



Delivered to My Alpha Alien Lovers

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Description: I always joke that the only way I'll ever find my other half is if I can get on a spaceship to another planet light years away. Because every man I've dated on this world has been a major disappointment. My bestie, a happily mated wolf shifter, tells me I need to take responsibility for my own choices. Easy to say when you've got it all, including the adorable twins whose images feature in every social media post, holiday greeting, and direct message. Since aliens are the stuff of fantasies, I finally take her advice and sign up for the app where she met Rex, Mail-Order Matings. According to Jenny, even a human can meet their fated mate on there. Imagine my surprise when a pair of men who claim to be aliens send me a message. It has to be a joke. Probably cosplayers or something. But how can I resist finding out?

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Chapter One

Amaris

I loved my best friend, Jenny. I did. But dinners at her house were...chaotic and I usually left hungrier than I arrived.

That was why I sat in my car outside her house and debated on whether it was too late to call in sick for dinner.

She wouldn't believe me, of course, but still, I considered it.

None of the chaos was her fault. She had one-year-old twin shifter boys who were already popping from wolf to human to wolf again while confined in a high chair.

I might be fussy too.

The front door to Jenny and Rex's house opened, and I smiled and groaned at the same time. I'd lost my chance. Jenny's mate was ripped from head to toe. His shirt strained at the biceps, showing off his physique. Jenny claimed most shifters looked like him. Man, I wanted that. Not him. But someone like that. Devoted. Muscular. Hot. Mine.

Rex waved me inside, and I grabbed the peach and blackberry pie I'd baked, knowing it might not survive the wrath of the twins.

Still, they were cute, and I had been named their godmother. Jenny's mate had sisters

but they insisted I be the godmother. I was honored to assume the role.

Rex assured me this feral phase didn't last forever. He had to remind Jenny of that as well when she was at her wits' end.

"Hey, everyone!" I announced as Rex ushered me in. The smells of meat loaf and roast chicken wafted through the air.

"Glad you decided to come in," Rex whispered. "Thanks for joining us. The food is almost ready."

"What are you two whispering about? My cooking is fantastic."

"Oh, Jenny. Come on. Everyone knows you make a mean meat loaf. Rex happened to notice I was dawdling in my car." No reason to deny it. Jenny had probably already seen me in the car before Rex. Hell, she probably sent him to get me.

"Again? Are we that bad?" Jenny appeared in the doorway that transitioned the dining room into the kitchen. She had a spoon in her hand and a drip of some kind of sauce at the corner of her mouth.

"You're not that bad. Stop it. But...where are the boys?"

Rex cracked up. "They are actually napping. The four of us had a big ordeal today, and they are tuckered out."

"What happened?" I asked with alarm. Sure, the boys were wild as could be but that didn't mean I wanted anything to ever happen to them.

"They shifted into wolves. Full, crazy shift."

“It’s not the first time,” I said, not really understanding. “I’ve seen them shift with my own eyes.”

“This time, it stuck. We ran as wolves for a while, and they shifted back without my command. A big day, indeed.” Rex’s pride for his sons oozed from him. They were only babies to me, but they’d made a huge step in terms of being a shifter. And it was very early to shift, from what I had heard.

“Aww, that’s so cute.”

Rex swiped the bit of sauce from Jenny’s chin and planted a kiss that belonged on the pages of a romance novel, on her. I looked away to give them a bit of privacy and noticed the boys on the couch. I walked over to see them. Their limbs were tangled together as they tended to sleep. Mouths open. They were knocked out cold. What a life.

Theron and Theo were just about the most adorable things—when they were asleep.

The chubby cheeks seriously did me in. I glanced over to see Rex and Jenny still making out and whispering cute things to each other. Jenny giggled and blushed.

I sighed. If only it were so easy for humans. One look. One feeling. One mate forever.

“Let’s eat,” Jenny announced and walked back into the kitchen. As she passed him, Rex swatted at her butt.

We shared conversation over dinner, but as we finished up the meal and moved on to my pie for dessert, the boys woke up.

They toddled into the dining room. One went into Jenny’s lap and the other crawled

into Rex's. They rubbed at their eyes, and Theron waved backward at me.

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“Are you hungry?” Rex asked. He didn’t have to. Those boys had boosted the whole economy when they started eating solid food.

They set both boys in their high chairs, and I helped by cutting up a couple of chicken thighs and two pieces of meat loaf—each.

Good thing Rex made solid money as a contractor.

We chatted about work and other things over dessert, and I passed on an offer of coffee. If I had any caffeine after noon, the night would be restless for me, and I valued my sleep. The boys were calmer than usual and, after a pound or so of meat each, they were ready to cuddle with their papa.

“I think I’m going to get these two into the bath before they pass out again. Thanks for coming over again, Amaris.”

He walked out, one twin in each arm, and I sighed. I wanted that. So badly I could taste it.

“You won’t find your mate or husband or whatever if you don’t get out there,” Jenny said, chuckling.

“I wasn’t—”

She put up her hand. “I know you aren’t drooling over Rex, but the idea of him and a family. You’re not being proactive about it, babe.”

“I’ve gotten out there. In there. All around there. I’m convinced there’s no one on this Earth for me.”

Jenny snorted. “There has to be someone. Look at you. You’re smart. Beautiful. Funny. A catch for anyone.”

“Maybe I need to look into space travel. There’s a chance there’s a hot alien mate with a special tail and all kinds of salacious thoughts.”

“Or...” Jenny leaned on the hood of my car, drawing out this conversation as a break from the twins. Small, but one nonetheless. “You could join the app. It’s where I found Rex. There are all kinds of shifters and monsters on there. If you’re dead set on an alien, there might be one on there for you as well.”

Her and this app.

“I promise to think about it.”

“You should. You deserve a guy who’s crazy about you, Amaris.”

Chapter Two

Tylan

One Earth year. My travel partner and I had been assigned this location for that length of time, and while we had requested it, we had not dreamed it would be approved. Others had made the same ask and been turned down. What gave us the edge, we might never be sure of, but it didn’t hurt that Farsel’s uncle had the ear of the committee.

As the months passed, and we traveled extensively, we observed that many citizens

of this world did not appreciate what they had and spent so much of their time fighting with one another.

Natural beauty, what they hadn't already paved over, still remained, but it might not for long if their citizens did not exercise care. We'd been to planets that had already passed the point of no return. As intergalactic cultural anthropologists, we never knew what we'd encounter, especially in locations so far from home. Earth was the most distant anyone on our planet had traveled, yet the most similar to our home. For one, we could breathe and move here without any special equipment. The atmosphere retained by the orb contained appropriate amounts of things such as oxygen, the gravity was only a bit less, and they actually had water in large quantities. Even we didn't have such oceans and rivers.

We hurried to gather our data in time for the return of the ship that left us here, gathering our belongings as well and preparing for departure. We had a tentative date, but space travel could be affected by many factors, and therefore the precise time could not be anticipated too far in advance.

At first, we'd welcomed the additional months we were informed of. Political issues at home had affected funding for scientific research, but it should all be resolved soon—Enjoy your extra time!

Five years later, we were still waiting for our ride. We had enjoyed and made good use of our time, even opened a little business because no more funds would be coming our way. Unlike the alien superheroes of comic book fame, we did not have any powers like flight or invisibility. The gravity difference did give us a little more athletic ability, and we were highly educated even among our own people. But no more than that.

“How old are we again?” Farsel asked me over breakfast, proving that no matter how many degrees a man had, he could still have his weaknesses. “I have such a hard time

translating age from our world to here.”

“We are thirty-two here. And before you ask, yes, we have reached the age of mating and are very soon going to feel the effects.” That was the one thing we’d been dreading. We could live the rest of our lives here, if we had to, regretting only our possible inability to get the results of our research home. After the one message, we’d neither received nor been able to send any.

But the mating time could not be put off. It would come sometime in the next Earth year, and if we were still here, we would have to mate with someone from this planet. Or try to. Would it work? Not if the bond did not form. But we’d have to try.

“If we mate here, we will never be able to leave,” Farsel said. “We will be trapped here, forever.”

“You don’t know that.” Did he? “If we can survive here without any breathing devices or other such things, our mate should be able to do the same at home.”

In nearly six years on this world, we had not turned our attentions to any females beyond admiring them for their attractiveness or perhaps kindness. But if the symptoms of mating disease began, we would have to try.

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At best, if we missed the mating window, we would be alone forever. But, at worst, we would die. Most survived at least the physical effects, but the mental... Few lived long lives who were not mated in time.

“How would we even find someone?” he asked. “If one of us gets the symptoms, we will only have a short time to find our mate. And from what we’ve observed, most humans take months or even years to find and mate with their significant other.”

“I guess we’d better try to find a way. Maybe one of those online dating services or something.”

“I’ll look into them then come to the shop in a while.”

We sat for a while, in silence, before Farsel left for work, and I poured a second cup of coffee and went to my home office to see if I could find anything on social media to help us with our need to find a mate. Singular. On our world, where females were born far less often than males, good friends would often vow to share a mate when they grew up. And it was fortunate that we had done so because it was going to be hard enough to locate one woman willing to mate with us.

I settled back with my coffee and started a search.

Chapter Three

Amaris

Jenny erupted in a loud squeal when I called to tell her I intended to sign up for the

Mail-Order Matings app. After much research, I'd learned the app used an algorithm to match people based on hundreds of different aspects of their lives. And the possible mates encompassed a larger demographic than any other app I'd looked into.

"Are you going to go for a shifter?" she asked, her next words muffled but involving putting something down before she had to hang up and then nobody would be happy.

"I don't think so. I might leave the species open, since I still hold to the fact that my mate is out there in the universe. Far far out there."

She groaned. "That's silliness. I'm sure you can find a hunky bear shifter or maybe a jaguar or even a wolf who wants nothing more than to cuddle with you. You've been reading too much alien romance."

I avoided alien romance, although she would have no way of knowing that. The days of discussing books at length with my friend ended when she became a mom. I read shifters. Dark mafia, absolutely. Reading about sexy aliens looking for a human mate would only make me long more for something out of sight and out of reach. Light years away.

Imagine a chiseled alien male scrolling on his phone through the Mail-Order Matings app. I was sure they had better things to do in the galaxy than to search for a human girl who dreamed of stars and planets and space travel.

Huh.

Maybe I should've been an astronaut.

Then I could go up in space and, if I was lucky, a hot alien would kidnap me.

"Ahem," Jenny cleared her throat. "Did you even hear what I said?"

“Yeah. Alien romance. Which I don’t even read.”

“Sure. Fill out the questions, and then you wait. It might take a couple of days to get the first few matches. Then you cull them and it makes decisions based on your likes and dislikes, helping them learn more about you. But call me when you get the first one. No excuses. Day or night.”

I snorted. “You want me to wake you in the middle of the night if I get a match? Rob you of your precious sleep?”

She grunted. “Good point. But call me first thing in the morning. Any time after dawn. I’ll be up.”

My best friend was a sleep-deprived mess. Yet, I wanted a life similar to hers with a hot hubby and sweet little children to love. “Agreed. I’m gonna go answer questions.”

“Deal.”

She hung up but before she did, I heard her calling out for Theo. Someone was in trouble.

I’d filled in only enough information to create an account on the app. Anxiousness settled in my belly as I began to fill out more specific information. Was I looking for a reverse harem? Did I only want one mate? The choices seemed endless.

I wouldn’t mind being the peanut butter in a hot-guy sandwich, not at all.

As with the species of mates, I chose not to answer that question specifically, choosing “all of the above” instead.

See what Fate came up with.

There were more questions, but my stomach reminded me it was time to eat. I put the phone down and went over to make myself an egg sandwich. Sure, I was capable of cooking more but I wanted something comforting. Eggs. Cheese. Butter. Bread. What could be more comforting than that? I made a cup of hot chocolate and returned to the couch where I ate and turned on a movie for background noise.

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I nearly choked on my sandwich as I got to the steamy questions. What did I prefer in the bedroom? An alien or two. How would I rate my sex drive on a scale of one to ten? Depended on the partner and me. Most of the time, a solid nine.

The rest of the questions were on a more boring note. My favorite books and movies. What I liked to do in my spare time. Not much.

I put the phone aside again before I was done and walked outside to my balcony. Fresh air helped when I was feeling overwhelmed, as happened sometimes. Tonight was one of those nights. Maybe it was the app. Maybe the thought of purposefully seeking out a mate instead of randomly dating.

