



SWEET TENTACLES

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CONTENTS

[1. Tessa](#)

[2. Tessa](#)

[3. Tessa](#)

[4. Nem](#)

[5. Tessa](#)

[6. Tessa](#)

[7. Nem](#)

[8. Tessa](#)

[9. Nem](#)

[10. Tessa](#)

[11. Nem](#)

[12. Tessa](#)

[13. Nem](#)

[14. Tessa](#)

[15. Tessa](#)

[16. Nem](#)

[17. Tessa](#)

[18. Nem](#)

[19. Tessa](#)

[20. Tessa](#)

[21. Nem](#)

[22. Nem](#)

[23. Nem](#)

[24. Tessa](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Message](#)

I

TESSA

Am I really doing this?

Standing outside the mating agency, I ask myself for what must be the hundredth time.

But maybe the real question is, should I?

Sadly, the answer to either of them remains the same.

Yes.

Because I have no choice.

Tucking my scarf tight around my face, I push the door open and step in.

Several green heads whip around at me in such swift unison, I jump back with a start. Why are these aliens staring at me?

“Greetings and welcome.” One Pyar’eshin comes up with a friendly smile. “I’m Heeren, the director around here. Is there anything I can help you with?”

I don’t answer as I scan the room.

Reception desks line the sides, each with a Pyar’eshin sitting behind it, gawking at me like I’m a museum exhibit.

Advertisements and accolades mount the walls, shouting how great their service is. Then there's what I assume is the romantic element, which includes the red gossamer curtains overhead with little foil hearts hanging down glitter strings and the yovan candles whose pungent scent makes me more dizzy than entranced. Not the business front I was expecting.

Heeren must have become aware of the others staring. He turns back to cut them a harsh look. That gets them to drop their head and go back to whatever they were doing. Heeren turns to me, the smile now apologetic. "We don't see many Earth humans around here."

"Okay." I don't think they were staring at me because I'm human though. Ever since Earth entered its 22nd century and made contact with aliens, technology has advanced to the point where space travel is commonplace. Sure, humans are small in number compared to aliens as a whole, but we are not exactly rare. Besides, there are plenty of aliens who look humanoid with one head, two eyes and four limbs, and they don't get weird looks. My outfit is really what stands out the most about me.

"Is it safe to assume you're here to apply for one of our mating programs, Miss...?"

His slit eyes seem to bore into me, so penetrating it makes me nervous. I push up my giant lenses and adjust my scarf, making sure they cover most of my face.

"Tessa. Just Tessa." I don't plan on revealing my full name, or any of my real information for that matter. "And yes, I'm

here to be a mail order bride.”

“Mail order bride. That’s such an Earth thing to say.” Heeren chuckles, amused by my word choice. “But you are in the right place. Among all the intergalactic mating agencies, we offer the widest variety of programs, and we’ve established ourselves as one of the most reputable, upstanding organizations out there in the past decades. Would you like me to show you the brochures and holos, so you can consider which program fits you best?”

“No.” My immediate answer sends his eyebrows quirking up. “I’ve already made up my mind.”

“Oh. That’s great. Which program have you decided on?”

“This one.”

I point at the wall. Heeren follows my line of sight and sees the latest motion advertisement they put up. “The Euxik Four Mating Program?” I hear him suck in a sharp breath. “The one with the Ohd-kasaches?”

“Yes.”

Heeren whips back to me, his green face marked by mixed emotions. Shock. Disbelief. Bewilderment. “I thought no one would ever apply for that.”

“But your agency runs it exclusively.” I frown. “I saw it in a live holo ad the other day.”

“Yes, because it’s Federation-funded and we thought it would be easy money since no one would actually...” Heeren swallows, clearly realizing he shouldn’t continue in that

direction. “I mean, are you sure about joining the Euxik Four Mating Program? Do you know what Euxik Four is?”

“Home to the Ohd-kasaches.”

“And the Ohd-kasaches are?” he nudges in a tone that makes me wonder if I look like an ignorant child to him. But then, any three-year-old knows what the Ohd-kasaches are.

“A species that once tried to take over the universe, but failed.” I shrug, pretending not to shudder at their name like he just did. “Basically, the villains of the century.”

“Exactly. It’s a conqueror species we are talking about. They are all male, which means they are constantly on the hunt for females to host their eggs. Except they don’t take you out on dates for that. They used force to turn other planets into hosting sites and got into a war for it.” Heeren shifts his feet, apparently disturbed by this horrible part of history. “Millions died in their attempts.”

“But we still beat them,” I say with a fake cheer. “I mean, the Federation beat them.”

“Only at a heavy price,” Heeren returns. “The Ohd-kasaches are extremely strong, and it has nothing to do with their military technology. Their weapons are themselves. I’m sure you’ve heard how they can modify their physical form?”

I nod.

It’s kind of a horror story. Not in the textbooks, but I’ve seen detailed accounts of it online.

An Ohd-kasach has dozens of tentacles where arms and legs should be, and he can adjust their temperature, moisture and rigidity. The Ohd-kasaches don't walk like humans do, one step at a time. The structure of their tentacles allows them to move so fast that they practically glide over surfaces. At such speed, they can turn their tentacles into the sharpest blades and cut people's heads off before they can even blink.

And that's not even the scariest thing about them. No. If that's the case, then it wouldn't have taken the whole Federation, all of its thousands of planetary members joining forces, gathering every bit of firepower they had to defeat the Ohd-kasaches.

The biggest advantage of the tentacle monsters is not their tentacles, but their ability to regenerate instantly. Anything they lose, they grow back, which makes them invincible in battle. Nothing can kill them.

Well, almost nothing.

Months into the war, the tides started to turn when the Federation figured out a way to remove the Ohd-kasaches from the battlefield. Normal firearms didn't damage the Ohd-kasaches enough to prevent regeneration, and the atomic disintegrator was impossible to apply at a large scale. So the only solution was a chemical weapon: vitriogen. A poisonous gas that disrupted the nervous system so they couldn't regenerate properly. Wrong parts grew at wrong places and caused breakdown from within.

The Ohd-kasaches started dying, very painfully.

They died like flies, but they still didn't stop. They fought more viciously than ever, gambling on them winning the war before dying out.

Until the Federation declared that if they didn't surrender right now, vitriogen would be unleashed on their home planet and all their hosting sites. Every last member of their species would be wiped off this universe.

Not even the Ohd-kasaches could hold out against such a potent threat. After the surrender, they gave up their hosting sites and signed a treaty that forced a total reform on their end. It was either assimilating or getting annihilated at that stage. They chose assimilating. So began the Era of Reform that spanned decades.

Needless to say, it's a long and arduous journey. Even to this day, Euxik Four still isn't widely accepted as trade partners, having only convinced a handful of planets to establish diplomatic relations with it, let alone granted membership in the Federation.

The universe's fear of the Ohd-kasaches runs deep. Even if people would look past history, the powers they wield simply make them too powerful to trust. Deadly tentacles. Instant regeneration. Living weapons that can't be killed by the usual means. That's not even taking their telepathic abilities into consideration. Suddenly, I'm sweating as this reminds me of something:

No one lives near these creatures. No populated world exists in their vicinity. Sector 0293 is all their own. They are feared.

Worse, isolated.

And yet, I'm going to mate with one of them.

“Then you must have also heard how they used their inborn weapons to chop people's heads off.” Heeren's voice comes back to me, harsher than before. “They are murderers. Don't you agree?”

“But...” I struggle. “It can't be that bad if the Federation supports—”

“You don't seem to understand.” Heeren interrupts me. He presses his mouth into a thin line as he stresses, “The living Ohd-kasaches carry the same genes as the dead ones. If their ancestors could kill, they can too. No one is deadlier than them. Not even the Drelyes.”

Now it's my turn to press my mouth tight, not letting a sound out through my clattering teeth.

The Drelyes.

Why did he have to mention the Drelyes?

Did he know—no no no, discard that thought. Have some confidence. No one knows why I'm here. Yes, no one.

Don't show fear.

Don't give yourself away.

I can do this.

“Yes,” I speak after a while. “I understand the Ohd-kasaches did terrible things. But that was many, many decades ago. The war criminals have died out. The current generation on Euxik

Four has low crime rates—even lower than many Federation planetary members. That’s why some Ohd-kasaches qualified for this mating program.”

“True.” Heeren nods. “The Federation sees the change and believes the Ohd-kasaches can be reformed. So they push this program to help solve the problem of... overflowing bachelors on that planet.

Is that a nicer way of saying Euxik Four is full of horny males looking for females to satisfy their beastly needs? I picture the Ohd-kasaches doing all kinds of perverted things with their tentacles. Laying eggs in the wombs and turning females into living hosts of their children. That happened in history with their ancestors, and a lot of the females were unwilling—they either died during pregnancy or after delivery.

Recalling the historical facts sends a tremor down my spine, unease seeping in. Maybe it was a mistake to pick an all-male species. But I keep my face straight as Heeren goes on.

“We’ve checked and interviewed all the male participants to ensure their records are clean. Still,” he says gravely, “one would be wise to say it’s never truly safe to be around an Ohd-kasach, especially if you are a female. I wouldn’t recommend you partake in this program, Tessa.”

“You don’t recommend your own program?” I gawk, not sure what is going on, my thoughts jumbled like a ball of yarn.

Why would the director of an intergalactic mating agency try so hard to tell a client off? Does he hate his job? Hate

money? Because the lonely alien males are known to pay a lot to find a bride.

Something is not adding up.

“Why, no! Not in this case. We are not some unscrupulous agency that tricks unfortunate females into signing a mating contract, shoves them into a seedy cargo ship, and leaves them to rot at the first backwater stop.” Heeren shivers in disgust, as if he’s seen something like that happen personally. “We care about the safety of our female participants. And if that means slimmer profit for us, we will take that loss.”

Now this is not something I was expecting.

I thought mating agencies were all hungry for females. So many lonely alien men on remote planets. So few willing women. I thought they would snatch anyone who came along the way.

But apparently, I was wrong.

And my mistake could cost me everything.

I bite my lip, trying to not panic and instead figure out a way around this. If I’m honest, I’d agree with everything Heeren said. It’s not safe to be around a creature as notorious as an Ohd-kasach. But I don’t want to go somewhere safe. As counterintuitive as it sounds, danger is now my only shelter.

“My safety won’t be an issue, because...” I start, making a last-ditch effort at argument.

So weird that I’m the one attempting to convince him. Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around? But I don’t think too

much as I hurry to collect my thoughts.

“Because, um, the Ohd-kasaches have reformed. Now they have this thing... I think it’s called an inhibitor? The inhibitor is surgically planted in their head to keep them under control. I think it’s unfair to judge them solely based on their ancestors’ crimes, since it’s illegal for them to be without an inhibitor nowadays. Of course, it doesn’t make them one hundred percent safe, but there’s no such thing as absolute safety. We can’t let our biases prevent us from meeting new people, embracing new cultures...”

I trail off, hearing myself.

What am I doing here, trying to convince another person of something I don’t believe?

Hypocrisy aside, I sound so insincere, so forced that anyone surely could detect the falsehood in my words.

This is a bad idea through and through.

“Never mind,” I decide before I can embarrass myself further. There must be some other way. Some other things I can do to save my sorry ass. “If this program is not available for me, I guess I’ll see myself out.”

I spin on my heel to leave, but Heeren calls from behind, “Wait!”

When I turn to look at him, I find that earlier smile back on his face, and it’s broadening into a super wide grin. What the hell?

“Congratulations! You just passed our interview for the Euxik Four Mating Program,” Heeren declares like a happy little boy. “Yes, I realize it might have been a bit too spontaneous. But we check the willingness of both our male and female participants. We do not encourage people to join our programs when they still have doubts or biases. Safety. Consent. Acceptance. These three core principles are the reason why our service stands out in the industry, unlike some shady, exploitative business around the corner whose aggressively expensive signboard doesn’t hide the deplorable nature of their under-the-table dealings.”

Again, it’s like he’s talking about something very specific. But I don’t ask. Relief floods me as everything starts to make sense.

Of course Heeren was just testing me. They are a reputable mating agency. It’s their job to make sure every match is made morally and all parties are participating of their own accord. At least that’s what I read on their online page.

“So I’m in the program?”

“Yes, right after you complete this form.” Heeren guides me to the desk and takes out a stack of paper. “I know it’s nonsensical that we still have to do paper forms in this time and age. There are so many more convenient, environment-friendly ways. But you know, red tape.”

I sit down at the desk as Heeren instructs. I begin to fill in the form, careful to stay vague about anything that might give away my past.

After I hand it back, Heeren eyes me skeptically like he doesn't understand how I can skip so much of the form. I haven't been exactly open about myself, but maybe the basic information is enough, because he doesn't question me and goes straight to inputting the form into the datapad. I can't see what he's doing behind his desk, but a few minutes later, he asks me to come with him to the test room.

"The system needs your genetic information to conduct automatic matching," he explains, "We have the devices and licensed professionals ready to take a sample of your saliva, and that's all we need."

I do as he says and we complete this step quickly enough. When we return to the desk, he inputs some more data. Then, his eyes widening, he shoots his head up at me.

"I can't believe it."

"Wha-what?" I ask, suddenly gripped by terror.

Did he search me up and find out about my past? I don't think I'm famous online, but God, if that's the case, this could be the biggest mistake of my life.

I'm about to bolt when Heeren says, "The system has matched you to someone."

I freeze in my seat. "Already?"

"Yes. Apparently, you're very compatible with a certain Ohd-kasach." Heeren narrows his eyes at the screen. "Let me see who it is... Oh, his profile picture is very cute. Want to have a look at your future mate?"

He turns the screen over after I nod. The moment I see that headshot, I almost faint.

That's an alien all right. No sclera, just two large black bulbs for eyes. No nose, just two small holes that I'm not even sure are for breathing. No lips, just a mouth type of opening that hints at rows of serrated triangular teeth. With those slender tentacles dancing off his oval, ink-black head, he reminds me of deep sea predators and he doesn't even have a real face. All I see are some grotesque features mashed up together like horror personified.

Cute? There's nothing even remotely human about this "future mate" of mine.

No, he's not cute. More like nightmarish. Exactly what people would picture when they hear the word *Ohd-kasach*.

Dear Lord, what have I gotten myself into?

I feel like hyperventilating.

But wait. No. This isn't right. This line of thought. I'm not here to become a mail order bride, despite what I told Heeren. I lied. Because it's what I must do. I have no choice.

I need this mating program to work, and if that means I must pretend I'll mate with this... this misshapen alien monster, then I'll do it. I've got that much willpower in me. I keep telling myself so before I look back up and force a smile. "Yes, he's cute."

My reply clearly pleases Heeren as he nods and smiles at me. "You two will definitely get along. I've never been wrong

about my matches.”

Guess I’ll be his first mistake ever.

I maintain the fake smile. “Can I withdraw from the program if things don’t work out?”

I know I can. It’s in the document I downloaded from their online page, but I still want to make sure.

“You can,” Heeren answers cheerfully. “I’ll send you a detailed document on how it all works later. But here’s a simplified version: the male you are matched to pays us, and we send you to Euxik Four using our own vessel. Once you arrive at his place, the one-month trial begins where you live with him. Both parties are not legally bound at this stage, so you don’t have to do anything you are not ready to do, such as, you know.”

He winks at me and I’m slow to realize what he means.

Sex. The thought never even crossed my mind. Having sex with that alien monster? Nothing against aliens, since plenty of them are attractive in my opinion, but in the case of an Ohd-kasach? God no.

I shift in my seat uncomfortably. “That’s... that’s good to know, I guess.”

“Yes, and after the one-month trial, you’ll get to make a decision all on your own. You can choose to stay on Euxik Four, if the mateship has been satisfactory, and receive a thousand dinals from your mate, which is equal to... eh...”

He pauses, struggling to convert that unit to credits. He eventually gives up and gets back on track.

“Anyway, it’s a decent amount of money. But if you don’t find the mateship satisfactory, you can choose to leave, and you’ll still receive a monetary gift. No one influences your decision or kidnaps your will. If they try, please report to us. That counts as a violation of our terms and we don’t treat it lightly.”

“But what can you do about it?”

“Well, a lot of things.” Heeren grins. “We can bring this to Federation court and get the offender incarcerated, for example.”

They can put people in jail for breaking the rules?

What will happen to me if they find out I lied into the program?

I tremble a little, but then I remember prison is nothing compared to what I’m running away from. Being locked up might not be that bad... as long as I stay off the radar.

Heeren seems to misread the look on my face. He softens his voice, comforting me. “Don’t worry, we’ll make sure everything runs smoothly. You’ll be fine. You’ll be safe. In fact, we’ll take every measure to ensure your wellbeing, since your participation would be great advertisement for us—the first female participant in the Euxik Four Mating Program.”

“The first? Me?”

My astonishment makes him laugh. “Yes, Tessa. You’re the first female who has ever signed up to mate with an Ohd-kasach. Prepare to go down history for that.”

I hope he’s joking. I really hope so.

I don’t remember how I get back to the hostel, but when I do, my whole body crumples into the bed. My head blanks out and doesn’t come back to the world until my datapad buzzes. I roll over to see a document transferred to me, then a new message.

Heeren is telling me when I’ll be expected to leave for Euxik Four. To be with my “mate” at his place. The flight will be arranged for me. All I will have to do is bring myself there on time.

Shit, this is really happening, isn’t it?

I stare up at the ceiling, wondering if I’ve gone too far.

I’ve lied my way into a mateship with the universe’s worst nightmare. If I don’t tread carefully, this could all backfire.

The Ohd-kasaches are so dangerous, no female has been willing to mate with them despite the financial incentive. No one in the entire universe except me. Bravery? Stupidity? Guess we’ll have to wait and see, though I know for a fact I’ve never been anything close to brave.

Either way, as I said, I have no choice.

Danger is my only shelter.

2

TESSA

It takes three days to complete the necessary paperwork for the mating program. Health exam. Criminal record investigation. General background check. After all these are done, I go straight to Euxik Four on the Pyar'eshin flight.

Heeren accompanies me, saying he'll be monitoring my mateship from their branch office and standing ready to provide me with any assistance I may need during my trial. I'm glad that he doesn't just leave me alone after taking care of the documentation, which grants me the legal status I need for temporary residence on Euxik Four. Not that I require him to babysit me every step of the way. Having traveled and lived on alien worlds before, I'm supposed to be prepared for anything. But let's be honest with ourselves, it is Euxik Four I'm going to. No one is ready for that place.

The trip spans more sectors than I can count and lasts almost as long as a week, which proves to be a challenge for me. One thing is that I didn't bring enough sleep pills and I suffer from sleep problems on board. Not that I don't suffer them on land, but it deteriorates and leaves me tired

throughout the journey. Then there's the other thing. You might think the cosmic view great on a spaceship, but throughout the flight I see nothing but darkness. Endless darkness. It does things to my brain, making the nightmares worse. I'm amazed that I can manage a normal front and interact with the Pyar'eshin while being extremely deprived of rest. No one seems to notice anything wrong with me this whole time. Got my makeup to thank for that, I suppose.

The day we arrive on Euxik Four, it's sunny and hot and I suspect my sleep deprivation has finally caught up with me, because I'm seeing two golden stars in the bright blue sky. Before I rush to make any exclamations, though, it occurs to me Euxik Four has twin suns, but the climate remains no warmer than tropical Earth. Great, I'm not seeing double. Just so tired that I'm starting to forget important information.

After leaving the spaceport, we transfer to a shuttle and head to the branch office. Hours later, I'm indoors again.

"Lemonade?" Heeren hands me a bottle.

I thank him and take the cool beverage. I look all around us. It's empty compared to their main office. I don't even see anyone else here except the Pyar'eshin staff who tagged along. They came via the same flight. I hope this decrease in employee number doesn't mean Euxik Four has much higher living costs, because I've only got so much savings on me. Three months of hopping around the galaxies has already taken a big chunk of it away. I open the bottle and start gulping away to combat my budding nervousness.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, and I apologize if it was a conscious fashion choice...” Heeren is looking me over as he sips on his drink. I try not to let it bother me. It’s normal for people to size up each other. It’s normal. So don’t act weird. “But you look more comfortable—more like yourself without the scarf and lenses.”

I know what he means. That scarf was the largest I could find, totally not my size. I wrapped it around my head and used it to cover my face. Those lenses weren’t even corrective, just there to prevent direct eye contact. With those items on, I stepped into their agency looking like a suspicious criminal on the run. That’s why they stared at me. And it’s not too far from the truth. Sans the criminal part. But the moment we landed on Euxik Four, I ditched the scarf and lenses. There’s no commercial flight between Euxik Four and other planets, which means no offworlder unless passage is applied for months ahead, so the chance of me getting caught here is small enough to be ignored.

“Yeah. Figured that look didn’t suit me, and it’s warmer here anyway.” I wonder if I should make up an excuse for wearing a disguise in the first place, but Heeren doesn’t question me, so I set that aside.

“The climate is certainly ideal. Never too cold, and never too hot either. They say you never experience the cruelties of winter and summer on Euxik Four, only the perks. But the world is 90% water and 6% land, so I hope you brought your swimsuit.” Heeren downs his drink, then breathes a sigh of

pleasure. “Your mate should be here any second now. While you wait, would you like to go over his profile again?”

I shake my head. I’ve memorized everything I need to know about my... mate. His name is Nem. He owns some underwater farm jointly with his brothers. He lives in a house made of coral and shells. His favorite pastimes are cooking and listening to music, which happen to be things I enjoy doing too. But I doubt it matters, seeing there’s nothing similar in our cultures. And I don’t care who he is or what he does. The only thing I care about is to stay hidden. For one month. That should be enough to shake off the Drelye. Never would the Drelye think I would be here on Euxik Four, a place so nefarious that it has rarely seen visitors in the past decades.

I’m honestly shocked that the Pyar’eshin set up an office here. But then, they work with the Federation, so it makes sense they are more proactive in dealing with the former conquerors of the universe.

“Are you all right?” Heeren asks. “You look a little tired.”

“I am.” It’s what happens when you haven’t rested well for three months. I rub my sore eyes and sigh, “But it’s okay. No big deal. I’m used to this now. Just need a nap to charge up again.”

“Must have been the long trip, then.”

“I think so.”

We exchange some more words before the conversation dies down and I close my eyes, squeezing in a momentary rest.

“Ah, there he is. Your mate Nem has come.”

I open my eyes when Heeren pipes up, excitement in his voice. From outside the agency, a looming shape pushes the door open. Nem marches in, and I’m instantly dizzy.

He is huge.

Not the regular, human kind of huge. He has to be eight feet tall or something. I’m not even at his chest. I’m not even sure he has a chest. That headshot that came with his profile? Not even as bad as the walking nightmare I’m confronting right now. His face is still that strange, grotesque mashup I saw. But his body... God, that’s the worst thing. There is his ink black torso, including the shoulders, chest and stomach, but everything from his waist down is tentacles, tentacles, and more tentacles. He doesn’t even have hands!

I crumple to the floor.

“Tessa.”

Heeren rushes to my side, but something cold and slimy wraps around my midriff instead, helping me up.

“Are you unwell, my mate?” Nem’s voice is strange, not the usual low baritone of a male, but a little screechy and high-pitched in nature. His tentacle arm withdraws after I steady myself. I don’t dare look up at him.

My mate. God, he’s calling me that already. I’ve been matched to a tentacle monster, and it’s me who brought it on myself.

Just thinking about it ties a knot of dread in my stomach. “I’m... fine.” Except I might have made the stupidest mistake by running away from one alien monster, only to land myself right in front of another. Who would think it’s safer to be with an Ohd-kasach than a Drelye? Just who in their right mind?

“Your face is growing paler by the second,” Heeren comments, his eyes filled with concern as I turn to him. I can tell he genuinely wants this to go well. Maybe it’s related to his bonus. Maybe he just likes getting people together. I don’t know. “Is it the weather? Or are you having second thoughts? It’s normal to get cold feet at the beginning. I bet Nem is feeling nervous too, right, Nem?”

No answer. I muster the courage to glance at Nem and find his eyes on me, fixed and unwavering. It’s like he only sees me and forgets everything else in the world. It’s different from when the Pyar’eshin collectively stared at me. His gaze feels so much more... intense.

Maybe he’s never seen a female before? His species is males only after all. I could be like a freak to him.

I break our eye contact, not wanting to give any excuse for him to act aggressive. But he keeps staring at me so much, he doesn’t even notice when Heeren repeats the question targeted at him. Three times.

“Well, this is... interesting.” Heeren coughs into his fist. “Nem, why don’t you take Tessa home to rest a while? If something comes up, don’t hesitate to comm me. I’ll be here all week. Got nothing but free time...”

Nem doesn't wait for Heeren to finish before he lashes out several long tentacles and whips them around my arms. I scream, thinking he's attacking me, but the tentacles just lift my body like it weighs nothing. They bring me to his chest and hold me there, letting me listen to the strong beats vibrating against my skin.

Is... is he cuddling me?

Heeren is laughing now. I think that means the Ohd-kasach isn't trying to harm me. Because if I die here, the mating agency will definitely get in a lot of trouble.

“We are going home, my mate.”

Nem glides out the door with me in his arms, his writhing mass of tentacles taking him to a private shuttle waiting outside.

I'm not getting into enclosed space with someone I don't know, so I struggle. Yet he holds me so tight, there's no way I can break free. He isn't even making a conscious effort to stop me. But he must notice what I'm doing because the look he shoots me is one of disapproval, as if I'm being naughty trying to get off him like that. Eventually I have no choice but to give up, having exerted myself intensively. Panting in his arms, I catch a salty, slightly fishy scent wafting over and my nose wrinkles in a reflex. The Ohd-kasach does not smell good. Though I can't say he smells bad either. If anything, his scent reminds me of the sea and that is the most neutral thing I can ever think of. Yes, he smells neutral, however strange that sounds.

Once we're inside the shuttle, Nem slides into the pilot seat and puts me in his lap. I know better than to struggle futilely at this point, so I make peace with my situation. It's just me as a grown woman sitting in a giant alien's lap. Nothing strange going on here, right?

As we take off, I try to memorize the route instead of focusing on how it feels to have my ass against his moving, writhing curtain of tentacles. Nem keeps me in this position the entire way, making it hard for me to notice anything other than him. When the ride is over, I realize that all I know about the route is we passed some woods and towns, and now we are entering a ground level hangar.

Minutes later, Nem glides out and gets back on the ground. Nestled in his steady arms as we move into the sunlight, I whisper to his chest, "You can put me down now."

He doesn't do that, continues to walk while carrying me. I wonder if the translation matrix is working as supposed to.

But maybe I'm getting used to this. His embrace doesn't feel cold and slimy anymore. Instead he's warm and snuggly. I don't know why it is, but the initial fear is melting away as I listen to the beats vibrating through his skin. Triple hearts, the mark of a true, deadly Ohd-kasach.

"This is my land," Nem rumbles as he comes to a stop. I look up from his chest and see white sands stretch ahead and back without end. There's a clear view of the sea on one side and the distant promises of woodland on the other. Rows of vibrant, beautifully constructed houses sit in between, with

corals and shells decorating the outer walls, looming like enormous, iridescent mansions.

I only get a cursory glance at the landscape before Nem puts me down and I return to a standing posture.

“Everything on my land is mine.”

He must be referring to the properties scattered beyond the beach, but his intent gaze on me sends a tingle down my spine. Did he purposefully wait until we entered his territory to put me down, so he could claim ownership of me?

“I... I am under the Federation’s protection here.” I don’t know why I’m saying this, and with a stammer no less. “You can’t make me do anything.”

Nem nods. “I won’t.”

“And there are serious consequences if I get killed here.”

“You won’t.”

“And... and even though we are matched, I still have a choice. I’ll live in a separate room. We can’t share a bed.”

“We won’t.”

His fast indulgence leaves me speechless. Did he just agree to all of my demands?

Maybe this isn’t as bad as I thought.

After waiting a moment and confirming I have no more demands to make, Nem takes me to his home. It’s one of the houses in the lot between the beach and the woods. I don’t realize just how large it is until I step inside. The interiors

shock me with all that incredible space and huge furniture. The couches—or whatever seats they are—look like an extended version of king-sized beds. The tables stand on legs that almost reach my waist. Almost. The chairs are pretty tall too, but not so tall that I can't plop into them, so I'll live, I think. Everything is enormous here and it makes me dizzy. But it makes sense for a giant monster like him to have a giant home.

“Would you like to have lunch, my mate?” Nem asks after I've marveled at the place long enough.

I'm surprised that the first thing he thinks of doing is feeding me. But it is around noon, so maybe he needs feeding himself. “You should have lunch if you're feeling hungry, but I'll pass.” I've been keeping my eyes wide so I stay awake. However, the initial wariness of meeting the alien tentacle monster is waning and I'm slipping back into that perpetual state of tiredness. “Can you show me my room? I'm a little tired from the trip. A nap would be nice.”

He obliges me and heads down the hallway. I follow him and remember to add, “Oh, and by the way, you can just call me Tessa.”

It's weird to hear him say “my mate” all the time.

Nem tosses me a blank look like he doesn't understand why I would like to be called that. Maybe it's more affectionate to address each other by title here? But I can't tell him I won't be his mate. Not for real. I'll be gone once the trial is over. So I don't want either of us getting attached in any way.

He eventually nods, conceding.

“*My Tessa.*”

Okay...

I step into my room on his heels, and right there, the bright pink bed with gauzy curtains has me rooted to the floor. The sheets are pink too, with laces and frills draping down at the ends. What on earth is this? I turn to Nem with eyes I’m sure are filled with questions.

“I bought it for you. Searched ‘good Earth human bed for females’ and this is the bestseller that came up in the results.” He grunts, noticing the despair on my face. “You don’t like it?”

“It’s... fine, I suppose.” It looks like a little girl’s bed, and I’m a twenty-five-year-old woman. But it’s his house and his credits, so I swallow my complaint and walk over. The size fits me surprisingly well though, so it’s not for children as I thought. I sit down and feel the mattress sink under my weight. It immediately bounces back when I release some of the pressure. Nice. Very responsive.

Already, a yawn is slipping out of my mouth.

I’ve been forcing myself to stay awake, because I knew today was important. When I could have tipped my head and dozed off, I talked to Heeren like a normal, diurnal being, not wanting him to discover anything unusual about me. But now the lack of sleep is catching up and I can’t hide it in front of Nem.

Thankfully, Nem doesn't ask any questions. He acts like it's totally normal for diurnal beings like me to sleep in the middle of the day, turning around and letting me have the room to myself. Right after he steps out, I collapse onto the bed and drag the sheets over my body, amazed by the soft texture and the perfectly comforting weight.

I fish a hand into my pocket and pull out the datapad. I didn't bring any luggage, wanting to be able to get on running anytime. Luggage would slow me down. This datapad is the only personal item I have on me, since I need it for everything from booking flights to buying myself food. And it's not just me. You can't really expect to survive in this day and age without access to StarNet.

