



# Alien on the Moon

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Science Fiction

**Description:** This scientist didn't believe in destiny. But the stars disagreed.

When Elena packed up her Earth life to join her sister on the alien planet Thryal, she expected some culture shock. But these aliens treated her like she still believed in flat planets and magic potions! When a crisis hits Thryal's moon colony, suddenly her "primitive" Earth perspective doesn't seem so worthless. Now she's stuck on a failing agricultural station with Rylan, the frustratingly brilliant—and gorgeous—alien lead scientist who actually listens to her ideas. She thought she came to Thryal to be closer to her sister. Turns out, the universe had a different hypothesis about where she belonged! But when their success draws them back to the capital, can their budding relationship survive the spotlight of Thryal's scientific elite? Or will Elena's fears send this experiment in love crashing back to Earth?

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## Chapter 1

Elena

Elena swore as the microscopic wire slipped out of her tweezers for the millionth time. She dropped her project, leaned back in her chair, and sighed loudly.

“Why can’t things just work for once!” she exclaimed, irritated. She’d been working on an improvement to the restaurant tech on Thryal for over a week, but things kept going wrong.

With another long-suffering sigh, she got up and dropped the microscope headset onto her small desk in the corner of the lab. With her hands on her hips, she looked around. Almost everyone had left for lunch, leaving the alien lab looking like a ghost town. She walked over to the snack table and grabbed a trima bar, similar to protein bars back on Earth.

Outside the sole window of the royal lab, the Thryal sun was shining brightly over the capital. As she munched on the protein bar, Elena spared a moment to admire the alien planet. She had come here with her sisters, following Carmen when she fell in love with the prince of Thryal. Now, her sisters were both happily married, and she felt more left out than ever before.

Elena bit her lip, watching as a royal transport pod landed and a bunch of Thryals rushed out. The sun made their trademark shimmery gray skin glow. If she could just figure this gadget out, maybe she would finally feel useful, and the royal engineers and scientists would consider including her on actual important projects.

Newly motivated, Elena returned to her soldering. When the wire obediently soldered into place, she let out a whoop of joy and sang exuberantly to herself.

Her middle sister's laugh made her head snap up, the lenses over her eyes making the world spin for a second. Sofia snorted.

"Hey, Wall-E, it's time for lunch," she said teasingly.

Elena's lips curved up, knowing her big blue eyes would be magnified ridiculously through the lenses, especially on her petite frame. She tugged the headset off and gave Sofia a playful glare.

"Wall-E was a technological marvel, so that's not the insult you think it is," she replied primly.

Sofia grinned. "Well, you know, a sentient robot saving space and all. I thought it was apt."

"Technically, Wall-E was— You know, never mind. I'm starving. Let's go." Elena knew if she explained further, she'd be falling straight into Sofia's trap of demonstrating her nerdiness. She knew her sisters loved her, but with her history, the teasing sometimes hit too close to home.

Sofia threw an arm over her shoulder—her way of apologizing—and led Elena to the royal dining room.

"Let's go see what ridiculous outfits Carmen and Arccoo have on today. Shall we?"

Elena snorted, grateful for the change of subject.

"They really do get more absurd every day. It's like she's begging us to make fun of

her,” Elena replied. Despite the ridiculousness, warmth filled her. Seeing her sisters happy after everything they’d been through was a balm to her heart. Sofia’s marriage was still new. She and Zaraq had just returned from their honeymoon to Earth. The way Zaraq couldn’t stop talking about it made her strangely proud of her home planet.

They walked into the dining room, the long table piled with colorful Thryal food. Elena perked up. The food here was still an experience, even though they’d been here for ages. Eating bright orange potato-like dishes never got old.

Carmen and Arccoo halted their conversation as the sisters entered followed by Zaraq. The ex-fugitive still had an element of roughness to him, which suited Sofia perfectly.

Sofia nudged Elena, and she covered her mouth to hide her grin. Carmen and Arccoo wore matching shimmery puke-green robes—robes!—with mustard-colored embroidery around the edges. I will never unsee this, Elena thought humorously.

“Hey, sis, how’s the lab?” Carmen asked.

Elena sighed and dished up some food. “It’s fine. Lots going on, though I’m not involved in much of it.” She cringed at how dejected her tone was. She was grateful for Arccoo letting her work in the lab, and it wasn’t his fault the others thought she was just there for decoration.

Arccoo frowned, his dark eyebrows casting a shadow over his violet eyes. Before he could say anything, Elena waved a hand and repeated. “It’s fine, really. They found a new fossil in the Gruiph Orbs. Did I tell you that?”

Sofia and Carmen exchanged their signature “our sister is going on a nerd tangent” look, which Elena studiously ignored.

“They just came back with it yesterday. You know how in our world stuff gets preserved in amber?” she directed to her sisters. “Here, it’s something called reactoim, which sounds too much like rectum to me, but anyway.” She paused to chew a bite of food. “It’s bright pink and harder than titanium, so it’s super hard to get the fossil out without destroying it.”

Though her sisters listened patiently, Arccoo seemed to be the only one interested. Elena deflated a bit. Carmen noticed and smiled gently at her.

“So, what are you going to do to get it out?” she asked kindly. Elena shrugged. She hadn’t been privy to that discussion, as usual.

One might think a degree in mechatronic engineering with a master’s in biomechanical studies would pave the way for her to be part of the team, butnope. Everything about her screamed “outsider,” as usual.

At least on Thryal, she could attribute it to being an actual alien to them, whereas on Earth, she had no such excuse. Her mouth twisted to the side. At least the tech in space made up for it, she told herself.

## Page 2

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Elena was startled out of her thoughts when a knock sounded at the door. It was quickly followed by a tall Thryal female dressed in a high-tech space suit.

“Apologies for the interruption, Your Highness.” She gave a short bow, lowering her head in deference. Arccoo frowned.

“Stiya. I wasn’t expecting you back from Kheros so soon,” Arccoo said, his brows still furrowed in concern. Elena studied Stiya’s belt, the number of gadgets on it almost making her mouth water. Only the apparent seriousness of the situation kept her from blurting out a million questions.

“I’m afraid it’s not good news, my liege.” She looked around at the Flores sisters and Zaraq, tilting her head in question at Arccoo.

“They’re family. You may speak freely.”

Stiya nodded and sat on the chair Arccoo waved her toward. She ran a tired hand across her face.

“I fear that the terraforming project has run its course,” she began, looking pained. “Even the experimental compounds I took recently have shown no improvement to the crops.”

Arccoo swore softly, drawing wide eyes from all three sisters. The outburst was uncharacteristic for the normally composed royal. Elena was the first to recover, leaning forward eagerly in her seat, her food forgotten.

“Terraforming? Where are you doing that?” she asked.

“Kheros is our moon,” Arccoo said for everyone’s benefit. “We have a research team up there to find ways to expand our food supply and purify the air to make it livable.”

“Livable? Isn’t Thryal huge?” Sofia asked, having traveled around it a lot.

Arccoo smiled, though it was strained. “It is one of the bigger planets, yes, but our quality of life has been decreasing for centuries. There isn’t much else we can do that wouldn’t permanently alter the balance of nature with dire consequences.”

Carmen scoffed. “Didn’t stop Earth,” she said snarkily.

Arccoo reached over and took her hand in his. Elena guessed it was as much for his comfort as for her sister’s.

“Our tech is advanced, so we’re able to accurately predict the consequences of each of our actions. We’re reaching the upper limit of population and waste production.” He swore again. “The terraforming project is our last hope.”

“I’m sorry it’s not better news, Your Highness. Rylan is still hopeful, but I thought you should know.” Stiya sighed. “I’ll return in the morning. We still have a few things we can try...” She trailed off, her mouth twisting as if she could taste the half-truth as much as Elena could hear it. “We’re just running low on ideas. It feels like we’ve tried everything.”

“What seems to be the issue?” Elena asked, pushing her glasses up her nose. Stiya gave her a confused look.

“Elena is one of the brightest minds I’ve ever met,” Arccoo assured her.

Elena ducked her head slightly to hide her blush.

Stiya turned to her. “Our lab here did extensive experiments on soil we brought back on our first mission. We thought we’d identified the right components to add, but the practical application is proving difficult. We’ve set up a research station on the moon and started planting. Nothing’s taken so far.”

Elena hummed in thought, brushing a flyaway lock of hair back into her neat bun. The chestnut lock fell out straight away and she gave up, pulling it behind her ear.

“What about the atmosphere? Is it similar to here?”

Stiya shook her head. “Unlike the soil, which has high concentrations of nitrogen, the air is mostly carbon dioxide. Small doses are fine, but breathing too much of it is toxic. Our secondary mission, once we have the crops growing, is to facilitate forestation.”

“We’re hoping to relocate some of our population to ease the strain on Thryal,” Arccoo supplied.

Elena worried at her bottom lip as she thought. Could the atmosphere be causing the crops to fail? No, surely the scientists would have thought of that. Maybe the plants they were growing were just incompatible? If she had access to the research files, maybe she could...

Stiya stood, nodding to Arccoo. “If you have no further questions, I’ll take my rest.”

“Thank you, Stiya. I know the back-and-forth is taxing, so I appreciate you coming to inform me yourself.”

Stiya smiled and turned to leave.



“Wait!” Elena burst out, practically jumping out of her chair. Her mind was racing. Was this where she could finally make a difference and be useful?

Stiya turned, her thin eyebrows locked together. Elena’s will almost crumbled under the sudden attention of her family, both her sisters’ eyebrows high on their foreheads. She stood straighter. This is a great idea. Just say it, she pep-talked to herself.

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“I want to go. To the research station, you know, on the moon. I think I can help. I mean, I know I can help!” she rambled out, ending with a wince. Way to play it cool, Elena. “What I’m trying to say is, it’s not like I’m being useful here, and if you’re low on resources...” She looked at Stiya, who nodded hesitantly. “I could finally do something,” she ended lamely.

Stiya looked at Arccoo. “If she’s as brilliant as you say, my liege, we certainly could use a fresh perspective.”

Arccoo nodded thoughtfully. “Thank you, Stiya. We will advise you of our plans before you depart.”

With that, Stiya left. After a moment of loaded silence, Carmen and Sofia spoke at the same time.

“What the hell?” Carmen asked Arccoo.

“I’m going with!” Sofia exclaimed.

Elena almost laughed at the matching expressions of shock on her brothers-in-laws’ faces. Before either of them could respond, she cut in. “I’m going alone, and hush, big sis. It wasn’t Arccoo’s idea.” She narrowed her eyes at her sisters.

Elena ignored Sofia’s petulant expression, though she couldn’t stop the slight smile at seeing Zaraq’s clear relief.

Carmen huffed. “What if it’s not safe?” she asked, more to Arccoo than Elena.

Elena rolled her eyes.

“Oh, like how jumping on a foreign craft and traveling through space with no experience wassafe?” she said, her voice rising at the end. “And how taking down a crime lord with some half-baked plan wassafe?” Elena raised her hand to stop Sofia’s outraged mumbling about her “well-thought-out and smoothly executed plan.”

Arccoo leaned back, regarding Elena. “How much experience do you have in terraforming?” he asked.

Elena calmed somewhat. Arccoo’s tone was steady, not judgmental at all. He was genuinely interested.

She sat down carefully, thinking. “Not huge amounts,” she admitted. “I did a semester on biodiversity during my masters, and my thermodynamics and chemistry classes gave me a good idea on what to look out for.” She took a deep breath. “Besides that, I’ve done a lot of reading on the theory of terraforming. As you know, Earth has its own struggles.” She ended with a shrug.

Arccoo looked at Carmen, slightly apologetic. “I think it might be a good idea. Stiya is one of the best, and if she’s losing hope... Like she said, maybe a fresh perspective is exactly what we need.”

Carmen chewed her lip. “But... you’d have to leave tomorrow! Don’t you want more time to think about it?”

Sofia snorted. “What’s to think about? A new place to explore, new people, possible ghostly moon-men?” Zaraq nudged her. Still new to the family, he had kept silent until now.

“I don’t think it’s a decision for anyone but Elena,” he said.

Elena beamed at him, completely contrary to the daggers flying from Sofia and Carmen's eyes. To his credit, he took it in stride.

"I've seen what carelessness can do to a planet," he said sadly. "Manmade or otherwise. If Elena thinks she can help, it's worth a try." The sisters' glares softened, and Sofia laced her arm through his.

"He's right," Elena said. "Don't you see? This is how I can finally contribute."

Once again, a rare moment of silence consumed the dining room until her sisters let out matching sighs.

"Let's go pack your stuff," Carmen said, jumping up and holding a hand out to Elena. Elena's shoulders sagged in relief. She by no means needed her sisters' permission, but knowing they disagreed with her decision would have grated on her.

Carmen and Sofia kept her up late, claiming they needed to fit in bonding time before she went away. Once they left, Elena fell into a restless sleep and woke hours before she was due to leave. Finally, she stood with her pack over her petite shoulders. The hum of transport pods and spacecraft surrounded her family.

"You've got your snacks?" Carmen asked, gripping Elena's hand tightly.

"Stop 'momming' me, sis."

Sofia pushed past her older sister. "Camera? Comm device? I want to know everything, you hear me?" Elena shrugged off her tight embrace with a smile.

"Stop. I'll be fine, and I'll send pics." She nodded to Arccoo and Zaraq, who both smiled encouragingly.

“I’ve sent word ahead, so Rylan, the head of the team, will be expecting you. I know you’ll make us proud, second sister-in-law,” Arccoo said.

Elena’s heart grew warm.

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With a last wave, Elena stepped onto the spacecraft. Even after the time she'd spent in space and traveling around the galaxy, the tech inside still made her heart race and her eyes grow wide. She spared a thought to her academic nemesis back at college. Eat your heart out, Nick Powell.

### Chapter 2

Rylan

"Here are the samples you asked for, boss."

Rylan looked up from the incubation chamber, his hands covered in gloves deep inside the cube. He blinked a few times to adjust his sight, his eyes having been narrowed to his work for what felt like hours.

"Thank you. Place them in the transfer pod, please." Triim carefully navigated the tubes into the smaller adjacent chamber, sealing it and pressing the vacuum button. A slight hiss emanated from the mechanism as it pulled out the air and replaced it with a gaseous mixture aligned with Kheros's atmosphere.

Rylan reached out to grab the samples, a slight cramp in his hand making him wince. He glanced up at the clock on the wall. Shit. It really has been hours, he thought. With a sigh, he pulled his hands out and stretched.

"I'll get back to these later," he said, mostly to himself.

Triim smiled tightly from where he was clearing his station.

Rylan left the lab, rubbing one side of his neck where a crick had formed. He wished he could attribute it purely to staying in one position for too long, but he knew the build-up of stress over the past few weeks was likely the main culprit.

The common room was still packed when he entered. The smell of rehydrated food packs filled the small area, making his mouth water despite the slightly sterile smell of it. Though he dreaded Stiya's update from Arccoo, he was looking forward to the fresh produce she'd be bringing from Thryal.

If only they could be self-sufficient, but that was the crux of the matter.

"Hey, boss! Are you joining us, or are you too good for us lowly scientists?" Jaku called from across the room. Kyn punched his arm, though she was hiding a smile.

Rylan rolled his eyes. "Get over it, Jaku," he said with a smirk. The jokester would never let him forget his place at the top of the hierarchy in the base. Ironical, since Jaku outranked him back home. Rylan quickly punched in his order and carried his tray over to the table.

"How are the baby brals coming along?" Kyn asked, and the table grew quiet.

Rylan sighed. "They're touch and go. One minute it seems like they're taking, and then there's discoloration or they just outright wilt."

"Might be all that negative energy you're carrying around, boss," Jaku joked, sufficiently breaking the tension.

Rylan kicked him under the table, a small smile forming on his lips. Jaku yelped.

"Yes, yes, I know, future of the planet and all. We'll get there, we just need more time," Jaku said, uncharacteristically serious.

Around the table, “yes” and “we got this” echoed from his coworkers. Rylan nodded to show his appreciation for the support.

His mind raced as he finished his meal. The chatter of the common room faded into the background. The food, usually flavorful, tasted ashy in his mouth. He barely said goodbye to his colleagues, his mind already back in the incubation cube.

“If we changed the atmosphere, made it more like Thryal... but first we need plants to grow and oxygenate. Damn!” His mutters were mostly ignored by the scientists and auxiliary staff in the corridors, with everyone stationed here used to it by now. Even if what came out of his mouth was rubbish, for some reason, it helped straighten things out in his head.

Usually.

Hours later, Kyn found him carefully measuring out compounds in the lab. She apologized for the interruption, a grimace on her face.

Rylan groaned. “What is it now? Please don’t tell me the soil samples have already run out,” Rylan said, rubbing his face.

Kyn sighed. “They have, but that’s not why I’m here. We’ve received a comm from the mainland.” She shuffled on her feet, and Rylan held back his impatience on a thin tether.

“From Stiya? Has she spoken with the prince?”

“Not from Stiya. The prince himself. He’s... well, here, read it yourself.” She handed her holo-blet to him. Rylan’s breath caught in his throat. The fear of the project being shut down gripped him. Slowly, he took the device from Kyn and read the missive from the crown prince.



“He’s sending his sister-in-law? What?”

Kyn shrugged. “It doesn’t say much. Just that she’s a ‘brilliant mind’ and he believes she could bring a fresh perspective.” She paused, an eyebrow raised. “Isn’t she from Earth? Not to be rude, but... what could she possibly contribute that we haven’t?”

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Rylan tipped his head back in frustration. Though he felt bad for thinking it, he couldn't help but agree with Kyn. He didn't need a royal tag-a-long to babysit on top of his current situation.

Loyalty to the Crown made his back straighten, and he pinned Kyn with a look.

"I get what you're saying, and this might just be a way for him to monitor his 'investment,' but she is still royal. We should treat her with the necessary respect."

Kyn nodded, looking chastised. Rylan patted her on the shoulder, reassuring her.

"It will be challenging, on top of everything, but let's keep our heads, yeah?"

Kyn smiled slightly, taking her holo-blet and leaving him to his thoughts.

Rylan turned back to his samples. He struggled to concentrate, not helped by the protests from his stomach. He hadn't eaten since lunch. Even then, he barely finished the small meal.

When he reached the common room, it was almost empty. The cooks were already starting to clear up. Rylan nodded his thanks as the head chef pulled out a plate of meat and vegetables, the last of their supply.

He placed his holographic computer on the table, reading through his comms as he ate. The one from Prince Arcchoo caught his eye and he reread it. Along with the message about his sister-in-law returning with Stiya, he'd attached a report from the royal scientists.

Conditions continue to decline within Thryal's atmosphere. At the current rate of population growth and waste production, the point of no return lies within the next thirty years. The implementation of the air purification and waste management projects proves to be ineffective at significantly slowing the rate of decline. Due to the cost and ineffectiveness of the developments, further expansion is not recommended at this time.

The recommendations included relocation of at least ten percent of the population within the next decade, as well as replacing half of the food production with alternative measures. Rylan swore. The pressure behind his eyes grew almost unbearable.

The other reason for Kyn's visit permeated through his doom and gloom, and he stood resolutely. Nothing like the outdoors to clear a mind, and he might as well collect the samples they needed in the process. He sent a quick request for assistance to Triim.

As he suited up, he felt a pang of homesickness for Thryal. He always went for a hike when he felt overwhelmed, but due to the landscape and low oxygen levels, it wasn't feasible on Kheros.

Feasible, maybe, but not pleasant, he corrected himself.

He caught up with Triim as he entered the transport pod. The older Thryal man was built like a tank, his suit straining over his muscled biceps. Rylan always wondered where he found the time to work out.

He shook his head at himself; not everyone had an unhealthy obsession with work. Rylan found it hard to switch off and struggled to maintain a healthy routine.

It was why, despite his success and wealth, he was still glaringly single. He couldn't

imagine making time for someone outside of his passion.

“How are the twins?” he asked Triim as he buckled in.

Triim grinned as he punched in the coordinates for the newly planted crop fields.

“Terrors. My wife was so happy she only had to be pregnant once, but she’s regretting it now.”

Rylan laughed. “What are they now, three? I can’t imagine controlling two toddlers,” he said, wincing.

“It’s a task, for sure. Makes me happy I’m stationed here three out of four weeks a month,” he said, though Rylan saw a glint of sadness in his eyes. They fell into silence for the rest of the ride, both occupied in their thoughts.

The Kheros sky darkened as they stepped out of the pod, the distance from the sun causing a chill in the air. Rylan pulled a thermometer from his toolbelt and swore as he saw the reading.

“Not good for the new hatchlings,” he murmured to Triim, showing him the reading.

Triim stooped down, dipping his gloved fingers in the soil. He looked up at Rylan with a grave expression.

Triim was their best field tech. From his expression, Rylan could tell this batch would likely be another failure. He swore softly. They were quickly running out of options.

“Let’s get the samples in any case. Perhaps collecting this time of day will show us something else.”

Triim nodded, though Rylan knew it was wishful thinking. The soil would give the same results.

As Triim boxed up the samples, Rylan took out his oxygen meter and measured the air. He frowned. When he checked his notes, he was bewildered.

“According to this reading, the oxygen levels have increased,” he said to Triim. “The new plants have barely sprung up!” He crouched to inspect a seedling. The color was off, and the shape of the leaves looked more oblong than round.

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“What could be causing this?” he said rhetorically, running a hand over his bald head. His hand snagged on his oxygen mask. If the increase in oxygen levels continued, they soon wouldn’t need them anymore.

Rylan tossed and turned in his bed. The oxygen levels in the air—usually too high in carbon dioxide to breathe—worried him. It should be a milestone. It should be an achievement.

“It’s useless if we don’t know why. We can’t replicate it,” he muttered, his voice thick with exhaustion. He couldn’t remember the last time he had a good night’s sleep.

As always when he couldn’t sleep, he dressed and returned to the lab. The automatic lights flicked on, illuminating the long room as he walked to his desk. The lab ran the entire length of the compound with interconnecting chambers for the different departments.

His desk was right at the end. He usually savored walking through the collection of machines and cooling rooms, the racks boasting plants they were trying to grow outside. Tonight, it added to his frustration.

Stopping at one of the incubation chambers, he stared at the neat rows of bral sprouts. The info panel lit up.

“Atmosphere matches Kheros. Soil matches Kheros. Temperature and humidity controlled. It just doesn’t make sense...”

He reached his desk and dropped down on the chair, turning to the window to peer at the night sky. If he squinted, he could almost make himself believe he was back on Thryal, in his old lab, where the whole of his home planet wasn't relying on him to make this work.

Still homesick, he pulled up some pictures of the Pnitaan Forest, near where he grew up. The vibrant colors soothed him. A picture of a pnittee popped up, and he huffed a laugh.

The tiny animals were adorable. Rodent-like with long fur and big eyes, they were some of the fiercest predators in the forest. Being bit by one was signing a death warrant. They were also incredibly strategic, their brains taking up half the size of their cute but deadly bodies.

Another picture popped up, depicting an impossibly tall tree. Rylan zoomed in, finding a baby breu clinging to its father. They were incredible, their bodies covered in sleek fur with tufts of vibrant feathers springing from their foreheads. On the other end of the scale from the pnittees, these mammals were so dense and slow that conservationists had to work full time to keep them alive.

“This is what I’m working to save,” he said softly. “Murderous little critters and majestic tree dwellers.”

He sighed, closing the tab and sitting in the darkness. He’d been at the Kheros compound for almost two years. In the beginning, every day was exciting. His small team had lived in a makeshift homestead while they built the compound that he was now in. Camaraderie was high, and the progress they made every day was tangible.

Back then, anything seemed possible. They’d successfully recreated Kheros’s atmosphere in their labs on Thryal, and the plants were thriving. Of course, they’d expected setbacks, but the level of failure that now stared him in the face was stifling.

His train of thought led him to the “precious cargo” that Stiya was bringing back. His excitement for fresh produce and new seedlings had faded to the dread of welcoming Prince Arccoo’s sister-in-law.

Curious, he pulled up the news articles that had circulated when Prince Arccoo married his human bride. The picture was grainy, but he could make out Princess Carmen’s sisters. Was it the tall one with the crazy look in her eyes?

No. He smiled to himself. The graininess of the picture couldn’t hide the inquisitive blue-eyed stare of Carmen’s youngest sister. Elena, the article said.

What would she be like, he wondered? He studied her. Petite, posture slightly hunched as if she hated the attention. Her hair fell in waves over her shoulders. Rylan stared at the color, so unlike any he’d seen before. The reddish-brown hue was imbued with lighter strands that reflected the tiny globe lights of the palace ballroom.

Rylan scrolled through the rest of the wedding photos, trying to find the elusive Elena in the background of each. In one, she was standing in the corner of the ballroom looking uncomfortable. In another, he recognized the lead royal engineer. The man looked practically exasperated, a few shots showing what looked like Elena asking a million questions.

The lights in the lab flicked off when the sensors had not detected movement in several minutes, and Rylan jumped. He guiltily closed the tab he’d been looking at.

“It’s just recon,” he assured himself. “Always good to know what to expect.”

His voice echoed in the empty lab, and he laughed at himself. What a loon.

Later, back in his room, he finally fell into a fitful sleep. When he woke, he would adamantly deny that his dreams were consumed by curious blue eyes and waves of



chestnut hair.

## Chapter 3

Elena

“How have you addressed the temperature differential?” Elena asked, the open page on her tablet already stuffed with notes.

Stiya’s effort to hold back a groan was almost tangible.

“There isn’t a massive difference compared to some of the more remote areas of Thryal, so we’ve classed that as negligible.”

Elena could hear her patience was growing thin.

She had peppered Stiya with endless questions during the transport to Kheros between cramming in as much knowledge about terraforming and the Kheros project as her brain could possibly take.

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“Look, we’re almost there,” Stiya said.

Elena almost laughed at the palpable relief in her tone. She was used to people quickly getting bored with her incessant questions, and she’d learned—mostly—not to be offended by it. It helped that Stiya had started looking at her with less annoyance and more respect. Begrudgingly.

Elena gasped as she followed Stiya’s finger and stared out of the window. Seeing the moon up close was remarkable. She let out a small, excited squeak.

“I’m going to walk on the moon!” she exclaimed with a fist pump. The texture of the surface was rough. Elena could see the tilled fields surrounding a large building. The compound. Cool. In the early morning light, the windows of the compound were brightly illuminated from inside. Elena pressed her nose to the window, trying to make out the plants. She frowned.

“How many plants have grown to full term?”

Stiya sighed. “Not many, outside. We have some plants thriving in our lab, but it’s proved difficult to replicate in the fields.”

The craft jerked as it landed at the dock. Stiya jumped up and passed an oxygen mask to Elena.

“We’ll need to unload the fresh food and new samples quickly. The team will be anxious to get started,” she warned.

Elena nodded, securing the strap underneath her bun. Stiya released the airlock and opened the craft.

A few people were already waiting to greet them outside the dock. Stiya waved a few into the cargo hold to collect the crates of fresh fruit, vegetables, and meat.

A tall, handsome Thryal male approached her. With his typical gray luminescent skin, the shimmer of his bald head was dazzling in the early sun's rays. His emerald eyes betrayed his nervousness. Elena assumed he was a mail boy or laborer, judging by his standard-issue spacesuit and belt of tools. The oxygen mask blocked off half his face and distorted his voice when he spoke.

“Hi, you must be Princess Elena. I’m—”

“Oh, god, just Elena. Please. And great, you can help with the samples!” Elena interrupted, waving him into the craft. He started to argue but followed her.

“Here, be careful with these. They’ve been packed with the lids loose to help them breathe, so don’t tilt the crate.”

The man started speaking again, but Elena waved a hand.

“They must go straight to the incubation chambers in the lab. Try not to get too much of the compound’s air into it.”

