



Alien Wants A Wife

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Description: Dumped by my cheating ex, I've worked incredibly hard to build a brand-new life for myself. My star achievement? Being chosen to compete for love on reality TV—but the male contestants are aliens.

Having been abducted from Earth with two other human women, thankfully I'm paired with Roan, an adorable sweetheart, who lives on a planet with a population numbering just him and his brothers. Roan, who's never had a chance at love before. Roan, who desires nothing more than a wife to cherish. Roan, who makes my pulse race with desire and... happiness?

Now, the production crew are offering me a secret deal—they'll guarantee the safe return of the human women to Earth if I make Roan fall in love with me...

...and then break his heart. On intergalactic TV.

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Chapter One

Harlee

“What To Do When You Find Out Aliens Are Real,” I say, reading aloud the title of the brochure I’ve been handed. My first instinct is to roll my eyes. What a joke. Instead, I arrange my face into what I hope is a friendly-slash-excited expression. “Cool. Such a fun premise for a dating show,” I lie.

My throat is strangely dry, as if I haven’t drunk any water in ages, and my head’s fuzzy. It feels like I’ve woken up after having my wisdom teeth pulled out and my cheeks are stuffed with cotton balls.

Or like I’m hungover.

“You look confused,” Chloe says. I think we’ve met before. I mean, I know her name, so clearly we have. Only, I can’t quite remember where...

I lick my lips and take another sip of water from my bottle. It’s pale blue and has my name printed on it, for all that I’m positive I’ve never seen it before today.

“Not confused,” I lie again. “Excited to get started. This is a dream come true.” And I give her my biggest smile, the one I’ve practiced in front of the mirror where I wrinkle my eyes to make it appear genuine.

Hurriedly, I drop the brochure onto my lap so the glossy paper stops exposing how much my hands are shaking. This is a dream come true. I’ve been submitting

applications to reality TV recruitment calls for almost two years, but nobody ever called me back for an interview, let alone got me to sign a contract. Until LOVE... What's the name of this show again?

I glance around but can't see any cameras. Chloe and I are the only two here. Otherwise the room is reminiscent of a miniature game show studio, with adorable (but uncomfortable) heart-shaped chairs, and the LOVE GALAXY logo printed onto the wallpaper.

LOVE GALAXY? Surely I'd remember the name of the show I'm going to be starring in.

Surely I'd be able to remember what had happened last night...

I'd visited the lawyer's office to go through the last of the paperwork. Mr. Smith had been an older man, with wispy white hair and a double chin. And... Chloe had been there! That's right. She's his secretary. Or his personal assistant, maybe. I'd signed the contract, and then... Was that when Chloe had opened the bottle of celebratory champagne?

Don't tell me I'd gotten so drunk I'd made an ass of myself.

I gulp more water to get rid of the furry feeling coating my teeth. Don't get me wrong. I love a girls' night out; it's such an Insta-worthy moment, but I wouldn't have drunk myself into oblivion on the eve of my success. Not after two years of hard work, countless applications and what felt like a hundred self-deprecating audition videos.

Would I?

"I knew you'd take it like a champ." Chloe crosses her legs, perched on the edge of

her heart-shaped chair. She's wearing cat-eye glasses sporting the interlaced double C's of the Chanel emblem near the hinges, and half her fingers are covered in silver rings. "You're the type of person I was hoping we'd be getting this season."

"Oh?"

"Intelligent. Savvy. You know what you want and you're here to make sure you get it."

"That's right." Another smile. "My dating life has been pretty pathetic lately. This opportunity to find love?—"

"Really?"

"Really... What?" I twist around in my chair, double checking there aren't cameras. Double checking this is the pre-recording catch-up I'd been promised and not secretly our first on-screen interview. Because this feels like a trap. I lock my hands together to keep from picking at the much-abused skin of my cuticles, which even my gel polish can't hide. "Aren't I here to find love?" I temporize.

"Are you?" Chloe raises immaculately groomed eyebrows, staring straight at me in a way that seems to say cut the bullshit, Harlee.

I wince. "No. But?—"

"Exactly." Reaching forward, she squeezes my hand, cutting through my attempt at a justification. Her much-longer acrylic nails pinch my skin. She can't mean to be hurting me, though, so I concentrate on not pulling my arm out of her grasp as she says, "You're smarter than that. You're here for the publicity. The fame. The sponsorships. I knew it the second I saw you."

I glance down at myself. I'd chosen my outfit with particular care, wanting to cultivate my 'good girl' aesthetic pre-filming. Boyfriend jeans. Ankle boots. A tight-fitting sweater. A chic winter coat, dark to match my black hair. The pièce de résistance is my scarf. I made it myself, using fabric printed with my own design (a thousand tiny blue and pink forget-me-not flowers) which I'd unironically called True Love.

"You remind me of me," Chloe continues, with a grin of her own. "We're practically twins. That's the reason I picked you to be my—how should I put this?" She glances down at her hands, searching for the right words.

I lean closer. I've read all the books 'written' by reality celebrities, the ones that tell you about their time on set and how these shows operate behind the scenes. I'm not naïve enough to think reality TV is reality. It's unscripted, sure. That just means there's more room for people to lie.

In fact, I'd be surprised if any of the contestants of LOVE GALAXY are looking for love. It's an open secret that those of us who want the fame that comes with reality TV have an ulterior motive. Most of the time, that's money. Often, it's a massive boost to our social media following. Occasionally, it's free business advertising.

For me, I'm here to collect proof.

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Proof I'm a talented designer.

Proof my business will be a success.

Proof, even, that this new version of myself I've worked so hard to create is good and kind and sanguine.

"You're my special project," Chloe concludes. "I'm not saying I can guarantee you'll find love, but..." Here, she winks. It's obvious she's memorized her spiel, and all these pauses are for dramatic effect. I appreciate her effort maintaining the pretense of authenticity, nonetheless. "Icanguarantee you'll get the best edit. Icanguarantee you'll be the star of the show, the heroine everyone is rooting for. But only if you do exactly what I say."

"That's... That's really kind of you."

Is this part of her job? Has her boss told her to do this? Is my assistance the production team's way of guaranteeing that at the end of the twenty days they'll have enough good footage to cut into a compelling storyline?

I don't ask. This new me isn't skeptical of other people's motivations. This new me doesn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

I was born in the Year of the Monkey. It's not like I'm lying about who I am; it's more that I'm making sure I become the person I was always meant to be. Someone good and kind and sweet. Someone creative. Someone everyone wants to be best friends with.

I'm certainly not groggy or hungover.

And I'm absolutely not the type of person everybody loves to hate.

So I smile again, as brightly and excitedly as I can. "When do we start?"

"As soon as you've promised not to tell anyone about this conversation. I can't have the other contestants thinking I'm picking favorites. Although I totally am." She adds that last bit in a stage whisper. "If you tell anyone about us working together, I'll deny everything. And who are they going to believe? You or me?"

There's a moment of silence before I realize she actually wants me to answer. "Oh." My chest tightens. I didn't think it was possible for me to feel worse, but embarrassment amplifies my headache. "You," I admit, feeling my face heat and hating that she's right. "They'd believe you."

"Exactly, and we wouldn't want you to look like a liar on TV, so it really is best if we keep our colluding a secret. Nobody needs to know."

"Not even the other staff?"

She laughs. "Nothing happens around here that Mr. Smith doesn't know about. Only, don't you go telling anyone else. What the other contestants don't know can't hurt them. Yes?"

Again, she waits for a response.

"Yes," I agree. "I won't tell."

"And you promise to do exactly as I say?"

“Sure.” I’m grateful she picked me.

For once in my life, I might actually win something.

“Excellent.” Chloe claps her hands together. “Now, listen carefully. You, Harlee Jun, are going to make Roan fall in love with you, and then you’re going to break his heart. For all the world to watch on intergalactic TV.”

Chapter Two

Harlee

“Ahh...” Now I really don’t know what to say. “Wait a minute.” I clear my throat, trying to pick my next words with care so I don’t sound ungrateful for this golden-egg opportunity. “How will I be the star of the show if I break someone’s heart? Won’t the audience hate me for doing that?”

“Of course not.” Chloe waves a hand, waving away my concerns. “So long as you plan the breakup so that it looks like Roan is the villain. It’s simple.”

“Of course,” I echo. “Simple.”

I don’t know who this Roan guy is, although I’m safe to assume he’s a contestant on LOVE GALAXY not because he’s looking for love but because he wants fame and fortune. So it wouldn’t really be me breaking his heart; it will be a purely transactional arrangement.

We’ll both be getting what we want.

I wince.

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My head's doing this thing where, if I move my neck, my vision goes blurry for a second. The entire world is moving around me. Surely, it's gravity I can feel.

My last hangover wasn't like this. Then again, I hadn't been in the middle of a career-changing meeting with a ... producer? What exactly is Chloe's role?

No, last time I'd been draped over my toilet, trying not to get vomit on my bathroom tiles. That had been the night I'd finally accepted I'd been dumped by my cheating ex. That had been the night I'd decided to audition for TV. To prove to him, and to all of Australia, that I was somebody worth loving.

Poetic to think it all started with a hangover and now it's going to end with one.

"... great to have these little details ironed out," Chloe is saying, and I get the distinct feeling I missed part of her speech.

I can't ask her to repeat herself because she's already standing, gesturing toward the closed door. I follow her lead, picking up my water bottle and brochure. I've got to grab the chair arm while the world runs circles around me, and by the time I'm able to take a step without tripping over my own feet, Chloe's opened the door and is clearly waiting for me to leave. I hurry, not wanting to risk pissing her off on the first day.

Not when she's got so much influence with how the show's storylines will pan out. Not when she's promised to help me. It's been two years since I've had an ally.

"Why Roan?" I ask cautiously, heading for the door. "In particular, I mean?"

“Oh, no reason.” She gestures for me to leave.

Right...As I step by her into the narrow corridor, I can't help making a closer study of her face, as if I'll be able to gauge why Roan from her expression. She doesn't meet my eyes. Rather, she's examining a tablet. Even in her high heels, she's considerably shorter than me. Which isn't hard, considering I'm nearly six feet. I'm taller than most women I meet. It gives me a slight advantage, because when I glance down, I catch sight of her screen, which is angled up toward her face.

She's flicking through different photos, all of the same room but taken from multiple angles. She dismisses each photo almost as quickly as it appears on her screen. Then she pauses, and I realize they're not photos, because someone's in the frame and they're moving.

It's hard to tell exactly what they look like, upside down and miniaturized. They're wearing all green. Even their hair is green... or maybe that's a hat?

“Is that him?” I snap my mouth shut as soon as I've spoken. My voice had been too loud in the small confines of the passageway. It had bounced along the walls, magnified, and I'd sounded, for a second, my old pushy self. “Haha,” I attempt a lighthearted laugh. “Merely curious.”

Chloe stares at me for a long second, before saying. “That would be telling,” and then she closes the door, me on the outside, her inside.

Huh. I've got a secret alliance with the production team. Kind of like I'm their mole. Their spy. Their secret ally with the guaranteed happily-ever-after heroine edit.

I grin, for real this time. LOVE GALAXY is going better than I'd dared hope.

All I've got to do is make some guy fall in love with me.

Then dump him.

Guilt threatens my good mood, but I ignore it. It'll be better if I dump him before he can dump me. Better for the show. Better for my story arc.

It might even be better for him... somehow.

I glance around. One end of the corridor is open to the outside. I can see a lot of sky. So I turn in the opposite direction, heading deeper inside. This place doesn't resemble Mr. Smith's lawyer office, and exactly how I got here seems to be one of the things I can't currently remember.

I also can't remember what I'm supposed to be doing. Or where I'm supposed to go. Maybe if I track down some aspirin, I'll be able to shake off this hangover.

As I pass the next door, it automatically slides open, revealing a small-ish room with mirrors on the walls and three tables with vanity lights. Makeup and styling products are scattered over the tables, including curling irons and blow driers with diffuser attachments. I kind of want to check brand names on the foundation bottles, but there's nobody else in there and no sign of any painkillers, so I continue walking down the corridor. I want to find another member of the production team and maybe even a filming timetable.

I'd always imagined behind the scenes to be a rush of people, busy doing a million and one odd jobs, but it's so quiet I can hear my headache thumping against my skull.

The next door doesn't open, and I can't find a handle or any release button to unlock it. But the door after that slides open on its own, and I'm face to face with another woman.

She's about half a foot shorter than me, with pink hair and muscular arms. She's

wearing a frown and a cocktail gown in a soft pink fabric that shimmers when she moves.

“Hi.” I raise a hand, notice how shaky my fingers are and drop my hand back to my side. “I’m?—

“Let me guess. You’re Harlee.” She winces when she speaks, pressing a hand to her temples. “Got any painkillers?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing.” I run a hand through my hair, pretending I’m brushing strands away from my face when really I’m scraping my nails over my scalp, trying to scrape some of the pain out of my head. “How come you know who I am...” I let the end of my question die as she steps to the side, giving me a clear view of the room behind her. It’s a walk-in-closet, divided into three rows by color. One area is all green clothes with a sign that says Briar. The next section is all pink clothes with Lydia. And the final third is all blue clothes with my name.

As I step inside the room, the door automatically closes behind me.

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“So you’re Lydia,” I guess, judging by her pink hair. “Is Briar here?”

“No. I haven’t met her yet. Apart from Chloe, you’re the first person I’ve seen all morning.”

“So you’ve spoken to Chloe?” I try to keep my voice sounding vaguely interested as I head toward my third of the clothes. “Did she say anything in particular to you?”

Lydia shrugs one sculptured shoulder. “Just that filming is going to start soon and that we need to dress fancy.” She glances down at herself, clearly unsure of her choice of gown. “Apparently we’re going to meet the guys this morning over at the main house, at some sort of canape meet and greet.”

If she’s also in cahoots with the production team with a secret task of her own to complete, she doesn’t let on, acting entirely normal.

“Oh, cool. That sounds fun.” Because I’m starving.

Inconspicuously, I search for cameras. I don’t really think they’d record us where we get changed, but it’s not uncommon for reality TV to use the audio of ‘private’ conversations of women getting ready together overlaid onto other footage. In case our voices are being recorded, I vow to mind my tongue and refrain from asking Lydia about her obvious headache. Maybe she also drank a little too much celebratory champagne last night.

Last night... I wish I could remember!

“It’s lovely to meet a fellow contestant,” I say, keeping to the type of small talk I’ve seen on other reality dating shows. “How are you feeling? Nervous? Excited?” Like you could sleep for a week?

“Both.” Lydia lets out a shuddering breath. “I still can’t quite believe I’m here, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been dreaming of this moment for so long. Now it’s actually happening, it feels...surreal.” I start sorting through the blue clothes, trying to disguise how much my hands are shaking. There’s an enormous variety, from princess ballgowns to slinky evening dresses, exercise gear, lounge wear, silk pjs. Some have been thrifted; others are new with the tags still attached. None are designer, but I spot a few good pieces, nonetheless.

My own clothes are also there, already clipped onto hangers. I mightn’t remember what I did last night but thank God I’d at least been lucid enough to bring my suitcase. Someone else must have unpacked for me. That was kind of them. Whoever they are.

What I can’t find is my phone or handbag. But that’s not unusual. Some shows don’t let you keep your phone during filming. And it’s not like anyone important is going to be texting me anyway. Still, I feel strange not having access to a clock or my camera. Or Instagram.

Copying Lydia, I select a cocktail dress. It’s pale blue, low cut with a band around the waist from which the skirt falls. It swishes around my legs when I walk, and I enjoy the feel, but visually... Something’s missing.

“How old are you?” Lydia asks, leaning around my trolley of clothes to better see me. “Wow. Nice dress.”

“Thanks.” I run my hands down the satin. It feels like we’re both playing roles. Asking each other the questions we think the audience will most want to know the answers to. “Thirty-one. I’m half Chinese, half Australian,” I add before she can ask. Because everyone always asks. “But don’t ask me to translate any tattoos, because I can’t speak Mandarin. I never learned. Howabout you? I mean, how old are you?” I clarify, because she’s clearly Caucasian, and I’ve discovered that white people don’t expect anyone to ask about their heritage.

“Thirty-two.” And she holds up two pairs of shoes—one silver, one pink. “Which do you think?”

“Silver. All pink might be a bit much.”

Lydia nods, accepting my advice.

If I’ve been guaranteed the heroine edit, then what does that make Lydia? The bitch? The villain? The cute best friend? The sidekick?

Me working with Chloe isn’t necessarily going to ruin Lydia’s storyline, I assure myself. Maybe I can even talk to Chloe about getting a good edit for Lydia too. And for Briar.

Maybe there’s a way we women can all come out of this experience looking good.

A trio of friends.

Hot, sexy friends, ready to take on the world.

“Hey, did you get given a weird brochure about aliens?” I ask, continuing my hunt through my clothes. I select a sequin-covered shawl. Blue, of course, with long tassels around the edge. Finding a loose thread, I pick at it, detaching individual

sequins.

“Oh my god, yes,” she says in a rush, as though she’s been dying to talk about it. “What’s that all about?”

“No fu—” I catch myself before swearing. I haven’t been told I can’t use the f-word, but saying fuck all the time doesn’t suit my new good-girl vibe. “No idea,” I finish meekly.

I find a small sewing kit tucking into one of the drawers, the type you get for free in posh hotels, and I thread the needle, using it to sew a sequin onto the bodice of my gown. I don’t take the dress off; instead, I use my body as a dress form so I can more accurately choose where I want each of the sequins to go. This would be so much faster if I had fabric glue.

“I hope they don’t have someone dressed as an alien,” Lydia says. “I think I’d die if the whole show’s alien themed and they didn’t tell us sooner. Like with pretend spaceships and little green men.” She shudders.

“LOVE GALAXY.” I repeat the show’s name. Hopefully, it’s not a hint. “It had better not be a spin-off of Sexy Beasts, either,” I agree, naming one of the dating shows I’d watched in preparation. In that one, singles are dressed in prosthetics and masks to look like monsters. It’s supposed to teach people not to make snap decisions about whether they find someone attractive from their appearance alone. But everyone knows hiding your face is delaying the inevitable. We all judge a book by its cover, no matter how much we profess otherwise.

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“Those beasts were never sexy.” Lydia sits on the floor, as there are no chairs in here, and fiddles with the straps of her silver stilettos. “I don’t want to pick between two guys wearing Chewbacca costumes.”

“Me neither.” I sit down next to her, careful not to wrinkle my skirt. Even with her five-inch heels, she’s going to be shorter than me, and for that reason I’ve already chosen a pair of ballet flats. I don’t want to risk towering over the guys.

Happy and charming, I am.

Not too loud or too tall. Certainly not overbearing.

“Aliens wouldn’t be a good look for me, you know?” Lydia says. “I’ve just gotten a bank loan to open my own bakery, and my brand is going to be really wholesome and fitness focused, so I don’t want people thinking of Wookiees when they come in to buy?—”

“Your cookies?”

“Exactly.” And she holds out her hand.

I put the sequins onto her palm so I can focus my attention on my sewing. I’m guessing I have little time for alterations, so I focus on the neckline, wanting to add a little bling to an otherwise fairly plain dress.

“What about you?”

“I’m a fabric designer. I love drawing patterns.” I want to tell her about the collection I had featured in Spotlight last year but strategically shut my mouth. I can’t risk sharing all the best bits about me before we’ve made it onto the set. I’m saving the details of my business for when they’ll make the biggest impact and get the most amount of screen time.

Lydia watches me work for a while. I get the impression there’s something she’s not saying, and when I glance up at her from my sewing, she opens her mouth before closing it again.

Our eyes lock, and I swear for a second I see tears. Then she blinks and looks away. Okay...Careful not to prick her with the sewing needle, I squeeze her outstretched hand, ignoring the sequins trapped between our palms.

Perhaps she’s the same as me, half scared of the fact she can’t remember what happened yesterday. Perhaps she also wants to flop sideways until she’s lying down, her head filled with a headache that’s making the room spin around her.

I don’t ask. “Makeup time?” I say instead. “I’m going to need some serious color correction to hide these bags under my eyes.”

Chapter Three

The LOVE GALAXY Official Fan Chatroom

Private chat | 3 members

F Crew:

Excited, R?

ROAN:

Never felt like this before. What is a word that means 'excited' but bigger?

F Crew:

Ecstatic? Elated?

SkyLander:

Oh, yeah! Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Congratulations, Roan.

F Crew:

Exuberant?

SkyLander:

Euphoric?

ROAN:

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All of those are me.

SkyLander:

Aww. You are going to be the most sought-after Mate in LOVE GALAXY's history. I know it!

SkyLander:

Be your charming self and the Females will be chasing you!

SkyLander:

!!!

Harlee

“You ladies ready?” Chloe asks, coming to stand in the open doorway.

“Yes.” Lydia and I both scramble to our feet, brushing non-existent wrinkles from our gowns and double-checking our reflections in the makeup mirrors. I snap the last sewing thread with my teeth, wishing I'd had time to add even more sequins, but at least my dress isn't as plain anymore.

I'm so nervous that my hands are sweating. I fan myself with the alien brochure, trying to get a breath of fresh air so my foundation doesn't melt straight off my face. But the room is stuffy, the ceiling is too low, and it suddenly feels like the roof is

pressing down on my head.

“Where’s Briar?” I ask, mainly to distract myself, and I’m pleased to hear my voice sounds relatively normal.

“She’s scheduled to appear last, so she’s got some extra time to get ready,” Chloe says, beckoning us to follow her into the corridor. “Mr. Smith needs you two ladies over at the house so we can start filming.”

“Jumping straight into the fire,” I joke.

Chloe laughs.

Lydia looks nauseated, clearly well aware of the fact that we’re about to be standing in front of the cameras.

After two years of waiting, finally. This is it.

I shorten my stride, so as not to overtake the much-shorter Chloe. “Do you have any last-minute tips for us?”

“There’s nothing to worry about.” Chloe glances at Lydia and me over her shoulder. “We chose you for a reason. You’re both perfect LOVE GALAXY material. Our audience is going to adore you.” Reaching the end of the corridor, she pauses before the door leading outside.

We’re up higher than I’d realized, and there’s a ramp from the door leading down to the ground. That’s about all I can see from my current position.

“When we get to the house, Lydia, you’ll be the first woman to enter. You’ve got to walk down the stairs that lead into the kitchen, and when you get down there, you’ll

meet the first of the male contestants,” Chloe says, looking at Lydia for confirmation that she understands. “The two of you will be free to chat and to get to know each other.”

“Lucky duck.” I might’ve felt jealous of Lydia if I weren’t so nervous. From watching other dating shows, I know it’s always the girls who get to go first or last who make the biggest impression in episode one.

“Exactly,” Chloe agrees, and she’s got to raise her voice because it’s so windy outside. “Use your time alone with the first guy to your advantage, Lydia. Remember to flirt and laugh. Have fun. After that, Harlee will join you, followed by the second guy and so on, until everyone is gathered in the kitchen. Doing it this way gives you all a chance to introduce yourselves to the other cast members and, by extension, to the LOVE GALAXY audience. Oh, and remember the golden rule—never look directly at the cameras when you’re in a room with other people. Got it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Lydia gives a determined nod.

“Let’s go.” Mr. Smith steps into the corridor, shunting us forward with waving motions.

His attempts to get us moving don’t work because Lydia and I are both staring, transfixed, at his face.

He’s obviously Mr. Smith, the same lawyer who’d gotten me to sign my contract. I easily recognize him, even though he’s currently dressed in an alien costume with professional prosthetics.

He doesn’t look nearly so old anymore, like all the makeup he’s got on has taken twenty years off his age. He’s thickset, with a bald head and a long, skinny tail that’s flicking, similar to what a cat’s tail does when it’s annoyed. Oh, and he’s got rolls of

leathery skin where his neck should be. It reminds me of those fancy ruffle collars people used to wear in the Elizabethan era. Only his isn't lace.

I exchange a wounded look with Lydia and then glance at the brochure I'm still using to fan my burning face.

What To Do When You Find Out Aliens Are Real.

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Well fu— I mean, fiddlesticks.

LOVE GALAXY is one of those tacky dating shows. Lydia's mouth is open, but she's too surprised to speak. That, or she's too furious.

To say I'm shocked would be an understatement; this is exactly what I'd been praying wouldn't happen. If this moment hadn't been two years in the making, I'd probably be preparing to storm out. As it is... well, I guess I should be grateful it's not me dressed in the alien costume.

And maybe it's not too late to persuade the crew to take a different creative direction...

Frowning, Mr. Smith pushes his way past. Chloe smiles, seemingly unsurprised to see him dressed up. He doesn't return the smile, just walks down the ramp, presumably expecting the three of us to follow.

"Excellent." Chloe turns her smile on Lydia and me. "Remember, don't look directly at the cameras. Pretend they're not there, and be yourselves," she adds, squeezing first my hand in a show of support. "That's my best advice. The audience, and the guys, will be able to tell straight away if you lie."

"Of course." My heart lurches. Which is ridiculous because I'm not lying. I'm being myself: this new, better version of myself. The version everyone will love.

Roan

“Walk down the stairs,” John Smith says. “And for the love of God, stop looking directly at the cameras.”

“Easy.” I straighten my shoulders and immediately make accidental eye contact with the lens of the closest camera. It is clipped to the handrailing and is staring straight at me. I turn my gaze toward the ceiling, pretending that did not happen.

Beside me, John Smith humphs.

“I can manage,” I assure him. At the bottom of the stairs is my family’s kitchen, and in the kitchen awaits the first two Female contestants. They are talking quietly with my eldest brother, and their voices are trailing up the stairs tantalizingly. I strain to hear their individual words, but they are too distant for me to interpret clearly.

“Start from the beginning,” John Smith orders, and I trip over my own feet as I return to my starting position at the head of the staircase, keen to get going.

John Smith examines his datapad, reviewing the various camera angles, ensuring everything is working. Behind me, stands another Female. She is holding a microphone and has another camera trained on her face, ready to commentate on descent, as if walking down stairs is an intergalactic sport.

She is the first and only Human I have seen, and as I wait for John Smith to give me the go ahead again, I peek over my shoulder, watching her.

If the Female contestants are comparable with this crew member, then my brothers and I are going to be lucky indeed.

She is ... small. Much smaller than I had been expecting. With hairs instead of scales, and a smooth brow. She is dressed in clothes which cover her torso, leaving only her head, arms and feet bare. Resting on her nose, she wears a metal frame that circles

and magnifies each of her eyes. The frames have two arms, which curve back over her ears, holding them in place at the center of her face. I have not seen such a contraption before. Is it... decorative? Functional? Mayhaps each piece of circular glass is a miniature screen, displaying information right before her eyes and prompting her commentary.

“Right,” John Smith says, drawing my attention back to him.

Inside my chest, it feels as though my heart is doing backflips, excitement and anticipation causing me to bounce on the balls of my feet, eager to meet the contestants. Eager to meet my forever Mate.

Who will she be?

“On the count of three, Roan. And three.” The Drah’os Male waves one of his two arms through the air, signaling me to begin.

Keeping my gaze fixed squarely on the stairs’ mid-point landing, I head downward, walking significantly slower than is natural. John Smith says slowness is for ‘dramatic effect’.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Roan is the youngest of the three Ril’os brothers. Born on this planet, he has never once left its atmosphere, his work on the family farm keeping him busy...

She continues talking, but I cease listening as I finally pass the landing and turn the corner, bringing the kitchen into view.

It looks strangely the same as always, with the counter across the back wall devoid of clutter and the large wooden table taking up most of the rest of the space. Except...

My gaze jumps to the two eligible Females, and I practically slide down the final stairs, coming to an abrupt halt at the table's edge.

"I am Roan," I announce, straightening to my full height and puffing out my chest, ensuring my shoulders are displayed to their full breadth. "Welcome to my home."

The two Females stand, the legs of their chairs scraping against the flagstone floor.

"Hi, Roan. I'm Lydia, and this is Harlee," The closest Human Female raises a hand in greeting, wiggling her fingers in a gesture I have not seen before but which I immediately copy, not wanting to risk appearing rude. She has pink hair, the ends of which curl around her shoulders.

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“Lid-ee-a. Lyd-i-a. Lydia.” I practice. “Har— Har-lee.”

“Yeah,” Lydia agrees. “I see you’re dressed in scales, too.”

“Too?” I glance down at myself. I am not dressed in anything, except for my boots.

There is silence as we all stare at me, then?—

“Cut!” John Smith strides down the stairs, taking them two at a time. “What was that?” he demands of everyone, his two hands on his hips.

“I don’t get it,” Lydia mutters to Harlee. “Why dress in Halloween costumes?”

Harlee makes ashhhsound. Noticing me watching them both, she stretches the corners of her mouth upwards, displaying two single rows of white, blunt teeth.

Again, I copy, opening my mouth so she can see my many rows of very sharp teeth. Will this impress her? Mayhaps Humans find teeth attractive rather than threatening.

Instead of scales, her skin is smooth and incredibly pale, almost comparable to starlight. In comparison, she has dark hairs on her head that fall in a sheet down her back, with a few pieces cut shorter at the front to frame her face. The two rows of hairs on her forehead are also black, as are the small hairs that wreath each of her eyes.

Her eyes— I lean closer, trying to judge their colour. Her pupils are much rounder than any Ril’os eyes, and they expand further as she stares at me. Her irises are an

intense brown, ringed in black and highlighted with specks of... gold?

Yes, gold.

She flinches when I show her my teeth and hastily looks away, avoiding meeting my eyes.

“What a lot of wet blankets you all are,” John Smith scolds, pointing to each of us. “This is the first time you’re meeting Humans,” he tells Killan and I. “And this is your first time meeting?—”

“Aliens?” Harlee finishes for him.

“Yes!” The Drah’os Male practically screams.

“Riiighttt...” Lydia drags the word out, seemingly unbothered by John Smith’s display of temper. “How negotiable is the alien theme?” Lydia presses. “Because I’m not sure sci-fi nerd is the image I was hoping to cultivate here.”

“What is asi-fi ner-d?” I ask, confused by the words that don’t translate. Confused, if I am being honest, by a lot more.

Nobody bothers answering me.

“Non-negotiable!” John Smith barks at Lydia.

This is not how I had imagined the filming of a reality broadcast to proceed—with so much yelling and interruptions by the director. But mayhaps it is only like this at the beginning... Mayhaps when we grow more accustomed to being filmed there will be less and less supervision.

I give an internal nod at this thought. Yes, that must be how things work. All the episodes of the previous seasons of LOVE GALAXY I have watched showed the participants interacting without disruption. They were given the privilege of time together to get to know one another.

“Chloe—” Harlee addresses the commentator as Chloe pokes her head around the bend in the stairs to see what is holding us up.

“You’re doing great.” She gives Harlee a little finger wiggle, followed by a flash of her flat teeth. “Love that dress.” Then Chloe ducks back out of sight.

“It’s not great—” Harlee begins to call after her, but John Smith rests a heavy hand on her shoulder, and she sinks an inch under the weight of his hold.

“I don’t have time for your conniptions,” he scolds. “You were told all about thealien’—he says that word as if it disgustshim—‘theme this morning and had plenty of time to air your grievances then. Now, let’s focus on the filming. I’ve got a lot of work to get through today, and we’re already running late.” To complete his point, he glances at the screen of his datapad, checking the time.

I reach across the table and slide his hand off Harlee’s shoulder. Has he not noticed how uncomfortable she is?

Immediately, Harlee straightens, rubbing at the back of her neck.

Oblivious, John Smith says, “Now, introduce yourselves properly. Flirt, banter, laugh. Hahaha.” And he demonstrates, sounding anything but amused. “Sorin will be down in a moment, if he can manage the stairs without falling over. Then I’ll send down”—he waves a dismissive hand through the air—“whatever her name is.”

“Briar,” Harlee offers, but John Smith is already retreating back up the stairs, eager to

continue filming. Before he moves from our sight, he glances over his shoulder “Flirt harder!” Then he is gone, and we are left listening to his retreating footsteps up the final steps.

We return to our seats.

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Voices drift downstairs. One is Sorin's. I cannot imagine him accepting orders lightly. His scales will turn blue with indignation and embarrassment. He is not much of a talker at the best of times. John Smith is hardly going to get the response from Sorin he will expect.

I look to my eldest brother, but Killan has his upper arms crossed over his chest and is drumming the fingers of his free hand on the table's surface, his eyes narrowed as he watches the stairs as if he can see through the wall to glare at the Drah'os Male.

He is as angry as I have ever seen him, annoyed by the disruption to his day and the inconvenience of having to wait in the kitchen when he could be by the lakes, working.

Why cannot he see that the Females are worth any number of disruptions? I decide to ignore him and his bad temper, turning my attention to Harlee and Lydia, displaying my teeth to them to show my accommodating nature.

"Ahh..." Harlee glances between me and Lydia, shuffling on her chair, suddenly uncomfortable. I half rise, intending to fetch something soft to sit on, but I can think of nothing which matches this description, and so I sit back down again.

The silence is eating into my ears, slowly turning my excitement to nervousness.

"I am Roan," I begin, immediately recognizing that I have told them this already.

"And how old are you?" Harlee asks, locking her hands together and resting them before her on the table.

“Thirty Common years. I was born here, on Ril II.” I lean forward a fraction, inching my own hands closer to Harlee’s. Her skin, I muse, would be soft to touch, like water. Soft and slippery and hard to keep a hold of.

“Ril II. That’s the name of your farm?” Lydia asks this question.

“The name of our planet.”

“Of fucking course it is.” She laughs, but it sounds strained. Rasping.

“Not officially.” I glance between the Females. Were they not told about Ril II when their ship landed yesterday? “Ril II is the name my family calls it.”

“You’re good at role playing,” Harlee says right as a thump from above echoes down the staircase, followed by Sorin’s cursing.

“Cut!” John Smith screams. “Again. From the top!”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any improv experience.” Harlee resolutely continues talking through the sounds from upstairs, casting the camera clipped to the kitchen counter a glance. “So, are you guys, like, D&D fans or... what’s that live role-playing game called?”

“LARP,” Lydia answers, sinking lower in her chair and crossing her arms over her chest.

“You and my brother would make good Mates for each other,” I say and nod between them. Despite their many physical differences, they are as sullen as each other.

“Roan.” Killan growls his warning, but I take no heed.

“Your temperaments suit well.” I return my gaze to Harlee. Would we suit? I slide my hand a little farther across the table, inching closer to her clasped hands.

Two hands. Two arms.

Not four.

“Your scales look crazily real,” she tells me with another glance at Lydia.

Mayhaps they are telepathic and are saying many things that Killan and I cannot hear. Their continued shared looks certainly hold a lot of weight, but I cannot read enough of their facial expressions to know what they are thinking or feeling.

I straighten to my full height, demonstrating how good of a Mate I could be. Capable. Competent. Able to care for a family of my own.

“And your arms,” she says, studying me closely. “How are you able to move all four independently? I don’t get it.”

“Akh...” I do not understand the question. “I... do.” I have never given much thought to how I move my arms. “How do you move yours?” Is there a different way to move arms that I do not know about?

“Incredible,” she muses. “Your horns. And your eyes. I mean, you’re obviously wearing contact lenses. But I can’t work outhow the scales were made. Surely you’ve not got prosthetics over your entire body. That would have taken fucking—” She clears her throat. “I mean, that would’ve taken ages and an entire makeup team of specialists.”

“While we were left to do our own makeup,” Lydia huffs.

“You made up what?” I ask, but they must not hear, because Lydia says: “Wouldn’t it be funny if they really were aliens.” And she snorts.

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“No.” Harlee shakes her head. “No!” She frowns. “Surely not. It’s... I mean...” Her hands are shaking, and her eyes widen as what little color is in her face drains away.

Chapter Four

Harlee

Fuck. Aliens are real. Aliens are fuckingreal!

For a second, all I can hear is white noise buzzing through my head. My vision clouds over, and I swear I’m swaying, as my entire understanding of the world gets ripped out from under my feet.

I mean, I always knew there’d be intelligent life on other planets. It would be ridiculously egotistical to believe otherwise, when the universe is constantly expanding. But there’s a massive difference between knowing academically that aliens exist and sitting across the table from two.

Beside me, Lydia inhales a sharp breath. And then her hand is on my knee, squeezing so tightly her fingers bite into my muscle. I flinch away from the pain, my body jerking. The response is enough to kick-start my vision again, and I blink, my gaze focusing on aliens.

Aliens!

And not the green little blob men that science-fiction novels advertise. There’s nothinglittleabout these guys. They’ve got to be seven feet tall. Or more.

They are green, though.

They're also covered in scales and have four arms and horns that curl back from their faces. And... are those fangs? Despite myself, I lean forward a fraction, all the better to see.

The alien sitting directly opposite stares back at me. He's got what I can only describe as an open, honest expression, as if he's genuinely pleased to meet me and is completely oblivious to how much Lydia and I are currently freaking the fuck out.

Roan, he'd said his name was.

He's clearly not surprised by Lydia and me, just curious about our differences. So I'm guessing this isn't his first day finding out about intelligent life on other planets. It's like he knew Lydia and I were going to be aliens, only he didn't know what type of aliens.

"Were we..." I can't finish the sentence. It's as though my mouth has forgotten how to form words, because the words I'd been about to speak are so utterly absurd that I shouldn't even be thinking them.

Were we abducted by aliens?

I inhale, but my lungs don't want to accept air. My head's swimming. My headache has returned in full force, and I can barely hear my own thoughts over the blood rushing through my ears.

For all that, I'm not suffocating. Merely panicking. Which has to mean that there's breathable air on this planet.

This planet!

Nobody of my generation should be able to say that they've visited a planet that isn't Earth. This shouldn't be possible. This shouldn't be happening.

Ril II. That's not any name I've heard before. It isn't Mars or Venus. It isn't even that crappy little rock at the edge of the solar system that scientists have been arguing mightn't be a real planet after all—Pluto.

We're in a whole new solar system.

A whole new galaxy!

I grope under the table, searching for Lydia's hand, which is still squeezing my knee in a death grip. I catch her wrist, holding onto her like she's my lifeline. Like there's an infinitesimal chance she isn't as frickin'terrified of what's happening as I am and might actually know how to get us out of here.

