



# Becoming Brandy

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**Description:** The first time I was abducted from Earth, I was introduced to three sexy, alien brothers who wanted to mate with me. And, boy, did we "mate." But when I wasn't able to produce any heirs, they moved on. I stayed on the ship as an envoy, alone and lonely.

But then I was abducted again. And this time, the aliens are not so nice. These bad-boy space pirates want to use and abuse me, but I have tricks up my sleeve. For one, my best friend is married to their king. For two, I have ways of bringing men to their knees.

Even alien men can't resist.

Can I tame these bad boys and get to safety? But after I've tamed them, will I really want to leave? Get your copy today.

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

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Brandy sipped her coffee in disappointment. This was the third cup she'd ordered, and it still tasted as bland as shoe leather. After dumping it in the trash, she walked over to the replicator embedded in the wall. She pressed her hand to the space next to the fake coffee machine, willing her order with her mind as she spoke it.

“Mocha latte with skimmed milk. And get it right this time. Sheesh.”

Her voice echoed in the empty space. The set of Central Perk from her favorite show Friends used to be one of her happy places. She remembered when she'd created it over a year ago. Brandy could not get enough of how lifelike everything was, even down to the smell of brewed coffee in the air. The plush couches were just like those onscreen. The street featured in the show was visible from the window in front of her. Glowing neon signs read Espresso and Cappuccino in the same enticing scrawl. She would sit and sip coffee from big mugs, picturing Rachel and Ross chatting it up while Phoebe played Smelly Cat.

Except there was no Rachel and Ross. No Phoebe or Joey. There were no friends to speak of. Brandy was alone.

Sure, she could conjure up people to wander around the scene, but they couldn't talk to her and she couldn't touch them. They were more like moving paintings, not really satisfying as companions. Lately, she'd been adding them into the simulator just to try to keep the loneliness at bay.

It wasn't helping.

There were other humans on the ship. Women consorts for the male aliens. And Harper had just joined them, but Brandy didn't know her well. She was off cavorting with Rahan, Kahn, and Marin. Plus, Brandy had felt a little animosity from the girl since Rahan had once been her lover.

Today, she was alone, yelling at the wall. Now all she needed was about forty-five cats and a collection of old newspapers and milk cartons stacked around her slowly decaying body.

Brandy didn't even wait for her fourth cup of coffee to brew. She ended the simulation, the room fading back to blank white. As she watched everything around her disintegrate, she had the strong impression that her life was blending into the emptiness as well.

God, she needed a hobby.

Things had been a lot better for her on the ship when Charis had arrived. Charis was her new best friend, and they'd spent lots of time together doing all the things BFFs do. Sure, she'd had to share Charis with Han, but that was okay. Han was very busy preparing to rule the universe, so that gave them lots of time to watch old movies or try out dishes from the food simulator.

But Charis was pregnant and not feeling well. When she'd been ordered to go on bedrest, their afternoons sipping coffee or taking turns making the simulator create fun scenery for them to explore ended. Brandy had tried hanging out in Charis's bedroom, but the alien doctors were always eying her suspiciously. The offspring Charis carried would solidify Han's role as king, and many aliens had their panties in a bunch about it. Brandy had been shooed away on several occasions.

Everyone was busy being wooed or wooing, carrying babies or ruling the universe.

No one was wooing Brandy. She was not able to produce an heir, something about her genetic makeup. Bram had explained there was nothing to be done about it and walked off. He was not known for sugarcoating anything, but that was fine. Brandy was not one for motherhood anyway. Her own had been a bit of a beautiful disaster.

But what to do? She couldn't even get drunk. The simulator didn't produce alcohol.

Brandy wandered down the bright white hallways. She'd grown so sick of white on white. Everything was so plain. So sterile. The only place where anything exciting happened was on the bridge, so she took a detour there. It was frowned upon for her to hang out there, but when she walked into the large room, it seemed calm.

The bridge was about eight-hundred square feet, wide open and glowing white. At the moment, there was no furniture, but she knew they could change it by communicating with the organisms that made up the ships exterior. Brandy had long ago stopped trying to understand how the whole thing worked; she just knew it did whatever it was willed to.

Non-transformed Cartharians aliens were at work on their different control panels, sliding shapes around their smooth white walls in patterns that made no sense to her. She watched their long, clawed fingers move deftly, their red eyes darting around. She was no longer scared of their monstrous appearances. They were giant and imposing, their red eyes cruel. But their fangs and claws never strayed in her direction. The scaly skin and mane of hair didn't seem odd anymore. The creatures didn't bother her, nor even glance her way. Sure, they were attracted to her, but had been told under no circumstances were they allowed to touch her.

Although she was getting so bored even that prospect started to sound interesting.

But those claws...

She dismissed the idea. Instead, she wandered to the enormous front screen that displayed outer space. Stars were scattered like glitter across a sea of black. Earth, her home, was the small blue ball in the left-hand corner. The vastness of the universe made her feel small and insignificant. She was so far from home.

Not that anyone there missed her, either. She'd been a high-class escort—prostitute if she wanted to get technical. Her pimp didn't beat her, but he did encourage her to use substances to deal with her emotions. She'd been drug-addicted when Rahan found her and brought her on board. And what a disappointment when they found out she couldn't bear children.

So she'd thrown herself into helping the girls they brought on board. There weren't many. And a lot of them were unsuitable, so they were sent home. The few girls she'd grown attached to had been sent back to Earth.

Now, in the control room, Brandy put her hand on the screen, reaching out toward the stars.

“Hoping to take up a career as a navigator? Or maybe a science officer is more your style?”

When she turned, Bram was standing in the doorway, hands clasped behind his back. His expression was the same every time she caught a glimpse of him—a general disdain for most things mingled with an inner sarcasm he barely tried to cover up. But she knew he liked her; he just didn't show it.

Bram was as tall and handsome as the other humanoid males. It helped they could basically pick their appearances when they shifted. Bram's was sculpted down to a T. Most aliens didn't bother, but Bram was a man all about attention to detail. If he'd been born on Earth, he would have been pegged as gay. Up here, however, things were a bit more complicated.

She walked over to Bram, offering him a welcoming smile. “What’s going on today, Bramy? Marriages to arrange. Women to abduct?”

He glowered. “You know I am not allowed to procure human females, not since the last escapade. Though, if you ask me, he might be a little bit more grateful since I was the one who secured him his mate.” Bram rolled his eyes.

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She smiled, running her finger down his chest. Always in the same attire, Bram preferred crisp white T-shirts and pants. His blond hair was always brushed back in a perfect wave.

“I’m bored,” she teased. “You wanna get out of here and have some fun?”

He wiped his hand down the front of his shirt, straightening non-existent wrinkles. “I have work to do.”

“Great.” She brightened. “Let me help you.”

His brow furrowed. “Don’t you have hair to braid?”

It was a mean and dismissive comment. Brandy sucked her teeth, trying not to let the hurt show on her face. “I have skills, you know. I’m smart.”

Bram didn’t answer her. His eyes were drawn to something on one of the control panels. Striding over to a flashing wall, he left Brandy and conferred with the beast watching the monitor.

They spoke in their strange alien voices. Brandy only knew a few words in their language and they weren’t using any of them, but something was clear—Bram was concerned. He kept touching the lit symbols, his face growing redder and his brow more furrowed.

Brandy sidled up beside him. “Bram, what’s wrong?”

He ignored her, heading to another wall and pressing his hand to it. Han's voice came in over the loudspeakers. "What is it?"

"Sire," Bram said, his voice shaky, "we have a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Han said.

"It's the Hugrathian clan. One of their ships just appeared in this solar system."

"I'll be right there."

The commlink dropped, and Bram wrung his hands nervously.

"Who are they?" Brandy asked.

Bram's eyes flicked to her as if he'd forgotten she was there. "They are a rival clan, our sworn enemies and one of the most ruthless races in the universe. A big deal as you might say."

Brandy's eyes widened. "And they're coming this way?"

"It appears so, but do not worry your pretty head. Han can deal with them."

Brandy turned to see the ship sliding into view on the screen. It was similar in shape to their own, smooth and egg-shaped, but theirs was obsidian, making it hard to spot. As she watched, the ship seemed to disappear entirely.

"Where'd they go?" she asked.

Bram whirled around. "A cloaking device. Can our scanners pick them up?"

Bram hurried away, but Brandy began to feel a strange sensation take hold of her body. It was as if each individual atom inside her was coming apart. When she held her hand up to her face, she could see her skin pixelating.

“Bram,” she called, but then she couldn’t speak. Soon, the room grew dark. Her ears stopped picking up sound. Panic was her brain’s last input. After that, nothing.

Suddenly, her body began stitching itself together. It was the most strange and unnatural feeling, like bits of her were sticking together like drops of water on a windshield, slipping down to form one whole.

Lurching forward, she touched her limbs, her head. She could see and hear. Thank God, was still intact.

“Well, hello, gorgeous.”

Brandy spun so fast she almost fell, fear making her dizzy. She was on a ship similar to the one she’d just left, except everything glowed a dark purple as if everything was lit by black light. She didn’t have much time to notice anything else, because several large males across the room caught her attention. They were examining her as if she were a piece of meat.

“Who are you?” she asked, taking a step back until her back bumped into a smooth wall.

The male in the center smiled. He appeared to be an alien shifter in human form just like Han and his brothers. These males had adopted very different appearances from Han’s people, though. They were tattooed badasses—almost like they were straight out of Sons of Anarchy—leather, shit-kicker boots, tight T-shirts, and smug faces. Brandy shivered as their eyes roved over her.

“What do you want?” she asked, voice reed thin.

The center male finally answered, his tone superior. “We want what anyone wants. Revenge. And you are the first step in our plan.”

Brandy's darted from face to face, trying to form an escape plan. The men were blocking any exit—not that she'd be able to get off this ship anyway. Behind them, more alien soldiers waited, these in beast form. Brown, gold, and green-scaled skin flexed over their gigantic muscled arms. Their slitted red eyes zeroed in like laser beams. Disproportionately large jaws held rows of fangs that always made her shiver. These creatures had elongated heads and even longer claws. If the aliens on Han's ship were the stuff of nightmares, these beasts were her worst fears realized.

And she'd bet no one here had told them they weren't allowed to touch her upon threat of death.

A choking panic made her hands tremble as she held onto the wall behind her. This could not be happening. Brandy's eyes scanned the bridge, finally spotting the screen and what it displayed—a vast blanket of stars and Han's ship, the large egg-like vehicle in Earth's outer orbit. But it was so far away.

“Miss your lover?” the male asked, stepping forward.

Brandy shrank back as much as she could, which wasn't far since she was already against the wall. She sized him up, a strange mix of fear and excitement filling her.

He was handsome in a terrifying way—huge arms and chest beneath a black T-shirt and tight pants made from a leather-like material that moved like cotton. When he stalked her way, his black combat boots thundered on the floor. Dark slicked-back hair framed his blue eyes. His chin and jaw were stubbled with a day's worth of

growth. He was the kind of guy she would've fallen for on Earth—one who spelled his name with a capital T for trouble. And it had always ended badly.

Which was likely how this would go.

“Stay away from me.” She huddled into herself, trying not to let them see her tremble.

He grinned, his eyes slitting like a predator's. “I would think you'd be more grateful to your hosts. After all, you'll be staying with us for a while. I'm Drake and these are my brothers, Tork and Wrek.”

“No,” Brandy said, refusing to believe. “I'm not staying a while. They'll come for me. Han—”

“Yes, Han,” he said, interrupting her. “He's exactly the person I wanted to talk to you about. I bet he's missing you right now. Frantic. Losing his mind.” He made a gesture with his hands around his head to mimic how upset Han must be.

Brandy didn't think Han would be worried after losing her, but she didn't want this guy to know it. “Probably. And he's going to destroy you when he finds out you've taken me.”

Drake smiled humorlessly. “Destroy me?” He cut his eyes to the males to his right and left. “That's hilarious.”

He was acting like a cartoon villain. If Brandy weren't so afraid, she might laugh. Why was he trying so hard to be nasty? Did he think he had to impress her with how evil he was?

His brother, the one he'd called Wrek, appeared more serious than smug. “We should

open a commlink now. Transmit our demands.”

“Demands?” Brandy asked.

The brother on the left, Tork, shook his head. His expression was dark and calculating. “Let him stew without his mate for a while. Wonder what we are doing to her.” He widened his eyes in a way Brandy didn’t like.

Wait, had he said Han’s mate?

“Who do you think I am?” Brandy asked.

“Han’s female,” Drake said. “Charis.”

It was Brandy’s turn to laugh. “Charis? I’m not Charis. You guys have beamed up the wrong girl.”

All three males stared at each other. The serious one, Wrek, came forward with a black cylinder in his hand. He began running it up and down her body. “This one is not pregnant. Hadn’t you heard Han’s mate was pregnant? You said it was why we were attacking.”

Confusion washed over the faces of the other two.

Brandy laughed harder. “You messed up. You abducted the wrong girl. What kind of fly-by-night operation are you running here, anyway?”

Drake and Tork shot menacing looks at Wrek, who held up his hands. “I scanned the ship, then picked up the female who was closest to Han. Why wouldn’t he pick the most beautiful female for himself?”

Most beautiful female, eh? Wrek was quickly becoming her favorite.

“Guess you can just send me back,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Wrek strutted to the ship’s wall where a set of glowing symbols awaited. He began manipulating them. “It’s no good. Now they know we are here, their shields are up. We won’t be able to beam anyone else out. Not unless we can get those shields down.”

Drake seethed, stalking around the room as if wanting someone to blame. Brandy sank against the wall, hoping to avoid his wrath.

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Tork held up his hands. “Don’t blame me. You gave this mission to Wrek when I told you he couldn’t handle it. If you’d have left it up to me, we’d have his mate here and a desperate Han on the commlink. Now we have nothing.” He gestured at Brandy in apparent disgust.

Nothing? She wanted to protest, but Drake stalked toward her. Cowering, she tried to grow smaller as he towered over her, veins on his neck pulsing. “I hope you have more to offer than a nice set of tits.”

Brandy covered her bosom with her arms. She’d faced lots of angry, intimidating men in her previous line of work. She knew the best thing to do was not to make them any angrier than they already were. The testosterone would wear out eventually. She stared at him with doe eyes. “I’m good for a lot of things.”

He snorted, but she could tell he found her attractive. When he stepped closer, he trailed a hand down her neck. “I bet you are.”

“Drake,” Wrek said. “Don’t you think we should deal with the issue at hand? They seem to be charging weapons as we speak.” Wrek gestured to the screen and Han’s ship sitting patiently in the dark expanse of sky.

Drake moved away from her, adjusting his pants. His physical reaction to her closeness was apparent.

“Take us out. I need time to think.”

“Where to?” Tork asked, his hand on a section of wall that pulsed with light and

symbols.

“I don’t care, just get us out of here.”

Tork began tapping the panel.

They were going to leave. Panic tightened its grip on her. “No, wait. Let’s talk to Han. I’m sure he’ll listen to your demands.”

“No more whining,” Drake said, watching Han’s ship grow smaller in the distance.

Their ship shot forward. Brandy lurched, nearly tumbling as the stars blurred to smears on either side of the screen. She dropped to her knees, feeling like she might be sick. A hand on her arm made her lift her head. Drake leaned over her, grinning.

“Come on, gorgeous. Let’s make you more comfortable.”

“Wait. I’m sure we can come up with a deal,” she said, her mind reeling. “Charis is my best friend. Han will listen.”

He pulled her up like a rag doll and began to lead her out of the room.

“The idea was to steal Han’s heir and keep him from inheriting his kingdom—to throw the whole system into chaos to give us the upper hand.” Drake’s gaze shifted to her. “Though I have no idea why I’m telling you that.”

Brandy got the impression Drake was playing at being a bad guy without actually being one, though she couldn’t be sure.

She tried more negotiation tactics. Being an escort on Earth had taught her to haggle with the best of them. “Why don’t you send me back, and I can talk to Charis and

Han for you? What is it you want? World peace? A seat at the table? Money?"

"I want Han dead," Drake said, his face serious.

"Okay," she said slowly. "I can't promise that, but maybe we can think of secondary wants. What's on your B list?"

Drake yanked on her arm, starting to drag her to the door again.

Digging in her heels, she said, "Wait. Okay, how about this? Han has a mate. You all need a mate, right? Just like Han, you can't procreate without a human female. And I'm a human female." She smiled, putting a hand on her hip to show off her assets after snatching away from him.

Drake's eyes roved over her. "You'd willingly mate with us?"

"All of you?" she asked, uncertainty grabbing her. She wasn't sure what she'd gotten herself into.

Drake raised an eyebrow at Tork and Wrek. Wrek seemed keen on the idea. Tork kept his cool, not giving away his thoughts.

"If you mate with us and help produce an heir, it would solidify our position in the hierarchy," Drake said, mulling it over. "But if you refuse, or you cannot produce an heir, we will not only take Han's child, but we will kill your best friend Charis as well."

"Now hold on. We don't need to drag Charis into this."

"No, this sounds like a great plan. One we can start right now." He grabbed her arm again, heat flaring in his eyes.

“Drake, wait. Let’s think this through.”

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Tork and Wrek watched as she was manhandled from the room. Her eyes darted around, searching for help that wouldn't come. She was completely on her own and at the mercy of these animals.

Abducted twice over. FML.

Drake dragged her down the hallway that glowed with the same purplish black as the other parts of the ship. And she wasn't surprised when he stopped and placed his hand on the wall, causing it to disintegrate. He shoved her inside with a very firm hand on her bicep.

The room was small and bare, cell-like in nature. He forced her down until she was sitting on the floor. She wrapped her arms around her knees and stared up at him.

"I've got business to attend to now, but I'll be back later. You can show me all the things you are good for."

She was too stunned to do anything. He stalked out of the room, making the wall close behind him.

As soon as he was gone, she was up, touching all the surfaces, willing the organisms inside to open and let her out. Either they functioned differently than on Han's ship, or they'd locked out her DNA from accessing the system. It didn't take her long to figure out there was no way out.

She sat down, gripping her knees again. Her little plan to manipulate Drake had backfired. Now if she didn't mate with all three of the brothers and get pregnant by

one of them, they would hurt Charis. She couldn't let anything happen to her best friend, but she'd also sworn to herself when she left prostitution that she'd never again let a man make her do anything she didn't want to again. Apparently, that promise was about to be broken three times over.

Unless she could get out. Or Han would rescue her.

Han would rescue her, right? She'd been with him alone only once, and it was an awkward encounter. Han had known he was supposed to try to procreate with Brandy, but in the end, he'd given up and left to read poetry. She'd had better success with Kahn and Rahan, but neither had been able to produce an heir and had lost interest in her. She was not adequate. A toy they'd become bored with.

So, what would happen to her once these men found out she couldn't get pregnant? And would Han risk everything for a broken toy?

Charis would insist on Brandy's rescue if she knew about the abduction. But her friend had been very ill. Would Han even tell her? He might not want to worry her in her fragile state. Maybe they would just decide Brandy wasn't worth the trouble and let Drake have her. That was more depressing than the last soggy crab leg at a buffet.

To keep her spirits up, she began reciting lines from her favorite movies. She ran through the rescue scene of *The Princess Bride*—Inconceivable!—and the end of *The Sound of Music*. She quietly sang songs from *The Little Mermaid*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Wicked*. Her mom had been a huge theater buff, having once been a B-movie actress turned porn star. In fact, that was how Brandy was born—a birth control failure during a porn shoot. What a way to be conceived, with her mother double penetrated while faking an orgasm as the camera rolled and a crew watched. Country music singers should write songs about her life. Nothing more tragic than that for an opening scene.