I put the datapad on the nightstand, thinking I can also chuck it if needs be, though I prefer not to, because I don't have money for another one. My time at the troupe has only made me so much and I'll run out of savings soon if I'm not careful.

On that note, I probably should check the news. I do that every day so I don't miss out on the information I need. Information that might determine if I'll live to see the sun rise. Hyperbole? Not really. The Drelye has previously used StarNet to track me down, so it's better to keep ahead of the game.

But to hell with it, I hear my fogged brain mutter. I need to nap. Anything else can wait. This bed is too nice for me to get out of. It's nicer than any hostel bed I've slept in for sure, and

it's luring me away to a nice, comfortable place called dreamland.

I yawn again, not putting up any resistance, and let sleep take over me in the next breath.

3

TESSA

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Little butterfly, where are you?”

Darkness, it’s so familiar to me now. So are the sounds in the darkness. I cower around the corner, my back against the wall, trembling, trying to make myself as small as possible.

“Come on now. You know you can’t hide from me.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I can hear him prowling closer. His footsteps herald death. I can recognize them miles away. My hand flies to my mouth, keeping any sounds in.

Can’t breathe aloud.

Can’t let him hear me.

I stay where I am, not moving, because there’s nowhere to go. Darkness engulfs me on all sides like thick, black fog. I can’t see anything past it.

“Come out, little butterfly,” echoes the sickeningly sweet whisper. “Come out and play.”

Tremors wreck me when he stops, the footsteps suddenly gone. Now I can't even hear him. I don't know which is worse, knowing he's approaching and I can't run, or not knowing what he's doing at all.

Either way, I'm a sitting duck.

But I can't let him find me. I shift my weight and slowly, guardedly rise to my feet. I peek around the corner and see no one. Has he gone? I want to heave in relief, but something keeps me on my toes. The hair on the nape of my neck stands all on its own. But before I can figure out why, I hear it again.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Silver winks in the corner of my eye. I turn around, never so slow and wooden. *Let it be moonlight. Please let it be moonlight.* But moonlight dances off the razor-sharp ends of his claws, and there in his mouth corner, a bone-chilling grin spreads out.

"I found you, little butterfly."

No! I jerk awake, my mouth wide open in a silent, terrified scream.

For a moment I don't know what's happening. Cold sweat coats my back. It takes several fast gulps of air to recover my senses and realize where I am.

Euxik Four.

The only place in this universe that can keep *him* away.

He's not here.

I close my eyes to allow myself a moment of peace. That was a dream. It was only a dream. Nothing about it is true, except the terror... the fear that I've lived through time and again... for three months.

I'm used to this now, startled awake by a nightmare, which usually involves a certain stalker of mine and some other unpleasant things. It's become my new norm, not getting enough sleep and pulling all-nighters, despite desperately wanting to rest. I tire easily in the day. Napping is the only way to replenish my energy and get anything done.

A glance out the window makes my stomach lurch. The suns are setting. It must have been hours. I don't nap that long normally, but these past days really drained me, coming up with all those little lies and trickery to pass into the mating program and conceal my true intention at the same time.

I still feel guilty about claiming I'm one year older than I really am. Maybe it didn't even matter, but I didn't want them to know my real age. The more they know, the more *he* will know if my information leaks out.

Paranoid? Not when I'm dealing with a Drelye that has hunted me down for three months.

I move to get off bed, but the huge ink-black figure curled up at my bedside has me freeze in my spot. What in the world...? I take a minute to study its shape, though I know this can't be anyone except Nem, my mate in name only. The tentacles spilling from underneath are what give his identity

away. This Ohd-kasach is asleep, on the floor, near me. I must have forgotten to close the door.

But that doesn't explain him napping here. Surely my room isn't the only place to sleep in the house?

I can't wrap my head around what this means. But a sleeping Ohd-kasach doesn't look as dangerous. If anything, it looks... made of jelly. Coffee flavored. His skin doesn't seem to have the same texture as humans. Smooth and shiny, it probably feels squishy when pressed.

Before I know it, my index finger is on his side. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm rubbing his skin slightly and getting a slick feel. It's so odd, but I don't think he was this slick before. He was more slimy and yucky, making goosebumps break out on my arms. Now he's surprisingly... tolerable. I wonder if it reflects a change in my opinion of him. Do I find him—this giant, ink-black creature dozing at my feet like it's the most normal thing in the world—less of a monster now? No, of course not. An Ohd-kasach would always be an Ohd-kasach, just like a Drelye would always be a Drelye.

That being said, if he's not waking anytime soon, I don't mind touching him a little longer. It's like petting a giant pup that might frighten me when awake, but when asleep, they are so cute and harmless.

I let my fingers stay on him until he cracks an eye open. "My Tessa?" He seems to be aware of my touch and looks down. It's then I realize the inappropriate nature of my action.

Touching someone when they are asleep is not something I normally do.

I want to take my hand back and apologize, but he groans with a clear tinge of pleasure. “Your claw is so soft.”

“It’s my hand.”

“Your hand is so soft,” he murmurs. “I think it gave me a dream.”

“Dream?”

“Yes.” He smiles. My world shakes a little. I can’t believe an Ohd-kasach is smiling at me. But that’s what he’s doing, lifting his mouth corner in an upward curve, flashing a hint of his white, serrated teeth. “It was a nice dream. Very nice.”

Well, at least one of us got to have good dreams. I shrug. He’s still checking out my hand on his skin, and for some reason, one tentacle has been sticking out from his curtain of tentacles down below, standing ramrod straight like it’s suddenly got a disorder or something. I look at it long enough and the idea comes to me that it should feel different from the rest of him. Not slick and squishy, but... different.

“So you don’t mind if I touch you?”

“No,” Nem says simply. “We are mates. You can touch me anywhere you want, anytime you want. I don’t hold back from you.”

“In that case...” I try to fight the urge, but my curiosity is getting the better of me.

This shouldn't be that big a deal if he is giving me the go-ahead.

I run my hand down to the tentacle arm sticking out like a rod. I want to hold it, but even with the help of my other hand, I still can't encompass its incredible girth.

This tentacle is incredibly thick and long. It's also incredibly hard. You won't think a tentacle can feel like rock, but that's what I'm getting from this. Strange it's so different from the other tentacles, and I probably should be scared a little bit, but I can't stop stroking it from the top to the middle, then back up to the top. I must be possessed to like this feeling. To like touching an alien monster's tentacle. But it can't be that weird, right? Except when I look at Nem, I find his face turning blue.

"What's wrong?" I instinctively withdraw my hand and he curses under his breath. Did I offend him? Oh God, what was I thinking, touching an Ohd-kasach like that? Of course he's offended, and he can snap my stupid little neck like a twig without batting an eye. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"It's not your fault." He's groaning again. I wonder why he looks so pained. And the blue on his face turns brighter with each second. Is this a medical condition? "I need to use the bathroom."

Oh boy, that doesn't sound good. I watch him rush out, his mass of tentacles thrashing in a way I can only describe as maniacal.

I plop down to bed, still baffled by the fact that his face suddenly changed to blue. People's skin color doesn't change for no reason. Not even chameleons do that just because they can. There has to be a reason for it, and I wish I knew what it is.

4

NEM

My mate is absolutely lovely.

Her mane is the first thing I noticed about her. It's ink-black, the same color as me, but shinier and prettier. Her eyes parallel the clouds of finest raindrops visible in the sky.

When she's standing, she doesn't even reach my chest. Other than the pink bed, everything in my place seems oversized for her. Such a dainty little thing, and with such thin shoulders and limbs too. I'm worried that a wind might blow her away.

Must keep her safe, with me.

I try to shake off the thought, but it's been there since I first saw her.

I was going into the Pyar'eshin Mating Agency to collect my mate, and honestly, I wasn't expecting much. Heeren said it would be difficult to find a mate for me, or for any other Ohd-kasach for that matter. No female in their right mind would apply for the Euxik Four Mating Program, not even if we offered them money. So I prepared myself for anything.

She could be oddly shaped, ill-tempered, diseased, but if she was matched to me, then I would love her. I would treat her well like she was part of my family, because she would be that.

I knew I wasn't the most desirable bachelor out there. I knew what my ancestors had done and how the universe thought of that. I was lucky the system matched me to the first female participant. Now I would have what I'd always wanted, which was a mate and a family. As far as I knew, everyone had their own reason for joining a mating program, but I was a simple male, so having a loving family to return to every day after work was my idea of happiness.

I rearranged the room next to mine so it would fit human living habits, since my mate was said to be from Earth. I bought human food, clothes and toiletries in case she needed those. I also kept my hope low, not wanting to feel disappointed.

But qish, oh qish, I never thought she would be this lovely. And exotic. Her lower appendages were few and stiff, but they didn't detract from her beauty. I couldn't take my eyes off her adorable, fabric-protected figure and cuddled her the first chance I got. She felt soft, tiny, and she tired easily. As soon as we got home, she went to take a nap, and I went about cooking so I could have supper ready when she woke up.

My thoughts kept drifting to her while cooking. After that I padded to her room and saw her still sleeping. I couldn't stand

going away again, so I lay down and curled up at her bedside, taking strange satisfaction in watching her sleep.

I didn't know when I dozed off, but I dreamed of her being with me—the two of us swimming in the sea and enjoying the sunshine on the beach. I used to do that with my brothers on a daily basis, but with her, it felt different. At least in the dream. Then something strange happened. I *sensed* her, and she let me.

I inevitably woke up with a boner. And as though it wasn't enough to get aroused in sleep when my mate was around, she touched me. *There.*

Heat instantly flooded my face. No female had ever touched me like that. It felt incredible, having her slim fingers moving up and down my thickness. It made me want to mate with her, there and then.

But she didn't seem to know what she was doing. So I fled. I couldn't wait until she found out it was actually my cock she was stroking. Granted that I wanted more, but what if she found me revolting for having my cock sticking out like that? I hear Earth humans have taboos about physical contact, and our customs might not be the same.

I'm stroking myself in the bathroom as I think about all that. My mind keeps replaying my mate putting her hand on me and sliding up and down... completely unaware of what she was doing and how much shocking pleasure it brought me.

Why did she do that? Did she enjoy touching me?

The last thought makes me so impossibly hard, I stroke myself more furiously than ever, picturing me getting on top of that lovely creature, spreading her lower appendages and...

I pause when I realize I don't know what to do next. How do I mate with her? I've never mated before, and I don't think I've ever seen any guides to mating with humans. Maybe it's not really possible to mate with a human. Remember how tiny she is. There's nowhere to put my cock inside her.

Does this mean we are too incompatible to be mates?

I deflate as it occurs to me that Tessa can leave after the one-month trial. The choice is hers. But the mere thought of losing her makes my blood run cold. I'll never allow that to happen. Never. She is mine.

If she doesn't like me yet, I'll be patient and earn her affection. I'll make her want to stay.

Being an Ohd-kasach, I'm used to people not warming up to me right away. Everything about me scares them. The tentacles, my ancestors used them as weapons of mass destruction. The height, it helps me easily tower over most species in the universe. They call me a monster for being born this way, and I usually don't care, but with Tessa, I hope she'll see me for who I am.

I clean up and get out of the bathroom. It's time to have supper, so I start setting the table. The food has been kept warm in the kitchen, so when I bring it to the table, it's the right temperature. I'm pleased to see Tessa come over and widen her eyes at one of the main dishes.

“Is that... a beef casserole?”

I nod. “I’ve been practicing Earth cuisine. This is my latest replication.”

“By hand?”

I nod again. Hand-cooking is something I enjoy, so I never use the food dispenser when I can make the food myself. I want her to enjoy what I’ve made too, and it seems she does. Pride fills me when I see the craving on her face. She wants to eat this. She wants to eat my cooking. Words fail to describe how much joy that brings me.

“Take a seat.”

She does as I say, but hesitates over the dish. “Can I?”

“Yes.” I can’t wait to feed my mate.

I take a chunk of food using my spoon, ready to put it in her bowl so she can bury her face in it and eat, but then I see Tessa using another spoon to pick up food and fill her bowl.

Oh. She can eat by herself.

Disappointment sinks in. Too bad I don’t get to take care of her this way. But just because I rarely see females, it doesn’t mean they can’t do what males can. Her home planet Earth has always had both male and female dominant lifeforms. She must have learned how to take care of herself.

But she looks so tiny, so fragile, and the world is such a harsh place. My triple hearts contract thinking about the

challenges she must face. How did she survive over the years?
Did she ever get hurt?

As I watch her eat, I silently vow to myself that I won't let any harm come to her. My mate will be safe and pampered here with me. Anything she wants, I'll try and get for her. There's nothing I won't do to make her happy.

TESSA

Nem is a decent cook. I'm full from all the food I scarfed down at the table. Never expected an alien to make such authentic Earth cuisine, but apparently Nem knows what he's doing.

In the bathroom, I take the opportunity to explore the hygiene options. Apparently the shower here uses real water, both hot and cold. A nice little surprise. Not every place out there provides real water these days. Most come with a sonic shower, such as the hostels I've stayed in. Sometimes that's good enough, but call me old-fashioned, I will always go for real water if I have a choice.

After I step out of the bathroom, my hair drying in the natural heat, I do a little more exploring, wanting to know the house inside out so I can ease the anxiety of having to stay in a strange place for a month.

The house looks different from Earth homes on the outside, with all those coral and shells and whatnot reminding me of its colorful, alien heritage, but the interiors are easy to navigate. I have no trouble strolling from one room to another, drinking in

the layout and decoration, and I take the time to memorize the entrances and exits. Wouldn't want to be trapped inside if emergency arises. And by emergency I mean a certain Drelye.

As I inspect the rooms, one thing jumps out at me. None of the rooms comes with a wardrobe except mine. It makes sense since I don't see Nem wearing clothes, or any other Ohd-kasach wearing clothes. However, the wardrobe in my room isn't just there. It's filled with modern, 22nd century Earth women's clothes.

Guess I don't have to worry about not having clothes to change into. Having dug through the wardrobe, I know I'm settled for a long while. The little surprises don't end with clothes though. The toiletries in my en suite bathroom are normal too, the kinds I saw and used on Earth every day. It makes me wonder if Ohd-kasaches share our preferences. But I have a feeling that's not true.

Did Nem get all those things for me specially?

After mentally calculating how much that would cost, I feel a bit guilty. He shouldn't have spent that much. Not on me.

The guy probably thinks he's splashing out on his mate to make her happy, which is a good thing. But I never meant to be anyone's mate, so all this splurge on new furniture and human items? Yeah, it will end up being a terrible waste of money and energy. A shame, because some other woman might have loved it.

I absently step through an open door and into the room next to mine. This room is just as large as the other rooms, simply

decorated, so far the only one that looks inhabited. My eyes dart around before alighting on what looks like a plunge pool at the center of the room. Nem is standing at the pool tinkering with the pipe in his arms.

“Are you filling that pool?” I ask, but then realize the question is pointless. I’m seeing water come out of the pipe as I speak. “Must be convenient to have an indoor pool. Being able to take a dive anytime you want.”

Nem blinks his large black eyes at me, as if he doesn’t know what I’m saying. “This is my bed.”

His bed is a plunge pool?

I have to admit my curiosity is piqued. Standing at the wall, I watch as he continues what he’s doing, transferring water into the not-a-pool thing.

When he’s done, he takes the pipe to the en suite bathroom. He returns with a huge slab of foam-like material and places it on top of the pool. My eyebrows must be shooting to the sky when he lies down in that foam and the whole thing molds to the shape of his body like water, hugging him snugly.

“It looks like a mattress.”

“It is.” Nem lies back in his bed, his eyelids hooded and his tentacles spread around like noodles, occasionally twitching, but his posture remains relaxed, giving him a comfortable vibe.

I observe the scene. It must be cozy sleeping in that bed. He certainly looks like he is enjoying the experience. Will it suit

me though? Not that I want to share his bed. Just curious about the specs of alien furniture. Yep, general curiosity.

“Do you want to lie with me?” he suddenly voices, catching me unprepared with the question.

I blink.

Is it common for aliens to ask other people if they want to lie with them? Because it’s certainly not common on Earth. Plus, he is a tentacle monster. Even with my clothes on, it can’t be a good idea.

I don’t immediately answer because I don’t want to offend him. Being in his property and not knowing much of his character, I must tread carefully.

Nem waits patiently, gazing at me out of his big droopy eyes. One of his tentacles is flapping, nodding up and down on the bedpost. It catches my attention with the lazy, rhythmic movement, like it has its own consciousness or something. I’m tempted to march up and grab the thing so I can run my hand over it. Maybe it’s because I’ve touched him before and know what it feels like, not disgusting at all, but kind of smooth and squishy. I’m not finding his tentacles so scary anymore, which is weird.

I shift in my standing position, unable to decide what to do, until Nem rolls to his side and makes a string of squelching noises.

“Come,” he coos, enticing me as a siren would a sailor. “Sit on the waterbed.”

As if entranced, I do as he says.

My bottom touches the mattress and I instantly feel the difference. That bed in my room is soft and bouncy, but this... this is something else. It feels alive and knows my needs. I'm still tired from the day's events, and the waterbed promises sweet, sweet relief.

Nem seems pleased that I've done what he asked. "Now lie down." He gently prods me with an arm when I don't immediately respond, his moist tip brushing my shoulder blade. "Give it a try. I promise you won't regret it."

"Okay," I say after hesitating a moment.

This can't be that bad an idea, can it? The current generation of Ohd-kasaches was born with inhibitors planted in their heads. The inhibitor keeps them under control and reforms them into model citizens. At least that's what the Euxik Four governing board touted. I don't believe you can change a whole species' nature with a little implant. There must be a story behind it that I don't know. But in Nem's case, he hasn't done anything that proves he's harmful. Just a regular, nice tentacle monster who cooks great food.

Probably.

I take a deep breath and let myself slip down. Once I'm flat on my back, something encases me on all sides, soft and warm. It feels like soaking in a bath, but better. A moan escapes me at how comfortable it feels to lie down and be hugged like this.

Should have tried it sooner.

I roll over and see Nem beaming at me. “I knew you would like my waterbed.”

Yes I do. It’s so bouncy and snuggly. I like it more than I expected, and sleep is washing over me in such overwhelming waves, I don’t even care I’m lying with a tentacle monster anymore.

“Can I sleep here tonight?”

I stiffen when I hear myself blurt that out.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m the one who said we wouldn’t share a bed. I insisted on living in separate rooms. And yet, I just asked to spend the night here. This has to be hypocrisy at its worst.

But his bed feels so, so good. I moan again despite myself.

“No need to ask.” Nem stares at me out of his black, twinkling eyes. “We are mates. You can sleep with me.”

That sends a happy tingle dancing down my spine. Never expected to say this, but the tentacle monster is quite an agreeable person, isn’t he?

I yawn. The nap I took this afternoon is not enough to wash away the weariness. Not after I’ve been deprived of ample, undisturbed rest for so long. Sleep is threatening to take over me again as I settle deeper into the waterbed, finding myself the snuggest place, and stop moving. With the mattress hugging my body so perfectly, I need no covers to retain the warmth, and from the looks of it, neither does Nem. He is

probably more used to the weather here though. I don't know if I'll startle awake tonight like every night in the past three months, but it doesn't matter. I'll take any respite I can get.

But then I feel his arms whip out and wrap around my whole body. Tentacles everywhere all of a sudden. Panic seizes me when he basically ties me up and pulls me over to him. "What are you doing?"

I don't think he's trying to kill me, but... did he mean sleep with him by *sleep with him*?

All sorts of kinky tentacle porn scenes flash into my head unbidden, and I shudder. I'm not here for that. No, I'm here to hide from an alien monster predator, not to fall victim to another.

But before I can struggle, Nem tightens his grip on me and pulls me closer, his breath beating heavy on my eardrums. "Sleep."

"But—"

"I won't do anything, I promise. Just want to keep you close," Nem whispers into the crook of my neck, and I shiver, my body tensing up at the unfamiliarity. His long, nimble tentacles circle to my back and start patting me as one would a baby. "It's all right, my Tessa. Nothing will happen. You can relax."

I want to, but something is pressed against my thigh, hard as rock.

Is that the special arm I touched earlier today? Why is it doing this again? None of his other arms acts weird. But then, his face is weird too. I've never seen a person turn such a bright blue like he did.

Maybe it's just how his alien body works.

I give up thinking and let him cuddle me. My muscles relax naturally when I realize he isn't doing anything more than holding me tight in his many arms, and it feels nice after a while. Indeed, nice. As much as this weirds me out, I instinctively snuggle up to his chest and moan in comfort. I haven't felt this warm and cozy in a long time. I can't stop making small, muffled sounds of delight.

His special arm responds by getting even harder on my thigh, almost poking me at this point, but I pay it no mind. I have a feeling it'll go away on its own if I just ignore it.

As for the risks of lying with him, it's not like he and I can do anything even if we want to. I'm sure we are incompatible that way, him being so huge and me being... well, normal human size. I'm five feet seven, so definitely not short. But I'm too small compared to him. There's no way we can have sex.

Besides, Nem promised me nothing would happen tonight, and I somehow believe him. It may sound silly, but he doesn't look like the lying type.

I close my eyes and allow myself to drift off in his tentacled embrace, feeling strangely safe and content.

6

TESSA

When I open my eyes, the suns are up outside the window, and I'm alone in the waterbed.

Looking around, I take a moment to realize what happened.

I've slept, for the first time in three months, straight through the whole night. Without even waking up once and shaking from some nightmare.

For three months I suffered from sleep trouble. Even my naps were haunted. I always woke up screaming, either out loud or inwardly, my back covered in sweat. But last night I didn't dream of the Drelye, and now that I'm awake, I feel... refreshed.

I slide off bed and go use the bathroom. When I'm out, I smell delicious food. The scent lures me to the dining space and there on the table, breakfast is laid out ready to be consumed.

Is it totally bonkers that this alien can make the full English breakfast? Yes.

Do I mind though? No.

But as I sit down to eat, unease washes over me.

I'm his mate—in name only, and for no longer than a month. But here is the thing about mail order brides. Males get them with certain expectations in mind, and I'm not exactly playing to those expectations, am I? He's the one who does things around here. Cooked for me. Washed the dishes. Arranged the rooms and everything. Meanwhile, I just lounged around and took rest. It's like I'm making him serve me or something.

That is not what I do.

I clear my throat as Nem appears from the kitchen with a pitcher of tea-like liquid. “Hi. Good morning.”

“Greetings.” Nem sets the pitcher down and takes his seat across from me. “This is a popular imported beverage called kono. It's suitable for creatures of all species and all ages, and it contains no toxin. Completely non-poisonous and safe to consume.”

I blink at his emphasis. “Okay.” I get myself a glass of kono and sip on it. Not bad. Tastes like grape juice. But I remember what I wanted to say. “I'd like to be useful.”

“You *are* useful.” Nem looks at me like I'm crazy. It's clear that he doesn't understand. Of course he doesn't. I try to rephrase.

“I mean I have nothing to do here. Can I partake in the housework? I want to help.”

He bats his large, round, obsidian eyes and seems to catch my drift. “You can take over the cleaning if that’s what you want, though we already have cleaning units for that. I’m taking a week off from work, so I cook, which is not something I always have time for. Do you mind me cooking?”

“No,” I reply quickly. “You are an amazing cook.”

Nem smiles at my simple compliment, his cheeks showing a shimmer of blue. “Are you interested in taking a stroll out with me later? I’d like to show you around.”

“Sure.” It’ll help me get familiar with the terrain, and I want to find out how far I’m from the Pyar’eshin Mating Agency. Since I don’t know if the Drelye will catch up with me, or when he’ll do that, planning escape routes is always in the back of my mind.

We finish breakfast and walk out to the beach. The suns are blazing over our heads and casting a warm and bright coat on everything. I don’t find the temperature uncomfortable. It’s just right. Maybe a little too warm for some people, but I like it. Gives you an urge to go swim, and I’m pretty good at swimming, having grown up around the lakes in the Michigan Section, United States Region.

A few steps away from the coastline is where we stop. Turquoise water ripples beautifully across the distance. Gulls flap their gray wings over the expanse of liquid jade and hover around, on the lookout as they always seem to be. The wind blows over, warm and salty, the scent mingling with that of the Ohd-kasach beside me. I take a deep, slow inhale, watching

the hypnotic scene that spreads out generously before me, wondering if I should take a dive. Too bad I didn't bring my swimsuit.

“The waves are not as harmless as one may presume.” Nem's voice echoes in my ears, as if he knows what I'm thinking. “It's risky to swim in these waters when you don't know the hidden dangers and are without a chaperone. When you grow familiar with it, however, it'll be like walking through your garden.”

“Okay. I won't swim without a chaperone.” But his words don't stop me from enjoying the view. “What are those little islands over there?”

Nem looks where I point. “Those are ecosimulators.”

“For what?”

“Licon farming. We have millions of clumps growing underwater.” Seeing the blank look on my face, he explains, “Licon is a marine plant edible without processing. It's more nutritious and easier to corrupt than seaweed, which makes it valuable.”

“Oh.” My gaze wanders around as I try to picture what licon looks like. Edible marine plants. It's so hard to imagine the former galaxy conquerors growing underwater crops for a living. Guess Nem is nothing like his villainous ancestors. Maybe today's Euxik Four is full of honest workers like him. But it does no harm to have people assume otherwise. I want the outside world to continue seeing the Ohd-kasaches as monsters.

Danger is my only shelter.

We walk along the shoreline, enjoying the salty winds on the way. No one else is around. It feels like the whole beach belongs to us. So much peace and quiet and sunshine.

I keep my eyes on the sea, watching the waves surge and retreat, rinse and repeat. These Ohd-kasaches are so lucky to have all this natural beauty to themselves. Imagine living in a house with such an ocean view. The thought flits through my mind, giving rise to a question. “Do those houses over there belong to your family?” I point to the other side of the beach, remembering something like that being mentioned in his profile.

Nem nods. “My brothers and I each have a home on the farm. We share the land and sea.”

“The sea?” I gasp. “You can own the sea?”

“Not the entirety of it, of course,” he explains patiently. “I understand things might be different where you come from, but here we can own a very small part of the sea, as long as we use it for certain approved purposes. Licon farming is one of them.”

“I see. Still, it’s incredible to think you can claim ownership of something so... great.” I look out at the ocean, amazement roiling in my chest like the distant tide. “Back on Earth, no one owns any part of it.”

“Because your world has much less water?” Curiosity shines in his eyes. “No, wait, I think it’s because your

dominant lifeforms are not amphibious as we are. None of your people seems to have tentacles in the holos I've watched. Only two stiff lower arms which you call legs. That must have created difficulties for swimming, and therefore, managing the sea."

"Maybe." I raise an eyebrow. "You sound like you've done your research on my place of origin."

"Yes I have, as much as I can," Nem admits, his cheeks shimmering a faint blue. "I wanted to be prepared for you, although... although..."

"Although?"

"Nothing could have prepared me for your beauty."

My heart skips a beat despite my attempt to steady it beforehand. "Did you also research on pickup lines?"

"What's a pea-cup line?"

"Never mind." I fake a cough. Why did I even say that? It's not like this tentacle monster would try to pick me up or anything. His species probably doesn't even have that concept. It feels so narcissistic in hindsight. Desperate to distract him from my embarrassment, I lift my chin at the first thing I spot in the distance. "Where is that?"

"It's the cliff. The view there is great too." Nem follows my line of sight. "Would you like to go there?"

"Sure."

But Nem isn't moving. Instead he stops, his eyes on me. A beat later, one of his upper arms starts rolling toward me.

What is he up to? I watch as Nem carefully coils the tentacle around my wrist, palm and fingers like a constrictor, before settling down in a satisfied lull. Even then I still don't know what he's doing, but if I must take a guess... "Are you holding hands with me?"

The thought almost makes me burst out laughing. No, it can't be. Yet Nem responds by squeezing my hand gently. "That's right. I saw that it's something your people do as mates."

"Are you going to try every single thing Earth couples do with me?"

"Unfortunately, no, because I don't know what they do beyond this," Nem sighs. "But I enjoy what I know so far. Holding your hand feels... pleasant."

Same. I push the word down. A person would have to be crazy to think "holding hands" with an Ohd-kasach is fun. I'm not crazy. This isn't even hand holding. He doesn't have hands. I'm just playing along because it's what I must do to make it through the month. Former galaxy conqueror species, remember? It's unwise to offend him by shaking his tentacle off like it's some disease. I need to survive. Right. Survival is the only reason I'm letting him hold my hand like this. Not because I like the feeling of his warm moisture wrapped around my fingers like a hug.

He starts walking again.

As soon as we get back to moving, I realize the intimacy of all this. I've never held hands with a man publicly. Not since I graduated high school anyway. It's always made me feel oddly vulnerable, like I'm a little girl who needs guidance. But this isn't bad. On the contrary, it's kind of nice to know someone still wants to do this with me. Even though that someone is eight feet tall and has tentacles for hands.

Although, the more I think about it, the more I wonder what's so good about having a pair of hands.

They can never wrap around my fingers as fully as Nem's tentacles do.

I can't help a smile, feeling the beats vibrate against my palm so strongly, my own pulse speeding up along as we march shoulder to shoulder.

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

I may be getting used to the triple hearts situation. I find it interesting, especially when I finger the inner side of his tentacle and feel his hearts skip a collective beat. Do they always work at the same time? I do a little more fingering just to find out, but Nem gasps, his breath suddenly coming in ragged. A growl leaves his throat, and I suspect he is upset, so I stop playing with his tentacle and let him go. What ensues is the most deprived, most disappointed face I've ever seen.

I giggle, feeling like I've done something naughty and gotten away with it, though I'm not sure what *it* is. All I know

is Nem doesn't really seem upset. Rather, he regards me with a look that reminds me of hungry wolves and red-hot flames. I don't know why I'm heating up. Is the temperature rising? I turn my face away and walk faster.

Our stroll turns out to be a long one and we manage to cross the beach late in the morning, taking in all that white-gold, granular beauty. The suns recede out of sight when we reach the foot of a cliff.

Darkness falls, passing cool air around.

Something sways in the corner of my eye. I stop and turn to see an undulating stretch of shadow. Unlike most things under rocks, it's not motionless, but bleeding out of the darkness and creeping up to me, the shape so eerily vague that I strain to make out what it is. But forget that. Why is it moving? The longer I stare at the shadow, the better I see its shape. Formed like a claw with razor-sharp ends, it's getting closer and closer to me, swaying, hissing.

As a living thing would do.

My hair raises. My skin crawls. I'm frozen in my spot, terrified that it might be what I think it is. Then there comes a sound. The sound I'm all too familiar with.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I jump, and before I know it, I'm screaming bloody murder.