Roan's watching us with an intense look of excited concentration, giving the impression he's trying to work out why our perfectly normal conversation derailed so abruptly or why Lydia and I don't know the answers to the most basic of questions.

Like: What planet are we on?

What star are we orbiting?

“Whose house is this?” Lydia asks, voice gravelly, barely louder than a whisper.

That wouldn't have been my first question, but I'll give credit where credit is due: at least she can form complete sentences. That's more than I can manage.

“Our house,” Roan answers.

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Killan growls. Actually growls. Like a grumpy old bear.

“Technically, this is Killan’s house,” Roan corrects. “I live next door, and Sorin lives at the southernmost edge of our farm.”

“Right...” Lydia glances around the room, her breathing ragged. “I’m having a little trouble processing everything that’s happening.”

“What would you like me to explain?” Roan asks, the perfect host. “Our house? Our farm?” He drags something akin to a computer tablet closer to him and touches the screen to activate the power. “Our planet? Something else?” He hovers one hand over the screen, prepared to use the tablet to help with any explanations Lydia requires.

“Umm...” She clears her throat.

Releasing Lydia, I run shaky, sweaty hands down my cocktail dress, hunting for the pocket where I’d stashed my brochure.

At almost the same time, another man—another alien!—stumbles down the last few stairs. Catching himself on the banister, he straightens, and the green of his scales drains slowly away, to be replaced by a pretty teal. He looks beseechingly at the two men, and only when he’s examined the entire rest of the kitchen, does he let his gaze fall on Lydia and me.

“Akh...”

“This is Sorin,” Roan offers an introduction. “My other brother.”

“How come I can understand what you’re saying?” Lydia asks, pointing at Roan’s mouth. “Your lips don’t match your words, but I can definitely understand you.”

“We all have translators.” Roan touches the back of his neck, indicating a spot slightly behind one ear.

Lydia copies the movement, all eyes but mine on her. I take the opportunity to straighten the wrinkles in the glossy paper I’m hiding under the table and to skim the first few lines of text:

What To Do When You Find Out Aliens Are Real

Step 1: Don’t panic.

Well, that’s unhelpful. Why aren’t there instructions on how not to panic?! Deep breaths and... and... And I don’t know! I suddenly can’t remember any of the advice from the YouTube tutorials I’ve watched on meditation and calming the mind.

I’d have been better off watching E.T. and taking notes as though it were a documentary. Because aliens are frickin’ real!

“... three brothers,” Lydia says, and I realize the conversation moved on while I was reading and panicking. “And you’re all hoping to get hitched?” Her voice wobbles.

“That does not translate.” Apparently Roan is their designated spokesperson, because the other two remain silent. “Hitched? With ropes?” He frowns.

“No, hitched as in to get married. Fall in love. Be happy forever after.”

“Oh, yes.” Roan nods enthusiastically.

A nod for him must mean the same as it does for us.

“And you applied for LOVE GALAXY?” Lydia asks.

Roan nods again, then glares at his brothers until they also nod—with a lot less enthusiasm.

“Because you want to date us?” Lydia points between her and me. “Humans?”

“You want to know what day it is?” Roan blinks, confused, again.

“What? No. I think we’re getting lost in translation.” She almost smiles. Almost. Except that her smile is actually more of a grimace. A smile-slash-grimace. A painful smile.

My hands are shaking so much, I can hear the brochure crinkling. Peeking under the table, I read further.

Step 2: Watch for signs of aggression

These can take many forms. If you feel threatened, then you probably are being threatened.

Threatened?Threatened?!I’m going to panic again, so I reread step one over and over until I’m breathing deeplyenough that my lungs actually fill with air, and some of my lightheadedness recedes.

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“Did you know about us?” Lydia suddenly asks, as if this is the one question she always wanted the answer to but has only just gained the courage to ask. “Did you pick us out of a lineup or... what? How did Harlee, Briar and I get chosen?”

“Why— What?” Roan looks to Killan, clearly more confused than ever.

“We did not pick you,” Killan says, speaking for the first time in a long time, his voice so low it practically rumbles up his chest. “As you have taken a chance, we took a chance. If you dislike what you see”—impossibly, his voice drops another octave as he grows angrier—“you do not have to choose us, if we are so far from the Mates you imagined.”

Right... So the brothers know nothing about Humans or Earth. They don’t even seem to know that we’ve been abducted.

They, on the other hand, aren’t acting like prisoners. And Roan had said this is Killan’s house. So does that mean the brothers signed up to LOVE GALAXY without knowing that the women they’d be partnered with would be us? It certainly seems that way.

Okay. I take another deep, shuddering breath. Do I feel threatened?

I peek at the brothers.

Killan is pissed. But he hasn’t done anything to harm us. If I had to bet money, I’d guess he’d rather storm out of the room than keep up his side of this conversation.

Sorin is hovering at the far edge of the table, acting as if he's too nervous to sit down and remain still.

Roan apparently doesn't know what a smile is, because he's stretching open his mouth to show us all his pointed teeth, and it's creepy. His smile is analogous to the smile of a killer clown. Only, Roan has more teeth than any Human clown—rows and rows of teeth, more shark than Human.

It would hurt if he took a bite out of you.

Except... Despite the smile, he isn't giving off killer clown energy.

Quite the opposite. He seems sweet. Friendly. Eager to please.

To guess, I'd say he's the youngest brother.

Cautiously, I glance toward our newest arrival. Sorin. His scales are still more blue than Roan or Killan. He's tall. Although probably not as tall as Killan. And he's broad shouldered. A little bigger than Roan, perhaps.

Abruptly, he squeezes around to the back of the table, bumping into Roan and Killan's chairs as he goes, until he's facing the stairs. It's like he's waiting for someone. Briar, maybe?

"Cut!" Mr. Smith screams. "What are you doing?"

I jump, gasping. Lydia, too. Although it's not us two that Mr. Smith is yelling at. He's still out of sight, somewhere near the top of the stairs, if the echo is anything to judge by.

The mere thought of Mr. Smith gives me the sweats.

Then comes a new Human voice, someone who isn't Chloe: "I'm trying to walk down these stairs without being insulted." She's almost yelling as loudly as Mr. Smith.

I want to run up to her, waving my brochure. Stop yelling. Don't make him angry. He's an alien. They're all aliens! But I'm not positive my legs would hold my weight, and fear keeps me seated.

Selfishly, I recognize that if Mr. Smith is yelling at Briar then Mr. Smith isn't yelling at me and Lydia. And he sounds pissed. Really pissed.

He wouldn't kill us, would he? He needs us for his show. We're the contestants. Without us, he'd have no story.

LOVE GALAXY: the intergalactic dating show where Human women are abducted from Earth to couple up with aliens.

I sneak another peek at those aliens, avoiding eye contact.

Sorin's shifting from foot to foot, full of nervous energy. Killan's got his upper arms crossed over his chest and is sitting low in his chair, clearly sulking. And then there's Roan, whose mouth is moving without any sound coming out.

For a second I think something's gone wrong with the translator-thingy he mentioned earlier, but then I realize he's speaking silently on purpose, practicing saying my name.

He looks up, and I glance away but not fast enough. For a second, our eyes met. My stomach does this strange flip-flop thing. My muscles tense. I don't feel threatened. At least not by him.

Instead, maybe it's Roan who should feel threatened by me. Because I've just remembered what I promised Chloe earlier this morning.

I'm to make Roan fall in love with me.

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And then I've got to break his heart.

His alien heart.

Chapter Five

Roan

I can feel Harlee watching me, and I lift my upper right arm to wiggle my fingers at her, as I have seen the Humans do several times.

She does not repeat the gesture, glancing down at her own hands, hidden below the tabletop.

"Is this not right?" I ask, wiggling my fingers again. When she does not immediately respond, I lower my hand in case I am breaking some taboo Human custom I do not yet understand.

"That's called waving," Lydia says, glancing between me and Harlee. "It's for when you first meet somebody."

Harlee has not spoken a word in many minutes. I worry.

"Have I done something to insult you? I am eager to learn what I should do to make you more comfortable in our—I mean, in Killan's home."

"It's not you." Again, Lydia is the one to answer, even though I directed my question

to Harlee.

“Akh. It is Killan.” I nod in understanding, causing my eldest brother to deepen his scowl.

“No,” Lydia denies with a shaky laugh, sounding anything but joyful. “Not Killan. We’ve... Well... You see, we’ve had a long day and a bit of a shock, and I guess we’re both feeling tired.”

“You have travelled far to be here.”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” Lydia agrees.

I search her face for signs of tiredness, wishing to memorize them so that I can recognize tiredness in Human Females next time and act appropriately. Her shoulders are rounded forward as she tries to make herself appear smaller, and the top of her spine is curved slightly. The curtain of her pink hairs swings forward, partially shielding her face, and she tucks a few strands behind one ear with an impatient and well-practiced gesture.

I look at Harlee, trying to correlate my data. My results will be more reliable if I can identify the same tiredness traits in both Humans.

Still, Harlee is looking down at her hands, almost as if she is holding something out of my sight. I bend over, pushing my chair back, so I can peer under the table. With a rustling of paper, she presses both hands into the pockets of her dress, hiding whatever she has from my sight.

At Killan’s nudge, I straighten. There is a third Female standing on the landing of the stairs. I do not know how long she has been there, watching us... Watching Sorin. Her hairs are much redder than Harlee’s and Lydia’s. And there are spots across her

nose and over her cheeks. Mayhaps they mean she is sickening for something. Before I can ask, however, she hurries down the last stretch of the stairs, tripping over the hem of her green dress.

In an instant, Killan is on his feet, catching her neatly and setting her upright.

“Thanks.” She pats one of his arms, as if it is an everyday occurrence for her to be touched by a Male. Then she waves at Sorin. “Hi, again.”

Again?

“Cut!” John Smith stomps his way down the stairs, his Human assistant following closely behind.

Why cannot you leave us alone? I want to demand of the director. This is not how filming is supposed to work. This is not the experience I imagined. But I feel traitorous for thinking such thoughts. Without LOVE GALAXY and John Smith, there would not be three eligible Females sitting in our family kitchen. And so I grit my teeth to remain silent.

John Smith must know what he is doing. I should trust that he has our best interests in mind.

“You two haven’t met yet,” he reminds the new Female. “Remember?”

Again. My insides lurch. I look between Sorin and Briar. “Have you already met?” The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop them.

The transport ship the Humans arrived on only landed yesterday afternoon, and John Smith kept us from meeting them before the cameras had been set up, claiming he wanted to capture our first impressions on film. That is exactly what this moment is

supposed to be—our first meeting.

The moment when all our lives change forever.

Apparently not for Sorin.

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“Hey.” Briar raises a hand to catch John Smith’s attention. “Can we have a moment, just us women together? You know, to get our heads around everything that’s happened.”

Mayhaps I am not the only one confused by what is happening here. Lydia asked me many questions she surely should have known the answers to. Harlee has fallen silent and is keeping papers secret. Briar is confronting John Smith as if she does not wish to be here. As if she is not excited to be meeting her potential Mate.

“No.” And the Drah’os Male grabs hold of her dress, yanking it down, exposing another inch of her smooth collarbone.

“Oh, very classy!” She shoves at his shoulder, but he does not release her.

“Do not touch her,” Sorin growls before anybody else can react, sounding much more like Killan than himself. He leaps onto the table, and I stare as my usually reserved brother walks over the tabletop and jumps down at the other side, landing beside John Smith.

“I’m fine,” Briar assures him, acting as though she really has met Sorin before. “Don’t get yourself into trouble because of me.”

I glare. What is happening? Why did Sorin not tell me of his earlier meeting?

More importantly, why did Sorin not invite me to go with him to meet one of the Females?

Nothing about this moment feels how I imagined it would. Nothing about this moment feels like it is the beginning of the rest of our lives. This catastrophic mess is not anything like the other first meetings of the previous seasons of LOVE GALAXY I watched.

Or had those episodes been lies?

“Get back over there.” The Drah’os Male dismisses Sorin’s completely un-Sorin display of temper and gestures for him to cross back to the table’s opposite side. “We need continuity.”

“Or else our audience will realize LOVE GALAXY is staged.” Briar’s voice drips with contempt.

“It is not.” I stand. “LOVE GALAXY is real. And how come you two have already met?” I direct that last accusation at Sorin, straightening my shoulders until I am standing to my full height, determined not to let my brother’s superior size intimidate me. I have fought with Killan many times, and Killan is larger even than Sorin. “You did not tell me.”

I might be the youngest, but I will not be daunted.

Everyone stares at me.

A heavy silence fills the air.

“It is real,” I reiterate stubbornly. Isn’t it?

“Exactly,” John Smith agrees, glancing from one person to the next as though daring anyone else to contradict him. Briar opens her mouth to respond, but John Smith continues. “Start fromhi,” he tells her. “Introduce yourself to the group and then take

your seat at the table. Followed by some light banter and flirting.”

“Introduction, sit, light banter,” she repeats. “And then we’ll get a break?”

“Sure. Whatever.” He backs up a few steps, moving out of the cameras’ direct line of sight. “Action!”

I return to my seat. Continuity must be maintained.

“Hi,” Briar says, acting as though she had not been arguing with John Smith a moment earlier. “I’m Briar Chapman. I’m a Human from Earth. I’ve been working as an advisor for nearly a decade, with a degree in political science and lots of experience in charity fundraising. From the moment I first found out that I was going to have the opportunity to potentially meet my husband on live TV, I... well, I guess I was a bit discombobulated. It felt like getting hit over the back of the head with a paperweight.”

I feel similarly. My eyes are stinging with the beginnings of a headache, and a storm of emotions roils around my stomach. I want to simultaneously chase John Smith out of our home and question the Females about every aspect of their lives. I want to crush the cameras in my hands until they are nothing but broken pieces, but I do not want to waste any time getting to know our guests.

One of these Females might be my future Mate.

That last thought has excitement muting my more rebellious feelings, and I lean forward, watching their faces closely.

“So you are unmated?” Sorin asks.

“Un-what?” Briar blinks.

Lydia has her mouth ajar.

Harlee's eyes are wide, her dark pupils expanded.

“Mated,” Sorin repeats, stiffly.

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“Sorry, I don’t think I know what that means.” Briar rubs at the back of her neck, at the skin under which her translator rests. “Maybe it isn’t translating. Mated. Unmated. Oh, do you mean married? Or divorced? No, I’m not either of those things. It’s actually been a while since I’ve dated anyone.”

Dated. There is that word again. I think, maybe, Briar is not asking what day it is. I think, maybe, dated means something different to the Humans than it does to the rest of us.

With his question answered, Sorin has set his jaw in that stubborn way of his that means he has no intention of speaking again for some time. As a youngling, I used to believe he had a set quota of words to use each day, after which he was not entitled to speak again. Now, I know that is just his way.

“Hello.” I lean further over the table, taking advantage of Sorin’s silence. “Br-eye-ya. Br-eye—” Saying her name in my thoughts and saying her name aloud are two different tasks, and my tongue suddenly feels much too large for my mouth.

“Briar. That’s right,” she confirms, then bares her blunt teeth at me.

I twist the corners of my mouth upwards, lips peeled back from my teeth, attempting to copy.

Harlee finches.

“Was that not right?” I snap my mouth closed.

The heavy silence returns.

This is the most awkward conversation of my entire life.

Unless... Unless of course this is what conversations between potential Mates are supposed to be like. Then, I suppose this is actually the best conversation I have ever had. It is hard to tell... Already some of my newfound excitement is ebbing away, to be replaced by more confusion and anger.

I hate that I do not understand what is happening.

I want to demand answers from Killan. The oldest of us, he spent the first seven years of his life on Ril I, interacting with others of our species. But Killan is drumming the fingers of his lower hand on the table, resolutely ignoring my questioning look.

Sorin, also, is looking anywhere but at any other person.

Both of them are leaving me floundering in the soul-crushing silence of three Females who do not appear to be enjoying themselves. Unless... Unless of course this is how Human Females show enthusiasm—with flinches and silences strong enough to gut a Male of his hard-won confidence.

“It was a great first attempt,” Briar says, breaking the silence with a quick glance at the other Females. “What’s your name?”

An excellent question. Proof she wishes to know more about me.

Or is it proof that she is trying to fill the silence? I cannot tell and decide it does not matter. Either way, I have an opportunity to prove myself worthy of the Females’ attention and consideration.

We have only twenty days together, after all. I must act swiftly to secure their interest.

“I am Roan.” I puff out my chest, wanting to make myself pleasing to their eyes. “I would make an excellent Mate. I own one-third of this farm, and I can provide a good and comfortable life for a Female and our younglings. You want younglings, yes?”

I look between all three Humans. Nobody but Briar meets my gaze.

“Ah, maybe.” Briar shrugs. It is a stunted movement, as she has only two arms with which to shrug. “I mean, I guess...” she continues.

Could Briar be my Mate? I sneak another glance at the still silent Harlee.

Mayhaps Harlee is similar to Sorin—her metaphorical quota of words filled. Although... I would not have thought so earlier, when she had been asking me many questions about my scales and horns. She had not appeared quiet or reserved then.

Something has changed since she entered the kitchen, and I cannot believe that it is just tiredness, as Lydia suggested. Harlee looks... I struggle to identify her expression, trying to judge the downward cast of her gaze. Scared. She looks scared.

Of me?

“My brothers and I all wish for many younglings,” I assure the Females. Assure Harlee.

“Roan.” Killan warns, sounding much like John Smith interrupting.

“It is true,” I declare, crossing my lower arms over my chest and glaring at my brother. “Even if you have never said as much, I know you, Killan.”

His foot collides with my shin.

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“Ow!” Pain radiates up my leg, but it feeds rather than diminishes my determination. “You cannot deny that the only reason you do not already have a house full of younglings is that there are no Females on our planet.”

Killan grips the back of my chair. “You go too far—” he begins, his voice dangerously low, but Briar interrupts—either unaware of his anger or unfazed by it.

“No Females?” she asks, her voice pitching high in a question. “What do you mean there are no Females here?”

Killan snaps his mouth shut. Sorin shuffles from foot to foot.

I frown, again confused by their apparent lack of knowledge.

“We three are the entire population of this planet,” I answer, wishing I could rewind the clock and begin this whole day over again. “You were not told this when you applied to LOVE GALAXY?”

Chapter Six

The camera zooms in on Commentator Chloe. Behind her, in the background, are the six contestants, crowded around the kitchen table. Commentator Chloe raises a microphone to her mouth, addressing the audience.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Get ready to be blown away by this brand-new season of LOVE GALAXY. We’ve

met the girls. We've met the boys. Who do we think they will choose?

Harlee

The tension in the room explodes.

I blink, realizing how lost in my own panic I'd become. I must've accidentally stopped listening to the conversation, and now everyone's staring at Sorin, and Sorin himself is staring straight into the lens of the closet camera—exactly what we've been told not to do.

"I choose Briar," he announces, as if he's the contestant of a reality game show, not a dating show, and has been asked by the host which of the two suitcases he'll open for the chance of winning a million bucks.

And maybe he was asked. Maybe that's the part of the conversation I missed hearing.

Judging by everyone's expression, though... I'm guessing Sorin has gone off script.

"Cut!" Mr. Smith digs his chin into the hard rolls of skin surrounding his neck, reminding me of an ostrich trying to bury its head in the sand. There's saliva gathering in the corners of his mouth and a mad glint in his eye, kind of how you'd imagine Frankenstein might have looked when he was creating his monster. "You can't make demands like that," he tells Sorin. "That isn't how LOVE GALAXY works."

"Are there rules?" Briar asks, extremely skeptically. She doesn't seem to care that half the people in the room are aliens or that she's pissing off the already-cranky director. It's like she doesn't care if she gets the villain edit—or no edit at all.

"Yes!" Mr. Smith's tail flicks. "You must get to know all the Females before picking

your Mate on the last day of filming,” he says, speaking to Sorin.

Sorin doesn't say anything. He simply stares at Mr. Smith, clearly imagining shoving Mr. Smith's head through the closest wall. I can't blame him. I think maybe I'd enjoy shoving Mr. Smith's head through a wall.

Because surely it's all Mr. Smith's fault that we're here, on an alien planet! He was the one who pretended to be a lawyer. He was the one who lured us into his office with the promises of fame and fortune.

Oh, and love, of course.

Pain stings my index finger, and I clench my hands into fists. I hadn't realized I'd been picking at my cuticles until one had bled. It's a nervous habit of a lifetime.

Briar rolls her eyes, clearly without the time or energy to deal with Mr. Smith's tantrum. “Was kidnapping three innocent women and hauling them to a new planet against their wills part of your so-called rules?” she demands, not pulling her verbal punches.

“What?” Killan stands so swiftly his chair falls over. It hits the flagstone floor with a bang that has me flinching. “What have you done?”

Across the table, Roan's mouth drops open.

I study him closely, the alien I'm supposed to date.

From the answers he'd given to our earlier questions, I'd suspected he didn't know about our abduction. His reaction is all the remaining proof I need.

Nobody is that good of an actor.

Nobody on reality TV, that is.

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“That’s right,” Briar tells Killan. “We didn’t even know aliens existed until yesterday. We certainly didn’t know it was possible to fly between galaxies. Yet all of a sudden we’ve got translator chips in the back of our necks.” And she rubs her neck, slightly behind one ear.

Wait a minute—I frown, raising an arm to touch the same spot on my own neck.

A dull ache sits at the base of my skull. I hadn’t noticed it before because of how hungover I’ve been all morning. Touching the sore spot means I can suddenly isolate it from the rest of my thumping headache.

It feels similar to having a tight knot in my muscle. Only this knot is shaped like a perfectly circular disk, similar in size to a coin.

My chest constricts, and I’ve got to bite down on a cry of distress for fear of drawing unwanted attention to myself.

Frickin’ hell! When Roan had mentioned translators earlier being the reason I can understand what he and the other aliens are saying, I’d thought he’d meant... like... like there was some sort of alien technology that changed the sound waves into English while they were in the air somewhere after leaving Roan’s mouth but before entering my ears... Or something.

I hadn’t thought he’d meant someone had surgically inserted a piece of technology into my neck, turning me into the Human equivalent of a radio antenna.

I’m holding my fists so tightly, my nails are digging into my palms. I want to shout

my protests. But the last time I threw myself, anger first, into the middle of a confrontation, it ended badly. Really, really frickin' badly.

My cheating ex had retaliated by dumping me. Asher had used my anger against me, claiming I was yelling abuse at him that he didn't deserve. The cheating bastard.

Heartbroken, I'd gotten so drunk that I'd ended up draped over my toilet as my stomach had tried to vacate my body.

The memory of that horrible, crappy time is a scar cut deep into my skin. I carry it with me everywhere. Even now, I try opening my mouth to find my voice, wanting to protest, but there's got to be a frog stuck in my throat because no sound comes out.

You're not that angry person anymore, I remind myself. You're easy-going. You're thoughtful. You're the girl everyone wants to be friends with.

You're also a bit of a coward now, too. That last thought comes unbidden, and I push it down into the dark recesses of my mind, cowering away from my own cowardice.

Instead, I try reassuring myself that the real reason I'm staying silent is because I don't want to make an enemy of Mr. Smith. He got us into this mess; maybe he can get us back out.

I also don't want to alienate Chloe. She agreed to help me get a good edit. Maybe she'll also agree to help us women get back home. She's Mr. Smith's assistant after all. Surely she's got some influence over his decision-making.

Roan stands, and the movement catches my attention. He's glaring at Mr. Smith with such fury I wouldn't be surprised if he swung a punch.

He's a few inches shorter than Killan and not as broad across the shoulders. Despite

that, he's still built like a rock. If I wrapped my arms around his chest, I doubt I'd be able to make my hands meet.

All three brothers are taller and stronger looking than Mr. Smith, but Mr. Smith does that thing again where he digs his chin into the copious skin ruffles around his neck. That, combined with the stubborn way he's glaring at everyone, gives him an air of immovability. Like he's used to fighting for what he wants and is prepared to hold his ground, no matter what the opposition throws at him.

I'm still half hoping Roan is going to throw punches.

His expression certainly suggests he's thinking violent thoughts.

Rather than adding to my panic, the sight of the brothers facing Mr. Smith helps my lungs expand a fraction further so I can breathe a fraction deeper.

They're on our side. Killan and Sorin and Roan. The brothers clearly never wanted abducted brides. They signed up to LOVE GALAXY believing their potential matches had been made fully aware of all the facts—like how they're the only three permanent residents of this planet. Like how there are no other women living here. And like how Briar, Lydia and I are basically their only chance of them finding love and starting a family of their own.

Tension fills the air, sparking, invisible electricity buzzing between us six and Mr. Smith.

“Why go to so much trouble?” Briar asks him. “You’ve got the whole universe at your fingertips, and yet you picked us three? The three you had to drug and abduct. Why Humans?”

“Let us get one thing straight,” he says, staring around at us all gathered at the table.

“I’m the director. I’m in charge. If you want to continue on with LOVE GALAXY, you’ll do what I say.”

“What if we don't want to continue?” Briar asks. “What if we want to go home?”

Yes,I want to scream.I want to go home.

Ingrained fear and two years of self-restraint keeps me silent.

“You can’t.” Mr. Smith doesn’t even pretend he’s negotiating.

“Why can’t we?” Lydia demands, adding her support to Briar’s refusal to kowtow. She wraps an arm around my shoulders, and I lean into her hold, drawing comfort from her touch. No matter how crappy the situation is, I’m not alone.

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I let out a shaky breath, repeating those words to myself over and over again.

I'm not alone.

I'm not alone.

“Do you have a ship? Do you have coordinates? No!” Mr. Smith declares triumphantly. “The brothers don't have a ship either. So, if you want to return home, you'll do what I say. And I say that you have to complete LOVE GALAXY!”

Chapter Seven

Harlee

All opposition dissolves quickly after that. Briar and Lydia are clearly unhappy, but I can tell they don't want to do anything to anger Mr. Smith further on the off chance he cuts his losses and leaves us here, on Ril II, with little chance of returning home.

He's the only one with a spaceship. He's also the only one with Earth's coordinates. Maybe we could recruit another transport ship, but the brothers aren't positive anyone else could find Earth even if they wanted to help. The universe is a big place. We could search for a thousand years and still not find the Milky Way Galaxy.

Lydia, Briar and I trudge after Mr. Smith and Chloe as they lead us back to their spaceship for something he calls the 'individual interviews'. Getting from the main house to his ship isn't as simple as it sounds, and if I needed any convincing that staying on Ril II is a terrible idea then this short walk would have done the trick.

As soon as we step outside, we're accosted by the wind. It full-body slams me, and I slide back a few inches.

Mr. Smith and Chloe don't pause; they charge ahead, having nowhere near as difficult a time as I am battling the wind. It's almost as if they're wearing invisible armor or as if they've got super grip on their shoe soles.

I bow my head, pushing forward. The wind grabs at anything it can—my dress, my hair, the water in my eyes, the breath in my nose. It's also filled with a super-fine grit that rubs against my skin, feeling horribly like a sandpaper exfoliator.

The landscape offers little comfort, bare as it is of trees and plants. I don't think anything could grow out here. There's just Killan's house and Mr. Smith's lone spaceship. Everywhere else I look is nothing but the distance (and blurry) horizon.

The first time I'd come outside, earlier today, I'd been too nervous about meeting the guys to give the landscape much consideration. Australia has deserts, even if I've never been in one. That's what this has to be, I'd thought—a desert in the middle of a freak windstorm.

Now, I know better, and it's so much worse than a simple desert. There are no sand dunes. No signs of life. The wind had rubbed the planet's surface completely flat, and its ground is as hard as marble.

I practically trip upwards when I reach the ramp, stumbling into the belly of the spaceship with a growing sense of relief. I hate that I'm glad to be here, the ship that stole me from my home. But it's a hundred times nicer inside than being outside.

I'm rubbing grit from my eyes and nose, craving water so I can wash out my mouth.

My hair's a tangled mess, and I'm pushing sweaty strands away from my face, hot

and panting after the effort of walking only about twenty meters.

Lydia's coughing, ragged, hacking breaths, hands pressed to her knees, as her lungs expel the grit she breathed. Even Briar's looking more defeated than I've ever seen her. She's glaring at Mr. Smith's back as he makes his way deeper into the spaceship, but tears are running down her cheeks.

I wouldn't say she's crying. Not judging by the way she's angrily swiping at her red eyes. Her tears are probably thanks to the wind. But her shoulders are slumped, and she keeps glancing behind her, toward Killan's house, like she wishes she was back there instead of here. Or like she wishes the brothers had come with us.

I also wish that, but Mr. Smith ordered them to stay in the kitchen.

I got the impression he didn't want the six of us mingling without him to monitor everything. I got the impression he wants to ensure our compliance by keeping us separated—at least for the first few days of filming.

That Roan, Killan and Sorin all stopped arguing against Mr. Smith when Briar and Lydia did reinforced in my mind their commitment to helping us.

It's almost scary how fast I went from being oh my God, the brothers are aliens to the brothers are our alien friends. Now, the only person I'm still freaking out about is Mr. Smith himself—the asshole who pretended he was a Human lawyer to trick me into trusting him.

“Come on, Harlee,” Chloe says, gesturing for me to follow her. “We're interviewing you first.”

Of us Humans, she's the least windswept. There's enough gel in her blonde curls to make them impervious to the gale-force wind outside. Her glasses protected her eyes,

and I think she has starched her clothes, making sure they'll stay wrinkle-free.

I'm impressed. She really knows how to dress for the occasion.

"Harlee can't go on camera looking like this," Briar says, her voice raspy from the wind. "Give us a minute to fix her hair." And she pulls a comb out of her pocket. It's identical to the one I'd used a few hours earlier, when I'd fixed my hair after the first time I'd struggled through the wind to Killan's house.

"Good idea," Lydia agrees, finally straightening. She's pale, her lips almost white, but she gives me a tight smile when I meet her eyes.

"Two minutes." Chloe holds up two fingers, demonstrating she means business, and then heads down the corridor. Some doors are already open, including the one Chloe walks through, following Mr. Smith. Other doors are locked, and there aren't any handles or anything else to indicate how we can open them.

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“You okay?” Briar asks, dragging Lydia and me into the makeup room.

Lydia holds up a finger, pausing Briar’s question. Then she removes a blue-gray asthma inhaler from her dress pocket and takes three deep breaths, pulling medicine into her lungs.

After another few deep breaths, she nods. “Ihatedust.”

“God.” Briar exchanges a look with me, eyes wide.

Lydia must take insult, because she stuffs the inhaler back into her pocket and crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” Her expression suggests any arguments to the contrary would be highly unwelcome. And it’s not like we’ve got enough to deal with already, so Briar steps up behind me, reaching up to fix my hair.

I bend my knees, making myself a couple of inches shorter so she can more easily reach. Lydia grasps me by my elbows, helping keep me steady, and for a second there’s nothing but the sound of our combined breathing.

A mix of emotions squirms in my stomach, making me feel as if I’ve eaten a bowl of live worms. I hate feeling like this—stressed and panicked. It’s draining my energy and feeding my headache. All I really want to do is lie down and cover my head in an icepack.

What I've actually got to do is face up to my two near-impossible tasks.

Finding a way to return to Earth.

And making Roan fall in love with me.

The first of those seems absurdly more important than the latter. But I'm thinking they might actually go hand in hand. If I want Chloe and Mr. Smith to help us get home, then I've got to do what they say, and what they've said is for me to make and then break Roan's heart.

I close my eyes, the task unpalatable. I'd thought the other contestants would be the same as me—here for selfish reasons. Certainly not here searching for genuine love. Yet that's exactly what Roan's hoping for.

Romance. A partner. Someone with which to share his life and have children with.

And then there's me, the one destined to rip the heart out of his chest and present it to him (and the entire LOVE GALAXY audience) on a silver platter.

"I don't know about you," Briar says in a whisper so quiet that I feel Lydia lean closer, all the better to hear, "but I don't trust Mr. Smith. Even if we do as he says, what's stopping him from ditching us the second LOVE GALAXY finishes filming?"

"Fucked if I know," Lydia whispers, and I open my eyes again. She's watching Briar over my shoulder, and I study the tight lines at the corners of Lydia's mouth, another sign of how stressed she is.

"Maybe there's some way we can find the control room," Briar says. "If we could find the cockpit, we could take control of the ship."

“Have you ever flown a spaceship?” Lydia asks, even though we all know the answer.

“It can’t be that hard,” Briar argues, the breath of her whisper tickling the back of my neck as she continues to busy herself with detangling my hair. “Mr. Smith can do it.”

“Good point.” Lydia thinks for a second. “But not all the doors open automatically. There are... What are they called?”

“Biogenetic locks,” Briar answers, speaking slowly, in a way that makes it clear she’s not said those words before and is repeating what she heard someone else say. “Mr. Smith bragged that some of the doors only open to him, but I can’t believe that. Every lock can be picked.”

“By an expert,” says Lydia. “Are you an expert?”

“No.” Briar’s comb catches on a knot. “We still have to try.”

“I’ll talk to Chloe,” I say, finally breaking my silence. It’s been so long since I’ve talked that my voice sounds like it did when I first woke up, hard and raspy. I clear my throat. “She’ll be on our side.”

“I don’t know...” Briar lets the end of her sentence fade away. She might be too kind to outright disagree with me, but clearly she wants to.

“Chloe and I are allies,” I say, keeping my voice as quiet as possible, not wanting the cameras mounted to the wall to overhear. “She’ll help us. I know she will.”

The desire to tell them about the deal Chloe and I made twists inside me, but I bite back on the urge. She made me promise not to tell, and I don’t want to disappoint her because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut on the first day.

I also, selfishly, don't want to admit to the terrible thing I'm about to do.

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Make Roan fall in love with you. And then break his heart.

“I can’t believe Chloe had anything to do with our abduction,” I say instead. “But she’s his assistant, which means she’s got sway over his decisions. She can help us ensure Mr. Smith fulfills his end of our deal and actually returns us to Earth after LOVE GALAXY.”

“It can’t hurt to ask,” Lydia agrees with a single-shoulder shrug.

“Really?” Briar asks. “Because Chloe hit me over the back of her head with a paperweight. That’s my abduction story. What’s yours?”

“She hit you?” That doesn’t sound right. I glance over my shoulder at her. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. I’ve got the lump on my head to prove it.”

“I—” I struggle to justify what Chloe did. “Probably, Mr. Smith blackmailed her into helping him, like he’s blackmailed us into complying with his orders. Chloe probably didn’t have any choice.”

“Right... Well, you ask Chloe for help, if you think that will work,” she agrees.

It isn’t quite the glowing endorsement I’d been hoping for. Nevertheless, beggars can’t be choosers, and so I give her a thankful smile.

“But we should still try to find the cockpit,” she adds. “Maybe Lydia and I can

secretly search while you're being interviewed. Mr. Smith and Chloe can't possibly watch all of us all the time. Maybe you can drag out your interview for as long as possible to give us more time to search the ship. Act stupid or something. Get them to repeat all their questions. You can?—”

She snaps her mouth shut as Chloe sticks her head around the doorway, motioning for me to follow.

I take a deep breath. My heart's suddenly racing. I'm nervous again, and not just because Briar's entrusted me with creating a diversion.

I've waited two years for this moment—my first interview on reality TV. For twenty-four months, I've been preparing possible answers and practicing facial expressions in front of my bathroom mirror for this exact moment.

Sure, I never imagined my debut into celebrity-ville would be on alien TV, but TV is TV wherever you are in the universe. And I have every intention of making myself proud and of proving to everyone watching— I mean, of proving to every alien watching that I'm a good person. That I'm a successful person.

That you're a heartbreaker, my brain adds, but I ignore it. Stupid brain.

Holding my smile on my face, I brush the last of the dust out of my eyelashes and follow Chloe into the interview room, on my best behavior. Ready to create a diversion.

Chapter Eight

The LOVE GALAXY Official Fan Chatroom

Private chat | 3 members

ROAN:

So... I might have made a terrible mistake...

SkyLander:

NO! What do you mean?

F Crew:

What the fek happened?

SkyLander:

Tell all the gossip!

SkyLander:

!!!

Roan

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I look up from the private chatroom conversation I have going on my datapad as Sorin takes the seat recently vacated by Briar. Already, the kitchen feels empty without the Females. It is a strange feeling, after so many years of there only being the three of us.

“It is my fault,” I say, making my confession. “I convinced you both to apply to LOVE GALAXY. I never...” But my voice fades away.

I had been about to say I never should have pushed us to apply, but I cannot confess to wishing Harlee, Briar and Lydia had never come to Ril II, even now I am in full possession of the facts of their abduction.

Traitorous thoughts circle my head. I hate that the Females had no choice in coming here. But here they are, and I want with a need that is bone-deep for LOVE GALAXY to be real. After all of John Smith’s lies about willing Females, I want some of what he promised us to be true.

I want the chance to prove myself a worthy Mate. I want the chance to explore the possibility of a viable relationship between me and... Harlee?

Lydia reminds me too much of Killan.

And Sorin has already set his claim on Briar.

I think of Harlee and the way her voice disappeared along with her confidence when she learned the full extent of her abduction and John Smith’s betrayal. I think of how heartbroken she must be. Of how lonely.

Of how I could offer her comfort. Protection. A new home...

"I choose Briar," Killan mocks, in a voice that is clearly supposed to be Sorin's. If he remembers that we are being filmed, he pays the cameras no heed. "I choose Briar."

Sorin grits his teeth and growls.

"Scudding fool," Killan scolds. "And you, too, Roan, for getting us into this scudding mess."

"Fek you." I cross all four arms. I am not above admitting fault, but Killan knows exactly what to say to set a fire burning in my stomach. Being the oldest, he always thinks he knows best. But if we left everything to Killan, nothing around here would ever change. All our days for the rest of our lives would be identical until we died of boredom or old age.

"How did you meet Briar before the first filming?" I demand of Sorin. "Why did you not tell me so I could meet the Females early, too?"

"It was an accident," Sorin answers.

"You wanted to keep the Females to yourself. That is why you did not tell?—"

"Listen to yourselves," Killan interrupts. "Already sounding like stubborn fools, fighting for Mates."