Not that her childhood was all bad. She got to meet people. Travel. Her mom didn't quit the business when Brandy was born, but giving birth had changed her body and her chance at stardom. Instead, she'd began directing her own porn films. Brandy was not allowed on set, but she did spend time in the green rooms, talking to adults in bathrobes who gave her chocolates and let her ride in their expensive cars. For many years, Brandy thought her mom, and later, her stepdad, made movies people could go see in the theaters. It wasn't until she was nine and stumbled onto a shoot that she realized what those nice people in bathrobes really did for a living.

Brandy had no idea how much time had passed when the outer wall began to disintegrate again. She stood, trying to ready herself for anything. Wrek entered with a tray of food.

"I thought you might be hungry." He didn't bother to do more than glance at her as she took the tray.

"I am. Thank you." She inspected the contents—a meat that resembled chicken, something brown that seemed like it could be gravy, and a cup of water. Either their food simulator was not as good as Han's or they were giving her subpar items on purpose. She would not complain. Not if wooing these men was the key to hers and Charis's safety. "This is really nice. Thank you, Wrek."

His eyes fluttered. They were a strange shade of purple, almost lavender. There were other tweaks to his appearance, too. He wore leather and black like the rest of them, but his tattoos resembled science equations rather than the tribal swirls Drake sported. Wrek's hair was longer, curling around his ears and the nape of his neck. He kept tucking strands back in a nervous tick that seemed to increase the closer he got to her. His glance kept landing on her and then bouncing away as if he were afraid.

The quiet, nerdy type. Brandy knew what this kind of guy liked, just as she had Drake's number.

She set the tray down on the floor, got up, and moved toward Wrek. Closing the gap between them, she tossed her blond hair and licked her lips. “I appreciate what you said about me before. That I was the most beautiful woman on Han’s ship.”

Wrek gulped, hands smoothing hair back that hadn’t moved. “If I was more accurate, I would have said, ‘In my estimation, she is the most beautiful.’ Beauty is subjective and therefore non-quantifiable.”

Brandy smiled. “It’s enough that you thought I was the most beautiful.” She walked fingers up his chest, letting one hand rest on his broad shoulder. He may have been a nerd in spirit, but his body was not; it was broad and well-defined. She licked her lips again, tilting her head so her hair fell away and he could see the expanse of her bare neck.

He watched her intently. His body was stiff as if he was holding back from reaching for her. But she could tell by his breathing that what she was doing was working.

“Are you on break? Do you have a minute?” She puckered her lips slightly, leaning until the tips of her breasts were touching his chest.

“I... uh... I have to get back soon. Drake says he’s first.”

“Drake is first? That doesn’t seem fair. How soon do you need to get back?” She let her hand move from his shoulder to cup his neck.

“In a few minutes?” The rise in his pants now pressed against her. He was putty in her hands. If only she could win him over to her side, she might not need to bother with the others. He might offer to drive her off the ship himself.

She wrapped her other hand around his neck, standing on her tiptoes until their faces were nearly level. Her body was now up against his tight enough she could feel the

thundering of his heart. His breath smelled of peppermint. A dimple in the center of his chin made him adorable. His eyes kept darting to her lips, her breasts, and then back up to the ceiling as his heart sped up.

In a seductive, throaty voice, she murmured, “There’s a lot we could do in a few minutes.”

When she felt his hands slide along her hips to rest on her butt, she knew she’d won.

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He pulled her to him, bending awkwardly to place his lips on hers.

She was expecting a sloppy kiss, full of urgency and over-excitement. What she got was a welcome surprise. His kiss was soft at first, but it quickly hardened. Good pressure and tongue placement. She'd kissed lots of guys. Maybe hundreds. His wasn't bad at all.

She felt her own body warming to him. To his scent, which was strong, male, and intoxicating. And to his touch that was the exact right amount of demanding, showing how much he wanted her without being desperate. His tongue pushed between her lips, licking, exploring, while his hands squeezed her backside. He pressed her closer until she was against his erection. The huff of breath in her mouth when he moaned was a sign he was enjoying it. One of his hands slid up, tracing the skin of her breast before cupping it.

He stopped kissing her just long enough to trail his hot mouth down her neck. She tilted her head for him, enjoying the pleasure of his lips sending tingles down her skin. His thumb was rubbing the tender nub beneath her shirt and bra, using it like tinder to start a fire.

She'd had no idea how much she would enjoy this kiss with Wrek. It was unexpected and welcome. She hadn't had a partner since Rahan had left her for Harper, and her body seemed to know it had been too long. Warm wet heat pooled between her thighs. She rubbed them together to help the ache, but it only increased the longing.

His tongue lapped over the skin at the tops of her breast where her shirt stopped. She gripped his back and pulled her closer to him, tilting her head back to pant and moan.

A whirring alerted her to the wall opening. A figure strode in. Before she knew it, Wrek was yanked away.

Brandy stumbled forward before righting herself. A furious Drake held Wrek by the arm.

“What in the hell are you doing? I send you in to give her food, and this is what I find you doing?”

“I... uh... I just...”

“Enough!” Drake hollered. “I told you I was first. What did she say to get you to disobey me? She probably has your access codes already.”

“No,” Wrek answered emphatically. “I would never do that.”

“Right. Great set of tits and she lets you touch ‘em. You probably procured her a shuttle, too.”

“I didn’t.” Wrek swung his gaze to Brandy as if confused.

“She’s playing you, brother. Don’t you see you are the easiest mark? Like she actually wants to have sex with you...” He sneered. “Come on. Think with your head, not your dick.”

Wrek stared accusingly at Brandy. He looked so hurt she almost felt bad.

“It’s not true,” she said.

Drake laughed. “A good liar. I like this chick.” None too gently, he shoved Wrek out of the room. “Leave her alone until I’m done with her,” he ordered. “One blowjob

and she'll have you taking her back to Han in a rowboat.”

Appearing dejected, Wrek shuffled away. Drake stayed in the doorway, studying her.  
“Clever girl. I'll be back to see you later.”

Brandy stuck her tongue out at him, but he just laughed and closed the wall in her face.

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She was losing her marbles. She really was.

Having no clock, no connection to the outside world, and no one to talk to, Brandy had started to lose it. Wrek hadn't been back, and neither had Drake. Food had arrived with a non-verbal beast who set the tray on the floor, sniffed at her, and walked out. She'd even tried to engage him in conversation before he'd left, but he'd growled in her face before retreating.

She'd sang all the songs she knew, recited all the movie lines. She'd even taken to using the leftover food to decorate the walls, drawing flowers and puppies, but since the surface was a purplish-black, it wasn't noticeable anyway.

Finally, she'd given up and fallen into a fitful sleep with dreams of floating into empty space.

When her cell wall opened again, her eyes fluttered open. Tork was leaning over her.

"Captivity does not become you," he stated.

"What do you care?" she asked, sitting up.

He made a face that let her know he certainly did not care.

Tork was not the type to seduce. He was the type to avoid. Tall and handsome like they all were, his face held an intensity the others seemed unable to master. His scowl

could shoot ice into the souls of the toughest humans, but it was his sneer, as shifty as a hyena's, that Brandy really feared. He turned it on her now, his eyes tracing her curves like most males did when they saw her. She shivered and crossed her arms over her body protectively.

Leaning on the wall, he pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette and lit it with a human lighter.

Brandy raised her eyebrows. "I've never seen a Cartharian smoke before."

He took a drag and blew the smoke out. "Human pot is nothing compared to what we grow. You want a toké?"

She shook her head.

He chuckled and took another drag.

"What are you doing here?" she asked coldly.

"Boss man says you need stimulus. The scanners indicate you are in distress. He doesn't want his new toy upset." He adopted a mock-scientific tone that sounded a lot like Wrek before continuing. "I'm your chaperone. Going to take you for a walk, puppy."

"Take me for a walk?" She wanted to refuse this smug bastard, but she was going crazy. And maybe if she were out, she could figure out a way off this ship. "Fine. Where to?"

He took a step back, the cigarette pinched between his lips, and gestured for her to exit. Brandy didn't wait. She hurried out of the room.

“Don’t think about running,” he said. “I have a stun feature on this thing I’ve been dying to try out.” He wagged one of those dark cylindrical wands in his hand.

“Where else would I rather be?” It was her turn to sneer.

“Exactly.” He took another hit of his smoke before stubbing it out beneath his boot. “This way.”

She walked beside him down the hall, feeling nervous and lightheaded. It must have been a contact buzz from whatever Tork was smoking that made her mind feel fuzzy and her limbs weak. Shaking her head a few times, she was able to gain control of most of her senses. Whatever effect it had on Tork, she could not discern anything different from his behavior. He sauntered like he owned the place. His black T-shirt, fitted snugly to his arms and chest, flexed and relaxed as his arms swung. And his boots clomped loudly on the floor. He had the habit of pushing his dark hair back, though it would always fall forward again. The wavy locks were wild in a way that most girls would find incredibly sexy. Brandy knew better. She’d dated all kinds of guys like Tork. She knew they spent a lot of time trying to seem as if they didn’t give a shit when they cared a whole hell of a lot.

He stopped in front of a wall and pressed his hand to it, turning to her instead of watching it disintegrate. “What’s your name again?”

“Brandy.”

“From the song. Brandy, she’s a fine girl?” His half-lidded eyes watched her in amusement.

“Something like that,” she said tersely.

“Yeah, something like that.” He chuckled at his own joke and then waited for her to

enter.

Stepping into the room, she was surprised, to say the least. She'd expected a park to walk around in, something natural and peaceful. What she found was an old-school gym straight out of the movie Rocky.

The floor was tacky like it hadn't been washed in a while. The windows grimy with soot. The main feature was an old-school boxing ring with sagging ropes. Around the ring were various other workout items—speed bags, punching bags, jump ropes, and a rack of weights. There were gray dented lockers in the back and dressing rooms around the side.

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After sealing the wall, Tork made his way to the weight bench, loaded it up with flat black disks of various weights, and started bench-pressing. Brandy watched his muscles flex, wondering what in the hell she was supposed to do here.

She'd never been one to work out. Her agency, which was a nice way of saying her pimp, wanted her to be waifish—with enhanced breasts, of course. So she'd worked on her skills in bulimia and then calorie counting when throwing up proved to be bad on her system.

The clank of the weights hitting the rack drew her attention. Tork was sweating. He drew his shirt off, revealing glistening pecs and abs that any male on Earth would've killed for. He also had tribal tattoos on one arm, though she had no idea the meaning. Averting her eyes, she felt her pulse speed up. She should not be ogling his amazing body. Tork would get her in trouble. And if Drake claimed her, she could get Tork in trouble, too. Best to avoid him and stay quiet.

“If you aren't going to work out, then you can spot me.” He waved her over as he situated himself underneath the heavy bar again.

“Spot you?”

“Yeah. Over here. Don't let the bar crush my spine. Simple. You can handle that. Right, puppy?”

God, she wanted to deck him. Or maybe let the bar crush his spine. Instead, she walked over and put her hands under the bar as he pushed out something like twelve more reps. He didn't need her help, moving the bar up and down like it weighed

nothing. Cartharians were naturally strong, so she didn't was why she didn't understand why he pumped weights.

He got up, using his shirt to wipe the sweat from his torso. The glistening muscles would've put Conan the Barbarian to shame.

"Your turn." He gestured at the bench with his balled-up T-shirt.

Her eyes popped. "My turn?"

"Yeah. Bench or squat? Or maybe you'd rather do some bag training."

"Bag training? How can you think any of this is my thing?" She gestured to her very non-muscular body.

He wiped his face with the shirt again before tossing it on the floor. "Look, sweetheart, I was told to get you some exercise and that is what I plan to do. Now, don't give me a hard time about it. We can finish here and go on our merry way. I know that's what we all want."

Back to her cell. She wasn't sure which was worse, being here with him or being locked up alone.

"Fine, I'll work out, but don't you have a treadmill around here somewhere?" She scanned the room.

"You don't need that shit. Waste of time." He took her hand, dragging her toward the center of the gym and the large boxing ring that occupied it.

"What are you doing?" she asked, trying to tug away, but his grip was strong.

When they got to the base of the ring, Tork started handing her sparing pads. Thick headgear, gloves, and a mouthpiece. She stared at them with a growing sense of horror. “What are these for?”

“Jesus, you ask a lot of questions. Does Han put up with that mouth? Get the gear on. Put the mouthpiece in first so I can’t hear your yammering.” He got a bandage out and started to unwind it. Then he took her wrist and began to wrap it.

She was expecting him to be rough, but his touch was gentle. His fingers brushed against the skin on her wrist as he expertly bound it. His eyes flicked up to hers and then down at his work. “So you don’t break your bones when you hit me,” he said, reaching for the other one.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Can’t break my bones, puppy. At least you can’t. But thanks for the concern.”

“Han could break your bones.”

His eyes shot up, narrowing. “Yeah, your precious Han could. If he could catch me.”

“He’s not my precious Han.” She pressed her lips together, realizing she shouldn’t have said anything. She wanted them to think she was worth something to Han, so they would keep her alive. But the words were already out, and Tork pounced on them.

“Eyes only for his pregnant bride now, eh? Tossed you aside? Jilted lover?” he mocked, one eyebrow arching.

“It’s none of your business.”

“Or is there something else you’re not telling us? Maybe you aren’t the prize you’ve been pretending to be?” His eyes zeroed in on hers.

Did he know she hadn’t been able to produce heirs for Han and his brothers? If he suspected, then it was all over. They’d toss her out of the airlock. Or worse, they’d use her for pleasure and throw her away. There was that broken-toy feeling in the pit of her stomach again, making her sick.

But Tork didn’t press the idea any further. He finished wrapping her wrists, and then helped her put on the boxing gloves. After jamming the headgear on her head, he slipped the mouthpiece between her teeth. “In the ring,” he commanded.

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She wanted to punch him right there, but thought she might get in more hits while in the ring. Once she crawled under the ropes, she stood with her hands up, ready for anything. The board creaked beneath her feet like she really was in an old boxing ring and not some simulation in space.

Tork climbed up with much more grace than she had, the ropes barely moving. He raised his own fists, adopting a boxer stance that could only come from experience. When he saw her form, he dropped his fists and shook his head.

“Not like that. Here.” He walked over and began moving her arms. “Elbows in to protect the ribs. Fists up to protect the face. Most of boxing is trying not to get hit. Or at least, not getting hit anywhere important.”

“What about punching?” she asked, feeling pent up. “I want to get to the punching.”

“Oh, really?” His eyebrows went up in an amused smile. “Fine. Hit me.” He stepped back around and positioned himself across from her in the ring.

“Hit you?”

“Hit me.”

“Anywhere?”

“Not in the jewels. Aim for the head or chest. The best shots are under the chin with an uppercut or the kidneys. If you turn the head far enough, the brain will hit the side of the skull, making them black out.”

“That’s brutal.”

His face darkened. “The world is brutal. Or haven’t you figured that out yet?”

She gritted her teeth and punched him.

It was like hitting a brick wall. Her hand instantly hurt. Tork didn’t flinch.

“You need to follow through with your shoulder. Turn your body. Like this.” He reached out and tilted her arm, extending her body. She moved awkwardly, but he did it again, telling her this time to take a step forward and put her weight into it. Then he stood there and let her hit him again. This time, the punch still hurt like hell, but at least he flinched a little when she connected.

“Do it again.”

She hit him several more times. Each time, he stopped to correct her. By the time a half an hour had passed on the caged clock on the wall, she was sweaty, tired, and much better at boxing. She felt herself almost smiling.

He smiled, too. And not in that smug, self-satisfied way he had. A real smile. It looked nice on him. He helped her out of her gloves, unwinding the bandages and letting his fingers linger a bit longer than necessary on the skin of her wrists. Brandy felt the thrill of it, the heat beginning like it always did when a man she found very attractive seemed to like her, too. But then she reminded herself that not only was Tork dangerous, he was also her captor. Munchhausen Syndrome anyone?

She pulled her hands back, flexing them, and stepped away to pull off her headgear and shake out her hair. A sweaty mess, she thought about asking for a shower, but then she wondered if he would think she was indicating she wanted to take one with him. And part of her did. She told that part to shut the hell up.

“That was okay. Decent,” he said, sitting on a battered bench and squeezing a water bottle in his mouth before dumping it on his head and chest. Topless, he glistened. Lord.

“I’m not much of a boxer,” she demurred as he handed the water bottle to her. She shook her head before heading over to a water fountain and drinking from there instead. She could practically feel his eyes on her backside as she bent over.

When she stood up, he was there standing behind her. “We could do this again. If you want to learn more.” One eyebrow arched.

“Sure.” Her heart pounded.

Reaching out, he took a strand of loose hair and tucked it behind her ear. The tension between them was palpable. She gripped her hands together and waited for him to kiss her, tried not to think about what she would do if he did.

You’d give in. You’d let him do whatever he wanted because you find him so attractive. And you’d be a fool.

A voice sounded from above. “Tork?”

He jumped a little and then took a step back. “Yeah?”

“You’re needed on the bridge. Now.”

“Be there in a minute.” Tork turned from her, walking over to his shirt and tugging it on. She watched his muscles flex as he covered all that deliciousness with fabric. Once he had it settled, he said, “Stay here. Do what you want. Someone will be back to escort you to your room later.” He started to walk away.

“Wait!”

He swiveled to face her.

“What am I supposed to do until then?”

He shrugged. “Work on your uppercut. It sucks.”

4

Brandy waited in the smelly gym, running over every frustrating interaction with Tork.

Wrek was easy to figure out. Or at least she thought. And Tork? He was doing the standard douche-bag-dis routine. Brandy remembered when that book *The Game* came out and the subsequent TV show after it. For at least a solid year, guys were “peacocking” and “dissing” girls to much-varied effect. It was an infuriating year, and she was glad the fad had mostly petered out.

It was not over in space land, apparently.

She found a refrigerator and stared at the empty shelves. She’d had a meal a while ago, but with no clocks and no sense of time, she had no idea how much time had passed. Would these men let her starve? She didn’t think so, not if they thought she could produce an heir, but who knew if they remembered to feed their pets?

The Cartharian culture was so complicated. From what she understood, Cartharian females were nonexistent. Or at least, they were now. She had no idea what happened to them or where they went, but if the species was going to continue, they needed females from other species to produce their offspring for them. The problem was there weren’t many species that could do it. And not all members of those few species were able to get pregnant with Cartharian babies. So they created scouting ships and began scanning the populous trying to pinpoint females who could.

From everything Brandy had been told, her body was able to conceive and give birth

to a Cartharian child, but so far, the proof was in the pudding. Lots of alien sex and no baby. Ergo, she was useless. And now she worried Tork might have figured that out.

But maybe he wouldn't tell Drake. Or maybe the boys would become so enamored with her they'd beg her to stay on. Rahan had taken a liking to her enough to petition Han to let her stay after she'd proven unable to help with their baby problem. Han had agreed. Maybe these aliens would do the same. Hopefully, they'd agree to leave Charis the hell alone, too.

Right. And aliens were all little green men.

Finally, after a lot of poking through empty lockers and office shelves in the gym, she found a food replicator in a back office and convince it to make her scones and coffee. Normally she'd watch what she ate, but what did it matter? She could be dead tomorrow.

