



His Human to Learn

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Description: Step one in finding my fated mate: being able to communicate with the cute alien I think might be the one.

Tori

I survived Earth's fall into ruin, made the journey to a new alien planet, and found somewhere safe to live. My translator never started working after it was implanted, and I wasn't about to be forced to stay on Earth. The plan is to learn the language before falling for one of these aliens.

Of course, my plan fails spectacularly the first time I see Marron. I can't even say hi to him, yet I'm ready to know everything about him. I doubt Marron has a problem with our inability to communicate, but it doesn't set the foundation for a good relationship if we can't even talk. Before this goes any further, I'll have to learn a lot.

Marron

When I joined this tribe, it was to be useful and to give my younger brother a better life than we had in our old tribe. We work the fields every day, we help with chores, and now, I'm attempting to woo the fiery-haired female who lives on the farm.

Tori can't understand me, but we can fix that. It will take time and effort, but I can think of nothing I would not do for my female, my future mate. Now to prove to her that I can learn her, I can know her, and I can be what she needs.

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1

Tori

"We're having a family dinner tonight," Nia says as she peeks into the room Jen and I share in her home.

We've been living with Nia, Beren, and Lyath for a few weeks, and this is the first time they've ever called dinner family dinner. Jen and I frown at one another.

"What do you mean, family dinner?" Jen asks, rising from the bed we share and following Nia out of the room.

Jen and I came to live on the farm after the translation device implanted in my head never started working. We thought I'd be sent back to Earth if anyone found out, so I avoided talking to anyone and pretended to be uninterested in everything until we came up with a plan.

The plan consisted of listening to gossip from some of the other women, who all said that Beren and Lyath opened their home to a human who was going to be sent back to Earth so she didn't have to go. Turns out the gossip wasn't entirely accurate because while they did keep her from being sent back to Earth, she's also one of Beren's mates. Thankfully, when we asked them to save us, they opened their homes without a second thought.

"The males who help out around the farm are staying over for dinner because their wardens need alone time," Nia says with a shrug.

"They're coming inside?" Jen and I both ask at the same time.

Jen is four years younger than me, which means, technically, she isn't barred from being in the same room as unmated males like I am. At twenty, I'm seen as a grown, unmated female, so I'm not allowed to be anywhere near a grown, unmated male unless we're both going through the mating ceremony. It's for our own protection and making sure the males don't start forming bonds with women who don't want a mate yet. Women like me, who are still too scared to leave the house because I can't talk to anyone without another human there to translate for me.

"Thro is coming inside because he's still years away from being grown, and his brother will eat on the porch, wait until you girls go back to your room, and then come sleep on the couch," Nia says as though she has it all figured out.

"Do they know about me?" I ask, my fingers wringing together. "Do they know I can't understand them?"

Nia turns to face me and frowns. "We haven't told them anything yet, and we wanted to leave it up to you to tell them if you wanted. Thro and his brother are here often because they work on the farm, and they have for a while now. They're good males. Hopefully, they'll help you feel more comfortable around others. Plus, you need demons to practice talking with, and Thro loves talking."

"And his brother?" I ask, feeling my stomach do a little flop at an unmated male being near me.

It's not that I think I'll fall for the first unmated male I'm near. I know the chances for that are slim. Even the mating ceremonies have only proven to match up a few dozen women with their males so far. The chances of me feeling a calling toward anyone, especially the only grown male who will be near me for as long as I live on the farm, are so low I shouldn't worry.

"His brother is a quiet male." Nia gives me a reassuring smile, as if she can tell why I'm so nervous. "I doubt you'll even know he's here."

I take a deep breath and feel Jen's fingers in mine, giving me a soft squeeze. "You do need to practice learning their language."

"I know," I grumble under my breath. "Fine, let's have a family dinner with someone creepily eating on the porch, and maybe I can learn a few words."

"It's a marathon, not a sprint," Nia tells me as she moves to the kitchen to prepare dinner. "You won't be proficient in the language for a while, but no one here will ever give you a hard time for it."

I give her an appreciative smile and then take a stack of plates from her to set the dining room table. We work silently for a few minutes before hissing and harsh clicking fill the air outside the front door.

The demon's language is harsh and makes them sound angry. I've gotten used to that part since I've also seen how Nia melts into her mate sometimes when he says things in a tone that sounds like he's fighting with her. I assume it's angry language, and I hope I won't hear it that way one day.

"The one that sounds like a girl is pissed that his brother has to eat outside." Jen leans toward me and starts to tell me what they're talking about.

"You probably shouldn't say Thro sounds like a girl." Nia snorts as she tries to cover her laugh. "I doubt he'll be too happy to hear that."

"Shh." Jen waves her warning away and tilts her head to listen better.

There's more hissing and clicking. The voices are barely distinguishable except for

the higher-pitched one. I can only tell that it's Beren talking with someone else because I've grown used to how Lyath and Beren sound when they speak. The third voice belongs to someone I don't know. The low vibrations of his hiss make it sound almost calming, and it's the first time I've thought one of them sounds nice instead of the usual anger.

"The brother is telling them he's honored to be fed at all, and he has no problem waiting for you to go to bed before he comes inside. Beren's thanking him and telling Thro he needs to be respectful to us, even though he's mad that we're the reason his brother can't come inside."

My face flushes, which means I'm beet red. I can't help that no matter how much I wish it didn't happen, as soon as I get a slight blush, it turns into a raging inferno under my skin and makes my face look like a tomato. It could be the tiniest embarrassment, and someone would think it's the most mortifying thing that has ever happened to me. Of course, it's at this moment, when I look terrible, that the front door opens, and I make eye contact with the most handsome alien I have ever seen.

"Close your mouth." Jen nudges my arm with her elbow and speaks to me out of the corner of her mouth.

Beren pushes the handsome demon behind him and immediately starts saying something I can't understand to Nia, who's trying and failing to hide her smile and laugh behind her fist. She speaks to Beren in the same hissing and clicking sounds she can make without thinking about it because her translation device works as it should.

A smaller male with a broken horn, Thro, pushes past Beren, his head whipping around between everyone as he says something that has Jen laughing. The smaller male turns around and tilts his head to look behind Beren as he speaks some more.

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I want to laugh and smile with everyone else. I want to be part of the chatter and understand what's making everyone act like something is so funny. Instead, I'm standing red-faced and stunned as I try to force my mind to understand anything so I'm not the only one left out of this conversation.

Jen says something to Nia that I can't understand, and I don't want to be a burden and have her translate everything that's happening. I step backward, hoping no one notices me trying to escape. I take a second step when no one moves to look at me. A third, and I'm almost back to our room.

I only pause when Beren shifts his body, and I make eye contact with the unmated male. He's staring right at me, but doesn't look happy or entertained like everyone else. No, he seems concerned, and it has me flushing even brighter. I scurry the last couple of feet to my room and don't stop until the door shuts behind me.

I take one shuddering breath and then a second as I push my unruly red hair behind my ears and try to decide what I'm going to do. The storm season is over, so the wood paneling that sealed the window has been removed.

I know I shouldn't sneak out since it's dangerous at night. I also know I can't be in this house when I can hear everyone having a good time, and I'm left to guess what everyone's saying, not knowing even a little bit.

A knock on the door has me jumping and realizing how dumb an idea it would be to climb out the window.

"Tori." Nia's voice on the other side of the door sounds worried, and it makes me feel

even worse because I know she and Jen take it upon themselves to translate for me and think they aren't doing a good job when they forget. It's not their fault, and it's not their responsibility.

"I'm fine," I call out, my voice betraying me as it cracks. I'm not crying, but my throat is dry and burning, so it sounds like I'm on the verge of sobbing. "I'm good. I just need a second."

"We were talking about how the plan to separate you and the unmated male didn't work out so well. No one was laughing at you, I promise."

"I didn't think you were." Which was true until this moment. Now I think she's saying they weren't laughing at me because they were laughing at me.

Thro must be close to Nia because I can hear him clicking and hissing just on the other side of the door.

"Thro says he would like you to eat with us so he can get to know you."

More clicking and hissing in a much more animated tone this time. Nia says something to him in their language and then translates it for me.

"He says it's his responsibility to ensure you're unharmed since his brother isn't allowed to be near you."

"How chivalrous." I try to laugh, but it comes out thin. "Seriously, give me like five minutes to fix myself, and I'll come out."

Nia must translate what I'm saying to Thro because she's hissing and clicking. When she finishes, the younger male says something else, and I hear someone lightly hit the door.

The sound of the others at the dining room table grows louder as they begin to pass around food and eat. I was serious about only needing a few minutes. I can feel my face cooling down, and my throat stops burning. I smile, trying to make myself feel happier, and then open the door.

Thro falls backward until he's lying face up on the ground halfway in my room, halfway still in the hall. He jumps to his feet quickly and sticks his hand out to me. He says something in a rapid, disjointed sound with a smile on his face.

I try to tell him I can't understand him, but he has an arm wrapped over my shoulder and is dragging me to the kitchen table, where everyone's now staring and watching this interaction unfold. Thro pulls a chair out for me, the whole time chattering about something I can't understand. When I sit down, he sits between Jen and me and starts filling my plate.

"Do you want me to translate everything?" Jen asks, brow quirked as Thro keeps talking and talking and talking.

"Is it anything bad?" I ask, hoping he's saying nice things since he looks so happy.

"It's a lot about how happy he is that you're here and some stuff about his brother." Jen pauses. "A lot of stuff about his brother."

Jen frowns and asks Thro a question in his language, which he quickly answers. Jen snorts and turns her attention back to me.

"He says he's going to help you learn their language so that way you stop crying in your bedroom alone because you can't understand everyone talking about Marron."

My cheeks flush again, but I try not to let the embarrassment get to me. Even if I'm embarrassed about being called out like that, it's not being done maliciously. I don't

think Thro has a malicious bone in his body.

So, I grab my fork and start eating, nodding my head along with Thro's stories, letting Jen translate when she thinks something is important. For the most part, I listen to everyone talk, wishing I could understand them, but more so wishing that the male on the porch was sitting next to me instead.

2

Tori

After dinner, I decide that I really need to start learning the language, so I follow Lyath and Beren out into the fields every morning, talking with them all day as they attempt to teach me.

For the most part, it's a lot of them pointing at things, pronouncing them in their language, and waiting patiently for me to get it. Maybe it's not the best way to learn, but it's the only way I have without constantly dragging Jen around to translate.

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Another reason I don't mind helping them around the farm as I try to learn the language is that I see Marron a lot. I don't know how I never saw him before dinner, but now that I have, it's like I'm acutely aware of where he is all the time. He seems just as aware of me because he looks away from me anytime I look at him.

A few months go by, and I do the same thing every day: talk with Lyath or Beren and, in the evenings, use Jen to help me ask about specific things I want to learn. I'm not fluent or anywhere even remotely close, but I can have disjointed conversations that kind of make sense for the most part, so long as whoever I'm talking to has a good sense of patience and speaks slowly enough to me that I can try to figure out what they're saying.

"Can you cover for me for just a little bit?" I ask Jen in English.

She gives me a suspicious look but nods, not wanting to ask any questions in case Nia asks where I am. Plausible deniability is always good. Even though I'm a grown woman and technically can do whatever I want. Well, almost anything since what I'm about to do is definitely breaking one of the only rules in the tribe that I need to follow.

I crawl out of the window in our room and land softly on the grass on the other side. Thro's staying for dinner tonight, and Beren and Lyath are already back in the house, helping Nia prepare dinner. If I'm fast enough, I should be able to catch the male I want to speak with before he's too far.

I run around the side of the house, looking around the fields, hoping to see Marron finishing his work. Luck must be on my side because I can see his bright red scales

and dark horns in one of the further fields.

I run as quickly as I can, sticking to the paths so I don't hurt any of the crops. By the time I make it to the field I last saw Marron in, I'm a little out of breath and a lot red in the face. I put my hands on my knees, taking in deep gulps of air to calm myself before speaking to him for the first time.

We've never spoken a single word to one another, and today, I hope to change that. I wipe at some of the sweat on my forehead and am about to stand up when a dark shadow covers me.

I know Marron's found me before I'm ready for him to see me as soon as he starts hissing and clicking his tongue. He falls to his knees in front of me, his hands moving to my shoulders to help me stand straight, and then he's touching my face with the backs of his scaled fingers.

He repeats something over and over again, the same rhythmic clicks and hisses that I don't understand. Apparently, all of my work on learning their language enough to talk to Marron has been unsuccessful.

"I am okay," I say slowly in disjointed clicks that I hope sound right.

Marron's brows rise, and his eyes go wide. Then, a soft smile splits his lips, and he leans back on his calves to give me my space. I regret saying anything because his hands are off me now, and he's just staring at me, waiting for me to say something else.

"I want..." Deep breath while I try to remember which hiss to use. I repeated this exact phrase to Jen repeatedly because I didn't trust any of the others not to ask questions about why I wanted to say this. "I want to know you."

"Me?" Marron asks, pointing at himself and then repeating his question with my same statement. "You want to know me?"

I nod, my cheeks flaming as I chew on my lower lip, hoping this isn't too forward. Technically, I'm supposed to go through the mating ceremony if I want to get to know any of the males, but I don't feel comfortable doing that until I can actually talk to them. At the rate I'm going, it'll be over a year before I'm ready to go through the mating ceremony.

Marron nods and then rubs the back of one of his horns.

"My name is Marron," he enunciates the sounds well enough that I can understand him, and I appreciate that I don't have to tell him to repeat himself just yet. I'm sure it'll happen, but I want this to seem normal for as long as possible.

"My name is Tori," I tell him, smiling brightly since I can say that easy peasy.

"Yes." Marron laughs and then shakes his head as he tries to keep his eyes from returning to mine. "I know who you are."

I bite down a bit harder on my lip and start fiddling with the hem of my shirt. As far as first conversations go, this could be worse, but it could also be way better. "You are unmated?"

Marron's eyes snap to mine and then journey down my body and back up. My toes curl, and my breath catches when his eyes land back on mine with a soft determination that makes me think he's unmated but wouldn't mind being mated to me.

He starts to speak just as slowly as the other times, but there are words I don't understand. I can't make out what he's saying, but I can guess.

"Not something... talk about... Beren..." Marron gives me a sad smile as he finishes speaking and then lifts his fingers to stroke my cheek.

I try to think of something to say to make it clear that I'm not trying to get him in trouble with Beren or Lyath, since I know this is his job. Unfortunately, I don't know how to say that, and I don't want to butcher it and make this even worse.

"I want to know you, Tori."

A small gasp leaves my throat at him, saying my name, because we all know males only say the names of women they want to sleep with. Marron must not have meant to let it slip because his eyes are wide again, and his hand drops from my face.

"Sorry." He gets to his feet and dusts off his palms, trying to put this moment behind him. "So sorry."

"No!" I shake my head, wanting to reach for his hand to take it in mine. "No, sorry. Me sorry."

That gets his attention back on me. His eyes narrow on me, and his lips press into a tight line. He says something that's not meant for me because it's way too fast, with clicks and hisses I don't understand.

He motions for me to walk back to the house and follows me. We don't say anything on the way back because something about what he just said is familiar. I'm racking my brain, trying to piece together the hissing sounds I just heard. I don't even notice he has me walking in through the front door.

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Nia, Beren, and Lyath all ask where I was, and I tell them I needed to get something from outside. They don't believe me, but don't ask if I went looking for Marron. I eat dinner, listening to what everyone is saying. Beren says something to Nia that has her leaning into him. I sit upright, narrowing my eyes on him.

"What did you just say?" I ask in English, my voice louder than I mean for it to be. "That word you said at the end, what is it?"

Nia frowns at my question like she's unsure why I'm so worked up about it, but it's one of the words Marron was mumbling when he was seeing if I was okay when he stumbled upon me in the fields, and was part of what he said when he was chastising me for apologizing.

"He called me his mate," Nia says, a question sparkling in her eyes when my face immediately flushes. "Why?"

"No reason," I lie, turning my full attention to the food in front of me. "It sounded familiar. I must be used to hearing you guys say it."

"Uh-huh," Nia says. Obviously, she doesn't believe me, but she doesn't press anymore.

I don't offer anything to the rest of the conversations. I'm too busy figuring out if Marron called me his mate or if I misheard him. And if he did call me his mate, is that something I'm okay with when we can't even talk to each other yet?

Marron

"I have a plan," Thro says as he scampers back to where we're meant to be working today.

He tugs on my tunic until I lean down so he can whisper in my ear. Does it matter that Beren and Lyath are off working in a different field today? No, because Thro thinks this is some secret mission we are on when, in all actuality, it is just Beren and Lyath trying to make sure the unmated female in their care is not preyed upon. Not that I would prey upon her. Well, if she wanted me to, I could be amenable.

"I will tell Beren and Lyath I am ill tonight while we have dinner. I have even perfected fainting. Jen has been helping me. So, I will faint. They will be so concerned for me and rush to take me to the tribe to get me to Vex. Then, when all of them rush to get me aid because having the most favorite male die on your watch is a bad look for anyone, you will sneak back to the farm and have alone time with the unmated female."

I listen to his plan because I have to give him credit for making it better than his last plan. In that one, he wanted to set fire to one of the fields to keep Beren and Lyath away from the house. Still, I do not want to scheme ways to get close to Tori.

Yes, it's been many days since I last spoke with her, and maybe Beren, Lyath, and Nia have been watching her more closely. I have not been quiet about how I feel for the fiery-haired female. I saw her once, told Beren I was interested in his ward, and have continued to tell him I am interested in her so he does not think this is some fleeting infatuation. As soon as Tori is willing to be with me, I will be ready, but I will not force my affections on a female who does not want them.

"No more scheming," I tell Thro, pushing him off me so I can continue my work. "I have told you that as soon as the small female wishes me to woo her, I will. I am not

going to force my attentions on her."

"It is not forcing your attentions," Thro argues.

I do not know why he is so interested in me mating Tori, but he has been adamant about making it happen from the moment he saw how my face changed when I saw her. He has also taken it upon himself to ensure her protection, as he puts it, since I am not allowed near her. This means he eats dinner out here many nights, and when he is with me, he recounts everything Tori did.

"I do not think you would even know how to force your attentions on anyone. No, this is more about giving you a chance to allow her to see that she should allow you to woo her. Right now, Beren and Lyath keep her locked away, so she has no idea you are here and eager to speak with her."

"And can she speak with me?" I ask, lifting one of my brows.

Tori is working hard to learn our language, but still does not know it very well. We might be able to speak for a few moments together, but we could not carry on a whole conversation. I would be fine with sitting silently with her, but that does not build a strong foundation for a good mating.

"Between what she has learned and what you have learned, I am sure you can have many conversations together." Thro pauses, taking a deep breath since he talks so fast.

It makes me happy that he is so carefree. He has already experienced too much in his life, and he deserves this time to not care about anything other than scheming.

"I will wait until she finds me or until she signs up for the mating ceremony," I tell Thro, hoping I do not sound too stern.

I do not want to ruin his fun, but I also need him to understand that he will not push this any further than he already has.