"We are not fighting for Mates," I grumble. It is not Briar I want.

"And do not get any ideas about following Sorin's example," he snaps, pointing at me. "We will respect the Females' desire to return to their home and do everything we can to assist."

“I know that,” I say, ignoring how churlish I sound. And ignoring Killan’s order. If Sorin can claim a Female, so can I. Quietly. Secretly. So my brothers do not know what my plan is until after I have succeeded.

Harlee might not have come here by choice, but surely she can choose to stay. I need only spend these twenty days of filming convincing her that a life on Ril II with me will be a goodlife. A life of love and companionship. A life worth giving up her home for.

Once she has gotten to know me, she will not want to leave.

I stand, trying to keep my movements as unhurried and inconspicuous as possible. Killan might be my older brother, but he is not the boss of my decisions. He can tell me what to do until his face turns blue, I do not have to comply.

“Where are you going?” he demands, standing, presumably intending to follow me—or to stop me.

“Nowhere.” I shrug, stepping away from him, putting distance between us. “To John Smith’s ship. He said he wanted to interview everyone. There is no harm in me going now, is there?”

“Akh...” Killan glances between Sorin and me, clearly thinking the two of us are conspiring behind his back, although we have had no time alone together since meeting the Females. And as if I would tell Sorin my plan, anyway, and risk him getting in my way as he tries to convince Briar to copulate with him.

I meet Killan’s gaze, keeping my expression innocent.

If, after the twenty days are over, Harlee still wishes to return to her home, I will do everything within my power to make sure that happens. But, until then, there can be

no harm in showing her what an excellent Mate I can be.

I take a slow step toward the staircase, inching my way out of the kitchen and away from my brothers, even as Killan points a finger toward my chest.

“Be smart,” he warns, teeth gritted. “Leave the Females alone. It would have been better for us had they never been brought here.”

Chapter Nine

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

I didn't quite hear what you said. Could you please repeat the question? Again.

City Single Harlee scoots forward until she is sitting on the edge of her heart-shaped chair. Commentator Chloe takes a deep breath.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Sure—

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Sorry, I'm a little nervous. This is a dream come true. I'm still having trouble believing this is happening. That I'm here, in the LOVE GALAXY studio room, er...

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Completely understandable.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Recording booth-slash-umm-spaceship?

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Spaceship, yes. Why don't you tell us about yourself, Harlee?

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Well, honestly, Chloe, I always thought I'd be married with kids by the time I was thirty. But obviously that hasn't happened. The last few years of my life have been somewhat of a roller-coaster, to say the least. I could never have prepared myself for the hardship that comes with being dumped by the man I thought I'd be spending the rest of my life with. Family is so important to me, but I wasn't good enough for him, you know? He always wanted me to be someone else. To be someone better, and our relationship became toxic—for the both of us.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

He put a lot of pressure on you?

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

I think he did. But I happen to like the person I am, so when he gave me his final ultimatum, I left and didn't go back. It was heartbreaking, but it had to happen, for my own mental health—and for his. Since then, I've been focusing on getting to know the real me.

City Single Harlee holds a hand to her chest.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Deep down, all I want is to be loved and to love someone. And I'm ready to take the ultimate leap of faith.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Aww. Do you?—

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

That's why I'm here. Because I know there's somebody out there in the world... I mean, out there in the universe who will love me for myself.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Do you think?—

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

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Did you know, Chloe, that there's a word in Mandarin that literally means 'leftover women', and it's used to describe unmarried women over the age of about twenty-seven. Shèngnu. Well, I don't want to be a leftover woman anymore. I want to find my person. I want to find love.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Do you think vulnerability is a strength?

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Sheesh, I really hope so. Because I feel incredibly vulnerable, opening up about myself and my life in front of thousands of viewers.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Billions.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

I'm sorry. What?

City Single Harlee does a double take, staring at Commentator Chloe.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Billions of viewers watch LOVE GALAXY. There are going to be billions of people

who see this interview.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Oh...

City Single Harlee looks directly into the camera, eyes wide.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Oh!

City Single Harlee swallows.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Right. Well... I suppose I should introduce myself p-properly then, to thebillionsof p-people watching. Hi, everyone. I'm Harlee Jun. I'm a Human from the p-planet Earth, from the Milky Way Galaxy, and I'm doing all of this with the express hope of finding the love of my life.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Your Mate.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Sorry? Oh, right. My Mate. Yes, I'm searching for my Mate.

City Single Harlee turns back to Commentator Chloe.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

whispers Did that sound genuine enough, or should we do a retake? I think I could do better.

Roan

“Harlee.” I pause in the ship’s central passageway in front of the open door through which Harlee is exiting a brightly-lit room. Behind her, I catch sight of LOVE GALAXY wallpaper. Then John Smith is standing before me.

It is a tight fit; the ship was not designed to have so many people lingering.

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“You’re early,” he snaps. “We’re interviewing Lydia before you.”

“Am I?” I blink, innocently. “I will wait.”

“Hmm.” He gives me a long look, before motioning for Lydia to proceed him into the room Harlee has recently vacated.

Lydia dawdles, taking hold of Harlee’s hand.

“Did you—” Harlee begins, but a swift glance at everyone watching has pink flooding her cheeks, and she closes her mouth.

“No.” Lydia shakes her head. “Mr. Smith locked Briar in one of the bedrooms, and I can’t open the door to get her out.”

“She’s perfectly safe,” John Smith snaps, taking hold of Lydia’s shoulder and pushing her through the open doorway before him. “She’s resting.”

“Then how come you won’t let me speak to her?” Lydia demands as John Smith begins to close the door behind them.

“Actually, Chloe,” Harlee says, raising a hand to catch the assistant’s attention over the top of John Smith’s head. “Could I have a quick word? In private?”

“Bit busy—” is all Chloe has time to say before the door closes completely, leaving Harlee and me in the passageway by ourselves.

“Right.” Harlee stares at the shut door. “Maybe later, then,” she mumbles as if she thinks Chloe can still hear her.

And maybe Chloe can. There is a lot I do not know about Humans.

She turns and flinches when she sees me, almost as though she had forgotten that I was here—or that she was not alone.

“Harlee,” I repeat, then pause, suddenly wondering what else I should say. Starting our second-ever conversation with a detailed list of all the reasons I would make an excellent Mate might appear too zealous. Unless, of course, that is exactly what she is waiting for. “Akh...” No words escape my mouth, and I’m left wondering if this is how Sorin feels every time he falls silent, faced with the endless possibilities of conversational topics.

“Hi.” She tucks a strand of hair behind one ear. Standing, she is almost level with my shoulder, and she has to tilt her head back to meet my gaze, which she does before hastily looking away again.

She is the tallest of the Females, I realize, and I like that. I like that I do not have to bend as far to bring us face to face.

“Actually Roan, I w-wanted to talk to you as well. Maybe there’s somewhere we could go.”

This being my first time aboard, I do not know where anything is.

“This way, I think.” She takes the lead, and I follow her deeper inside.

A few of the doors automatically slide open as we pass them, but most remain sealed. Behind one of them, Briar is being kept prisoner, and I clench my hands into fists,

wishing there was something I could do to release her. But all sealed doors are controlled by a biogenetic lock that responds to John Smith only, effectively keeping everyone else out—or in, as the case may be.

So instead I follow Harlee through one of the open doorways. The room beyond is unlike any I have seen before. It is small, with a low ceiling, and I must bow my head to keep from hitting my horns. Two cameras have been mounted onto the walls, and their lenses move as they zoom in on our faces.

Also present are mirrors along two of the walls and three tables all set with bright lights. Containers and electronic equipment are scattered over every surface, and Harlee brushes some of them aside as she takes a seat, turning on the swivel chair to face me.

I copy her, sitting, but the chair is much too low for me, and I am sure my knees are poking up toward my chin. No matter how much I swivel, I cannot find a comfortable position.

“Can I, er, help you?” she asks, eyes narrowed as she watches me spin.

“What is the purpose of this room of—” I survey the unknown objects—“things?”

“It’s a makeup room. You know, for getting ready for filming.”

I pause in my quest to find a comfortable position. “You get ready for filming?” Should I be getting ready for filming? I will be having my first on-camera interview soon. “What do you do to get ready?”

“Oh, well, I put on some makeup and curled my hair.” She runs a hand through her perfectly black, perfectly smooth hairs, threading her fingers between the strands. “The curls didn’t last long, thanks to the wind, but it was curly for a bit,” she adds, as

if she can read the direction of my thoughts.

I narrow my eyes, suspicious, but quickly dismiss any idea that she may be telepathic. She and the other Humans would not have had so many questions for Killan and me when we first met if they could read our thoughts.

“I w-wanted to thank you,” she says, “for earlier.”

“For earlier?” I blink.

“Yes, for when you sided with Lydia and Briar and me.”

“You were abducted,” I remind her. Of course, I sided with her. To do otherwise would have been to condone kidnapping. I have heard of similar cases before, where people have been taken from their home planets, usually by the Hov, to work as slaves in their gladiatorial Arena. It never occurred to me that LOVE GALAXY would be involved in such a practice.

“I did not know—” I begin, but I am so desperate for her to understand that I trip over my words. “I never would have applied— Abducted?—”

“Don’t say the ‘abducted’ word.” John Smith’s voice blares through the room as loud as if he were standing between us.

Harlee jumps, pressing a hand to her chest and looking around wildly. Her gaze settles on the closest camera as John Smith continues speaking, “Flirt. Banter. Laugh. Happy thoughts only,” he demands through the loudspeaker.

A flash of something that might have been anger flits across her face, but then Harlee is brushing her hands down the silk of her dress, smoothing the fabric. “Flirting only,” she agrees, but I could have sworn she had been about to say something else, something not so agreeable.

I glance between her and the camera, hating that this is how we met. Hating that John Smith is tarnishing our first time alone together. Hating that I am desperate enough,

selfish enough to want to continue with LOVE GALAXY even after all the horrors that have befallen Harlee and the other two eligible Females.

I open my mouth to tell her of these thoughts, wanting to explain my internal struggle, but she leans forward, resting a hand on one of my knees, and my brain short circuits.

I look down at my leg, staring at her small hand. Against my green scales, her skin looks impossibly pale and impossibly soft.

I swallow, my blood rushing to my cock.

With a gasp, I shove my chair backwards, away from her hand, desperate to hide my growing bulge.

The chair's feet are nailed to the floor. With a crack, the seam where the chair seat meets the chair back splits, and I tumble backwards. My ass hits the ground with a thud that rocks the entire spaceship, leaving my legs draped over the chair seat.

My heart thumps in my chest. There is no way John Smith will not use the footage of me falling over in the first episode. Everyone in all the known galaxies will see exactly how alone I am. How unpracticed I am at speaking with Females.

“Umm...” Harlee stands, leaning over me. “Are you alright, Roan?”

Her hair swings forward over her shoulders, and she brushes a strand out of her face with a dismissive wave of her hand. Creases line her expressive brow, and she presses her lips tightly together, holding back more words.

“Go on,” I urge her. “I am a mighty Male. I can handle whatever you have to say.”

“I’m...” She covers her mouth with a hand, but a giggle escapes, nonetheless. “I’m not laughing at you,” she assures me, more giggles slipping out from between the gaps of her fingers. “I’m laughingwithyou.”

Her happiness is a beautiful sound. Contagious.

“With me?” Feigning incredulity, I slide my legs off the chair and use my upper arms to push myself into a more upright position.

“Ah-ha,” she agrees, unable to open her mouth without laughing.

Our gazes meet. The corners of her eyes crinkle. Slowly, she removes her hand from her mouth. The corners of her lips are curved upwards, and she is showing me her blunt teeth again.

Akh, so this is what her happiness looks like. I had been wondering.

Then she blinks, breaking the connection.

“Come on. Up you get.” She grasps one of my lower arms, clearly trying to help me. Her strength does little to move me, but I follow her guidance and stand. Remembering too late not to straighten to my full height, my horns scrape against the ceiling.

“Fek!”

“Come here.” She steers me into turning around and sitting on her still-intact chair.

The urge to pull her onto my lap is almost undefeatable, and I glance around the room, seeking inspiration for how I might encourage her to touch me again. I would risk embarrassingmyself a million times if it meant the possibility of her hands on me

once more.

“What should I do to get ready for filming?” I ask, examining the array of containers and electronics scattered over the three tables. “Mayhaps you could suggest something?”

“Oh.” She blinks. “Sure.”

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I pick up an object. “This one?”

“That’s foundation.”

“Foundation for what?”

“For your skin. I mean, your... scales? Actually”—she gently takes the container out of my hand and returns it to the table—“I don’t think that’s your color.”

“It is not.” I scan the objects, searching for a green one but find nothing.

“How about this?” Harlee picks up a small tub, about the size of her palm, and unscrews the lid to reveal a white paste.

I am most definitely not that color, but I reframe from stating the obvious.

“This is a moisturizer.” Absorbed in her task, Harlee kneels in front of me and dips two fingers into the tub, scooping out a small blob of paste. “I think it should work on scales as well as on skin. Tell me if it stings.” And she rubs gentle circles on the inner wrist of one of my arms, a pucker marring the center of her usually smooth forehead, indicating... Concentration? Concern? Care? Humans use many facial expressions unfamiliar to Ril’os.

My body responds to her nearness. My heartbeat accelerates. My mouth goes dry. My muscles grow stiff. I am afraid that if I move the spell will break, and Harlee will release my hand.

And my cock, of course, is once again pressing against my sheath, desperate for release. Desperate for her touch.

I know without a doubt that I am going to make a fool of myself, again. It feels inevitable, inescapable. If we stay here, with Harlee's fingers caressing my wrist, I am going to lose control. But how can I break contact, when this, here and now, is the most erotic moment of my entire life?

"Harlee." Despite my best efforts, a moan escapes my mouth, and I shift forward in my seat, until my knees brush against her arms.

"Oh, umm..." She stands, loses her balance, grabs hold of my shoulder to keep upright, then snatches her hand back, akin to me having burnt her. "We could try some mascara," she says quickly, dropping the moisturizer pot back onto the table. "Only you don't have eyelashes... Right."

"Eyelashes?" I shift closer again, until I am on the edge of the chair.

"These are eyelashes." She closes her eyes and gently brushes a finger against the black hairs decorating her eyelids.

Unable to resist, I copy. Her eyelashes are soft, almost too soft for me to feel them. I do, however, hear the pause in her breathing as she stills.

"And what is this?" I touch one of the two lines of hairs arched across her forehead.

"My eyebrows." Her answer is a whisper, and she leans a fraction more firmly into my touch.

"And this?" I press a fingertip to one corner of her mouth, careful not to scratch her with my claws. "When you show your teeth in happiness?"

“That’s a smile.” Her eyes flutter open. “You don’t smile?”

I shake my head. When I tried before, she had flinched away from me, scared, and the last thing I want is for Harlee to be frightened of me.

Harlee

Flirt, Mr. Smith had instructed, and so that’s what I’d done. But the way Roan has acted in response makes it abundantly clear he’s taking everything I’ve done seriously. The guy literally fell off his chair when I touched his knee. Now, he’s staring at me like I hung the moon. Like I’m the first woman he’d ever had a crush on.

Like I was his only hope of finding love.

I had everything planned for being a contestant on an Earth-style dating show, starring alongside other self-centered celebrity wannabes.

Nobody has ever looked at me as Roan is looking at me, not even Asher at the height of our relationship, when he was still telling me that he loved me and pretending that I mattered to him.

After less than a day I already know that the difference between my ex and Roan is as vast as a chasm. And I am woefully unprepared for flirting with the most adorably innocent alien in the entire frickin’ universe.

Roan doesn’t deserve to have his feelings trifled with. And he doesn’t deserve to have his heart broken, by me of all people.

Me, who knows better than most what it feels like to have the one you love abandons you.

If there was any way I could make Mr. Smith turn this spaceship around today and take us Humans home, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Anything has to be better than treating Roan as a toy to be played with and then tossed away, rejected. On intergalactic TV with an audience of billions.

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I open my eyes to find him watching me intently.

With him seated and me standing, I'm finally taller than him. This close I can see all the tiny details of his scales—the way they neatly overlap each other in a way that means they can turn complicated corners and fill in even the most difficult of places, like the creases of his elbows and the indentations between his fingers.

Only his palms are free of scales, so even his touches are soft, where the rest of his body is straight lines and solid muscles—as evidenced when I tried to help him stand and couldn't lift him, even the smallest amount.

Why Roan? I'd asked Chloe, when she'd first told me her plan for us. Why Roan? But it's so obvious now I've met him. He's sitting in front of me with his heart on his metaphorical sleeve, wanting nothing more than to be noticed.

To be loved.

Breaking his heart in front of the cameras would make for spellbinding TV. The audience of billions wouldn't be able to keep their eyes off the screen. It would be like watching a sinking ship—piquing everybody's morbid curiosity.

My heart hammers a stampede in my chest. I reorganize the makeup on the closest table as an excuse to break eye contact and to give my hands something to do, hoping he doesn't notice how much I'm shaking. Hoping he doesn't notice how much I'm regretting our time spent alone together.

Chapter Ten

Harlee

“What do you mean Briar’s going with Sorin? Going where?”

Mr. Smith stares at Lydia, but Lydia doesn’t back down. She’s got her hands pressed to her hips, and her sleeveless sundress does wonders for displaying her muscular arms. She should be in an advertisement for a gym, with her eyes shining and her cheeks flushed as she glares at the director with as much stubborn refusal to back down as he’s got.

She opens her mouth, and right when I think she’s going to really start berating him, she takes a half step back, glancing at me.

For a split second I see despair in her expression, but then she blinks, and it’s gone. Whatever argument with which she’d been about to confront Mr. Smith dies when faced with the very real threat of him refusing to take us home after the show’s finished filming. And Lydia really, really wants to go home.

I step up beside her, linking my arm with hers and trying to offer her my silent support. I think, of the two of us, I’ve had infinitely more practice at keeping my mouth shut.

Still, I hate seeing the full force of her personality squashed into submission.

Like me. The thought isn’t a happy one, and I shield away from it.

I’m not submissive, I tell myself instead. I’m happy-go-lucky. I’m everyone’s girl Friday. And I smile, wrinkling the corners of my eyes because the cameras are filming us and I don’t want anyone thinking I’m not grateful for the opportunity LOVE GALAXY has given me.

The audience always finds it incredibly easy to hate the girl who isn't grateful.

We're back in Killan's kitchen—Roan, Killan, Lydia, Mr. Smith and me. The plan is for us to say our goodbyes to Sorin and Briar here, then to film content for the second episode. I'm not sure exactly what that content is going to be, as Mr. Smith hasn't outlined that part of the plan yet.

Already, my fake smile is making my cheeks hurt, and I'm so tired, having hardly slept last night. Thoughts of Roan had run riot around my head as I'd lain in the dark, trying to focus on the sound of Lydia's deep breathing.

The two of us had been given a room on the ship to share, with hammocks instead of proper beds—and mine had been too short to be comfortable. We haven't seen Briar since before my interview yesterday; she'd slept in her own room, the one Mr. Smith's been keeping her locked up in whenever she isn't needed for filming.

And now he's sending her away, exiling her to Sorin's house, all because of the fuss she made yesterday, telling the guys about us Humans being abducted and demanding better treatment.

A sour taste fills my mouth.

I doubt Mr. Smith will tell the audience the truth of what's happening. Probably LOVE GALAXY will make Briar and Sorin's separation from the main group look like a romantic getaway so the new couple can get to know each other better.

"Sorin has a house at the southernmost border of the farm," Roan answers Lydia's question when it becomes clear Mr. Smith isn't going to say anything else.

I don't remember seeing any farm, the few times I've made the trek through the wind between the house and ship. Unless, of course, it's the wind they're farming.

“She won’t have to walk there, will she?” I ask, trying to keep the worry and anger out of my voice. If experience has taught me anything, it’s that showing defiance guarantees you’ll look like a bitch on screen and won’t get you anything but a terrible reputation.

Roan shakes his head. “We have underground tunnels that connect our houses. It takes about an hour of travel to reach Sorin’s. I believe cameras have already been set up there.” He glances at Mr. Smith, seeking confirmation, but the director is examining something on his tablet screen and deliberately ignoring us.

“Why so far?” With only three people on the entire planet, I’d have thought the brothers would spend most of their time together, for lack of any other company, but apparently quiet Sorin craves privacy.

Before Roan can answer, Briar, Sorin and Chloe descend the stairs into the kitchen. Sorin’s scales are flushed blue, and he avoids making eye contact with anyone. Briar’s looking distinctly windswept, and she’s tugging at the hem of her dress, double checking it’s covering her ass.

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“A quick farewell,” Mr. Smith announces, motioning for Chloe to step closer. She positions herself directly in front of a camera, holding a microphone to her mouth. “And action!”

Briar hurries over to Lydia and me, pulling us into a hug. She isn’t acting, even though we’re surrounded by cameras. She’s shaking, and I bow my head, burying my face in the crook of her neck. She squeezes tightly, the best type of hug, and I squeeze her back, wishing I could tie the three of us together, making it impossible for Mr. Smith to separate us.

“The first of our contestants have coupled up,” Chloe says in her most professional commentator’s voice, speaking into her microphone.

“Keep safe,” Lydia whispers, glaring at Briar as if she thinks being tough will ensure Briar does as she’s told.

It feels like there’s every possibility we won’t see Briar again. Like she’s saying goodbye for good. But surely that’s just me being melodramatic. I’m feeling particularly vulnerable, and so every small thing that happens hurts a hundred times more than normal.

“You, too,” Briar responds, and I can tell she’s forcing herself to smile because she looks like me when I first started practicing my fake smiles in front of the mirror. There isn’t happiness behind that smile, and the corners of her eyes don’t wrinkle.

It makes me want to hold her even tighter, to protect her from everything that’s happening. There’s something so innocent about that smile—that she hasn’t had to

practice it. That she hasn't perfected it into something so accurate that it becomes indistinguishable from the real thing.

"We'll keep trying," I find myself promising her and Lydia both, my voice so quiet I can barely hear it myself. "We'll keep searching for the cockpit. Or maybe there's something else aboard the ship that we can use to get home."

"I don't trust Mr. Smith," Briar whispers. "We need a back-up plan, one that doesn't rely on his cooperation."

"Just don't piss him off," Lydia begs, face pinched. "Don't ruin this for us."

Chapter Eleven

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

What do you think of your brother staking his claim on Briar so early in the season?

FARMER ROAN:

My brothers have spent their lives in service to our farm. They deserve happiness. They deserve families of their own and Mates to care for.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

You aren't annoyed that Sorin claiming Briar means there's one less Female for you to get to know? Maybe Briar could have been the one for you.

FARMER ROAN:

She is not.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

You sound sure about that. But how could you know? You only just met the Females.

Farmer Roan shrugs.

FARMER ROAN:

I know Briar is not for me because I know who is.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Already? After one meeting?

FARMER ROAN:

Yes.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

So are you going to tell us who—Lydia or Harlee? Or are you going to make us guess?

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Commentator Chloe laughs.

FARMER ROAN:

Harlee.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Really? So... so simple?

FARMER ROAN:

Yes. So simple. I know, in here, that it is true.

Farmer Roan taps his chest.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Back on Earth—as the resident Human expert of LOVE GALAXY, I can tell you that's what we'd callinstalove.

FARMER ROAN:

In star love?

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Insta.Instalove. It's a Human expression. It means instant love, as in you fell instantly in love with someone as soon as you saw them.

FARMER ROAN:

This is good, is it not?

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Honestly, not really. It's viewed with suspicion. It can mean you're desperate. And no Female wants a desperate Mate.

Commentator Chloe laughs again.

FARMER ROAN:

Akh... Right. I understand.

Farmer Roan nods, pauses, then frowns.

FARMER ROAN:

I do not understand. Why is this a bad thing?

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

I'm the one who's supposed to be asking the questions. I'll simply say that it's not really attractive to, you know, fall in love with someone so quickly. It makes your feelings seem fake.

FARMER ROAN:

I see... There is a lot I still need to learn about Human Females.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Definitely. But that's fine, 'cause I'm here, and I'm always happy to help.

Roan

Trying to look neither desperate nor fake, I keep my gaze from lingering on Harlee as Briar and Sorin say their final farewells and set off on their journey to Sorin's cottage, where they will presumably stay for the remaining days of filming. Silence fills the kitchen, with Killan and Lydia both sulking, their arms crossed, and Harlee... I move my head in a circular motion, pretending I am examining the kitchen, while really I am trying to catch sight of Harlee in the corner of my eyes.

She is standing behind one of the kitchen chairs, hands clutching the chair back. Her mouth holds a smile firmly in place, as she waits for John Smith to finish doing whatever it is that has captured his attention on his datapad. She is not as happy as she is determined to look for she is holding onto the chair with such force that her knuckles have turned white, betraying her true feelings.

"Okay," John Smith straightens, glancing around at us. "Time to film episode 2. I'm after some natural dialogue. We're still in the early stages, so try to spend most of your time talking about your lives and hopes and dreams—and a lot of flirting." He waves his free hand through the air, dismissing our lives, hopes and dreams as being of no more importance than fodder for his broadcast. "To help, I'll be setting the group a task that I expect everyone to participate in. Even though Chloe and I will be back on my ship, we will be watching closely. Any signs that you're not following instructions and... well, we all know that you need me a lot more than I need you, so don't fuck this up." He shoots the Females one last glare, then he and Chloe head up the stairs. A moment later comes the sound of the front door opening and closing.

More silence.

A muscle twitches in Killan's forehead. He is furious at being told what to do. Even more furious, I think, that two Females were threatened in his kitchen and there is nothing he can do but comply with demands.

As if it costs her strength, Harlee releases her hold on the chair and turns to more fully face the group. "I wonder how Briar and Sorin are getting on."

"Akh..." The cheerful note in her voice sounds strange. Forced.

"Me, too." Lydia nods, her voice strained, too, and when she glances toward the camera clipped onto the kitchen bench, I realize they are trying to give John Smith the natural dialogue he demanded.

"Me as well," I add, taking a half step closer to the Females and throwing Killan a meaningful say something look.

His frown deepens, but before he can argue, his datapad releases a sharp beep that has Harlee jumping and looking around the room for the source of the alarm.

I pick up Killan's datapad, as he makes no move to do so, and when I touch the dark screen with a finger, it lights up, displaying a message from LOVE GALAXY. It's two brief paragraphs. I can read one, but the other paragraph comprises these strange, disjointed symbols, presumably Human writing.

Killan, Roan, Lydia and Harlee,

Now that introductions have been made, it is time for Two Truths and a Lie.

But can you guess which contestant is hiding the biggest secret of all?

#TellAll #LoveGalaxy

I read my half of the message aloud, then ask: “What is Two Truths and a Lie?”

“Ugh. It’s a game,” Lydia explains. “We all take turns telling the group three things about ourselves, but one of those things has to be a lie. Then, the others have to guess which is which.” She wrinkles her nose. “I’m way too sober for this. Hey, have you got any alcohol? The best games are always drinking games.”

“I do.” For once, Killan agrees with Lydia, and he makes a selection on the touch screen set into the backslash—the one that controls his kitchen.

A slot opens in the bench-top, and we are presented with four cups, each filled with a single portion of golden liquid—the color of Harlee’s eyes.

“I make it myself,” Killan says before downing the contents of one cup and immediately requesting a refill.

“Cool. Hootch.” Lydia follows, swallowing her serving in a gulp.

“It is not cold,” I insist.

“Wow, that’s burns.” Lydia’s voice breaks, and she coughs. “Really, really strong.” She sways where she stands, reaches for the closest chair and misses, stumbling forward. Killan catches her around the middle and sets her on the chair, before putting four filled cups on the table. When she reaches for one, I hurriedly push them farther across the table, away from Lydia.

“Hey.” She scowls at me. “Not fair.”

“Hold your horses.” Harlee takes the seat opposite Lydia. “Don’t get too drunk, or you’ll be hammered before lunch.”

I quickly slide onto the chair beside Harlee, leaving Killan to choose between the two chairs on either side of Lydia. Sitting, he sinks low, his upper arms crossed over his chest, and after another moment of thought, scoots his chosen chair farther right, putting more space between himself and Lydia.

If she notices, she does not give him the satisfaction of reacting. Rather, she points at me. “You thirst,” she slurs. “I mean, thirst.”

“You first,” Harlee translates, with a fleeting glance at me.

I break eye contact, proof that I am neither desperate nor fake.

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“My favorite color is gold?—”

“Gold?” Lydia repeats, wrinkling her nose.

“Yes. My favorite food is fresh tehna fruit, which we have to order from off-world. And...” The two truths were easy. The lie, less so. I search my thoughts, trying to conjure up something intelligent to say. “I wake up every morning before the sun has risen.”

“You try guessing.” Lydia points at Harlee. Although what she is guessing, I do not understand, considering I followed the instructions, speaking my truths first and my lie second, as the name of the game ordered.

“Umm...” Harlee worries her bottom lip, watching me.

Considering it is her attention that is on me, surely that gives me an excuse to shift my chair a fraction closer to hers. And my eyes... They do not want to stop staring at her lip, trapped between her blunt, square teeth. And, really, I have no excuse at all for imagining the way it might feel if I were to nibble on her lip for her, a hand on the curve of her waist, the other stroking her silken hairs.

“Your favorite color is gold—that’s the lie,” she eventually guesses, raising her brows of hairs.

“It’s not really a color, is it? That’s a metal,” Lydia slurs.

“Wrong.” I preen. “It is the most beautiful of all colors.”

“Since when?” Killan demands.

“Since yesterday. Since—” Harlee is what I had been about to say, but Lydia giggles, pointing at Killan.

“You don’t know your brother as well as you thought. Harlee, as punishment for thailin’— I mean, thailing, I dare you to... I know! I dare you to kiss Roan. In that cupboard.” And she points at the door that leads off the kitchen to Killan’s food storage.

“Wrong game,” Harlee says, grabbing the drink Lydia is making another go at reaching.

“It’s better this way. More flirty.” Lydia pouts, her gaze on the drink and then on me. “Two Truths and a Lie: Dare Edition. If you get it wrong, you’ve got to complete a dare. And I’ve just dared Harlee to kiss you.”

I do not know what a kiss is. And I still do not really understand all the rules. Did Harlee guess my lie wrong on purpose, or did she honestly not know which was which?

“Lydia—” Harlee warns. “We’re playing Two Truths. Not Truth or Dare. Not Seven Minutes in Heaven. Not... I don’t know. Catch and Kiss!”

“Catch and K-iss?” Interest piqued, I turn wide eyes on Lydia, thinking that of the two Females, she is more likely to answer my question.

“Catch and Kiss is where?—”

“Nope,” Harlee interrupts. “Don’t give them even more ideas for group tasks.” She takes a sip of one drink, and a shudder runs through her body. Standing, she grabs my

hand, pulling me after her as she heads for the storage room.

“Seven minutes in heaven!” Lydia calls out after us. “Blow his tiny mind, Harlee!”

“You’re so going to regret this when you’re sober,” is Harlee’s reply, and she yanks open the door Lydia indicated, pulling me into the storeroom after her.

“What now?” With the door closed behind us and the lights off, it is impossible to see anything, but I widen my eyes, trying anyway.

“Now we wait. Thank God there aren’t any cameras in here...” Her voice trails off, and I search the darkness for what stole the end of her sentence.

I can see something; I was mistaken before. Three red lights, barely larger than mere dots, are evenly spaced around the dark room. They’re not comparable with anything in Killan’s house from before LOVE GALAXY, and I’m immediately reminded of the red lights each of the cameras has to show that it’s filming.

“Do you think they can see us?” Harlee whispers, and I’ve got to strain to hear her over the pounding of my heart.

Yes, would be my answer, but I do not reach around her to turn on the light. I think she might be more comfortable in the dark, even if it offers no more privacy than a well-lit room.

Or maybe not turning on the light is me being selfish. In the darkness, it feels almost as if the rest of the world does not exist, as if it is just the two of us. I can almost pretend one of my brothers is not on the other side of the door. I can almost pretend LOVE GALAXY did not turn out to be a total sham.

“What is hea-ven?” I ask, following Harlee’s lead and whispering.

“Something that doesn’t exist.” She exhales, her warm breath dancing over my scales.

“What iskiss-ing?”

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“Something— Wait, you don’t know what kissing is?”

“Should I?” I reach out a hand, intending to steady myself against a wall or a storage shelf, and accidentally brush against Harlee. She is standing a lot closer than I had realized. “Sorry.”

“That’s my shoulder.” She takes hold of my hand, intertwining our fingers. Her skin is cold; I think Humans do not retain body heat as sufficiently as Ril’os. In the darkness, without my sight, I am more aware of her touch than of anything else. The difference in our temperatures only serves to amplify that awareness.

“You’ve really never kissed anyone?” she asks, and then I hear a click that is her teeth as she snaps her mouth shut. “Sorry, for a second I forgot that it’s only you and your brothers.” She squeezes my hand. “Isn’t that lonely?”

“I have off-world friends.”

“They visit you?”

“We message. On our datapads.” On the LOVE GALAXY official fan chatroom.

“Like internet friends. That’s cool.”

“They… might be cold. I have never specifically asked about their temperature.”

“What I don’t understand is why you guys insist on living here. Aren’t there other planets with other people where you could go?”

“Many planets.” More planets than anyone has ever been able to record. “But Ril II is our home. Our livelihood is here. Our parents’ legacy.”

“I see.” A pause. “No, actually I don’t. I wouldn’t stay somewhere I wasn’t happy. I’ve done that before, and it sucks. It really sucks, and leaving also sucked, but now—” A little laugh. “Now everything is... great.”

Except Harlee does not sound as if everything is great.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not saying that my parents didn’t love me. Of course they did. They just...”

I hear her swallow.

“Never mind. It’s a long story.”

“I have time to listen.” When she does not say anything, I lightly squeeze her hand, letting her know that I am with her. That she is safe with me.

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I want to listen.”

“If you’re sure?—”

“Yes.” No hesitation.

“Umm... So...”

I can practically hear her internal debate as she determines whether she will tell me or

not.

There is another pause, then she says, “So back in the seventies, my dad got a scholarship for post-grad study in Australia. That’s where he met my mom, at uni. They fell in love and got married after graduation. Immediately, Mom got pregnant with my brother, and then with my sister. Dad got permanent residency and a job working at the uni as an economics lecturer and— Am I making sense? Is this translating?”

“Yes.” Some of it. Enough that I think I understand the gist of what she is telling me.

“Well, it wasn’t until my brother was fourteen and my sister was twelve that I was born. My parents were shocked. They didn’t think it was still possible for Mom to get pregnant. And so I was born. The surprise child.”

Another pause. I do not interrupt. Mayhaps Harlee is lost in her own thoughts. Mayhaps she is regretting telling me about herself and her family.

“My siblings are smart, like really smart. They were both in high school by the time I came along, and my parents were always busy driving them to school or debate club or cricket or their music lessons—I told you it’s a long story.”

“And I am still listening.”

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“My brother graduated from uni with honors in law and my sister got a degree in economics, just like Dad. All before I’d even finished primary school. My parents would brag to everyone about how great their kids were doing, but they never bothered mentioning me to their friends. They didn’t even seem to care when I told them I wasn’t going to uni—that’s how proud they were of my siblings. And my dad’s Chinese, so university is a big deal in my family.

“It felt like I was growing up in my siblings’ shadows, invisible to my parents. No matter how much I misbehaved— No matter how much I rebelled against their rules— They never paid me any extra attention. Like, one time, I stole a hundred dollars out of my mum’s wallet so I could buy a second-hand iPod from a friend at school, and Mum thought she must have dropped the cash on the ground somewhere when she was shopping, even though I was literally using the iPod right in front of her.

“It used to make me miserable thinking that they didn’t need me. So one day, when I was in my twenties, I decided to stop talking to them. I’m not sure they even noticed, to be honest. They knew I’d moved in with my boyfriend and that I had a job. They probably figured I was fine looking after myself. I bet they were pleased they didn’t have to listen to me yelling at them anymore.”

I feel her shrug.

“Both my brother and sister are married with kids of their own now, and my parents are completely obsessed with their amazing, ‘perfect’ grandkids. And, yes, okay, I was stalking them on Facebook for a few years after we stopped talking—that’s how I know about their kids.

“Anyway.” She sighs. “That’s a long and boring story to say that, if you’re not happy, leaving can suck. It definitely sucked for me, finally admitting to myself that I wasn’t needed. But then... Well, after a bit, it got better.”

Again, Harlee does not sound better. Her voice holds notes of false bravado, easily detected when I cannot see any of her unfamiliar facial expressions to confuse matters.

“They did not deserve you,” I say through gritted teeth, anger holding my body tense. “They should have praised their incredible luck, having a third child after so many years. That is many parents’ greatest dream.” It was my parents’ greatest dream—when, after my sister had died and my family had moved to Ril II, my mother had become pregnant with me.

I grew up engulfed by joy and love. Never did I doubt my welcome. Never have I looked at Killan or Sorin and wondered if they wanted me here, with them.

“That’s sweet of you to say, but don’t waste your anger on my family. There are so many more important things in the world to?—”

“Youare important.”

“Thanks.” Her gratitude is spoken so quickly, I almost think I imagined it.

I open my mouth to tell Harlee that it is me who should be grateful for her sharing this painful piece of herself, but she shifts then, as if uncomfortable, and I change my mind, not wanting to give her neglectful parents any more of our time alone together than they have already gotten. “What is a boy-friend?” I pick one of the many words I did not understand.

“My stupid ex. Asher. What a loser. I should’ve dumped him the day we started

dating. But I wanted to be like my parents. I wanted someone to love me. Stupid, I know.” She laughs.

“Not—”

“Back on Earth,” she says, speaking louder, “we have songs written about kissing. And books. Lots and lots of kissing books. And you can’t channel surf on TV without seeing people kissing. It’s literally everywhere. I had my first kiss when I was fourteen. It wasn’t a good kiss, but it was still a kiss.”