Depression was not her usual viewpoint. She'd been voted best smile and most optimistic in high school for a reason. She chose to think Charis was at her wit's end right now, begging Han to intercede. And that Han, in his love for Charis, would do anything to get his mate's best friend back.

"They're flying here right now," she said aloud, feeling only a little bit crazy. "Soon, they'll be calling Drake up with their demands before they blast the shields away, or whatever."

After eating, she curled up in a ratty armchair in the back office and went to sleep.

Sometime later, she was woken up by approaching footsteps.

When she sat up, Drake was standing in the office, a displeased expression on his

face. “Did you seduce my brothers?”

“What?” She sat up further, shaking the sleep away. “What are you talking about—”

“Did you seduce my brothers?” he said more forcefully. He was pissed.

“No, I...”

“Save it.” He held his hand up. “I should’ve known when I saw you that you would be trouble. And they’re so weak-minded, too. So easily controlled.” He was talking to himself now. She kept quiet, but it didn’t work for long. Drake’s accusatory glare found her. “Get up.”

“Where are we going?”

“What does that matter to you? Our deal is forfeit. You are trouble. I’m going to deal with you my way now.” He kicked the chair, causing the back to vault upright. Brandy nearly fell as she was trying to stand up.

“You don’t have to be so mean,” she said, gripping the desk for stability. “Everyone knows you’re in charge. You don’t have to flex your muscles all the time for people to respect you.”

“Apparently, I do. Both my brothers are asking for your release. They want you to have privileges on the ship like a real citizen. Now, why would they want that? Both claim they haven’t slept with you, but I’m not so sure.”

Brandy glared. “Maybe they want me free because they are decent creatures. It’s clear you have no idea what that feels like.”

He glowered, anger pulsing in the veins around his neck. “Let’s go.” He gestured

toward the door.

“Where are we going?”

His icy stare didn't waver.

She tried not to let her nerves show as he directed her out of the gym and into the hallway. The pace he set for them was brisk, and she was out of breath by the time he stopped in front of a wall and began opening it with his touch.

Brandy didn't know what she was expecting, but it wasn't for a gigantic angry beast to tear out of the room.

It all happened so fast. One minute, there was a smooth purple-black wall in front of them. The next, it dissolved and a giant alien beast bursted from it. Long, clawed fingers wrapped around Drake's neck as it used its momentum to smash the man against the far wall.

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Brandy screamed, backpedaling out of the way as a fight broke out in the hallway. The alien was just like the others she'd seen—scaly with a mane, red eyes, slitted nostrils, and elongated fingers ending in claws. With one hand, it had Drake by the throat and was lifting him so his boots scrabbled on the floor. Caught off guard, Drake struggled for air, grasping at the hands that were choking him. As she watched his eyes bulge, Brandy's panic turned to terror.

Drake kicked the beast in the ribs over and over as he slowly suffocated. One last hard kick made the alien beast curl inward, his hand letting go of Drake's throat. Drake fell into a crouch, gasping. A few tortured breaths and Drake was up, slamming the beast into the wall so hard it wobbled. It wrapped long arms around Drake's back and sank its claws deep into his skin and muscles beneath. He let out a howl, his face twisted with pain.

Desperate, Drake's eyes darted around, landing on Brandy. "Call... for help."

Brandy stared at him, unable to move.

Leaning around the beast's snarling head, Drake locked eyes with her. "Call for... back up. Please."

What should she do? Drake was just about to punish her for her supposed transgressions, but this fight needed to be broken up before someone got hurt.

"What do I do?" she asked.

Drake was concentrating on keeping the beast pinned while enduring the claws

sinking further into his back. Through gritted teeth, he said, “Press your hand... to the wall. Call Wrek.”

Brandy pressed her hand to the wall. Nothing happened. “Drake, it’s not working!”

When she turned, the beast had wrestled out of Drake’s grasp and was trying his best to end his life. The beast slashed out with its claws, cut through Drake’s shirt, and sliced open his chest. Purplish-black blood dripped down his skin as he used his arms to stop the onslaught.

Brandy whirled back to the wall and pressed her hand to it. “Wrek, we need you down here. Hurry!”

A voice crackled overhead. “Brandy? Is that you?”

“Wrek! Please. One of the... aliens is tearing Drake apart.”

“Oh Gods.” The commlink ended.

Brandy turned toward the battle.

Drake was on his back, resembling a piece of shredded beef. Black blood was everywhere—the floors, the wall. The beast stood over Drake’s heaving chest.

It raised its claws to strike.

“Stop!” Brandy screamed.

The beast’s claws stopped in midair. It turned slowly, locking its red eyes on her.

Trembling, she tried her most forceful tone. “Leave him alone. You’ve done enough.”

Nostrils sniffing the air, it left Drake's body and began to stalk toward her. Blood dripped off its claws and pattered on the floor. Those red eyes locked in like he was seeing his next victim.

Brandy ran.

Heart pounding, she sprinted down the corridor with the beast in pursuit. She could hear it thundering along behind her, footfalls shaking the floors beneath her feet. Breath caught in her throat, she ran with abandon.

Images flashed through her mind as she skidded around a corner—blood on those sharp claws, Drake in a puddle of his own blood. Was that what she'd look like when they found her lifeless body?

She took another corner, her feet slapping against the floor. Tortured sounds were pouring from her throat. Behind her, giant feet pounded on the ground with each lopping step. It was gaining on her.

And then the corridor ended. A dead end. She skidded around to go back the way she came as the beast rounded the corner. She was trapped.

Back against the wall, she tried desperately to think of a way out. The beast blocked the only exit. She tried pressing her hands to the wall with her back to it so she could keep her eyes on him, but no opening appeared.

The beast stalked forward with its claws out like a monstrous Freddy Kruger.

"Stay where you are," she shrieked, panic tightening her insides. "Don't come any closer!"

Nostrils flared as his razor-sharp teeth parted. A guttural growl rolled out of its throat.

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Tears streaked down Brandy's cheeks as she pressed herself against the wall and began to pray. Dear God, don't let me die on some alien ship torn apart by this monster. If I have to die, let it be on American soil with Tom Petty playing in the background.

The alien prowled closer. A set of bloody claws closed the gap between them. She squeezed her eyes shut, unable to stop her trembling. An appendage traced down her neck to her chest. Tears streamed down her cheeks as it touched her. The horror of the moment made it hard for her to draw breath.

The tip of its claw drew a line from her collarbone to her cleavage with excruciating slowness. The creature smelled like raw meat left out in the sun. Like maggoty hamburger in the garbage after the Fourth of July. Her eyes opened, seeing the thick mane of hair, matted into dreads. The scales along its neck reflected the purple light of the walls. This was the last image she would see before her blood was spilled.

She held her breath, waiting for it to be over.

The wall behind her disappeared. Brandy fell back as others rushed into the corridor. Eyes widening, Brandy watched as Wrek, Tork, and an army of humanoid aliens charged through. Two or three shot pulses at the beast from their cylinders. Her attacker twisted, contorting as it fell to the ground and shook. As the beast twitched in the aftermath, men secured its wrists and ankles before hauling it away.

Wrek put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Brandy nodded. "But Drake... he looked bad."

“Which way?” Tork asked.

Brandy pointed, and Tork took off running down the hall.

She slid down, gripping her knees. Wrek hovered over her like a father over an injured child. “Can I check your vitals?”

Nodding, she let Wrek run the wand up and down her body before he pronounced her physically okay. Then he sat down on the ground beside her, his back leaned against the now-solid wall.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” Wrek said.

She grimaced, not sure what to say. It had all been too much. “Is Drake... dead?”

“Him? No, it will take much more than that to finish my brother.”

Brandy wasn’t sure how to feel. No matter what had happened, she didn’t wish anyone dead.

“Why did that thing attack him?”

Wrek bowed his head for a moment as if considering what to tell her. “There are some of our clan who do not appreciate his leadership style. They led a revolt a while back and attempted a mutiny. He’s imprisoned them in there. I guess he should’ve thought twice before opening the door.”

“So, he was taking me into a jail cell with angry, violent beasts?” Her voice had risen in hysteria at the thought. What if that thing hadn’t attacked Drake? Would it have done that to her?

Wrek shook his head. "I have to believe my brother would have better judgment than that. It must've been a mistake."

"He said I seduced you. That you were asking for my release." Her voice got shrill. Drake was going to feed her to monsters.

She turned pleading eyes to Wrek for answers. He was not his brother. And she needed allies now that she knew what Drake was capable of. Wrek, sitting next to her, was the easiest ally to procure.

She reached out, gently touching his hand before drawing hers back again. "I appreciate you trying to help me."

"Drake is impossible. He won't listen to anyone. He's got this vendetta against Han. I'm sorry you are tangled up in it."

"What is this feud with Han?" she asked, leaning her head back. She was tired from all the stress and strain, but she struggled to keep her eyes open. It was important to keep Wrek on her side.

"He and Han have a feud trending back for generations. There was a war for control of our country. Many battles were fought. Too many died. Han's ancestor and ours were allies, but when the battle was won, Han's people assumed the throne and backstabbed us. We've been fighting to take it back ever since."

"So, you're space pirates fighting over a throne of a planet far away?" She arched an eyebrow.

Wrek shrugged. "It doesn't feel that far away. Drake takes it personally as the eldest. And with Han not yet seated, since he's awaiting an heir, he feels like this is his time to strike."

“Thus, trying to abduct Charis. Except you got me. So disappointing.”

He leaned slightly toward her. “I’m not disappointed.”

She could feel things heating up between them. It would infuriate Drake if he knew she was once again seducing his brother for personal gain. But then again, Drake was incapacitated and maybe Wrek would agree to transport her back to Han’s ship while he was out of commission. Forget mating with the brothers. She could get her ticket out of here right now.

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Turning toward him, she pursed her lips, parting them slightly. She arched her back, shaking out her hair.

Trembling, he reached out and brushed his thumb along her cheek. His eyes were that mesmerizing purple. And his soft, reserved manner was sweet and endearing. She was used to brutes who took what they wanted. Wrek was thoughtful and kind. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes.

“Drake thinks you’re bad for me,” he murmured.

She felt her body responding to his closeness. “And I think Drake wants me for himself. What do you think?”

He was breathing heavily, his hand in her hair, fingers slowly stroking the strands to the ends. “I think you’re one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met.”

He leaned in further, still hesitating. They were now inches apart. She could smell that scent all males had. One of their many intoxicating qualities that made her lose herself.

This time when he leaned toward her, she closed her eyes, and he initiated the kiss.

When he brushed against the smooth skin of her mouth, it made heat spread across her body. But he seemed unsure of himself, so she took charge. Grabbing his head, she used her tongue to coax his lips apart. With a moan, he let her in. Their tongues tangled in gentle sweeps that sent thrills up her spine.

One of his hands gripped the back of her neck, fingers snaking into her hair. He pulled her closer, kissing her deeper. He seemed to be getting the hang of it, letting himself enjoy her without worry. When he pulled his mouth away, she was breathless and hot.

“Why did you stop?” she asked.

He shook his head, eyes narrowed at the rise in his pants that proved he wanted her. “Drake.”

“Forget him.” But when she reached for him again, he leaned back.

“You’re wonderful, Brandy.” He let go of her and stood up, adjusting his clothes. “But he’s claimed you first. What he’d do to me if he found out...” Wrek blushed.

“Well, well, well...” a voice said from the doorway.

When their heads jerked toward the sound, Tork was leaning against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest and a smug smile on his lips.

Wrek flustered, stepping away from Brandy.

Busted.

“I knew you were a rebel, little brother,” Tork said, still smiling darkly, “but I didn’t know you’d go directly against Drake’s wishes. Brave, little brother. Brave and stupid.”

Brandy swiveled her gaze between the two men, not really understanding. “What did Drake say?”

Tork raised an eyebrow. “He said you are his. He owns you, and we are not to touch you until he’s done with you.”

5

The words swirled in Brandy's head. He had claimed her as his own. No trying out all three to see if offspring was possible. She was Drake's property until he said different.

But Drake hated her. He wanted to throw her in a jail cell with murderous aliens. Anger burned through her as the men regarded her.

"He can't do that," she insisted, standing up despite her fatigue.

"Oh, he can, sweetheart. And he has." Tork studied her with disappointment before donning his usual smug expression. "As the eldest brother, he has rights we don't. He gets first claim on human females in the attempt to produce an heir. We get the leftovers. Great, huh?"

"It's the same on Han's ship. But lucky for Rahan and Kahn, Han has a mate now."

Wrek tilted his head in that thoughtful way he had. "But why are you not mated to one of them? It's inconceivable."

Tork smirked. "Playing it a bit desperate, aren't we, bud?"

Wrek blushed.

Brandy attempted to answer his question just to take the heat off Wrek. "None of them wanted me. Well, Rahan had an interest until he found someone better."

Wrek shook his head like he couldn't believe it.

"Lucky for Drake, then. I'll tell you a little secret, sweetheart. One you aren't going to like very much. Drake has no intention of returning you to Han. Ever. Even if Han meets Drake's demands, he's told me he intends to keep you. So, your charms are not wasted. Congratulations," Tork said dryly.

Her mind seemed to contract at Tork's words. "No. No, he can't."

"There's that word again. Can't. Drake can. And he does. Welcome to our world." Tork leaned his head back, his expression dark.

"We'll stop him. Won't we Tork?" Wrek turned to his brother for reassurance but didn't get any.

Tork shook his head. "I like my hide, Wrek. You might not care for yours, but mine is nice. I'd like to keep it."

Brandy leaned against the wall, hopelessness stealing over her. Drake was awful. She bowed her head.

Wrek stepped in front of her. "Look, we can figure this out. You're smart and good at what you do."

"Good at making men like me, you mean," she blurted. "What good does that do me?"

"That's just it," Wrek said, running a hand through his hair. "We can get Drake to like you. And if he really likes you, maybe he can be persuaded to let you choose what you want to do."

“Like if I want to leave or stay?”

Wrek nodded. Her eyes trailed over to Tork. “Do you think it could work?”

His shoulders moved up and down inside his jacket. “Who’s to say? It could work, or Drake could eject Wrek out of the airlock.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Brandy balked.

Tork shook his head.

Brandy turned to Wrek. “He’s kidding, right?”

Wrek wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“So, if you help me, Drake could kill you?”

Tork nodded. “Sure. Drake can do whatever he wants. Are you sensing the pattern now, sweetheart?”

“Then you can’t help me. You have to stay out of this.”

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Wrek took her hand. “That is the exact reason we should help.”

Brandy shook her head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Not if we keep Drake happy,” Wrek said. “We’ve survived our brother for a long time. When he’s happy, he’s a teddy bear.”

“A murderous teddy bear,” Brandy murmured.

Wrek continued like he hadn’t heard. “So we do everything to make Drake happy. And then, when he’s at his pinnacle of happiness, we make our request. Nothing too crazy. We aren’t asking him to call off the feud with Han or anything.”

“But I can’t let him abduct Charis. She’s my best friend.”

Tork shook his head. “They’ve raised shields. It’ll be almost impossible to get in now.”

“So you have to show me how to make Drake happy. And you have to do it quickly before he recovers. And my performance has to be perfect or we could all die. Did I get it right?”

Tork and Wrek nodded morosely. “Pretty much,” Tork said.

Brandy blew out a breath. “No pressure, huh? God.” She scrubbed her hand over her face. “Well, no time like the present. Tell me what I have to do.”

Wrek stepped forward, but Tork put a hand on his chest to hold him back. “No offense, little brother, but I’m pretty sure I’m the man for the job.”

Wrek started to protest, but then stopped. “You’re right. Out of the two of us, you’re the most like Drake.” His eyes darted away as if this comment both upset and frustrated him.

Brandy wanted to reassure him, but Tork was already putting a hand on her back, urging her forward. “Let’s go, sweetheart. We don’t have much time.”

“Wait, where are you going?” Wrek asked, starting forward.

Tork raised an eyebrow. “Drake wouldn’t have her in front of anyone. I’ll need to instruct Brandy alone.”

Brandy turned around to see his face so she could gauge his intentions, but he urged her forward again. “Down the hall. Take a right. My room.”

Back to the gym again? She had enjoyed their sparring match, but she didn’t think it was going to help her convince Drake unless he, too, was a female boxing fan. She got an image of her sparring with Drake and shook her head. Then she recalled that time she’d been hired to fight in a kiddie pool full of Jell-O pudding with a girl in a gold bikini. She’d smelled like chocolate for a week after that.

Tork stopped her in front of a wall, pressing his hand to it. As she waited for the material to dissolve, she glanced back to see if she could spot Wrek, but no. He was the one who cared about her, who wanted to protect her. What was she doing here with Tork, the brother she found vastly more attractive but knew could hurt her?

“Time waits for no man,” Tork said, gesturing toward the now-open entrance. He seemed irritated, like this was all her idea and he was fed up with her nonsense.

Frowning, she entered, scanning the area as he sealed up the wall.

The gym was gone. In fact, the room was completely empty, a space about the size of a school gymnasium glowing a dim purplish-black.

When she glanced back, Tork was staring at her with his arms crossed.

“So,” Brandy said, trying to come off bright and excited, but just sounding exhausted, “what should we do first?”

“I should ask you that. What special skills or talents do you have? What can you do to prove to Drake you’re worth keeping? He wants an heir, but I have a feeling that might not be possible. If it was, one of Han’s brothers would have snatched you up.”

Brandy winced.

“So, what else? Prove you’re worth it.” Tork stared at her as if bored.

This question took her back. “I... um... I’m good at Friends trivia?”

He frowned.

“Okay, not that. I know how to give a great massage.” She flexed her long fingers.

Tork shook his head. “Think bigger than that.”

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Bigger than that? She hadn't gone to college. She'd started working as a stripper when she was eighteen, and a call girl only two years after that. She hadn't gone to any training schools or taken lessons.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

He threw his arms down in disgust. "Then what are we doing here?" He turned to go.

"Wait! I've got it. I can do acrobatics!" She nearly clapped her hands in delight at thinking of the answer, before stopping herself. Tork wouldn't like ditzy.

"What is acrobatics?" he asked, tilting his head to the side.

Brandy smiled. "Give me access to this room's simulator and I'll show you."

Taking a deep breath, Brandy stepped up to the long ribbon of fabric and looped her arm around it.

Tork had given her access to the simulator room and left, saying he'd be back in twenty and not to take any longer than that. Once alone, she worked fast, using the room to order up an outfit, high ceilings, and a long piece of silken fabric. She'd done it all so quickly she'd even had time to do her hair and makeup. Her mama always said there was nothing a little mascara and lipstick couldn't fix. No wonder Brandy had become a hooker.

When the wall of the room opened and Tork reappeared, she was ready. Sparkles danced off her gold and turquoise leotard, which clung to her curves. She knew her

long legs were one of her best features, and this outfit showed them off to perfection. She watched his eyes trace up the length of them.

“What’s all this?” He appeared more astonished than upset.

She smiled. “Just you wait.”

When she pressed her finger to the boom box she’d ordered up, the music began to pulse out into the room. She’d picked You Give Love a Bad Name, by Bon Jovi. God, she was a sucker for hair bands and the men in them. That was probably why she was so enamored with Rahan. And why she was attracted to Tork. She could feel his eyes on her as she stepped up to the silk and wrapped her arm around it.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he tried to seem uninterested. Smiling, she knew this routine would hold his interest.

Brandy let the music surge around her as she inched her way up the silk.