7

NEM

My first reaction, when I hear her scream, is to whip out my arms and snatch her. I don't know what's happening, but I keep her close to me in case of attack, and my eyes scan our surroundings swiftly trying to locate the enemy.

I'm ready to pounce, but I don't see anything.

"What's the matter?" I look down at the tiny human in my arms. She's out of breath, panting, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wild with fear.

"The... the shadow."

Shadow? We're standing in the shade of the cliff, so maybe that's what she's talking about, but I don't understand how that's scary and it's making me anxious. Is there something—someone out there trying to harm her? All my nerves are shouting to protect her, and I will, but I need to get a grasp of the situation first. "What about the shadow?"

"It..." She looks down at herself, her voice diminishing as if she's losing the strength to speak. "It looked like something a moment ago."

“What did it look like?”

“A claw.”

“A claw,” I echo. “And that frightens you?”

“Yes.” She breathes in. “I’m sorry. I must sound insane, screaming so loudly for no reason...”

“I don’t think you are insane.” But I doubt the shadow alone scared her. Although my mate is small and looks fragile, she isn’t easy to break. She doesn’t scream when she sees me, and a lot of offworlders scream when they see me. “Was there anything else?”

She hesitates a moment before telling me, “Yes. There was a-a sound that I heard.” Tessa swallows, her hand gripping my chest tight. “It goes like this.”

She mimics the sound to me, and I think about it.

“That’s the waves crashing into this side of the cliff.” I glide up and bring her with me, showing her the knobs and dents along the rock surface. “I can prove it. Wait a while and listen.”

We wait. Minutes tick by until a wave soars high enough and sweeps over our side of the cliff. *Tap*. It creates the sound that fits Tessa’s description, a soft murmur rather than a resounding splash, and her face visibly relaxes.

“I see.” Tessa heaves a sigh of relief, then bats her thick little lashes at me. “Sorry I startled you for nothing.”

It wasn't nothing. I frown. Normal people don't react like that when they see the shadow and hear the wave. Her scream signaled danger. That's why I snatched her. I couldn't let anything happen to this tiny human. Something out there frightens her, and while we don't see it now, there's no telling whether it'll show up in the future. The possibility apparently scares her to death.

My muscles tighten, bunching into cords on the threat.

Who is it that she fears?

Who is it that wants her harm?

I gnash my teeth, thinking about this invisible enemy. My blood boils when it occurs to me that they might have harmed her already. That is why she's so frightened, isn't it? They harmed her.

She is my mate.

They fruking harmed my mate.

A feeling I've never known detonates in me. Before I know it, I'm trembling from sheer rage. My vision reddens. My world breaks down. All thoughts leave my mind in this instant—all save one.

Kill them.

Something slips from the back of my mind, popping the lock I thought to be secure. It instantly alarms me, and I react—but not fast enough.

Pain shoots through my skull like an arrow.

I yelp and fall, bringing Tessa down with me, but I keep her to my chest instinctively and act as her cushion. The moment I hit the sands, the pain intensifies a thousandfold and hacks my nerves to dust.

I shriek in extreme agony.

“Nem!” Tessa sounds both shocked and distressed. “Are you okay?”

I can’t answer. Too much pain. I don’t know if Tessa has taken off because I can’t feel her anymore. I can’t even feel myself. Fruk. The inhibitor is kicking in full tilt. Fruk it. I’ve always known how badly the inhibitor can screw you up, but I never thought it’d act on me again. My body is convulsing with such violence I’m foaming at the mouth.

“Hang in there.” Her anxious voice lets me know that I have yet to pass out. “I’ll find someone to help you. Please hang tight.”

I do that. Not because I expect someone to come and help me, but because I want to live and see her again. I just got my mate. I’m going to spend the rest of my life with her. I’m not dying from this stupid inhibitor.

Time passes. I have no idea how long, but the pain subsides and leaves me paralyzed on the beach. The wind lashes my skin. Then I hear the familiar rustle of tentacle arms gliding over the sands. I know my brothers have arrived before they even speak.

“Nem? Nem?” That’s Tar. I hope he’ll stop shaking me. It hurts after the bout. “You are conscious. Thank the seas. We sensed something wrong, came out and saw that human female running around calling for help. I knew this must have happened to you. Jun, Sol, help me lift him.”

My other brothers comply and together they put me on some sort of metal frame. From the jolty sensation I suspect that’s the ladder Sol broke last summer. We’ve kept it in one of the storage sheds all this time.

I search for Tessa as they start carrying me away.

“That human female left after leading us to you.” Jun seems to notice my absence. “Said she must run to the agency and get help.”

I groan. The agency can’t help with this. But I’m too weak to talk. I let them carry me to my place and transfer me to the bed. My three brothers crowd the room. Since we’re similar in size, it’s like having three other me packed in here, taking up all the space.

“Are you feeling better?” Sol asks, bringing a bowl of water to me.

I shake my head and use my eyes to tell him that I just need to rest. Sol puts the bowl on the nightstand and sits on the edge of the bed. Jun joins him, watching me with a concerned frown.

Tar clears his throat. “Time for a link, everyone?”

I nod, and the others follow suit. Tar extends his tentacle arms and taps each of us on the shoulder. Thoughts swarm my mind instantly and the room quiets in contrast. Everyone is talking in the head. It saves me the strength needed for voicing my thoughts.

What triggered the bout, Nem?

Yes. What happened? The last time we met, you were getting a mate from the agency. Then we see you again, and it's this.

You looked dead back there. We were so worried. What did you do?

There seem to be more messages on the way, but I halt them with a telepathic barrier. *One question at a time.* I randomly pick one of them, then take down the barrier. *You, Tar. What did you ask me again?*

What triggered the bout?

I think about that for a moment and answer as concisely and on point as possible.

Anger.

The anger against someone who might have harmed my mate. Even now I still tremble from the residues of the rage that got me into this mess in the first place.

My brothers give a collective gasp.

That's a Vice, Jun says.

Yes.

You committed a Vice, Sol says.

Yes.

One of the four Great Vices, Tar says.

I'm getting annoyed. *Quit talking like I don't know what a Vice is, you airheads.*

I've known the Great Vices for as long as they. Anger. Envy. Hatred. Greed. Anyone born on this planet can recite them. Anyone born before the Day of Defeat, that is. After the Federation won the war against our ancestors, it's been hammered into everyone's brain that we carry the Great Vices within us. The Great Vices make us evil. They make us sin. Therefore we must reform ourselves, endure the inhibitor planted in our nervous system, and abide by the laws—not just that of Euxik Four, but that of the Federation too.

In simpler terms, we've been put on shackles to prevent us from becoming war criminals again.

I'm fine with that. My generation grew up working and earning our keep, not taking whatever we wanted from other planets. I think it's a good thing. The concept of war makes me uncomfortable to say the least.

But the inhibitor. It's not something we can ever get used to. It's designed to keep us away from anger, envy, hatred and greed, so we'll never repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. The thing is, you never know how the inhibitor determines an Ohd-kasach has committed the Great Vices. What's the metric? Where's the line? No one can tell. But one thing is certain. Every inhibited Ohd-kasach has had *bouts* in their lives, at least several times, the pain so strong it borders on fatal. But

we learn to live with it, thrive with it, and overcome its negative effects, using certain tricks.

I know those tricks. They have helped me dodge the bouts in the past when I got mad at people and landed myself in some scuffles. We don't tell the Federation, but all of us know those tricks. My brothers and I share a favorite. It's a short little song, and it does wonders. It can distract the mind and send the wrong neural signal, so the inhibitor doesn't detect the Great Vices we are committing.

But even without the song, we should be able to control our minds... on normal occasions.

Not in that moment. Not when I realized someone could be trying to harm my mate. Someone might have already harmed my mate. I don't care who they are. If they ever come to my place, I will murder them before they can even dream of touching her. There are certain aspects of the Ohd-kasaches that can never be reformed.

I grunt when I see my brothers still hovering at my bed, their equally massive frames eating up most of the space in my room.

Have you finished interrogating me? Get out.

I think one of us should stay. You need someone to take care of you, Tar proposes. What if you suffer another bout?

I won't. It only happened because I got careless. I won't be careless again. Now I have a mate to protect. I can't afford to get stupid again. You can go.

Are you sure? I won't mind staying a bit longer to make you feel better. Sol leans in and entwines his arms with mine, but I shake off his attempt at hugging. We're all grownups now, for the seas' sake. The others laugh. *If you insist, I guess we should leave you alone. Comm us if you need anything. You know we only live a couple of yards away.*

Yes, because you never let me forget that. I swat Sol's reaching arms away again. *Oh will you stop getting touchy-feely with me? Save that for your mate.*

But I don't have a mate. Sol pouts, still trying to cling to me. I cringe away. *You'll get one soon.*

You think so? Sol takes back his unwanted limbs, beaming at the idea of having a female for himself, so he can cuddle her anytime he wants. *When?*

I don't know, but Heeren promised to help, didn't he? We all enrolled in the mating program, so we'll all get a mate.

Jun grimaces. *I'm not looking forward to it. In fact I regret paying to participate. Now the Pyar'eshin have our money and who knows if they will bother with delivering on their promise. The agreement specifically said if we failed to get matched, the agency won't refund us. It's a scam, I'm telling you, and the Federation is in on it too.*

He looks like he has more to say on the subject, but I stop him. *Do I look like I care?* I wave to the door. *Go.*

But it concerns us all, if you really think about it. Paying that much for nothing makes no sense. Something about those

little green men doesn't sit right with me. I read in the news the other day that some mating agencies just took your money and disappeared—

“Go!” I boom, breaking the link.

They jump before filing out the door, mumbling, “Guess Nem has already recovered if he can shout that loudly.”

As if they would like three voices prattling nonstop in their heads when they are trying to rest.

I turn in bed. The room is cleared and I enjoy the peace and quiet for a moment. But then emptiness grows inside me, makes me feel like I don't have everything I need here, even though I've slept in this bed, in this room all my life. I've never realized how lonely it can be until now. Last night Tessa was here. It felt incredible to cuddle her while sleeping. No words could describe that feeling of fullness. Happiness.

I'm missing Tessa already. I need her here with me. Hope she'll see that it's unnecessary to contact Heeren and be back soon.

Wait. I twitch as questions sneak into my mind. How did she know where the agency is? I took her home by shuttle, and she's now going by foot. What if she gets lost and some other Ohd-kasach finds her off the street and keeps her for himself? It can be dangerous for her to go out there alone when this planet is filled with sexually, reproductively unsatisfied bachelors who have been starving for females all their lives.

The thoughts put me on high alert and drive me off bed. While it still hurts to move, I hurry out of the house and start searching for her.

8

TESSA

I've overestimated myself. I thought I memorized the route and since the ride from the agency was short, it wouldn't take long to reach there.

But I don't make it far enough before I realize how lost I am. Trekking farther in unfamiliar land feels dangerous. So I stop, trying to figure out what to do next. Luckily, one of the twin suns goes the same way as Earth's sun, sinking west and telling me the directions. I make my way back to the beach and it's there I find Nem looking for me.

Apparently, he's better now. I don't know what happened to him back there and I'm worried it'll happen again. I have questions, but after we get home, I see he's still in need of rest. So I let him do that, keeping my mouth shut while taking care of some chores. When night falls and the ablutions are done, I crawl into Nem's waterbed because I want to know if lightning can strike the same place twice.

I haven't slept well in three months. My nights were always troubled. Until last night. Is it because I overcame the nightmares on my own? Is it because of his bed? As ridiculous

as the second possibility sounds, I'm giving it a chance. Sleep is too important for me.

Nem welcomes my presence at his side. "Exactly what I need for recuperation," he breathes out, holding me to his chest with dozens of tentacles. "I'm glad you are sharing my bed."

"Only because of the nightmares," I mumble the excuse, not letting myself think otherwise. It's not like I truly enjoy sleeping with him or anything. Maybe the amazing waterbed is part of the reason, but that's it.

Nem hears me. "You get nightmares?"

"Yeah, right up until last night," I admit. "I'm trying to see if I'll get any nightmares tonight."

"What did you dream of?"

"Just general nightmarish stuff." I fob him off. "You know, dark night, empty street, creepy sounds, that things-go-bump sort of feel."

"Was there a claw?" he asks in a seemingly casual tone, tightening his grip around my midriff as though to secure me, and for a moment I want to tell him yes, there was always a claw at the end that scared me awake. Sometimes it had blood dripping down the long, poisonous spikes. Sometimes it just gleamed death in the moonlight. "Like the one you saw out by the cliff?"

"Something like that..." I don't want to get too deep into it, so I reach out and turn off the lights. That keeps him from

raising more questions as dark silence falls between us.

With all his tentacles wrapped around me, Nem buries his face in the crook of my neck and closes his eyes contently, as if he's found home.

I'm getting used to being cuddled like this. It felt weird at first, but now that I know he doesn't intend to harm me, it's actually pleasant. I like the smell of the sea he carries all the time, which eases my mind like scented candles that burn through the night. I know the hours passed peacefully when I wake up and the window shines a warm color in daylight.

Another night without the nightmares. Slept right through it again.

Guess lightning *does* strike twice.

I drag myself to the bathroom and wash up lazily, wondering what this could mean. Does Nem's waterbed have magic that dispelled my nightmares? Or is it less about the bed and more about the person I shared the bed with? My heart skips a beat at the memory of finding safety and warmth in his arms.

I, a defenseless human woman, feeling safe around an Ohd-kasach whose body is the deadliest weapon in itself?

This is... perplexing.

I don't know what to think of Nem. He's definitely not what I thought he would be. The first time I met him, I felt intimidated, but the past two days he's cooked for me, taken

me out on a walk, talked to me and cuddled me. He's been nothing but... normal. Sweet, even.

It's so weird to think of an Ohd-kasach as sweet. I don't know what to make of this. Am I developing feelings for Nem? That's the last thing I want. I'm on the run. I didn't come here for funny business like mating. Not that I think we can mate. We're incompatible. Heeren made a mistake when he let the system match a human to an Ohd-kasach. Soon, both he and Nem will see the mistake, and I'll be on my way out of Euxik Four and back home. I'll have shaken off the Drelye, which is the only reason I became a mail order bride.

I remind myself over and over what I came for, pushing all funny thoughts aside. Then I'm out of the bathroom and ready to face whatever life throws at me on a new day.

“Greetings, my Tessa.”

Nem is up and preparing food again. Soon after I show up, he brings breakfast to the table and sits down with me. His plate is much bigger than mine, almost a little table by itself, but it makes sense considering his size. I take a while to inspect his countenance before I start eating.

“You look well today.”

“Thanks. I've fully recovered after a good night's rest.” Nem smiles. “You look the same as yesterday, very much like the Maid.”

“The Maid?”

“Yes, from the famous sand painting The Maid of a Hundred Dreams. You both have such a shiny, algae-colored mane. The Maid is widely admired for her beauty on her home world, as do you, I’m sure.”

I didn’t expect him to return the compliment, and with one more specific and sincere than mine. Heat climbs to my cheeks but I ignore it. I don’t look like a figure from some famous sand painting, whatever that is. He’s exaggerating. And I’m definitely not admired for my beauty anywhere. I scramble for a change of subject. “What happened to you yesterday at the beach?”

“My inhibitor acted on me.” His eyes come together in what I think is a frown. It’s both weird and interesting to see someone without brows frown. “You know what the inhibitor is, I assume?”

I nod. “It’s a neural implant your people received surgically at birth. But I don’t understand... it acted on you?”

“It monitors our brains for four negative emotions.” Nem pauses his eating and explains. “Anger. Envy. Hatred. Greed. These four negative emotions are collectively known as the Great Vices. If we display any of them, the inhibitor injects pain into our nervous system and uses it to restrain us. Such an instance is called a bout. Sometimes the pain gets too severe and we die, but most of the time we don’t.”

“What?” My mouth drops open. He could have died? I didn’t know the inhibitor worked this way. I’ve always thought it’s something... milder. “But it’s normal to have those

emotions, temporarily, I mean. Everyone feels negative once in a while, but they get over it and move on. As long as those emotions aren't there forever, I don't think it's that big a deal."

"It is for us." Nem shakes his head. "After the war, people wanted to prevent the same tragedy from happening again. They wanted to know why my ancestors did what they did. So they carried out in-depth research on our brain and the results showed that Ohd-kasaches had terrible control over their emotions and desires, especially anger, envy, hatred and greed. The Great Vices were recognized as the main driving force of my ancestors' atrocities, and in response to that, the governing board of Euxik Four introduced a law that made inhibitors mandatory. It's illegal for an Ohd-kasach to live without an inhibitor today because that increases the risk of him committing the Great Vices."

That generally matches the story I've heard about his species. I just didn't know the part about the Great Vices. But God, imagine being born into this world and told that your ancestors are war criminals, the worst people in history, and because of that, you carry their evil genes that automatically render you criminal material. You have to always wear an implant that may or may not deal you so much pain you die.

It's crazy when I think about it. How does Nem deal with this on a daily basis? I shudder to imagine my own feelings being monitored all the time and once I overstep, I get punished with intense pain.

Now I know why Euxik Four has such low crime rates compared to other planets. Even minor offenses are rare, according to official statistics. It's hard to break the law when it could trigger the inhibitor and get yourself killed. But there's still one thing that I don't understand.

“What negative emotion were you feeling at the time?”

“Anger.”

“An-anger?” My hands drop to my lap, and I chew my lip, feeling like a misbehaving child. “Did I do something wrong?”

“It wasn't you.” Something moist reaches my fingers. I look under the table and see Nem taking my hand in his coiled tip, stroking it gently as he tells me, “It'll never be you. There's nothing you can do that can make me truly angry.”

My hand turns as warm as my cheeks. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” Nem says softly. “I was angry at someone else. The person who wants to harm you.”

“How did you know there's a person who wants to harm me?” Did he go out of his way to investigate my background? Did he find out the truth? My heart thunders against my ribcage. God, I hope not. That would mean he's also found out about my lies. I could get in jail for fraud.

“Because you seemed terrified, and I am not blind.” Nem tightens his grip on me. I barely catch the dark look flitting through his eyes before it disappears. He sounds so tender when he speaks again, his attention on me unwavering. “You

are my mate now. I want to keep you safe. I can't tolerate anyone wanting to do you wrong."

"Oh." My belly tickles at his protective tone. "You must really like having me as a mate."

I'm half-joking, but Nem replies without hesitation. "Yes, and I intend to keep it that way. I would like to keep what's mine."

As if to prove his point, his tentacles latch onto me under the table and coil around my ankles, calves and thighs, taking over more and more of me. I sit rail-straight, feeling his tendrils brush over my skin like feather-like kisses. It's not bad. His touch doesn't repel me. Rather, a shiver of excitement races through my core as we keep our eyes locked.

Something flares in his black eyes, and then out of nowhere, I see a new tentacle jut from below his waist. As always, unlike the other tentacles, it's sticking out like a rod.

"It's that one again," I whisper at the familiar sight. "Hello, nice to see you."

Nem looks confused when I raise my hand and wave a little, but his special arm raises its front end at me, as if greeting me back. My gaze stays on that girthy, special appendage, my interest growing by the second. Finally, when Nem realizes what it is that I'm looking at, he turns a bright blue and I blurt out.

"I want to pet it."

“You want to *what?*” Nem’s arm stretches even straighter and... am I seeing things or is that appendage drooling at me?

“Pet it,” I say earnestly. Perhaps because it’s more recognizable than the others, I’m taking a liking to that particular arm. It has more personality going for it. “You have a lot of arms, don’t you? But that one is my favorite.”

Nem is gawking at me now.

“I don’t know how to explain this to you, lovely Tessa,” His arm is straining to reach forward like it can’t wait to meet me, drooling as it goes. Nem hurries to bring his other arms over to cover it awkwardly. I don’t know for what though. It’s cool to have a limb that stands out, yet that look on his face is absolutely tortured. “This is, uh, not what you think it is, but actually my—”

The door slams open, startling me into looking over. Three Ohd-kasaches glide in one after another, each with a fruit basket in their arms, and I hear Nem curse under his breath before mumbling something along the lines of “did they have to come *now?*”

“Greetings, brother,” the visitors screech cheerfully. “In light of your terrible bout yesterday, we’re here to bring you some get well gifts...”

There’s a suspicious pause as they quickly surround Nem in a ring. From the outside I can’t see what’s happening, their massive frames blocking my sight, until one of them squeaks in a voice I can’t ignore. “Good seas, Nem, what are you doing with your cock sticking out like that?”

NEM

I swear, if I didn't have a bout yesterday, I would be having it now, right after I murdered these airheads.

"Jun, shut up." Tar whips him in the back. Jun yelps, but he should be grateful because I would whip him if Tar didn't, and my whip would be so much more painful. "Nem's mate is here."

"That's why I said it. Qish, you've got no sense of humor."

The muscles in my jaw tic.

Sol immediately drags Jun away, so I don't plunge into an ugly scuffle with one of my brothers when my mate is around. Tar gives me an apologetic look.

"Sorry, we didn't know the timing of our arrival was... less than appropriate."

"Forget it," I grumble. "Just put the fruit baskets down and leave." I would have told them to take those stupid baskets with them, but maybe Tessa would like the fruits. I push Tar aside and dart to the bathroom so I can take care of my

erection. It's so hard to be around Tessa and not get any physical reaction.

When I come out, my cock has shrunk into its pouch and I've made sure the lower tentacles act as a curtain to keep it covered. This is how every Ohd-kasach maintains decency without the use of fabric.

I walk to the living area and find Tessa talking to the others, smiling. She seems to carry herself quite well around Tar, Jun and Sol. My brothers are grinning so wide, I don't even remember the last time they are so gleeful. She's apparently charmed them. I can see her becoming part of the family—no, that's not true. She is my mate, so she is already part of the family.

“Oh, look who is here.” Jun glimpses me and turns around, his grin now mischievous. “Did you take so long in there jacking—”

My whip on his head cuts him off on a yelp.

“Ignore him,” I tell Tessa. She chuckles, and I'm relieved that she seems unfazed by the embarrassing episode. She is not immature, unlike *someone*. I cut Jun a warning look, making him retreat to the corner so he doesn't piss me off even more. “So you've met all my brothers?”

“I met them yesterday, and I just talked to Tar and Jun,” Tessa says with a smile. “Your brothers seem like really nice people. It must have been fun growing up with them.”

If she means fun by fighting and bickering all the time, then probably.

I want to take her away, but Sol slides in between us. “Tessa, I hear your people invented the universal handshake, a gesture of greeting that requires skin to skin contact,” he says expectantly, sneaking his arm toward her. “Let’s do the universal handshake.”

My eyes twitch. I voice a firm “no” before I push him away. I turn around and see confusion in Tessa’s eyes, so I explain, “Sol is very, *very* touch-starved. If you let him touch you, he’ll never let you go.”

“I see.” Tessa watches as Sol goes away dejected. “Maybe he’ll have an easier time when he gets a mate.”

“We’re all hoping for that.”

I take Tessa to the balcony with me, so she doesn’t get too interested in them. I find myself wanting to hog all her attention. That doesn’t stop her curiosity though. “You all seem pretty close in height and build. Is any one of you older than another?”

“No. We came from the same clutch and hatched on the same day. That makes us the same age.”

Tessa nods, then looks out to the living area where my brothers loiter. “Do your parents live far from you? I mean, they must have heard about your bout too, and your people seem to take it seriously.”

“They might have sent me get well gifts or visited me too, if they were still around,” I admit. If I must compare our cultures, then according to what little I know of Earth people, their equivalent of suffering a bout is undergoing surgery. “But they are gone. Father was publicly executed for his war crimes. Mother was pregnant at that time, but died soon after delivering the clutch. She never saw us hatch.”

Tessa stiffens. A look of horror clouds her pretty gray eyes, so I beat her to speaking.

“No need to apologize. You didn’t know.” I squeeze her hand and feel her relax a little. “Truth be told, I don’t feel much about them. I don’t know how they got together or whether my mother wanted to have us. If she didn’t, I understand. But I’m happy that I grew up with Tar, Jun and Sol. They may be embarrassing at times, but they are family, and family is irreplaceable.”

Her eyes turn misty at that. “Now you make me miss my family on Earth.”

“We can visit them together in the future,” I assure her. But she shakes her head and sadness mars her face, like she knows it’s never going to happen. I wonder if there’s something I don’t know and she isn’t telling me, but I don’t have time to think as Tar comes over.

“Nem, it’s time for work. We’ll get going.”

I go to see them off. At the door they pause as Tar turns to face me. “See you at the plots next week. But before that,

enjoy your off time with her and try not to trigger another bout.”

“Sure.” I wince at the phantom pain his words brought about. “I’ll be back to gather the crops as soon as I can.” Which is after the vacation. I took the week off to spend time with my mate and help her settle down.

Tar nods. He turns his attention to Tessa.

“I wish you a very productive mateship with my brother.” His voice carries solemn weight. “Our species needs children to continue, Tessa. The sacred responsibility of reproduction now falls on the shoulders of you and Nem. I hope you’ll mate frequently and breed as many as possible. Have faith in that my brother will fulfill his duties by providing you with all the comforts you need, so you can receive his sperm and carry his eggs without worry.”

“O... kay.”

I sigh, knowing it’s impossible for them to not cause embarrassment. Not even for a moment.

I watch them go away and wave goodbye, but over the wind drifts Jun’s scoffing mumble, “Carry his eggs? I don’t think he has even *sensed* her!”

Tessa must have heard that too, because as soon as I close the door and walk back to the table, she sidles up with a question.

“What does it mean, you haven’t sensed me?”

“Jun was referring to a thing we do. It’s called sensing. But it’s just sucking with these things on our sensory arms. We have other arms for other purposes, and we only use the sensory arms to pick up sensory information this way.” I raise my sensory arm to show her the goods, and she makes a marveling sound at the rows of circular, pink flesh.

“What does it have to do with me though?” She sticks a finger out to poke at my sensor, and I shiver at the delicious contact, suddenly aware of her proximity to me. “Is it something only mates do?”

“Pretty much. We don’t normally sense people, only the environment. But if we do sense people, it has to be someone we feel affectionate toward.”

Tessa continues to study my sensors. “Back on my planet, we have our own way of expressing affection.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, very much so.” Her voice hums low. “It’s called kissing.”

I hear myself swallow loudly. I don’t even know why. But the way she’s looking at me out of her heavily hooded eyes, the faint color in her cheeks, the slim fingers dancing down my arm, it all sends my pulse racing. I can’t control myself leaning closer to her, and when I don’t think it’s close enough, I lift her by the waist and put her on my lap, so she breathes onto my face.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand your Earth custom,” I rasp.
“Care to demonstrate?”

“Hmm. I don’t know.” She pretends to think, and I love that she’s torturing me like this. My cock is going rogue again, pushing out of its pouch and wedging in her ass crack. I suspect she feels it because she is squirming on my lap, her breath coming in small gasps. “Will you do something for me too?”

“Anything,” I answer without hesitation.

“Demonstrate your sensing ritual to me in return.” She blows warm air into my ear, almost making me come on the spot. I gnash my teeth to prevent myself from losing it all. Not yet. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s fair trade.”

Tessa chuckles. “Then lower your face.” When I do that, she pulls at my arm and says, “Lower.”

I drop my face further, to the point that our foreheads nearly touch. But she’s still looking up at me, kneeling on my thighs. Her hands fly up to cup my cheeks. I’m not sure what’s going on until she cranes her neck and sends her mouth to mine.

Something quietly explodes in my head. For a moment, I’m frozen. Completely blanking out. Then fireworks blast in my ears when her tongue slides in and cautiously, daintily, licks at mine.

Hunger consumes me. Hunger that I’ve never known existed, but is now awakened and out roaring for more. So, so,

so much more. My Tessa has no idea what beast she's unleashed. She gasps in surprise when we come apart for a second and I steal the initiative, capturing her mouth in mine, tonguing her just the way she taught me, except I do it longer, careful not to hurt her with my sharp, serrated teeth. By the time I let her go, she's limp against my chest and panting. The bright red on her cheeks makes me swell with pride.

“You-you learn fast.”

“I suppose I do.” I stare at her mouth. “Yours is shaped differently from mine.” It's so soft, plump, pink, perfect for sucking and licking. It makes me go crazy.

Tessa chuckles. “Yeah. These are called lips.” She licks them to show me what she means, and I see her lips are a little swollen, but she has a satisfied look on her face, which makes my cock twitch in anticipation. If she liked that, imagine what else she would like me to do to her.

“Give me your hands.” I tell her when she looks all blank, “I'm going to sense you. It's what we agreed on, remember?”

“Oh, right.” She puts her hands out and watches as my sensory arms wrap around them. A slight frown creases her eyebrows when something occurs to her. “Will this hurt?”

“Of course not.” I take care to align my sensors along her hands, wrists and forearms, covering every inch of her skin. “You'll only feel a light suck on you, barely even noticeable, then it's over. As the receiver, I will obtain your scent, taste and feelings.”

“Okay. Sounds easy enough.”

Our eyes meet in mid-air and I let things stay this way for a moment, making sure she knows what I’m going to do next. Sort of a heads-up.

Then I suck.

Tessa gasps. Her hands tremble in my grip and I barely hear her call my name, engulfed by all the wonderful things I feel through her. I’m in heaven, and heaven smells like citrus, complemented by a gorgeous note of jasmine, most refreshing on a summer day; tastes like honey, pure sweetness with a floral impression.

I’m copping another sense before I know it, addicted to the amazing scent and taste. She moans, squirms in my lap and... is that pleasure she’s oozing? She takes pleasure from what I’m doing to her? Qish, I think she wants more and I can’t let her down now, can I?

Tessa whimpers when I ramp up the game and suck her with all my sensors at once. “Did you like that?” I ask, because I’m not sure why she is climbing me so wildly.

“Ye-yes.” She’s breathless as her fingers dig into my shoulders, her hips pushing against my stomach. “More.”

I eagerly oblige as I feel her excitement spiking through the sensors. My mate is excited for me. That in return excites me beyond measure. So much so that I lose control of my cock. I shoot a big load in the middle of sensing, making a mess on myself.

Tessa pauses, watches wide-eyed as the sticky white fluid trickles down my arms, a surprised look on her face. My cheeks burn in shame. How could I have come so quickly? I haven't even satisfied my mate. But her gorgeous scent and taste, oh, they drive me to the edge and I go again, spurting everywhere this time, causing her to squeal when it hits her buttocks, staining her clean fabric with my filth.

“Oh, Nem.” I think she's mad at me, so I don't dare look at her. I know what I've done. I've screwed up our session of intimacy by coming too quickly and making a mess on both of us.

I want to apologize, but there's something strange going on with my cock. It bounces back hard, brushing over the spot between her thighs, and Tessa moans at the sensation. I suspect she likes it, so I sweep it over that mysterious spot again, luring another sweet sound from her. Aware that my action brings her pleasure, I do it over and over, pulling more arms to stroke her through the fabric, making it up to her with my effort.