"I have promised Beren that I am not a liability on his farm. If he no longer believes me, neither of us will have jobs."

"I do not need a job." Thro shrugs. "I came here to help you so you could be allowed a female when they started coming. Well, now the female meant to be yours is here, and you are doing nothing to woo her. I do not see why I am needed here anymore."

"You do not feel good when you are helpful?" I ask.

It is true that Thro does not enjoy work, but no one truly enjoys it. We do it to sustain the tribe and ensure that we are helpful. Thro can tell me he does not need a job, but he would be bored all day without it.

Beren and Lyath allow Thro to continue his lessons with their ward, Jen, on the days she has one of the older females come to teach her. He is behind in his lessons because our father cared little for educated males, but I do not want him to grow up without knowing things like I have. He is too clever for that.

"Fine!" Thro throws his hands up. "I enjoy being helpful and being close to Beren and Lyath's family because they treat us like family, but I would be thrilled if you were happy as well. I do not like being the only one between us who is allowed good things."

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"Thro." My brows furrow as I kneel to the ground. He is looking away from me right now. Obviously, he does not want to discuss this, but it has come out anyway. "I do think I am allowed good things. I have you, I have Toron and his mate, and Itha. You think they do not make me the happiest of males?"

"That is not the same, and you know it." Thro crosses his arms over his chest, still not facing me. "You would be happy with a mate."

"And what would you know of it?" I ask.

I am not trying to sound insensitive, but the only reason Thro cares at all about mating right now is because he wants me to mate with Tori. He has no interest in it for himself and won't for many more years until he goes through the changing.

"I know that males who have mates are happy," Thro says, turning to glare at me. "Toron is happy with his Alice. He is an angry male and always looks like he might kill someone, but when he is with her, he is the happiest. Beren, as well. How many times have you seen him smile?"

I frown, trying hard to think if I've ever seen it.

"Exactly!" Thro says as though he is making some grand point. "You have not seen it because he only does it with his Nia and Lyath in their home. He is actually a happy male, but you would never know unless you see him with his mates."

"What does this have to do with me?" I ask.

I am sure Thro has all the good intentions in the world, but I am not an angry male. In fact, I try very hard not to be an angry male because our father was angry enough for all three of us.

"You do not smile often." He rubs at his eyes and then glares at me like he is unhappy to have to wipe away his tears. "But when you saw her, you looked so happy. Now, any time we talk about her, there is a chance that you will smile, and that is what I want. I want a brother who smiles more than he looks sad. You deserve to be happy. I do not know why you do not see that."

My teeth clench together as I listen to my brother. It is true that I am not the happiest of males. Much has happened in my life and to those I love, making it hard to see happiness when others do. It is not always, but it is enough to leave a heavy weight on my shoulders, making it harder to see the brightness of our lives.

"I want to be happy, Thro." I wrap a hand around his shoulder and pull him close to me. He throws his arms around me before I think for even a second he won't. "I promise you, I am learning to be happy again. Thanks to you, thanks to Toron and Alice, and yes, thanks to Tori—do not tell Beren I said her name, or he might seal me—but that does not mean we are going to make her be with me before she is ready."

"I make you happy?" Thro asks, not turning his head from where it's buried in my shoulder.

He's fifteen, which, according to the humans, would make him close to being fully grown. He still has at least five years if he goes through the changing when I did. That is why I do not give him a hard time for needing so much comfort. He is still a young, and even grown males sometimes need someone to hold them.

"You make me so happy," I tell him, believing every word because it is true. Without

Thro, I would not be in this tribe now. I would not have a roof over my head, and I would most definitely not be working on this farm where I met my mate.

"I am still going to tell her every day how strong you are and how well you could protect her." Thro pushes away from me, brushing the tears from his eyes again. "I have already told her how you protected me for many years. I do not know if she understood what I was saying, and no one translated it. I think it made them all a little sad. That is not the point, though. The point is, I will tell her every day until one day she understands and she knows that you are the perfect male to choose for a mate."

"I think I can live with that kind of scheming." I pat him on the shoulder and then stand.

My scales feel warm on my back, the same feeling I get whenever Tori is near and has her eyes on me. I turn slowly, hoping she does not know I can feel her gaze. Thro ruins any semblance of me looking nonchalant, though. He throws his hands in the air and waves at Tori.

"Tori!" he yells her name as she raises one of her hands to wave in response to him.

She is standing next to Beren, telling him something, but Thro has their attention. Tori's cheeks are already blooming in color, which is beautiful. I would like to see where else she turns pink because I have a feeling it is in all the places I will very much like to look.

"Tori, I must tell you about how Marron is so strong. He was just lifting so many things. I will tell you all about it. Yes, yes, you may leave Beren. I will keep her entertained with talk about my brother."

Tori cannot understand much of what he says, but Beren and I both can. I expect a look of displeasure on Beren's face when Thro begins to shout about me and dismiss

him, but instead, he just shakes his head with his usual scowl and turns back to the house.

I watch Thro and Tori walk around the fields while he talks, and she listens. I do not know how she can be so entertained by a story she does not understand, but it does make it harder for me to stay away from her.

I want a female who cares for my blood as much as I do. I stare at them for so long that Tori's eyes meet mine, and then she's mouthing something I can't make out. She lifts her fingers in a little wiggle, waving at me before turning her attention back to Thro.

I groan as I kneel back to continue my work. I do not know how long the fiery-haired female will stay away from me, but I hope to be near her soon.

4

Tori

The world's most awkward first introduction happened four months ago, and since then, I haven't found time to sneak out to speak to Marron again. I've wanted to, and I've tried, but somehow, he's never alone. Either Beren or Lyath is always working with him in the field, or they'll walk him back to the tribe in the evenings. The one time I thought I could go, I crawled out my window just for Nia to come out the front door, asking me to help her set the dinner table.

"I'm going to bathe before it gets too dark," I call out to Nia and Jen.

They're both sewing in the living room, and I don't think they'll want to join me, but they might. I've already decided there's no way I'm going to get Marron all to myself unless I ask them to let it happen. Seeing as I'm not ready for all the questions that

will follow, I'd rather not mention it until I'm ready to answer those questions.

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"Tell Beren and Lyath to come in for dinner then," Nia says, barely looking up from her sewing. "They can go ahead and send the boys back to the tribe and be inside so no one accidentally stumbles on you naked."

"Will do," I say, forcing the warmth in my cheeks away.

I step onto the porch and grab the rope handle to the bell Beren fastened to the porch ceiling. I ring it a few times, alerting everyone that the workday is over and they can all go where they need to go. I stand on the porch for a few minutes while waiting for them to appear.

"Dinner?" Beren asks as he wipes his hands on his tunic, leaving dark smudges of dirt.

"Nia wanted everyone inside."

My conversational skills are improving each day, but I'm still only good at topics I already know about and phrases and words I use frequently. Beren gives me a short nod and then turns to see where everyone else is in the field.

"Marron and Thro will go home tonight," he tells me, his gaze flicking over at me from the corner of his eyes when he says it.

"Okay." I shrug, not wanting to give him more suspicion than he already has.

They've all seen me wave at Marron. They know how he watches me whenever I'm outside. And they're all almost positive I've snuck out to talk to him before. They

have to be at least a little suspicious, or they wouldn't always be trying to keep us apart.

"Where are you going?" Lyath asks when he notices the clothes in my hands.

"Bath," I respond, not giving them a second longer to interrogate me as I step off the porch and head toward the river that feeds the irrigation ditches of the farm.

Beren's set up a small fence around the farm's perimeter that keeps most animals out of the farm, and not many come this close to the tribe anyway. There's always a chance there could be a verpar or olack out near the river, though, so I'm not surprised when Beren grumbles under his breath something I can't understand but probably has to do with him not liking me going alone.

"I will be safe," I call over my shoulder, shooting the males a smile.

Beren continues scowling in my direction even after I smile, but he goes inside when he sees I won't be deterred. I'm sure he was mostly making sure that Marron and Thro were off the farm before going inside, so they didn't think Marron was sneaking away to find me.

I whistle a song to myself as I walk, not liking how quiet the planet is when it's just me by myself. It's peaceful at first, but then it gets creepy. My mind starts thinking all kinds of crazy scenarios, like maybe I'm actually back on Earth, and everyone else has died, and this is all some kind of weird hallucination, and if I think about it too hard, I'll wake up and be back on Earth and alone for real. So, I whistle so I don't go down rabbit holes of what-ifs.

I'm on my second song when I see a tunic thrown onto one of the pathways. I keep whistling, squatting to pick up the tunic and hold it up, trying to figure out whose it is since it was just left out here. Beren and Lyath wear mostly beige tunics since they

don't bother with dying them, but Marron has a whole stash of dyed tunics he got from one of the other males whose mate likes him in a specific color. I hold the red tunic up and determine it's probably Marron's.

I suck on my bottom lip, trying to decide if I'm really about to steal a tunic and hide it away in my room so I can wear it when no one is around. Is it a little pathetic? Maybe, but I never said I wasn't pathetic. I add the tunic to the top of my little pile of clothes and continue whistling all the way to the river.

I strip and set my dirty clothes in a pile next to the clean ones, then wade into the river. There's a small section just past the irrigation ditch dams that's calmer than the rest, and that's where I wade to before lowering my body down so I'm sitting in the warm water with only my shoulders and head dry. I whistle as I start scrubbing at the dirt and sweat accumulated on my body throughout the day, and then lean back to start getting my hair wet.

I dunk my head under the water and notice movement in the field closest to my bathing spot. I place one hand over my mouth and scoot back in the water so that only my nose and eyes are out.

I would know Marron's bright red scales anywhere, but he hasn't noticed me yet. He paces back and forth, his head pointed downward as he looks for something. I bite my lip as I notice his lack of a shirt and realize he came back for the tunic I've stolen.

He looks around, moving in a circle before throwing his hands up and grabbing his horns in frustration. Then, he raises his gaze from the ground, and his eyes land directly on me. He stares for a few beautiful and perfect seconds, his chest expanding and his eyes widening in wonder. Then, he turns around so fast I'm surprised he doesn't hurt himself.

"Sorry!" he yells out, not turning around as he starts walking back the way he came,

his tunic not as important as getting away from me.

"Wait!" I call out, lifting myself just enough to get my mouth out of the water. Marron's body freezes, but he doesn't turn around to face me. "I have your tunic."

He grows even more tense somehow, and then he ever so slowly turns his head. He turns enough to see me out of the corner of his eye and then whips back around like he wasn't looking at all. Not that there's anything to look at when I'm making sure the water covers me.

"It is yours," Marron says, starting to walk away again.

"Wait!"

I don't know what I'm going to do to get him to come back this time, but just like before, he stops. The only movements are his shoulders rising and falling as he takes deep, unsteady breaths.

He turns his head so his words don't need to be yelled as loudly. Again, there are still some words I can't pick out, but for the most part, he doesn't say anything too convoluted.

"You are... and I should not be here." Marron grabs his horns again, forcing himself to look forward. "I should go."

"You can stay," I call out, hoping it's not too forward.

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Who am I kidding? I don't care if it's too forward. This could be the only time we can talk for the next few months, and I don't want it to be over so soon.

Marron murmurs something under his breath, the word mate sounding like an airhorn against the rest because I've been trying to figure out if it's what he said all those months ago. Hearing it muttered from his lips again, I know, without a doubt, he said it the first time we talked. I might've tried to tell myself I heard wrong, but now I know he calls me mate.

"I'm not going to flash my boobs at you," I say in English.

He must be intrigued by the words he doesn't understand because I can see him decide to do the right thing or wrong, depending on how you look at it.

"What?" he asks, spinning around slowly.

He holds a hand up near his eyes like he might have to cover them at any moment if I decide to stand from the water. I want him, but I still barely know him. Not to mention, as soon as he thinks this is going too far, he'll bolt.

"I will sit," I tell him in his language, hoping it will help him understand that I have no interest in making him uncomfortable.

He nods but doesn't move to come closer to the river so we can talk. I use my hands to drag myself through the water a little bit, so I'm sitting where I was before I noticed him out here. His eyes widen as my shoulders pop out of the water, and then my collarbones. His attention is riveted to the water even as I stop moving and make

it clear I'm not showing it anymore.

"I did not know you were here," Marron says, his gaze finally forced away from the slopes of my breasts up to my face, where I'm probably bright red. If he notices, he doesn't say anything. No, he takes a step closer and then another until he's standing next to the two piles of clothes I left on the shore.

"I find the tunic on the farm." I point at the pile of clothes and then toward the fields. Marron kneels and flicks through my clothing before plucking the tunic off the ground. He goes to stand back up, but I call out again, wanting to make this last and maybe get him to shed some of the rule following he seems so fond of. "I willtradeyou."

I don't know the demon's word for trade, so I say it in English and try to think of a way to explain to him what I mean. He tilts his head to the side, his hand fisting the tunic as he waits for me to elaborate.

"I take the tunic. You take something."

He seems even more confused by my offer than he was before, which makes me feel foolish. I don't even know what I have that he could want, but I know that I want his tunic. I was planning on wearing it to bed tonight and pretending he gave it to me.

"This is yours. I told you this."

He holds the tunic up, points at it, and then returns it to my pile of clothes. My cheeks burn as I realize I misread the situation, but then again, I don't know what he was doing digging through my clothes if he didn't want it back. He must realize my confusion because he folds the tunic neatly on top of my clothes and says more.

"I was not sure if it was mine or Thro's."

My eyebrows rise because I don't know how he could think it was Thro's when Thro is easily my size, and the tunic is not. I'm about to say something when Marron turns his attention to the dirty clothes beside the clean ones. He flicks at my tunic and pulls out a piece of fabric that has me dipping my head under the water. When I come back up, he's still holding my underwear in his hand and looks at me in question.

"Trade?" He uses the English word, and I can't even answer because I'm burning up inside. The only thing saving me from absolute mortification is that I didn't sweat too much today, so at least they're not gross.

"You want..." I don't know the word for underwear, so I just motion toward his hand.

"Very much," he says as though this is a completely normal conversation.

Maybe for the demons, it is. I haven't asked any of the women if their mates have asked for their underwear or what they could possibly want with them. I'm not about to ask Nia about it. So, I do the only thing I can think of to get my answer.

"Why?"

Marron's smile widens as he begins to explain to me what he plans on using my underwear for. He talks too fast, with too much enthusiasm, and with too many words I don't understand. After a minute of explaining it all to me, the only word I understood was 'cock'. He tilts his head to the side, laughs, and explains again, slower and not even remotely the same thing he just told me.

"I want them to hold." His tongue flicks between his lips, and I nod lamely at his excuse. He laughs to himself before standing. "I should go. It is late."

"Okay," I say, my mind still trying to figure out what he's going to do with my underwear. He tucks them into the hem of his shorts so no one can see that he has

them. He shoots me one more devilish smile before turning around and making his way back through the fields.

I finish cleaning my hair and then hurry with the rest of my bath. The clouds are darkening, and I don't want to be left alone out here. I dress quickly in Marron's tunic and shorts before speed walking back to the house. I feel eyes on me as I walk back through the fields, and when I turn to see who it is, Marron is standing by the gate, waiting to make sure I get home safe before he leaves.

I'm chewing on my bottom lip when I open the door to the house. The smile I'm wearing would be proof enough that I was up to no good, but I'm also wearing my crime.

"Thro came by to tell us Marron had to come back to look for his tunic," Nia says as her eyes flick down to what I'm wearing. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Me?" I squint and tap my chin. "No, I don't think I have any idea what you're talking about."

Nia shakes her head, her lips twitching at the corners as she tries to keep the smile off her face. "Be careful, that's all I ask."

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"When am I not careful?" I ask, skipping to my room with a flick of my damp hair. Nia snorts a laugh before sitting back down on the couch to work on more sewing.

After that, she doesn't push anymore about what happened and even seems to ease up on chaperoning me when Marron is here. Beren and Lyath are still overbearing, but they don't know how to be any other way.

Still, I need to find more time to be with Marron so I can figure out if we can make this work even without being able to communicate fully.

5

Tori

Tonight, we're celebrating mine and Jen's first full year with Beren, Lyath, and Nia. It's an excuse for everyone to get together and have a little party, but Jen and I have no issue with being the stars.

Beren finally got around to making the pathway from the house to the tribe, so I'm allowed to make trips up to the tribe to grab supplies on my own. If any males approach me, I have to tell them I'm an unmated female, not in the mating ceremony. So far, that's only happened a couple of times, and the males immediately apologized and went on their way.

Today hasn't been any different. Most of the demons know who Jen and I are at this point since we've been here for a year. Some of them still think I have no idea how to talk with them, but for the most part, they treat me like a regular tribe member. The

only ones I ever need to remind to follow the rules are newer tribal members who come from other tribes in search of mates. But, again, they're always respectful when they're rejected. The screening process is thorough for males who come to see if their mates are here, so I would hope they're all respectful.

"Tori!"

My stomach tightens when I hear a male call out my name, who I don't want to say my name. My shoulders rise, and the pack of alcohol skins shifts uncomfortably on my back. I grip the strap tighter and keep walking, hoping that there is another Tori in the tribe that's mated to whoever just called her name. I'm not that lucky because I can hear the sound of footsteps approaching me, and then someone much stronger than me grabs the pack from my shoulder.

"Let me carry this for you. Are you going to the farm?" Joll asks, giving me a smile that feels icky as he talks.

I reach for the pack, but he moves it to his opposite side and starts walking. I stand in place for a second, debating my best course of action here.

I just left the tribe, and it's only a five-minute walk to the farm's gate. Then again, lots of stuff can happen in five minutes. I don't think Joll would do anything to me because I've known him for a year. Well, known in a very loose sense. His mother used to come to teach Thro and Jen's lessons. She kept bringing her sons up too often, and they kept antagonizing Thro and Marron whenever they came to escort their mother home, so she was asked not to return anymore. Since then, Lyath has been helping with their lessons as best as he can.

"I can walk on my own," I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest and planting my feet. I don't want to cause a scene, not when I'm pretty sure Joll's just eager for female attention. The problem is, I'm not interested in letting him woo me.

"I can also walk with you," Joll says, facing me, the pack still on his shoulder. "Your wardens would not want you walking alone in the trees."

"There's a path. I walk it a lot. I do not need help."

I can feel my nerves kicking in because my words come out uneven and not as crisp as I would like them to. I'm still self-conscious about my ability to speak the same language as the demons. I've worked hard, but it's obvious that I'm not like the other women here who can speak it fluently, thanks to the translator device.

Joll's smile takes on a cruel edge. "I did not understand that."

My blood rushes to stain my cheeks bright red as tears of irritation prick my lashes. Worst of all, I can tell that Joll wants me upset. For what reason? I don't know.

Most of the demons I talk to have a decent understanding that I'm like one of their young when it comes to talking. They might speak a little too slow and a little too loud in an effort to help, but none of them have ever purposefully misunderstood me just to deny my wants.

"I said no," I say, mustering up a bit more of an edge in my words.

My eyes harden as I stare up at Joll. If he thinks I'll back down, he'll learn quickly that I can be stubborn. His smile falls, his brows pulling together, and then he's rubbing the back of one of his horns.

