bringing a new life into the universe, I thought.

Fate had other plans and was about to remove one instead.

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QEB

I BREATHED in through flared nostrils, taking in every scent my highly-tuned senses could pick out.

I let the breath out slowly before doing it again, repeating the action ten times.

Then I stood stock still, cocking my head from one side to the other as my instincts sorted through the assorted smells, searching for something that I would recognize the moment I had sniffed it.

Not that I had managed to sniff it yet.

I had traveled to every cryo-library in the galaxy, constantly searching their stocks for a female—the *right* female—and always came up empty.

I paused for a moment, my nostrils picking up something, a glimmer, a *glint* of gold in a worthless pool of nothingness...

And then moved on, deciding what was there wasn't worth pursuing.

I continued absorbing the pheromones of the females frozen in their tube-like cryo-chambers, trapped in an endless sleep.

I let out a sigh and shook my head. "No."

My guide grinned nervously and physically shuddered at the disappointed shake of my head.

"We have one more batch left," he said. "Based on your criteria, I'm *sure* we can find something for you."

I hadn't been completely honest with him—and how could I?

The information I possessed stood to transform the entire galaxy and you didn't just share that sort of thing with just anyone.

Especially not a stranger whose loyalties you did not know.

There were plenty of forces out there who wished for our failure and their

tendrils ran deep in every tier of the empire.

It had been a long day and I was already exhausted.

We had gone through most of his stock and *none* of it met my requirements.

I wanted to quit and call it a day, my body aching from constantly standing, walking, travelling.

But I knew that the *next* batch might very well contain the female I was looking for.

And so, I gave him a nod and allowed him to press at the controls on his tablet.

The cryo-chambers before us, each with their own female locked inside, slipped through holes in the floor and would be shuttled around the facility, back to their original position.

The tubes were frosted, for which I was grateful.

It was one thing to sniff a female, to get a sense of her origins, her upbringing, her *essence*, and was quite another to have to look her in the face as she lay there asleep for all time.

It boggled my mind that the creatures in these tubes were frozen, never to be released except to a paying patron.

Such as me.

Many of them would never breathe fresh air with their own lungs ever again.

They were fed everything required to sustain them via tubes.

I often wondered at the legality of such a business but as it provided me with the means of achieving my mission, I didn't push my questioning too hard.

A body required surprisingly little to keep it alive.

While it wasn't up and about moving, its calorie requirements were low.

They needed *just enough* oxygen—or whatever gas or liquid the alien species breathed—and *just enough* food to keep the body from devouring itself.

It was the brain, as always, that needed the most amount of energy.

I shivered at the thought of having to spend my days in a cryo-chamber such as this.

It was a kind of living death, not that those inside the chambers knew that.

They were each here because *they did not exist*.

Not officially, anyway.

The guide glanced over at me and hastily pulled his eyes away.

He was a Docile, a form of human whose genes had been spliced with that of a Morak—known to be the most docile and peaceful creatures in the known universe.

Genes dictated disposition—at least for the most part—and if you wanted servile creatures in human form, you could not ask for a better genetic profile.

And just as his had been spliced with more docile, submissive species, mine had been spliced with more virile and aggressive species called the Krev.

We were physically more muscular, barely even needing to exercise to maintain our powerful physique.

We sported horns on top of our heads that were shiny and black, whereas the Dociles' were barely little more than short nubs.

The Dociles retained their more human appearance, their skin shiny like that of a native Earth octopus, their eyes naturally wider than usual, seeming to always have the appearance of being shocked.

Or afraid.

And they were terrified of Ferals like me.

As well as they should be.

The first generation of Ferals had almost torn the Empire apart from the inside.

It was believed that, due to their servile nature, Dociles would make ideal soldiers—they followed orders without question, even if they were horrifying.

They respected authority to a fault.

But they lacked the destructive passion for war, which was why we Ferals had been created.

We were born warriors, with superior strength, speed, and aggressive natures.

And what ultimately led to so much death and destruction...

We also possessed enhanced senses—such as our powerful sense of smell.

That was I could sniff out the female I was looking for.

The female that would change everything.

As the Docile led me into the next huge warehouse, I moved to the front

of the room, the cryo-chambers once again lined up in military rows before me.

I took two deep cleansing breaths to wash out the memory of the previous cryo-chambers and began the process all over again.

I breathed in great lungfuls of the frozen female species from all four corners of the galaxy.

My head thumped with a painful headache as the cold air hit me.

I paused for a moment, cocking my head to one side, picking up on something...

A tiny pinprick like a grain of gold in a sea of sand...

But then it began to fade again, as it always did, and I returned to calming myself with meditation.

I shook my head and looked over at the Docile, who looked even more fearful than usual, when suddenly, I felt it.

Like those single strands of gold... only this was stronger—*much* stronger—and the strands wrapped around my neck and yanked me viciously to one side.

My heart thudded, beating a staccato rhythm, my muscles instantly flexing, swelling, and becoming stronger.

With my spliced Krev genes, I also succumbed to something they called Steyatt.

It was a period of seven days when the Krev *had* to mate.

My sexual drive went through the roof and with it came enhanced senses, driving me almost crazy with desire.

After finishing at this cryo-facility, I had fully intended on finding a female and mating with her for the full Steyatt term.

My eyes bulged and my body shook and I quickly backed away as if I could escape the scent that way.

But the scent strands wrapped tighter around my neck, knocking me back so I could barely keep my feet.

I reached into the communicator device strapped to my forearm and opened a small compartment.

I reached in to extract the medicine I kept there but the half a dozen capsules fell through my shaking fingers to the floor.

I immediately dropped to my hands and knees, my entire body heaving.

“Are you all right?” the docile asked nervously. “Do you require medical assistance?”

Medical assistance?

I *never* needed medical assistance!

Another perk of the Krev genes.

Picking up a single tab proved too difficult, so I scooped up a handful instead.

I raised them to my lips and was careful to slip just one between my lips.

I dry-swallowed it and lay down on my front on the floor, waiting for it to take effect.

During the past five years of relentless searching, I had *never* needed to use a Numb-er before.

I knew I would have to use it if I came across the one I was looking for but I had never found even a *hint* of her...

Until now.

My heart slowed to its regular thirty beats a minute, my muscles relaxed, and the protruding veins on my arms and neck began to ease.

The Numb-er medicine was taking effect and I regained control of myself once more.

I could still smell her, could still scent her, somewhere in this huge warehouse.

I shoved myself up onto my feet, and staggered a little, feeling like I had been smashed in the face with a shiak hammer.

The Docile looked even more fearful than usual. "Do... Do you wish to... call it a day?"

I ignored him and marched through the endless rows of cryo-chambers.

I dared not breathe in deeply for fear with even the Numb-er in my veins it would not be enough to counteract the female's scent.

I breathed through my mouth instead, letting the thread guide me to whichever chamber possessed that incredible smell.

I passed one after another until I came to the one I thought housed it.

"This one," I barked. "Remove the others."

The Docile hastily tapped at his computer screen and the other cryo-chambers slipped through holes in the floor, leaving me alone in that huge warehouse with that one cryo-chamber, a single spotlight from above illuminating it.

The surface was cloudy with ice and condensation.

I reached up and hesitated before wiping a hand over it, revealing the female beneath.

In an instant, I knew.

I was right.

This female was who I was looking for.

She had a beautiful face, like an angel, long with a pointed chin and elf-like ears poking out from behind her long blonde hair.

She was slim, and tall—for a human.

Her eyes were closed, her brow smooth, embroiled in whatever dreams she was currently having.

The scent from her was overpowering.

Just as it will be for all Ferals throughout the galaxy, I thought.

And they would react the same way I had.

In fact, without the numbing medicine at their fingertips, they would react *a whole lot worse...*

“This one,” I snapped, attempting to keep the excitement from my voice. “Have her released immediately.”

Five years of endless searching had come to an end...

Five years of touring every cryo-library in the galaxy...

Five years of failure...

And finally, I had found her.

ELLA

I SCREAMED.

It seemed to last an eternity, like a record caught playing the same note over and over again... only there was no one there to stop it.

Within that scream contained a lifetime.

I had *an eternity* to ponder and consider it, and it was only at the tail end of the scream (and I thought that moment would never come) when I threw up my arms around my face to block the searing heat from enveloping my body the way it had the other passengers.

I flew back, slower than I thought as if I had met some kind of resistance, as I wrapped my arms about my head.

It took a fraction of a moment to realize it, but the flames of the fire were no longer there, as if they had been a figment of my imagination the whole time.

In place of that terrifying heat was an intense coolness, freezing and pressing against my back.

My body was in shock, my brain even more so.

I had expected one experience and ended up with another—one so far at odds with the original concept of death and mayhem and destruction that my brain assumed the reality my senses were telling me I was in—floating in a tank of thick viscous fluid in what appeared to be a research facility of some kind—simply *had* to be the dream.

I peeked from behind my arms and slowly lowered them.

Everything hit my senses all at once:

The smell of something metallic, so strong and thick it wasn't really like smelling at all... but a *taste*.

That same stench stuck to the back of my throat and made me gag.
But gagging made me take in a deep breath...

Only it wasn't a breath at all.

It was water—no, not water, it was somehow *thicker* than water.

My hands were free and flailed back and collided with something hard pressed against my back.

Finding my movement restricted, I panicked further, my arms flailing out to either side, finding the same hard material to my left and right too.

I was surrounded on all sides by a thick wall of glass.

I reached out and pressed my hands to it.

It was ice cold to the touch.

Several figures busied themselves at various stations throughout the room, their backs to me.

The walls were plain white, clean and minimalist in nature like a hospital.

I lowered my arms and met the same resistance I had felt earlier, pressing against my forearms as I waved them in front of my face.

The liquid was thick like dense soup, light blue and shimmering like sunlight bouncing off a lake's surface.

And it was definitely real.

Definitely real.

Whatever this was, wherever I found myself, it was clearly *not* a dream or hallucination.

Then that begged the question...

Was what I had experienced before, with the rolling balls of fiery flames...

Was *that* the dream?

It didn't seem like it.

There was an entire back story attached to it.

I remembered being at the Seeding Facility, being rushed out and put onto the transport ship that took off and blasted into space, and then...

And then...

We were *attacked*.

It had seemed *so real*.

Just as real as this tube.

But then, didn't *every* dream seem real?

Didn't *every* nightmare?

That was what made them so joyful and terrifying, respectively.

The fact they *could have been* real.

I tried to think back and focus on what had happened to me in the recent past, right before this glass tube...

And there was nothing.

Nothing that could explain me being here and *not* on that transport ship.

But wait...

There was something...

Coldness, I seemed to recall.

An internal darkness of frigid temperatures that seemed to last forever...

And something else...

A hand... A *blue* hand had wiped away the cloudy curtain before my eyes.

My eyes had been shut so I could not see the figure's face, but it was eclipsed by a bright light of color, as if I were a fish and someone had placed their finger in the water.

And it had been so long...

So long since there had been contact—any contact at all—and I wanted to reach out and meet that hand with my own.

But I couldn't move.

And that emotion more than any other trumped the terror I had been feeling up until that moment...

Longing.

Or had *that* been a dream?

That shadowy figure surrounded by an aura of light...

My mind was a jumble of memories, unclear, indistinct, a mystery even to myself.

I thumped on the wall and tried to yell at them to let me out.

I held my breath but it didn't last long with my body flailing the way it was.

I took a breath and... realized I was breathing underwater!

Whatever this stuff was, it clearly had oxygen in it!

I put my hands to my face and felt something hard there, a mask wrapped tightly over my mouth.

I attempted to yank it free but found no purchase... and it was probably a good idea I couldn't as it might very well be the only thing keeping me alive.

Trapped. I'm trapped in this thing...

My eyes widened further with panic and my legs kicked and flailed at the

transparent glass of my glass coffin.

“Ah. You’re awake.”

One of the figures stood before my tank.

The woman was short and slim.

Her nurse’s uniform was immaculate and bright.

I would have taken her for a human... if it wasn’t for her eyes which were slightly too large for her face, bulging as if in a constant state of surprise.

Her movements were slow and deliberate, her skin a little too shiny, as if she had been passed through a lamination machine.

Her smile was bright and pleasant... if a little empty.

“Let’s just get you out of there, shall we?” she said, her voice enhanced by the liquid and making it boom like it came from God Himself.

A loud alarm blared and yellow-orange lights flashed in constant turns.

Suddenly, the container shifted and the front wall gave way and the liquid I was encased in spewed out.

I fell with it—but not to the floor.

Something caught me and I hung there with cords holding me in place, suspended like a marionette.

I struggled, flailing once more but my arms and legs were weaker than I expected.

A child could have put up more resistance!

Where am I?

One minute I was on a transport ship heading into space, a fire raging and billowing towards me, liquid and dangerous, and the next...

I wake up in this tube?

None of it made sense.

And if this *was* a dream, then it was really a nightmare.

“Release the apparatus,” the female said.

A moment later, the tubes holding me snapped loose, and I fell to the floor.

The mask still covered my mouth, only now instead of allowing me to breathe it hindered my attempt to do so.

The female in the white coat knelt beside me and removed it.

The moment she did, I sucked in a lungful of air.

It seemed a whole lot harder work than the liquid.

“Calm down,” she said in a surprisingly relaxed voice. “You’re awake now. You are awake.”

Awake?

Did that mean all this really *was* real?

That it *wasn't* just another dream?

But even dreams can lie.

I flailed, struggling to push the figure away from me.

My blows were weak and the figure caught my arms easily.

Up close, she looked even stranger, with a flat broad nose, scaly skin, and wide eyes that, although alien, had a strangely human quality to them.

“Relax,” she said. “You’re going to be all right. You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be—”

“Sick!” I blurted immediately before actually throwing up over the figure’s perfect bleach-white jacket.

I didn’t care if she was upset—I had far bigger things to worry about!

I coughed and sputtered, attempting to get to my feet, but it was no use.

I was too weak.

I managed to get to my hands and knees and managed to voice the one question that had been flashing through my mind ever since I had awoken:

“What the fuck is going on?”

A second nurse joined the first and eased her away so she could change her clothes before offering me a paper towel to wipe the sick from the corners of my mouth.

She attempted to hand me a glass of water but I blocked her.

In a rasping, croaky voice I repeated my earlier question:

“What the fuck is going on?”

“You’re in a cryo-facility on Mlara 12. You were just Defrosted but the process has only just begun.”

Mlara 12?

I had only ever heard of Mlara 5.

I couldn’t recall there being more bodies in the Mlara system than that.

But what did I know?

“What do you mean... Defrosted?” I coughed. “I’ve been... in cryo-sleep?”

The figure nodded. “An unusually long cryo-sleep. But your health markers are good. We’re confident you’ll make a full recovery.”

Unusually long...

The blood would have fallen from my face but it was still half-frozen in my veins.

I reached out and managed to grab the nurse by the lapels.

I lacked the strength to tug her closer and so fell forward instead, using my full weight to bring her face to mine. “*How long?*”

The figure’s eyes were broad and wide, suddenly very afraid, until I realized they had been this wide the entire time.

Had she been afraid this entire time?

Of what? Of me?

I was as weak as a newborn babe and of no danger to anyone!

I’d gone to the Seeding Facility to *have* a child, not *become* one!

But I held on firmly to her lapels, proud of myself that I was at least capable of that much.

“How long?” I repeated, my voice a hoarse croak, secretly desperate for that glass of water she clutched in her hand.

The figure licked her lips with a purple tongue—*purple!*—and spoke hesitantly. “Two hundred and sixty-three years. And six months, three weeks, and two days—”

I faded out after that.

As my brain struggled to calculate the current date, the blood really did fall from my face, and black spots dotted my vision.

Would I *ever* fully wake up into the real world? I wondered right before the darkness swept in and took me.

I was to learn that eventually, yes, I would.

And when it did, I would end up wishing I had instead remained asleep in the cryo-chamber...

QEB

I STOOD WATCHING the scene play out.

Ever since selecting her, I had not allowed her to pass out of my sight for a single moment.

I even refused to allow the Facility staff to use their suction technology to pull Ella's tube through the floor.

Instead, I insisted she be manually removed from the machine arm and carried into the Defrosting Zone.

Not one second.

The Krev Empire had far too many enemies and none were above harming Ella—even if they had no idea what our purpose for her was—which, I could safely assume they didn't or else they would have already launched a military attack upon the Facility, destroying everything in sight.

No matter the cost.

That was just how important she was.

That meant I needed to keep her close at all times.

The moment she awoke, I wanted to see her being born into the here and now.

Whatever she had been in the past had been wiped clean—probably *literally!*

Humans had managed to do what they had threatened to do for so long, and almost wipe themselves out.

That was why we needed her now; the reason any of the Modifieds were even alive today, why our genes had been spliced with those of alien species, and why she had to be the one to unite us.

I watched as Ella Defrosted.

On the biometric feedback monitors, I could see she was in perfect health. In fact, beyond perfect compared to modern Modifieds.

She was tall compared to many modern humans, with smooth graceful legs, arms that were slightly muscled and well-defined, and a face that... Well, I simply could not stop looking at it.

Her cheeks were smooth, with high cheekbones, her blonde hair thick and dense, waving like alien Naifaz snakes.

Hypnotic.

Majestic.

I couldn't prevent the growl that emitted from my throat.

I reached for Communicator strapped to my forearm and immediately released another capsule, downing it in one go.

I wasn't supposed to take this many, I knew.

I was only supposed to take one a day, but already I had popped *three*.

If I were to lose control before the time was right, it could well spell disaster.

I smiled as Ella struggled, banging against the glass container with all her strength—massively reduced due to her long sleep—but it was her spirit that caught my attention more than anything else.

It was that spirit that would save us.

When the capsule finally released her, the fluid flowing through the holes in the metal grating floor, to be captured and reused in other cryo-chambers, she continued to fight and get to her feet, even to attack—if only feebly—the scientists attempting to defrost her.

Already, her scent permeated through the one-way screen, entered my nostrils and brain, infecting me like some terrible disease.

Perhaps it was a disease.

After all, few things could infect a Krev the way she was doing so easily and without apparent effort to me right now.

My Communicator buzzed.

I glanced at it to ignore it before noticing the address flashing above it in floating holo-images.

I ground my teeth.

It was HQ.

Of course they would want an update on the current state of affairs—especially since I hadn't answered the previous few calls already.

Their patience would be wearing thin.

And once that ran out...

I shivered.

The repercussions didn't bear thinking about.

I turned away from the window and hastened out the door, down the corridor, and grabbed a breathing mask from the wall before entering the decontamination room.

Once the lights flashed green, I was free to pass outside.

I slammed the door shut behind me and accepted the call.

Immediately, the Colonel's face swelled before me.

It was a big, bold, and angry face, with too many lines to count.

His brow drew down, his face a miasma of wrinkles.

Despite being an expert with modern technology, the Colonel never seemed able—or perhaps the correct word was *willing*—to stand back so the holo-projector could take in his whole appearance rather than just his angry swollen face.

Likely, he *wanted* whoever he was speaking with to be deathly afraid of him.

Well, I was *not* afraid of him, but it never paid to be short with the Colonel.

“You dodged my calls,” he snapped accusingly.

He never asked questions, only made accusations.

“No sir,” I said.

“My call log indicates otherwise. Give me your reason.”

Somehow, the lines on his face tightened up even further, becoming even more aggressive.

“I was right in the middle of a Scenting, sir. To quit and begin again would mean my mission would take longer.”

I prayed on the Colonel's biggest hate and used it against him:

Wasted time.

He gave me a grunt—the biggest sign of approval it was possible to receive from him. “Very well. But you must report in at the allotted times. Your mission is of the utmost importance and not one Headquarters takes lightly. Do you have anything new to report or is this yet another failure?”

I glanced toward the Facility's door to ensure it was shut.

Being outside in the arid landscape with its few native animals—no creature could survive in the toxic atmosphere unaided—meant there was less chance of being overheard.

Not zero, but less.

“I’m afraid there has been no sign of what we are looking for, sir,” I informed him. “None at all. I’m sorry to report we are at a loss once again.”

The hesitation on the Colonel’s face was infinitesimal—almost invisible—and was only because I had endured these discussions with him so many times over the past few years that I could read it.

Anyone listening in would no doubt be unable to ascertain the same meaning.

Even out here in the arid desert was not safe for communications.

Messages could be snatched from the air as satellites relayed them from one planet to another.

A system of codes had been devised where you reported a *version* of the exact opposite of what you truly meant to say.

It had been almost impossible for me to do at the beginning, having to pass along meanings that weren’t obvious from the words themselves, but with practice, it became as easy as breathing.

It kept the enemy guessing and aided with any skulduggery our enemies might attempt to launch upon us.

Our enemies might know we were traveling from one cryo-facility to another, even that we were hunting for an alien female...

But they had not yet ascertained *why* we wanted her.

“That is very... disappointing,” the Colonel said. “Some of us had hoped you would find something sooner or later. If this carries on, we’re going to have to assign you to another mission.”

I nodded in confirmation.

He was *actually* telling me he was pleased—insofar as he was *capable* of being pleased, that is—and that he would give me everything I required to achieve my mission.

He hesitated just a moment. “Is there anything else you can do there before you leave for another facility?”

He was asking how certain I was that Ella was the female we were looking for.

And if there was any doubt at all in my mind.

I had to be careful how I responded—it wasn’t just my reputation on the line, but also the Colonel’s.

He had to have total faith in me—and although he had never so much as nodded his approval of my performance—just him selecting me for this

particular mission meant he had to have at least acknowledged *some* of my skills.

“I’m certain,” I said with a single nod of my head.

A light twinkled in the Colonel’s eye—the one fully open and not the one that had sustained a terrible injury many years ago that no one knew the story of. “Very well. Return as soon as possible for the location of the next facility.”

He ended the transmission without the usual sign off and his face—mercifully—disappeared from view.

I let out a deep sigh, misting up the mask, and and marched back toward the facility.

I was putting my word and career on the line in declaring I had discovered Ella.

I only hoped I could get her to the Capital before it was too late and we lost everything.

ELLA

I WOKE UP FOR A SECOND—THIRD?—TIME.

It was impossible to tell.

When you dreamt in cryo-sleep, it was an endless cycle one after another, an infinite series of dreams that recycled and fed on each other.

With little stimulation entering the unconscious on a daily basis to keep your mind active, there was little for it to focus on and process.

And so, you experienced countless combinations of the same dream over and over again.

The dream of me having a child...

Of being Seeding at the Facility...

Well, bang went that dream!

Over time, it had morphed into a nightmare where the child was not born to an alien male I might have chosen but a creature that more closely resembled a leech back on Earth.

Each time it was hungry, I had to offer up my breast knowing it would once again latch me with its sharp needle-like teeth, feeding on more blood than milk.

It was the stuff of *true* nightmares.

And things only got worse from that point...

Now, with my aching joints and torn muscles, I gradually began to regain my strength.

There was something reassuring about genuine pain when it made you know beyond any doubt that you were truly awake and alive.

It was in stark opposition to the fake pain formed by dreams that, now that I thought about it, ensured the pain never really arrived.

In dreams, it was always the *expectation* of pain that caused the fear.

I lay on a flatbed with cuffs around my arms, legs, and head, as a therapy machine gently moved my joints, gradually offering more and more resistance so my body could naturally pump my blood once more.

Fortunately, my ligaments had not been damaged by the overly long cryo-sleep and could move as they always had.

I let the machines work their magic, unsure if I had ever seen such technology before.

But what did I expect?

It was 263 years *after* the time that existed now only in my mind.

A program on the history of the human race played on the holo-TV.

The years flicked by five minutes at a time, showing the entirety of the key events that had taken place in my absence.

While I was asleep, the human race had gotten itself into a real mess

After the global economy collapsed and the nations of the world looked for someone to blame (never themselves, of course) they declared Third World War.

Old allegiances were picked up as if they had never been gone at all.

The war raged on for years, and with modern technology, it was a blistering, terrifying experience.

Then, when one side could see they were going to lose and the end was in sight, they saw no other option but to double down and release nuclear weapons...

And all the enemy could do was retaliate.

Much of the Earth was destroyed, the surface rendered uninhabitable for many years.

The human race struggled beneath the Earth's surface in deep bunkers and that's where scientists began to splice human DNA with that of alien species.

First, they created the Dociles—and I immediately recognized their large bulbous eyes from the nurses I had encountered earlier.

Others were more aggressive-looking, with large powerful horns, bigger body frames, muscular, clearly stronger and more athletic than the Dociles.

They were known as Ferals and became humanity's soldiers.

They were all given a piece of genetic code that made them impervious—or at least resistant—to nuclear fallout, allowing the human race to return to the surface once more.

From there, they reached out to the stars, trading and rebuilding from where they had been right before they almost annihilated themselves.

263 years all within a few minutes...

It was hard to believe we could have been so stupid.

But I was grateful for one thing at least:

I had not awoken during those dark years when humans lived underground.

At least now there was some art, culture, something I might recognize and return to.

Although what I was meant to do in this new world, this new *galaxy*, I had no idea.

The rehabilitation machine ceased its whirring and released my arms and legs and slotted back into the holes in the bed.

Then the table tilted back so it lay prone like a regular bed.

I eased up and sat on the edge of the bed, wiggling my fingers and toes before working up to my arms, legs, and neck.

I felt as good as new.

I pressed my hands to the bed's cold metal surface and ran my fingers over it, relieved I could still sense things with my fingertips.

Many Long Sleepers, as they were known, had lost certain senses.

A nurse entered and, her eyes bulging slightly, said:

"Oh. You're up! How are you feeling now?"

"Good," I said, surprised at the conviction in my voice. "Great, actually."

The nurse clicked her fingers on either side of my head, checking my ears still worked. "Can you hear this?"

I nodded.

"Can you smell this?" she asked, cracking a plastic tube open.

It was an overpowering floral scent of some kind.

It made me cough. "Yes."

Next, she ran a finger over my exposed leg. "And this? Can you feel it?"

I nodded again.

The nurse beamed with joy and made a note on her tablet. "That's excellent news! Everything appears to be in full working order!"

My stomach growled and I placed a hand over it. "How about taste?" I said. "I'm *starving!*"

"Yes, of course. Nothing like a 263-year slumber to work up an appetite! Please wait here a moment and I'll arrange for someone to take you to the

canteen.”

“Yes, please! You guys do have normal food here, right? Not jelly or food capsules?”

The nurse blinked at me in surprise. “Why, Nutrient Gel is the most satiating food there is! But we have regular food too... As long as you don’t mind chewing?”

Don’t mind chewing?

Who minded chewing?

“Chewing is... good with me,” I said.

“I’ll see who’s free to take you,” the nurse said, shoving the door open and leaving.

Before the door fully swung shut, another figure stepped into the room.

He was another Docile—and I already *hated* using that term, but hey, it was what they referred to themselves as in this futuristic world so who was I to judge?

He had the same bulbous eyes and wore a long doctor’s jacket.

His head was shaved bald.

He must have lost some weight recently as the jacket hung from him like he should have worn a smaller size.

He approached me with a tablet in his hands, smiled up at me, and checked my details on the screen. “You’re Ella?”

I nodded. “I am.”

“Excellent,” he said around a mouthful of teeth. “I’m here to tell you there’s good news. You’ve tested out and you’re cleared to leave the Facility.”

“Leave?” I said. “I thought I was going to go eat something?”