The man frowned. Elena felt sorry for him. He seemed confused. He obviously didn’t know much about the project.

“These are the modified bral plants,” she explained patiently. “They’ve been raised in the lab down there.” She pointed more or less in the direction her ship had come. “To the exact specifications of the atmosphere here.”

She lifted a crate, carefully balancing it on her forearms. “If they’re disturbed too much, they’ll fail before they even make it to the fields.”

Elena thought she spotted a small smirk behind his oxygen mask, but she couldn’t be sure. She huffed. “Well, lead the way!”

The man lifted his crate and led her toward the compound doors. Elena noticed a few people nodding at him. That’s good, she thought. If they treat the lower staff with so much respect, maybe they’ll be nice to me.

They entered the compound, pausing to take off their masks. Elena’s eyes widened as she took in the lab. The array of machines and tech sent her blood rushing in excitement.

“Oh, wow, this thing is next level,” she said, stopping at what looked like a microscope. “It’s almost like a hybrid between a microscope and an x-ray machine, except you can set the depth and it’ll give you the microscopic image of any layer inside the subject.”

She blew a loose strand of hair out of her face. “It’s the only piece of equipment that can do that without destroying your sample.” Elena couldn’t wait to use it. “This would’ve been so useful during my masters,” she said wistfully.

“You don’t have this machine on Earth?” the guy asked.

Goosebumps erupted on her arm as he brushed against it. Elena held in a shiver.

Elena scoffed and shook her head. She was about to reply when a glass cube containing thriving plants caught her eye.

“Are these the bral crops? They look great.” She studied the control panel. “Oh, the

atmosphere is set to match Thryal's atmosphere. I wonder what the process is for transitioning them..."

The man seemed amused but didn't offer a response. Of course, he wouldn't know. He led her further into the long room.

Elena gasped as she passed the biggest centrifuge she'd ever seen, the machine taking up almost the size of a king-size bed. She placed her crate down.

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“This is amazing! How did you even get this here without messing with the balance?” She ran a hand over the curve of the machine. “This is a centrifuge,” she explained. “If the mechanisms are a nanometer off, the whole thing breaks. They have to be built to exact specifications.”

“The engineers had the parts sent separately. They built it here,” the man replied, also placing his crate down. “It took six months to build.”

“That’s amazing,” Elena breathed.

Before she could ask more, Stiya rushed into the room, her eyes wild. “Oh, there you are! I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Good, you’ve met Rylan.”

Elena’s heart stopped.

Her jaw fell to the floor.

Embarrassment heated her cheeks to nuclear degrees.

This... this was Rylan? The freaking head of the research project? And she’d been talking to him like he knew nothing. She buried her face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry,” she mumbled. A soft laugh made her peek between her fingers.

Rylan shrugged, still smiling. “It happens. Don’t worry about it.”

Stiya looked between them with a frown creasing her eyebrows. “Wait, what

happened?”

Elena groaned.

“Nothing happened. Elena and I were just getting acquainted.” He picked up his crate again, a sly grin tugging at his lips. “Shall we?”

Elena bit her lip and followed his lead. Her breath still felt stunted, her cheeks burning. Besides his obvious amusement at her embarrassment, Rylan didn’t seem bothered by her oversight. She would have expected a man in his position to be pissed that she didn’t know who he was.

Elena groaned internally. Why did he let her go on for so long? Because you didn’t give him much chance to speak, genius.

It wasn’t the first time she’d cursed her rambling tendencies, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

Rylan led her to an incubation room further down the lab. This time, he was explaining things as they went along.

“This is where the soil experts conduct their research and experiments. We passed the atmospheric science area—with the centrifuge—and yes, those were the bral crops.”

He smirked at her over his shoulder, making her cheeks heat for a different reason. If she hadn’t met so many Thryals back on the planet, she would be questioning whether every Thryal man was impossibly handsome. Her brothers-in-law definitely set a high standard. Though she thought Rylan surpassed even them.

“We transition them slowly from Thryal’s air to Kheros’s, to see if they can naturally adjust their biology. It hasn’t worked so far,” he said, his face growing serious. Elena

could see a slight indent between his eyebrows, revealing his worry.

She bit her tongue. She would have time for in-depth questions later. They placed their crates down, and Rylan held out a hand for her to shake.

“I’m pleased to officially meet you, Elena,” he said with a smile. Elena bit her lip, shaking his hand.

“And you, Rylan. I really am sorry about before.”

He laughed and shrugged. “I did try to correct you, but then you saw the lab. It’s nice to see someone else so excited about a bunch of machines.”

Elena gasped in mock outrage. “Bunch of machines? How dare you! This is some of the most advanced and coveted technical equipment I’ve ever seen!” They both laughed, and Elena was grateful for Rylan breaking the ice.

They walked to the end of the lab, Elena still eyeing the equipment excitedly.

“This is where I work. We’ve cleared a desk for you over here,” he said, leading her to an empty desk. “You can shadow me for a few days to see how everything works.”

“Thank you, that’s really great,” Elena said. She tried to hide her surprise at his openness.

“Is something wrong? Did you want to be in a separate section?”

“No, no, it’s just...” Elena laughed sheepishly. “I feel like I’m getting the royal treatment. I mean, I guess I am a royal now or whatever, but back on Thryal, they sort of just let me tinker about without involving me in any serious projects.”



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Rylan frowned. “I see. Well, that won’t be the case here. We need all hands on deck, and I look forward to hearing your ideas. I looked up your qualifications,” he added a bit guiltily.

Elena grinned.

“Same. Impressive history,” she teased. She wanted to face-palm for not looking at any of his photos.

“How about a tour?”

“That sounds great. I wouldn’t mind freshening up, too.”

“I’ll show you the common areas and your room. Then we can grab some breakfast and head out to the fields. Does that sound good?”

At Elena’s nod, Rylan led her through the compound. He described each part of the facility and how they all worked together. Elena couldn’t help but steal little glances at him as they walked.

He was serious, a small frown on his brows, but a glint of mischief in his eyes hinted at something more. The way everyone they passed smiled or nodded went a long way to showing his leadership.

“This is your room. It’s not the royal palace, but I hope it’ll do.” Rylan pushed a door open and led her inside. The room was small, with a plush-looking bed and a desk. A built-in wardrobe was already stocked with the standard work-suit, and a few

bookshelves stood ready for her to fill them. Her pack had been delivered and sat waiting on the bed.

“Your private bathroom is just through here.” Rylan pulled open one of the wardrobe doors, exposing a hidden ensuite behind. Elena peeked in.

“What is this, a bathroom for ants?” she said in her best Zoolander impression. She couldn’t help but snort at the expression on Rylan’s face. Somewhere between confused and offended, his mouth opened and closed as he tried to figure out what to say.

“I’m just kidding. It’s a thing from a movie back home, where this guy...” Elena waved a hand. “Never mind. This is perfect, thank you.”

Rylan shook his head, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I have a feeling there will be many of these moments,” he said.

Elena grinned.

He wasn’t wrong. A few hours later, they were crouched down, fingers deep inside the Kheros soil.

Elena grinned at him through her oxygen mask. “So, come here often?”

Rylan laughed. “What does that one mean?”

“It’s a really dumb pick-up line. You have pick-up lines. Right?”

As he pulled the stalk of a wilting plant from the ground, Rylan snuck her a look. “Are you trying to pick me up?”

Elena's face reddened. "No, I mean, it was..."

She narrowed her eyes as Rylan burst out laughing. "Oh, now you're making fun of me?" She shoved his shoulder playfully. It didn't escape her notice that he barely budged, his lean frame strong and solid.

Rylan's laughter tapered off as he inspected the root of the plant he'd upended. Elena sobered, scooting closer to him to inspect it.

"See this blue bit?" Rylan asked, pointing to an area of pocked marks filled with indigo sludge. Elena grabbed a sample jar, holding it open for Rylan.

"We haven't been able to figure out what causes this, and we haven't collected a viable sample. I think you brought good luck with you." He smiled at Elena, though it was strained.

"You're worried about what it means," Elena said, studying his face. He nodded, his eyes downcast. "Well, let's get it back to the lab. What do you start with?"

"What would you recommend?" Rylan asked, seeming genuinely interested. He placed the sample carefully in the glass jar Elena held out.

Elena stared at the sample, her mind running through the various tests they could do, cross-referencing them with the equipment she'd been admiring in the lab.

"I would start with a microscopic analysis of the secretion, the surface of the root, and where the two interact," she replied slowly. "A chemical analysis next, and—do you have DNA samples and testing equipment?"

She pushed her glasses up her nose as Rylan nodded. "Finally, checking for fungi or other microorganisms. Longer term, we could do stress testing on this sample and

some healthy ones under different conditions.”

Rylan studied her thoughtfully. Elena thought she saw a flicker of something pass through his eyes, but it was there and gone before she could make it out. Admiration? Annoyance? She wasn't sure.

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“All right then. Let’s get this back to the lab and start testing,” Rylan said, placing the sample in a sealed container along with the other samples they’d been collecting.

Elena’s eyes felt heavy, and she rubbed an ache in her back. “Caffeine first. Please tell me you have caffeine?” She looked up at him with big, pleading eyes, making him huff a laugh.

“We have caffeine,” he confirmed. “We should probably grab something to eat, too. We’ve been out here for hours.” He gestured to the darkening sky.

Elena gaped. She hadn’t noticed how much time had passed.

Time flies when you’re having fun with an alien scientist.

### Chapter 4

#### Rylan

Elena was not at all what Rylan expected her to be. When he heard that the crown prince’s sister-in-law was coming to help with the mission, he was struck with a wave of dread, picturing a spoiled brat who thought she knew more than she actually knew about terraforming.

But Elena was a bright mind who thought outside of the box and seemed eager to learn. In some ways, she was brighter than most of their coworkers, and he found himself seeking out her advice even before some of the senior scientists.

Even stranger, he found himself seeking her out for reasons unrelated to the work.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

She smiled and glanced up from her computer. “I patched myself into Earth’s databases to study our agricultural techniques and see if any of them could apply to Kheros.”

“Does your planet have terraforming technology?” he asked, pulling up a chair.

“Not exactly. At least, not to the same degree as your operation here. But we’re capable of surviving in some of the least hospitable places on our home planet.” She pulled up an image of a village in an ice-covered wasteland. “For example, humans have thrived in places where few plants can grow because of the frigid temperatures.”

“Fascinating.”

“I’ve also been looking into desert agriculture on Earth.” She pulled up a picture of a land covered in dust with no water or plants in sight. “There isn’t a one-to-one parallel with Kheros being terraformed, but it seems like a good place to start.”

“So, where did you live on Earth?” he asked. “Snow or desert?”

She blinked. “Oh, um, neither really. I mean, we got snow from time to time, but my sisters and I lived in a temperate area. We had warm periods and cold, but it’s not nearly as extreme as the ones I mentioned, so we had plenty of greenery around for us to farm and eat.”

He nodded. “You’ll have to tell me all about your home planet sometime. It sounds fascinating.”

Laughing, she shook her head, making his heart twinge. Was that no because she didn't want to talk about Earth or because she didn't want to talk to him?

"I'll be honest. Outside of Arccoo and Zaraq, I've never seen a Thryal take an interest in Earth. I know, compared to your tech, we're like backwoods hicks. You're the first person I've met who says he wants to understand more about Earth. Do you really want to know?"

"Of course." It didn't hurt that it would give him a chance to spend more time with her. He glanced around the room. Most of their coworkers were already on their break, but she and Rylan were overworking as usual. "How about over lunch?"

She grinned. "Lunch sounds fantastic right now."

Once they got their food, they found a quiet corner of the cafeteria. Rylan ignored the way the other scientists whispered and snickered among themselves. He knew there were rumors about the two of them dating, but he didn't dignify them with a response.

Why would he? Doing so would only lend credence to them and might make Elena uncomfortable. And if there was anyone he did not want to be unhappy, it was the prince's sister-in-law. He tried to tell himself it was just for that reason rather than having any real attraction to her.

But he'd never been good at lying, especially not to himself. When they sat down and she looked up at him with those bright blue eyes, he felt his heart palpitate.

"So, what is Earth like?" he asked.

Elena laughed softly, a small smile curling on her lips. "That's sort of like asking me what my star system is like. Earth is complicated and incredibly diverse. Some people dedicate their whole lives to studying just a fraction of our history and cultures."

“Thryal has been culturally united for the past several centuries.” He took a sip of his Jolt, letting the energy drink wake him up. “The planet is under a single government. It’s not like that on Earth?”

“God, no.” Laughing, she shook her head, her smile as dazzling as the stars in the sky. “Our geopolitical system is constantly evolving, with old countries absorbing others or new countries declaring independence from their mother country.”



“That sounds complicated.”

“You have no idea.” She took a sip of the ruava tea and a bite of her food. “And that’s just on the world stage. Our culture can vary, not just from country to country but even from city to city. Two communities in the same city can have completely different cultures depending on where they are.”

Humming thoughtfully, he took all this in. Aside from this mission on Kheros, Rylan had never been off Thryal, but he’d always wanted to see another planet. Earth’s culture seemed so completely alien to his own, and he was fascinated by Elena’s accounts.

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “Maybe a better question is this. What is Earth to you?”

She hummed and then looked up out the window as though she could see Earth among the starlit cosmos. “Home, I guess. But also not. An old friend turned stranger.”

That was not the answer he’d expected. “What makes you say that?”

She took a bite of the plo’meeek stew she’d ordered for lunch. “In my native language, English, we have a word. Nostalgia. It comes from two other words in another language, Greek, ‘nostos’ and ‘algos.’ ‘Nostos’ means homecoming while ‘algos’ means pain. Put together, it means ‘the pain of not being able to return to a time or place.’ Right now, Earth only lives in my nostalgia. After everything I’ve seen and done, I can’t return to my own world and have it be the same because I’m not the same.

Does that make sense?"

He nodded. It was a familiar feeling for him, a yearning to go back to a time or a place in his life where he never knew loss or grief. But even if he could go back, it wouldn't be how he remembered it. "But you do miss Earth."

She smiled. "Don't you miss Thryal?"

"Sometimes. Though I mostly miss the conveniences and amenities. As long as I have my work, though, I'm fairly content."

"I feel the same way. My sisters are my home, so as long as I'm with them, I'm content, but I miss a lot of Earth culture." Her eyes brightened, and she leaned in mischievously.

"Speaking of... I have some Earth snacks in my room, and I'm really craving some chocolate now. I see that you can have caffeine." She pointed to the energy drink next to his lunch. "What about theobromine?"

He thought for a moment. "Theobromine should be safe. As far as I know, it isn't toxic to us."

Grinning, she leaned back and clapped her hands. He'd seen her do it a couple of times when something delighted her, and he found it incredibly endearing. "Perfect. We'll finish up here and then I'll show you my snack stash."

They quickly finished the rest of their lunch, and she led him to her room. His heart rate was elevated as he realized they were alone in her bedroom. His mind raced, trying to figure out the last time he'd felt so attracted to someone.

A purple foil-wrapped bar sat on her desk as though waiting for them. She snatched it

up and gestured for him to sit on her desk chair while she took the bed.

“I’ll give you a little bit to start,” she said, breaking off a corner and handing him a solid brown triangle before taking a piece of her own. “This is a Milka chocolate bar. You can just chew and swallow or let it melt in your mouth. I do the second so I can enjoy it for longer.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” he said and popped it in his mouth. At first, he didn’t taste much. But then, it began to melt, and the flavor hit—a perfect balance of creamy, sweet, and the barest hint of bitterness. It was unlike anything he had ever tasted and truly divine.

It must have shown on his face because Elena laughed. “I take it you like it.”

“You said that this is called a Milka chocolate bar.”

She broke off another piece and split it in two, taking half for herself and giving the other half to him. “Milka is the name of the company that makes it. The food itself is called a chocolate bar.”

“And this is a regular snack on Earth?”

She tipped her hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Not necessarily this brand, because it’s a little expensive and higher quality, but there are other, cheaper kinds of chocolate out there.”

“Amazing.” He savored the rich flavor until it was gone from his tongue. “I understand you feel ‘nostalgia’ for Earth. I would, too, if leaving it meant leaving behind such wonderful human food.”

She laughed and handed him the rest of the bar. “Here. Take this one.”

His eyes widened. “But you said it’s something you keep for nostalgia. Are you sure?”

Her blue eyes twinkled. “Don’t worry. I bought several whole boxes of them the last time I visited home.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

He didn’t eat it that night. Instead, he hid it away for safekeeping. He would ration out this wonderful gift from Elena.

The next day, they ventured out to pick up some soil samples. Elena wanted to see why and how the soil was being depleted before any plant life could grow.

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Though they were working on the atmosphere, it was still unstable, meaning they had to wear oxygen masks. When Elena stepped outside, she paused for a second at the threshold.

“What is it?” he asked, turning back.

“Only a handful of people from my world have set foot on our moon. It’s easy to forget where we are when inside the base, but I guess it just hit me.” She laughed. “I’m the first human to walk on an alien moon.”

She stepped onto the soil. “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

He tilted his head in confusion. “What does that mean?”

“It’s what the first man to visit our moon said. It was originally supposed to be ‘one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind’ but he got excited and forgot that first A.” She jogged to close the distance between them, and they walked to the place where the soil first started to fail.

“What was the name of this spacefarer?”

“Neil Armstrong. He walked on our moon with Buzz Aldrin while a third man, Michael Collins, stayed back on the ship.” She paused to do some math in her head. “This was about sixty Earth years ago.”

Rylan’s eyes widened. “That’s not very long at all.”

“Like I said, we’re not very technologically advanced.” She shrugged. “We’re in the infant stages of spaceflight and haven’t even figured out how to travel faster than light.”

“How did you get here then?” He knew Earth was lightyears away. If humanity hadn’t figured out faster than light travel, it should have been impossible for her or her sisters to be on Thryal. Ordinarily, he would have assumed the prince had brought them, but from what he remembered, the prince returned from Earth alone, and the humans arrived later.

“Arccoo was rescued after getting out a distress call, but he left his damaged ship behind. We found the part he needed and fixed it up. Then we flew it to Thryal.”

She smiled at the memory. “I’ll never forget when we first broke free of Earth’s atmosphere and got a good look at our home planet. As far as humanity knows, it’s all we have, and it’s so small compared to the rest of the universe. We’re so small.” She laughed. “Which means that every time we fuck up, it’s not a big deal in the grand scheme of things. Right?”

“Right.” He was stunned. This woman and her sisters from a planet run by primitive technology had figured out how to repair and fly a royal cruiser and brought it right to the king’s door.

“This is the spot,” he said, stopping. They pulled out some flasks and got to work digging in the unyielding earth.

“Well, that’s part of the problem,” she said through gritted teeth. “This soil is packed absurdly tight. Makes things pretty hard to grow.”

“We’ve tried to break it up, but nothing seems to be working. It always seems to become hard-packed and dead again after about a week.” He closed the lid on the last

flask.

She finished, too, and got to her feet. “So, the soil needs something that will continuously keep it churning to break it up.”

He sighed and was unable to keep the bitter frustration out of his voice. “We’ve tried automated machine tilling, but that requires too much energy and resources. It wasn’t viable.”

She hummed, not looking at him. Instead, she studied holes they’d made in the ground. “Before terraforming, was anything else living on this moon?”

“Nothing outside of some microbes and single-celled organisms. Why?”

Lifting her samples to the sunlight, she studied her specimens. “It’s just a theory that’s percolating in the back of my mind. I’m not ready to voice anything yet.”

He nodded, knowing how the scientific mind worked. Trying to put words to a half-baked theory only ever led to confusion and embarrassment. He could be patient and wait for her to tell him when she was ready.

“So, when you’re not in the lab, what do you like to do?” she asked.

“It’s difficult to do here, but I enjoy hiking and working out. It helps to clear my head and gives me the chance to take a mental break. I’ve found that my best ideas all seem to come after I’ve stepped away from my work and gotten my blood pumping.”

“Same.” Her blue eyes sparkled. “It’s been scientifically proven that breaks help the mind to refocus itself. While you’re thinking about something else, your subconscious is still trying to solve the problem, and usually it comes to a solution that your conscious mind would not have thought of.”

She grinned mischievously. “Do you want to hear a funny Earth story about that?”

Her smile was infectious, so Rylan nodded, a grin also spreading across his face. “I would love to.”

“Well, there was this ancient Earth mathematician named Archimedes. The king came to him with a problem. He suspected that the pure gold crown he had commissioned was actually part silver, and he wanted Archimedes to prove it. The mathematician spent days puzzling over it but got nowhere.”

“He couldn’t do a chemical analysis?” Rylan asked.



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She rolled her eyes. “It hadn’t been invented yet. We’re a young species. Remember? Anyway. Eventually, Archimedes had to take a break, so he settled in to take a bath. As he submerged himself, he noticed that the water around him rose.”

“And he realized that the pure gold would be denser than silver and gold, which can be measured by the water,” Rylan said.

“Exactly.” She snapped her fingers and formed them into finger guns. “So, he shouts ‘Eureka! Eureka!’ which is ancient Greek for ‘I have it! I have it!’ And he jumps out of the bath and runs straight for the king to share his discovery, forgetting one crucial detail.”

Rylan leaned in closer. “What was it?”

She smirked. “In his excitement, he forgot to put on clothes before running from his house, through the streets, and finally to the king’s chamber. Moral of the story? If you have a major scientific breakthrough while in the bath, make sure to put on your clothes before announcing it to the world.”

Rylan threw his head back and laughed. “I’ll be sure to remember that.”

## Chapter 5

Elena

“Have you heard of Milpas?” Elena asked, pushing her hover chair from her desk over to Rylan’s to peer over his shoulder at the results of the soil samples.

He picked up his head, glancing sidelong at her. “No. Is that an Earth snack?”

As if on cue, her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t had anything to eat or drink in hours. Often, when she found herself wrapped in her work, she would forget little things like eating, sleeping, and using the bathroom.

She giggled. “I think you’re thinking of Milkas.” The last time she’d visited Earth with her sisters, she stocked up on her favorite chocolate. She had brought that and some other Earth snacks with her to the base for some easy fuel while she worked.

She looked around. All the other scientists seemed to be on their lunch break, and she hadn’t even noticed. “But I would be happy to tell you all about it over lunch.”

Apparently, Rylan had the same habit of getting too wrapped up in his work because his stomach audibly grumbled at the mention of food. He flashed her an embarrassed smile. “Lunch sounds great.”

The cafeteria was mostly empty by the time they got there. Elena ordered the granis, a porridge with meat and spices, while Rylan got the plo’meek stew.

“So,” Elena said between mouthfuls of porridge. “Milpas is a farming technique from the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. It’s a form of companion planting, which leads to a higher crop yield without pesticide or fertilizers.”

Rylan set the spoon down and leaned in closer, his gaze fascinated and eager to learn. “How?”

She loved the way he looked at her. The Thryals on Arccoo’s planet seemed to think of her more as a kid who needed babysitting, but he truly listened to her and her ideas. The respect he felt for her was obvious and intoxicating.

“One of the best-known versions of it is the three sisters: maize, beans, and squash. The Mesoamericans would use the corn as a climbing trellis for the beans while said beans would enrich the nitrogen in the soil and stabilize the stalks of corn. Meanwhile, the wide leaves of the squash would keep the soil moist and cool and prevent weeds and predators from killing the corn and beans.”

His eyes lit up at this, and her stomach fluttered when he grinned at her. “So, what you’re saying is that, for us to keep the soil enriched after terraforming, we need to maintain a polyculture farmland rather than a monoculture?”

Elena snapped her fingers, turning them into a finger gun. “Bingo.”

At this, he furrowed his brows. “Bingo?”

“Earth phrase.” She waved a dismissive hand. “It just means that you got it right.”

“Bingo,” he repeated with a smile. “Your language is fascinating.” Out of anyone else, the words might have sounded sarcastic, but she knew he was being sincere.

Her cheeks warmed as she looked away, studying the bits of wheat in her granis. She never quite understood what her sisters meant when they said a sign of having a crush was feeling flustered at the smallest word of affection. Not until she met Rylan.

“Thanks.” She bit her lip. Now was not the time for a crush. She and Rylan had a terraforming project to save and a famine to prevent. “So, what do you think? Should we start looking into plants that can be combined to form symbiotic relationships? That way, we don’t have to keep adding nitrogen to the soil. It will start to naturally enrich itself.”

Her mind raced with ways to combine the properties of Thryal plants and create a more sustainable soil system.

Rylan scratched his cheek, his brows furrowing as he pondered her suggestion. “I think it’s worth looking into. But that assumes the soil itself is capable of sustaining life.” He said the last part sharply. It wasn’t exactly a rebuke, but it carried within it a warning for her to look before she leaped.

She hummed thoughtfully. The granis filled her mouth with a subtle warmth, like eating a jalapeno pepper. It distracted her from the heat in her cheeks. She thought she had the solution, but he made a very good point. “Right. I guess I got ahead of myself a little there.”

“No, no, it’s a great idea.” He flashed her a soft smile. “Even if it’s not the whole solution, I think you found a piece of the puzzle.”

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He took a sip of his Jolt and tapped his fingers on the cafeteria table. “So, for our next steps, we should take more samples and pinpoint what the soil is missing. Then, we can find plants that will replenish these nutrients.”

She forced herself to focus on the words coming out of his stupidly handsome face rather than the easy grace of him tapping his elegant fingers on the table. She was never going to make fun of her sisters for being easily distracted by the little things their husbands did ever again.

Okay, that may have been a lie. She was definitely still going to tease them about it. But she would be doing it knowing full well that she was a hypocrite.

“Elena?” Rylan waved a hand in front of her face. “Elena? Are you okay?”

She blinked, coming back to herself. Her cheeks burned a bright red. “Sorry. Must’ve zoned out for a second there.”

He smirked. “Daydreaming about Milkas?”

“Milpas,” she replied, but now that he mentioned it, she could go for a bite of her chocolate stash, too. Hmm...She arched an eyebrow. “That is, unless you’re trying to trick me into craving a chocolate bar so I’ll share.”

He pressed a hand over his heart in mock offense. “You wound me.”

“But...” She leaned in closer, looking up at him from under her lashes.

“But if you were to offer to share, I wouldn’t object.”

Sitting back, she barked out a laugh. “Knew it. You have a sweet tooth.”

“That’s an interesting hypothesis. The scientific method requires the repetition of an experiment,” he said, straightfaced. “I tried the dessert you call chocolate once and liked it. But to conclude that I have a sweet tooth, I would have to try it at least two more times to see if the hypothesis is correct.”

She rolled her eyes, playing the role of the begrudging assistant. “Well, if you insist for the sake of science... I may be able to find some for experimentation.”

Once they had finished their meal, she headed to her room for her stash of Earth-made processed junk food. As much as she liked the food on Thryal, something was comforting about the familiarity of food from her home planet, a reminder that no matter how far away she was, Earth was still there.

People at home still went about their business. They continued living, working, loving, and dying. And they all looked up at the sky and wondered if the little blue planet so full of life was alone in the universe. She was one of the privileged few who could say for certain that it wasn’t.

She fished a chocolate bar from her stash and opened it, taking half for herself and giving the other half to Rylan.

Grinning, he took a bite. “Trial two supports your hypothesis.” Craning his head over her shoulder, he studied the rest of the food in her stash. “Is all of this chocolate?”

“No, not all of it. I call this my homesickness stash. Because when you’re far from home, you miss the little things, like the food you eat that isn’t good for you but still tastes good and reminds you of road trips when you were a kid.” Scooting aside, she

made a space for him on her bunk and patted it as an invitation for him to sit down.

Compared to Thryal, Earth seemed primitive and mundane, but Rylan always listened to her describe her home planet with rapt attention. He was brilliant, and she found that incredibly attractive.

She'd met plenty of smart guys so high off their own intelligence that they assumed they were the smartest people in any room and condescended to anyone who disagreed. Rylan wasn't like that.