"Me or any male?" he asks.

My face screws up at his question, and then the realization hits me. He's trying and failing miserably at wooing me. A part of me feels bad because some of the males don't know how to interact with females, but Joll grew up in a tribe with them.

"One male," I tell him, holding out my hand for the pack with the skins of alcohol.

His eyes narrow before he removes the bag and hands it back to me. His jaw clenches as he goes to move back around me to the tribe, but he stops short.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks.

I frown at him, thinking he's talking to me when I just made it clear that I have no interest in him or having a conversation with him. He's not talking to me, though. His gaze is firmly planted on someone else who's walking down the trail toward us.

"I was told to help set up the farm." Marron's words are clipped and harsher than I'm used to hearing from him since he usually speaks slowly and softly to me. "You were not invited."

I clear my throat to hide the laugh that tries to escape. Then, because I don't need to be here if there's an altercation between males, I start my way back to the house, knowing that even if Marron follows me, he won't do anything that could get him in trouble with the rest of the tribe. At least he won't when anyone could stumble on us.

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He's returned to watch me bathe a few more times, each time stripping his tunic from his body and offering a trade. I blush, but I always agree. He leaves his tunic on my stack of clothes and takes the underwear I was wearing that day. I haven't worked up the courage to ask him what he does with them again because I can understand him better now. I don't know if I could handle knowing without burning up from the inside out.

"Do you wish to be alone?" Marron calls after me after I've been walking for a couple of minutes. Whatever he talked about with Joll didn't take long, and he doesn't sound like he got into a fight.

I flick my hair over my shoulder and let my eyes trail over his body. I don't miss how he falters in his steps for a moment and then walks faster to reach me.

"Is that a yes or a no?" he asks with a laugh that makes me blush harder. I avert my eyes, but I know his full attention is on me.

"Yes," I say, chewing on my lip as I try to think of what else to say.

We've had a few conversations when I've bathed, but they don't usually last very long. If he gets caught, there's a good chance he'll be kicked out of the tribe. I don't want that to happen, but I also want him to keep watching me bathe because it's the only time we get alone.

"Do I need to speak with Joll about you being alone?" Marron's words are slower than normal, like he's having to choose specific words he knows I know. I appreciate it, but I also want to know what he would say if he wasn't filtering himself.

"No." I shake my head. "He wants to woo me, I think."

Marron hisses low in his chest, his eyes flickering red for just a second before they return to their normal black state. I don't think I've ever seen Marron angry. I kind of thought he was always just kind of happy since he always seems to be smiling at me or at Thro or Lyath and Beren when Thro is bothering them.

"Easy," I murmur under my breath, looking up at him through my lashes, hoping he knows I'm teasing. "I said I have a male. Or I think I did."

I shrug. Joll asked me if I had an issue with him or all males, and I didn't exactly answer it, but he should be able to piece together that there's only one male I want to pay me any attention.

"You told him you have a male?" Marron's voice sounds surprised, and all the lingering anger vanishes. "You said that?"

I shift the pack on my shoulder as an excuse not to have to look at Marron while we're talking. It's too intense because any time I look at him and see how he looks at me, I want to do things we aren't supposed to do. We aren't even supposed to be walking alone right now because I could lean into his chest just right, take a single deep breath, and be ready to ride him all day into the night. That's also one of the reasons I don't look at him when he's this close. The temptation to prove that we're mates is too much.

I switch to English and hope that I can admit to some things to get them off my chest, so I can act somewhat normal when he's around.

"I want to tell everyone that you're my mate. I want to claim you and mark you, and make sure everyone knows I only want you. But I don't know how to say that in your language yet. Or not all of it, and I really want to say that to you so that you

understand how serious I am about you." I take a deep breath and spin around to face Marron, who has stopped walking. I look up at him, a new fire inside me. I didn't realize I needed to say all this because I've kept it bottled up for almost a year. "One day, I'm going to tell everyone that you are mine, and then you're going to fuck my brains out. And then you're going to tell me what you do with my underwear."

I put my hands on my hips, let my eyes fall down the length of Marron's body, and smirk when I see his cock straining against the fabric of his pants. He doesn't hide it from me. If anything, he seems to stand a bit taller as I speak, and he waits to know what I'm saying. He must know that I've said quite a lot that he wants to hear because his breathing is hard, and his hands are clenched next to his side as though he's stopping himself from reaching out to me. My fingers tighten on the strap of the pack.

"Okay?" I ask, knowing he can't really answer my question.

I just want to hear him agree with me, even in a false way. I want to believe this is as difficult for him as it is for me, but I also need him to be on the same page about us not being able to work when we can't even talk with one another. I want to know the male I'm going to mate. I want to know him better than anyone else. To do that, we have to be able to talk.

Marron nods, "Okay."

I smile even brighter and then skip back to his side, nudging his hip with mine and walking back to the house. We walk in silence until the house comes into view. Marron stops walking, hidden by the trees from everyone else at the farm. It's for the best since we shouldn't be seen alone with one another. Nia wouldn't care since she's aware of my growing collection of Marron's tunics.

"Are you staying for the party?" I ask.

I might not want to tie myself to him entirely until we can talk, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be near him as often as possible. I would love to wrap my fingers in his and drag him to the house just to see what everyone's reactions would be. If it wouldn't lead Marron on, I'd do just that, but the others would expect us to go through the mating ceremony if we were that close.

"I do not know," Marron says, his lips in a flat line as he looks anywhere but at me.

"And if I say I want you to come?" I try not to sound too hopeful in my request because, for all I know, he hates the idea of parties. When his eyes fall on mine and shine a little brighter, I realize I asked the right question.

"If you want me here, I will be here," he says, taking the bag of alcohol from me and walking out of the shadows of the trees straight toward the house.

My mouth pops open, and he makes it pretty far before I register that he wants us to show up together. I school my features so I don't look so surprised and run to catch up with him.

"I believe this is for you," he says to Nia as he hands her the pack of alcohol.

She quirks an eyebrow at me before taking the pack. I'm huffing and puffing and trying to catch my breath from running. I shake my head, holding up a hand to Nia, saying it's not what she thinks, but before I can do that or she can ask a question, Marron's moving over to where Beren's working on setting up some sort of group seating, and Lyath's building a bonfire.

Beren gives me a look that tells me we'll be having a conversation tonight, and Lyath smiles and laughs at something Thro is telling him. I can't help the smile that splits my lips.

How could I not be happy when I was just caught alone with the male I want to be my mate, and the worst my family has done is give me are-you-kidding looks? It's great. It's made even better because in just a few short hours, the party will be getting going, and I'm going to find a way to sneak away and flirt with Marron.

6

Marron

"The human females are getting into the alcohol."

Beren falls into a chair next to me, laying one of his arms on the back of mine in a manner that might be kind if I did not know this male from working with him for more than a year now. He is keeping me close because he is warning me that he could end me in a single moment, and I will not know when it will happen.

Beren is a male who prides himself in caring for his mates and the two females under his care. This is all very good, but it is not so good for me when he looks at me like he is still uncertain whether or not he will seal me for how frequently I manage to find myself alone with his ward.

"I can see that." I shift in my seat, trying to figure out how long I will need to sit here to not be seen as rude when I get up to find somewhere else to be.

I am about to turn and tell Beren that I think Toron is calling me, but instead of getting to do that, Beren's hand moves to my shoulder, tightening in a way that has my eyes widening and my stomach dropping. Oh, I have done it now. He saw me arrive with Tori and will now tell me that Thro and I are out of jobs. Hopefully, that is all. If he tells us we need to leave the tribe as well, I will never forgive myself.

"Do you know how females act when they drink the alcohol?" Beren asks.

I shake my head, not quite sure what this could have to do with him killing me and hiding my body somewhere in the fields, but so long as it keeps me alive for a little while longer, I will take it.

"Some of the females cry, some get loud and laugh at everything, and some will get very touchy and want their hands on their males. Many of the females end up in one of those categories at some point through the night, maybe even multiple." Beren shrugs and sighs. "You do not need to worry about most of this, but you do need to know there is a good chance your female tries to woo you." His voice remains even and calm. None of this is what I expected when he grabbed my shoulder.

Wait, did he say my female?

"I do not know how your female acts when she drinks, but we will find out tonight." Beren frowns more deeply as his eyes track over to where all the females are laughing and talking.

One of the other females from the tribe fills all of their cups with the alcohol that the humans like, and Tori quickly drinks hers before looking around for me. Beren hisses and then squeezes my shoulder tight again to get my eyes back on him.

"She will attempt to arouse you. It is one of the females' main desires when they consume that liquid. She is not herself, though, and she cannot think clearly. I am telling you because you must be a strong male tonight when she inevitably gets you alone."

I shift in my seat, moving my cock to the side now that it is hard from thinking about Tori trying to woo me. I have no shame about it. Beren has now called Tori mine twice, and he has even admitted that I am the male she will try to find to force her affection on when the alcohol fogs her senses.

"I can go back home now if that would be easier."

I pray to the goddess that he does not accept my offer. I want to stay here all night, preferably until Tori is fast asleep, because I can hold her in my arms. I have decided I will offer to carry her to her bed when she inevitably falls asleep, and I hope no one wishes to stop me because this might be the only time I can touch her until she decides she is ready to claim me in front of everyone.

"No, no." Beren shakes his head. "That would be wonderful for my own mind and well-being, but Nia has told me you are allowed to be near her tonight, and I am not allowed to stop you."

My body becomes rigid as I try to piece together what he is saying. My brows pull together, and my lips flatten. Have I been allowed to sit next to Tori all of this evening? Surely not. That would be tossing aside the rules in front of so many brothers and their mates.

Granted, all of the ones here to visit us are friends with Beren and his mates and are the original females who came to this tribe. They all found their mates without the mating ceremony, so they may be willing to allow me more liberties, especially since Tori has not once rebuffed my advances. No, not even my advances, since she has always been the one to approach me. Well, except for all the times I walk upon her bathing, but that is only because of the first time she called me over.

"If you were to approach her tonight, none of us would have stopped you." Beren tightens his grip on my shoulder as I try to stand. I snap my head over to him and barely stop myself from shooing him off me. "I will let you go, but I am telling you that I trust you to take care of my ward."

"That is all I want," I murmur, fearing that if I say it too loudly, everyone here will know I have wanted the fiery-haired female for so long.

Beren already knows because I repeatedly tell him that I will be his blood as soon as his ward offers me the chance. I can see now that my reminders have chipped away at his sternness. It must be why he is allowing me liberties tonight.

"I know, and you are an honorable male." Beren stands, offering me his hand to help me to my feet. "That is why I am telling you how she will act with the alcohol. She will tempt you to be very dishonorable." He steps back and glances over my body as though he is sizing me up. "You are a strong male."

I puff my chest. "I am."

"Good, now, be strong in will, and remind yourself that if she tries to mate you tonight, it is because she is not thinking clearly." Beren crosses his arms over his chest and then tilts his head toward the females. I turn to face them, and my chest deflates.

"I cannot speak to them when they are all together."

I turn back to Beren, but he has already forgotten me. He is walking toward his mates, who are more focused on one another in a more intimate way than Beren probably likes out in his front yard. I turn my attention away from them before seeing things I wish not to.

Their home is empty tonight since Jen is staying in the great hall with some of the other young females. I do not know where Tori will go. I have a feeling that is why Beren and his mates are going inside now, so they will be finished with their lovemaking when Tori is ready to go to sleep.

I flex my hands by my sides, forcing my claws into my fingertips so they do not look intimidating if I try to touch my mate. Not that I will do anything more than maybe cupping her face or wrapping my hand around her shoulders.

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I take slow steps toward the small group of females. Many of them have moved closer to their mates as the alcohol begins to make them freer in their affections, just as Beren said it would. Tori's face is flushed before I am even near, and for once, I do not think it is just my eyes on her that have her looking so pink.

She walks to me before I can finish closing the distance between us, and then her hand is in the air, hitting me in the abdomen with an open palm that she rests against me. I am surprised, but even more so when she begins to slur her words. Even as she struggles over her words, she's trying hard enough that I can understand most of them.

"Did you know you could come talk to me this whole time?" She pouts and steps closer to me, her chin having to lift so she can peer up at me. I do not dare move my body, so I am stuck looking straight down. I am sure I am looking foolish, but any male would look foolish for his female.

"Beren told me." I don't move. I barely breathe, and then she narrows her eyes at me and steps closer. She is going to be the death of me in all of three beats in my chest.

"How do you feel?" I change the subject to think of something other than her warmth permeating through my tunic. The night makes it cooler, and we are away from the dying fire, so I am starting to chill.

"I feel good." She smiles up at me. Whatever she was narrowing her eyes about has passed. "I feel like I want to run my hands all over your body, maybe wiggle my hand into your pants, and stroke your cock until you're crying out my name." I keep a straight face as well as I can while she says her human words. If she presses her

abdomen against me, she is going to feel my cock twitching in my pants as I release. "That's how I feel."

"It is good you feel good," I say through clenched teeth. "I am also feeling very good. Yes, very much so."

Tori giggles and then turns around, leaning on me for support as her back presses against me. It is not until she wraps her hands in mine and my arms around her that I understand what she wants. Once I do, I become the most accommodating male. I kneel behind her so she can be closer and wrap my arms around her waist before snuggling her into me.

"I like this," Tori says as her fingers skate over my scales. "I want this more."

"I do as well," I say, thinking about how wonderful it would feel to have her in my arms, especially when I am alone in my bed at night. It will be so much better when I can breathe her in and know she is mine. "I think about this often."

Tori turns her head to look at me from the corner of her eye. I think she might hide things from me in English again. Or try to hide them. I planned to tell her I was learning her language when she agreed to mate me. I thought she would like it. She has started to tell me arousing things in her language, though. She did it earlier, and now she is doing it again. I do not know how much I can keep my knowledge a secret when she has a very pleasant way of describing things she would like to do to me.

"Can we be alone?" Tori asks.

I think about her question for a long moment because I do not know if this is one of the things I should be careful about. She has not tried to seduce me yet. At least, she hasn't tried in my language, so she thinks she has not tried to seduce me. So long as I do not give in to making love with her, I should be fine, right?

"Where?" The word sounds rough as it comes from my throat, and I don't realize just how much she is physically affecting me until I hear my own voice.

"The river? Where I bathe?" Tori's voice is soft and luring.

It is unlike the other females, who are all still somewhat near being loud and laughing with their males and the other females. They are all having much fun, and I am sure my Tori is as well, but she is a much more subdued female with the alcohol. I think this means it will be easier to handle her advances, or she will pounce when I am comfortable. I will need to tread carefully until I know for certain how she acts.

"You will remain clothed, yes?" I ask, even though I am already standing and wrapping my arm over her shoulder to keep her close.

"If I don't, what will you do?" Tori says, more to herself than to me. "No naked. Not tonight."

"Good, you are making this easy for me, such a sweet female." I praise her softly as we move across the yard toward the fields.

I look around for Beren, Lyath, or Nia, but they are nowhere to be seen. A few of the other brothers watch me walking with Tori and narrow their eyes, but no one moves to stop us as we get further and further away from everyone else.

Yril and Dath are certainly watching because they want to give me a hard time for this. They are Toron's blood, and since I am also now Toron's blood, Yril and Dath treat me as they would one another, which is with much teasing, especially about females.

"Do you like me when I'm sweet?" Tori asks, snagging my attention back and keeping it.

"I like you however you choose to be, but I like you most when you choose to be with me." I try to keep my nerves steady as I say the words because this is the most I have ever shared my soul with someone, and I do not wish to make a fool of myself.

Tori stops walking and then moves in front of me, her hands pushing against my abdomen before wrapping around my waist. Her eyes are misty as she looks up at me, and I realize now what kind of female she is with the alcohol. I did not think she would cry.

"You mean that?" Tori asks, her hands flexing against my back as she tries to hold me tighter, her face burying into my tunic and staining it with the tears that have decided to form rivers down her face. She was not even a little weepy, and now she is sobbing against me.

"Of course I do," I say, kneeling on the ground for the second time tonight. She throws her arms around my neck, and then her whole body is in my arms, and I am cradling her close to me. "Do you think I do not like you?"

"I know you do." She snuffles, but then even more tears somehow manage to dampen the crook of my neck. Her voice is wobbly, loud, and somehow happy and sad. "You make me feel..." Her words trail off, and then she makes an annoyed sound. "I do not have the words."

"You do not need them," I tell her, rubbing my hands up and down her back to soothe her. At least, I hope I am soothing her. This is soothing all parts of me, especially my soul. I enjoy my hands on her, and if she were not crying, I would be trying to figure out ways to touch her more.

"But I want to tell you," she whines.

"And you will when it is time," I reassure her.

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She's quiet for long moments, and if not for her wiping away her tears occasionally, I would not know if she was even with me right now. I shift her weight in my arms and go to stand back up. We have been sitting in the trails between the fields for a long while. There is no way we can go to the river now because the others will want to head back to the tribe soon.

If I do not return with Tori at some point, they will send out others to look. I would not mind them finding us together in the river as she tries to seduce me, but I do not want them stumbling upon me, holding her as she cries.

"Let me get you home," I murmur and smile when she peeks up to look at me.

"Will you stay with me?" she asks.

The question is so earnest and full of so much hope that I cannot deny her. Technically, it is still night, and I have been given permission to be with her tonight. I will use every single moment of the night I can.

"Of course." I hold her tighter and then stand a little taller when we come into view of the farmhouse. "My blood might give me a hard time, but know that I will get you safe and asleep soon."

As Tori speaks again, her voice is weak and slurred, and it makes me wonder if she is not already much closer to sleep than I thought. "I trust you."

My chest swells in pride at her words, and then I have the courage to do what I need to do for my mate. Yril comes up to me first, and when he goes to open his mouth,

already planning to say something that will make me seem foolish, I narrow my eyes at him and hiss. It is not a loud sound, but it is enough to get him to back away. I would lose in a fight with Yril. We both know this. So, when he laughs and shakes his head before returning to his mate, I appreciate him respecting my boundaries. Of course, as soon as one male is dealt with, one who will not be dissuaded is next.

"What are you doing tonight?" Toron asks, rubbing the back of his horn.

"I am staying," I say.

I do not ask for permission. I do not explain what I want to do. Instead, I hold Toron's eyes until he gives me a short nod. He looks like he wants to say something else, but I speak first.

"I care for her more than anything."

Toron nods again and then walks back over to where the rest of his blood is. They wave a quick goodbye to me and head out from the farmland and back to the tribe.

I wait until I cannot see them anymore before I check the fire and ensure it is extinguished. Tori is asleep in my arms, and I am so proud that she feels comfortable enough around me to let me take care of her like this.

When I am certain the fire is out, I take us back to the house and try to decide where I will have us sleep. It feels too intimate to be in her bed. There is also the couch, but I do not know how comfortable that will be for two bodies when even my body seems too big for it in the few times I have slept on it. Tori nuzzles closer to me, and I realize I will be happy anywhere as long as she is close.

Tori

"Are you two mated now?" Thro wakes me up with a question I don't understand even a little bit.