“You will. But it won’t be in the canteen. We need to get you to another Facility so you can get the nutrients you need, as well as educate you on what’s been happening the past few hundred years. A short holo-movie isn’t going to give you all the details you need. You’ll also find the kind of nutritious food you’re used to at the other facility. They’re a farming colony and live a more... gentle lifestyle.”

I hopped off the bed. “You are the doc, Doc. Just lead me to it!”

A noticed a spot of red sauce on the inside of his jacket. “Looks like you spilled your lunch.”

The doctor did up the top buttons of his jacket, hiding the stain. “Clumsy. I’ll have to be more careful in the future. This way.”

He led me out into the corridor.

“You guys don’t really eat ‘Nutritious Gel,’ do you? The nurse told me about it earlier.”

“Actually, yes. Farming is no longer necessary. Why bother when all the nutrition required can be put into a single paste?”

I shuddered at the thought.

Government regulations back in my time virtually *guaranteed* everyone became obese, so what were they like *now*?

Well, that was *not* how I was going to live my life—I’d make certain of *that!*

The corridors were mostly empty and the few technicians we passed hurried from one station to another.

Some wore overalls, others long white jackets.

They all possessed the same bulbous eyes, the same hasty shuffling feet, the same shudder every time there was a sudden sound, peering over the shoulders in the direction of where the danger might be coming from.

They reminded me of meerkats or baby kittens terrified of the world they suddenly found themselves in.

Shouldn’t *I* have been the one to feel like that? I thought wryly.

But I didn’t.

I felt *grateful* to be awake and alive.

Nothing was worse than sleeping your life away.

And I intended on living every moment of my life from this point on.

The doctor took a breathing mask off from the wall and handed it to me.

He helped place it on my head and twisted a nozzle on the side to allow oxygen to flow into it.

“Can you breathe all right?” he asked.

I nodded. “What do I need this for?”

“We have to head outside. Just for a moment. Our shuttle is waiting for us. Don’t worry, you don’t have to wear it for long. I know you must be sick of wearing masks!”

He shoved the door open and we stepped into the decontamination chamber.

Great plumes of gas washed over us before the lights blinked and the door on the other side automatically opened.

We crossed the arid landscape toward his waiting shuttle.

I couldn’t put my finger on why, but something made the hairs on my

back rise up like a cornered cat.

I shrugged and assumed it had something to do with the intense heat and powerful overhead sun.

If I had paid closer attention to my instincts, I might have noticed the danger and avoided all the trouble that came after...

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QEB

ARE YOU CERTAIN?

That had been the boss's question.

Was I really *sure* she was the one?

Only now was I beginning to suspect I might have been wrong about her.

At the time I scented her out among the many hundreds lined up in that warehouse, I *had* been certain.

No other female had *ever* taken control of my senses like that before.

But wasn't it equally possible she was *something else*?

Something about her pheromones?

About the way she had died?

Or how her body reacted to the food pumped into her body via tubes?

Maybe I *had* been foolish to stake my reputation on her.

Maybe I *had* been too rash.

And maybe if I called the Colonel back now informing him of that I may have had a mistake, that I needed to do *one last pass* of her before departing, he might be more lenient on me if Ella turned out *not* to be what I thought she was.

The Colonel had punished other Ferals by sending them to far and distant quadrants for much less.

Did I *really* want to risk my future on this female?

I hung the mask on the hook before moving back down the Facility's corridor.

Perhaps once I was face-to-face with her, once I explained the situation and everything else she needed to know, I would feel different.

I could smell her even now, her powerful hormones wafting up under my

nose.

I bent my head down to sniff at my shirt and immediately regretted it.

I stumbled back, bracing myself on the wall.

Her scent had even invaded my clothes!

And I hadn't even really been in the same *room* with her without a thick wall between us!

How was I supposed to cope with being with her face-to-face?

I continued on down the hall and entered the observation room once more, peering through the one-way glass at the Defrosting Zone.

The table was now empty, Ella no longer present.

In fact, there was only a nurse in the room now and she was hastily tidying up after Ella's earlier procedure.

I had never seen a Long Sleeper Defrosting process before and had no idea what happened next.

Ordinarily, a sleeper could simply wake up, and be a little groggy for a short period of time before being able to move around as usual.

As a Feral, I had been genetically engineered to require less sleep.

Our scientists had wanted us to require no sleep at all but even a super soldier needed at least *some* rest.

Three to four hours appeared to be the bare minimum.

I exited the observation room, rounded the corner, and entered the Defrosting Zone.

The nurse looked over her shoulder at me, jumping on the spot and shaking the way the Dociles always did at a loud or sudden noise.

I held up my hands and approached her slowly.

Dociles had to be handled carefully—especially when they were alone with a Feral as there were no other Dociles to call for help in dealing with me.

They always assumed we might fly off the handle and destroy them!

There were many rumors about Feral, most of them unfounded.

But some did contain a kernel of truth...

Scared or not, this nurse had to answer my questions.

"The female that was here earlier," I began, "the Long Sleeper that was Defrosted. Where was she taken?"

"T-To the c-cafeteria. She would be s-starving hungry after her long s-sleep."

She turned back to her table and returned to sorting through the objects.

I tapped her on the shoulder in an attempt not to surprise her.

She hopped on the spot anyway and turned to me with her huge, bulging eyes—even more fearful than if I hadn't just spoken to her directly.

These creatures could be *exhausting!*

“Where's the cafeteria?” I asked.

“D-Down the h-hall. T-Take a r-right and t-then the s-second l-left.”

She turned back to her work, seeming to find some solace in it.

I headed out of the room and followed her directions.

I paused where she had said to turn right as I caught a whiff of Ella's scent.

It seemed to be stronger here than it was back in the Defrosting Zone.

She left a trail wherever she went and I could follow it anywhere.

It was growing faint already but I could still smell it.

My nose was telling me to turn left, *not* right.

But the nurse had clearly told me to turn right.

Perhaps the doctor had taken a different route? I thought.

Maybe there was a different room for doctors.

I really had no idea how these cryo-facilities were operated and run.

I decided to follow the nurse's directions, turn right, and take the second left.

I heard the thrumming of the nutrition gel machines long before I reached the room.

The acidic stink of the food never failed to sting my nostrils.

Nutrition gel.

I *hated* it!

Humans—whether their genes were spliced or not—were never meant to suck food into their mouths.

We had evolved to *hunt!*

To *forage!*

Not to be handed a bowl of disgusting cold soup!

The Dociles, as demanded by their engineered natures, consumed it without complaint.

I had never even seen *one* turn up his nose or sneer at the stink.

They simply sucked it into their mouths, swallowed, and went back to work.

We Ferals much preferred the traditional human *and* Krev way of hunting.

A newly-slaughtered creature strung up over an open fire, the flames licking at the meat as the fat dripped into the flames below...

It made me salivate just *thinking* about it!

But nothing could distract me from the realization that Ella wasn't there.

Her scent had been so strong in the corridor and it should have virtually blown my mind coming into this enclosed cafeteria.

Suddenly, my heart began to thump harder and sweat ran between the scales from my Krev lineage, and I felt all my senses switch on and swell.

I could smell everything, hear everything, see everything, *feel* everything.

And that deep familiar sensation also kicked in—something hidden secretly within the genes of the Krev that could never be programmed or trained:

My *instinct* told me something was very, *very* wrong.

I reached for the nearest creature—a young Docile in a pair of baggy blue overalls—and, off his wide-eyed shocked stare, I said:

“Ella! Where is Ella?”

He shivered, not understanding.

Even if he knew the answer, he was unable to form the words out of fear.

Dociles were useful only in carrying out everyday tasks—that was, after all, what they had been created for—mundane, dull jobs that most pure humans could not stand.

They lacked creative thought and the ability to think on their feet—it had simply been programmed out of them.

I growled, causing the technician to shudder even harder.

He wrapped his arms over his head and rocked back and forth.

Now he was *truly* useless to me.

He'd require months of therapy to get over it.

But I didn't need any of them to tell me where she had gone.

I only needed my senses.

I ran, my loud footsteps echoing off the bare white walls.

The Docile's necks snapped in my direction before immediately hurrying into another room to avoid me entirely.

I came to the hallway I had smelled Ella earlier, that junction where I *should* have turned left instead of right.

Idiot!

Why didn't I trust what my own senses were telling me?

I sprinted down the hall, slowing only at the junctions as I raised my nose

in the air to breathe in that luscious feminine excretion.

It led one way and then another, my heart thudding even harder.

I knocked several Dociles aside, but they said nothing (and never would complain) as I raced toward the door Ella must have passed through.

The masks hung from hooks on the wall but I didn't grab one.

I did not have a moment to lose.

The gas hissed as the room decompressed and decontaminated me.

I peered through the glass in the door but was unable to make much out due to the plumes of gas obscuring my view.

The lights blinked green and the doors hissed open.

I took a deep breath and turned sideways to fit squeeze through.

I didn't attempt to sniff Ella's scent and I didn't need to.

I spotted Ella's blonde hair just ahead.

She wore a mask over her face and stepped into the back of a small shuttle.

She was being led by a white-coated Docile who...

My blood turned cold.

I immediately recognized it was *not* a regular Docile.

He was an Irregular, a failed experiment.

Despite what many believed, the scientists' gene splicing experiments were not always perfect.

Sometimes they threw out oddballs, misfits, those who did not fit the mold.

Some Irregular Dociles felt the same fear as their comrades except it did not incapacitate them.

Instead, they fed off it and committed unspeakable acts.

When a Docile saw the pointlessness of their existence, they no longer feared everything around them.

They feared what they would become if they remained where they were.

They were natural assassins, able to slip into any Docile population to extract whatever they wished.

No one *ever* suspected a Docile.

I sprinted towards the shuttle.

I raced as hard as I could across the open ground.

The hatch door whirred and slammed into place.

Two seconds later, the engines thrummed and the ship rose, kicking up a thick cloud of dust.

I continued at the same frantic pace, the dust stinging my face.

It wasn't more than a few yards above me.

I coiled my legs and sprang up with all the strength I possessed, reaching up to grab at the ship's underside.

I had no idea how my plan was meant to work out *after* this as I would almost certainly *not* be able to get inside the ship before it rose into the atmosphere—but I would worry about that when it came to it.

But I needn't have been concerned.

My fingertips only grazed the ship's underside, my sharp nails failing to get any kind of grip.

The ship rose ever higher, and the red sand of the arid desert died around me like a passing storm.

I stood there feeding on my single lungful of breath, watching as the shuttle—and Ella—rose into the sky.

She hadn't been Defrosted for more than a few minutes and already I had failed her.

As I turned to rush back into the facility, I knew the chances of rescuing her might be small but I *had* to try.

And if I didn't get to her soon, the Irregular would destroy her.

After all, if she was something the humans desired, had put so much effort into, then it was better for *no one* to have her than to allow her to fall into *our* hands.

How the Irregular had learned about her, I had no idea.

Was there a mole?

Had someone betrayed us?

It didn't matter.

Not right now.

The only thing that mattered was getting her back.

As I turned and ran toward my shuttle, I knew I would only get one chance.

And the fate of the human race depended on it.

ELLA

I WAS no expert on shuttlecraft, that was for sure.

I knew even less about these futuristic ones and barely knew much more about the ones back in my own time.

But there was one thing that was universal:

And that was that a rust bucket was a rust bucket.

And this wasn't only a rust bucket.

The owner was also a total and utter *slob*.

I found it hard to believe that a doctor, who had worked so hard his entire academic life to become a caregiver, could be so messy and complacent with his own surroundings.

Surely *some* of the habits transferred over, didn't they?

Evidently not.

Chains rattled from the ceiling where they lashed some kind of metal grate to the wall.

Empty containers rolled across the floor, bumping into my feet as the shuttle ascended higher into the atmosphere.

I had to change seats—twice—because the harnesses wouldn't snap closed the way they were meant to.

I wasn't sure what I had been expecting when I ascended the hatch door but it certainly wasn't this.

But what did it really matter?

I was just one human out of billions.

I had to adapt to suit the needs of the modern world.

Now that it dawned on me, I realized there would be precious little I could do in this new futuristic world I suddenly found myself in.

I understood *none* of the technology and it would take me a few years just to be able to use it!

Social customs would have changed—how could they not with all these strange human-alien spliced creatures running around?

I was, in a word, *useless*.

So then why would anyone want me Defrosted? I wondered.

Why *now* of all times?

Why not 100 years ago?

Or even 200 years ago?

Surely, when they had suffered their population crisis, someone like me with a perfectly good functioning pair of ovaries would have been an ideal candidate to Defrost?

So why didn't they?

As we ascended into the upper atmosphere, the sky worked through its gorgeous shades of blue and into an ethereal black.

I released my harness and climbed into the copilot chair.

There was crap on the seat so I had to sweep that off before sitting.

Non-transferable skills indeed...

“So where are we headed?” I asked.

The doctor ignored me, his huge bulbous eyes glaring out the screen as if stuck in traffic.

“Hello?” I said, waving my hand. “Where are you taking me?”

The creature barely shifted his eyes in my direction before shifting his grip on the controls. “Mhara 7.”

“I've never heard of it. Is it nice?”

“It can be.”

Silence.

Clearly, all that studying and knowledge didn't convert into interesting conversation either.

“How much do you know about my case?” I asked. “Do you know why they decided to Defrost me now?”

He shrugged. “That's something you can ask them when we arrive. I'm just the delivery boy.”

I frowned at that.

He *wasn't* just a delivery boy.

He was a fully trained *doctor*.

But it wasn't just that.

The tone of his voice had changed.

It was lower, deeper, not the light and bouncy one he had affected earlier—identical to all the other Dociles.

His entire body language had changed too.

Where earlier he was uptight, his eyes flicking from one object to another, his body shaking, constantly on edge, he now seemed relaxed and totally unperturbed.

Nothing at all like the other Dociles I'd encountered.

But maybe it was just being surrounded by other Dociles that made him act that way.

Sometimes being surrounded by nervous people could make *you* more nervous too.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling something was up.

"So... tell me about yourself," I said, as much an attempt to get him to relax as it was for me to calm down.

"What do you wish to know?" he asked.

"Where did you study? What's your specialty? Is medicine as vigorous as it was back in my time?"

He made a "ch" sound with his lips and then ran his tongue over his blunt teeth.

He took his time in answering me and just when I thought he was about to speak...

He didn't.

He was just going to ignore me!

I could see *manners* had clearly changed a lot since my time!

Suddenly, my cheeks began to burn and my hair stood up on end, and my skin felt itchy and tingly.

My senses went on high alert.

Something was *wrong* here, something I couldn't put my finger on—how could I, with everything so different now?

But still, that dark undercurrent was still there, that sense things weren't as they were supposed to be.

I wouldn't ask the doctor any more questions, I decided.

If he was just going to point-blank ignore them anyway, then what was the point in asking in the first place?

Out of the front monitor, I made out a ship fast approaching.

Except, it wasn't a ship.

It was a waystation of some kind.

I remembered reading about such things in newspapers back in my time, places where a hole could be torn in space, forming a wormhole, to allow a ship to pass from one part of the universe instantly to another.

Kind of like teleportation.

I sat upright, peering closer at the incredible hoop-shaped object.

Amazing.

In my time, ships could only travel under their own engines at warp speed.

This allowed for *instant* travel across *infinite* distances.

We came to a stop, parked in line behind half a dozen other ships.

Some were small, some huge—I thought one had to be some kind of starship cruiseliner.

They were all bigger than our rust bucket.

They were waiting to get the go-ahead to pass through the gateway that opened up ahead.

I supposed they needed to tear different holes depending on the desired destination.

With no way to enter into a conversation with the doctor, I sat there gazing out the window, bored.

If this was what passed for meaningful conversation in the modern world, I dreaded to think what a *date* would be like.

Dating.

I hadn't even *thought* about that!

I knew for certain I didn't want to date a Docile—not if this doctor was any indication of the quality I could be getting!

Besides, I couldn't get over their bulging eyes.

I would always think they were in a constant state of shock, as if I had done something wrong.

No, the Ferals were *much more* my type...

Or anything like the Krev.

The muscular frame, the broad shoulders, the narrow hips...

I began to salivate just *thinking* about them.

And their horns...

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so drawn to aliens but I simply couldn't get enough of how exotic they looked.

The thought of their blue scaly skin alone made me shiver.

So at least there was *something* I could look forward to in this current time.

That was, if we ever got out of this line!

Finally, it came to our turn.

A voice came over the communication console. "State your destination."

"Mhara 7," the doctor said.

"State your cargo," came the reply.

The voice was harsh, almost robotic.

"No cargo," the doctor said, paying me no attention when my head snapped toward him. "I wish to visit friends and family."

There was silence on the other end before the voice said:

"Please approach the gate."

"No cargo?" I said. "I thought *I* was your cargo?"

"Those on the other side of the gateway don't want your existence known at the moment. It's just procedure."

"Don't want my existence known?" I said, at a loss for words. "But I *do* exist."

"Not on paper. Officially, you died many years ago."

I was shocked into silence.

"Died? But I didn't die! I'm right *here!*"

Instead of answering me, he just turned and peered out the window.

Officially, I was... *dead?*

What did that even mean?

And what did it mean in my immediate future?

My stomach fell between my feet and I scratched at my arms, the hairs standing on end.

I wasn't sure I wanted to be in this future.

I wondered if maybe they would do me the courtesy of letting me get back in the fridge and waking me up when they found a future more to my liking.

The gate was right in front of us now and shimmered like the surface of a lake.

The voice came over the system again:

"Please hold. There's a malfunction on the other end of the gateway."

The Docile tensed, his body becoming hard.

I wondered why he should be afraid now, his eyes bulging to their natural size, his tiny hands gripping the controls so tight his green skin turned

yellow.

“What’s the malfunction?” he said in a slow and measured tone.

There was a pause before the voice spoke again:

“We are talking with the other station now. It could take some time.”

The Docile’s shoulders grew even harder, his weak jaw muscles tightening until I could see the cords in them. “We need to be on our way. If that destination is not available then the next closest one is acceptable.”

There was another pause. “The closest station is a thousand lightyears. It’s too far. Please dock with the station. We’ll do our utmost to ensure your wait will not be too long.”

The Docile looked at me.

In his expression I saw not fear, but something else, something darker and more sinister...

And when his eyes lowered to my neck, my heart pulsed faster, pumping my muscles with the need to fight and stop him from doing whatever it was he was thinking.

Then he nodded and began to relax. “Understood. Docking now.”

He shifted the controls and took us towards the station.

Whether there really was a better distant future for me or not, I didn’t know but I *did* know that my present couldn’t be much worse.

I didn’t trust this doctor.

Not one bit.

QEB

“HE’S DOCKING NOW,” the security officers at the gateway station informed me.

I sighed with relief, a huge weight lifting from my shoulders.

It had taken some doing but a quick call to the Colonel—requiring me to break all protocols and code in the book—had given him the information he needed to pull enough strings to have the security staff temporarily shut down.

But it would not last long—after all, the gateway stations were run by private companies and would not sacrifice profit any longer than necessary.

It was only because there wasn’t another ship lined up behind the shuttle Ella was on that they agreed to it at all.

More valuable than money were favors to the Klizar.

And now, thanks to me, the human military owed the greediest and most self-serving species in the entire galaxy.

It was only for the Klizar’s nature that the Irregular hadn’t killed Ella already—he would know they would not shut down operations for anything.

Almost anything.

They had agreed to fifteen minutes and not a nanosecond longer.

“You know what that means?” the Colonel snarled at me.

“I have ten minutes,” I said. “Tops.”

It would be enough.

It *had* to be enough.

I needed to get on the station, find Ella and her kidnapper, and deal with him.

I had to take him down fast.

“I hope she’s worth it,” the Colonel had told me as he ended the call.

There was a sharpness to his words that could have cut.

The threat was clear:

If I failed to save Ella’s life within the next ten minutes, I would be held personally responsible.

No pressure.

I raced toward the waystation where a dozen ships were already docked.

The gateway wasn’t only a hybrid jump point but a place for those on extremely long journeys to take a break for a few hours—sometimes even *days*.

It was a place where many cultures mixed, the intergalactic crossroads where all sorts of cuisines and entertainment came together.

Some of the more popular gateway stations heaved with customers.

Fortunately, this gateway station was not a hotspot.

There were barely enough colonies nearby for a waystation to even be installed but the ever-opportunistic Klizar always thought long-term and knew several mining operations would soon be set up nearby.

And so they had parked their station here, waiting for when the space traffic would arrive.

I docked with the station and hurried into the main welcome center.

It was alive with customers wearing big grins, their bellies full and their brains hooked on their favorite distraction of choice.

“Welcome!” an overly enthusiastic but cute Glee’ar said.

Her pink hair was styled into twin pigtails.

She held up an old-fashioned board that flashed with holographic images of food, entertainment, sports, and everything else the gateway station offered.

“What are you looking for?” she beamed. “We cater to every taste!”

Her smile would have been welcoming if I wasn’t in such a hurry. “Nothing—” I said before having an idea. “In fact, you might be able to help me.”

She beamed even broader. “Service is my purpose!”

“A friend of mine arrived just a few minutes ago—a Docile with a human female with blonde hair. You don’t know where they went, do you?”

Her brow drew down into an expression of deep thought and she pursed her lips. “No. I’m afraid not.”

My hopes sank. “Then where do you think they would go?”

“A Docile?” she said, cocking her head to one side. “Dociles are extremely peaceful creatures. They wouldn’t be interested in sports or other forms of entertainment. They would head to the canteen where they could find a delicious array of nutritious gels and—”

“That’s great! Thanks!”

I pushed through the crowd, heading directly for the sports betting section.

The Irregular wasn’t a *real* Docile.

That meant he would be *very* interested in sports—the bloodier, the better.

And that’s where I found him—standing at the kiosk, putting down a bet.

Ella stood beside him, her arms folded, cupping her elbows, eyes glancing back and forth nervously.

And I could see why she was nervous.

A small group of large Meerak eyeballed her, smacking their lips and taking great gulps from their tankards of alcohol.

It was only a matter of time before trouble erupted and Ella would get hurt.

I marched toward her.

As the Docile turned to Ella with a broad grin across his scaly lips, I immediately dropped my head, raised a hand to block my face, and turned to approach at a different angle.

I worked my way around in a semicircle, using Ella’s body to block any view the Irregular might have of me.

I kept my head low and entered a half-crouch and instead of slowing down as some might have done, I sped up, racing towards him.

The closer I could get to him, the easier it would be to take him out.

Then one of the drunkard aliens grabbed Ella by the arm and yanked her toward him, thrusting his thick purple tongue toward her, dripping with saliva.

As he yanked her from her position, I was exposed.

It took a moment for the fake Docile’s eyes to register what it was seeing.

A Feral racing toward him, brow scowling, hands open, ready to attack.

He dropped his betting slip, snatched Ella back from the alien drunk, and seized a knife from a diner who yelled:

“Hey, asshole—”

The Irregular jammed it to Ella’s neck, and for a moment, I froze,

thinking he had just ended her life...

But he hadn't.

Not yet.

He held the blade at her throat.

Ella, shocked, became stiff as a board.

The Irregular's eyes were broad and wide, able to see at a much wider range of angles than mine, and dared me to take another step forward.

I was less than two yards from them.

"I knew it was a ruse!" he spat.

Clearly not enough of one to stay aboard his ship, I thought.

If he had truly known, he would have kept an eye out for my ship that would dock soon after his.

Then he could have peeled away and disappeared gone before I even knew they hadn't stepped off his ship.

Ella whimpered, so terrified that tears ran down her cheeks.

"What do you want with her?" the Irregular growled. "Something of great value, I should think."

"Leave her out of this," I snapped. "This is just between you and me."

I took a step forward but the creature tightened his grip on the blade.

A single pearl of blood sprang from Ella's throat and ran down the smooth skin of her neck.

The scent of her bleeding was so strong it almost knocked me off my feet.

It came in waves, slamming into me, so strong I could virtually *taste* her fear.

The Irregular caught my reaction and his eyes—impossibly—broadened even further.

Then, gripping Ella even closer, he sniffed her.

But his senses were weak—they had been engineered that way by scientists—after all, what use did a slave have for senses?

He might as well have sniffed nothing at all.

But he seemed to realize the significance of her now...

Or at least a *hint* of it.

"She's the Savor?" he said. "That's just a myth. There's no such thing."

I just glared at him, not validating what he had said, and instead looked for any sign he might drop his guard, even just for a moment.

But his grip was tight, the blade so sharp, her neck so close...

I could smell her sweat, virtually feel the pump of the blood in the veins

at her neck.

“Then she’s worth a great deal more than they told me,” the Irregular snarled.

Ella whimpered and her eyes rose to mine.

And stuck, like a magnet.

We’d locked onto each other and I could see nothing else.

Neither could she.

I couldn’t bear the idea of her scent being snuffed out for good, for it to be removed from the universe.

And despite the prophecies, despite her purpose, despite her being the Savor, the one I was certain was going to rescue us from oblivion...

I knew that there was a far *greater* fate for her than that.

A fate with me.

And that fate could not end now.

Then the Irregular, finding some vestige of humanity within himself that ought to have been bred out of him, lowered the knife.

Ella looked down at him and hurried forward.

She tumbled and slipped.

I bent down and caught her before she fell to the floor.

I glared up at the Irregular in case this was some kind of sick and twisted joke and his real attack was still yet to come.

In his eyes, I saw something else.

Mirth.

“If she is truly what you believe her to be... then there is no payment high enough. Good luck, my friend. You’re going to need it.”

Then he raised the blade to his own throat and slit it.

The smile remained on his face for a moment but faded slowly as his green blood dribbled over his chest.

He crumpled to his knees and collapsed.

I clutched Ella close.

She was a sobbing mess in my arms.

“It’s all right,” I said soothingly, making soft shushing noises. “You’re safe now. You’re safe. I won’t let anything harm you. Not ever.”

That didn’t stop her from bawling her eyes out though.

I picked her up and carried her through the assembled crowd, senses on high alert in case any of them was in cahoots with the Irregular.

But they just watched, awestruck.

I carried Ella onboard my ship and put in our new destination.
The Irregular's words came back to haunt me:
Good luck my friend.
Luck? I thought. *It was going to take a great deal more than that...*

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PART II

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BECOMING THE SAVOR

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ELLA

I'M IN A NIGHTMARE.

I'm in a nightmare.

I'm in a nightmare.

I kept shutting my eyes, clenching them tight, muttered a prayer, and told myself that when I opened them, I would *not* be in this place, not be in this *hell* I had awoken in.

I wasn't in the future, I told myself, I really *am* only in a nightmare!

A nightmare was so much better than this reality.

But when I opened my eyes, I still found myself in this place.

I had suffered an extremely long cryo-sleep, been kidnapped by some strange little alien freak with huge bulging eyes, and had a knife put to my neck (I could still feel the cold kiss of the blade against my skin).

When I reached up and felt where he had nicked me, I could still recall the blood peeling down my neck.

It wasn't an illusion.

It wasn't a dream.

It was real.

No matter how much I wished it wasn't.

And I was living it.

How the *fuck* did I end up in this situation?

That was the question that I asked myself *most* frequently.

Why me?

Why did *I* have to be the one stuck in this time and place?