But I'm no saint. My will is so weak, I cave in to my base urges when Tessa arches her back and bursts into an orgasm, giving me the opportunity to sense her sweet little body.

Holy. Seas.

My cock starts leaking as soon as I pick up her feelings. That ecstasy. That pure joy. She loves this. I'm losing it just faced with the beauty of it all. The fact that I made her feel all these things adds so much to my own pleasure, and I come a

second time, spraying my spunk in all directions like a broken hose. By the time I stop, both Tessa and I are covered in filth, her mouth so wide open as if she can't believe what I've done.

Remorse runs my blood cold. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Tessa asks after a while, studying my cheeks that I'm sure are aflame.

"For getting your fabric dirty with my semen." Only she doesn't seem to mind that, tilting her head at me, curiosity shining in her silver-gray eyes, and I stammer, "And... and..."

"Yes?" she says with soft patience.

"And coming too fast."

Being intimate with her got me too excited, but that's no excuse. How can I be a good mate if I can't even control myself and satisfy her first? I drop my face in shame, ready for censure, but instead I hear a giggle.

"God, Nem, you're so cute."

IO

TESSA

“I’m not cute.” Nem blushes at my words. Yes, I know why his face turns blue now. It’s because Ohd-kasaches have blue blood, not red. I can’t believe I forgot that little fact about his kind. “I’m so much bigger than you.”

“Size doesn’t have to do with this.” I raise my eyebrows at him, then I wrap my arms around his torso, catching him unprepared. “Cute cute cute. Nem’s super cute.”

Nem has never been so blue. “If you say so, my Tessa,” he whispers, hugging me back, happiness clear in his voice.

We cuddle despite the mess we made on ourselves. There’s cum. Nem got it all over the floor and my clothes. I got my panties messed up too. But I don’t care. I haven’t felt like this in ages. The last three months has been a nonstop nightmare and I deserve a break, don’t I?

I don’t know what it is that just happened between me and Nem. I hesitate to define it. Not real sex, that’s for sure. Maybe just some silly fun. But it doesn’t really matter. Nem is such a sweet guy. I never thought I’d say this, but I like him. I like this tentacle monster who cooks better Earth food than

some actual Earthlings, cuddles me with all his arms, and wants to protect me even though he doesn't have to. He makes me feel so good, and I can't imagine a sweetheart like him still being single.

That's the problem, though. He's not single. He thinks he has found his mate through an intergalactic mating program. And that mate is... me.

I stiffen.

No, not me. I'm here by trickery. By fraud. Nem doesn't know it yet, but I never wanted to become a mail order bride. I'm here to hide from my deadly stalker. As soon as the trial is over, I'll be out of Euxik Four. I'll never see him again.

He won't know why I chose to leave. Worse, I can't even tell him why. He'll just blame himself for not being able to keep me. That's what Nem would do, if I know him at all.

It pains me to think I'm bound to leave him like dumping some unwanted trash. He will feel hurt, no doubt. But the situation is not that far gone yet. I can make this easier for him—for both of us—and I do that by putting a stop to this thing between us, whatever it is. I can't let it go out of hand.

I can't risk getting us attached to each other.

A deep breath to harden my resolve, and I push off Nem. "We should take a bath."

"Together?"

His tendrils search for my waist, wanting to pull me back into his arms, but I sidestep. "No. Of course not." I go away,

leaving his tendrils hanging in mid-air, and I don't miss the confusion on his face. Clearly, he doesn't understand why I evaded his touch after our little session—after I showed him how much I liked it. I do like it. I want him to touch me again. But sometimes what you want isn't what's good for you, or him.

I bite my lip, ignoring the tinge of guilt in my chest. *This is the right thing to do.* I duck into the bathroom and shut the world outside.

Later in the afternoon, I distract myself with the datapad. It's the only thing I brought with me on this trip, and it's convenient, only takes up a pocket. As I scroll through the news feed, I notice Heeren sent me a message, asking how everything is going.

I quickly reply, telling him it's been pretty good out here, my mateship with Nem is doing well, the food is nice, the weather is fine, yada yada. All formalities.

Heeren happens to be online, so we exchange some messages and I leave out yesterday's incident. I originally wanted to tell Heeren and seek the agency's aid, thinking Nem was in mortal danger, but after he explained to me, I decided it wouldn't be wise to trouble Heeren over the matter. It's not like the Pyar'eshin can do anything about the inhibitor anyway.

After learning that I'm safe and sound, and that Nem has been treating me well, Heeren reveals he's suddenly needed offworld and will take off soon. *But don't worry,* he sends. *I'll*

be back when the trial is over to hear out your decision and make sure it's not influenced. If you don't want to stay, no one can force you, vice versa.

All right, I send back. See you in a month.

Heeren goes offline. I put down my datapad and stare into the air, once again plagued by the feeling of having nothing to do. Nem is around the house, but I'm hoping to avoid him, so I stay in my room and keep the door locked. Only when Nem is out of the house, do I step out and keep myself busy with chores.

At supper, I don't talk to Nem. He tries to initiate a conversation, but I fob him off with hmms and ahhs. He obviously senses my disinterest and quiets down. After the meal, I go mop the floor and take a bath.

Then it's sleep time.

"What are you doing?" Nem is following me down the hallway. He sounds puzzled when I step into my room. "This is your room."

"Yes it is, and I'll go to sleep now."

"But you've been sleeping in my room." He gestures next door. "We've been cuddling."

Yes we have, and it's been really nice. I feel my lips curving up, but I remember my purpose and force the smile down. "I'll sleep in my room tonight." Pause. "And every night after that."

"Why?"

There's audible hurt in his voice. I try not to look at him. "No reason. It's just better this way."

When he wants to say something, I beat him to it. "Goodnight," I quickly swing the door close. My back pressed against the door, a breath leaves me and lingers in the air long enough for me to realize it's a sigh. That look he has when I shut the door in his face. Lord. Guilt guts me, but I shove it aside, drag myself onto the bed, and force my eyes closed.

I don't sleep well that night.

The Drelye isn't there to haunt me. My dreams feature Nem instead. How he finds out about the lies that got me into this program. How he doesn't lash out in anger, but becomes cold toward me. No matter how many times I apologize, he won't forgive me. He says if I don't leave now, he'll make me. I cry my eyeballs out in the dreams. When I wake up, it's with such a splitting headache that I decide it's the worst nightmare I've ever had.

I hate lying.

But what choice do I have?

Heart sinking, I spend the day alone on the beach, watching the seas and the coral houses, attempting to comfort my mind with beautiful landscape. It doesn't work. The hours drag on without end, but I think of something else I could do. Something I haven't done in a while.

Not since it became the reason I got in trouble with the Drelye.

I look down at my regular flat shoes, hesitating, not sure if this is a good idea.

It used to be the one thing I loved. The one thing I thought I would stay passionate about until I died. Then there came the Drelye. Now every time I try to dance, a dark whisper enters my mind, dripping with malice.

Do you know what you're like?

A little butterfly, so pretty in sight.

But all it takes is one strike.

Then of your eyes goes out the light.

With a shudder I kill the thought, desperate to block out all that memory, all that dark past.

What once came naturally feels impossible now. How do I pull it off? I can't even make my toes move. I'm just standing like a marble statue, looking stupidly into the distance, feeling like I've lost the skills that took two decades of training to shape and perfect. All that blood and sweat gone to waste. Even if I get rid of the Drelye, so what? My life will never be the same. I will never dance again.

Something wells in my eyes. I strain to shove it in, but tears stream out regardless. I can't be doing this. I can't be so weak. But the floodgate has been opened and nothing can stop it now. I end up sitting in the sands, alone, sobbing.

The wind blows over and sends ripples across the seas, capping the blue ridges with a rose-gold that glitters in the sunlight. It's beautiful. The scene paints a calming vibe that

eventually gets me to stop crying. I don't understand Nem saying the waters are risky. Maybe he thinks I can't swim, hence the warning. It doesn't matter. I'm not in the mood to swim anyway. Rather, I think I'll try dancing one more time.

Three months is long enough for any pity party.

I get up and do a casual twirl on my heels. Good. Not that rusty yet. I start warming up, stretching my arms and legs, aiming for a level four routine later. If I don't fall face-first, I'll count it as a win.

The routine starts with a sequence of leaps. This is when you make the entrance and present yourself on the stage. I try to recall the footwork as I go, thinking I might have forgotten some parts of it, but my body seems to remember my training better than my brain does. Every turn in the air, every shift of the core, they come so naturally to me that I feel home. This is not some magically acquired talent. This is what I've been doing for twenty years. I know every aspect of it like the back of my hand.

But then, as always, that hindrance occurs.

The shadow that blocks out my light. The voice that whispers my doom. The phantom that lives in my head.

It's him.

My nightmare.

My enemy.

I let him invade my thoughts for a fraction of a second and my left foot slips, nearly resulting in a fall. Nearly. The

imminent danger gets my adrenaline going like crazy and I stabilize at the last minute, saving myself from a broken spine and a cracked skull.

Breath leaves me in a panicking gulp as I land on the ground, shaking.

I can't do this... I can't... I'll never get rid of him. Not from my mind. Awake or asleep, I can't escape my nightmare. I live it every second of my life, the smell of blood forever fresh in the air.

Except that's not true. I know because I've gotten rid of it before. The nights I spent with Nem, I was free of nightmares. Nem made me see I could be free. He opened my eyes in ways I never imagined. But now Nem is not with me, is he? I must do this all by myself, because this dance is mine alone to finish. No one else should fight my battle for me.

The sky clouds over as I get back to dancing, doing a sequence of 180-degree twirls, keeping my arms balanced like wings. Klinkin is all about exaggerated leaps and flips that sometimes cross into the area of acrobatics, or even martial arts, but it also requires the dancer to express themselves through the body, show emotion and not obsess with tricks. It's hard to find the equilibrium, but when you do master the art, it's the most rewarding thing in the world.

The hindrance makes a comeback, but this time I'm prepared for it. Gritting my teeth, I force my attention on the next step, the next movement, and forget everything else.

I can do this.

Nem showed me that I can.

Light pricks my eyelids. New warmth flows into me, supplying the energy I need. I squint, realizing the twin suns are out again. Darkness has passed. I'm free. Suddenly, my movements become smoother than ever, my steps lighter. as if my whole body just shed an invisible burden.

When the routine is about over, I feel the soft breeze over my ankles like the hem of my costume. I smile at the pleasant memory of wearing that beautiful, elaborate dress and those accessories. My klinkin shoes had special little bells on them, so whenever I performed an aerial movement, a piece of music reverberated through the air. Every klinkin routine comes with its own song. You complete the song when you complete the dance, entertaining the audience both visually and auditorily.

Now I have no audience, but I pretend I do and they are clapping for me. I curtsy on the beach, which I take as the front of the stage. Then, pleased with the success of the show, I slowly make my exit to the imaginary backstage area.

Turns out I can still dance. I can overcome the obstacles that have been there holding me back for three months.

Smiling proudly, I glimpse a giant Ohd-kasach in the distance. Nem must have come to the beach too when I was not looking. He is facing this way and his eyes are on me. Has he watched the whole show?

I'm suddenly nervous. Not mad at him for watching, but nervous. What does he think of it? Did he like it? Why do I care if he liked it? I shake my head and walk up to him.

“Hey.”

Nem eyes me shyly, wringing his arms in a cross. “Hey.”

I smile. It’s impossible to not smile around him. “What are you doing here?”

“Came out to toss the trash.” He points at the recycling bag at his feet, then his eyes snag back on me. “Never thought I’d see the most beautiful scene in my life.”

“Aw, no.” I feign humility. “I wasn’t that good.”

He insists, “You were that good.”

I nod. “On second thought, you are right. I was pretty good.”

He grins and picks up his trash. I go with him when he heads for the recycling site. “Where did you learn to dance like that?”

“I went to school for that. The Academy of Interstellar Performance Arts, then the Bjero Studio.” I don’t know why I’m offering these details. It didn’t feel safe telling anyone. But there’s something about Nem that has me relaxed and worrying less. “Trained almost twenty years before I finally got a chance on stage. And not just any stage. The first dance tour around all the major sectors launched by any company or troupe.”

Nem widens his eyes at me, the astonishment plain as day.

“What?” I ask.

“You are a star, my Tessa.”

“I... I am not a star.” Not even when I was still in the troupe. “Small-time entertainer, if you will. And I don’t do it anymore.”

“Why?”

“Personal reasons.” I avoid talking about it. Regret washes over me for bringing this up. I shouldn’t have babbled. The last thing I want now is for Nem to know what happened to me and how it sent me on the run.

Thankfully, Nem doesn’t throw any more questions along that line. He goes back to the earlier situation instead. “What is the dance you just performed?”

“Klinkin.”

“Never heard of it,” Nem admits. “I don’t know much about this kind of art.”

“It’s quite popular in the major sectors.” But Euxik Four sits on the fringe of the universe, so it makes sense that he doesn’t know. “The Vectians invented it. Got its name from the sounds made by the shoes. You should really see those shoes. They are something to behold. So pretty.”

I’d have loved to perform Earth dances. Growing up, my favorites had been jazz and Latin. But klinkin is more profitable to the troupe, and it has its unique charms too. Aside from the expressive movements, the dance outfits are nothing short of beautiful and downright flashy, with long, graceful ribbons hanging from the skirts in a riot of color. That,

combined with the little bells on the specially tailored footwear, always made me feel like a fairy.

“I would love to see that.” Nem’s eyes are curving into crescents as he smiles. “My pretty mate wearing pretty shoes.”

I blush.

He doesn’t really think I’m pretty, does he? I’m alien to him. The aesthetics must be different. I know my people would be terrified by his appearance. No one is this big and tall on Earth. He literally towers over me. But I’m starting to think the incredible size is necessary, because you can’t contain all that sweetness with anything less.

“You know...” On our way back from the recycling site, Nem constantly waves in the air, getting twitchy with his arms. I worry he’s getting a bout or something, but then he turns to me and says, “I don’t think it’s hard, this dancing thing.”

I raise my eyebrows, and he continues in all seriousness, “Although I’ve never danced in my life, I’ve memorized all your movements. I bet I can recreate the dance.”

“Okay.” I cross my arms. “If you think it’s that easy, show me.”

“Gladly.”

Nem walks to the empty space between the coral houses and faces me. His dance begins, with the sea and the beach as the background.

I want to judge this fairly. Pretend this is a talent show and give every participant a chance. But he’s not even dancing. He

is just jumping around like a zombie fish in a frying pan, flailing his arms like crazy, and striking ridiculous poses at every opportunity.

I can't keep a straight face watching this, and before long, I'm doubling over with laughter, especially when he mimics me and does a curtsy at the end. Only, instead of taking one foot back, he twists most of his lower arms behind one standing arm, and he spares a pair to hold another pair out on the sides like the hems of a skirt.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming to tonight's big show," he even says, which only makes me laugh harder.

My stomach is hurting by the time I stop. "That's totally not how I did it."

"No?" He tilts his head.

"No," I say emphatically. "You have no idea how to dance."

Nem glides up. "Then teach me." He takes my hand and tips my chin up, so I'm looking him in the eye. I suspect from the smoothness of his movement that he's got this planned all along.

"Why would I want to do that?" I breathe, even though I already know I can't say no to him.

"Because if you don't, I'll go around doing that exact dance and telling people I learned it from the Earth human named Tessa. It's your reputation on the line."

"That's evil."

“Well.” He grins. “I *am* a villain’s descendant.”

“I can see that now.”

I keep my eyes locked with his, but only for a little longer before my attention travels down his face and alights on his flat mouth. It’s the opposite of sexy full lips, yet I find myself leaning forward, tiptoeing, my face tilting up.

His grin broadens at my signal and he responds by lifting me by the waist. Our mouths touch, and it’s the best feeling in the world.

II

NEM

I hate how time flies. A week goes by before I even notice it. I haven't spent enough time with my Tessa, and now I have to get back to work.

When morning comes, I grunt my way out of the house, hearing her chuckle from behind. Her laughter is the only thing that brightens my mood. I'm glad about the progress we made in our mateship over the week. She clearly feels closer to me now. We get to do something together every day, which is dancing, and I love every second of her correcting my awkward steps. I get a lot of skin contact this way. She'll never know the joy that floods me every time I touch her. And the hard-ons. I swear my cock is the most unruly thing in this world. Trying to control it is like trying to control the excitement of a peasant male as he jostles past the crowd to get a peek at the beautiful royal princess in a parade.

But she still doesn't come back to sleep with me. It's so perplexing. I thought she enjoyed my cuddling, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I take up too much of the bed and she hates that. Maybe it's the water that she doesn't like. Either way, we

sleep in separate rooms and I'm content despite the walls between us. She lives in my home. She is my mate. Nothing can change that. Well, nothing except the end of the trial.

She could still leave after three weeks.

The thought brings a frown on my face. Alone on the beach, I dive into the sea and swim as fast as I can, as if doing so could dispel my worries. I end up the first to arrive at the plots. There I lay down my containers and start gathering the ripe licon.

Harvest must be done quickly in this season, or the licon would fall off their roots, float to the surface of the sea, and start to rot there. I normally don't take time off, since the whole farm is only me and my brothers, and there's always so much work. Everything from seeding to shipment is done by Tar, Jun, Sol and me. We reduce the cost this way, but it takes a lot of time away. Tar is the one who talked me into a week's vacation, which I'm glad I took.

Now it's back to hard labor. I gather the licon by cutting the roots off and putting the clumps into the containers. My arms are the only tools I use, since I can control their temperature, moisture and rigidity to a certain extent, essentially turning them into anything I want.

I'm aware that most modern farms out there use autos for this kind of thing. The reason we don't is not the cost, but that every blade of licon is shaped differently. One may be tall and slim, covered in luminescent spores. Another may be short and stout, mottled with rainbow patterns. The only thing they share

is the root, literally. Each blade starts out with its own root, but over time the root merges with those of other blades, and together the blades form a clump. One must be very careful when cutting the root because the plant is easy to break. Once it breaks, it loses nutrients and reduces in value. I destroyed hundreds of clumps before finally getting it right.

My brothers appear when I've filled half of a container with crops and seawater. They seem surprised to see me, but then remember my vacation is over.

Glad to have you back, Tar taps my shoulder and brings me into the telepathic link.

Glad to be back, I say, not stopping my work.

And so productive too. Jun swims around my container and peeks at the swaying clumps inside. *It'll be great to have more crops ready in the barn. Ekton will take as much as he can*.

I pause and turn to Jun. *I thought Ekton ordered eighty dinals' worth?*

He always wanted eighty, but not this time. This time he's coming to pick up the goods himself.

Coming, as in coming to Euxik Four? I ask in disbelief.

Yes, Jun confirms. *Said he had always wanted to take his family to the sea. They don't have much water on his world, you know. Anyway, he got the official authorization and everything and wanted to visit before our planet "becomes a popular tourist spot and the beaches get ruined". He also asked if he could test the water quality using his own device*.

That's fine, I say. The water quality decides the nutritional value of the crops, and we only deliver top notch goods. It's our secret to retaining clients. If that gives him peace of mind, he can do whatever test he wants. But we'll have to watch him closely just in case.

Of course, Jun agrees.

Ekton has been a great client to us. His orders aren't the biggest ones, but they are steady and necessary for maintaining our profit margin. We usually deliver the goods to him using a certain intergalactic courier service. But if he wants to come, he can come, and he is right in that Euxik Four has a beautiful landscape. Too bad interstellar tourism isn't a thing here. We rarely see people come for business, much less travel. The Pyar'eshin are one of the few alien trade partners this planet has welcomed in recent years.

I shake the thoughts away and concentrate on the harvest. My brothers do the same, toiling away. By the time our containers are full, stomachs are rumbling. We barely haul the massive weights onto shore before crumpling on the sands, panting and taking a much-needed rest.

"Thank the seas we'll be done by the end of this week," Sol grumbles. "Harvesting is not fun."

"Better than shipping," Tar opines, lying on his back and basking in the sun. "Loading them onto the shuttle, flying to the nearest courier station, unloading them and flying back. It can get so lonely out there when no one is around to talk."

"I like the flying part."

“Sure you do,” Jun laughs. “You always volunteer to ship the goods.”

“That’s because you can’t see how gorgeous it is out there. The stars and the dust clouds have never been closer,” Sol says in a dreamy voice, as if he’s in the cockpit looking out the window right now. “The view is great, but you get to interact with different people too, eventually. The staff at the courier station is always friendly.”

“I don’t know. I never see anything out there.” Jun clears his throat uncomfortably. “What’s more, it seems to me every time I went to the station, they tried to scam me.”

“Offering express delivery at a higher price is not a scam.”

“It is to me. I didn’t make my hard-earned money so I could get ripped off by some random peddler.” Jun pauses, a frown climbing onto his forehead like he recalls something troubling. “I regret paying that mating agency. They will just take my money and never get me a mate.”

“They will get you a mate,” Sol retorts. “Nem got one. We all saw it.”

“Yes, but look how tiny she is. She’s obviously not compatible with someone like Nem. I bet the agency just sent her to act like they fulfilled their end of the bargain, but once the trial is over, she’ll leave and no one can stop her. After all, she can just point out the incompatibility and use it as a convenient excuse to claim the mateship is unsatisfactory. I’d be convinced. And then what? Nem will still have to gift her money for parting. That’s in the agreement.” Jun frowns

deeper. “In other words, our money has been taken with no guarantee of return. If this is not a scam, I don’t know what is.”

His plausible argument leaves the other two speechless. They trade dumbfounded looks, then turn their heads around, waiting for me to say something.

But they are in for a disappointment. I’m not interested in debating with Jun. He thinks money is more important than anything whereas the rest of us have different priorities. It’s natural that he guards against paid services such as the Pyar’eshin Mating Agency. Trying to change his values is pointless. I’ve gone that route before. Zero effect.

I’m more concerned about the other thing Jun mentioned. Incompatibility. He believes Tessa is too small for me, which is true. I’ll probably crush her with my weight alone if I’m not careful. But that’s not even the real problem here. The real problem is I don’t know how to mate with her. I know a female has a reproductive opening, but I don’t see it anywhere. How do I get inside her? Where do I lay eggs? The only opening seems to be her mouth, yet I have a feeling that’s not where my eggs go. Maybe my sperm. She would look beautiful with my sperm on those pink, plump lips. But definitely not my eggs.

Could Jun have said the truth? That I can’t mate with Tessa?

The questions linger in the back of my head for the rest of the day. I begin to search for some answers when I get home

and pull out my datapad. Tessa is almost done preparing supper, so I have a few minutes to look things up.

First I search “how to mate with a human female”. To my surprise, there are many graphic results. I tap into one of them and magnify it for close inspection. It takes mere seconds to understand what I’m looking at. So *that’s* where a human female’s reproductive opening is located. This article says it’s normally hidden under fabric, just like my cock is hidden in the pouch, although clearly mine has trouble staying hidden around Tessa.

The next thing I input is “human female anatomy” because I want to know more. The names. The shapes. The functions. I can’t curb my curiosity at this point. It feels like I’m peeping into Tessa’s feminine secrets through this and I feel guilty. But I can’t stop. Soon I gobble up everything I can find on StarNet, and I’m shocked, my cheeks burning like fire.

Turns out Jun was wrong.

Human females are used to mating with the males of their own species, who are similar to them in size. But human females can also mate with almost any other sentient creature, including those twice their size. They are extremely accommodating in this regard and their interbreeding ability is renowned in the galaxies.

In other words, her special biological structure allows us to mate and breed safely. As long as I take care, mating should be a very pleasurable experience for her.

I can’t believe I got so lucky.

At supper I don't hear Tessa talking to me. Actually, I do hear her talking to me about this dessert from the food dispenser, something called the sorbet and it being the same as that from her home planet, but my mind is entirely elsewhere.

I've done a lot of thinking and researching on my mate and her biology. But I haven't talked to her about it. What is her opinion on mating with me? Would she show interest? Just thinking about her saying yes gets me worked up like nothing else. My cock twitches in the pouch and my hunger grows, but not for food. I want her. I want to mate with her and lay my eggs in her womb. Imagining her carrying my clutch, her belly round with all those potential children has me groaning and dangerously close to leaking in the pouch.

Tessa notices my silence at some point. She stops her feeding. "What's the matter?"

Nothing. Just wondering how I can get you pregnant.

Her mouth drops open.

The way she is gawking at me, her face turning a rosy color, gives me a brief pause. Then I jerk.

Oh fruk, did I just say it out loud?

I2

TESSA

“I’m sorry.” Nem bursts out the apology, all flustered. “I didn’t mean... I mean I did mean it... but I wasn’t planning on telling you... No no, that sounds even worse. What I’m trying to say is—”

“It’s okay,” I cut him off, biting into my bottom lip. I thought I’d feel offended, but not by him. It’s impossible to be offended by this giant, sweet tentacle monster. My belly is tickling as I softly ask, “Just tell me why you, um, would want to get me pregnant?”

“Because you are my mate,” he answers without hesitation. “Isn’t it common for one to impregnate one’s mate?”

I suppose it is.

“But...” I chew on my lip, combating the heat in my cheeks. “I don’t think you can do that.”

“Why?”

“Well, for starters, look at the differences.” I gesture between us. “I’m pretty sure I can’t even have se—mate with you. Pregnancy will probably kill me, you know, like that

movie where the alien bursts from the human's chest and kills him."

Nem obviously doesn't know what I'm talking about, so he gives me a blank look.

"I know what it looks like," he eventually says. "I had doubts too. But it's safe for females to carry our eggs and deliver them. I just have to enter your womb gently, so you don't get hurt."

I suck in a breath. "You have to enter my *what?*"

"Your womb," he explains in all seriousness. "In order to impregnate you, I must first put my cock inside you. Then I must pleasure you with my cock. I'll have to penetrate you thoroughly, but taking in the full length will be difficult for you, so it's recommended that the first few times we work on getting you used to my size, conditioning you to the pleasure it brings, and pushing your orgasmic limits. When the day comes that you can take me all the way, I can get you pregnant by knocking your womb open gently and laying my eggs in there."

Oh.

I have a feeling that's not how human anatomy works. A man is not expected to go *that* far to impregnate a woman. But then, we are not talking about a man here. Maybe it's just how Ohd-kasaches do it, and by the liquid heat between my legs, I know I'm not in the least repelled by the idea of alien impregnation.

What does that say about me?

I squirm in my seat, the sorbet still unfinished before me, but no amount of frozen dessert can cool me down. My tentacle monster laying eggs inside me. Never knew a concept so horrifying could also be so hot.

“Not every couple has children, you know.” I struggle to maintain my good sense. “Maybe your mate doesn’t want to get pregnant.”

“She doesn’t?” Nem looks disappointed, his massive shoulders going droopy. Does he want to have tentacle babies with me that much? But after some quiet consideration, he nods in understanding. “I will respect her decision. Although, I really think it would be nice if I could start a family with her. The children will look like me. That’s how our genes pass down. But they will have her heart and her beauty. They will be perfect, good little babies who swim like fish and dance like fairies.”

That’s it.

He knows how to get me.

I whimper, the heat intensifying in my core, making me want to throw myself at him and start producing babies right away.

This is ridiculous. Who gets turned on by talks of family and children? But I can already see Nem being a wonderful daddy to our little tentacle monsters, taking care of them like

he has done me. And I'll love them too. They are my babies. They are the products of mommy and daddy's union.

Except...

Except I'm not really Nem's mate, am I?

My body suddenly cools down. My teeth clatter. My blood freezes. Reality grips my throat like a vise.

Who am I kidding here? I lied my way into the mating program. My intention was not to mate, which constitutes fraud. If anyone finds out about this, I'm going to prison.

I can't stay.

Closing my eyes, I let in a shaky breath.

It's going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay. I will get what I want and be rid of the Drelye. Nem will get what he wants too.

By the time I leave, Heeren should have signed up more female participants for his program. Nem will surely be matched again. This time to someone who actually wants to mate. Someone who would love to start a family with him, have all those little tentacle babies with him, and go with him to the beach where they can watch the children play and swim and... and be like a big happy family...

My chest aches so badly that I have to stand up. I gasp for breath, feeling suffocated.

"Are you all right?"

Nem is asking, but I don't answer. I can't. My legs move before my brain can decide what to do. They take me away and I bolt into my room, close the door behind me and throw myself onto the bed.

Damn it.

I bury my face in the sheets so my sobs get muffled.

Why does it hurt so much? I'm only giving up what never belonged to me in the first place. It's for the best. So why do I feel like I'm losing the most important thing in my life? Nem isn't mine. He is not. The sooner I accept this reality, the easier things will be for me, I know. But it doesn't stop my tears from gushing out.

I've met the sweetest guy in the universe, and not only can I never fall for him, I must leave him in three weeks.

NEM

Did I say something wrong?

The moment I see Tessa run, I shoot to my lower arms on alert. I don't know what's happening, so I watch her for a while.

Tessa goes straight to her room and shuts the door. She doesn't come out for a long time. I stand at the table alone, feeling like the biggest idiot in the world. She was fine a moment ago. It must have been something I said.

I pad to her room, wanting to apologize, but forget about it when I arrive at the door and hear vague, restrained sobbing from inside.

She is crying.

My triple hearts fist tight behind my chest, aching with every breath I take.

Humans only cry when they are sad. My Tessa is sad.

Did I make her sad?

I think about it. About everything that happened between us. About what could have upset her so much. I'm not sure, but maybe it's the talk of babies. Does she not want that? Children? I can accept a child-free mateship, if that's what she prefers. Or we can adopt children, if it's the idea of pregnancy she dislikes.

Why did I have to bring it up anyway? Now I've made her sad, and no one makes her sad. I'll teach the bastard a lesson if they think they can get away after hurting my Tessa.

Anger rises in me, churning like bile. I have no way of venting it because I'm the one who hurt her. I'm the bastard. Fruk. That makes me want to whip something.

Me and my stupid mouth!

Frustration sets in, stoking the rage like a fan. Together they leave a bitter taste in my mouth and I get angrier at myself, my arms lashing around wildly, a reflection of my internal turmoil. It gets to the point where I have to use one of those tricks for calming effect. Triggering the inhibitor is the last thing I want to do, so I hum a little song in my head.

Water home, water home, carry us to where the water meets the dome.

Swim away, swim away, we play in the suns and on the edge all day.

Come home, come home, goes the call that guides us back to the foam.

On our way, on our way, we shout to the moon and return without delay.

The simple children's tune does the trick every time. In a few breaths I'm calm again, and the sobbing has ceased in the room.

It's dead quiet in there.

I hover outside the door a little longer before I decide she's asleep and pad away. Maybe she's not. But I don't know what to do. I'm at a loss here. So I turn to the brother I always consider the most reliable.