I groan and try to shift around in my bed, but I'm stopped when I realize I'm trapped between a cool, scaled body and the back of the couch. The couch? I crack my eyes open and look around as best I can, and yep, we're on the couch. Why are we on the couch when my bed was free?

"Go away. You will wake her," Marron grumbles from above me, his arms tightening around me. His chin nuzzles softly against my head.

I try to take stock of how we're laid out, especially since we're on the couch. I know I'm wearing my clothes, which is good. I'd hate to be naked and out in the open, wrapped up in Marron. The way we're lying has it so one of Marron's thighs is splitting my legs, and as I start to feel how close he is, he shifts around, pressing his thigh between my legs in a way that has me biting my lip so I don't moan.

His body freezes as he realizes what he's done, and I hope I'm not soaked through. I'm pressed up against him, and I have been all night. I mean, if I turn my head just right, I'll be huffing his pheromones, so there's a good chance I've been horny since we went to bed. I know I woke up horny and with a headache.

There's a chance Marron will move his leg, but he must think better of it because he's relaxing against me again. His breath manages to even out again, and he's fast asleep.

"Did you mate my brother?" Thro pops up from the back of the couch. I let out a small shriek of surprise that has Marron snapping awake and pulling me underneath his body. His eyes turn red, and he hisses a long, dangerous sound at Thro, who shrieks like I did and runs out of the living room, through the front door without

closing it.

Marron stares at the front door for a few long seconds before his gaze turns down to me, the red gone and replaced with the deep black I'm used to seeing. Seeing him upset isn't something I'm used to. He's more himself when he looks down at me. The same careless smile pulls at his lips that he's always wearing when I catch him looking at me, and his hand moves from beside my head to caress my cheek. He shifts his body so he's not crouched over me but pressing down against me in the best possible way if we were anywhere except for the living room I share with other people.

"We did not mate last night," he tells me, as though I thought he would ever do that.

"I remember last night," I tell him, raising my hands to cup his face.

"All of it?" He tilts his head to the side, asking a question I don't completely understand, before darting his eyes away. "The crying?" He offers me a sympathetic smile as I let my head fall back with a disgruntled sigh.

"Yes, the crying, the talking, the touching." I wiggle my brows at him, and I'm pleasantly surprised when I feel his cock twitch against me.

"No talking of touching," he grunts through clenched teeth.

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"Best not to touch at all," Beren says as he walks out of his bedroom, looking like he slept great. "We have much to do. Get off my ward, and let us get started."

"Nia said resting today," I counter, reaching around Marron's neck to keep him down with me even as he tries to scurry off.

I wouldn't be surprised if he's scared of Beren. Beren enjoys knowing he can frighten him, but he has yet to tell Marron that he frequently uses his kind face and happy voice when speaking with him. They can be difficult to notice unless you get to know him, and the mixed signals he gives Marron on looking like he wants to kill him sometimes don't help.

"Nia is not here to counter the change of plans, so we are working," Beren says, his gaze soft as he looks at both of us. The crinkling in the corners of his eyes is the only sign of his glee in this.

Marron tries to leave me on the couch again, but I use all my strength to keep him with me. He could still get up if he really wanted to, but he's not about to force me to do anything.

"What work?" I ask, peeking over Marron's shoulder so I can glare at Beren. When he's silent for a second too long, I frown at him and return to lying underneath Marron. "He is lying to you."

"For what purpose?" Marron asks.

The gears in his head are working to make sense of what I'm saying. He can't imagine

Beren being capable of being a teasing male, so it must be something else.

"Because he will tell his male mate later, and they will laugh about it."

"This is very true," Lyath says as he walks out of the same bedroom Beren just left. "And as much as I enjoy listening, I would like to get food from the great hall. Nia is not feeling well, and we should feed her."

"Yes, yes," Beren says, linking his fingers with Lyath's. "Fine, we will leave, but no mating will be done in my home. No more touching, either. You have pressed my generosity by pushing off the mating ceremony. If you wish to be together as lovers, you need to do it properly."

I frown again at Beren and how his eyes stay fixated on me. He's only speaking to me. Beren's made it clear that everything I want hinges on me going through the mating ceremony.

I just need a little more time to get to know Marron. A little longer to make sure I can talk to him enough to make him understand me in all situations. I don't want to be tied down to someone who can't speak to me or who won't be able to understand me.

"I understand," Marron answers Beren like he's the one being warned. Beren makes a huffing sound that tells us how he feels about the whole situation before leaving the house with Lyath by his side.

"Make sure they do not mate," Beren says. I assume he's talking to Thro, who is still on the porch outside.

"But I would very much like them to mate," Thro says. "Once she is my blood, my brother will be the happiest male, making me just as happy. So if you are saying they are going to mate if I do not go inside, then I most certainly will never go in again."

Marron groans and rolls off me. This time, I let him, knowing he needs to put a damper on Thro's excitement. There's no reason to get his hopes up when nothing's happening yet. Marron looks down at me, his eyes falling down my body before snapping back to my face. He's worried about leaving me, but I can't offer him anything more than I could when we talked yesterday.

"Go," I tell him, offering a small smile so he won't worry too much about me. "I will talk with Nia's mate. Get him to let you in the house more, so I can get to know you."

Marron tilts his head to the side, his lips moving side to side against his teeth like he's thinking about the perfect thing to say. He leans down and cups my cheek.

"I know you, Tori."

Before I have a chance to respond to that or the fact that it's Marron straight up saying he wants to mate me now, he's out the door and talking with his brother in hushed tones. I groan and remind myself that I want to be a little more fluent before we mate. Just a little bit more.

Maybe I can convince Beren to let us go on a few dates without threatening Marron's well-being. He allowed us to be together last night, and it only took convincing from all of the other human women mated to his friends. I just need to convince him that this is for the best.

I'll mate Marron as soon as we can make the communication issues work. I don't want to be a burden on someone, and I want to be able to share all of myself with someone. I want that to be Marron. I just need more time.

"Did you know they have like six women in each room here?" Jen says before stuffing another piece of grilled olack into her mouth. "I had to share a bed with a stranger. I mean, she was eight, but still, a whole stranger passed out in bed with me,

and it's normal."

"We sleep in bed together every night," I remind her as I move the food around my plate. I don't feel super hungover, but my stomach feels slightly rotted, and food is just not something I'm in the mood for. I've already chugged a few cups of water because dehydration is real. Especially on this planet, where if we're not drinking water constantly, we're sweating it all away.

"That's different. You're not a stranger."

"I might prefer a stranger. You kick me sometimes."

"And you snore."

"I do not," I gasp.

The offense I'm taking is entirely irrational, but I just woke up in Marron's arms this morning, and now I might have just learned that I snore. No, I'm not even thinking about it. Worst case scenario, I snore, but it's a cute snore like a cute sleeping animal.

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"You do, but if you need me to lie to you, fine, you don't." Jen rolls her eyes and looks around the dining room.

The great hall is where all the human women live while waiting to join the mating ceremony or find their own homes. A handful of girls are too young to join the mating ceremony, and they all stay here, too. For the younger ones without mothers, a woman watches most of them, and I've heard a female from one of the other tribes is coming to help teach them all how to read in the language, since our translators don't work that way.

For the most part, the great hall is a good home. It's mostly human women with a scattering of mated males who have come to visit with Ralleth or one of the other males in charge of different aspects of the tribe's running. If anyone were to see the great hall to determine how many women are here, they'd think we were taking over this whole planet.

I finally manage to put something in my mouth, and it doesn't make my stomach turn. Jen's busy finishing her food and watching everyone around the great hall.

We've been coming up here more often since my ability to speak to others has improved. We don't make it a daily habit, but at least a couple of times a week, we come up here and hang out. Some of the women will talk with us, but most of the time, it's women from the original ones sent to the planet. They feel more like family because they come out to the farm and hang out with Nia, Beren, and Lyath.

Jen drops her fork and stares at someone behind me. I pop another piece of meat in my mouth and watch her brows tug together, and her lips tilt down in a frown. I

mimic her as I turn around to see who or what she's staring at.

"He looks serious," I say as I watch Ralleth look around the dining room tables with Olivia at his side. Their bodies are rigid, and their faces are stoic. They're searching for someone.

"What do you think is wrong?" Jen asks right as Ralleth's eyes land on us and stay there.

The queasiness in my stomach amplifies, and I wonder for a second if I'm finally going to throw up. I turn back around, thinking that if I don't look at them, maybe I'll have made it up in my mind that they were looking over here like they need to talk to us.

"They're walking this way," Jen whispers, picking up her fork and using it to move food around on her plate. She looks up through her lashes, tracking Ralleth and Olivia as they weave through the dining tables. "Oh yeah, shit, what did we do?"

"I don't know," I shrug, my stomach threatening to heave as the words leave my mouth.

Jen doesn't believe me for a second, but at this point, it's too late for her to ask because Ralleth is pulling out a chair for his mate to sit beside me and standing next to it with his hand on the back.

"Good morning," I try to sound cheery as I say the words, but I can feel how red my cheeks are, how much I'm clenching my fists to keep myself from throwing up, and the sweat now sliding down my back.

"No small talk," Jen says, setting her fork down, crossing her arms in front of her, and leaning toward the table. Her eyes are narrowed, and her lips are set in a firm line.

"What do you think we did, and are you planning on kicking us out?"

"What?" Ralleth's startled voice is enough to make me look up and see his shock. He's looking at his mate like this isn't how this talk is supposed to go. "We do not kick females out. You are always welcome here. I think your wardens would cause much trouble if they even thought we were thinking of it. Oh no, most definitely not."

Olivia reaches up and places a hand on Ralleth's to ease some of his worry. She keeps her eyes on us as she begins to speak. "It's come to our attention that Tori has been spotted alone with a male."

My face burns brighter, and my hand that was clenching itself into a fist relaxes for all of two seconds so I can use it to grab the chair's armrest. I lean over, and all of the contents of my stomach come right back up. I don't know if it's because I know what's coming or because my body is finally revolting from the alcohol. Either way, I'm almost positive I'm about to be told I have to go through a mating ceremony.

8

Tori

"You talk to my ward without me there and accuse her of something you have no right to accuse her of!" Beren is pissed. He has been since Jen and I showed up at the house with Ralleth and Olivia with us.

After I threw up, they thought it would be better to have this conversation somewhere more private, and I told them I wouldn't feel comfortable unless we were at my house.

"There was no accusing." Ralleth holds his hands next to his head, the same way he's been standing since we arrived.

"Then what do you mean to do by telling her that you know she has been alone with a male?" Beren asks, obviously not caring about the answer, because he continues. "Which male and who told you this?"

"Beren," Ralleth says his name like he's trying to appease a child throwing a fit. Speaking of children throwing fits, Olivia's babe is fast asleep, strapped to her chest, while we all listen to the grown males arguing. "Let us discuss this with everyone in a calm way, yes? We do not mean to cause insult, and we most certainly do not mean to upset you or your wards."

"You have upset me," Beren snaps, his arms crossing over his chest as he takes a deep breath. He and Ralleth are arguing on the front porch, but he looks inside to see all of us women sitting in the living room, patiently waiting for them to finish so we can have an actual conversation.

"Then I apologize," Ralleth says, his hands finally coming down to his sides because Beren is relaxing. "May I go inside and explain the situation to everyone?"

"Fine," Beren huffs before entering the house and standing behind the couch. Nia, Jen, and I are all sitting on it.

I sit with fidgeting hands and worry pouring from me. Nia and Jen both look upset at the whole situation. Arms crossed, scowls in place, and bodies so tense I'd be worried if I were Ralleth. The only thing that makes me feel better is the soft sounds Olivia's baby makes when she shifts in her sleep. Olivia doesn't seem to mind any of the bad moods in the room. She's more interested in her daughter and offers us small smiles of reassurance as we listen to the males.

"What exactly were you told?" Beren asks Ralleth when both males are situated behind their mates, comfortable and not as tense as they just seemed.

I don't know where Lyath is, but if I had to guess, it would be keeping Marron and Thro—mostly Thro—distracted so they don't overhear this conversation. Marron will blame himself even though we both were part of breaking one of the only rules we have to follow. Thro will probably tell Ralleth that we were alone and fell asleep together. He might even throw Marron under the bus for visiting me when I bathe because I'm sure the sneaky little male has some idea of what his brother is doing when he says he forgot something on the farm and has to return.

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"Someone in the tribe told us you have been seen with an unmated male on more than one occasion." Olivia gives me a soft smile. "First, we're not judging you for that. We wouldn't care about it if not for the fact that we're doing everything to keep all of the males following the rules so we don't have issues with males trying to take the women."

"No, no, that's fine," I wave off her justification. The way everything is set up here is so that human women are kept as safe as possible after some males came to the tribe to kidnap women they wanted for themselves. I understand why they have rules, and I also know that I frequently disregard them. "Who told you I was meeting with Marron?"

"You've been meeting with a male?" Nia says in the fakest surprised voice I've ever heard. I would be trying not to laugh if I weren't so nervous. "Why, I never... and under our noses?"

Olivia covers her laugh, but her lips quirk up on the sides. "Look, as far as I'm concerned, what happens on the farm stays on the farm."

"Then why are you here?" Nia asks, her tone shifting to something more serious. "I already told you what was happening and that we were keeping an eye on it to make sure no one was taken advantage of. Why's there an issue now?"

Jen and I both snap our heads in Nia's direction. Nia looks at both of us with an unimpressed flick of her eyes. "Do you think we didn't know about all of that? We're not idiots. We just needed to make sure you two didn't go around flaunting that we were letting you date when no one else gets the opportunity."

"We had a few unmated males come to us with concerns of Tori being seen with another unmated male, and when I talked with him, he told me that you were allowing him to woo you and say your name." Olivia holds my eyes when she says it, and the only reason her words don't have me spiraling is that I can see her baby's arm reach up from the sling she's in and start to grab at Olivia's tunic. It helps to soften the reason they're here.

"Marron would not have admitted to it," Beren says from behind us.

I'm glad he's here to tell Olivia precisely what I'm thinking. We've been alone, and he's been wooing me and saying my name, but I can't see him telling Olivia that. Not when he always seems so nervous to be caught alone with me.

"He wasn't one of the males to come to us," Ralleth says.

The fact has everyone in the room confused. Well, Olivia and Ralleth aren't confused because they already know who talked with them. Still, the rest of us wonder who would've said they were wooing me.

"I know I've been sneaking around with Marron, but there's no one else."

The words make me flush again, and my hands are sweaty from more than just how warm this planet is. If this was them telling everyone I've been with Marron, that's one thing, but whatever they've been told is a lie. I don't want them to think it's true. I don't want them doubting me. I look around at Olivia and then up at Beren. There's not an ounce of disbelief on their faces, just pure anger. I'm glad I am not on the receiving end of.

"Who is telling lies about my ward?" Beren asks, his lips pulling back in a snarl that would have me peeing myself if it were directed at me.

"If I tell you, they will be dead by the time the clouds have darkened," Ralleth keeps his voice calm, and it's clear he won't tell us. "We came here to think of ways to fix this."

"I can fix it as soon as you tell them their names," Beren offers.

Nia nods like she's all for letting Beren deal with the males who have decided to make up lies about me. I don't know why anyone would want to, and I don't know how many people they've told since I'm not in the tribe very often. For all I know, everyone in the tribe might think someone is wooing me. Marron could think I'm letting someone else woo me.

"Are you going to cry?" Olivia asks me, moving from her chair to stand in front of me. She scoops her daughter out of the sling and rocks her in her arms, the laughter making me smile. "Don't cry, okay? None of this is your fault."

"Well," Ralleth starts to say, but Beren's loud hiss cuts him off, and he holds his hands up again, saying he's done.

Olivia plops her baby into my arms, not even asking. It's okay with me because her bright red scales and big black eyes make me want to snuggle her close and see if I can get her to giggle like she did for Olivia.

Since realizing I had a calling to Marron, I've felt a stronger and stronger urge to have kids. This tribe is big on family and growing their families, so it makes sense that it would rub off on me the longer I'm here. Now, staring at Azaana's cute little face has me wanting it more and more.

Olivia moves to sit back in the chair and addresses all of us. "We need to know how you want to deal with the rumors. We can tell everyone that you're not entertaining any males, but we'd need to keep you separated from Marron, too, so no males feel

like he's being given special treatment. Or, you can go through the mating ceremony. We're pretty sure that's why the males who spoke with us did."

"They wish to force my ward into the mating ceremony," Beren snarls. His claws are digging into the couch, and Nia frowns at the gashes in the fabric before shooing his hands away so he doesn't make the tears worse. "They think they can force her to mate them. You realize this, yes?"

"We assume that's the plan," Olivia shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know how they're planning to make it succeed, considering it's clear she's already responded to a different male, but we weren't about to tell them that."

"So I either join the mating ceremony or stop seeing Marron?" I ask.

"Unless there's a different plan you'd feel more comfortable with," Olivia says. "We wouldn't even be taking it seriously if we weren't hearing from other males that they think the rules are softening. Gossip spreads fast in the tribe, and the male who says he's wooing you has made it very clear to many of the brothers that he's the one wooing you."

"Banish him for breaking the rules," Beren snaps, cutting Olivia off and causing Ralleth's eyes to flicker red for a moment. This time, Beren lowers his eyes, an act of submission we don't usually see from him, but Ralleth is his tribal leader, and there's still a hierarchy to these things.

"I would if it wouldn't give his rumors more merit. If your ward wishes to go through the mating ceremony, it will be clear that the rumors were the tellings of a male thinking too highly of himself and willing to spread lies to force a female into a mating. He will be shamed enough to leave the tribe on his own when it is clear your ward isn't his mate."

Ralleth's plan makes sense, but it hinges on me going through the mating ceremony. I'm still unsure if I'm ready to be mated to Marron. I'd rather be mated to him with communication issues than not be able to see him at all. If those are my options, I'll have to learn the language even faster. Marron might even be keen to help me once we're together.

"I'll do it," I say before Beren can get himself even more upset by thinking about a male making up lies about me.

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I know he's going to go to the tribe as soon as this conversation is over, and Ralleth will have to rush back to get others to help him keep Beren in check. He'll kill the male when he finds him. It sounds dramatic, but these males can be very dramatic. When the others learn Beren's killings are due to lying about capturing a female's soul, they'll all nod and murmur their understanding.

"Are you sure?" Olivia asks.

In my periphery, I can see Jen staring at me with wide eyes and Nia looking at me as if she's unsure if she needs to intervene and tell me we can come up with another idea.

"I'd rather have him in my life than not." I shrug. "Can you make sure Marron is one of the males in the next mating ceremony?"

"Of course," Ralleth says. "The males have already been chosen, but I will talk with my brothers to see who will be understanding of our situation."

"And the male in charge of these rumors?" Nia asks, her voice holding the same amount of venom that Beren's has this whole conversation. I'm surprised he's not the one voicing the question until I look over and see he's holding the back of the couch so tight that his claws are fully pressed through. They're going to end up with holes through the back of the couch, too.