The cool air of the night soothed me. The stars twinkled above as though each flicker was just for me. It was too bad I was way down here on Earth when my heart had always been in the skies.

Tipping my head back, I picked out the constellations. I'd studied them when I was little until my whole family was sick of me talking about it and I shut it down for the moment.

My position at the observatory was where it all paid off. I gave presentations to ticketholders, and while they got a 3D view of the galaxy, in no way was my job work. Looking to the heavens all day felt like a dream job.

After going back inside, I finished the questionnaire on the app and completed my profile with a simple selfie of me. No makeup. Hair not curled. In my pajamas. If a man couldn't like me like this, then I wasn't the one for them.

That night, I went to sleep with the galaxy projector on and my mind on an alien mate coming to rescue me and taking me to the stars.

A dream might be the only thing I ever had.

Chapter Four

Farsel

As if talking about it made it happen, I woke up very early the next morning with a dull ache in my stomach. It might be the late-night sandwich settling badly, but I had a bad feeling. One that was confirmed by noon when the ache spread from my core to my limbs. It was the mating burn, something only a small percentage of our people experienced but which many in my family did. A little fact I'd managed to conceal from those who approved my travel only because all of us held that secret close. I'd never have been allowed the trip. And since Tylan and I were bonded and sworn to share a mate, it would have cost him as well.

He'd spent a good part of the previous day looking at various dating apps but had not found any he thought would be good for us. But now I was extra motivated to find something to work. If I didn't find our mate, the illness would take me, and that would leave Tylan all alone and far from home.

In the predawn darkness, I turned on the light over the kitchen table and sat down with my phone to see if I would have better luck than my friend. This time of day had always been a time of clarity for me, here, at home, and on the other planets we'd been permitted to study. Tylan's aptitude with the internet here surpassed mine, in most cases, partly because it was one of his areas of study here, but I hoped that my mind's differences from his would make it possible to do what he had not.

Search terms. Female. Mating. Marriage. Dating. What I would expect to find

someone in search of a “love connection,” as I’d heard it called. A row of apps came up, and I spent some time looking them over, but what they offered either represented a segment of society—a particular religion or lifestyle—or appeared to be geared toward those interested in a physical hookup to ease their sexual needs or desires.

I was neither a farmer, a member of any registered theology group, nor any of the other specifics these humans seemed to sort into mating preferences. No wonder my friend had such a hard time. As I viewed and rejected app after app, I began to lose hope and wonder if I needed to look in another direction. My time was limited—an uncle had died less than two weeks after the onset of symptoms, and my grandfather had come close.

But then, just as I was ready to give up on online assistance, an ad for one more app came up on my screen. Mail-Order Matings. With nothing to lose and maybe something to gain, I clicked on the image and read the rest of the information. Like the others, this one was geared toward a particular group, but in all other ways, it was so different.

Instead of dating and marriage and similar terms, they used mating. The app was focused on helping shifters and others who were outside the norm find their fated ones. And because some of these true mates were humans, they allowed them to sign up, too. This app reminded me that not all inhabitants of this planet were standard humans. Despite the fact that many were and that although the greatest number chose to close their eyes to the others, they existed. How much better was I, having not taken those beings into consideration?

We had encountered many of them in our travels over the continents layering this world, yet when it was time to try to mate here, I forgot about them entirely? Our planet had far fewer types of sentient beings, but even we had some. How limited had my thinking become?

From what I was learning, there were many on Earth who were better suited for someone seeking a lifelong mating, and this app held the key to finding them.

I downloaded the app and began the process of filling out their questionnaire. Impressed with its extensiveness, I did my best to give accurate answers to as many of the queries as possible. Neither my friend nor I had any strong preferences in terms of hair and eye color, etc, but we did want someone seeking an equal partnership, and children would be desirable. Characteristics...kindness, a sense of humor, openness to new ideas. Where they asked about type of creature, I marked "other." Our presence on this planet was not something I could put out there to the general public. Not even shifters and orcs. Our mate would have to know, eventually. But privately.

Once I had completed the form, or most of it, I was able to access the app itself, and several potential mates appeared in my inbox. That fast and easy?

It couldn't be.

But it was, and reading each bio showed me why they were presented. Each was open to more than one mate, which was important to me, and they were all in an age range near ours. One tawny-haired female was a wolf shifter, another, adorned with silky black curls, claimed a witch/crow heritage going back five hundred years. Either might be all right. But the third?

Her name was Amaris, and she proudly stated she was a human with no magical legacy, but she admired the fact that shifters concept of mating appealed to her so much more than the idea of a marriage that would be easily dissolved when one or both parties found fault in the other.

I suspected many humans gave marriage a lot more of themselves than she was seeing, but she would base her ideas on her own observations. And the amount of thought she'd put into the whole thing made me even more interested in her.

It didn't hurt that she had dark eyes with long lashes and silvery waves of hair, a cheek whose curve I wanted to caress, and a small smile lifting the corners of her rosy lips.

She was open to shifters but would consider others...and for a job? She worked at an observatory. Narrating the stars passage on its curved ceiling.

Would she like to hear about how the stars looked from our planet?

I sent a message.

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Chapter Five

Amaris

I left my phone on the charger in the kitchen when I went to bed. I'd started doing that when I caught myself surfing late into the night altogether too often. As was my habit, I waited until I poured my first cup of coffee to sit down at the counter and check messages. I never gave the app I'd signed up for a thought until I saw the icon on my screen. Oh. Right.

What had I been thinking? Why would a shifter want me? Oh, I knew I wasn't horrible to look at, and I prided myself on my mind, but they were so different from humans. At least the few I knew were. They gave themselves to life and love with a wholeheartedness I'd never found in any of the men I dated.

Rex would lay down his life for Jenny and the kids; he would always make his mate and his family his priority. I hadn't seen a lot of that among my non-shifter friends with their other halves. Not that some regular guys weren't great, but there was a passion there I wanted with all my soul.

But would anyone like Rex want me? An ordinary human with an eye for the cosmos?

Swiping the screen, I opened the app, but before I could try to navigate anywhere, notifications flared to life. Dozens of them. What on earth? They must have made a mistake, sent someone else's messages to me.

But I couldn't resist peeking at one, so I scanned the subject lines. Wolves and other shifters, an orc, a wizard, other things I didn't even know existed. And one whose subject line said only, Urgent. That should have been every kind of red flag. My finger strayed back to a wolf shifter. Weren't they what I'd had in mind? A guy like Rex. Hot, kind, protective, generally awesome? My friend's mate even did the vacuuming without wanting gratitude and a trophy like some of my mundane friends' husbands seemed to.

But why would someone put down urgent? I clicked on his bio and read through. He and another guy were looking to meet their mate ASAP. He used the terms the shifters did like mate, but maybe that was something required here on the app?

Not a word about what they were. And his friend didn't seem to have a bio himself. If it was such a rush... Why would it be such a rush?

I went to the others again, reading through one after the next and considering what it might be like to be "mated" to them. Others had come in while I was wasting my time with the whatever he was who wanted a mate for himself and his buddy.

More shifters, mostly. But one vampire. For real?

I spent a good fifteen minutes reading his bio, which detailed his life in the past few centuries with an impressive compactness considering what he had to share. I tried to imagine what it might be like to spend time with someone who was only awake at night. Would he like to go out to movies or maybe lake swimming in the moonlight? Or did he just like to sit around and be elegant like in the movies. Would he expect his mate to be a food source? He didn't say, but my imagination went wild with the horrible possibilities.

I shivered and closed the page.

A couple of hours later, I'd reviewed so many more bios. Those who had hit me up and some suggestions from the app itself. If I liked any of those, I'd have to approach them first, and while a few were kind of interesting, I didn't think I'd feel comfortable doing that. Oh, I'd asked men out on dates, so that wasn't an issue, but it was such a strange new world, dating outside the ordinary human realm, and I didn't even know what to say.

I moved on to some wolves, my original interest, and they seemed nice. Cute, for sure, but none of them were making me want to reply. At least, not yet. But it didn't stop me from reading more. I finished the whole pot of coffee and curled up on the couch with my phone, lost in a world I'd only seen the slightest glimpse of before. All of these people who spent their time on this planet, going about their lives just like the ordinary humans and with so little notice.

After every bio, I found myself wandering back to the "urgent" guy. So much of what he said about himself was interesting and he sounded pretty nice. And he was hot. But...there was that big red flag.

Finally, I deleted him and blocked, or tried to anyway. I wasn't sure if it worked. But that should be no trouble because my address and phone were not available without my sharing it. And then I went out to buy some groceries. My phone burned in my pocket, but I managed to control myself until I bought my chicken and veggies, cereal and milk, and a few other items. I'd never had trouble getting dates, if I wanted them, but I wasn't Miss Popularity either. What was different here?

Chapter Six

Tylan

Farsel thought I didn't know what he was going through, but there were no true secrets back home among close friends. We didn't call them out, of course. Certainly

didn't let anyone who could have made an official record know about it. Because families that suffered from this particular issue were often denied opportunities. And not just for those who actually experienced the problem.

Or if they were already mated, which in theory should fix the problem. Some scientist had come up with the theory that if an affected party should be widowed, it could trigger a recurrence or a first occurrence in need of another mate who might or might not turn up. It wasn't a study or anything because nobody had ever had it happen.

It could...in theory.

Just never in fact.

But it was for reasons like this that people kept their own counsel.

My friend would never be here with me if they knew about his family's problem. And in recent days, I'd seen the signs of mating sickness coming upon him. We had to find him a mate and soon. As long as he had one, the symptoms would abate and Farsel could return home, when the opportunity arose, with no one the wiser.

If the rescue arrived before that time, not only he but his family would be logged, their future down the generations dimmed. Once marked as carrying mating sickness, it became nearly impossible to find someone outside another such family to mate with. No matter if they were fated, most would be pressured not to tie their children's futures to this potentially deadly genetically transferred illness.

So, while I hoped for a quick return to our planet, it would be up to me to ensure that we did so in the best of health. And that would mean our mate would need to come with us because if she didn't, he'd be even worse off.

And so would I.

But how?

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We had gone to local bars and clubs and had no luck. Mostly the atmosphere told us we were unlikely to meet our mate at a place like that. Unless she was here doing the same thing we were, looking for a fated mate, she wouldn't want to be in the kinds of dives we found ourselves in.

We'd joined a book club, a bowling league, and anything else social this world had to offer, but nobody we encountered was the right person, and we'd given up.

Farsel's condition had made it imperative that we find her now. I'd hoped he did not share his family's weakness, but he did, and I didn't have any ideas on how to look for her. Frustration had me stomping around the kitchen, and when I slapped my hand on the counter, his phone, which lay there, lit up.

Lucky I didn't smash it with my violence, but it just seemed like everything was going wrong with us getting stranded here for who knew how long and now his symptoms. Worrying about our people coming for us was probably foolish. If my memories of how it worked when someone got the mating sickness were correct, we only had weeks at best to find our mate before the damage to my friend became irreparable.

He could even die.

His phone home page was cluttered with apps, and I scanned them, grinning in spite of myself at his multiple weather and traffic icons as well as some related to his passion for gaming and one...what was that?

I picked up the phone and swiped it to open, hoping he hadn't put a password on it.

He had. I tried to think of what he might have used. Birthday? No, that wouldn't make sense in our home planet's system. A special holiday? Then I thought I had it. I typed in the date of our arrival, month and year. Bingo.

I didn't get too far into it, just opened the app and glanced to see what it was. No need to violate his privacy by doing more. Nope. Well not too much more. He'd sent a message to a female, short, one line, but it expressed the desperate straits in which we found ourselves. But it seemed Mail-Order Matings was an app for shifters and other paranormal beings, even humans if they managed to find it and were looking for someone out of the ordinary.

How cool.

I closed the app and left Farsel's phone where I'd found it and went to find mine. I hadn't seen any response from the female, but a glance at her bio and I knew I had to try as well. How long could it take?

Long. It took a long time to fill out the bio with all its questions. Who did I want to date? Who was a definite no? Vampires. I wasn't sure what alien blood would do to them, but I didn't want to find out. And orcs. But other than that, I was willing to accept any mate they chose to send us.

As I entered all the information, I tried not to let the anxiety get to me any more than it already had. What if our mate was back home all this time? Seemed likely that would be the case, but if there was even the slightest chance that she was here, I had to try.

Chapter Seven

Amaris

My eyes had been opened to a world of knowledge with this app. There were shark shifters, for one. Shark. Shifters.