"What brings you here at this hour?" Tar seems surprised to see me when he comes out to answer the door. Our houses are only a couple of yards apart. Still, we stay in our separate places, especially when it's rest time. "Never mind. You look like you could use some talking. Come on in."

I do. After we settle down in the living area, I start telling Tar about my problem. He listens. He nods. When I finish, he hands me a wine glass.

"That's female trouble," Tar explains under my puzzled gaze. "I have no more experience with females than you. Therefore, I can only suggest you intoxicate yourself with my latest purchase, a 509 Leux Moir. It'll make you feel better."

"Thank you, but no." I put the glass back. Alcohol is poison, and while I understand that some people have a high tolerance for it, I don't do poison unless it's absolutely necessary.

"Suit yourself then."

Tar gives me a look that tells me his tips are tied. I know. If any of us were good with females, we wouldn't have looked for one through a mating program. I didn't expect him to help. Getting it out of my system is enough, and I don't wish to disturb him further. I bid my brother goodnight and get on my way, walking in the opposite direction of the beach.

The night is cool, the wind gentle. I'm roaming farther and farther from home. My steps take me into the dark, lush woodland that backs the family properties.

Normally we don't come here. At least I haven't been here in a long time. When I was a child, I used to come and play with the animals. Of course, I didn't understand why the animals were doing their things one second and suddenly getting on running the next. I would run after them, giving a little chase through the woods. When I caught one of them, I would pet them however I wanted and they would let me, too scared to resist. They would essentially play possum until I lost interest in them and went home on my own. After I realized how much I terrified the wildlife, though, I stopped coming so the local flora and fauna could live in peace. There was no reason for me to visit anymore.

But right now, this place fits my mood perfectly.

As I stroll through the woods, it all comes back to flood my senses. The soft croaking of the red-eyed tree frogs. The singing of the cicadas and other insects. The crunching of leaves and branches under my lower arms. Sounds of nature surround me everywhere I go. Left and right, the underbrush

kisses me and the trees shake as I pass them by, greeting me with their pink, sunshine and flame-scented blooms. Moonlight streams down the trail I take, making sure I don't lose sight of all this verdant beauty. Everything here is just as delightful as I remember.

If only Tessa were here to see it with me.

I find my thoughts frequently drifting back to my mate as I continue my walk, wishing I had brought her out with me. Perhaps she would enjoy the scenery as much as I do. Perhaps it would do well to lift her spirit.

Something glitters in the distance and I stop. My head tilts trying to tell what it is, but to no avail. So I glide up for a better look. To my surprise, it's a flower, but grows among weeds instead of on a tree. When I hunker down and lean in, I see it looks different from all the other flowers I've encountered.

The color isn't as bright, the petals not as large. But it blooms just as pretty. With a streak of silver across its tiny petals, this flower stands out in the night and holds my attention.

Did the moon bless it?

Carefully I pluck the flower, hold it up, and marvel at the way it glitters in the moonlight.

It's so pretty, and so unique, like my Tessa.

I keep it in my grip and start making my way back. The return trip feels much shorter as I pick up pace, eager to bring

the little flower home.

When I get back in the house, the table has been cleared and the floor mopped shiny. Tessa must have come out and done the chores while I was gone. She probably isn't asleep.

I hesitate for a moment, then creep out to the back of the house. After finding the curtained window of her room, I quickly go around the corner so I don't get caught, but my upper arm stretches around the wall, bending to the limit, and touches the window. Three knocks.

A brief silence.

Tessa must be getting off bed and walking over, because I hear the window open shortly. She calls into the night air.

“Nem?”

She doesn't see me, and I don't show myself. I just stretch my other upper arm around the corner and hand the flower to her. There's a surprised gasp when she sees my offering.

“This is for me?”

Yes. My hearts are beating like thunder. I have no idea if she'll accept it.

Maybe she's still mad at me.

But I feel a soft brush on my arm, and the flower is gone. She took it! She took my gift. I inwardly squeal and kiss my arm when I take it back.

Her window is open when I glide around the corner, the curtains pulled away, so I go up and do a little shameless

peeping. Tessa is sitting in bed, fiddling with the flower, unaware of my presence at the window. My hearts stop when I see the smile on her face. It's a smile that could kill me, and I would die a very happy male.

I4

TESSA

It's a new day and I expect to spend the morning alone, using the cleaning unit and listening to some cosmic radios. So imagine my surprise when Nem shows up shortly after I set the cleaning unit on a circuit.

“I thought you would be at work today?”

Nem looks at me in a way that makes me wonder if I sound like I don't want to see him. That's of course not true. This is his home. He can come and go whenever he wants.

Besides, I can't deny that him wanting to see me again so soon makes my stomach flutter. Guess I'm not the only person who wanted us to be back together in the past hour after breakfast.

“We have this Trokkian client coming in today,” he explains dryly. If I didn't know he had no lips, I would think he was pouting. “My brothers made me the one to receive him. His family is coming with him. That means I will have to be their guide and show them around.”

“Oh.” He didn’t come back for me. I push down the slight disappointment and plaster on a fake smile. “Anything I can do to help?”

He stares at me, his large eyes bulging together in a frown. It flusters me a little.

“What?”

“That’s not what your smile should look like.”

I crook my eyebrow. “And what should my smile look like?”

“Happy,” he says simply. “Like when you accepted my gift three nights ago.”

“That’s a cute gift,” I admit, my mouth curving up at the memory. Who would have thought Nem would go out late at night and pick that little flower for me? It had to be the most childish thing one could do, but I loved it. Showed his thought of me. Plus, it’s the prettiest flower I’ve ever seen. I’ve put it in a bottle with some water inside, hoping the flower would last as long as possible. It smells nice on my nightstand and gives me good dreams.

Nem continues to stare at me. “Not cute,” he says with all the seriousness in the world. “It’s beautiful, like you.”

“Are you trying to make me smile?”

“Is it working?” He is wringing his arms now. “You only seem to smile genuinely when you are happy, and I want to make you happy. When you are sad, I’m sad too.”

My tentacle monster wants to please me.

I feel like my heart is melting. “Has anyone told you how endearing you are?”

“I hope that word means strong and reliable and mate-worthy.”

Now he’s just doing it on purpose. I can’t help a chuckle. Nem grins at my sound. “That’s more like it,” he says. “Would you like to come with me and receive the client? It would be fun... probably.”

“Okay. But tell me everything I need to know about Trokkians so I don’t embarrass myself out there.”

Nem obliges.

Over the next few hours he walks me through Trokkian biology, culture and living conditions as we prepare snacks for the reception. Never thought I’d say this, but tentacles can be very useful in the kitchen. They stretch so far and fetch things easily. I try not to think what it would feel like to have all those tentacles on me at once. All those holes they could fill. Dear Lord, and I thought I was not into tentacle porn.

We make cookies and cupcakes and have everything ready by noon. When the rumble of a private shuttle occurs outside, I know the client must be here.

Nem goes out to greet them. I follow suit, taking the plate of snacks with me. From the ramp comes down a pair of Trokkians that honestly look like lizard people. With scales and tails and everything. Behind them trails a mini lizard girl

with a datapad in her hand. Her eyes never leave the screen as she walks.

“So glad to see you, Ekton. Welcome to Euxik Four.”

“The pleasure is mine, Nem.”

It’s so weird to watch these two alien-looking aliens shake hands. But they do, tip to claw. Sol had it right when he called it the universal handshake. I suppose the handshake is the only thing about Earth culture that has spread this far and wide in the universe.

“This is my wife, Uinn.” Ekton introduces the people around him. “And this is my daughter, Mela.”

“Nice to meet you all.” Nem in turn introduces me. “This is my mate, Tessa.”

I must say up until this moment I haven’t really seen myself as Nem’s mate. I know that’s what I am in name, But I never thought it would be acknowledged publicly. It’s like you can pretend something doesn’t exist when nobody talks about it. But now they are talking about it, and the client and his family are acknowledging me with a nod. “Nice to meet you, Tessa, mate of Nem.”

Stop fluttering so happily, my stupid heart.

I return them a greeting, smiling as I offer the cookies and cupcakes. They each take a snack and seem pleased.

After the formalities, the Trokkians start talking about this planet they just landed on. “The spaceport was quite a

spectacle, so grand yet so empty. We have never seen anything like it.”

Yeah, I know that feeling. Spaceports are usually very busy, packed full of people coming and going. But on Euxik Four, the largest spaceport is like a ghost town. You don’t see many travelers, only automatic staff that stare at you out of their silent, plastic eyes. It makes you wonder if these places can ever turn a profit, or if they are publicly owned.

We take the Trokkians on a tour of the farm. Well, Nam takes them on a tour and I follow him around. It’s interesting watching him interact with other aliens in a professional manner. He’s clearly dedicated to his line of work, telling Ekton all about licon farming as we go. When we stop at the water’s edge, Ekton pulls out a small device and inserts it into the water. I have no idea what that does, but after he takes it out and studies its readings, pleasant surprise crosses his scaly face.

“This has to be the best water quality I’ve ever seen!”

That sounds good. I look at Nem only to find him already sneaking glances at me. He flashes me a proud smile when I catch him, his serrated teeth shining in the sunlight.

My tentacle monster is cute even when he gets smug.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Ekton suddenly sputters, after putting away his device and enjoying the ocean view, his cheeks flushed a deep red. “There has been an emergency with me and my wife.”

He grabs Uinn's arm and drags her to his side, their bodies pressed together so tightly it's suspicious.

"We didn't mean for this to happen at this hour, but it is beyond our control, and I'm afraid that we will have to be excused."

I notice a matching red on Uinn's face and realization dawns on me.

Before they came, Nem gave me a crash course on the Trokkians. Basically they are aliens with reproduction trouble. They can't breed as easily as many other species. To combat the risk of extinction, they evolved a high libido that drives them to mate frequently. And by frequently I mean they have to mate at least seven times a day. It's like humans having the urge to expel waste out of their bodies. When it hits, it can't be controlled and the needs must be met. Only, instead of waste, they expel certain bodily fluids.

But knowing it doesn't mean we are prepared. I hear Nem gasp and stumble through his words, "No-no problem. But where are you going to handle this, uh, emergency? Do you need to fly the shuttle or..."

"We can handle this anywhere, as long as there's privacy." Ekton's breath is becoming loud and laborious, his cheeks colored further. "That cliff over there seems suitable. We may be gone for half an hour or so. Could you please take care of our offspring in the meantime?"

Seven times a day, half an hour every time? I'm amazed that Trokkians can get anything done.

Swallowing, I watch as Nem guides them to the cliff so they can have their private time. When he returns, he's blushing so fiercely that I can only guess what he must have witnessed involuntarily.

The child has been playing with her datapad all this time, only taking her eyes off the screen when she needs more snacks and grabs them off the plate. "All right, Mela," I tell her. "It's time to get inside for a while. Don't worry. Your parents are not gone. They are just off—"

"Fucking." The child doesn't even raise her face, ignoring the way I open my mouth in shock. "I know. It's what they are always up to. But whatever. Live holos are more interesting than some stupid offworld trip anyway."

I trade looks with Nem.

Poor kid.

We take Mela into the house and settle her at the table. She keeps swiping at her electronics, but at one point tires of it and tosses it aside.

"This sucks," Mela groans. "No one is viewing my live holo channel."

"You have your own live holo channel?" I sit down beside her.

She nods. "It usually gets two digits of viewers, but there's nothing happening today, so everyone got bored and left. Now I have nothing to do."

“Oh, that’s unfortunate. But you are on vacation. Have you thought of doing something other than live holos?”

“There’s nothing to do here. I can’t go anywhere until my parents come back. The network here is super weird. I can’t access my online school portal. I can’t vidtime with my friends. I can’t go to klinkin class. It’s literally the end of my world.”

“You do klinkin too?”

I don’t know why I’m surprised. Trokkians live in a major sector, where the dance is popular. But Mela jumps. “Wait, you do too? That’s like, the coolest dance ever. Half of the kids at school are taking that. But I’ve been watching klinkin shows for longer than any of them. I wrote in my essay that when I grow up, I want to be a dancer.”

“My mate *is* a dancer,” Nem says. I chuckle when he puffs out his chest so proudly, as if that’s the most awesome career in the world.

The child now stares at me open-mouthed, uttering a sound of wonder. Is that starstruck worship in her eyes? I fake a cough into my fist. “Well, I’m not *that* good. But if you like, we can dance a little, for fun.”

“Really? That would be grea...” Mela trails off, suddenly cowering. “But I’m just a beginner. It’ll suck too bad.”

“Everyone starts as a beginner. It’s totally normal.”

“But-but I’ll humiliate myself.”

“You won’t. Trust me.” I stand up. It pains me to see someone be passionate about the art, but not dare to express themselves because they fear failure. I had the same fear when I was young. Scratch that, I had it just the other day, thinking I could never get back to dancing. It’s something everyone struggles with more or less. But damned if I’m not going to show the child how to overcome the fear. “Nem is a beginner too. But he would love to demonstrate his skills, right?”

“What?” Nem makes a startled sound, like he never thought he would be dragged into this.

I raise my eyebrows at him. “You asked me to teach you, remember? And I did.” Although he has been busy these days, we’ve still found time to squeeze in a little lesson every night. His progress is slow, if I’m honest, considering he doesn’t have much time for practice. But compared to when he started, now he knows enough basics to complete a level one routine.

Nem looks between me and the expectant child. “Fine.”

Resigned, he glides up and accepts the hand I offer. After the music starts playing on my datapad, we move into the simple routine I’ve been teaching him. I can tell Mela is about the same level by the ohhs and ahhs she produces, especially when Nem does a twirl. As our dance goes on, I let her know she can join in anytime she wants. Mela jumps on the bandwagon after watching a while. The three of us mess up the rest of the routine by not matching one another’s steps, but Mela is laughing by the end of it.

“That was so much fun.” She hops around, still practicing the movements even as the music comes to a close. “Do you think we can do it again? Please?”

“Of course.”

And so begins a second dance. After it’s over, Ekton and Uinn come through the open door. “I see you’re all having a good time.” They smile at their daughter. “Well, it’s time we get on with our trip. Mela, aren’t you excited for the wild preserves we are about to visit? Think about all that beautiful nature we’ll be seeing.”

“I don’t care about stupid wild preserves.” Mela scowls. “I’m never getting what I wanted from this trip anyway.”

“That’s not true,” Uinn says. “We wanted to save this as a surprise for you, baby girl. But we may as well let it out now.” She trades a look with her husband and together they announce, “We booked the FireBoom Amusement Park for tomorrow.”

“You did? No way!” Mela squeals. “You really did? Are you sure it’s FireBoom?”

“Uh-huh. We’ve got tickets to your favorite theme park.”

The girl squeals at a higher pitch and rushes over to hug their parents. “Oh thank you mommy. Thank you daddy. This is going to be the best trip ever.”

Uinn smiles and strokes her daughter on the head scales.

Ekton shakes his head at me and Nem, like he feels thoroughly defeated. “Today’s children have no appreciation

for nature. It's always theme parks or bust." He sighs. "Thank you for taking care of our child while we were, uh, away. The deal is still on. We'll take all the licon you have in stock, but we'll do that three days later, when we stop by to refuel and prepare for the return trip. What do you say?"

"Sounds good."

They shake hands on it. Ekton nods at me and leaves with his family. The three Trokkians board their private shuttle and take off. From the corner of my eye, I see Nem watching them fly away.

Is that longing in his eyes?

Longing to have a family like that? Partner and child?

My chest tightens, pain washing over me in slow yet unstoppable waves. Of course he wants that. I can tell it's why he joined the mating program. My Nem isn't the type who seeks only pleasure and no responsibility. He wants a family of his own and he'll lavish them with all the love and attention in the world.

But that's not the problem.

The problem is, I want the same thing as he does, and I can't have it. Not with him.

Better not even think about it, I warn myself harshly. Do you want your fraud exposed and your ass thrown in jail? No? Then stay away. Don't let him come too close. Don't give him a chance of finding out. There may be heartbreak, but it will be temporary.

We will both heal from this and move on.

We will be fine.

TESSA

I'm putting distance between me and Nem.

I feel horrible doing it. Not that I think it's wrong. It's necessary to defuse the tension between us. Let whatever spark there is fade away. Nip the bud before it can grow into a flower.

But the look Nem gives me every time I avoid his touch is just killing me. I might feel better if he were persistent—if he kept harassing me with his intimate attempts—but he isn't like that. He's too worried that he'll make me uncomfortable, so he drops any advancements and stays away. But that doesn't stop him gazing at me from a distance, with all that longing smoldering in his black eyes, thick as molasses.

It hurts, knowing he wants me, and wanting him in return. But this is for the best. Once the trial is over, Nem will be able to start looking for a new mate, and I'll try not to cry my eyeballs out when the program does find a better match for him.

On the bright side, my nightmares are completely gone.

I haven't dreamed of the Drelye since I tried that waterbed, and while I'm back in my room now, my sleep has remained normal. I'm active and energetic in the day and I sleep like a baby through the night. No naps in between. I've never felt healthier, and I have Nem to thank for it, though I try not to think about him too much these days.

Here is me praying this new pattern will stick and I'll never fall back into nightmares again.

The third week into the program, I hear from Nem that Tar will be going to town later in the morning. It's to purchase supplies and I can go with him if I'm interested. I'm super grateful that Nem told me this because I've been itching to go out and have a little fun. Not too much fun. I'm not really a party animal. But just seeing new things and meeting new people is exciting enough. Who doesn't like having a bit of spice in their life? But when I ask if Nem will come with me, he shakes his head.

"I have to help Sol clean the barn. It's been empty since Ekton bought out the stock. It could use some tidy-up."

"Can't it wait? You can come with us today."

"No." Nem pauses. "It's best if I don't go. I'd only bother you."

"Bother me? You don't bother me."

Nem doesn't argue with me. He just gives me that look he has been giving me a lot recently. Longing, mixed with a dash of sadness. After finishing breakfast, he stands up and takes

the dirty dishes away, leaving me alone at the table with a bitter taste in my mouth.

What have I brought on myself?

Later in the morning when I get into Tar's land transport vehicle, I don't see Nem coming out and I know he is serious about not wanting to bother me.

This is for the best.

I keep telling myself that, hoping I'll believe it one day as Tar starts the engine and drives off.

"Fun fact. We are not the only licon farm out here," Tar starts when we hit the main road. Mountains begin to roll into view. Mountains that I didn't know are there until now, looming in the distance like hidden road blocks, only discoverable once we're on this side of the road. I stare ahead at the landscape, my mind devoid of thought. "There is another one over that hill. Run by a person named Wes. Used to be our rival when we were starting out."

"Really?" I ask, wanting to keep my mind off Nem. "Why were you rivals?"

"Well, it was for trivial things like them having an algae bloom and tainting our waters, or our client mistaking their farm for ours and ending up at the wrong place with the wrong goods. We once got into some heated arguments with the owner there, so Jun and I decided to confront Wes and have a showdown. Both sides agreed to meet at noon and brought as much muscle as possible."

“Oh God, did you get into a fight?”

“We were planning on that, but Nem went there with us and the first thing he said was ‘Wow, what a perfect little beauty you are.’ He was referring to Wes’ pet chuchu, a fluffy white creature that won several planetary chuchu show prizes. Wes was giving Nem suspicious looks, but Nem continued to shower that chuchu with compliments, so much so that it brought a grin to Wes’ face. The next thing we knew, they became fast friends and made the rest of us look like fools.”

Tar sounds like he still has hang-ups about that, but I throw my head back, unable to control my laughter.

It’s totally something Nem would do.

My tentacle monster is too sweet to even make enemies.

I stop when I realize I’m thinking about Nem again. Can’t seem to get him out of my mind, no matter where I go. I bite my bottom lip and look out the window, distracting myself with the fleeting scenes.

The vehicle quiets for a while.

“Tessa.”

I turn to Tar. He is staring at the road ahead, his tone level.

“Here is something I’ve never told anyone,” he whispers. “When you arrived on our farm, I felt a little jealous of Nem.”

“Jealous of Nem?” I’m sure I sound confused.

“Yes. I was the one who chose the Euxik Four Mating Program. The first in the family to go that route. My brothers

showed little interest. But I convinced them it'd be a good opportunity. I talked them into looking for a mate instead of just waiting for the right one to fall from the sky. That's not going to happen, I said."

"Nem originally didn't want to join the mating program?" I ask, surprised.

"None of my brothers did. The payment was substantial after all. But by the time Nem got into it, he'd changed his mind and believed it was the right decision. He was ecstatic the day Heeren told him that he'd found his mate."

Yeah, he must have thought he was one step closer to starting his own family.

My lips curve plaintively as Tar goes on.

"So I always thought I would be the first to get a mate, since I initiated this whole thing. But I wasn't, and it doesn't matter. Now I'm glad that Nem found his mate first. I trust you can make him happy." Tar studies me through the mirror in his vehicle. "Not to influence your decision or anything. The choice is entirely yours. Just want you to know that if you choose to stay at the end of the trial, I will be happy to call you family."

I feel a lump in my throat. "How do you know I can make him happy?"

"For starters, Heeren told me that you two were highly compatible. Close to a hundred percent. The automatic matching system calculated it using your genetic information.

Also, Nem talked to me about you and I saw the way he looked. He... well..."

Tar pauses on a pensive note, as if recalling the scene, the vehicle slowing down. I stare into the mirror, watching as he weighs his words carefully before opening his mouth.

"He looked like a male in love."

Nem... in love?

With me?

My nose stings. Hotness wells in my eyes. I don't want this to happen. I don't. But Tar's voice grows panicky and I know I've lost it.

"What is wrong, Tessa?"

Me. That's what is wrong. I should never have participated in this mating program. I should never have met Nem.

Now I'm going to hurt him with my deception, my eventual withdrawal.

He'll be broken.

And that hurts me more than anything.

Tears stream down my cheeks. I hurry to bury my face in my palms and force down any sobs threatening to come out. I'm sure Tar sees what I'm doing, but he doesn't say anything, and he has my gratitude for that. The last thing I want now is to be bombarded with questions.

When the vehicle comes to a stop, I've collected my wits and wiped my cheeks clean with a tissue he handed me. He

steps out first and opens the door for me.

“We have arrived,” Tar prompts in his softest voice. “Do you want to come out? Or do you need a minute in there?”

I answer by stepping out, ready to resume today’s activity.

The town swims into view. Low-slung coral buildings line the road, interspersed with trees and shrubs. Storefronts have their colorful signboards put out and peddlers can be seen roaming the street. Cut out the tentacles and architectural iridescence it can pass for a human town, or any other town for that matter. But as I walk down the street, I notice the buildings stand taller than I thought, and all these Ohd-kasaches are just as large as Tar. Good Lord, this really is a planet full of tentacled giants.

I instinctively move behind Tar and take cover. Call me a coward or whatever, but I’m good at staying alive and I prefer not to be accidentally stamped by one of the so many eight-foot-tall aliens roaming around me.

“I’ll have the usual list of things, Yak. Thank you.”

Only when Tar enters a store do I step aside and look around. The store owner, whom I assume is the one called Yak, has a dark torso with gray spots all over. He pulls the bridge of his lenses up the facial bump where a nose should be. He looks Tar over. “Sure thing, in a minute,” Yak mumbles, waddling from behind the counter, his back hunched. “Wait, is that a human with you?!”

I start at his raised voice and nearly topple over. Tar taps on my shoulder, lending me the strength to steady.

“Yes, this is Tessa. She is my brother’s mate.”

“Interesting.” Yak glides up to study me up close. His tentacles undulate as he comes, one of them reaching for my arm, but I dodge in time. He might harbor no ill intention, but I’m wary of a stranger’s touch. Nem is the only exception I’ve made, letting him cuddle me at our first meeting. “You look familiar. I think I have seen you somewhere.”

“That can’t be,” I tell him. “I’ve never been here before.”

“I know. You have to be the first human I’ve seen around here. That’s what makes it interesting.” Yak takes down his lenses and yells to the backdoor. “Lix, get your network-addicted ass down here and bring Tar his usual list of things!”

“Coming!”

I wait patiently with Tar.

Minutes later, an Ohd-kasach stumbles through the backdoor with a huge box in his arms. Is that Lix? I don’t know if my guess is on point, but he seems much younger than Yak and it shows in his more agile movement. His torso doesn’t have those gray spots either. It’s slick and black instead like Nem.

“Here you go, Tar, the fertilizers—”

Lix transfers the box to Tar as he speaks, only to cut himself off when he glimpses me.

“It’s you,” he gasps.

“What about me?” I ask. Why does everyone act like they know me?

“I saw you in that holo. My whole family watched it.” Lix points a tentacle at me, a shocked look on his face. “Holy seas, I can’t believe I’m seeing you in real life.”

I have a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling. But I press on, “Where did you see me? What holo are you talking about?”

“That one. The latest viral holo. Everyone has watched it. Everyone is talking about it. It was sooooo epic.” Lix flails his arms excitedly, gushing as if I’m supposed to know what he’s talking about. Tar is looking between us puzzledly, which means, apparently, not everyone has watched it. “Oh, never mind. I’ll just show you.”

Lix whips out a datapad, does a few taps here and there, and turns the screen to us. My eyes widen.

It’s a holo of me and Nem.

More specifically, it’s a holo of me and Nem dancing together.

I remember it. That dance happened the day when we received Ekton and his family. We were trying to entertain Mela at home and... didn’t she say she was doing a live holo channel? She probably forgot to stop recording and we went live without knowing it.

My eyes travel down to the numbers on display and I suck in a breath. 243,477,349 views? Seriously? So many people watch this kind of beginner level performance?

I must look so confused. Lix starts explaining, “It’s the first time anyone has ever seen an Ohd-kasach dance. You know what our reputation is like. Not to mention it’s with a human. You two look so sweet together, if I’m honest. People love seeing uncommon but genuine pairings like this, and it’s such good PR. We are sharing the holo everywhere, trying to bump it to a billion views.”

A... a billion views?

That’s like, the entire population of a small alien world.

If that many people watched it, then *he* could have watched it too, and if he watched it, then he knows...

My eyes suddenly go round, my pulse racing.

Dizziness washes over me in a roaring wave, sweeping away my senses before I can blink. The world turns black and white and everything moves in slow motion. I hear my own heartbeat, wild and frantic, as reality unfurls its wings and bares the darkness underneath. The darkness I’ve attempted to escape, but now must face.

He knows where I am.

The Drelye knows where I am.

“Tessa?” Tar’s voice knocks on my eardrums. “What’s the matter? You look so frightened.”

I open my mouth, wanting to give a proper reply, cook up an excuse, but no words come out. Instead, my lips betray me by trembling like leaves in the wind, and my voice makes me sound like I'm choking.

“Can we... can we go home?”

NEM

Something is wrong with Tessa. I'm sending her home early.

Standing outside the barn, I stare at the message Tar sent me a moment ago. Something is wrong with Tessa? What does that mean? I send a message asking those questions, but Tar is not getting back to me. I don't wait around though. I immediately contact our private medic Dr. Rob and make sure he is available. I don't know what happened, but if it's anything medical, I'm sure Dr. Rob can handle it.

I'm hovering outside home when Tar's land transport vehicle returns. Tessa gets out, runs to my open arms, and darts right through the door. Surprise takes hold as I realize she's ignored me. I know she's been distancing us for some reason, avoiding responding to my need for her, but not even acknowledging my presence?

This isn't like my Tessa.

"What happened?" I turn to Tar. My brother just shakes his head.

“I’m not sure. There was a holo about you and her. It attracted a lot of views. When she saw it, her face became so colorless that I worried she was sick. Have you commed Dr. Rob?”

“Yes,” I affirm. “But first I need to find out what exactly is troubling her. It might not be sickness.”

Tar nods and lets me rush inside, closing the door behind me.

“My Tessa.”

I glide into her room and am surprised to find her packing. There’s a small cloth bag on her pink bed. It contains her datapad and a few food items. I also recognize the clothes I bought for her along with the pink bed. She has been wearing them since she got here.

But now she is taking these things away?

I scan her with my puzzled eyes. “What are you doing?”

“I’m leaving.” She doesn’t face me when she answers. It only increases my curiosity.

“Leaving for where?”

“Somewhere far away.”

“How far?”

“Very, very far.”

I’m stunned. She is going somewhere very, very far away, and she didn’t tell me beforehand? I could have prepared with her.

“You know what, I shouldn’t take these.” Her hands pause on the bag, then she picks it up and shakes the contents out. “It’s your stuff. I can’t take your stuff.”

“Of course you can. I got them for you.” I frown, not sure what’s going on. “I can carry them for you.”

“You can’t. Where I’m going, I’m going alone.”

Now I’m shocked. “You are leaving without me? But-but the program—”

“I’ll talk to Heeren and deal with it,” she says without looking back. “I know the trial should last a month. If there are any consequences for my early withdrawal, I will take sole responsibility.”

I don’t understand. Why is she talking like that? My gaze is glued to her back. “But if you go, who will take care of you?”

“I can take care of myself.”

“But there’s danger out in the universe.” I can’t bear to imagine what a tiny human like her will face out there alone. “I should accompany you. Tell me where you wish to travel. I can book us flights and hotels. I can plan the route and take us back and forth—”

“Nem!” She whips around. My eyes widen at the tears washing down her cheeks. “Stop it. Just stop. Shut up.”

I can’t. “What made you cry?”

My arm reaches out, but Tessa dodges. “It’s all over now.”

She slumps to the floor and more tears come streaming down her face. I'm gutted. What could have upset her so much? Did someone treat her with disrespect? I should have gone with her to town.

"Tar told me about the holo," I start, trying to get to the bottom of this. "Is it the reason you are so upset?"

Tessa nods, sobbing.

"We can request the holo hosting platform to take it down."

"Too late." She shakes her head, choking on her words. "Too many people have watched it."

So she doesn't like being watched? That's unusual for a performer. But I nod along and try to be helpful. "All right. Then we'll ignore it. Block all the keywords and filter it out of our feeds. I'm sure people will forget about it after a while."

"No, you don't understand." She has stopped crying. Where there used to be tears, there is only despair. "If so many people have watched it, then he may very well have watched it too."

"He?" I'm quick to snatch the keyword. "Who is this *he* you are talking about?"

She doesn't answer.

My hearts sink to the bottom as silence dawns between us.

What is she hiding from me? Doesn't she trust me enough to tell? My gut says it's something I already have an idea of, and I think of all the signs I picked up over the weeks, the terrified screams she gave at the cliff, the recurring nightmares

she mentioned having. Is all that related to this? But what exactly is it that she fears? How come I still can't connect the dots?

I'm going borderline insane. Someone had better give me some straight answers, now, or I can't promise I won't stomp out and start hunting down anyone who looks like a suspect for hurting my mate. To the void with the inhibitor. If it doesn't kill me, then it can't stop me.