When she spoke, he listened. He never dismissed her, instead absorbing whatever she said and thinking through her ideas instead of opening his mouth and saying the first thing that popped into his head. And when it came to discussions of Earth, every little thing sounded like magic to him, making her see her home planet in a new light.

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

He picked up a bag of cheese puffs. "What are these? Is everything in this box edible?"

Laughing, she shook her head. She was glad she'd gone through that phase where she was fascinated by manufacturing products. "Of course, you would pick the hardest food for me to explain first. Do you remember the plant I talked about earlier as a part of the three sisters? Corn?"

He nodded.

"Well, these are made with that plant. Corn is a staple food in my world. You heat a dough made from it and extrude it through a machine. Then, you coat it in the curdled milk from an animal called a cow."

He hummed thoughtfully. “It sounds complicated.”

“It is. But it’s also what we humans call junk food because it may not be healthy, but it tastes great.”

“I’ll have to try it sometime.” He picked up a bag of potato chips. “What about this one?”

And the world fell away from her. It had a habit of doing that when she was on the verge of a revelation. The potato chips set off a faint resonance, like hearing a familiar musical tune from across the house and trying to recall the name of the song.



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It was coming to her. She just needed a minute to think. Potatoes. Something about potatoes. And it connected to the Milpas. No, not Milpas. Monoculture.

“Elena?” Rylan began.

“Shh!” she hissed, holding up a finger. The idea was coming together. What was it? Monocultures were risky because one blight could wipe out the entire species. It happened with bananas and with...

“The Irish Potato Famine!” she exclaimed, leaping to her feet.

Rylan looked at her like she had grown two heads. “What?”

“Come on. We need to get more samples. I have an idea.” As they geared up, she explained how a massive famine in Ireland had been caused by a blight on the potato monoculture. To be fair, it had also been caused by the behavior of the British government, but that didn’t apply in this situation.

“So, you think a microbe in the soil could be causing this?” Rylan asked as he collected a sample of topsoil near where the terraforming first began to fail.

“I wouldn’t be surprised. It could be one that’s depleting the nitrogen in the soil rather than rotting plants outright. Maybe a mutated disease or something.”

Even from behind the oxygen mask, she could see that he was smiling. “You’re brilliant.”

Her cheeks heated up at that. To avoid thinking about it or his lips on hers, she turned back to the samples she had been collecting. “I’m sure you would’ve thought of it eventually. The chips just helped me make the connection.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Rylan said. He was standing close to her, just inches away. With a gloved finger, he tilted her head up so that she’d look at him. “I’m fascinated by the way your brain works. You’re one of the most formidable minds I’ve ever met.”

She let out a high, girlish giggle. How embarrassing. If Sofia and Carmen were there, they’d never let her live it down. “I could say the same about you. Most people tend to get tired of my rambling after a while.”

Rather than keep facing him and putting her foot in her mouth, she headed back to the base. There, she dropped the samples into the slot to be processed and pulled off her protective gear.

“Wait,” he said, catching up to her. He caught her arm as she tried to push past him. His grip was firm but not enough to hurt. Still, years of bullying in school and dealing with sexist creeps in her labs gave her quick reflexes.

Whipping on him like a rattlesnake, she punched him in the gut before she even realized what she was doing. He doubled over more in shock than pain, but guilt immediately slammed into her. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking—”

He held up a hand, straightening once he’d caught his breath. “No, I should be the one apologizing. Give me a minute to take off my safety gear and then we can talk.”

She waited, guilt twisting in her gut as he put away his samples and removed his suit. Why did she do that? What was wrong with her?

He emerged in his day clothes. “I think I owe you an apology.”

She blinked. Why was he insisting on this? “But I punched you.”

Shaking his head, he let out an amused huff. “Yeah, after I came onto you, made you uncomfortable, and then grabbed you when you tried to get away. That’s on me.”

“But I—”

“I misread things between us, and I’m sorry for that. If you still want to be friends after this, I would love—”

“I like you, too!” she shouted.

It was his turn to take a step back in surprise. “You what? But you pushed me away.”

Elena felt too exposed. Here she was, out in the open, admitting her feelings and neuroses where anyone could hear. “Can we talk in private?”

His emerald eyes widened. “Yes, of course.”

When they reached her bedroom, she shut the door with a sigh. “I’m not used to feelings like this. Or attraction.”

Rylan stayed silent, listening and letting her speak before revealing his thoughts. But the way his brows furrowed told her she had upset him with her words.

Still, she barreled on. “I’m not kind in the way that my sister, Carmen, is kind, and I’m not fun in the way that my sister, Sofia, is. I understand logic, machines, and nature, not people. So, when you started flirting, I panicked because I don’t know what to do with that.”

With a sigh, she scrubbed her face with her hands. “It’s nothing you did wrong. I’m just a neurotic weirdo.”

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Finally, Rylan spoke. “Before, you said people don’t like your rambling. But that isn’t true. I love to hear you talk. When I look at you, I see someone who’s beautiful. But then you have an idea, or you start talking about something you’re passionate about, and the joy of it makes you radiant.”

For the first time in her life, Elena didn’t think. She acted. Throwing her arms around him, she pulled Rylan in for a kiss.

### Chapter 6

#### Rylan

Elena’s hands trembled as they clutched Rylan’s shirt. He could feel every tremor of her body against his, and it ignited him. Every whispered word fueled his desire for her. Every touch, every caress, was like a blazing inferno that burned like the sun.

Her eyes bore into his own, more potent than the strongest of liquors. The space between them was a battlefield, and their silent exchange of glances were volleys of arrows and cannon fire.

It wasn’t just carnal desire. It was an emotional connection that penetrated his heart deeper than any dagger could. Rylan cupped Elena’s face tenderly, brushing aside a stray lock of hair with an almost reverent touch. He drowned in her sapphire eyes. The corners crinkled with fear and anticipation, mirroring his own.

“Rylan,” she whispered his name like a prayer, the sound sending shivers down his spine. He leaned in closer, feeling her warm breath dance across his skin. “I want

you.”

His fingers traced the curve of her jaw, down to the nape of her neck, each touch searing its path into his memory. Her breath hitched as she leaned into him, her much softer frame melting into the solid shield of his body.

The room around them dissolved into insignificance. The world outside ceased to exist.

All that mattered was this moment, the intoxicating mixture of fear and desire coursing through them like a wild river.

Rylan’s lips found hers, seeking solace in their delicate curve. Elena’s fingers balled into fists in his shirt, anchoring her to him as waves of passion crashed over them.

Her lips were sweet, her taste intoxicating. It was an elixir he could not get enough of.

Her hands explored his chest. His arms encircled her protectively, pulling her closer until no space separated them. Her heart pounded against her ribs, keeping rhythm with his own thunderous heartbeat.

His breath hitched as her lips trailed a path of fire down his neck, whispering words that stoked the flames within him even higher. She was an elixir, intoxicating him with every taste of her lips.

His senses were in overdrive. All he could smell was the faint scent of lavender from her hair, all he could hear was the ragged sound of their breathing.

Unable to bear it a moment longer, Rylan began undressing her. He wanted to see every perfect inch of her.

Their lips separated only when he pulled her shirt over her head, revealing her in all her splendor. His eyes drank in the sight of her, moonlight highlighting the curves and dips of her body. He traced the line of her collarbone with his thumb and then down to the swell of her breasts encased in delicate lace. The sight that stole his breath away.

Elena's eyes looked up at him from under heavy lashes, a veritable ocean of desire in their depths. One hand tugged urgently at his shirt, pulling him down toward her again.

Their lips met in another explosive kiss as Rylan discarded his own clothing, guided by an urgency spurred by the heat of their bodies pressed together.

Her hands roamed over his chest, exploring every ripple and contour of muscle. His own hands mirrored hers, each brush of his fingers leaving her gasping for breath.

In response, she wound a hand around the nape of his neck drawing him closer than he ever thought possible. The world contracted to the space between them, to the rhythm they created with the synchrony of their heartbeats, to the urgency reflected in their intermingling breaths.

Rylan unclasped her bra and tossed it aside, soon making her pants follow. His fingertips traced down the curve of her waist and along the slope of her hip, his touch both exploratory and possessive.

He looked into her eyes once more, finding a fear made beautiful by trust. A single nod from Elena was all he needed.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he drew her even closer.

Her body arched into his, craving the press of flesh on flesh. She stroked his smooth

head then pulled him down to her, drawing a low growl from deep within him.

As he stroked her wet heat through the lace of her panties, Elena's breath hitched, and she let out a soft moan.

He slipped his hand under her silk panties, his touch electrified by the warmth of her womanhood. She gasped at the sensation, arching her back. A shiver ran through him as he gently explored the most intimate part of her, fascinated by the gentle swell and damp heat that answered his questing fingers.

His gaze never left Elena's face as he watched her reactions. Her brows furrowed slightly, her lips parted in surprised gasps, and her eyes fluttered closed as she surrendered to the wave of sensations. He was lost in her. Every gasp she made, every shiver, and every moan sent tremors through his body as if they were one entity.

Pulling down her panties with shaky hands, Rylan revealed her fully to his gaze. His heart pounded with a mixture of reverence and lust as he looked at Elena, lying before him as vulnerable as she was beautiful. Every curve of her body seemed to beckon him closer, promising a sweet surrender that he had only dreamed of.



“Oh, god,” Elena whimpered.

Rylan continued his ministrations with a fervor heightened by her response. His fingers danced lightly over the sensitive flesh, each touch eliciting gasps and soft moans from Elena that stoked the fire burning within him.

Emboldened by her sounds, he leaned in close, his breath hot on her damp skin. His lips met the softness of her inner thigh, lightly tasting her there. Elena’s breath hitched at the contact, and her fingers dug deeper into Rylan’s hair, pulling him closer.

Rylan was drowning in a sea of desire, his every thought consumed with Elena. He wanted to memorize every inch of her body, every sound she made. His hands explored the soft expanse of her skin, tracing the contours of her hips and thighs with a reverence that sent shivers down Elena’s spine.

Moving further up, he pressed gentle kisses along the path his fingers had traced moments ago. Elena’s body arched beneath him, a silent plea for more.

“Mmm... Rylan,” she whimpered. He could feel her body trembling beneath him, forcing his excitement to grow.

Relishing in the sounds he was drawing from Elena, Rylan’s touches became more insistent. Her moans filled the room, acting like fuel to his burning desire. With each stroke of his tongue against her sensitive flesh, she bucked against him, seeking more of that electrifying sensation.

He complied willingly to her silent pleas, increasing the pressure of his tongue and tracing patterns that had her gasping and writhing beneath him. The taste of her was intoxicating, driving him to explore further and deeper. His hands slid up her body, stroking the soft skin of her stomach before encircling her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her pebbled nipples that ached for his touch.

Her breath came in short sharp gasps as his fingers danced over her soft skin. Rylan could feel her body tightening around him, her moans growing ever more frantic and high-pitched as she neared the brink.

“Rylan... I... oh, god...” Elena’s words dissolved into incoherent whispers, drowned out by the rhythmic pounding of their desperate heartbeats.

He lifted his gaze to meet hers and found a world of desire reflected in her eyes that mirrored his own. He intensified his efforts as he felt her body begin to shake beneath him.

Her back arched off the bed, a silent scream caught in her throat as she reached the peak of pleasure. He stroked her through each wave until she relaxed, panting, flushed, and utterly sated.

With sweat pooling on his forehead, Rylan paused to admire Elena once more with eyes that sparkled like galaxies being born and a chest heaving as if trying to catch every star within it. He couldn’t help but smile seeing the satisfaction painted across her face.

Before long, Elena’s hand found its way back to Rylan’s smooth head, pulling him up toward her in a clear indication that she was far from done with him. His body pressed against hers, the hard plane of his chest against the soft curves of hers.

His lips found hers in a kiss filled with hunger and need, their bodies aligning in a

way that seemed as natural as breathing.

“Elena,” Rylan murmured against her mouth huskily.

His touch explored her with a renewed fervor. He entered her slowly, his eyes never leaving hers as he pushed inside inch by slow inch until he was fully sheathed within her.

A gasp escaped Elena’s lips as she adjusted to his size, her body stretching deliciously around him. He remained still for a moment, allowing her time to relax before he began to move. He was slow and gentle at first but quickly gained intensity.

Her fingers dug into his back as she met each of his thrusts with one of her own, the intensity building like an unending wave and threatening to crash over them both. “Rylan,” she whimpered, her voice shaky. His thrusts became more insistent, his hips grinding against hers with each forward movement.

“Let go for me, Elena,” Rylan whispered into her ear, his voice rough.

She cried out, her body convulsing as she climaxed.

Feeling Elena tighten around him was all it took for Rylan to lose control as well. His movements became uneven as he succumbed to the pleasure coursing through him. His moans mingled with Elena’s in the air between them as he rode out his own orgasm.

They lay there panting afterward, bodies tangled together in a mess of limbs and sweat-soaked sheets. Rylan placed a kiss on Elena’s forehead before pulling her closer to him, wrapping an arm around her waist protectively.

“Are you okay?” he asked breathlessly.

Elena looked up at him from where she had nestled herself against his chest. Her lips curved into a satisfied smile. “I’m more than okay.”

Rylan smiled, feeling sated and more relaxed than he had in years.

## Chapter 7

### Elena

If overthinking were an Olympic sport, Elena would be the reigning champion. Her mind was a constant loop of Murphy’s law as she tried to anticipate everything that could and would go wrong at any given moment in her life. Spontaneity was Sofia’s expertise, not hers.

So when she woke up beside Rylan after a night of sex performed entirely on impulse, she naturally panicked a bit. She had slept with her coworker, one she would have to see every day if this didn’t work out.

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And even without even taking into account the HR nightmare of the crown prince's sister-in-law dating a coworker, their job was to prevent mass starvation. Would they become too distracted by each other to actually solve the crisis?

Rylan shifted, lazily opening his eyes to study her face. "Good morning."

All the blood rushed to her cheeks. "'Morning."

Stretching luxuriously, he pressed a kiss to her lips and got to his feet. "So, should we get breakfast before processing the soil samples?"

"Together?" she squeaked, cursing herself for how high her voice rose in pitch. This was new territory for her. Usually, she would sleep with a guy, and they would go their separate ways in the morning.

And she liked it that way. Being around people was exhausting most of the time, and the Thyrls could be especially frustrating. Because she was the prince's sister-in-law, they were always cordial, but she could tell they thought she was just some yokel from a backwoods planet who had no idea what she was talking about. Rylan was one of the few people who she thought could never be exhausting to be around.

He paused, his pants hiked halfway up his thighs. "If you want," he said carefully, as though he was defusing a bomb. "We don't have to—"

She cut him off. "I do." Laughing, she sat up. "I really do. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page."

The muscles around his shoulders visibly relaxed as he flashed her a relieved smile and pulled his pants the rest of the way up. “Understood. I know I’m not someone befitting of your rank, so if you—”

She blinked. “What?”

“You’re the prince’s sister-in-law. You may not be noble Thryal blood, but you are one of them. I’m a commoner, though, which means I am beneath you.” He looked confused as he explained, as though he was answering a question that should have been self-evidential.

Elena got to her feet and took his hand. “Rylan, you’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met. If anything, I thought you’d be embarrassed to be seen with a weak and lowly human.”

“So, neither one of us is embarrassed by the other,” he said, handing her the bra they’d discarded during their night of passion. “I’m glad we cleared that up.”

Breakfast was far less awkward than she feared. Several of the other scientists gave them knowing looks, but out of respect for them, or more likely, for the prince, they didn’t say anything.

After eating, she began running the samples, searching for any microbes that may be responsible for depleting the soil and cross-referencing them with the diseases that the Thryal staple crop, bral, was susceptible to.

After a few minutes, the results came back. No microbes were causing a blight in the soil. In fact, there were barely any microbes at all.

A hunch was beginning to form in her mind. The soil had all the correct nutrients, but with the low variety of organic matter, she had a sneaking suspicion that the problem

may lie in the overspecialization of the terraformed land. After all, where were the insects and other animals? There was no real food chain.

When wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone, it may have seemed counterintuitive at first, but all species from the lichens and willows to the beavers and even their primary food source, elk, benefited.

Terraforming may be starting from scratch on a new planet, but the plants themselves didn't know that. Like fruit trees on Earth that still produce massive seeds for long-extinct megafauna, the bral was failing to thrive because they expected a different environment.

"Do we have any samples of soil from Thryal up here?" she asked one of the experts in soil enrichment, Kyn.

She blinked. "Why would you need that?"

"I want to get a baseline for what makes bral thrive on Thryal along with whatever plants or animals are important for its survival." She gestured to some of the research on her computer. "Getting a bigger picture of the environment might be the key to figuring this out."

"I'll send it to you," Kyn said and disappeared to another part of the lab.

While she waited, Elena began looking at other terraforming projects. Most of them were outright failures, and those that weren't were too expensive to be maintained enough to be useful. The costs outweighed the benefits.

When she received the soil analysis, all her theories were confirmed.

"What are you looking at?" Rylan asked.

Elena jumped. She had been so focused on her theory that she hadn't heard him approach. "I've just been thinking. Maybe we're approaching terraforming the wrong way."

"How so?" He pulled up a chair to sit beside her.

She gestured to the open tabs on her computer, all pertaining to the environment and the need to balance various elements in the ecosystem. "Everything is so specialized and laser-focused on this one specific crop. Remember how I mentioned those Milpas yesterday?"

"Yeah, you wanted to look into polyculture practices as a solution." He furrowed his brows. "But I don't see why that means we're terraforming the wrong way."



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“Do you know how many of the Thryal terraforming projects succeed?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know the exact percentage.”

“Half. Only half of all Thryal terraforming projects lead to a successful crop yield, and those that do are far too expensive to maintain. Growing a crop is not like keeping a potted plant. It needs a complete environment for it to thrive and provide any real yield, not just more nitrogen in the soil and carbon dioxide in the air.”

“But a complete overhaul? Do you know how expensive that is?”

“Probably less expensive than a famine,” she snapped. And then her stomach lurched. If she kept on this trajectory, their conversation would end with Rylan storming out of the room and out of her life, muttering “know-it-all bitch” as he did so.

It happened with her first real boyfriend, Mike, before a robotics team match. She’d noticed a flaw in his code for their entry and tried to fix it. Mike told her to leave it alone, and it turned into a fight. Eventually, she gave in and left it alone.

They lost the match, and the ensuing I-told-you-so argument had been even worse. He broke up with her and turned the entire robotics team against her, telling them that she’d intentionally sabotaged the code for their robot.

It wasn’t true, of course. He wrote bad code, and he didn’t appreciate that his girlfriend called him out on it.

But that and a decade of other miserable experiences had taught her one thing. People

didn't like it when she told them they were wrong. She only ever wanted to help, but no matter what, she would somehow insult them.

Before yesterday, with Rylan, she felt safe being a bit snappish, but things were different now. Weren't they? They were together, and guys didn't like it when their girlfriends snapped at them. Even when those girlfriends knew they were right.

"I-I mean," she stammered, her heart racing. If she didn't watch her tone, he would leave her just like everyone else. Everyone but her sisters, and sometimes she worried they were obligated by familial ties to stay with her.

"You're not wrong," he said, his eyes narrowing in thought. He glanced around the room. Following his gaze, she clocked that people were listening.

He nodded to a nearby conference room. "Let's talk in private, okay?"

She nodded mutely, feeling a bit like a prisoner on death row. Yesterday, their disagreements had been so easy, but now, the threat of rejection loomed large over her head.

The logical part of her knew that one rude statement wouldn't be enough to get him to break up with her, and if it was, he wasn't worth it anyway. She could tell herself that all she wanted, but the animal part of her brain that was wounded by rejection still flinched at the threat of being kicked away.

Closing her eyes, she practiced her box breathing, something Carmen taught her whenever her mind would get away from her, wild as a runaway horse. In for four, hold for four, out for four, repeat...

Rylan was just a guy—a hot, brilliant, and kind guy, but still a guy. She was there to help prevent a famine, not date Thryal's most eligible genius. If being honest about

what they needed to do caused him to reject her, she could live with that if it meant millions more would also survive.

“Are you okay?” He looked at her with such concern that it made her heart beat like a jackhammer.

She crossed her arms, suddenly feeling childish. “I’m fine.”

Raising a skeptical brow, he pulled up a chair and sat down. “Is that why you look like you’re on the verge of a panic attack?”

Despite herself, she chuckled. He was blunt, and she appreciated that. It took a lot of guesswork out of their interactions. And if he was being brutally honest, she guessed that she could be the same.

Grabbing a chair for herself, she sat down with a sigh. “Just another weird, neurotic hangup. I like you. A lot. And most of the time, when I like someone, they eventually decide that I’m too much and leave. I guess when I snapped at you, it made me panic about potentially driving you away by being a know-it-all.”

He smiled and took her hand. “You could never be too much.”

“That’s easy for you to say now. Give it some time.” She sighed. “As much as I enjoyed last night, it really made things weird.”

“Well, do you want to go back to being friends?”

“No,” she said much too quickly. When he shot her a smug look, she laughed sheepishly. “I like you a lot, and that’s the problem. It makes me afraid to disagree with you because people seem to take disagreement as insults.”

“I’ve been told that I have the same problem. It’s the body language. I’m not very good at reading it.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Here’s a proposal. When we disagree, I’ll tell you when I need to take a break or you’ve crossed a line. And you’ll do the same for me.”

“Please do,” she said, the tension leaving her body. “Thank you.” He understood. Hell, he understood her better than her own sisters sometimes.

“So, back to what you were saying about how our entire system needs an overhaul.”

He tapped a few buttons on the conference table and the holographic plans for the terraforming project appeared. “Why do you think this?”

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Getting to her feet, she pulled up the soil composition of bral fields on Thryal and pointed to the percentage of organic matter. “Do you see all this?”

He nodded. “Our soil here is missing that.”

“Exactly! You’re treating terraforming like a greenhouse. A sustainable environment, though, requires an ecosystem. You need squigs, and fungi to break down plant matter.” She pulled up a picture of the Thryal equivalent to an earthworm. “And you need pollinators like zegs.” She called up the image of an insect similar to an Earth bee.

“Like the Milpas you mentioned yesterday,” he said. “Things feeding one another while also helping to strengthen each other.”

She snapped her fingers and, in the same motion, formed them into finger guns. “Bingo.”

Getting to his feet, he brought the schematics forward again. “I don’t think we need an entire overhaul. We still need the machines we use to oxygenate the air and feed the soil initially, especially if we bring in plants and insects from Thryal. Something has to sustain them until we’ve stabilized everything.”

“So, instead of having the moon under constant life support, it will eventually begin to sustain itself,” she said.

He winked. “Bingo.”

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, she clapped her hands in excitement. “In the meantime, we can begin filling the soil with organic matter from our base by composting our food and waste. Give the squigs plenty to eat before they arrive.”

He openly beamed at her as her mind raced, already trying to figure out what plants and small life forms would best work together to make the soil healthy and sustainable.

Feeling his eyes on her, she blushed. “What?”

“You’re so beautiful like this.”

“Like what?”

He moved in closer, taking both her hands in his. “Excited. Your mind moving so fast that your body cannot seem to contain the energy.”

“It’s not annoying?”

He shook her head. “I never understood people who act annoyed by the happiness of others, especially when they’re taking joy in something they love.”

Why was she so afraid earlier that he’d push her away for speaking her mind? Everything Rylan had ever said or done indicated he valued her point of view. He respected her as an intellectual equal.

Standing on her tiptoes, she surged upward to kiss him. His hands found their way to her waist and pulled her closer, and she hooked her leg around his. Leaning lower, he deepened the kiss, his hands working their way inside her shirt and cupping her breasts, and—

There was a knock at the door. Elena and Rylan hopped apart like two kids caught necking under the high school bleachers. Rylan cleared his throat. “Who is it?”

“The team morale committee,” one of the residential staff, a Thryal named Ged, said. “We reserved this conference room for our meeting.”

“Right.” Rylan straightened his clothes. “We’ll clean up and be right out.”

Elena stifled a giggle attack as she helped Rylan shut off the holographic plans and followed him out of the room. Ged and the other members of the committee watched them pass with knowing stares. She couldn’t even find it in herself to be embarrassed.

Rylan took her hand and gave it a squeeze. When she looked up at him, he winked, and she had to cover her mouth to stifle her guffaw.

As soon as they were safely out of earshot of the committee, both broke down in laughter so powerful that they had to lean on each other. Elena’s fit lasted long after her sides and cheeks ached.

When was the last time she’d laughed like that with someone? It was probably at her sisters’ antics, but she couldn’t exactly remember. It definitely wasn’t with any of her boyfriends, though.

Rylan was special, more special than Elena was ready to admit to herself.

## Chapter 8

### Rylan

Rylan smiled as he stared at the import form’s label of “Approved.” The squigs and other pollinating and soil-enriching insects were ready to be sent up from Thryal for

introduction into the soil. Throughout the past few weeks, they had been composting the base's food and waste, and now they had enough to make a tasty meal for their new arrivals.

Elena looked up from her workstation as he approached, her blue eyes bright. “Did you get it?”



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“The squigs should get here by tomorrow. We can introduce them into the soil as soon as we’re sure they’re stable.”

“Yes!” She jumped to her feet and threw her arms around his shoulders. “You’ll see. This will all work out.”

Behind them, Jaku whistled, and Elena let go, embarrassed. Jaku was one of the researchers specializing in air composition and loved getting under people’s skin.

It took Rylan some time to realize it wasn’t personal. Aside from his work, which he took seriously, Jaku treated everything like a joke. He was nobility and seemed aware that an element of nepotism was at play in how he got the job, so he tried his best to put in good work, even if he was playing the role of the class clown during his off hours.

Rylan rolled his eyes. “Don’t you have work to do?”

He stretched back in his chair, resting his arms behind his head and smirking. “Don’t stop on my account. You guys are cute.”

“And you have a talent for ruining the moment,” Rylan retorted, resting his hand on Elena’s shoulder. She wasn’t ashamed of him. He knew that. But sometimes, with the way she grew tense and embarrassed when others pointed out that they were together, it was easy to forget.

After all, she was nobility, and he was a commoner. He’d made good money as a scientist, but all the money in the world couldn’t make up for that shortcoming, even

if Elena said that kings and noble blood weren't taken very seriously on Earth.

Some of the tension left her shoulders as she sighed. "Whatever, Jaku. Is the atmosphere ready to sustain small life forms?"

He scooted aside for Rylan and Elena to see the computer. "Everything is looking good so far. Those squigs are about to discover a literal whole new world of decadence."

"Excellent." Elena raised her hand in something the Earthlings called a high-five. After teaching it to some of the researchers, the practice had taken off in popularity, with members of the base at all levels striking the hands of one another to show approval.

Jaku returned the high-five with an enthusiasm that left Elena shaking her hand. Though she was initially nervous when engaging with scientists outside of Rylan, she had truly begun to flourish in the past few weeks, blossoming like a satcha flower as she gained confidence in herself and her wisdom. Rylan had loved to watch her grow.

Pushing up her glasses, she offered Rylan a soft smile. "We have a lot to do before our little buddies arrive. So, back to work?"

The next day, the first shipment of squigs arrived in conjunction with the rest of the base's supplies. The zegs would come later, once they had plants to pollinate. This would be the smaller test case before they began the moon-wide project.

Rylan hefted the crate of squigs, pretending not to notice the way that Elena admired the muscles rippling in his arms and back. He enjoyed working out as a means of clearing his mind, but lately, he'd been reaping some unexpected fruits of his labors. Namely, Elena ogling him at every opportunity.

“Shall we?” he asked, nodding in the direction of the compost pile.

When they reached it, Elena coughed, wrinkling her nose. “Even with the oxygen mask, it still stinks.”