Even the thought of spending an amount of time underwater with a shark mate, well, it didn't sit right with me. I'd never felt pulled to learn scuba diving—largely because of fears of being eaten by sharks. His words were pretty though. He should find someone who liked his poetry and smooth moves, but that girl wasn't me.

I chatted through the app with some of them, but they didn't click. Not that I expected a click necessarily, but there had to be some kind of connection, even through something like typing on the phone.

There had to be.

I gave up my search, or being searched for, for a few hours and cleaned my house and cooked up some chili and left it to stew in the slow cooker. Cheddar jalapeno cornbread would go in right before I was about to eat. There was nothing like steamy cornbread fresh out of the oven.

Once my laundry was done and I'd put away the last of my clothes, I went back to the phone. Finding a mate and searching through the app had become somewhat of an obsession.

It was more than lust or wanting someone in my life. My soul craved love. Real love. Giving and receiving it.

Of all the people I'd spoken to and whose profiles I'd viewed, one that stood out among the rest and silly me had blocked them based off one word: Urgent.

I didn't consider their perspective or a scenario in which that word could mean anything other than a red flag.

I clicked onto my settings, hunting for the blocked profile, but found nothing. A sinking feeling took over my chest. What if that person was my mate, and I'd simply misinterpreted the meaning in the subject line and made a judgment that would change the course of my life.

After a chat online with one of the customer service people for the app, they informed me that blocked profiles could not be accessed for the safety of the user.

Damn it! He had been hot and interesting and nice. I'd gotten myself so caught up in one word and picture that I'd even missed his name somehow. And he had a friend as well. Two tall, handsome, powerful shifters, and I'd blocked them over a trigger that had more to do with me than with them.

And now, they were gone.

Because here I was, urgently seeking them out when they had been doing the same thing. They had only been bolder about the approach than I had.

That night, I ate and chatted with the Mail-Order Matings customer service about the blocked profile, but they answered swiftly saying that the profile would remain out of reach for both users once someone blocked them.

In my frustration and stubbornness, I scrolled through the app with new fervor, hoping that the customer service person and facts would be wrong and sway in my favor.

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I was almost done for the night when a message popped up in my inbox. It was from a new match and a new profile. In fact, the app said the profile had only been created the day before.

Gasping, I clicked on the message when I saw the word, the same word as before in the subject line. Urgent.

This profile had no picture but it had to be them. Fate wouldn't do me that dirty and I only half believed in the concept—or the person? Some people talked as though Fate was a woman, weaving love into people's lives. Either way, maybe she would help me.

The body of the message read the same. Please respond to this message, Amaris. They used my name again. Before using this app, I'd never experienced so many people taking the liberty of a pet name on first contact—shark shifter called me babe on his first message—but these men did not.

I had to take this chance. What was the worst that could happen?

His name was Tylan. The other message with the same wording was from someone named Farsel.

Farsel and Tylan. At least I had names for them both now. That was under the assumption they were the ones I was looking for.

I opened the chat window and sent them a message. What does one say to someone when you already rejected their friend?

Tylan,

Who are you? Have you messaged me before?

Jenny called after dinner, begging for an update. I thought maybe my best friend would say I was being picky but she cheered me on, encouraging me to follow my instinct.

I took my phone to bed with me that night, and as I was getting ready to sleep, it beeped.

I hopped over to it with one shoe still on and found a reply from Tylan. I have not messaged you before. You have a beautiful name, female. I'd love to talk more if you are interested.

Female. Something about that made me shiver. I'd heard Rex calling Jenny that a few times and figured it was a shifter thing. Tylan's profile didn't say much about his species, but I hadn't put humans on my desired list.

I pushed away the alien notion from my mind. Just because I'd wished since I was a girl that my mate would be an alien didn't mean it would happen for me. The most important thing was love and attraction and common interests.

A tail wouldn't hurt though.

Chapter Eight

Farsel

Huddled under the blankets, I tried to summon the energy to get up and shower. The female I had picked out had blocked me, and I was sure she was the one. Having

contacted her even that much, even without a positive response, had kicked my mating sickness into high gear. If I hadn't found her, it might have allowed me more time, but as my father warned me, once the connection happened, everything moved fast.

I had assumed it meant a person-to-person meeting. Face-to-face rather than a message that hadn't even been replied to, but judging by how awful I felt, it didn't matter how minimal the connection.

Clutching my phone, I tried to work my way past the block to reach our mate again. Amaris was such a beautiful name, and her picture had shown me a female whose appearance matched her name. Not that her visuals like that mattered where mates were concerned. I'd never said I hope our mate is pretty—I'd hoped for intelligent, kind, with a good sense of humor. We would grow old together with wrinkles and other signs of aging, would probably never look better than we did right at this moment.

So, while she would be wonderful to look at now, those good qualities I sought would make her a pleasure to wake up next to even when we were old and gray. I didn't have proof that she would be all those wonderful things, but she would be my mate and therefore perfect for me. For us.

But no matter how hard I tried or how many messages I sent to admin, I was unable to convince anyone to let me try again. If someone was blocked, then they'd made their choice, and nothing could be done. My phone was currently down in the kitchen because it was no use to me at all. I pulled the covers up to my chin and tried to go back to sleep. Our mate had rejected us, and although it might not kill him, having come so close to mating and losing her forever would hurt him deeply.

Maybe I shouldn't tell him. But no because the only way he'd be able to go forward was in full knowledge of the fact that he'd never be able to meet his mate because I

screwed it up for both of us.

I flipped the covers over my head and squeezed my eyes closed. After a while, during which time I lay awake and aching, a rap came on my open door.

“Farsel? Can I get you anything?”

Did he know I had mating sickness? I hadn’t told him so. “No, just lounging in bed for once. I’m fine.”

The blanket and sheet were pulled down, revealing the concerned expression on my friend’s face looming over me. “You’ve never lounged in bed in your lifetime. Are you sick?”

Did he guess? Humiliation surged through me. There was nothing worse than mating sickness among our people, and if anyone found out one member of our family—me—suffered from it, it would ruin all the rest of them. “I think I ate something bad last night. My stomach is a little upset.”

“We ate the same dinner. You look like shit, by the way.”

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“Oh thanks. I guess whatever we ate just didn’t agree with me, then.”

“Liar.” He plopped down in the chair next to the bed and glared at me. “We’ve never been dishonest with one another, and while I was willing to pretend I didn’t know about what might happen to you, now that it’s occurring, don’t try to deny it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The words flowed from my mouth, a betrayal of the bond of friendship and brotherhood we shared. But it was like I couldn’t stop them, the urge to protect my family from even him too strong. From almost birth, I’d been warned not to tell anyone ever of our weakness. “I just need to rest awhile. In fact, I feel fine now. I’m getting up.”

I kicked the blanket away and swung my legs over the side of the bed, standing...too fast.

My friend caught me and steadied me before I could hit the floor. “Now, done lying?”

I opened my mouth to deny it again then snapped it shut and nodded.

“Take a shower and come down to the kitchen for breakfast, and we’ll talk.” He grasped my shoulders and turned me toward the bathroom. “If you think you can manage that?”

“Of course I can.” I shrugged his grip aside and took a step away from him. “But there’s not much to talk about.”

“I’m going to make pancakes.”

My favorite. I went from rigid to slumped over. “Thank you.”

“Whatever happens, I’m here for you, but I think I have the cure for what, as they say on this planet ‘ails you.’”

He couldn’t possibly, but I nodded and headed into the shower. The steaming water helped a bit, and I was able to get dressed and manage the stairs down to the main floor of our home. In the kitchen, there was a tall stack of hotcakes on a plate, another of eggs, and a pot of coffee waiting for me. My stomach growled.

“Sit down and eat, and I’ll talk while you do.”

Since starving held no attraction, I did what he said, and by the time my belly was half filled, so was my heart with hope.

My friend had managed to reach around my mistake and contact our mate. He was going to ask her to meet us.

“I don’t know why I didn’t ask you to give it a shot.”

“Because you thought you were hiding your mating sickness from me.” He added more pancakes to my plate. “Eat up. You need your strength.”

“Who else knows?” Every person who did was a potential danger to my family.

“I’m not sure exactly. My family does, and probably a few others close to yours. And before you ask, we’ve always known. Your secret is safe with us. Right now, our concern is getting you mated before you are too sick to recover.”

“Thank you, friend.”

“Eat. And trust that everything will be all right.”

“I trust that you will do your best to help that happen.” And what more could I do? It was a heck of a lot better situation than I’d awakened to.

Chapter Nine

Amaris

It took only a half dozen messages for me to know Tylan was something special. His bond mate was Farsel and that was the person who had messaged me before, claiming I was his mate. Their pictures matched what I had seen before, and soon they sent me more as the trust between us built. They asked for more pictures of me, but I wasn’t as confident in my body and my beauty as they were.

After all, they looked like tall, lean, tattooed gods. What was there not to be confident about?

I sent them some selfies, but a lot of them were no makeup, hair twisted on top of my head, sitting on my couch ones. If they couldn’t love me in my jammies, then they weren’t worth the effort. Because I spent a good deal of time in my pajamas by choice. Jenny swore I owned more loungewear than regular clothes. I had no argument.

Your profile says shifter but doesn’t tell me what kind? What are you and Farsel? Is it rude of me to ask?

He responded saying it wasn’t rude to ask. He and Farsel wanted to tell me, but maybe it was better if we discussed it in person.

Why? Lol. Are you two elephant shifters or something mystical?

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Tylan answered back. Not elephants, Amaris. Nothing mystical either, though it would depend on your definition of the word.

Huh. That didn't sound weird at all.

Mermaid? Unicorn? Gryphon?

I texted them back, nestling in deeper under the warm comforter on my bed. Sometimes Tylan seemed so formal in the way he spoke, which I kind of loved, but if he didn't have a sense of humor, well, it might be a no go, no matter how sexy they were.

Female, you are funny. Not any of those either. I think the truth should be seen and not typed out here, on an app.

My stomach sank. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? Did they want to meet me? The thought thrilled me and made me nervous at the same time. Mostly excited. I was ready to meet them and solve the mysteries they were shrouded in.

We clicked online, but, more than anything, I wanted to know if that spark extended to real life. I had some online friends and, once we met in person, the vibe wasn't the same.

I hoped that wasn't the case here.

What exactly are you suggesting?

Sitting, up, I held my breath, waiting for the reply.

We would very much like to meet you, Amaris. We, of course, don't have your specific address, but the area the app gave us is only an hour away. Would you allow us to meet you for a meal? In a public place where you will feel safe?

Well, didn't that cover all the bases.

I would love to. I can text you an address. How soon would you like to meet?

Their answer came faster than mine had. As soon as possible. We are eager to hear your voice. See your smile in more than a picture.

My chest and cheeks heated up.

Tomorrow morning? My favorite diner. Eight o'clock? Is that too early?

I didn't sleep a wink that night. While I was excited to set the date, overthinking and questioning soon took over.

What if they didn't like me? I mean, I thought I was nice enough, but what if they came all this way and we had this incredible emotional connection and in person, it was all a flop?

As I parked in front of the diner, I shook the thoughts away. They were sitting at a table near the front window. There was no missing them. Their shoulders stood above the rest, even sitting in the booth.

Here goes nothing.

As I exited the car, they turned toward me, rising to their feet as I entered and sat

across from them in the booth. Though this was my favorite spot in town, the butterflies in my stomach overruled any hunger.

“Hi, Tylan, Farsel.” My voice cracked on the words. Goddess, help me get hold of myself.

“Amaris,” Tylan said, sliding back into his seat. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You’re more beautiful in person than in your pictures.”

“Oh,” I whispered as heat rushed mostly to my cheeks but to all parts of me at the same time. “Thank you. I could say the same about the both of you.”

“Are you hungry, female?” he asked.

Female. The word or maybe the incredible tone in his voice got to me in the best way possible.

“Maybe just some coffee first. I’m very nervous all of a sudden.”

Farsel moved his fingers restlessly, as though he might reach across the table to touch me. I would welcome it, sensing that the move might just calm me. “There is no need to be nervous around us. We would never harm you. You are safe with us. And even if you cannot feel that now, we are here, and there is one of your human police officers over there.”

I’d seen him as I came in.

“Tell me, then,” I said.

“Tell you what?” Tylan asked.

“Tell me something you didn’t put on the app. Tell me everything.”

“You have to promise not to make a fuss.”