Tessa jerks back when I march forward. Panic clouds her eyes. I can tell she wants to run, but I block her way.

"You are not going anywhere today," I rasp. "Not unless you tell me what's going on, who is he, and why the fruk you look so terrified."

Shakily, she looks up at me. I make sure she sees I'm not joking. My massive frame shuts her in, forcing her to face me. I allow her enough time to hesitate, to debate with herself inwardly, to bite her luscious, plump lips in indecision. This must be hard for her. But I want her to see I'm worthy of her confidence, and, thank the seas, that pretty mouth of hers eventually cracks open and says what I hope to hear.

"Fine, I will tell you everything."

She closes her eyes after a pause. The indecision is gone, the fear diminishing. But why does she still have that touch of despair in her eyes? And it's thickening by the second. Like she somehow decides it won't end well, her opening up to me. I don't like this. She is not telling the truth because she trusts me.

But I don't have time to care about that because she's talking, "It started about a year ago..."

TESSA

It's happening. I'm telling Nem everything I've been hiding from him. From everyone else too.

This is going to turn out bad for me. My hands are shaking, but I try to not let it show, willing my back straight and my voice even.

Must keep it together.

Get it all out as coherently as possible.

Not because I want to, but because Nem has been nothing but nice and sweet to me, and he deserves to know the truth.

I can't keep up the lies. I can't handle the way he looks at me. My conscience is tearing me apart.

The first thing that goes out is the real information about myself. I've been avoiding using my full name anywhere. Tessa Wright, daughter to Colleen and Roy Wright of Earth, but on stage, I performed under the name Butterfly.

"I was a member of the Light Bugs Troupe. Joined it after leaving the Bjero Studio and stayed in the troupe for a year. During that year, I danced solo and with a partner named

Keaton. Well, his stage name is Firefly, but we called him Keaton because that's his real name, and he kind of looked like that famous movie actor of the same name, though they weren't from the same planet..."

Recalling Keaton's features, I trail off for a moment. I haven't thought of him in a long time. Not because I forgot him. Just that I've been avoiding those memories. They lead to the Drelve all too easily. But I have no choice now. I must face my past. I must fess up, for Nem's sake.

"Anyway, Keaton doubled as our general manager and helped train us. He also organized the shows, which reaped a moderate level of success. We were making money and building an audience of our own. We thought things could only get better from now on and all those years of intensive, brutal training would finally pay off. I even got fans. Can you believe it? Me, fans? Nobody even knew who I was back on Earth, and yet there in the outside world, thousands of aliens paid for my every show and followed me on social media. Not much compared to the real stars, but it was a big deal for me. I felt on top of the world."

I take a breath, readying myself for the hard part. Nem is watching me as he listens with all his attention. His quiet patience renews my courage for reasons I can't explain.

"But then something went wrong. I started to hear footsteps in the night, close behind me. I knew I was being stalked and got so scared, I just hurried up and never dared a backward glance. But it happened every night I returned from a show,

and there was one time I did look back. What I saw were claws... and legs. Really, really long legs, with spikes on every joint.” I swallow. Breathing suddenly becomes so difficult for me. “It was a Drelye.”

“A Drelye?” Nem screeches. His tentacles start to twitch. “One of those contract killers?”

“Yes.” That’s what his kind is known for. “I don’t know his name, but I suspect he was a... a fan. He was there at my every show. But unlike other fans, he didn’t leave afterward. He followed me home instead. Every single time. If I ran, he’d chase me down the street and laugh. He’d tell me I couldn’t get away from him. There was one time he caught me, but I fought and escaped his claw at the last minute.”

The tentacles are taut like wires. “He tried to kill you?”

“I don’t know. If he wanted me dead, he could have done it long ago, but no, he never left a wound on me. I think he was doing something even worse—playing a cat and mouse game. He kept stalking, harassing and threatening me, as if to see when I’d break.”

“Did you go to the authorities?”

“I tried. But I was on an entertainment world and the enforcers there didn’t like trouble unless it benefited them.” This part of the truth left a bitter taste in my mouth that lingers to this day. “When I didn’t offer them credits, they told me to suck it up and get out. They refused to look into the matter.”

Fire lights up Nem's black eyes. "How dare they. I'd strangle those bastards."

"Well, I couldn't, so I wanted to protect myself and leave the planet. I had one last show to do, and I told the troupe my plan. They supported me. Keaton tripled the security that night, just so I could feel safe. But it didn't stop the Drelye. He snuck in and..."

I gulp, my throat too tight to allow any sounds out.

"And?"

"He killed Keaton."

I don't know how I manage it. My voice sounds like it's getting squeezed out of a narrow pipe, so squeaky and barely recognizable.

"It was after the show and we gathered backstage. Keaton's head fell from the rafters like a scene straight out of a horror movie. Everyone was screaming. No one noticed the Drelye standing in the shadow. When I looked there, he grinned at me and said that I hadn't been good, that I would be next if I didn't stop flirting with other males.

Then, as you can probably guess, I got on the run. I wanted to flee all that horror, but everywhere I went, he was always around the corner, ready to capture me when I thought him gone. So I had to turn around and bolt. Again and again, he caught up and mocked me with his light, drizzly footsteps. He whispered the things he would do to me if I ever fell into his hands.

For three months, I ran like mad and didn't dare to stop. I was so scared that he'd catch me, I couldn't sleep. Every dream, every thought, it was haunted, and I thought I'd never get rid of him.

Until an idea hit me.

What if I ran somewhere he would never follow? What if, instead of me, he was the one scared? Even the killer could be killed.

The idea took root in me. Fighting danger with danger. It was my last hope. The only problem was, there weren't many places that posed danger to a Drelye, whose ghostlike speed and lethal efficiency characterized the universe's top assassins. His kind thrived in danger. They took pride in their infamy because it was paralleled by no one.

Except, perhaps, the former galaxy conquerors.

The deadly tentacle monsters known as Ohd-kasaches who happened to be accessible through a mating program.”

I'm too nervous to continue. Nem is staring at me with his eyes wider than ever. Does he see where I'm getting at? I think he does. Hence the stunned look.

“Are you saying. You came to me. Not because you wanted to mate with me. But a Drelye—”

He fails to finish, his teeth grinding violently.

Is he furious with me?

I choke, knowing he must be. Anyone would be, after they have been deceived like this. “I’m sorry.” Even though no apology can make up for my horrible, horrible action, I still try desperately. “When I stepped into the agency, I was looking for a way to protect myself, to get rid of the Drelye once and for all. I know it’s hypocritical of me to say this now, but I never meant for you to treat me as a real mate. I never meant for any of... any of...”

Any of his love and affection and tenderness.

Because who would have thought a tentacle monster would feel all those things for them?

Who would have thought they would, in return, feel... feel...

No.

It doesn’t matter. It’s all over. Now that he’s found out the truth, he couldn’t feel anything for me other than disgust. He cared for me with all his hearts, yet I used him in the most despicable way possible. I tricked him. I deceived him. All for my own selfish interest.

I’m a fraud.

How could anyone ever feel anything for a fraud?

My voice is cracking as I scramble to apologize again, not knowing what else to do. “I’m sorry. I know my action has caused all kinds of loss and damage. The money you paid for the program, I will give it back with interest. And for

everything else, the time, the expenses, I will compensate you too. But... but if you'll take pity on me, please... please..."

Please do not report my fraud.

I have my mouth open, ready to beg, ready to cry, ready to do anything for my own benefit. Yet, hard as I try, no sounds make it past my lips. Shame fills my chest instead, taking away my air, causing me dizziness from the deprivation.

How could I ask him to do anything for me, after everything I've done to him?

I've been shameless enough, using him the way I did. I can't keep it up. Even I am not that low.

Whatever he chooses to do to me, I deserve it.

But even as I prepare for the worst, I can't deny the sliver of hope. It's there, sprouting inside me, telling me what I want to hear.

This isn't that bad, says the little voice in my head. Nem is such a sweet guy. He will get over the initial shock and forgive me. He will pull me to his chest and tell me it's all right. He will caress my back with his tentacles and stay with me until the end of the world.

He still cares for me, right?

"The Drelye." Nem speaks, for the first time, in a voice so cold that I shudder. "You said he had been tracking you all this time. Did you sight him before you went to the mating agency?"

He's ignored my plea. I don't know what this means. But I have to answer his question. I can't lie to him. Not anymore.

"I did. A few days before."

Tears roll down my cheeks when I see him turn around and dart out of my room.

He doesn't even cast a backward glance. My hope shatters when I realize he has left through the front door and isn't coming back.

Apparently, Nem has decided not to forgive me. He'll deal with me as how I should be dealt with. He'll report my fraud and let the mating agency take legal action.

I'm going to spend some very long years in prison.

And I deserve every second of it.

My body slumps down. My world crumbles. I cry my eyeballs out, knowing I've lost everything that has ever mattered to me.

NEM

I'm shaking. I tried to not let it show in front of Tessa. But I'm shaking on my way to the barn.

A Drelye has been after my mate all this time?

He has stalked her, chased her, terrorized her, and even threatened to kill her after decapitating her dance partner.

And I had no idea about it?

I could whack a hole in the wall out of sheer rage. My tentacles are twisting over one another like intertwined ropes as agony rips through me in a sharp pang.

How could someone want to harm a small, innocent human like her. How could I have no clue.

To think she has been living in fear throughout our entire time together. My chest aches unbearably. It all makes sense now, the screams and nightmares. But she shouldn't have gone through all that in the first place. She should have lived freely and happily and displayed her talent to the world, not duck into hiding and pray some cosmic assassin wouldn't find her.

I would shriek, but my last vestiges of sense stop me. Letting myself sink deeper into rage is a bad idea. Not only is it bound to trigger a bout, but it won't help with anything. It can't solve any problems, and I need to solve the problem of the Drelye, so I do the opposite and circumvent the inhibitor with the same old little tune.

Water home, water home, carry us to where the water meets the dome.

Swim away, swim away, we play in the suns and on the edge all day.

Come home, come home, goes the call that guides us back to the foam.

On our way, on our way, we shout to the moon and return without delay.

I'm still standing. No sudden collapses. No near death experiences. Good, consider just now as I was singing in my head, I felt the inhibitor rearing up in alarm and snaking around in search of any semblance of the Great Vices. It returned disappointed. Guess you get better and better at dodging this with practice, even though I haven't been this angry in ages. I stomped out of the house right after Tessa finished because I couldn't take it anymore.

The Drelye must be dealt with. Immediately. I couldn't take any chance with him. Not when it involves Tessa.

I step into the barn, keeping my roiling emotions reined in the best I can.

Three Ohd-kasaches turn their heads at me.

“Thank you for coming so quickly.” As I left home, I grabbed my datapad and commed my brothers to gather in the barn. It’s what we always do for a meeting. The venue is either here or in one of the storage sheds. “I must talk to you about something.”

The tension in my voice makes them trade looks.

“What is it?”

I think they can feel how important this is. Tar and Jun are waiting for me to explain, a solemn look on their faces. Even Sol isn’t being clingy for once.

“We have a Drelye on our hands.”

A brief silence follows my announcement. “By a Drelye,” Sol asks tentatively, “do you mean the spider type alien?”

“The species that murders people for a living?” pipes up Jun.

“The species that’s almost as infamous as us?” adds Tar.

“Yes to all of that,” I say. “We’ve all seen the Drelyes on news channels. It’s either they poisoned this famous politician or assassinated that merchant prince. They are killers for hire and they have absolutely no morals. The Federation wants them locked up, but they are just too fast to be caught, so they always get away with their crimes.”

“Holy cerulean seas. That’s awful,” Sol exclaims. “But what does it have to do with us?”

They all look at me. That's when I realize I haven't come to the point. "Tessa." I strain to leave the anger out of my voice. Can't let the Vice control me. Can't loosen the grip. "There's a Drelye out there who wants Tessa dead or worse. He's been hunting her for months, and now he may have found out she is here."

"What?!"

My brothers explode into a cacophony of shouts and roars.

"Tessa is in danger!"

"Why didn't you say so sooner? I was wondering why you even brought up a Drelye!"

"Is he here already? On the farm? Let's go get him!"

"That's the issue. We are not sure where he is right now." I wave my arms for them to calm down. Qish, how come they are so hotheaded? Although I'm glad they would spring to defend my mate. I would do the same for them in a heartbeat. "But I'd rather act on the side of caution, which means we must follow the plan."

"Right, right—the plan!"

They quiet down after a while. Now we are engaged in a four-way staring contest, with none of us saying anything, until Sol breaks the silence.

"What is the plan?"

"I haven't come up with one yet," I admit. "But I have night patrol in mind."

“Good call. Drelyes always work in the dark,” Tar agrees. “Now that the harvest is over and the stock has been emptied by Ekton, we have more free time this season. We can take turns doing guard duty too. Give the Drelye no chance of getting around us and harming Tessa.”

“We’ll break his spider legs one by one if he dares to show up,” Jun hisses, his upper arms transforming into blades on either side as he adjusts the moisture and rigidity. “Got to chop them off if they are no good.”

“Chop them all off,” Sol echoes. “Toss them into the pan and oil it up so we can chomp on some good old fried drumsticks.”

We turn our heads at him.

“W-what?” Sol asks.

“That’s not what we do,” I say.

“Yeah, we don’t do that,” Jun and Tar agree.

Sol drops his head. “Sorry, I thought that’s where we were going with the legs.”

“Never mind.” I get back on track. “We’ll do night patrol and guard duty. That’s the plan. I will guard the first night, and we take turns for the rest of the month. Any objections?”

Unanimous agreement.

I’m relieved when I leave the barn. My brothers will be helping with this. Not that I can’t protect Tessa on my own,

but she can never have too much security. She deserves the best, my precious human, my one and only mate.

My hearts swell as I think of our time together. The magical ways she made me feel. The lovely kissing ritual she taught me. The graceful world of dancing she introduced me into. The absolutely angelic smile she had on her face when she accepted my gift and loved it.

I had thought I would love anyone who would be my mate. Anyone, even if I was not attracted to them at all. Because, I had thought, love was something that could happen if I willed it to happen. If I told myself enough times that I loved a person, then I would be convinced that I did, and I would be happy starting a family with them.

Here's the thing though. I was wrong. Dead wrong.

I don't think there is ever going to be another being in the universe I would feel this way toward. So happy, so full. Tessa may look different from me, but deep down we share a lot of things, such as interest in cooking and music. I enjoy doing those things with her. In fact, I enjoy her presence around me, even if we aren't doing anything. Life without her is impossible to imagine now. I can't bear the thought of losing her to anyone, anything.

Which is why the Drelye will never get to her. Over my dead body will that bastard touch a hair on her head.

I'll keep her with me, safe and happy, no matter the cost.

"My Tessa?"

Darkness catches me unprepared when I step into the house. The suns are setting outside. We normally have the lights on by now. Is Tessa not home? Puzzled, I flip on the lights and start looking around the house for my mate.

But after entering each and every room, I realize something is very, very wrong.

Tessa is gone.

TESSA

“So you’re saying your original intention is not to mate with an Ohd-kasach?”

On the screen, Heeren is shooting his eyebrows to the sky. Obviously, he never expected that I commed him to say this. I don’t hear disapproval in his tone, but he must be displeased. Who likes being deceived?

Even Nem doesn’t.

I bite my tears back at the thought of him. I’ve cried enough back in my room. I’ve cried so much, in fact, my eyes are stinging. But I need to stay presentable when I’m doing vidtime. I can’t look like I just cried an ocean. That’s the whole purpose of powdering up before coming out to the beach and comming Heeren to tell him the truth.

Instead of waiting to be reported, I decided that I’d rather come clean myself.

“Yes. That’s what I’m saying.” Hard as I try to hide it, my voice comes out so hoarse that I’m pretty sure anyone can tell how much I’ve bawled. My cheeks burn from the

embarrassment, though Heeren doesn't look like he's noticed, keeping his face straight and all. He's probably too polite to let it show. "I joined the mating program for purposes that have nothing to do with mating itself."

"And you think by doing that, you...?"

"Committed fraud." I'm not sure why he's wincing. Is my action that bad? I thought the worst I'd get was a couple of years in prison, or maybe if I was lucky, a large fine. But his reaction sends my heart sinking to the pit of my stomach. Have I misjudged the situation? Am I going to face some serious penalty like lifetime incarceration? God, I've really screwed up.

Heeren takes a deep breath on the screen. "All right, darling, I'm going to tell you something—"

He doesn't finish because another voice drowns out his. Someone is shouting my name repeatedly, and it's so loud I can't ignore it. I turn around to see Nem running over, his tentacles all flailing maniacally around him. "Tessa! Tessa! Tessa!"

"I'm here."

I don't know why he's so frantic. Nem glides inches short of me, running his large, crazed eyes all over my body. "Are you hurt? Are you unwell? Are you—"

"No to whatever you are about to cry out next." My hand on his arms manages to calm him down. "I'm fine."

“Thank the seas.” Nem exhales loudly. “When I came home and you weren’t there, I thought you were gone. That the Drelye had caught you.”

“The Drelye might not come,” I tell him. “I might have overreacted. Maybe he never saw the holo and has already forgotten about me. I was making a scene at the house, and I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” he growls. “I’ll kill that bastard if he ever dares to set foot on my land.”

Is he serious? I can’t picture my sweet Nem killing anyone. An Ohd-kasach he may be, but he is unlike his savage ancestors. His generation is inhibited. The slightest overstep in thought would lead to punishment by the neural implant in their heads. I’m worried that he’d trigger a bout as he still looks so intense, his gaze sweeping around the area in haste like he’s trying to dig up some enemy that doesn’t exist.

Then he sees my datapad.

“Is that Heeren? What is Heeren doing on your screen?”

“I just commed him to come clean...” I chew on my lip. “With, you know, everything.”

Heeren confirms, “Miss Tessa Wright has confessed her deception to me. She said she’s ready to face the consequences.”

“I don’t give a damn about consequences.” Nem basically presses his face in the screen. He’s snarling like an animal now. “You had better not try to take her away.”

“Nem.”

He ignores me, just glaring at the green alien like he’s ready to pounce. “She is my mate. No one takes my mate from me.”

“Nem,” I call again, this time more urgent, my voice shaky. “You don’t want me in jail?”

“Why the fruk would I ever want you in jail?” He seems to be roaming the edge of insanity now. Do I really affect him that much? My belly tightens at the look in his eyes. It’s like he sees me as his possession and he can’t stand the mere thought of losing me. Nem isn’t usually like this. He’s always sweet and caring. Yet, I’m finding this side of him... quite delicious.

I clear my throat.

“I, er, thought you stomped out of the house because you were mad at me.” And I cried so hard over it. “I thought you wanted to report me to the authorities and get me the punishment I deserve...” Welp, it sounds too stupid now. I can barely finish.

“I was anxious to speak with my brothers. I wanted them to know about this matter and join me in protecting you, because we share the land and its security concerns us all.”

“Oh,” I noise. “That... that actually explains it.”

But even after the misunderstanding clears, Nem continues to glare at Heeren. “So what now? Are you going to take this to Federation court? Or are you going to be sensible and forget

about everything you've heard today? I don't want to make this ugly, so I hope you won't leave me no choice."

I gasp. Is he threatening Heeren?

"Hey, never said I was going to take this to court." The green alien throws his hands up. "I was just about to explain to Tessa that she didn't have to worry about it when you appeared."

"I don't?" My mouth hangs open. "But I deceived you. I lied about wanting to become a mail order bride. That's technically fraud."

"Not really. As long as you meet the requirements, pass the tests and have a clean record, you can participate in this program. As for you not being completely honest about your motives, it was well within our range of predictions." Heeren is wincing again, as though it pains him a great deal to admit this. "Not every female is out here for love, even though we strive to make every match as successful as possible. But sometimes, a successful match doesn't have to be full of love right off the bat. Why do you think we offer financial incentives? The Euxik Four Mating Program is desperate for female participants. If it were a more popular program, then maybe your action would be questionable. But yeah, in your case, I wouldn't worry about it. Just complete the trial as agreed and you won't be in any legal trouble."

I can't believe my ears.

Heeren is giving me a pass. He's letting me off after I thought I broke the rules and would definitely get sued for it.

But if what he said is true, the rules for this specific program aren't that strict, which means I'm cool. I've done nothing that harmed their interests and for that reason they won't take any action against me.

All my worries have turned out to be unnecessary. I've just been torturing myself all this time. Now I feel both so elated and stupid that I could burst into tears all over again.

"Was that all?" Heeren asks. "Because if so, I'll be out. Got a lot of paperwork to handle here. You have no idea how many applications this other program received in a week. We will, uh, see you soon when the trial is over?"

I nod.

Tentacles latch onto my waist and lift me once the screen goes black. "You are not leaving." Nem pulls me to his chest, binding me tight with dozens of tentacles. "Don't even think about it."

"Okay." I breathe into his chest as he starts walking with me in his arms, not bothering to argue with him on that. "I'm tired." The day has been an emotional rollercoaster. All that crying has left me terribly drained, both emotionally and physically. I don't think I have the energy to even eat supper. "Can you carry me home and put me to bed, please?"

"Yes, my Tessa."

He does exactly as I ask, getting into my room and laying me carefully in bed. He draws the blankets over as I roll on my

side, yawning, eager to take some rest, but something nags in the back of my mind and keeps me from closing my eyes.

“You know, this is the first time I’ve talked of the Drelye in a long while,” I whisper, not sure where my sleep-muddled brain is taking me, but I flow with it, knowing Nem will listen. “Every time I went to the authorities, screamed for help, people either didn’t believe me or told me they couldn’t do anything about it. If any enforcer could catch a Drelye, then his kind would be out of job, wouldn’t they? So I just thought, why bother. No one would help me anyway. I think I trained myself to believe that I didn’t need others. Only I could help myself. Even if it meant making up lies.”

“You don’t have to do that anymore. No more lying. No more running.” Nem rests his upper body on the edge of the bed, his large black eyes shimmering in earnest. “You’re safe here.”

I want to believe him. I truly do. But there’s a voice in my head that mumbles otherwise, and I’m too tired to argue. That’s an issue for another day. For now, I just want to sleep, and hopefully when I wake up, my red-rimmed eyes will stop stinging and my hoarse throat will stop burning.

“Goodnight,” Nem says, but he doesn’t go anywhere. He curls up on the floor and stays there, looking slick, ink-black and squishy, reminding me once again of coffee jelly. My mouth corner curves up when I realize he’s guarding me at the bedside, giving the reassurance that I need to finally close my

eyes, knowing my tentacle monster will still be here in the morning.

20

TESSA

I love beaches.

Honestly, I didn't know I love beaches until I'd been on Euxik Four for a while. Growing up where I did, I had been familiar with beaches and waters, but sometimes you need a troubled mind to really appreciate the soothing power of the warm sea wind.

And my mind is undeniably a mess as I drag my toes around, drawing stick figures murdering each other in the sands while waiting for Nem to return.

This morning I woke up early, and he took me out on the beach, saying the tide was pretty to watch. The twin suns rising were also a spectacle, of course. I enjoyed it thoroughly. But after that Nem said he got a gift for me and left. Now I'm alone on the beach, both excited and nervous about it.

Excited because Nem seems to have a way with gifts. His last one, I absolutely adored. What is it going to be this time?

Nervous because I'm not sure I should be taking anything else from him, especially if it costs money. Why? Nem doesn't

know it yet, but I don't think I can stay.

Heeren may have let me off, but the Drelye won't do the same. I'd lied again when I told Nem that my stalker might have forgotten about me. I didn't want Nem fussing over me. He's already spent a lot paying for the program, redecorating the room, and buying all those items to fill my wardrobe. I can't have him splurge more on me because, truth be told, I have a very strong feeling that the Drelye has watched the viral holo and found out I'm on Euxik Four. He is coming for me, and once he is here, he'll make good on his threat by slicing my head off my neck.

But I'm praying that he doesn't know *exactly* where I am. Euxik Four is a big world. Much larger than Earth. Without knowing I joined the mating program, the Drelye will have to search the whole planet just to pinpoint my location. It'll take him a long time. Long enough for me to complete the trial, so I won't get into trouble, as Heeren said. Then... then I guess I'll need to get off this world. Who knows if the Drelye will eventually catch wind of my whereabouts? The longer I stay, the riskier it gets.

I haven't told Nem about that.

Something tells me that my tentacle monster doesn't want me to leave. Well, not something. He told me so. *You are not leaving. Don't even think about it.* This morning he even stressed it again when we were watching the tide and cuddling, his tentacles coiling around me possessively. It was so cute of

him to want me to stay here with him. It was also bittersweet. Because it can never be, me and him.

Not that I don't like him. Actually, I think my feelings for Nem run deeper than mere affection. He is the first guy I've slept with, literally. We shared a bed and he dispelled all of my nightmares for me. Like a knight that defended my dreams fiercely. Only, instead of swords he wields tentacles, and instead of a handsome face and a typical action hero's toned body, he has, er, his own special charms.

Okay. Okay. His appearance is not exactly attractive by human standards, what with the nose missing and the disproportionately large eyes. He looks like E.T. more than anything. That is, if E.T. had an oblong, ink-black face. He doesn't even have hands. His torso is huge, and I don't doubt his muscle, but it's not the type of muscle one sees on a man, abs and pecs and biceps. It's a slab of darkness, slick and squishy, connected to a wide neck at the top and dozens of thick, writhing tentacles at the bottom. Nothing about him is humanoid. Not even animal-like. One look at him and there's the instant knowledge that he's an alien, through and through.

And did I mention he doesn't even have hands?

It used to intimidate me, his appearance and height and everything else that screams alien. My knees gave out the first time we met. But now I only see the biggest sweetheart in the entire universe. If I leave him, I'll never meet another guy like him, and I'll cry myself to sleep every night in a very long time.

Still, I don't have a choice.

The agency might claim I have, but I don't. The Drelye will find me sooner or later, and I can't risk letting him wreak havoc on the lives of Nem and his brothers. Not just me, they could be in danger too.

I know that Ohd-kasaches are supposed to be tough, menacing, villainous, but that's what I thought before I came. That's what the outside world thought, falsely, of their current generation. Three weeks into living on Euxik Four, I've discovered that Nem is anything but villainous. Despite his magnificent size, he is the type that won't even hurt a fly. Nem can never withstand the Drelye because, let's face it, the Drelye won't hesitate to kill—he's highly trained for it—and Nem isn't.

Nem would die if he ever went head to head with that cruel spider-killer.

And I can't let that happen to him, can I? My heart would break and I don't think I'd be able to live if anything happened to my precious tentacled alien.

I must leave when the trial ends. It's for the good of us both.

“Look what I got you.”

The cheerful voice snaps me back to reality. I turn to see Nem gliding over at full speed. Eager to show me the gift in question, he has both of his upper arms waving a bag over his head like it's a flag or something. The scene oozes silliness, so much so that I laugh.

“Did you get this in a store?” I ask when he comes to my side and hands me the bag, which has a pretty red bow on it.

“I ordered it online a week back.” His eyes twinkle with anticipation. “Open it and see.”

“You really shouldn’t buy me any more...” My voice tapers off as I take out the garment and hold it before me. “Wow, what a beautiful swim dress.”

It’s a little modest compared to what I would buy myself, but very cute. Fit and flare, black with purple butterfly designs all over. The fabric is super soft and nice to touch. I suspect my eyes contain little red hearts in them as I hold the dress close, loving the feel of it against my skin.

I originally wanted no more gifts from Nem. It was not okay to let him continue spending on me when I knew I would leave, but this swimsuit looks so cute I don’t think I can give it up.

“I saw the butterflies and immediately thought of you.”

His words send a happy flutter through my stomach. “You did?” I can’t help a smile when he nods.

“Will you wear it and come swim with me?”

“Of course.”

I hurry off to a more private spot and change into the swimsuit. As I thought, it fits me pretty well and the silky texture is worth dying for.

Nem lights up when I show myself from behind the cliff.
“You look lovely.”

“Thanks.”

I try to be casual about it, but I can't ignore the fact that his gaze is glued to me the entire way to the sea. I don't want to ignore it. I enjoy his attention way too much to do that. When we enter the water and he averts his eyes to check out our surroundings, disappointment drives me to yank at the nearest tentacle.

“Me,” I whisper after successfully reclaiming his attention.
“Only look at me.”

“My Tessa?” Nem seems surprised by my sudden demand, but he smiles. “That's something I would love to do, although you should know that no matter where I look, you are always at the forefront of my mind.”

“Nice save.” My lips spread into a smile. I climb onto his back when he instructs me to. He starts swimming, carrying me along. “And we are headed to?”

“Where the water meets the dome.”

I wonder if he means the horizon. But we can never reach the horizon... or can we? With the question in mind, I watch the waves come rolling all around us, my arms locked tightly on Nem's chest as the strong whips of his tentacles propel us forward. He swims incredibly fast. I feel like I'm speedboating, with the waves passing me so quickly. One minute they are roaring around like frenzied beasts in the

ocean, the next they are churning away in the distance and reminiscent of the bubbles in a boiling pot.

A loud wave crashes into us without warning. Caught unprepared, I swallow an unfortunate mouthful of saltwater and spit out some. Thankfully, nothing got into my nostrils, though I'm beginning to understand why Nem warned me against swimming alone when I first arrived. The waters here are insanely turbulent and this is a sunny day. Imagine what the sea would do in a blistering storm. This is not some calm and predictable Earth stream we're talking about. The sheer volume of water Euxik Four has only made the waves far more dangerous to navigate.

"Don't worry." Nem's voice vibrates against my skin, soothing on my nerves. "You'll grow more familiar with the waves as you get down here with me more often. Then one day it'll be completely safe for you to swim alone. It just takes time."

"How long?"

"It depends," Nem answers while looking ahead. "But it will happen. You have your whole life to practice."

My whole life?

Nem still thinks I'll be able to stay and spend my whole life here...

Stunned into silence, I hear Nem add, "But before that, I will accompany you wherever you go on sea. Hope you won't mind that."

“No, of course not.” I wrap my arms tighter around his torso, forcing away the sting in my nose.

My tentacle monster wants me safe with him. Here. Forever. He’s trying really hard to keep me as his mate. Does he know I wish to stay too? I’ve been enjoying my time on Euxik Four more than I ever expected. But it can’t be. I can’t stay just because I want to. Not when there’s a cosmic assassin out there looking for me. I’d bring danger and destruction on us all. Just like I brought it on Keaton. My chest still aches so bad at the loss. I have trouble breathing whenever I think of Keaton. He was not only my dance partner, but a good friend too. When he learned that I had been stalked, he offered to escort me home for a while, and I think that’s when the Drelye set his eyes on Keaton.

My friend lost his life because of me. He had a whole bright future ahead of him, as a talented young artist and business manager, but he never got to live it, and it was all my fault. I don’t know what I’ve done, but I should never have caught the Drelye’s attention. I should never have told Keaton about him. I should never have dragged my friend into my trouble. Keaton was a good person. I did him wrong.