She’d learned to do this in Vegas when she did a stint as a performer by day and an escort by night. The performances were at a shitty hotel down the strip from the good ones, but she’d loved every minute. The lights and music would mingle around her as she contorted her body, rolling herself down the silk and then climbing back up again. There was nothing more beautiful than a woman wrapping and unwrapping herself, like the world’s most exciting striptease. And she didn’t even have to get naked.

Now, in the room with Tork, she didn’t think about all that. She didn’t think about much, letting her body feel the routine. One arm extended out as a leg wrapped around the silk and held it tight. Then she let go, letting the fabric twirl her down before stopping herself upside down, her arms extended and her hair dangling to the floor. Her eyes met Tork’s. Even though he was upside down, she could see he was enjoying himself. She winked before crawling sensually up the silk again.

By the time the song was over and the music finished, Brandy was out of breath and filled with elation. She hadn't done a routine since one of Charis's first nights and that disastrous party with Rahan. It felt good to be back up again.

Dropping down, she stood before Tork, panting a little and regarding him expectantly.

He did not look happy.

"Didn't you like it?" she asked, pushing the hair out of her face.

Shaking his head, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do you think this is a game?"

Brandy put her hands on her hips. "Of course not. I just thought—"

"What you thought was my brother would like a circus act, is that it? A man who keeps his own people enslaved, and you think he'd like ... whatever that was." He gestured at the fabric angrily.

All her hope deflated. "A lot of men like it."

"Human men? Or men like Wrek maybe. Not Drake." Tork turned his head, lighting a cigarette. He puffed on it in frustration.

"Then you tell me," she said. "You tell me what Drake likes."

"You want to know?" He squinted at her through the smoke.

"I'm asking, aren't I?" She was mad. Nothing she did was right, and this whole situation was a nightmare. "I didn't ask for any of this."

“You want to know what Drake likes?” Tork took a last long drag on his cigarette before stubbing it out on the ground. “Drake likes this.”

He crossed the gap between them in three long strides. One hand slipped behind her head as the other wrapped around her back. Then he pulled her in and kissed her.

At first, she was mad at the suddenness of it. At his lack of concern for her consent. But all that melted away as he kissed her. She had known her body wanted Tork, but nothing could’ve prepared her for what it would do when she was in his arms.

Brandy couldn't believe what she was doing. She was supposed to be preparing to entice Drake, not make out with Tork. But make out with him, she was.

Tongue, lips, teeth, it was all one blur of passionate desperation. Like he wanted to consume her, and she was loving every minute of it. Nobody turned her on like Tork. Not Wrek. Not even Rahan. He was everything she'd sought after in a man—a little bit of danger mixed with a dash of sadness and a whole lot of heat. She gripped his lapels and pulled him closer.

One large hand snaked around her neck, buried in her hair as the other wrapped around her back. His mouth enfolded her, opening, his tongue searching. She returned the kiss, her hands grasping his shirt desperately. His fingers trailed down to the sensitive skin on the small of her back as his mouth left a path of kisses down her neck.

She couldn't breathe. She didn't want to. Her whole body yearned for him to take it farther. She pulled him in closer.

He shook his head and let go of her, taking a step back. "This is a mistake."

She reached for him, her head spinning. "Tork, don't go." Grabbing, she caught his muscular arm and whirled him around. Anger darkened his face before his eyes were once again tracing over her lips and breasts.

Her hands sought out the straps of the leotard, pulling down one strap and then the

other. With the fabric barely clinging to her body, she began a dance she'd perfected after years of training, a striptease, while he watched. She knew her body did things to men. It was a weapon, one of the only ones she had at her disposal. Panting, she watched as his gaze traveled hungrily across the vast expanse of skin. With excruciating slowness, she removed her leotard.

Tork watched her with rapt attention for a few seconds before striding over.

With a low growl, he picked her up with one arm, driving her back to the wall. His body pressed to hers with delicious weight as he ground into her. Bringing her legs around his waist, she thrust her hips up, rubbing against him. He was a thick hot length stroking against all the right places.

Her hands tugged at his shirt, drawing it over his head. His chest was a rock-hard wall of muscle. And those tattoos. So sexy she wanted to bite each one. When she ran her hands over his nipples, he shivered.

His hands worked on his pants frantically, yanking so hard the fabric ripped. Wanting them flesh to flesh, her hands helped urge them off.

"Hurry," she ordered.

His eyes darkened like he didn't like being told what to do, but he obeyed nonetheless.

His pants dropped to the floor and then his boxer briefs. God, his member was just as enormous as she expected, but she only got a brief glance before he pressed himself against her, his shaft wavering close to where she wanted it to go.

But up against the wall like this, the angle was wrong. He picked her up again, this time lowering her to the floor. No time for a bed.

She felt his hands reach out for something, feeling the soft caress of fabric as Tork drew the long silk toward them. The same silk she'd used to slither on to do her acrobatic, he used to tie her hands together. Wrists bound above her head, she had no choice but to submit to his whims, a thought that nearly made her come just thinking it. She was his to do with what he wished. Brandy stared up at Tork, getting lost in his dark eyes.

He gazed at her bound, naked body, but his desire seemed to get the best of him. Tork fit his knees between her thighs and urged them open.

When his mouth fit over hers, his breath intoxicated her, and her head whirled deliciously. A throaty moan escaped her lips as he ran his hand over her bare thighs and between her legs. Arching up into his hand, she gasped. She could barely keep up with his touch. His mouth was on her nipple just as his fingers found her wetness.

Both sensations at once were almost too much. She bucked against his hand, urging it to go faster, harder. Then his fingers retreated and he slipped down her body, covering her stomach and hips with his tongue.

Oh God, she was going to explode before he'd even entered her.

She wanted to wrap her hands around his throbbing erection and aim it home, but she was bound. He seemed to sense what she was asking for. Slowly, he crawled up her body, his arms on either side of her head, the tip of his erection hovering at her core. Locking eyes with her, he slid it home.

It gave her chills that ran the length of her body. One moan and he thrust up until his full length was inside her, stretching, pulling, lighting her on fire. It was like her whole body was electrified with the best kind of pleasure. It tore through her like a riptide, making her muscles convulse.

“Oh, God!”

He pounded into her with wild, frantic pulses.

The building ecstasy exploded like a supernova. She came clamped around him, riding his pleasure as her own filled her senses again and again.

He climaxed with her, his whole body tightening and pulsing. The growl she'd heard before rumbled in his chest as he arched over her.

When he finished, his head sagged and he placed his forehead against hers. She pressed her head against his, feeling something like happiness for the first time since being taken.

But he pulled away, standing up and grabbing his clothes. Leaning up, she watched him, alarm growing as she saw how angry his expression was becoming.

“Tork, is everything okay?”

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He whirled on her, flashing his teeth. His eyes were red and pulsing, as if he were going to shift into one of those beasts. She sat up in alarm. Her hands were still bound.

“See what you made me do?” he growled, stalking to the wall.

“Tork, what is happening?” She scrambled against the knot at her wrists, trying to loosen it.

The wall opened, and he strode through naked. She tried to get her wrists free to be able to run after him, but he placed his hand on the outside wall and closed it to seal her in.

“Tork!”

There was no answer.

She freed herself from the silks eventually, ordered new clothes from the simulator, and got dressed. With nothing else to do, she passed the time requesting food she didn’t eat.

What had she done wrong to make him storm out? The sex had been hot—there was no denying that. But maybe she’d given in too quickly? Men were terrible that way, always wanting sex but liking the chase more. Women shouldn’t make them wait too long, or they’d accuse them of being teases. But if they gave it up too quickly, they were called whores. They couldn’t win for losing.

The questions swirling around her brain were killing her.

She picked at a steak, tearing it apart with her fingernails until it was a bloody mess. There was no time for sitting around pouting. She was supposed to learn how to please Drake before he recovered from his wounds, yet she was wasting time in an empty simulator room. Who the hell knew where Wrek and Tork were? Tork had locked her in. Left her. He didn't care. She should've figured with the type of guy he was.

When the wall started to dissolve, she got up, expecting Tork, but it was Wrek on the other side.

She tried not to show her disappointment when he walked in. "Hey, Wrek. How's it going?"

"Tork left you in here? I'm so sorry, Brandy. I could kill my brothers."

Brandy shrugged, wiping her hand on a napkin. "Did Tork tell you?"

He shook his head, glowering. "I had to find out from a guard. Tork wouldn't even face me, the coward. And he's supposed to be the brave one. I could kill him for leaving you. What happened? Did he not think you were up to the task?"

Brandy blushed, realizing Wrek didn't know what had transpired right over there on the floor. "He got mad at me, but I'm not really sure what I did. I thought I was doing what he wanted."

Wrek ran a hand through his chin-length hair. "That's Tork for you. Hot and cold. His mother is the same way."

"Is she here?" Brandy asked, thinking of Han's mother and Kahn's. Both were as

strange as they were terrible. She wondered if spending enough time with these alien men did that to a woman. They made women mad with their strange ways and fluctuating emotions.

“Tork’s mother is back on the home planet.”

“What about your mother?” she asked.

“She is dead.” Wrek swallowed, his eyes darting away.

“Oh, I’m really sorry.”

He dismissed her comment with a shake of his head and took her hand sweetly. “I have something I’d like to show you.”

She smiled, appreciating how much he doted on her. “What would I do without you?”

His cheeks flushed.

“This way.” He drew her to the open wall and led her through it.

They walked down the hall. Brandy searched for Tork or Drake or any of those alien guards, but the hallway was quiet. She wondered what the time was. She’d gotten into a bit of a rhythm on Rahan’s ship, sleeping and waking at the same time every day until it felt almost normal. The simulation rooms could project sunshine that felt real, and her circadian rhythms had leveled out. But here, she was all out of whack again, no semblance of normalcy. She could feel her mood slipping into something dark and brooding. Normally perky and upbeat, she couldn’t muster her usual enthusiasm. Plus, there was the fact she was a prisoner suffering at the whims of aliens who were not particularly nice. Would Han ever come for her? There’d been no sign so far that he was even attempting a rescue.

But Wrek's hand was warm, and he kept glancing at her shyly when he didn't think she'd notice. She trusted him. In fact, he was the only one on the ship she trusted. She really hoped this surprise of his would not let her down.

They stopped, and he opened the wall. As the space disintegrated, they were met with a wall of darkness. Wrek pulled her toward it, but she hesitated.

"It's a good surprise," Wrek said, smiling. "I really think you'll like it. It seemed like you might need something to keep your spirits up."

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Brandy gave in and inched into the dark room. Wrek sealed it up and turned on the lights.

Gasping, Brandy brought her hands to her mouth.

She could hardly believe her eyes. The space they were standing in appeared exactly like the house she'd lived in for a good part of her childhood. The little ranch on Elm Street had been where all her best and most cherished memories were formed. It was the place where her mom and stepdad had been happy. Where'd they'd all been a family together before her stepdad died and her mother had gotten into pills. Seeing it now, she felt like crying and leaping for joy all at once.

There was the little kitchen with the almond-colored refrigerator and the kitchen island where her mother prepared meals. And to the right was the little living room with pink shag carpet where she'd played endless hours with her Barbies. The big boxy TV was in the center with her stepdad's battered leather recliner angled toward it just waiting for him to plop inside.

She approached the chair, touching the worn armrests as tears sprang to her eyes. Her stepdad had been dead at least fifteen years, but seeing this chair made her feel like he could walk into the room at any minute. She scanned the area, half hoping he would. Her eyes landed on Wrek, who watched her.

"You did all this," she asked, wiping away the tears, "for me?"

His smile broadened, his purple eyes twinkling. "Do you like it?"

“It’s amazing.” She couldn’t stop taking in every detail. There was her mother’s Reader’s Digest collection lined up by month along the shelves in the living room. And the stairs. If she walked up them, would she find her old bedroom?

“How did you do this?” she asked, lifting a mug from the coffee table and inspecting it. The burnt sienna color was something straight out of the eighties.

“I’ve invented a device that can scan people’s memories and replicate things found there. It only works on places we know well where the memory is strong.”

She started, feeling as if he’d peeped in her window. “You scanned my memories?”

A blush burned up his cheeks, letting her know he sensed he was in trouble. “When you first arrived, yes. Drake ordered me to, so he could find any weaknesses Han might have. But you didn’t know much about Han. Now I know why.”

“Well, I guess if Drake ordered you to.” She was still miffed he went into her mind without her knowledge, but it really wasn’t Wrek’s fault. He was Drake’s pawn.

“What else did you see?” she asked, worried about the answer. All those men from her previous profession were stored in her brain. Did Wrek see them? All the nights flat on her back, faking her enjoyment? What would he think of her?

“I didn’t see much else. It was a quick scan.”

“Please don’t do it again.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, wringing his hands.

“I forgive you.” She put her hand on his shoulder gently. “It feels surreal standing here. It’s like I’m eight years old again. Like if I looked out that window, I’d see Fred

Cutler riding his bike around the cul-de-sac.” She walked over to the front window, but there was nothing outside but grass and trees. Emotions were still swirling inside her, bittersweet memories mingled with the confusion of the day. What she wouldn’t give to go back to being small. To be able to crawl onto her mother’s lap and be wreathed in her arms. To smell her stepdad’s pipe smoke and hear the murmur of his TV shows as she went to sleep. She needed something like that right now.

Leaning in, she put her head on Wrek’s shoulder. Tentatively, he put his arms around her, holding her tightly. She wrapped her arms around his waist and nestled in. Sighing, she soaked in the feeling of being comforted. Wrek was steadfast. His arms were cords anchoring her down. It was exactly what she needed.

The ship rocked beneath their feet. They both stumbled, Wrek trying to stabilize her as he glanced up with concern on his face.

“What was that?” Brandy asked.

Wrek let her go, hurrying to the wall. He touched it, drawing out lights and symbols that he seemed to understand. “We’re under attack.”

“What?” Brandy asked, panic pumping through her veins.

Wrek nodded. “It’s Han. He’s here.”

The ship shook again, this time more violently. Wrek opened the wall and started through it.

“Wait,” Brandy called. “What do I do?”

He turned as if he’d forgotten she was there. “Stay safe.” Then he bolted out of the room and sprinted down the hall.

Brandy ran to the entrance, but the ship rocked again, pitching her onto the floor. While the ship rumbled, she stayed on her knees, starting a prayer she hadn’t spoken in years. They were going down. She was going to die. Hail Mary, full of grace...

But the ship leveled off and the rumbling stopped. She stood up, clinging to the wall. When the ship didn’t toss her to the ground, she left the room and continued toward where she’d seen Wrek disappear.

The walls were pulsing a purplish-red. There were no alarms going off that she could hear, but walls were opening and aliens, both humanoid and beast, were exiting them. At first, Brandy was nervous she’d meet one like the monster that had attacked Drake, but they were all too busy to notice her. It took her a while to find the bridge, the place where she’d first been beamed on board.

It was in pure panic mode. Aliens were rushing around, tending to symbols on the walls that were flashing red. Wrek had his hands on a large white board rising out of the floor. He was clearly doing something important judging by his expression. Tork

rushed in, pulling a shirt over his impressive muscles. He went right to Wrek, and they started talking in hushed tones.

Brandy huddled against the wall, not moving. She didn't want to be noticed or pushed out, but she also wanted to be close if Han came aboard. Excitement built in her chest. Han was coming to get her.

But as the ship rocked again and more warning signs flashed, it occurred to her that maybe he wasn't coming to get her. Maybe he was just here to destroy them. After all, if Drake was after Charis, it would be easier to blow up the whole ship than to attempt a rescue. Han could abduct Charis a new best friend.

She felt chilled to the bone as she thought about it. Would Han simply destroy everyone?

"He's hailing us," Wrek said, turning to Tork.

He frowned. "Put the bastard on."

Wrek raised an eyebrow, but Tork insisted. "Do it. I want to talk to him."

"What will Drake say?"

"Do it!" Tork ordered.

The large blank wall at the front of the room suddenly turned into a screen. Han's face appeared. Boy, did he seem pissed.

"Han," Tork said, stepping up with his hands casually behind his back. "Nice of you to call, cousin. It's been, what? Ten years."

“Save the bullshit,” Han fumed. “How dare you attack our ship and transport one of our own off-board.”

“To be technical,” Wrek said, stepping beside Tork, “she was not one of your own. As a human, she has no laws governing her removal.”

“You know what I mean,” Han said through his teeth. “You cannot beam anyone off our ship. There are laws forbidding unlawful removal.”

Wrek clammed up fast, but Tork continued. “You abducted her from Earth. We abducted her from you. Seems pretty even, don’t you think?”

“No!” Han banged his fist on something off screen. “You had no right. I am king—”

“Will be king,” Tork said, cutting him off, “when the little tyke arrives. And how is your mate? Under the weather, I hear.”

“Don’t you dare talk about Charis. I know this abduction had something to do with her.”

Tork’s expression was one of mock innocence. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Enough of this. Where is Drake? I want to speak to him. Now.”

Tork shrugged. “Drake is busy. He has better things to do.”

“Tell him he better find time to talk to me or these little warning shots,” he jabbed his finger angrily in their direction, “are just the tip of the iceberg.” He gazed around. “Where is she?”

“Who?” Tork asked, studying his nails like this whole thing bored him.

“Where is Brandy?”

“Oh, her. She’s around here somewhere.”

“I’m here,” Brandy said, running forward. “Han, how is Charis? Is she okay?”

Wrek’s eyes went wide as he saw Brandy.

Tork shot him a dirty look before adopting his used-car salesman smile. “See? Here she is. Right as rain. She says she prefers it here. Now she knows what real Cartharians can do.”

Han ignored the jab as he scrutinized Brandy. “Are you all right? Charis was so worried. As was Rahan. He’s insisting we kill everyone on the ship as retribution.”

They cared. They really did miss her. “I’m okay. When are you going to come and get me?”

“Very soon,” he said, but his expression tightened. She’d seen enough men lie to know when she was being duped. His eyes darted to Tork. “Let her go. I don’t want there to be bloodshed.”

Tork smirked. “You’re willing to spill blood—lots of your own people’s blood—for a human female?”

“Thanks a lot,” Brandy mumbled.

Tork ignored her. “You know what dealing with Drake is like. He’ll want to kill all of you. Even if you do beat us, what is the cost to your ship? To your fragile and pregnant wife?”

Han’s eyes narrowed. “I won’t leave Brandy there to die.”

Wrek stepped up. “What if we can convince her to stay?”

Everyone turned to him.

“What?” Brandy asked.

“Hear me out. What if we woo Brandy, much like you do your human females? We show her how good it might be to belong to one of us and then when you check on her next, she tells you she wants to stay.”

Han shook his head angrily. “I could never believe what she said. You could be forcing her.”

“We’d allow her to transport back to your ship then. And only willingly would she return here.”

“Wrek,” Tork said, alarmed. “Drake will kill you.”

“He won’t if she agrees to stay.” Wrek flashed a smile at Brandy.

Han pointed a finger at Wrek. “That right there. You’re guilting her. You are making her feel like she has to stay, or Drake will do something bad to you.”

“We’ll get Drake to sign a writ saying he won’t harm anyone. He’ll sign in blood to make it binding and that will be that.” Wrek sounded pleased with himself, but Tork

was glowering.

Han waved his hand at someone behind him, signaling. “Send me the writ with Drake’s blood on it. I’ll give you an hour.” The commlink clicked off. Han was gone.

Brandy felt uneasy. The men on this ship were going to woo her and try to convince her to stay? That sounded nice, but was it all a big trick? Something to keep Han quiet while they came up with a more devious plan?