"He will be there," Ralleth answers, making it clear that he doesn't plan on lying or softening this. This is just a shitty situation, but at least he's not letting me be blindsided. "That is probably why he has been spreading it so much in the last few

days."

"You knew of this for days?" I ask, my fingers wrapping around one another until they're pressing almost painfully together.

"We did," Ralleth says. "We did not wish to ruin your party. We knew we needed to speak with you soon, though, because the next mating ceremony is in a few days."

"It would be best if you didn't see Marron until then," Olivia adds, "Just to make sure no one thinks there's anything suspicious going on."

I nod, my thoughts racing at how fast this will go now that I've finally agreed to go through the mating ceremony. The first day of the mating ceremony is in three days, which means I could be a mated female in as little as six days. I could be mated to Marron.

On the one hand, I'm more excited and happy than I have been in a long time. On the other hand, I'm so nervous there's a good chance I'll throw up again.

"Ralleth and I will go find Marron and tell him of the good news," Beren says in a tone that suggests it isn't good news.

He stares down Ralleth until the other male kneels down to his mate and whispers something in her ear that makes her blush. She swats him away, and then he's waving over to Beren and allowing him to lead him out of the house.

"Alright," I sigh when the boys are out of the house. "Can you explain to me exactly what's about to happen?"

Nia was in charge of creating the mating ceremonies, and she still has a hand in updating them and ensuring they run smoothly. I've never really asked her about it

because it was something I wouldn't be going through for a little while longer. Now that it's been decided that I'm going to do it, I realize I wish I had asked a lot more questions during the time I've been living here.

"I'll go make some food," Nia says as she stands from the couch. "I heard you threw up everything this morning, so let's get something else on your stomach."

"Thank you," I murmur, more appreciative of her support in all this than I have the words to tell her right now.

Nia isn't very far from us as she cooks. As Olivia begins to explain what I'll need to do during the ceremony, sometimes Nia interrupts to clarify or explain more about some parts of it. At some point, more food is dropped off in front of me, and I eat it all.

By the time Ralleth returns to take Olivia and his daughter back to the tribe, she and Nia have explained everything to me and answered most of my questions. The only thing left to do is wait three days until I can see Marron again and make sure he's okay with all this happening.

9

Marron

The bedroom I share with Thro has never felt as small as it does at this moment. He, of course, has been a nonstop ball of energy since Beren and Ralleth came to visit the house three days ago to tell me that I was going to join the next mating ceremony, and I was going to follow all of the rules exactly as they are written so there is no doubt in anyone's mind that I am an honorable male who deserves the human female that I will claim as my own as soon as I am allowed. Thro could probably be heard shouting his joy as I sat on the bed, hands on my knees, trying to figure out what had

changed in such a short amount of time and why it was Beren and Ralleth telling me this news and not Tori the next time I was to see her.

"Are you nervous?" Toron asks as he stands in the doorway of my bedroom.

"I am," I offer him without much of a struggle.

Toron has been a good male to Thro and me since we moved in with him and his mate two and a half years ago. He has rules and can be strict, but he is a much better male than my father and has not once raised his hands to me. We have locked horns on more than one occasion, but what males who are blood do not? He is more of an overly protective older brother, much like I am to Thro, and his mate is just a caring sister who has more love than she knows what to do with. Many more emotions that she has too much of as well, but it is not a bad thing when it allows her the capacity to care for so many so deeply.

"Well, she is your mate already. Nothing will change that when you go through the ceremony." Toron sounds certain, and that makes me feel better.

His mate did not choose to be with him for many, many days after he knew she was to be his. He did not last nearly as long as I have since he only had to wait a handful of days, but still.

It is not as though my mate has rejected me. She has just not chosen to be with me because she is not confident in her speech yet. I think she sounds wonderful, but then again, everything she does is wonderful. Even the weird sounds she makes while she sleeps that had me worried she might be choking when I first heard them.

"I am heading to the great hall now," Toron says when I have not responded to him for many moments. "I believe Kal is now in charge of the mating ceremony since Ralleth did not want there to be any questions as to whether or not you were granted

preferential treatment. It was meant to be Yril working with the males, but none of your blood are allowed in this ceremony."

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I frown and cannot even look Toron in the eyes. I do not like causing trouble. I do not like making life more difficult for those who have made mine and Thro's lives so much better than they ever were. I clench my fists together and force myself to look up at him.

"I do not understand what is happening or why it is happening, but I am sorry for any trouble it has caused you. For any trouble I have caused you."

Toron begins to laugh, realizes I am being very serious, and then snarls at me. All of the humor leaves his body as he marches into my room until he is standing right in front of me.

"You have nothing to apologize for. You have done no wrong. The mating ceremony needs adjustments. We have been discussing them for relationships like yours that happen without anyone noticing until it is too late. What is happening now? You are going to go to the mating ceremony, you are going to follow the rules, and you are going to be mated to your female in three days."

"Why so much talk of rule following?" I ask as I swallow the lump in my throat.

I very much crave Toron's approval. He is not the first male in this tribe to show me kindness, but he has shown it to me the most often. It is something for which I am immensely grateful.

"You are not an angry male, so I will tell you even though I know it will upset you," Toron sighs as he leans against the wall and crosses his arms in front of his chest. "A male has been claiming your female is allowing him to woo her. He has been telling

many of this, and I think the only reason you do not know is because he has told others not to make you, Thro, or me aware it was happening. Something about you thinking she is your mate."

"She is my mate," I snap at Toron, my scales itching in an unfamiliar way as my eyes flash red. The need to fight him lasts only a moment, and my eyes turn back black, and my claws sink back into my fingers. Toron watches me with a curious expression before I avert my eyes and repeat myself in a much calmer voice. "She is mine."

"I know this, my brothers know this, and your female knows this," Toron says, sounding more upset than I was. "Some males think she belongs to another because of lies, and because of these lies, they are also wondering why they are not allowed to woo the females freely. By going through the mating ceremony, your mate is proving the male is a liar, and she can claim you as well."

"Which male has been making up these lies?"

"You know him, Joll, the one whose mother used to teach your brother and the human female. I do not know what he aims to gain from his lies about your mate, but they will be proved wrong in no time. This will all be forgotten." Toron moves back toward the door. "I need to make sure Kal is okay with handling everything this evening. Can you get yourself to the great hall on your own?"

"It is a short walk. I doubt I will get lost." I try my best to joke with him, but I can feel a heavy weight in my chest. Toron taps the doorframe once before turning and leaving me on my own.

Thoughts that make me think Tori is only going through this mating ceremony to prove to others that this male is a liar run wild in my head. I do not want her to be forced to mate me. I hate even more that it is because of a spineless male who wishes to force her into mating with him. How he could think this plan would work is

beyond me, but it will not be successful. No, it will be even less than successful. I will prove Tori is my mate, but I will not mate her until I am sure that she chooses to be with me in all ways. Not because she fears what others may think about her if she does not.

I must have sat on my bed for longer than I realize, just thinking about Tori and how she might be doing this for reasons that make the beating in my chest feel hollow and broken. The clouds outside have darkened slightly, which means it is almost time for me to be in the great hall.

I dig through my wardrobe, going through the tunics one of the other brothers gave me when he found his mate liked him best in blue. I still do not know which of the colors is Tori's favorite, but I do know I have traded her one red tunic, one brown, one grey, and one purple in exchange for the clothing she wears around her hips that presses against the place I most often think about.

Even just thinking about the undergarments I have traded her has me stretching to my tallest to grab for the small wooden box I keep hidden on top of the wardrobe so Thro does not find it. I hold it tight to my chest before closing my bedroom door and opening the box.

I only have one pair of her undergarments left. I have been meaning to trade with her again, but have not found the time. I pull them out and wrap them in my hand as my cock hardens in my pants.

With one last glance outside, I make sure I have enough time and then pull my pants low enough that I can fist my cock in the hand holding Tori's undergarments. I hiss long and hard as I begin to pleasure myself with her clothing. I think about the first time I found out human females wore these.

It must have been at least half a year ago when Tori was outside helping to prepare

the fields before storm season. The wind was strong, and she was wearing one of her skirts. The goddess blessed me that day when I looked over at just the right time to see Tori squealing and trying to push the skirts back down. Her face was bright red, and her smile was huge.

I replay the memory in my mind, my breathing growing more labored. In my mind, Tori looks around the fields, notices no one but me, and then smiles as she pulls the hem of her skirt into her hands, raising it to reveal more than the tease of her I saw, thanks to the wind.

The hiss that leaves my chest now rivals the one I made when she showed herself off to me. I keep pumping myself as my body tightens in pleasure.

My mind races through my interactions with Tori, scouring for the perfect moment. The moment I want to think about as I fill this last pair of her undergarments with my seed. All previous memories come to a harsh halt. This might be the last time I will do this because she will be my mate soon.

Sure, I might still sneak away with a pair of her undergarments and dirty them, but I will much more frequently want to fill her. My jaw clenches as I think about filling her, filling her undergarments, and then having her wear them. I release into the fabric, wishing so badly Tori was here now so I could tell her what I want to do to her. How I hope to keep her wet and dripping with my seed. How I want her covered in it. I want to rub it into her body, coat her clothing, and then send her out into the world marked as mine.

I snarl and snap my teeth as the last of my release shoots out of me and into the fabric. I wipe the tip of my cock, and then frown down at the undergarments. If I were a smarter male, I would not have done this when I had somewhere to be, because I very much would like to wash them in case something happens and I am forced to continue pleasuring myself with her traded clothing. Instead, I tuck them

into my pocket to dispose of later.

The house is quiet as I leave. Thro has gone back to the farm today because he cannot be trusted not to try to interfere in the mating ceremony. I love my brother more than anything. He is one of the best males, but he also gets himself into trouble.

It is for the best that he is not here, though I do wish he were. As much as his troublemaking can annoy others, it brings me joy to know he can be himself in this tribe. It helps to calm me and has helped me realize that this tribe is filled with good males.

As I step out of the house, the tribe seems eerily quiet, and I realize this is because almost no one else is there. I can faintly hear a babe crying from one of the other houses and laughter from another. The paths around the tribe are empty. I look around, waiting to see if anyone will show up, and I am surprised when they remain strangely barren.

The walk to the great hall from Toron's house is not long, but it is still a few minutes. I have made the trip many times, but I have never once felt unnerved as I do now. I keep looking around me, my claws lengthening in case they are needed. It feels as though I am being watched.

There's scampering around one of the buildings, and I am almost certain I see a smaller male, one who is the same coloring as Thro, and a human female, duck around the corner. I snort, knowing Thro has almost certainly recruited Jen into his mischief. Or maybe she has recruited him. All I know is that I was worried for nothing.

At least, I think I am worried about nothing for a few short moments before someone hits me in the back of the head. The world is dark before I feel my body hit the ground.

10

Tori

Marron's still not here. I keep tapping my thigh with my fingers over and over again. One thought keeps running through my mind, and it's that something terrible has happened to him.

There's no way he would miss this part of the ceremony. He wouldn't miss any part of the ceremony if he could help it. I'm not supposed to talk right now, though. None of us are now that we're in the room with the males. And since the rules have been stressed to me over and over again, I refuse to say anything about how Marron is in trouble.

I would be freaking out more if Diane, the human woman in charge of making sure the human side of the ceremony follows the rules, has been pushing for us to wait for all of the males to arrive before we start. Kal, the male in charge of the males, has been pushing for us to start, but he hasn't been pushing veryhard. I think he wants us to wait for Marron as well, since he probably already knows what's happening.

Ralleth told Beren and Lyath that I would be in no danger during the mating ceremonies, and that's why they didn't put up much of a fight when Ralleth switched Marron's relatives out from being the ones watching us.

The women on our side of the table all seem to be waiting anxiously for it to start, but none of them have sounded irritated or upset at it taking so long. They probably all hope that if more males are here, they'll have a higher chance of finding mates.

Marron won't be any of their mates, but they don't know that yet.

Most of the males are also fine with waiting, or at least, as far as I can tell. A few of them have been moving around from side to side like they're getting impatient, and Joll has been switching from staring daggers at me to staring daggers at Diane and Kal like it'll make them change their mind and start the sniffing. I don't know what he has against me, but I don't appreciate how hard he's staring at me.

"We cannot postpone this for much longer," Kal, a demon I just met for the first time today, murmurs as quietly as he can to Diane.

They've been whispering to one another, which makes my skin start to itch. If they start this without Marron here, I'm sure the plan will still work to prove the male who's been lying about me is a liar, but I was also hoping to be with Marron at the end of it.

I've had three days to accept that my timeline was moved up. It won't be so bad to be mated to him since I've done nothing but think about him in the last three days. I didn't realize how badly I needed him around until he wasn't close by every day like he usually is.

"Why can we not?" Diane asks, one of her brows arching.

Her arms are placed over her rounded belly as she strokes it in soft circles, making us all acutely aware of how close she is to popping. I'd think it's something she's doing subconsciously, but I've seen some of the other women do it to get their males or others to calm down. There's one thing this alien species loves, and it's knowing there are babies around—lots and lots of babies. I'm honestly surprised Diane didn't bring her son as backup.

"Almaac's mate." Kal crosses his arms over his chest like he's trying to steel himself.

I'm hoping Diane stays strong. She's my last hope in holding out until Marron gets here. "I know you wish for all the brothers' happiness, but it is getting late."

"I am not tired," Diane says, her slow, rhythmic stroking staying steady.

"Yes, well, it has been a long while—" Kal's cut off as the door to the ceremony room swings open, and a bruised male comes limping in.

I choke on a cry as I realize this bruised and beaten male is mine. My hands cover my mouth, and Diane is beside me, wrapping an arm over my shoulder to keep me from moving. I want to push against her, to run to Marron, and hold him close while I find out who did this to him.

Kal's already by his side, though, and he's asking everything I want to. Marron doesn't answer him, though. His eyes scan the room until they land on me, and he gives me a soft smile that only accentuates how his top lip is split and his left eye is swollen shut. I try to match his smile, but it isn't very believable.

Marron takes a deep breath before standing at his full height. He still doesn't speak to Kal, and I realize, much around the same time Kal does, that he's following the rules set forth for this whole ceremony.

The males aren't allowed to talk on the first night of the ceremony since they don't have permission to woo anyone yet. It's easier to have a no-talking rule instead of just no-wooing because the males will scheme ways to get as close to wooing as they can.

Marron walks silently to the male side of the table and takes a spot next to Joll. I don't miss how Joll's eyes flash red so quickly that I wonder if I imagined it. It isn't until I see Marron's hands clenched at his sides as he side-eyes Joll that I realize who's been telling lies about me—the same male who probably did this to Marron.

I bare my teeth, much like the demons do when they're upset. What can I say? I've taken to living on this planet and accepting some of their mannerisms. A few of the males lean their heads and look toward where Joll and Marron are standing, wondering which of the males I am snarling at.

I only stop when Joll finally drops his eyes, and at that point, the first male is already walking down the line of women, sniffing at our necks. I tilt my head and pull my hair off my shoulder. The male is quick, and I wonder if he doesn't actually sniff from my neck. The second male proceeds down the line the same, and when he gets to me, I'm certain there's no sniffing happening.

I would ask if I could talk, or if I cared about them sniffing me. There's only one male I want to sniff me tonight, and he's the last to go.

The rest of the line proceeds the same. Each male comes down the line, sniffing everyone's neck except mine. I have to wipe my eyes occasionally to push away the tears that keep slipping out. I can't help it when I'm stuck staring at Marron and the bruising that's already starting to mar his face. I want to know who did it to him so I can hurt them back. He's the kindest male, the softest male, and one who shouldn't have to bear this kind of pain anymore.

When Joll moves around the table, I can feel my gut churning. I want to tell him to fuck off or that I hate him, and I know what he did. I want him to know that I would reject him even if I were somehow drawn to his pheromones.

My emotions must be evident on my face because Marron raises his brows and draws my attention back to the present, back to him. His fingers twitch next to his thigh, and then he wiggles his pointer finger at me in a tiny wave. I bite back my smile, brushing away more tears because they just keep falling.

When I place my hands back to my sides, Marron's eyes flash red, and I feel a

presence too close to me. Nothing could make it clearer that none of the other males sniffed me than Joll's loud, obnoxious, and almost too long sniff from my neck. It has me baring my teeth again, an unhappy sound pulling from my chest as I snap my head in his direction. Technically, it's not talking, and no one chastises me for it. Joll gives me a confused look before backing away and leaving the room like all the males before him.

When I turn around to see where Marron is, he's already around the table and moving down the line of females. I watch him, not even hiding my attention as I openly wait for him to make it to me. He spends less than a second at each woman's neck, moving with so much speed I wonder if he'll be called out for it. Instead, a few of the women giggle and turn their focus down the line to me, like they already know the one who was openly crying for him is the one he wants to get to.

As if to make his point to everyone here that he's here for me and me alone, Marron stops behind me, standing as close as he can without actually touching me, and takes the loudest inhale of air I've ever heard. A few women laugh even harder at the sound, and I can't help the small sob that leaves my throat. I want to turn around, throw my arms over him, and tell him I never want to be away from him again.

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Marron is stronger than me. He turns from me before I can face him, and he's out the door before I can even think of moving my feet to chase after him. He's following the rules, and I need to do the same.

Kal doesn't have to follow any rules, so he's running after Marron. I hope he'll ask him everything he did earlier, but Marron can tell him. I need someone to help Marron since I can't be there for him yet.

"Before we leave." Diane takes a seat in one of the chairs against the wall. "We need to discuss who each of you might be interested in. We'll have a little dinner tomorrow night where you talk to the males and have them woo you. Some of you might feel pulled toward one of them already, or maybe even multiple. If you're not, don't worry. There'll be time for that tomorrow."

I raise my hand, wanting to make it abundantly clear that I'm following the rules and also claiming Marron as mine. There are a few more giggles behind me, and I'm almost positive I hear one of the women mumble something about not being surprised I already have dibs on someone.

"Tori, which males interest you?" Diane asks, sounding like she doesn't already know. She even pulls out some parchment and a pencil-like device.

"The last male." I don't say his name because each male was only given a number when we entered, and that's how we know them. I don't know if any of the women know I know Marron from working on Beren and Lyath's farm, but I don't need to flaunt that I'm perfectly fine with saying his name.

"Tori... interested in..." Diane mumbles under her breath as she writes on the parchment. She looks back up at me. "Anyone else?"

"Maybe the male you all but threatened?" one of the women says from behind me, and I feel my cheeks grow red in embarrassment.

"I want to know why you don't like that one," one of the others says before I can reply to the first woman. A couple more ask similar questions that have me turning into a bright red tomato in front of all of their eyes.

Diane is there to save me, though. "As much as I would love to sit here and gossip all night, my mate is expecting me home before morning, so let's get through this part of the ceremony, okay?"

The women all agree, and thankfully, the attention is pulled from me and set on the other women as Diane goes one by one through them, allowing them to say if they felt any special way about any of the males. Two others say that they're interested in specific males, but for the most part, the women don't feel any particular about them.