Why couldn't I be like the other women who had gone to a Seeding Facility, enjoyed their week-long hump, and then come away Seeded and

ready to give birth to a gorgeous new baby?

Why couldn't I be one of *those*?

Why did *I* have to be the unfortunate one?

Always?

When my kidnapper—and it was hard to even reconcile the fact I had indeed been kidnapped—had released me and pushed me forward, I had fallen into the arms of the Krev that'd rescued me.

He was big and muscular, everything the kidnapper was not.

When our eyes had latched onto each other, I thought I had heard a physical *click*.

I felt attracted to him—not only physically, as who *couldn't* be drawn to his exotic blue scaly skin and shining golden irises and thick black horns that jutted like a virile bull's?—but also on a deeper level somehow, in a way I did not quite understand.

His eyes had latched onto mine, and mine onto his.

I had fallen into them, becoming completely calm and patient beneath his steadfast gaze.

There was a strength in them, a sense of command, of power and control.

And I wanted to be a part of it.

I felt comfortable in his arms, but even he could not prepare me for what I had seen next:

The kidnapper had raised his blade to his *own* throat and slit it wide open, the blood gushing to the floor in a steady cascade, swiftly followed by his body.

I had screamed—not out of sadness for his passing as I neither knew him nor wanted to—but because of the pure shock of the moment.

Just a few words from my Krev rescuer and the creature had opted to end his own life.

I had *no idea* what was going on.

I wasn't even sure I *wanted* to know.

My muscle-bound protector carried me through that strange entertainment center and onto his ship, and we set off.

He ran a full medical check on me, ensuring I was not harmed.

He spoke soothingly, softly, but I did not register his words

I didn't think he was attempting to pry into my private life.

If he had, I likely would have burst into tears and formed a messy puddle on the medical table.

“You’re all clear,” he said, raising his eyes to mine.

I just stared at the floor between my feet, swinging my feet back and forth like a child at a playground.

I continued to shut my eyes every few seconds, muttering that same prayer over and over again that it all really was just a terrible dream and that soon I would wake up and everything would be back to normal.

He tapped me gently on my knee, starting me from my daydream.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he said firmly. “Everything is going to be fine. I know what happened to you was a shock. I know it’s not something you likely experienced much in your past life before waking up here but I can tell you things *will* get better. *Much* better.”

I sensed that hadn’t been the first time he had said such comforting words to me but I had been so numb and emotionally distant that my mind hadn’t processed it.

“Now, how about we get some food in your belly?” he said, offering up his blue scaly hand.

He watched my expression carefully and, as my eyes lit up at the suggestion, my stomach joining in the duet, growling louder than I could ever recall it doing so before, he smiled.

It was a very warm smile—and genuine.

Nothing like the fake ones the kidnapper had given me, or the distant, vacant smiles from the Docile nurses who had taken care of me earlier.

It was *real*, genuine and I pulled more than a little confidence from it.

It took a moment for me to take his proffered hand.

He helped me off the medical bed and led me into the living-cum-kitchen area of his ship.

It was not a huge ship but *much* bigger than the kidnapper’s shuttle.

It was also clean and tidy, without pointless things rattling on the walls, and did not feel like it was going to fall apart at any moment.

It felt steady and well-made—much like its owner.

He reached towards a machine built into the wall, its screen flashing with images.

As he reached over, his shirt pulled tight across his back and shoulders.

I couldn’t help but notice how muscular he was.

I immediately pulled my eyes away as he turned to smile at me. “This is a replicator. I think you had basic designs in your time. This one is far more advanced. It can learn from the feedback your body gives. As you eat, it

watches you and analyzes your body's reaction to the food. It does this so it can alter the meal's ingredients so each time you eat, it only gets *better*. It also changes the ingredients depending on the situation.

"If you've been exercising, it will give you more nutrients for your body to absorb. If you feel sluggish, it will counteract that effect too. The really cool thing is that even if you order a different meal, it will use the same data it has on you and the meals you both enjoyed and disliked and will create new ones for you. Want to give it a try?"

The screen flashed with various images of strange and bizarre meals—none particularly appetizing to me.

Then one flashed up I *did* recognize and it made my heart soar.

I pointed at it. "That one! I want the lasagna!"

The male—and I still did not know his name—smiled. "Then lasagna it is."

He pronounced it "laz-ag-na" but it sounded cute so I didn't correct him.

"In fact," he added, "I might try it myself. Maybe you can tell me all about it as we eat."

He looked up at the wall. "Computer. Two laz-ag-na's, please. Make them both with the standard menu and remove any previous preferences."

He turned to me and smiled. "I want to try the *genuine* thing."

The computer beeped and a few seconds later, there it was, the food piping hot on a twin set of trays.

The Krev male picked them up and carried them over to the single large dining table.

We sat together side-by-side.

I didn't wait and dug into the food immediately.

I was pleased to find a small plate of garlic bread as a side dish too.

I scooped up a piece, ladled the lasagna onto it, and bit into it.

I rolled my eyes in deep satisfaction, admitting a low groan of pleasure I didn't want to stifle.

The male spooned up some of the lasagna into his mouth and considered the flavor as it ran over his tastebuds.

His eyes illuminated before he dug into his meal with the same relish I did.

We made a mess, although I thought he only did that because he saw the way *I* was eating.

He didn't want to show me up or make me feel embarrassed.

He was a *whole lot* different from the kidnapper, I thought.

But I was still under his charge.

He still had me on his ship, was still taking me somewhere I had no knowledge of, for a purpose he had not yet shared.

And I wondered if my situation had really gotten any better than it had been.

Still, the food was better.

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QEB

SHE WAS A TERRIFIED, quivering, shuddering mess.

I hated seeing her that way, but under the circumstances, I thought she was recovering very well.

It wasn't every day that you were Defrosted, kidnapped, and rescued!

She had sobbed all the way when I carried her back to my ship, and remained silent as I ensured she was in good condition—she was in better than good condition, she was in *perfect* condition.

It was a relief as not everyone who awoke from such a long sleep recovered with such robust health.

Some didn't take it, their bodies going into shock, and could not be revived.

Ella appeared to experience none of those issues.

Still, she was tightly coiled within her shell, and if I was going to tell her everything she needed to know in order for me to complete my mission, I needed to make her see I was of no danger to her at all.

When her eyes lit up at my suggestion we get something to eat, I knew I had hit upon the right idea.

The taste of the laz-ag-na was delicious!

Far more subtle than traditional Krev food which tended to be spicy with flavor and still very much alive on the plate.

This laz-ag-na was dead and inert but reminded me of the meals we were fed in the training camps as young Feral soldiers.

Perhaps it was the human part of me, but I simply could not get enough of the stuff.

Once we were done, I leaned back, so my stomach was more comfortable.

I had gone back for seconds and even considered going for thirds but wanted to be able to *walk* afterwards, so I decided not to.

“Do you want some dessert?” Ella asked.

My eyes widened to the size of a Docile’s at the suggestion.

I shook my head and rubbed my belly. “Maybe later. I couldn’t eat another bite right now!”

“I’m glad you liked it,” she said, already smiling and beginning to come out of her shell the way I hoped.

I leaned forward and extended my hand to hers in the traditional human fashion. “My name is Qeb, by the way. I don’t think we’ve formally met.”

Ella hesitated before taking it and shook it gently, and only for an instant.

But the touch of her skin against my palm sent a shiver through me and my urges through the roof.

It was my Steyatt, after all.

One added benefit of the laz-ag-na was that it concealed part of her natural scent—but only *partially*.

With each bite, I might have been consuming her, and not the meal.

I tried to shake my head of such thoughts but they would not abate.

And so, hastily reaching for my communicator, I ejected Numb-er and washed it down with a gulp of water.

“What’s that for?” Ella asked, motioning towards the pill I had just taken.

“Oh... It’s for a... condition I have,” I said.

I wasn’t ready to explain to her it was her *scent* that was having such an effect on me that I needed drugs!

There was a great deal I needed to explain to her before that.

Ella looked thoughtful for a moment before glancing at her lap and running her fingers across her palms. “Can I ask you something?” she said.

Here we go, I thought.

She was going to ask me one of the million questions that must have been running through her mind non-stop. “Of course.”

“Why did he kidnap me? And why did he kill himself?”

It was one of *many* questions I expected her to require an answer to, and as it had happened most recently, I supposed it was at the forefront of her mind.

“He was an assassin,” I informed her. “He was loyal only to the highest bidder. He has no honor and did what he did because it was in his nature.”

“Then who hired him?”

“Actually, I don’t know. It could be any of our enemies.”

“‘Our’? Who is ‘our’?”

“Humans. It might not look like it, but I am actually human. At least, partially. My genes were spliced with those of a Krev. You saw the history video at the Defrosting Zone, right? About how humanity was forced underground? How scientists began to splice human genes with those of alien races? Well, I’m one of those. I’m not First Generation Feral, but Fifth.”

“Fifth Generation?” she said, frowning.

I nodded. “With each generation, improvements are made, whatever is required at the time. You see, initially, the Dociles were created to be everything humanity needed. They are naturally submissive and take orders without question. They are in a constant state of fear, as you probably noticed by their disposition. That’s why they could never be trained to become great warriors, no matter how hard the Scientists tried.

“They learned to use weapons all right, but they lacked the killer instinct required to break alien armies. That was why we were created. The Ferals. So we could fight in their place. The First Generation was extremely wild and prone to berserker rages—”

“What’s a berserker rage?”

It was easy to forget Ella knew nothing of our terminology or recent history—or even, to us, our relatively distant past—so I would have to take it slow in explaining the details to her.

“A berserker rage is when Feral blood is pumping so hard, his anger so visceral and strong, that he loses control. He goes into full bloodlust. In such a state, he ignores all orders, all mission objectives, and goes out on his own, killing anything and everything in his path.”

“It this... bloodlust,” she said, hesitating over the terminology, “common? Is it something you... Ferals still have?”

I nodded. “Yes. But it happens rarely now, and only in the most extreme cases. It seems that no matter how much the Scientists try to edit our genes, they simply cannot get rid of every aspect of the Krev they do not want. They could not have chosen a better species to splice human genes with to create a warrior but with the positives also come the negatives and they cannot be removed completely.”

“Then... you were created in a lab?” Her eyes widened and she raised a hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply you were any less of alive, or without a soul or anything like that...”

“No offense taken. We *are* alive, and that is all that matters. And the fact we can create our own thoughts, create our own memories, means we *do* possess a soul. We are still biological creatures, still created in much the same way as natural humans—although we don’t have a single mother and father as you had in the past. We have *multiple* mothers and fathers. Their genes were spliced together too, to create the most perfect specimen possible, and they, in turn, were spliced with the most perfect Krev genes they could create.”

“Does that mean you’re clones? That you’re all the same?”

She had hit upon one of the most difficult subjects to come to terms with over the years.

No one liked knowing—or at least *believing*—they were not unique, but as I had the same genetic input as all my brothers, we *were* like clones.

I had come to terms with it long ago and my conclusion was this:

“When we’re first born—created might be a more accurate term—we were identical. But from the very first moment we opened our eyes and formed our very first memories, we each experienced life differently. The more memories we have, the more experiences we endure, the more different we become. It’s like human twins—a phenomenon all but impossible now. Those twins have the same genetic material and yet you would never say they are the same person. It’s the same with us. The older we become, the more thoughts we have, the more experiences, skills, training... So we can never be the same person. I have opinions on subjects my brothers do not share.”

Ella nodded and fixed me with a hard look and said:

“You haven’t explained why the assassin killed himself.”

I had avoided that for a very good reason:

“He killed himself because you are the Savor.”

“The Savor? You don’t mean Savior?”

I shook my head. “Savor is the correct term. Those that can scent you experience it as tasting, like consuming a delicious meal. That’s why you are the Savor, not the Savior. Although, technically, you are that as well.”

Ella just blinked. “Wait, wait. I’m arguing about semantics, meanwhile I miss the meaning of what you’re telling me. I’m the Savor? What does that mean?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Then I stood up, which my bulging stomach stuffed with delicious laz-ag-na now allowed me to do, and extended a hand toward Ella. “To properly

explain that, I need you to come with me.”

Ella hesitated for less than the blink of an eye.

I was not so naïve as to believe it was because she trusted me.

I also didn't believe she wouldn't try to run at the first chance presented to her—although I was sure she would soon realize that in this future world where she knew no one and understood nothing, there really was nowhere for her to run to.

She took my hand because her interest had been piqued and she wanted to learn the truth about herself and why she was here.

But explaining it sure wasn't going to be easy.

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ELLA

HE WAS *COMPLETELY* different from the kidnapper, that was for sure.

Every time I asked a question, he came back with a response both thoughtful and patient, ensuring to take his time to explain in as much detail as possible.

As someone not from this time, he had to explain the background of everything first.

I had a lot to process and appreciated his patience with me.

When he offered his hand and I had willingly taken it, not feeling forced or cajoled to do so, it was a terrific step forward in my self-confidence.

He led me through his ship and took me down a long ramp, leading to the belly of the ship.

The moment we entered the room at the bottom of the steps, the sensors clicked on and the lights illuminated a huge room.

The ship, it turned out, was *much* larger than I had at first thought.

We were in a cargo hold, although, at present, it was holding very little.

A single large box sat in the middle of the room, a tarpaulin draped over it, concealing whatever was inside.

And there *was* something inside, something *alive*.

I could hear it shuffling to and fro and I couldn't help but wonder what it was.

"I told you about how the Ferals were created," Qeb said. "About how they were prone to bloodlust and losing control of themselves. Well, *this* is a First Generation Feral..."

He pulled the tarpaulin off the box.

A creature lurched at me, slamming into the bars of the cage, reaching

through with his thin but strong arms in his attempt to grab me.

I screamed and leapt back, lost my footing, and fell hard on my ass.

Qeb had already taken the precaution to ensure I was far enough away from the cage for the creature not to reach me.

And a *creature* was what it was.

It was as different from Qeb—who claimed he was also a Feral—as he was to me.

The First-Gen Feral had more of a human shape, skinny, but brawny and strong.

On his head jutted two small horns that were nothing like the regal majesty that adorned Qeb's.

Its hair was scraggy and long, its body emaciated and dirty.

Various pipes fed into the cage and must have been how it was fed food and water.

The creature spied Qeb out the corner of its eye and immediately shifted position to lunge for him instead.

It banged its head against the bars of its cage, not seeming to notice any pain it might have felt.

It didn't speak and instead growled under its breath.

"This is a... Feral?" I said, unsure of what I was really looking at.

Qeb nodded. "This is my ancestor. As Scientists can genetically modify humans every day, the generation cycle is *much* faster than those found in nature."

"Why does he look more human than you? I mean, he doesn't act human... except for maybe someone in a prison or mental home!"

"At the time, it was believed that by giving the Feral more human DNA than Krev, they would be more like humans and thus, more conscious and able to appraise situations, solve problems, and, more important, follow orders. They wished only for the physical superiority of the Krev and removed entire sections of their genetic code. Mostly that was done as a way to control their blood lust. Instead, they got the *opposite* of what they had aimed for. A creature with no real consciousness, and completely uncontrollable. They were also bred with no way to give birth to offspring as a way to control their population number."

He suddenly yelled at the creature, causing me to jump, but the little beast paid him no attention and continued to rage inside its cage.

"But in this creature, the Scientists saw an opportunity and decided to

unleash it as our army. We needed an army and we needed one *fast*. And so they created them and released them against our enemies. They performed well enough, often preferring to attack with their own teeth and claws than the advanced weaponry we gave them. But they served their purpose.

“The Scientists created waves and waves of them, releasing them throughout the galaxy. They would crash land on a moon or planet and wreak havoc. We managed to take over some colonies. It got humanity noticed. The ferocity of the Ferals created a fear that spread throughout the galaxy. *No one* wished to face them in battle, and so everything went to plan.”

I sensed a “but” or “until” and I wasn’t disappointed when Qeb continued:

“Until the Ferals began to breed in the wild.”

I blinked in surprise. “Breed? I thought you said they were engineered so that was impossible?”

Qeb nodded. “It was supposed to be. They were never meant to pass on their genetic material naturally. They were meant to be used and discarded, but nature had other plans. When you play Creator, you have to expect the unexpected. Some unknown female, likely created as an Irregular, managed to give birth. Even more surprising, she actually managed to raise it.

“The Feral population began to explode out of control. Humans bombed the Ferals, attempting to wipe them out. But they couldn’t destroy them all. And so, the Scientists decided to create a Second Generation Feral to hunt down the original generation.”

I snorted.

Qeb cocked his head at me. “You think this funny?”

“It’s hilarious. The Scientists made a mistake in creating the Ferals... and think they can solve it by creating *another* generation of them!”

Qeb thought for a moment before a smile spread across his face. “Yes. I can see the futility of that. But this time, the Scientists decided to try to make them less susceptible to bloodlust and better able to control themselves. They hit upon a remarkable discovery: By allowing the creatures to mate, in other words, by letting them keep their need for the Krev Steyatt, they became far more self-aware and controlled.”

I looked up at him. “You’re able to mate?”

He nodded. “Every modern Feral can. In fact, it’s necessary for our survival.”

Then a thought occurred to me:

“Why are you telling me this? Why do you have a Feral in a cage in your cargo hold?”

My mouth felt dry as I realized he would not be telling me this if it was not for a very specific reason.

He took a step toward me and the Feral growled and traced each of his steps.

I continued to reach, stretching between the bars in an attempt to grab us—and almost succeeded.

“I’m telling you because we need your help,” he said. “You were Defrosted from deep sleep because we believe you are the Savor. You have the unique ability to control these creatures. They can scent you, sense you, smell you. It’s overpowering. Your scent is the only thing that can control the Ferals.”

I took a step back. “Control? How?”

Qeb followed me, taking another step forward. “By controlling your scent, you can command them to stand down and not attack us. The Ferals have mated in the wild and become so numerous they threaten the very Empire itself. They’re planning an attack on the Capital and, if they succeed, it will wipe away all hope of our civilization.”

He took a deep breath. I had already lost mine.

“We need you to save us,” he said. “To save *all* of us.”

It was a sledgehammer to my heart and mind, and I stumbled back, shaking my head.

I looked at the creature in the cage, the monster that had no sense of itself at all.

And he wanted me to *control* this thing?

“I can’t do that,” I said. “You must have the wrong person.”

“There is no one else—”

I took another step back. “You’re asking for the impossible. I can’t do this. I’m just me!”

And I turned and ran.

QEB

I HAD DONE my best to relay the information as methodically as possible, but at the end of the day, what I had to tell her was *always* going to come as a shock.

As I watched her turn and run, her back rapidly shrinking into the distance, I felt like a failure.

I wanted to give Ella more time to come to terms with what I had told her but it was time we simply did not have.

I jogged after her before she ascended the ramp out of there.

“Ella!” I called after her. “Ella... Wait...”

She looked over her shoulder, turned, and stopped.

I was relieved she didn’t immediately bolt off even faster.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds...” I said.

Ella shook her head. “You’ve got to be kidding! You *must* have me confused with someone else.”

I shook my head. “I have not.”

“How can you know I’m this Savor you keep talking about? I’ve never done *anything* like this in my entire life!”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re not capable of it. Throughout history, somebody has always stepped up, someone has always come forward to lead, to do things they themselves never thought they were capable of. They each had a destiny to fulfill, and right here, right now, this is your destiny.”

Ella shook her head more aggressively. “No. You are *wrong*. I *read* about adventures like this, I don’t *live* them! I haven’t even been abroad much! I’m not a thrill seeker or adventurer. Why don’t you pick someone like that? I’m *sure* there must be one in those cryo-tanks!”

She was panicking, marching back and forth, running a hand through her thick hair.

It distressed me to see her in such a state.

“Let me show you how I know you are the right female,” I said.

I raised my forearm and showed her the communication device.

Then I pressed the button underneath, revealing the Numb-er pills I had been popping like they were going out of fashion.

“Earlier, you asked me about these pills. And I told you they’re for a condition I have. Well, *you* are my condition. I am as much a Feral as the creature in that cage. It can scent you... just as I can. The only difference between us, the only thing stopping me from ravaging you the way he wants... is these capsules.

“I take them because otherwise I would end up like him. I would go into a berserker rage, become full of bloodlust, unable to control myself. All my attention would be focused *entirely* on you. I am in Steyatt and I sense it keenly.

“I’ve been searching for the past five years for the female that might possess the scent that could save us all. And for five years, I never caught even a *whiff* of it. *Never*. Until today.”

Ella had stopped pacing, her hands braced on her hips, her glare having melted into a softer tone of interest.

“You... can smell my scent too?” she said uncertainly.

She lowered her nose to her armpit and sniffed.

She came away with a look of disgust on her face. “This? Seriously?”

“I could scent it the moment your tank was raised from the holding bay at the cryo-facility. And yes, I am just as susceptible to it as every other Feral.”

Ella’s breath began to slow.

I could see her heart rate was also easing in accordance with it as the veins in her neck pulsed at a lower pace.

“Okay,” she said, raising her hands. “Let’s say I do believe you... that I am this Savor of yours—which I’m not ready to admit just yet, by the way... *How* would it work? How do I control it? It just comes off of me, right?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “No one does. All I’m asking is that you try. All we’re *all* asking is for you to try. Just channel it in whatever way feels natural to you. There aren’t any textbooks on this subject, no instructions or guidelines to follow. It’s something that will come to you naturally.”

Ella shot me a look. “You think you can call *any* of this natural?”

“There’s nothing more natural than finding a mate attractive,” I said simply.

For some reason, Ella’s cheeks blushed red, before she shook her head and set her shoulders.

She turned to the creature in the cage on the other side of the cargo hold.

And just glared at it.

The creature grumbled, making popping sounds with its lips and peering about, disinterested.

It no longer reached through the bars—even it could tell there was no way it could possibly reach us at this distance.

I placed my hand on Ella’s back and gently eased her forward. “Let’s try getting a little closer. Maybe it will work better that way.”

“You think?” Ella said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Please,” I said, motioning forward.

She let me guide her.

The scent of her was truly stronger now that she was focusing on it, seeming to emanate off her in a series of powerful waves.

I reached for another Numb-er and downed it.

If I wasn’t careful, I was going to overdose.

Ella focused even harder on the creature in the cage... and then something strange began to happen.

The creature stopped peering at the bars of its cage and seemed to relax.

Then it backed away, turned three times in a circle, and came to a stop.

It sat down, legs crossed, and shut its eyes.

It even rocked back and forth gently.

My eyes bulged.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

I had *never* seen a Feral act this way.

I turned to Ella, who maintained that look of concentration, sweat sliding down her face.

“You’re doing it!” I said. “You’re really doing it!”

Ella lost concentration for a moment and the creature growled, its eyes opening.

It shifted position to get up but Ella focused again and took another step forward.

The creature *should* have launched to its feet, *should* have raced toward

the bars and grasped at us...

Instead, it did shut its eyes once more and returned to its meditative state.

She had—somehow—hacked the creature’s genetic code, filling in the spaces where the Steyatt should have been.

She was controlling it.

She had turned a Feral into a Docile.

Then Ella stopped, the sweat now like rivulets down her face.

She collapsed on the spot, but I was there to catch her.

I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her and squeezing her tight.

I loved the feel of her soft body against mine.

The scent of her was overpowering even now, after ten capsules, and my cock hardened to rock.

The smell of her was so strong I couldn’t remain so close without losing control.

I broke the embrace and placed Ella on her feet.

I kept the smile on my face, but the truth was, being so close to her without being able to act on my desires was not something to smile about.

It was a *crying shame* I could not enjoy her the way I so deeply, desperately craved.

I looked over at the creature, still curled in its meditative state and, for the first time in my life, felt jealous of the creature.

It had achieved a level of control I never had.

And with Ella around, I doubted I ever would.

“SHE DID IT, Colonel. She controlled the creature!”

The Colonel did not show the same level of excitement I did.

Instead, his features relaxed—just a little—those deep crevices at the corners of his eyes easing just a little.

It was the equivalent of someone—someone with a *normal* set of emotions—leaping for joy and screaming at the top of their lungs.

“That’s good news,” he said simply.

Then his expression turned grim, and in his features, I saw someone who was suffering from sleep deprivation. “There have been new developments. You may wish to sit down.”

I did, as it was not common for the Colonel to issue such words of warning when it wasn't warranted.

"What is it, sir?" I asked.

"The wild Feral army is on the move. They're growing closer to the Capital faster than we expected. We've been firing everything we have at them but nothing is slowing them down. If this girl is what you say she is, she may be our best—and *only*—weapon against them. I need her brought here *immediately*."

I shook my head. "She's not ready for that yet, sir. She managed to calm a *single* Feral but it took great concentration. She will *never* stop an entire Feral army. Not without more training. I need more time."

The Colonel slammed his huge fist on the desk, causing his holo-facade to shudder. "*We don't have more time, dammit!*"

He calmed himself before adding:

"Your concerns are duly noted but we need her here *now*."

I could not break the Colonel's command.

He had made his decision and there would be no changing his mind.

It would be easier to change the laws of the universe.

"Then maybe there's a way we can achieve both things at once," I said. "If she can pass a more difficult test, say, a larger group of Ferals, perhaps she could take on an entire army."

The Colonel pursed his lips and looked about ready to refuse my idea.

I interceded:

"If we dispatch her and she fails, the Ferals will know we have a new weapon against them. And next time, without the element of surprise, she might not work so well."

I saw a flicker in the Colonel's eye and a slight nod of his head.

It was enough.

"We don't have time to stage an elaborate test," he said. "Whatever you suggest, it has to be done on the fly."

"I have an idea for such a test," I said.

"What do you have in mind?"

There was only *one option* I could think of and it was not one I much relished carrying out.

It could very well cost both our lives...

ELLA

I WAS AS SHOCKED as Qeb when it happened.

One minute I was wondering how I was meant to do this—if I could even *do this!*—knowing Qeb *had* to be wrong.

How could *I* possibly be the Savor he was talking about?

How could *I* possibly be anything other than *me*?

And yet, as I stared into the eyes of that horrible caged creature, so consumed by its anger that it could not even control its own urges, I had to admit I did feel something.

And it wasn't disgust.

In fact, I thought the creature had felt it before even I had.

Even if I *was* the one who was meant to be having the effect, it was only off the creature's look of startlement that I knew I was doing *something* right.

What it was exactly, I wasn't sure.

I was willing myself to control the creature while wondering if there really was some kind of scent I was giving off that could positively affect these creatures.

If there was, it must come off me in waves, I reasoned, and enter the creatures' consciousness.

And if I could control it somehow, I could help alleviate its anger issues.

At first, the creature had blinked, as if I had struck it physically.

Then it cocked its head to one side, reminding me of a puppy staring into a mirror for the first time and realizing the thing staring back with the floppy ears, big eyes, and fuzzy face was not another dog at all, but itself.

Only this wasn't its reflection.

It was *mine*.

The reflected image looked like him but it smelled like me.

Straightaway, an image developed in the forefront of my mind of a kind of Ying and Yang, with the creature on one side and me on the other.

We were each half a circle and completed each other in a way it could not do so by itself.

Then, sensing I was having an effect on the creature, I pushed harder—and again, the word “push” wasn’t exactly the most accurate description, but it was the best I could think of.

I saw the creature, and felt it too, as he began to lower himself to the floor—at first hesitantly, and then faster—until it sat crossed-legged, eyes closed, and entered a peaceful state of mind.