“Would you like to do the honors?” he set down the crate and stretched out the kinks in his muscles.

“Gladly.” She punched the code to open the box, and he tilted hundreds of squigs out and onto the field of rotting food and body waste. The squigs lay there for a moment, acclimating to the new environment before burrowing into the dirt. “Enjoy your meal,” she said to them. “And make us plenty of fertile soil.”

“You’re talking to them?”

She winked. “Everyone needs encouragement. Even on Earth, talking kindly to plants will help them grow better than yelling at them, though that could be more related to the noise and vibration than the actual words. The sentiment is there, though.”

Feeling a little ridiculous, Rylan cupped his hand around his mouth. “Eat this rotting food and shit out plenty of great dirt!” He turned to her. “How was that?”

She snickered, causing a strange lightness in his chest. He loved the sound of her laughter. More than that, though, he loved the sound when it was him making her laugh.

“Ten out of ten. No notes.” She hooked her arm around his. “Let’s head back to base. If we don’t go now, I don’t think I’ll ever get that smell out of my nose.”

He nodded, trying not to inhale too deeply. “Agreed.”

Elena was right. The squigs made quick work of the compost, transforming it into soil whose composition more closely resembled Thryal.

After about a month, they had planted the bral along with vleben, a bean-like crop that was known for adding nitrogen to the soil and was commonly grown alongside bral. Now, all they could do was wait and focus on revamping the system in other ways.

Taking a holistic view of terraforming made the initial process slower, but they were seeing results. The oxygen composition of the air had gone up, allowing them to breathe outside without their masks for short periods of time, and the increasing atmosphere allowed the temperature to stabilize, helping the plants to grow.

He and Elena had been working through all hours, sometimes even jumping out of bed in the middle of the night when they were hit with a sudden idea. When it came to self-care, it seemed that two workaholics were a recipe for disaster.

One morning, he woke to find Elena shivering in bed beside him. This was new. He knew humans shivered when they were cold, but he'd made sure that his bedroom was the ideal temperature for her.

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So, why was she shivering? And if she was so cold, why was her body warmer to the touch than usual?

“Elena?” he whispered, shaking her.

She groaned, rolling over and forcing her eyes open. They looked glazed with misery. Then they widened in panic. “Trash can,” she said. “Now.”

He grabbed the wastebasket and handed it to her, only for her to regurgitate the previous night’s meal. Panic rose in him. Humans weren’t supposed to just vomit. “What’s wrong?”

She spat out the rest of it and wiped her mouth. “Flu, I think.”

“What flew?” Was she delirious? “Nothing’s flying in here.”

She shook her head and then screwed up her face as though it caused her physical pain. “No, f-l-u, flu. It’s a human disease, generally not serious, but seriously gross.”

At this, Rylan relaxed. Thryal illnesses rarely manifested like this, but it was apparently common for humans. “What does it entail?”

“Headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, chills, and a sore throat. Speaking of...” She staggered out of the bed with his trash can still in her hands and tottered to the bathroom.

“I’ll get the base’s doctor,” he said from the other side of the door. “We’ll find a cure

for this flu.”

“There isn’t really much you can do,” she replied after the sounds of retching died down. “Mostly just drinking a lot of fluids and resting. Sometimes, people need to be rehydrated intravenously, but that’s about it.”

She let out a groan. “Shit, the new composition samples. I was going to test them today.”

“It can wait until you’ve recovered. How long does it usually last?”

“Few days. A week at most. The worst is usually done after the first twenty-four hours.” She let out another awful retch.

“Will you be okay if I go to get the doctor?”

“Should be.”

After some research into Earth’s illnesses, Dr. Trox was able to confirm what Elena first thought. It was just a common Earth flu—miserable, but easily survivable for a healthy adult human like Elena.

“You don’t have to stay here. We both have a lot to do, and we don’t need two people behind on their work,” she said once Rylan had gotten her bundled back into bed. “Trust me. The flu is not something you want to be around.”

Sitting up, she tried to swing her legs out of bed. “Actually, I should just head back to my room. I don’t want to make your room all gross.”

He gently but firmly pushed her to lie back down. “My work can wait just as much as yours can. Let me take care of you until you’re feeling better.”

“Okay,” she grumbled. “But don’t complain if I get you sick. I tried to warn you.” She handed him the key to her room. “Can you grab me a hair tie and my toothbrush? I’m pretty sure I also stocked up on ginger ale from Earth, so a couple of cans of that would be nice, too. It’s in my homesick snack stash.”

He saluted. “Be right back.”

Finding the hair tie and the toothbrush didn’t pose any issues, but the cans of what she called ginger ale proved to be more of a challenge. A can, he knew, was made of metal, but there were several different cans with different labels and colors. And he had no idea how to read human writing.

Shit.

Just to be safe, he grabbed a can of each color, six in total. Then he carried them and the rest of the supplies she had asked for back to his room.

When he opened the door while laden with sick day supplies, she laughed at the number of cans in his arms. “I probably should have specified what ginger ale was, huh?”

“Yeah, that would have helped.” He set everything on his desk and handed her the hair tie. “Which one is it?”

“The dark green can,” she said, pointing to the one on the far end. “Thank you for looking after me.”

He handed her the drink. Pulling the tab open, she took a sip and set it on the bedside table. Then she took the hair tie and pulled her hair back.

“Let me,” he said, taking it. He ran his fingers through her soft, chestnut hair before

braiding it and tying it off.



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“How do you know how to do that?” she asked, lying back down, and getting comfortable once more.

“I used to braid my mother’s hair sometimes, mostly when she wasn’t feeling well and couldn’t braid it herself.” Even after all these years, the thought of those afternoons spent in her bedroom looking after her between homework assignments sent a pang of grief-tinted nostalgia through his chest.

“Was she ill?” Elena asked, studying her hands.

“A rare muscular degenerative illness. We did the best we could, but...” He trailed off, his meaning obvious. He hadn’t thought about his mother in years and couldn’t remember the last time he’d even spoken of her.

It was a painful subject, and he wasn’t good at navigating that. But with Elena, he felt as though he could open up to her.

“I lost my parents at a young age, too,” she said softly.

He picked up his head. He knew about her sisters, of course. Everyone did. But she’d never mentioned her parents before. He didn’t want to bring it up, instead assuming that it was a sore subject and that she would talk about it when she was ready.

“Illness?”

“Accident,” she replied. “One minute, I’m a kid with both parents. The next, I’m an orphan.”

“I’m sorry.”

She sniffled, putting on a brave smile. “It’s okay. Long in the past.”

“Who took care of you?”

“My sister, Carmen, practically raised me. She was still basically a kid herself, and she did everything she could to take care of us. We lived with our grandparents at first, but they weren’t always around. Sometimes, when I picture my parents, I don’t picture my mom and dad. I picture her.”

Reaching over, she grabbed the can of soda and took another sip. “I know people have their doubts about a human with their crown prince, but she’ll be an amazing queen someday.”

She sighed, her eyes glazing over, though he couldn’t tell if it was from sadness or fever. “I miss her. She always took care of me when I was sick.”

“I could call her if you want.” He was already reaching for his comms when she shook her head.

“No, I don’t want to bother her. She and Sofia are probably busy, and I know they’d drop everything and come as soon as you call.” Wiping her eyes, she shook her head. “Sorry. Fevers make me weepy and emotional. Like getting drunk and hungover at the same time.”

“Can I do anything to help you feel better?”

She yawned. “No, you’re doing a great job taking care of me. Just stay until I fall asleep and make sure a trash can is nearby in case I need to throw up again.”

“I’ll do you one better,” he said, getting in bed with her.

“No, I’m gonna get you sick, too,” she mumbled, but she was already clinging to him like a child.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take. What’s your favorite streamshow?”

She yawned again and snuggled in closer. “I haven’t had much time for Thryal shows. Do you have any you recommend?”

Rylan absently pressed a kiss to the top of her head as he thought. What did he watch when he was sick and staying home from school? Not much. He mostly slept.

But his mother loved her stream shows. It was a way for her to escape the pain for just a little bit. And he would watch with her during those long afternoons.

The streamshow she liked best was about a group of terraformers on a bizarre planet full of mysteries and adventures. It had inspired him to become a terraformer, and watching it always filled him with a warm nostalgia.

He called up the streamshow on his comms. “This was my mother’s favorite. We used to spend afternoons watching it together and daydreaming about terraforming strange planets. What do you think?”

She rested her head against his chest. “It sounds perfect.”

Pressing play, he kissed the crown of her head again as they both settled in to watch the streamshow. Elena managed to stay awake for the first three episodes before falling asleep in the middle of the fourth.

Soothed by the steady rhythm of her breath and the warmth of her body, Rylan felt

his eyelids droop. Shutting off the comm pad, he joined her in slumber.

### Chapter 9

#### Elena

A week after she recovered from the flu, the base received a message from the palace that Carmen, Sofia, and their partners were going to come up for a visit. Arccoo wanted to see their progress, so, naturally, everyone was in a panic anticipating the arrival of the crown prince.

Being his sister-in-law, she didn't have the same reverence for him, but she knew they needed to show progress on the project. Otherwise, the royal council would pull the plug, and all their hard work would be for nothing, so she had every reason to be nervous.

And that wasn't even getting into the fact that her sisters were going to meet Rylan. They were going to love him. She knew this. But she also knew they had high standards—especially for the youngest in the family—and would be very vocal in the unlikely event they thought that Rylan was unworthy of her.

“Almost ready?” he asked from the doorway to the lab.

She grinned, trying to tame the swarm of butterflies in her stomach. “Yeah. And you?”

“As I'll ever be,” he said. Hand in hand, they walked to the hangar where the crown prince and his extended family would be landing. “I'll admit that I am a bit nervous.”

“About meeting the prince and keeping the project running or about meeting my sisters?”

He flashed her a wry smile. “Yes.”

“Arccoo is a good guy. You don’t have to worry about him. It’s my sisters you have to be scared of. We’re very protective of each other.” She gave his hand a squeeze and let it go as the doors opened, and the royal cruiser landed. “But you’re going to be great. I know they’ll love you.”

“I really hope you’re right.”

With a pneumatic hiss, the doors opened. Carmen and Sofia were the first ones out. Shrieking with joy, the sisters ran to hug one another. It had only been a couple of months, but it felt like longer.

Carmen was the first to take a step back, grabbing Elena by the shoulders and studying her. “How are you feeling? You said you were sick a few days ago.”

Elena shrugged. “Just a forty-eight-hour bug. Nothing serious.”

“Yeah, you can’t keep a good mad scientist down,” Sofia said, punching Elena in the arm.

Laughing, she rubbed the spot. “What about you guys? How have things been?”

“Same old, same old.” Sofia leaned against Carmen, using her older sister’s shoulder like an armrest. “It’s been pretty boring without you blowing up the lab every other day.”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “What Sofia means to say is that we’ve missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Behind her sisters, Arccoo and Zaraq cleared their throats. Elena smiled sheepishly at the oversight and approached to hug Zaraq first. “Good to see you.”

“Glad you’re doing well,” he replied.

Turning to Arccoo, she pressed a fist to her heart and inclined her head. “Your Highness.”

Rolling his eyes, he wrapped his arms around her. “My little sister, you bow to no one.”

She reciprocated his hug. “I trust that you’re treating Carmen well.”

“You’ve threatened me with regicide enough times to know the answer to that,” he teased. It was an old inside joke between them. Any time Carmen seemed even vaguely displeased, Elena and Sofia would threaten regicide. The royal council didn’t appreciate it, but they and Arccoo found it hilarious.

He even put in his final will and testament. If I have been murdered, despite comments to the contrary in the past, it was most likely not Sofia and Elena Flores. Those words were intended as jokes.

Stepping back, he rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m eager to see what you’ve done with the place.”

“Rylan and I can give you guys the grand tour,” Elena said.

Her boyfriend made a fist over his heart and inclined his head. “I would be honored to do so, Your Highness.”

With a gesture for them to follow, she and Rylan started walking. “We’ll take you to the compost field first. You can see what all those squigs you’ve ordered have been up to.”



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“Shouldn’t we put on oxygen masks?” Carmen asked as they headed out the door.

Elena shook her head. “We don’t have to. The air is thin but breathable now. We should be fine for a little while.”

“It was Elena’s idea to focus on creating an ecosystem rather than a garden.” Rylan pointed to the compost field, which was starting to have some shoots grow from the ground filled with squigs. It stood as a sharp contrast to the nearby field of fertilized dirt that still lay barren.

“I didn’t know you had a green thumb,” Sofia said.

Arccoo frowned, though, when he looked at the shoots. Elena’s heart sank. Bral was supposed to be a dark greenish brown, but these were a golden green. “Are you sure you planted the right crops?” he asked.

She nodded. They still hadn’t quite figured out the change in color. It wasn’t rot or infection, but nobody on the base had any idea what was causing the damage. “We’re looking into it.”

Carmen rested a hand on his shoulder. “Science is trial and error. You can’t just brute force it into the results you want.”

Elena snorted at the hypocrisy. She’d lost count of the number of times she’d said that to Carmen and Sofia over the years.

Rylan shared a knowing look. He’d probably experienced the same problem, too.

Such was the struggle of scientists.

“So, not saying that this isn’t impressive, but are we going to stand around staring at rotting food or are there other places you want to show us?” Sofia asked, wrinkling her nose.

Elena nodded sympathetically. “We’ll take you to the lab next.” It really did smell awful out there, even with the squigs breaking down the waste. “We can show you the equipment, explain how it works, and tell you what’s on our wish list.”

“How far from the base is it safe to explore?” Zaraq asked, taking his partner’s hand. “Sofia and I want to see what the rest of the moon looks like.”

“We can go over that in a bit,” Rylan replied, leading the small group back inside. “The short version is that it depends on whether or not you want to use an oxygen mask.”

“Will the mask block out the smell?” Sofia asked.

Elena tipped her hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. “Eh, it’s better than nothing.”

“Unfortunately, we’ll have to do the meet and greet first,” Carmen said. “So, we’ll stick to the base for now.”

Rylan tapped Elena’s arm. “I could show them around the lab while you explore with Sofia and Zaraq if you want.”

“I thought you wanted me to stick with you,” Elena whispered.

He flashed her a quick, small smile. “Do you think I’m too much of a nervous wreck to introduce your family to our coworkers?”

“Stop.” She rolled her eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Then go and have fun with your sister. The lab will survive without you for a few hours.”

“You don’t mind, Carmen?” she asked and pointedly ignored the way her older sisters glanced at one another. They’d picked up on something between her and Rylan, but in the interest of preserving her dignity, she wasn’t going to mention it until her sisters brought it up.

“You and Sofia go have fun,” Carmen said. “The meet and greet stuff will be pretty boring. Trust me.” She batted her lashes at her husband. “Not saying that I want to shirk my royal duties, though, of course.”

Arccoo chuckled. “Of course.” His hand curled around Carmen’s waist, pulling her close as they walked. “A future queen has to get to know her subjects.”

Elena and Sofia exchanged glances and then began to playfully retch in unison. Rylan raised his eyebrows at this. The idea of making fun of a royal was unthinkable for the Thryals, even if the royal was also a brother-in-law.

Arccoo, being the youngest and only recently named heir after his brother’s treasonous actions, was used to being teased by family. He would never voice it, but Elena suspected he thought of her and Sofia as his little sisters, too, and enjoyed being included in the playful bickering. His brother’s mockery had always come across as scorn.

“We’ll meet back up at lunch.” Carmen hugged her sisters goodbye. “Just don’t get yourselves killed out there.”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “The most dangerous thing is falling into the compost. Right,

Elena?”

“That and the spontaneous quicksand holes,” she lied with a shrug and headed to the envirosuit supply room. “It took out one of our guys about a week ago.”

“Wait, what spontaneous quicksand holes?” Sofia jogged to catch up to her with Zaraq close behind. “There’s spontaneous quicksand holes?”

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Elena let her stay in suspense for a bit before bursting out laughing. “The look on your face!”

Sofia’s expression fell, though Elena couldn’t tell if it was from relief or disappointment at the lack of dangerous environmental features. “There are no spontaneous quicksand holes. Are there?”

Snickering, Elena shook her head. “Nah, I’m just fucking with you.”

“Then let’s get a move on,” Zaraq said. “I’ve always wanted to try a low-gravity backflip.”

“You’re in luck, because the further from the terraformed land we go, the weaker the gravity. It’s like a trampoline park.”

“A what?” Zaraq asked, confused.

Sofia took his hand. “Trust me, babe. You’ll love it.”

Elena led them to the area least affected by the terraforming. She hadn’t yet figured out why gravity was weaker in this area, but it was on her list of mysteries to solve.

They bounced for a couple of hours, all the while catching up on each other’s lives. Sofia and Zaraq had been exploring some nearby exo-planets and hunting down legends on Thryal.

Life seemed to be a nonstop adventure for her sister. Elena was happy for her but

knew that it would be an exhausting life for her. She wasn't suited for an existence of spontaneity like Sofia, nor was she suited for the diplomacy and manners of royalty like Carmen. For a time, she thought she'd be married to her work, but now that she'd met Rylan...

"So," Sofia said as they made their way back to the base for lunch. "That cute head scientist. What was his name? Ryan?"

"Rylan." Elena rolled her eyes. She knew this was coming, but she had hoped her sisters would be kind enough to refrain from interrogating her about her love life in the middle of her very important work.

"Right." She smirked. "Are you guys experimenting on each other—if you catch my drift—or is it just extreme sexual tension right now?"

Elena's cheeks burned. "Did you have to say it like that?"

"It's my sisterly duty to phrase things in the most embarrassing way possible. Right, Zaraq?"

Her partner stepped back. "I'm not getting in the middle of this."

"Smart man," Elena said. Well, there was no way Sofia or Carmen would let this go now. She might as well fess up. "Rylan and I are together, but I don't know if we'll stay that way. After the mission—"

Sofia playfully elbowed her. "He'll sweep you off your feet and to another lab for some more sweet, sweet nerd love."

"You're the worst."

Sofia winked. “I know.”

After removing their envirosuits and getting cleaned up, they headed to the cafeteria to meet up with Carmen, Arccoo, and Rylan. The trio sat at a quiet corner table. After grabbing their food, Elena, Sofia, and Zaraq joined them.

Sofia slapped the lunch tray on the table. “So, you’re dating my sister.”

Rylan’s emerald eyes widened as he glanced between Sofia and Elena. The latter shrugged and shook her head in resignation. “I warned you,” Elena said.

“How long have you been together?” Carmen asked. Elena knew not to look to her for any protection from the onslaught of humiliation to come. Her oldest sister was just as bad as—if not worse than—Sofia.

“A couple of months,” Rylan replied carefully. The next several questions came rapid fire from both older sisters.

“What’s her favorite color?”

“What food texture does she hate?”

“What does she like to do when she isn’t in the lab?”

“What makes her feel better when she’s sick?”

“What’s her favorite snack?”

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“No need to interrogate him,” Arccoo interrupted, earning a glare from both older sisters.

Elena just buried her face in her hands.

Carmen took his hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. “Arccoo, I love you, but you need to butt out. This is a sacred Earth ritual known as ‘making sure the youngest has good taste in men.’ It’s our right as older sisters to interrogate him.”

“Still, don’t you think this is excessive?”

Rylan held up a hand. “It’s all right, Your Highness. Elena has already warned me about this Earth ritual.”

He turned to Carmen and Sofia. “To your questions: teal, slimy, read or draw, drinks ginger ale and rests while watching stream shows, and Milkas, a delicacy she’s kindly shared with me.”

Sofia raised her eyebrows. “Elena shared some of her homesick snack stash? You really must be special.”

“Yeah, she barely even shares it with us,” Carmen said, hiding her smile behind a sip of her drink.

“So, did I pass?” Rylan asked. “Do I have your stamp of approval?”

Sofia and Carmen exchanged glances, holding a conversation with just their gazes.



Almost in unison, they nodded.

“You passed,” Sofia said.

Carmen held up a finger. “Probationally.”

He sagged with relief while Elena, face still in her hands, groaned. Why did her sisters insist on being so embarrassing?

“For what it’s worth, you and Elena seem to be a good match.” Arccoo winked. “Your intellect is very close to matching hers.”

Rylan straightened up at that. The prince had given him his blessing to date his sister-in-law. Elena knew he had some insecurity about not being nobility, so this was a boost to his confidence.

“You do understand that I’m a commoner. Right, Your Highness?” Rylan asked and then immediately backtracked. “Not to imply that I don’t trust your judgment, but—”

Zaraq laughed. “Rylan, I’m a commoner, too. And with my history, if Arccoo was to be displeased with anyone, it would be me, not the genius scientist.”

Rylan shot Elena a confused glance. She hadn’t told him about Zaraq and his past, mainly because it wasn’t her story to tell. “Later,” she whispered, and he nodded.

“To be honest, I don’t think I can forbid this even if I wanted to,” Arccoo said. “These women are far too strong to be dissuaded by anyone, including the orders of a prince. Did you know that they repaired a spaceship on their own in order to get here?”

Rylan chuckled. “I heard something to that effect.”

“It was mostly Elena,” Carmen said. “She figured out how to repair Arccoo’s ship almost entirely on her own.”

Rylan took Elena’s hand. “I’m beginning to suspect your previous telling of this story was a bit modest. “

She shrugged. “It wasn’t relevant.”

Laughing, he shook his head. “You never cease to amaze me.”

## Chapter 10

Rylan

After lunch, Rylan oversaw the clearing of the cafeteria for the welcome celebration. Kyn and Stiya hung up streamers while his cooks prepared their best holiday dishes. They set up a dance floor in the center of the room and covered the surrounding walls with portable holo-screens.

Some of the scientists on the base played instruments while others could sing, so they formed something of a band. He had initially suggested that they just stream music, but the musically inclined had shot that down. When else would they get the opportunity to play for royalty?

Elena sidled up to him as he watched them all work. “Carmen and Arccoo want me to tell you that you didn’t have to go to all this effort for them.”

He shook his head. “Of course I did. This place isn’t much, but a royal visitation from the crown prince deserves a royal celebration.” He glanced around. “Where are they?”

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“I left them to freshen up and rest in their rooms before the party. Travel like that takes a lot out of you, so I wanted to let them relax for a bit.” Standing on her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek. “I guess you’re stuck with me then.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He pursed his lips, trying to figure out how to phrase the next question. “Have they said anything about the project? Reading emotions is not my strong suit, so I couldn’t quite tell how they felt about it when I was with them earlier.”

“Carmen is impressed.” She shrugged. “I guess you expected that, though. It’s hard not to be when you come from a planet like ours. Arccoo has always been more stoic, so he’s harder to read.”

“If you had to guess, though...”

“I’d say that he’s on our side. He wants this to succeed, but I can tell he’s holding back on something, and I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s a problem with the council. But with the progress we’ve made, I don’t see how they could defund us.”

He nodded, supposing he should have expected that answer. The prince would reveal his plans. Rylan just had to be patient until it was time. “And if they end the project?” he asked, hating himself for the feeling of bitterness welling in his chest.

The prince’s support could make or break this project, and he was far from an expert in Rylan’s field. He might not understand what progress looked like because it wasn’t going to yield immediate results.

She looked up at him and offered a weak smile. “Well, we’ll always have Kheros, I guess. Unless—unless you’d want to keep in touch after.” Something so hopeful lingered in her gaze that his heart clenched. Didn’t she know what he felt for her?

“Of course.” He leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. “Even if this project ends, I have no intention of ending things between us.”

“Good. Because I don’t, either,” she said, though the relief in her voice was palpable. Was she really so afraid that he was nothing but a fair-weather lover?

He kissed her again, harder this time, and she wrapped her arms around him, pulling herself flush against him.

“Whoo!” a familiar voice interrupted their moment.

Elena leaped back as though she’d been bitten as Sofia approached with a teasing grin spread across her face.

“Is that really necessary?” Elena grumbled, her face flushing adorably.

“As your sister, it is my god-given right to embarrass you in front of all boyfriends.” She turned to Rylan. “Just like it’s my god-given right to threaten anyone who hurts my little sister with extreme bodily harm. Carmen won’t do it because she’s royalty, and those threats might accidentally be taken seriously, but I have no such limitations.”

Elena rolled her eyes. “Didn’t you already threaten him at lunch?”

“I just think it bears repeating. Do not fuck with the Flores sisters.”

Rylan chuckled. “I wasn’t planning on it.” He liked Sofia’s spirit. She struck him as

fiery and willing to stop at nothing to make sure her family was safe. He didn't have much living family, but if he did, he knew he would be the same way.

He was so glad Elena had that. No matter what happened to him, she had people to love and protect her. Maybe soon, they would accept him into this family unit they had formed.

Using two fingers, Sofia pointed at her eyes and then at him. It was clearly an Earth gesture, but the meaning was obvious across languages. I'm watching you.

"Anyway," Sofia said brightly, her tone changing as abruptly as the subject. "Everyone is awake now, so Carmen wanted to know if we could do anything to help."

Rylan shook his head. "We have things well in hand here." He gave Elena's shoulder a squeeze. "You should go, though. Spend time with your family."

Smiling, she stretched up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Call me if you need me."

He laughed. "Don't worry. I can plan a single party. Family is far more important."

He watched Elena leave with her sister and sighed. As a kid, he longed desperately for a sibling, but his mother nearly died carrying him, and after she passed, his father never remarried and never had any more children. He understood why, but it didn't stop his childhood from being lonely.

Shaking his head, he returned to his work. After all, he had a party to plan.

The band ate first so that they could play during the party itself. Once they were all ready, he called Elena and told her to bring her family. The band started up as they

entered the room.

The others all made noises of appreciation, but he was most focused on Elena. She took it all in with wide-eyed wonder.

In addition to the physical decorations, he'd set up holo-screens to make it look as though they were in the middle of a forest. The streamers hanging from the ceiling gave the appearance of jungle vines and the birdsong complemented the band's music.

“What do you think?” he asked.

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Her face broke out into a wide smile. “This is wonderful. Your planet’s technology never ceases to amaze me.”

He turned to the prince and his wife. “I know this is nothing like the palace, but I hope you enjoy our humble gathering.”

The prince smiled. “I’ll be honest; I prefer humble parties like this to the grand snobbery of palace balls.”

Carmen smiled and wrapped her arm around her husband’s waist. “Agreed.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Rylan kept his posture straight, but internally, he sagged with relief. He’d never met the previous prince, but he heard that the royal could be a piece of work, so Rylan was glad that Prince Arccoo seemed much more polite.

“Did you hire the band?” Sofia asked. “I didn’t expect you to have live music.”

Rylan beamed with pride. “In addition to being brilliant scientists, many in my team are accomplished musicians. They insisted on playing for the prince and his family.”

“Well, let’s not waste the music then.” Sofia grabbed Zaraq’s hand. “Let’s dance.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” Carmen said, grabbing the prince and pulling him onto the dance floor.

“We’ve been taught to revere our princes and kings almost as gods,” Rylan said as he watched Prince Arccoo’s human bride dance playfully in a circle around her husband.

“I’ll admit that it’s strange to watch you treat our crown prince like an equal.”

“Arccoo has never been one for pomp and circumstance,” Elena said. “I think a part of the reason he fell for Carmen—aside from how awesome she is in general, of course—is that she treats him like everyone else. Where we come from, the people choose who is in charge, and they only rule for a short period of time.” She grimaced. “For better and worse.”

Judging by her expression, she wasn’t interested in pursuing that topic any further, so he didn’t ask her to elaborate. Instead, he focused on the dancers as they laughed and moved in rhythm to the music.

He held out a hand. “May I have this dance?”

Elena’s blue eyes widened, and her cheeks colored. “Oh, uh, I-I don’t dance.” She gestured to her sisters. Carmen moved with an easy grace while Sofia’s energy was unmatched. “I’m not like them. I have no sense of rhythm and have no idea where to start.”