I stay with everyone until Diane stands from her chair after the last woman says who she's interested in. Most of the others left after talking with Diane about how they felt. I hope that by staying, I can ask her about the rules regarding my sneaking out tonight to see Marron. I need to know that he's okay.

When Diane ushers the last woman out and leaves the two of us alone, I try to appeal to her. Unfortunately, she already seems prepared for it and whips around much faster than I expect a heavily pregnant woman to be able to.

"No sneaking out," she says as though she's read my mind. The look on my face must confirm her suspicions because she's sighing and giving me a sad look. "You know I'm perfectly fine with how you two were dating or whatever the demons call it.

We're just having to navigate a difficult situation right now, and I need you to be a little bit stronger. It's only two more days. Can you do that?"

"Do I have any choice?" I huff, hating how whiny I sound because, really, it all seems way too unfair.

"Of course you do," Diane says. "You sneak out tonight, mate Marron, and there's nothing any of us can do. In fact, a lot of us will be happy for you. I'm asking you not to do that only because it makes Olivia's mate's job harder. He wants this tribe to run smoothly, and if you and Marron disregard the rules he's trying so hard to make the others follow, he'll have to make difficult decisions."

"You think he'd kick us out of the tribe?" I ask.

"I don't want him to have to even think about it," Diane replies, her hands returning to her stomach.

She's quiet for a while, and I don't know what to say either, so we stand in silence. Her hands move rhythmically over her abdomen until she decides she has one last thing to say.

"Things were easier before everyone else came. We found our mates and mated them when we felt like it. A part of me wishes it were still like that, but there are bad males out there. I guess there always will be, and I'd rather be too safe than for one of the other women to get hurt."

I nod, understanding what she's saying. I've heard stories from Nia and her friends about life before all the other women started coming to this planet. It was a small community that looked out for one another and was one giant family.

A part of me wishes Jen and I had been sent earlier so we could still feel that

closeness. Then I think about how if we had come earlier, we might not have the family we do now with Nia, Beren, and Lyath.

Yes, my situation right now sucks, but it only has to suck for a couple more days.

"Will you make sure he's okay?" I ask. "I won't visit him or sneak out, but I need to know he's okay."

Diane's brows pull together, and then she wraps her arms around me in an awkward hug. It's not uncomfortable because of her, at least not on purpose. It's just that she's trying to pull me closer while her pregnant belly is trying very hard to push me away.

A soft knock on the door breaks up our hug, and the door slowly opens to reveal a large male with pink scales. He eyes the empty room before coming inside, a babe strapped to his chest.

"I did not wish to interrupt, but it is late."

"I was talking with Tori," Diane says, walking over to the male and wrapping an arm around his waist. She nuzzles her face close to the sling where her son's being held and coos at him. "Did you see her mate out there?"

"He's back in Toron's home now. Vex is looking at him to make sure he is not too badly injured." Almaac's eyes flicker red as he speaks, but they return to their deep black after a few seconds. "He is worried his mate might try to do something reckless."

"I would never," I say with faux outrage, as though I wasn't plotting a way to sneak out of the great hall to see Marron before Diane talked me out of it.

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"Good," Almaac says with a firm nod. "Then, if you are in no danger of being reckless, I am taking my mate home."

"You're good, right?" Diane asks me as she interlocks her fingers with Almaac's.

"I'm good."

I make a quick cross over my heart with my pointer finger. They both look like they believe me, which is a great confidence boost because I'm still not one hundred percent certain I'll stay away. I'm at ninety-nine percent sure because I agree I don't want Ralleth to have to debate whether or not to kick Marron and me out of the tribe, but I also really like Marron.

The more intelligent half of me wins out, though. When Diane and Almaac leave, I follow them out into the great hall and then branch off to go to the room I'm sharing with a few other women. I waste no time falling asleep.

If I'm lucky, I'll be unconscious until later tomorrow. The more time I can spend not awake, the less likely I am to sneak around to find Marron.

11

Tori

I went to bed like a good little human last night and slept until mid-morning. It's easy to stay away from Marron while I'm unconscious, but as soon as I wake up, I'm ready to find him all over again.

Instead, I go with a few other women to the bathing pool. I'm used to bathing on my own, but there's not a lot of modesty in the tribe. Not that anyone is looking at me when they're all still a little self-conscious of themselves.

When the world ended, I had been shaving my legs and armpits for about two years. So, looking down at my body and the vast amounts of body hair I now have and don't have the means to dispose of makes me more than a little embarrassed. All of us women are in the same boat since there are no razors here.

We could figure out a way to make some since the males have knives and other sharp objects, but no one has broached the subject yet. I don't want to be the one who brings it up. Not to mention, I like not having to worry about shaving all the time. My legs aren't itchy from hair growing. The demons don't seem to mind it at all. Many of them seem intrigued since their bodies are made up of smooth scales without any hair.

For a few minutes, I ponder why I don't hate my body hair as much as I did when I first started letting it grow. Then, my thoughts return to Marron.

More importantly, I want to figure out a way to make sure the male who hurt him doesn't get a chance to hurt anyone again. Not to mention, I kind of just want him out of the mating ceremony and the entire tribe for hurting Marron at all.

I dry off quickly and run back to the great hall as my clothing dries up the small bits of water I missed. Ralleth and Olivia are sitting where they usually do, and when their eyes land on me, they must see how determined I am because they both sit up a little taller.

"Tori, how are you this morning?" Olivia asks me, waving her hand and offering the seat across from them.

I take the seat and return her smile. I'm about to demand a lot from them. The least I can do is give them a few smiles and a minute or two of small talk. "I'm good. How are you?"

"Tired." Olivia laughs and lays her hand on Ralleth's forearm. "We were up most of the night with Azaana. She's decided now is not the time to sleep through the night."

"That's rough." I rub the back of my neck since I don't know what else to say, and my limit for small talk seems much lower than I thought it was.

"Go ahead and speak your mind," Ralleth says. "You did not come to speak about my daughter's sleeping."

"I want to know what's being done about the male who hurt..." My voice trails off as I decide if we're far enough away from the others to say Marron's name or if I should just leave my statement as is because Ralleth and Olivia will understand who I'm talking about.

"Marron has decided he wishes to continue through the mating ceremony before telling us which males attacked him. I disagree with this, but he has told me it will be the best course of action to take. I have no reason not to trust him, but I also wonder why he thinks he must protect this male until the ceremony is over."

I don't realize I'm grinding my teeth so hard until I open my mouth to speak and feel a twinge of pain in my jaw. Note to self: Stop grinding your teeth because there's no dentist in the tribe—probably not a dentist on the whole planet.

I lean across the table until I'm close to both of them, and they do the same, so I can whisper to them that others can't hear. "It was Joll. You have to know that."

"I assume it is him, yes." Ralleth leans back in his seat, not even flinching when I say

Joll's name because they both know there is no way I'm saying his name like I want to sleep with him. "I can do nothing with assumptions. I would love to send him out of the tribe, especially after what he has done to you. However, going through the mating ceremony is still the best plan if his only fault is that he lied about wooing you. This will prove he was not. If Marron wants to wait to unveil his attacker until he is already humiliated by being rejected by a female he has been telling others is his, well, I will not stop him. I do wish he would admit who it was to keep you safe, but I do not think you are in any danger from any of the males, and if Kal thinks you might be, he will be swift in keeping you safe."

"I'm more worried about my mate doing something to protect me," I say.

Marron wouldn't attack Joll without reason, but he has plenty of reasons. He didn't attack Joll last night when he came into the room with a swollen eye and split lips, so maybe he's more in control of his anger than I give him credit for.

"If he protects you from another male harming you, then he has done an honorable thing. This would not be punished," Ralleth says easily, as though it should be fine that two males could fight over me at some point during this mating ceremony. It's not fine. It's definitely not fine because I can't handle even thinking about Marron getting hurt again.

"I don't want anyone to touch my mate," I say louder than is probably best.

A few heads turn in our direction, but most women in the mating ceremony with me last night already know I have my eye on one male. When I was heading to the bathing pools this morning, I heard a couple of women not in the mating ceremony talking about it in hushed tones. Gossip spreads fast in the tribe, and my claiming Marron is mine will only help to prove that Joll was a dirty liar.

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"No one will touch him." Ralleth's eyes flicker red, and Olivia squeezes his forearm. "Almaac has been watching the males we believe to have hurt him. Toron has not left his side since he left the great hall last night. And Beren and Lyath have been watching over Thro more closely in case of retaliation. I am determined to make this a safe and prosperous tribe. I gain nothing by allowing males to hurt one another for a female. I would like to avoid it at all costs."

"Then kick him out of the tribe." I'd like to think I sound passionate and strong when I say it, but even I can hear the whine in my voice, and it makes me cringe.

"As soon as Marron, Thro, or your cousin offers to tell me what happened, I will happily address it." Ralleth's tone brooks no argument, but he can tell from the confused look on my face that I had no idea Thro and Jen were part of this. He quickly adds more to the story to keep me from worrying about Jen. "They are fine. They are the ones who found Marron. At least, that is what they are saying. They have not told anyone anything more than they found him hurt and helped get him back to the tribe."

"But Jen wasn't hurt?" I ask, my chest shaking as I take in unsteady breaths.

"She's perfectly safe." Olivia leans across the table and takes my hand in hers. "Everyone's safe now, and we're watching what's happening. Trust in Ralleth. He's promised to make this tribe safe, and he's doing everything in his power to ensure that it is."

I nod, unsure of what else to do. I came to talk to them with grand ideas of telling them to kick Joll out of the tribe and demanding that they bring justice to the hurt

inflicted on Marron. I guess I kind of did that. But now I just feel even worse.

"Do you want me to see if Jen wants to stay in the great hall until the mating ceremony is over?" Olivia asks.

"She can do that?"

"Of course." Olivia smiles, bright and genuine, just like always. "I think it would be good for you to have her here. When the ceremony ends, I can make sure she gets back to the farm safely."

"Yes, please, yes," I say, standing from my seat and making out like I'm about to walk with Olivia out of the great hall and to the farm to get my cousin myself. Olivia laughs behind me, and Ralleth grumbles something under his breath.

"I'll have your brother take me," Olivia says to Ralleth, pushing away from the table to stand beside me. "You can stay here with Azaana. She needs her father today."

"You only say that because she is finally asleep," Ralleth frowns and then looks down at his chest. I don't know how I didn't notice it earlier, but he has his babe strapped to his chest, a small cocooned alien hybrid snuggled up against him. He wears a second top over his first, which opens in the front and is looser than I'm used to seeing the others wear. It must be why I didn't notice Azaana napping against him for so long.

"Diane's been branching out in the style of clothing she makes," Olivia says when she notices me looking at Ralleth's tunic. "I can see if she'll show you her patterns if you are interested. I think Nia said she was, but she hasn't been up here since everything happened. I think she's too busy keeping Beren from burning down the entire tribe."

Her description of what's probably happening at the farm makes me laugh. Beren cares deeply about those he believes are his. As soon as he took Jen and me in, we

became his. As soon as I chose Marron, he became Beren's as well. I'm more surprised Nia's been successful in keeping him from rampaging through the tribe.

"It is best if you stay in the great hall," Ralleth calls from behind me. I turn to face him, my face already falling.

He's right. Once someone decides to go through the mating ceremony, there are rules they're supposed to follow. One of which is staying separated from the males. I swallow a hard knot in my throat and force myself to acknowledge what Ralleth is telling me to do.

"If he can follow the rules after being attacked, I can follow the rules while I wait for my cousin," I tell him with all the resolve I can muster.

"I'll be back so fast," Olivia says.

She doesn't wait for either of us to acknowledge her before she runs out of the great hall. Ralleth's eyes track her the entire time, and when she disappears, they narrow into tiny slits. I think for a second, he's going to chase after her, but then Azaana makes a soft sound in her sleep. It takes Ralleth's focus off his mate and onto their daughter long enough for him to relax into his seat.

"Will you keep me company while we wait for my creature to return?" he asks.

I don't have anything better to do, so I take my seat again. We chitchat for a while, and Ralleth tells me how his daughter is growing. He describes his plans for the tribe now that it's expanding and proving sustainable. Best of all, his eyes light up anytime he mentions Olivia.

She's working with Vex to use his extra-smart alien knowledge to figure out a way to make soap for us. I listen intently when Ralleth tells me about that because I need

soap badly. I wince whenever I lift my arms and see the bright hair hidden. The smell after even just a couple of hours on this hot and humid planet is pungent. The only saving grace is that the demons can't smell to save their life, so at least they can't smell just how gross we are on this planet.

Before I know it, Olivia is standing next to Ralleth again, and Jen is beside me, throwing her arms around me and telling me that she's fine and that she's sorry she scared me.

"I need you to tell me everything," I whisper into her ear as I hug her.

"Not here," Jen replies. "Can we go back to your room?"

I don't even answer her. I wrap my fingers in hers, stand from my chair, and drag her through the great hall until we're back in my room. Technically, it's the room I'm sharing with a few other women, but they're all off doing something else, so we have the place to ourselves.

"You better tell me everything," I say to Jen as she finds a cozy spot on the bed. "Seriously, none of this, not saying anything until after the mating ceremony bullshit."

Jen frowns at me and then tosses her hair over her shoulder. "You're going to be pissed at me, but I'm almost an adult. I also helped you find Lyath's farm and have acted as your translator for almost two years."

I cut Jen off, not needing her to remind me of everything she's ever done for me. She's done a lot. "Shut up and tell me what happened."

"Okay, so it started with Thro convincing me to sneak out of the house..."

12

Marron

My eye is much more swollen today than it was last night. I was hoping it would look less like I was kicked in the face and more like maybe I was just a clumsy male, but instead, the bruising has darkened, and the swelling has reached what I am hoping is its peak.

Alice fussed over me all of last night more than she had to fuss over her own babe. It was embarrassing, but then again, I have never had someone to fuss over me. So maybe it also made my scales feel warm in a pleasant way.

I shift from foot to foot, refusing to pay much attention to any of the other males waiting in this sectioned-off part of the dining hall. We are all allowed to speak with the females tonight, though the females will approach us instead of us approaching them.

I would very much like to go to Tori as soon as I see her, but I am forced to stand in this little painted square on the ground. The rest of the unmated males feel as restless as I do. What keeps me calm is knowing Joll and those aiding him will not be allowed to approach my female.

"Remember, just because you like a female does not mean she likes you. Some do not feel the calling as you do, so it may take them longer to feel comfortable around you. This is the first night of many that you will be allowed to woo the females. Do not feel despair if one does not show you interest tonight," Kal recites the words as

though he has them memorized from saying them so often. Considering his job in the tribe is to help with the mating ceremonies, I am sure he does. I also wonder if he does not talk to himself with his words because he still does not have a mate either.

"Any questions before the females arrive?" Kal asks, looking around the area.

Each male in the ceremony stands in the center of his little painted square along the perimeter of the sectioned-off area. I do not know where Joll stands because I refuse to look around for him. He is to my left or right since I can see the three males standing opposite me.

I do not hear any males asking questions because I am too focused on watching the others around the dining hall. The unmated females are being kept in another room while Kal prepares all of us unmated males, but still, I want to see my Tori as soon as she comes into view. It has only been a day since I last saw her, but it has easily been one of the longest in my life.

Yesterday, she cried for me when she saw how I was attacked. She did not say anything to me about it, and I did not dare tell her I would be okay. When she bared her teeth at Joll as though she knew immediately who did this to me, I could not help but puff my chest in pride. My fiery-haired mate is just as fiery in spirit. I can only wish to see it more often when I am allowed to be near her without fear of breaking some arbitrary rule that should not apply to us.

The world seems to slow as a group of females emerges from one of the hallways. I feel my chest expand, attempting to make me appear larger than I am. My hands clench at my sides, and I hold my breath until I see her. Tori looks around the room, her eyes not stopping until they land on mine, and then she smiles.

Of course, she takes in just how terrible I look. Her smile turns into a scowl as she turns her head to the left, where I now know Joll is, and she bares her teeth again, just

like she did last night. Given how upset she seems, I would not be surprised if my little mate took it upon herself to find justice for me. I know I should not take this much pride in how much she cares for me, but how can I not? Many males dream of a female who would fight for them.

Diane guides the humans to the mating ceremony and explains the rules of the evening to them as they walk over to us. I am sure she is reiterating everything, just as Kal did for us. As soon as the females enter the sectioned-off area of the dining hall, they are free to approach us.

Many of the first females through are nervous and anxious. Not my female, though. Oh no. Her face is red, and her expression is furious as she walks past me, lifting one of her fingers as if to tell me she will be with me in a moment.

I bite my bruised lip since I do not want to start laughing. I am sure laughing is not against the rules, but I am not certain, so it is better to be cautious.

"I know what you did, you stupid fucking lizard man," Tori hisses in English. She keeps her voice low, but Joll must be closer to me than I realize because I can make out everything she says.

A few of the females who wandered further into the area can hear her, and her insults have gotten their attention. The othermales might not know what is being said, but the humans sure do. I look at where the human female in charge is standing and realize very quickly that she will allow whatever is happening to happen so long as Tori does not make too much of a scene.

"Did you really think jumping my mate would make me choose you? You force me into this mating ceremony, and then you try to make it so you're my only option? I would kill you long before I ever chose you."

Tori's breathing is loud enough that I can hear it as she sucks in a deep breath and blows it out. I can imagine her steeling her back, forcing her gaze even harder.

"I will not mate you. I will not live in a tribe where you are. When this is over, you will be without a home, without a mate, and no one will pity you."

The male standing between Joll and me makes a choking sound, a laugh he is trying to force down. I want to see if Joll looks chastised enough now that my female has spoken to him in a way he can understand. If I look over and see him looking anywhere but at the ground in shame, I might be capable of more anger than I thought. That keeps me looking straight ahead, waiting for my human to talk to me.

Or at least, I would if I did not see movement out of the corner of my eye. It is small, just the flick of red hair that draws my eyes to where Tori is walking toward me. Of course, Joll has to prove he is as desperate as his actions have made him out to be. He disregards the rules for us and reaches out for my mate, grabbing her upper arm to stop her from walking away from him.

"Release my mate, or I will finish what you started." The hiss that leaves my chest is so loud it almost drowns out my words.

I do not step out of the painted square on the floor because Tori does not look like she is in pain. She is angry more than anything else. My female can handle herself, but I will not stand idly by and not at least threaten the male who is ignoring her boundaries.

Joll releases Tori as though she is too hot to touch, and as he does, Kal is between them. His eyes are blazing red as he hisses something at Joll before grabbing one of his horns, dragging him through the area, and motioning for a different brother to escort him somewhere else. I care very little about what they do with him tonight. Tori walks toward me, and the fierceness on her face morphs into worry as she takes

in my appearance.

"I am better than I look," I tell her with a smile. Or at least what I hope looks like a smile. I wince as my scales tighten, but hope it is small enough of a reaction that she does not notice.

"You are hurt," Tori snaps and then frowns at herself before repeating herself in a softer tone. "You are hurt."

"I have been hurt before. I promise this is much more bearable than other things I have dealt with." I say this to ease some of her worries, but the horrified expression that settles over her clearly shows that I have done the exact opposite. "I only mean that you do not need to worry about me."