Chapter Ten

Tylan

We were as nervous as cats on a roof made of barking dogs as we got ready to meet our mate at the “diner.” Although we had been on Earth for a number of years, there were so many concepts and words that we still weren’t familiar with. The location Amaris wanted to meet us at was one of those things. And although it was a morning meet, we had no idea whether it was a casual or more formal place, so we looked it up on Google.

“Looks like it’s a casual-dining restaurant with large portions of fried foods.” Farsel nodded in satisfaction. “We will have our fill.”

He looked so much better than he had the morning before. Of course, until the mating actually happened, we wouldn’t be out of the woods. I said “we” because while I did not suffer from the sickness, if our mate rejected us, I would not only miss her for the rest of my life, but Farsel would likely die, leaving me without anyone from home or who was close to my heart. Life would go on, here on this planet, and so would I, but bowed in grief.

And I might never leave, even if the opportunity arose, because it would mean leaving them both behind. It made no sense, really, but no matter. My bond mate and my mate were my immediate family, all the others more distant, even if I was on the same planet with them. And I would not burden them with my lifelong grief.

“About ready?” Farsel looked in the hallway mirror and unbuttoned one button on his shirt then fastened it again. “Which is better?”

He was so serious I couldn’t help but laugh. “Your choice. I am not the female to be aware of your attributes. Just leave it as it is, and we’ll go.”

We climbed into our car, a 4-wheel drive we’d chosen for practical reasons. In our tenure here, we’d traveled widely, often by air carrier, but for anywhere within a few hours or so, we chose to drive. “Remember when we first steered this vehicle around?” I said, an image of that day, only our third on the planet, filling my mind. “Weren’t we a danger.”

“Very different from the hover cars, as we soon learned.”

“You said why bother, we wouldn’t be here long enough to make use of the skill,” I mused. “We thought we’d be long home by now.”

“We did. Well before the time for mating.” Farsel buckled his belt and leaned back. “If that had happened, would I have sickened and died?” He paled. “If our mate was here?”

“I don’t know if there is only one possibility. Have you ever met anyone whose mate was from another world?”

I considered. “Not personally, although I heard of one from a friend of a friend once.”

“Maybe if we were home, there would have been a different mate...but I can’t imagine someone more right for us. She’s truly the one.”

I agreed. Amaris, the female we would be meeting in an hour or so, was perfect. The one. I knew that from the moment I saw her image on the app, without question. And with each mile, as we sat lost in our own thoughts, I prayed that she felt the same about us. She might not be bound by the same mating instincts we were.

“Look, there it is.” Farsel pointed off to the side of the highway up ahead. Right by the road, as the guidance system indicated. “That’s a big sign.”

“We could not have missed it,” I agreed, relieved. The system was not perfect, and more than once, we’d ended up somewhere other than we intended. It had been built by our own scientists, and we’d been warned that the atmosphere of another world could interfere with the operation. “We shall take this drive to exit to the smaller byway.”

“Do you think she’s there now?” Farsel pressed his face to the side window. “Sipping coffee and thinking of us?”

“She might be.” I pulled into the parking lot beside the diner and parked. “But we’re a few minutes early.”

We went inside and looked around, but there was no sign of our mate yet, so we requested a table right at the front, hoping to see her arrive. The serving person came with a steaming pot of coffee, something it seemed every human liked. An acquired taste, but we had grown to welcome its bitterness on our tongues.

We told the serving person that we would wait to order our meal when our female got there.

“Female?” His brow furrowed. “If you both have a woman, she might not appreciate being called that.”

“No? Why not?” Farsel asked.

“If you have to ask, you’re hopeless,” the young male said and went off shaking his head.

“What if she doesn’t come?” Farsel spoke the question that occupied my mind as well. “Maybe she’s changed her mind and doesn’t want to meet us.”

“Turn your gaze outside the window.”

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There she was, as beautiful as a flower, and her scent reached me the moment she stepped out of her car. Lovely.

And when she came in and sat down, her voice was as sweet as she was. She was nervous, but we tried to reassure her, and then she asked, “Tell me something you didn’t put on the app. Tell me everything.”

And I replied, “You have to promise not to make a fuss.”

Chapter Eleven

Amaris

“Make a fuss?” I murmured mostly to myself. I never made a fuss. Fuss had never been in the same sentence as Amaris. Maybe as a child but never as an adult.

“Perhaps what we are would be shocking to a human. That’s all. No one is calling you dramatic. You are far from it.”

How they couldn’t see me shaking like a leaf across from them was wild.

“Just tell me so we can move on.” I didn’t realize until this conversation how preoccupied I was about what species these two gorgeous men were.

Farsel chuckled. He was a bit paler than Tylan and there were dark circles under his eyes, indicating he wasn’t getting a lot of sleep. An assumption, since I’d just met him. There was a chance he had allergies. “Lean in close.” I did as he asked without

hesitation. “We are aliens. We are not from this galaxy and not from this planet. We are not human at all.”

I sat back and bit down on my lips, determined not to make that fuss I so well denied would happen.

Instead, a giggle bubbled from me. “You’re telling the truth?”

“We would never lie to you, Amaris.”

Tylan’s voice was steady and his eye contact didn’t cease as he spoke the words.

“Excuse me. I need to use the restroom.” I shot up from the booth and nearly sprinted toward the bathroom. I went into the first available stall, shut the door behind me, and pushed my back against the cold metal. Forcing about a dozen long, deep breaths, I let what they’d told me seep in.

They were aliens. Not from this planet. Not even from this galaxy.

My first reaction was disbelief. They had put shifter on their species. I had expected something like wolf or bear or even something strange like giraffe, but shifters didn’t change into aliens.

Aliens.

It all felt like a gag now. All the conversations we’d had since making contact. The way they already seemed to know me on a level even though today was the first time we’d met.

Aliens.

Of course, I had wanted to be the mate of an alien or two since I could remember. I dreamed of them finding me and whisking me away to another place where all of life's tedious problems failed to exist and I could be loved and love in return.

But to hear it? To be in the middle of what I'd dreamed of?

There was no way this could be real.

No freaking way.

I mulled over all the possibilities while I cried and kicked the doors and even the toilet in front of me. Good thing there was no one else in here, or they might've called the police. A mad woman in the stalls.

The only person who knew about my dream of mating with an alien was Jenny. But she was my best friend, and the thought of somehow her playing a trick on me was out of the question. I trusted my best friend.

Fate? Could this person who puppeteered other people's love lives make it this simple for me?

Download an app.

Meet some hot, beautiful, perfect aliens.

Have my happily ever after?

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Sounded too easy.

Too perfect.

Too good.

As I thought about it, Jenny wasn't the only one I had told. I had joked with coworkers about aliens beaming me up. Some at my book club as well.

Maybe they had set me up.

Some elaborate joke.

Never been bullied before, but there was a first time for everything.

I had to find out the truth. I washed my face at the sink and then patted it dry with paper towels that could double as sandpaper. The mirror showed my face as a splotchy mess, but they would have to deal with it.

"Are you okay?" Farsel asked. His brow furrowed over his perfect nose and he gripped the edge of the table.

"Depends," I answered. "This is all too uncanny for me. If you're working for someone or with someone to play a joke on me, then just tell me. I've told people over the years that I thought one day I wanted to have an alien mate." I whispered the word alien, just in case there was someone listening in. I suspected it was all a secret. Shifters were more accepted these days, but aliens...that was pushing it. The last

thing I wanted to do was get them in trouble or discovered, joke or not. I didn't wish bad things on people. Ever.

Farsel and Tylan exchanged a glance. More than that. It looked like they were sharing a conversation without speaking a word. I wondered if they were telepathic. How fun would that be?

"We don't understand, Amaris. We don't work for anyone. Do you not believe us?" Tylan asked.

I wanted to. I wanted to believe more than anything that these two dreamy aliens had joined the app, and somehow luck had smiled on all of us and we found love.

It all seemed too good to be true.

Things that were good for us came at a price. They had to be worked for. Struggled for. Right?

Sexy aliens didn't just land in a girl's lap.

"I don't know."

Chapter Twelve

Farsel

"I hope you will believe us because I don't have much time to explain."

Even to me that sounded odd, and judging from Amaris' expression, she shared that opinion. "Did you have an appointment after breakfast?" She shifted in her seat, going from confused to uncomfortable. Our mate didn't have to speak for us to read

that in her. “Maybe we should do this another time.”

“No. That’s not what I mean. If we don’t mate in the next week or so, I’ll die.”

“That’s not even funny.” She moved to stand, and I reached for her then let my hand drop, not wanting her to feel coerced. “I should go.”

“Please, don’t go,” Tylan said, doing what I hadn’t and taking her hand in his. “We can’t explain in great detail here, but we can eat and get to know one another. And then, if you trust us enough to want to know more, we’d like to invite you to dinner at our home. I promise, we’ll answer any question you ask to the best of our abilities at that time.”

Her gaze flicked from one of us to the other. “Well, I am hungry, and their waffles are crazy good here.” She shook her head and sighed. “I must be the crazy one though.”

The serving person returned and filled a cup for our mate then took our orders. We all had waffles with fresh berries on them and Amaris also ordered some bacon. Once he’d left, I asked,

“So, dinner?”

“Let’s take this one meal at a time,” she said. “Once we finish eating, I’ll let you know if I am up for coming over to your house. You have to admit, it’s a lot to take in.”

She was right.

“I understand.” My friend had a great way of speaking with people. “On a planet that does not have contact with others, it must be jarring to have two males express that

they come from a place your technology could not get to in several lifetimes.”

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“Is that true? Lifetimes?” Her shoulders eased, some of the tension falling away as she leaned closer. “No wonder we haven’t met any aliens yet. I mean...unless I just did.”

The waffles arrived at that point, and we settled in to eat, conversation fading for a bit until we’d all made headway on our breakfasts.

“What do you think?” Amaris asked, picking up her coffee cup. “I don’t suppose you have waffles on your planet.”

“True. We have something more similar to your pancakes, so we make those at home.” Tylan took another bite. “How do they get all these squares on this?”

“You come all the way from another galaxy and can’t figure out waffles?” Amaris giggled. “I’m not sure, but that makes you more believable. They have a sort of a machine called an iron, and you pour batter on the bottom side and then lower the top one. It bakes to fill the holes in the plates, and I am not doing well here explaining.”

“No, I think I understand.” It kind of made sense. “So you can only get these in restaurants because of the specialized equipment.” I was enjoying the conversation enough that I wasn’t as aware of how ill I felt, and just being close to her gave me hope. Not just that I could survive but that with our mate, we could thrive.

“Oh no. They sell waffle irons all over the place. We could buy one online and try making waffles sometime if you want.”

“What a great idea.” Tylan pushed his empty plate away and grabbed his phone.

“Let’s do that now.” He unlocked it and handed it to Amaris. “Where should we buy it?”

“There are a lot of choices, depending on if you want to spend a lot of money or not.”

“We want the best.”

I sat back and watched my bond mate and our female go back and forth on which waffle iron to buy. They looked at different sites and argued the merits, even managed to get the restaurant cook to come out and give advice. In short, although I was running low on energy, it was the best morning of my life.

She hadn’t agreed to come over, much less mate us yet, but if she did, we’d have a great time together. And if she didn’t...well, I couldn’t think about that.

Finally, she agreed to at least come over, with the understanding she would tell someone exactly where she was going so she felt safe. I couldn’t wait!

Chapter Thirteen

Amaris

Jenny and Rex were more than happy to help with my safety. They got Rex’s mom to come watch the twins and they followed me over to Tylan and Farsel’s house.

A lot weighed on this date.

More than a lot. This date was a matter of life or death to Farsel. I had more to learn about the ways they differed, but this was the main way.

Farsel, if I didn’t agree to be their mate, would die.

And somehow, they wanted me not to factor that in when making a decision about mating with them.

Yeah, right.

I got out of the car and checked my outfit. I wore a casual dress and had a cardigan over my arm in case it got chilly. Jenny and Rex got out after me. They would stay outside the house until I told them to leave—in person.

They really were good friends.

“Text me something every fifteen minutes, Amaris. I swear, if it goes to sixteen minutes, I’m coming in,” Jenny asserted. She and Rex knew everything. The alien part hadn’t shocked them as much as I expected it to.

“Yes. Got it, boss.” We laughed.

They got back in the car, and I made my way to Tylan and Farsel’s door, my stomach a bundle of nerves.

It felt like walking toward my destiny.