I will never do the same to Nem.

“Here we are.” Nem nudges me out of my thoughts, excitement in his voice. “What do you think?”

I look about us. We’ve gone a long way offshore. From here I can’t see the beach. Blue waves surround us with fluffy white clouds scattered all over. Then I raise my eyes and see the

exact same thing up there. Where does the sky start? Where does the ocean end? I suddenly can't tell. Everything around us seems so seamlessly put together, so natural and harmonious, so impossible to differentiate.

“Is this where the water meets the dome?” I ask, already aware of the answer. Amazement washes over me when I realize the Ohd-kasaches get to see this spectacle every day. Well, at least those on the coast. They can swim out here anytime they want and witness the different parts of the world blend together. Blue and white on all sides, smooth and perfect. “It’s the loveliest sight ever.”

“I don’t know about that.” Nem surprises me with his whisper. He swims to the reef ahead and sets me on the rock. “I’ve seen something much, much lovelier.”

He’s looking at me when he says that.

I blush.

“This is nice,” I remark when Nem pulls himself onto the reef and sits beside me, his tentacles circling around my midriff automatically. I don’t care we are soaking wet. The wind blows gentle and warm on us, a feeling most cozy. My head falls on Nem’s shoulder and my arms go around his thick waist. “I like us being together like this.”

“Me too.”

I don’t know when our cuddling turns into kissing, or when his tongue slips into my mouth as smoothly as his tentacles into my swimsuit. Maybe I initiated it, craving his touch so

much, even as I tell myself it's the last thing I should be doing. But when I realize where this is going, I can't stop. I don't want to stop.

This feels too right, even though I know it's wrong.

I start undressing when it's clear that we both want more. Need more. I may be stupid for doing this, since I won't stay with him for long, but before leaving this world and this wonderful being, I want to create some fond memories for him. For me too. Memories that I will remember him by and smile every time I revisit this part of my past. He won't know why I make love to him—why my heart breaks even as I do that, knowing we can never be—but it doesn't matter. All that matters now is we are together and I'm bent on making every second count.

Before it all falls apart.

“My Tessa.” Nem hums in delight as I step out of the swimsuit and let it pile at my feet. “You have such a beautiful body.”

“Thanks. Yours isn't half bad either.” I let him pull me over so I'm crushed against his chest, feeling his rock-hard tentacle on my stomach—no, wait, that's his mating organ, isn't it? The one I mistook for one of his many arms. My mouth goes dry as I stare down at the lengthy monster. Am I really doing this? Can I even take it in? “That is, uh, a nice-looking cock you've got there.”

Gosh, what am I saying? *That's a nice-looking cock you've got there?* I'm so embarrassed I can punch myself in the gut.

But Nem smiles, quite proudly, and puffs out his chest. “Glad you think so. I will use it well to pleasure you.”

I gasp when he slides his cock between my legs, forcing me to stand wide open and feel that huge thing throbbing like it’s ready to attack. For a moment I fear he’ll do that, shove it inside me without regard to my wellbeing. But Nem surprises me by rubbing his cock along my pussy, coating his length with my liquid heat. Electricity shoots to the top of my head when he swipes my clit with his hardness, then he retreats down the slick folds, only to rub his way back up and stimulate my clit again.

“Where-where did you learn that?” I’m panting and squirming after he repeats the act for a few times. I thought he was the inexperienced type, having met few females in his life, not knowing the birds and the bees and needing me to guide him through this kind of thing. Yet here he is, making me drip with need like he’s known the drill all along.

“I watched a holo on how to mate with a human female,” Nem answers, pausing what he is doing. It leaves me squirming a lot harder, begging for the amazing stimulation to be back. He smiles apologetically and gets back to rubbing his cock on my clit. *Yes*. I can hear him moan in delight too. “I learned how to do this and... oh... that’s so good. Is it good for you, my Tessa?”

“Yes it is,” I whimper, watching his monster cock press its head into the pink little nub so hard like it’s bullying my clit.

And I can't do anything about it. The sensation is simply out of this world. "Very good for me."

Nem holds me closer. "You know what is the other thing I've learned about mating?"

"N-no." I breathe brokenly into his chest. He seems to really like cuddling me, and I like him liking it, so I let him do that while his cock fucks my clit, sending waves of pleasure rocking through me. So much so that I feel myself climbing. Climbing to the peak. Closer by the second. Nem must feel it too. He's groaning, and there's this clear, transparent fluid leaking from the head of his cock.

"On Earth..." He buries his face in the crook of my neck, like he can't hold it in anymore, but he must. "Your people call it making love."

Me and Nem, making love?

I shiver, warmth spreading out from my core. And the next thing I know, I'm shaking uncontrollably, calling Nem's name as I come.

NEM

I've made my mate come, and at the same time, managed to not burst. I'm damn proud of myself.

Holding it in is fruking hard. Especially when my mate is the most beautiful being in the universe. When her juices come gushing out, splashing onto the underside of my cock, the damn thing tenses so badly I feel like exploding. I almost do. But I've sworn I'd never get carried away again and leave Tessa unattended in a situation like this. I want to be a good mate. That means putting her needs before me. Though, I can't say my motives are really that selfless. My brain is coming up with all kinds of filthy, perverted things she'll let me do to her once her body becomes familiar enough with mine.

Imagine her limp and sated, not in need of any more pressure, but her highly sensitized body is conditioned to enjoy my touch and respond to everything I do. She'd round her pretty gray eyes when I put my tentacle deep down her throat, sliding in and out rhythmically. All her cries would be muffled as I mimic the act of mating in her throat, and I'd only know if she loved it by how she rocked her hips to match my

pace, how her face contorted with pleasure, how her pussy spasmed on my cock.

But her throat wouldn't be the only place I'd invade. I never told Tessa this, but an Ohd-kasach has many sickly desires, which he can only meet by exploring his female's body thoroughly. A carryover from my perverted ancestors. Not that I want to blame my ancestors for everything, but there's a reason they have been the villains of the century, even in death.

I need to own my mate. Not just mate and breed with her, but own her in every aspect. I also need to take care of her because there's no greater privilege for me as a male.

But first, I make love to her. The mere thought of this concept makes me smile. Her people are so romantic, linking the act of mating with love, and so wise too, because that's exactly how I feel toward Tessa. I also feel that I can't ignore the questions it brings into my mind.

If Tessa mates with me and her people equate mating with love, does it mean she loves me?

If she loves me, does it mean she'll choose to stay?

My hearts flutter at the prospects, and while I know it's unwise to work your hopes up so high, I can't help it. I want her to love me back. Qish, how I want it.

Pain bangs into me when my cock finds no relief. It's licking at her entrance, drooling with hunger, and straining to be where it should—inside her. But I catch a hint of

trepidation on her face when she looks down at my cock, and even though she doesn't say it aloud, I know she's scared. Her feminine opening trembles at the threat of invasion, which I will eventually do, but not now. I mean to show utmost patience with her and make this as pleasurable as possible.

I draw my arms around her body and play with everything I see and like. Her swelling chest is common on females, according to what I learned from the educational materials, but I didn't know her breasts would feel so soft and plush. Like her lips. But then, every part of her feels like that. Except the two little stones of flesh standing so round and hard on her breasts.

"I don't have these." I sweep my arm over her soft chest, and out of curiosity, pinch one of those little stones. She moans at my manhandling. "The outlets to the lactiferous ducts, if I recall correctly? For producing milk?"

"That's a strange way of saying nipples," Tessa whispers. "But yes. It's what I'd use to feed babies."

"Our babies?" My cock distends further at her words, dealing me a fresh dose of pain. Qish, being with her is such a torment, yet I don't ever want it to stop. "Will you be a good little mother and feed our babies with your milk?" She nods dazedly, as if unable to do anything else, and I put my mouth on her breasts. "In that case, I must taste them first to make sure the babies are getting quality feeds."

"Nem." Tessa groans, arching her back and sending her nipple deeper into my mouth. I suck on the sweet flesh like it's

sustenance. No milk comes out, which disappoints me slightly, but the taste itself is heavenly and I can't resist moving on to the other nipple and doing the same, taking satisfaction in her cries of pleasure.

Soon she's wriggling left and right in my arms, telling me what I want to hear the most. "I need you inside me." Her hands desperately grasp for my cock, but they are too small to even close around it, so she has to plead, "Please, please fuck me."

There's nothing else I would be more eager to do. My cock has been ready this whole time, leaking so much that my fluid has mixed with hers and formed a little pool on the reef. Now, as I send my cock into her, I feel how tight and snug she is, and I groan out of pleasure. This is happening. I'm mating with this beautiful, incredible human. But then something unsettles me as Tessa quiets in my arms. Why did she stop making noise? I look down, horrified to find her delicate face screwed up in a frown.

"Am I hurting you?"

"Just a little," Tessa breathes out shakily, giving me a look of reassurance, but from her colorless complexion I think she's hurting more than just a little. I thought she was prepared for me, but as I take my time inspecting our joined parts, a horrible realization dawns on me.

We may be incompatible after all. She's too tiny—normal size among her people, but I'm just too huge.

I'm splitting her apart.

“This isn’t working.” As much as it kills me, I must do what’s best for her. “I’ll pull out.”

She looks like she wants to say something, but forgets it when I start moving, pulling out slowly, carefully, taking pains to avoid hurting her. I can’t bear harming my mate in any way. I’d sooner die than do that.

Tessa gasps as I push through her tight heat backward, her pale cheeks pinkening as I go, and strange enough, a long moan drags out of her mouth and her body quivers on its own. By the time my cock eases out, the thick length is glistening with her arousal. It’s almost like she relishes what my overly large mating organ is doing, which is destroying her tiny human body. But can it be? Is she really into this?

I cop a sense of her to make sure, and her feeling drives me borderline insane.

She loves it. She loves what I’m doing to her. The pain is there, the hurt is real, but it’s fading away, overridden by all the other sensations flooding her every sense.

“More,” my mate coos, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Make me hurt good, my big tentacle monster.”

In that instant, all thoughts fly out of my head. I slam my cock back into her, growling, and feel her grip me on all sides. It’s so good, I want to spill my seed in her now, but I’m selfish. I want to watch her writhe in desire for a little longer. So I move as slowly as I can, restraining myself from exploding too soon. I’ve made that mistake once. Not again. I want her satisfied before me.

Tessa is making noise again. I love when she wriggles around while giving those loud, feminine moans. It's like birdsong, only sweeter. And her movement, qish, she's letting her thighs open wide to accommodate my cock better, and it has me so turned on it's impossible.

How can her tiny body take in such a monster like me? It must make her uncomfortable. Yet she is not complaining. She's accepting it all like the good little human she is. I crush her dearly into my chest as my cock pounds in deep, drawing those sweet, sweet sounds out of her throat, and I wonder where this treasure has been all my life. How come I've only met her recently. How come I've never known I needed her so much. I could have lost her forever if Tar hadn't convinced me to participate in the mating program.

It's impossible to imagine now. Not meeting Tessa. I probably never would have known what I'd missed in life. Because there's not another person who can make me smile so much, harden so fast, and blush so blue.

Only her.

I've only ever wanted her, not some random system-matched female I thought I could love and build a family with. There's no point in having children if it's not with this small, lovely human who dances like a fairy. She is mine. I'm hers. It's that simple. It's that true.

A storm of emotion swells in my chest, filling it to the brim, almost choking me with the sheer intensity. I'm on fire, burning for my mate even though I'm wet like a fish. I'm in

pain, so close to the peak yet waiting, waiting, waiting. The sweet torment only comes to a head when my mate reaches her orgasm and brings me down with her, granting me the release I so madly crave.

“I love you, my Tessa,” I croak, not caring if it sounds cloying. I’m bursting and spilling my semen into this female. The least I can do is to let her know how strongly I feel toward her, and if I’m not mistaken, her eyes turn a little watery. Are those tears? I haven’t made her sad, have I? Panic hits me, and I lean down to kiss her cheeks, trying to make her feel better, whatever the reason for her sadness may be. “I love you so much,” I tell her again, wanting to hammer the point home. “This is the happiest day of my life. I’ll never forget our first time together.”

“I won’t either. Never forget. Never, ever...”

She quiets down, something strange in her tone, which makes her voice thicker than usual. I don’t know what it is, but she seems content when she lets me cradle her and kiss her some more, telling her everything I want her to know. About us. About how I feel toward her.

If I’d known having her felt like this, I’d have plunged right into the mating program without ever needing Tar to try and convince me. Although, on second thought, that wouldn’t be desirable since the slightest change could lead to the greatest influence on the outcome. I couldn’t risk that. This is the best for us both. Me and Tessa getting together because of her so-

called deception. If lies could make you this happy, then I wouldn't have it any other way.

“Do you want to get back?” I ask after a while. The clouds are blocking the suns, the wind is getting stronger and she's naked out here. I worry she'll feel cold. Not that Euxik Four could ever get cold. It's always the right temperature for an Ohd-kasach. But humans need fabric to protect themselves. That shows how fragile they are.

When she shakes her head, expressing her wish to stay out here longer, my tentacles drag over the swimsuit and cover her body with it. Tessa responds by nudging close into me as if trying to share more of my warmth. I swear I melt a little when she buries her face in my chest too.

She's so adorable. So tiny. Like a jaguar.

I used to have this jaguar as pet when I was a child, until one day I realized it didn't want to be my pet. It was just too scared to fight back, so it let me have my way, hoping I'd become bored and leave it alone. The day I decided on its release is when the jaguar was most joyous. It ran away so fast that I barely caught sight of its curly tail before it disappeared forever from my world.

Thinking about the jaguar makes me cradle Tessa closer, suddenly worried that she'll run away too. I don't believe my mate will abandon me. She obviously enjoys being with me. She's even mated with me. Surely, that alone suggests intense affection, even though she hasn't said anything about it explicitly.

But, just in case, I put my sensory arms on her skin and suck.

“Hmm.” Pleasure. That’s great. I also feel joy, peace and tenderness. So far so good. And now... wait... is that *grief*?

Out of nowhere, a shiver runs down my spine and plants an ominous feeling in my stomach. I hurry to scan Tessa from tip to toe, trying to see what’s wrong, but confusion emerges when I get absolutely nothing. Tessa is snuggling up against me. Her eyes are closed, but her lips are curved up. She looks content. Serene. Happy.

So why are my sensors saying my mate is grieving?

Wondering if I’m picking up the wrong information, I pull the sensory arms away and latch them back onto her skin. This time I choose the area I consider as having thinner epidermis, so there’s less bio-interference along the way. Yet oddly enough, the result remains the same. I still sense grief in my mate, but she is literally lying in my arms, warm and comfortable with a smile on her face. What’s there to grieve so deeply about? It’s not like I’m dead.

No, wait, the longer my sensors stay on her, the more accurate the result. I don’t think that’s grief over death. It’s more of a feeling that can be described as... as...

Heartbroken.

Right. That’s more accurate. Narrows down the range of grief and points to something more specific.

Except it still doesn't make any sense. People don't feel heartbroken right after mating with the object of their affection, and there's nothing in her expression that confirms such a negative emotion. Unless, of course, that affection I detected earlier was also false.

Are my sensors even working properly?

I take back my sensory arms, and for the first time ever, stare confusedly at the rows of contracting pink flesh, not sure what's wrong with these usually very trustworthy organs.

NEM

The moon is hanging above the barn when I glide in, press the button on the wall, and see three Ohd-kasaches staring at me. “You could have at least turned on the lights.”

“We try to accustom ourselves to night settings,” Tar explains. “This way we may get better at detecting a Drelye.”

“Good point.” I make my way to the center of the barn where they stand in a circle. Looking around, I can see they all know what we’re here for. It’s been four days since the security plan got in motion. Reports on the status quo are very much called for. “Who will go first?”

“How about me,” Tar pulls out a datapad and starts in his usual, deep, solemn tone. “I’ve noted down all the events I observed during the nights I patrolled and stood guard. Let me read it out loud to all of you.”

He starts reading.

I give him my undivided attention, but only until I realize nothing he noted down is of significance. All trivialities like how the wind changed in scale and speed, how many red-eyed

tree frogs leaped down his route, how loudly the waves crashed against the sands. The report goes on and on without a foreseeable end, Tar's voice droning in my ears like mosquitoes. I'm not sure how long I've been here because it feels like an eternity has gone by.

The others look dead inside as the whole thing plays out. They keep sneaking me glances, hoping I would cut him off, but I started this, so I have to suck it up. Fortunately, Tar's report does come to an end, where he says no abnormal activity has occurred in the past four days. Great. Ten minutes of all our lives wasted.

Jun's report is much shorter, and therefore tasteful, with a similar conclusion as the previous one. Sol delivers an even shorter speech, claiming he didn't see anything suspicious going on and the perimeter was secure.

"Except..." Sol pauses on a deliberate note. Seeing my attention on him, and feeling rather pleased with it, I assume, he then finishes, "I saw Tessa out on the beach. She was weeping."

"What? When?"

"Yesterday. We were reseeded the plots, but I came onshore to take a break and feed on some snacks. Nothing from the crustacean pens, mind you. I know those are for sale, unless it's holiday, then we eat them ourselves for celebration. Though it would be really nice if we could keep one or two, not for eating, but for companionship..."

"Tessa," I interrupt him, annoyed.

“Oh right, Tessa. I don’t know what happened to her, but she seemed unhappy.”

Tar frowns. “Did you upset your mate, Nem?”

I have no answer. What Sol said about Tessa, I’ve noticed myself, and I’ve been trying to get to the bottom of it. To no avail. At first I thought it was my sensors messing with me, but after I experimented on some other creatures, it turned out they were working fine. Tessa is sad. Ever since we mated, she has been sad. Or perhaps she has been that way since earlier. I don’t know. But she doesn’t look like it. Every time she sees me, there’s a smile on her face. A smile so sweet and genuine that I don’t want to believe it’s not heartfelt. If I hadn’t sensed her that day, I’d think she was perfectly happy spending her days at my place, cooking and cleaning and dancing. I’ve had a lot of fun learning from her, though to be fair, I’d enjoy practically anything as long as I’m with her.

But I’m beginning to think it’s all one-sided. Does Tessa not really want to do all those things with me? Is she sad because she feels trapped here? She said her initial reason for being here wasn’t to mate with me. But I thought that had changed. That she was starting to see me as mate, regardless of the fact that she never wanted to be in the program—not for real. Apparently, I was wrong. She isn’t happy here, and the month is drawing to an end. The decision will be made in less than a week.

She could be telling Heeren to send her back.

The possibility injects a powerful dose of anxiety into my veins as it slides into my mind. I'm suddenly unable to stand still. I'm shifting my lower limbs constantly. The meeting feels like dragged-out torture and I can't wait to get it over with.

When I leave the barn, I make a mad dash for my place, anxious to see my mate. Once in the doorway I can see Tessa sitting in the living area and watching something. A holo? I don't want to disturb her, so I tiptoe to the row of seats and stand beside her. She doesn't seem to notice me as she continues to watch the cosmic weather forecast. Why is she learning about the weather in other sectors? My insides twist up into knots as this seems to point to one thing and one thing only.

"Are you leaving?"

Tessa jerks. Her head whips in his direction. "You're back."

"Yes." She has ignored my question. I press my mouth together. I sit down beside her, hoping once again I'm wrong about this as my sensory arms go around to suck on her neck. Damn it. Still grief.

"Oh, wow, someone has been copping a lot of feels of me these days."

I stare at her face. It's that smile again. I don't know what it is with humans, or maybe it's just her, but Tessa smiles like that every time she doesn't feel like smiling. I've noticed and pointed it out before. She must be aware of it too, more or less. But it seems a person doesn't change their habit so easily.

This pains me, because I've seen her genuine smile before. She looked so lovely with it. Not to mention happy. I want her to be happy.

But more importantly, I want her to be candid with me.

And for her to do that, I suppose I should be candid too. So I set the example by saying, "I've been doing that because I want to know how you feel. As you know, my sensors can pick up not only your scent and taste, but also your feelings."

"Yeah, you told me that." She bites her lip. Is she feeling nervous? I have half a mind to sense her again, but I control myself, not wanting to come off as clingy as Sol.

"I can feel you are unhappy," I say a while later, watching her bite deeper into her lip. "Is there something wrong?"

"No."

She turns off the screen, but doesn't look at me.

My hearts sink a little at her reaction. She won't tell me what's going on. It's fine. But if she thinks I can't find it out myself, then she's wrong. There's nothing I won't do for her wellbeing. "It's less than a week before the final decision. Five days, to be exact," I start, observing a slight tremble in her body. Clearly, she remembers the date too. "You'll be taken to the agency and put everything on paper. Stay or leave, the choice is yours."

Tessa nods. "I know that."

"Do you also know your decision?" I ask. "Have you made up your mind about leaving? Is there anything I can do to

persuade you otherwise?”

“How-how did you know I’m going to—”

She fails to finish, so I finish for her. “Leave? Because you aren’t happy here, and if you aren’t happy here, I can only assume you’ll be happier gone.” The words hurt me even as I push them out. My mate prefers to be anywhere but at my side. I don’t like that. Every fiber of my being is screaming not to let her go. She is mine. But she has her own will, and if keeping her here means hurting her, then I don’t know what to do. I breathe deeply, preparing myself before heading to the real question. “Do you not like being with me?”

She opens her mouth. No words make it past her lips, but at least she’s not saying no.

It gives me a sliver of hope.

“You do have feelings for me, don’t you?” I say softly, taking her hand in my coiled tip, caressing the silky perfection that is her skin. The way she hums to my touch and automatically snuggles up to me makes my chest swell with happiness. “You like me, don’t you?”

“More than you think I do,” she whispers. “I don’t mate with just anyone, you know.”

“I don’t either,” I tell her. “You are the only person I’ve ever mated with and will ever want to mate with. I have never demonstrated the sensing ritual to any female except you.”

“Really?” Tessa is smiling. This time I can tell it’s from the bottom of her heart, and it makes me smile too. “I’ve kissed a

few boys when I was younger, but none of those felt meaningful. It's only with you do I truly enjoy it."

My mate truly enjoys being intimate with me. She has no idea how much that delights me. "Does this mean you'll stay, then?"

But she shakes her head, dashing my hope.

"Why?"

"It has nothing to do with you, or me."

She looks up at me. I catch the fleeting pain in her eyes, but then she closes them, blocking me out. I don't know what to make of it. What does she mean by it having nothing to do with us when it's all about us? There's a long, perplexing silence in the air that leaves me cold and helpless. Not how I normally feel. But I'm dying just at the thought of losing her.

"Is it the Drelye?" I'm grasping at straws here, unable to think of anything else. "Do you not believe that I can protect you? Because if that's the case, you should know that I am perfectly capable of keeping my mate safe from any danger."

Her eyes snap open. "No," she blurts, and I detect panic in her tone. "You'll end up like Keaton."

Keaton? The male dance partner she had?

I feel like I'm onto something. Didn't she say Keaton was killed by the Drelye? His head rolled off the stage rafters. It must have been a horrific sight. One can only imagine how deep a trauma that must have left. "Is that the reason you've decided to leave? That I'll suffer the same fate as Keaton?"

Tessa nods, tears streaming out of her eyes. “He tried to help me. But it directed the Drelye’s attention to him. That’s what got him killed. I can’t do the same to you.”

She can’t do the same to me?

“It’s not you who got Keaton killed,” I point out. “The Drelye did, and he’ll pay for it, sooner or later.”

Tessa doesn’t say anything to that. She sobs into my chest, and I let her. It’s clear that she’s racked with guilt about her friend’s death. I feel bad for whoever that male is and the fact that he lost his life. But my mate needs to see that I’m not him.

“I’m an Ohd-kasach.” I tell her when she calms down. “I can defeat the Drelye.”

“Oh, Nem.” She smiles plaintively. “I know your ancestors were powerful, but Drelyes are professional killers. They are too strong. You can’t hold out against one of them.”

Is she hearing herself? I’m starting to doubt my sanity, because who would ever think an Ohd-kasach couldn’t hold out against a Drelye? Yes, those creepy spider aliens make for good assassins, and they earn a shitton of money doing that sort of dirty work. But we’re former galaxy conquerors, for the seas’ sake. My mere presence can scare aliens who don’t know me into fainting. It’s impossible to wrap my head around her logic, so I make a tentative probe.

“What exactly makes you think I’m less strong than the Drelye?”

My tiny human widens her eyes at me. “Oh, I don’t mean it that way. You’re certainly not physically inferior or anything. But I mean, you are... you are...”

“Yes?” I press, curious as to what she thinks of me.

She fesses up after a moment of hesitation. “The Drelye is a cold-blooded creature, and you... well, you have never really harmed anyone on purpose, right?” Getting affirmation from me, she continues, “See, you’re just too sweet to stand a chance against a real killer like him.”

That sets me off, officially. I can’t stop laughing.

“Nem.” She sounds terribly confused. “Are you... are you mocking me for my concern?”

“No, never.”

But I laugh some more and only stop when she glares at me. Realizing what it must look like to her, I get a grip on myself and keep her close when she tries to struggle out of my arms. She can never get away. Not after I found out her reason for wanting to leave. What’s mine will stay mine. For now and forever. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, hiding my grin.

“So you only wanted to leave because you thought the Drelye would threaten my life, just like he did Keaton?”

I feel her nod, her single pulse vibrating against mine. “I want to be with you. The past weeks I’ve been happier than I did in a long time. But the longer I stay here, the more dangerous it becomes for you and your brothers. I can’t put

you in that awful situation when you've been nothing but good to me.”

Of course. I groan, seeing pieces of the puzzle come together in my mind. Of course my mate thinks I'm “too sweet” to withstand a Drelye. I haven't done anything to prove to her that I'm competent in battle. Ever since she came here, she's been hanging around Ohd-kasaches whom I know to be friendly and law-abiding. She's never seen the bad seeds, so to speak, the ones that not even the inhibitor could keep under control. And because of how I've treated her over the month, she now sees me as some nice, soft, sweet male who only does the most harmless things in the world.

Which isn't true.

My ancestors' blood runs in my veins. Their violent desires, I share. Their cruel thoughts, I understand. What sets me apart from them is that I know the consequences of letting loose. History has taught my people a painful lesson. We won't make the same mistake, not for altruistic purposes, but for our own survival, wholly.

But surviving on our own, without taking other people's resources and killing them, is not something we're accustomed to. The Federation warned us against crossing the line ever again. The alien representatives who negotiated the treaty called us godless animals because, according to them, only by fearing something greater than us, greater than all beings living and dead, could we go straight and never stray from the light. I don't know if that's true. Growing up, I've never seen

any Ohd-kasach show interest in religion. That includes myself. But it doesn't matter as long as we set our minds right.

I would love for my mate to see me in a more forgiving light. I prefer she thinks of me as a carer, someone safe to be around. But that's not who I am. Not entirely. I carry the same genes as my ancestors. I have the same powers as them. Only, I know that trying to conquer the universe won't do us any good in the long run. But we have been tentacle monsters and godless animals. Those things we'll always remain. And my mate needs to see that.

"Have you heard of my ancestors' powers?" I ask.

"Yeah. Body modification. Instant regeneration. Not to mention the speed and strength. They were living weapons."

"I am too, with the exact same powers." I remind her. "And trust me, I'm not 'too sweet' to use my powers. If you'd watched me plow underwater, you'd have known."

"But you used them for farming. It's different from battle," Tessa whispers. "What if your inhibitor acts on you when you are... I don't know... doing something angry? You could get killed, and I don't want that to happen. I want you alive and well and building a family with the right person."

"You are the right person." I turn my face up so I'm looking her in the eye. "You may have come here for the wrong reason, but you are right for me." She looks stunned. I add, "My people have tricks to dodge the bouts. I won't trigger the inhibitor again."

I hadn't triggered it for a decade, in fact. Not since I entered adolescence and suffered a bout for the first time. After that I practiced the tricks and settled on a favorite one. Nothing happened to me until she came along. *My mate had been harmed.* The instant rage that blazed through my veins caught me unprepared. I hadn't expected my feelings for her to be so... powerful, which accounted for my slip of control. I won't let that happen again, now that I've known how important she is to me. I will train my mind better, so I don't worry my mate with another bout.

"The Drelye wouldn't want to mess with me."

My arms snake up her neck and alight on her face, fondling her soft flesh because I can't keep my tips off this Earth beauty. She looks down at me, her lashes casting shadows on her cheekbones, and there's a faint blush that renders her pastel pink. My cock twitches at how delicious she looks, but I force it down using every bit of my willpower. This is not the time. I still need one more push.

One more push to change her mind—to keep her here, as mine, body and heart, in name and in reality.

"My Tessa," I call, making sure her attention is entirely on me. "If we put aside the Drelye and everything else, with only us in consideration, will you stay and be my mate?"

She blinks, and I don't miss the way she catches her breath, but I go on.

"Will you grant me the privilege of loving you, giving you everything you need, and smashing the brains out of any

creepy spider-killers that might dare to come near you?”

She gasps at the last part. It almost makes me regret saying that. Could have at least phrased it to be less violent.

But then she giggles.

“This has to be the weirdest marriage proposal ever.”

I have no idea what maa-ridge is. But, the fact that she’s smiling again tells me things are headed in the right direction. My arms get into a happy little dance all over her delicate frame. She struggles against me, giggling, “Stop it. Stop groping me everywhere.”

I can’t. My organs have developed a mind of their own. Their relentless groping soon results in Tessa falling sideways onto the seat, with me on top of her. My mate is laughing as she play-fights me with her small fists. “Your tentacles tickle. Let go.”

“Only if you say yes.” I keep her pinned down with my arms, baring my teeth to feign menace. “Say yes, or I’m never letting you go.”

“My my, are you trying to influence my decision?” She breathes heavily underneath me. “That’s breaking the rules.”

I’m doing everything I can to not latch onto her swelling chest and toy with those hard little pebbles stretching against her fabric. Qish, it’s so obvious that she is aroused. I bet I’ll feel how excited she is if I just sense her. But I refrain, ignoring my cock that has escaped its pouch and is pushing against her belly.

“Every good villain breaks the rules,” I croak, sending one of my upper arms to her mouth. “Therefore, I’m not backing down until I get my answer. To the void with the rules. Kiss my tip if you’ll be mine.”

“Oh, sweet Nem,” she whispers against my skin and halts there, her gaze going up to meet mine. For a moment I can’t read the mixed emotions in her eyes, and I fear she might not choose to be with me after all, but slowly, she imprints her lips on the front end of my lengthy, moist appendage, murmuring, “You can never be a villain even if you try.”

My mate still thinks I’m too sweet for anything slightly unprincipled. I sigh, wondering if I can ever get rid of that label. Though honestly, I couldn’t care less about that now.