The shock of what I had just done, of what I had just achieved, rocked my concentration, and straightaway, the creature lost its center—the center of me—and awoke once more.

Qeb was at my side and mumbled something under his breath—“You’re doing it! You’re doing it!”

Once I was done, feeling a little tired after the session, I collapsed and Qeb was there to catch me.

It felt good to be in a living creature’s arms.

Thankfully, that creature was the muscle-bound God that was Qeb.

Nestled between his powerful biceps and chest, I felt my own sense of warmth, *my own* other half, and realized I too had been missing something.

Perhaps we *all* were on some level.

Perhaps we *all* needed something else in the universe to complete us.

At that moment, my other half was Qeb.

I wasn’t ready to part from him when he suddenly jerked back.

I still longed for his touch...

And more.

It was probably just spillover from the fact I was meant to be in a Seeding Facility right now, meant to be having a wild time with an alien male, with him pumping me full of his delicious Seed so that I could have my child.

With the way my heart swelled and how alive I felt, I could have mated with him right then and there.

Instead, he took me upstairs and gave me a room so I could rest.

It wasn’t just the basic quarters of a member of his crew that might work on the ship, but Qeb’s own quarters.

The *captain’s* quarters.

He was gone before I could object, mumbling something about needing to send a quick message.

I sat down and, despite the lethargy I felt from my earlier exertions, felt alive and full of energy.

I was amped, shocked that I had done it.

I felt a subtle shift of the ship as we altered direction, heading for some other distant place.

When Qeb returned, he informed me:

“There’s a moon nearby that I would like for you to see.”

“I thought time was of the essence?”

He nodded. “It is. But that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy our journey on the way, does it?”

“No,” I said, reflecting his smile back at him, “I suppose not.”

We settled down on a moon called Daemon’s Demand, an unremarkable rock that took a full week to complete a single revolution.

It orbited a huge gas giant called Daemon’s Desire, that, other than its gorgeous marble-like colors that swirled across its surface, was much like any other world I had seen over the years.

It was remarkable how quickly you got used to your surroundings.

One minute, you were amazed, the next, you’d seen so many that they all seemed much alike.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, of course.

They were each unique in their own way, each as different as human thumbprints.

You could spend a *lifetime* simply enjoying the view of a single planet or moon, but the galaxy was far too interesting to do that.

We took a smaller shuttle that detached from the larger ship’s underside down into the atmosphere of the moon below.

Daemon’s Demand had remarkable pale blue skies that reminded me very much of Earth.

When I pointed this out to Qeb, he surprised me by mentioning he had never actually been to Earth.

I frowned at him. “But I thought the Capital was being attacked? I assumed it was Earth.”

He shook his head. “Earth stopped being the Capital a long time ago. It is not ideally situated for a civilization that wishes to dominate the cosmos. It was designated a POS—that’s a Planet of Significance. It’s no longer the

Capital.”

“Oh,” I said, a little disappointed. “And what’s the Capital like?”

Qeb beamed. “With a brand-new canvas to work with, the human race has worked wonders. We made all our errors on Earth and developed a true wonder in the form of the Capital. All humans—whether they’re Pure or Modified, live in peace and harmony. We all work to achieve the greatness of our civilization and spread the word.”

I nodded but couldn’t deny the twisting sensation in the pit of my gut. “The human race has a, let’s say... uneven approach when it comes to sharing our values with other cultures.”

Qeb’s smile faded for a moment before broadening once more. “We must have learned a lot from any mistakes we made a long time ago. There’s no longer any fear we might harm others unintentionally.” He cocked his head to one side. “But you do not look convinced.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t think one way or the other,” I said. “But from what I know of humanity, things often don’t work out the way we intended.”

I decided to leave it there as Qeb adopted a thoughtful expression.

Suddenly, I was aware of the danger:

Modifieds had been *created*, and then educated, but who decided what would be studied?

Whatever they learned would dictate their thoughts and opinions, how they would live their lives, how they would interact with each other.

Everything.

History could be rewritten, changed, altered, even deleted.

Entire *centuries* could be wiped out.

Maybe it could have been done for the good somehow... but I didn’t think so.

After all, no matter how much Modifying these Scientists did, there was no denying the human desire for greater and greater power.

We descended down a natural slope and Qeb picked a spot.

He tossed a small square of cloth on the ground and it mushroomed into a perfect mat.

Then Qeb placed the hamper he had brought from the ship on it and opened it.

The first tub contained freshly-made lasagna.

Its aroma hit me full in the face.

It was a *huge* amount and even if we both wanted to stuff ourselves to bursting (as we had the other day), we couldn't have finished it off.

Then, he came out with more trays and bowls, more containers, each item appearing more delicious than the last.

Qeb froze when he removed a tub that appeared to contain soup.

He was peering into the dark shadowy recesses of a nearby copse of trees, his brow jutting with thought.

"What is it?" I murmured before he raised a hand for me to be quiet.

Then his expression began to abate and he relaxed.

"Nothing," he said. "I thought I heard something..."

Screeeeeeeech!

The Feral burst from the undergrowth clutching a shield and spear.

Bizarre images had been painted over its body in unintelligible shapes and designs.

He yelled at the top of his voice as he drew back his arm and released the spear.

Just when I thought I could relax, my destiny caught up with me once more...

QEB

THE CREATURE BURST from the undergrowth and hurled a spear at us.

I snapped it from the air, catching it before it could impale me in the chest.

I flexed my arm and snapped it in half.

Handling one of these creatures was not a challenge, but out here where they ran wild and free, they *never* traveled alone.

“Let’s go,” I said, grabbing Ella by the arm and dragging her away.

My ship was on the opposite side of the forest.

We would have to work our way around it in a circle if we wanted to reach it.

We ran into the woods and I instantly sensed more of the creatures ahead.

I shifted direction, gently nudging Ella with me, and wrapped my arm about her shoulders.

We emerge into a wide clearing.

It was just about the *last place* I wanted to be right at that moment.

But we needed to cross it if we wanted to escape, and the quickest way for us to cross it was to begin *immediately* and not hesitate a single moment longer than necessary.

As we ran through the knee-length grass, more of the creatures emerged on our left.

As we arced around, now running at a right angle to where we had initially entered the clearing, I could see the creatures were attempting to surround us.

But that wasn’t the end of my troubles.

Ella was trailing behind, struggling to keep up with my intense speed.

I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her after me.

Each time she lost her footing, I was there to raise her up so she could keep running.

But we could not keep going like this forever.

We circled back into the forest and hurried down a shallow hillside towards a small river.

It was not deep or fast flowing and crossing it should not be difficult.

The biggest challenge was going to be ensuring there were no creatures on the opposite side who might try to capture us there.

But there was going to be no way to know if they were there or not until we had crossed *at least* halfway.

And so, we continued to race as fast as our legs could carry take us.

The water was clean and slow-moving, barely reaching up to my waist.

Even Ella could cross it without any issues.

We reached the halfway point and I looked up.

I was relieved to find there were no wild Ferals on the other side.

Yet.

“Come on!” I yelled.

Ella must have found a dimple in the river’s floor as she sank beneath the surface and became completely submerged.

I reached under the surface, grabbed her, and dragged her out.

We made it to the other side, Ella coughing and sputtering.

And that’s when I spotted it.

How we might just be able to get out of there in one piece.

Up ahead was a small hole in the ground where the rock had given way.

It was a cave, and although I was unsure what might be inside it, I knew what was *outside* it!

I climbed into it first to ensure it was safe before motioning for Ella to follow behind.

I focused on the darkness, using what little light permeated these depths.

It was a small cave, dry, and nothing appeared to be of any danger inside it.

Outside, I heard them.

The creatures.

Rushing toward us—or was it away?

From this location, it was impossible to tell.

But they *were* running.

I pulled Ella in behind me.

If they attacked, at least they could only harm me and not her.

As we waited, we found they didn't approach.

They ran back and forth, and I realized with dawning hope that they had not yet spotted us.

I crept over to the hole and, careful to not raise my horns where the enemy could see them, I turned my head to one side to listen closely.

The creatures muttered to each other about how we had come this way, but that no one had yet seen us.

I turned to Ella. "Can you reach out to them? Can you control them?"

Ella's eyes bulged and she shook her head aggressively.

"We *both* know you can," I said.

"That was when there was just *one* of them!" she hissed. "Now, there are *lots* of them!"

"Your scent can affect any who come in contact with it," I told her. "That means the number makes no difference."

Still, Ella shook her head.

I reached out and gently stroked her cheek. "Try. Please. It might be our only chance of getting out of here."

Ella seemed to take some confidence in my touch. "Okay," she said hesitantly.

She approached the hole and shut her eyes.

She did, I assume, as she had done before.

She focused on her scent, pushing it outward.

I didn't know how she did what she did—in fact, I was *shocked* she had managed to do it the first time.

Although it was her destiny and it should have been expected, it nonetheless came as a huge surprise to me.

How could it not?

It was a myth that had long since been forgotten by most.

Ella became deathly still and took slow, controlled breaths.

I risked a glimpse out of the cave and saw the creatures jabbering amongst themselves, discussing plans on how to locate us.

I noticed no change in their countenance.

If Ella really was having an effect on them, I saw no evidence of it.

Finally, Ella shook her head. "I can't. There are too many of them. I can't do it!"

I was more than a little disappointed.

After all, if she could affect *one*, there was *no reason* she could not affect many more.

And if she could not get over this hurdle, then there was *no chance* she could affect an entire Feral army.

My hopes dwindled but I was not mad at her.

I took her in my arms. "It's all right," I said softly.

I realized Ella's well-being was as important to me as the mission.

Her vs. the entire human race.

I had felt certain she was capable of so much more than a single Feral.

That was why I had engineered this whole situation—so she would get the chance to explore her abilities.

I knew there were wild Ferals on this moon, knew it was only a matter of time before they would be attracted by our presence, or else by Ella's scent.

And if she couldn't control them?

Then I could handle two dozen of them by myself, and with my shuttle on standby to act as my backup, I could easily destroy the population on the entire planet if I wished.

It might have been a trick but it was the only way I could challenge Ella while ensuring her safety.

I could only console myself with the fact it had been necessary.

Necessary not only for her, but *our entire species*.

And now, I didn't know what to do.

ELLA

THE FERAL in the cage had been terrifying.

The lost and haunted look in its eye, the frantic way it scabbled around, reaching through the cage bars, reminded me of what it was like to lose your sanity and end up in a lunatic asylum.

But with it came the knowledge it was locked away in a cage, could not escape, and even if it did, Qeb would be there to protect me.

The ship, doubtless, also had defenses and weapons that could take the creature down, so there was never any chance I would come to any harm.

But out there on Daemon's Demand, these creatures were *wild* and there was a whole lot more than one of them.

They all had that same crazy look in their eyes, the same twin horns jutting from their brows, the same expression of loss... even if they did not look so defeated.

After all, they still had their freedom, and a purpose—they wanted to hunt us down and kill us.

Huddled together in that small, yet strangely cozy cave, Qeb had suggested I attempt to use my newly-acquired ability to control these things.

I tried to enter that same calm state I had earlier that'd given me success but no matter how hard I tried, my fear trumped my attempt at serenity and I was left unable to focus at all.

After all, when you feared for your life, when your existence was on the line and depended on using a skill that you'd *only just* learned—and not even come close to mastering!—then all ability to concentrate went out the window.

Qeb had seemed genuinely disappointed when I had informed him I

couldn't perform as I had on his ship, but still he welcomed me into his arms.

I hugged him and felt at least some calmness and peace within his presence.

I felt him do the same, his beaded scaly blue skin cool against mine.

Just what I need.

But there was another reaction too... below his waist, as his cock became rock hard and pressed against me.

When we parted, I looked up into his eyes and saw the same misty desire on his face that was doubtless depicted on mine.

I acted on instinct and rose up onto my toes, just as he leaned his head down and our lips met.

My hands reached for his narrow waist and felt at the muscled torso I had admired ever since I had first met him.

His hands did likewise, reaching down to my ass, and dwelt on it as if it were some kind of priceless artifact.

His lips were soft and yet his actions were firm, an intoxicating mix.

He tasted sweet as if he had enjoyed a nice pot of yogurt ice cream.

Neither of us said a word.

Neither of us *needed* to say a word.

We seemed to know instinctively that this moment was precious.

As so, with the wild Ferals ranging back and forth outside our little hiding spot, we made love.

He took his shirt off over his head and I did the same with mine.

He reached down and worked my bra free.

I let it fall to the floor but he snatched it up and hung it from a rock that protruded from the wall.

Then he bent down to suckle at my breasts.

He slathered my pert nipples with his black tongue, drawing a hungry moan from my lips.

I had written off any chance of being Seeded, of mating with an alien male, the moment I had awoken in this time and place.

None of the alien males I might have been chosen by at the Facility would still be alive today.

Even the longest-living creatures could not live beyond a hundred and eighty years.

I ached to have Qeb inside me.

I ached down to feel his massive member.

My, my.

I was desperate to feel him inside me.

Perhaps it was the fear talking, or the desperation at our situation, not knowing if we were ever going to survive this, but I longed for him, desired *anything* he could give me.

He slipped his hands under my pants and I unbuttoned them so he could push them down over my hips and to the floor.

He immediately ran his hand over my sex and I felt a shiver course through me.

He rubbed at me, gently at first, building up in tempo and pressure.

Electricity flowed through me, not unlike the ability had felt earlier when I'd successfully controlled the Feral.

An electric charge zipped through me, shimmering across the surface of my skin.

Unable to wait any longer, I pushed him back against the wall, turned my back to him, slid him inside me.

He crouched to give me the correct height.

He was big—*very* big—and I took him slowly, inching onto him bit by bit.

I placed my hands on the wall opposite and bounced on him as he placed his hands on my hips and helped drive me onto him deeper.

He grunted at the back of his throat.

It was all I could do not to follow suit.

We couldn't be too loud—not with those creatures outside looking for us.

I threw back my head, my hair flowing about my shoulders.

I gasped, realizing my friends had been right.

This *was* something I would enjoy, something I would never regret.

If nothing else, at least I had this.

The knowledge that no matter what, this moment, here, would *always* live with me.

Forever.

Even if our lives failed to last much longer than the next few moments.

Qeb pulled me off him, turned me around, picked me up so that our faces were the same height, and balanced my knees hooked on his elbows.

He speared me relentlessly from beneath.

It was all I could do to hold on and wrapped my arms around his neck.

My hands reached up to feel at his incredible horns that almost scraped

the top of the cave.

It was crazy, us rucking here in this cave when those creatures were desperate to kill us just a few yards away.

But that was also what made it so exciting.

The fact we *shouldn't* have been doing this, the fact that we should have been worried, scared, nervous about being discovered.

I hugged Qeb closer, drawing my breasts to his face.

I threw back my head and would have screamed if Qeb hadn't clasped a hand over my mouth to catch it.

He grunted too, burying his own aggression between the swell of my large breasts.

Then, I felt it.

The powerful thrust and emptying of his balls inside me, his Seed—his *delicious* Seed—feeling me up.

This was what I had gone to the Seeding Facility for.

This was what I needed.

And although it was a different time and place—and even Qeb—that had given it to me, I felt grateful I had, at last, received it.

He grunted for the last time, his huge pulsing cock diving deep inside me.

He sighed with relief, and we remained there for the moment, me perched on his elbows, resting.

The sweat trickling over my skin and between my breasts was already cooling in the cave's chill air.

He removed himself from me and placed me down on my feet.

We got dressed and shot shy glances at each other.

Neither of us could help but smile and burst into laughter, hastily stifling it with hands over our mouths.

We shared a hug, clutching each other close, smiling with affection, knowing this moment would live forever between us.

“How about we see if they've moved on yet or not?” Qeb asked. “After our little... break.”

He crept over to the entrance and slowly poked his head out.

Due to the lack of light coming through the entrance, I guessed it must have been nighttime already.

At least that might give us some cover—although these Feral creatures were likely better equipped and more experienced with the darkness than we were.

Especially out in a forest like this.

“Looks clear,” he said. “We’d better hurry. There’s no telling when they might come back.”

He helped me out of the hole and we waded across the river and ascended up the shallow incline we had come down earlier.

Qeb came to a stop.

With his superior senses, no doubt he had picked up on something I couldn’t.

I glanced back in the direction we had come but couldn’t make out the cave, already lost in the dim darkness.

I wasn’t even sure we would *be able to* find it again.

Qeb crept forward and around the trunk of a thick alien tree I had no name for.

I don’t know what he saw there, but his shoulders relaxed.

He shook his head in wonder and waved me over. “I think you should see this.”

I approached—slowly—and was amazed to find two Ferals sitting, legs folded, eyes shut, entranced and deep in meditation.

I shared a look with Qeb. “What’s going on?” I said.

“I think our lovemaking didn’t only benefit us...”

I looked back at the creatures sitting there, happily lost in their own little world.

At peace.

I was lost in my own world.

And it made no sense at all.

QEB

THE JOURNEY back to the ship was an uneventful one...

That is, if you counted finding dozens of wild Feral creatures sitting on the floor in a deep state of meditation *uneventful*...

Until now, it would have seemed impossible.

But Ella had done it once again.

This time, unknowingly.

I couldn't help but feel some satisfaction that it had actually been the *two of us* coming together that had done it this time.

No other explanation made sense.

After all, up until that moment, resigned to our fate as we were, the creatures had been rushing back and forth, hurrying to find and kill us.

Only one thing had been different between then and now, and that was our lovemaking.

Ella's scent had filled my every sense, my nostrils full to bursting with her, and enclosed within that small cavern, it had only *enhanced* her incredible scent.

Powerful and overwhelming, it had taken all of my self-control to not take her the *moment* we had entered that little hovel.

As I had reached for another Numb-er pill, I had hesitated, asking myself if that was really what I wished to do.

This could be the last private moment we got to share with each other.

After this, I would call my shuttle, which would descend to pick us up, and we would return to the Capital.

Was being numb to her really what I desired most?

The answer was an emphatic *no*.

I wished to smell her, to touch her, to feel her.

To taste her.

And when we embraced, fearing the worst, my arousal at full mast, I was pleased to find Ella reciprocating my affection.

I had taken her in my arms and felt at the soft flesh of her curves, the smoothness of her skin.

So unlike my scales that it couldn't be any more different.

When she backed me against the wall, I thought she had changed her mind, and when she had opted instead to slip me inside her, my senses had cried for joy.

I lost myself to her as her body wrapped around mine, pulsing around me, delicious and everlasting.

I licked her breasts and tasted the sweat that formed there.

It was like liquid manna from the heavens, containing her scent in its purest form.

It could be bottled and sold for a fortune.

Suddenly, she wasn't just a mission, something to achieve.

She was *everything*.

When I finally exploded inside her, filling her with my Seed, I realized I had never felt any greater sensation in my entire life.

I swore to myself it would not be the last time.

As we wove through the forest holding hands, smiling over at each other, I realized *nothing* would ever be the same again.

Not in my life, and not in humanity's either.

Ella had managed to control *an entire moon's population* of Ferals and that meant overpowering an entire army was at least *possible*.

Without a moment to spare, I returned us to my main ship and sent a quick message to the Colonel:

Mission accomplished. Heading to the rendezvous now.

He would want to know the details as the very fate of humanity might well be resting on it but I decided not to share them.

I input the coordinates for the Capital and returned to Ella, who stood staring out the window on the observation deck.

She was admiring the blinking stars and the depth of space. "It's really quite beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "We see stars all the time. Planets, moons, asteroids... And it becomes normal. Everyday. Nothing special. But really, when we stop and appreciate it, it really *is* special."

I ran my hand through her hair, thankful I could do that whenever I pleased now.

I drew her towards me and kissed her on the cheek. “Such a view is only the *second* most beautiful thing in the galaxy.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

I snorted. “There are no other girls.”

She wrapped her arms around my waist. “I never want this moment to end.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted. “But we’re heading to the rendezvous point now. Just above the Capital. We’ve already been given permission to enter. I’ll bring us in low, where we know the Feral army to be. We’ll have to get close. They will fire at us but it’s the only way to ensure you can have an effect on them.”

Ella nodded. “Okay. Just so long as you’re with me, I’m sure I can do anything.”

I kissed her on the top of the head. “I’m part of this now. The only way to access your full power, it seems, is for us to make love.”

Ella pulled back and looked at me with a frown. “What are you saying? That we have to have sex in front of *both armies*?”

I smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear that had slipped free. “No one ever needs to know how we managed to defeat the Feral army. Only you and me.”

I kissed her on the lips and she responded in kind.

But I had to pull back, to not make love to her, even though my body was *begging* for it.

“Let’s save it for the big battle,” I said.

Ella made a tutting noise before grinning and leaning her head against my chest. “Spoilsport. Do you think many people have had the fate of humanity riding on them making love before?”

I roared with laughter. “No, my love. I think we must be the first.”

“Mm,” she moaned, driving my senses haywire. “Then let’s make sure it’s a session for the ages... Even if no one else will ever see it.”

Yes, ma’am.

THE JOURNEY to the rendezvous point was short but felt a whole lot longer without my being able to make love with Ella.

Keeping her at arm's length that way was one of the most difficult things I had ever had to do.

As we descended into low orbit and the sporadic fire of the Ferals' missiles and torpedoes began striking my ship's shields, I was ready.

Ella glanced at the shaking walls and asked:

"Will the shields be able to hold?"

"I diverted all power to them," I said. "They should be able to hold long enough. After all, we're not firing any of our traditional weapons, only our most powerful one."

I kissed her on the forehead and opened her bathrobe.

She was naked underneath and I took a moment to admire her.

She was a true beauty.

I eased her naked body onto the bed.

She was just as warm and supple as I remembered from our first time together.

She leaned back and let me take her, the ship shuddering after another heavy barrage of fire.

The Feral army was no doubt confused by this strange suicidal ship that had parked within range of their missiles... and then *not* returned fire.

The lights flashed and Computer would have issued warnings every few seconds but I had already disabled them.

We didn't need more distractions than we already had.

As I humped Ella, she clutched me close, her head thrown back and screaming with delight.

I ground deep inside her, loving how tightly her pussy squeezed me.

And when I ejected my Seed into her for the second time that day, I *knew* in my heart it would not be the last.

And hopefully, next time, the fate of the world wouldn't have to be resting on it.

As Ella's screams came to a slow, we each lay there, wondering if it had worked, if we had managed to take down the Feral army with a single deployment of a single weapon.

Then I realized the missiles had stopped firing and the ship no longer shuddered.

It was all the confirmation I needed.

I looked down at Ella beneath me, her body covered with a thin layer of sweat, and shared a smile.

“Mission accomplished,” I said.

She reached up and pulled me closer to her so she could kiss me on the lips. “Maybe. But *never* believe your mission with me is complete.”

I chuckled as I grew stiff once more and together, we began round three.

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PART III

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GEN 6

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ELLA

ENCASED inside our little bubble of pleasure aboard Qeb's ship, it was all too easy to forget there was an *entire planet* below.

Two armies had come together to fight what would spell the end for one or the other.

We had arrived just in time and helped avoid too much bloodshed.

The wild Ferals had immediately lost their aggression and sat on the ground, crosslegged, entering that now-familiar meditative state.

Their opponents—the Modified Ferals—were perplexed that the enemy had suddenly just laid down their arms and seemingly surrendered.

It had always been assumed the wild Ferals didn't know *how* to surrender.

For the longest time, the Modified Ferals refused to approach their enemy and kept at a safe distance at all times, assuming this strange shift in their temperament to be some kind of trick to lure them into a trap.

But when they finally plucked up enough courage to step out from their defensive lines... nothing happened.

They walked amongst their suddenly incapacitated enemy and poked at them with the point of their plasma rifles, ready to act in case there was a violent reaction...

But the wild Ferals simply remained calm and sedate, leaving the soldiers scratching their heads.

As the Modified Army turned cleanup crew, moving through the wild Ferals' ranks and depositing them elsewhere, a slow sense of hope began to drift through the human population.

Soon after that, the Capital's population began to emerge from their homes.

And slowly, a celebration of epic proportions began to take shape.

No one had prepared for victory—no one had even *begun* to fully comprehend what had just taken place and turned to ascribe it as being a miracle handed down from on high.

On high is about right! I thought—if two rucking mates in a ship high above the melee could be described as such.

By the time Qeb and I had finished with our lovemaking, the celebrations were in full swing.

Tickertape fluttered from the sky and ornate holographic shows lit the clouds.

Food suddenly appeared on tables like magic on stands lining the streets, where anyone passing by snatched up whatever they wished, feasting and drinking with merriment.

I had expected Qeb to be busy with communications but instead, he received *just one message*.

It made him smile.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We’ve been invited to the palace by the Emperor.”

“Emperor?”

“It’s not every day a prophecy comes true,” Qeb said with a grin. “And even less often when it saves the entire Empire!”

I couldn’t help but feel like a complete and utter fraud.

After all, all we had really done was *make love!*

Qeb reached over and squeezed my hand, smiling at me, imbuing me with quiet confidence.

“Everything will be fine now,” he said. “Actually, *more* than fine. You’re the prophesized Savor. Look down at the streets. They’re celebrating in *your* honor.”

I couldn’t even *begin* to process what that meant—if it even meant anything at all.

It was too much for me to compute, so I decided to relax and just go with the flow.

I didn’t need to trust *anyone* in this city, or this planet, this entire *Empire*.

I only needed to trust one—Qeb.

So long as he was always by my side, I *knew* nothing bad could ever happen to me.

Still, with Qeb by my side, I was confident we could overcome whatever

challenges were hurled our way.

I gasped when the palace reared into view.

It was *huge*, with enormous domes sitting atop its roof like the gorgeous Taj Mahal... *on steroids*.

Despite it being on a far and distant moon a million light-years from Earth, it was still strangely human with alien undertones.

I had to remind myself almost three hundred years had passed since I had “died” and although much might have changed, human architecture appeared to still follow the same design rules.

Still, I was intrigued to see in more detail what had changed and what remained the same.

Any futurist in my time would have given their *right arm* to see humanity’s future how I was about to see it firsthand.

Who would have thought all they had to do was die... under the right circumstances, of course!

Qeb sat the shuttle down and we were immediately greeted by a unit of heavily-armed Ferals.

They looked strikingly similar to Qeb—how could they not when they had each been created from the same DNA?

Perhaps I should have been more surprised at their differences rather than their similarities.

Surely that’s the greater mystery?

They stood tall with broad shoulders and muscular frames and cold black horns—some were chipped, some dented, some having been snapped off completely.

Still, even those in seemingly perfect shape were *different* from Qeb.

The differences were tiny but still identifiable to me.

My mind instinctively referred to them as imperfections as they *differentiated* from Qeb, therefore making them seem less perfect by comparison.

I was confident a million of these Modified Ferals could stand in a line and I could walk down them and *always* identify Qeb with ease.

The Captain wore a purple sash across his body and pumped his fist to his chest and bowed his head.

That was how they greeted Qeb when he descended the ramp.

He thumped his chest in return before reaching back to take my hand.

He led me down the ramp and the creatures immediately dropped to one

knee, heads bowed, facing the floor.

“What are they doing?” I whispered to Qeb.

“They’re paying the Savor the necessary respect,” Qeb replied softly.