Tork whirled and gave Wrek a smack on the arm. “What in the hell were you thinking?”

Instead of cowering, Wrek stood his ground. “It stopped the torpedoes, right?”

“For now!” Tork roared. “Wait until Drake is up and able. He’ll use you as a torpedo to start the fight back up. He’ll never go for this, and you know it.”

“Do I? What would be better than one of us finding a mate who is biologically compatible? Drake wants to repopulate with her. With offspring, he can take a higher place in the hierarchy.”

“But that means giving Brandy to Drake. Exactly what he’s already demanded.” Tork eyed her. She tried to read the expression on his face, but was unable to before he turned away.

“What if I don’t want to be owned by Drake?” she asked.

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“That’s the beauty of it,” Wrek said, growing excited. “Now, you’d get to pick. You could pick one of us or none of us. You have all the power.”

Tork rolled his eyes. “Drake will love that. It’s his favorite thing to have to deflect to a human female.” The sarcasm was thick. “Gods, you and you’re scheming. When are you going to learn?”

“What do you think, Brandy?” Wrek asked.

“I don’t know.” It sounded good, but was it some sort of trick? She was not smart enough to figure out what the scam might be.

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks,” Tork said, interrupting. “Wrek, you are not hearing me. There is no way Drake will go for this.”

“There’s no way I’ll go for what?”

All three of them whirled.

Drake stood in the doorway, appearing shrunken, bruised, and battered, but he was standing unassisted. All the aliens turned and did some gesture that seemed like a solute. Brandy glanced at Wrek. His eyes were gigantic. Fear rolled off him in waves.

Tork stepped forward, adopting his devil-may-care-attitude. “They pieced you back together, eh? I thought you were done in for sure.”

Drake narrowed his eyes, surveying the scene. “What’s going on here? I thought we

were under attack.”

“We were,” Tork said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them. “But Junior over there talked Han down. He got him to stop firing.”

Drake’s gaze snapped to Wrek. “How did you do that?”

Wrek opened his mouth to answer, but Tork cut him off. “He reminded him we still have a hostage Han cares about. What good would blowing us up be if he destroyed Brandy over there?”

“He cares about her?” Drake said, surprised.

She huffed, taking offense at his tone. When she opened her mouth to speak, Tork beat her to it.

“Of course. Brandy is a precious commodity, a superior human female guaranteed to carry Cartharian young. One of the best of her planet. Why would anyone not care about that?”

Drake’s gaze landed on her and stuck. “She’s superior?”

“Of course she is,” Wrek piped up. “Why else would Han have had her?”

Brandy smiled, trying not to let her face betray her. She was not superior, just ordinary, and she was pretty sure she wasn’t even able to carry Cartharian young.

She bit her lip and endured Drake’s stare.

“Send her to my quarters. Let me know if Han tries to do anything. If he scratches his ass, I want to know about it.”

Drake turned, walking as if he were trying to hide a limp.

Brandy whirled toward the two men watching their older brother leave. “He said to have me sent to his quarters!” she mouthed, raw nerves making her feel sick. Alone with Drake? He was so mean.

Wrek and Tork exchanged a look. Tork, of course, was the one to speak. “Well, sweetheart, it’s time to see which of Wrek’s hairbrained schemes is going to pan out. Either that, or we’ll all be pushed out of the airlock.”

8

Brandy was trembling as Tork and Wrek escorted her to Drake's room. Why did it feel like they were sending her to her execution? Whatever happened to her being wooed and convinced to stay? All of this felt like the opposite. She couldn't wait to leave.

The last time she'd seen Drake, he was sacrificing her to criminals to be used as a sex toy. Now that he knew she was valuable to Han, he wanted her, but she had no desire for him. Her demise had seemed imminent, but since Han was now threatening to blow up the ship to save her—an idea that didn't sound that great, but at least he cared—her hope was making her selfish. She wanted off the ship, and she wanted it now.

Well, to be fair, she kind of wanted Tork again, but that was a bad idea. He would be nothing but trouble. And Wrek was sweet. She wouldn't mind hanging out with him and getting to know him better. It was Drake she wanted nothing to do with. And it was Drake she would be forced to see.

Why were the jerks the ones she always ended up with?

Her escorts stopped in front of a wall before facing her. Wrek seemed genuinely sorry for her. Tork seemed annoyed.

"He's in there?" she asked, her hands shaking. There had only been a few times in her life as an escort that she'd been scared for her life. One time, she'd been hired by a drug lord to attend a party where notorious felons were going to be. She'd begged her

manager at the time to let her skip, but the money had been too good. It was a night she'd rather not remember.

She hoped her time with Drake wouldn't fall into that category.

"He's in there," Wrek said, reaching for her hand. "He won't hurt you or he'll have to face Han."

"If you say so," she said.

Tork was digging in a pocket for a cigarette. They all watched as he lit it and took a drag. "Just do that trick you showed me," he said, squinting through the smoke, but he wasn't smirking. Was he... jealous?

She wanted to ask him, but knew he'd never admit it. Plus, there wasn't time. The wall opened behind her. Darkness waited on the other side of the wall. And then a voice bellowed, "Come in."

Tork's hand on her back ushered her into the dark. But when she turned to him, dejection was on his face. She expected him to wipe the real emotion off as soon as their eyes met, but he didn't. He stared at her sadly as the wall closed and separated them.

Once the dim purple light from the hallway was gone, there was almost nothing to see by. Her heart pounding in her ears blocked out any sound. She whirled toward the large space. Her hands went instinctively behind her, feeling for the wall. It was her body's last-ditch effort to escape what she knew was coming. What would Drake do? Force himself on her? Hit her? And how was this playing into what she'd been promised about wooing her?

"I hear you can dance," a disembodied voice said from the deep reaches of the room

beyond.

Her head turned toward the sound even though she couldn't see him. "I can."

"Good," he said, the voice growing clearer. He must be moving closer to her.

She tensed, waiting. "What do you want with me?"

"What does any man want with you?" Now his voice echoed from the right.

She turned that way, her pulse pounding. "I don't know. Sex?"

"Just sex?" the voice asked, this time from the left.

"Companionship?" She was trembling. "An heir?" What game was he playing at?

"Don't you know what men desire? I thought that was what you were good at."

She stared at the darkness, trying not to let the fear come out in her answer. "I do what men desire. They tell me what they want, and I make it happen. What do you desire?"

"You don't care what I desire," he said, his voice seeming to come from everywhere now. It reminded her of the Great and Powerful Oz, someone playing at power they really didn't have. And what was she afraid of? She'd been with worse than Drake.

"You don't care what I desire either," she said cheekily. "And you should. I'm the one who can produce offspring. You men walk around like you own the planet when you are nothing without women." It felt good to mouth off. How would he take it?

Suddenly, he was behind her, his breath on her neck.

“I do care what you desire, as long as what you desire is me.” A large hand snaked around her waist. He whirled her toward him, pulling her in until her body was up against his. Her hands pressed against the hardness of his chest as his arms held her tight. She couldn’t see his face, just the dim shape of him. And she could feel his arousal, raised and waiting.

She pushed him away. This time, he let her go. She took a step back so there was space between them. “Why should I desire you? The last time I saw you, you were trying to feed me to criminals.”

He laughed, a deep baritone. “I wasn’t really going to give you over to them. It was a scare tactic to keep you in line.”

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“A scare tactic? Is that how you deal with all your dates?”

He took a step forward, trying to bridge the gap between them. “Sometimes.”

She inched backward. “Well, that doesn’t work with me.”

“What does work with you?” he rumbled.

How should she answer? The direct answer was there were lots of ways to her heart and her... er, panties. There was the hot passionate sexual attraction like what she felt with Tork. There was also the slow, sweet courtship she shared with Wrek. She doubted Drake would like to hear about either.

“Start with not trying to scare me. Maybe talk to me. Take me to dinner.”

“Take you to dinner?” he growled.

He moved away, and she wondered if her time with him had ended. Then she worried he was going to come back and force himself on her, something she wouldn’t put past a man who’d tried to use the threat of rape as a scare tactic.

Instead, the lights in the room gradually warmed until it flickered with candlelight. An expensive Italian restaurant appeared—a single table dripping in fine linen, a candelabra above, wall sconces, and a string quartet playing in the corner. The table was set for two in the center. Smells of baking bread and tomato sauce made her stomach rumble and her mouth water.

It was reminiscent of her favorite Italian restaurant back home, Magdaleno's. They had the best veal parmigiana outside of Italy.

Unsure of herself, Brandy decided to sit at the table that was clearly meant for them. Treating this just like a date, she took the napkin and draped it across her lap, adjusting her clothes and hair. She wanted a mirror and a bag of expensive makeup, but she would have to make do.

The sweet sounds of the violin, cello, bass, and viola floated around her. She knew the instrumentalists were part of the simulation, but the music was soothing, as was the candlelight. Her shoulders relaxed. After picking up the wineglass, she took a sip. Real pinot grigio, not replicated, slipped down her throat. She hadn't had alcohol since entering Han's ship. The only intoxicant that ship had was smuggled on by Rahan, and his was unpredictable and strong. She took undignified gulps of Drake's delicious floral liquid to take the edge off.

Drake returned a few minutes later in date-ready attire. The tailored suit would have cost thousands on earth. Navy blue with a crisp white shirt underneath, the fabric fit his muscular body like a glove. His hair was combed back and he'd shaved, appearing young and fresh without the stubble.

But his gait was awkward in the clothes. Sitting down across the table from her, he fussed with the starched collar and shrugged big shoulders before settling down.

They stared at each other for a while, not sure what to say.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, not really sounding like he cared for her answer.

"It's an improvement for sure," she said, lifting her empty wineglass, hoping it would refill.

Drake reached for the wine and refilled her glass. “This bottle was imported from your planet, not replicated. Wine is one of the things I like about humans.”

She smiled. “Wine is one of the things most people like about humans. That and bacon cheeseburgers.”

“Would you like one? A cheeseburger?” He arched an eyebrow.

Shaking her head, she gazed over. “I’d like to see what’s on the menu.”

“There’s no menu.” When he snapped his fingers, a waiter appeared, pushing a cart with two silver trays on it. The covers were removed with a flourish, and Brandy’s eyes widened. The food appeared as delicious as she was hoping it would be—one plate full of chicken scaloppini, risotto in a buttery cream sauce, and giant prawns on a salad drizzled with balsamic vinaigrette.

Drake grabbed a thick steak from the other, and began devouring hunks. Brandy selected her dish. She lost herself in the flavor. It was so buttery and delicious she made an audible noise.

His eyes darted up at her.

“Sorry.” She put her hand to her mouth, almost giggling. “It’s so good.”

Surprise lightened his expression. “Food gives you that much pleasure?”

She shrugged, finally nodding. “We were poor when I was little, so I didn’t have a lot of choice in food—peanut butter sandwiches, butter noodles, that sort of thing. Now, I get excited about really good food. It’s one of the reasons I agreed to stay on Han’s ship.”

“Try this,” he said, cutting a bite of steak and offering it to her.

Carefully, she bit the morsel off his fork. It was a strangely intimate gesture. As she chewed, her brain lit up with excitement again. “Damn, that’s good.”

He smiled. It was strange to see him almost happy.

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“Try mine,” she said, coiling a fork full of noodles.

He leaned forward, opening his mouth to take in the pasta. She watched him suck the noodles in and chew, wiping cream from his chin. Eating could be sexual, and she was having that feeling now, watching him eat. He was so strikingly handsome with his angular features and high cheekbones. He reminded her of a more muscular Jon Stamos. She’d had a thing for Uncle Jesse from Full House when she was a teen. Maybe that was why she was finding herself leaning closer, elbows on the table.

“Good?” she asked when he was done chewing.

Nodding, he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “But that’s enough eating.”

After he stood, he walked around the table, took her arm, and pulled her up. Shocked, Brandy didn’t know how to react. But he didn’t wait. He swept her into his arms, drew her close, and pressed his mouth to hers.

It happened so fast. His hard body was against hers, one hand on her back and the other in her hair. His mouth was urgent, kissing and sucking, his tongue trying to pry her lips apart. It was all too sudden. She pushed against him, trying to extract herself from his embrace.

“What are you doing?” she asked when her lips were free.

He frowned. “What you wanted me to do.”

“What? I never—”

“You were practically begging for it.” He said it with such confidence she laughed. His eyes narrowed angrily.

“Listen, Drake, we were having a nice time until you nearly sucked my face off. What’s so wrong with a little dinner? A little conversation?”

“You aren’t here for conversation.” He let her go, stepping back. His voice was a growl again.

“See, that’s your problem right there. You think that sex is all a woman needs. It’s not true. Human women like sex, but they also like to be talked to, listened to. They like to be wooed and asked about their day.”

He frowned. “How was your day?”

“Shitty,” she said with a sad laugh. “I’m stuck on a ship with a bunch of alien guys who only wanted me because they thought I was someone else, and now they want me because they think it will piss off Han. Oh, and to pump out a bunch of babies!” She returned to the table and slumped into her chair.

Drake stood where he was, staring at her. “What do I ask about now?”

She held out her hands in a frustrated gesture. “If I have to tell you, it doesn’t count.”

“What doesn’t count?”

“Never mind.” Stabbing a bite of food from her plate, she put it in her mouth. She chewed in a very unattractive fashion. At least food could make her feel better.

Drake sat heavily in his chair. For a while, he watched her eat. Then he picked up his own fork and knife and began to finish his meal.

“Is our ship like Han’s?” he asked, his voice tentative.

Brandy finished chewing and took a sip of wine. She needed gallons if she was going to make it through this date. “Your ship is a lot like Han’s, but his is white and yours is purplish. The layout is mainly the same. Oh, and as far as I know, Han has never thrown a guest into one of his prison cells.”

His gaze snapped back to her. “So you’ve never done anything you regret?”

She met his gaze, the comment stinging. As a prostitute, she’d done hundreds of things she regretted. Hell, most of her life was just one big list of regrets. “I’ve never tried to kill anyone.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill you.”

“Then what exactly were you trying to do?”

Drake turned his gaze away.

“Fine, don’t talk to me. We don’t need to get to know each other. That’s not an important part of a relationship.” Brandy huffed, realizing how futile this all seemed. She couldn’t wait until Han called back to see how she was fairing so she could tell him she wanted the hell off this ship.

“I don’t want to talk about me. Talk about you,” Drake said, gesturing to her. “What is Earth like?”

“Earth in general? It’s big, blue, and green.”

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He frowned, folding down dark eyebrows. “What was your life like?”

Brandy shrugged, feeling the uncomfortable well of emotions bubble up. “My life on Earth was complicated.”

“What does that mean? Complicated?” His eyes bore into her like he really did want to know.

She took another sip of her wine. The first glass was buzzing through her veins nicely, but she needed more if she was going to tell Drake about her childhood. “I grew up as an only child. My mother tried hard to take care of me, but she had her own problems. When I was eighteen, I moved out on my own and started working.”

“It must’ve been a shock when you woke up in Han’s transport ship.”

“You’re not kidding,” she said with a laugh. “One minute I was waiting for a ride behind the Venetian, and then next I was waking up in a room with Bram staring down at me. It took him half an hour to get me to calm down enough to listen to what he had to say.”

“And what did he say to make you want to stay?” Drake leaned in, his expensive suit stretching over his muscles.

Her eyes rested on his hands, the ones she knew were very different in his true form. It would be like wearing a Halloween costume twenty-four-seven. What kind of toll did it take on these men? She stared into Drake’s eyes, thinking that, of all the things that changed, the person deep inside didn’t.

“Bram didn’t say anything to make me stay.” She glanced at her nearly empty plate. “They gave me something more important than what I had waiting for me on Earth.”

“And what was that?”

She tilted her chin. “A family.”

“You need a family?”

She smiled wryly. “Yes, a family that trusts and doesn’t lie—that listens and takes the feelings of the others into consideration.”

Drake’s eyes darted away. “You make it sound so easy. It’s not. Families are complicated. They do things to piss you off. Families mess up.”

“Right. And then you forgive them because they’re family.”

He returned his gaze to her face, seeming to consider what she said. But then, Drake stood, dropping his napkin on the table and showing her his back. “This is a waste of time.”

“Drake.”

But he didn’t turn. He strode out of the room without a backward glance.

Drake shut the door, leaving her stuck inside. Why were the men on this ship always doing that to her? Power trips.

It was at least an hour later when the wall opened and Tork appeared.

“Hey,” she said, sitting up from where she’d been slumped over the table, sucking the last drops of wine directly from the bottle. She set it down with a thunk and straightened her top.

“Liquid lunch?” he asked.

She shrugged.

Tork raised an eyebrow, surveying the room. “Was this Drake’s idea of romance or yours?”

“Drake set this up,” she said, gesturing around the room. “But it’s not bad.”

Tork’s eyebrow rose higher. “If you love Hallmark ads and inject episodes of Lifetime movies directly into your veins.”

“How do you know about the Hallmark channel?” she asked.

He shrugged. “We get cable.”

“So, you’re saying this is cliché?” she asked.

He gave her a look that said—Do I even need to say it?

“You can do better?” she asked, her hand on her hip.

“Can and will. Let’s go.” He turned and started walking out of the room.

She had to jog to keep up with him.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she finally reached him.

He continued with his relentless pace. “Do you ask everyone this many questions?”

“No.” Jesus, he was a jerk. What had she done to make him so mad at her? “I only ask these many questions when I’ve been, I don’t know, abducted and kept a prisoner on an alien ship!”

“It’s up ahead.”

The room he led her to was already open and created, making her wonder if he had this plan all along. What was going on with the other two while she was cavorting with the third brother? Had Drake given up on claiming her first after their failed date?

But the scene cleared her head of any questions. Tork had created a spectacular view. The ground was a rocky terrain, flecked with mountain grasses and tall pines clinging to sheer cliff faces. They stood on an outcropping, one of the most beautiful valleys she’d ever seen stretched out below. Straight out of a painting, the ledges plunged down to a sun-dappled trees, waterfalls, and grassy plains. A river meandered through. Birdsong filled the air.

She smiled, shifting toward Tork. “This way,” he said, taking off up the path without seeing if she was coming.

Boy, he knew how to ruin the mood.

She took off after him, climbing the path up the side of the mountain as fast as she could. After only a few minutes, she was gasping and her thighs were screaming. Tork seemed to have no issue. He trekked up the path, easily avoiding roots that tripped her feet. And he certainly didn’t stop to take in the view or check on how she was doing.

She tried her best to keep up and not complain, but when she twisted her ankle on loose rocks and pitched forward, striking her hand on a bolder, she cried out.

Lifting the injured hand, she winced. Blood trailed down her palm.

“What happened?” Tork said, skidding back down.

“I fell.” She sat heavily on the boulder, gripping her bleeding hand.

He grabbed it, examining the injury. “You’ll live. Let’s keep moving.”

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Brandy stared up at him with cold eyes. “Why are you so mad at me? What did I do to you?”

He flashed her a dark look, but then his eyes landed on her bloody hand. Sitting beside her, he ripped off one of his sleeves, took her injured palm, and began wrapping it up. “What would the others say if I brought you back, all banged up? Are you trying to get me in trouble?” But his voice had lost its edge. And his touch was gentle. He wrapped the fabric around, securing it with a knot on the back of her hand.

“You ripped your shirt,” she said, pointing to his now-bare arm that showed off his tattoos.