It is easy, in the darkness, to know that she is redirecting our conversation. I take advantage of our inability to see each other to shuffle half a step closer to her, until there is barely a slither of a space between us. I can feel her every breath, and when she moves, the rustling of her clothes is almost as loud as the blood pumping in my ears.

She’s still holding one of my hands, her skin warmer, as if she has absorbed some of my body heat. Maybe if I ask nicely, she will give me one of her kisses, too.

Chapter Twelve

Harlee

Isigh, bowing my head. Roan is a lot closer than I’d realized, and my forehead’s suddenly resting against his chest when that hadn’t been my intention. My instinct is to pull away, but there’s something comforting about the way he’s still holding my hand, so I let myself sink a little more fully against him.

Just for a second, I tell myself. I’ll stand on my own two feet in another moment.

Of course, us being in here together is exactly the type of footage Mr. Smith was

hoping to get. Even if he didn't know what Seven Minutes in Heaven means, I'm sure Chloe has already explained it to him.

And then there was me spilling my guts about my parents. I'd always known that was inevitable, from the moment I'd started applying for reality TV. Doesn't mean I was prepared for how I feel—like I've carved myself out, hollowed myself, and put my insides on display for everyone to pick over.

It was my own silly fault; I was the one who mentioned my parents. And then when Roan had asked for the details, I'd found I couldn't deny him the truth. Even though it had meant telling billions of others the truth as well.

“Harlee?” Roan says, and I already know what he's going to ask.

“What is kissing?” With a hand under my chin, he tilts my head until I must be looking at him, not that I can see anything in the darkness—well, nothing but the red lights of the cameras filming us.

I'm surprised by the strength of my desire to kiss him. I hate how lonely he sometimes sounds. I think he doesn't mean for it to be so obvious, and even though I don't know him all that well, I can tell.

Then again, it's possible I'm projecting my feelings onto him and misreading the entire situation.

Probably nobody on Earth has noticed I'm missing. I doubt anyone has reported my disappearance to the police. The idea should please me. Because if nobody notices, then when I do return, I'll be able to slide easily back into my old life as if none of this ever happened.

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But... how could anyone be genuinely pleased by the idea of nobody noticing their disappearance? It's impossible.

Sure, maybe a few of my Insta followers might wonder why I haven't posted lately. And probably the company that organizes for my fabrics to be distributed to my buyers will have noticed, but only because I haven't set up my banking to auto-pay my bills.

I haven't spoken to my family in five years. And I haven't spoken to Asher in two.

And my friends...What friends?my brain demands. I've been so focused on getting onto reality TV and working on expanding my design brand that I've had hardly any free time to socialize.

Ironic, really, that the reason I wanted to star on TV is the exact reason nobody will notice I'm gone. I wanted the validation of people thinking I'm a good person, someone worth loving and spending time with that I quite literally abandoned everyone I used to have in pursuit of that goal.

Not that Asher had ever thought I was good enough for him. And he certainly hadn't loved me unconditionally. No way. Asher had given his love to me only when I'd done something he'd thought was worthy of reward—when I'd pretended I hadn't seen him flirting with other women. When I'd made him laugh. When I hadn't interrupted the hours and hours he'd spent playing video games, ignoring me.

He'd dumped me, anyway, after three years of us living together and me desperately trying to make a home for us.

I'm a leftover woman, my brain tells me. And, like always, that intrusive thought is akin to what I imagine it feels like to be stabbed.

After Asher, I'd taken a long hard look at my life, and I'd decided there were lots of parts of me that needed fixing. And fix them I had.

Would my old friends recognize me, after my breakup from Asher? After two years of us not seeing each other? I'm so different to who I'd been back then. I'm quieter and more reserved. More focused on thinking about what I'm going to say before I've spoken.

I'm as tall as I've ever been, but somehow I take up less space now.

Even in this moment, filled with a desperate ache to kiss Roan, I'm hesitating, weighing up my options, instead of jumping in headfirst, as the old me would've done.

This is what happens when you've been burnt one too many times: you lose faith in yourself. You seek external validation from strangers, because the family you thought you could trust has broken your heart more times than you can count.

I release a shuddering breath, tightening my hold on Roan's hand, anchoring myself to him. There's something so solid about him. So dependable. He's been nothing but kind and supportive since we met.

And all he's asked in return is for a chance to get to know me. He simply wants what everybody wants—love, family, companionship. Kisses.

I wrap my other arm around his waist, loving the feel of his scales against the palm of my hand. They're not soft. There isn't anything soft about Roan—except maybe the way he treats me. His body is all hard muscles and tough scales.

Toughness doesn't mean roughness, and I stroke my hand over his lower back, trying to memorize the feeling of him. Unlike any Human, of course.

Unlike anyone I've ever met before.

Fuck it.

Standing on my tiptoes, hands on Roan's shoulder, I lean in and...

"Kissing is for noses?" He sounds highly confused.

"What? No!" As comfy as the darkness is, it's also impossible to see Roan's mouth, so I locate it with my fingers. His lips are silken, kind of. He's got these white scales that (when you can see them) look a lot like teeth and that I can feel with my fingertips. I suppose, evolutionary-wise it's a good idea to always be looking ready to bite anyone who has the foolish impression you're their prey. Kissing-wise... excitement sends tingles down my spine in anticipation of learning how they'll feel against my lips.

"Harlee." His mouth moves under my fingers, his warm breath skating over my skin.

I hate that we're being filmed.

I don't hate what I'm about to do.

"Roan," I whisper his name and finally press my lips to his.

His body tenses, and I hear a sharp inhalation. Closing my eyes, I let myself rest more fully against his chest, molding myself to his statuesque form, drawing pleasure from his warmth.

I take the lead. Haltingly, he copies, moving his lips against mine. It's not exactly what I'd call kissing. It's more two people awkwardly rubbing lips together, out of rhythm with each other. Not super sexy. Endearing, though.

Running a hand up his chest, I linger at the base of his throat, squeezing. I'm not scared I'm going to hurt him; I could no more physically hurt Roan than I could a heavily armored rhinoceros. Instead, I use my hold to angle his head a little to one side so our noses don't keep getting in the way. Then I deepen the kiss. Nipping his bottom lip. Tracing the seam of his lips with my tongue.

He shifts, resettling his weight, relaxing his muscles, parting his lips, and the entire experience shifts from being ungainly and graceless to fireworks.

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That's the only way I can think of to describe it—fireworks. Desire shoots through me, and my hold on Roan strengthens until he's all I'm thinking about. In the darkness, it's him and me and our kiss.

And his erection, which is pressing against my stomach. I can't stop my grin. I'm smiling against his mouth, and he takes full advantage, slipping his tongue into my mouth, exploring. Taking control.

I grip his throat tighter. He releases a longing moan, and we both stumble back a step, him bumping into the door behind him.

I pull back, blinking in the suddenly too-bright light. The magic bubble around us has popped. He must have accidentally hit the light switch beside the door.

Roan's eyes are glazed over, and his lips are slightly swollen. He doesn't seem perturbed by the light's interruption. We're still standing so close that I can feel how fast his heart is beating. Then he blinks, and some sense seems to return to his brain because he says, "Kissing is not what I had been expecting."

"No?" I wipe the corner of his mouth with my thumb, removing the smear of my lipstick.

As I draw my hand away, he sways forward an inch, prolonging the touch.

"What did you think it was?"

"I..." He shakes his head. "I had no ideas."

“And you liked it?” Glancing down, I’m pretty sure I know the answer. What I’d felt pressing against my stomach is a distinct bulge. Considering he’s not wearing any clothes (other than his boots) I’m a little surprised to not be staring straight at his dick. Instead, there’s a rather solid bump, over which his scales appear to be stretched.

Stretched. Is that the right word?

Somehow his scales have expanded. Or maybe the parts of his scales that overlap are less overlapped, accommodating his hidden erection. There’s a seam down the center of the bulge, approximately five inches long, that looks about ready to burst open, much like a zipper straining to keep an overstuffed bag closed.

I’m reminded exactly how alien Roan really is. A fact I’m surprised to find doesn’t worry me anymore. Yeah, he’s an alien, but more importantly he’s my friend. My ally.

Someone I trust.

A fast learner and an excellent kisser.

“Yes.” He blinks. “I liked it! I would spend my whole life kissing you.”

And, with that heart-meltingly romantic sentiment, my guilt comes rushing back in full force, a punch straight into my stomach.

I gently disentangle myself from Roan and take a step back. With the lights on, the room has lost a lot of its comfortable, secure feeling, and when I glance around, I see walls lined with shelves, and shelves packed with food storage. It’s so neat, organized and clean that it’s got a kind of clinical feeling to it, and I wrap my arms around myself, already missing Roan pressed flush against me.

I've also got a clear view of the cameras. Three of them are staring straight at us, recording everything. I bet Mr. Smith is back at his ship, watching. He's probably congratulating himself for what a great job he's done, pushing Roan and me together.

A kiss on the second day for the second episode. That isn't exactly revolutionary in the world of reality dating, at least not for Earth, but if all aliens are like Roan and don't know about kissing, then I've possibly blown a lot of minds. Billions of minds.

This whole reality TV experience would've been so much easier if Roan were a wannabe celebrity on the hunt for fame and fortune and a bit of tasteless, pixelated nudity. Instead, he's ridiculously innocent, staring at me with wide eyes. He clearly knows something is wrong, but he's got no clue what.

I force myself to smile, crinkling the corners of my eyes.

I can hear the echo of Mr. Smith's voice in my head from earlier when he was ordering us to flirt more. And I can still remember exactly what Chloe had said when she'd asked me to break Roan's heart. All these thoughts are buzzing around my head, filling my ears with noise.

I wanted to kiss Roan. But I also had to kiss him. And I'm having trouble reconciling those two opposing ideas into something that doesn't make me feel like I'm lying to him.

This moment together should have been either something completely amazing and special—Roan's first kiss! Or something meaningless and playful—an act for the cameras.

Instead, it's something in-between. Something that Mr. Smith and our future audience have tainted.

I take another step back, and I swear Roan's eyes get even wider. He's even more confused. He looks how I feel.

"I wanted to kiss you," I tell him the truth, unable to leave the closet without at least giving him that much. "Thank you for letting me be your first kiss. I guess it's only a Human thing, but"—I shrug, trying to lighten the weight of my words even as I say them—"it was special to me that I got to be your first."

His whole face lights up.

"And my last." He reaches for me, but I open the door and tumble out, running away.

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Chapter Thirteen

The LOVE GALAXY Official Fan Chatroom

Public chat | 2,564,967 members

I watched the LOVE GALAXY trailer. Here is my opinion.

I cannot decide if Humans are the cutest species I have ever seen or the most pathetic. Where are their tails? Sharp teeth? Claws? Protective plates? Scales? Wings? Stingers? Are they as weak and helpless as they appear? They wear coverings made of cloth to protect their delicate skin, yet the clothes would do nothing against a predator's attack. Mayhaps they are not even the dominant species of their planet! I want to know everything about them—how they breathe, how they talk, how they procreate. Everything.

And imagine pairing them with Ril'os! Those stuck-up bastards are notoriously picky.

Thankfully, the producers have apparently learned their lesson with the complete failure of last season, because it appears the mentality now is that if the contestants are not bringing enough drama they will literally force it out of them. Which is brutal but will hopefully make for a great broadcast.

Finally LOVE GALAXY might actually be worth watching again.

Anonymous:

I sort of want to watch, even though I hated last season.

SkyLander:

Bring on the drama!

torkstenlover8572583:

LOVE GALAXY has honestly always been the most unhinged.

Harlee

I burst out of the closet so fast I startled Lydia and Killan. They're both standing, fingers pointed at each other, but they freeze when they see me. Lydia's cheeks are flushed, and Killan's mouth is still open, as if he was partway through a sentence.

Or an argument.

I can't believe I didn't hear them. It goes to show how focused I was on Roan.

Lydia gives me a tight smile and sinks back into her chair, arms crossed and a scowl wrinkling her forehead.

"Not exactly sure what Mr. Smith was hoping for by leaving us four alone," she says, "but I think we've got the 'drama' part of our brief nailed." She does a double take as I near, her gaze raking my face, a hand pressed to her temple. "And the 'thirting' part—thirting. Flirting!"

I run a hand self-consciously over my hair, feeling new knots where Roan had gripped the back of my head. I'm also tugging at the hem of my blue sweater and straightening my cuffs. Turns out a man with four hands can keep himself occupied

ruffling up a girl's outfit. I'd bet a week's pay I'm the picture of debauchery.

"Who won?" I ask, trying to direct the conversation away from me.

I can feel Roan hovering close beside me, but I don't dare look at him. I don't want to see the hurt I've caused him—kissing and then running.

I shiver, although I'm not cold.

I am ashamed. Scared. Confused.

And still a bit horny.

"Me," Lydia declares. "Mr. Stick Up His Ass here couldn't work out which one was my lie."

"You broke the rules," he growls, and it's so close to being animalistic that I practically feel the ground rumble with the strength of his growl.

"And I told you," Lydia says through gritted teeth, making it very clear this is what they were arguing about, "you don't have to always say the lie third."

"Akh." Roan releases a long sigh, as if only now understanding the game rules.

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Lydia shoots him a glare, clearly thinking Roan is taking Killan's side against her. "What would be the fucking point?—"

"I need to powder my nose," I say, grabbing her arm and pulling her up. "Come on. Back to the ship."

"Powder your nose?" she grumbles. "Really?"

"Yes, really." I drag her out of the house, all the while she's muttering about how men are stupid regardless of whether they're Human or Ril'os—or whatever the fuck Mr. Smith is. Only when we're bombarded by the wind outside do I release her so we can pull the hems of our sundresses up to cover our noses and mouths. I don't care that I'm flashing my panties; I want to breathe without dust getting into my lungs.

Lydia and I hide in the makeup room for the rest of the day. When nobody comes searching for us, I suspect it's because Mr. Smith is satisfied with the burning dumpster fire of footage Lydia, Killan, Roan and I have already provided him for episode two.

That, or Briar and Sorin are keeping him occupied with their shenanigans.

Isn't that why he sent Briar away? Because she was too much of a handful, and he didn't want her encouraging Lydia and me into trouble.

Well, sucks to be him. Lydia and I are determined to make trouble of our own.

My tummy's rumbling by dinnertime, but when there's still no sign of Mr. Smith (or

food) we decide to make good on our promise to Briar to continue exploring the ship, searching for a way home that doesn't leave us relying purely on our captor.

I hate this spaceship with a burning passion. It's sterile and bland. The only colors are items that have been brought onboard for Lydia, Briar and me—our clothes and the decorations in the interview room. All the rest of the walls are painted in what I'd describe as 'military gray', with matching floors and ceilings.

Our bedroom is also bland—two hammocks, a toilet that pops out of a hatch in the wall when you press a button and a shower that's set into the ceiling and that doesn't have proper privacy screens.

"Oh fuck. Look at this," Lydia whispers.

I step around her, and my mouth drops open. The room she's indicating has three Human-sized crates set upright into three of its four walls. Each crate has been molded to fit around a specific person, with one being taller than the other two. They're attached to their own machine, from which hangs pipes and wires, controlled by a touchscreen tablet. Right now the tablets are flashing words in a language I can't read.

It's the strangest thing—I've got blurry memories of being in this room before, except that the memories are more like vibes left over from an unpleasant dream than anything substantial.

Lydia is hovering in the open doorway, her shoulders bowed, and she shakes her head when I glance her way. No, she's not stepping inside the abduction room.

I want to refuse, too, but I also want to know if there's some way we can access information through the tablets. I poke at one with a finger. Immediately, the flashing stops, and the screen changes to display four quadrants, each marked with more

words I can't read. Evidently my translator doesn't work on written language, just spoken.

A missed opportunity, if you ask me.

Then again, Mr. Smith probably made that choice on purpose so we can't do exactly what we're trying to do now.

I hover my finger over each option. Is it too much to hope that one will show us a blueprint of the ship, telling us behind which locked door the control room lies. Or maybe the key codes to the doors. Or, better yet, Earth's coordinates.

"Pick one," Lydia hisses at me from her place in the doorway, which is kind of rude, considering I'm the one doing all the hard work, but she does jolt me into action, and I press a random quadrant.

The screen changes, again. This time lots of writing appears, and it's rapidly scrolling through paragraphs and paragraphs—too quickly for me to have read, if I knew how. Then the Human-shaped crate flashes blue, as if the mold has LEDs set into the plastic.

I back up a step, right as the blue light switches to orange. The tablet is also flashing orange, and I bump into Lydia behind me right as a warning siren echoes along the corridor.

"Frickin' hell."

Lydia and I duck back into the makeup room, and the door automatically closes behind us. But not before I see Mr. Smith hurrying out of another room, a little further along the corridor. He's heading toward the creepy crates, and a second later, the siren stops.

I move to press my ear to our door, hoping I can hear Mr. Smith moving about, but of course the door opens again, sensing me leaning closer.

Mr. Smith must hear, because he glances up, and we accidentally make eye contact—me in the makeup room; him in the creepy crate room, both doors open. His tail is thrashing like it's the epicenter of his emotions. His face is a sickly puce, and he's buried his chin deep into the thick folds of skin around his neck.

"You okay?" I strive for an air of innocent curiosity and silently curse myself when I hear fear in my voice.

The bastard doesn't answer—just glares, before selecting an option on the tablet I'd been messing around with. The door to the creepy crate room closes, with him on the inside. Hopefully there isn't a camera in there that recorded me, or else I'm going to be in a lot of trouble for setting off that siren.

"Did you see what I saw?" I ask Lydia in a whisper, taking half a step out of the makeup room in the direction Mr. Smith had originally come from.

"The cockpit," Lydia agrees, and we rush to the closed door.

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There had been a second, as Mr. Smith had emerged to investigate the siren, when I'd caught a glimpse of the room behind him. It had looked much like the cockpit of an airplane, covered in buttons with flashing lights and a literal joystick.

Big surprise: this door doesn't open when we get near. It's got to be one of those with a biogenetic lock that only opens when it senses Mr. Smith. I run my hands around the edges, testing if I can get it to open manually using brute force, but the gap between the door and the wall is so narrow I can't get my fingernails into it, let alone my actual fingers.

"Pack your bags!" Mr. Smith bellows.

With my heart leaping into my mouth, I spin around to find him and Chloe standing in the corridor.

Lydia grabs my elbow, her fingers digging into my arm. I don't pull away. Having her beside me is infinitely better than being alone. For a bit, I'd thought the crew would be my biggest ally on LOVE GALAXY. Now I'm realizing it's the rest of the cast.

"You're moving to the main house," Mr. Smith says, before turning to Chloe and yelling, "Get them off my ship."

With a final glare, he pushes by Lydia and me, his tail hitting my leg as the door to the cockpit opens for him. Frickin' biogenetic lock! Glancing over my shoulder, I see all those backlit buttons and rows of touch screens, but I can't do anything about them, not when the door is already closing. Not with Mr. Smith and Chloe both here.

Not when I can't read any of the options on the touch screens.

For a second, we're shrouded in silence. It's only then do I realize how much I'm shaking. No wonder Lydia is holding my arm. If I were her, I'd be scared I was about to faint or something. Sweat runs down my back, while heat prickles my face and neck.

This is my fault, my brain is telling me. Whenever I rush into action— Whenever I don't stop to think— Something always goes wrong.

I'm not supposed to be that person anymore, not since leaving my family and Asher leaving me. I don't steal from my mom's wallet anymore. I don't throw my abandoned homework into the trash. I don't put my hand up first at a comedy show for audience participation.

I'm friendly, I remind myself. I'm easy-going. I'm relaxed and chill and creative and kind.

Chloe gives me her I'm-deeply-disappointed-in-you face before beckoning for us to follow her into the walk-in-closet.

"Here," she says, "you get a bag each. You'll need to pack enough stuff to last you the rest of filming because I don't think Mr. Smith is going to let you back on board. So don't forget anything." She hands Lydia and me both a duffle bag each.

"I don't understand. Where are we going?" Lydia asks, her voice pitching high.

I also want to know, but after being the one to get us into this horrendous mess, I'm not game enough to break my silence. I can only hope I haven't pissed Mr. Smith and Chloe off so much that I've risked our chance to get back home.

“To the house,” Chloe responds curtly.

“Killan’s house. No way.” Lydia drops her empty bag and crosses her arms. “I’ll stay here, thanks.”

“No, you won’t.” Chloe unclips a small camera from a rack of clothing. It’s about half the size of her fist. Adjusting the lens, she turns it on so the red light is shining, and she raises it, pointing it first at my face and then at Lydia’s, filming a close-up. “Pack your bags.”

“No.” Lydia kicks her duffle bag. The fabric tangles with her foot.

“Pack your bags,” Chloe repeats, “Or did you want me to tell Mr. Smith that you’re refusing to do as he says?”

“Seriously?”

“Come on.” I tug at Lydia’s arm, and when she doesn’t budge, I pick up her duffle bag and start simultaneously packing hers and mine.

My earlier confidence has completely drained out of me to be replaced by even more guilt. Guilt because I never should’ve disobeyed Mr. Smith. Guilt because I risked so much for absolutely no reward. Guilt because Lydia has to live with her arch-nemesis—although exactly why she doesn’t like Killan, I don’t understand.

“Trust me when I tell you it’s for the best,” Chloe says, her voice a little softer. She gives Lydia a we’re-all-in-this-together smile. “If you and Harlee go to the main house and agree to keep participating in all the tasks and stuff that Mr. Smith asks of you, he’ll get over this little misunderstanding. I’m sure if I tell him that you didn’t know what you were doing and that you never meant to set off the alarm, he’ll come round. Then, when the show’s finished, we’ll all go back to Earth together.”

“Of course we didn’t mean to set off the alarm,” Lydia grumbles, but she has stopped glaring at Chloe, and when I try handing her the half-filled pink duffle, she takes it and continues packing for herself.

“Then again...” Chloe continues, still following Lydia and I with her hand-held camera, “maybe you’ll change your mind and want to stay. Roan is a cutie. Or”—she shrugs, as if whatever she’s going to say next is of no great importance—“maybe you really will still want to leave, and all the guys will be heartbroken. The choice is yours.”

“Can you imagine Killan being heartbroken?” Lydia almost laughs. “I think not.”

Chloe doesn’t answer, except for a glance at me and a wink.

Chapter Fourteen

Roan

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:09 pm

I roll onto my side, am immediately uncomfortable and switch to my back instead, staring up at the dark ceiling. Whichever way I face, it does nothing to ease the weight inside my chest. Chloe's words are running circles around my brain. Desperate and fake. Desperate and fake.

This must be why Harlee ran from the storeroom and would not look at me after our kiss. I am falling instant in love, and I scared Harlee away because my feelings are too strong.

She thinks I am being fake.

She thinks I am lying.

Our kiss... I touch a hand to my lips. I think Ril'os do not kiss. I certainly never saw my parents act this way. But feeling Harlee pressed against me, feeling the softness of her lips and the malleability of her body, it was unlike anything I have ever experienced before. Or imagined. Or could have imagined.

It had sent fire-like desire racing through my blood until I had been all greedy need and desperation?—

Akh. The weight in my chest increases, and I press a hand to my sternum, as though I can rub away some of this uncomfortableness.

Surely desire and desperation were the entire point of the Human kiss. Why kiss someone if desperation is not desired? Unless... maybe Harlee has kissed many people many times, and now kisses have lost all their feelings for her. Maybe she

was being polite, teaching me about a Human tradition. It was Lydia who suggested we go into the storeroom together for kissing, not Harlee.

I cover my face with my upper hands, releasing a long, drawn-out groan.

How will I ever persuade Harlee that a life on Ril II with me will be a good life if I cannot hide my eagerness when in her presence?!

I would change my behavior if I thought I could. I would stamp down on my feelings of panic and worry that I am doing the wrong thing, and I would cut out the lump in my chest that reminds me desperation is not desirable.

My datapadpings, and I sit bolt upright, groping for it in the dark. At my touch, the screen lights up, and I hastily close my inner eyelids. They are translucent, which means I can still see, but they mute the powerful light.

The message is from Killan, and in his usual abrupt fashion he has only written:

Come now.

For someone who can spend hours lecturing Sorin and me on the various aspects of our shared farm and the business economics that go with running a not-for-profit charity, he never applies that same passion to his written messages. Mayhaps I would then have some idea of what is so important that I need to be disturbed in the middle of the night.

Harlee. The thought comes unbidden, and I hurry down the tunnel that connects my cottage with Killan's larger house. Before I've reached the last door, I hear Female voices. I speed up, tripping over my own feet, so when I enter the kitchen it is with less grace than for which I hoped.

Harlee and Lydia are standing near the table, with large bags resting at their feet. Killan is hovering near the kitchen bench, his upper hands clutching cups of water as if he at least remembered some of his manners but not enough to actually hand the water to the Females.

“What is happening? Do we have another task to complete?” If John Smith has hurt them... To keep myself from clenching my hands into fists, I tug the cups from Killan’s hold and set them on the table for anyone who might want a drink to take.

“This is kind of like a task, I guess,” Harlee says, nudging the blue bag with the toe of her shoe. “Mr. Smith says we’re to stay here from now on.”

“Akh. Of course.” I exchange glances with Killan. “You are always welcome.”

“Thanks.” She gives me a small smile, barely lifting the corners of her mouth. “We don’t want to get in your way or be a burden but... yeah,” she finishes with her shoulders sagging.

Again, it is clear they were sent to stay with us against their will. I hate that Harlee is so hesitant to accept our hospitality, but it just makes me even more determined to show her how much I care and how well I can provide for her.

“Never.” I pick up the two bags, holding them in my lower hands. “Right, Killan?”

“I have spare rooms,” Killan grumbles. The angry bastard.

“I have a room,” I say on the spur of the moment. “Harlee should stay with me because...” I struggle to think of a reason that is not purely because I want her to.

“It’s been a long day,” Lydia says, saving me from failing to finish my sentence. “Which room is mine?” She points to the closest door leading from the kitchen.

“Here,” Killan gestures for her to follow him downstairs to where the bedrooms are, and she gently tugs her pink bag out of my hand.

When Harlee tries to take her blue bag, I strengthen my hold, saying: “This way.” She does not immediately let go, so we are both tugging on the bag’s handle. I am relentless, and she is forced to follow me or release her hold.

“Roan...” she begins, sounding tired.

“I am not desperate.” The words fall out of my mouth, and I freeze, one hand still clutching her bag, another hand opening the door that leads from Killan’s kitchen to the tunnel connecting our homes.

“Sorry?”

I glance at Harlee over my shoulder. Her expressive brow is furrowed, and the corners of her mouth are cast down in a frown. “I mean...” Again I fail to find the right words.

“I don’t think you’re desperate.” She takes a step toward me, and I use her forward momentum to continue leading her to my cottage, whether or not that had been her intention of stepping closer.

“Why did you say that?” she asks.

I purse my lips.

“Roan?” Harlee follows me to the end of the tunnel and through the underground door that leads into my own kitchen. It is considerably smaller than Killan’s, as Killan’s used to be the house my brothers and I had shared with our parents. As Sorin and I had grown, we had built our own homes, and then our parents had moved back to Ril I, leaving the three of us each with our own place.

In preparation for LOVE GALAXY, I had cleaned every surface and inside every cupboard. Now, with my heart beating in my mouth, I step aside so Harlee may see my house—and everything I have to offer her.

Harlee

Roan’s gaze is locked on my face as he waits for me to examine his kitchen. I can tell

this is a big deal to him because his expectation that I say something is almost tangible, a near-physical force. It's kind of adorable. It's definitely distracting, and for a moment I stare at the room not taking any of it in.

Then I blink. "It's cute." The kitchen is about a quarter the size of Killan's, with a workbench along one wall, beside a modern-looking stovetop, oven and touch-screen tablet. Most of the space is being taken up by his kitchen table, which is big enough for two people to sit at, facing each other.

Set into the wall are a couple of hooks from which he's hung posters—movie posters by the looks of it, with a variety of alien actors and bold script titles I can't read. A few of the aliens look similar to Roan and are clearly from his home world. A few others are completely different. Blue, huge horns and spikes along their arms.

"Cute?" Roan looks around with a frown, as though he's examining his home with fresh eyes.

"Cute is good," I tell him. "I like it."

The kitchen reminds me of Roan. He's much more settled here than Killan is back in the main house. There are the movie posters for one, where Killan's walls are blank. But I also catch sight of a few scratches and scrapes, suggesting Roan recently rearranged his furniture and accidentally bumped into the walls.

At my praise, he straightens, stretching the corners of his mouth upwards in what he evidently believes is a Human smile. It's still super creepy, considering how many teeth he's got, but it doesn't cause me to flinch away from him like it did the first time we met.

I return the smile with one of my own. A genuine one. It's always so easy to smile when I'm with Roan.

Immediately, he takes a half step toward me; I'm the sun and he's being pulled closer by my gravity. His gaze drops lower, to my lips, and heat sizzles over my skin.

If I'd thought his expectation while he'd been waiting for me to compliment his kitchen had been tangible, then the look he's giving me is akin to scorching fire. All-consuming. Inescapable.

We mightn't share many of the same facial expressions, but at this moment I can tell exactly what Roan's thinking. Probably because he never tries to hide his feelings. He's that old saying: as easy to read as an open book.

And what he's thinking about is how much he'd like to kiss me. And more. Much, much more.

Okay, I'll admit there are a few other hints divulging Roan's thoughts than his expression of open hunger. There's also the growing bulge between his legs. And his panting breaths, loud enough I can hear them halfway across the room.

Self-consciousness ripples over me. It isn't a bad type of self-consciousness; on the contrary. I can feel every thump of my racing heart. Hear my blood pounding in my ears. Feel the fabric of my clothes against my skin. Taste the air.

It doesn't taste like Earth's air. It's grittier, somehow. More... natural. Probably because there aren't any big cities on this planet pouring out pollution.

I lick suddenly dry lips, and Roan's moan is filled with all kinds of longing. It does strange things to my knees, weakening my legs and causing my thighs to clench.

Oh, it's been a long time since I've had a boyfriend, and I'm feeling woefully rusty. Added to that is the guilt that churns inside my stomach every time I think of Chloe's orders.

Break Roan's heart.

I open my mouth. I don't know why. Maybe intending to tell him about my promise to Chloe, but of course that's when I catch sight of the mini camera clipped to the lintel of the closest door. Another is attached to the kitchen table, and a third is hooked to the handle of a nearby cupboard.

I close my eyes for a brief second. I can't say anything where Mr. Smith might hear. Especially as it's my fault that Mr. Smith kicked Lydia and I out of his spaceship. He's already mad enough at us; I can't risk making him madder without also risking him refusing to take us home.

Blinking, I point to a door, directly opposite the one we'd entered through. "What's in there?"

For a second, I think Roan's going to ignore my question, and I wouldn't blame him if he did. It couldn't have been more obvious that I'm trying to break the tension between us.

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I need to break it. Otherwise, in another few minutes of him looking at me like he wants to eat me, I'm going to be tempted to lie down on Roan's kitchen table and let him, regardless of the cameras.

"My bedroom," is all he says when he does eventually answer. He's got a sort of stunned look on his face, as if he's struggling to follow the abrupt change in conversation because his brain (and his dick) is still firmly fixed on the idea of kissing.

After another moment, he eventually steps around me to open said door, showing me his room.

The first thing I search for are cameras. And yep, there they are. Three of them, with their lenses trained on the bed, their red on light shining brightly.

And oh wow, it's an enormous bed. Compared to Human standards, I'm guessing it's close to a king size, but it's way longer, to accommodate Roan's bulk. He's both taller and broader than a Human man, and this bed was clearly made for him.

Roan steps into his room and drops my duffle bag right in the middle of his bed. Then, he turns back to look at me, waiting for me to say something, again.

Somehow I don't think 'it's cute' is going to cut it this time.

"Wait..." I grab my bag, preparing to lift it. "You said this is your room. So where am I sleeping?"

“Akh...” He glances around, searching for an answer, as if he’s expecting someone’s going to materialize out of thin air and tell him what to say.

He’s being an adorable idiot. All awkward and shy innocence. But before I let myself think about how easy it would be to wrap my arms around his neck and make out with him to kingdom come, I walk back into the kitchen.

There’s the door that leads back to the tunnel and Killan’s house, and then there’s the door that leads into Roan’s bedroom. The only other way out I can see is a ladder up to a hatch in the ceiling.

I climb it, lifting the hatch as I go, only to find myself in a small room, about the size of a cupboard. It’s a square room with windows set into three of the walls and a door in the fourth. But that door leads to the planet’s surface, and through one of the windows I can see the entrance to Killan’s house and, a little way beyond that, Mr. Smith’s spaceship.

Also, the wind. I can see that it’s still blowing a gale.

I bet you could walk for a thousand days out there and never stumble upon a single tree or river or rock. The landscape has been blown completely and utterly flat. It’s the view you might see in Mad Max—endless nothing. Worse than any Earth desert because at least in a desert you might find a couple of cacti or snakes or camels. Here, there’s us.

Just us.

A chill races through me, and I climb back down. Roan’s kitchen is a luxury hotel in comparison, and I take a couple of deep breaths, trying to settle my nerves. A wave of exhaustion washes over me.

Roan is still in his bedroom, so I return there. He has stored my duffle neatly under his bed, clearly trying to make the room look more like I belong in it.

“Through here?” I point to a door I hadn’t seen before, distracted, as I had been, by Roan’s ginormous bed. I push the door open and— It’s nothing but a bathroom. “Nope, not through there,” I confirm, looking back at Roan. “Why did you say you had a spare bedroom I could stay in?” I point back toward Killan’s house. “Your brother said?—”

“This is your room.” Roan nods decisively. “I will be sleeping... Akh...” He examines one of his hands reminiscent of never having seen it before and finding it the most interesting thing in the whole universe.

“This is so your room.” I look from the indentation in the mattress where Roan had clearly been sleeping not fifteen minutes ago, to the tablet and the cup of water on the bedside table. There are two spare pairs of boots in one corner and a shelf with nicknacks within arm’s reach of his bed. He wouldn’t even have to sit up to grab stuff off that shelf.

And then it hits me. In the most unsuave, unsophisticated, naïve, tongue-tied manner Roan has manufactured the good old romance classic: the only-one-bed situation.

Chapter Fifteen

Roan

There is a moment of silence as Harlee looks between the bed, her bag tucked under the bed and me. Her eyes are narrowed. She could not have been any more suspicious of my motivation had I been wearing a large sign that read please, please, please, stay with me. I am begging you.

“Well played, Mr. Roan. Well played.” She gives a slow nod. “I’m impressed by your ingenuity.”

“Yes?”

Her shoulders sag, but the corners of her mouth lift. “Yes, alright. But only for tonight.” And she toes off her shoes, bending down to riffle through her bag.

I release a long sigh, kick off my own boots and eye my bed with renewed appreciation—and apprehension. Usually, I would fall into bed, paying little attention to where I sleep. Now, I am panic-wondering if Harlee prefers a particular side or—my heart lurches—mayhaps when she agreed to stay she had not actually meant for me to stay.

I meticulously line my boots up beside my two other pairs to give myself something to do as Harlee collects more clothes from her bag and retreats to the bathroom.

Scolding myself for being ridiculously desperate, I lie down first on one side of the bed and then on the other, testing to see if one is more comfortable than the other and moving to what I hope is the least comfortable side... if there is, in fact, a difference.

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Having changed my mind for the fourth time, I am mid slide over the mattress when Harlee reappears, wearing loose-fitting clothes that cover from her ankles to her wrists—blue pants and a shirt, made from what looks to be impossibly silky fabric. I freeze in the center of the bed, and she climbs up onto one side, pushing against my shoulder with two small hands, trying to move me away from her. I wiggle a few inches farther onto my side, but when she lies down, she sinks toward me, where my greater weight is making a deeper indentation in the mattress than she is.

I hear the hiss of the breath she releases as she comes to rest against the length of my body, her right arm and leg pressed to my left side. We lie like that, completely still for the count of several heartbeats, until she appears to accept the situation and rolls onto her side, facing me.

“No blankets or pillows?” she asks.

The word ‘blankets’ I understand, but pill-oo does not translate.

She slips a hand under her cheek. “You don’t get cold when you’re sleeping?”

“No.” Do Humans? How strange, but I do not say so out loud. “Scales do not need coverings,” I tell her instead.

“I suppose not.” She brushes a hand down my chest, her fingers skating lightly over my scales. She repeats this movement, this time using the back of her hand, her blunt nails making a soft tap, tap, tap sound.

Immediately, my body responds. And I use my datapad to switch off the lights before

Harlee can see the impact such a small caress has on me.

My cock strains at my sheath, demanding release, demanding Harlee's attention. I can think of nothing but how it might feel for her to run her fingers over my cock as she runs them over my chest.

She resettles, getting comfortable, but she does not put space between us, mayhaps understanding how futile such a gesture would be.

I shut my eyes, pretending I am sleeping—anything to keep from pressing more firmly against her body. Anything to keep from guiding her hand lower.

Eyes closed makes it infinitely worse. My imagination presents me with memories of the kiss we shared earlier today, the feel of Harlee's soft lips against mine. The way she sucked on my tongue. The way she pressed into my hold, molding herself to my chest.

Before I can stop it, a moan escapes my mouth.

Harlee stiffens. I can feel tension radiating off her.

I wince. "Are you asleep?" I ask my question in my quietest whisper, clasping my lower hands together with the strength of my hope that she did not hear my moan and that her stiffness is the natural state of a sleeping Human.

"No," she answers in her regular voice. Then laughs. "This is awkward, hey?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean... I am not desperate!"

"I never said you were." She sits up; I can make out her silhouette against the dark wall behind her. "Why do you keep saying that?"

“No reason.” I clamp my annoying, stupid mouth shut before it can say anything else to embarrass me and roll onto my side, my back to Harlee. “Ouch!” I flinch away from where she poked her finger into my side. It did not hurt so much as startle me.

She pokes again.

And again.

I roll onto my back, glaring at her. “I wish I had never invited you to sleep here,” I grumble, lying. But it only makes her laugh louder.

“Too late, buddy. Spill the beans.”

I frown. “You wish for me to spill food?”