When she still looks concerned, I open my mouth to say something more to try to ease her, but she holds up her hand and presses it against my chest. It silences me immediately and makes me want to step closer to her, wrap my arms around her, and tell her that I am ready to claim her as mine as soon as I am allowed tomorrow.

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"I can worry about you," Tori says, her pale eyes staring up at me in a way that makes my beating feel like it will burst through my chest at any moment. "You're mine to worry about now."

My hands twitch at my sides, wishing to reach out and touch her. I turn my head to the side, hoping I can find Kal to ask if I am allowed to touch Tori if she is receptive.

Tonight is about whatever the human female is comfortable with, and my mate is more than comfortable enough with touching. I do not find Kal in my quick glance, but I do see the human in charge. She gives me a reassuring smile and a thumbs up, which I have learned from the other humans means I have her blessing.

I need no more than that before I reach out and pull my mate flush against me until we are both inside the small square I have to stand in. Tori's laugh is a beautiful sound that bubbles up around us as she moves her arms around me and tries to hold me as tightly as I am holding her.

"You look so bad," she says, placing her chin against my chest and staring at me.

"You do not," I reply, loving how her cheeks seem to refresh their pink hue at my words. "You look very, very good."

Tori bites down on her lip before beaming up at me with one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen. Her beauty is always there, but it is even more pronounced when she is happy and smiling. Witnessing her look as stunning as she does makes me feel like I am one of the most blessed males, even more blessed when I remember that she will be all mine.

"I don't know how to call you a flirt." She shakes her head as she lets the words spill from her in her language.

For a moment, I think about the best time to make her aware of what I have been doing in my free time. I thought waiting until we were mated would make an excellent mating present. Right now, though, I cannot stop myself from replying to her.

"You just did," I say, keeping my words quiet, just for my mate's ears.

The words don't sound as fluid as she speaks them, and they sound a little funny since I cannot move my lips in the same ways she can. I have been told I can be understood in English, which is good enough. I can see on Tori's face as she registers how I just spoke to her that it is more than enough.

"Can you?" She pushes away from me, a glassiness in her eyes that makes me fear she might be close to tears. Her throat moves to swallow, and she tilts her head. "Can you understand me?"

"Most of your words, yes. Some of them no."

Tori takes another step away from me, and I do not stop her. I worry for a moment that somehow I have overstepped, that she has not wanted me to learn her language, and that she does not find it as romantic as I want her to. I do not reach for her, but she does not keep me worrying for long.

She opens her mouth to say something but stops herself. Instead, she throws herself back against me. Her feet leave the floor so she can wrap them around me as she shimmies her way up my body. I stumble back at her enthusiasm and then wrap her in my arms, holding her so she does not have to work to keep herself wrapped around me. Her face is close to mine, her hands reaching up to grab my horns so she can hold

me tight.

"Why?" she asks.

"You are mine." I pause for a moment, wishing both of my eyes were working so I could appreciate how close she is to me. "I want to know you. So I learned to know you."

Tori is crying now, but she does not move to wipe the tears from her eyes. Instead, she says something so beautiful to me, something that makes my beating quicken.

"I know you, Marron."

Her lips press against mine, and it takes everything in me not to mate her out here in front of everyone in the dining hall.

13

Tori

I have so many things I want to talk to Marron about. I want to tell him I know what happened.

Joll and his friends knocked Marron out when he was on his way to the mating ceremony, roughed him up while he was still unconscious, and then tied him to a tree outside the tribe's walls. Best case scenario, he was just supposed to miss the mating ceremony. Worst case, he could've died out there.

I'm not thinking about any of that anymore, though. Not when Marron talks to me in English, telling me he did it for me. No, when he tells me that, I can't do anything but climb up his body and press my lips against his. I don't care about the others around

us. I don't care that I'm not entirely sure if this is within the rules. The only thing I care about is being as close to my male as I can.

"Can you leave the square?" I barely get the question out before I kiss him again, loving how he hisses against me and rattles our bodies. It's a much different sound than the one he made at Joll when he grabbed my arm, and that one was one of the sexiest things I'd ever heard.

Marron's fingers tighten where he's holding me. He's got handfuls of ass, and he's not hiding how much he's enjoying getting to support me.

"You lead." He manages to get out, telling me I can do whatever I want to him as long as I initiate it.

"I want you to sit," I speak to him in English and moan my pleasure at him understanding me as he moves toward one of the tables with a handful of chairs around it.

I expect him to grab one, pull it out, and sit down quickly. Instead, he shuffles my weight around to grab the back of one of the chairs and keep me in his arms. He pulls the chair back over to the little white square he was standing in and then turns the chair to face the wall before sitting with me in his lap.

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"Now, what do you want me to do?" Marron asks.

I shift myself in his lap, my hands moving from his horns to behind his neck. I grind my hips when I feel his cock pressing against me and sigh softly when it twitches against me. I lean back, taking in how he is still the most handsome male I've ever seen, even with half his face swollen and bruises marring his cheeks and eyes. He smiles at me, the motion causing him to wince, but he tries to hide it.

"I want you to sit back and let me do whatever I want to you."

I grind myself against him in slow strokes. I wish we were wearing less clothing, but we are still in the dining hall. Even without the mating ceremony, there's an actual rule about no nudity in the dining hall. I never understood it, but now I think I get it.

"I can do that." Marron nods and then leans back in the chair, relaxing his body and letting his hands rest on the armrests. "I can be very good at that."

"If I hurt you, tell me." I look him in the eyes, making sure he understands I'm serious about it. I want to tease him since there's not much we can do out loud in front of everyone. What I don't want is to tease him so much that I end up hurting him. "I trust you to tell me, okay?"

His throat bobs as he swallows, and then he nods, his eyes flashing down my body to where I'm still grinding against him. "This is the opposite of hurting me."

I chuckle, my smile forcing my eyes to crinkle in the corners. I lean forward, rising on my knees to press another kiss against his lips. I move from his lips to his bruised

cheek, down his jaw, to his neck. When he hisses sharply when my tongue traces the scales where his shoulder and neck meet, I wrap my lips around the spot and suck on it. He's relaxing in his chair, but as soon as I latch onto his neck, his hands come up to cradle me against him.

"Will you mark me?" Marron asks, his words tight as he forces them through clenched teeth. I don't move my mouth from around his neck to answer him. I know what marks he's talking about.

One of his blood has a mate who marks her male all over with scars from her teeth. I never thought I'd be into it, but now that I have Marron's scales in my mouth, his hands holding me against him as if begging me to bite down, I'm finding that I want to know how it'll feel to break his scales. I run my teeth over the sensitive spot, and Marron hisses a low sound, his cock never letting me forget it's still between us.

"I am not in pain," he assures me, as though I could mistake his sounds of pleasure for anything else.

I scrape my teeth against the same spot, trying to decide if I have it in me to bite down into him hard enough to mark his scales. I press them against him softly and can feel how his body tenses in anticipation. It's all the motivation I need as I bite down hard enough to split his scales. His fingers tangle in my hair, holding my head close to him as I keep my teeth sinking into him.

"Such a sweet mate," he groans as he leans his head further to the side, allowing me more room to get comfortable. "So good to me. My sweet mate."

Marron's body begins to relax, and he relaxes his hold on my head. His claws run through my hair in soft motions that have goosebumps popping up all over my arms and down my body. His touches are soft and sweet as he waits for me to pry my teeth away from his neck, but he doesn't rush me, and I find it comforting to just rest

against him, with him in my mouth. I don't know how long we sit like that before Marron goes rigid and hisses loudly.

I don't look around to see what he's hissing about because his fingers are still tracing through my hair and down my back. I close my eyes and rest my head against him, and his body seems to lose some tension. Whatever had him hissing and upset must be gone because he fully relaxes again, this time moving my legs so I can curl up in his lap. He makes sure my teeth can stay in him before continuing to trace lines up and down my clothed body.

"Sleep if you need, Tori," he whispers.

I hum softly at his use of English and how proud I am to call this male my mate. I'll be even more proud tomorrow when we can make this official.

"I will keep you safe."

My breathing slows, my mind wanders, and I feel myself drifting off to sleep before too long. Neither of us seems to care that we're still in the dining hall, in a chair facing the wall. We don't care that others could still be talking around us and trying to woo their mates. It doesn't matter that at some point, someone is going to stumble over here and see me passed out with blood staining my lips and chin and a fresh wound in Marron's neck. We don't care about any of that because we have one another.

For the first time, I don't worry about whether or not we'll have communication issues because we'll figure it out. Or we'll try to out-learn the other to be the first to understand.

"Someone should wake them."

I don't know which male is talking, but it's the first thing I hear when I come back to reality. There's still a taste of the coppery tinge of blood in my mouth, but I must have released Marron's neck in my sleep. Now, I'm curled against him with his arms wrapped around me, tightening like he just woke up.

"Just leave them to sleep," another male says, sounding more irritated than anything else. "I have been out here all night. They are in no more danger of breaking the rules now that more are awake to see them than they were through the night."

My lips tug down as I listen to the conversation. The second male must be Kal because he's in charge of watching over the male side of the mating ceremony. It would've been him if a male were to watch us all night. I don't know why he didn't wake us up and tell us to return to our rooms, though.

"I do not care if others see them like this. I just do not want them to be embarrassed," the first male says.

"Sleep," Marron whispers the word to me, his arms tightening again.

I keep my eyes closed, but can't keep the smile from my lips when he whispers to me in English. Thankfully, the two males talking about us are behind us, so they don't see my smile or how Marron's thumb begins to move over a patch of my exposed abdomen.

"They will not be embarrassed," Kal says. "She jumped on him last night and then sank her teeth into his neck. He almost lunged for me when I came to make sure they were okay. So, if anything, they will be more than proud of what they have accomplished while still following the rules."

"Fine, fine," the first male says. "I will stay until they wake and take Marron back home."

My brows rise, but Marron doesn't seem surprised that it's Toron here to check on us. In fact, his thumb starts to slow again, and he might have fallen back asleep. A chair moves behind us, making Marron tighten his hold on me for a second before relaxing again. I follow his lead and try to fall back asleep.

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Unfortunately, just like the first time I woke up in his arms, I can't seem to fall back asleep. Instead, I keep my eyes closed and listen as everyone else wakes for the day.

It starts with cooking ware being moved around and olack being roasted. Then there are plates being set out and food being served. Slowly but surely, more and more women wake up and filter into the dining hall.

For the most part, the great hall is filled with unmated females, but mated males are allowed inside if they have business to attend to. And this morning, quite a few of them have business in the form of coming over to where Toron's watching Marron and me sleeping to see if he needs help.

"How is your ward?"

"Is he asleep now?"

"Did you notice the marking on his neck?"

"I do not think that was one of the injuries he sustained the other day."

"Was your ward attacked a second time?"

"We will need to banish a female next, it seems."

I don't know how many brothers are behind us now, and Toron doesn't seem to be entertaining them. They're able to entertain themselves well enough.

I can't say I hate their teasing because, if anything, it makes me feel more confident that everyone here is happy that Marron and I are finally getting together. Most of them were probably there the night I got drunk and wandered off with Marron, all but begging him to go skinny dipping with me.

"Is she our blood now?" one of the males asks, his voice sounding closer than the others.

Marron tenses, and a hiss escapes his lips. My eyes open, and I look up to see what's happening. Marron's eyes are still deep black, but he's pinning a male to our right with a glare that tells him to back off. Yril holds his arms up, the sleeves of his tunic sliding down, revealing all of the scars his mate has bitten into his scales. He smiles at us and backs away.

"She has claimed you," Yril says, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he smiles. "You have been blessed."

"I have," Marron responds, relaxing back in the seat when Yril is far enough away. "Now bless me more and leave us alone."

Yril barks out a sharp laugh before turning on his heels and returning to the group behind us. At least with them back there, we can pretend they're not here. Or we can pretend until they all begin talking again.

"They slept out here all night?"

"Must have been uncomfortable."

"They should gift Kal something nice for being a good male."

"I would not have slept in a chair all night for any of you."

"You have slept in chairs to watch my mate before."

"That was different. You scared me then."

Marron lets out a frustrated sound, apparently unable to find sleep now that there's a small crowd behind us with absolutely no care about how loud they're being or how uninterested we are in their conversation. He nuzzles his face against my hair before helping to shift me to my feet. I stand in front of him, and he gives me a once-over.

"How do I look?" I ask.

"You look like you have claimed a male." Marron brushes his fingers across my chin as he says it.

He wipes at the dried blood for a few strokes before remembering the wound in his neck. He presses the same fingers against the bite, and I can see his entire body shudder in pleasure. He closes his eyes, clenching his teeth as though not to let a hiss out, and I'm sure he's coming yet again at the memory of my teeth sinking into him.

I wait until he looks back down at me before leaning in and pressing a kiss to his lips.

"I want to look like yours," I whisper against his lips in his language.

His eyes go wide, and his hands reach out for me again. As much as I'd love for him to mate me right now, we still have an audience, and we need to wait until tonight. I stand up straight, ignoring how Marron's hands have found my ass yet again.

I address the others, knowing it'll be our best bet not to have sex with each other in the middle of the dining hall. "Do any of you know where my wardens are?"

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The question is barely out of my mouth before Marron drops his hands from me and looks up at me as though I have betrayed him in such an awful way. I give him a playful wink, hoping he knows this is for the best. Then, I mentally prepare myself to wait until tonight before my mate can claim me.

14

Marron

"Why are you out here?" Beren asks when he answers the door to his home.

I am meant to be in the tribe since the mating ceremonies have not ended. It is hard to be so close to Tori and not go to her, though, not after everything she has done for me.

Beren's eyes harden when he sees the bandage on my neck. I know he is trying to think of whether or not I had a cut there after Joll and his friends attacked me. Before he can ask me any questions, I move the topic toward why I came out to his home.

"I would like to petition for the farmland we have been clearing," I say, standing as tall as I can with my hands behind my back. I want him to look at me as a strong, capable male, not the barely coordinated male I was when I first began helping on his farm. "I know you have been taking applications for males to work the land and live in the house there. I would like to be added to the males you are interviewing."

Beren's brows rise on his forehead. He leans against the doorframe, moving to one side so his mate, Lyath, can stand beside him.

"Are you interested in the land?" Lyath asks, sounding as surprised as Beren looked for all of a second. "What about our farmland? Are you to leave us to start your own?"

My scales feel tight at the question. Maybe I should have told them I would no longer be helping them on their farm before I asked for the other land. I avert my eyes, my hand moving up to rub the back of my horn. I try to think of what to say, but I am too embarrassed at this point.

"Stop being mean to your blood," Nia says as she squishes between her males to stand in front of them. "They're teasing you. Pay them no mind."

"You are ruining your mate's fun." Beren glares down at her, but Nia just swats him away.

"He wants to talk to you about taking over the farm he's had a hand in preparing for its next owner. He's been out at the house as often as the two of you, getting it ready for someone to live in it. The least you can do is offer him the same courtesy you've given every other male who's asked about it."

Beren and Lyath look at one another for a moment, and they have a silent conversation. I have been there for the interviews that Nia is talking about. Beren has been rude and condescending to every male who has come out to look at the land, and Lyath has not helped the poor males who try to tell them how they can be good farmers.

Nia does not know how the interviews go. Beren and Lyath seem to decide they aren't going to ruin Nia's perception of them just yet and shrug.

"Come with me," Lyath motions as he steps from the porch and heads toward the other farm. "We will have many questions for you."

"Many, many questions," Beren says, walking behind me.

They have me trapped between them, and it isn't until we are further into the fields where Nia cannot see us that I realize they could dispose of me easily if they so chose. Maybe they are now unhappy that I am the male who calls to their ward's soul. Or maybe they do not want me to have a farm near theirs and will dispose of me for that.

"Stop looking scared," Lyath calls out from over his shoulder. "You make our ward happy. We are not going to kill you."

"I may still kill you," Beren says nonchalantly. "What is the wound on your neck?"

My gulp is audible as I try to decide the correct answer to this question. Obviously, I am mating Tori. There is no getting around that, and Beren has, on more than one occasion, called her my female and my mate. I hope he is being his usual self, and this is his version of teasing me, even though it feels very much like he is testing me to ensure I am an honorable male.

"Tori has claimed me," I say, keeping my eyes forward so I do not have to see when Beren strikes, if he is going to kill me. "In the old ways. She has claimed me. We are not mated yet, but only because we are following the rules of the ceremony."

"You are blessed," Beren says, coming to stand beside me. He claps a hand on my shoulder, and for the first time in a long while, I do not wince when he does it.

I have grown accustomed to others touching me. Especially the males I am now blood with. It took me a long time not to flinch when a hand was raised toward me, but none of them made me feel less than. If anything, they continued to treat me as they did everyone else. Over time, I have managed to find ease around them.

"Very blessed," I murmur, thanking the goddess when the gate to the next farm comes into view. It is not too terribly far from Beren and Lyath's farm. The fields butt up against one another, but the houses are on opposite ends.

"You know this house is one of the larger ones, yes?" Lyath asks, turning over his shoulder and smiling when he sees Beren touching me in a way that makes it clear I am not to die this day.

"I am hoping to fill it." I rub the back of one of my horns as soon as the admission is out of my mouth.

I have always wished for a large family, and I know I will attempt to get Tori swollen with my young as often as possible. Thro has told me that she is also eager to have children, not that she has ever told me. But I have seen her with some of her sisters' young, and Thro tells me she often talks about starting her own family. I have had to tell him to stop talking many times because it made me want things I could not have yet. Now, I am close to having everything I have ever wanted, so it does not feel wrong to tell the other males how I wish for a large family.

"We are to have many young to spoil, then?" Lyath asks.

I realize they have not asked me about my ability to tend to the farm, what I plan on growing, or my strategies for planting and harvesting. They are not asking all their questions and then cutting down my answers as they have done to the various males before me. It would make me suspicious if I weren't so eager to express my excitement about starting my own family.

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"I hope many," I tell Lyath. "Like you said, it is a large home. It would be wasted with no young running around."

"Does your female know of your plans to fill the house?" Beren asks. Opening the door to the house for Lyath and me to enter.

"She wants a large family as well, but no, it is not something we have spoken about," I answer.

If I had talked with Tori about wanting young before now, I would have never made it as long as I have in not mating her. It is already hard enough not to claim her without the talk of young.

"And if you are not given this house?" Lyath asks. "What is your plan then?"

"You should already have a plan if you want to mate a female," Beren adds.

I walk through the house, stopping in the room I hope to share with Tori. "I have had a plan since I first saw her. You already know this."

I look over at Beren, leaning against one of the walls with his arms crossed over his chest. It's clear to me now that my interview is much different than the other males they have shown this place because they want to give it to me. I wonder how long they will pretend they are still thinking about it. Will they make me wait for their answer until after I am mated, or will they grow bored of this game before then?

"I petitioned for a home in the tribe after seeing Tori for the first time. It is a small

one near the wall. I have kept it clean and in good condition, in case Tori ever offered to mate me. I ask for this house now because I think it would make my mate happy to stay near her blood. Not to mention, there is no one else in the tribe you trust to keep the fields fertile. You have run every other male off."