He shrugged, reached over, and ripped off the other sleeve so both sides matched.

She held her palm like a broken thing. Together, they sat and stared over the valley.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

He turned to her, dark eyes softer now. His nearly black hair fell into his eyes, and he tossed his head to clear it away. “What was it again?”

“Why are you mad at me?”

He blew a breath through his nose, turning back to the valley. “I’m not mad at you.”

“They why do you act so... mean?”

“It’s part of my magnetic personality,” he said dryly.

“Sometimes you’re sarcastic, but you aren’t always mean. Lately... I don’t know. It’s like you can’t stand the sight of me. Why even come and take me on this hike if you hate me?”

“I don’t hate you.” His eyes traced the lines of her face. It was like her words had broken a wall and she was seeing inside. And he was a person she thought she would really like.

“Brandy, my brothers are idiots. They drive me crazy. And you don’t. I like being around you. And then I have to see them put their hands on you...” His own hands squeezed into fists.

“Sibling rivalry? Your brother is playing with your favorite toy?” She raised an eyebrow.

Anger flashed across his face. “When I see them touch you, it makes me want to rip their arms off.”

She put her hand on his forearm, the lightest of caresses like she might touch a wounded animal. “If you had just told me, it would have made all this much easier.”

“How? Now we’re all in some competition to see who can mate with you. I don’t think I can stand it. I might have to bow out.”

She frowned, staring deeper into his eyes. “You like me so much you don’t ever want to see me again? How does that make any sense?”

“I can’t stand it. I want it to be me touching you. Me kissing you.”

She didn't realize how close their bodies were until he was nearly on top of her. The smell of his mouth triggered the memory of them on the floor, writhing together in ecstasy. She wanted that again. Wanted him again. Her eyes flicked up, and she knew he knew what she wanted.

Reaching out, he brushed the hair from her neck. Fingers grazed the skin of her collarbone, the faintest brush, but enough to start a tingle that radiated across her skin and down her chest.

"Did Drake... touch you?" he asked, staring intently into her eyes.

She shook her head.

He leaned closer. His dark hair fell over his eyes as he stared at her. "Did Wrek?"

"Not really."

"Only me?" he asked. This time, his fingers trailed down her arm, touching her skin oh so lightly. The touch was almost nothing. Yet, it caused her body to come alive, nerve sensors awakening and wanting more.

"Only you," she whispered, focusing on those lips again. She remembered them on her. Remembered the passion, bucking against him, wanting to ride him for eternity.

His head tilted the slightest bit as he studied her mouth. The hand that had been touching her arm reached out. When his thumb settled on her bottom lip, rubbing against it, she felt tingles much lower.

"I want this mouth to be mine," he said, staring at it. "Tell me it's mine."

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“It’s yours.” She’d say anything to him right now.

His hand trailed down her neck, fingers grazing her exposed collarbone. “I want this neck.”

“You can have it,” she said, leaning toward him.

His hands pulled at her shirt, tugging down the V until the tops of her breasts were exposed. She watched them heave as his fingers slid over the mounds of flesh. “I want these, too.”

“Take them,” she moaned.

Both hands gripped her breasts and squeezed. Her nipples were hard as glass and so sensitive. She arched into him, wanting to urge him on. As if sensing her desire, he yanked her shirt down, exposing her bra. Then he pulled that down, too, letting her nipples free.

Exposed and yearning for his touch, she could barely stand to wait as he stared at her nakedness. “What are you waiting for?” she asked, reaching for him.

He gently pushed her hands away. “If these are mine,” he said with heavy-lidded eyes, “then I want to enjoy them.”

Still panting with want, she watched as his head bent down, his mouth angling closer. The anticipation of his touch drove her crazy.

The flick of his tongue on one nipple made her buck and groan. Just one flick. She felt her core slicken in anticipation. But he was driving her mad with waiting. “You’re taking so long.”

“They’re mine,” he said with a grin. “I get to do what I want.”

Starting to protest, her comment died as he sucked the nipple into his mouth. The pressure of his teeth grazing against that pleasure center felt so damn good. He licked and bit until she was gripping his forearms like a madwoman.

“The other one,” she pleaded.

“Is mine as well,” he said. He skimmed his tongue across her cleavage before centering himself over the neglected nipple.

When he gave the nipple a lick, he flicked the other with his finger. Both sensations at once made her squirm. He began working each nipple in tandem.

She couldn’t take it anymore. She clawed for his pants, wanting them off.

“No,” he said, pushing this advance away. “I get to take my time.”

Groaning, she submitted. Normally, she wanted to be in control after years of being subservient to her clients, but being with Tork was different. His worship of her body felt amazing, both physically and spiritually. He was drawing things out of her she hadn’t even known she had buried.

She couldn’t ponder it further because he was picking her up and lowering her to the ground. Surprisingly, there were no rocks or sticks beneath them, only smooth soft grass. It was his simulation after all. He could do what he wanted to the room. And her body.

Once he had her flat on her back, Tork gripped her thighs and knelt between them. “I claim these thighs, too. Or are they already spoken for?”

Gazing up at him, she shook her head. “All yours.”

A broad smile spread across his face. She watched as he undid her pants and slid them down, revealing her long legs. His eyes traced her skin hungrily. Licking his lips, he ran his hands down her thighs and back up, fingertips stopping just below the band of her panties.

She shivered. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on his touch.

Fingertips trailed along her inner thigh. They slipped along the edge of her panties playfully.

“What about this?” he said in a low growl. “Has anyone claimed this?”

Her eyes fluttered open.

He licked his lips again, staring at her most sensitive region like he was ready to dive in.

“It’s mine,” she said, watching him.

“It’s yours?” he asked, fingers stroking all around the fabric. “That’s too bad. If it were mine, the things I would do to it... I could make it very happy.” At the last word, his fingers trailed up her slit. Even though it was over the fabric, it lit her on fire.

She lifted her hips. “What would you do to it?”

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“Can I show you?” Fingers tugged at the cloth, but they didn’t pull it down. The teasing was killing her.

“Show me,” she said throatily.

“If you say so.”

He swept the fabric down her hips. Soon, he was sliding her panties over her ass and pulling them off.

His eyes lingered on her like he couldn’t stop himself from staring. The pure pleasure on his face softened his features, making him appear boyish and so achingly handsome. She wished she could snap a photo of him as he was right now.

But then he was reaching down and caressing her core. Her eyes rolled back in her head as the pleasure flooded her body. She wanted to watch his massive body loom over her and his face tighten as he enjoyed her pleasure, but her own enjoyment was too much. Her hands clawed at the dirt as he slipped his finger into her hot wet center.

“Tork,” she moaned, swiveling her hips, wanting him deeper.

“Is it mine?” he asked, plunging one digit into her before adding another.

The throbbing heat of it was burning her up. She could barely speak. “It’s yours.”

“Good.” His voice was a low satisfied grumble.

He shed his clothes, giving her a quick view of his amazing body before lowering himself again. She felt him angle toward her, and she knew what she'd been longing for was about to come to fruition. How many times had she thought about the sex with him and wanted it again? Over and over, she'd pictured it—his massive arms on either side of her head, his pecs and abs slick with sweat as he readied himself, and his face as he felt the pleasure her body was giving him. Brandy gripped his arms in anticipation as he hovered above her.

Slowly, he lowered himself until the tip of his erection pressed against the outside of her core. Bucking her hips up, she tried to encourage him to enter her, to scratch the itch that had been building, but he hesitated. His intense dark eyes stared into hers.

“I know the others may please you. There's nothing I can do about that,” he said seriously. “But they won't make you feel like I do. I want you to remember that.”

She nodded, holding onto his arm. “Make me feel good, Tork.”

He grinned.

He sank down, his cock sliding home. It was like every nerve ending inside her was dialed up to eleven as he thrust into her. She clutched him, holding on for dear life. The heat of him, the size, felt so good she could barely hang on.

But then he began rocking his hips, moving up and down with a friction that doubled the pleasure. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders, throwing her head back as wave after wave of undulations sent her building to climax.

The wave that radiated out to all parts of her body was more than she could've expected. Tingles upon tingles made her legs shake and her mind melt. She came screaming his name.

When Tork cried out, stiffening, she rode that wave of ecstasy with him, feeling him convulse inside her.

He let his bulk hover over her without crushing the air from her lungs. She felt perfect and satiated beneath his wall of muscle. Like nothing could ever be as good as this.

She loved the fact they never had to worry about protection. Aliens didn't carry human diseases, and she'd long since stopped worrying about getting pregnant. It was just not going to happen.

He kissed her neck where it met her shoulder in a very tender way she hadn't known he was capable of. Then he rolled off her and started to dress.

She watched him, the muscles of his back rippling as the fabric slipped over them. "Don't get dressed so soon," she begged.

He scanned her naked body, but his expression was sad. "I'm only allotted an hour, and that time is almost up."

"An hour? Why?"

"It's the new agreement we have. How we managed to do this without killing each other. For now." He stood and grabbed his pants, giving her an excellent view of his toned backside.

"An hour? Really? That's it?"

"That's it."

She gripped her clothes, not ready to dress yet. She'd had visions of her and Tork

wrapped in each other arms as they watched the sunset over the valley. That was certainly not going to happen now.

And what was worse was Tork was back to his morose self, stuffing on jeans and not meeting her gaze.

She stood up and reached out to grab his arm. When he turned to her, a scowl flashed on his face before he seemed to think better of it and hid his emotions from her. “When will I see you again?”

“I don’t know,” he said darkly. “It’s not up to me, is it?”

Turning, he strode back down the mountain path.

Dressed and cleaned up, Brandy made her way carefully down the path and found the door. Tork had been kind enough leave it open. This was the first time she'd been allowed to roam free. Glancing down the hallway, she slipped out and started exploring.

Han's ship had long since stopped being a mystery to her. Even though rooms could morph and change in a way that made it feel like the ship was never ending, the space inside was relatively small. She had grown to think of it like a flying shopping mall; that was about how many rooms and areas there were to explore. It helped to change rooms up, but after a while, that wore off and all that was left was a constricted, trapped feeling.

Drake's ship seemed to be the same thing, long hallways with no markings, rooms that people could "feel" if they knew what they were doing. Brandy pressed her hand to the hallway wall, trying to tune in to its frequency.

This room was larger with several alien workers inside. She walked away a little faster. Farther along, she found a large area that was currently empty. She suspected it was used for gatherings and debriefings, though she couldn't be sure. Drake had a different way of dealing with his crew than Han did.

Soon, she found another of those terrible jail cells for the aliens who had taken place in the mutiny. It was all she could do not to sprint in the opposite direction.

When she turned the corner, the rooms were smaller, though she couldn't be sure

what was inside. Sliding her hand over each, she got a little bit of the flavor of what was inside. This space was messy and disheveled. Moving down, she found an alien room that had two males inside.

The next room was occupied by a tidy person. It was filled with lab equipment. Slowly, she began to recognize a familiar feeling. The owner of this room was someone she knew.

Pressing her hand flat against the wall, she called inside. “Wrek? Are you in there?”

In a few seconds, the wall disintegrated and Wrek stood on the other side, seeming preoccupied.

“Brandy?” he said, looking confused. “Is it time for our date?”

She smiled at his tousled hair. “I don’t know. I was just wandering around and found your room. Sorry if I’m bothering you.”

“No, no. Come in.” Wrek stepped back, allowing Brandy to enter.

She walked into his dark abode, feeling like she was peeking into his life. The dwelling was small and had low ceilings. On the far wall, a mattress on the ground was covered in a nest of blankets. The rest of the room was dedicated to one form of study or another. The left side had stacks of books and a lit-up wall with alien text glowing on it like the smart boards she’d seen in fancy office buildings in Vegas.

The other side held scientific equipment, but the likes of which she’d never seen. She had no idea what the tubes, beakers, bins, and electronics did, but she suspected something miraculous.

Turning around, she met Wrek’s gaze. He was holding the back of his neck in a

sheepish way that made her suspect he was embarrassed by the nerdiness of his room.

“I was working,” he stuttered.

“I see that. What were you working on?”

“Oh, many things. Let me show you.”

He took her hand and led her over to the smart board, where he moved the symbols around by touching them. “I’m trying to recalibrate the defense shields by diverting power from unessential systems. It’s touchy because this whole ship is one symbiotic being. Taking something away from a system it needs could cause the whole thing to malfunction.”

Brandy nodded like she was following what he was saying, but she didn’t have a big science background. She wasn’t stupid. Had actually gotten straight As in high school before she was forced to drop out and start working the streets. But she’d never been scientifically inclined.

“What about that?” she asked, pointing at the table full of lab equipment.

“Oh, that?” His face brightened. “That is something very special.”

He strode over, picking up a vial of what appeared to be blood. He rolled it gently, letting the liquid coat the sides and then slide back down. “I’ve been working on solving our reproduction problem for a while now. It’s kind of my passion project.”

“Your reproduction problem?”

He nodded, his face morphing into something serious. “Our people have long life spans, but it doesn’t matter if we can’t repopulate. Once someone dies, there’s no one

there to replace him. The population is precariously low. Which is why we're all clustered around your planet abducting human females for the chance to pass on our DNA and save our race."

"I knew it was bad. I just didn't know how bad."

He nodded, setting the vial down. "That's why everyone is so desperate. Males are fighting over human women who can produce like they're starving and women are the last bit of beef. Frankly, I find it disgusting." He softened his tone. "Not that we don't love having human women around."

"I get it," she said in an understanding tone. "Most women don't want to be thought of as pieces of beef either."

"Right," he said animatedly, jabbing his finger in the air to annunciate the point. "So, what if every woman, every female, could carry a Cartharian child? What if we didn't have to hunt and steal for reproductive rights?"

“Every woman?”

He was getting excited now. “Yes. And not just human women. Any species that was compatible with us. We could broaden our search.”

“You mean leave here,” Brandy said, suddenly realizing what this meant. “You mean to go away from Earth.”

He set his hands on the table, regarding her with sympathy. “I am sure Han wouldn’t leave.”

“But he’s king. He could go back. If his crew could reproduce, they could go back to your planet.” And take Charis with them. What would Brandy do then?

“It isn’t working yet. There are things I still need to test.” His eyes flicked up to hers and then to his work. With a sweep of his hand, he seemed to try to divert her attention away from a topic that was clearly upsetting her. “But now, it’s time for our date.”

“Our date?” She’d nearly forgotten. “One hour, right?”

“Tork told you?” Wrek asked, straightening his shirt and ushering her toward the door.

“He did. Brothers learning to share their toys.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she murmured. She didn’t know why, but what Wrek had said upset her. Han could leave. They could all leave. And then she’d go back to Earth and be just an ordinary girl. Unless... unless she could take the serum and bear one of them a child.

Now that was a thought she’d need to piece over. How did she feel about being a mother? Her own had never been what she’d would call nurturing, choosing her own selfish desires over Brandy’s. Their relationship had gotten so bad Brandy left before graduating high school. How did Brandy think she could be any better with the role model she had? She had her own selfish tendencies, after all. Plus, it would be a child of a different species. How would she feel when the child didn’t look or act like her?

No, none of it was ideal.

Her mind snapped back to attention as Wrek led her into one of the simulation rooms. She was expecting either something bold like Trek or something traditional like Drake, but she got neither. Ahead was a simple grassy park. There was nothing particularly interesting about it—trees, grass, concrete sidewalks, and a fence that could be seen in any park around America. Maybe something interesting was going to happen when they got inside.

Wrek led her over to a wrought-iron bench. He sat down heavily and gestured for her to do the same. But the minute she sat, it was clear nothing else was going to happen. It was also clear Wrek’s mind was lost in his work.

Brandy sat, staring out at the grass in an attempt to focus her attention. The silence lingered, this simulation not even equipped with sound or wind. Wrek probably hadn’t thought about it. And silence was something Brandy did not do well with.

“Do you like parks?” she asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” His eyes lingered on the grassy knoll off in the distance, but she

could tell he wasn't really seeing it.

"We used to have a park by my house as a child. You know, that house you had replicated for me?"

"Right."

"Also, I've grown an extra set of limbs. They're great. Do you want to see?"

"Sure." He didn't even notice her ridiculous comment.

"Wrek," she said, putting her hand on his thigh. "If you want to go back to your work and take a rain check on our date, I'll understand."

His eyes finally settled on her. "That would be great, Brandy." He smiled, but suddenly his eyes widened at something behind her.

"Get down!"

She felt the bench lift. Tilting forward, she fell into Wrek's arms as they spilled onto the ground. Was it an earthquake? Another attack? She peeked over her shoulder.

An alien stood over them, seething. She recognized it from the fight with Drake, the one who'd attacked and nearly killed him. Large greenish scales, a huge lion-like mane, red slitted eyes, and dripping fangs that pushed a growl in her direction. Claws cut into the wood of the bench, splintering it.

It was angry.

Wrek scrambled up, putting himself between the beast and Brandy.

“Run!” Wrek yelled as the beast punched him in the chest.

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The thud of fist on ribs echoed through the room. She thought she heard bones crack as Wrek crumpled backward, slamming into the ground. Grass sprayed up as his body dug a trench into the turf. Brandy scrambled to get out of the way.

“Wrek!” she said, reaching for him. His body skidded to a stop, but Wrek did not get up.

The beast turned red eyes on her and strode forward. Her eyes locked on its six-inch claws.

Wrek lurched up just in time to stop the beast from striking Brandy. The long-clawed hand bashed into his shoulder with another horrible crack. Wrek cried out in pain, but then gritted his teeth and pushed up from the ground, wrapping his big arms around the beast’s middle to stop him from advancing on Brandy. Veins on his neck popped out as he struggled to contain the beast.

She watched, terrified, as the beast slashed nails down Wrek’s back. Blood sprang up from the furrows in his tattered shirt. Though Wrek must be in agony, he held on for dear life.

“Brandy, go!”

She scrambled up, her heart hammering. She hated to leave him, but how could she stay? She wavered between running for help and staying to fight. But one more look at the beast and she knew there was nothing she could do.

“I’ll be back, Wrek.” But he either couldn’t hear her or respond. He had the beast in a

bear hug, gripping his own forearms to bar the beast from wrestling free. But it seemed like the beast was not as interested in tearing Wrek apart as it was in trying to get to her. Red eyes flashed as it watched her back way. Its nostrils sniffed in her direction. The creature roared and slashed at Wrek, more blood spraying into the air.

Brandy ran. The wall was part of the simulation, making it hard to find. Once her hands slammed into the membrane that separated her from the hall, she pressed her palms to it frantically “Open, open, open.”

It didn’t comply.

“What’s happening?” She pressed her palm to it again, but nothing happened. She smacked it and punched it, screaming. Still, it stayed closed. Maybe the beast had locked her in. Noises behind her made her whirl around. The beast had broken free, and it was tearing across the park toward Brandy.

Fear broke out like goose bumps over her body. The beast would tear her to shreds. She crouched low, wondering if she could run, but she knew it was much faster.

Wrek popped up, gaining on the creature. He was bleeding heavily from multiple places, slashed and scratched until shreds of his skin were hanging in chunks. “Wrek!”

Brandy gasped as he jumped on the beast’s back. Wrek punched with the strength she didn’t think he was capable of. His fist pounded into its ribs with swift well-aimed thuds that echoed through the simulator. The creature turned to Wrek, roaring and driving its claws into his chest like a set of steak knives. Blood seeped onto his already-soaked shirt.