“No. It means tell me everything about why you keep saying you’re not desperate. I never suggested you were.”

“But you are thinking it.” I cross all my arms over my chest, suddenly wishing there was a blanket on the bed under which I could hide from Harlee’s scrutiny. I may not see her narrowed eyes watching me, but I can easily imagine them.

“No, I wasn’t.”

I cannot believe her.

“I told you about my parents.” She pokes me again. “You really can’t tell me about this?”

I sit up, turning more fully to face her, and search for one of her hands. She lets me take it, curling her fingers around mine.

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“You know you sound like Killan when you’re grumpy?”

My mouth drops open. “Do not say such horrible things!”

Another laugh, and I cannot stop from straightening, proud of myself. She has not laughed so much the entire time I have known her. Hopefully, her reaction now is because she is feeling comfortable and relaxed in my presence. Hopefully, it is a good sign.

“Tell me.” She squeezes my hand. “Please.”

I grumble more, fresh humiliation burning a hole through my chest. “Chloe said that I am in star love with you but that was a bad thing because Humans do not trust in star love. It means I am desperate and fake.”

“What’s ‘in star love’?”

“In star love,” I repeat slowly. “That is what she called it.”

“In star? In star?” Harlee repeats. “Oh, God, do you mean instant love?”

“Yes.” I bow my head.

“Wait? You can’t be in love with me already, Roan. We hardly know each other.”

“I know I want to be your Mate. I know I want you to stay with me forever.”

“Oh.”

Silence fills the air around us, harsh and heavy, until I want to run out of the room. Or smash the cameras. Yes, I want to smash all the cameras so that John Smith cannot use the footage of this moment to share my humiliation with all the known universe.

“I still don’t think that means you’re in love with me, Roan. I think it means you’re lonely.” She reaches out, the fingers of her free hand brushing against my chest. Then she traces her way down one arm until she can hold another of my hands, entwining our fingers.

I purse my lips. Chloe was right: Harlee does think my feelings are fake.

“Sweetheart—”

I can practically hear her struggling with what to say next.

“I am tired.” Pulling free of Harlee’s hold, I lie down, my back to her, again.

“Right.”

More silence.

Minutes tick by before Harlee lies down, too. She slips toward me, toward the lower indentation in the mattress, then turns around so we are back-to-back.

“Goodnight, Roan. I hope... I hope...” But she sighs and never finishes her sentence.

Chapter Sixteen

Harlee

“Harlee? Harlee?” There’s a soft bang, followed by Lydia swearing.

Bleary-eyed, I sit up. The room is dark, although I guess that doesn’t mean it’s still nighttime. Since Roan’s house is mainly underground, there are no windows and no natural sunlight.

A dark shape is standing at the foot of the bed, but when she sees me, Lydia fumbles her way around to my side. She sits, groping for me in the darkness. Our hands touch, and she grasps my fingers in a chokehold.

“Are you alright?” I whisper, trying not to wake a still-sleeping Roan beside me.

I feel, rather than see, Lydia nod. Then, apparently realizing just how dark it is, she whispers. “Yes. I was worried about you, so I snuck in to check.”

“I meant to come back—” I start to say, which is true—when I’d realized Roan didn’t actually have a spare bedroom. But I’d somehow gotten so caught up in him that I’d forgotten about Lydia.

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Before I can admit to my fault, she says, “I also wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“You know—for telling you to kiss Roan. I was way out of line.”

“I had wondered about that.” At the time, it had felt out of character for Lydia to push me toward one of the alien brothers, but then I had kissed Roan and... well, again I’d gotten so caught up in him that Lydia had slipped straight out of my head.

“With Smith sending Briar away, I panicked that he’d try separating us, as well,” she explains in a muffled whisper. “I pushed you to kiss Roan, thinking that Smith would be pleased and keep us together. It was stupid. And selfish. In my defense, I was a bit tipsy... Actually that isn’t a defense at all. Sorry,” she finishes rather lamely.

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t have kissed him if I hadn’t wanted to.” Which is entirely the problem—I wanted to kiss Roan. And I didn’t want to break his heart.

“Okay. Good,” but she doesn’t sound relieved. If anything, she sounds more stressed than when we’d started this conversation.

I feel her shift, the bed creaking under the combined weight of three people. I think she’s glancing around the room, not that there’s much to see in the darkness.

“Roan had his spare furniture stolen, too?” she asks after another slight pause.

“Ahh... What?” Maybe I’m groggier than I’d realized because her words don’t make

much sense.

“You’re sharing a bed,” she clarifies.

“Yes...”

“Because all the furniture in Roan’s spare room is missing?” An accusatory tone enters her whisper. It makes me not want to answer.

Instead, I say, “Are you telling me that Killan’s furniture was stolen? By Mr. Smith?” A second later, my brain finally understands what she’s saying. “Oh, my God, are the two of you sharing a bed?”

“Shh!” She waves at me to lower my voice. “Yes, we’re sharing a bed, and it’s a fucking nightmare. Killan didn’t stop grumbling for ages, but it’s not my fault I’m stuck on this planet, in his house. It would be almost funny how mad he is, if I wasn’t so homesick. If his complaining gets us into trouble, I’m going to kill him.”

“Shh.” I shush her this time. If the cameras can hear our whispering, then the universe might think she’s serious about committing murder, which would be a whole other kettle of fish for us to be dealing with.

“There are only seventeen days left.” I try to sound reassuring.

She lets out a derisive snort.

“We can survive seventeen days.” I squeeze her hand encouragingly.

An idea strikes, and I try shuffling across the bed a bit, to give her more room. “Sleep here, beside me.” I butt up against Roan, and it’s like trying to push a sleeping giant out of the way. He doesn’t budge, and I don’t dare to push too hard because I don’t

want to wake him. Partly because I don't think Lydia wants another alien witnessing her misery and partly because I don't want to deal with him sulking all over again because of something Chloe said to him.

Lydia doesn't try lying down; maybe she can tell there isn't enough room, despite the ginormous size of the bed.

"Do you think us three are the only ones LOVE GALAXY has ever abducted?" she asks.

"God, I hope so."

"Why go to so much bother? If there are billions of people in the universe, Smith could've found willing participants easily. Kidnapping people is risky business."

"It's not like there are police on this planet," I remind her. "Or any type of government. Mr. Smith must have known it'd be easy to escape punishment." I shrug. "It's not like there's an Australian embassy in space where we can go for help."

"Yeah..." Lydia doesn't sound convinced. "Do you think Roan would lend me his tablet if I asked? Maybe there's some way I can search online."

"Last I checked, Google only works on Earth."

"Search the alien internet, I mean. There's got to be something online about previous LOVE GALAXY competitors. Or something online about Smith."

"The inter-galactic-net," I pun.

"Now I'm thinking about it," she says, clearly not listening to me anymore, "Smith is just the director. He's got to be working for someone."

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“For a TV network or a production studio.”

“I should get back...” she says, but she doesn’t move. Probably dreading sleeping beside Killan.

“I can kind of understand why he’s so intense,” I whisper. “I’d hate it, too, if three abducted women turned up at my house and I couldn’t do anything to help them.”

“He could pull his finger out of his ass,” she grumbles.

“He’s worked really hard on his family business. I imagine he’s scared LOVE GALAXY is going to be negative publicity. Still, I’m sorry he’s being such a dick to you.”

“Maybe I’m being a bit of a dick to him,” she concedes, slumping against me. “We should never have signed up for reality TV. What idiots we were.”

“Hindsight’s a bitch. Speaking of, do you trust Chloe?” Wrapping an arm around Lydia’s shoulders, I metaphorically cross my fingers and toes that the cameras aren’t more sensitive than Human ears and can’t hear us. A fool’s hope, no doubt.

“I don’t know.” Lydia sighs. “Probably not... Maybe... She’s Human, at least.”

“Yeah,” I agree but without any real enthusiasm. She is Human, although I’m beginning to think that doesn’t count for much. Roan isn’t Human, and he’s the nicest guy on the entire planet.

I stare down at a sleeping Roan.

“You’re lucky,” Lydia whispers, hugging me before standing. “Roan is at least bearable to be around.”

I barely notice as the bedroom door shuts behind her, and I’m still watching Roan several minutes later when he opens his eyes.

They don’t glow, exactly. But there’s a brightness to them that means I can see he’s awake even though it’s still dark.

“How much of that did you hear?”

He doesn’t answer. I’m guessing he doesn’t enjoy answering whenever he knows I won’t like his response. Which is a bit of a cop out, but I guess it’s better than him outright lying.

If I’m being brutally honest with myself, maybe I’m a little bit grateful I lacked hindsight and got abducted. It meant I got to meet Roan. Weighing up how much I hate Mr. Smith and how much I fancy Roan, the scales are definitely skewed toward Roan’s direction.

If only there’d been some way we would’ve met that didn’t involve LOVE GALAXY, my deal with Chloe and Mr. Smith’s threats.

I’ve got the strangest feeling these seventeen days are going to whiz by, and then I’ll have to face the miserable prospect of saying goodbye to a good man.

Chapter Seventeen

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

What qualities would your ideal Mate possess?

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Oh wow, you're straight into the hard-hitting questions for our first interview! I guess he'd have to enjoy laughing. A sense of humor is always a must. But I also like a guy who can take himself seriously when the situation's right. You know, someone who doesn't joke around when we're having those serious talks all couples have, about our feelings and our future.

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

A funny serious guy?

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

When you put it like that... When can I meet this perfect man?!

City Single Harlee laughs.

CITY SINGLE HARLEE:

Is he here?

Harlee

Either Roan can't hold a grudge or he's planning something. Whatever it is, I woke this morning to find the bed empty, and when I'd dressed and entered the kitchen he'd greeted me cheerfully, as if he hadn't been sulking last night about instalove and chronic loneliness.

I'm eating my breakfast, watching him across the kitchen table. He must be practicing his smiling, because every time he catches my eye, he grins, flashing all those rows of sharp, pointed teeth at me.

I narrow my eyes, trying to work out what he's got planned, but he doesn't say anything. Just whisks my bowl away the second I finish eating so he can start on the washing up.

Breakfast had been my first real alien meal since arriving. Before now, Lydia and I have been eating pre-cooked meals in plastic containers back at Mr. Smith's spaceship.

Now, Roan has taken on the task of feeding me, and we broke our fast with something similar to porridge—if porridge was perpetually gritty and tasted similar to sweet potato.

I get up to help him clean, but he's already finished, probably because his kitchen is part manual, part automatic. With a robot arm attached to the inner ceiling of the largest cupboard, which returns the cleaned crockery to their rightful places.

“Come.” Roan takes my hand, leading me back to Killan’s house. In one of his other hands, he’s holding his tablet, the screen of which he keeps checking.

Killan and Lydia are both waiting for us.

“You are late,” Roan’s eldest brother says by way of a greeting. He’s got his upper arms crossed, like usual.

Lydia raises her eyebrows when she sees what I’m wearing, but she doesn’t say anything. In her defense, I wasn’t being subtle when I got dressed this morning. I’m wearing a blue sweater I packed from the ship. It’s got cute white sheep all over it. Except that I’ve colored in one of the sheep with the only black pen I could find—my eyeliner pen. It’s my tribute to Princess Diana’s iconic ‘black sheep’ sweater and a blatant hint to me being a professional heartbreaker.

I wanted to remind myself of what I’m supposed to be doing—and how much I hate the idea of doing it.

“Late for what?” I ask.

“I thought you might enjoy seeing the farm,” Roan answers.

“A tour? That’s a great idea.” I’m infinitely curious about this farm I keep hearing about.

“This way.” Roan motions for us to follow him as he crosses Killan’s kitchen to one of the doors. I don’t actually know my way around this house well. It’s got to be at least three stories high (or should I have said ‘three stories low’?) with stairs leading both up and down.

As I step through the open doorway, my mouth falls open because there’s a forest!

A frickin' underground forest!

Inside a giant, massive, huge cave.

I'm standing on a walkway made of metal grates. It's about three feet wide and curves along the cave's edge. It's got a railing, thank God, because we've got to be four stories above the cave floor. My heart lurches as my brain presents me with all the possible ways I could fall to my death, until I'm gripping the hand railing so tightly my knuckles have turned white.

"Fuck." Lydia steps up behind me. She seems shorter than usual, and I think that's because her knees are threatening to give way. She's got her eyes half closed, and she only peeks over the walkway's edge for a second before stepping away, her back pressed to the cave wall.

"I don't... How..." I'm so overwhelmed by what I'm seeing that I'm experiencing the phenomenon where my brain can't finish a sentence.

The cave is so large I can't see the back wall. It could be miles and miles long, for all I know. I can see the sky, though... so maybe this isn't a cave at all, but actually a sinkhole? I'm not sure what the difference is. Either way, when I look up, I see the dusky sky, and I can hear the wind, but the cave walls protect the trees, and there's an eerie silence down here. It's hard to explain—being able to hear the screaming wind but also the silence of the cave/sinkhole thing.

The forest itself must be hundreds of trees big, all different sizes and shapes.

Roan steps up beside me. He's watching my face again, as though the sight of the underground forest is so ordinary to him it's lost all its magnificence. Instead, he's waiting for my response.

I don't know how I can possibly say anything that will describe the awe I'm feeling.

“Wait a second.” I step back through the door so I'm once again standing in Killan's kitchen—a relatively boring, ordinary kitchen.

Then, one step forward and I'm in an enormous forest cavern.

Kitchen. Cavern.

Cavern. Kitchen.

Cavern.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Joking?” Roan asks, and he’s looking at me with the expression I’m coming to realize is him being confused by English. Either what I’ve said didn’t translate or the translation was too literal for my meaning to be clear.

“This is incredible, Roan. Killan.” Understatement of my lifetime.

I shake my head, blinking a few times as if expecting the sight before me to disappear. Maybe it’s a dream. Maybe I’m still back on Earth and all of LOVE GALAXY has been some bizarre hallucination. “Did you... Did you make this? Or find this? Or... what?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Lydia agrees, still pressed to the wall, as far from the edge of the platform as possible.

Killan doesn’t stop scowling long enough to answer my question, but he does uncross his arms, and I think maybe he’s at least a bit pleased by our reactions.

“The cave was always here,” Roan says. “Our parents bore through the ceiling to open it up to the light, and my family planted the trees.”

“What are you farming? Fruit? Timber?”

“This is not our farm.” Roan’s eyes are practically sparkling. He’s excited. “This is

merely our arboretum.”

“Oh, of course. Because everyone has their own arboretum!”

“They do?” He looks crestfallen.

“No! Can we go down?” I gesture at the trees. The tops of their highest branches are nearly level with our walkway. “Can we get closer?” If I were to lean right over the handrail, I might be able to touch leaves.

“This way.” Roan walks a few meters farther down the walkway as it snakes along the side of the cavern wall until he reaches a ladder. Four stories down is suddenly looking farther and farther away, and my breath catches: I’ve got to climb down without any ropes or other safety equipment. Evidently, Ril’os aren’t scared of heights. And I probably wouldn’t be either if I were them. I glare at Roan’s muscles. There’s no way he’s accidentally falling off an impossibly long ladder when he’s got four arms with which to hold on.

Only having two arms makes me woefully under-prepared.

“Hell no.” Probably thinking the same thing as me, Lydia backs away from the ladder and promptly walks into Killan, who’s standing behind her. He holds her shoulders with his three hands, keeping her steady—or keeping her from touching his bare chest; I can’t tell which.

When she doesn’t immediately shake off his hold, I realize how scared she is. Terrified, in fact. With a white face that has drained of color.

“I do not have time for this,” Killan growls.

“I’m not—” Lydia begins, finally pulling away from him.

He doesn't let go and he doesn't let her finish whatever argument she'd been about to retort with. "I have work to do. Correspondences to answer. I am not going down there and wasting another day ignoring administration chores. If you insist on slacking—" he says to Roan—"then I will instruct Lydia on how to help me in your stead. Yes?"

"Oh, umm..." Lydia chews her bottom lip for a moment, clearly surprised by Killan's suggestion. "Yes. Yes! I can help you do... whatever it is you need to do."

"Good." He turns, directing Lydia to turn too, and together they head back the way we'd come.

"Huh." Stunned, I watch the pair disappear into the kitchen. "I guess Killan has a lot of admin work to do today."

"I guess..." Roan does not sound convinced, and the way he's staring after his brother with his mouth slightly open proves how surprised he was by Killan being almost tactful.

"If you need to get to work—" I begin, but Roan shakes his head.

"I will climb down first."

"You'll catch me if I fall?"

He smiles—an unnatural, forced smile, but as genuine as a natural one. "Yes."

A deep breath. "Okay." I nod my consent. I'm dying to go exploring. I hadn't realized how cooped up I'd been feeling, not being able to go outside because of the wind. Suddenly, my legs are aching with the need to move. I resolutely ignore my fear of falling and grab hold of the ladder, following Roan.

Roan

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Harlee climbs slowly, and I must keep reminding myself not to rush too far ahead. The thought of her falling takes the breath from my lungs, and for a heartbeat my head spins. I feel how Lydia had looked. And I reach out one arm to brush lightly against Harlee's booted foot, reassuring myself that she is still safely clinging to the ladder.

When we eventually reach the cave floor, she is panting with exertion, but her eyes light up as she turns to face the trees.

"Wow." The exclamation is barely more than a breath of released air. "How did you—" She shakes her head. "I can't begin to imagine the amount of work it would've taken to create all this."

"It was much work," I agree, looking at the trees and remembering my parents laboring day after day, with limited supplies and tech, to create the home they knew would be a sanctuary for their family. "Killan and Sorin helped, a little bit."

"You were too young?"

I nod. "My parents brought my brothers to Ril II after my sister died. They wanted to grow Nufaral." At her confused look, I clarify. "It is algae containing high amounts of Eoli, a nutrient that my species needs to remain healthy. We grow the algae in the underground lakes and ship it back to Ril I to sell so that other Ril'os will not grow sick, like my sister did. We also have a charity." Although this is not strictly in answer to her original question; I want to tell her so she can be as proud of my family as I am. So she can understand that regardless of how desperately I want to travel beyond this planet, I cannot leave the farm. "We supply Nufaral directly to medical

facilities for those Ril'os who cannot afford to purchase our product themselves.”

She turns her large eyes onto me, staring at me with the same awe with which she had been examining the forest. A thrill races along my nerve endings, and I straighten to my full height, preening at such a compliment.

“Even when the farm was established, my parents did not stop working. They turned their attention to making this forest, worried my brothers and I would not appreciate a planet with no life.”

“They wanted you to stay here all your lives.”

“Yes.”

“Even...” She closes her mouth, trapping her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Even though they knew we would be by ourselves, yes.”

“Nobody else from your home planet comes to visit? This place is amazing, Roan. Surely you’d get visitors—friends or family from Ril I.”

“I speak with my parents, but they do not visit.”

“Oh, they’re not... So they’re alive.”

“Yes.” I step closer to her, wrapping my lower arms around Harlee’s waist, wanting... no, needing to hold her. “They returned to Ril I when my father became too frail to continue working. I think my mother misses being here, but she cares for my father. With his memory fading, it would be too much for him to return, even for a short visit.”

She leans back a fraction, all the better to see my face, using my arms as leverage to keep from toppling backwards. “You haven’t talked all that much about the farm since we met, but I can tell you love it here. I can tell how important this place is to you.”

“Killan—” I begin, intending to argue that my passion is nothing to my eldest brother’s, but she shakes her head, silencing me.

“I think I’m finally beginning to understand why you signed up for LOVE GALAXY. You can’t leave.” She closes her eyes. “Roan... I don’t... I don’t think I can stay.”

I freeze, as if standing still will somehow make this conversation stop. As if standing still will somehow cause Harlee to forget what she is saying—or, better yet, to change her mind.

She blinks, opening her eyes again but not quite meeting mine, looking over my shoulder instead. “I don’t want to give you false expectations. I’m exceptionally grateful to have met you, and I wouldn’t change any of the terrible things that happened which led to me being here. But I—” She frowns, her sentence forgotten.

I glance over my shoulder, trying to see what has caught her attention. There is a camera strapped to a tree, watching us.

“I didn’t realize,” she finally says. “I thought... Never mind. I was being silly.” She smiles, the corners of her eyes wrinkling. “Can you show me around? I’d love to see more of the forest.”

I glance between her and the camera. She did not finish what she had been going to say, and while I had not wanted to hear her words of rejection, I also do not want her speech to be controlled by John Smith and the ever-watchful cameras.

“Harlee.” I ever-so-slightly tighten my hold of her waist. If she really wanted to break free, I would let her go, but she does not struggle. I think not all of her attention is on me, but she acknowledges her name when I repeat myself. “I am not trying to trap you on Ril II. But I would appreciate the opportunity to show you what your life could be like here.” There is a silent wait at the end of that sentence, but my heart seems to leap into my mouth before I can say it, and my voice falters. Not because of the cameras. Not because of John Smith. Not because of LOVE GALAXY. My voice falters because speaking the words out loud makes them more real, somehow. More substantial.

And even more heartbreaking if she were to leave at the end of the twenty days.

“I...” She lets out a long, shuddering breath. “I can’t make any promises,” is how she completes that sentence. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

She doesn’t have to glance over my shoulder at the camera again for me to know she is acutely aware of its presence. I can feel the stiffness in her muscles that had not been there when I had first wrapped my arms around her.

I immediately want to take away all her worries.

“Let us play a game.” She laughed last night. Maybe I can make her laugh again.

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“A game?” Her brows rise, and she finally meets my gaze. “What sort of game? Hide and Seek?”

“No.” I smirk. “Catch and Kiss.”

Chapter Eighteen

Harlee

“Catch and Kiss?” Pushing against Roan’s arms, I break his hold around my waist and take a hesitant step back. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I swear the glint in his eyes is devilish. He looks suddenly years younger. If I hadn’t been the person to teach him how to kiss only yesterday, I’d swear he’d been catching and kissing girls his whole life. Confidence radiates off him, and a thrill of excitement sends a rush of heat to my face. I take another step backwards. “Okay,” I hear myself agree. “On the count of three? One. Two?—”

“Three!” Turning, Roan sprints away.

For a second I’m left standing there with my mouth open. For some stupid reason it never occurred to me that I’d be the one doing the chasing. Now... Well, now my heart is beating so fast I might already be running, so I charge after him. I’ve no clue where I’m going. Roan has the advantage of knowing the terrain. And a height advantage. My advantage is... Umm...My advantage is... I grit my teeth, pushing

myself faster. My advantage is that I'm not going to surrender!

Roan is almost beyond my sight, and I have to concentrate on keeping a watch on him and on the ground at the same time so that I don't trip.

The forest is remarkable. It really looks as if it's been here for hundreds of years. Some of the tree trunks are so wide I wouldn't be able to wrap my arms around them and touch my fingers together. Some have roots thicker than my waist, looping up and out of the ground. If I didn't know better, I'd think they were trying to trip me on purpose.

Other trees have these amazing branches that have grown in spirals instead of straight lines, as though someone has tamed their growth until they look kind of like curly french fries but with glossy green leaves.

It's dark under the canopy, with the overhead sunlight muted by the constant wind whipping up dust and the trees conspiring to take whatever sunlight remains for themselves. In a few places someone has set up lights, attaching them to tree trunks or to artificial poles. They remind me of the lamppost in Narnia, but their light only illuminates so much of the forest, leaving the majority in shadows.

"I'm getting closer!" I yell between panting breaths, not because it's true but because I want Roan to think I'm about to catch him and make a mistake.

It seems to work because he suddenly second-guesses himself and changes directions. I cut around a tree, taking a shortcut, cutting the distance between us in half.

He glances over his shoulder at me, and I almost swear. He's making this race look effortless! He's barely out of breath and he's certainly not sweating.

And here I am, getting overheated and having trouble breathing. I should (if I was

being smart and thinking about how gross a sweaty, panting Human might appear on camera) stop running and admit defeat.

Asher always used to say I was too impulsive, too quick to jump into action. He'd wrinkle his nose, sneering whenever I spoke without thinking first or was the first to volunteer for a task or opportunity.

Leave it for someone else, he'd say. Why are you always drawing so much attention to yourself?

I don't stop running. There's a part of me that wants to give my ex and the cameras and Mr. Smith a silentfuck you. In fact, I run faster. Even though sweat is dripping into my eyes.

Despite my resolve, I'm flagging. And the climb down the four-story ladder didn't help.

We still haven't reached the far wall of the cavern. Or maybe Roan is leading me in circles.

Then he grabs hold of a lamppost with both of his right arms and, using his momentum, he swings himself to the right, darting around another massive tree.

I try copying him, but my hold on the post slips, my smaller hand having trouble gripping it. I almost land on my face, catching myself on my left arm instead. Thankfully, the rock of the cavern floor is thickly covered by soil and leaf litter, so my fall doesn't hurt.

"I'm" pant "coming" pant "to" pant "get you!" Not my most threatening, but I'm pleased I can still talk. Breathing is causing a stabbing pain in my ribs. Stupid stitch!

Pushing myself upright, I take the turn slower this time, but when I get around the tree, Roan is nowhere in sight.

I stumble to a halt. I might be determined, but I'm not stupid. There's no way I'm picking any old random direction and running that way. Maybe, instead, I can find a clue to point me in the right direction.

Hands pressed to my stitch, as if that might alleviate some of the pain, and gasping in mouthfuls of earth-smelling air, I walk a slow circle. The massive tree is so large that its canopy has stopped other trees from growing too close, creating a mini clearing. There are a few dead stumps where trees tried to grow and failed. It's particularly dark here. Almost no sunlight penetrates the magnificent tree's leaves.

"You can't..." pant "hide forever," I try yelling so Roan will hear me wherever he is, but the words come out as more of an ungainly wheeze, and I don't have the breath to spare to try again.

There's a noise... Maybe?

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I freeze, trying to listen over the thumping of my heart.

There! That was definitely a noise. A footstep, perhaps. Maybe Roan is close by and trying hard to keep quiet. Hiding instead of running. Sneaky man. No wonder he disappeared so quickly after rounding the giant tree.

I look up, searching the branches overhead. They're so large that I bet I could lie down along the length of one and not be visible from the ground. Probably trees are easy to climb if you've got four arms.

I stride forward, with every intention of scaling the tree trunk. I mightn't've climbed a tree in nearly two decades, but I'm not giving up. I'm having too much fun to quit.

I'm smiling, I realize belatedly. Really, properly smiling. And I've barely spared many thoughts for Mr. Smith. Even now, it's easy to brush him from my mind.

Well, not completely; I haven't forgotten where I am or what happened to get me here. But the memory of my abduction isn't front and center, like usual. And I don't feel the need to search for cameras.

In fact, I've got my fingers crossed that if we are being filmed I won't find out. I don't want the magic spell of this moment to be shattered.

Reaching the tree, I hunt for a foot- or hand-hold, thinking that if I can get myself a foot or so off the ground, I should be able to reach the lowest branch.

That's when I see it: a hollow in the base of the tree. It's about four feet tall and three

wide, looking like a tear, as if there was a branch at the base of the tree but it snapped off, tearing open part of the trunk. The wood is paler here, maybe dead... But the rest of the tree is as magnificent as ever, so whatever happened to make the hollow, it didn't cause lasting problems.

I duck my head and shuffle forward.

Were I in the bush back home, I'd be worrying about snakes and spiders and scorpions. Here, I'm only worried about tripping over the uneven ground.

The tree hollow is even larger inside than I'd realized from outside. I can stand up straight and not hit my head.

I reach out a tentative hand, searching for the walls, and touch something warm.

"Fuck!" I leap back, right as Roan's four arms catch me, pulling me against his chest.

"Caught you," he whispers, and his breath tickles my cheek.

"I caught you," I argue, and to prove my point, I loop my arms around his neck, standing on my tippy toes to make myself a few inches taller.

Leaf litter crunches underfoot, and the scent of musty earth is even stronger here. It's also so dark that I can't quite make out Roan's face. Except for his eyes. They're doing that not-quite-bright-enough-to-be-called-glowing thing again.

Maybe he can see me better than I can see him.

My theory is confirmed when he bows his head, capturing my lips with his, aiming perfectly.

I sink into the kiss, savoring the warmth radiating off his scales. His scales... I shudder with delight. I never realized quite how amazing scales are until I met Roan. They're smooth and hard all at once, and when I scrape at the back of his neck with my fingernails, there's a satisfying skritchingsound.

He shivers, pushing against me, and I scratch him again. He rewards me with another shiver and a moan that has me wondering if he's got scales all over his body. That could be interesting.

I use the tree to anchor myself steady, and Roan thrusts against me. His bulge is back, and I'm feeling decidedly greedy; I worked hard to catch Roan, and I'm getting my reward. I don't doubt for a second he had this planned and always knew exactly where he was running to.

I'm positive there isn't a camera hidden in the tree hollow, and so I allow myself the privilege of pushing back against him, thrusting my hips with a reckless abandon I haven't felt in over two years.

With nobody watching, with nobody judging me, I feel like I can be absolutely and perfectly myself. That annoying voice in my head that's always telling me to talk quieter or to sit up straighter or to wear flat shoes instead of high heels—it's silent now. All I can hear are my own breaths, intermingled with Roan's.

He doesn't seem to care that I'm sweaty. In fact, he's pushed a hand into my damp hair and is tugging lightly, massaging my scalp, drawing me closer.

Our heartbeats are racing. I can feel his pulse beating in his throat, and I wrap one hand around his throat, spreading my fingers as far as they will go, squeezing. He growls and breaks the kiss, but he doesn't pull away.

Rather, yanks at the hem of my sweater, and I gladly help him take it off me, loving

the feeling of the cool air on my hot skin. I wouldn't be surprised if Roan told me there was steam shooting out of my ears. I'm so overheated it's nearly overwhelming.

I'm hot from the exertion of running.

And I'm hot with desire.

I press my eyes closed, using my hand at his throat to draw his head down. He traces the length of my collarbone with lips and tongue. It's the most wonderful feeling and almost too much to bear.

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It's me moaning, and it doesn't come as a surprise when Roan tugs down my tank top and fumbles with the clip of my bra.

"Harlee," he breathes my name. "So beautiful. So perfect."

And it doesn't occur to me for a second to contradict him.

Roan

Desperation and desire claw at my chest until I feel like I want to tear off my scales. As if my body cannot hold all of these delicious sensations inside. They are too many and too great. Instead, I tug artlessly at Harlee's clothes, until she is bare from the waist up. I wish we were in my cottage, standing under a bright light, so I could see all the tiny details of her skin, but at least there is privacy here in the tree. Even if the walls are rough and the ground dirty. Even if Harlee deserves so much more than a forest floor.

She pushes against me, grinding her hips, and the sensation against my straining cock, confined within my sheath, is enough to drive me mad. I press against Harlee, forcing her to stumble back a step, catching her weight as she shifts her feet on the uneven ground, until she is leaning against the inside of the tree trunk. Then I bow my head and devour her breasts. Her skin is incredibly soft, finer than the most expensive cloth. I lick and nip my way across the upper arch of one breast, cupping the wonderful weight in my lower hands.

I think she is unlike Ril'os Females, who do not have such distinct curves or large breasts. But I barely give the differences consideration. She is my Harlee.

My first.

My only.

Perfection.

Chapter Nineteen

Harlee

I arch my back, pressing into Roan's hold. The contrast between the rough wood at my back and his amazingly smooth scales at my front has me appreciating the feeling of Roan all the more. I'm going wild for his touch. It's as though my body has been craving this type of connection with someone for the last two years of loneliness—longer, maybe. Only, I haven't realized how much I needed this until now. Until I'm being consumed by Roan.

The thought that I'll be leaving Ril II, leaving Roan, is a stab of pain in my chest, and I instinctually tighten my hold on his neck. If I could think of some way for both of us to have everything we want—to be together, for Roan to stay on his farm, for me to not have been abducted... But it's impossible. We quite literally come from two different worlds. And so I push the thought of our inevitable separation from my mind.

It's a simple thing to do, for Roan's exploration of my exposed skin with his fingers and lips and tongue demands my full attention. I swear his four hands are everywhere at once—holding me steady, massaging my breasts, lightly pinching my nipples, sending waves of desire and longing and hunger through my body, stronger than I've felt in a very, very long time.

I crave his touch, even as he presses close, leaving not a sliver of space between us.

I'm running my hand down his chest before I've fully realized what I'm daring to do. My fingers trace his scales lower and lower, to the bulge between his legs. He bucks wildly against my feather-light touch, and I grin, pleased with myself.

He's half wild with need because of my kisses and my body.

Because of me.

"How—" I begin to ask, but Roan must anticipate the end of my question because he slips one of his hands down to where mine is, directing me to where I should apply pressure to open his slit. His cock springs free, hot and red and weeping.

It isn't covered in scales. Nevertheless, I'm instantly fascinated.

I sink to my knees, intending to get a closer view; it is rather dark in here, after all. And while my eyes have grown somewhat accustomed to the low lighting, I still can't make out the finer details. But Roan shakes his head. He catches hold of my arms, keeping me from getting any lower.

"Can't," he bites out between clenched teeth. "About to blow."

"Oh!" I suppress a giggle, and a fresh wave of pleasure and pride has me grinning. Because of me. I probably look like the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. Way too pleased with myself.

One small step for humankind.

I'm going where no woman has gone before.

I tug his head down, drowning in our kiss. Barely drawing breath.

And then something wet hits my exposed stomach. It's warmer than I'd been expecting, but not unpleasantly so.

Roan gasps against my mouth, and I take the opportunity to nip his bottom lip. Another gasp, another buck of his hips, one final pulse of his cock, trapped between our bodies.

I drop from my tip toes, peaking between us at the result.

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“Harlee!” Roan looks horrified. He’s got two hands pressed to his cheeks, hiding his face, and with his other hands he wipes at my stomach, cleaning me. All he manages to do is spread the mess further.

Considering we don’t even have a towel or a tissue between us, I pick my tank top off the ground and use that, wiping his hand and then pretending to polish the head of his dick, like I’m shining shoes.

His eyes widen even further, and he opens and closes his mouth, trying and failing to think of something to say.

“Did that feel good?” I ask, barely recognizing my own voice. I sound so confident.

Roan nods.

“I’m glad.” I press a kiss to the highest point of him I can reach, which happens to be his shoulder. I love how much taller than me he is. It wasn’t often back home that I met men significantly taller than me. And the few times I’d tried internet dating, everyone I’d met up with had been surprised I wasn’t a petite, short Asian.

“You...” Roan clears his throat. He’s got his back pressed to the inside of the tree, and I think he might have been shrunk a few inches, like his legs are having a hard time keeping him upright. I wish we could lie down, but there’s something special and unique about hiding inside a partially hollow tree, nonetheless.

I love knowing that Roan grew up in this forest as the forest itself grew up. He must know all its secrets. Mr. Smith never stands a chance of finding us here.

“Thank you.”

I blink up at him. “For what?”

“For... for...” He gestures between us. “Everything!”

I laugh. “Don’t thank me. I’m pretty sure you knew exactly what you were planning when you suggested we play Catch and Kiss.”

He drops to his knees. For a second I think his legs finally did give way, but then his hands are at the clasp of my jeans, and he’s fumbling with the button like a man who’s never had to undo one before.

“You don’t have to reciprocate,” I tell him, my heart racing. Not that there was anything to reciprocate; we only kissed. The easiest hand job I’ve ever given! And the most satisfying. “This isn’t a tit-for-tat relationSHIP!” I yell the end of the word as Roan finally gets my jeans undone, yanking them and my panties down to my knees. With my legs spread, that’s as far as the fabric will stretch, and I feel instantly trapped—trapped by Roan’s arms around my waist. Trapped by my own jeans locking my legs.

He glances up at me then, licking his lips and looking entirely decadent. Suddenly, my legs are the ones threatening to give away. I grab at the tree behind me, searching for a handhold, and instead I’ve got to hold on to Roan’s shoulders to keep myself upright.

“You don’t need to—” I begin again, feeling my confidence seeping away. Water through a sieve. Easily gained; easily lost, apparently.

My pulse is thumping. Sweat prickles at my back. I’ve never had a guy go down on me before. What if he doesn’t like my smell? What if I look too different from Ril’os

women? What if?—

He cards a hand through my pubic hair, leaning closer for a better look at my pussy. I freeze, my breath catching in my lungs. Trapped by my two colliding emotions of anticipation and fear.

Roan doesn't have a single hair on his entire body—he's all scales. He doesn't even have eyelashes.

“Okay!” The last of my confidence drips away, and I try covering myself with my hands. Roan doesn't stop me from doing so, but he catches my wrists, holding onto me lightly.

“Harlee,” he whispers, my name, a prayer. Then he leans even closer, and I let him draw my hands away.

Roan

I tip my head to one side, all the better to examine my Harlee. She has hairs between her legs and the most decadent scent I have ever smelled. I lean closer, drawing in a deep breath, trying to memorize the scent of her desire.

She squirms under my hold, and I release her hands so I can grasp her waist with my upper hands, keeping her steady. With my lower hands, I examine her hairs. They are coarser than the hairs elsewhere on her body, extremely dark, and they guard the most delicious scent.

I move my examination downward, slipping my fingers between her folds. Moisture wets my fingers, and I experimentally lick my hand clean.

The taste is exquisite. Mouthwatering. Moaning, my eyes flicker closed, but I force

them open again, not wanting to miss seeing a moment of our secret time together.

“Did you just—?” Harlee’s exclamation is shocked, and I glance up at her face to find her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted.

“No?”

“No... Umm... Yes?”

“Akh—”

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“Yes,” she says with finality. “Absolutely, yes. I got a surprise, that’s all.”

Heart thumping in my mouth, I resume my exploration, learning the shape of Harlee with my fingers. She continues to squirm, even when I try holding her still, but her squirming is not her trying to pull away. Mayhaps me touching her like this compares to how my cock had felt pressed between our bodies, rubbing against the silken skin of Harlee’s stomach.

I replace my hand with my tongue, lapping up her wetness. She gasps, her hands grabbing at my horns, pulling me closer.

She wants me!

With a triumphant groan, I renew my exploration, tracing her folds, circling her quim, relishing her delectable taste. I could kneel at her feet and feast for a full night and a day and still crave more.