He chuckled. “To be honest, I’m not much of a dancer myself. I’m terrible at it. But with the right partner, I thought we could have fun being terrible together.”

“I…” Her gaze slid to the dance floor, where she stared with longing for a moment before turning back to him. “Fuck it. Let’s dance.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him onto the floor to dance among her family and the rest of the scientists. Carmen and Sofia cheered when they saw her and Rylan join them.

At first, it was awkward. Neither of them seemed to know where to put their hands and feet or what moves to make. Should they just shimmy and sway or should they



make up moves based on the lyrics to the songs?

“Waltz,” Carmen said as she shimmied past.

He blinked. “What was that?”

Rolling her eyes affectionately, Elena smiled. “She said waltz. It’s a very simple Earth dance. Traditionally, the guy leads, but I can do it first to demonstrate.”

“Anything’s better than flailing around awkwardly,” he replied.

“Agreed.” Elena smiled. “So, since you’re following this time, put your hand on my shoulder. I’ll put mine on your waist. And then, we hold each other’s hands with the empty ones.”

He did as she said. One hand went on her shoulder and the other took her free hand. “Like this?”

She nodded. “Now, we move in a box to a rhythm of three beats. I lead and you follow. Ready?” She began to move. “One, two, three. One, two, three. You’re getting it.”

He smiled. “I have an excellent teacher.”

“Now, let’s try a twirl. Hold up your hand and I’ll spin out, and then spin back in.”

He did as she said, lifting her hand and letting her twirl away from him and then back to his arms. She looked up at him through her lashes. “Are you ready to try leading?”

“I think so. Forgive me if I step on your toes.” He readjusted his grip, holding her waist while she held his shoulder.

“Are you kidding? That’s half the fun.” They danced in their little box, and the world faded away. It was just him and Elena stepping in rhythm to the music.

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“Did you know that the waltz was scandalous when it was first invented?” she asked, breaking some of the spell.

He raised his eyebrows. “This? How could this possibly be scandalous?” He was certainly enjoying the time and close proximity with Elena, as always, but it hardly seemed scandalous. Of course, the gentle scent of her hair and the feel of her body under his palm were nothing to complain about.

“The first thing you need to know about Earth culture is that we’re very sexually repressed. It’s gotten better in recent decades, but back then, the barest hint of sexuality used to be enough to cause a conniption. And this...”

She pressed herself close to him, close enough for him to feel his member begin to strain against his pants, aroused by her nearness. She glanced down at it and then smirked. “Chest to chest. Practically crotch to crotch. You can see the effect it has on...certain people.”

He pressed a kiss to her lips, bending her backward in a dip. With an appreciative moan, she wrapped her arms around him and nibbled on his lip. Her sisters whistled in the background, but he ignored them, righting Elena.

Her cheeks were beautifully flushed, and her lips were engorged with desire. She smirked. “Now you get it.”

They all danced until they were breathless, their feet throbbing with every step. Then they grabbed dinner at the buffet he had set up. He had broken into the base’s alcohol supply for this occasion, and all imbibed but Carmen and Prince Arccoo. As the

future king and queen of Thryal, they didn't want to risk a scandal by getting too drunk.

Sofia, Zaraq, and Elena had no such qualms. "Rylan, have you heard of a game called beer pong?" Sofia asked. Her green eyes were bright with mischief.

Her partner grinned, looking equally impish. "Sofia introduced me, and trust me, you're going to love it."

"Couple versus couple?" Elena grabbed his arm, and he really began to wonder what he was in for. But if she wanted to play, he would play.

"Do we have anything we can use like a ball?" Sofia asked.

Elena shrugged. "We can try flipping a coin into it. I have my lucky quarter from Earth. We can just wash it off."

For a moment, Sofia looked disgusted. But then she just shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

As Elena ran off to grab her coin, Zaraq set up the game while Sofia explained the rules to Rylan. "So, it's pretty simple," she said. "You throw a coin into a cup filled halfway with alcohol. Every time you land one in, you have to drink it. The first one out of cups wins."

"Seems easy enough," he replied.

She grinned. "You say that. Just wait until you're halfway through the game."

Elena returned with the coin, and they got to playing. Sofia went first, flicking the coin from her hand and sending it sailing into a cup. She and Zaraq high-fived. Then it was Zaraq's turn. He got it in as well, meaning that they had a strong start. Rylan

and Elena would have to work hard to catch up.

As Sofia predicted, the alcohol started going to his head halfway through the game, making everything pleasantly light and floaty. Elena, being much smaller than him, was already swaying slightly and slurring her words a little bit from her successful landings.

And soon, it was down to just one cup on either side. The two couples were well and truly drunk, squinting carefully as they took aim and missed their targets. By now, a crowd had gathered around them, curious about the game and the fierce competition between two drunk couples.

Rylan was the last to go. He took a moment, focused, tried to clear his inebriated mind, and flicked the coin. It seemed to move in slow motion, the light glinting off each side as it sailed through the air. And then, with a plop, it landed in Zaraq and Sofia's final cup.

The crowd went wild. Rylan drank the last of their cup before picking up Elena and kissing her as he spun in a circle. When he set her down, Sofia and Zaraq bowed to him in a tipsy show of respect.

"Nice work," Prince Arccoo said, patting Rylan's shoulder. "I hereby name you beer pong champion."

Once again, the crowd went wild with cheers. Elena pulled him down into another kiss. "My handsome champion."

## Chapter 11

Elena

Watching Rylan have fun and let go was a sight. Elena enjoyed every moment, and when Rylan won the beer pong tournament, she felt a sense of pride.

This man is mine, she thought.

With his hand firmly wrapped in hers, she pulled him eagerly back to their room. The moment the door closed behind them, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply.

Rylan responded with equal fervor, holding her tightly against his chest. They separated, both gasping for breath, their faces flushed and cheeks glowing. His fingers traced the contours of her face as if he were trying to memorize every line and every curve.

“Tonight was incredible,” Rylan whispered, his gaze lost in hers. Elena could only nod in agreement, too consumed by the heated proximity to articulate words.

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His arms wound tightly around her waist, pulling her even nearer to him. Their surroundings faded into an intimate blur as their hearts beat loudly in their ears, their world reduced to the feel of each other's bodies and the taste of the other's lips. Rylan's hand dove into her red-brown hair, a low groan vibrating in his throat.

He moved them toward the bed without breaking their kiss, gracefully maneuvering through the dimly lit room. They fell onto it with a soft thud, his body hovering over hers as they continued their feverish exploration. The cool sheets underneath Elena were a stark contrast to his warm body pressing against hers.

Their clothes became a hindrance, and with a mutual understanding, they began to shed them, their hands feverishly working at buttons and zippers. The cool air hit their exposed skin, causing goosebumps to prickle across their bodies.

Elena made a small noise of surprise when Rylan's hands touched the bare skin of her back, sending a shiver cascading down her spine. He chuckled softly, his breath tickling her ear as he whispered comforting words.

Rylan gently nibbled at the nape of her neck, his fingers tracing patterns along her side. She gasped softly as his hand slipped under her waistband.

Elena's fingers dug into his shoulders, a soft moan escaping her lips as she arched against him. His whispered promises into the shell of her ear only heightened her sensations.

He planted kisses from her jawline down to her shoulder, leaving a trail of fire along her skin. He moved lower and lower, his lips leaving a path of tingling sensation

down her chest and stomach. Her hands roamed through his hair, pulling him closer to her. Every touch seemed to set her skin ablaze, but she welcomed the flame, craved it.

His hands moved with a purpose, each touch a promise of love whispered between them. Their eyes locked, and at that moment, they acknowledged the passion that surged like lightning between them. It was electrifying, overwhelming even, but neither of them wanted it to stop.

The sound of their hearts thudding filled the room as they explored each other with an undying curiosity. Elena writhed beneath him, her breath hitching when his lips grazed her hipbone.

A shiver ran up her spine, making her gasp for air. Rylan responded by pressing himself closer to her, his body heat seeping into her skin.

She ached for him, arching her hips so he would touch her where she craved him most. He obliged, planting a kiss at the juncture of her thighs. She cried out as a cascade of sensations washed over her.

As he continued to lick and tease her, she clung to him tighter, her hands clawing at his back, every whimper and gasp music to his ears.

Elena gasped when his fingers entered her, her heart pounding like a drum. She could feel herself falling apart beneath him, letting go of everything.

His name was a broken whisper on her lips, a plea for more, and he didn't disappoint. He moved with slow precision, each thrust eliciting another gasp from Elena.

She clutched him desperately as he quickened his movements. Her breathing hitched as she felt herself nearing the edge of pleasure. He watched her closely, her eyes



darkening with lust as he saw her teetering on the brink.

With one final push, Elena shattered beneath him. Her body convulsed in pure ecstasy as wave upon wave of pleasure washed over her. She cried out his name as an intimate affirmation of their shared euphoria.

After a moment of letting Elena recover from her high, Rylan pressed light kisses to her forehead and cheeks before making his way to her lips once again. His tongue entwined with hers in an exchange that spoke louder than words.

Everything about this moment was perfect. The way his body fit into hers like missing puzzle pieces, the way his breath hitched as she ran her fingers down his back, the way his voice sounded when he whispered sweet nothings into her ear. Everything was unequivocally perfect.

He had been patient enough, and as the last of her tremors died away, he entered her with a slow thrust. Elena gasped, her nails digging into his back as she adjusted to his size.

Rylan buried his face in her neck, his breath warm and steady against her skin. He was surprisingly gentle, taking care not to hurt her as he began to move.

Every thrust made Elena whimper with pleasure, her hips moving in sync with his. She was clutching at him desperately, each touch drawing lines of fire across her skin. He moved deliberately within her, grinding his hips against hers.

The sensation was too much, intoxicating in intensity. Elena wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing him deeper into her. His movements became faster, more urgent, yet he maintained gentleness that kept her comfort paramount. Rylan's hands held on to her with a fervor that spoke volumes of his feelings for her.

Each thrust echoed through the room like a whispered confession of their shared desire. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony as if they had been dancing this intimate waltz for an eternity. Beads of sweat glistened on their skin, their breaths ragged and panting as they neared their precipice together.

Rylan's eyes met hers, revealing a depth of emotion more profound than any words. His hand moved to gently cradle her face, his thumb tenderly stroking her flushed cheek. His gaze was so intense, so loving, that it made her heart flutter wildly.

Her name fell from his lips like a prayer as he thrust into her harder, pushing them both toward the edge. The sound of it sent tremors down Elena's spine, intensifying the knot of pleasure building within her. She felt herself teetering on the edge of bliss.

"Rylan..." she murmured, her voice soft and filled with awe. His name on her lips was like a benediction. It was a plea for more. More of his touch, more of his love, more of him.

He smiled with a tender and loving expression as he heard her whisper his name. It was faint, nearly drowned out by the sounds of their labored breathing, their bodies moving against each other rhythmically.

Rylan's movements didn't falter even for a moment. He kept his gaze locked with hers. There was raw emotion in them, a mixture of love, passion, and an irresistible desire that seemed to have taken hold of her.

Elena could feel the tension building within her again, the pleasure surging to unimaginable heights. She clung to him tightly as if her life depended on it.

Her nails traced paths down his back under the intensity of the moment. Every thrust of Rylan's body against hers only added fuel to the fire building up inside her.

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“Elena,” he groaned, his voice strained as he continued to move in rhythm with her. His voice was hoarse from exertion, yet it was sweetly melodic in Elena’s ears as she felt herself getting closer to climaxing.

She was trembling beneath him now, waves of pleasure cascading through her body. The world around her seemed to blur into insignificance as she focused only on Rylan and the intimacy they shared.

He increased his pace in response to her plea, causing Elena’s mind to spiral into oblivion. The sensation was too much, too overwhelming, yet not enough. She needed more of him. She craved the closeness that his body provided.

Her hands roamed his back, tracing the solid muscles, her fingers digging into his skin as though attempting to imprint him onto her flesh. His taste lingered on her lips, potent and sweet, a flavor she intended never to forget.

With a trembling gasp, Elena pushed her hips up to meet his powerful thrusts, feeling the world tilt as an intense wave of pleasure stormed through her. Elena was unraveling beneath him, her body responding to his in such a primal way that it left her reeling.

“Rylan,” she whimpered, her voice barely a whisper against the sound of their pounding hearts. Her nails dug into his back as she clung to him tightly, pulling him deep within her.

Before long Elena felt that familiar coil in her stomach start to tighten again. “Rylan,” she panted out, letting him know she was close. He nodded against her shoulder,

increasing his speed in response.

With one final thrust, they found their release together, bodies clenching and convulsing in the throes of shared ecstasy. A wave of intense pleasure washed over them both, tearing moans from their throats as they clung to one another.

As the pulsating waves subsided, they lay entwined, panting heavily. Rylan pressed lazy kisses down her neck, igniting small sparks that sent shivers down her spine.

The silence of the room was broken by the slow rhythm of their breathing and the soft whispers of adoration they exchanged in the aftermath.

## Chapter 12

Rylan

Waking up next to Elena quickly became Rylan's favorite thing. Her even breaths puffed warm air on his chest while her head rested in the nook of his shoulder. Rylan lifted his head and placed a kiss next to her messy bun.

Elena groaned as he shifted. "Not yet," she mumbled, throwing her leg over him and cuddling closer.

Rylan chuckled. "I guess the soil samples can wait a bit longer," he mumbled into her hair as he pulled her in tighter.

Elena giggled. "Cuddles trump soil samples right now," she agreed. She hummed contentedly into his neck.

"Last night was great," Rylan said. "Though I don't appreciate the pain in my head this morning."

Elena laughed. “I can’t believe how good you are at beer pong! A true master.” She poked his side. “I declare from here on that you shall always be my teammate.”

Rylan grinned at the praise. “Is that a royal decree, Princess?”

Elena gasped and propped herself up on an elbow. “I thought I told you not to call me that!”

He laughed. “I can’t believe how casual you and your sisters are. Even Arccoo has become less formal. The Flores sisters will be the downfall of Thryal royalty,” he said with a smirk. Elena scoffed.

“You clearly never met Arccoo’s brother. Man, that guy was a piece of work.”

Rylan winced. Growing up as a commoner, it was unheard of to speak ill of anyone in the royal family—whether they were disgraced or not. Elena didn’t seem to notice and flopped onto her back.

“I need a greasy breakfast. Do you think there’s still some rupen strips left?”

Rylan smiled. The meaty strips were often fried in oil, and Elena had compared it to something she called “bacon.” It was strange to have it at breakfast.

“I’ll speak to the cooks. I’m sure your sisters will appreciate it, too.”

Elena smiled back at him. “Have I mentioned how great you are?”

Rylan grinned and kissed her. “A few times, but I’m not opposed to repetition.”

They dressed quickly, stealing glances at each other and grinning each time they were caught. The way Elena bit her lip as her eyes roved over him made him want to drag

her back into bed and never leave.

The sun was cresting the horizon as Sofia and Carmen stumbled into the common room.

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“Life-juice, please,” Sofia said. She made grabby hands, her eyes barely open. Rylan smirked as he poured her some of the caffeine-rich ruava tea.

“Too many shots, Sofia?” he asked cheekily.

Sofia glared at him. “Too many words, Rylan. Gimme!” She grabbed the mug from his hands and immediately sipped, ignoring the heat of the drink. Carmen was significantly more composed, smirking as she thanked him for her mug.

“What do you have planned for today?” Elena asked, pushing two breakfast plates toward her sisters. There was a huge stack of fried rupen strips between them, and Sofia moaned as she bit into one.

Sofia held up a hand to Elena, signaling her to wait until she’d consumed more caffeine. Elena shot Rylan an amused look.

“Looks like this Earthling is still adjusting to Thryal wine,” she fake-whispered to him. The comment earned her a fierce glare. Rylan was slightly terrified, but Elena just laughed.

“I’m going back to bed after breakfast,” Sofia said.

“Arccoo mentioned wanting to have a picnic later. Are you two free to join us?” Carmen added.

Elena bit her lip, pulling up her to-do list. Rylan watched the crease in her forehead, a slight despondent air to her. He placed a hand over her device and smiled at her.

“We have some things to work through this morning, but I’m sure we can make time for a picnic later.” Elena beamed at him and finished the last of her breakfast.

“Let’s get to it then. Come fetch us when you’re ready to go?” she asked her sisters, who both nodded absently, focused on their breakfasts.

Sofia was already pouring a second mug. Elena snickered at her obvious discomfort.

Rylan smirked. Elena had been in a frighteningly similar state only an hour ago, yet she teased her sister for it. He knew better than to mention his thoughts, though. He wasn’t prepared to receive another installment of the Flores dagger glares.

When they reached their desks, Rylan stifled a sigh. His desk was covered in untested samples, test results from other scientists, and various updates from the compound. Elena wrinkled her nose at the sight.

“No rest for the wicked, huh?” she said, clapping him on the shoulder. Rylan frowned.

“Who are you calling wicked?” he teased. He really enjoyed her Earthly sayings, though they never made much sense. He’d learned to just go with it.

Elena laughed, though the sound died quickly as she started up her machine, and a million messages pinged through. Rylan couldn’t hold back his snicker.

“Karma, was it?” Elena had taught him about the strange concept. That one actually did make a lot of sense.

Ah, there it is, Rylan thought as Elena’s glare prickled over his skin. He bit his lip to hold in his smirk.



The morning flew by as both of them caught up on admin. With the royals visiting, they'd been away from their work for the better part of two days, and it showed. Rylan massaged his forehead as he read through what felt like the fiftieth report.

"Doesn't look like there are many changes in the soil or the atmosphere," he said to Elena.

She blinked as she looked up from her screen. "The plant samples look the same, too. I expected faster results with the squigs working on the soil." She frowned and pushed her glasses up her nose. "We should go check on them."

Rylan nodded as he stood and stretched. Elena's eyes roamed over him hungrily.

"Eww, table that look, sis." Sofia strolled in, looking considerably fresher.

Elena scoffed.

"As if you don't look at Z the same way," she retorted.

A pleased flush warmed Rylan's skin. Did she realize she'd compared their budding relationship to her married sister's?

Before he had time to process that, Carmen and Arccoo entered the lab. Rylan automatically straightened, patting his head even though he had no hair to flatten. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Arccoo smiled at him. "At ease, soldier," he teased. "We're here to collect you for lunch."

Sofia scoffed. "In truth, we need you guys to pick a picnic spot. We have no idea what's out there." She waved toward the window.

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Carmen elbowed her. “We just want to spend time with you,” she corrected her blunt sister diplomatically. “And... maybe we don’t know where to go.” She looked up sheepishly.

Elena laughed and threaded her arm through Rylan’s. His chest warmed at the familiarity. “Let’s go then.”

The picnic took them away from the lab for almost three hours, and they returned to chaos. Jaku, normally found with a grin or a smirk, had lines of worry on his face. The sight sent shivers of discomfort down Rylan’s spine.

“Rylan, where have you been? Your comm is off.” He shot a careful look at Arccoo and Elena’s sisters. “Can I show you something in the lab?” he asked pointedly. Rylan checked the comm device on his wrist. The battery had died. He swore softly.

Distracted, he offered vague apologies to the prince and the sisters before following Jaku to the lab. He was halfway down the corridor when hurried footsteps followed him.

“What’s wrong?” Elena asked, her voice tense.

Rylan shook his head. “We shouldn’t have stayed away for so long. Go back to your sisters. I’ll find out what happened.” He almost winced at how terse his tone was but worry overtook his senses. Elena stopped, hands on her hips.

“Nope, we don’t talk to each other like that. I’m coming with you, and we’ll figure this out together,” she said.

Rylan drew a deep breath into his lungs and kept walking, making Elena almost jog to keep up with his long strides.

“We’re going to talk about this later,” she promised ominously.

The lab was a flurry of activity that quieted somewhat when they entered. Everyone flashed them grim looks. Rylan’s stomach tightened with anxiety.

He strode to Jaku’s desk with Elena hot on his heels.

“Well? What is it?” he asked impatiently. Jaku looked up from the sample box on his desk, where a few squigs were lazily wriggling around. No, not lazily, more... sluggishly. Rylan frowned as he leaned closer.

“Why are they green?” he asked slowly, lifting his eyes to take in Jaku’s somber face.

“It started this morning. They seemed off when I checked on them, so I took a few to test. It’s like they’re...”

“Dying.” Elena finished for him, covering her mouth with her hand. “Well, shit.”

“Have you tested the soil?” Rylan asked brusquely.

Jaku nodded and pulled up test results on his screen, tilting it so Rylan and Elena could see. “This is why I tried to call you. The soil is reverting back to what it was before we introduced the squigs.”

“Oxygen?” Elena asked.

“Decreasing steadily.”

Rylan cursed and started pacing. The squigs were meant to be the answer to most of their problems. It had been working, so why did it stop? What happened to them?

“Have you tested for diseases?”

Jaku shook his head. “I didn’t want to dissect any of them without your say-so, sir. With your permission, I’ll pull a few and start running bloods.”

“Do it. Elena.” He turned to her, taking in her shaken expression and wide eyes. “You’re one of our best researchers. Find every possible disease squigs could have and compile a table of symptoms, prevention, and cures.” Elena nodded, happy to have something to do.

Rylan turned to the department heads listening to the conversation.

“Kyn, I need soil samples taken every hour. Analyze for nitrogen, phosphorus, carbon, and sulfur. Test pH every ten minutes.”

Kyn nodded, scurrying off to mobilize her team.

“Triim, I need eyes on the squigs at all times. I want to know every movement they make.”

Triim saluted him and started suiting up.

“Stiya,” Rylan heaved a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry to leave this to you, but you’re best at communicating with the royals. I need them entertained and kept away from the lab until we figure this out.”

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Stiya rolled her eyes but obeyed. Rylan caught the furtive glance she shot at Elena but chose to ignore it. He'd spoken true, Elena was one of the best researchers he'd ever come across. The way she could work through data at a breakneck pace would be necessary if they wanted to resolve this quickly.

He also wasn't entirely sure Elena's loyalty lay with the project and didn't want her relaying the issue to Arccoo before they had a solution. Rylan hated himself for thinking like that, but he had to manage his risks. If Arccoo shut them down, while they were so close, it would break him.

Hours passed with Rylan fielding constant updates and questions. He'd stolen glances at Elena for the last hour, his exhaustion interrupting his concentration. She was still hunched over her desk, one of her monitors displaying an extensive spreadsheet. She was meticulously color-coding each disease with the preliminary results Jaku provided.

Rylan's gaze snapped away when Elena leaned back and stretched. He'd noticed she had only left her desk for refills of caffeine. Like him, she had to be starving by now.

He was just about to offer to grab some food when Sofia's voice rang across the lab.

Damnit, Stiya!

Sofia dodged a scientist carrying a tray of seedlings and rested her hip against Elena's desk.

"Woah, that's quite a spreadsheet you've got going, sis. Impressive." Elena looked up

from her screen, doing her standard blink as she adjusted her sight. Her eyes grew wide.

“Sofia!” She jumped up, grabbing Sofia’s arm as if she wanted to drag her out of the lab. “What are you doing here?” she whisper-shouted.

Sofia blanched. “Uh, sorry? I didn’t know the lab was off limits.”

Elena met Rylan’s eyes with a panicked glance. “It’s not. I mean, not usually, but we have a lot going on. You’ll be a distraction, and we can’t afford that, uh, not that anything’s wrong, you know, we’re just...” Her ramblings trailed off and she led Sofia out of the door.

Rylan smirked. Elena’s cute propensity to rattle on when she was nervous provided a short respite from his stress.

The smirk dropped when Kyn delivered another report to his desk. With a quick glance, Rylan confirmed that the soil had degenerated further since the last update an hour ago. He sighed when the words started bleeding together on the page.

He wouldn’t be able to focus until he had some food and a nap.

Elena found him as he was entering his chambers. She wrung her hands together, biting her lip.

“Any update?” she asked tentatively. Rylan rubbed his forehead.

“All bad,” he replied. Elena followed him into his room.

“I’m sorry about Sofia,” she said. “She has no boundaries. I think I distracted her enough to forget about the ‘tense vibe’ in the lab, as she put it.” Rylan nodded,

pulling his top over his head.

“Thank you. I’m going to take a nap.” He fell down onto his bed, the bunk squeaking slightly in offense.

“I’ve looked up all diseases, and I’m slowly ruling them out as the results come in. I’m going to head out to the field to see them.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

Elena frowned at him; her head tilted as if she couldn’t figure out his mood. The awkwardness that had faded as they got to know each other suddenly came slamming back. The door closed softly behind her, leaving him feeling strangely empty inside.

Rylan sighed, turning onto his back and staring at the ceiling. The tile squares blurred into swirls through his fatigue.

This setback really couldn’t have come at a worse time. After the celebration, after seeing Arccoo’s pride at everything they’d managed to achieve, failure would bite worse than a yurtri serpent.

What are we going to do?The thought resounded through his mind as he drifted into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 13

Elena

“Are you kidding me?” Elena muttered in frustration, staring at the squigs that lazily squirmed along her desk. Almost all of them had stopped eating the compost, and the soil was already losing its fertility.

Worse than that, they looked engorged and sickly, like they carried some disease. But in her research, she couldn't find any kinds of diseases they were prone to that matched their symptoms.

“What is wrong with you?” she muttered, lightly prodding at one of the squigs with a pair of tweezers. It burst open, its skin peeling back like a blanched tomato as slime oozed out of its former body cavity.



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Yelping, she leaped to her feet in disgust, covering her nose as a putrid odor filled the room. She and everyone in the immediate vicinity fled.

“Oh, that’s foul,” Sofia said, approaching from down the hall. She wrinkled her nose at the smell. “What happened?”

Elena refused to meet her sister’s eye. “Squig popped.”

“Gross.” She craned her head to peek into the lab window. “Do you know what’s wrong with them yet?”

She shook her head, resisting the urge to scream in frustration. “I have no idea.”

Sofia squeezed her sister’s shoulder. “Hey, I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You’re the genius. Remember?”

“Not feeling like one right now.”

Her older sister sighed, looking resigned. “Look, we’re going to head back to Thryal soon, but Arccoo wanted to talk to you in private before we left.”

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath in and out. Best just to get it over with. “Where is he?”

Sofia furrowed her brows in concern. “Are you sure you want to go now?”

“I’m not a child. I can handle myself if it’s bad news,” she snapped, feeling a bit

childish for it. Her older sister was just the messenger. None of this was her fault.

Sofia put her hands up in a placating gesture. “Yeah, I know that. I actually was going to suggest that you change first. No offense, but you reek. What are those squigs made of?”

“Spite and cruel mockery, I think.”

She sniffed her shirt. The squig must have gotten some of its juices on her when it burst because the shirt smelled awful. But she was heading in for what was inevitably going to be a frustrating conversation, so she was feeling petty. “I’ll stay in this. If I have to suffer through the bad news, Arccoo should be just as uncomfortable.”

Sofia smirked and patted Elena’s shoulder. “It looks like the squigs aren’t the only things full of spite. He’s in his room. I’ll take Carmen somewhere far away.” She sniffed again, her face twisting in disgust. “Very far away.”

Feeling like a prisoner on death row, Elena made her way to Arccoo’s room. He sat waiting on his bed, expecting her. Carmen wisely seemed to have already cleared the area.

When she entered, he wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, what’s that smell?”

“The scent of someone doing their duty, Your Highness,” she said, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

He gestured for her to sit down at his desk chair.

Arccoo sighed, looking incredibly tired. She knew she wasn’t being fair to her brother-in-law. He had the literal weight of his planet’s future on his shoulders, but she believed in this project and needed him to believe in her.

He scrubbed his face. “Look, Elena, I’m trying. You have no idea how hard I’ve been working to buy you all more time, but we need results.”