But Wrek didn’t seem to notice. He fought like a wild man, all punches and elbows. His teeth were gritted. The veins on his neck pulsed as he hit the monster under the

jaw and pounded him in the skull. The beast staggered, bumping into a tree before stabbing Wrek in the ribs. Wrek winced, but he used that moment to pull his arm back and deliver a terrible punch.

His knuckles smashed into the creature's jaw, snapping its head up. There was a crack of bone on bone. The beast dropped to his knees. Its arms sagged. Then it fell forward, settling into the grass. The bloody claws furrowed into the dirt as it gripped for purchase once before falling for good.

Brandy gasped, a sound of relief, triumph, and pure shock. Wrek had won. She inched carefully in Wrek's direction. He was staring down at the beast as his blood continued to drip onto the grass.

"Wrek, are you okay?" she asked, hovering over him.

He raised his head with a weak smile before he fell to the ground.

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Brandy cried out, falling to her knees beside Wrek. He seemed unconscious, not dead, but there was so much blood. She shook his arm desperately. “Wrek? Oh, God.”

She put her hand to her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. Wrek had saved her by allowing one of his people to slice him into a bloody pulp. He’d fought so bravely, defeating a beast much bigger than himself. And it had all been for her.

She gripped his arm, crying. The wounds were so severe, so numerous. Blood was everywhere.

Unable to wake him, she ran back to the wall and pressed her hand on it, willing it to open. This time, it obeyed. Running blindly, she tore out of the room and down the hall. The first non-beast alien she saw, she grabbed his arm desperately.

“Wrek is hurt. One of the simulation rooms. Please!”

He followed her to where Wrek still lay. Relief filled her when the guard handcuffed the beast who’d attacked them. And reassured when they got Wrek on a floating gurney and began carrying him out of the room.

“Where are you taking him?” Brandy asked one of the medical staff tending to Wrek’s wounds.

“A healing pool,” the medic said, and then went back to ignoring Brandy.

They took Wrek away and locked him in a room, not allowing Brandy to see him. She waited in the hallway for what felt like hours, sitting on the floor, worrying.

Finally, the wall opened, and a medic stepped out. He seemed surprised to see Brandy there.

“Can I go in?” she said, standing up. “Is he okay?”

“His vitals are stable, but I am afraid you cannot go in.” The medic regarded her with something like distaste in his expression.

“Let her in,” a voice called from inside the room. Wrek.

Brandy didn’t wait for the medic to agree. She rushed past him into the dim, damp room.

It felt like stepping into a sauna, one that was lit only by glowing lights that rippled and shimmered, throwing dancing beams around the room. The floor at her feet was rock. Ahead of her, the pool gave off both the light and the moisture. It was about the size of the pool her childhood best friend had, maybe fifteen feet in diameter, though it was hard to tell because the shape was not regular. The light glowed from the bottom of the pool. By it, she could see Wrek bobbing chest deep in the water.

“Hi,” he said with a smile.

“Hi.” She was so glad to see him. She approached the edge and crouched where he was, his elbows resting on the deck’s surface.

“I’m going to live, Brandy. You can stop making that face.”

“What face?” she asked.

“The one where you look at me like I’m on death’s door.” His grin was wry.

She stared at his body, searching for wounds. There were several, but they were all pink and healing, like the skin beneath a scab that had just fallen away. “How did you heal so fast? You were...”

“I was a mess. That hvratha tore me up. But Tork created a healing pool for me, and the medics used the salve. I’ll need to visit here a few more times, but I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

She dipped her hand in the water. It was the perfect temperature.

“Want a swim?” he asked, damp curls dripping into his big lavender eyes.

“Can I? Will it do anything to me?”

“Other than make your skin look amazing? No. It’s safe.”

She gazed at the water, wanting to get in so badly. Wrek was naked and she didn’t have a bathing suit, so there was that little problem. She could go in her bra and underwear. She’d done a lot worse in her life.

“Okay, I’m coming in. Turn around.”

He raised an eyebrow, but complied, staring at the back of the cave wall.

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Brandy stripped, laying her clothes on a dry bit of stone off to the side. Clad in only her skivvies, she lowered her body into the water. It felt amazing.

Sighing, she let the water flow over her. It came up to her collarbones while standing, so she didn't have to tread water to stay afloat. Being inside the warm pool made her muscles relax.

"Can I turn around now?" Wrek called.

She swam up, wrapping her arms around his torso. He winced, and she pulled back. "Oh, no. I'm so sorry."

He turned to her, a soft smile on his face. "It's nothing to apologize for. I'll heal quickly with no harm done."

"No harm done? Your whole body was shredded." Her eyes roved over the pink skin of his scars. "Why did that thing attack us?"

Wrek's eyes darted away. "There are many here who do not want to see Drake or any of us mate and take our proper place amongst the leaders of our country. Plus, I think he might have wanted to mate with you. Many here do."

Brandy flushed. "Oh."

"But you're safe," he said, taking her hand. "I've vowed to protect you."

She watched their fingers lace together under the water. The more time she spent with

Wrek, the more she was growing to like him. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you saving me. It was... No one has ever done that for me.”

Their eyes met. Something tightened between them, almost like a rope cinching between her body and his. She contemplated his eyes, the curve of his cheek as it dipped down to his lips. He was handsome in an entirely different way than Drake or Tork—smart and kind. And he cared about her so deeply.

Maybe it was the water on her skin or the fact she knew Wrek was naked beneath the surface. Maybe it was the sexual tension that had been building between them all this time. Whatever it was, sitting there holding hands with Wrek made her flesh tingle and her sex ache. She had a strong impulse to press her body to his, to push him against the pool wall and wrap her legs around his torso. But he was injured. She didn’t want to hurt him further.

But the ache down below couldn’t be denied. And now the soaking wet bra seemed to be rubbing against her nipples, making them harden and yearn for a rough touch. Was Wrek capable of such a thing? She flipped her gaze to him, seeing the heat in his hungry eyes. They kept darting from her eyes to her lips and down to the tops of her breasts where they skimmed the top of the water’s surface.

With one soft hand, she trailed her fingers over the shoulder that wasn’t injured. His eyes lit up at her touch.

“How hurt are you?” she asked, moving closer and causing the water to slosh a little between them.

“Not very much,” he whispered. One of his hands floated onto her waist and started urging her closer.

She followed his lead, cutting the distance between them in half. His body and hers

were separated by the thinnest slip of water. One of her thighs brushed against him, starting a tingle down there, too.

Brandy placed her other hand on his neck, careful to keep it from the injured skin. “Is this touch okay?”

Wrek nodded vigorously, his tongue pushing between his lips before slipping back again. “That touch is more than okay.”

She slipped a hand around to his naked chest. “Is this?”

His torso rose with the breath he sucked in. “That’s good.”

Wrek’s other hand curved around her body. Now there was barely a trickle of water between them. Brandy’s legs naturally fit around Wrek’s, centering her over the hard shaft beneath her. His strong thighs supported them as her arms went around his neck. Their mouths were perilously close together. Brandy gazed at his full lips, licking her own. Now her nipples were throbbing against the thin strip of fabric as they begged to be released.

Brandy had been taking all the control in her interactions with Wrek, but she slowly felt him take command. Hands cupped her ass, bringing her into him so his shaft pressed against her folds. Her core was barely hidden by the piece of soaked fabric she wore. She knew if they weren’t in the water, those panties would be soaked either way. Heat was burning from between her thighs. A heat she wanted extinguished with a solid pounding.

He moaned as she slid over him. Then he helped her grind on top of him, rubbing their most sensitive parts together. Her breasts bobbed and splashed in the water. Releasing one hand, she reached around her back and unclasped the bra. As it floated away, Wrek’s eyebrows went up.

“Your breasts are magnificent,” he said in awe, floating a hand up to cup one gently.

But gentle wasn't what she wanted right now. She leaned in, pressing her taut breast into his hand. The signal worked. He gripped harder and then began tweaking her nipple, pulling on it and making it grow. When the other begged not to be neglected, Wrek seemed to sense that and moved over, twisting the nipple between his finger and thumb in such a way that she bucked on him frantically.

His lips found hers and then his tongue, grazing hers with a sensuality his brothers were not capable of. She gripped his head and kissed him passionately. She wanted all of it, all of him.

Wrek pulled back and Brandy let out an utterance of protest, but instead of stopping, he lifted her and placed her on the pool's side. She glanced down, noticing this head was right in line with her lower half.

Silently asking for consent, which she gave with an eager nod of her head, he pushed her knees apart and moved in on her panties.

Brandy reclined, arching as he let his mouth and nose linger just an inch from her throbbing core. She wanted the panties off, wanted to tell him to tear them away, but she held back. Wrek was as slow and methodical with sex as he was with his science experiments, testing each touch, each kiss for a reaction and then continuing accordingly.

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At first, he stroked the outside of the fabric with his fingers. She groaned and shivered. Finally ran his tongue along the strip of fabric, stopping to bite it with his teeth. At this, she pushed her hips up, letting him know to keep going. With a low chuckle, he slipped one finger along the fabric, stopping before it gave way.

She was on fire, no longer just wanting his touch, but needing it. Pressing her lip between her teeth, she sought her own pleasure. Using one hand to keep her upright, she used the other to find her hard nipples and stroked them herself. When she looked down, she found Wrek watching her with fascination.

He grinned before slipping his fingers where she wanted them to go.

He roved them over her clit and into her warm wetness. The stroking pulled her closer to the edge. When he let his tongue replace his fingers, her moans turned into gasps. The throbbing expanded, making every nerve ending pulse with pleasure. The nipple between her fingers added shockwaves of heat to the already growing earthquake in her pussy.

“Stop,” she said just before she came.

He raised his head in alarm. “Is everything okay?”

“More than okay,” she said, pulling on him.

He followed her lead. Using his strong arms, he hefted himself out of the pool, sitting on the edge beside her.

She had no time to waste. Standing up, she pulled off the panties, straddled him, and slid down onto his rock-hard cock.

The burn and stretch felt so amazing. She dug her nails into his shoulders, swiveling her hips. He cried out, too, and she remembered his injuries.

“Oh, Wrek, I’m sorr—”

“No,” he said, grabbing her to stop her from getting up. “Don’t stop. It feels too good to stop.” He pulled her down on him slowly, every inch of him filling her with pleasure.

She rocked back and forth and up and down, wanting it all, every possible variation. When he grabbed her waist and moved with her, it magnified the feeling. His head was back as he pleaded with her for more. And she happily gave it to him as he reciprocated with upward thrusts to meet her demands.

Their writhing turned desperate, animal, and she loved it. This was no timid Wrek. This was a side of him she’d never seen. He gripped her hard, gritting his teeth in the animal pleasure of it all. Purple eyes flashed as he used one of his hands to speed up the tempo. He was taking charge, making things happen. And it was so sexy.

The rhythm built a tension inside her that she could no longer hold onto. Riding his cock, she climaxed as waves of joy washed over her body. The orgasm built and built, never seeming to end as he drove into her. She was shaking, convulsing, the pleasure building into a crescendo. He continued to move her up and down, keeping her in a loop of pleasure that blew her mind.

When she was done, he cried out, tensing beneath her as he surged into her. He shook, head back, mouth open. She watched his body tremble, satisfied.

That had to be the best lay of her life.

Amazement in his eyes, he said, “How soon until we can do that again?”

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They sprawled on the side of the pool, both exhausted and completely satisfied.

Brandy laughed, a low sound in the back of her throat. “Who knew you were capable of that?”

He leaned up on one elbow and kissed her forehead. “With you, anything is possible.”

She put her hand on his cheek gently. “You really are something.”

He grinned, leaning into her touch. But then he was up, drawing on a robe that waited on a rock ledge nearby.

“Where are you going?” she asked, sitting up.

“I’ll replicate clothes for you before I go, or you can use that robe.” He pointed to one sitting next to where his had been. “I’d love to stay, but I have to get back to the lab. Very important work. It’s going to be more important very soon.”

She cocked her head, curious. “What’s going to happen soon?”

“Nothing to worry about,” he said, pulling his robe strings tight as he bent to give her another kiss. It was sweet and lingering and made her think about their lovemaking, wishing there could be more of it.

But Wrek was gone before she could entice him to stay. Dedicated to his work. It was something she admired, but didn't entirely understand when her own work had been the very thing she'd been trying to get him to stay and do.

She got up and dressed leisurely in the soft yoga pants and loose T-shirt Wrek had ordered for her. He'd also left her three different dinner options—a chicken Caesar salad, a quinoa and vegetable hash, and a veal parmigiana. She ate portions of each, and all were delectable. Near the end of the meal, her stomach began to feel queasy, so she stopped eating. Too much rich food after such an explosive tryst.

Wrek had also left the door open, so she wandered out, taking a stroll along the purplish hallways. She wondered absentmindedly if she should be afraid. Wrek had mentioned there were lots of creatures on this ship who wanted to mate with her, but she passed lots of guards, too, all of which seemed to be looking out of her. She had no doubt Wrek had sent at least one of them to keep a casual eye on her without her knowing.

Her stomach twisted again—with pain this time. A low dull throb. She wondered if she'd injured something during her time with Wrek. Totally worth it. She'd ask him for some painkillers when she saw him next.

Following the hallway around, she came to the ship's bridge, the large doorway open. Drake and Tork were inside, along with several other crew members, in a heated discussion. Brandy glanced in, deciding it seemed too tense for her to enter. She started to skirt past the opening when a giant beam of light shone brightly from the bridge's center.

Turning, she watched as figures began to appear within the beam's center. Fuzzy shapes materialized as shouts went up from the aliens on the bridge. Several alien beasts and humanoids came into focus. Han, flanked by his brothers Rahan and Kahn, aimed weapons at the aliens scrambling around the bridge.

“Han!” Drake shouted, reaching for the wall.

Han hit the top of a round globe-like device, and a pulse shot out like a wave. It hit Brandy’s body, paralyzing her. She fell, dully aware of the floor. Unfocused eyes stared up at the purplish ceiling as everything around her buzzed like she was very drunk.

The world around her faded and sharpened a few times before she was able to make out a face above her.

Rahan. She tried to speak to him, to touch his arm, but nothing was responding. He studied her, a worried expression dominating his features.

Strong arms slid under her body, and she was lifted. Rahan held her to his chest as he walked her into the room and toward where they’d materialized. As her head lolled lifelessly to the side, she took in the disarray. All of Drake’s crew lay on their backs, immobilized. Drake, Tork, and Wrek followed her with their gazes, sending her plaintive looks. She wondered what they would say if they could. Would they beg her to stay?

They didn’t have the chance. Neither did she.

Light filled her vision, then a warm tingly heat as parts of her body seemed to float away. They were beaming her up. In the next second, everything went black.

\* \* \*

Brandy woke to a wave of nausea so strong she was vomiting before her eyes were even open.

Lurching up and tilting to the side, she stared at her own sick. Her stomach was

revolting. Clutching it, she examined the room. She had no idea where she was, and the surrounding space gave her no indication. Everything was white and glowing. The bed resembled a cloud with fluffy cotton blankets. Curtains draped from the four posts around her, obscuring her view of the room beyond.

“You’re awake,” a voice said.

Charis appeared in the slit between the curtains, throwing her arms around Brandy’s neck. “Oh my God. I was worried sick. They took you and then Han said he couldn’t get you back, not without hurting you, and I was just beside myself. Are you okay?” The words came out in one long stream as Charis hung onto Brandy for dear life.

As she wrapped her arms around her friend’s body, she realized just how big Charis had grown with the pregnancy. She knew Cartharian babies grew faster than humans, but she hadn’t known they grew that fast.

“I’m okay,” Brandy said. “At least, I think so.” Another wave of nausea crested. Brandy put her hand over her mouth, hoping to spare Charis.

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“Are you sick? It’s normal. Here, this will help.” She grabbed something on a nightstand beside the bed and brought it over to Brandy. It was a clear, bubbly liquid. When she drank it, she grimaced. It tasted like an old jock strap.

“Oh God, that’s awful. What is it?”

Charis stared into the empty glass. “Something the doctor whipped up for me, but it will come in handy for you. Morning sickness can be a real drag, but this will help. It made me feel much better.”

Brandy put her hand on her stomach, hoping the liquid would settle it. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Charis took Brandy’s free hand, gazing into her eyes. “Enough about me. How are you? Is everything okay? Were they terrible to you?”

“They were... okay. Sometimes more than okay.” She thought of Drake, Tork, and Wrek. “Are they here? I mean, what did Han do to them?”

Charis frowned. “They’re in a holding cell right now. Han confiscated their ship. They’re going to be tried on criminal charges.”

Tried on charges. That sounded bad. “Han’s not going to do anything to them, is he? They’re nice guys for the most part.”

Charis gave Brandy a look that was so soaked in pity it made her want to vomit again. “Honey, how can you say they’re nice guys? They abducted you, locked you

up.”

“If you only knew them—”

“They raped you.” Charis stared at Brandy unflinchingly.

“What? No. No, they didn’t. At first, Drake was kind of rough, but we worked it out. They didn’t—”

“Brandy,” Charis said, stopping her. “You’re pregnant.”

The blood drained from Brandy’s head.

“What did you say?”

Charis squeezed her hand, appearing as if she was delivering the world’s worst news.

“I said you’re pregnant. You’re having a baby. One of theirs.”

13

Brandy laid in bed, staring at the canopy. Charis had wanted to stay, but Brandy had insisted on being alone. News like this was best processed by herself. Alone. Devastated.

She was pregnant. There was a life inside her. Touching her stomach did not make it feel real. Even vomiting up the bubbling liquid Charis had given her didn't do it. She felt her body changing. Her stomach felt taut. It kept cramping in a way she'd never felt before, but she'd just been through a major ordeal and had been teleported from one alien ship to another, so, yeah, she was queasy. It was to be expected.

But Charis had explained that when they'd gotten her on board, the ship's doctor had done a full body scan to make sure she had no injuries and found the pregnancy. Apparently, the growth rate of Cartharians also made it possible to detect upon conception. If she chose to believe she was with child, she would have lots of questions for Charis, but she was choosing not to believe it. If she ignored it for long enough, it would go away. That was how her mother dealt with raising Brandy anyway.

Motherhood. What a disaster. Her own mother had barely tolerated her. How in the world was Brandy going to deal with mothering a child who was not even human? To make matters worse, whoever the father was, he'd be incarcerated. She'd be a single mother to an alien son. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she brushed them away.

No, it couldn't be true. It just couldn't.

Charis brought food. She offered more anti-nausea drink. Seeing the mess of sick, she got a cleaning crew to take care of it. She'd even ordered a chair and slept in it beside Brandy's bed, her watermelon-sized belly rising and falling as she slept.

Brandy stared at Charis's sleeping form in the dim light, unable to sleep. The baby was a source of joy for Charis. She was in love with Han and knew he was her life mate. Brandy didn't even know who the father of her child was. Wrek or Tork, it could be either one.

In the morning when Charis stirred, it was the first question she asked her friend.

"Can I find out who the father of the child is?" she asked a groggy Charis.

"Good morning to you, too," she said, pushing the unruly brown hair out of her eyes. Her round face was radiant. Charis was one of those pregnant ladies who glowed when expecting. "And yes, you can, but not until it is born."

"All this advanced technology and I can't know until it's born?" Brandy dropped her hands onto her bedspread, exasperated.

Charis shrugged, rubbing a hand over her baby bump. "Do you have an idea whose it is?"

"One of two guys."

Charis kept her eyes down as she asked another uncomfortable question. "And did you like either of them?"

"Both actually."