I find a small bud, and when I do, Harlee bucks against me, moaning my name.

The sound is a fist around my cock, and I jerk involuntarily.

Delighted, I repeat the movement over and over again, focusing my attention on the bud that yields such tangible results.

“Oh God, Roan.” Her hold on my horns tightens. I try tilting my head back so I can see her face, wanting to bask in her pleasure, but doing so reduces the pressure of my tongue. Unsatisfied, I return my attention to her core, doubling my focus.

Her body quivers. She gasps, hardly able to draw breath. This moment, here with Harlee, is more amazing than anything I have imagined.

Chapter Twenty

Harlee

We emerge from the forest, both pretending we haven't just felt each other up. My hair's probably a bird's nest of knots, and Roan's keeping his lower hands clasped suspiciously in front of his groin, but all things considered I'm pretty proud of our efforts.

Lydia is sitting at Killan's kitchen table, with Chloe leaning over her shoulder. Killan is nowhere to be seen. The women have got a tablet propped up in front of them and are talking to someone. At this angle I can't see the screen, but it's Briar's voice I hear.

With a jerk of his head, Roan motions for me to follow him, and I make a half-hearted attempt to catch Lydia's attention to let her know we're back from the forest. She's so focused on their conversation I don't think she hears, and I don't push the matter, not really wanting anyone to see how wrinkled my clothes are. Plus, I've got my tank top balled up in my hand because it was too dirty for me to put back on, and I can only hope I don't smell too strongly of sex.

"Yeah," Lydia asks suddenly, looking at Chloe. "I want to know. Why us?"

Whatever Briar said, it's got Lydia on edge, and she's glaring at Chloe.

Chloe sighs, making it clear she's sick of their conversation. "Be-cau-se," she says, extending the individual syllables of her answer into a trashy drawl. "Do you remember those medical tests you took before being accepted?"

I stall halfway between following Roan and half listening to their private conversation. Those medical tests hadn't been fun—blood tests, urine tests, sexual health tests. I shudder at the memory.

“We were checking for compatibility between Humans and a few other species,” Chloe continues. She's looking between Lydia and the tablet screen; clearly they've still got no idea I'm here. “It so happens that Ril'os sperm acts in much the same way as Human sperm.”

“Gross!” Lydia claps a hand over her mouth.

I hear Briar ask another question, but I can't quite make out all the words. Whatever she says, it makes Chloe grin.

“Surprise pregnancies make for thrilling TV, even in outer space,” Chloe concludes.

I stumble back a step, my heart practically leaping to my mouth.

Roan returns to my side. He's got his head cocked to one side, clearly confused about why I'm taking so long to follow him. He isn't acting like someone who overheard a revelation designed to make us angry.

Lydia's face is turning red. Chloe's still grinning, looking entirely too pleased with herself.

I duck under two of Roan's arms, stepping into the tunnel that leads from the main house to his cottage, and he lets the door swing closed behind us. Its hinges are silent, thankfully. I'm not sure if I want anyone to know that I overheard. I need time to process.

Surprise pregnancy.

If Roan and I had gone a step further... We weren't exactly being careful. Getting pregnant had been the last thought in my head. In fact, it never occurred to me that we might be compatible in that way.

I'm shaking, and I tuck my hands behind my back before Roan can notice.

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Still, he senses something's wrong, and when he asks if I'm well, I'm unable to force a fake smile.

"Fine," I mumble, instead. "I'm fine."

Hurrying back to his house, a sense of relief and... home-ness washes over me. It's not enough to make me feel better, though, especially not when I see a camera still clipped to a cupboard and to the overhead lintel of the front door.

"Going to the bathroom," I say, ducking my head and pretending to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear to block my face from being filmed.

Alien bathrooms are strange.

Firstly, there's no mirror. While I usually enjoy checking my reflection, maybe today it's a good thing I can't see myself. I don't think I could bear seeing how pale my cheeks must or how hollow my eyes must look.

I certainly feel hollow, akin to the tree Roan and I hid in.

I've been such an idiot! I always knew Chloe was working for Mr. Smith, but I'd somehow still convinced myself that she was on our side. I'd thought she was my ally, and that if I did what she asked of me, she'd make sure Mr. Smith followed through on his commitment to taking Lydia, Briar and me back home.

How wrong I'd been.

Chloe doesn't care about any of us.

She's as bad as Mr. Smith.

Worse even, because she's Human and a woman, yet she still helped abduct us, knowing exactly what torture she was going to be putting us through.

Fuck! Why are all my options terrible?

I could break Roan's heart as I've been told to, then demand Mr. Smith take me, Lydia and Briar home, as he promised. That's terrible option number one.

Alternatively, I could immediately stop getting to know Roan and spending time alone with him. I could make it super-duper clear that I've no intention of staying and that he shouldn't get feelings for me. Then, I could spend the rest of our twenty days on Ril II hoping and praying that Mr. Smith will still take us Humans home despite the fact I've potentially botched one of the major storylines of his TV show. That's terrible option two.

And it's terrible for two reasons. First, I don't want to stop spending time with Roan. He's amazing and incredible, and I'm selfish enough that I want to spend every last minute on this planet in his company. Second, I'm pretty sure Roan fancies me enough that when I leave he's going to feel crap regardless of how clear I am about not staying.

I'm the first girl he's ever kissed.

I'm the first he's ever spilt spunk on.

I'm the first chance he's gotten to experience intimacy and romance and love.

We're both frogs sitting in a pot of water. While Mr. Smith and Chloe are slowly turning up the heat so they can enjoy watching us cook.

I storm around the bathroom, gritting my teeth. The entire room is a shower, with a drain in the floor and a showerhead in the ceiling. The walls, floor and ceiling are all made of a waterproof material that reminds me of plastic but, when I thump it with a fist, sounds like glass.

To access the toilet, you've got to press a button, and it spits out a bowl from a hatch in the wall. The bowl's got a rim that kinda looks like a seat, but it's super uncomfortable, clearly having been designed for someone taller and larger than me. I get the crazy idea that if I put too much of my weight on it, I'll slip right in and be flushed down the pipes, so instead I do this awkward hover-squat thing, sticking my bum out behind me with my hands braced against the side wall for balance.

I'm giving myself a worrier's headache. I can hardly believe how wonderful I felt only a few minutes ago, when it had been just me and Roan. Back when I'd been ignoring our million and one problems. Now, my guilt is back, and it's a like knife that's been stabbed between my ribs. I'm almost surprised when there's no blood.

I search the bathroom twice over but don't find a second hatch. Even after a night and most of a day living in Roan's house, I still don't know how a girl's supposed to clean her hands, other than in the kitchen sink. If there's another hatch in the bathroom from which a basin pops out then I've clearly missed it. In the end, I give up and turn on the shower instead. I need a proper wash, anyway.

My stomach's sticky with drying cum.

Using what I hope is soap, I scrub my tank top and undies clean—partly because I'm fairly certain Roan doesn't own a washing machine (why would he when he doesn't own any clothes or blankets?) and partly because I want to eliminate all evidence of

what Roan and I got up to hiding in the hollow tree.

In the heat of the moment, it had been so incredibly easy to push thoughts of LOVE GALAXY out of my mind. Presently, I'm thinking about how upset Lydia's going to be with me if I've fucked up.

Scrubbed clean, I search the bathroom for the towel I didn't bring in with me, and then do this ridiculous hoppingdance, trying to dislodge as many waterdrops as possible. Thank goodness there isn't a camera in the bathroom, or else I'd be making an even bigger fool of myself than I already have.

Still dripping, I've got no choice but to use my jumper (the cleanest of my dirty clothes) as a shield, pressed against my chest, in an attempt to preserve at least a little of my dignity and privacy, and then I scramble out of the bathroom, into Roan's bedroom. He's not here, but judging by the soft sounds coming from the kitchen, he isn't far away. Of course, it's not him I'm worried about seeing me like this. It's the three stinking cameras.

It's impossible to keep from flashing them my butt, so I don't bother trying as I sort through my duffle bag, hunting for clean clothes.

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“Do you think we don’t know what you and Roan were doing, hiding in the woods?” Chloe asks.

I jump, clutching my jumper firmly to my breasts. “What the fuck?” Looking around the bedroom, I double check I am, indeed, alone. Then I point at the closest camera. “Do you mind? I’m getting dressed!”

“So what?” She dismisses my concern, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

One-handed, I step into my panties and wiggle them up my legs, a job made harder by how wet my skin still is.

“You can’t drag him into the woods and ravish the virgin off-camera,” she continues. “That wasn’t part of our deal.”

“So LOVE GALAXY is a porno?”

There’s a pause while I try putting on my bra without giving the cameras an eyeful and while Chloe is presumably surprised by the force of my question. It’s definitely the most direct I’ve been with her since we met, but I really can’t stomach any more of her bullshit today.

“Don’t be that girl,” she snaps, breaking the silence. “You knew what you were getting into when you signed your contract.”

“No, I didn’t.” I lower my voice, not wanting Roan to overhear. “You literally drugged and abducted me!” I hiss.

“That’s old news. If you’re going to be successful in life, Harlee, you’ve got to stop obsessing about stuff that’s already happened. You can’t change it.”

“You can’t seriously be telling me to just get over?—”

“You’re still obsessing over your ex-boyfriend and now this. Boohoo. Nobody likes a crybaby.”

“What?” Her mention of Asher throws me for a number, and her insult feels like she looked inside of me and saw my biggest fear.

Don’t be that girl. Nobody likes that girl.

Nobody likes you.

I draw a deep breath, angrier than I’ve been in years. Certainly visibly angrier than I’ve let myself be in a very long time. I’m shaking again, and my face is burning. I’m so furious I can hardly think of what to say. All my possible responses are swirling around my head so fast they’re bumming into each other and tangling together into one giant mess that’s probably going to result in me spluttering indecipherably.

“D-Don’t—” I struggle to corral my emotions.

Chloe laughs.

“D-Don’t you dare bring Asher into this.”

But it’s like Chloe doesn’t hear me. Even though it cost me so much effort to shape my emotions into something resembling self-determination.

What she says instead is: “Zip it, Harlee. You’ve got no excuses for what you did

today, hiding in the forest. Don't hide like that again, or?—”

“Or what?” I demand.

“Or I'll tell everybody about our deal. I'll tell them about your betrayal and how fucking selfish you always are. And—” She pauses in that way of hers that makes it clear she knows exactly what she's going to say next and is making you wait for dramatic effect. “If you don't have the stomach to break Roan's heart on camera, then I'll do it for you. And it will be so much worse for him coming from me.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Roan

“Hey,” Lydia says, entering my kitchen. “You left this behind.” She raises the datapad she is holding, showing me, before setting it on the table.

“Thank you.”

“You alright?” Lydia frowns as she studies me, hands on her hips.

I look down at myself, searching for what has caught her attention.

“You look depressed,” she clarifies.

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“I am not.” Glum, mayhaps. Confused, yes. Why has Harlee remained hidden from me since we returned home? Did I do something to upset her? Am I not yet good at kissing?

“Hmm...” Lydia glances at the open door behind her, then seems to decide she can spare a few more minutes before returning. My guess is that she is avoiding Killan, and I cannot entirely blame her. I have done the same thing myself many times when he is reciting one of his many favorite lectures on the importance of our farm and how we should work harder to increase production.

I wince, thinking of all the work I have not done these last three days, and silently vow to make up for it. Later.

“So... where’s Harlee?”

“Bathroom.”

My answer only makes Lydia more suspicious. She leans to one side, as if expecting Harlee to step out from behind me and surprise her. I attempt a Human-style smile, but it does not have the desired effect as Lydia glares at my many, many sharp teeth.

Increasingly self-conscious, I snap my mouth closed.

“Seriously, what’s wrong? You’ve been over-excited since the moment you first met Harlee, but now...” She points to my face, my expression evidence enough with which to end her sentence. “What’d you do to piss her off?”

“Nothing.” I scrape the toe of my boot across a flagstone. “If you wanted to be good at kissing, hypothetically!”—I hastily add—“what would you do? How would you practice?”

She laughs, sees I am not laughing and laughs more. “Sorry, but my cousin asked me that exact same question, and he’s eleven.”

I cross my arms, glaring.

“If your brother doesn’t scare me, then you certainly don’t.” Lydia glares right back. “You seem like a nice guy, Roan, but I’m not going to give you tips for dating Harlee. She isn’t staying, so there’s no point in getting your hopes up.”

“She might,” I retort, ignoring how churlish I sound.

Lydia huffs, rapidly losing her sense of humor. She might have asked how I am, but her loyalty is clearly to her fellow Humans, not to me.

“I guess she might,” she concedes, “if you were to ask her. But why would you?”

“Because—” I begin, but Lydia has not yet finished.

“Do you really expect her to live the rest of her life in a cave? Sure, you’ve got a couple of trees, but that’s not the same thing when the rest of your fucking planet is a windstorm! If she stays, she’ll be the only woman here. She won’t have any friends. She’ll get super lonely and depressed.”

“I am not?—”

“Don’t lie! You’re so fucking lonely, Roan, and I’m incredibly sorry about that, but don’t you fucking dare ask Harlee to stay here and suffer with you.”

“Lydia!”

We both turn to find Harlee standing at the open door of the bedroom. She is dressed in clean clothes and has brushed all her hairs over one shoulder, where they drip water onto the floor. She smells of my soap, and I growl, low and possessively before I can stop myself.

“I can’t deal with this right now.” Harlee’s shoulders sag. There are dark circles under her eyes, and her lips are so pale without their usual wash of artificial color. “Did you come over just to yell at Roan or?—?”

“I came to talk to you,” Lydia says.

Does she really believe that a life here, with me, would be so tortuous for Harlee?Evidently so.

I want to defend myself. I want to demand Lydia leave my house, leave Harlee and me alone. But I am not a youngling unable to control my feelings. So I grit my teeth and remain silent. If Lydia wishes to speak with Harlee and if Harlee wishes to hear what Lydia has to say, then I will not come between them.

“Okay,” Harlee agrees.

“It’sprivate.” Lydia looks pointedly at me, waiting for me to leave.

I hold my ground, crossing my arms. I might not be interfering, but I am not above refusing to leave my own home.

I had always thought my brothers would be my biggest contenders in LOVE GALAXY. I never considered the possibility that I would be fighting against another of the Human Females for Harlee.

“I think I know what you’re here to tell me,” Harlee says, sounding exhausted. She takes a seat at the table and gestures for Lydia to also sit. “If it’s about the whole pregnancy situation?—”

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“You know?” Lydia gasps, not sitting.

“Only because I overheard part of your conversation with Chloe and Briar. It was when Roan and I came back inside from the forest. You were sitting at Killan’s table. I waved, but you didn’t see me.”

“What—” I begin, because I did not hear any such conversation, but Lydia interrupts.

“That makes my job of telling you easy. Briar didn’t want you to—you know. When I told her that you’re spending lots of time with Roan.”

“Briar did not want what?” I ask.

Harlee glances at me, and the overhead lighting emphasizes the dark hollows under her eyes. “Briar doesn’t want me getting pregnant by accident. Chloe told us today that Humans and Ril’os are biologically compatible.”

“Yes.” I nod.

“Wait, you knew?” Lydia demands.

“Yes. LOVE GALAXY only ever matches compatible species.”

Lydia glares.

Harlee says, “I guess that makes sense. But us women didn’t know until now.”

I am filled with an undeniable urge to hunt down John Smith and pummel him.

“You need not worry,” I reassure Harlee instead, my desire to comfort her overpowering my want to strike the Drah’osMale. “I did much research before you arrived, reading scientific papers and advice columns, and I bought many contraceptives. I will show you.” I hurry into my bedroom, open the drawer of my bedside table and withdraw the handfuls of supplies I had shipped to Ril II before filming commenced.

“Here.” I drop everything onto the kitchen table.

Harlee’s mouth falls open.

Lydia finally sits, rummaging through my collection. “Condoms,” she says, holding up a packet clearly marked with an instructional illustration. “Always a classic. Even in outer space, turns out.”

I bite back my retort demanding she stop touching my things.

“As I did not know which species you would be,” I tell Harlee (not Lydia), “I tried to be prepared for many possibilities.”

“You sure did. I don’t recognize most of this stuff.”

“I know what this is,” Lydia says. “And this isn’t a contraceptive, dude.” She waves the silicon replica of my erection through the air, using it to point at me. “This is a dildo.”

“I mean...” Harlee looks at it. “It definitely wouldn’t get a girl pregnant.”

“Exactly.” I give Harlee one of my practiced smiles, displaying all my teeth.

“Is it accurate?” Lydia begins a closer inspection of my erection.

“Very. I followed all the instructions.”

“Wait.” Lydia stills. “What do you mean, all the instructions?”

“To make the replica.”

“You made this? It’s a replica of your dick?”

“Yes. I cast a mold?—”

“Fuck!” Lydia drops the erection, and it bounces across the table toward Harlee.

“It’s kind of adorable you made such an effort.” Harlee catches my replica before it can roll right off the table and into her lap, wrapping her fingers around the thick base.

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Immediately I am thinking of how it felt to have my real cock trapped between our bodies, rubbing against the silky-smooth silk of Harlee's stomach. I bend my knees, using the table to hide my very real growing bulge from Lydia's sight.

Maybe Harlee is thinking similar thoughts, for her face turns pink and she returns the replica to the pile of contraceptives.

"And this?" Lydia picks up another box. "What's this?"

"A polyplastic barrier."

She nods. "Like a sheet condom."

"A dental dam," Harlee adds. "We've got something similar back home. Is this the pill?" She picks up a small container and shakes it, listening to the rattle inside. "For me?"

"For me," I confirm. "I must take one every day for as long as I wish my milt to remain sterile." To prove my point, I open the box, retrieve a pill and swallow it, even though there are a few hours yet before I officially would need to take it again.

"A pill for men?" Lydia and Harlee exchange a look I cannot read.

"You do not have such ways to disrupt your reproductive cycle on..." I struggle to remember how to pronounce their home planet's name.

"On Earth," Harlee supplies. "Not really. Not for men, anyway."

“I do not understand. ‘Not really’ means ‘no’?”

“Let’s just say that it totally should exist on Earth,” Lydia answers, “but doesn’t for a shit ton of sexist bureaucratic reasons.”

I still do not understand, but Harlee and Lydia are continuing to sort their way through my supplies, and I donot want to disrupt the fascinating little lines of concentration decorating Harlee’s forehead, so I do not push the matter.

“What about this?” she asks me, holding up what looks to be a piece of malleable pipe with thin walls that bend when lightly squeezed.

“Akh. That is a cock shield.”

“I’m sorry, it’s a what shield?” Harlee blinks.

“A cock shield,” I repeat. “To protect a Male’s cock during procreation if the Female has barbs in her quim.”

“Her quim?” Harlee repeats. “Ohhh. You mean,down there.”

I nod.

“Why are there barbs?”

“To keep the Male inside her for longer, to increase their chances of successfully creating younglings.”

“Sounds painful.”

I shudder in agreement. I had secretly been hoping LOVE GALAXY would not pair

me with a Wiyn, even with the invention of the cock shield.

“Do you think...” Lydia clears her throat, suddenly sounding a lot less sure of herself. “Do you think Killan has all this stuff, too? Actually, don’t answer that.” She stands, heading for the exit. When she reaches it, she turns back to face us. “You know what the best contraception is? Abstinence.” Then she hurries away.

“God, she sounded just like my dad then.” Harlee shudders.

“I have trouble keeping up with Lydia’s emotions. One moment she is happy. The next she is yelling at me.”

“Then she’s hunting through your contraceptives like she’s searching for pirate’s treasure. She’s having a rough time adjusting, is all. I don’t think she means half of what she says.” Harlee smiles, motioning to the pile. “You really thought of everything.”

I survey my collection. “I wanted you, whoever you were going to be, to feel safe.” I shake my head. “Not just to feel safe,” I correct. “But to be safe, regardless of our choices. Abstinence included,” I add as an afterthought, never wanting Harlee to feel pressured.

She reaches up to where I am standing and squeezes one of my hands. “I do feel safe. With you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

What are your thoughts on having children, Roan? Are you hoping to be a father one day?

FARMER ROAN:

That is a question I have not allowed myself the privilege of contemplating with any real hope. To father younglings, I must first find myself a Mate, a dream that already feels so completely beyond my reach...

COMMENTATOR CHLOE:

Not anymore! Not with LOVE GALAXY. We can personally guarantee you your very own happy ending.

Harlee

Visiting the algae farm attempt number two starts strong the following morning when, after breakfast, Roan and I return to Killan's house to find him and Lydia grumpy but not openly arguing with each other. As I step onto the balcony overlooking the arboretum, I'm once again in awe.

At this height, we're closer to the canopy than the ground. Something about the contrast between knowing the planet's surface is windswept and bland makes the colors of the trees all the more vibrant. I can easily imagine using the leaves as inspiration for a new fabric pattern— Hundreds of new fabric patterns. The leaves are

familiar, in that when I look at them I know they're leaves. But, at the same time, they're so incredibly different from anything on Earth.

Grasping the balcony railing, I lean as far forward as I can, trying to see the finer details of the closest tree. It's got this winding trunk that looks a little like a stretched spring, as if it was in no hurry to reach its full height when growing. Its branches are all clustered at the top of the trunk, spreading outward in an approximation of a ten-point star. And the leaves are equally as spring-like as its trunk, dangling off the branches more like thousands of Christmas decorations than actual leaves.

It's mindboggling that one of the doors in Killan's kitchen opens straight on to a forest cavern. This is something multi-millionaires on Earth might aspire to, but I doubt any one of them has such an impressive view from their penthouse windows, despite their wealth.

And they certainly couldn't imagine such unique trees, not in their wildest fantasies.

"Your farm has a hard act to follow," I tell Roan.

"Akh..." He wrinkles his nose, clearly confused.

"I mean," I explain with a laugh, "surely nothing can compare to your arboretum. It's..." Amazing. Fantastical. Extraordinary. All of those words fit but none of them feel large enough to encompass the entirety of the underground forest.

"Mayhaps. Mayhaps not," he answers mysteriously, a glint of excitement in his eyes.

"I will climb down first," Killan announces, as we near the ladder. "Then Lydia, Roan and Harlee."

"Always so bossy," Lydia snaps, but her words are missing their usual fight. The

closer we get to the ladder, the more she shakes her head. She's pressed close to the cavern wall, one hand on the stone as a guide, as if she wishes she could glue herself to safety.

"You okay?" I whisper, and she shakes her head. I want to reply, but I suddenly can't think of anything reassuring to say. She's terrified of heights, but she can't say no to climbing down three stories because Mr. Smith sent the four of us a new task to complete this morning.

Killan, Roan, Harlee and Lydia,

With introductions coming along so swimmingly,

It is time to whet your appetite for more,

With a tour of the farm.

#GoWithTheFlow #FaceYourFears

Killan begins his descent, pausing a few feet down from the hatch, clearly waiting for Lydia to follow. She's shaky and sweaty, and when she meets my gaze, I take hold of her arm, pretending for her sake that I'm strong enough to catch her if she falls.

Getting her first foot onto the first rung of the ladder seems to take forever, as she inches closer, moving slower than a snail might. She's holding onto the ladder with both hands with such force, her knuckles have turned white.

I don't let go of her arm until she's climbed beyond my reach, and that's when Killan reaches up to grasp one of her ankles. Lydia moves a fraction faster after that—maybe thanks to Killan's support... Maybe because she wants to get away from him... Either way, he keeps hold of her ankle the entire way down, which has

got to be hard for him because he's supporting himself with one upper arm and one lower arm, making his movements somewhat lopsided.

When they're safely on the forest floor, Roan and I hurry down to join them. Well... 'hurry' might be an overstatement. I do manage to climb down faster than Lydia did, but that can't be entirely because I'm not afraid of heights. Being nearly a foot taller than her has to have helped, considering the ladder was made for Ril'os and the rungs are a fraction too far apart to make climbing feel natural.

Despite not being afraid, my heart still leaps into my mouth on at least three different occasions when I'm stepping down with one foot and the rung isn't exactly where I'm expecting to find it.

Regardless, Roan and I also reach the forest floor safely, and then the brothers are leading Lydia and I not through the trees but down a tunnel cut into the stone. If I'd had to guess, I'd say we're walking directly underneath Killan's kitchen, deep underground. I hadn't noticed this tunnel yesterday, but I'd been somewhat preoccupied with chasing Roan and everything that had followed.

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Thinking about yesterday sends a wave of mixed emotions through me. Our time together hiding in the hollow tree had been exhilarating. What came after with Chloe, less so.

I glance behind me to where Roan is, the tunnel being too narrow for us to walk side by side. He tips his head in a questioning gesture, and I smile but don't say anything. The stonewalls so close make even the smallest sounds echo, and I don't want to thank him for playing Catch and Kiss with me within earshot of Lydia and Killan.

Not to mention the cameras. Because of course there are cameras in the tunnel. Mr. Smith didn't task us with a farm tour and not prepare for filming. Maybe he's hoping to record today some of the things Roan and I did privately together yesterday.

"Our Nufaral farm is the largest of its type in the known universe," Killan says, heedless of the echo. He glances back at us three following him, and there isn't the usual shadow of grumpiness over his face. He looks almost animated, as if he's genuinely excited to be showing off his farm. "The cave ahead houses the first of the lakes our family adapted for Nufaral harvesting. It is also the smallest lake and now used solely as the nursery from which the other, larger lakes are seeded."

Before I can ask what a nursery lake is, we reach the end of the tunnel. It opens onto another cave. The walls, floor and ceiling are all black rock, something I'd hardly been aware of in the forest cavern, but which is the star of the show in this cave. There are a few lights set into the roof, but none of them are large enough to illuminate the entire cave, meaning shadows dance over the walls.

Enormous stalactites appear to pierce through the ceiling, reaching down ten...

fifteen feet, like teeth in a giant's mouth. They're black, like the rock, and their pointed ends are decorated with delicate waterdrops that hang suspended over a large lake.

The four of us are standing on a metal grate that curves around the inner cave wall, a bare few inches above the lake's surface. The entire cave floor is lake, and the water's so dark it's impossible to judge how deep it goes.

As we stand there, staring, one of the stalactites finally releases its waterdrop, and I swear I hear it hitting the lake, breaking the surface tension and sending ripples cascading outwards. Thanks to the overhead lights and their resulting shadows, the ripples of the lake are reflected on the walls and ceiling, until it feels as if the cave itself is alive and moving.

"Holy shit," Lydia breathes, and I've got to agree with her.

"This is your smallest lake?" I ask.

"Yes." There's no disguising the smugness in Killan's tone. "I will show you." And he leads us down another tunnel, into another lake cave, this one twice as large—or even larger still.

"The lakes run in an approximate line," he explains, "from here, down south to Sorin's cottage. It would take more than a day of walking to reach the ninth lake, which is why we have the cart track, which runs parallel to the lakes, connecting the two houses."

"Sorin looks after the lakes closest to his place, and you two care for these lakes?" I ask, glance between Killan and Roan.

Roan nods, opens his mouth to answer, but Killan speaks first. "Roan does most of

the day-to-day work at the end. I help with seeding and harvesting, but the majority of my time I spend running the business-side of our operation.”

“And the charity?”

“What charity?” Lydia frowns, shadows flickering over her face, turning her pink hair eerily green.

“We donate Nufaral to medical centers on Ril I for those who cannot afford it themselves,” Roan says, finally getting a word in around Killan.

“Because...?” Lydia prompts.

“Because it contains an important vitamin responsible for increasing our intestinal absorption of other important elements.” The expression that flashes across Killan’s face is something like anguish, but it’s gone too fast for me to get a proper look.

He doesn’t mention his sister. Nor does Roan, so I don’t say anything either. It isn’t my place to talk about their grief.

“We seed the eight harvesting lakes at the same time so the algae matures in sync,” Killan continues, in a not-so-subtle attempt at a conversation change. “We are approximately fifty days out from our next harvest. The drying process?”

“Sorry,” I interrupt. “There’s Nufaral algae in the water now?” I crouch, squinting into the water, but I can’t see anything but shadows and reflections.

“There is,” Killan answers, but it’s Roan who beats him to the pole that’s resting against the cave wall beside the tunnel we’d entered through. And it’s Roan who sweeps the pole through the dark water. It reminds me of a telescopic pole you’d use to clean leaves out of a swimming pool, but instead of a net at the far end, it’s got a

hook.

Roan uses said hook to scoop up a stringy clump of algae, which he presents to me. It's slimy to the touch, dark emerald in color and looks a bit like hundreds of fine embroidery threads all tangled together.

"The process reminds me of my sourdough starter," Lydia says, sniffing the algae in my hand but not touching it. "When I want to make bread, I add some of my starter to my dough, and the yeast multiplies, feeding on the flour and water. You're doing the same with your algae—adding some of your starter from the seed lake to the other lakes so it multiplies. What does it eat? It's green, so does that mean it's photosynthesizing?" She glances up at the stalactites covering the ceiling, clearly indicating the complete and utter lack of sunlight. She's right: these caves have a different feel to them than the forest cavern, which is open to the sky.

"Primarily, they feed on the nutrient which the water leeches out of the rock." Killan reaches out a hand, catching a falling waterdrop as it plummets from the tip of a stalactite toward the lake's surface. It's black, the same dark color as the rock. "And we supplement those nutrients with sunlight bulbs," he adds, pointing to the closest light.

"Supplemented with sunlight. So sunlight isn't its primary energy source," Lydia asks.

Killan answers, but I don't hear what he says. Instead, I take a step closer to Roan, muttering, "Are you seeing what I'm seeing? They're finally agreeing on something."

Roan shakes his head. "I never thought this day would come."

"Perhaps pigs can fly!"

He gives me a quizzical look.

I laugh. “Miracles really do come true. Oh, quick! They’re leaving us behind.”

We hurry to catch up, following Lydia and Killan as they make their way further around the edge of the cave, examining the lake from multiple angles, talking about feeding times and supplementary diets and... I honestly don’t know. As interesting as algae is, there’s only so much algae talk I’m prepared to listen to in a single day.

“Do you also make bread?” Roan asks me, gently brushing the back of his hand against my arm.

“God, no.” And I realize how little I’ve told Roan about my life back on Earth, too focused on returning home to spend any time actually thinking about home. “I’m a designer. A fabric designer. I kind of have my own business?—”

“You do?” Roan pauses to look at me, his eyes wide. Excited? Happy, perhaps, that we have this in common.

“It’s way, way smaller than your business,” I hurry to correct him. “I’m my only employee, and I do all the work. Well, except for the actual product manufacturing and distribution. I’ve outsourced that to a couple of larger companies. But I design all my fabrics myself.”

“Fabrics like this?” he asks, plucking at the hem of my pastel blue T-shirt and rubbing the cotton/polyester mix between forefinger and thumb.

“Yeah. But not this exact one. I was actually just thinking about how this pattern here would make a beautiful design.” I run my hand over the cave wall, watching the water reflection dance over the dark rock. “These really organic waves. There’s no two of them alike.” I drop my hand to my side, remembering how keen I’d been on my first day here to tell the cast and the cameras about my business. Useless, now, of course, because no alien is going to want to order fabric from Earth, if they even know how to find Earth in the first place.

Still, the way Roan’s looking at me, like I’m the most brilliant designer in the whole universe, is sending butterflies through my stomach, and I smile, tucking a lock of hair behind one ear.

“You don’t really have any fabric on Ril II,” I say, stating the obvious to the alien not wearing any clothes. “But I can design other things, too. Like logos and packaging. Do you have a logo for your company?”

“Akh... We use our company name on our packaging. NaturalNufaral. Is that what you mean?”

“Kind of. A logo can certainly include the shop name. But it also uses an image and colors to trigger a response in your clients. For example, I call my shop Harlee’s Heart, and my logo is a floral heart so that when my clients see my logo they think of love and comfort and beauty. And that inspires them to buy more of my fabrics to use in their sewing projects—hopefully. I could design your company’s logo, encourage even more people to buy your algae. It’s a supplement, so something health related, something that makes your clients feel good about taking care of themselves.”

My right hand is practically tingling with my desire to start work. I always get this same excited feeling when I’m about to begin a new project. The possibilities are limitless, if I only put pen to paper. Or stylus to touchscreen.

“We could use green as your signature color,” I say, unable to stop myself now I’ve started. “Green to match the algae. Green to remind people of being outside, around plants and fresh air. Oh and maybe we could incorporate some of this wave pattern...” Without any tools to get started, I’m just spit balling random ideas. “Yes? No?”

“Yes. Yes! Although you must be careful.” Roan lowers his voice. “If Killan hears you speaking of logos and business branding, he will become overwhelmed with the need to subject us to one of his long lectures.” And Roan winks. Winks!

I giggle, lighthearted. Loving how easy it is for us to flirt and joke, to spend time together, to talk about our lives and our plans. “We can’t have that,” I tease. “I promise to only mention logos and business branding to you. It’ll be our secret.” And I wink too, right as I catch sight of the cameras in the corner of my eye.

It’s a knife to my stomach—the inseparability of wanting to flirt with Roan, and Chloe ordering me to flirt with Roan. Our moments alone together, recorded, analyzed and edited by LOVE GALAXY, turn into something twisted. Something not quite sanitary because I’m giving my abductors exactly what they demand.

Confused and angry, I speed up, following Killan and Lydia through another short tunnel into a new cave. Roan’s right behind me, and when he touches my shoulder, trying to catch my attention, clearly aware something’s wrong, I pretend I’m too focused on what Killan’s saying to notice.

It’s cowardly, even for me, but I can’t explain what I’m feeling to Roan. He can’t know about my deal with Chloe, and so I stare at Killan as if I really am fascinated by aquatic algae.

“... filtration.” Killan’s voice echoes around the new cave. It’s the smallest cave we’ve visited yet, and it doesn’t have a lake, meaning we’re standing on stone instead of an elevated walkway.

“Then we begin the drying process by removing all the excess water from the harvested Nufaral,” Killan continues, as Roan finally gives up trying to catch my attention. “This does not take longer than two days, using our drying tables.” Killan points to a conveyer-belt-like table, at least ten feet squared, which takes up most of the cave.

In place of stalactites are several robotic arms. They’re motionless at the moment, as there’s no algae on the table to be dried, but I’m guessing by the railway-like tracks covering the ceiling, the robot arms usually have run of the cave.

“I saved a sample to show you,” Killan says, leading us to a free-standing cupboard against the far wall. “This was collected and dried in the previous batch.” And he withdraws a handful of dried Nufaral.

It looks a little like dried seaweed, if dried seaweed were crispy embroidery floss in a tangled knot even the most enthusiastic crafter couldn’t unravel.

“And it’s edible?” Lydia asks.

Killan nods. “Edible fresh and dried.”

She breaks off a small piece and pops it into her mouth.

Interested despite myself, I study Lydia’s expression. She purses her lips, looking exactly like a restaurant critic preparing to write a review.

“Tangy,” she eventually says. “And fresh. It melts in the mouth, like cotton candy.”

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“Really?” I touch the dried algae Killan’s still holding. It isn’t crispy at all. Not like dried seaweed in the slightest and much more like... fiberfill. Honestly, I think it could make quite comfortable pillow stuffing. If, say, someone was thinking of repurposing one of her dresses into a pillowcase as a gift for the alien hovering by her elbow, sulking because she was too much of a coward to tell him the truth about her deal with Chloe. A sorry-I-have-to-break-your-heart-on-intergalactic-TV gift. A sorry-for-humiliating-you-but-have-this-comfy-pillow gift.

“Do you think I could have some?” I ask.

If I expect Killan to be confused by my request, I’m sorely mistaken. He collects a generous armful of dried algae from the cupboard and piles it into my outstretched hands. “The best Nufaral in all the universe, grown fresh on our farm,” he says, looking straight at the closest camera, mounted onto the rock wall. “Delicious.”

“Don’t look directly at the lens.” Mr. Smith’s voice echoes through the cave. “How many times do I have to remind you?!”

Killan scowls.

Roan does too, stepping forward half a pace as if preparing to step between me and the cameras. As there are several in the cave, filming us from all directions, he isn’t likely to succeed. His thoughtful attempt makes my heart backflip in my chest, though. And, as a counterbalance, a fresh lump of guilt takes up residence in my stomach.

“Ugh!” Mr. Smith groans, making his annoyance at us as clear as if he were standing

in the cave, too. “Might as well begin your second task of the day.”

“Another one?” Lydia groans.

Mr. Smith doesn’t pay her the slightest amount of attention. ”More banter from now on,” he demands. “More flirting. More...everything!” He yells that last word. Combined with the echo, it makes me jump, and I’m immediately angry at myself for showing signs of fear.

Hastily, I plaster a smile on my face. Mr. Smith’s interruption is the reminder I didn’t need of everything I’m finding it impossible to forget.

A second later, an incessant beeping fills the chamber.

“What’s that?” Lydia asks, hands clasped over her ears.

“Message on my datapad.” Killan withdraws it from a pocket in his... boot. I guess if you’re not going to wear clothes, your boots are the best place to store your tablet. “You will never guess who it is from,” he deadpans.

“LOVE GALAXY,” Lydia and I answer at the same time.

“Killan,” Killan reads. “Continue your deep dive, by sharing with Harlee your favorite place underground.”

“More water puns?” Lydia rolls her eyes, right as there’s more beeping, coming from Roan’s tablet this time.

“Roan,” he reads, with another glance at me. “And then... the same task. ‘Share with Lydia your favorite place underground.’”

“Oh, cool.” Lydia takes Roan’s tablet, reading the task for herself. Glancing at me, she winces. “Good luck dealing with Mr Stick Up His Ass. You’re going to need it.” And she leaves so fast she’s practically running, pulling Roan along after her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Roan

I pull my hand out of Lydia's grasp and glance back. An absurd wave of possessiveness rolls through me, until I am clenching my fists and gritting my teeth.

Harlee is mine, I think. Even as another, more rational piece of my brain, thinks, she is safe with Killan. I trust Killan... do I not?

Never have I doubted my brother before, and the feeling stops me in my tracks. I want to rush back to Harlee’s side. I want to hold her against my chest and never let go. But I would be doing nobody any good by refusing to complete the task.