Before I reached the door, Farsel opened it with a smile on his face, but the rest of him screamed death and sickness. He was far paler than that morning, and the happiness didn’t reach his eyes. They’d lost some of the brightness. His life was in my hands.

“Good evening, Amaris. You look more beautiful every time I see you.”

“Thank you.”

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He stared for a moment until Tylan came up behind him. “Farsel, are we having dinner right here on the porch? Let our female inside. It’s getting chilly. Her temperature isn’t like ours.”

Farsel shook his head a bit and cleared his throat. “Forgive me. I swear I have manners.”

I went inside. The place was spotless, and I had a feeling they kept it that way. There was no overpowering smell of air freshener or cleaning products. The floors shone and sparkled. The place was modern with everything in its place.

They stood in front of me, observing as I observed their home. It felt as though they were waiting for my assessment. “You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you,” Tylan answered. “It’s important that you like it. Are you hungry?”

“I am. Something smells really good.”

“Farsel did the cooking. I make breakfast, and he takes care of the rest. I hope it’s okay that we don’t eat meat. But we could get some if you prefer it. Maybe I should’ve picked up something in case. I can go out now.”

I put my hand on Tylan’s forearm, intending to calm him. “Whatever you made is fine. I don’t have to have meat with my meal.”

Farsel’s gaze was fixed on my hand. His flexed. Maybe touching was a thing for them as it was for shifters. It certainly was for Jenny and Rex. “The dining room is

this way.”

On the way, I made sure to touch Farsel’s arm and thank him for the meal. They sat on either side of me. The spread was gorgeous. Roasted vegetables. A creamy tomato soup. Freshly baked whole grain bread. There was butter on the table and some cheese on top of the tomato soup, so they ate dairy, which was good. I could take or leave meat, but butter? Nonnegotiable.

“Everything looks incredible.”

We ate in silence for a while, but I noticed Farsel moved a bit slower than his bond brother and friend. This must’ve been torture for him. Having me here and not being bonded to me.

“Oh,” I said and pulled out my phone right on time. “I have to text Jenny every fifteen minutes, or she will worry.”

They both laughed. “She’s a good friend. I’m glad you have good people in your life.”

“Me too.” After texting, I went with my instinct and threaded my fingers through Farsel’s under the table.

Instantly, he regained some of his color and looked over to smile at me. “Thank you, Amaris.”

“Of course. I’d love to learn more about you and where you come from, please.”

While we ate, they talked. They lit up while speaking of their home planet and the galaxy they called heavenly. They each had some tattoos that peeked out from the edges of their clothing, and I was intrigued to learn how far they went along their

bodies. We finished our meal, but they had begun to tell stories about how they first came to Earth and experienced the glaring differences.

We were laughing as Tylan brought out a large chocolate cake and served everyone coffee. Farsel, who was telling us about his first time in a fast-food drive-through, seemed to be getting better by the second. Not well but better.

Tylan had chimed in with a story of his own when the doorbell rang, bursting our bubble.

“Who could that be?” Farsel asked.

I reached down and checked my phone.

“It’s got to be Jenny. I forgot to text her. I was so engrossed in your stories.”

Sure enough, Tylan went to the door, and I heard them speaking. They wanted to see me and he chuckled. “We were just about to have some cake and coffee. Why don’t the two of you come in and join us? We can all get to know each other, and you can scope us out.”

Apparently, they agreed because soon, my best friend and her mate were seated at the table with dessert and coffee in front of them.

Farsel and Tylan took turns eating and telling stories.

By the end of the night, it felt like we were all best friends catching up. We laughed and bounced things off each other. The cake had only one slice left, and Farsel and Tylan insisted I take it home with me for a late-night snack.

I didn’t want to say goodbye.

“Can we have a minute?” I asked.

Jenny and Rex went outside to wait.

“Is everything okay, female?” Tylan asked.

“Yes. Everything is more than okay. I-I want to give this a real shot. There’s clearly something between us, and I want to explore it. I guess what I’m asking is...would you two like to date me?”

Chapter Fourteen

Tylan

Amaris agreed to date us. Which was amazing and thrilling and worrying at the same time. “We’d love to date you,” I said, “but Farsel only has about a week before the illness becomes too bad to recover from.”

She nodded slowly. “He seems better tonight. Like, I watched him improve as we had dinner. Doesn’t that mean that as we spend time together and if we’re getting closer, he should be okay?”

“You’d think, but what you’re seeing is mostly the mental improvement at being close to you. His body’s deterioration will continue, albeit maybe slower, until such time as he is mated or dies.”

“Why don’t you just come out and say it, Tylan.” Farsel smiled at me, but I could see the pain in his eyes.

“You’re hurting.” Amaris moved closer to him and rested a palm on his forearm. “Is it very painful to have the...what is it called?”

“Mating sickness,” he said. “It’s not fun.” He put his hand on hers. “But it feels nice to have you touch me.”

“I like it too,” she admitted. “You’re warm.”

We walked her to the door and opened it, said good night to her friends, and wished them a good evening. Then we sat on the stoop and watched them drive away.

“How much does it hurt you to see her leave?” I asked.

“She was right. Whether it was mental or physical, I did feel better with her here. Not perfect, for sure, but better. And it’s coming back strong, now.”

“All right.” Standing, I held out a hand and tugged him to his feet. “Let’s go inside and decide what kind of a date we’re going to take our mate on.”

Despite his weak grip, his smile was bright. “What do you think she would like? Another diner maybe?”

Holding the door open, I waited for him to pass me. My friend had always been so strong and hearty, and seeing him weaken was hard. He was my tie to home, my best friend, my only friend here, and if anything happened to him, I didn’t know what I’d do.

“Maybe something not as casual as a diner?” Farsel sank onto the sofa with a sigh. “She enjoyed our meal, and it was a little fancier. I think our mate likes a variety of cuisines.”

“And she didn’t mind that we don’t eat meat, but I think we need to make sure that where we go, they serve it for her too.” It wasn’t what we did, but we’d been on this planet plenty of time to get comfortable with their choices. Besides, Earth was not the

only planet where the inhabitants chose to eat the animals. Most younger planets had that sort of thing.

“We have a week to convince her she’s the mate for us. If she’d been a shifter, do you think she’d know already?” He rubbed his eyes then tried to smile again, with less success.

“Most likely, but then she wouldn’t be Amaris. And can you see us with anyone else?” I sat down on the chair next to the sofa. “Because I can’t.”

“Me, either.” He laid his head back and closed his eyes. “I just hope I can hold up long enough to manage to date her for a week. It might be better if I just stepped back and let you mate her. I might have waited too long.”

“Don’t talk like that.” It made me feel near panic to hear it. “We are supposed to mate her together. That’s always been understood. Now, tomorrow night, we’ll take our mate out for dinner to a very nice restaurant. Show her how much we like and respect her and give her a chance to spend more time with us. I think we’re winning her over.”

“I hope so. And I promise to do my very best to make it through the week.”

I helped him up to bed to rest, hating the fact that he felt so frail. Wishing I could lend him my strength.

Chapter Fifteen

Amaris

Tonight couldn’t have gone better. I had more questions than answers, but one thing I knew for sure...I was already falling in love with them.

Though I lacked the instant mating call of shifters and aliens, something in my chest stirred in their presence and even before meeting them in person.

I had gotten into bed when my phone buzzed. Butterflies fluttered inside me, hoping, wishing it was one of my alien suitors, but I wasn't disappointed to see my best friend's name appear on the screen instead.

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“Hello, Jenny,” I answered, laughing. I wasn’t surprised at all she’d called to give me her opinion on Tylan, Farsel, and all things alien.

“Were you hoping it was them?”

“Yes. Go on, then. Tell me what you thought of them.”

Jenny sighed. “First of all, we wanted you to know that we were checking on you. We never expected to be invited in.”

“But...”

“But Rex and I had a great time with them. They are kind and polite, but there’s more than that and I wanted, we wanted you to know before the night was done. Before you made any decisions about them one way or the other.”

Uh-oh. “Tell me. Was something wrong?”

“Actually, the opposite. My wolf liked them.” There was a giggle from her. “Not more than you, my love. In a different way. What I’m trying to say, Amaris, is that my wolf felt no danger from them. She was excited for you. No shifter red flags, as it was.”

“You liked them?” I asked. Not surprised but also, I thought it would take more than one visit for my friend to make up her mind. She was protective of me in an endearing way.

“I did. We did. Are you...are you going to be their mate?”

I let out a long sigh. My instinct was to say yes, but my human brain thought it too hasty to say yet. Though, the longer I wanted to make my decision, the longer Farsel was tortured. I hated that for him, but I had to detach myself from that result in making my decision.

Then again, if his mating instinct told him that I was his mate, then it should be mutual. My human mind was muddled with questions and no answers but already, I had a burning in my heart—telling me they were the ones for me.

Beside the fact, I didn't even know if all this alien stuff was real. It wasn't that I didn't believe the detailed stories they told. I suspected no untruths in them, but the whole thing was out of my spectrum of logic.

They came to Earth together on a mission and now needed to find a mate.

Farsel was from a different family with some kind of genetic issue and had to secure his mate by a certain time or perish. A heavy weight on anyone's shoulders but maybe not for an alien female. Then again, they would know instantly. Probably. I wasn't actually positive.

“I don't know. We decided to date. This week.”

“Dating is good. It's a start. We're here for you, no matter what happens.”

We talked a bit more but ended the call with them wishing me good luck. I wondered if they and their wolves could sense something I couldn't about whether or not I was truly their mate. Or if they were really aliens.

Maybe it was just a really good cosplay?

Ugh, I was too tired to think about it and at the same time, could hardly go to sleep in this state.

Unknowing was the worst. Especially in a romantic scenario.

I lay awake, staring into the darkness. My window was open and I thought about the future if I was to accept them. And if they were really born from another galaxy, then would they take me there? The twinkling stars taunted me, asking me to go beyond my scope of understanding and to take Farsel and Tylan at their word.

They were not from this planet. They were tall and handsome and smart, and somehow plain, human, me, was their mate. The one they wanted to spend their lives with.

All my dreams were right there in front of me and while I'd hoped they would come true, now that they were, I couldn't believe it was happening.

To me.

Before falling asleep, I heard my phone buzz. I almost ignored it, thinking it was a late-night email or some text selling me something, until I thought better and answered it.

I sighed and giggled as I saw it was Farsel. He was more soft-spoken and gentle, where Tylan was sassy and funny. They complemented each other perfectly.

We enjoyed tonight with you. Thank you for agreeing to date us. We are honored. Sleep well, beautiful. We are thinking of you. Farsel and Tylan.

Sometimes their texts and messages seemed to be plucked right out of a romance novel, but I'd come to realize it was simply them.

I enjoyed myself as well. I'm looking forward to dating you both and getting to know you better. I was just looking at the stars and thinking of you as well. Goodnight.

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In my mind, I could see them smiling and Farsel slightly blush. Sometimes, I felt like he liked me more, but it was only more urgent on his end.

I could save his life.

He and I and Tylan could all save each other.

The last thought in my head before I fell asleep was of them sleeping on either side of me. Holding me. Warming me. Keeping me safe.

I was one lucky girl.

Chapter Sixteen

Farsel

The next day, I was feeling a little better again. I gave full credit to Amaris for it, even if her leaving had set me back a bit. I'd slept well and dreamed of a beautiful human who saved me from death by giving us herself. And then I had the whole day to relax and get ready for our date. As my friend pointed out, I had to save every bit of strength if I was going to make it through the week and to our mating.

And, as I pointed out in return, if this was my last week to live, I didn't want to miss a moment of spending it with our mate.

But since we weren't seeing her until evening, I accepted Tylan's suggestion and went to lie down on one of the backyard loungers in the shade of a tree. At noon, he

brought me out a sandwich and lemonade, and I drifted off again. It should have worried me that I was napping like this, but worry wouldn't serve at all.

Close to sundown, I woke from yet another dream. This one was even more vivid and took place on our home world. A place that not only Amaris was not likely to see, but neither were we.

It was only longing speaking through my subconscious.

I went inside and showered, dressed, and got ready to spend an evening with our mate. My reflection in the bathroom mirror did not reveal a healthy male, and I was afraid she wouldn't want someone who looked so bad. We took great pride in our appearance, in showing how we were strong protectors of our females who could be counted on to provide for them. Since arriving here, I'd learned that most females were pretty good providers themselves, but it was hard to let go of that concept.