“*Necessary* respect? No respect is necessary! I didn’t do anything!”

“If it wasn’t for you many of them would now be dead. In the human-Krev culture, their lives belong to you.”

The full implications of our actions hit me in the chest and I gasped with surprise.

Back on Earth, I had been a lonely librarian and now, I was someone these Modified humans respected enough to *bow to*?

It was a lot to come to terms with.

The unit stood upright, and the Captain kept his eyes low, only ever glancing up at Qeb’s face and never mine. “The Emperor and Empress are awaiting you in the throne room.”

He motioned for us to follow him.

His unit immediately split into two perfect parallel lines, forming a long corridor.

We walked between them and they turned on their heels, marching at our speed.

I clutched Qeb’s arm close, unsure quite how to process this.

I returned to my previous strategy of relaxing and just letting things unfurl moment by moment.

If I tried to take in everything, I was sure my head would explode.

As we marched through the huge corridors and hallways, magnificent and huge, making a mockery of every Earth wonder I had ever seen (mostly on TV!).

At regular intervals I spotted genuine human treasures, obviously shipped here from Earth—here, the Mona Lisa, there, the statue of David, and over there, Van Gogh’s most famous work...

Each piece was more magnificent than the last, some a little damaged.

I wondered what must have happened for it to be in such a state but it had been lovingly restored to the best of their ability.

The servants we passed immediately stopped, bowing their heads as the soldiers had done earlier, while others—visitors or family members of high-ranking officials—gasped, whispering amongst themselves and scurrying over to watch as we approached the throne room.

The doors were big and heavy and opened slowly.

A Docile armed with a golden scepter smacked the tip on the floor and announced the arrival of Qeb and the Savor.

The soldiers filtered down either side and formed a protective circle at regular intervals.

Where the rest of the palace until now had been opulent, the throne room was something else *entirely*.

Green sunlight streamed through huge windows and cast a magnetic glow over the few in attendance.

The distant scent of burning incense reminded me of my trip to Rome and the magnificent cathedrals there.

I heard haunting choir music but that might have just been my imagination.

At the end of the room, sitting on matching thrones with long armrests shaped like giant elephant tusks, sat the Emperor and Empress.

Up until a couple of days ago, I hadn't even *known* they existed—and they were as ignorant of my existence as I was of theirs.

Now, they were hosting me!

Qeb approached the foot of the steps leading up to the twin thrones, put his fist to his chest, and dropped to one knee.

I followed his lead and the moment I did, the Emperor said:

“No, no, no!”

His voice was loud and booming and made me shake.

I glanced at him before quickly lowering my eyes, not sure if I was somehow disrespecting him by looking at him directly.

I look to Qeb for help but he was still looking at the floor.

Fat lot of good you are!

The Emperor got to his feet, his Empress at his side.

They descended the steps slowly before reaching down and taking my hand.

He helped me and Qeb to our feet.

“You are the Savor,” the Emperor announced loud enough for everyone in the throne room to hear. “You bow to *no one*.”

As I wondered if he had watched Lord of the Rings and decided to steal one of its most famous lines, a remarkable thing happened...

The Emperor placed his fist to his chest and *then fell to one knee*.

The Empress did likewise.

As if the starting pistol had been fired, the other soldiers and servants in

the room dropped to their knees.

I shared a look with Qeb, more terrified now than I had been even when the wild Ferals had been chasing us.

He beamed at me, happy.

While I wondered *what I had gotten myself into*.

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QEB

IT WAS a huge honor to be invited to the palace to meet the Emperor and Empress.

My whole life I had served them and followed their orders, putting my life on the line to ensure their desires came to fruition.

I *never* expected to meet them in person, and only the bravest heroes, those who had exhibited *extreme* courage could ever hope to receive such an honor.

But for the Emperor and the Empress to *bow to us*?

It was virtually unheard of.

The only times I could recall it ever happening was when the Emperor's forces had been defeated in battle and he was *forced to submit* to the new ruler.

Of course, he had no intention of handing over the reins of power to *us*—much less the Savor—and it was a good thing Ella was an outsider and not interested in playing such political games.

I suspected that was the *real* reason he had wanted to meet us so soon after the victory.

To appraise Ella and gauge the level of danger she might represent.

Ella conducted herself well, bowing and nodding every opportunity she got.

It would quickly become apparent to the Emperor she had no desire for his throne or his power.

“The people have already begun to celebrate,” the Emperor announced, “but in your honor, I intend on hosting the largest celebration in our illustrious history at our palace *this very night!* As guest of honor, I invite you

to attend.”

An invitation from the Emperor was not something you turned down easily, although from Ella’s expression, I thought she was on the cusp of doing so:

“A party?” she said, concealing a yawn behind her hand. “I’m not sure. I’m very tired—”

I took a step forward to prevent Ella from insulting the Emperor. “We’d be *honored* to attend, my Emperor.”

I bowed respectfully and the Emperor nodded in kind.

“Excellent,” he said. “Then I suggest you go to your quarters and rest so that you might be ready for the celebration.”

With that, he turned and marched away, his long train flowing behind him.

The Empress pursed her lips for just a moment, her eyes flicking between Ella and me before she too turned and marched alongside her husband.

My throat felt dry.

I wasn’t sure what the Empress’s expression meant—if it had meant anything at all—but she was rumored to be the one with the sharpest mind, constantly on the lookout for any threats that might present themselves.

Perhaps she had seen something in Ella she did not like.

But there was nothing we could do about that now.

I extended my arm to Ella.

She took it and we followed the Captain out of the throne room, up the stairs, and remained silent until we reached Ella’s suite.

My room was next door, but I decided to go in with her as she doubtless had a million questions to ask me.

The moment the door shut, we were alone, and Ella fell into my arms, clutching me close. “Thank God that’s over! Did you see that? The *Emperor* bowing to *me*? And the *Empress*!”

She threw up her hands and shook her head.

“You are the Savor,” I said simply. “They want to pay you the proper respect.”

“And hosting a party in my honor? I hope they don’t expect me to tell the story of how we managed to control the Ferals!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “They might ask, but you don’t have to tell them anything. Or even the truth.”

Ella fell onto the sofa and virtually sank into it.

“But it went all right, didn’t it?” she asked, suddenly nervous. “I mean, I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?”

“You did everything great. But in the future, don’t even *think* about turning down any of the Emperor’s invitations. It’s considered... bad manners.”

Others have lost their heads over it, I wanted to add but thought better of it.

Ella’s eyes widened to the size of a Docile’s. “I didn’t accidentally *insult* anyone, right?”

I shook my head. “No. And even if you did, they know you’re not from this time and place. And besides... You’re the Savor. You can do pretty much whatever you please.”

I was certain that the Colonel would have briefed them with everything he knew about the Savor the moment the attack had succeeded, I thought.

But the truth was, I *was* nervous.

The Capital was not the same as the rest of the Empire.

Everything here was a game of politics, everything leveraged for the very best advantage.

No one could be trusted and *nothing* was left up to chance.

The sooner the celebration was over, the sooner we could leave.

I had some savings, but nowhere near enough to give Ella the kind of lifestyle she deserved.

I felt nervous about broaching the subject with her and decided I would do it at the end of the evening.

After the celebration—once all of this busy madness was over with.

The last thing she needed was another weighty subject on her mind.

I sat on the sofa beside her and wrapped my arms about her shoulders.

I kissed her on the cheek and gently stroked her face.

She shut her eyes, almost falling asleep right there and then.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s get you into bed. If past celebrations are any indication, you’re going to need to be at full strength.”

Ella groaned. “I would rather spend the time alone with you...”

She ran her hand over my knee and up my inner thigh, sending tendrils of electricity racing up to my brain.

I was growing accustomed to her scent—not that it made the effects any less enticing.

I still felt it grasp hold of my senses, holding on tight and refusing to let

go.

She consumed me and I look forward to when I could have her all to myself.

But I wasn't the only one...

I knew her scent was sensed by *every* Feral in the palace.

As we marched between the soldiers lined up on either side of us, their attention began to become distracted, and they glanced in our direction—Ella's direction—and I knew the same thoughts were passing through their minds as were passing through mine.

Once they lined up around the edges of the throne room, I noticed *every single one of them* break formation to reach for the Nymb-er pills hidden within their communication devices.

I kept a close eye on them, knowing that although they were there to protect us, really, if they stopped taking their medication, *I* might very well have to be the one to protect us *from* them.

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ELLA

THE PALACE HAD GIVEN me a dress I could wear to the celebration tonight.

It was normal in design in many ways.

It had been cut from a single piece of cloth, the front left open, exposing my legs—by far my best feature—and trailed along the floor behind me.

It was relatively low cut but what really stood out were the strange little triangle-like scales down the middle of my back.

I didn't think I had ever seen a dress like it back in my own time but it was eye-catching if nothing else.

After I had put on the dress, a team immediately entered my suite and set to doing my hair and makeup.

I had intended on doing it myself but I supposed it was better for experts to do it as I might have come off looking very strange otherwise.

By the time they were done, I looked like a completely different person.

Now I realized why the dress was so brightly colored:

It needed to be bright or else I would have looked pale and pasty.

If I had just been wearing the makeup, I would have looked like a clown.

But combined with the dress... *It worked!*

I check myself out in the mirror, turning one way and then the other, and felt confident.

I sure hoped Qeb would like it, suddenly feeling very nervous and self-conscious.

When the door adjoining our two rooms opened, revealing Qeb in a sharp suit that highlighted his awesome body in the very best way possible, I knew my impression of the dress and makeup was right.

A very distinct bulge formed in the front of his pants and I immediately

shook my head and waved my hands.

“Don’t think you can ravage me now!” I announced. “Not after all the effort they went through to make me look like this!”

He placed his hands on my hips and brought his lips so close to mine that they almost touched.

For a moment, I considered overruling my earlier decision not to let him ravage me...

But his cooler head prevailed and he lowered his face to my exposed shoulders, breathing in my scent.

It occurred to me then that the makeup and hair people hadn’t given me artificial perfume.

Was it to ensure my own “scent” was as easy to sniff as possible?

“Shall we?” he said, extending his arm to me.

“We shall,” I retorted.

I took his arm and he led me out of my suite where the same escort team of soldiers snapped to attention, lining the hall in either direction.

There were many other suites in this part of the palace but none housed other guests.

I supposed they didn’t want to take any unnecessary risks with their precious Savor.

Savor!

It still made me chuckle to think of anyone referring to me that way!

As neither of us knew where we were going, we followed the Captain.

He came to a stop beside a large door inlaid with intricately carved designs.

He opened it and we passed through.

The moment we did, a loud roar issued up from below.

It was so loud and unexpected that it made me hop on the spot and clutch Qeb’s arm even closer.

Below us were hundreds—perhaps even *thousands*—of guests.

They raised large glasses filled with what might have been champagne.

They were cheering at our entrance.

My entrance.

I supposed it was a perfectly normal reaction to celebrate the person who had saved your life, but it still felt very strange it was directed at me.

Once the cheers died down, music kicked in—a funky beat that had all the hallmarks of the 21st century.

As Qeb led me down the steps, he leaned over and asked me:

“It appears they chose music from your century. Do you recognize it?”

No, I thought. It was *nothing* like anything I recognized!

If this was music from my time, they sure had a funny way of choosing it!

As we descended the steps, I noticed everyone else wearing clothes similar to mine and it dawned on me that the evening was themed around *my* timeline.

This really is a party in my honor!

But what they attempted wasn't quite right.

Now I understood what someone from the 1940s might have thought about people from my own time dressing up in their style.

Still, I appreciated the effort and was touched.

In fact, it was nice they should think of me that way in an attempt to make me feel more comfortable in this new timeline.

After all, you could only climb into a cryo-chamber and go *forward* in time.

There was no way of going *backwards*.

This was my home now, my time and place.

As I glanced over at Qeb, I realized I didn't mind it at all.

The partygoers smiled at me, beaming broadly, raising their glasses of alcohol, while a few attempted to begin conversations.

Most discussed the same topic:

What to do with the wild Feral army they suddenly had on their doorstep.

I could tell from their tone they hadn't expected a victory.

They'd expected to be *destroyed* by the creatures and it was a miracle that they had not.

I was shocked when one of the party members suggested:

“Just slaughter them all. They would have done the same to us.”

“They are animals,” another nodded in agreement. “I doubt they even know what consciousness is. They certainly have no understanding of the value of higher culture.”

She gulped from her class of champagne and burped loudly.

The wild Ferals aren't the only ones without an understanding of high culture, I thought.

Most of the partiers had the general appearance of regular humans.

They did not have the horns, scales, or tails of the Krev but some wore their makeup in a style mimicking them.

How species and Modified cultures mixed, I had no idea.

But I noticed not one of those in attendance was a Docile—they were exclusively the servers and were universally ignored as they carried out their duties.

As Qeb excused us from a conversation, he turned me away to speak with another group.

Although, to be honest, I didn't really have to say anything as they were all quite happy to fill in the awkward silences themselves.

I leaned in closer to Qeb. "Are they really going to kill them all? The wild Ferals? It doesn't seem right, especially since these people—or at least the Scientists—created them in the first place."

"Hopefully they'll think of a better solution," Qeb replied.

"If they don't?"

He shrugged. "Then they'll have brought it on themselves."

I frowned at his ruthless dismissal of the wild Ferals.

After all, *he* was part of their lineage—even if it was manufactured and fake.

They were like ancestors to him.

I would never dream of treating any animal or pet like that.

It gave me pause for thought before I said:

"Then maybe the wild Ferals aren't the real monsters here."

Qeb came to a stop and turned to me, eyes searching my expression, looking for meaning. "What do you mean?"

The tension was thick between us.

Mercy was not a trait valued among the Modified Ferals such as Qeb.

I opened my mouth to explain when another figure interrupted us. "I believe she's displaying the famous—or should that be *infamous*—21st-century empathy."

The figure was tall, dressed head to toe in black flowing cloaks.

He had a long face and wore a small pair of spectacles that perched on the tip of his bulbous nose.

His eyes were blue and watery but his stare was strong and firm.

He peered through his tiny spectacles at me.

I shrunk beneath them, feeling like a student at school and I had managed—yet again—to upset the teacher.

The other partygoers glanced out the corner of their eyes at this figure and hastily drank the champagne from their glasses and excused themselves from

whatever conversations they were having.

Just to get away from this figure.

I immediately realized he was powerful and influential in this culture, someone to be reckoned with.

“Ella,” Qeb said, placing his fist to his chest and bowing respectfully to the unknown man, “let me introduce you to the High Scientist.”

A Scientist.

One of those who had created the Modifieds like Qeb.

I placed my fist on my chest and bowed to him respectfully, even though it made me feel sick to my stomach to do so.

This figure made me feel ill at ease and *very* unsafe.

The High Scientist nodded minutely in what was meant to be a reciprocal show of respect.

I met his eyes and did not look away. “This empathy is what got the human race into its troubles to begin with,” he said. “Feeling sorry for lower creatures when it should have been *themselves* they were most concerned about. That was what led to our downfall and almost obliterated us from the galaxy.”

I smiled up at him but it was cold and without warmth. “I am a stranger to this time and place. I know little of your history.”

I emphasized the word *your* and made it clear I had no doubt it was twisted by inaccuracies. “But in my time, we did not need to modify genes and shape people into what we required them to be.”

His smile was tight. “Then you are naive, child.”

I ground my teeth. “We hadn’t yet destroyed each other or the planet with nuclear weapons and we lived in relative peace.”

Relative being the operative word, but as this Scientist hadn’t lived in my time, he had only dusty old books to rely on for his knowledge.

“For two hundred years we have been at peace,” he said. “And it is thanks to Science that we have developed the perfect recipe for peace.”

“By engineering everyone to have no free will,” I bit back, “or allowing them to have their own thoughts.”

I wanted to argue more but Qeb placed his hand on my arm.

He bowed his head respectfully. “And we thank you and your fellow Scientists for keeping us safe in creating this amazing Empire we now find ourselves in.”

The Scientist didn’t acknowledge Qeb—which made me even angrier—

as he no doubt considered him a lower life form than he himself was.

The Scientist nodded his head once. "I would very much like to learn how you were able to subdue the wild Feral army. At your earliest convenience, I invite you to visit the High Temple of Science so we may conduct some experiments to see what you are truly capable of."

As I watched him go, I felt the tension leave my shoulders.

I was *glad* he had gone.

"You need to be more careful," Qeb hissed. "You do not want to anger the Scientists. They have virtually unlimited power."

"He gives me the creeps," I said, rubbing a hand over my arm where goosebumps had presented themselves.

Qeb cocked his head to one side at my use of the word *creeps*.

"It means he spooks me out," I said.

Qeb nodded. "He spooks *everyone* out. For the Scientists, progression is worth *any* cost. *Nothing* gets in their way." He leaned in close so no one else could hear his next words to me. "Not even the Emperor."

He looked at me pointedly, ensuring I understood his words.

It meant this future world, despite its appearance on the surface, was not so peaceful after all.

Whoever these Scientists were, they seemed to be the true power in the Empire.

A Docile appeared before us and said:

"Excuse me, the Colonel wishes to speak with you. Please follow me."

Docile turned and left before Qeb could react.

"I'll be back in a second," Qeb said. "Just stay here."

I sensed there was something more he wanted to tell me as he patted my hands and glanced out the corners of his eyes.

Then he followed after the Docile, leaving me alone in this odd place with these strange people.

I watched in horror as, in Qeb's wake, they began to circle and move in on me like sharks at a feeding frenzy.

QEB

THE DOCILE LED me to the library.

It was located down a narrow hallway just off the ballroom where the party was hosted.

It was typical of the Colonel not to want to meet in a crowded place.

It was even more typical of him to want to meet in a library.

He had always been the studious type, preferring to pore over maps, and status and information reports than mingle with people.

I tugged at the sleeves of my suit and cleared my mind for what might happen behind these doors.

I couldn't shake the sudden appearance of the High Scientist from my mind.

Ella was getting a lot of attention—and not all of it was good.

The appearance of the High Scientist validated my earlier concerns.

We needed to leave the Capital as soon as possible.

Especially since the High Scientist had “invited” Ella to “visit” the Temple of Science for some “tests.”

Those tests could easily be an experience she would never recover from.

It was as dangerous to refuse the High Scientist's invitation as it was the Emperor's.

Save for the Empire's military, no one else was allowed to command Modified Ferals—save the High Scientist.

And as he and his cohorts had been the ones to create us in the first place, there was no telling what instructions they had implanted within us to ensure they held overall control.

That was rumored to be the reason they hated the wild Ferals so much

and made it their life's mission to destroy every last one of them...

They had no control over them.

And they had committed the greatest sin of all... and mated when they weren't supposed to be able to.

They had broken the Scientists' control over them.

We couldn't leave right now, I knew.

But by morning...

We would leave before the Capital had a chance to recover from the night's revelries.

After speaking with the Colonel, I would return to Ella's side and not leave it even for an instant.

I eased the library doors open and shut them behind me.

It took a moment to locate the Colonel.

He sat in a corner smothered with shadows.

He was small for a human, but despite his stature, exuded control.

"Take a seat," he said. "Congratulations are in order."

I sat down but did not get comfortable as meetings with the Colonel never lasted very long.

He was a man that liked to get to the point as quickly as possible and avoided all small talk.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

The Colonel pushed an envelope toward me. "Here's your next assignment."

I picked up the envelope. "Next assignment?"

"The Savor has been found. She has saved our army, our Capital, our entire Empire. As she has been found, you no longer need to search the cryo-facilities for her."

Of course.

The fact I had achieved my mission meant I had to be given a new one.

But I had been so focused on Ella and keeping her safe that I hadn't even *considered* the fact I would be reassigned so soon.

The Colonel nodded toward the envelope. "It's a comfortable position, entirely too easy for a soldier of your experience. But I figured you deserved a little rec time before you take on more dangerous missions."

Dangerous missions?

I didn't open the envelope and instead turned it over in my hands.

The Colonel cocked his head to one side. "Is there a problem, soldier?"

I considered my words carefully. “I was hoping... I could remain as Ella’s security. Now she has served her purpose, she may become a target for others that wish to take advantage of her. She’s a stranger in our time and doesn’t know how things work.”

The Colonel lit a cigarette—a relic from centuries gone by that had largely died out and only kept alive by those of a more nostalgic nature—as hard that was to believe of the Colonel.

He blew out a puff of smoke. “I thought you would have been pleased to be given a new challenge. Five years is a long time for a single mission.”

I nodded. “I am. And ensuring Ella’s safety is that new challenge. I found her and nurtured her so she could carry out her duties.”

Although “nurture” might be stretching the meaning a little if the Colonel or anyone else knew what we’d had to do to allow Ella’s ability to fully express itself on the battlefield.

The Colonel tapped his cigarette on the rim of his ashtray. “A great many difficulties will pursue Ella from this moment on. And I don’t just mean of a political nature.”

“What other type is there?”

The Colonel took another slow drag on his cigarette and considered how much he should reveal to me. “There is a rumor,” —and I instantly knew it *had* to be more than a rumor as the Colonel never dealt with uncertainties—“that the Scientists have developed a particular interest in Ella and her ability.”

My heart caught in my throat.

It was worse than I had feared.

And Ella was out there, right now, alone...

“The Scientists’ ultimate goal is, and has always been, control. Ella and her ability represent a... challenge for them. After all, if she can shut down wild Ferals as she did today, what would stop her from doing the same to *all* Ferals throughout the Empire. The military would collapse. Any of our enemies could attack and we would be helpless.”

The envelope fell from my fingers. “But she has no interest in that. She just wants a quiet life.”

“That may be the case. But the Scientists don’t know that.”

I balled my hands into fists.

If the Scientists got their hands on her...

I shook my head at the terrible things they might do to her.

I couldn't allow that to happen.

I *wouldn't* allow that to happen.

"If only there were someone to take her from this place," the Colonel said, crushing his cigarette in the ashtray and pointedly not looking at me. "If there were someone who cared greatly enough for her, to watch over her and protect her, to hide her and keep her from harm..."

He sat back and his eyes slowly worked their way up to mine.

In them, I saw everything.

Somehow, he *knew* about us.

Somehow—and exactly how, I couldn't figure out—he knew how we had defeated the wild Feral army.

That we had mated.

Maybe even—if he was really offering what I thought he was—knew we were fated mates.

I was shocked, as it was something I had only just begun considering myself.

"She will be the target of many in the galaxy and she—nor her protector—will ever know peace."

He had manufactured this meeting so he could warn me of what was coming.

He was validating my own instincts.

"I will let you decide your own fate," he said. "But bear this in mind: if you choose the hard path, you will never be able to return and take another."

I nodded, comprehending what he was telling me.

"Thank you, sir," I said.

I got to my feet and saluted him with a solid thump of my fist on my chest. "Serving you has been my greatest honor."

The Colonel gave a relaxed salute in return. "I wish you all the best, soldier."

I hurried back toward the door but before I even reached it, I heard a scream.

It was muffled with distance but I instantly recognized the throat it emitted from...

"Ella..."

As I ran for the door and threw it open, I heard the Colonel sigh and say hushed words beneath it:

"And so it begins."

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ELLA

I MISSED QEB.

Being surrounded by strangers—especially among Modified aliens—wasn't exactly my idea of fun.

Especially when I knew *nothing* about their culture or recent history—or even what happened *the day before!*

I may as well have been dropped in a Mayan temple thousands of years ago!

They were all interested in *one particular* question...

The one question I didn't want to answer (at least, not *truthfully!*) and was how I had managed to put the wild Ferals into a vegetative state.

At first, I skirted the question and avoided answering each time they attempted to circle back to the same topic.

Then I decided to just run with it and have some fun.

"I have magical powers," I told one, his eyes bulging to the size of tennis balls.

He quickly drank his drink, made an excuse, and left.

Two problems solved with a single sentence!

That had to be some kind of record.

I turned to leave when I was accosted by another pair.

"We were wondering if you could settle a bet for us. We have different ideas of how you defeated the wild Ferals and wondered which of us is right."

They looked at me expectantly.

"What were your guesses?" I asked, downing another mouthful of champagne.

One suggested I possessed an ancient rune that allowed me to curse the wild Ferals.

The other looked at me suspiciously and inferred I was somehow queen of the beasts!

Considering how they reacted to my scent, I supposed it wasn't all that far from the truth.

I downed another gulp of champagne, leaned in close, and said:

“Actually, you're both wrong. The *real* way I can control them is because, 263 years ago, the Scientists used my DNA to create the very first Feral. So, we have this symbiotic bond. When I came back to this time and place, they can still feel it.”

The creatures leaned back from having leaned in close to listen to my every word.

They shared a look and sighed. “Then we have to pay out to Kliia.”

They raised their glasses to the *third member* of their group, already involved in a conversation with someone else.

He grinned a broad smile at having won the bet.

There I was, thinking I had come up with just about the craziest thing answer I could think of and it turned out someone else had come up with the same thing!

I turned to leave but was interrupted once more.

“Just how did you manage to do it?” a female with a high forehead said. “None of us can quite figure it out. But it must have been quite something. In fact, many of us would be willing to donate funds if you could repeat it so we could see—”

A loud tapping sound penetrated the music and the dull murmur of conversation.

The music cut off immediately, along with the conversations, and everyone arched their necks toward the sound's origin.

It was the same Docile I had seen earlier, tapping his gold-tipped scepter on the floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and esteemed guest,” he said, finding me amongst the crowd and nodding his head respectfully.

I rolled my eyes.

Now what?

Were they going to *demand* I show them how I had overcome the Feral army?

I downed the last of my champagne and slammed the glass on a Docile's silver tray and placed my hands on my hips, ready to tell them every last sordid detail if that was what they *really* wanted to know.

There was no doubt in my mind they would discover the truth eventually, and even if they didn't, then the worst, most sordid lie certainly would suffice in its place.

But my guess was to be proven wrong.

Very wrong.

The Docile continued with his announcement:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you your entertainment for the evening!”

Entertainment? I thought. *I thought the music, drinks, and conversation were the entertainment?*

As well as asking me the same question over and over again a million times.

The crowd clapped—requiring them to turn their hands sideways and clap horizontally rather than vertically.

From behind the Docile came a long stream of Dociles.

Even I could tell they were young—just barely out of their teenage years if I had to guess—with the obligatory big eyes.

The females were slim with overly large breasts and hips, and the males bore extremely large chests and narrow hips and, hanging between their legs, ludicrously large penises.

They wore big beaming grins, their eyes huge and wide, and did not reflect any genuine warmth that they might have been feeling.

In fact, their eyes were empty, as if someone had already sucked out their souls.

As they moved through the crowd, my mouth falling open, my eyes even wider than theirs, they each partnered up with a member of the party—whether they had come as singles or couples, it made no difference—and began kissing them.

The first male approached me but I shook my head and pointed him elsewhere.

He was not offended and didn't shrug or show any kind of confusion.

I wasn't sure if he was even *capable* of feeling emotions.

It struck me then that these creatures had been *created* to never have to suffer emotions.

The thought sent a shiver through me.

The partygoers had no such qualms and crowded around each of the young Dociles, like piranhas in a feeding frenzy.

Eyes agog, I turned and headed for the exit.

For the first time since I had arrived at this “celebration,” I met no resistance or pointless questions that I had no intention of answering.

They were distracted by something else that captured their attention, and I was relieved *I* was no longer the object.