She kissed my tip. She said yes. *Yes!*

I must be grinning so widely that I look like an idiot, because she’s laughing ever so loudly, and it’s music to my ears.

“God, you’re so cute, Nem, you understand that?”

Not really. She is about the only person in the entire universe who thinks an Ohd-kasach is cute. I don’t understand that. But I don’t need to understand. I’m content knowing she loves me. Not just likes me. She *loves* me. That’s why she puts my safety before her own happiness. And because of that, she’ll probably always think I’m some nice, soft little sweetheart even though, in truth, I couldn’t be farther from that.

NEM

My mate has agreed to stay with me. That's great. That's all I've ever wanted. My mind is at peace. But it doesn't seem so for Tessa. She has told me about her worries, and despite my attempts at displaying my strength, she still doesn't believe me when I say I can protect both of us.

Honestly, it's nice to have someone showing such genuine concern for me, but she gets so worried that she can barely eat or sleep these days. She pleaded with me to take more safety measures, and although I didn't think it was necessary, I did it. Just for the sake of reducing her stress. I sent a letter to the governing board elucidating the matter and requesting intervention. I haven't heard from them yet. But Tessa seems so relieved that they will respond within two weeks as it's the normal timeframe for them.

I've also been trying to remind her that the Drelye may have given up his sinister plot against her and moved on to his next target. I'm getting close to convincing her of that. Even though it'll still take some time, obviously, to completely ease her

mind, I'm glad to see her starting to smile again when the day comes for her to announce her decision.

“Heeren said he arrived last night. Brought all the materials for legitimizing our mateship. There's going to be more paperwork, but nothing too complicated. After that, we take the materials to the local civil department and make the application. And here's the crazy part. Heeren said he had dealt with the civil department before. They are so quick to approve mateships that he's sure we can get it all done in a day.” Tessa is squealing as we head out through the door. “Can you imagine? We'll officially be mates before the suns even set.”

I love that she is so excited about legitimizing our mateship.

“Yes, but we must get going now. We've spent a little too long in bed this morning.” I smile as I recall all the lovely things we did together. Well, it was mainly cuddling. We could have done more, but it was so good to just have her back in my waterbed and relish every simple, blessed second of holding her close to me. She'd lived in the guest room for a while and it just felt... wrong. My gut knew it and I didn't like it, but I had to respect her choice.

Now, though, everything is right.

Now she's finally where she should be—at my side.

Her hand is laced with my tentacle as we walk to the shuttle waiting outside. The suns are slanting their warmth across the sleek hull, making the craft shine a metallic gold. As we move

closer, Jun glides out of the shuttle and I feel Tessa pause. “You are coming with us?”

“Yes.” Jun grins, standing on the ramp. “I’ll be taking you to the agency and see for myself, won’t I, Nem? There’s no cheating me out of my money. Not even by my own brothers.”

“Ignore him.” I sigh when Tessa turns to me with an interrogative look on her face. “It’s that stupid bet.”

“What bet?”

Tessa turns her interrogative look to Jun.

“One I made with Tar and Sol when you first arrived on the farm. Nem didn’t know about it, but I think Sol told him later on,” Jun explains. Thank the seas he made sure to leave me out of the stupidity. “I said you would never stay, because it seemed like you wouldn’t. This whole mating program is the little green men’s scam.”

“So you want to see me announce my decision at the agency?” Tessa asks. “You’ll lose the bet if I say I’ll stay, right?”

“Yes, and the 10 dinals along with it.” Jun scowls at the amount, apparently picturing the sheer agony of parting ways with it. “But even if you do stay, and I do lose, it doesn’t mean the program is not a scam. Don’t get me wrong. You are a pleasant little thing, and I’m happy that you make my brother smile like an idiot, but I don’t trust anything that costs me so dearly. 1,000 dinals just for enrolment. And another 1,000 as a monetary gift to the female. Why, they didn’t have to come up

with all this mateship nonsense when they could have just robbed me plain and simple.”

Tessa eyes me. I have a feeling that she’s doing some mental calculation, so I squeeze her hand lightly. “Don’t worry about it. We can afford the expenditure. It’s only two thousand in total.”

“*Only* two thousand!” Jun sounds like he’s going to faint.

“Well.” Tessa bites into her lip, keeping her eyes on me. “I can give the monetary gift back to you. That should cut the expenditure down in half.”

“No. You don’t have to do that,” I insist. “You are on a new planet. You don’t know many people around here. The money can help if you ever need to spend on things. That is, things other than what I procure for you. And if you run out of dinals, I can give you more, so you’ll never go without.”

“Oh, Nem.”

I don’t know why Tessa is suddenly pressing her mouth on mine, plain joy dancing in her eyes. But it’s a welcome surprise and I take the opportunity to claim her soft tongue. When we come apart, she is panting with a delicious blush on her cheeks.

“You have no idea how big of a darling you are.”

“Because I promised to provide for you?” I can hear the puzzlement in my voice. “I thought all males do that for their females. Ekton does it, for example. Is it not like this on Earth?”

“It depends. A lot of the time, the answer is no. But it’s not necessarily good or bad. Just different.”

“But you like me doing it?”

“Yes.” Tessa chuckles. “This is going to sound shameless, but I love the idea of you pampering me like that. I think I’ll hold onto the money even if I find a source of income for myself someday. Hope that’s okay?”

“Of course.”

There’s another quick kiss of appreciation from her that melts my triple hearts. Never thought I’d get rewarded just for performing my duty to my mate. Isn’t she so very easy to satisfy?

“Can you two stop being sickening so we can get on our way?” Jun’s annoying voice cuts into the moment. “By the way, Nem, you did bring all your materials, right? Identification badge. Health records. Application form for legitimizing your mateship.”

I’m about to say yes, but then remember I don’t have everything ready. I left out the health records. Must have gotten carried away by the significance of the day.

“I need to fetch the health records, my Tessa. Be back in a minute.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

I step away and tear my eyes from her waving hands. A grin curves up my mouth corner at her eager anticipation. She wants me to be back with her as soon as possible. It’s like she

can't bear being away from me either. My lovely, lovely human female. All right. Maybe it is a little sickening, as Jun said, how much we are clinging to each other. I wasn't like this before I met Tessa. But it's such a wonderful feeling to know the object of your deep affection reciprocates your feelings on the same level. I'm drunk on happiness. I can't stop grinning even as I go back to the house and open the door.

Except the door is already open.

My tip hovers on the handle as I stare at the gap that leads to the inside. The door locks up when someone goes out. Only the person still inside or someone with authorization can open the door, meaning no one except me, my brothers and Tessa can enter and exit at will.

Thoughts flit through my mind, but none seems worth paying attention to.

It's just a door. I probably have been neglectful and left it ajar. Ever since Tessa agreed to stay as my mate, I've been overcome with happiness. Every day feels like a dream come true and I can't bear to drag my attention away from her even if I want to. Not a good habit though. I remind myself not to forget this kind of thing again and step inside.

The rooms are eerily quiet as I glide past them. I know they are supposed to be quiet, since no one else is here, but I can't help noticing the flutter of the curtains and the creak of the cabinets. Together they play a song not perceivable to my ears, but suggested by the changes of the wind. One second the

noises are there, gurgling and muffled, the next they aren't. Eerily quiet, indeed.

I get into my room and grab the records I need. When I go out, I make sure to close the door, but cold air slips through the gap and sends shivers running down my spine.

Cold... on Euxik Four?

Before I can register this bizarre phenomenon, I hear a sharp gasp in the distance. I look over and see Tessa point her finger at me, all color draining from her face. She's shaking. What's the matter? I want to ask, but my sensors pick up something. A series of light, drizzly sounds.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My head blanks, but my reflex kicks into high gear. "Jun! Take Tessa inside!" I shout, before whipping around to confront the enemy in the shadow.

TESSA

“No,” I scream when Jun lashes his arms around my waist and hauls me into the shuttle. The hatch closes and I’m left in the metallic space alone with him, cut off from the outside world, from my mate. “I saw the Drelye. He’s going to kill Nem.”

Technically, I didn’t see the Drelye. Like his people, he walks in shadows and rarely shows himself unless it’s right before the death of his prey. He let me see him in the past because he wanted to toy with me, I believe. But not with Nem. He was moving in the darkness around Nem. I felt it. There was something wrong after Nem went inside. I couldn’t put my finger on it. But when he came back out, I glimpsed the vague yet familiar contour of a claw and my harrowing experience with the Drelye immediately kicked in, telling me what it could be.

“We need to help him!” I’m struggling violently to break free of Jun’s arms. “Open the hatch.”

“Easy.” Jun holds me in place effortlessly. All my struggles go to vain on account of the differences between our sizes and

strengths. “Nem won’t want you to go out there. It’s dangerous.”

“Then how can we leave him out there?”

My question goes unanswered. Jun loosens his hold on me when I threaten to bite him. But he isn’t putting me down. He carries me to the window so I can see the scene playing out outside. “Watch, and know that danger for you is not necessarily danger for us.”

I open my eyes wide.

There he is, my mate, gliding over the sands on his writhing mass of tentacles, but stopping short of the surf. Nem doesn’t intend to hide in the water. Rather, he’s luring the Drelye out of the shadows. I spot a severed tentacle lying near our residence, a thin blue stream meandering on the ground, and my chest crushes in pain. Nem is injured? I know he can regenerate, but what if the Drelye aims for his head next? I don’t think anyone can regrow a head and all of its intricate components on site.

Worst of all, I still don’t see the Drelye. Where is he? Which way will he attack? Apprehension grips me so tight I can’t breathe. My blood freezes when I see the first claw stretch out. It’s from behind Nem. “Look out,” I yell, forgetting I’m inside the shuttle and he can’t hear me through the hull.

Jun sighs. “It’s all right. Calm down.”

Calm down? How am I supposed to calm down when my mate is in mortal danger? I would turn to glower at Jun, but

I'm afraid of missing a single beat from the battle. So I focus on what's important, not daring to bat an eye.

The Drelye has shown himself fully. I see a giant alien with eight walking legs and poisonous spikes all over them. His claws, flashing the blinding gold of the suns, go straight for Nem's neck. I almost faint. Almost. Because Nem seizes his wrists before I can do that. Once latched onto the surface, the tentacles shift into blades in a fraction of a second. Like snakes made of lightning, the blades slash into the forearms and drag out what I can only guess is a mix of blood, tissues and bone marrow.

The Drelye screams.

I never thought he would scream, the Drelye, the creature who haunted my dreams for so long and turned my life into a living nightmare. He once seemed to be more of a symbol than an actual living being. Something that hammered fear deep into my soul every time I suspected that I sensed his presence. One could argue he was immortal to me, as does the natural forces of good and evil. A fearsome, cruel, alien god.

But now? He is howling like a domestic animal getting slaughtered as Nem slashes more of him open. It happens so fast that I'm afraid I'll miss out if I so much as blink. One by one his legs fall off, scattered around the sands like the torn pieces of a doll. Blood spilling everywhere. I close my eyes, lacking the guts to keep on watching, until something goes splat on the window.

It's that claw, I realize as I open my eyes again. A tremor runs through me instinctively, thinking the Drelye can rip the window apart like he did in some of my darkest nightmares, but then I remember he is being tackled. No, not just tackled. He is literally being shredded to pieces.

And Nem is the one doing the shredding.

Like a cold-blooded killer.

I shudder, my thoughts suddenly coming together so jumbled that I can barely function. I can barely see straight. When the hatch reopens, my legs take me out down the ramp. I follow blindly, unconsciously, much as a piece of human wood, crossing the beach now littered with broken appendages and more types of body fluid than I can identify.

"My Tessa?" Nem must see my expression as I approach him. His voice carries audible concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I don't know what else to say. What has happened? The Drelye came. Attacked. Died. Nem is standing victorious before me, bathed in blood and tissue. Oh, hell, is that an eyeball on his shoulder?

Nausea assaults my stomach. I feel like puking, but I don't want to. So I slap a hand over my mouth and gag. From the corner of my eye, I see Nem reach out, but he seems to realize something and withdraws his tentacles faster than he can touch me. Quietly, he lets me get over the unpleasant urge and waits for his turn to speak after that.

"I'm sorry."

“What for?” I’m still covering my mouth because the stench is too bad. The rusty smell threatens to take over my senses and I avoid it like the plague. “You did what you had to do.”

“I did.” His voice drops an octave, bordering on the realm of melancholy as his observant eyes scan my face. “But you hate it.”

“Yes.” I can’t lie about this. “Murder is the last thing I condone in this universe.”

That sends him into a stunned silence.

I force myself to ignore the scene of carnage and look up, wanting to know what he’s thinking. I can’t read his face though. Nem is looking elsewhere, not directly into my eyes as he always does. His whole body is stiff, his tentacles hardly stirring.

The wind sweeps over, sending the terrible smells of death through the cracks between my fingers and into my nostrils. I’m so tempted to gag again, and very loudly at that, but I have a feeling this isn’t the right time. That a subtle, unseen balance is on the cusp of tipping. I wonder what it is, but don’t have time to think as Nem speaks again in his unusually low voice.

“So what does this mean for us?”

“I’m not sure,” I whisper, putting more effort in studying his clouded face. Is that frustration? Heartache? Misery? Finally, some emotions that I can understand. But why is he feeling all that?

“You can go, if that’s what you want.” Nem squeezes the words out of his throat, which throws me off. “You can leave me.”

Why would he think I’d want to leave him?

I stare at him blankly, feeling like there’s something I’m not getting here. Maybe it’s because I’m still in shock from the battle, the bloodiest event I’ve ever witnessed in my whole life. But it looks like Nem isn’t being himself either. Why is he talking like that?

“Nem.”

I step up. Surprise ripples through me when Nem takes a step back. There’s hurt in his eyes. I can see it now. My breath catches in my throat.

“Just stay where you are.” Nem waves his upper arm, erecting a nonexistent barrier between us, only the movement is weak as if he’s aching too much to even get the meaning across. “You don’t want to be near a murderer.”

I gasp. “You are not a murderer!”

“I... am not?” He sounds like I’m telling him there’s only one sun in the sky.

“No. I mean, you did kill the Drelye, but I don’t think of you as a murderer. Not in the sense that you would go around slaughtering people on purpose.”

His chest vibrates with a thrumming sound. I hope that’s a good sign. But then his massive shoulders slump. “You hate what I did. This... this bloodshed disgusts you very much. I

can see that. I wish I didn't horrify you in such a way, but I couldn't refrain from killing the Drelye. He cut my arm off when I wasn't looking. It was painful, though I regenerated soon after. But more importantly—far, far more importantly, he harmed you. I would kill him on that single account, and I would kill him again and again if it was possible, each time in a new, excruciating manner, just so that he suffered for what he had done.”

I swallow.

Is it weird of me to find him hot for saying that? No one has ever gone this far for me. The thought of my sweet tentacle monster turning into a cold killing machine that savagely punishes anyone who has done me wrong? My my, is it getting hotter here?

“I hate what you did, but not for the reason you think.” Straightening my thoughts and translating them into words is a challenge when I'm struggling not to jump on him and hug this big darling of mine. “You are not a murderer. It's just not who you are. But you had to stain your hands with blood, for me.”

“And I'd do it all over again if you come under threat.”

I widen my eyes at his sincere, childishly cruel tone. He doesn't even care that he killed. Is it his Ohd-kasach genes at work? If so, why am I not fazed either? I should be scared. At least a little. Right?

Yet I hear myself say, “And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad that you would defend me so fiercely.”

“Anything for my mate.”

Our eyes stay locked in mid-air, the tension dissipating. Then one of us starts smiling. I don't know who, but it doesn't matter because the other follows suit. Nem grabs my wrist with his upper arms and I let him pull me into his embrace. The moment I'm surrounded by his triple heartbeats again, I feel at home. My hand drops to my side and I snuggle up to him, enjoying the peace and quiet I find in his arms.

“It's all over now,” Nem murmurs in my ear, taking the chance to peck on the sides of my face. “You can rest easy. Your life will be free of danger from here on.”

“Sounds like the most romantic thing ever.” I kiss him back, wrapping my arms around his thick neck.

I'm losing myself in the moment and forgetting everything else until a thought flits through my mind. It strikes me dumb, then as soon as I come to myself, I push him away. “Wait,” I pant. “The murder!”

“I thought we'd just talked about that?”

“Yes, but also no.” I gesture at the bloodshed all around us. “This is murder! I'm pretty sure it's a crime on any planet, especially on Euxik Four, I assume, considering your ancestors' less than clean records. What if the authorities want to lock you up?” Panic sets in even as I speak. My legs act on their own and take me to the center of the scene. “Come on, we've got to collect all these body parts.”

“Why?”

“So we can toss them into the sea.” I wave at Nem anxiously. “Come, we must hurry if we want to destroy the evidence of the crime before anyone sees it.”

Nem doesn't move. There's a strange expression on his face that crosses between laughter and pain. His face contorts, and it only gets worse when I hunker down and try to decide which broken leg I should pick up first. “Don't do it,” he calls before I can scrape myself against the long spikes, wheezing from the effort to suppress himself. “Those things may remain poisonous even after his death.”

“Yes, Tessa, better leave it there. We can clean up later.”

I turn around at the second voice. Jun is sauntering over. He's obviously seen and heard everything. “But it's criminal evidence,” I protest.

“I wouldn't worry about that. What Nem perpetrated is justifiable homicide. Since the murder took place without any provocation on the actor's part, that absolves the actor of any criminal liability. In other words, he exerted his right of self-defense and won't be held accountable for it.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I'm sure because I went to law school.”

Whoa.

I cast a glance at Nem to make sure Jun isn't shitting me. Nem gives me a smiling nod, which blows my mind. Jun actually went to law school. “Then what made you stay and work here?”

“This wasn’t in the plan. Thought I’d go on to become a lawyer and make lots of money. But it turned out there weren’t many cases to be fought on Euxik Four, and the legal industry was already saturated as fruk.” Jun shrugs. “So here I am, growing underwater crops manually like some primitive.”

Nem laughs. “It’s a good job. Admit it.”

“Whatever,” Jun mumbles, then sweeps his gaze between us. “Do you two mind going and getting changed quickly? I don’t have all day, you know.”

I look down at myself. Having hugged Nem, I’ve smeared my clothes with some unknown, disgusting green and red fluids. Nem looks even worse. We can’t appear in public dressed like this. So I hurry back home and pull Nem with me. After a quick shower and me changing into a new dress, we get out of the house and board the shuttle.

“Great,” Jun mumbles in his pilot seat. “Now there’s nothing to stop me from finding out the result of that bet.”

He fires up the engine.

“Do you think Jun will ever realize that he never had a chance at winning?”

Nem’s whisper drifts from behind. I lean back in my seat as the shuttle takes off. Images flash before my mind’s eye. The first time I met Nem and he just went straight to declaring ownership of me. And I wasn’t even repelled in the slightest? That definitely signaled all that was to come next and how I truly felt toward him from the beginning.

I smile when I feel his tentacle creep around the seat, coil around my palm and thread through the cracks between my fingers, holding my hand like he means it, like he'd never, ever let go. And I believe him.

“Yeah.” I gently squeeze his tip in my palm, whispering back to him as I strain to stifle a laugh. “The poor guy never had a chance.”

EPILOGUE

TESSA

“Take your toes back so your right heel returns to the original position. Repeat that for the other foot, or the rest of your feet, if you have more than two... and we are done. All right, that’s all for the first part of this routine. Thank you for coming to today’s lesson. See you next time.”

I exhale after turning off the recording. The connection gets cut, but the screen is still on, showing the students and their influx of messages, which I’ll answer right after a break.

I’m about to step aside and grab a drink when I notice the giant thing standing beside me. I almost jump out of my skin. “Nem. When did you come back?”

“A while ago,” he answers, curious eyes on my screen. “Were you doing live holo?”

“Yep.” I take a bottle of kono from the freezer unit and open it. I start talking as I sip on the refreshing beverage, “Just teaching the kids a few moves. You remember Mela? Her accidental recording made me sort of famous online. Not *famous* famous. But there was enough attention going around, so I figured I could do something with it.”

“I see.” A tentacle taps on the screen, tracing the virtual reality shapes of the young students. “You’ve attracted quite some children from all over the universe.”

“It’s their parents that came to me, actually. But yeah, they have seen that viral holo too, and since anyone with more than five thousand followers on StarNet is ‘the real deal’ to these kids, they are excited to learn from someone as cool as me.”

Nem smiles. “I’m happy for you.

“Thanks.” I give him a quick peck on the cheek. “Do you mind taking over things in the kitchen? Dinner is almost ready, but I still have a bit of business to take care of, as you can see.”

“No problem.”

I turn my attention to the screen after Nem leaves and starts giving answers.

The questions are mostly from the parents as I know they must be paying attention to the first, free lesson and wanting to know how it is, what the full course is about, how is it different from offline class, etc. Most of these I have covered before I began the live holo, but I don’t mind going through them again, just to reassure the parents if nothing else. This isn’t some get-rich-quick scheme for me. I don’t expect myself to have a lot of students at first. Even if no one signs up, it’s not the end of the world. I can still do the thing I like by dancing for my followers. It won’t be too different from a real-life audience. But, maybe it’s because of the time I spent with

Mela, I find working with children very meaningful. And who knows, maybe I'll even help a kid or two learn how to dance.

I'm excited just thinking about exploring my new career path, and of course, my new life.

Two months have passed since I made the decision to stay. Heeren was elated and talked about using my success story to promote the program. I didn't mind. He had the right to do that because it was in the stack of papers I signed. Days after Nem and I returned from the civil department, the brothers threw a party to officially welcome me into the family. They invited a lot of friends over, including Wes and his farm hands, and introduced me to them. I had a blast at the party, which felt like a wedding on its own, with all the nice food and drinks, festive decorations and heartfelt good wishes.

It's all so very wonderful. I could never ask for more, though I do have plans to visit my family on Earth soon. Once the busy farming season is over for Nem. I've reestablished contact with my parents via StarNet after cutting myself off from them for months, hoping to protect them by hiding their existence from the Drelye. Now I don't have to worry about that, so I'm looking forward to bringing Nem home to meet my parents.

Knowing how my parents are, I'm confident they will get along well.

Later that night after dinner and a shower, I crawl into the waterbed. Without the lights on I sense someone near me when the familiar scent drifts over, warm and salty. I reach out

to feel it up. Nem is in bed early tonight. I was going to read a while, but now I have my favorite thing to play with, so screw reading.

Nem groans when my hand slides down to his erection. “Do all of my appendages look similar to you?” He inhales after I give an affirmative sound. “Yet you always find my cock without fail.”

“Given how hard it is, I can’t miss it even if I try.”

“All the more proof that we are perfect for each other.” His arms come around my back and pull me close to him. I hum in pleasure when he starts massaging my thighs, rubbing his moist tentacles on me and creating a trail of sticky, transparent arousal like it’s essential oil. “My Tessa, if you’ll entertain me, I have a new idea for tonight’s mating session.”

“Are you talking about egg laying?” I whisper. “I’m willing to go there with you, maybe in a year or two. Build that family we both want. But not right here, right now, if that’s okay with you. I want us to enjoy *us* a little longer.”

“I understand that. We can wait a while for children.” His giant head bobs in the dark in a motion I can only assume is nodding. “But I’m not talking about impregnation. It’s... it’s something I saw in this educational holo when I was younger and have been fantasizing since then. Be warned that it’s a lot more...ahem, perverted.”

More perverted than fucking my womb open and laying his clutch in there?

I would have trouble believing that, but a flurry of possibilities enters my mind and shocks me with the sheer scope of my knowledge regarding tentacle porn. Oh hell, how did I know where the fourth tentacle can go? I wasn't even that interested in porn to begin with.

After struggling with my unwanted knowledge and what that says about me, I ask, "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know. Not sure if it has a name. I think that because it's so wicked and unnatural, few have tried it and no one has given it a name." He hesitates. "If you don't want to do it, you shouldn't feel like you have to."

"Well, I'm not feeling anything until you describe this thing to me."

"It's embarrassing," he murmurs, his cheeks shimmering blue in the dark, "Come closer so I can whisper in your ear, and not even the stars and the moon will hear me."

Isn't he weirdly shy for a tentacle monster?

I chuckle. "Okay."

I have no idea what he has in mind. My best guess is something backdoor. Not what I've ever considered, but to my surprise, the thought excites me more than it repels me now that it crosses my mind. My thighs come together and rub each other as I fantasize about Nem's fantasy. It'll probably start out uncomfortable, but it's good. Every time his cock enters me, there's a mild degree of pain and it has nothing to do with how wet I am. Nothing I can't take though. And it only proves to

me that I'm being claimed and stretched by my mate, who is every bit as alien as I am human. His size is twice that of mine, for God's sake. It's a miracle that I can take him at all. The slight discomfort at the beginning doesn't even matter because I know how amazing the sex will turn out to be and I'll come harder than ever, so much so that I run the risk of passing out. All I can say is, mating with an alien monster is nothing like that with a human male, and I'm perfectly okay with that.

More than okay, actually. I love my mate's thick, lengthy tentacles, and I can't wait for him to stretch all of my secret places. Anywhere he wants.

Heat pools at my center as I nudge closer, waiting for Nem to tell me what he wants. Hopefully something like double penetration? I know he can do a great job at that if he wishes. Lord save my mind from the gutter, though I know it's too far gone now.

"So this is going to be the lewdest thing ever. The ultimate forbidden mating act of all time." Nem breathes excitedly onto the shell of my ear, sending goosebumps down my arms. Anticipation builds inside me as I widen my eyes, listening with all my attention. "I want to put my cock in your mouth."

"And?"

"And...? No, that is all." Getting a skeptical look from me, he whispers something of an explanation. "Your mouth is very pretty."

“Wait.” I shake my head. “You are saying the ultimate forbidden mating act is a blowjob?”

He nods solemnly, that blue still shimmering on his cheeks.

“I know this is extremely perverted. The mouth is for ingesting food, not... well, not that kind of thing. So if you don't feel comfortable doing it, please tell me. I want our mating to be pleasurable for you.”

I smile, then I laugh.

“What brings out that laughter, my Tessa?”

“Nothing. Just realized this is classic you.” He doesn't seem to get that, but it's okay. I bring his tentacle up to my mouth and kiss it. “You have this natural filter. Anything becomes sweeter when it goes through you.”

He moans at the way my lips brush up and down his sensitive pink flesh. “You make it sound like my fantasy is not wrong at all.”

“Because it isn't. You can do that to me anytime. Feed me that big cock of yours like I subsist on it. Choke me with the thick, thick ropes of baby making material you have. Fill my every hole like you own them. And feel how hard I come for you, expressing my gratitude to you for taking such good care of me.”

“Qish, *my Tessa.*”

I feel a tremor against me as his voice changes pitch. The next thing I know. Warmth splashes on my belly and trickles down to my thighs. I don't have to look to know what it is.

“Shit,” Nem groans torturedly. “I really need to gain better control of myself. But you—you just excite me too damn much.”

I giggle, not a trace of shame in my coquettish voice.

“My bad. Guess I’m responsible for getting it back up for the game.” I dive below his waist and take his cock into my mouth. Except I can’t. It’s too girthy that I’ll probably break my jaw trying to get it all in. So I kiss my way along the length instead, licking and sucking, and savor the salty taste of his flesh. The soft, freshly released thing hardens again all too fast, rising high like a proud king that demands my service.

“You’re so good at this,” Nem groans and I feel his tentacles on me sucking and relaxing. “Hmm, and you’re enjoying it so much. Aren’t you a dirty little female, with your pussy so wet and ready for me? You like it more than I ever thought you would.”

Nem is playing with my folds as he speaks, his tentacle teasing at my entrance, making it drip even more than it already does. I try to focus on giving him head and taking the crown of his cock into my mouth. But that’s about it. His giant, bulbous head fills me to the brim, and I can’t take another inch without risking a snap in the jaw. Blushworthy noises stream from my stretched lips as I wonder how he feels. Does he love what I’m doing to him? I soon get my answers from his string of grunts and moans that are ever growing in volume.

“You are incredible, you know that? Let me do something for you too.” His lower limb shows me what he means by easing its wet length into my pussy, turning harder and hotter as it goes. My moan comes out muffled as I feel it mimic the motion of fucking. In and out. In and out. The tentacle is not as thick as his cock, so it fits me just right. What’s more, it comes with the flexibility to explore anywhere it wants. Once it finds the right spot, it keeps coming back to hit me there, making me scream despite the cock in my mouth.

“You look so beautiful when you’re taking me in both of your holes.” Nem chuckles. But when I glance up, I catch the dark fire of lust in his eyes. The fire that burns so bright it threatens to consume all who dare to look into it. My soul shivers, and my body does too, loving how crazily he wants me and how my sweet monster would turn dark for me in a heartbeat. That, together with the tentacle pistoning in and out of me, is enough to send me over the edge.

I explode. But my scream doesn’t come out this time because his cock forces its way in a little further while his arms hold my chin in place, muffling all my sounds. He is fucking my face very gently and carefully, using his sensors to make sure I’m not hurt and am enjoying every second of it. He won’t let me deny myself the pleasure of being fucked this way even as I ride out my orgasm. And I love him for it.

When it’s over, we lie in the waterbed with our bodies covered in all sorts of juices. It feels sticky. It feels dirty. But we don’t care. We cuddle like it’s the dead of winter and we need to share warmth or we would die.

“I’m so lucky to have a mate like you.” Nem places a soft kiss on my forehead. “You have fulfilled the filthiest of my fantasies.”

“My pleasure.” I smile, kissing him back.

“I’d also very much like to fulfill your fantasies in return,” Nem purrs, his arms taking me closer to him so that our breaths mingle, hot and ragged. “Tell me, dear, what do you want to do with me?”

“Oh, a lot of things,” I answer with a sleepy trill. “Most of them are more perverted than what you did.”

“More perverted than what I did?” He gasps. “Like what?”

“Uh-uh. Not telling.” I can see the curiosity growing in his eyes, and I grin. “But you have the rest of your life to find out.”

“Good enough.” He tightens his hold on me and nestles his head in the crook of my neck, which has become one of his favorite spots on me. The lights flicker out and we close our eyes, letting the peace and quiet sink in around us. “I love you, my Tessa.”

“I love you too, my tentacle monster.”

I have a feeling this is going to be another night of good, satisfying sleep.

THE END

AUTHOR'S MESSAGE

Hiya! So glad you completed this journey with me!

If you are interested in reading more from me, consider trying out the other book I've written, [*Protected by the Orc Warrior*](#). It's a short erotic romance novella about a human village girl and the big teddy bear orc who saved her from other, more gruesome orcs. It also has a guest appearance by one of Nem's brothers (okay, it's Sol).

I plan on writing more books in the future, so just in case you want to know about my new releases, here's my newsletter: <https://subscribepage.io/VfhwbQ>

Oh, and allow me to gently drop my Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/MayFlyME>

See you around!