I certainly would be doing no good by starting a fight with Killan when I know... When I know what?

That he will not hurt Harlee... Of course he would not!

That he will not steal Harlee from me...

I am growling before I register I made the decision to do so. I clench my hands into fists. I will fight Killan for Harlee if I must. I will fight him... and I will lose. Because Killan is bigger than me and stronger than me and older than me.

“Come on,” Lydia cajoles, jolting me out of my spiraling thoughts. “Where’s your favorite place to go? One of the caves? Your house? Sorin’s house?” She raises her

brows then, clearly eager for an excuse to visit Briar.

“The arboretum,” I tell her truthfully, having to physically wrench my jaw open to speak.

“Okay.” She nods. “I like looking at trees as much as the next woman. Lead the way.” And she indicates I should walk ahead of her, back the way we originally came.

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I draw in a deep breath. Never have I wanted to hit Killan as much as I do in this moment, and he has not even done anything wrong. One small part of my brain remains rational—he has not done anything wrong. This temper flare has everything to do with my feelings for Harlee and nothing to do with my brother.

In silence, Lydia and I pass the two lakes and make the short walk through the tunnel that leads to the arboretum.

I search for something to say, something I can tell Lydia, that will banish the quiet hanging over us like a weight, but nothing comes to mind. Conversation with Harlee feels natural and easy in comparison. Impossible that Harlee and I could ever run out of things to say to each other.

“Sooo...” Lydia drags the word, head tipped back as she stares up at the trees. Maybe she is as lost for words as I am. Maybe she is uninterested. “What exactly do you like best about them?”

“I watched my parents plant every single tree, and then I watched each tree grow, from seedlings into adults.” I wave at the forest before us, all encompassing. “They are my friends.”

“Dude, that sounds so lonely.”

I shift from foot to foot, uncomfortable sharing this part of myself with the Female who yelled at me last night, calling me selfish for loving Harlee.

“Sooo...” she continues. “Do you, like, have a favorite tree? One in particular?”

Yes. But how can I tell her it is my favorite because that is where Harlee and I hid from the cameras, stroking each other into pleasure. “Akh...” I take a hesitant step forward.`

“No further!” John Smith snaps, his voice issuing from the camera clipped to the overhead balcony.

“Why not?” Lydia asks, but she mumbles her question, evidently angry at being told what to do but too anxious to put up any real fight.

“Because there are no cameras among the trees,” I answer in John Smith’s stead. “He cannot record us if we enter the arboretum proper.”

“Exactly,” John Smith barks. “Pick another location, Roan.”

“But this is my favorite?—”

“Lie, for all I care. You’re not taking Lydia into the trees.”

Harlee

“Is the drying cave your favorite place?” I ask Killan, glancing at the conveyer-style table and the rather shabby freestanding cupboard.

He gives me a what do you think expression, which is unsurprisingly similar to his I’m in a crap mood expression. Just a few moments ago, he’d been bragging about how great his algae is. Now, he looks like he’s in a waking nightmare, a muscle in his cheek twitching.

“No. Right.” I scruff the toe of my shoe against the rock floor.

It's unnaturally smooth rock, for a cave. The walls are, too. Along with the lack of stalactites, I'm guessing this cave is artificial, carved from the rock with the same machinery that made the tunnels and the giant hole in the ceiling of the forest cavern. Not that I've spent much time underground to be a good judge of these matters.

"I think..." I lean forward so I can see the screen of the tablet he's holding. It's still displaying our latest task, #SharingIsCaring. "We should start the task now?" I don't want to push him when he's clearly not happy. But I also don't want to be left standing here for the rest of the day. Especially not now Roan and Lydia have left.

I'm not jealous—of either Roan or Lydia. But I desperately want to know what Roan's showing her. If I could've been a third wheel on their date, I'd've snapped up the chance.

"If you can think of somewhere you'd like to share—" I begin, keeping my voice unthreatening, but Killan interrupts.

"Come." Without waiting to see if I'm following, he strides down the tunnel, back the way we'd come.

I hesitate for a second, then dump my armful of dried-algae-slash-pillow-stuffing on the table, planning to come back for it after the task is complete. Then I run after him.

Killan doesn't pause and he doesn't slow until he's standing before the first lake, the 'seed lake', he'd called it. The one where the baby algae lives before being disseminated to the larger cultivation lakes.

I stumble to a halt. I might be nearly six feet, but keeping up with Killan is an impossible task. Except for now, when he's staring at the seed lake like he's never seen it before in his entire life.

I follow his line of sight, searching for whatever it is that's caught his attention. But I don't understand. Everything is just the same as when we were here half an hour ago. Absolutely breathtaking but surely not responsible for Killan's suddenly foul mood.

"Umm..." I press my hands to my hips, missing Roan with every passing second. He'd know what's gotten into Killan, and he certainly wouldn't leave me standing here in silence, like a fool trying to guess. "This is your favorite spot because it was the first lake of your farm?"

He turns around to face the wall, next to where another ladder reaches down from the balcony platform overhead.

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Just when I'm thinking I might as well climb the ladder and head home, for all the good this conversation is doing me, he clears his throat.

"There used to be a plaque. Here." And he touches the wall, a little to one side of the ladder, about level with his shoulders.

I lean forward a fraction, squinting through the dancing shadows, and that's when I see there's a square portion of the rock wall, about the size of an A5 piece of paper, that's been smoothed of blemishes. And there are four small holes, like where screws might have been.

"Your parents put a plaque there?" I guess. If the planet's only ever had five residents, then the plaque can't have been from anyone else. "To mark the first lake?"

"A memorial plaque for my sister."

Shit.

I move to touch Killan's arm, thinking of comforting him, then change my mind. He doesn't seem the kind of guy who'd appreciate a hug—and, well... if I'm being brutally honest, I can feel the cameras watching us, and I don't particularly want to have my hug rejected by Killan in front of billions of audience members.

"I'm so sorry. Roan told me a bit about how she got sick?—"

"Why are you sorry?" Finally, he looks at me.

The similarities between him and Roan are extreme, but I could never get them confused. Roan is a fraction smaller, a fraction less intimidating. Significantly less overbearing. And his eyes aren't stained by sadness, as Killan's are.

"Umm..." For a second, I don't understand his question, then I realize he's genuinely asking why. Maybe offering apologies when someone tells you about their dead sister isn't how condolences work for Ril'os. "I mean, I'm sorry that happened to you and your family. I'm sorry she got sick." I'm sorry she died. But I don't come right out and say it, not when Killan hasn't said the d-word either. "Where's the plaque now?"

"Sorin has it."

"Oh." Maybe because Sorin could see how heartbroken Killan is, even just thinking about the plaque, let alone seeing it every day. Or maybe Sorin is as heartbroken as his older brother and wanted something in his cottage to remind him of their lost sister.

I can't work out if Killan's telling me this just because or if he's trying to make me understand something. Something important.

Whatever that something important is, I'm not getting it.

"I can't imagine what it must have been like for you, going through everything." I hardly know what I'm saying. I do know I don't want Killan to regret sharing this part of himself with me—and with our audience. I've got a strong feeling this moment here is going to make the final cut of today's episode; it's exactly the type of juicy family drama that would've been highlighted in reality TV back on Earth.

He blinks, looking at me with hazy eyes. I'm not sure he heard me.

"Moving to a new planet. Starting a new life. Working every single day to make sure

that what happened to her doesn't happen to anyone else. It's an immense responsibility." No wonder he's so frickin' grumpy and stressed all the time. As the oldest brother, he's carrying a lot of emotional weight on his shoulders. "Few people would have the strength to bear it as you do."

"Roan was born on Ril II."

"Okay..." I turn to more fully face Killan, but he's glaring at the wall again, as if it did him a personal injury. "Are you telling me that Roan never met your sister?"

"Her name was Roa."

"Roa sounds an awful lot like 'Roan'."

To be born into a family who already loves you, who's desperate for another child... I've always wondered what that might feel like.

And it's that thought which has me realizing what this absurdly awkward conversation is all about.

"You're scared I'm going to hurt Roan." I can barely say the words out loud, and when I hear them, I jump, scared of my own shadow. Scared of Killan being able to look inside of me and seeing the deal I made with Chloe to save myself at Roan's expense.

There's nothing I can say that wouldn't be a huge lie. No, I won't purposefully break your baby brother's heart. Even if it is the only way I can guarantee Lydia and Briar and my safe return to Earth.

What was it that our first task had said? Two Truths and A Lie... Can you guess which contestant is hiding the biggest secret of all? Of course that's me and my

preordained betrayal.

Then, I start panicking that me not saying anything is as good as a confession. I splutter something about needing to use the bathroom, grab hold of the ladder and make a hasty escape.

Except it's not hasty at all. Because climbing up three stores is hell on your muscles, and my arms are still aching from the climb down an hour ago. And because I'm crying, and it's even harder to climb a ladder when you can barely see through your tears.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Roan

I return home to find Harlee sitting at my kitchen table, clothes spread out before her. She has one knee drawn up to her chest and is working on a project I do not understand. I take the seat opposite, resting my upper elbows on the table and my head in my hands, watching her.

Contentment settles inside of me. I am properly calm for the first time since leaving her with Killan.

“Are you designing?” I ask.

“What? Oh, no.” She glances up and smiles at me. “I’m making you a pillow.” Holding up the fabric she is working on, she shows me. “I cut up one of my sundresses, and now I’m sewing up the sides.”

“For me?”

“Yes, for you.”

I lean forward, all the better to see. “What is a pill-oh?”

“It’s something you rest your head on when you’re sleeping. It’s... Actually, now I think about it, if you don’t know what a pillow is that probably means you don’t need one.” Her shoulders drop, and she stares down at the fabric.

She is holding a small metal... wire? Half the length of her smallest finger and very

fine, one end of which is connected to a thread connected to the fabric.

“I like my pill-oh very much,” I tell her, reaching across the table with one of my lower arms to stroke the back of her hand. “I will rest my head on it every night.”

“You might hate it.”

“I love it.”

“You haven’t tried it.”

“I can try it now.” I mime resting my head on the table.

She laughs, pulling the pill-oh closer to her chest and beyond my reach. “I haven’t finished it yet. I’m going to make you the most comfortable pillow in the entire galaxy. You just wait and see.” Resuming her work with the thin wire, she asks, “Where did you end up taking Lydia? For the second task?”

“You are jealous?”

“No.” Another smile. “I’m interested, is all.”

“I thought of taking her to the arboretum, but that did not go according to plan. So I told Lydia my favorite place is Killan’s house, where I grew up, and I helped her climb the ladder home.”

“That was kind of you.”

“It took alongtime. She stopped halfway and refused to keep going until I threatened to carry her over my shoulder.”

“I bet that made her angry.”

“Yes. When Lydia is angry, she has less space inside of herself for fear.”

“Makes sense.”

I lean back in my chair, warmth flooding my chest as I watch Harlee. Is this what our life could be like? The two of us working together, for each other. Loving each other. Sharing time together.

“I would make a most excellent Mate,” I announce, sticking out my chest and keeping my shoulders straight, making myself as large as possible.

“I... I don’t doubt that,” Harlee replies slowly, looking at me with big, round eyes.

“So you will stay?”

“Roan— It isn’t quite that simple.”

“Not simple?”

“No.”

“Why not? This is not instant love,” I hasten to remind her. “My feelings are real and not desperate.” Well, maybe a little desperate. But that is only because I truly believe we would make a most excellent match, Harlee and me. “We could be happy together. We could...” have a family together. But I swallow the end of that sentence, my heart pounding in my chest. I do not want to scare her with the force of my wanting.

Harlee

I study Roan, desperately trying to memorize every scale. It’s only been a few days, but already the thought of leaving feels akin to tearing open my chest.

I want to reassure him, but what is there to say?

I can’t tell him I’m going to stay because I don’t know if I am, no matter how hard leaving would be. What if me wanting to stay ruins Lydia’s chances of going home? How could I possibly choose between them?

And Briar. I haven’t spoken to her in days, but when she was exiled I made a promise that I’d keep searching for a way to guarantee our safe return to Earth. She’s relying on me.

“Just don’t say no,” Roan begs, undisguised hope in his eyes.

“But I can’t say yes.” My stomach sinks. Abandoning my sewing, I reach across the

scuffed table for him. “You know I can’t. There’s Briar and Lydia?—”

“Then say you will consider staying.” He takes my hands in all four of his.

“Consider—”

“Consider staying,” he repeats with force. “If you do not trust instantaneous love, then take your time, considering how you feel. Do not yet decide either way.”

Could I stay?

The question pops into my head. I’m surprised I haven’t given it proper consideration before. I guess I’ve been so fixated on how horrible it was to be abducted and how important it is that we negotiate our travel home that I kind of forgot there’s a third option.

I could stay.

I’d be giving up the business I’ve worked so hard to build. But it’s not like my family would care; they probably haven’t even noticed I’m missing. I imagine people don’t bother going looking for you if you’ve already walked out of their lives.

I close my eyes, forcibly relaxing my neck and shoulders. Forcibly releasing some of the tension I’m holding onto.

Mr. Smith has the only working spaceship on Ril II. He’s also the only person who we know of who has Earth’s coordinates. Both facts make him our only way home. So if I do decide to stay beyond the end of LOVE GALAXY, it’s not a choice I can undo. If I stay, this is what the rest of my life will be like: living with Roan, with nobody for company but him and his two brothers.

It is kind of amazing here, with the connected houses and the underground forest. But there's little need for my design skills. I can create illustrations in Procreate like a champ. What I know about farming and living a rural lifestyle wouldn't fill a shallow teaspoon.

I hear Roan shift and open my eyes to see him watching me intently.

"Alright. I'll consider." It's the least I can do for Roan, after everything he's done for me. I owe him that much.

I owe myself that much.

He stands, drawing me up with him.

And that's when his blasted tablet starts beeping. Again. Third frickin' time today.

He pokes at the screen, so the alarm stops, and the screen turns from black to displaying the latest LOVE GALAXY message, and I read it aloud, focusing on keeping my voice steady.

Roan and Harlee,

Things have been heating up between you.

Now it is time to heat up the kitchen.

Your task is to have a romantic meal together.

#DateNight #LoveGalaxy

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

I close my eyes, latching onto the two people who I know, without a flicker of doubt, are responsible for me being unable to give Roan the answer he wants to hear. Frickin' Mr. Smith and Chloe are standing between us.

The last thing I feel like doing is following more of their orders. I want to curl into a ball and hide under the bedcovers. Then, I remember, there aren't any sheets on Roan's bed. There isn't really anywhere to hide from the cameras in his house.

So I plaster on a fake smile, and only when I'm sure I've got my expression under control do I step out of the circle of his arms. "How about I cook, since you made breakfast?" I approach the kitchen cabinets, searching through them for ingredients. Nothing looks anything like Earth food, so I hurriedly close the doors, pressing on the touchscreen set into the backsplash instead. I saw Killan use his version of this to order us drinks that day we played Two Truths and a Lie—or Truth or Dare. Or Seven Minutes in Heaven. Whatever that mess of a game had been.

Of course, I can't read any of the options presented on the touchscreen, so I click a few at random. There's a mechanical swirling sound, followed by a few clicks, then a hatch in the counter opens, and a platter rises. On it are two plates. One's completely empty. The other has a kind of sludge on it... It looks edible, if unappealing.

I try again. This time I'm given two bowls and a plate, all of which have unidentifiable food—but at least it's not sludge this time, so I'm going to count it as a win.

"There. Dinner." I step back to admire my handiwork, which was really no work at all.

He's looking at the food as if surprised by my choice.

"Well, I think it looks great," I lie.

What it doesn't look is romantic... And the task had specifically said aromantic meal. Considering how the rest of the day went, not to mention last night when I set off the alarm on Mr. Smith's ship, I want to make completing this task a peace offering. Not that Mr. Smith deserves a peace offering.

But Lydia does.

Lydia deserves me not annoying Mr. Smith more than I already have.

And Roan... I get that us having a romantic meal together is probably going to make everything worse if I do leave. Butagh! I really want to have a romantic meal with him. He's never been on a proper date before. If I can give him one, then I bloody well will.

I inspect our surroundings, searching for ideas that might be considered romantic to both Roan and Mr. Smith.

I don't think there are candles on this planet, and I'm yet to see fabric of any variety, so there's no tablecloth.

I duck into Roan's bedroom to rummage around in my duffle bag, and I return triumphantly with my cocktail dress, the one I'd worn the first day we met. I don't strictly remember packing it. Then again, I'd been distracted by Chloe and Lydia at the time.

When I lay it over the table, it's almost big enough to cover everything but the corners.

I transfer the plates and bowls to the table, trying to use the crockery to cover the arm and neck holes, and I almost succeed.

Roan's lips are lightly parted as he watches me set everything up. When I steer him to his seat, he follows without complaint, sitting down and watching me curiously across the table. I drag my heavy chair around, closer to his, until we're not face to face, but side to side, so I can hold one of his hands under the table.

After all my button pressing, I still only ended up with one empty plate. (The cutlery I found in a draw.) So I pile a little of everything onto the single plate, sharing with Roan.

There's a definite glow in his eyes, the Ril'os equivalent of a smile, as he nods toward my skirt-slash-tablecloth. "Do you always eat with clothing?"

"Yep." I grin. "It makes the table look pretty."

He makes that akhsound that sometimes means he isn't prepared to say actual words, probably for fear of insulting my interior decorating style, and at other times signals confusion. I'm not entirely sure which interpretation I should apply to this situation and decide it doesn't matter.

I take a bite of food, loving that I can hold one of Roan's right hands and yet he still has a right hand free for his cutlery. One of the many benefits of four arms.

The food's not nearly as nice as the breakfast Roan made me. Maybe because I didn't know which buttons I was pressing. Maybe because Roan made our breakfast himself instead of relying on fast food prepared by a robotic arm living in a cupboard.

I try not to wince with every mouthful and get the impression Roan is trying as hard. Adorable man.

I love how something as simple as us sitting down together to eat a meal feels special. Doesn't matter that the food's gross (well, maybe it matters a little bit); we're enjoying each other's company.

Is this, I wonder, what our life together might look like?

And children, I remember with a jolt. We're reproductively complementary.

In five years' time, if I were to stay, would it still be just the two of us eating together? Maybe... I close my eyes, the thought almost too perfect to bear thinking about. Maybe it could be me and Roanandour children.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Harlee

“Have you watched many of the previous LOVE GALAXY seasons?” I ask, choosing a dinner conversation I’m hoping is safe territory and not going to wrench open another discussion of why I can’t commit to staying.

“There are seventy-five seasons,” he answers, between bites. “Ours will be the seventy-sixth.”

“Seventy-sixth!” My voice pitches high, and I accidentally drop my cutlery. I dive under the table to retrieve it, and when I return to my chair I notice Roan has shifted even closer. The legs of our chairs are touching, and when I sit back down, one of my thighs is pressed against one of his. “Have you watched them all?” Apparently, there are a lot of lonely aliens in the universe.

Roan chuckles. “No. Only the first two dozen seasons.”

“And then you decided to apply? They must have made a good impression on you.” I got the feeling this is the first season Chloe has worked on, considering she called herself the ‘Human expert’ and there haven’t been Human contestants on the show before.

I wonder if Mr. Smith has been the director for all seventy-six seasons, or if he’s also a relative newbie. Imagine trying to one up yourself seventy-six times. No wonder he’s got an air of desperation about him. No wonder he resorted to kidnapping three contestants.

“Do many Ril’os apply?”

“Not Ril’os. When I first saw LOVE GALAXY, it felt almost too good to be true...” There’s a pause, as if we’re both thinking the same thing—that LOVE GALAXY most certainly was too good to be true.

That’s the magic of show business: the audience only ever sees what the director wants them to. All the behind-the-scenes crap of Mr. Smith threatening not to take us home if we don’t follow his orders is hardly going to make the final cut—or even the blooper reel.

It goes to show how isolated from the rest of the universe Roan and his brothers are that they saw LOVE GALAXY and believed it to be real.

At least Briar, Lydia and I knew when we were signing up that actually finding true love was going to be the last thing on the crew’s agenda. Nobody who watches reality TV back on Earth thinks it’s actually reality; we all know the magic good editing can create.

Finished eating, I turn in my chair to more fully face Roan, pressing my knees to my chest and tucking my toes under Roan’s thigh, using him like a blanket.

He glances down, clearly surprised by my chilly touch. I snuggle closer, loving how he’s always several degrees warmer than me. He’s my own personal heater.

The amenities on Ril II might be lacking, but I’m not short on luxuries.

“...then I met you,” Roan continues, “and it felt exactly as if LOVE GALAXY had read my mind and given me everything I ever wanted.”

It takes a second for me to realize he’s continuing his paused sentence from a minute

ago, and I feel my heart swell.

“It does feel a bit like we’ve beaten the odds,” I agree. “Despite everything”—I emphasize ‘everything’ in the hopes Roan knows I mean everything LOVE GALAXY has tortured us with—“we’re connecting.”

He leans closer. Maybe he’s going to kiss me again. Until...

... something on the table rustles.

“What—?” Hunting through the tablecloth, Roan finds the culprit, still tucked in the pocket of my cocktail dress. It’s the brochure, edges crumbled.

“Oh, I’d forgotten about that. Chloe gave it to me.”

“These are words.” Roan runs a finger over the title, *What To Do When You Find Out Aliens Are Real*, and I read it aloud. Clearly, his translator is the same as mine and can’t decipher written language.

He doesn’t need a translator for the accompanying cartoon illustrations, though, which look like something straight out of an eighties’ comic book, with the green aliens short and stocky with eyeballs on the tips of their fingers.

“Step 1: Don’t panic.”

The Human in the first illustration is holding both hands to her cheeks as she stares at the alien. Above them is the classic UFO from which extends a gravity beam. Subtle it is not.

“And this one?” he asks.

“Step 2: Watch for signs of aggression.”

“You were frightened?”

“Not of you,” I tell him truthfully.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

The look of happiness and pride he gives me is nearly too much to resist, and I'm so close to kissing him, cameras bedamned. Abruptly, I grab our plate, intending to clean up to distract myself, except that Roan takes over.

"This right here," I tell him with a grin. "This is real romance—when the man cleans the kitchen after dinner."

"Yes?" Immediately distracted by compliments, Roan abandons the dirty plate and practically skips toward me. "Do Human Males not clean?"

I laugh. "None that I've met."

"Piff!" I think he's annoyed, but then he makes a dive for me, and I only narrowly miss getting caught by scurrying around the table. More Catch and Kiss. He follows, and I dart through the closest open door, too late noticing it's his bedroom. He lunges toward me. I've got nowhere to escape to, and it's not like I'm trying all that hard to get away. He wraps his arms around my waist and twists in the air so that we land on his mattress on our sides.

I can already feel the hard bulge at my back that's his growing erection, and now I know how to open his slit, I immediately want to turn around and start feeling him up.

But... cameras.

Roan must be thinking the same thing, because he releases me, rolling onto his back. He's got his lower hands not-too-subtly covering his bulge, and he slips his upper

hands behind his head like a pillow.

If there was one critique I was going to make about Roan's room, it would be the lack of blankets.

Oh, and there being no wardrobe for me to hang up clothes.

I'm tempted to use the cameras as clothes hangers, blocking the lenses, but I'm pretty sure Mr. Smith would consider us tampering with his cameras a criminal offense.

"Give me a second." I press a kiss to one of Roan's perfect biceps and fetch my cocktail gown off the kitchen table. Quickly returning to Roan's side, I throw it over our heads, pretending we're characters in *The Sims* doing the WooHoo. I imagine what our audience might see when this clip's played—fireworks over a bouncing bed, with our feet sticking out the end because my dress isn't nearly long enough to cover our heads and our legs all at once.

On second thought... I empty all my clothes onto the bed, creating a fabric fort under which Roan and I are lying. If we move too vigorously, they'll undoubtedly slide onto the floor, so I breathe shallowly, not wanting to tempt fate.

"Better?" I whisper, because there's something about being under a pile of clothes that makes whispering the proper way to talk.

"Not exactly..." Roan grimaces, probably hating the feeling of having his scales covered by fabric, so I slide across until I'm lying on top of him, 'protecting' him from my clothes.

"Much better," he agrees earnestly, wrapping his four arms around me and burying his nose in my hair. "Much better," he repeats, but it sounds more like *munch* because his words are muffled by the kisses he's distributing down my cheek,

over the curve of my ear, along my throat.

I sink against him. This is probably a terrible idea, but despite all the reasons I should jump off Roan and run for the hills, I can't bring myself to stop touching him.

Roan had such big dreams when he applied for the show; if I can make even a few of them come true, maybe I can salvage something of LOVE GALAXY—regardless of what our future ends up being.

“Try not to move,” I whisper. “And don't make a sound.”

Poor thing, I'm already thinking of all the ways I could pleasure him that don't involve him moving, and I'm loving it. We've hardly even started and I'm already getting back that feeling of confidence I'd first felt when we'd hidden in the tree.

Under these clothes, hiding from the cameras, I'm in charge. Me. Harlee Jun.

I skate my hands over his body, wishing I had four hands instead of two so I could touch twice as much of Roan at once. He's got his bottom lip trapped between sharp teeth, and I free it gently with a kiss, not wanting to risk him accidentally hurting himself.

Unsurprisingly, it's hard to disrobe when you're trying to remove the clothes on your body but not the clothes covering your body. This would be so much easier if Ril'os used blankets. And I might have made a slight error in judgement telling Roan not to move before I'd undressed, because he makes no move to help me.

It's well worth all the muttered swearing and panting and effort, though, when I'm lying completely naked on top of Roan, skin to scales. I rub myself slowly over him, relishing the feeling—a massage of scales on skin. Not a sports massage, of course; a relaxation one. Awareness of all the places we're touching races over my skin.

Like before, it's excruciatingly easy to forget about everything but Roan. At this moment, nothing else matters but him and me and how we're feeling. He moans, and I feel an echoing moan slipping from my lips, like we're tied together by an invisible string. What feels good for him feels good for me. And vice versa.

I would hide in our fort for eternity, if I could, avoiding all our problems. Avoiding the inevitable heartbreak.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Roan

Staying still is the hardest thing I have ever done. My cock throbs with heat, my body alive with desperation and longing. I have never, in all my life, wanted anything as I want Harlee.

She is my everything.

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Peeling off the last of her clothes, she slips and slides over my body, skin to scales. I never realized how sensitive my scales could be. I had thought them tough—armor, protecting my body. Lying under Harlee, I am rewarded with all new sensations. There is no space separating us, yet I long to be closer.

Harlee runs her hands down my chest, shifting her weight so her knees are resting on the bed on either side of my thighs. I bite my bottom lip in a frantic attempt to keep still, as she traces the tips of her fingers tranquilizingly softly down my scales towards my sheath.

“Like this?” she asks, as she applies pressure to my crotch, releasing the seal of my slit and freeing my cock. It arches up toward my belly, a bead of precum already leaking from the tip.

“Exactly like that,” I manage to say between gritted teeth, my hips involuntarily thrusting.

She giggles, the most beautiful of all sounds, and snatches her hands back so that my cock touches nothing but air.

I’m groaning her name in frustration, but she shakes her head.

“I told you not to move. You’ll tip the clothes off us, and then everyone will see.”

“See how frenzied I am for your touch.”

“Frenzied?” She studies me with wide eyes.

“Frenzied,” I confirm. And I cannot stop myself reaching for my cock.

My hand is nothing in comparison with the tantalizing idea of Harlee touching me, but another bead of precum pools at the tip, nonetheless, and I arch my back, pressing harder into my hold.

“I wanted to do that,” she pouts, her gaze locked on my hand as I stroke myself. I am so close to coming I would be embarrassed—if I could conjure up the energy to care about anything but how wonderful I feel, being watched by Harlee.

I hear her breath catch in her throat, and then she is daringly pushing my hand away and taking hold of my cock herself.

There is a moment of complete silence as we both stare at her hand on me. Her skin is so pale compared to the flush of deep green spreading across my stomach and to the angry redness of my aching cock.

Her hand looks so small too, her fingers long and thin and elegant.

Then she strokes me, just the once, and I swear my vision blacks out for a second, as pleasure rushes through me.

She strokes me again, and it is nearly more than I can bear. I am trying so hard not to spurt that my entire body is taut, every muscle straining against the inevitable. I want this moment to last as long as possible. I want my time with Harlee to extend into eternity.

Attempting to distract her, I slide my lower hands down the curve of her waist and hips, grasping the generous globes of her ass. She hisses, snapping her eyes closed, and her grip on my cock loosens ever so slightly.

Pleased, I continue my exploration, dipping lower, through her coarse hairs to her swollen core. She is so wet that I can actually hear my fingers dipping between her folds.

She drops her head, resting her forehead on my chest. The clothes threaten to slip, but I catch them with my upper hands, holding them in position over us. There is no way I am letting the cameras film Harlee like this. Me seeing her naked and writhing is her gift to me, and I will not share it with anyone.

Possessiveness stronger than I have ever felt before rockets through me, and I am growling before I can stop myself. My chest vibrates with the force of it, and Harlee looks up, surprised.

“You okay?” she asks in a whisper.

In answer, I dip my fingers lower, finding the bud that she craves being touched, and her expression instantly changes. Her cheeks flush pink. Her mouth opens in a silent gasp. And she spreads her legs further, granting me greater access.

I take full advantage of the situation, exploring her, testing a light touch against a firmer touch, seeing which pleases her more. When I take my fingers away entirely, she grips my forearms, her fingers digging into my biceps.

“Don’t—” she pleads, and I cannot deny her anything, so I hasten to bestow all my attention back upon her sensitive bud.

“Yes,” she pants. “Yes, yes. Oh, Roan.” Her back arches. Her cry splits the otherwise silent air.

I make a grab for the clothes, keeping them steady, as she undulates against me, chasing her pleasure. I chase it too, applying a fraction more pressure, and she nods

her head vigorously as her arms and legs give way, and she falls on top of me again.

“Yes?” I ask, remembering how she asked me the same question when I spilt my milt over her stomach, hiding in the hollow tree.

“Oh, God yes.” She presses a sloppy kiss to my shoulder, her chest rising and falling with her rapid breaths.

It takes all my self-restraint not to arch up against her there and then, her quim tantalizingly close.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Harlee

Dazed by the strength of my orgasm, I blink, trying to clear the spots from my vision. If Roan told me I'd momentarily blacked out, I wouldn't be surprised. I don't think I've come so hard in a long time, and certainly not with a man.

My most reliable orgasms have all been self-induced. But there's something intensely personal about it having been Roan's fingers on my clit. He'd teased and stroked until I'd been a writhing, squirming mess.

The distinct smell of sex clings to my skin, and I revel in the feeling of sated confidence burning its way through my veins. It's a drug, drip-fed to me by Roan's devoted attention and the sight of his engorged cock, leaking in anticipation of my touch.

With my legs on either side of Roan, I sit up—not so straight as to tip the clothes off us, but enough that I can more fully see the broad expanse of his chest. My oversensitive clit accidentally rubs against his scales—ohh! I could come like this, rubbing against one of his thick thighs, using the natural texture of his scales to massage myself to my finish.

I roll my hips, experimentally, and Roan catches his bottom lip between pointed teeth again, clearly still trying to keep quiet and motionless. A battle we both lost long ago.

Grinning, I continue grinding against him, loving that I can control the speed and strength of my sexy massage, but also loving that I'm not doing all the work alone. Roan tenses his muscles, and his leg moves under me, rubbing deliciously against my

wetness.

Pleasuring myself, I reach greedily for his cock. It's thick and long and dripping. As I wrap my fingers around him, I savor the heat of his skin, several degrees hotter than me. I can only imagine how he'd feel inside me and how easy it'd be to come on his cock.

I stroke him, making sure to give the head a small twist.

Abandoning his attempts at stillness, he thrusts into my hold, growling my name with such force that I can feel it rumble through his chest.

I plant my free hand on one hard pec, using it to take most of my weight, unafraid of hurting him. Considering our size difference and Roan's strength, I think he could carry me all day and not grow tired.

Using my other hand, I guide him to my pussy and slowly sink down. He freezes, his gaze locked on the point where our bodies join. It's the center of our universe.

It takes me a moment to adjust to his girth; I'm stretched tight, almost to the point of pain. And then it passes, and I'm left with nothing but a desperate frantic desire to move, to thrust, to chase our combined pleasure.

I find a messy rhythm, the sound of wet flesh obscenely loud. Roan's thrusts grow erratic, but he's still holding himself so tightly that a muscle twitches in his cheek. I think he's trying not to spill early like he did last time. But that's no fun, and I speed up, determined to pull all the pleasure from his body I possibly can, even as my own ecstasy peaks.

"Har-lee." He grunts, shuddering. I swear I can feel his hot cum squirting up inside me, painting me. I don't stop pumping him, though, and his cock gives another

desperate twitch.

“Wow.” I’ve got my eyes open as wide as they’ll go, trying to see all the small details in the shadow of our clothes fort. Roan’s face is distinctly blue. Were he Human, I’d probably be panicking, but blue is his blush. And when he licks his lips, I follow the movement of his tongue as if it’s me he’s licking.

I should probably clean us up, but before I can do anything more than admire a sated and stunned Roan, he reaches for me, pulling me into the circle of his four arms.

The mess, I decide, settling firmly against him, can wait until later.

“Harlee?” Roan kisses the top of my head, hooking a leg around both of my thighs, determined to trap me against him. Determined to never let me go.

I have to clear my throat before I trust my voice to work. “Yes, Roan?” I’m both exhilarated and calm; I could either conquer the world or take a nap. Nevertheless, a twinge of the all-too-familiar guilt returns, a knot in my stomach, and the clothes are suddenly a heavy weight. I brush them away from my face, taking a deep breath of fresh air.

Immediately, I see the red lights of the watching cameras, so I bury my face against Roan’s shoulder, eyes closed tightly shut. Just a few more minutes, I beg my brain. Allow me a few more minutes in Roan’s arms.

“Is it always like that?”

His question nearly breaks me.

“I— Um...” I should lie. It would make what I’ve got to eventually do so much easier—if he thought that this thing between us was nothing special.

The words stick in my throat, but apparently Roan can read my silence, because he says: “I thought not.”

“No,” I reluctantly agree. “It’s not always like that. At least...” I gather my long-neglected courage. “It was never like that for me before you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Roan

The days pass much too swiftly, and I am left scrambling, trying to complete the tasks set by John Smith while simultaneously attempting to ignore the cameras and prove to Harlee how good a Mate I could be. The tasks themselves are not so difficult, if often confusing. I still do not understand the concept of a ‘kissing booth’, which we had to make from repurposed supplies found around my cottage. To sell kisses... I shake my head. I would not want to kiss anyone but Harlee, and she is generous in giving me her kisses for free.

Sometimes we kiss long into the night. Covered by her clothes.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Often, I have fantasized about crushing the cameras into dust, and then I imagine how I would lay Harlee across my bed, fully uncovered, and lick my way up her body, from her toes to the top of her head, openly worshipping her as she deserves to be worshipped.

But I cannot. Destroying the cameras would anger John Smith, and it is not me who his temper would strike, but the Females. He continues to threaten not to return them to their home planet if they do not comply with his demands. I can see fear in Lydia's eyes at his threats, and this in turn causes Harlee to fear. She cannot, she tells me, abandon Lydia and Briar to such a fate, regardless of her ultimate choice.

Briar, we sometimes hear from, when she uses Sorin's datapad to call Harlee or Lydia with updates about her and my brother's exile.

Of the Humans, Briar appears to be the most settled. She tells Harlee about our farm and how Sorin is teaching her to monitor algae growth. It is work she appears to genuinely enjoy, and when she looks at my brother, the corners of her eyes soften with affection and... love?

Harlee also notices such clues. She studies Briar's face with profound attention, trying to catch hold of Briar's unspoken words. For there is a lot we cannot openly discuss, our conversations being closely monitored by John Smith. We cannot talk of the Females' abduction nor of their mistreatment by the Drah'os Male. We must dance around such topics using code words and pointed looks.

I have grown somewhat accustomed to reading Harlee's Human expressions. A smile, I have come to realize, does not always mean that she is happy, even when she

crinkles the corners of her eyes. Even when she says she is happy. I must search for other, smaller signs to test if something I have said has pleased her or not. I analyze the way she tucks strands of her ebony-colored hair behind one ear. Or the way she will watch me through her lowered eyelashes when she thinks I am not watching her.

Her forehead contains many clues to her feelings. Without scales, it wrinkles when she frowns and wrinkles when she smiles. I would record all the minute changes that cross her face if I could, for prosperity's sake. There is not a single expression I want to misunderstand.

One of my favorites is when she harmlessly nibbles on her lower lip, trapping it between her teeth. She does this when she is particularly focused on whatever it is that has caught her attention. Oftentimes, she nibbles her bottom lip when she is studying my mouth, and then I know without a shadow of doubt that she is thinking of kissing me.

She is doing so now, and I abandon the dishes I had been cleaning, crossing my kitchen to kneel where she is seated at my table. She turns until she is facing me. Like this, she is a fraction taller than me, and she bows her head to press her lips against mine, cupping my face in both hands.

I press into the kiss, until my stomach is against her knees, and Harlee is leaning back in her chair, my hands at her waist and caressing the curve of her hip.

Breathless, laughing, she pulls back and pushes against my chest. I settle back on my heels, relishing the taste of her.

“You’ve got to warn a girl before you kiss her senseless,” she says, using her thumb to wipe the corner of my mouth clean of her lip paint. “It’s like scuba diving. They say you can’t surface too fast or else you’ll get the bends. My head’s spinning with how good that kiss was.”

“Roan. Roan.” There is a soft bang, followed by Killan’s hushed swearing.

Gently disentangling myself from a still-sleeping Harlee, I sit up, bleary-eyed. My eldest brother is looming over my bed, upper arms crossed over his chest. In the darkness, I can only see his silhouette, but from his silhouette alone I can see that he is in a temper—not angry enough to have woken the entire house, thankfully. But angry enough that he has come into my bedroom to disturb my sleep in the middle of the night.

“You turned off your datapads,” he accuses in a harsh whisper.