I stumbled from the ballroom where the party was being hosted.

I simply could not get away fast enough.

I had thought it immoral to clone and Modify a new species who were to become little more than slaves, and ensure to tear out any possibility they might *question* your commands, but seeing those young Dociles had brought me face to face with the true depravity and grotesque nature of what such technology could do.

And I wanted no part of it.

This might be the future and this might be the new normal but it didn't have to be *my* normal.

I would never entertain such acts and would always ensure to steer clear of such activities.

Just because this was the future didn't mean everything had progressed positively.

That much is obvious.

I edged towards the patio that fed onto the green grass of a large lawn.

The blades tickled my exposed feet and I was grateful to be reminded of my home and time.

I had grown up in the country and always felt a deep affinity for nature.

Every time I suffered a problem at school or argued with friends, I ran into the welcoming arms of the local forest.

It always reminded me that there were greater things than what I was then going through, that nature and animals and trees and plants and flowers didn't judge you, and that tomorrow would be a new day.

The soft glow of yellow light from the ballroom barely reached out here.

As I continued backing away from it, refusing to fully give myself to the darkness as I was still a little afraid of being alone in an alien city, my elbow bumped into something.

Instinctively, I said:

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—”

I turned to see the victim of my clumsiness and the words froze in my throat.

It was a Feral.

A *wild* Feral.

I started back, tripped, and fell.

I kicked at the ground to put more distance between myself and it.

I stared, horrified, and knew it would descend on me that very moment...

Except it didn't.

The Feral remained in his cross-legged position, eyes closed, hair astray, as was common among the wild Feral population.

I realized he must have been one of the Ferals I'd tamed earlier with my scent.

And now that my fear was subsiding, I began to notice *other shapes* in the semi-darkness.

The curved knees of more Ferals were dotted like tossed breadcrumbs.

They each sat in silence, eyes close, hands relaxed in their laps, gently rocking back and forth.

I got to my feet and dusted myself off.

I realized they were *all* wild Ferals I had shut down.

I walked among them, and the soft golden light falling from the ballroom had already been picked up by the huge moon in the night sky.

I made out *hundreds* of them—no, *thousands!*

They were all crammed in here on the palace grounds.

"Shocking, isn't it?"

The voice came from the darkness.

I yelped and hopped back, this time managing to keep my feet.

I had been afraid it was one of the Ferals who had spoken, that I had caused him to wake up, and if just *one of them* could awaken, then *all of them* could...

But when I looked up into the broad expressive face, I realized it was not one of the wild Ferals at all.

It was a *Modified* Feral.

He looked very similar to Qeb but there were enough differences between them that I didn't have to look for tiny clues as I had done with our armed escort earlier.

His head was larger, his shoulders broader, his eyes shot through with icy blue instead of golden, and they shone dangerously in the moonlight.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” he said in a voice deeper than Qeb’s. I shook my head. “It’s all right. I scare easily.”

He took another step toward me but maintained a respectful distance and turned to the wild Ferals surrounding us. “These creatures were meant to wash over us and destroy the Capital and everything we stand for. Now look at them.”

He swung his arm great around and smacked a wild Feral hard across the face with an open palm.

The creature’s head struck the ground with the force and slowly retracted back into his sitting position.

A large red mark lay across his cheek but he did not stir from his slumber. I wondered just how deeply they were meditating.

“Now they are more docile even than Dociles,” the male said.

“What if you woke him up?” I said.

The creature shrugged. “I am more than a match for them.” Then he looked up at me and grinned broadly. “I am Sixth Generation, the first of my kind. I am the prototype for the future. I’m better in every way than the Generation Five model. I’m stronger, smarter, sharper, with better instincts, and... greater endurance.”

With this last, he fixed me with his eyes and winked.

What had started as a chance encounter to make a new friend had just turned into a seedy rendezvous.

“I should... get back to the party,” I said.

“No,” he said, reaching out and grabbing my arm. “Stay. We have barely gotten to know each other yet.”

I tried to yank my arm free but he refused to let go.

He was so strong—monstrously strong—and it was clear there was *no chance* I could get out of this with strength alone.

I needed to be cunning.

I drew myself up and raised my chin. “I am the Savor. I have met your Emperor and Empress. They will hear of it if I’m treated badly.”

The creature hesitated for a moment before his grin broadened further.

It was pointed at the corners in a sinister way I did not like and was full of malevolence.

“Oh, but you misunderstand. I was *sent* here specifically for you. You see, as the latest generation, I have been chosen as your fated mate.”

My heart stopped.

I didn't know what the word *fated* meant in this context but I sure as shit knew what *mate* meant.

"Who sent you?" I asked.

"That need not concern you," he said, seizing my other arm and pulling me closer.

"You are *not* my mate," I said. "I *already have* a fated mate!"

I might not know what the term meant but he sure did and perhaps it would hold more sway with him than it did with me.

His expression shifted from sinister to angry in a single heartbeat.

His grip though stronger and I had to twist my arms to ensure he didn't break them.

"You lie!" he snapped.

I met his eyes and didn't look away.

My heart beat like a mouse in a trap but I would not allow him to see it.

"I'm *not* lying," I said in as cold a tone as I could muster. "Go ask Qeb. *He's* my fated mate. That's how we defeated these creatures and put them in this meditative state. We mated and it enhanced my power."

The creature's eyes bulged, his anger giving way to intense shock.

Then his brows drew down and his sinister bearing returned with a vengeance. "Then you will mate with me, too. After all, a Fifth Gen is far inferior in every way. And I'll prove it to you..."

As he leaned forward to kiss me, I twisted away and screamed.

It took a moment for me to realize I actually had access to *another* strength—not the one in my arm which was so inferior to my attacker, but my *other* power.

The one I had recently acquired.

The scent.

Perhaps that had been what had attracted the creature to me in the first place.

But perhaps now I could turn it *against* him, turn him into a vegetable like all these other Ferals.

But first I needed to distract him to give myself time to find my center.

"But surely it's better for me to *give* myself to you rather than for you to *take* me?" I said.

He spoke, but I did not listen.

Instead, I focused on my breathing, taking deep cleansing breaths and letting them out slowly.

I knew he wasn't a talker but one who preferred to *take action*.

I felt confident he wouldn't speak for long.

As he licked his lips, dousing them with saliva, I knew I would not give up without a fight—and I most certainly would not give myself to him willingly!

I relaxed my shoulders and let my scent flow.

I focused on him receiving it, focused on him taking in my scent, saw it flow through his system, into his lungs and blood, into his brain... reaching every part of him.

Then I imagined everything shutting down, everything becoming soft.

I was shocked when the creature's grip on me weakened.

It's working!

It's really working!

I focused harder but the sinister look in his eyes distracted me, making me fear for my life.

I focused once more and wished there was some kind of incantation I could say instead, something simple and easy that would have the same effect.

My victory was short-lived as the creature regained his strength.

I closed my eyes and focused even harder, imagining great waves pulsing out from me, knocking him back and making him susceptible to my influence.

The creature did sway, but only for a second.

He seemed confused about how he was feeling but didn't say a word to me if he thought I was the one responsible.

He wrapped his hand around my throat and squeezed gently.

I lost concentration, gripped his arm, and looked up into his eyes.

He pressed his lips against mine, pulled me in close, and grabbed my ass with his free hand.

I struggled in my attempt to push him away, but I realized there was no stopping him without Qeb to help me.

When the beast removed his lips from mine, I threw back my head and screamed.

QEB

I BURST into the ballroom and threw the doors open.

They swung and slammed against the walls opposite.

Few guests looked up from their activities.

Some humped figures lying in all manner of positions, while others rubbed themselves while they watched.

It was a truly shocking sight and one strong enough to shake me from my fear for Ella.

It was an orgy.

The orgies were only a rumor passed around the people and nobody really believed they existed.

But they really *did* happen.

If I had known, I *never* would have left Ella by herself.

Hell, I never would have even let her *attend* such an event in the first place!

And suddenly, Ella's scream made sense, although I thought it had emanated from further away than the ballroom.

The guest of honor was usually at the center of attention, and that meant if she was part of the orgy...

I raced through it, my heart screaming, threatening to burst from my chest.

I reached the middle of the room and peered at each of the small groups.

Everyone was naked, so it was easy for me to dismiss most of them.

It appeared they were taking their turns with the model Dociles that had been brought in.

Male with female, female with male, male with male, female with

female...

Every taste was catered for.

The moment one participant was done, they stood back and observed as the pummeling continued.

I ruled out everyone.

None of them matched Ella's appearance...

Except one.

A female on her hands and knees as a male guest slammed her hard from behind.

He pulled on her blonde hair but she was at such an angle that I couldn't make out her face.

I reached for the female and pulled her hair back from her face.

The male pumping her grunted with agitation. "Hey! Get to the back of the line! It's *my turn!*"

I raised my arm back to slap him when I spotted the female wasn't Ella at all, but a Docile.

She wasn't here.

Immense relief flooded my system before it was replaced with another fear:

Then if she isn't here, where is she?

Screeeeeeeeee!

I heard her scream again.

It didn't come from the ballroom but outside.

I immediately sprinted toward the exit, through the open patio doors, and out into a field of meditating Ferals.

I was shocked to see them there.

Were they intending on slaughtering them here and now? I thought. And turn it into some kind of spectacle?

That left a very sour taste in my mouth.

To slaughter your enemy on the battlefield was one thing, but to do it when he was so incapacitated...

There was no honor in that.

It was not worthy of a Krev—or a human, for that matter.

Another scream came from my left.

I shifted direction and bolted toward it.

Within two strides, I came across Ella in the arms of a Modified Feral.

I scanned him and instantly identified him as next-gen.

He was reaching toward her cheek with his tongue but Ella squealed and pulled back as far as she was able.

“Unhand her, foul beast!” I bellowed.

I could have reached for him and torn him from her but with his tight grip on her arm, it was almost certain to harm her.

The creature raised his eyes to me and grinned broadly. “This has nothing to do with you, *Five*,” he spat. “Begone before I force you to watch.”

I took a step closer and my opponent straightened up.

He pulled Ella in closer to him, clutching her tightly to his chest.

Ella struggled but she might as well have been fighting a statue.

“Are you *sure* you wish to do this, *Five*? I am stronger than you, faster than you, smarter than you. Your defeat is all but inevitable.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But there’s one advantage I have that you do not.”

“Oh? And what’s that? What could you possibly possess that I do not?”

I launched myself at him and the creature dropped Ella, immediately assuming an attacking Form.

I had expected him to go into a defensive pose but as he unleashed his attack, I felt each vicious blow to my arms.

He wasn’t just an upgrade—he was a *significant* upgrade.

His blows handed hard on my forearms and I knew I wasn’t going to last long if I continued to defend like this.

I twisted each time he struck me so his blows landed painfully on my elbows.

He flinched, hissing through his teeth.

He gripped his injured hand and growled at me.

Then he came at me with *even greater* ferocity.

His movements were so fast I could barely keep up.

I almost tripped on a wild Feral before I began to *intentionally* slip around them, keeping them between him and me.

I needed every break I could get.

I tasted blood from where he had landed a successful blow and split my lip.

“You’re only delaying the inevitable,” the upgrade said. “Give up this foolishness before any serious harm comes to you.”

He was right, of course. I *wasn’t* going to beat him like this...

Which was why it was a good thing it was only *the first act* of my strategy.

I stopped backing away and launched an attack at him.

He moved swiftly, easily knocking them aside.

I growled and clenched my teeth, performing one Form after another, knowing he would recognize each move as they came.

We were taught Forms to help us master both defensive and attacking moves.

They were designed to be easy to adapt to, shifting from one pattern to another...

But he looked down on inferior models and assumed we would be *unable* to adapt.

He threw back his head and began to laugh, but I didn't let it get to me.

I was lulling him into a false sense of security.

Finally, it came time to break the Form.

I was meant to deliver a blow to his chest, and I watched as he lowered his arms in expectation of that blow.

Instead, I immediately swung my arm upward instead, catching his chin with my elbow.

He made a dull *Duh!* noise and stumbled back.

I used the momentum against him.

I lashed out at him, adopting another Form, striking him on the nose, chest, and arm.

Within seconds, he picked up on the Form and regained his balance.

So I shifted once more:

Instead of kicking at his ribs, I swung my foot around and swept his legs out from under him.

His eyes bulged as he crashed to the floor.

Seeing my chance, I fell on top of him immediately.

I pinned him down and smashed him in the face with one blow after another.

He raised his forearms to protect himself and shifted his weight to roll over.

I was expecting it and crouched so he rolled underneath me.

Then I tightened my legs around his waist, gripped his neck from behind, and squeezed with all my might.

He struggled, throwing his elbows back and catching me in the face, chest, and ribs.

But I didn't release him.

I held on tight and had him choking.

But, in an incredible display of strength, he climbed to his feet—he was just tall enough for me not to be able to pin them in place with my legs—and raised me along with him.

It was not an easy thing for him to do as I was still a large opponent and weighed a ton.

He coiled his legs and threw himself into the air, landing on his back, crushing me.

He had to do one more time before I was winded, lost my grip, and rolled away.

He rubbed at his throat, now red raw from where I had been hanging onto it, and took his time to catch his breath the same way I was.

We each panted, struggling for air.

He glared at me before nodding his head. “Of course,” he said, his voice an ugly grasp. “Experience. That’s your secret weapon, isn’t it? Experience. I should have seen that coming. But rest assured. It shall not be a mistake I make again in the future.”

He got to his feet as I used a meditating Feral to stagger to mine.

I had weakened him but he had *severely* weakened me.

As he approached, his gleaming icy-blue eyes glaring and angry, I knew my end was about to come.

I looked behind me and hoped I wouldn’t see Ella there, that she had turned and run already.

But I knew she wouldn’t.

And there she stood, body tense, arms by her side, glaring.

“Ella, I can hold him off. But you need to run. *Now.*”

She didn’t.

If anything, her body tensed even more resolutely.

The tendons in her arms and neck tightened and I realized she wasn’t glaring at me at all...

But at the upgrade.

“You see?” he said, misreading the situation completely. “She does not *wish* to run. She wishes to mate with the victor. And that victor, I assure you, shall be me.”

He leaned and launched himself at me, his massive fist pulling back to deliver the deciding knockout blow...

When, suddenly, his front knee gave way and he fell face-first into the

dirt.

I just stood there, shocked at what I had seen.

Had I damaged it? I wondered.

I was almost certain I hadn't.

And yet, how else could I explain his sudden collapse?

Overcoming my immediate shock, I threw myself at him and adopted my previous hold, choking him out.

The creature struggled against me but it was not with the same aggression as before.

He seemed... *diminished*, somehow.

I doubted it was due to his distraction.

After all, when a Modified went into attack mode, every sinew and nerve was dedicated to it.

We would not stop until we had defeated our enemy and achieved our mission.

No, this was something else, something *from outside*.

Something *external*.

Something...

I recalled the face of a meditating Feral and immediately understood what was happening.

My gaze drifted up to Ella, who was still staring with that same intense focus she had earlier, glaring at the creature beneath my arms.

He grunted as I squeezed harder, my arms aching from the effort.

I managed to say four words in his ear:

“You've been Ella'd.”

Then, with a dawning look of realization, the upgrade looked up at Ella and seemed to see her for the first time not as a female but as *the Savor*.

As he possessed Krev genes like me, he was susceptible to her Scent every inch I was.

In fact, with his *superior* senses, he was *even more* susceptible to her power.

I could feel it emanating from her right at that moment and, despite his death throes as I choked the last of the air from his throat, there was a large unmistakable bulge in the front of his pants.

The scent was clearly playing out its seductive act.

Then his body went limp... and he was gone.

I waited longer in case it was all a ploy.

I had no idea what other genes had been inserted into his genome but, by the way he had reacted, with my arm wrapped around his throat, I didn't think it likely he was immune to being suffocated.

Confident it was not a ruse, I dumped his body to one side.

I only knew he was truly gone when I saw his purple face and tongue sticking out his mouth in a grotesque expression.

I hissed through my teeth at the pain in my chest and limped over to Ella.

Her body was still tense and she remained glaring at the creature lying unconscious on the ground.

I took her in my arms and whispered to her softly:

"It's okay. It's okay. You can let go. Everything's okay now. You're safe. I'm here."

Ella's body was slow to unfurl.

When it did and she truly let go, she burst into tears of relief and melted in my arms as I lifted her up and carried her away—away from that demonic creature that had attempted to take advantage of her, away from the orgy happening (supposedly) in her honor, away from the High Scientist.

Away from it all.

I clutched Ella close, her scent still invading my senses.

It was so strong and powerful that it was all I could do not to mate with her right there and then.

But I couldn't.

Instead, I channeled my desire for her into action and weaved my way through the endless fields of wild Ferals until I reached the far side where the partygoers had parked their ships.

I slowed down as I approached my own shuttle.

My new mission would be one I would have to *give myself*.

I would get as far away from here as possible.

I would ensure she never came in contact with humans—Modified or otherwise—ever again.

I would take her where no Krev could pick up on her scent, where she would pass as an ordinary human.

There were plenty of places we could hide and I had seen many during my time in the military.

In fact, one sprung to mind right away:

A beautiful little colony moon in dire need of farmers.

We would go there, I decided, and hide and wait until everyone had

forgotten about us.

We would live our lives in peace and harmony while Ella learned to control her ability, to conceal it so no one could find her ever again.

She would keep it just for me.

We would have a family, kids—natural-born human-Krev!

It made me smile to think they would be natural-born like the wild Ferals I had spent my entire life fighting.

The universe was alive with ironies.

Thack!

Something struck the back of my head and I fell to my knees.

I fell forward but managed to cradle Ella in my arms, placing her gently down on the ground.

Then I rolled over and peered back at my attacker.

It couldn't possibly be the upgrade—his purple face and protruding tongue made that certain of that.

No, it was someone else.

A Feral.

A *wild* Feral.

As I glanced at the other Ferals, still lost in a world of their own, I realized it wasn't one of those.

No, this Feral had the bright eyes of *intelligence*, unlike any wild Feral I had ever seen before.

He aimed his plasma rifle at me and I raise my hands in surrender.

“Don't hurt her,” I said. “Don't touch her.”

The feral smiled. “Hurt her? Of course not. She's the reason I'm here.”

I coiled my legs to launch myself at the creature but he had already begun to swing his plasma rifle around, striking me for a second time.

This time, it was a deciding blow.

The last thing I heard him say was:

“Don't worry. You're coming too.”

PART IV

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AN UNEXPECTED TRUTH

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ELLA

I DABBED at Qeb's face.

He didn't have a fever but if I didn't do something about the twin strikes it'd taken to knock him out, the swells were soon going to be bigger than his head!

He had fought bravely, all for my sake.

At every turn of the fight, the Gen 6 prototype had the upper hand.

He really *was* faster and stronger and Qeb seemed doomed to defeat.

Then he had surprised the Gen 6 upgrade—and in all honesty, surprised me too—when he turned the tables and struck with devastating blows that his opponent hadn't expected.

He had made full use of his (supposedly) “inferior” skills and abilities.

On another day and at another time, it was totally possible he could have defeated the Gen 6 model all by himself.

But not today.

As I watched the tables turn once more—and not to Qeb's benefit this time—he lost his momentum and edge, and I knew I had to do *something* to prevent his failure.

And so, digging deep within myself, I found that center that had proven so elusive earlier.

I began sending out those waves of scent and aimed them directly at the Gen 6.

I saw no evidence it was having any effect at all and only went to show how important it was to keep on going even when all your senses were telling you nothing was happening.

My first hint of success was when the new Gen model stumbled, his legs

losing power to support his own weight.

He looked shaken, having never experienced weakness before.

It had been all Qeb needed to take advantage of the situation and wrapped his arms around the creature's neck and squeeze tight.

With me weakening the creature internally and Qeb working him externally, the tables had shifted *massively* in our favor.

And now the Gen 6 was the one that was doomed.

The moment it was over, I felt exhausted and was grateful Qeb was there to catch my collapsing body.

It was so much harder when I wasn't in physical contact with Qeb, as if that were the secret ingredient that made accessing my full power possible.

If I did have some kind of power to manipulate these creatures, then it was a thin trickle compared to having Qeb holding my hand or better still...

Inside me.

He had carried me away from the palace—which came as something of a surprise as I would have expected him to take me toward it and into one of the suites upstairs.

Instead, he hurried across the endless fields of meditating wild Ferals and towards some other destination.

Through fluttering eyes, I witnessed the grim look of determination on his face.

Whatever he planned on doing, it was something he was going to see to the end.

No matter what.

That was until there was a sudden loud *thwack* noise that made Qeb crumple to his knees.

He still managed to lay me down softly.

I rolled over and saw the Feral standing over us.

There was *no mistaking him* as a wild Feral.

He had the same appearance as those we had seen on Daemon's Demand, with his thin, wiry frame, his straggly hair, and short twin horns jutting from either side of his head.

But instead of his hands being curled into claws or armed with old and ancient weapons like spears or blades, he held a *plasma rifle* in his hands.

And despite my exhaustion, I could see the obvious glint of intelligence in his eyes.

This is no regular Feral.

As he delivered a second vicious blow to Qeb's head, knocking him out for good this time, I slipped deep inside myself for that calm control where my power lay, and reached for Qeb with a free hand.

But I couldn't find his arm, needing very much to draw upon the strength he provided me.

Instead, I used what small amount I had available to me and directed it at the Feral towering over me.

He blinked for a moment and, I thought, perhaps, despite how narrow the trickle of power was that I wielded, it still might have enough of an effect on him.

Then he smiled and shook his head before raising the communicator attached to his forearm.

I watched in horror as he ejected a pill I recognized Qeb had consumed before—for his *condition*—namely for me and the effect my scent had on him.

He swallowed it, and any effects I had on him—or any *hope of escape*—disappeared as it entered his body's system.

He bent down and carried me onto his ship and used a special lifting machine to bring Qeb with us as Qeb was far too large for him to be able to carry by himself.

Then we set off, heading to some unknown place.

I wondered if I would ever stop being abused and taken advantage of in this future.

I had been kidnapped *several times* now, with Qeb rescuing me each time.

But this time, I felt certain, it would be *me* that did the rescuing.

Exhausted and spent, I passed out.

When I woke, it was in this hut with Qeb lying on the bed, still unconscious from having been knocked out.

I moved to the window and peered outside.

There was a large clutch of tall trees with alien creatures swinging from the branches.

It was sunny, and if it wasn't for the situation we found ourselves in, it might have been described as a paradise.

I moved to the door and gently eased it open an inch.

I spotted two Ferals outside, standing guard, plasma rifles held tight to their chests.

They weren't there to keep us safe, I knew.

They wanted to keep the rest of the village safe *from us!*

I eased the door closed and sensed that escaping would be *impossible* without Qeb's help.

There was a bowl of water with ice and a clean cloth.

I used it to dab at Qeb's face where the twin lumps were growing larger with each passing moment.

Other medicine had been made available too, and I was quick to administer what care I could considering my limited knowledge of the subject.

He had sustained multiple lacerations and even unconscious as he was, his body jerked when I touched his ribs.

I figured they were either broken—in which case, I was at a *total loss* as to what to do—or only badly bruised.

When I lifted his shirt, I saw the huge purple bruise and opted to rub some ointment onto it.

Qeb let out a deep sigh in his sleep and his body relaxed along with it.

Who were these Feral creatures? I wondered.

They were clearly wild but they possessed control that the others I had seen did not have.

Instead, they seemed completely in charge of their faculties.

I decided not to dwell on it and hoped the answers would come with time.

The door banged open and a clutch of gossiping wild Ferals entered.

They were female, sporting the same unique look of the males we had seen on Daemon's Demand and—

Then it struck me.

I had seen the trees outside before...

And the animal creatures that swung from them...

I had last seen them when Qeb had brought me to Daemon's Demand what felt like a lifetime ago.

The wild Ferals that chased us through the undergrowth had forced us to hide in the cave and enjoy our first-ever lovemaking session.

We are on Daemon's Demand!

These creatures had brought us back to it!

I jumped to my feet at their sudden appearance and stood before Qeb's unconscious form, holding out my arms to either side to prevent them from approaching him. "Stay back! I warn you!"

I searched for a weapon and spotted a vase with fresh flowers.

I grabbed it and pulled my arm back, preparing to hurl it at the first sign of aggression.

The lead female raised her hands in the universal sign of surrender. “We mean you no harm.”

“And what about him?” I said, jerking my head toward Qeb.

“We mean *no one* any harm,” she said. “Please, put down the vase.”

I pulled it back threateningly. “Worried I’ll beat you, huh?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “It was made by my father.”

The sudden injection of a personal element into the scene made my body relax—just a little.

The lead female that had spoken turned to the others and nodded her head.

They slowly wound out from behind her and approached the bed, lining around it.

I watched them carefully and realized that even if I had wanted to stop them, I would have been powerless to do so.

Not because these wild Ferals were much larger or physically stronger than me but because they were greater in number.

Then, to my astonishment, they began applying the medicine I had attempted to do earlier.

Where I had been hesitant and unsure, they moved with calm, smooth motions.

Clearly, they were *much more* experienced with such things.

My defenses lowered, my shoulders sagged.

I had completely misread their intentions.

“It’s perfectly normal to be concerned for your loved ones,” a figure said, stepping up beside me.

She was like the other female wild Ferals except much, *much* older.

She had deep lines crisscrossing her face—wrinkles of a long and productive life.

But her eyes were sharp and focused.

She had a bearing none of the other females possessed, and I immediately knew she had to be the leader of these people.

She turned to me and offered her hand.

I was so used to being subjected to this time’s customs that I had expected her to thump her fist on her chest and felt *awkward* when I reached

for her hand and we shook.

“There,” she said. “Now we’re not strangers. Come. I wish to show you something.”

She stepped toward the door but I didn’t move a muscle.

The females gossiped amongst each other as they took care of Qeb’s injuries.

“Let them do their work,” the old Feral told me, gently taking me by the arm and leading me away. “We will only get in their way.”

As she led me toward the door, I couldn’t help but glance over my shoulder at them.

Was I was really going to leave Qeb in the hands of his mortal enemy?

Those he had sworn to fight?

And had I just handed his life over to them?

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QEB

I BOLTED UPRIGHT and immediately felt something on my arms and legs.

Figures stood around me and I immediately launched myself at them.

They scattered, racing away.

I still wasn't completely conscious and yet my survival instincts had already kicked in.

The back of my head thumped hard where, now that I was able to think a little, I recalled I had received two powerful strikes, laying me low.

The figures in the room evaded my slow-grasping hands.

They were small and surprisingly agile creatures and hastened towards a square of light in the corner of the room.

They gibbered amongst themselves as they rushed through the door.

They were wild Ferals, I realized.

There was no mistaking their hurried, frantic gait and wild thatch of hair perched atop their heads.

I peered about the room and noticed Ella was not there.

Then I recalled the creature that had laid me low, sneaking up behind me in my weakened state as I carried Ella in my arms.

And I saw red.

The wild Ferals had attacked me and stripped Ella from me!

Well, they would not have her for long!

I growled and approached the door but before I reached it, another pair of wild Ferals entered.

These were nothing like the smaller creatures that had just scattered from me.

They were self-controlled with plasma rifles clutched to their chests.

They shared a look and raised their hands as if in surrender.

But there will be no surrender!