No matter what our female wanted, it was hers. If she chose to work outside the home, great. If she preferred to stay there and dedicate herself to our family, great too. I had to remind myself we were in a new world and our mate was someone born and raised there. We all had a lot to learn in a short time.

That was the issue. If we had unlimited hours, days, weeks, I had no doubt she would come to see us as her mates. But we had less than a week.

I headed downstairs, ready for an evening that would be enjoyable no matter what came of it. Spending time with Amaris was something to look forward to.

When we arrived at the restaurant, she glanced up at the neon sign that looked like an arrow moving across a track and pursed her lips. "This is such a fancy place. I've driven past it, but I never thought of stopping."

Tylan leaned forward from the back seat. “So you don’t like it?”

“We can go somewhere else.” I started the engine again. “The diner?” It was an hour or so away, and I wasn’t sure it was open for dinner, but we’d try.

“What? No!” Amaris bounced in her seat. “I mean, it’s a very nice place that I’ve seen when I traveled down this way but never happened to visit. Partly because the reviews on it said it’s wonderful but expensive.”

“Oh good.” I turned the car off again. “Wonderful is what we were going for. They have many animal-based dishes.” Which she should like.

“I don’t eat meat at every meal...” She offered us both a shy grin. “Although I’m very relieved that you like dairy and are okay with eggs because I’d miss omelets and cheese and things.”

We escorted her into the restaurant and were directed to the bar for a few minutes while waiting for our table to be ready. But no sooner had we placed an order for cocktails than the maître d’ showed up to escort us to the dining room.

“Your server will bring your drinks, unless you’d rather have some more time in the bar?” he said.

“Amaris?” I would do whatever she wanted, not only because she was our mate, but she was more familiar with the customs here. We hadn’t been to a fine dining restaurant on this planet, and usual practices varied from world to world and even community to community. “What would you prefer?”

“I’m kind of hungry,” she admitted. “I don’t mind having drinks at the table.”

So, we followed the man in the dark suit to a corner booth lit by candles and some

very low-wattage ceiling lamps.

“It’s very dark here,” Tylan commented.

“I’ve noticed that the higher the prices the lower the lighting,” our mate said, giggling. “I think they don’t want us to notice how expensive the food is. Are you sure you don’t mind spending so much on me?”

“It’s an honor.” I waited while our cocktails, chosen by our mate, were placed before us. “So, what are these again?”

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“Cosmopolitans.” She winced. “Do you even drink alcohol? I didn’t think to ask.”

“I have yet to hear of a world where there is not some sort of intoxicating beverage or food or vapor, if not all three and maybe even other forms. Yes, we have enjoyed alcoholic drinks here.” I took a sip. “Much more refined than lager.”

Amaris nodded. “Yes. Have you tried gummies?”

I glanced at Tylan, who shrugged. “I don’t know what those are. Why?”

She giggled again. “Never mind for now. I don’t usually indulge, but maybe one day we can together.”

As the evening went on, we sat in booth with our mate between us, eating and drinking. Our mate ordered salad and a pasta dish with no animal flesh, even though we assured her we didn’t mind. She seemed to enjoy her thin noodles with a creamy sauce, though, and we held her hands and even got her to let us feed her a few bites. Sitting, thighs pressed together, I could almost hope that things might work out. Her scent surrounded me, her laughter raised my spirits, and the evening went too quickly. I couldn’t wait to see her again.

Chapter Seventeen

Amaris

This was what it felt like to fall in love. I was sure of it. My men, because I was now calling them that in my head, were coming over to my apartment for a movie night. I

appreciated the nice dinner out but at heart, I was at home and snuggled with my kind of girl.

I made a trip to the grocery store after having a phone call with both of them. They were doing everything I wished they would. Morning calls. Checking in on me. Getting to know the real me.

They hadn't made a move on me yet beyond hand-holding and kissing on the cheek, but I wanted them to. I so wanted them to. At the same time, I had a feeling that mating with them would be the seal to our arrangement. Once we were mated, much like shifters, it would be similar to vows of marriage.

If this was real, and Goddess, I hoped it was, then I wanted to be completely sure. Not only for me but for them as well.

I picked up all the makings for movie snacks. I would make brownies and cookies and popcorn.

Tylan and Farsel had made the mistake of telling me that they had never seen *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Big mistake.

There was no greater tragedy than not seeing those movies.

Of course, we would only be able to get through one film in a night, but it gave us reasons for more movie nights. And more movie nights with them sounded like what a girl needed in life.

I cleaned my house even though it was not dirty, even going so far as putting on clean sheets because who knew where the night would go despite my hang-ups. Once everything was set up, I leaned against the kitchen counter and forced a few deep breaths. I wasn't nervous, per se, but excited to see them. I felt not myself when they

weren't around, which was weird since we'd only had a couple of dates.

When a knock sounded at my door, I relaxed. They were here. I was in knots when they weren't around.

Interesting.

"Hi," I said, opening the door wide. There were two of them, after all. Dressed alike. "Was there a black shirt-and-jeans meeting I missed? I feel out of place now."

I'd tried to make it clear that tonight was casual. I wore a matching lounge set which could pass for clothes but really, it was more for staying in.

"We didn't even realize we were wearing the same thing until it was too late and we were almost here. You, on the other hand, are stunning in that color."

I looked down at my coral matching outfit. It was my favorite color and did look nice. I loved their eyes on me. Made me stand a little taller. "Thank you. Come on in."

When they came in, my apartment seemed to shrink. Their heads were only inches from the ceiling. I glanced over to my couch, doubting it would fit the three of us.

Huh. Maybe I would have to drape myself over their laps.

What a shame.

"I made some snacks, but we can order dinner if you're hungrier."

Farsel cocked his head. He always studied me. "You cooked for us. Made us food from your hands?"

“It’s just brownies and from a mix at that. And cookies, from a roll of dough. No need to be in awe.”

They shared a look.

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“Do you two communicate telepathically?”

“We do not.” Tylan looked confused. “Why would you think that?”

“Because sometimes you look at each other and to me, it’s like you are having an unspoken conversation.”

One of Tylan’s eyebrows went up. “Perhaps because we have known each other for so long. And for us, just so you know, any food you make us from your hands, well, it’s special. No matter how little effort. We appreciate you going to the trouble.”

“It was no trouble. I love to cook.”

“We brought you these. We hope you like them. We failed to ask you what your favorite flowers were.”

I took the watercolor bouquet of flowers from his hand and brought them to my nose. It was filled with roses, carnations, tulips, and some sprays of lavender. “I love all flowers, actually. Except poinsettias. I’m allergic to them.”

Both of their eyes widened. “What will happen to you?”

“Oh”—I turned to head to the kitchen to put the beautiful display in a vase—“the milk from the stems makes my hands and face break out in hives. Nothing too serious, but I do try to stay away from them during Christmas season.”

“There are no human holidays on our planet,” Farsel grumbled. He sounded forlorn.

Maybe he thought I might be so attached to Easter ham that I might shun them for it.

“I bet there are some cool ones though. Tell me what you celebrate instead.”

The Fellowship of the Ring had been on the TV while I got ready, but I started from the beginning and paused it while we talked. They told me their people celebrated the changing of the seasons and harvest time and mating and the bearing of children.

I thought it over while they shared. I wasn't so attached to Christmas trees or Valentine's flowers that I would get upset. Instead, their holidays sounded exciting and like a breath of fresh air.

Human holidays had become somewhat mundane for me of late.

Maybe, somewhere deep, I'd known my alien princes would come.

They helped me fill the surface of the coffee table with snacks and dug in with gusto. We started the movie, and I warned them that this was a long one but one of my all-time favorites.

“Trust us,” Tylan chuckled. “We don't mind spending hours with you, Amaris.”

Chapter Eighteen

Farsel

Such a fun evening! Even though I was on the downside of mating sickness, we were spending at least some of every day so far this week with our mate, getting to know one another better. We'd observed enough of the customs of the planet, particularly in this area, to understand that matings among humans did not happen instantly. Shifters usually seemed to, which was one of the reasons I'd looked into the website

where we met our mate. There were a lot of other people besides shifters there, but they were the most populace group.

And yet, the Goddess or Fate as shifters said she was called, had given us a human as our mate. We used the term fated but not in the same way. As I got to know our mate, I believed that the one they called Fate was the same as our Goddess. And it gave me chills to think that she could bring together people from different galaxies and know that they were right for one another. We were not a specifically religious planet, although we did believe there was a Goddess. We just didn't recognize—or at least I didn't—how huge her place was in the universe.

Cuddled with our mate between us on the sofa, we watched the movie she loved and took pleasure in her enjoyment of the reenactment of a work of Earth literature. She had made us sweet treats, which, although she could not know this, were traditionally what a mate did to let her male know she'd chosen to accept them.

Her whole home was permeated with her scent. Light, sweet, indescribably heady, and when I bent to nuzzle her throat and inhale that fragrance, she tipped her head to the side, granting me access, which I took full advantage of. I saw Tylan's hand take hers, on her thigh, linking their fingers, and rubbing his thumb slowly over the back of it. Then his other hand brushed her hair from her cheek and he kissed her lips.

If I hadn't had my own lips moving down the side of her throat to her collarbone, I might have been jealous. We were bonding, not mating yet but exchanging touches and kisses, moving in the right direction. And from the way she linked her free arm around Tylan's neck and continued kissing him, she was fine with it.

The movie continued, flickering on the screen, the music swelling as the hordes stampeded across a landscape that looked nothing like we'd seen on this world. I understood it had been filmed in a Southern Hemisphere country, and what I'd actually viewed before becoming absorbed in our mate's fragrant skin, made me want

to take a trip to that place. It looked a lot like parts of the continent where I'd grown up.

I slipped the top button on her blouse free and kissed the skin revealed before moving on to the second. The elegant curve of her neck was only the beginning of the part of this female I wanted to explore, to memorize, so that whenever I was apart from her I could close my eyes and remember everything about her.

Things were getting hot and heavy, but I could sense reluctance, as if she was fighting a desire both to mate us and to wait.

She wasn't ready. I sat back and waited until their kiss ended to say, "I think we're going too fast for you, female. Why don't we sit back and watch the movie for a bit. Eat some more of your delicious sweets."

Tylan nodded. "You're just too intoxicating."

We watched a couple of minutes of the movie before she spoke up. "Would you...can you tell me what is different about your people from humans? I mean, you're very sexy and tall and good-looking by our standards, and you breathe oxygen... Are you just like us?"

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“Not exactly.” Tylan stroked her cheek, and she leaned into it. “Would you like to see what makes us different?”

“Yes please. I’m kind of nervous about it, though.”

“We don’t have to rush,” I put in. “It’s nothing frightening.”

“No.” She struggled to sit up straight on the soft couch. “Share. Show-and-tell.”

“Is that an idiom?” I asked. “It sounds like I might have heard it before.”

“Yes. It’s actually a thing in kindergarten where children bring something from home and show it to their class and describe it.”

“I see. In that case, you remain seated and my bond mate and I will show and tell, answer any questions what you are about to see may reveal.” Standing, I steadied myself before pulling my shirt over my head. Tylan did the same, and we both shifted our jeans down on our hips, released the belt there, and turned in a circle, revealing all that made us different in appearance from the average human.

After a long moment I stopped, dizzy, and allowed Tylan to help me stay upright. “You all right, Farsel?” he asked.

“Fine.” I was anything but fine, but he knew that. His question was more about whether I was still with him than anything. “Okay, Amaris—you don’t have anything to say at all?” Her silence worried me.

“I-I don’t know what to say.” She stood up and came close to walk around us, her gaze focusing about where I’d have expected it to. “You have tails.”

“Yes,” Tylan agreed.

“Can I touch them?”

“Of course.” I stepped a bit away from my friend, not wanting our female to think I couldn’t stand upright even though she was well aware of my illness. I still hated that it might make me appear weak.

When her hand closed around my tail, I shuddered, unable to stop it, but once she’d finished looking over those obvious parts, her fingertips crept to the tattoo on my right shoulder. The minute she touched it, it glowed. And as she examined all of the tats on my upper body and Tylan’s, they all lit up. Because that was how they worked. “What makes them light up?” she murmured.

“You do. Happiness, excitement, sometimes even anger. The colors will change with the emotion,” I explained.

“And they don’t all show all the time either,” Tylan added. “It’s complicated.”

“Either you have the best tattoo artists in the world, or you’re telling me the truth. You really are aliens.”