“Yes,” I agree, lying back down and attempting to recapture the comfortable stillness of sleep. “So that you could not disturb us.” Time is limited; I would not waste a second of it talking with Killan when I could be sleeping pressed against the length of Harlee.

“I have decided not to hold tomorrow’s business meeting?”

“Good.” I roll onto my side, carefully slipping two arms under Harlee. With a little sigh, she snuggles against my chest, resting her cheek on my shoulder. I rearrange the blanket-clothes over her to keep her naked body hidden from the cameras—and from my annoying brother.

“—instead, it will be now. While everyone is sleeping.”

“Nooo.” I hold on to the word, sounding too much like a whining youngling to be proud of myself. But our family meetings are my least favorite part of working on the farm. Killan insists on holding them regularly, the idea being that we can report progress to each other. But more often than not, the meetings crumble into him lecturing Sorin and me about how we could work harder or faster or... whatever else has Killan’s horns in a knot that day.

I close my eyes, already dreading the moment when I climb out of bed, leaving Harlee behind. Because I already know, out of Killan and I, which of us will win this argument. My eldest brother is ruthless, and with him still quarreling with Lydia, I doubt he has anywhere else to be—certainly not curled around a Female of his own.

“Akh!” I release my frustration as a grumbled whisper when it becomes apparent he has no intention of leaving.

Harlee’s eyes flutter open.

“Sorry to wake you,” I tell her, pressing a kiss to her beautifully smooth forehead. “Killan is sorry, too.” And I throw my brother a glare.

“Sorry,” he grumbles, when Harlee raises her head high enough off my shoulder so that she can see Killan looming over us in the darkness.

“What’s wrong?” She sits up fully, catching the clothes to her chest, keeping her breasts private.

For my eyes only. The thought sends a thrill akin to being shocked by electricity through my veins, and suddenly I find myself not nearly so angry at the interruption.

“Nothing,” I reassure her, speaking at my normal volume now she is awake.

“Shhh!” Killan hisses, with a pointed look at the camera clipped to my bedhead.

“Killan has lost all sense,” I continue speaking as if he never interrupted. “He is demanding to hold our family business meeting in the middle of the night.”

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“So that certain people”—he nods toward the camera again—“do not overhear.”

“Because we have many commercial-in-confidence matters to speak of,” I mock, and I swear I hear Killan’s teeth grinding as he clenches his jaw closed on whatever insult he had inevitably been about to hurl at me.

“It’s fine,” Harlee whispers, lying back down and settling her cheek on the pillow she made for me, in place of where my shoulder had been. “You should go, if it’s that important to him.”

“Yes,” he snaps. “Speak sense into Roan.”

“I thought Mates always sided with each other,” I grumble, climbing out of bed. It is only when I am standing do I fully comprehend what I have said.

Mates.

Killan is silent, finally, glancing between Harlee and me.

Harlee is silent as well, mayhaps thinking of a kind way to remind me that she has not yet agreed to be my Mate. I wish the light was on so that I could see the details of her expression.

Unless... Unless, of course, she is staring at me with horror. Then I am glad it is dark.

“I did not mean—” I begin, my mouth suddenly uncomfortably dry. “That is, I know you have not chosen. I should not have said—” I stumble over my growing panic.

That had slipped out of my mouth without conscious thought. It came so easily and had felt so right that I had not immediately realized where I had gone wrong.

“I have contacted Sorin,” Killan says, filling the empty space after my half-spoken apology. “He will already be on his way.”

“Go,” Harlee says, voice soft. Gentle. “I’ll be here when you return.”

But you might not be here forever. The thought fills me with a feral need to throw myself back onto the bed and to wrap my four arms around her.

I want Harlee to choose me so much it is a physical pain. I crave a future spent with her so fiercely my head swims with the beginnings of a headache, and I have to clench my hands into fists to keep myself from reaching for her.

Tomorrow (or is tomorrow today already?) will be day fourteen of filming. The end is rushing toward us with startling speed. If Harlee decides to return to her birth planet, leaving me, I know with absolute certainty that my heart—and my soul—will shatter.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Harlee

Silence is the sound of loneliness. I search Roan’s kitchen for a TV or radio I can turn on to take away the bitter edge and find nothing, not even his datapad, which he must have taken with him to the meeting.

Instead of returning to his silent bedroom, I practically sprint down the passageway connecting the two houses, and when I burst into the kitchen, it’s to find Lydia sitting at the table with her hands wrapped around a cup of golden liquid. Killan’s hooch.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask, suddenly conscious that I didn’t wait long enough after Roan had left to put on socks and shoes. I am wearing my silk PJs, but without Roan beside me, they’re rather inadequate at keeping me warm.

“Nope,” Lydia says, taking a sip. She’s fully dressed; she mustn’t have made it to bed yet, leaving me wondering if she and Killan had another argument. Maybe that’s the real reason for him wanting to hold the meeting at midnight—an excuse to get out of the house and away from Lydia.

I can’t believe I ever thought Killan and Lydia might be a good match for each other. Maybe the old saying opposites attract is true. Maybe Killan and Lydia are too similar.

There are dark semicircles under her eyes, and if I’m any judge, I’d guess she has lost weight since our first day of filming.

“Do you know why Killan and Roan were acting so weird?” she asks.

“What’d you mean weird? They’re having some sort of meeting.” I lower my voice, thinking about how Killan didn’t want Mr. Smith knowing. It’s all an illusion, though; there aren’t any secrets he doesn’t already know about.

“Yeah, but when Killan came back to the house with Roan, he checked his datapad, and then they rushed up there.” She points to the staircase leading up to the ground floor. There’s not much up there, from what I can remember—the front and back doors and a small mudroom with storage for extra boots.

“They went outside?” With the constant windstorm, it’s impossible to hold any sort of conversation outside. The wind screams and snatches the words from your mouth before anyone can hear what you’ve said. Good for staying out of Mr. Smith’s earshot; bad for holding a meeting.

“No. About a minute later, they came rushing back into the kitchen and wouldn’t answer any of my questions. Then they went through that door.” She points to one of the few doors that I actually recognize. It leads to the tunnel connecting Killan’s house with Sorin’s. There’s an underground railway line along which single-person carts travel—a personalized high-speed train of sorts. Not that I’ve travelled in one of the carts; Mr. Smith made it clear he didn’t want any of us visiting Briar and Sorin in exile.

Curious, I open it. Sure enough, there’s the track, running down the center of a narrow tunnel. There’s only one light, and it’s at the end of the tunnel closest to the door where I’m standing. The rest of the tunnel’s in darkness, and I can barely see more than a few meters ahead.

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There's no sign of Killan and Roan. And there's no other door through which they could have gone from here.

"Thatissuper weird," I agree, closing the door behind me and taking the seat beside Lydia. It's built for Ril'os, so there's plenty of room for me to tuck my cold feet under my butt.

"If they piss off Smith, Smith will leave, and I'll be stuck here forever."

"They won't piss him off."

"They might," she insists.

They might, but I don't admit so out loud. Lydia's upset enough as it is. Instead, I ask: "Why do you hate Killan so much?"

"He's the one who hates me. Everything I do drives him crazy. I breathe too loudly. I eat too fast. I wriggle too much in bed." Her voice rises with her temper. "It's not my fault we have to share! If I'm such an annoying person, he could sleep on the floor."

"He doesn't know how to handle living with a woman. I bet he's freaking the fuck out."

She laughs, wheezing. "I'm freaking the fuck out."

"He probably secretly fancies you." I wrap an arm around Lydia's shoulders, remembering how on our first day we'd sat in these exact seats, only it had been

Lydia comforting me then. I want more than anything to repay the favor. I want more than anything to see her happy.

She's the first woman I've spent any real time with since splitting with my ex and deciding to reinvent myself. She's my friend. My first real friend in two years.

"He's not a twelve-year-old boy," she huffs, leaning her head against my shoulder. "Pulling my hair and spitting in my food isn't proof helikesme. And if he does—ha!" Laughing, thistime she sounds as though she finds the idea funny—even if she doesn't sound cheerful. "God help Killan the virgin."

"Yeah..." My heart skips a beat.

Every single second of every single day for the last thirteen days the cameras have been on. I've woken up multiple times during multiple nights and seen the cameras on. Not once have I seen them without their red lights.

"What?" Lydia glances around the kitchen, brow furrowed.

"The cameras."

"Sorry? What'd you say?"

"The cameras. They're off."

The color drains from Lydia's face. "Shit!" And she charges upstairs.

I follow.

As we mount the top, she presses the release button on the front door. It slides open, letting in a gust of wind so strong we stumble back a step.

Muted dawn sunlight paints the sky a dusty orange, but I can hardly see it, thanks to the wind stinging my eyes. The airborne grit is abrading my skin, and I've got to hold both hands in front of my face so I can keep breathing. It's through the cracks between my fingers that I see...

...the spaceship is gone.

Roan

"Their trajectory has remained steady," says Killan, his voice crackling over the intercom.

"Not far now," I answer, studying the map displayed on my datapad. It is tracking the location of our carts through the tunnel and our proximity to Sorin's cottage. We cannot travel at full speed, however, as Sorin is also on the track, heading in our direction, toward Killan's house.

He is coming north for our meeting. Killan and I are headed south, tracking John Smith and Chloe.

I minimize the map, switching to another display. This one shows a 3D graph on which our ground sensors are plotting the route of John Smith's spaceship in real time. He has not yet left the atmosphere, traveling close to the planet's surface.

We do not know if Sorin's house is the final destination or if it is a coincidence that he is heading that way as he readies his ship for space travel. Killan and I are going to look foolish if he is merely visiting Sorin and Briar, but we cannot take any chances that he will attempt to leave Ril II, abandoning the Females.

Not that there is anything we can do to stop the Drah'os Male if he is about to leave Ril II. We have no ship of our own in which to follow him and no ground defenses

with which to threaten him.

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That we noticed his ship moving was pure luck, thanks to Killan's inane decision to hold our meeting in the middle of the night, when normally we would all be sleeping.

When my cart slows, I know it is because Sorin is approaching. A moment later, he comes within reach of our intercoms, and Killan signals him with an alert.

"What?" Sorin demands, sounding as grumpy as I was to be woken and pulled from the arms of my... my...almost-Mate.

"Turn around," Killan demands. "John Smith is airborne, heading toward your cottage."

"Fek!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Harlee

"Itold you they'd fuck it up," Lydia says the second the door closes and we can both hear ourselves think again. "I knew it!"

"Roan—"

"He can't do anything."

"It might all be a misunderstanding. Mr. Smith could still come back." I grab Lydia by the shoulders. She looks like she's on the verge of puking. Her breathing is

ragged. Wheezing. “Come on.” I lead her back down the stairs, sit her down and then fetch her a cup of water.

“I knew it,” she says again, but she doesn’t sound half so triumphant anymore. Rather, her voice is weak. Stunned. Almost as though she didn’t actually think this moment would happen, despite how much she’d been worrying about it. “We’re stuck here.”

“Would that be so bad?” Despite commonsense telling me to keep my mouth shut, I’m unable to stop myself from asking the question. At least I’ve got enough restraint left to whisper it.

Unfortunately, Lydia hears me. “I forgot,” she practically spits. “You’re in love with Roan. You probably don’t even want to go back.”

“I don’t. Not really.” As soon as I say the words, I know they’re true.

“Fucking hell, Harlee! I knew you fancied Roan, but I’d always thought you’d chicken out and come home with me.”

“Whoa!” I raise my arms, surprised by the force of her outburst. “Chicken out?”

“You know what I mean.”

The sad thing is I do. Spending time with Roan has helped me realize how ashamed I’d become of me being me. I hadn’t wanted anyone to see how much my family and Asher had hurt me, so I’d changed into a new person. Harlee Jun 2.0.

Now... Now I think I might be Harlee Jun 1.5. I can’t go completely back to being who I was before I ever met my ex, especially after everything that’s happened in the last few days. At the same time, I feel more like myself than who I’d been at the

beginning of LOVE GALAXY. It's been days since I've second-guessed my instincts. Days since I've silently scolded myself for speaking too loudly or too excitedly. Days since I've faked a smile. Days since the buzz of anxiety made me jittery and scared.

Lydia's got her arms crossed and is slumped in her chair.

I can't stay angry at her. I get why her emotions have been yoyoing all over the place, first furious at Mr. Smith, then mad at me. She's faced disappointment after disappointment, and they've all been stuff outside of her control.

Her yelling, I realize with startling clarity, reminds me of someone attempting to appear bigger and braver and louder than they actually believe they are. All bravado, no bite. I remember back to the first time we met—I'd thought then she'd been putting on an act. But I haven't given it much consideration because I'd been acting too.

"No matter what happens," I promise her, "I won't abandon you."

She peeks up at me through her lashes. I'm not sure she fully believes me, but I mean it. If she wants to get home, then I'll do whatever I can to help make that happen.

Even leave Roan?my pesky brain asks. But I brush the question aside before I can linger on the answer. Because I'm pretty sure, if push came to shove and I absolutely had no choice but to pick between leaving with Lydia and staying with Roan, I know who I'd choose—and the answer isn't going to make either Lydia or me happy.

"Did you hear that?" Lydia shakes my shoulder, and I straighten, scrubbing at my face with my fists.

"What?" I don't remember falling asleep, but the pain in my lower back and

shoulders from bending over the table is real.

She hushes me to be quiet, and I'm listening so intensely I'm holding my breath. There's the sound of the front door opening. The screaming wind. Then no wind at all. Followed by heavy footsteps on the stairs—aliens in boots.

Chloe is the first one to appear, with Roan standing directly behind her. It takes me a second to notice he's got both his right hands on her back, like he's afraid she's going to fall—or run.

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Mr. Smith and Killan appear next, and it's much more obvious that Killan's got Mr. Smith in a restraining hold, with one of the director's arms twisted behind his back at an awkward angle.

Lydia is on her feet in an instant. Her eyes are flashing, and I think we're all expecting her to yell at Killan.

"What happened?" I ask Roan, waylaying another argument.

Roan looks at me, and there's something about the way he's holding his jaw tight that tells me he's angry—not Lydia-level angry but angry, nonetheless.

"John Smith and Chloe tried abducting Briar."

"What?!" Lydia and I gasp at the same time.

"They knew about our business meeting and they knew Briar was going to be alone. After Sorin left, they flew their ship to his house and tried to drag Briar outside," Roan explains.

A muscle twitches in Killan's forehead. If I'd thought Roan looked angry, it's nothing compared to Killan, who looks ready to strangle Mr. Smith with his bare hands. If I don't get to him first.

"Then what?" I demand.

"Then, Briar fought them."

“Is Briar alright?”

“She is well,” Roan confirms. “She and Sorin are sharing many kisses and congratulations, feeling well-satisfied with themselves.”

“Let me get this straight,” Lydia says. “Briar was almost abducted again, but she fought them off. Then... when did you guys get there?”

“When Briar was still fighting,” Roan answers. “Sorin was... not pleased. He stopped John Smith and Chloe from taking Briar, and?—”

“And now we’ve got two prisoners?” Lydia interrupts before Roan can again describe Briar and Sorin’s make-out session.

“Not prisoners. Allies,” says Chloe. “We’ve come to an agreement.”

Mr. Smith hasn’t said anything. He’s got his chin buried in the thick folds of protective skin around his throat, and his tail is flicking back and forth, reminiscent of an angry cat.

Chloe pulls free of Roan and takes a seat at the kitchen table with her head held high, acting like it’s our fault she tried abducting Briar. She’s got balls—or delusions.

Definitely delusions.

If I’d had any trust left in Chloe, it would be shattered. I’m not surprised, though. If she helped to abduct Briar, Lydia and me once before, what was stopping her from trying again? Certainly not her sense of morality.

“What agreement?” I glare at her, as she gives me her best I’m-so-much-better-than-you smirk.

Rather than answering, Roan looks to his older brother. There's a pause where I'm left doubting Killan will answer, then he pushes Mr. Smith toward the kitchen table, to take a seat beside Chloe. "They will finish filming LOVE GALAXY," he says, not quite meeting my or Lydia's eyes. "He will show the universe how my brothers have fallen in love with their Females. He will advertise our farm favorably. And he will return Lydia to her home planet."

"How exactly are we going to force him to do what we say?" Lydia asks, hands on hips.

"In love..." I repeat, but my voice comes out high pitched, as my heart hammers against my ribs, and nobody appears to hear.

In love? my brain is screaming. In love!

I blink. I feel like I've been struck over the head. Or, more accurately, like the past thirteen days have been one huge exam I haven't known the answer to—until now. Turns out, when you're seriously considering permanently setting up home on a planet at the outer edge of civilized space where there are no shops, no nightlife and limited opportunities to socialize with more than the same five people, that probably means you've fallen in love.

I can feel Roan's gaze on me even before I look at him.

Of course I love him! I've loved him for days. Weeks! But I've been refusing to acknowledge those feelings because loving Roan would've been me betraying Briar and Lydia and our cause to return to Earth.

Now Mr. Smith and Chloe are our prisoners (of sorts), the tables have turned. They've got to do as we demand, not the other way around. In one fell swoop, the brothers and Briar have taken back control of our lives.

I step toward Roan, and it's like we're magnets, drawn to each other.

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The rest of the room must be set to mute; I know Killan and Lydia are still talking, but I've lost track of their conversation.

"Killan is being presumptuous," Roan says, speaking only to me as he rubs the back of his neck and closes the distance between us so that he can take hold of my hands. The way he's watching me, eyes wide with uncertainty, tells me he doesn't know how I'll react to everything that's happened this morning.

"No, he's not being presumptuous. I promised you that I'd seriously think about whether I wanted to stay, and I know our twenty days aren't up yet, but I've already made my decision."

"Harlee—" he swallows.

Mesmerized, I watch his throat. I can see the muscles moving—that's how much tension he's holding in his body in anticipation of what I'm going to say.

Suddenly, it's the easiest thing in the world to tell Roan my feelings. My chest is full to bursting with yearning, and it spills out.

"I'm so incredibly in love with you, Roan. I love your kindness. I love your playfulness. I love your enthusiasm. I love your bravery. I love?—"

The end of my sentence is muffled as Roan wraps all four arms around me, pulling me against his chest. I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing his cheeks, his chin, his mouth—any part of him I can reach. They're messy, wetkisses. Uncoordinated. Passionate. Filled with happiness and excitement.

Behind me, distantly, I hear Lydia groan, but it's Chloe's voice that cuts through the air like a knife.

"God, you're pathetic, Harlee," she says, her voice full of enough contempt that it catches my attention, despite the kisses Roan is tracing along my jaw. I pull back to shoot her a glare.

Roan's looking dazed. His usually slit-shaped pupils are wide. He's breathing fast, his arms still holding onto me so tightly my feet are dangling above the ground.

"You know Harlee's only saying all that rubbish because she wants you to believe she's on your side," Chloe says to Roan, who has to blink a few times before he can pull his attention off me long enough to glance confusedly at Chloe.

"Akh..."

"Harlee is manipulating you," Chloe continues. "She's been manipulating you this entire time."

"Chloe—" My heart skips a beat.

"I've got proof. Look." Out of her pocket she withdraws her tablet, which folds open to its full size.

"You didn't think to search their pockets?" Lydia asks Killan dumbfoundedly.

"Look," Chloe reiterates, turning her screen to face the rest of us. It's playing a film clip, from the interview room back on Mr. Smith's spaceship, with the LOVE GALAXY wallpaper and the heart-shaped seats. Video Chloe and I are sitting, facing each other. I'm wearing a maniacal smile, and I'm dressed in the clothes I'd been abducted in.

“You’re my special project,” video Chloe tells video me. “I’m not saying I can guarantee you’ll find love, but I can guarantee you’ll get the best edit. I can guarantee you’ll be the star of the show, the heroine everyone is rooting for. But only if you do exactly what I say.”

“That’s really kind of you,” video me replies, my smile widening.

“Chloe—” I warn, my heart in my mouth. I remember checking the room for cameras when we’d had that conversation and had seen none. I’d thought we’d been private.

Chloe turns up the volume, pointedly ignoring me.

“Excellent.” Video Chloe clasps her hands together. “Listen carefully. You, Harlee Jun, are going to make Roan fall in love with you, and then you’re going to break his heart for all the world to watch on intergalactic TV.”

Chapter Thirty

Roan

You are going to break Roan’s heart. On intergalactic TV.

“Of course,” the recorded Harlee agrees. “Simple.”

“That’s not...” The real Harlee tightens her hold of my neck. “Roan— It wasn’t like that,” she says, as I set her on the ground and step back.

I’m shaking. Did Harlee just say... Did she just say... She loves me?

“Harlee...” I can barely speak. There are so many things I want to tell her, and they all try rushing out of my mouth at the same time, creating a lump in my throat.

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“Yes, I made that deal with Chloe,” she speeds on, “but it was before I met you. Before I fully understood what LOVE GALAXY was. Then, afterwards, I did meet you and?—”

“Of course, Harlee agreed,” Chloe scoffs, interrupting. “She wanted to be guaranteed the best edit of everyone on the show, so she made a secret deal with me to screw you all over. Harlee’s been a traitor from the very beginning.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Lydia glares at Chloe, before I can say anything. “If anyone in this room is a traitor, it’s you.”

“You literally just tried to kill me,” comes Briar’s voice.

Surprised, I glance around the room, but Briar is not here in person. Killan is holding up his datapad, on which he has opened a communication link with Sorin’s datapad. Both Sorin and Briar’s faces fill the screen.

“You even admitted to wanting to kill me!” Briar says.

“Kill you?” Lydia asks, at the same time Harlee says, “What do you mean, kill you?”

“We did not want to unnecessarily worry you—” Killan begins, but of course Lydia interrupts.

“You can’t not tell us stuff as serious as attempted murder, dude!”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” Briar says.

“Yes,” Sorin says, grimly. “It was.”

“Is that bruising on your wrist?” Lydia points to Briar.

“We were just calling to see if everything is going okay with you,” Briar says, in lieu of an answer, quickly hiding her hands beyond the camera frame and out of our sight. “It’s been a textbook case of a hectic morning.”

“Well, it’s an absolute crapfest here.” Lydia flashes her blunt teeth in a smile that does not make her appear happy. “But I’m willing to bet we’re still having a better day than you. Smithreallytried to kill you?!”

“Yeah. Him and Chloe,” Briar finally agrees. “I guess they wanted to drum up some drama or something. This is honestly turning out to be the least real reality show ever. And now Chloe is going full drama queen on Harlee because Harlee had the audacity to fall in love. Real pathetic, Chloe.” And Briar fake gags as she says Chloe’s name. “I vote we lock them both up until filming has finished. We can’t risk them trying to escape in the middle of the night before they’ve taken Lydia home.”

“No fucking way.” Chloe shakes her head. “You’re not locking me up!”

“Good idea,” Killan agrees. “I have many rooms empty of furniture that would suit them well.”

“Smith is being awfully quiet.” Lydia stares at Mr. Smith.

He says nothing, burying his chin deeper into the tough folds of skin around his throat. We’ve defeated the bully.

Briar, I think, answers Lydia, but I do not hear what she says, for Harlee takes a deep breath. Such a small movement, yet it catches my attention, as if there is a rope

around my neck, tying me to her.

She loves me?

“Roan,” she says softly, only for me to hear. “I wish there was something I could do to make everything right between us again.”

I clear my throat. I need to hear those words again. I need to be absolutely positive I did not imagine them. “You want to stay?”

“Yes. I mean, if you’ll have me.”

“You really...love me?” It takes everything in me to ask. If I misheard— If I was mistaken?—

“Yes! I do. I do love you, Roan. So, so much.”

“Really?”

“Really, really. I thought I’d been in love before, but it never felt like this. Being with you is easy. And real. And amazing. Even when everything else was going wrong— Even when I was scared and panicked and cowardly— Even when I thought I should want to return to Earth and all my thoughts were a jumbled mess in my head—I’ve never once regretted you.”

I release a shuddering breath as the tension and the worry dissipate from my body so quickly they might never have existed.

“I want to be your Mate.” I say the first words that fall out of my mouth, the lump in my throat miraculously dissolved. “I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Harlee. And to have younglings with you—if that is even possible. I want—” I feel as

if I am about to explode with all the happiness inside of me. “I want you.”

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“Just like that?” she asks, voice cracking. “You’re not angry with me?”

Can Harlee not see that she is everything I have ever desired? To be angry with her for something she said before we met would be impossible.

“Even after everything Chloe said?”

“I fall asleep thinking of you. I dream about you. And then to wake with you in my arms—that is everything.”

“Aww,” Briar croons. “This means Harlee and I are sisters-in-law.”

I do not have the time nor the inclination to ask what such words mean. Rather, I wrap my arms around Harlee, and she sinks against me, one hand pressed to my back, one at my throat, directing me to bow my head so she can kiss me.

And kiss me.

And kiss me.

Harlee

I’ve got no idea when the others crept out of Killan’s kitchen. Truth be told, they could have stormed out, screaming and shouting, and I probably wouldn’t’ve noticed, too wrapped up in Roan’s arms and our happy bubble.

So much has happened this morning that I feel a bit like a merry-go-round has taken

up residence in my brain. On one of the carousel horses rides everything that happened with Briar and Mr. Smith and Chloe. On another horse is Lydia's disappointment that I won't be returning to Earth with her and all my worries about actually getting her home. Roan and I are riding adjacent horses. Actually, scratch that— Roan and I are riding the same horse, cuddled up together, blissful.

From somewhere downstairs, on the lowest level of Killan's house, I hear distant voices. Chloe's, I think. Probably still arguing with Lydia. Maybe Mr. Smith's voice... Definitely Killan's, hashing out exactly how filming is going to continue. He's in his element, barking orders and expecting everyone to comply.

"Come on." I tug on Roan's arm. "Let's get out of here before they return."

Eagerly, he follows, and we dash down the passage to Roan's cottage—our cottage. Bursting through the door, Roan practically tosses me over his shoulder and sprints into the bedroom. He brushes my clothes off the mattress, and they go sailing across the floor.

"Wait a second." Disentangling myself, I grab my clothes, draping them over the cameras. I know they're still off, and technically there shouldn't be any way for Mr. Smith or Chloe to turn them back on now that they're locked up in Killan's house without access to their spaceship or tablets, but I want to be doubly sure of our privacy.

When I turn back to the bed it's to see Roan shucking off his boots and diving onto his side of the mattress.

His side.

It's these simple things that make me smile, and I'm grinning as I pull my jumper over my head.

Roan's eyes widen, and he lifts himself on his elbows, all the better to watch, so I make a show of it. Bending seductively as I remove my jeans. Wiggling my hips as I step out of my panties.

For a second, I wait for that little voice in my head to berate me for making a fool of myself, for making too much of something that doesn't mean the same to Roan as to me. But it doesn't come. For once, the negative part of my brain is silent, so I continue wiggling my hips as I slowly, slowly slide my bra straps down my arms, unclipping the hooks.

Roan's hand is at his bulge, releasing his cock. It's red and hot and already leaking. He strokes himself, and my thoughts short circuit. I freeze, mesmerized.

It takes me way too long to realize that if I were to take three small steps forward I could be the one stroking his cock—and Roan could be the one stroking me. I practically leap the distance, and the bed bounces under my suddenly-added weight.

I tumble on top of him. Carefully, of course. I don't want to damage the gem of the show. And then the gem is in my hand, and dreams really do come true.

“Harlee—” Roan moans my name, then he flips us so fast I squeal.

Kissing his way down my stomach, he tosses one of my legs over his shoulder and buries his face in my pussy, licking, lapping, sucking, teasing. I can hear how wet I am, and pleasure has my toes curling as I squirm against him, both desperate for him to press harder and almost too overwhelmed by the tingles flowing through me. I grab restlessly at his horns, needing to hold on to something for fear I'll float away.

My pleasure peaks, and I scream, completely and utterly obsessed with the alien between my legs. Completely and utterly uninhibited by self-consciousness.

“I have something for you.” Roan says much, much later. We’re laying on his bed, tangled together. I might have been sleeping. Or maybe I was in a stupor, sated and loose-limbed. Happy.

“Oh?” I tip my head back so I can see his face. Using his chest as my pillow, what I actually see is the underside of his scaly chin. “What is it?”

Reaching overhead, to the shelf over the bed, he fumbles around for a second before drawing down another tablet. It’s smaller than his main one, with battered and scratched corners, as if this is his old tablet. I’ve got a distant memory of us abandoning his newer, everyday tablet in Killan’s kitchen, when we’d made our mad dash to the bedroom.

He clicks the ‘on’ button, but the screen takes a while to light up, reminding me of an old computer, struggling to work. When it’s eventually displaying the home screen, Roan opens a document he’s got saved, and the screen is filled with a zoomed-in version of my brochure, the one Chloe gave me on our first day.

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Clearly, Roan scanned it onto his tablet... for some reason.

“I don’t understand.” I wriggle up the bed a bit, until I’m lying level with Roan, our heads touching at our temples.

“I have been working on this for a while now,” he explains, “whenever you were in the shower, mainly. I cannot draw, but I tried anyway.”

I study the brochure more closely. “What to do when you find out...” I read the title aloud, but he’s removed the word ‘alien’, replacing it with a word in a language I can’t read.

“What to do when you find out Humans exist,” he says. “I had to invent the spelling of ‘Humans’. We do not have such a word, not even in the Common Tongue.”

“Step 1,” I continue reading. “Don’t panic.”

He’s altered the accompanying illustration. He’s colored the Human woman’s hair black, to match mine. And he has completely erased the alien, drawing a self-portrait in its place. At least... I’m guessing it’s a self-portrait. Roan wasn’t lying when he said he couldn’t draw.

“Step 2,” I read. “Watch for signs of... What does the last word say?” I point to the one word in that sentence that Roan has replaced with his own language. I think the original had read “Watch for signs of aggression.”

“Instant love.”

I laugh. “Watch for signs of instant love. And step 3?”

“You never read step 3 to me, so I did not know what it said.”

Sure enough, he has erased all the English writing after ‘step 3’ and has added his own.

“What is step 3?” I ask, absolutely loving that he made this for me.

“Step 3,” he says, but he’s quoting from memory, because he’s turned his head to look at me, the corners of his mouth turned up in the most smile-like smile he’s shared yet. “Live happily forever after.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Lydia

Something wakes me, but I’m too groggy to know what. Beside me, Killan is climbing out of bed before I’ve gotten my eyes all the way open. There’s the slap of his bare feet hitting the floor as he storms from the room. A second later my brain comes online, and I’m bolting out of bed after him.

It was the sound of the front door opening that woke me. Well, not the front door itself, but the shrieking wind outside. It had only lasted for a couple of seconds, but that had been long enough to disturb both of our sleep.

My feet catch in something, and I’ve got to grab the bed to keep from faceplanting.

It’s the fabric handles of my duffle bag, dumped in a pile in the middle of the floor because I know how much mess annoys clean-freak Killan. If he saw me, he’d snarl an unhelpful told you so in his most grumpy, gravelly, irritatingly-sexy voice.

Disentangling myself, I kick my bag under the bed and race to catch up. With his long legs, Killan is already at the top of the stairs. By the time I reach the ground-floor landing, he's got the front door open and is staring outside, into the darkness.

I press forward, fighting against the wind, until I'm standing beside him. His eyes have a glassy look to them that tells me he's got his inner eyelids closed. They protect his eyes, but they're translucent so he can still see.

I've got no such luck, and the dust in the wind makes my eyes sting and water so I can't see anything. Even with the collar of my sleep shirt pulled up over my nose and mouth and me peeking through my eyelashes I can't see anything. It's pitch-black outside. The only light is leaking out Killan's open door.

There aren't any stars because the wind is holding so much grit in the air that it's basically blocking out the sky. It would be so fucking easy to get lost out there, and that thought has me thinking about how close Briar came to being abducted by Mr. Smith and Chloe for a second time and dumped on the planet's surface, left for dead.

Killan says something, but I can't hear him over the wind. Using a hand to keep my collar over my lower face, I cup my free hand around an ear, hoping he'll get the idea. He must work out what I mean, because he presses the release button, and the front door slides closed again, locking the wind outside.

The walls are soundproof; with the door closed, the shrieking is suddenly cut off, leaving us in blissful silence.

"The ship is gone," Killan says.

"Sorry, what?" I lean a fraction closer. Maybe I'm still half asleep because I swear he said?—

“The ship is gone.”

“No.” I shake my head.

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“Yes.”

“It was too dark. You can’t have seen?—”

“It was dark outside because the ship is gone. There were no lights.”

“No!” My head’s spinning. “Maybe the ship ran out of power.” Maybe this is all some terrible joke.

“It is gone.” He pauses, then mumbles an “I am sorry.”

It’s his apology that does the trick. There’s no way Killan would apologize to me for anything less than an absolute fucking disaster.

“No—” But my voice has lost its conviction.

I’m vaguely aware of Killan helping me down the stairs to the kitchen and setting me onto a hard-backed chair. I’m vaguely aware that I’m still a semi-breathing, semi-functioning Human, but all I can focus on is those four tiny words.

The ship is gone.

Something (I don’t know what) is pressed into my hand.

“Drink,” Killan insists, and mechanically I do as I’m told, his hand guiding mine to my mouth.

The liquid burns its way down my throat.

I'm left coughing.

"Lydia. I'm so sorry, Lydia." Harlee presses my asthma puffer into one of my hands. Her fingers are hot. Or maybe mine are cold. "Lydia? Can you hear me?"

I want to nod my head. I really do. But moving is more than I can bear.

It's hard enough to keep breathing, but for once it isn't my asthma that's the trouble. It's me. I'm on the verge of panic.

The ship is gone.

Who am I trying to kid? I'm not on the verge of panicking; I am panicking. And breathing is like trying to pull gravel into my lungs.

"She has been like that since we found out," I hear Killan say, but his voice is distant, as if he is standing far away from me. He must have woken Harlee and brought her here. Then Harlee must have gone through my duffle bag, searching for my medication.

"How did John Smith even get out?" Roan asks, and his voice is quiet, too.

"We did lock him up, right?" I think it's Harlee who asks that. She blows on my hand, clearly trying to warm me.

The ship is gone. Again.

For real this time.

“Yes,” Killan answers. “He must have had some way to open our locks that we did not know about.”

“And Chloe?” Harlee asks.

“Still here,” says Killan, nodding toward the pantry door, where Chloe (and her makeshift bed) have been secured for the night. There’s a pounding sound; she’s banging her fists on the door and yelling obscenities at us—or maybe at Mr. Smith for abandoning her. She’s as trapped on Ril II as I am.

Serves her right, the fucking bitch.

“Are we sure he’s left?” asks Harlee, raising her voice to be heard over Chloe’s commotion. “Maybe he’ll come back for her.”

“I have checked the results of our ground sensors,” Killan, again. “His ship left our atmosphere and is beyond our range. We cannot track him, and there is no way to bring him back.”

We should have—But even as I start that thought, I shut it down. There wasn’t anything we could’ve done differently that would’ve kept Smith on Ril II until the end of filming. Yes, we’d made an agreement with him. And, yes, we’d locked him away, but that had been a rudimentary and temporary solution.

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If I'm being truthful with myself, I might be forced to admit that we had no way of making Smith take me home. We could've demanded he do as we say until our faces turned blue; that didn't mean he'd listen. Or even tell the truth. We had little-to-no leverage over him, beyond locks, and he'd easily unpicked those.

The instant he and Chloe had tried to abduct Briar for that second time had been the instant my chance of returning had vanished. I'd just been too stubborn to admit it before.

"The cameras—" Harlee begins.

"Are still off." That's Roan's voice.

"Frickin' hell." She reaches forward, cupping my face in one hand. "Lydia. We'll get you back to Earth. Mr. Smith isn't the only person in the galaxy who owns a ship."

"But he's probably the only one who knows Earth's coordinates," I say, speaking with cracked lips.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Harlee proffers.

I look up, past her and Roan, to Killan. He's the only one who hasn't tried reassuring me. He's silent still, his lips pursed, his upper arms crossed over his chest. He stares back at me, looking as grumpy as usual, but there's something else in his expression—something I'm having trouble identifying but which my gut tells me is misery.

He knows as well as I do that the probability of us discovering Earth's location without Mr. Smith is non-existent. The universe is infinitely big. There are more galaxies than we can comprehend, let alone record. Earth is lost to me.

I am lost to Earth.

Overwhelmed, I want to crawl back into bed and hide under the blankets. But it's not even my bed; it's Killan's.

I tug my hands free of Harlee and Roan.

They exchange a look. I can't read what it says. It's one of those looks that couples share when they're so in love they can practically read each other's thoughts.

I'm happy for Harlee, deep down, underneath all my selfishness. Under all my heartbreak. I had so many amazing plans to open a bakery. To finally fulfill my lifelong dream of financial independence. Of being healthy.

I'm back to square one—without a cent to my name.

"It'll be okay," Harlee says, again trying to reassure me, but I barely hear her.

At this moment, I think Killan's the only one who understands what I'm going through. Killan, the guy who hates my guts.

Epilogue

LOVE GALAXY: CANCELLED!

The once-popular reality dating broadcast has been sucked into a metaphorical black hole.

Reality Investments canceled the broadcast mid-production. Ultimately, it became clear that LOVE GALAXY had been rejected by fans and that it was going to take a big marketing push to bring them back. ‘Humans’ were introduced in the trailer for season seventy-six, but even this previously-unknown species could not revive a dying star.

Anonymous replied:

I am not surprised.

nofan replied:

Humans, who cares?!

Comments have been turned off.

Harlee

I’m surrounded by trees. They tower over me, their branches and leaves covering the sky. Distantly, the wind whistles overhead, but it’s muted, barely noticeable.

Excitement races through my veins, electricity preparing to strike a storm, as I turn a circle, taking in more of my surroundings, searching for clues.

There are tracks in the soil, a broken twig, and deeper in the forest, rustling leaves.

“Ready or not,” I yell, breaking into a sprint. “Here I come!” And my voice bounces off the stone walls, reverberating through the cavern, magnified louder than it’s ever been.

“Oh, my Mate,” Roan replies from his hiding place among the trees. “I am ready.”