“Where is Ella?” I growled, bearing down on them. “Where is *my mate?*”

“She was taken—” the larger one began, but I had drawn close enough to seize him by the throat and lift him physically off the floor, feet dangling.

His eyes widened with fear. “She’s in the village! She’s in the village!”

His buddy backed away, clutching his plasma rifle close, its barrel aimed at me.

But he didn’t fire.

I realized they must be under some kind of orders not to harm me.

Well, I thought, that was *their* mistake.

I would not be doing the same.

I tossed the Feral aside, the blood pulsing through my veins, threatening to overtake me and send me into a wild berserker rage.

Then this village would have a great deal more to concern themselves with than whether or not to open fire on me.

I would lay waste to the village until I found the one they had taken from me.

Ella.

The two armed Ferals hastily rushed through the door.

I followed them out and was immediately assaulted by the sights and smells of a Feral village—complete with tiny Feral children.

Mothers saw me and hastily gathered their children around themselves before rushing into their tiny huts.

I threw back my head and howled:

“Where is Ella?”

Those that hadn’t seen me until then certainly did now.

A wave of fear broke through them like tossing a rock among a flock of Mpiya.

A single figure didn’t scatter like the others.

I came to a stop and I saw him.

It was the creature that had struck me twice on the head on palace grounds.

I reached up and touched the bulging throbbing orbs he had given me and a new sense of anger undertook me.

He was the one responsible for taking her from me.

He had to be the one to pay.

I had never entered a berserker rage before but knew there would be little that could draw me back from the brink.

A red mist floated before my eyes and I locked in on that wild Feral who, sensing the terrible danger he now found himself in, turned and bolted.

I took off after him.

He knew the village well and likely had a hiding place in mind.

As sprightly and quick as he was on his feet, he simply didn't have the rage that embolden me.

He turned around one hut after another and I followed him, gaining a single stride with each turn.

Then I noticed his pattern—it was always a left followed by a right.

I decided to cut him off at the next turn.

I lowered my head and ignored the next turn, and instead smashed through a hut wall.

It was stronger than I had expected, with some kind of rock layer behind the intricately-woven wooden canes, but it peeled before me like paper anyway.

I steamrolled through it.

A small family gasped in horror as I launched myself through their home, providing them with two more entrances.

I burst through the wall on the other side and, amidst the cloud of dust, spotted the wild Feral I was chasing.

Caught by surprise, he spun and turned on his heel to head in the opposite direction, but I swung my arm at him and caught his leg, knocking him off balance.

He struggled to his feet.

I grabbed at his ankle and pulled him toward me, wrapping my fists around his throat.

I drew him to me so our noses were virtually touching. “*Where. Is. The. Girl?*”

My tone was murderous with rage.

He struggled against my grip and beat his fists against me but I was as immovable as a rock.

There could be no dislodging me, no preventing me from my attack.

I released his throat just enough for him to speak more than garbled consonants.

He coughed and spluttered:

“With... With the... Elder!” he managed to say before wheezing uncontrollably.

“And where is this *Elder*?”

I would not be stopped until I had the information I needed.

The creature seemed unwilling—or perhaps unable due to my having crushed his throat—to say more.

It drove me into an even greater depth of anger and I squeezed harder still.

The creature sputtered, his body shaking, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

All I could see was red.

All I could imagine was Ella.

And the fact *this creature* had been the one to take her from me.

The fact *he* had been the one to steal my future from me.

We were escaping!

We were getting away!

We were going to be together!

We were going to be happy together.

Forever.

And he took her from me...

His eyes rolled into the back of his head and his body went limp.

I dropped him and turned to face my next unfortunate victim.

I would tear them all apart if I had to.

This hut village would be reduced to a smoking ruin—

“Qeb!”

The red mist about my eyes shivered and lifted like raising a curtain on a new day.

Ella hurried toward me but slowed before she came close enough for me to embrace.

She wore a horrified expression, eyes shifting between me and the creature at my feet.

Her terror struck me full in the chest.

In my murderous rage, I had not thought what *Ella* would *think*.

She was clearly *disgusted* by it.

I promised myself I would *never* fly into another rage again.

Not if it meant having to see her direct that expression at me again.

I stepped toward her and she took a shuffle-step back, unsure if she could

really trust me.

“Ella...” I said. “I would never hurt you. You must know that. I would *never* harm you.”

Her eyes fell to the crumpled figure on the ground behind me.

The gaggle of creatures I recognized earlier from the hut I woke up in hurried over and kept a wary eye on me.

Within moments, he was coughing, sputtering, and croaking

He looked rough... but very much alive.

My shoulders sagged with relief.

Ella glared up at me and waved a finger under my nose. “Don’t you *ever* do that again!”

I shook my head, knowing that so long as I drew breath, I never would.

She fell into me and I clutched her in my arms, hugging her close.

The fear of having lost her and then the fear of losing her due to my berserker rage was a potent mix.

When we parted, I saw Ella had tears in her eyes.

We were the center of the wild Ferals’ attention but seeing I was not rampaging any longer, they began to emerge from their homes.

“Where are we?” I asked Ella. “What are we doing here?”

Ella comported herself. “They brought us here. The wild Ferals. Except... they’re not really wild at all. I think these are the ones you told me about before—the ones that woke up to consciousness naturally. And you’ll never guess who I met...”

She took me by the hand and led me through the village.

The villagers were wary as I moved through them.

“Do you remember that story you told me about the wild Feral female who got pregnant?” Ella said. “The one that gave birth to wild Ferals able to think for themselves? Well, she’s the Elder here! She brought me here to do something for her—to fix those wild Ferals we sent into a meditative state. Do you remember?”

How could I forget?

It had been the first time Ella and I had made love, joining as one, and my fate of always being at her side was sealed.

From that special moment, *my entire life* had changed.

“She wants me to wake them up, but I can’t do it alone,” Ella continued. “I need you. You enhance my power somehow. I’m not sure how it works but I just *know* it’s right. Come on. We have to help them!”

We weaved through the village until we came to a large fire already crackling with young flames.

Ferals prepared game they had hunted down and hung it over the fire, its fat hissed as it dripped into the flames.

An old Feral with weather-beaten skin and signature scraggly hair so gray it had begun to turn white at the roots.

I have never seen an old Feral before—neither wild nor Modified.

We were so often used up in war serving our purpose to defeat the enemy that we tended to live *very* short lives.

Only the *best* survived, becoming more powerful with experience but were rarely put into positions where we could put it into action.

She extended a hand to me and I gazed at it, unsure of what I was meant to do with it.

“You take it,” Ella told me.

“Take it where?” I responded.

The Elder shared a look with Ella and they burst into laughter that bowled them over until they couldn’t keep their feet.

Once they were able to speak, the Elder rubbed the tears from her eyes and completed the action by taking my hand in hers and moving it up and down in a strange movement I had never seen before.

“This is the *traditional* way humans greet each other,” she informed me. “At least, it was in the old days. It’s one of many customs we have kept alive in our culture so we never forget our origins.”

I frowned at her and placed my fist to my chest. “But the Fistor has *always* been the way humans have greeted each other.”

The Elder shook her head. “There is *much* you have been told that is not true. Much has been withheld from you about your own culture and history—both of humans and the Krev. It was done for one specific aim: control. *Always* for control. For that is where the power, the riches, and immortal life lay. Now, come, sit by the fire and talk with us. What we discuss may not make for comfortable listening but it is the truth.”

Ella took me by the hand and pulled me over to the bench wrapped around the fire.

As the fire roared into life, so too did the incredible story the Elder shared.

As did my anger.

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ELLA

SEEING Qeb with the wild Feral choking to death beneath him had been one of the most terrifying things I had ever seen in my life.

It wasn't that I hadn't seen death before—living in a busy city sometimes meant you were exposed to such things—it was realizing that someone you cared for, someone you trusted and held close, and always assumed to be caring and considerate, could also be a terrifying killer.

Seeing Qeb so enraged made me fearful.

After all, if he could lose control of himself like that with wild Ferals who had done nothing but show him kindness since they had brought him here, *what else* might he be capable of?

It was not a line of thinking I much enjoyed.

In that horrifying split second, I had feared him.

I had feared him and everything he could do to me.

How he could so easily take my own life and crushed it from me as he had done with the wild Feral.

But when I said his name and he turned to me, and his grim mask of desperation cracked before crumbling completely upon seeing me, I knew my fear was irrational.

He had only been afraid I was in danger, that someone had taken me—which they had.

I put myself in his place.

He had awoken in a strange hut surrounded by creatures he had spent his entire life fighting, so was it really much of a surprise he had reacted the way he had?

Especially since I had not been by his side.

His reaction was as predictable as it was preventable.

After all, the Elder and I didn't have to leave that hut.

We could've stayed and waited for him to wake up.

He would have been shocked, surrounded by these creatures, but I could have been on hand to calm him.

I had to take at least *some* of the responsibility for the way he'd reacted.

After all, what if the situation had been reversed and it had been *me* that had awoken in the room and *he* wasn't there?

I didn't have his physical strength and speed but I would have been no less concerned about his whereabouts.

When I took him in my arms, I felt the tension leave him, realizing he was as stressed about the situation of us being parted as I was.

I was relieved when the choked Feral—and why was I *not* shocked when I saw it was the very same that had beaten Qeb about the head?—began to rise under the careful treatment of the village's caregivers.

It would take some time for him to recover but I was confident there wouldn't be any permanent damage.

Now, we sat around the fire, Qeb finding himself in a situation he *could never* possibly have conceived himself to be in.

We were listening to a wild Elder regaling us with her tale.

She told us about how she had awoken into consciousness one day—and it turned out to be the very *same day* she had given birth.

She told us she never knew who the father was as, at the time, she had been unconscious and completely unaware of herself or her surroundings.

When I asked what it was like to live without consciousness, she thought about it for a while before replying:

“I hope you shall never know that kind of nightmare. You are not truly alive. You feel like a puppet and someone else pulls your strings. I remember certain things... I remember attacking, remember my clawed hands smothered with blood... but little else. And then one day, it was like the sun rising and the light shone on me. And beneath me, still attached by his umbilical cord, was my child.

“The first wild Feral born with consciousness. I have no idea why I was the one who developed consciousness at that moment, or even how I had become pregnant. It should not have been possible. But it *did* happen and that's the most important thing. Although my son had consciousness, it was not with any great sense of intelligence.

“It was only later, when other wild Ferals began to have children, that we became smarter, until they gave rise to the creatures you see around you now. We are small in number but our will to survive is every bit as strong as yours. Which is why, when the rumor of our existence reached the Temple of Science, they knew they *had to destroy us* immediately.

“After all, they desire control above all other things, and if they cannot control the breeding of their own creation... Then it would call into question their ability to control anything at all. And so they attacked us without mercy. We moved from one moon to another, one planet to another, hiding amongst the indigenous populations, always managing to keep just one step ahead. But we knew we could not keep on running forever. Eventually, we *had to fight back.*”

“How?” Qeb asked. “By your own admission, there is only a small number of you.”

The Elder nodded. “But as we traveled, we found there were more like us—more wild Ferals born in the wild. But even added all together, we couldn’t hope to challenge the Modified Feral Army. Their numbers are vast and there was no way for us to defeat them.

“But there was *one army* that just might listen to us: the first-generation Ferals that had been released into the wild. They are *many* in number and although it pains me to admit, they really are little more than animals. They had been treated as such. And so, we marshaled them, corralled them, the shepherds leading the wolves, to fight against the Modified Ferals.”

I looked over at Qeb to see how he was gauging this information.

After all, the Modified Feral Army she was talking about was the very same he had been a part of his whole life.

I was pleased to see he was in a reflective mood and listened intently.

After a lifetime of fighting wild Ferals, I imagined it must have been difficult for him to believe what he was hearing.

“It worked,” the Elder said. “We managed to create a formidable resistance. Then one day, we felt the tide of war turn in our favor. It was *us* on the front foot taking the initiative. We never intended on taking innocent human lives—after all, we consider them brothers and sisters—but we simply could not allow them to wipe us from the face of the galaxy. We are living, thinking beings! *We deserve to exist!*”

There was no denying her passion, which must have been the chief driving force of the resistance she had led.

I think it was fair to say I was in awe of her.

“And then you staged the attack on the Capital,” Qeb said sternly. “Doing so would have wiped out the heart of the intergalactic human Empire. If you’re so intent on making peace with us, why do that?”

The Elder sighed. “We appraised every other option we could think of, but nothing stuck. We could not allow your elites to take advantage of any weakness we might show. We had the war’s momentum on our side and needed to use it to the best effect. We didn’t want innocent humans to die, but we didn’t want more wild Ferals to die either. We were put in an impossible position and so, we decided to wipe out the Capital.

“Doing so would remove the head from the snake. Yes, they would have reformed and created new headquarters elsewhere, but we would have them on the run. It would be *they* who were on the defense *and having to run from us*. But where they had intended on annihilating us, we only planned to destroy the elites of your society, not the everyday working man and woman. In truth, we felt, despite the unfortunate cost, that it was a price worth paying for both of us. It would free you and every human throughout the galaxy from their shackles.

“You too would be free to live your lives however you wished—something only too few Modified Ferals experience in their lifetime. Surely you agree with that?”

Qeb nodded and glanced at me. “Yes. Yes, I can understand that.”

A shiver went through me when he looked at me like that.

He looked so protective and strong and yet vulnerable at the same time.

I didn’t know quite how he did it—especially with his blue scaly skin and thick black horns jutting from atop his head.

I raised my hand to his cheek and stroked it with my thumb.

“You are free to live amongst us for as long as you wish,” the Elder said. “Unfortunately, we cannot allow Ella to travel freely right now. She is *much* too powerful and if the Empire gets its hands on her... Well, let’s just say things would not work out particularly well in our favor.

“Already, our army has been defeated, put into a vegetative state from which they might never recover. And already the Empire’s army is amassing once more, preparing for a counter-strike against us. Ella and her ability might very well be our *only chance* of stopping them. Perhaps war might not be necessary any longer, so long as Ella can get close enough to their ranks to shut them down. With no bloodshed, we could take over the Capital

peacefully.”

Qeb shook his head. “I cannot allow you to overthrow the Empire. For all they’ve done, they have still spread the light of knowledge throughout the galaxy. It is a better place thanks to them. Despite their little... foibles.”

The Elder nodded. “Then at least help us use Ella’s ability so we can achieve our mission without bloodshed, and without innocent humans having to die. Surely that’s worth making a sacrifice for?”

Qeb frowned, seeming unsure at this request.

He had been brainwashed his entire life into believing everything the Empire did was for the *good of humanity* and the galaxy at large.

He had literally *been created* to believe such things.

I could not believe it was an easy decision for him to make.

“Please take some time to consider it,” the Elder said. “It could end this war in a single stroke. In the meantime,” the Elder said, turning to me. “I would ask of you a kind request.”

“Of course,” I said, ready to return the kindness she had shown us.

“One of my sons was among those you put into a vegetative state. He’s still in it now. I fear he may never wake up from it. We have many others that were affected. If you could wake him, bring him back to himself, I would very much appreciate it.”

I had *no idea* how to wake someone up, only to send them to sleep!

But I figured that if I had done this to them, surely I could be the one to undo it?

I nodded. “Okay. But I can only do it with Qeb at my side.”

The Elder led us into a large field—not unlike the one I had stumbled upon at the palace—and here too, a familiar sight greeted me.

Hundreds of wild Ferals sat with their legs folded, heads bowed in meditation.

Except...

These Ferals were *definitely not* in as good shape as those at the Capital.

Their backs were not straight but bent, and their heads rolled from one side to the other as if on the cusp of sleep—or perhaps it was *collapse*.

I had never stuck around long enough to see how long the meditative state I had cast them into would last but now I could see it would last until the very end.

Until death.

Unless I woke them.

I shared a concerned look with Qeb and felt a deep clenching sensation in the pit of my stomach.

Qeb took me by the hand as the Elder pointed to her son.

“Please,” she said. “Wake him. I wish to look into his eyes once more.”

I placed my hand on his head—as I had no idea what I was doing, I figured it was as good a thing to do as anything else.

I closed my eyes and found that familiar center and, clutching Qeb’s hand in my own, felt the pulse of my scent flowing out from me once more.

In my mind, I pictured the wild Feral before me wake up, for his eyes to bolt open.

As the seconds ticked past, I felt beads of sweat form on my forehead.

I felt like a fraud.

I didn’t know what I was doing.

I had no clue how to control this power of mine.

And as I turned to Qeb to shake my head at my failure, I heard a gasp over my shoulder.

The Elder dropped to her knees beside her son and ran her hands over his face.

He blinked awake as if from a deep slumber. “What... What... happened?”

It was all he could manage to say before his mother wrapped her arms around him, clutching him close.

She looked up at me over his shoulder. “Thank you!” she cried. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“It’s... nothing,” I said, still perplexed at what I had done.

I turned to help the next Feral in line when I started back.

He was *already* blinking awake.

The scent shockwave I had sent out had already had an effect on him—and those around him.

They blinked awake and got to their feet, stumbling, but very much alive.

Each had the same words on their lips:

“*What happened?*”

“*Where am I?*”

“*The last thing I remember was...*”

The Elder pulled her son up to his feet before peering over the vast horde of waking wild Ferals.

As she moved from one to the next, she looked them each in the eye,

asking them simple questions.

She had seen that something was wrong.

She was frantic, almost beside herself.

I approached her and grabbed her arm. “What is it? If there’s something wrong, I’m sure I can fix it—”

The Elder shook her head, causing the tears gathering in her eyes to dribble down her aged cheeks. “Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “Everything... Everything is... How did you do this?”

She fell forward and embraced me.

I was at a complete and total loss.

I looked over at Qeb for help in translating what she was saying to me.

He shrugged his shoulders too.

He also *had no idea*.

The Elder pulled back and gripped my shoulders. “Don’t you see? Look at them! Before, they were *all unconscious!* We manipulated them! They were little more than cattle! We brought them peace of a kind, but they could never think for themselves, could never converse. *Now look at them!*”

I did as she asked and realized what she was referring to.

The Ferals spoke clearly and easily, having conversations with each other, blinking and shocked as they peered at their surroundings and hands as if they had never seen them before.

“Don’t you understand?” the Elder said. “You’re not a weapon! You are *the cure!*”

QEB

IT HAD BEEN an evening of shocking revelations.

What the Elder had told us was a shock.

Not only the things she was saying with such apparent authority and knowledge, but the fact *there was no one here to court martial or punish her.*

Or label her Irregular and send her back to the liquidation chamber where she would be “decommissioned” and her body parts harvested to build a new model that wouldn’t have the same defective thoughts.

To even *whisper* such things was to call into question the Empire’s total authority.

The sudden realization of the horrific precision with which the Scientists had controlled and manipulated us was truly breathtaking.

One of the Elder’s revelations gave birth to dozens of other ideas, spiraling into even more.

And I knew without a shadow of a doubt that with all those interconnecting pieces of information, they simply *had to be true* because they were interwoven so effectively and efficiently.

In other words, how could they *not be true*?

And if they weren’t, what was the true explanation?

Suddenly, the reasons given by the Temple of Science seemed weak and pathetic in comparison.

I wondered how we had managed to live our lives for so long under such lies.

But then, when all you knew were lies, you believed what your eyes told you.

Believe and then you will see.

I felt sick to my stomach that I had been created to exist in such a cold and murderous regime.

I barely had time to process that truth before Ella began waking up the wild Ferals—with more than a little trepidation on my part.

After all, how did we know this wasn't a ploy to lure us into trusting them and awakening their people so they could turn around and tear us to pieces?

I didn't trust them.

But I *did* trust Ella.

And as she trusted the Elder, as far as I was concerned, there was no other requirement necessary.

But the most shocking revelation was the Elder's proclamation that the wild Ferals now had full consciousness.

They were *thinking* Ferals—every bit as much as the ones holding the plasma rifles, and even the Elder herself.

As the Elder led them into the village, they peered at the huts as if seeing them for the first time—despite having lived here for years, perhaps even *their whole lives*.

They ran their hands over the wood and faces of the other tribe members, tasted the tears that leaked from their parent's eyes, and holding them close, no doubt to savor the warmth generated both physically and within themselves.

With them being so focused on each other, it was a perfect opportunity for us to sneak away.

As the Elder hugged Ella—and even managed one for me!—and turned to leave, I slipped the pillows loose of their coverings and began stuffing them with food that had been left on a side table.

“Well, that was a shock, huh?” Ella said, shaking her head.

“Get ready,” I told her. “We're leaving.”

We were going to need a lot of food wherever we ended up.

“Leave?” Ella said, shocked. “Why would we leave? They need our help.”

“They want us to overthrow the Empire!” I said. “We can't do that! Even if we tried—even if we were successful, the Empire will always find a way to strike back. Trust me. We don't want any part of this war. We need to go. *Now.*”

Ella was silent for a moment as I continued jamming the food into the pillowcases.

Then, very quietly but confidently she said:

“No.”

I turned to her, not sure if I had heard her correctly. “Sorry?”

“I said *no*. I’m not leaving. I’m staying here. If you want to go, you can, but I’m staying.”

What Ella was saying was madness.

Pure lunacy.

She couldn’t be serious she wanted to make a stand against the Empire with these creatures?

I approached her and placed my hands on her shoulders. “I understand you like these people, but they’re going to get themselves killed. I guarantee the Empire is preparing an attack right now as we speak. They won’t hesitate to wipe out these people. They might have had some success in the past but it won’t last forever. When the Scientists put their minds to something, there is *no stopping them*.”

Ella shrugged my hands from her shoulders and cupped them within her own.

She looked up into my face. “Leave if you want. But these people are on the *right side*. I won’t abandon them. Not when there’s so much relying on us. We can bring an end to this war. Don’t you see? It can *come to an end*, and no one ever needs to die or suffer again. And we can do it. *If we work together*.”

I considered tearing the bedsheet off the bed, wrapping it around Ella, and carrying her from the village over my shoulders but quickly tossed the idea aside.

She was headstrong and would look for a way to escape me and return to these people.

In doing so, she would only put herself in greater danger than she already was.

Still, I didn’t like the idea. “You might get hurt. If the Empire gets hold of you... If they snatch you from these Ferals... They’ll do terrible, *terrible* things to you. I cannot let that happen. *We must leave*.”

But Ella was resolute and shook her head. “We are stronger together. We both know I am nothing without you. But if you must leave, then you should do what you think is best. I’m staying.”

“The only way for you to be safe is for us to run far from this place.”

Ella reached up and ran her fingers through my hair. “Nowhere will be

safe until the Temple of Science is destroyed. Nowhere. *Especially* for you and me. I'm doing this for you, for me, for our future. For everything we can have one day. But we have to fight for it *now*. I need you by my side. Without you, my power is nothing. *Please.*"

I had been prepared to argue against her, to say I could not do it, could not put the light of her life at risk... but once she said that final word, that final word of *begging*...

My heart melted and I knew I would do anything for this female.

I raised my hands to her cheeks and stroked her face. "As you wish, my love. But if your life is endangered *at any point* I will get you somewhere safe immediately. Do you understand?"

Ella placed her chin on my palm and nodded. "Yes. I understand. But first, we must try to end this war. And when we do, it will be over for *everybody.*"

I knew she was right, of course.

Although I didn't wish to fight another battle in yet another war that had nothing to do with me, I knew that if this time it could signal the end, then it was at least worth trying.

"Arrrrggghhhh!"

It was a scream outside.

Someone ran through the village and yelled at the top of their lungs:

"They're coming! They're coming! Everybody run! They're—"

The voice was cut short by a silent bolt of light that might have been lightning if it had not been for the soft "*ffffap!*" noise as the full power of an ion cannon was unleashed, sending a bolt of plasma into the heart of the village.

I also knew what would come next:

"It's the Empire," I said. "It's the Scientists... They've already found us."

I grabbed Ella by the hand and dragged her into the village where another ion blast seared through a row of huts, disintegrating the creatures inside instantly.

I dragged Ella behind me, quickly appraising the angle of attack.

They appeared to be coming from the north direction, so they would sweep in from the sides, boxing us in.

I'd been part of a similar attack *countless times* over the years and knew the playbook by heart.

I bolted around our hut, to the back that adjoined the forest.

I took a single moment to pause and check my earlier appraisal had been correct.

I could already make out my former brothers-in-arms—the Modified Ferals picking through the forest to the left and right, firing their plasma rifles at any wild Ferals that sped toward them in angry fits of rage.

The wild Ferals opened fire in retaliation, striking half a dozen Modified Ferals in the chest and head before being slapped down themselves.

We couldn't escape.

The trap was already closing.

“Over here!” a familiar voice hissed.

Ahead of us, peering out from a hatch in the ground, was the Elder.

She held it up and waved for us to join her.

I glanced over at the Modified Ferals before deciding the Elder offered the best—and likely only—chance of escape we were going to get.

We hurried over in a crouch and dived through the hatch.

The Elder lowered it back down. “There's a tunnel,” she said, motioning behind us. “Follow it and you will come out beside a lake. There are emergency transport ships there. Take one and search for our other cells throughout the galaxy. Keep your ears open for rumors and follow where they lead.”

She removed a chain necklace from about her neck and handed it to Ella. “When you find one, give them this and explain what happened here.”

Ella tucked it in her pocket and reached out for the Elder. “Come with us! The wild Feral Army will need a leader.”

The Elder tapped Ella's hand and smiled warmly. “*These* are my people. They are *my responsibility*. Don't worry. I'll be fine.”

And with that, she thrust the hatch door open, climbed out, and ran toward the Modified Ferals' front line.

Within moments, her scream was cut short too.

Despite only having known her for a short time, I felt an immense pain in my heart.

Ella openly sobbed.

I wrapped my arms around her and led her down the tunnel.

The sound of heavy fire from the Modified Feral Army grew more distant the further we went.

We emerged out beside a large lake just as the Elder had told us we would.

I spotted the emergency shuttles lying dormant and empty and realized just how many of the villagers had managed to escape alongside us.

None.

The attack had been carried out quick, hard, and effectively.

And mercilessly.

Always without mercy.

Not a single member of the village would be allowed to survive by accident—and those that did would soon wish they had not.

They would be tortured into giving up any secrets they held—or even secrets they were forced to create as the torture would not end until their lives had been taken.

With a new sense of disgust for the Empire, I deactivated the cloaking shield and pulled the hatch open.

I helped Ella on board and shut it behind me.

We're supposed to go to another wild Feral cell? I thought.

There were about a billion places a cell might hide, and the odds of finding them were virtually impossible—especially since they did not want to be found.

But I also knew Ella wouldn't stop until we *had* found them.

Right now, the most important thing was getting Ella somewhere safe.

I powered up the engines, turned the controls, and—

Ffffwap!

A thick bolt of plasma from an ion cannon swatted us from the sky and sliced our ship clean in half.

The cockpit fell forward and smashed into the lake.

As we rapidly began to sink, I grabbed Ella by the arm.

We barely managed to gulp a lungful of oxygen before a huge metal arm descended into the water and plucked us out.

And I knew our fates were sealed and my worst dreams had finally come true.

ELLA

I KNEW war was one of the worst things a civilization could commit against another, and I had been on protests several times back on Earth in my own time, but I realized I had never known how desperately disgusting it was until I saw it with my own eyes.

The Modified Ferals descended upon the village without remorse.