“So, what? You’re just pulling the plug?” She crossed her arms, digging her fingers into their soft flesh. The physical pain was enough of a distraction from her growing anger.

He shook his head. “Not yet. We’re giving you one more chance. Then, unfortunately, we’ll have to switch to Plan B before it’s too late to avert disaster.”

“Don’t you believe in me?” Try as she might, she couldn’t keep the hurt from her voice.

“Of course, I believe in you, little sister,” he said, looking almost equally pained. “You have one of the brightest minds in the galaxy. I know that, if given enough time, you’d figure it out. But we don’t have that time, and the royal council is pushing me to end this project.”

Getting to his feet, he opened his arms, offering a hug. A petty part of her considered rejecting it, but she decided against it. This wasn’t really his fault, after all. He was fighting for the project as much as she was.

She wrapped her arms around his chest. He gave her a squeeze and then made a disgusted noise. “You really should change your shirt,” he said. “Or burn it.”

Rolling her eyes, she stepped backward and gave an exaggerated bow. “As you wish, my liege.”

“We’ll be leaving in about twenty minutes. Carmen and Sofia will want to say goodbye.”

She nodded and headed for the door. “I’ll be there.” Pausing, she turned back to him and gave him a weak smile. “And there’s no hard feelings. I know you’re doing your best, and above everything else, we’re family. Nothing will ever change that.”

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“Thank you,” he said softly. After his brother’s betrayal, he began to close himself off for a time. It took a while for him to open up to anyone outside of Carmen again. Even though she was upset, she knew he still needed some reassurance that she hadn’t rejected him over this.

Heading back to her room, she changed into a clean shirt and threw the dirty one into the basket for the laundry collection bots to pick up. Sitting on her bed, she let some tears escape for a few minutes before splashing cold water on her face and heading to the hangar to say goodbye to her family.

Carmen, Sofia, Arccoo, Zaraq, and Rylan were all waiting for her. Rylan hung back, his gaze pensive as she hugged the prince and Zaraq goodbye.

Stepping back from Arccoo’s hug, she flashed him a weak smile. “No hard feelings. I mean it.”

He returned her smile with an incline of his head.

Then Carmen and Sofia threw their arms around her. “We’re so sorry,” Carmen whispered. “We know how much this means to you.”

Elena straightened and gave them a smirk. Though a little hurt by their lack of faith, she didn’t want to end their visit on a bad note. “Hey, I’ve still got one more try. Don’t count me out just yet.”

Stepping back, Carmen smiled. “You? Never. We believe in you.”

Sofia patted Elena's shoulder. "So, channel your inner mad scientist and figure this out. Thryal just isn't the same without you."

Elena's world went a bit fuzzy as her eyes misted over. "I'll miss you guys, too."

She watched them climb the steps to the ship and take off with a pang of homesickness. They would be waiting on Thryal, but for now, she had work to do. She turned to Rylan and sighed.

"We need to talk," she said.

He nodded. "My office." They walked there together in silence, but it wasn't the usual kind of quiet, comfortable companionship that filled their hours in the lab. This silence was made of that terrible anticipation that usually accompanied bad news.

Shutting the door, he sat at his desk and gestured for her to sit down across from him. "I take it that Prince Arccoo told you about ending this project," he said, looking wan and exhausted.

She crossed her arms, her fingers again digging into her flesh and adding a new set of little crescents to complement the old. "Yeah, he said he was going to buy us some time to figure it out first."

"Elena..." he began.

She shook her head. "No, don't you 'Elena' me. We've come too far to give up now, especially with so many lives on the line."

Didn't he realize what giving up meant? She would go back to Thryal as a failure, and he would be shipped off to wherever the king and queen wanted. Long-distance relationships rarely ever worked out, especially one as new as theirs. They might

never see each other again.

“I’m sure Earth also has a concept of the sunk-cost fallacy.” Sighing, he scrubbed his face. “I know you’re disappointed, but...”

“Disappointed? No, I’m confused and pissed.”

Too much energy buzzed beneath her skin. She had to move, had to get some of it out.

Standing, she paced the room. “This project is your baby. You’ve worked so hard at it and what? You’re just giving up now? We’ve had a setback, yeah, but we’ll figure it out.”

“Not just a setback,” he snapped. “This entire project has been setback after setback. Some things are just doomed to fail.”

Doomed to fail. Just like they were doomed to fail if they just rolled over and gave up. She thought he really liked her. Was this relationship just a diversion for him? Was he ready to cast her aside when she was no longer useful, just like all her peers on Earth?

Intellectually, she knew this was an illogical line of thought. His feelings for her and his feelings about the project were entirely separate entities. But he once told her that as long as he had his work, he would be content. Did that mean the work was more important? Would she always come in second to it?

It was completely illogical to feel like the fact that he wasn’t fighting for the project meant he wasn’t fighting for her, but feelings were rarely logical.

“I think you’re wrong,” she said. “I think we can’t just give up on this. We’re close to

an answer. I can feel it. We just have to try.”We can’t just give up on us.

“And we’re going to. But Elena, you know that the odds of success—real success that we can show the royals—are vanishingly low. I also have to be realistic. You said yourself that half of all terraforming projects fail, and the other half only last a few years before it’s too expensive to maintain. How likely is it that we can make this one project a success when we have no real precedent for it?”

She straightened, meeting his gaze with a glare and a determined set of her jaw. “Well, sitting here with your thumb up your ass won’t make it any more likely to succeed.”

With that, she turned and slammed the door behind her. Elena had come here to prove herself as a scientist. She was here to save a terraforming project and stop a famine in its tracks.



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Maybe it would be better if she and Rylan had some time apart to think and plan. He had been a distraction in the past few weeks. She didn't want to admit it, but it was true.

Her mind would frequently drift from whatever experiment she was running to the sensation of his skin against hers and how he would touch her like she was something precious and perfect. She would fantasize about moving back to Thryal with him and working together on the cutting edge of scientific breakthroughs.

Sometimes, when she was feeling particularly lovesick, she would daydream about the kids they would have and what she would name them.

Clearly, though, he didn't feel the same way. Rylan was eager to wash his hands of this moon, this project, and of her.

Fine.

But she wasn't going to give up so easily. Not on him and not on Kheros.

She grabbed an oxygen mask and made her way back to the lab. The odor of the dead squig had driven most of her coworkers away, but she returned to her desk, took a sample of the slime, and began to examine it under a high-powered microscope.

Strange shapes squirmed in the membranous goo, but she couldn't yet identify them. At first, she thought this might be some kind of larvae, but they didn't look like any of the larvae she'd read about. Could it have been a parasite? Something already living in the soil that was affecting them? However, the preliminary soil tests showed

that the ground was practically lifeless.

She spent the next several hours banging her head against the wall, both figuratively and, once or twice, literally. What was she missing? Why were the squigs dying off?

Her comms beeped and a message flashed on the screen. Remember Eureka.

It was from Rylan, of course, and though she could tell it was intended to be a peace offering, it did nothing but gall her further. He wanted her to leave the lab and abandon her work.

Between the two of them, someone had to keep at it, and from the looks of it, he had already given up. She had to pick up the slack.

But the part of her that still ran on logic rather than frustration pointed out that she hadn't eaten in hours and did need to sleep eventually. She would be no help if she ran herself to the ground.

"Fuck you, Rylan," she said without any heat as she got to her feet. After grabbing a quick bite from the cafeteria's food synthesizers, she showered and went to bed.

And then she lay there staring up at the ceiling. Though she was tired, she couldn't seem to fall asleep. Her mind raced from frustration to frustration—Rylan, the squigs, the depleting soil, Rylan, the fact that she still had the smell of the goo in her nose even after showering, Rylan, the fact that she was never going to be taken seriously as a scientist, and once again, Rylan.

With a groan, she checked the time on her comms. It had been about two hours with no sign of the sandman. She tossed and turned for another hour after that before giving up. Sleep would not come to her that night.

So, instead, she went to the cafeteria, grabbed a bottle of Jolt, and headed back to the lab. If her sisters were there, they would carry her bodily—kicking and screaming—back to her bedroom and lock her in there until she finally fell asleep.

Rylan would have an easier time coaxing her out. All he'd have to do was invite her into his bed, and she would happily join him. She always seemed to sleep better in his arms, and—

Nope! She wasn't going to think about it. He'd been too much of a distraction to her already. She needed to focus. What was wrong with the squigs?

By this point, she'd read everything she could find on their physiology and environment as well as contacting several expert entomologists, but none had responded to her queries just yet.

Were there any parallels to Earth animals? She had been thinking of them as being akin to earthworms, but maybe she needed to expand her scope of study. Thryal creatures and Earth creatures both evolved in similar ways, but that didn't mean they were the same.

She knew she was grasping at straws, but it was better than giving up. Stifling a yawn, she got back to work.

## Chapter 14

Rylan

Rylan sighed, rubbing at the headache blooming behind his eyes. He understood why Elena was so upset. Of course, he did. The failure of this project was as frustrating as it was humiliating.

When she came in with bright eyes and unusual ideas, he began to hope that maybe they had a chance at saving the project and countless people from hunger. And for a while, it looked like it was going to work.

It made the defeat all the more bitter. But Elena was right that they still had time to—what was that Earth saying she was fond of? Throw shit at the wall and see what sticks. Despite what he said, he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

“Stiya, can you get me the new soil readings?” he asked as he passed her in the hall. He considered going back to the lab, but Elena was probably there, and he wanted to keep his distance until things cooled down a bit between them.

She sighed and sent him the latest test results. “Maybe you can make sense of what’s going on.”

He returned to his office with the files and read through them. None of it made sense. Why were the squigs dying? Though the previous test made it appear that the soil was depleted, it now seemed richer than ever. Why, then, did the plants grow in yellow-green rather than their normal rich, dark green?

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He puzzled at it for hours before dragging himself away to grab dinner. He would be of no help to anyone if he ran himself into the ground.

The cafeteria was strangely quiet and sedate. Usually, it was full of friendly chatter, but it seemed as though everyone sensed that the end of the project was coming soon, and they had failed to make it work.

“Sir,” Kyn said, sitting down across from him. “Is it true? Are they ending the program?”

“Only if we fail to fix our problems. The prince has kindly granted us more time, but...” He took a bite of his kallar sandwich and sighed. “Try not to spread this around, okay? Morale is low enough as it is.”

She shook her head, a determined look crossing her features. “You said we had one more shot at this, so you need to make that clear to everyone because we all still believe in this project. We want it to succeed, and knowing we still have a chance will give us enough hope to continue.”

“Would you want it even if it’s false hope?” He sighed. “I understand what you’re saying, but I’m also trying to be realistic. Isn’t it insanity to try doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results?”

She smirked. “Not insanity. It’s science. Isn’t the whole point that we repeat experiments to make sure that we have the right answer?”

He opened his mouth to retort but then closed it. She had a point. Didn’t she? The

whole job of a scientist was to hypothesize, collect data, and then synthesize it and repeat until they were sure the results were correct.

“Just try telling that to the royal council,” he muttered.

She inclined her head, conceding the point. “I still think it would be best if you were straightforward with everyone. Just tell them that the fate of the project is not yet decided, so we still have time to solve it.”

“I’ll think about it. Like I said, I don’t want to give false hope.”

“False hope is better than no hope at all.” She collected her tray. “If anyone asks me, I’ll tell them what you said, but we both know it’s better if you get ahead of this.”

With a sigh, he finished his meal and headed back to his office to write the base-wide memo. Sitting at his desk, he typed, deleted, and then retyped his message, struggling to put this situation into words. Finally, he came up with this:

Everyone,

Rumors have been going around about the project being canceled. This is not yet true. While Prince Arccoo has delivered an ultimatum on behalf of the royal council, he has also graciously given us one last chance to provide results. Do not give up or give in to despair. We still have time, and we can still pull this off. I believe in every one of you.

Rylan

He sent it out and then decided to take his own advice by focusing once more on the soil test results. After reaching dead end after frustrating dead end, though, he decided to go to bed. Before hitting the showers, though, he peered into the lab

through the window.

Elena sat there furiously typing into her comms. She had to be just as exhausted as he was, so he typed her a quick message: Remember Eureka. It was their code word to get the other person to take a break.

A look of anger flickered across her face as she read it. That was new. Usually, she would smile affectionately if he sent her a silly message or picture. Instead, she shut down her comms and fled the room.

So much for that peace offering.

If he was being honest, he wasn't sure what she expected him to do. He sensed an underlying reason for her being upset, but he couldn't even begin to make sense of it. Why was she being so stubborn?

For a time, he thought he understood humans, but now, it seemed as though he'd never understood her at all. What did he do wrong?

At least she still respected him enough to take his advice. She left the lab, presumably to shower and go to bed. Instead of dwelling on her capriciousness, he decided to do the same.

He lay in bed, tossing and turning, his mind full of theories and frustrations. Why were humans so confusing? Why were things falling apart, both in the project and his love life? And why were the squigs dying?

After about three hours, he gave up on sleep and dragged himself out of bed. If he wasn't going to rest, he might as well take some more samples of the plants and the squigs.

He didn't bother with an envirosuit, instead just walking right out with his boots on and testers in hand. The planting field reeked of whatever infection the squigs had, and the gelatinous goo covered everything in sight. Regretting forgoing the envirosuit, he squatted and felt the yellow-green leaves of the bral and vreden.

Strange.

Usually, blighted leaves would be brown and crunchy at the end, but even though these were yellow like they had an infection, the leaves themselves were supple. They had been focusing on the soil and squigs and avoiding taking samples of the plants themselves out of fear of damaging them when they were already so delicate, but maybe that was the wrong course of action.

He took a sample of both plant species from every row before checking the soil's nitrogen levels. Somehow, it was even healthier than the last readings. So why did the plants droop and turn yellow? By all rights, they and the squigs should be thriving.

"What is wrong with you?" he muttered, rubbing a leaf between his thumb and forefinger. He half expected it to crumble to dust, but it stayed soft and strong.



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As an afterthought, he picked up some soil mixed with the slime. Maybe it was somehow contributing to the strange uptick in nutrients and the odd color of the plants.

Out of curiosity, he ventured to the pile of compost they had left out in case the squigs started eating again. After days of sitting there unchanged, the organic material had begun to break down again. He stooped down and took a sample of that too before heading back inside.

After dropping the samples off at the lab to be analyzed and pointedly avoiding Elena's gaze, he headed back to his room to try and sleep. Something was steeping in the back of his mind like a kettle of satcha flower tea, but he knew he was too tired to fit the puzzle pieces together.

Mind still buzzing, he eventually drifted into an uneasy sleep.

At breakfast the next morning, Kyn sat across from him again. "Trouble in paradise?" she asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He took a pointed sip of his Jolt to avoid snapping at her.

The scientist rolled her eyes. "Come on. Until yesterday, you and Elena were attached at the hip, and now you're barely looking at one another. What happened?"

He sighed. "My love life is none of your business." Aside from the conversation they'd had the day before, they hadn't really spoken to one another outside of work-

related topics. Why was she talking to him about his personal business like they were friends?

“It is if it means you’re too distracted to help fix this. And you both seem to do your best thinking when bouncing ideas off each other.” She took a bite of her granis. “How are we going to do this if you’re in a lovers’ spat with the other smartest person on our team?”

Unfortunately, she had a point. When he was working, he kept turning to Elena to ask what she thought only to remember she was not with him. She was his favorite person to go to for brainstorming.

“She’s mad because she thinks I’ve already given up on the project and don’t care about it anymore,” he said, focusing on his food.

“Well, have you?” she asked.

His head snapped up. “Of course not! And I still care. I want this to work, but...”

“But what?”

He sighed. “I understand the prince’s point of view. Why keep throwing everything at a losing strategy? Science may be trial and error, but so far, we’ve been some trial, all error. And we have to think about the bigger picture here.”

“Preventing a famine,” Kyn said.

“Exactly.” He took another sip from his Jolt. “I wish I could just get it through her head that I can’t let people die for the sake of our egos. If we need to change strategy, we should do it before it’s too late.”

“Have you considered...” She stirred her granis, seeming to do it more to buy time to put her thoughts together than to mix the savory porridge. “Maybe this isn’t just about the project?”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

Rolling her eyes, she muttered something like, “Men,” and took a vicious bite of her breakfast. “Okay, let’s think here. How did you and Elena meet?”

“You know how we met.”

“Yeah, but I want you to say it.”

He didn’t appreciate the way she was talking to him. He wasn’t a child, but she was speaking as though she was helping a particularly slow student with his math homework. “Doing this project.”

She pointed her spoon at him. “Exactly. And you bonded through this project. Right?”

He furrowed his brows. “Yes?”

“So, what happens when the project is over?”

Oh. “Oh.”

She smirked. “There we go. I knew we’d get there eventually, sir.”

“So, I fucked up.” He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “What do I do now? I thought I made it clear I was interested in her beyond this project.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, you might have said that, but emotions are funny things, especially if you’ve been hurt before. It can be difficult to believe the next person is telling the truth.”

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“You think someone hurt her?” The idea of it sent a solar flare of protective anger through his chest. How could anyone hurt someone like her?

“I don’t know.” She scooped out the last dregs of her granis. “That’s the kind of question you should be asking her. But people like us tend to be left out for some reason or another. We’re too bad at reading the room, or we feel like we have to be invited into the social gathering, or, once they strike on a topic we’re interested in, we go from quiet to rudely dominating the conversation.”

“So, she feels like me giving up on this...” he gestured widely to indicate the base and the project, “is the same thing as giving up on us? It doesn’t make sense.”

She shot him a pointed look. “Like I said, it’s emotional thinking, not logical. Two different things.”

“So, I’d better find her and apologize?”

She nodded. “So, you’d better find her and apologize.”

He finished his food and got to his feet. “Thanks for the talk. I probably needed that.”

“Any time.”

Well, there was no time like the present. Odds were that Elena skipped breakfast in favor of spending more time in the lab. As he approached, he saw her through the window talking with Jaku.

She looked more cheerful than she had the day before as she talked and laughed with the other scientist. Jealousy flashed through him like a lightning bolt. It wasn't a rational feeling—he knew Jaku was married and not at all interested in Elena—but it still stung.

Still, even though their fight had only been going on for about a day, he missed the way she smiled when she looked at him and laughed at his stupid jokes. He missed working together and their conversations, whether related to the project or just about life in general. Her conversation with Jaku reminded him of exactly what he had been frozen out of.

And then he heard what they were talking about.

“I mean, you did see his memo. Right? He said he wasn't giving up on the project just yet,” Jaku said.

“Well, yeah, he said it to keep morale up, but you should have seen him.” Her voice lowered in register as an imitation of Rylan's. “I'm sure your planet also has a concept of the sunk-cost fallacy.'Ugh, what a condescending ass.”

Rylan clenched his jaw. A part of him wanted to walk into the room and confront her right there, but instead, he turned and walked away. Jaku didn't need to be caught in the middle of this fight. They would resolve it in private like adults.

But doubt started to wriggle into his mind. Maybe everything was a failure after all. He left Thryal because he chose to make history over making friends. But nothing he tried seemed to work. The plants refused to grow and when they did, they grew sickly. The squigs all died. Everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong.

And his romantic life wasn't doing much better. He was on the verge of losing the most amazing woman he had ever met because he was too oblivious to see what she

really needed from him. And when she tried to express it, he was condescending to her without even meaning to be.

Until this point, he hadn't actually been ready to give up. But now, there really seemed to be no point. He couldn't make plants grow. He couldn't make love bloom. It seemed like nothing he did would ever work out. Was there even a point in trying?

## Chapter 15

Elena

Elena's comms beeped, and a message from Rylan popped up. Come see me.

A part of her didn't want to go, but she knew the sooner this was resolved, the sooner they would no longer be in this uncomfortable limbo. They would either stay together and work on this project or break up and accept their failure in both science and romance.

She got to her feet and dragged herself to the conference room Rylan had asked her to meet him in. Hesitating, she steeled herself before knocking on the door.

"Come in," Rylan said.

She slipped inside and paused, just taking him in for a moment before sitting down in the chair across from him. Instead of thinking about the memories of the day before this dredged up, she focused on him.

Rylan looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept at all the previous night. But his jaw was clenched, and his back was straight. Something had pissed him off.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't undermine my messages to my crew about this

project,” he said. “Do you want them to have enough morale to try and fix this or not?”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t eavesdrop on private conversations.” It was a weak defense of her venting, and she knew it, but she was too mad to fully concede to his point.

Crossing his arms, too, his posture matched hers. “Well, I was going to apologize, but then I heard you talking about what a condescending ass I am and thought you wouldn’t want to hear it.”

She blinked, his comment putting her on the wrong foot. “You what?”



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“I was going to apologize.” He sighed, scrubbing his face with his hand as though fighting off a headache. “Not for being willing to accept that the project is coming to a close, but for not seeing what our fight really was about.”

Her eyes narrowed behind her round glasses. “And what’s this fight really about?”

“That you feel like me giving up on the project is the same as giving up on us.”

Her mouth gaped. He was right, of course, but she assumed he hadn’t picked up on the subtext of their argument. Still feeling too obstinate to fully agree with him, she averted her gaze. “Well, I am also a bit upset about the project being shut down.”

He raised his brows. “But...”

This was so embarrassing. She knew she had been acting like an ass in the past day, but pride kept the words stuck in her throat.

Taking a slow breath in and out, she forced the words from her lips. “But you’re right that I was more upset because I felt like you giving up on this project was the same as giving up on us. I know that it’s not logical and you’ve reassured me plenty of times before that you care about me beyond this project, but—”

He held up a hand. “I understand. Someone very intelligent told me that you’ve probably been hurt before, and that makes it difficult to trust again.”

“Who?” she asked, a flicker of a smile crossing her face. “On a base like this, that hardly narrows it down.”

“We’ll worry about that later. First, I want to make it clear that I care a lot about you, Elena. You have one of the brightest minds I have ever met. You’re funny, beautiful, and kind. I would be a fool to lose you.”

Her eyes misted with tears as her throat tightened. “Thank you. I’ll try harder to believe you.”

Sighing, she shook her head. “But I owe you an apology, too. I shouldn’t have implied that you don’t care about this project, especially not to Jaku. And I should have been straightforward about what was really upsetting me instead of leaving you alone to guess. And I’m sorry for being so petty while we were fighting. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

He waved her off with a flick of his hand. “Already forgiven. And for the record, I do believe in this project. We have another chance, so let’s not waste it by fighting.”

“I love you,” she said. It surprised her the way it slipped out yet still felt entirely natural. The sky is blue, plants eat sunlight, and Elena loves Rylan.

His face lit up in a broad smile and he held his arms open as an invitation. “I love you, too.”

Grinning, she crossed behind the table and sat in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him. Giving a little moan of appreciation, he deepened the kiss, his tongue and hers performing an elaborate dance.

“I missed this,” he mumbled when he came up for air.

She giggled. “It’s only been a day.”

“It’s been far too long.” His lips hungrily met hers again. A message on his comms

dinged, interrupting the moment.

With a sigh, he opened it. Apparently, he had taken soil samples the night before because these were readings that she had not seen yet.

“Did you collect these last night?” she asked.

He nodded, grimacing. “Made the mistake of trudging through the field without my envirosuit. It was covered in that disgusting slime. I even took a sample of it to see what it was made of and whether the composition differed there. The squigs seemed to be eating the compost again, at least.”

She sighed. “Well, if we’re going to solve this, we should probably stop making out and look at these.”

“You’re just far too much of a distraction.” He nibbled on her ear, giving her goosebumps.

Elena opened her mouth to retort, but then something on the comms caught her eye. “Hang on...what’s this?”

She read through the analysis of the plant samples he had collected. A jolt of excitement and possibly hope passed through her. “It says the nutrient value in the leaves is almost equivalent to the bral on Thryal.”

He blinked and read where she pointed. “Wait, then why is it still yellow?”

Squinting at the screen, she bit her lip as she thought. “Maybe it has something to do with the atmosphere.” As the words left her mouth, ideas began to swirl in her head, and electricity pulsed through her, urging her to move as though that would somehow help the flow of her thoughts.

She got to her feet and paced circles around the office as she voiced her theory. “On Thryal, you have several miles worth of atmosphere and an ozone layer, which shield the planet from your sun’s rays.”

“But on Kheros, the atmosphere is much thinner,” he said. “The envirosuits are more to protect from the sun now than to help us with breathing. But if they’re getting too much sunlight...”

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She grabbed one of the leaf samples and headed to the lab with Rylan following close behind. As expected, when she looked at it under a microscope, she saw fewer chloroplasts than on bral grown on Thryal. The same applied to the vreden as well.

It wasn't that they were dying. The plants were simply being overfed by the sunlight, so they were producing fewer chloroplasts. "Come and look," she said, gesturing for him to stare down the microscope.

Picking up his head, he grinned. "They're not sick. They're just getting too much light." But then his face fell, and he sobered. "What about the squigs, though? If the soil is fine—more than fine, actually, it's better than ever—why are they dying?"

That was a good question, one she didn't have an immediate answer for. But it was close. So close. It was there at the tips of her fingers. She just needed to reach out and grab the thought.

Then his words about the night before came back to her. "You said they were eating the compost again?" she asked.

He nodded. "I thought it was strange because you would have thought they'd all be dead after going for so long without food."

"What species of squig is this?" she asked. "I couldn't find much about them when doing research."

"They're splices," he said.

“Splices?”

He shrugged as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. “We didn’t think a normal Thryal squig could survive on the moon, so we had that group genetically engineered. They’re a mixture of several different but genetically compatible species we created to make them hardier.”

Her blue eyes widened. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It’s standard practice for introducing fauna to terraformed land,” he said, furrowing his brows. “It didn’t seem important.”

“Didn’t seem important? It explains everything.”

He stared in naked confusion. “How so?”

How could he not see it? “Rylan, I’ve been looking at databases of naturally occurring species on my and your planet in order to get an idea of their basic traits. But I’ve obviously been looking in the wrong place, so nothing matched. What are the species that contributed to their gene pool?”

“Upper and lowland squigs. Plus Thrac’s squig and Galan’s squig.” He scratched his chin, which had grown stubble over the past few days.

“Perfect!” She jumped onto her comms and began searching up the species he mentioned. They looked like the upper land squig but carried internal traits more similar to Galen’s Squig and the Thrac’s Squig. Like the Galac’s Squig, they could survive in extreme temperatures, and like the lowland squig, they ate a lot and needed very little oxygen or water to survive.

“The slime inside the one that burst on me...” she said, pulling up a slide. “I thought

that it was filled with parasites, but really—”

“It’s eggs!” Rylan exclaimed. His eyes bright with excitement, he began typing into his comms so quickly his fingers were a blur. “So, if we look up the life cycle of all four species...there. Thrac’s squig lives and dies in broods. All in the brood hatch at roughly the same time. And then they live, mate, and then all die off together.”

“And they’re intersex, capable of mating and being mated with,” Elena read.

Her face twisted in disgust. “It says here that once they’ve fertilized their eggs, their whole bodies focus entirely on growing the brood in its earlier stages, using all internal organs and processes for fuel to keep them alive until the skin splits and the eggs burst out. Ugh, and I thought human childbirth was bad.”

“The reproductive cycle seems to be unique to the species. It looks as though the nutrients in the slime also enrich the soil for the newborn squigs.” He turned to her. “Elena, can I say it?”

Smirking, she inclined her head. “By all means.”

“Eureka!” He picked her up and twirled her before pulling her into a kiss. “Eureka!”

“Oh, good, you’re back together,” Jaku said, poking his head in the doorway. “What’s going on?”

Elena stepped aside with a laugh, letting Rylan take the floor. “Don’t tell anyone until we’ve confirmed it,” he said. “But we think we’ve figured out what’s going on. And it’s all good news.”

His eyes widened. “Really? What is it?”