"Hmm," Charis said.

“It wasn’t rape,” Brandy said, feeling choked up again. “It was consensual. I like Wrek and Tork very much. Even Drake is just hurt and misunderstood.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” Charis said, and Brandy knew she was thinking of Han.

“What’s going to happen to them?”

When Charis looked up, the worry in her face twisted Brandy’s insides. “Nothing yet, but Han was talking execution.”

Brandy sprung up. “We have to stop him.”

Charis was on her feet a moment later. “I know where he is. Come on.”

The best friends gripped hands and started out of the room. An alien guard murmured concern in his language, but Charis waved him away. “It’s fine. We’re allowed to move as we choose. We’re going to see the king.”

When the alien didn’t do anything to stop them, Brandy knew Charis ran the roost around here.

They ran barefoot and pregnant through the glowing white halls. Charis found the room Han was in and pressed her hand to it. As it disintegrated, men at a conference table appeared. Han sat with his brothers and a few other humanoid aliens. They were clearly discussing something important, but they stopped as the women entered the room.

Han stood, the rest following. “What are you doing here, sweetheart?” he said, walking to Charis. “Aren’t you two supposed to be resting?”

“There’s something really important we need to talk to you about,” Charis said, taking a step back. “Brandy says she wasn’t raped. She cares about those men. You can’t kill them.”

Han’s face darkened. He glanced back to Rahan and Kahn. “But they did abduct her and hold her against her will, as well as attack our ship and disregard direct orders. Their crimes are numerous.”

“But they didn’t see any other way. Your people and Drake’s have been at war for a long time, right? Maybe some forgiveness could go a long way to smoothing that over.” Brandy gave Han a hopeful look.

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His face did not soften. “It has been decided. Drake and his brothers will die.”

“No!” Brandy exclaimed, falling forward. Charis caught her, barely holding her up. Rahan came forward and took Brandy in his arms, lifting her up like a rag doll.

“Han!” Charis said in protest. Han pulled her aside to speak with her while Rahan began walking out of the room with Brandy in his arms.

“It’s all going to be okay,” Rahan said, holding her close.

“It’s not,” she said, crying into his chest. His shirt was open, and her tears smeared against his skin. She thought of the times they’d been together, but none of them had compared to her times with Wrek and Tork. And who even knew about Drake? She’d just been getting to know him. Now they all were going to die.

“It’s all my fault,” she moaned.

Rahan stopped walking. “None of this is your fault. You have to know that.”

She shook her head. “They just wanted a mate. Just like you and your brothers. Was that so much to ask?”

“They abducted you, dove,” he said, a growl in his voice. “We were so worried.”

“I appreciate that, but you have to understand. They don’t deserve to die.” She peered into his eyes, hoping he would see her pain. “One of them is the father of my child.”

Rahan's expression tightened. She could tell what she was saying hit him. He set her down gently, making sure she was steady on her feet before letting go. "What if I take you to them?"

"You'd do that?" She squeezed his arm in anticipation and hope.

His impish smile appeared. "It's my ship, after all."

Brandy hadn't smiled in a long time, but she did now. Putting her arm in Rahan's, she let him lead her to where they were holding the others.

They walked for quite a while, winding around until Brandy felt like they were near the bottom of the ship. Rahan stopped in front of a wall with two posted guards. The creatures nodded at their captain and moved aside as he rubbed his hands together.

"I want to warn you, they're in chains. I don't think they were beaten, but—"

"Don't think they were beaten?" Her voice was piercing. "How could you?"

"I didn't do it," he said, holding his hands up in defense. "Just be prepared. You have three minutes. Say what you need to, but don't get too close."

"They wouldn't hurt me."

"You don't have any idea what desperate men will do," Rahan said in an admonishing tone. "Okay, let's go."

He pressed both hands to the wall. It took much longer for the surface to begin to disintegrate than normal. When it did, Brandy's stomach began to knot as her eyes tried to adjust to the darkness inside.

They stepped in, Rahan at her back.

The space was small, low ceilings dripping with unnecessary water. The walls were rocky, old, and dank. She wondered if this was a simulator room made like a medieval dungeon or if they just kept a dungeon handy. On the far wall, she spotted the brothers. They were indeed shackled by the wrists with thick metal chains. Exhaustion permeated their bodies, heads hanging forward as if dead.

She forgot Rahan's words and ran to them, centering herself between Tork and Wrek, putting her hands on their bare chests.

"Brandy, stop!" Rahan called, running up behind her.

All three heads lifted. Three pairs of eyes focused on her face. Wrek was the least tattered, no bloody cuts or black eyes for him. Drake and Tork had not fared so well. Each had apparently taken many blows to the face and torso, judging from their cuts and bruises. Tears sprang to Brandy's eyes.

Gentle smiles bloomed on all three faces as they studied her.

"Are you okay?" Wrek asked in a cracked and dry voice.

"Are they treating you well?" Tork asked.

Drake inclined his head in her direction, lifting one side of his bruised mouth. "Good to see you."

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“Oh, boys,” she said, still crying. “I’m so sorry. How could they have done this to you? I’m getting you out of here. I don’t know how, but I am.”

“Brandy,” Rahan said with an edge of warning in his voice.

The men shifted their gazes to him. Drake sneered. Tork seemed as if he could rip Rahan’s head clean off.

“Shut up, pretty boy, and face me like a man.” Tork pulled against his chains, making them rattle.

Rahan rolled his eyes. He touched Brandy gently on the elbow. “Are you done?”

“No,” she said, turning away from him. She touched each of their faces tenderly, careful to avoid cuts and bruises. She wanted to memorize every feature just in case.

“Rahan,” Wrek said, locking eyes with the prince. “Can we make a bargain? Han wouldn’t speak to me, but maybe you—”

“If Han wouldn’t speak to you, I shouldn’t either.”

“I thought you were afraid,” Tork said, the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut flashing. “I could smell your cowardice when you walked in.”

“Shut up,” Rahan said, surging forward.

Brandy blocked him with her body. “Just talk to Wrek,” she begged. “Please.”

Rahan shook his head, his shoulder-length hair swaying. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“I have something spectacular,” Wrek said, leaning forward until his chains strained. “I can fix our fertility problem. For good.”

Rahan’s eyes widened, but Brandy went cold. Now it was dawning on her how she’d gotten pregnant. Had Wrek been using her as a guinea pig for his experiments? Heat burned through her body as she zeroed in on Wrek. She’d kill him. She’d...

“I’ll talk to Han,” Rahan said, but his voice held no confidence. “He’ll want to see what you can do.”

“It’s in the testing phase right now,” Wrek added.

Rahan’s brow furrowed.

“He can do it,” Drake said. “If my brother says he can fix our problem, he can.”

Rahan glanced back and forth between them. “All right. I’ll ask him. Brandy?” He held a hand out, waiting to lead her out of the cell, but she planted her feet.

“I need to talk to them.”

“You already have.”

“Alone,” she commanded. It was so unlike her, but it worked.

Rahan started to back up. “I’ll give you one minute. Any funny business from them and the deal is off.” He eyed the men to let them know he meant business and then exited the room, closing the door behind him.

They turned to her. Wrek was the first to speak. “Brandy, thank you.”

“Shut it,” she said, her voice teetering on the edge of tears. “You owe me an explanation.”

He frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I can fix our fertility,” she mimed in a whiny voice. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out? Did you?” She was in his face, her hands fisted at her sides and her heart pounding. She wanted to slap Wrek across his beautiful face.

But he didn’t crumble with shame, only appeared confused. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out.

All three men stared at her.

“Wow,” Wrek said. “That’s... amazing.”

“And terrifying,” she said, her tears flowing freely now. “Are you telling me you didn’t do this to me? As your experiment?”

Wrek shook his head. “I didn’t experiment on you if that’s what you’re thinking. Though, it could have been my fault because... you know.” He widened her eyes, trying to remind her of their tryst without actually saying it.

The other two seemed to catch on anyway. “Good for you, little brother,” Drake said with a wry smile.

Brandy dropped her eyes. “It could be Tork’s, too.”

Tork smirked as Drake glanced over at him. “What can I say? Women love me.”

“I’m the only one? Gods!” Drake slumped against the wall.

“Regardless, you are telling me that this child was made the normal way?” Brandy’s hand strayed to her already-expanding belly. No bikinis for a while.

Wrek nodded. “Turns out you can carry our children after all.”

Her head swirled. She’d been so worried. Then so angry. Now she was just... tired.

“What do we do?”

“I wish I could hold you right now,” Wrek said sweetly.

“Get in line,” Tork grumbled. When she met his eyes, his were tender. “If we get out of here, we’ll take care of you. All of us.”

She studied the three male faces, each signing a contract with their eyes. They meant what they said. They would stand by her.

“All right,” she said. “Then we need to convince Han to take your deal.”

14

Brandy waited outside the closed wall as Rahan and Han talked inside. From the sounds of things, the conversation wasn't going well.

Men's voices argued. Something crashed. Brandy bit her nails until they were ragged. There was no moment in her life more important than this one, and the tension of it all made her feel sick. Or maybe that was the pregnancy.

The wall split open and Rahan stormed out, Kahn at his heels. Rahan glanced at Brandy standing there and shook his head. "Pigheaded, that one. Stubborn as a moose."

"Maybe stubborn as a mule?" Kahn offered. "He's just in a mood. Charis's time is close."

"So?" Rahan said loudly. "We've got three of our cousins, and warlords of clans that want to kill us, and he thinks a public execution is a good idea? It's a great way to start a war! Can't wait to see how they retaliate," Rahan yelled inside loud enough for Han to hear. More crashing sounded from the room.

Brandy cringed. "Nothing changed his mind?"

Rahan sadly shook his head, and Kahn offered her a sympathetic shrug. "We'll keep trying."

"But he wants to do it tomorrow," Brandy cried with exasperation in her voice.

“A lot can happen in a day,” Kahn offered.

“No,” she said, marching past the boys and into the room. She was going to confront Han herself. Sure, he was brash, rude, and angry, but he was also her best friend’s mate and she’d seen him melt more than once at Charis’s touch. He had a soft side, and she could find it.

“What are you doing in here?” Han growled.

Lord, he was big. Standing over six and a half feet tall, Han was imposing, more so than the abnormally big males she’d been around. He was pure intimidation, and it sent chills up her spine. Most of her wanted to turn around and run, but she remembered her baby and her men. She stood her ground.

“Your Majesty, I come to plead my case.”

“I’ve heard your case,” Han said, thumping a book shut on his desk. The area resembled a mid-century office room from some British house of Parliament—oak desks, scrolling woodwork, lots of bookshelves and tapestries. Stacks of books waited beside the big leather chair in the corner by the fire. He glanced at them, clearly wanting to be done with her already.

“Han, these men are not criminals. One of them is the father of my child.”

“Which makes the other two unnecessary. What if I spare one of them in order for the child to have a father? The man would spend his life in jail, but the child would be able to see him from time to time.”

“How can you even suggest that?” she asked, her voice rising. “What you want to do is barbaric. We don’t do public executions anymore.”

“On Earth. But this isn’t Earth, and you cannot pretend to know the Cartharian ways. You are human and a woman. I do not need your counsel, so good day.” He turned his back, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

Oh, he was making her furious. She even stomped her foot. “Han, listen to me.”

“Sire,” a voice said from the doorway. A humanoid guard rushed in. “It’s time.”

When Han stared blankly, the guard tried again. “Your mate, sire. She is giving birth to your child.”

Han’s face went white. The book dropped from his hands as he took off running.

Charis was having her baby? Brandy had been so preoccupied she hadn’t even asked how much time Charis had left. She had to be there.

Forgetting everything, she took off running after Han.

Sprinting down the hallway, she came to a room flooded with commotion. Aliens were coming in and out. Hushed voices were turning into shouts. Inside, someone was screaming.

Brandy recognized her friend’s pained cry, turning like a corkscrew into her chest. She pushed past an alien guard and slipped into the room.

It was bright white and devoid of furniture except for what she guessed was a bed in the center of the room, though she couldn’t see it for the group of people clustered around. Aliens and humanoids both were blocking her view of her friend, so Brandy rushed forward, ducking under elbows until she could wiggle to the front.

Charis lay on the bed, sweaty and disheveled, like she’d just run a marathon or swam

the English Channel. Her shapeless white gown was drenched in sweat. Brown hair lay in soggy curls on her forehead and down the nape of her neck. Brandy watched, pained, as Charis squeezed her face up, moaning and balling the blanket into her clenched fists. Her cry sounded like pure agony.

Han paced on the other side of the bed, lost. Brandy had always seen him as a powerhouse, demanding things, knowing exactly what he wanted, but right now, he was a scared little boy in a man's body. Her heart went out to him, even though he'd just been ordering the execution of the father of her child.

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They'd deal with that later. Right now, they needed to make sure Charis was okay. And from the looks of things, she wasn't.

Brandy crawled on the white bed, grabbing Charis's hand gently. Her eyes snapped open. When she saw it was Brandy, she gave a weary smile.

"You're here."

"Of course I'm here, honey. Where else would I be?" Brandy wiped the sweat off her friend's forehead with her sleeve.

Charis smiled and opened her mouth to speak, but her body went rigid as another wave of pain hit her. She squeezed Brandy's hand so tightly her fingers started to tingle. Charis's throaty moan made Han stalk beside the bed like a caged animal. Aliens darted out of the way to avoid him.

Two alien humanoids tried to remove Brandy from her position on the bed, but Charis shook her head, and they left her alone. A worried and unsure Harper appeared. Charis waved her in. She took up residence on the other side of the bed, offering silent support. Brandy knew she was a nurse, though not a labor and delivery one, but it was nice to have her all the same.

Hours passed as Brandy wiped the sweat from Charis's brow, offered her ice chips, and rubbed her back. When it was time to deliver, she held one of Charis's legs while Harper held the other. Charis delivered her child like a champ. The baby emerged squalling. It was alien in features—big eyes, oval head, long arms and fingers, and scaled skin—but when he opened his round eyes and stared at his mama, Charis

melted. They all did.

Charis pulled the baby into her arms as Han leaned over. “It’s a boy,” Charis whispered, exhausted but amazingly happy and radiant. Han leaned down and kissed his mate’s forehead.

When Brandy flicked her gaze to Han, she was shocked to see tears in his eyes. After they cut the cord, Han picked up the little bundle and snuggled the baby close to his chest, cooing. It was so uncharacteristic and amazing to see.

His glistening eyes surveyed the room as his face exuded happiness. “I have a son.”

His gaze fell on Brandy. She grinned, happy for him. This wasn’t a time for their dispute, but his smile faded. She worried he would yell at her to leave now that the crisis was averted.

“No child should grow up without a father,” he said, locking eyes with her.

She nodded. Was he saying...

“I’ll reconsider Wrek’s offer,” Han said.

Brandy could not believe her ears. “Does this mean...”

“I’ll put a stay on the execution. We’ll renegotiate.”

Her heart leaped. “Thank you, Han. You won’t regret it.”

Han turned his attention back to his mate and baby. Brandy knew she had to be the one to deliver the good news. She gave Charis a kiss on the forehead and slipped away. She couldn’t wait to see the expressions on her men’s faces.

Brandy sat on the soft velvet couch, rubbing one hand over her burgeoning belly. Alien babies did grow fast. A three-month gestation and she'd be a mother. In the two weeks since she found out, she was still not sure she'd gotten a handle on it. But a lot had changed since then.

For starters, Han and Charis were new parents. It was so amazing to see Charis cuddling her baby, feeding him, and tackling diapers. Alien babies were just like human ones in so many ways. And Charis was a natural, so nurturing and loving. Brandy had known she would be great, but Charis was taking it to a whole other level.

Han had officially been crowned king of his people. There was a ceremony with elaborate alien speeches, decorations, and lots of food Brandy could not try on her sensitive stomach. She'd been served her favorite meal of shepherd's pie while the others ate their strange green fish and lopsided fruit. Charis had been glowing in her emerald and gold gown, the baby on her lap. Even Han's mother seemed mostly pleased with the outcome, and she was never pleased about anything.

Rahan and Kahn were there. And Harper sat between them in a radiant gown of red that flattered her figure. Brandy felt fat and unattractive in her stretchy blue dress, but it was a mile ahead of being a prisoner on an alien ship. Plus, she had her men at her side.

Han had held good to his word, meeting with Wrek and then all three brothers to charter a peace treaty. Wrek had agreed to share his discovery of solving their

reproduction problem with Han in exchange for full pardons. It was a tentative peace, but it was working. All three of the men were now free to roam the ship as they pleased. Wrek had been meeting with Bram to transfer knowledge. And Rahan and Tork had formed an unexpected friendship over their love of women and working out.

Drake was still surly. Han was still angry. The baby cried, and Brandy had morning sickness. But things were good. More than good.

Now, back in her Central Perk simulation, she and all three brothers were enjoying a little peace and quiet. Splayed on the couch, Drake was at one end rubbing her feet while Wrek brought her a decaf cup of coffee just the way she liked it.

“You know, if you keep treating me like this, I’m going to get used to it,” Brandy said, smiling at Wrek as he handed her the large mug. Steam wafted her way, smelling delicious. Her baby liked coffee. He took right after his mother.

“You should get used to it,” Wrek said. “The mother of our child deserves only the best treatment.”

She cupped his cheek sweetly.

“It’s because of you that we’re even alive,” Drake said, rubbing the soreness away from her ankles.

“I didn’t do anything. It was Han seeing his baby boy.”

The wall opened. Tork walked in, shirtless and wiping sweat from his glistening chest. Brandy’s eyes widened at his gloriousness. Pregnancy had not dulled her desire for men. If anything, it had heightened it. And all three of the men seemed more than happy to allow her to scratch her itch, so to speak.

Tork caught her eye and winked seductively. It was his night for a date with her, and she was looking forward to it immensely.

Wrek brought a stack of books over to the coffee table and set them down among the mugs. “I’ve dug up all I can on offspring of our species. Some of these need to be translated, but I am sure I can make that happen.”

Brandy put her hand on Wrek’s, causing him to stop and meet her eyes. “This is wonderful. Thank you. I’ll be very prepared.”

Her trepidation about motherhood was still there, but it had eased some since Charis’s delivery. It helped so much to see Charis love on her baby, to see him coo at his mother, bonded by a love that transcended species. When Brandy held that baby, her own heart swelled. Soon, she would have one of her own. Charis would help. And the baby would have three strong role models as fathers. What could go wrong?

Well, lots of things. She could get homesick. The men could fight. She might get pregnant with one of their babies and the others could get jealous. She might turn selfish, angry, and resentful. But she didn’t think any of it would stick. Being with her men and her best friend was the happiest she’d ever felt. And the joy of motherhood seemed like the last piece of her very content puzzle.

She got up, Drake helping her to her feet. Her belly was swollen, as if already in her second trimester. For a moment, she thought about how big she was, but Tork and the others had already assured her they found her just as attractive, if not more so, in her current state, so she told her inner critic to shut the hell up.

After she dressed in a cute floral maternity sundress and flip-flops for her date with Tork, he arrived showered and ready at the door, his eyes sparkling.

He held his arm out. “Ready, sugar?”

She smiled. “Where to tonight?”

His eyes sparkled mischievously. “It’s a surprise. You’ll like it.”

She took his arm, the thrill of being with him as new and fresh as the first time. It might wear off eventually, but this other feeling growing under her ribs would stick. She leaned into his touch. “Take me anywhere, as long as it’s with you.”

THE END