They tore through the innocent kind villagers, not hesitating even for a moment to unload a deadly bolt of plasma into their chests or heads.

I thought we were going to face the same fate until the Elder called us into that underground hatch.

We had managed to escape when so many others had not.

They had brought us there because they thought they could keep us safe, could keep other Ferals—in particular the Modified Ferals—from picking up on my scent.

Somehow, they had managed to track us to Daemon's Demand and laid waste to what I had been increasingly thinking of as the perfect oasis where Qeb and I could rest and be safe and maybe, if we were very lucky, have a family.

But it had not been safe.

And I was beginning to suspect *nowhere in the galaxy was*.

Not from these Scientists.

Not from their obsession for power and total control.

They split Qeb and I up the moment we were brought on board the transport ship.

Qeb kicked and screamed, flailing to get free of our captors, but he was easily overpowered by his fellow Modified brothers.

I was placed in a cell and held at armed blaster point—although it was completely unnecessary as I had no fight left in me.

At least, not on the outside.

I had barely even begun to get over the effect my ability had had over the wild Ferals—how I could wake them up *and turn them into thinking beings* when the Empire had descended upon us.

But if I thought the treatment of the wild Ferals in the village had been the very meaning of depravity, then I was in for a rude awakening when I arrived at the Temple of Science.

They took me into the depths where I heard the wailing and crying of creatures who had long since lost all hope.

Many even sounded like they had lost their minds.

Despite the pristine white walls, I associated it with a dungeon, its antiseptic stink stinging my nostrils.

I was going to be treated the same as these other creatures... tortured, experimented on...

I tried not to think about that.

There were far more important things to be concerned about right now.

Like Qeb's welfare.

How they were going to treat me was nothing compared to how they would treat him.

After all, he had destroyed their 6th Gen prototype—something that must have been, to their minds, *impossible* for an inferior Gen 5.

Fighting against the Gen 6 model had been an act of defiance, and as I had seen, defiance against the Scientists would not incur a positive outcome.

I slowed my pace a moment when, through a plate glass window, I saw the wild Ferals I had put in a meditative state.

They sat on the floor, arranged in long lines.

Modified Ferals picked them up, carried them over to a machine, and dumped them in a funnel.

Their bodies rolled down a long slide, and at the bottom, they met the most disgusting machine I had ever set eyes on.

It was part meat grinder, part abattoir.

First, a surgical slit was made down the creatures' skin, from head to toe, then the skin was peeled off in a single piece.

This was sucked into a pipe that disappeared, joining a bubbling melting pot of liquid that gave off a noxious stink.

Then came the most disgusting part:

The body was hacked to pieces, the skeleton cracked open with powerful blows from sharp mechanical implements, the internal organs harvested and placed on bloodied conveyor belts that fed off into the deeper reaches of the facility.

At the end of each of these conveyor belts were refrigeration units where the body parts were kept and stored.

For later use? I wondered.

I had no idea, but I felt sick to my stomach—especially since no anesthetic had been administered and the process had been carried out on living creatures.

Unable to bear it any longer, I hurled, spilling what meager content I had in my stomach over the floor.

The wild Ferals were now at the mercy of the Scientists' whims, and as I had seen, they did not have a lot of mercy for anyone but themselves.

We descended deeper into the dungeon and I knew things could only get worse from here.

At the bottom of the steps, on hard flagstones, I came to a large laboratory.

The High Scientist was bent over a microscope, peering intently at something on a slide.

He gave no sign he even knew I was there.

And after about a minute or two, he stood up straight and, not even looking in my direction, waved vaguely toward the chair in the middle of the room.

It was a hideous thing, with straps and wires across the arms and back.

For all of their advanced technology, you would have thought they would have more sophisticated means of torture.

As the Modified Ferals strapped me in, locking me into place, any attempts at escape would be futile at best.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked. “Why did you kill all those innocent Ferals?”

The High Scientist murmured something to his Assistant who busily carried out his orders.

“You're a fool if you think those creatures were innocent,” the High Scientist announced. “Inside your cells lies the secret to your ability in controlling the Ferals. You shut down *an entire army* without raising a single

finger. There is little hope in stopping you from doing the same with our own Modified Feral army, if you so desired.

“But in you, we see opportunity. You see, no matter how hard we tried, we simply could not breed out the Ferals’ intense desire to mate. It comes from their Krev genes. Doing so produced the wild Ferals, who lost all sense of self-control. We discovered it was too high a price to pay, and so, we were forced to re-insert the Krev’s desire to mate back into them. Only then, after they had mated with their females, did they gain full control over themselves.

“And now, with you here, we might finally have a solution to our problem.”

“Let me disappear and I swear you’ll never see me again!” I said.

The Scientist cocked his head to one side with curiosity. “Let you return to the wild? For you to mate and create *more of you*? For you to form your own little anti-Feral army so you can overrun our entire Empire anytime you wish? I think not.”

I really hadn’t thought that far ahead.

I just want to be happy!

I found a male I loved and wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

I don’t want any part of this!

I don’t want to fight the Empire, to destroy armies!

I just want to live!

I just want to be!

“Once we harness the power of your scent, we can imbue our next generation of Modified Ferals with it, giving them resistance to it, perhaps even *cure* their reaction to it. And we will have, finally, discovered a cure for their desire to mate. They will become the perfect soldier, capable of self-thought and able to follow orders without any unwanted distractions.”

I reached out with my scent, not toward the Scientist as he was a so-called “pure” human, but toward the Feral soldiers I knew would be standing guard outside the door.

If I could only reach them, I could compel them to enter the room, wrap their hands around the High Scientist’s scrawny neck, and squeeze until no more oxygen could pass through it.

Then Qeb and I might just be able to escape from this place.

But try as I might, my tiny trickle of power couldn’t convince any of the soldiers to enter the room.

“You’re wasting your time,” the High Scientist said. “All Modified Ferals

now take a consistent dose of Numb-er pills. You have little effect on them. You ought to focus on keeping your reserves of energy.”

A grin lit his face—a face that I doubted had ever known a genuine smile in its entire life. “Trust me, you’re going to need it.”

He flicked a switch and the chair began to vibrate.

The wires and straps that I had thought were meant to hold me down instead rose like snakes, and sharp-tipped needles poked from their tips.

Then they entered my body.

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QEB

EVERYTHING THE EMPIRE had ever told me, everything I had been *created for*, all of it, had been a lie.

The wild Feral village had been decimated.

In the past, I had always been on the *other side*, been the one doing the destroying.

When I did, it was under orders.

I had turned my brain off and associated the wild Ferals with what we had always been told they were—vermin.

Pests that *needed to be destroyed* and threatened the very heart of the Empire itself.

Our jobs were to clear them out, and that was exactly what we did.

But being on the receiving end of the destructive onslaught left a *very* bitter taste in my mouth.

I had only spent a few minutes among these creatures and had only really spoken to one of them—their Elder—and found her to be kind and good.

She had given me more truth in a handful of minutes than the Empire had given me *my entire life*.

And she too had been destroyed by the Empire's plasma fire.

Perhaps she had thought we would have more time, that she could share more of her insights and wisdom of the truth of the human race before they came.

But she must have known the Empire would eventually find us.

And *destroy* them.

The Scientists had kidnapped Ella and not destroyed her.

There was only one reason they would have done that—and that was if

they believed her to be of use to them.

If there was one thing the High Scientist hated more than something getting in the way of his disgusting plans, it was waste.

Ella had potential, secrets locked up within herself, and he would attempt to get at and use them for his own purposes.

What plans he would have, I had no idea.

But I knew it would not end well for the galaxy.

The wild Ferals had been the only thing that kept the High Scientist's aspirations in check.

Being able to control them and wipe them out with a single weapon by harnessing Ella's scent...

It would mean he could spread throughout the galaxy like a cancer.

There would be no stopping him.

And he could, finally, achieve everything he ever wanted.

I clenched my teeth and ground my teeth.

My arms were tucked behind me with magnetic restraints, the same with my ankles.

Even if I managed to escape, the Modified Ferals could easily drag me back into this cell.

I knew the protocol—I had stood guard outside prison cells more times than I could count.

There was no way out.

It would *take a miracle* for us to escape this situation.

And not for the first time since we had been captured, my hopes sank.

There was a high-pitched whirring sound as the atoms in the door rearranged, turning them transparent so the guard on duty could peer inside the cell and see me sitting on the floor.

Then the door opened and a figure dressed in a cloak entered.

She was dainty and small, and for a moment, I thought they had allowed Ella to return to me.

My ears perked up, my eyes widening, ignoring my senses telling me this was some kind of trap if it was indeed Ella.

The figure reached up and removed her cowl.

My hopes sank back to their depths once more.

It was the Empress.

I turned away from her, not interested in anything she had to say.

"The guards have let me come speak with you, but we don't have much

time.”

Despite being the Empress, there was precious little she could do to improve my current station.

“Listen to me,” she said. “When you came to the palace and introduced Ella to us, I saw a vision. I saw her setting us free, of her removing the restraints the High Scientist has placed upon us and—”

“Your vision was nothing but a daydream,” I growled. “Look at us. Look where we are! In the depths of the Temple of Science, with no chance of escape. Your vision was probably planted within you by the High Scientist as a way to torment you.”

The Empress crouched in front of me and raised my chin with her tiny hand. “You must not lose hope. So long as there is hope, there is *always a chance*.”

“Can you set me free?” I asked her, my gaze flat.

I already knew the answer.

A definite *no*.

If she even attempted such a thing, she and her precious Emperor would both lose their heads.

“You know I cannot,” she said.

“Then why come here?”

The Empress stood up and moved toward one of the sullied walls and waved a hand as if she could see something I could not.

“There are things in this world that even the High Scientist does not know. Certain abilities reaching back as far as the birth of the human race itself. My ancestors could see things sometimes, pictures in their minds. The future.”

She turned to face me. “And when I met Ella, that was what I saw. And not just our future, but the future of the *entire human race*.”

“I see it too,” I said. “It’s a dream. A fantasy. Sometimes when you want something so badly, you believe it’s real. But it’s not and it never will be.”

The Empress raised her chin. “I have long since learned to tell the difference between a daydream and a vision.”

Whether or not I believed what she was saying, I was confident she clearly did.

“And I see your future too,” she said. “Your future with Ella. You will not live here at the Capital, nor anywhere within the reaches of the Empire. You will live beyond it and have many beautiful children, natural-born Feral-

humans. And you will know a peace unlike anything you have ever experienced. And the Empire will be at peace. The Temple of Science will be reduced to rubble and the natural course of life will resume once more, with no one attempting to further edit the Creator's handiwork—"

"Stop," I said, unable to hear anymore. "I don't want to hear this."

The vision she was describing perfectly mirrored the dream I had harbored since I had first met Ella.

She had described every element of it.

What would be, to me, *the perfect life*.

But dreaming of it did me no good in this place.

I was *a prisoner* and Ella was being tortured—

I shut my eyes to block out the sounds and images that rushed about my senses.

Clinging onto such hopes could only result in one outcome:

Madness.

To permanently fall into that fantasy world, believing it over reality.

I supposed it would bring at least *some sweet relief*...

But tugging at the edges would always be the sense I had failed Ella.

Failed to protect her.

And that was something I would not try to hide from.

I would never allow myself to forget what I had done—what I had *failed* to do.

And neither should I.

To forget my duty to her was to betray her memory.

The Empress just looked down at me, sensing she had failed in her desire to give me hope.

Still, she had a quirk of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "Perhaps you don't believe me... *yet*," she said. "After all, it's hard to hope in such a place as this. But you will not be here forever. Something will happen, something will allow you to be together again. And then, my vision will come true. *I know it in my bones as I know it in my heart.* And you ought to believe it too."

With that, she pulled her cowl back up over her head, knocked on the door, and left.

Leaving me to my own thoughts once again.

The Empress's words kept reverberating through my mind.

Something will happen...

You will be together again...

My vision will come true...

And I realized there was indeed *one way* her vision could come true...

In death.

Only there, on that ethereal plane, could Ella and I be reunited once more.

Only there could we live a harmonious life.

Only that could we ever hope to be happy once more.

In death.

Despite the maudlin turn of thought, I did take some hope in it.

So long as I could be with Ella at the end of this—whether it involved my being tortured or anything else they threw at me—at least I could be with her in the next realm.

I sat up a little taller and prepared to meet whatever might come next.

The Empress had succeeded in her mission.

She had given me hope... even if it wasn't the shade she had expected.

The lock snapped in the door and it swung open, clanging against the reinforced brick wall.

A team of Modified Ferals entered my cell and bent down to pick me up.

I put up no resistance as they led me down the hallway and further into the deep reaches of the dungeon.

Death was waiting.

And I had no intention of making him wait any longer than necessary.

ELLA

MY BODY RELAXED after the latest round of pain.

It didn't last long but it was *intense*.

I hardly even felt the needles entering my body, but once they began pumping whatever chemical they contained into me, I felt pain unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

Shooting bolts of lightning pierced my bones, making my entire body tense up tight and my teeth clacked together so hard they might have cracked under the pressure.

And the strangest thing?

The High Scientist only ever asked me the same question over and over again:

“How are you able to do what you do?”

And I had told him.

I had told him *every* aspect of it.

I saw no benefit in holding it back from him.

After all, he was going to torture me anyway and eventually get the information, so why not just give him the information?

But he seemed intent on ensuring to give me as much pain as he was able.

His generosity in that regard seemed to have no bounds.

It was as if he were chipping away at my spirit one piece at a time.

But there was one piece of information I *would never* share with him, one piece I knew could only do more harm than good—and do harm to the *one person* I cared most about in the entire galaxy:

Qeb.

The High Scientist knew I possessed the unique ability to control the

Ferals but he didn't know Qeb was the catalyst.

A special bond existed between us, his ability able to massively affect mine, somehow enhancing it and making it even more powerful.

If he knew about that, then who knew what kind of harm he might do to Qeb.

There was still hope Qeb might get off, might be allowed to live.

And that made giving the High Scientist everything he wanted to know all the more pressing.

All except that one piece of information that I clung onto like a life preserver being tossed onto the open sea.

"Again," the High Scientist said.

His assistant looked over at him with concern before flipping the switch and another injection of lightning was forced into my body.

I had learned to preempt each attack by tensing my body an instant before it struck.

It didn't lessen the pain but it prepared my body for the shock of the treatment.

"How can you do what you do?"

"I already told you!" I said through gritted teeth. "I just relax and it comes to me!"

The pain eased once more as my body flopped forward in the chair.

I wiggled my fingers, surprised I could still control them.

I sensed if this torture continued for much longer, I would lose that ability.

The assistant approached the High Scientist and whispered in his ear.

They conversed amongst each other, leaving me to wallow in self-pity.

None of this is my fault.

I remember listening to a self-improvement CD once where the teacher spoke about how you had to accept responsibility for everything that happened to you in your life.

And I did... but not to this degree.

I accepted I had gone to the Seeding Facility, that it hadn't worked out as I had hoped.

I accepted that.

That was on me.

But how could I have *ever* expected an attack would come and make everyone in my own timeline believe I was dead?

That I would be cryogenically frozen for *hundreds of years*, only to emerge in a new future unrecognizable from my own?

That I would possess a unique power enabling me to control a new form of human?

Then for me to end up in this place...

I could not—*would not*—accept responsibility for that.

But it was my situation nonetheless, and one I would have to deal with.

How will I get out of this?

During those moments when the torture paused for a moment, I always found that orb of welcoming light that gave me my power.

I embraced it but couldn't reach out far enough to find any Ferals—Modified or otherwise—that could help me.

I need my amplifier.

I need Qeb.

I need his touch...

But there was sweet little chance of that happening.

The assistant left the room, whispered something to one of the Modified Feral guards, and came back a moment later.

Left alone with the High Scientist, I decided to be the one to *ask him questions* for a change.

“Why are you doing this?” I said. “Why do you try to control the galaxy? Why enslave humanity? Why do *any of this*?”

I didn't expect him to reply and was surprised when he did. “I am not enslaving them. I am setting them free.”

I looked over at him.

Could he *really believe* what he was saying?

That in all these plans he carried out, with editing the human genome, splicing it with alien DNA...

That *any of it* had anything to do with freedom?

“Do you know the reason humanity did not progress much further than it could have done in your time?”

He didn't wait for me to answer. “War. It is *war* that held us back. Other people's constant desire for riches and power blinded them to the harm they were doing to the human race. All they could see was the short term. They could not see the future, what we were *truly capable of* if only we could find peace. And peace is the gift I shall give us.”

I shook my head. “Can't you see you're the same as them? You launch

one war after another, destroying one alien species after another... All for what? Peace? You don't want peace. You want *total control*."

"But by removing humanity's suicidal desire for pleasure, we have created the most perfect form of human there is."

"By making them *less human*."

"By removing their worst tendencies and replacing them with superior ones. Eventually, the perfect human *will be* created. And they will spread throughout the galaxy, spreading honesty, truth, and wisdom. The future belongs to us Homo Sapiens. And the sooner we stop fighting amongst ourselves and begin accepting our destiny, the better."

It was only then I realized the High Scientist was insane.

His view of human nature was twisted beyond all measure.

He would not—*was incapable of*—changing his worldview.

And he would not stop, would never give up on his goals.

Right now, I was one of those obstacles in his way.

He would have had me killed long ago... if he didn't see the opportunity I offered.

That was the reason I was here.

The only reason I was still alive.

And the reason I would have to, ultimately, die.

The door banged open, and a unit of Modified Ferals escorted a figure into the room.

A new chair rose up beside mine from the floor and they dumped the prisoner into it.

The straps immediately locked into place, restraining his impressive muscles so he could not move.

It took a moment for me to recognize him.

It was clearly Qeb but I had so prepared myself to never see him again that it came as a shock to see him now.

"Qeb!" I cried.

"Ella!" Qeb replied, straining against his restraints to reach me.

We were so close—just a few inches apart, our fingertips almost touching...

But not quite.

Seeing him brought tears to my eyes and they ran down my cheeks.

"Are you okay?" he said. "Have they harmed you?"

I gibbered and the tears streamed down my cheeks.

None of that now mattered.

All that mattered was that we were together, that I could see him for what was probably going to be the last time.

“As you are so unwilling to share,” the High Scientist said, “perhaps having Qeb here might loosen your tongue.”

I would now reveal to the High Scientist the final secret I had been, until now, holding back.

That Qeb was the secret catalyst that made my power truly possible.

After all, now that he was here, he would be subjected to the same torture I had been...

Unless I could stop it.

Although I could bear the pain myself, I would never wish it upon Qeb.

To relieve it, I would tell them *everything*.

It was one thing to *think* you were going to die, quite another to *know* you were going to die.

That there would be no recourse, no chance of survival.

With tears streaming down my face, I realized the obviousness of the truth:

We were going to die here.

But at least we would be together.

The cords became snake-like creatures once more and slammed hard into Qeb's body.

He grunted only slightly.

The High Scientist said:

“Increase the dosage. Hit him with everything we have.”

“No!” I screamed. “I'll tell you! I'll tell you! You don't have to do this! Please! Don't hurt him!”

The assistant turned the dial, hit a button, and the cords tensed like a python strike, pumping their deadly serum into his body.

Qeb grunted, his whole body snapping forward, then back.

Every muscle and sinew in his body tensed like high-tensile steel on a suspension bridge.

It only lasted a few seconds but once it was done, Qeb gasped for oxygen the same way I had after my first hit.

The High Scientist smirked and leaned in front of Qeb. “How are you able to do what you do?”

Qeb just grinned.

It took a lot of effort but it wasn't without its charm.

"No?" The High Scientist said, turning back toward the assistant. "Increase the dosage—"

"I said I'll tell you!" I pleaded. "Don't do this. Please. He has *nothing* to do with this."

"He has *everything* to do with this!" the High Scientist snapped. "*You are the one* that brought him into this! But if you tell me how you are able to control the Ferals, I shall let him go free."

I didn't believe him.

How could I?

He was never going to let either of us go free.

There was simply no chance of it.

But I could not watch Qeb be subjected to more harm just for my sake.

"All right," I said, taking a deep breath. "I'll tell you."

"No..." Qeb said. "Ella. Don't tell him."

I looked the High Scientist in the eye. "*We need to touch.* That is the secret. He possesses some kind of power that enhances my own. That is how we were able to have such a large effect on the wild Feral Army. *Because we were together.*"

The High Scientist chuckled—an ugly snorting laugh—before he saw the serious expression on my face.

Then he looked over at Qeb, who looked despondent.

His attention shifted back to me, realizing I was telling the truth.

He turned to the assistant. "Prep the machine. We want *readouts of everything.*"

As the assistant hastily made alterations to the equipment, Qeb's eyes rose to mine. "You shouldn't have told him. You know what he'll do next."

I nodded.

He would allow us to touch and force me to use my ability so their machines could gather the data.

Then he could replicate it with machines or drugs or DNA manipulation technology.

"I couldn't bear to see you harmed again," I said.

"I know," he said softly. "I would have done the same."

I looked deeply into his shimmering golden eyes, more beautiful than I had ever noticed them before.

"But you know what needs to happen next, right?" I said to him without

pointing out the details.

He nodded. "I do."

"And you're okay with that?"

He nodded. "If it means this ends today, I agree."

It was a big step for him to admit that, and I was relieved to hear it.

The High Scientist turned to us, an excited, broad grin on his face. "Excellent! Now we can begin the experiment! You shall be at the forefront of this new cutting-edge technology, the secret that will unlock humanity's true potential, saving us from ourselves and our own selfish desires. Remove Ella's arm strap!"

The assistant pressed a button and my arm was released.

I raised it and wiggled my fingers.

They felt tingly like I'd been laying on them all night.

I leaned over and held my hand over the scaly skin of Qeb's arm.

I looked into his eyes and he gave me a nod. "An opportunity will come when everything will change," he said.

Although the words meant nothing to me, they appeared to have a great deal of meaning for him.

I lowered my hand to his arm and felt the cool scaly touch of his blue scales.

The power rose within me like a raging river.

I sensed an end truly was coming...

I just didn't know exactly which end it would be.

QEB

THE TOUCH of her skin against my scales was like fire.

I could virtually *feel my life force and energy* flowing through her fingers, sucking it into herself.

I could almost *see the bright orb of light* that emanated from her.

The machines recording the experience lit up, the dials slamming from zero to full.

The assistant exclaimed excitedly:

“We’re getting the data! We’re getting the data!”

The grin that spread across the High Scientist’s face was maniacal.

I focused on Ella, whose eyes were closed, her brow smooth with calm.

I wondered if the High Scientist had any idea about what he had just unleashed.

He distracted himself with the dials and machines recording every last detail, berating the assistant any time the machines failed to perform optimally.

He was blind to anything but the goals he was attempting to achieve.

It was only when sparks issued from the machines and smoke began to fill the room that the High Scientist finally began to realize the danger of the situation.

His eyes rose to mine, then flicked over to Ella, then lowered to her hand resting on my arm.

His eyes broadened to the size of a Docile’s, showing the kind of emotion I never thought he was capable of.

He bellowed at the assistant:

“Restrain her! Restrain her now!”

Confused, the assistant was slow to react.

As he reached for the emergency shut-off button, the machine exploded, knocking him back against the wall.

The High Scientist ran toward the machine, smacking his fist on the controls...

But it was too late.

The machines were unresponsive, billowing thicker plumes of smoke.

Our chairs went haywire, spinning around.

I jammed my feet on the floor and held mine firmly in place.

Ella held on tight to my arm, her eyes flickering open for just a moment before she reentered that calm state of mind once more.

The restraints snapped open and shut around my legs.

I pulled against them, and the next time they came open, I pulled my leg free and slammed my foot in front of Ella's chair.

It slammed against my leg—and I gritted my teeth against the pain as the metal bit into my flesh—but it kept Ella's chair in place so she could continue to focus.

Then, finally, she opened her eyes and looked up at me.

She was clearly exhausted but her confidence was equally obvious.

“Done?” I asked.

She gave a sharp nod of her head.

I scooped her up in my arms and carried her toward the door.

The High Scientist raced toward us and grabbed my arm. “Where are you going? I did not say you could leave! Cease, creature!”

I shrugged him off and swung my arm toward him, knocking him bodily to the floor.

He was *shocked* I had placed a hand on him. “You dare risk the future of the human race for your own selfish needs?”

I glared down at him. “I dare to *refuse you*, my creator. It is you that has pursued his own selfish needs. And it shall be you that pays the ultimate cost!”

I turned and snapped at the door, kicking it open, prepared to fight the Modified Ferals outside...

But met no resistance.

Down the hallway, screeches and blaster pistols erupted like a distant rave was taking place.

I felt nothing as the Modified Ferals' screams were torn apart.

Then came the distinctive body shapes of wild Ferals racing down the hallway toward us.

Ella had done it, I realized.

She had managed to wake up the wild Feral army trapped within the Capital's confines.

The Temple of Science had been busy harvesting their organs but could have only gotten through a *fraction of their number* by now.

There were still plenty more remaining to wreak havoc on the Capital.

But it also meant they might *tear us* to pieces, and as they raged toward us, as unstoppable as a torrential river, they stopped and glared.

They sniffed at us a moment before passing by and continuing down to the High Scientist's lab.

Of course! I thought.

When Ella had awoken the wild Ferals on Daemon's Desire, they had gained some semblance of self-consciousness.

These creatures had attained the same level and would no longer kill indiscriminately.

I wondered if that spelled hope for the innocent inhabitants of the Capital or if they were still doomed.

Unconcerned, I turned down the hall and heard only the High Scientist screeching at the creatures that they were not to touch him, nor his precious machines...

And then came the creatures' high-pitched squeal as they tore him apart, ending the High Scientist's reign of terror for good.

I wound through the hallways, finding countless wild Ferals standing guard, watching over Modified Ferals who had surrendered.

And I knew there was indeed still hope for a peaceful future where wild and Modified Ferals and humans could live together in harmony.

I hijacked the first shuttle I came to and lovingly placed Ella in the copilot chair.

I ran my hands through her hair, kissed her, and held her close.

I prepped for dust-off and immediately took us away from that terrible place, knowing I would never again have to breathe its air, never again have to set foot on its surface.

Never again have to think about it... except to consider just how lucky I was that *I never had to visit it ever again*.

The Empress had been right.

We *had* been given an opportunity.

We *had* taken advantage of it.

And, with Ella by my side, we had managed to *destroy the Empire* from within.

Now, we had a chance to make that vision of hers—of ours—come true.

“I love you,” I told Ella. “And I will love you for the rest of my life.”

Despite her exhaustion, she smiled over at me. “I love you too. Let’s go build a future together.”

I pointed our ship toward the darkness of space and the infinite possibilities awaiting us.

All of them led to a single point of perfect bliss and happiness.

Me with my fated mate.

Forever.

I HOPE you enjoyed ALIEN PRINCE’S SEED. If you did, you’re going to love the second book in the series: ALIEN PRINCE’S MATCH. You can grab your copy now!

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ALIEN PRINCE'S MATCH EXCERPT

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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 shi'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.

I HOPE you're enjoying ALIEN PRINCE'S MATCH. You can grab your copy now!

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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.

[Learn more about my books here.](#) Find me on [Bookbub](#), [Facebook](#), and [my website](#).

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ALIEN PRINCE'S SEED

by Tammy Walsh

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