They explained their theory about how the fact that the light was stronger than usual on Kheros caused the plants to produce fewer chloroplasts and that it wasn't a disease killing the squigs but rather that they had a unique life cycle and were nearing the end of it. The new brood already seemed to be hatching.

“So, that means all we have to do is stagger the introduction of squigs into our compost areas and make sure there are always a couple of living broods while the others are dying,” Rylan said. “As for the bral and the vleben, they both appear to be nutritionally identical to the crops we grow on Thryal. The only difference is the color.”

Elena nodded to the door. “We were just about to head out to the new compost pile to see if we could find any young squigs. Do you want to come?”



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“Hmm, go out and wade in rotting food, or stay in here and do paperwork?” Jaku tapped his chin in exaggerated thoughtfulness. “You two lovebirds go have fun.”

Elena, now extremely mindful of the potential for skin cancer, donned her envirosuit and walked with Rylan to the compost pile. The odor of the squig slime combined with rotting food made her want to gag even with the oxygen regulator. She had no idea how Rylan was able to stand it out there the night before.

Digging through it was much worse, kicking up the smell whenever she moved dirt or a rotten scrap of food. She saw no sign of the young squigs.

Were they still too small to see without a microscope? Or was she wrong, and this was a disease rather than a reproductive cycle?

“Found one!” Rylan said, showing her his hand palm up. The squig was no longer than her pinkie nail, but it was there, and it was proof that the population was going to survive.

“Eureka!” Laughing, she threw her arms around him, knocking him over with her tackle. He fell into the rotting compost, and she landed on top, practically straddling him. For a moment, she had the urge to kiss him...and potentially do something more than kissing.

But then she remembered where they were. And she was not going to explain an infection-like thing to any doctors. “Sorry, sorry,” she said, getting off him and helping him to his feet.

She laughed, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment. “I guess I just got overexcited.”

Smirking, he shook his head. “Elena, you can tackle me like that any time.” Then he smelled himself and crinkled his nose in disgust. “But I would appreciate it if you did it somewhere other than a compost pile.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. Again.” She took his hand and began to lead him back to base. “We have to tell the others, though. The project is a success. We did it!”

She glanced at his back, still covered in dirt and things she didn’t want to think about. “Erm, after you shower, of course.”

Suddenly, she remembered that she hadn’t showered yet, either. Her hair was probably greasy, and though not as bad as him, she also wasn’t fresh as a daisy.

“Make that two showers,” she said and then saw the look on his face. She knew what he was about to say. “Separate showers. We’ll have time for that later, but first, we need to tell Arccoo and the researchers what we’ve figured out.”

They reached the base doors and helped each other remove their envirosuits. They tossed them in the pile to be cleaned.

Before they parted ways, Rylan caught her by the arm and pulled her in for one last kiss. “First, we make the announcement. Then, we celebrate.” He winked. “Both with the crew and privately later.”

“God, I missed you,” she said, kissing him one last time before heading back to her room. She felt lighter than she had in weeks, like gravity had turned off in her heart and it was bouncing in the air and back to Rylan.

Rylan

The next day, they ordered a few broods of squigs to be introduced over time and began the construction of a tinted glass shield over the bral and vreden while the team focused on strengthening the atmosphere. That way, the light feeding the plants would not be as strong as it was. It was a temporary solution, but it seemed to be working.

Within a couple of days, the plants were turning green again and were growing faster than ever with the nutrients from the first generation of squigs. Bral grew to be about six feet tall, with everything from the stems to the flowers edible.

Still, the plants hadn't flowered yet despite being mature enough to do so. This unsettled Rylan, and he searched for what they could still be missing.

"I think we just have to be patient," Elena said one day as they took soil readings from the field. "These plants have been through a lot. Speaking from experience, that tends to make you something of a late bloomer." She punctuated that pun with a wink.

He threw his head back with an exaggerated groan, both at the bad pun and because they'd had this conversation before. "I know. But with how precarious the project is, I don't want to take any chances."

She gave his arm a squeeze. "I get it. I'm nervous, too. But I also think things are going to work out. We're closer than we've ever been, and I've been thinking about ways we can boost the atmosphere. I think we need to increase the water vapor, which can be done by..."

He watched her as she theorized, and he wondered, not for the first time, how he could be so lucky that the universe brought them together against literally impossible

odds.

“And then we can... What?” Her blue eyes sparkled. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Because I love you,” he replied without hesitation.

She seemed to melt a bit at that but covered it with an affectionate roll of her eyes. “I love you, too. But come on. These plants won’t grow themselves.”

A week later, her prediction about the plants flowering came true. “Rylan, come here,” Elena said, excitedly waving him over from where he was doing his soil readings.

Curious as to what had her bouncing up and down with joy, he jogged up. “What is it?”

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She pointed to a vreden plant. A white and pink flower poked out from beneath the increasingly green leaves. It had climbed up the stalk of a bral plant, which also seemed to be flowering. “We did it! We have flowers!”

She threw her arms around his neck. He stumbled in surprise but still spun her and set her down with a kiss. “We did it,” he repeated and ran his thumb along the soft flower petal.

He almost couldn’t believe it. The moon had life, and it looked as though it could be sustainable. Once they had the atmospheric conditions more similar to Thryal, the bral and vreden were going to thrive.

“We need to tell Arccoo,” she said, taking pictures of the flowering plants.

They headed to the office, and Elena used the prince’s private channel to call him. When Rylan asked about it, she shrugged. “Being the royal sister-in-law has its perks.”

Apparently, it did indeed. Rylan would have had to go through a minimum of three layers of bureaucrats in order to finally get to Prince Arccoo, but the royal answered Elena on the second ring.

“Elena, is something wrong? Are you okay?” the prince asked as soon as his hologram appeared. Rylan almost felt bad for worrying him, but Elena had no such qualms.

She arched an eyebrow. “Why would you assume that something was wrong?”

Even with the grainy hologram image, it was obvious that the prince was rolling his eyes. “Because you only call this private line when either you’re in trouble and you don’t want Carmen to know about it, or it’s her birthday and you don’t want her to know what you’re planning. And I know her birthday was about six months ago. Ergo, something is wrong.”

A shit-eating grin crossed her features. “Nope! For once, it’s good news. Rylan is here, too, and he can tell you that.”

“It’s great news, Your Highness,” Rylan said, unable to hold back his own grin.

Elena pulled up the pictures of the flowers and sent them to the prince. “Check your messages.”

The hologram tapped the comms on his wrist. Then his face spread into a grin. “Is that what I think it is?”

She nodded. “We’ve finally got flowering. I’ll send you the brief on what our problems were and how we’ve solved them, but for now, we have a couple of hives of pollinators waiting to be sent up. With any luck, we’ll have our first crop in a couple of weeks.”

“You’re right. That is excellent news.” Prince Arccoo typed into his comms again. “I’ve just sent the photos to the royal council and let them know that I’m going to give you an additional three months. If you have a crop by then, we’ll see about continuing this project indefinitely.”

Rylan respectfully put his right fist over his heart and inclined his head. “Thank you, Your Highness. Your restored faith means a lot to us.”

“Restored?” Prince Arccoo raised his eyebrows. “I never lost it. Your team is one of

the most brilliant in the galaxy. I knew if anyone could figure it out, you would.”

Rylan didn’t know what to say to that, so he simply repeated the Thryal gesture of respect. “I am honored to be among those you hold in such a high regard.”

“Tell Carmen and Sofia I won’t be coming back for another couple of months,” Elena said. “And that I love and miss them.”

Prince Arccoo smiled. “Of course, little sister. We all miss you, too.”

With that, they said their goodbyes and shut off the comms. For a moment, they just stood staring at one another in shock at this sudden turn. Then, with a squeal, Elena threw her arms around him again.

The zegs arrived on the base the next day, and they set up something that Elena called an apiary. “On Earth, we have honeybees,” she explained as she finished putting together the slots in the wooden boxes.

“The insects collect nectar from flowering plants and return it to the hive to make honey, which they eat. But they make it in excess, so humans take what they don’t need and use it as food.” She opened the box of zegs. “According to my research, zegs and honeybees are remarkably similar, so I was thinking that even if we aren’t harvesting their byproducts like honey, apiary techniques will help in keeping them alive and healthy.”

Reaching inside the box, she pulled out a smaller cage, which seemed to carry the zeg queen. She set it inside the apiary and opened it, letting the insect crawl out and explore. The rest soon followed.

She smiled up at Rylan. “Now, all we have to do is wait and see if they take to this environment.”

In a couple of days, over half the field was blooming, and the zechs were hard at work pollinating the plants and building theirhive with the apiary as their base. It was fascinating to watch. Though there were only a handful of flora and fauna species so far, he was endlessly amazed by the way life grew out of what began as a barren wasteland.

And it was all thanks to Elena and her clever way of seeing the world.

But then, one night, he found her in the field looking oddly melancholy.

“Isn’t it a bit late to be running soil samples?” he joked.

Elena didn’t rise to the teasing. Instead, she gave him a bittersweet smile and waved for him to come over. “We have some pods. They’re not ready to be harvested yet, but maybe in a week or so.”



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He squatted down beside her and touched the small green pod. “That’s amazing.” She should have been overjoyed, but instead, she looked worried. “What’s wrong?”

With a weak laugh, she shook her head. “Overthinking as usual. Don’t mind me.”

Standing up again, he pulled her to her feet. “No, don’t do that. We’re all about open communication now, right?”

She sighed. “Right. But we’ve been through this before. You love me. You want to stay with me. But I keep thinking about what happens after this. I’ll go back to the palace, and you’ll go wherever they send you. We might never see each other again.”

She gritted her teeth in frustration. “I know it’s irrational and you’ll get tired of giving me reassurance eventually, but—”

“Who said I would grow tired of giving you reassurance?” he asked, cutting her off.

Her lips curled into a bitter half-smile. “Well, it has to be exhausting. Right? We just keep retreading the same conversation because my stupid, irrational brain refuses to accept that you really do love me as much as I love you.”

He flicked her forehead. “Hey, I happen to like your brain, even if it is sometimes irrational. So, don’t insult my girlfriend like that.”

Pulling her closer, he just spent a minute holding her in his arms. “If you need reassurance from time to time, I don’t mind giving it to you. Remember, relationships are symbiosis.”

She sighed. "I know. But I don't want it to be parasitic. You seem to have it together, so our relationship is, by nature, you giving more and taking less than me."

"You think I have all my shit together?" He snorted. "Before I met you, I didn't even realize how lonely I was. The moment you walked into my life, you made it infinitely better."

He leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "You aren't a parasite, and you never will be one. You're a brilliant, kind, funny woman, and it's a privilege to know you. I'm not a believer in a higher power, but when I think about the odds of us meeting and falling in love, I begin to doubt my own skepticism."

She sniffled, her eyes glassy, and for a moment, he panicked. Had he said something wrong? Humans cried when they were sad, but he didn't think he said anything that would hurt her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." He took both her hands in his. "What did I say wrong?"

"Nothing." She shook her head, wiping her eyes. "You said everything right. More than right, actually. That's the kindest and most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me."

His brows furrowed in confusion. "Then why are you crying?"

She let out a short, staccato laugh of embarrassment. "Well, most of the time, humans cry because they're experiencing negative emotions but not always. Sometimes, we cry because we're overwhelmed with positive feelings. This is a happy cry, not a sad one."

He let out a relieved breath. At least he wasn't a total idiot. "I meant every word I

said. And I know you will be there when I need you. You aren't someone who turns their back on people they love."

"Never," she agreed.

"Then, let's go back inside. I'm freezing." He nudged her back toward the base and both started walking in quiet contemplation.

She finally broke it first. "Rylan?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

He took her hand. "I love you, too."

It was a week before the first crop of vreden was ready to be harvested. The bral still had some more growing to do before it was ready, but everyone pitched in to pick the pods.

Three-quarters of the harvest was sent back to Thryal as proof of their success. The final quarter was to be a dinner incorporating the vreden they had picked themselves into the main course. After all, they deserved to enjoy some of the fruits of their labor.

"Here comes the final test," Elena said, scooping a bunch from the buffet onto her plate. "Does it taste good?"

They sat down across from each other in a secluded corner of the cafeteria. Rylan grinned. "On three, we take our first bite. One... two... three!"

They both took a bite at the same time. The vreden was hearty and earthy, and it perfectly complemented the spices the base's cooks used.

Living on an austere moon base meant the food tended to also be austere most of the time. The cooks often had to improvise with preserved food, so this was the first truly fresh vegetable they'd eaten in a few months. It was delicious, made all the tastier by the fact they'd grown it themselves.

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“Apparently, victory tastes like beans.” Elena grinned as she went in for another bite. “And it’s delicious.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Rylan offered his mug of satcha flower tea up to toast. After the crisis had been averted, he decided to lay off the Jolt on the advice of the base’s doctors. It was making him far too jittery and anxious, anyway.

Elena clinked her mug of tea to his. “To victory!”

“To science!” he added, toasting again.

Elena got that familiar mischievous look in her eyes. She batted her lashes girlishly. “And to romance.”

He raised his brows. “To romance.”

Instead of clinking her glass again, though, she surged forward and kissed him from across the table. He barely had time to set his drink down before her lips were on his.

“Victory may taste sweet, but you taste even sweeter,” he said.

Elena laughed and sat back down. “Ugh, barf. You’re so cheesy.”

“I don’t know what cheese is, human,” he retorted playfully. “You and your Earth idioms.”

She took another triumphant bite of the vreiben. “You know you love them.”

“And you love confusing me with them.”

She nodded, conceding the point. “You’re right. I totally do.”

“Get a room,” Jaku teased as he passed by them. “You’re so cloyingly sweet that you’ve given me a cavity.”

“Oh, we’ll definitely get a room later,” Rylan replied with a wink.

“Rylan,” she chastised without any real heat. Her cheeks blushed a pretty shade of pink.

“You two lovebirds have fun with that,” Jaku teased. “If you need me, I’ll be sitting as far away from you as possible.”

Elena rolled her eyes, but the smile did not leave her face. “Enjoy your meal, Jaku. We’ve all worked hard for it.”

“We really have.” Jaku headed to a table on the opposite corner, only to pause a few feet away and look back. “Seriously, though, thank you, Elena. You saved our project.”

She shook her head. “We all did.”

As Jaku left, Rylan took her hand from across the table. “He’s right, though. If it wasn’t for you, the project would have failed months ago. You’re a hero.”

The color of her cheeks darkened even further. “Like I said, we’re a team. None of us could have pulled this off alone.”

Chapter 17

Elena

“Surprise!” the crowd all called out at the same time.

Everyone was waiting for them, all the workers of the stations—from the researchers to the sanitation staff and the chefs. Her sisters and their mates had even arrived for the surprise, which of course included the prince.

“Oh my god!” Elena said as she stepped into the cafeteria with Rylan.

Elena almost jumped out of her shoes at the shock. But luckily, Rylan was there to hold her still. Elena was starting to feel that would be the case for the rest of her life. And it made her smile more than any part of the celebration that was waiting for them.

The whole crowd clapped and cheered for them. After a moment, Elena managed to notice the banner hanging behind the crowd. It read: Thank You!

Rylan held her hand tightly as they soaked in the moment. She looked up at him and he down at her. Both beamed with unmeasurable pride.

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Elena couldn't help but think this was all for Rylan, and he deserved every moment of it. And she assumed he was probably thinking the same thing about her.

After a moment, Arccoo stepped forward toward the pair. Elena held her breath, unsure of what to expect the prince to say.

"Congratulations," he said through a huge smile. "To both of you."

"Your Highness," Rylan said. "What's going on here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The prince laughed. "We're celebrating two of the brightest minds my kingdom has to offer. The two of you."

"Right," Rylan said. "Of course. But is that smart? We still have so much work to do. Do you really have the resources or the time for something like this?"

Even in the face of success, Rylan was thinking about the work. Elena thought at the moment that it was one of the best things about him. He was always striving to do more, do better.

"Yes," Arccoo said as he placed a hand on Rylan's shoulder. "We do. We have more than enough of both now, thanks to you. Everything that's being served tonight was harvested from the fields this morning. And the process is automated enough that it can be left alone for one celebratory dinner. Don't you think?"

"I suppose so..." Rylan breathed out.



“Take some time,” Arccoo said. “Enjoy this moment. You’ve more than earned it. And if it makes you feel any better, consider it an official order from your prince.”

Arccoo turned around just as the doors to the kitchen burst open. Plate after plate of the most delicious smelling food Elena had encountered since arriving there was brought out.

“Ready to enjoy the celebration of all our hard work?” Elena laughed as she squeezed Rylan’s hand.

“Might as well be, it was an order,” Rylan joked back.

Elena gladly joined the table piled high with food with Rylan by her side. They sat at the head of the table with the prince and her sisters, but they might as well have been alone.

Elena kept her eyes on him, and he returned the favor. They barely looked away from each other long enough to make sure their forks hit food.

Elena was happy just talking to him. They chatted about the work they did and the work they still had ahead of them. How they could fine-tune the machines. How they could adjust it for other types of crops and terrain.

Watching Rylan talk about something he was passionate about had quickly become Elena’s favorite pastime. She could do it forever and never feel the need to say anything herself. He was just so smart, and his voice was like music to her ears.

After dinner, the atmosphere shifted to a more traditional party. Music played over the intercom system. Treats and desserts were brought out. Groups split up to play party games.

It was a true celebration, better than any party in any palace, Elena decided. While they had more work to do, Elena was proud of what she was able to do to solve the problem. The kingdom was saved, and food would be made here to feed countless mouths.

About two hours after dinner wrapped up, the party was still going on. Elena decided to retreat to the refreshment table. Rylan had been pulled aside for another interrogation session by her sisters, and Elena couldn't bear to watch.

At the table, Arccoo approached her again. He once again had a huge smile on his face.

"What is it?" Elena asked.

"I don't know if I should say," he said with a sly smile.

"But you want to say? Don't you?"

"Just... When we get back to Thryal, I'll have some good news for you."

"Oh my god," Elena said as she rolled her eyes. "Just tell me now! What difference does it make?"

"I don't know if I can tell you yet," Arccoo said with a smirk, refusing to make eye contact with her.

"If you don't tell me right now, I'm running to Carmen, and I'll tell her."

"Tell her what exactly?" He laughed.

"I don't know, I'll make something up and she'll believe me and be mad at you. So

just tell me!”

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“Fine, fine. I’ll tell you. You’ve impressed people with your work here.”

“That’s the news?” Elena laughed. “That’s not news. I know that.”

“No, you don’t understand. You’ve impressed the right people. Back home, word of your work here has reached the royal scientists. And you’ve gotten their attention.”

Elena could barely hear the words as he spoke. Her mind just kept racing with the possibilities. The royal scientists were no joke. They were doing some of the most important work in the kingdom. To have their attention meant you’d done something right. Or something very wrong.

“The royal scientists?”

“Yes,” Arccoo said with a smile. “The royal scientists. Those royal scientists. And they’re impressed with you. You’ve been invited to join the Royal Institute.”

“Me?”

“How could they not be?”

Elena couldn’t believe it. This was all she’d been dreaming of for so long. She was given a chance to show off her intelligence. And it worked. Now no one could deny how valuable her mind was.

As just a simple human, it had been an uphill battle for her since arriving on Arccoo’s planet. And she was starting to believe the day would never come when she could

really make a name for herself. The attention of the top royal scientists was something of a far-off dream she thought she could never achieve.

Their attention was always treated as something to earn. She knew she'd need to prove herself in the field, but she just needed an opportunity that it seemed would never come. Finally, here that moment was, and she couldn't have been happier to do it by Ryland's side.

"What does this mean?" Elena asked.

"They want you."

"They want me?" Elena asked again. "What does that mean?"

"Elena, have some confidence for a second," Arccoo said with a laugh. "You just did some incredible work here. The best of the best now want you. What could it possibly mean?"

"They want me to work for them?" Elena could hardly bring herself to say the words. A mix of shock and excitement coursed through her body.

"They've been working on a project back home for a while. It's stalled for a bit, and they think a fresh pair of eyes could be a game-changer. You are the fresh set of eyes they've been looking for."

Elena's mind was still racing, reflecting on all her hard work: every late night spent studying, every moment fighting for her place at the table. It was all worth it, every single second of it. Her life's effort was not about to be a waste.

She'd never felt so happy in her entire life. The excitement was starting to overtake the shock in her body. Her hands were starting to tremble. Happy tears started to well

up in her eyes.

It was all she'd ever wanted. All she'd ever dreamed of. As far back as she could remember, she was working toward this moment. Though she never, even in her wildest dreams, expected to hear the news from the prince himself.

She could see her future before her very eyes. She could picture working alongside the royal scientists and someday becoming one herself. She imagined developing project after project and winning award after award. Not only that, she could someday be responsible for giving opportunities to other young women in the position she was once in.

As all of this hit her, Elena felt the urge to run to someone and share the incredible news. She wanted to celebrate with someone who would feel nothing but pride for her.

But the urge wasn't bringing her to her sisters. To her family. That's not who she immediately wanted to share it with. Not the people who helped and supported her along the way for so long and were ultimately always there for her.

The urge was pushing her toward Rylan—toward the one she'd only met not too long ago but the one she'd grown so close to, so quickly. He'd begun occupying almost every thought in her head.

She wanted to share it with Rylan, wanted to see his reaction. She wanted to feel his pride and be wrapped in his congratulatory hug.

And then, a less exciting thought entered her head. Rylan was here. And the royal scientists were very far from here.

She never realized it until that very moment, but her desire to prove herself to the

royal scientists had gained a new rival. Her desire was to be around Rylan and to spend time with him.

Could Elena accept the opportunity knowing it would pull her away from him? What if that meant they would never see each other again? That thought alone almost drained all the excitement out of her.

In such a short span of time, Rylan had become such an important figure in Elena's life that she couldn't imagine losing him forever. But she also couldn't pass up the chance to work with the royal scientists.

"Well?" Arccoo said. His words dragged Elena out of her head and back to reality. "What do you think?"

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“I... Uh...” Elena struggled to form full words.

“Too excited to speak?” He laughed. “That’s about what I expected. I’ll give your confirmation first thing in the morning. They’ll be very—”

“Wait!” Elena said. “I... I need to think about it first.”

“I... What?” Arccoo said, the shock in his words visible on his face.

Elena was just as shocked as he was at what she said. But with Rylan now in the equation, she couldn’t just say yes so quickly. She also couldn’t bring herself to say a flat no, either.

“You’ll think about it?”

“Yes... I... I need some time before I can give you an answer.”

“Do you understand the offer before you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Carmen said it’s all you’ve ever wanted. That you’ve been working toward something like this your entire life.”

“It is... It really is...”

“This doesn’t happen every day, Elena. You know that, right?”



“I do. I promise, I do.”

“Then what exactly is there to think about? How are you not screaming yes while jumping up and down?”

“If you’d given me this offer six months ago, I’d be doing exactly that. Hell, if you gave me this offer a week ago, I might have done just that. But... everything has changed.”

“Everything has changed? What exactly has changed?”

“Everything,” Elena muttered. “Everything.”

She then looked away from the prince, across the party to where Rylan stood with her sisters. They were all laughing and sipping their drinks. She was excited to see how well he was fitting in with them.

“Oh...” the prince said after following her gaze. “Thateverything.”

“Yeah...”

“Believe me, I get how that can change everything. It happened when I met Carmen.”

“For as long as I’ve lived on Thryal, being recognized by the Royal Institute was all I ever wanted. But now I found something else to want. Someone else to want.”

“I see.”

“Where Rylan goes, that’s where I want to be, too.”

As Elena said the words, she realized the truth. She’d never been so confident in

anything she'd ever said in her life. No scientific equation or experiment had ever made more sense than how she felt around Rylan.

He was what she wanted. Everything else would be secondary. She could happily work on whatever little project in the kingdom Rylan was assigned next. As long as she was beside him, it would be the right place to be.

“And that’s how you feel?” Arccoo asked. “Absolutely?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmm.” Arccoo thought for a moment. “That can be arranged.”

“Excuse me?”

“It can be arranged. We can accommodate that.”

“What’re you saying?”

“Rylan is an intelligent scientist, too. You two fixed the issue here together. He’s already proven himself on one project, so why shouldn’t he also get an assignment at the institute? Especially if it’s the condition by which they get you. And if not, well, I can just make it an order.”

“Are you serious?” Elena started to get excited again. Her dream position, with Rylan by her side. It was almost too perfect. “You can do that for me?”

“Of course. His next assignment will not be far from you. I promise.”

“Thank you...”

“Don’t mention it,” Arccoo said. “Now, let’s get back to the party. We have even more to celebrate now.”

Arccoo and Elena rejoined the party. As Elena slid back into place next to Rylan, she decided to hold on to the good news for now. He’d find out soon enough, and she could wait to see the look on his face.

The rest of the party would go by in a blur, thanks to Arccoo supplying everyone with shot after shot. But Elena would still remember a few moments.

Everyone danced to the music. Rylan got close to her. Both of them felt each other’s

bodies as they moved to the beat. She looked deep into his eyes and felt herself slipping away.

Rylan stopped the fun for a moment to grab them both water. They retreated to a quiet part of the party to rehydrate. Their gazes never left each other's eyes.

Rylan and Elena teamed up for one of the party games, a match in human darts against Sofia and Zaraq. Rylan stood behind her and helped throw the darts properly. The cool touch of his hand against her skin was driving her crazy.

The two lovers laughed at each other's jokes. They got food and drinks for each other, already knowing what the other liked. They had fun while looking after each other.

And that's all Elena would remember of the rest of the party in the morning. Surely at some point, she and Rylan stumbled back to her quarters, but she didn't remember.

Though, she didn't care. She remembered the important things. How sweet and caring he was. The fun they had. It was all she really needed.

And it made her excited for the future. If memories and moments like last night were what she had in store, the future was bright.

Together, with Rylan, she was happy.

## Chapter 18

Rylan

"Right this way," said one of the royal courtiers as they led Rylan and Elena toward the throne room.

The two of them were shown through a grand hallway in the palace, with ceilings higher than Rylan had ever seen. Stained-glass windows decorated the walls, telling the story of Thryal's past.

Rylan didn't need to look at them. Every Thryal was told the stories time and time again, starting from the moment they were born. But Rylan still gawked at the craftsmanship of the royal palace. Even as a man of science, he was blown away by the artistry.

He'd only been back on the home world for less than an hour, and Rylan had already been subject to more luxury than he had in his whole lifetime prior.

The palace, of course, had a private landing bay for their ship. They were greeted with a finely prepared meal on the flight, and when they arrived, a servant promptly took their bags. A speeder was brought out to them at the ship so they wouldn't have to walk to the palace, and Rylan was informed that a royal spa treatment was waiting for them after their meeting.

He knew that most of this was only happening because they arrived with Prince Arccoo. But that didn't stop Rylan from enjoying it all. He had to. There was no telling when he would ever experience anything like it again.

And now they were approaching the throne room of the king and queen. It was an honor Rylan never imagined he'd have. He was almost too shocked to move when he heard they requested an in-person meeting with him and Elena to get an update on their work on the moon.

"You ready?" Elena asked him as they reached the end of the hallway. A huge set of doors stood before them.

"No... I don't think so..."

“Don’t worry,” Elena said, placing a reassuring hand on the small of his back.  
“They’re perfectly nice people. Just be polite.”

“They will see you now,” the royal courier said. On cue, the huge doors slowly began to swing open.

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Rylan's jaw fell open as they stepped inside. The throne room was even larger than the highway, big enough to hold large balls and dinners. However, it was empty at the moment, just the king and queen's thrones at the far end.

Rylan kept his eyes on them. The Thryal royalty. He couldn't believe he was there.

Rylan had been a scientist for a long time. He put in the work, the time, and the effort to achieve that. He spent late nights studying in school. He had worked overtime on his projects. Yet this was the first time he was actually given the honor of meeting the king and queen.