Well, one bridge crossed. I’d thought she’d already gotten to that point, but since she hadn’t, I was very glad she had now.

Chapter Nineteen

Amaris

“Good night,” I said as they walked down the outside stairway.

I lingered in the opening of the door until Farsel stopped and looked over his shoulder at me. “Female, go inside and lock the door, please. I won’t be able to rest if I don’t see it.”

“Oh, okay.”

I shut the door, slowly, fighting with myself over asking them not to go—to stay with me. Farsel’s face dropped when Tylan mentioned they needed to let me get some sleep. He was being affected by leaving me the most. When he was with me, his coloring got better, but it didn’t take an alien to see that his shine wasn’t as bright as Tylan’s and his tattoos weaved slowly. He was dying over me.

Not heavy at all.

I leaned against the shut door to my apartment and let out a sigh, wrapping my arms around myself. If only for a moment, I wanted to contain the heat still sizzling in my body. This was more than lust. More than the igniting of my cells.

I was in love with them. Both of them. The way our bodies melded together and moved as though we’d known each other for years was a bonus, a big bonus, but there was so much more than that.

We were connected, and every time I spent time with them, our roots tangled up more and more.

Only a few minutes later, there was an ache in my chest. Good thing I would see them the next day and I had the day off.

I eyed my keys hanging on the hook by the door and for a split second wondered

what would happen if I took off and showed up at their front door.

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Probably nothing.

Maybe everything.

Instead, I decided to stay the course and be strong. I crawled into bed and tossed and turned, knowing deep down that if they were with me, I would have no trouble sleeping at all.

My first thought when I saw them the next day for our amusement park date was, Oh, shit, Farsel looks awful. He put on a half smile and shrugged one shoulder. “I’m okay.” He leaned down and whispered once he was near me. “Don’t worry. It hurts my heart.”

“I can’t help it. This is because of me.”

“Aw, female.” He stroked my cheek. “It’s for you and if you decide to be ours, it will all be worth it. Even if you don’t, I will always cherish the time we had together. Let’s go have a good time.”

We started off on a roller coaster and, while I was usually scared of the upside-down rides with the swift corners, with my men on either side of me, it was actually okay.

Tylan must’ve sensed my trepidation on the slingshot. He leaned over and told me that he would never, that they would never let anything happen to me. I didn’t ask the hows or whys—we were surrounded by humans, but somehow I believed them.

Farsel held my hand through the day. He was quieter than usual. He worried me.

More than that, he scared me. We paused for a break from all the walking, and I nudged him with my shoulder while Tylan got us a drink. "I'm worried."

"About what?" He sat up straight, seeming more energetic.

"About you. It's not even worry anymore. It's fear. I'm scared of what's going to happen to you. I'm scared of how much time we have left."

"Hey." He turned to face me. "This is part of the human experience of choosing a life mate. It's different for us, and especially different for me, but I'm okay right now. You're with me, and I get to spend time with you, and that's keeping me okay for now."

"For now," I said, fighting the tears welling up in my eyes.

"Amaris, please don't cry over me. This time I have with you, it's everything to me. I don't know if you do, but I believe in the Goddess and how she weaves love into everyone's lives. Everything will work out. I promise you. I just want you to be happy, sweetheart."

I gasped. "You've never called me anything other than Amaris."

His eyes widened. "I didn't mean to offend you."

I covered his hand with mine. "No offense taken. I thought it was cute."

"Cute, huh?" It was the most human thing he'd said to me thus far.

"Yes. Cute."

He chuckled, and his color brightened a bit. "I'll accept the compliment." He sighed

and stared into my eyes. “You really are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I’ve traveled through galaxies and met many different species but you...you are the most sparkling star.”

I’d never really been a girl who all out swooned, but my body swayed toward him and I got a bit lightheaded. They were pretty swoony. “I didn’t know aliens could be so romantic,” I heard myself say.

“What is it?” he asked. “Why are your cheeks so red?”

I snorted and shook my head, getting my senses back. “Because I’m falling for you, Farsel. You and Tylan.”

“A little touch of what I feel for you, then.”

“Everything okay here?” Tylan asked. He’d gone to get us lemonade but also had bought corn dogs. He already knew me.

“Everything is great,” Farsel answered. “I think our mate was getting a bit overheated.”

Tylan stared at his bondmate and then nodded. “I think that’s right.”

Their mate. Sure, they had said I was their mate, but he’d never referred to me that way before. Farsel was getting all kinds of bold, and I loved it.

Chapter Twenty

Tylan

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There were so many fun rides at this amusement park. We'd chosen the location based on information on her app bio. She'd mentioned that she loved rides—with the exception of a few types, most of which she'd managed to go on with us. We hadn't pushed her or anything, but whenever we suggested any ride, she agreed.

She screamed and clung to us, laughing and shouting but insisted she was having the best time ever. I liked to think it was because we had our arms around her, holding her safe. Farsel got a second wind after our rest break and went on a few more with us, but after a while, it became obvious that he was pushing himself, and that was not going to help matters any.

I held Amaris back when he went into a shop. "I know it's still kind of early in the day, but..."

"He doesn't look too good. Should we go home?"

"If you don't mind. Farsel won't suggest it, but I'm afraid he's going to collapse if we keep him on the move."

"How about we pick up some dinner then go to my house? We can relax there, then you can go home whenever he's up to it?"

Farsel appeared in the store door, holding up a funny hat with some kind of a horn on it and we laughed, but after he went in again, we put our heads together and made a plan for the evening.

"Okay, guys." Farsel came out wearing the hat and carrying a bag. "Here are yours."

“Our whats?” I asked, afraid I knew.

“Hats.” He held the bag open and Amaris reached in and pulled one out.

She put it on her head and posed this way and that. “What do you think?”

“You look beautiful.” The words emerged before I had a chance to think about them.

“Like always.”

“Really?” She thrust out her lower lip in a pout. “Even as a magical unicorn?”

“Unicorn?” This was the first time I’d heard of this animal. “Do they all have glitter on their horns?”

“Yes, of course. But they are extinct. Noah left them behind.”

Despite the time I’d spent on Earth, there were many things I didn’t understand, but over time, I was sure our mate would clue me in. For now, I’d rather get things moving toward the car. From the wobble in Farsel’s stance, we didn’t have a lot of time. Luckily, there were shuttles from the main gate, once we got there.

“Put yours on,” Amaris urged me. “We can be Team Unicorn for the rest of the day.”

I looked at the two of them beaming at me, wearing the silliest hats ever, and I wanted to protest. To refuse. To pretend I’d never met either of them. Not really. Once I thought it through, I recognized that since I’d do anything to make either of them smile. So I planted the ridiculous cap on my head and tipped my chin up.

Smiles became laughter.

These two would be my family for the rest of my life.

If Amaris agreed.

And if that happened in time to save Farsel.

That sobering thought had me putting our plan into action. “I’m tired. Anyone want to pick up some fast food and go to our house to relax for the evening?”

Farsel looked about to protest, but Amaris nodded briskly. “I am ready to get out of the crowds. What kind of fast food?”

We started toward the front gates, Farsel keeping up with our slow pace. “I was thinking Mexican unless someone else has a different idea?”

“Oh, there’s a food truck between here and there that has the most authentic and delicious tacos. We can stop there and pick up quesadillas or whatever you like and go eat it in front of the TV.” She linked her arm through Farsel’s and towed him along. “Let’s take the shuttle so we don’t waste any time. Do you guys have tacos on your planet? Oops, you don’t eat meat so probably not.”

We climbed aboard one of the shuttle cars towed by an engine with a unicorn horn sticking out of it. There were a lot of unicorns in this place, now that I knew what I was looking at.

“We have a sort of flatbread that we put filling in and fold over then eat.”

“What is the filling?” Amaris was leaning on Farsel’s shoulder, but he wasn’t participating in the conversation, which was beyond worrying.

The train wheeled around, up and down the aisles, while we talked about tacos. Ours were filled with a root vegetable mixture, and Amaris said there were potato tacos, which were kind of the same.

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By the time we got back to our house, Farsel was so tired, we helped him up to bed and Amaris and I sat alone and ate then I took her home. She had to decide soon, or there wouldn't be any time left.

Chapter Twenty-One

Amaris

I lay awake before dawn, clutching my comforter, hoping it would help me make a decision.

Then I imagined my life without making a decision. Could I live with myself knowing that taking my time to decide if I loved them had killed Farsel?

Worse yet, could I live in this world knowing he wasn't in it?

Tylan probably wouldn't be able to be with me either, with the knowledge that Farsel had passed because of me.

The thing was, I couldn't imagine a—life without either of them. And without that decision, I had no choice what the future held if I decided they were mine. Would we live here? Would I move into their home?

Would they take me away to another planet and make that our home?

So many questions, but I knew the answer. Any future was fine with me as long as we were together.

The hours between our dates dragged on as though it were months. I missed them. The way they looked at me. Our laughter and silliness. Craved their touch and even more touches we hadn't even shared.

I gasped, sitting up and throwing my covers back with the sudden realization.

I missed my mates. My mates. My alien mates who came from far away but made me feel like I was embedded in their hearts.

"I love them!" I shouted to no one but myself.

Shit. Now I had to tell them. I'd made Farsel and Tylan suffer enough, but especially the former. He paled by the moment and though there were signs of light when they were with me, I worried about him. More than worry—I was scared for the fate of my mate.

My stomach became sick at the thought of letting him suffer for another second, but I couldn't just barge over there and tell them I loved them. Could I?

I flopped back in bed and sighed.

They were the best turn my life had ever taken.

I had to tell them. Sooner rather than later.

In fact, I would have to tell them today.

We planned to have lunch and, while it wouldn't be the most intimate date, I didn't think I could contain my revelation any longer.

Opening my closet, I pulled out my cutest dress and sandals. I'd laid them out when

my phone buzzed as it did every morning. My men always said good morning and even in the short time we'd been dating, I'd begun to rely on the ritual.

Good morning. Hope you had a good night's sleep. Thinking of you. That was from Tylan.

You were the first thing on my mind this morning. Can't wait to see you later. That one was from Farsel. They had begun to text me separately, which brought about other thoughts.

How would the mating even work?

Would I mate with them one at a time or together? I'd imagined both, but we hadn't talked about any of that since I hadn't admitted they were mine.

I texted them back, off and on throughout the day, but Tylan was much more talkative than Farsel now.

I wondered if he was okay and asked him, but there was no answer.

So, I asked Tylan.

He is resting today. I'm not sure he's getting a lot of sleep. He'll be okay. Don't worry yourself.

Too late for that.

Farsel was resting and all because of the mating sickness, or the not-mating sickness.

I debated with myself about going over there, again, but decided I would wait. I didn't know why I was hesitating. There was no fear of rejection from those two. They had made up their minds about me before I even met them.

Our courting had been a dream. A week-long string of heavenly dates that any woman would pray for.

And here I was, procrastinating on giving them news that would change all of our lives forever.

A few more hours. That was all we had to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Amaris

I probably sounded crazy, insisting I come over, but what I had to say couldn't wait.

Farsel needed me and my confession. If he didn't feel well enough to go on the date, then his mating sickness was getting worse.

I couldn't let anything happen to him.

Instead of the dress and sandals I'd picked out, I went over in my jeans and a casual rayon button-down shirt and flip-flops. I doubted my aliens needed a dress for me to tell them I wanted to be with them.

In fact, I was hoping not to need a whole lot of clothes at all tonight.

"Hi," Tylan said as he answered the door before I could knock.

"Hi. I'm sorry for insisting on coming over but I wanted to see the both of you." I craned my neck to look around him. "Where's Farsel?"

"He's taking a shower, I assume." Tylan scratched the back of his head. "He's worse today. Worse than I've ever seen him. He thought the shower might perk him up. He's worried about you seeing him this way."

"I'm worried already."

"Oh, sorry." Tylan laughed. "Please, come in."

We shared a quick hug, but I soon heard footsteps. My confession needed to come sooner than later and because I didn't want anything to happen to Farsel, our mating would also happen tonight. There was no way they would turn me down, and even if there wasn't a situation with mating sickness, I was more than ready for them to take me.

Way more than ready.

"Farsel?" I asked, almost not recognizing my handsome mate. His brightness was all but faded.

"Amaris, it's so good to see you, mate." This time there was no chaste hug or kiss on

the cheek. He embraced me and pressed his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply. He held on for a while and I sank into his hold. This was where I wanted to be. Always. Safe and secure in their arms.

“Are you hungry?” Tylan asked. “We thought we would order something.”

Because Farsel wasn't feeling well. That was the part they left out. He cooked the most out of both of them.

“I am. Maybe we can talk while we wait for the food?” I asked. Farsel pulled back to study me, his eyebrows bunched.

“That would be fine, of course.”

Tylan got on his phone and ordered some food. I didn't know what he ordered and really didn't care because my priority wasn't food. I had other hungers that were taking priority.

“Can we sit down and talk?” I asked.

Tylan and Farsel sat down, but my paler mate, the sick one, never let go of my hand once. Our connection somehow helped him, and what I was about to say would help him even more.

“What did you want to talk about, sweetheart?” Tylan had taken to calling me that as well.

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My heart beat so hard I thought it might burst through my chest. This was the moment I'd been waiting for, and now, I found myself at a loss for words.

“Say whatever you need to, Amaris. Please.”

Farsel's plea shot right through my heart. “I wanted to tell you that I've made up my mind. About us. About you two being my mates.”

Farsel sucked in a breath and Tylan sat up straighter.

“I...I'm in love with the both of you. It has been growing since we began talking online and I had to tell you. I know that humans don't have mates, but I'm damned sure you two are mine. That is...if you still want me after making you wait.”

Farsel looked like he might pass out. “Amaris, this isn't because of your worry for me, is it? I feel it oozing out of you. You have to make this decision for you.”

“Are you trying to talk me out of this, mate?” The word slipped from my mouth without thinking, but I meant the sentiment all the same.

As easily as the word came from me, a tear ran down his face. “You're ours. You want to be our mate for life? We won't ever give you up. We don't believe in your human divorce or splitting up. We want you for as long as we live.”

“Thank the Goddess,” I breathed out. “Because I want you as long as I exist.”

Before I could take my next breath, Farsel grabbed me up and put me in his lap, eyes

shiny with tears. “You’re serious. You’re sure. Tylan, do you hear that?”

Tylan hugged me from behind, and Farsel’s gaze descended to my lips.

“Please, Farsel. Mate. Kiss me.”

Tylan chuckled from behind me, already kissing the back of my neck. “We’re going to do a lot more than kiss you, mate. That is, if that’s what you want.”

“I want that. All of that and more. Make me yours.”

Farsel’s lips met mine, and I plunged into depths of want I didn’t know were possible. He lit up like never before.

“You’re okay now?” I asked, pulling back to cup his face.

“I will be. Now that you’re ours, I’ll be more than okay.”

Tylan began to kiss me again, this time underneath my ear, and I let out a moan.

That was when the doorbell rang.

Tylan chuckled and pushed off the couch. “Dinner is here. I forgot we ordered it. One second.”

“Are you even hungry anymore?” I asked Farsel, rocking my hips against him.

“Not for food, mate. Only for you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tylan

Amaris said yes.

Just in time, judging from the symptoms my friend and bond mate had been trying unsuccessfully to hide from me. He was still eating and drinking, but a lot of what he took in wasn't staying down. And he was losing weight, as well. His color was terrible. Even with the human guise we wore here. It wasn't much of a disguise since our clothing covered most of our bodies, but it did the job.

We moved into my bedroom, probably just because it was slightly closer than Farsel's, and with little time to waste, began to uncover our mate, finally being able to see all of her without the fabric that had hidden her from my eyes. Our eyes. Her silvery hair and piercing eyes would be admired on our world where few had hair that color, and her skin was a peachy tone all over, with no tattoos at all. Would she stay clean of ink? Somehow I doubted it.

Once she was naked, she knelt in front of us and looked up, unfastening our trousers and reaching for both of our manhoods. I wasn't sure how close we were to human in that department, but I didn't ask her because who she was with before us was not our business, but I didn't need details.

"You two could be nude models," she purred, licking my head and then Farsel's, her boldness thrilling. "But I'd have to kill anyone who saw you like this. You're really mine." Our mate's voice held awe and something more. "I thought Fate only found perfect mates for shifters, but she gave me you."

She closed her lips over my cock and her fist on Farsel's and pleased us in a way no female at home would do without great encouragement. Usually, years into a relationship. I moved my legs apart, bracing myself as she switched off and used her hand on me, her hot sweet mouth on Farsel. I didn't know how he was upright, as ill

as he'd been, but with each stroke and lick and suck, he looked stronger. His color was not as obvious as it would be in a brighter room. Did Amaris notice? His tattoos were glowing bright, as were mine, but for human sight...I didn't know if she could tell yet.

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She'd see in the morning if we didn't attempt to hide it. In lovemaking, it was not something I was capable of. Neither of us were.

I stroked her hair, enjoying her ministrations, but after a bit, we each took an arm and lifted her to her feet. Easing our mate onto the bed, we removed our clothing and lay down on either side of her. Females on our world did not have large mammaries, just enough to feed our young, but Amaris' were warm, soft handfuls with dark nipples that poked my palms when I cupped them. Everything about her was fascinating and delightful. And I wanted to be inside her now, But until we completed the mating act, Farsel was in danger, so I held back while he kissed and caressed her before moving between her legs.

"You're so beautiful, sweetheart," he crooned, kissing her again and reaching between them. It was hard to wait but also good, amazing to see my friend and our mate doing something that would save his life, save all our lives really because without Farsel, we'd never have true happiness. Fate or the Goddess had given us each other to be family forever.

Farsel and Amaris clung to one another, hugging, kissing, as he drove into her again and again. His breathing grew harsh but not weak, no gasps or signs of distress. I'd heard of someone once who had been so close to the end, when he mated, the act killed him.

But Farsel, rather than dying, shouted when he reached his pinnacle and bent to mark her on the side of her neck. We did not share feelings, but it was hard to be this close and not share some of their experience. Mingled scents and pheromones were heady things for a bond mate, and when Farsel rolled to the side, Amaris reached for me.

I pulled her over on top of me and lifted her to sit, straddling my groin. “You’re our dream, sweetheart.” I helped her lift to take the tip of my cock inside her and then lower. “You’re in control here.”

She smiled. “I think you know me already. Equals.” Holding my hands she took me deep into her body, the tight channel massaging me. I’d ached for her since the first time I saw her picture, but this moment surpassed anything I could have dreamed of. She moaned and pitched forward, contracting around me in orgasm and nearly unseating me, but I adjusted her knees and took over, driving into her from below, so close but not wanting it to end. Everything with our mate was like that. So pleasurable...

And then I couldn’t hold back, and my cum was pouring into her body. She cried out and grabbed for me, once again rippling around me. Nobody back home had a body like our mate’s, a sense of humor, kindness. Nobody was Amaris. I marked her, and it was done. We were mated. Forever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Amaris

Several things happened at once as my eyes fluttered open. One, I smelled waffles. Two, I felt my mates close. One closer to the other but both of them in short distance from me.

Farsel, who I knew now by his smell and somehow his simple yet profound presence, was next to me.

I looked over to see him sleeping. His eyelids made no movement. His face was relaxed and peaceful for the first time since I’d met him. His skin was bright purple now, sparkling and glittery as though he were the galaxy, not belonging to it.

I placed my palm on his cheek, needing to touch him more than our bodies already were. Our legs were tangled. My bare chest plastered against his. Somehow it wasn't enough.

"Mmm, good morning, mate."

His eyes opened, and I gasped. They were sky blue where Tylan's were almost silver, but I'd never seen Farsel when his mating sickness wasn't already in play.

"Good morning. You are beautiful. No more sickness," I said.

He chuckled and pulled me closer. "Mating bliss is what I'm feeling now, my love. But what about you?"

Me? "Bliss is a great word." I moved my body a bit and the soreness, the delicious soreness of a night well spent with my mates, set in.

"Oh, mate. You're sore."

"How did you know?" I asked. I hadn't thought I showed anything on my face.

"I can feel it through our bond now. It helps me be a better mate for you." He placed his open palm between my breasts, right over my heart. "How about a hot shower and some breakfast? We can give you some of that human medicine if you need it. Once we get to our planet, healing pain will be as simple as letting a healing laser run over your body."

"Will we ever come back here?" I asked, thinking of Jenny, Rex, the twins. Burgers.

"We'll do our best, but it's not a guarantee. Intergalactic travel usually has to have a purpose beyond visiting."

I nodded. “I think that shower sounds good.”

He smiled wide and before I knew it, I was over his shoulder and being carried to the bathroom where he turned on the water. Tylan came in. “This is what I miss when I go to make our mate breakfast?”

We shared kisses and held each other. Once the water warmed, they made all the aches go away, promising to do more once I wasn’t sore anymore.

There was no rush. I had them forever now.

“I can’t believe you went out and got a waffle iron,” I said, laughing once we were dressed.

“We ordered the one you liked best online. You loved the waffles that day.”

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On our first date. And they'd remembered.

Tylan's waffles were better than the diner's. Once we were sated in all ways, we sat in the living room, cuddled up with one another. My purple and blue aliens surrounded me with their warmth.

"When will we go to your planet?" I asked.

"Eager, are you?" Tylan nuzzled my neck.

"Very. I'm ready to begin our life together."

"It already has, mate." Farsel scooted closer.

Epilogue

Farsel

It was time to go home. Our mate had been so positive on the subject, we had no qualms. If she had said no, we'd have ignored the message from our world and done what was necessary to go underground and never be found. It was a plan we'd discussed between the two of us when we'd realized that our mate was human. Perhaps go to that place where they filmed Amaris' favorite movies.

But her response to the message had been so positive, she'd caught us both off guard. We were not going to have to give up home to be with our mate and for the past several days, she'd been frantically packing and unpacking, wanting to take only

what was most important, what she might miss the most.

The waffle iron was going. It would take some reengineering, but I was confident that we'd be able to get it working or, worst case, have a new one made that would do the same job. In fact, I had an idea for patenting a device that should be very popular among our people.

We had a limited amount of baggage permitted per passenger, and that meant, our mate had to figure out how to fit everything she wanted to remind her of Earth into a relatively small space. She didn't need a lot of clothing, since we'd be able to provide her with all of that, so she'd filled her allotted space with things like digitized photos of her friends and their babies, her late parents, all sorts of locations that had been special to her. Coffee because we didn't have that and while it would eventually be gone, it would give her a cushion to get used to our drinks. She had a little bag of dirt from her yard. A rock. Miscellaneous things that had little financial value here or there but would remind her of Earth. A watercolor of a dragonfly she hoped to use as inspiration for a tattoo that glowed like ours. I hoped she wouldn't get too many.

"We will never be able to come back?" she asked as we stood next to our car in the middle of the wilderness. We'd driven nearly all day to get here, and she was probably tired. I knew I was. "Ever?"

"If we can come up with a research project that the government will back. We'll do our best, but can't promise." I hugged her, kissing the top of her head. Since the first time we made love, I had felt better and better. Now, I not only had shed the mating sickness but had a sense of well-being beyond anything I'd ever experienced. "Changed your mind? We can hop in the car and head off to a new life. We still have plenty of money from the funds we came here with to keep us for life."

Tylan joined our embrace, holding our mate between us. "Up to you, sweetheart."

She was quiet for a moment then lifted her face to me, eyes bright with excitement.

“And miss the adventure of a lifetime? No way, alien boys. When is that ship coming anyway?”

“You’re our brave mate, and we’ll make sure you never regret your decision.” I turned her to face the distant mountains. “Watch for it.”

And as the two of us stood, with Amaris between us, our arms around her waist, the elegant ship appeared in the distance. “It looks so faint,” she said. “Almost like a cloud.”

“Disguised.” Tylan smiled. “But it looks like a cloud from home.”

If she’d waited much longer to accept us, I might have died. Or the ship might have come to find me in the throes of mating sickness and ruined my whole family. It was an unfair prejudice, to treat people that way for something they had no way of preventing, and I wasn’t sure how, but I would find a way to prove that those with the sickness were just as good as anyone else. My degree was in cellular biology, and I had the samples in my bag from our travels to work with once I got home. Maybe there was a way I could use my skills to help all the families who feared being found out. Or those who already had been.

But for now, I was ready to board ship with my mate and my bond mate, to go home and start our new life together. Our families would welcome their new daughter, and if the Goddess or Fate was kind, we might bring a new kind of person to the universe. With the best of both of our people.

“Oh, look.” The ship had landed very close to us. It wasn’t big, just a landing craft, and Amaris would soon see what we used to travel between galaxies. She was going to love it!