Rylan had never even been in the same room as them. Maybe he'd seen them from afar at a parade once but never this close. And certainly, he never addressed or was addressed by them directly.

That was reserved for more important royal scientists—the smartest of the smart. Rylan had spent most of his career shipped off to work on remote moons like the one Elena found him on. Though, for that, he was grateful.

Rylan's mind was racing. He suddenly couldn't remember what he was supposed to do while meeting them. Arccoo had kept it all so casual.

Should he bow? Get on one knee? Avoid eye contact? Call them "Your Highness" or "Your Majesty"?

"Your Majesties," Elena said as they got closer. She then grabbed Rylan and pulled him down onto one knee with her. "We are honored by your invitation."

“Of course,” the king said. “Nothing less is deserving of our hero scientists.”

“Again,” Elena said, rising to her feet. “You honor us.”

“Very much honor us,” Rylan chimed in as he rose to his feet with her.

“Well,” the queen said, “we didn’t bring you both here just to be thanked for bringing you here. Word of your work, and its benefit to our kingdom, has reached us. But we’d like to hear from you directly.”

“Certainly. Rylan?” Elena looked at him.

“Oh, well... um...” Nerves started to take over. He was talking to royalty after all.

Rylan was too stunned to speak. The two of them, upon their thrones, exuded pure power. It was the most intimidated Rylan had ever felt in his entire life.

Then he realized he was being asked to do the thing he excelled at the most, talk about science. A calm swept over him.

“We successfully terraformed the moon. And we—before I move forward, how much do you know about terraforming?”

“Pretend we know nothing,” the king suggested.

“But that we also have somewhere else to be in an hour,” the queen added.

“Right... so... essentially, the moon was uninhabitable before. No plant life would grow. Our project changed the landscape of the entire moon to not only grow plants but grow copious amounts of crops. Enough to feed countless people across the kingdom. And more is being produced by the day.”



“Fantastic!” the king called out. “The potential famine is avoided then?”

“Not only avoided,” Elena chimed in. “But if we’re smart, we’re well on our way to having an abundance.”

“And what’s next?” asked the queen. “You figured out how to terraform that moon. What’s next? What’s the plan of action?”

“We let the machines do their work,” Rylan said plainly. “A lot of the process is automated. Currently, twelve people are stationed there. A station leader. A few mechanics and engineers in case something breaks. A couple of biologists to ensure the crops are healthy and safe to eat. And, of course, a chef.”

“We have them all on six-month contracts,” Elena added.

“And after six months?” asked the king.

“Well, then we evaluate everything,” Rylan said. “How have the machines been working? Have the crops stayed healthy? Is the output consistent? And if everything is successful, as I suspect it will be, we take the next steps. Find other moons and deserted planets to terraform. Figure out what other crops we can grow this way, both for food and medicine. I’d say within months, a lot of our problems in the kingdom regarding crop growth will lessen. And within two years, they’ll be all but forgotten.”

“That’s very good to hear,” the king said, unable to conceal a smile. “And you two are the geniuses behind it all. Right?”

“Yes, I suppose Elena and I are.”

“Then shouldn’t you be there?” the queen asked. “Why hire others to run the station for these crucial six months? Shouldn’t your brains be there to ensure it runs

smoothly?”

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“Well,” Elena said, “your invitation is why we’re here, Your Majesties. But it’s not why we’re staying. Both of us were invited back to Thryal by the royal scientists here. They have some projects they want us to work on.”

“Hmm,” the king said. “I can’t think of a better place for two minds like yours to be. Now, go enjoy whatever amenities of the palace you please. I can’t wait to hear of the success of your next project.”

“Thank you, Your Majesties,” Elena said as she knelt down again.

“Thank you, Your Majesties,” Rylan echoed.

“No, Thryal thanks you. Dismissed.”

The royal courier appeared out of nowhere to usher them back out of the throne room.

Rylan still couldn’t believe where he was and who he just talked to. The king and queen had personally thanked him. It was unbelievable.

And, as far as Rylan was concerned, Elena was to thank for all of it. He never would’ve solved the problem in time without her help. Her genius was just as invaluable as his own. She was like no one else he’d ever met.

And she was so smart while also caring so much for him, too. He knew what she did for him and how she helped both their careers.

She easily could’ve left him behind, taken all the glory for herself and accepted the

new position from the royal scientists. She'd have her pick of the litter of attractive scientists to choose from to help her forget all about him.

But instead, she insisted on something else. She demanded that to have her, the royal scientist on Thryal would have to accept him, too. And they did.

Now his life was only going to get better. He'd always be eternally grateful for Elena. And he planned to spend the rest of his life showing her that.

Though at the moment, he was still in complete awe of the whole palace. He tried his best to not gawk as they walked out of the throne room. He still wanted to seem professional, even if only the staff could see him now.

He could feel their eyes on him as he moved. They seemed nice enough, but he was still worried about embarrassing himself and, by extension, Elena. He couldn't let himself appear anything but collected.

The giant doors slammed shut behind them, and Rylan was finally able to breathe.

"How'd I do?"

"Fantastic," Elena said as she wrapped her arms around him for a hug. "Maybe a bit too wordy, but you did great. Most people aren't able to say a single word when first meeting them. It's so intimidating."

"Oh, that was almost the case," he said, looking at her. "But I found my strength."

"Yes, you did," she responded with a smile. "And as long as you didn't shit your pants, you did better than average."

"No, we're all good there..."

“So, what do you want to do now? Those spa treatments aren’t for another hour or so.”

“Well, what are two people to do when left all alone to their own devices in the royal palace?” Rylan raised an eyebrow at Elena. His hands landed on her hips, slowly moving toward her ass. “I haven’t even seen our suite yet. Legends talk about how comfortable the royal beds are.”

Elena couldn’t help but giggle, though she smacked his hands away. A stern look grew on her face.

“Not here, you bad boy, you. Not out in the open. Especially not so close to the throne room.” Elena paused for a moment. “But certainly, our suite will be the last stop on a little tour.”

“A tour?”

“It seems only fair,” she responded slyly. “You gave me a tour of the station. I’ll give you one of the palace. After all, you will be staying here for a while. Won’t you?”

“Oh, I plan to.” Rylan planned to stay as long as Elena did. The palace was nice but being by her side was better. Much better.

“Good, then let’s begin.”

Elena took Rylan by the hand and began the tour, showing him all around the palace and bringing him to her favorite places.

“This, I swear, is the only quiet place in the whole palace,” Elena claimed as she dragged him out to a little courtyard.

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It was nothing special, just a patch of grass surrounded by shrubbery. A bench sat in the middle, but Rylan could sense the happiness in her as she stepped out in the open.

“Whenever I get tired of my quarters, I like to come here to read.” Elena patted the bench next to her, indicating for Rylan to sit. “In a busy place like the royal palace, this is where I can always expect to find some calm.”

“Well, maybe we can read here together sometime.” Rylan sat next to her, and Elena leaned against him. The two simply took in the peace, enjoying each other’s company.

But after a moment, the tour resumed. Elena took him all over. She showed him the royal library and then followed it with a visit to one of six kitchens. This one, Elena claimed, was the best for a late-night snack. Next, they went to look at the indoor pool, which was followed by a trip to the outdoor pool.

And she even took him to a few of her least favorite spots in the palace.

“These are the places to avoid,” Elena said. “Worst parts of the whole palace.”

She took him to the armory, where they were immediately yelled at by guards. Next was the docking bay, where they could hardly hear anything over the sound of ships taking off and landing. Last was another one of the six kitchens, which Elena claimed housed the meanest chef in the galaxy.

After all the highlights, it was time for their spa treatment. And once again, Rylan was shocked by what was in store for him. Massages, mud baths, calming music,

creams, and lotions were spread all over his body.

He felt incredible afterward but couldn't imagine doing it all the time.

After all the treatments, Elena and Rylan were led to a steam room. Both her sisters and their mates were already there.

"I didn't really know how much I missed it while we were away," Elena said, settling in. "I feel so good now. Don't you, Rylan?"

"Yeah, never felt anything like it." But his voice wasn't very confident.

"You'll get used to it," Zaraq chimed in. "All this spa stuff, it doesn't feel like the toughest thing in the world. But fuck, I never sleep quite as well as after a deep tissue massage."

"And I've grown up doing stuff like this," Arccoo added. "No one would dare tell me it makes me anything less."

"Oh, that's not it," Rylan said softly.

Elena took his hand and squeezed it with reassurance.

"What's your favorite part of the palace so far, Rylan?" asked Carmen.

"Oh, I'm not sure yet. I'm still taking it all in. Elena showed me a courtyard that was nice."

"Really?" Sofia said. "Elena, make sure to show him the theater."

"And the gym," Zaraq added.

“Has he been to the wine cellar?” Carmen asked.

“Or one of the game rooms?” Arccoo suggested. “Any of them. But the one on the third floor is my favorite.”

Surrounded by so much luxury and decadence, Rylan couldn’t help but feel out of place. Being in a place like this was all too new to him. Never in his life had he ever felt hungry and had to choose which personal chef to go to. It was all so new to him.

It was also a bit scary to him. Could he ever get used to it all? Did he want to get used to it? He’d never imagined this lifestyle, let alone thought he could partake in it.

Those thoughts just kept flooding his head. They seemed to get louder with each new location of the tour. In fact, he’d been thinking a lot of that since arriving at the palace.

There was a chance that would have been all he could think about if it wasn’t for the second thought fighting for space in his head—the thought of Elena.

As long as he was with her, Rylan knew he’d belong. With her, he’d enjoy it all. It’d be nice together.

He was sure they’d both be happy here for years to come.

“Is there anything else I should be sure to check out, seeing as it’s my first day here?” Rylan asked the room.

“Oh,” Elena said with a smirk, “don’t you remember? The tour has a grand finale.” She gave him a suggestive wink for him alone.



### Chapter 19

Elena

Everything had fallen into place. Elena was happy, happier than she had ever been. With Rylan by her side, she felt as though she could take on the world.

She loved that he could barely contain himself. His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, touching, teasing, and caressing.

“Rylan...” she moaned. “I want you.”

She gripped his shirt tightly and pressed her lips lightly against his, breathing in the intoxicating scent of his skin. His eyes locked with hers, a fiery passion burning within.

His response was swift and overwhelming, his lips devouring hers in a fervent kiss. The room around them seemed to melt away as they became one, their bodies melding together in a dance of pure desire.

Elena’s breaths grew shallow as Rylan’s hands traced slow, deliberate paths over her body, igniting a flame within her that spread like wildfire. She arched her back, her moans mingling with his.

His touch was like a tempest, sending shivers down her spine and awakening a hunger she didn’t know she possessed. Rylan’s lips found their way to her neck, and she let out a soft whimper, her body trembling in response. His velvety fingertips

traced delicate patterns on her skin, causing her to sigh with delight.

“Rylan,” she gasped again, her mind clouded with desire. “Make love to me.”

He smiled, a wicked glint in his eyes as he pulled away, leaving her beguiled and panting. With a devilish grin, he whispered, “Not yet, my love. I have something else in mind first.”

And with those words, Rylan’s hands slid beneath the hem of her dress, his fingers trailing up her thighs to send a jolt of electricity coursing through her veins. Her heart pounded as she clutched onto his arms, her breathing ragged and uneven.

Her eyes widened in anticipation as Rylan’s fingers slipped beneath the delicate fabric of her underwear, caressing her most intimate parts with a tenderness that both startled and aroused her. She bit her lip, trying to stifle a cry as his touch sent waves of pleasure crashing over her.

Elena’s entire body was tingling with desire. Rylan’s touch was more powerful than any drug, more exhilarating than any thrill she had ever known. She could feel herself losing control, but she didn’t want to fight it. She wanted to surrender to him, to let him take her to the edge and beyond.

Rylan’s fingers continued to explore, teasing and tantalizing her until she was begging for more. His thumbs grazed against the most sensitive spots, causing her to arch her back and cry out his name. Her body trembled, aching for release, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to hold back for much longer.

And then it happened. Rylan’s fingers slid inside her, moving in a slow, methodical rhythm.

Elena’s breath hitched in her throat, her body reacting to his touch with ferocity. She

felt like she was being transported to another realm, one where only Rylan and she existed and time stood still.

Elena's eyes locked with his, her body alive with a raw, primal energy. The intensity of their connection seemed to electrify the very air around them. She could feel Rylan's breath on her skin, a soft, warm puff that sent shivers down her spine.

He continued to explore her, his fingers moving in a way that managed to be both tender and devilishly skilled. With each stroke, Elena's moans grew more desperate, each gasp more primal. She felt like she was on the verge of losing control entirely, the pleasure building within her until she was certain she would shatter into a thousand pieces.

At that moment, Elena knew she was lost. She was at the mercy of Rylan's expert touch, surrendering to the raw passion that poured through her veins like molten steel. Her body throbbed with desire, and her heart pounded in sync with his fingers' rhythmic dance inside of her.

As she lost herself in the pleasure, Rylan's lips found hers again, his kiss deep and passionate. His tongue danced with hers, further igniting the fire within her. She could feel the orgasm building, the waves of pleasure washing over her, and she knew she was going to lose herself in it completely.

Elena's moans filled the room, her body responding to Rylan's touch with a fervor that left her breathless. She could feel her climax building, the tension coiling tightly within her like a spring. She knew it was only a matter of time before it would unleash its force upon her, leaving her writhing with pleasure.

Rylan's fingers continued their dance, matching the rhythm of her arousal until she cried out his name at the peak of her pleasure.

“Rylan, I can’t...” she moaned, her voice barely audible as the orgasm crashed over her like a tidal wave. Her body convulsed, her breaths coming in short, ragged bursts as she rode the waves of pleasure. She could feel Rylan’s hands guiding her through it, his touch a soothing balm amid the chaos of her climax.

As her orgasm subsided, Elena found herself cradled in Rylan’s arms, his warmth surrounding her like a shield. She looked up to meet his eyes, her own filled with a mixture of love, gratitude, and awe.

Slowly, he removed the rest of her clothes, and she pulled his shirt over his head before fumbling with the belt of his pants. Their bodies entwined, a symphony of sweat and love, as Rylan entered her with a slow, deliberate thrust.

Elena let out a gasp, her eyes wide with amazement as he filled her. She could feel his warmth, his power, and it left her breathless.

Rylan’s lips found their way back to hers, his kiss as passionate as ever. He began to move inside her, a rhythm that was both deliberate and wild as if he was trying to take her to the stars and beyond. Elena’s moans grew louder, more desperate, as she met his every thrust with her own movements, their bodies moving in perfect harmony.

Their eyes locked as Rylan’s pace increased. He was taking her to the edge, pushing her beyond her limits, and she loved every moment of it. She wanted to surrender to him, to let him guide her to the highest peaks of pleasure.

As Rylan’s movements became more intense, Elena’s body responded in kind, each thrust sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through her. She could feel her climax building, and she knew when it came, it would be unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

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Rylan's fingers found her most sensitive spots, grazing them with a featherlight touch that drove her wild. She felt as if she were on fire, her heart racing like a wild animal, desperate for release.

"Oh, god... Rylan!" she cried.

Rylan tightened his grip on her and flipped her over so she was on top. She arched her back, her hips undulating in time with his thrusts.

As Rylan continued to move within her, Elena felt like she was flying, her body soaring to new heights of passion. She could feel the heat of his skin against hers, his muscles flexing with each thrust. Her breath was ragged, her heart pounding, and her moans grew louder and more fervent.

She could hear the thunder of his heartbeat, a rhythm that seemed to match the beat of her own. Their bodies were one, their movements in sync as if they were made for each other.

She could feel the building sensation within her again, the wave of pleasure that would once more bring her to the edge and the moment of ecstasy she craved. Her moans grew louder, more desperate, as she clawed at the sheets, her body arching and undulating.

And then it happened. She clenched, her muscles tightening around him in a vise-like grip, her body trembling violently as she squeezed.

He continued to thrust, not letting up for a moment.

Elena's release overwhelmed her. She could feel her body start to quiver, shaking violently as the orgasm overtook her. She cried out Rylan's name, her voice hoarse with emotion as her body convulsed in pleasure. Rylan thrust one last time, releasing deeply inside of her.

He collapsed onto her, their bodies entwined with her hair falling over her face. He kissed her forehead, her lips, her eyelids, anywhere he could reach, unable to express the depth of his love for her.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close, their bodies still shaking from the intense pleasure they had just shared.

As they lay there in each other's arms, Elena and Rylan knew they had just experienced something truly special, something that would bond them together for the rest of their lives. They had found each other, and they knew they would never let go.

In the afterglow of their intensely passionate lovemaking, Elena could feel Rylan's heart beating against her own, their bodies connected in more ways than just physically. She knew they had just shared something sacred, something that would forever change the course of their lives.

As the moments passed, Elena's thoughts began to drift to the future. She wondered what life would be like with Rylan by her side, the thought of it sending a warmth coursing through her veins. She knew they would face challenges and that life would not always be easy, but she also knew that with Rylan by her side, nothing would be impossible.

## Chapter 20

Rylan

“Breakfast is served,” Rylan said, placing a plate of freshly cooked eggs in front of Elena. He didn’t know what creature the eggs had come from, but they were all the rage with the royals lately.

They could’ve easily gone to any one of the kitchens and had breakfast made for them. But Rylan found no joy in that. He found that watching Elena eat and enjoy his cooking filled him with immeasurable pride. So, he’d do it every chance he got.

“Oh, thank you,” Elena said, finally looking up from the stack of reports on the table. She’d been poring over them since they woke up. She quickly scarfed down the breakfast before returning her attention to the reports.

Rylan couldn’t help but smile as he watched. A lesser man might’ve wanted Elena to give him some attention at a moment like this. But not Rylan. This was how he liked her.

Headfirst in her work, figuring out a tough equation or mapping a new solution. Rylan loved to marvel at her as she worked. She was like nothing else he’d ever seen. He never wanted it to stop.

He grabbed his own plate of eggs and joined her at the table. As he ate, he studied her face. The way her lips moved as she read to herself. How her eyes darted around the paper. The crease in her forehead that tipped Rylan off that something was off in the report.

“Something isn’t adding up here.”

“Really?” Rylan pretended to be shocked. “In what part?”

“The tests we ran yesterday... I think we miscalculated. We should get to the institute early to run them again. Hurry up and finish eating.”

“I just sat down,” Rylan protested.

“I know,” Elena said, standing up. “That’s why I told you to hurry up! I’ll be dressed and ready to go in five minutes. You should be, too!”

Rylan simply laughed as Elena raced off to the bedroom. He ate his eggs and watched her move, certain he could not be any happier.

Once again, he thought about how a lesser man would be angry at Elena. They’d want to be treated with “respect” or something and be allowed to eat at their own pace.

But that’s far from what Rylan wanted. He wanted Elena, quirks and all, and that included how blindingly dedicated she was to her work. It was awe-inspiring to him. And he felt gratified that he got to work alongside her.



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To the second, five minutes later, both Rylan and Elena were ready to get to work. They met at the door, gave a quick kiss, grabbed each other's hand, and walked out.

Since Rylan moved in with her, they'd been upgraded to a full apartment within the palace. It gave them great privacy while also giving them plenty of room to share. It was just another perfect part of their newly perfect life together.

The pair walked hand in hand through the palace. They headed out a side door and toward the institute, where the most prestigious royal scientists on Thryal worked. It wasn't far, technically still on palace grounds, and the two of them liked how much quality time the walk gave them. Because once they strode in, it'd be all business.

Rylan held the door open for Elena as they stepped into the institute. They may have arrived early, but no one would know that. At all hours of the day, the building was packed with scientists working away at a variety of projects for the kingdom.

On the way to their lab, they passed all sorts of exciting developments. The team making a weather machine was covered in snow. The team making jetpacks was covered in soot. The man in charge of discovering how to regrow limbs had a new hand, though it was the wrong color and on his back. Something was always going on.

However, Rylan and Elena were the first of their team to arrive. Their lab was still dark when they stepped in.

"We shouldn't expect the others for a few hours," Rylan said, putting on safety gloves and goggles.

“Perfect,” Elena said as she did the same. “Then we should be able to get some work done.”

The two of them immediately got to work on what was their third project since coming to Thryal. The first, a test to see if they were actually smart enough to work there, was to figure out a way to flash freeze living organisms without killing them. Then the second was to develop a new type of mining machinery for the mines of some far-off moon.

Working together, they finished both projects in record time. So for their third project, they were given a team and a problem that had stumped the royal scientists for a long time.

Space travel wasn't very efficient. The kingdom was always in need of a better fuel source—a cheaper way to get from one end of the universe to the other. If they could crack the code, they'd be legends.

“You know,” said another royal scientist one day in the break room. He had a smug look on his face. “Your project is another test. They give it to all the hot shots that come in with a big head. It's to humble you. If there was a better fuel source, it would've been found centuries ago.”

“Well,” Elena said without even looking at him, “if it's another test, I plan on passing. Like no one else before.”

“You heard the woman,” Rylan said as he followed her out of the room.

Maybe it was a truly impossible task, but they didn't care. Working together was all they wanted. And they were actually making some headway on a solution.

In their lab, they cleared a board of equations and started writing down new ones.

They didn't even need to communicate verbally. They were just naturally on the same page.

Elena would start to write an equation, and Rylan would finish it for her. He would reach for a reference guide, and she'd already be handing it to him.

By the time the rest of their team arrived, they were ready to conduct the newest tests, a series of simulations. The simulations came up with exactly what they were expecting. No new fuel source, but they were on the right path. Rylan could feel it.

The whole team got back to work. Some were drafting blueprints of new engines. Others began researching space travel techniques of other cultures, some from centuries past. The remainder were writing out more equations.

Other bodies in the lab didn't stop Rylan and Elena's in-sync workflow. Rylan knew right when to bring her a cup of coffee. Elena could tell when Rylan was getting frustrated and what snack from the break room would calm him down.

They could work together effortlessly. If any problem arose in the lab, it would not be between them. There was no competition. No rivalry. No jealousy. Rylan just loved her and knew she loved him back.

At one point in the day, Rylan and Elena made eye contact from across the room. They both just smiled at each other and carried on. It was all they needed.

They didn't need to constantly be right next to each other or working on the same exact thing. But as long as they wereworking toward the same end goal, Rylan was happy, and he knew Elena was, too.

Once again, Rylan was feeling like a broken record in his own head. But it was all he could think about. Any spare moment was populated with a single belief. He was

fucking lucky to have Elena.

He also got to go home with her every night. He got to catch her smiling at him while they worked. He got to feel her subtle slap on his ass as she walked past him in the lab.

Lucky and happy. That's what Rylan was. He felt he couldn't possibly be in a better position, and nothing was ever going to change that.

Around midday, an alarm went off on Rylan's communicator. He stopped what he was doing and took a deep breath. He knew that reminding Elena of this engagement on their schedule wouldn't be easy.

He walked over to where she was hard at work. Her eyes were firmly glued to the diagram of an engine before her. Yet her body language made it clear she knew he was behind her.

"Did you solve those equations already?" she asked.

"Not yet. I'm working on it. I'll have them done after lunch."

“After lunch? Why wait?”

“Because it’s lunchtime now.”

“I think I’ll skip today.”

“You can’t skip today, Elena.”

“Why not?”

“Because we have plans to meet your sisters. If just I showed up... again, I don’t think they’d be thrilled.”

“Right,” Elena said. She pursed her lips for a moment. “Maybe we can reschedule.”

“The royal scientists won’t stop being impressed with you if you go out to lunch one day. I love how dedicated you are to your work, and I am, too. But it’s okay to relax for a bit, even just one lunch.”

“Fine... fine... but I think we should stay late tonight. You know how long my sisters can chat.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Rylan said with a laugh.

The two of them strolled out of the lab, which was now empty since everyone else had already gone to lunch. They walked out of the building and down the path, off the palace grounds to a café in the nearest village.

The place was bustling with customers for the lunch rush. Luckily, Elena quickly spotted her sisters who'd already grabbed a table.

"Elena! Rylan!" Sofia called out as they approached. "You made it!"

"We were worried you'd get too caught up in work again to come!" said Carmen.

Both sisters hugged Elena. Then they hugged Rylan, too, which still always surprised him.

He'd spent a lot of time with the family since meeting Elena, but he was always stunned by how easily they welcomed him. Beyond the initial interrogation early on, they'd been nothing but kind toward him. It was almost like he was already a member of the family.

"Yeah, that wasn't happening today. Elena has been very excited about this lunch," Rylan said as he and Elena sat at the table.

Both of Elena's sisters burst out in laughter.

"She forgot again. Didn't she?" asked Carmen.

"Yes, of course, she did," Rylan said as the three of them laughed.

"We have very important work! I was focusing on that!"

"Well," Sofia said. "Tell us about it! We barely get to see you anymore. What are you two working on? What's this big project that has all of our sister's attention?"

"They have us working on finding a new fuel source," Elena said quickly. "Something to make intergalactic travel faster and cheaper."

“That sounds very interesting,” Sofia said.

Rylan leaned back in his seat. He knew he wouldn’t have to say much more at this lunch. They’d set Elena off. She could, and likely would, talk about the project for hours.

“You see, different cultures have used different fuel and different engine combinations for millennia.” Excitement could be heard in every syllable as she spoke. “So, the best one might be found somewhere in there. Or not all. It’s all about testing different fuel sources with different engines. Building new types of engines. Developing new fuels.”

“And how do you test for that?” Carmen asked.

From there, Rylan started to look at the menu. Elena’s sisters knew exactly how to keep her around. Any less interesting conversation and she’d be scarfing down her lunch to hurry back.

Eventually, Elena was done talking about what they did every day on the project. She finally turned her attention to the food Rylan had ordered for her ages ago.

“And what about you Rylan?” asked Sofia. “How are you enjoying your new position?”

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Once again, Rylan was shocked that they cared enough to ask.

“It’s been absolutely fantastic. Never thought I’d actually get to work at the Royal Institute. It’s obviously a huge step up from the station on that moon.”

“I can only imagine,” Carmen chimed in.

“And working alongside your sister has been a dream, of course. You know how smart she is. Every day, she shows me just how brilliant she is. Just when I think I’ve seen it all, she does it again.”

“Yeah,” Sofia said, “that’s our Elena.”

Rylan looked over at her. She looked beautiful even as she shoved her food in her mouth.

“Together, I don’t think there is any project we can’t tackle. There is no problem this distinguished group of royal scientists can throw at us that’ll trip us up. Together, we’re nothing short of unstoppable.”

“Elena always was the smart one,” Carmen added.

“Of course, she is. She just needs someone who will remind her to stop working long enough to eat and sleep.”

Elena tried to protest, but her mouth was full of food.



Rylan and Elena's sisters all laughed.

"Yes, she definitely needs that," Sofia said. "And you think you can do that? Take care of our girl in that way?"

"Yeah," Rylan said confidently. "I think so... Well, I mostly can. She can be as stubborn as she is smart."

Both sisters nodded in agreement.

"But," Rylan continued. "There is no one I'd rather argue with about when it's time for dinner. Or when is a good time to go to bed. Or wake up. For her, I'm happy to do it all."

"You better be," Elena said after swallowing the last of her lunch. "It's time to get back to work."

Elena stood up and hugged her sisters. She then looked at Rylan, holding out her hand for him to take.

"Right," he said. "Let's get back to it. Carmen and Sofia, wonderful to see you as always. We should do this again if I can drag Elena from her work."

"Even if you can't," Carmen said. "We're happy to eat and chat with just you. You're in the family now. Get used to it."

Rylan stood up and took Elena's hand as they headed back to work. As they walked together, Rylan came to a realization.

He could get used to it. All of it. Working with Elena. Spending every day with her. Lunches with her sisters. Trips to the spa. Private chefs on special occasions. He could get used to it all.

As long as he was with her, he knew everything would be all right.