"Perhaps we want to keep the land for ourselves and keep Thro and you on to work them with us," Beren says with narrowed eyes.

I stare at him for a moment, and it all clicks into place. The soft crinkle in the corner of his eyes, the way his lip is not nearly as tensed as usual. He is happy right now. I can barely see it, but the signs are there.

"If I can keep the house, I care very little about who owns the fields." I shrug.

Beren narrows his eyes, and Lyath smiles a deep grin.

"We are not that cruel," Lyath says, moving over to me and placing his hands on my shoulders. "Of course, this is your home. It has been your home since we started working on it."

It is my turn for my brows to rise and my eyes to widen. I assumed they would let me take over this farm, but I did not realize it would always be for me.

"We have been telling our ward for many, many days that she needs to go through the mating ceremony," Beren says. "We started showing the farm off to other males because she was getting upset that we did not offer it to you first, since you've done so much work on our farm and on this one to prepare it. She did not know we were already going to offer it to you if you were interested, and we were almost certain it would help prompt her to mate you. We were a few days away from telling her that only mated males were being looked at to take over the farm before Joll managed to force her hand anyway."

I frown at the reminder of Joll, and Lyath's lips also curl back. It makes me feel nice to know that others care as little for Joll and his dishonorable ways.

"Speaking of Joll, what happened to him after he grabbed Tori last night?" I ask.

"After he what?" Beren's body tenses, and his eyes turn a deep blood red. I look at Lyath, who looks just as angry as his mate.

"Did no one tell you?" I ask, my voice smaller now because I realize I may have caused even more trouble.

"What did Joll do to my ward?" Beren snarls the words.

He takes two steps until he's standing in front of me, his hands flexing at his sides like he is forcing himself not to grab me. He would never hurt me, never on purpose. I know this of my blood. However, I cannot help but be reminded of the young male I once was. My words feel too heavy, my throat too tight. No words come out of my mouth, and it seems to make Beren even angrier.

"It is time for you to leave," Lyath says, placing a hand on my shoulder and ushering me out of the house. Beren doesn't move from his position in the living area. His breathing is hard, his body primed for a fight. I look back only once as Lyath closes the door behind us, leaving Beren alone in the house.

"You are not in trouble, and Beren is not upset with you," Lyath tells me in a hushed voice. "Let me care for my mate. You must go care for yours."

I look up at the clouds and notice they are beginning to darken. At least I managed to kill plenty of time today. Still, I wish I could have left Beren and Lyath in good spirits instead of angry as they are now.

"Go and enjoy your night," Lyath tells me as he pushes me away from the house and waves me further down the trail. "Do not fret over Beren. He can be an angry male, but only because he thinks he is responsible for making sure nothing bad ever happens to anyone he cares about."

"That is—" I clear my throat to get the words out easier. "That is impossible."

Lyath smiles and nods. "Yes, well, I have explained that to him many times. Maybe one day it will stick."

"You are good?" I ask once more.

I feel terrible leaving Lyath and Beren as they are now, but there is no reason for me to stick around if there is nothing else to do.

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"We are," Lyath says, turning to grab the door. "Now go. The mating ceremony will begin soon, and I doubt you plan to be there long."

My beating picks up at the thought of bringing Tori back to the house so soon. I take one final deep breath and give Lyath a stiff nod before he disappears back into the house to calm his mate. I make my way back to the tribe and shake out my nerves as I stand in the meeting spot outside the great hall. I will wait here until Kal takes us all inside.

15

Tori

The rules for tonight are the same as last night. We all meet in the same partitioned area of the dining hall. The males stand in their little squares on the ground, waiting for a female to approach them. The biggest difference is that if we want to claim a male as ours and they're receptive to it, then we can leave the mating ceremony.

There are a few rooms in the great hall where we can take our mates if we want to get to know them more intimately, or if we trust them, we can let them take us out of the great hall. I intend to grab Marron's hand as soon as I find him and drag him to the nearest possible private space so I can finally get my hands on him in all the ways we haven't before.

I push some of my hair behind my shoulder and take a deep breath. I'm not nervous about what's about to happen. Maybe I should be. I'm more anxious to get to be with Marron already.

"They're all getting set up now," Diane says as she walks back into the room where we are waiting. "We'll give them two more minutes, and then go out. I'm sure some of you are anxious to get out there."

My cheeks heat even though I know she's also talking to other women. Still, it feels like I'm being called out. Not in a bad way, but it's still enough to have a blush covering my cheeks.

Some of the other women chat amongst themselves, but for the most part, we're all pretty quiet. Two others are more than willing to mate with their demons tonight. The other eight women don't think they've found their mates, but they're still open to seeing where things go with the unmated males. I wouldn't be surprised if they also find themselves with some private time. It's not against the rules to bed any of the males, even if you don't mate them. Something that some of the women talk about with hushed whispers and pink cheeks.

"I'm going to say we're good." Diane claps her hands together and motions for us to all get in a line. "Reminder, you need to tell me or the other chaperone that you're leaving with a male if you do decide to spend time with them alone. It's for your safety. No one here is judging anyone."

Diane opens the door, and we all file out in the same line we did yesterday. I'm a few women from the front, but once we get to the mating ceremony area, no one will try to beat me to my mate. As far as I can tell from the one mating ceremony I've been a part of, the women don't fight each other over males, and just like Diane said, no one really judges the others.

Everyone who goes through the mating ceremony is looking for the same thing, so it'd be unfortunate for one of us to make the others feel ashamed. Not to mention how hypocritical it would be. We're all here trying to find happiness, and none of us should be shamed for that.

"Any questions?" Diane asks as we near the hallway opening.

I twiddle my fingers in front of me, hoping that no one has any questions like they did last night. We stood in this hallway for what felt like an eternity yesterday when a few women had questions about what we were and weren't allowed to do. The not allowed list consisted of 'don't do anything that constitutes mating and don't do anything the males don't want to do.'

"How early can we leave with our mate?" one of the women who's made it clear she's interested in a male named Gere asks. I don't mind that question because I need to know if there's a time limit we have to reach before leaving.

"You may leave as quickly as you want, so long as you tell me or the other chaperone, and the male is receptive to leaving with you," Diane answers.

She keeps her tone factual and soft. It helps to make this all seem more normal than it is compared to what life was like on Earth. Not that I ever did anything other than a few awkward kisses and too sweaty handholding. What can I say? Not everyone's great at dating at sixteen.

"So, hypothetically, if I want to leave as soon as I get there, I just tell you, and I can leave?" the same woman asks. I nod along with her question, showing my support and that I'm just as curious as she is about it.

"Yup," Diane pops the p at the end and gives us a big smile. "We want you to find your mates. Once you have, we don't want to keep you away for any longer than necessary."

I want to roll my eyes, but it's not her fault I've been kept from Marron. It's my own damn fault for not ever going through this earlier. I feel silly now that I know how easy this is and how excited I am to be with him.

"No more questions?" Diane asks, looking down the line at all of us. Her hands rest on the top of her belly, and then she spins back around. "Alright, let's get you back with the males."

We follow her into the dining hall and toward the partitioned-off section. A few of the males are standing a bit taller than usual. Marron is one of them, which leads me to believe the other two are the other males getting mates tonight. I make my way over to Marron, not wasting any time as I wrap my arms around his waist.

"Hey," I say as I look up at him. His bruising has gone down, and the swelling is lessened enough that he can open his eye a little bit.

"Hey," he murmurs back.

He lifts his hands to cup my cheeks, his thumbs rubbing softly over my skin. He has a clean bandage on his bite mark, and my stomach flutters at the memory of sinking my teeth into him last night. He smiles brighter when he sees where I'm looking and lifts one of his hands over the wound.

We stare at each other for another moment before Marron kneels in front of me so we're eye to eye. "You told me that one day you're going to tell everyone I am yours."

My cheeks heat as Marron talks, reminding me of what I confessed to him before the party. I didn't know that he knew anything in English at the time. Now, here he is, reminding me that not only does he understand me, but he has no problem reminding me of what exactly I said.

"You also made me promise to fuck your brains out," he hisses low enough that I'm the only one who hears what he says. My stomach does a flip-flop, and my core clenches.

"I didn't know you could understand me," I tell him in English. My face burns red as I say the words. Embarrassment and arousal course through me in equal measure.

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"How long have you been trying to seduce me with words I might not understand?" Marron asks, pulling me closer to him. "Should I remind you of everything you've wanted to do to me? Of all the things you want me to do to you?"

"Take me somewhere more private, and I'll do anything you remind me I said." I give him the most seductive look I can manage.

I'm proud of myself for how fast Marron's brows rise. He gets up from where he's knelt. His head whips around until he catches someone's attention.

"I am taking her home."

"Has she agreed to this?" Diane asks, trying and failing to keep the laugh from her voice.

"I have," I barely get the words out before Marron has me thrown over his shoulder and is stalking out of the partitioned-off area.

"Be safe!" Diane calls out, drawing more attention to us than we already have, with Marron carrying me like a sack of potatoes.

"You just passed the hall," I say when we pass the hall where the private rooms are.

"I am taking you home. I just said this." Marron sounds smug as he says it, and I wish I could see his face.

As much as I twist and turn in his hold, he doesn't let me budge. Part of it is his male

pride in carrying his mate off like some grand prize. Especially when we're outside the great hall, and he's carrying me around in front of everyone. Even more proof that I'm his and no one else's.

"Hey, Marron?" I ask as we walk outside the tribe's walls and head down the path to Nia's house.

"Hm?" he asks as his hold tightens on my thigh. He likes it when I say his name, and I'll use it a lot because I like how much it affects him.

"Where are we going?"

"Home," he says, as though it answers my question even a little bit.

He chuckles to himself but doesn't give me any more of an answer. Not that I mind much when he starts to move his hand up and down my thigh. I whimper as he gets close to where I want him to touch the most, and I'm not even shy about trying to spread my legs to give him easier access.

"Needy female." Marron clicks his tongue before stilling his hand high on my leg. "Are you slick for me?"

"Pull my shorts down and find out." I smile when his footfalls stutter and even harder when he makes a soft grunting sound in response.

"Soon, little mate," Marron says, his body betraying the easy calm he's trying to portray with his voice. We walk for a little while longer before he comes out of the trees onto the unseeded fields of the farm next door to Nia's.

"Wait." I turn in his hold on me, jerking around to look around as though he's about to tell me this is a joke. "Marron, wait, is this?"

"Our home, little mate," Marron answers my question before I finish asking it. "It's a large house. I'll need your help to fill it."

My stomach flips again, warmth spreading through my body, and a fresh blush on my cheeks. "You want a family with me?"

"I want everything with you, Tori," Marron says, carrying me through the front door to the house and not stopping until he has me laid out on a bed in the furthest bedroom. "But first, I need to make a fire so you can see me when I claim you as mine."

I watch as Marron turns to the fireplace set in the bedroom wall. I admire how he moves, and his muscles bunch and tense as he rearranges the wood in the fireplace.

While he works on starting the fire, I shimmy out of my clothing. First, my shirt and a tentative look in his direction. He continues his work, knowing that I'm half-naked in our bed. Next are my shorts, and as I bend over the edge of the bed to place them on the ground, Marron decides to turn around.

His fingers wrap around my ankle, and he drags me across the bed until my ass is close enough that he can grab it without having to lean over the bed. His fingers curl on the hem of my underwear, stroking the skin underneath. He hisses softly before releasing the underwear and moving his grip to my hips. He rolls me onto my back in one swift movement and then hisses again, louder this time, as my nipples harden under his gaze.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, using the back of his fingers to stroke down my chest, over my breasts, and back toward the hem of my underwear. I arch upward, hoping he'll help me remove them so I am entirely bare for him. Instead, he lowers himself to his knees, pulls me closer to the edge of the bed, and throws my legs over his shoulders.

"Leave these on." He nuzzles his face between my legs, his jaw rubbing against the fabric of my underwear, pressing the damp material against me. Making both of us aware of how badly I want him. "I want these soaked, and then we can trade."

I moan a soft, desperate sound and know that I'm at his mercy, and something tells me that won't be the worst thing.

16

Tori

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Marron rubs his mouth against the fabric again, and as he turns his face to the side, he wraps his mouth around my thigh and gives it a soft bite. I moan and grab for his horns, begging him to do it again. He smiles but keeps his teeth to himself as he leans back on his heels, keeping my legs on his shoulders so he can admire me.

"If I do anything you do not like, you tell me," Marron says, his eyes moving up to my face.

I'm propped up on my forearms, watching to see what he plans on doing to me. My breathing is heavy, and my chest is almost as bright red as my face. Marron notices and seems to puff his chest a bit at how worked up he's gotten me.

"I will. I will. Just do something." I know I sound whiny, but I've waited way too long to be with him just to have him sit between my legs and stare at me.

Marron clicks his tongue at me, but his eyes hold a hint of mischief that I don't know what to do with. Before I get a chance to ask about it, he's bringing one of his hands up between my legs and resting the tips of his fingers along my slit. The fabric stops his touch too soon, but he seems to like that even more. He hovers his fingers, just barely touching me for long moments as he tilts his head to the side, and my clit pulses in an attempt to get more stimulation.

"Keep flexing against me," Marron says, his words more of a command, but his attention entirely focused between my legs.

I whine, and my poor clit pulses with more vigor like we'll get to come if I do what he says. Marron's eyes flash up to mine, and he nods his approval before returning to

watching me. His fingers still don't move or apply any more pressure, and the whine in my throat is turning into a needy whimper.

"Please, Marron, touch me. I need more." I flex my hips upward, attempting to grind against his fingers.

He pulls them away from my clit, raising them higher on my body until he grabs the front of my underwear and pulls them tighter up my body. He does it slowly as if he knows it could hurt if he goes too fast or too hard.

"I have dreamed about you in nothing but these every single night since you flashed them at me," Marron says, pulling my panties tight against me, the friction feeling wonderful against my clit. So much so that I let my head fall back, and a moan escapes my lips. Marron relaxes his hold on the fabric before tightening it like he just had it.

My breath catches in my throat as he does it again, and I realize what he's trying to do.

"What do you do with my underwear?" I ask in English because I'm too far gone to talk in his language. He's lucky I can say anything between the breathy moans escaping my lips as he keeps up a steady rhythm of pulling my underwear against my clit.

"I wrap them around my cock and pleasure myself with them," Marron says, not an ounce of shame in his voice.

He keeps tugging on my underwear with one hand, the other moving between my legs, stroking against my lower lips where they've started to poke out the side of my underwear since he's pulling them tight.

"You are so plump here," he says with an admiration I'm not expecting when talking about the size of my labia. "I will make you coverings with less fabric. I want to see you overflowing from them. Yes, I would like that very much."

"Are you going..." I moan as Marron presses a finger against my pussy through the fabric. He rubs soft circles against me as he keeps stimulating me with my underwear. "Please, are you going to fuck me?"

"Not yet." He glances up at me, a look of certainty on his face that tells me we're not having sex until he's had his fill of teasing me in my underwear. I flop down on my back and fist the blankets in my hands. "Good mate, lie back and let me bring you pleasure."

He's not lying, either. I don't need to do any of the work as he brings me closer and closer to orgasm just by tugging on my underwear. His finger continues to trace soft circles at my entrance, but he never slips between the fabric. No, he keeps pressing against the wetness pooling from me and soaking it into my underwear.

My moans become more and more desperate until I'm shattering, and the world seems to go fuzzy for a moment. I call out his name, my knuckles turning white as I grip the blankets.

Marron loosens his hold on my underwear as I come down from my orgasm, and then gently pulls them out from between my lips and smooths them out over me. He grabs my thighs, spreading me even wider as he leans close to my core and blows out a long, warm breath over my soaked underwear.

"Can you feel how wet you are?" Marron asks. He presses my thighs up and closer to my body so he can fold me in on myself before he blows another stream of air over me while staring at my eyes. "You are eager for your mate, are you not?"

"I am. Please, Marron, I need you." I reach up to grab his hand, and his face softens.

"What do you need from me, mate?" Marron asks, his eyes teasing as he presses his thumb against my clit, feeling it pulse under his touch, aching for more of him. "Use those human words and tell me everything you want me to do to you."

My breath catches for a second, and then I lick my lips. Wetting them in an attempt to buy myself some time. It was easier to tell Marron I wanted him to fuck my brains out when I didn't think he could understand me, but now that I know, I'm suddenly self-conscious. Like, my words are embarrassing now instead of sexy. I mean, Marron just told me he jerks off with my underwear, and it was the hottest thing I've heard. But now that it's my turn, I feel like I'm just going to embarrass myself.

"Use your words," Marron nuzzles his face close to my core, sniffing loudly like he did during the mating ceremony.

The idea of him sniffing me there has my face burning, and I squeal as I try to close my thighs. Of course, he's stronger than me and keeps me spread nice and wide for him. His eyes flicker up to me, and he presses his nose right against me before taking another long sniff, somehow making it even louder than the previous one.

"Marron!" I squeal and wiggle in his hold even more. He smiles against me, the amusement in his eyes making up for how mortified I am.

"My mate has the sweetest smelling cunt," he hisses against the fabric of my underwear. As if to prove his point, he rubs his nose against the wet fabric again. "I could live the rest of my life right here and die the happiest male."

"No dying." I swat at him and grab one of his horns. He flicks his eyes upward and gives me an approving smile. I'm sure he wants me to use his horns to hold him against me, but right now, I want him inside of me, not just sniffing me and rubbing

his face against me. "Not until I've made love to you."

His brows go up, but he finally relents and pulls away from having his face between my legs. "You wish for lovemaking now? I thought I was supposed to fuck you hard?"

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I make a whining sound in the back of my throat. "At this point, I don't care. I just need you inside of me."

"Then tell me what you want me to do to you," Marron says, pressing my thighs just a little bit more. "I'll do anything you want. You just need to tell me."

I lick my lips again and look down his body to where his cock is straining against the fabric of his pants. "Take off your clothes."

Marron's lips pull back as a hiss leaves his mouth. I don't know if my asking for it is what makes him so turned on by it or the fact that I just really want him bare for me. Either way, he's discarding his clothes so fast I don't even get my legs back down before he's grabbing my thighs and spreading me again.

I stare at his cock for way longer than is considered polite. It's the biggest, sexiest cock I've ever seen. A real masterpiece between his legs. I can't be blamed when I seem to forget all my words and lie, staring at it with an open mouth for too long.

"Is this how you would like to spend the evening?" Marron asks, a laugh in his voice, when fresh blood warms my cheeks and spreads down my chest. "I have no issue with it. I am glad you enjoy looking at me as I enjoy looking at you. I did think you might still want to be stretched on me, though."

I nod, finding my words and hoping I'm picking the right ones to make his brain short-circuit, just like he makes mine. "Pull my underwear to the side."

Marron's lips twitch into an almost snarl again. And it makes my core flutter and

pulse. Yeah, I can get under his scales just like he gets under my skin.

He does as I ask, pulling my underwear to the side and revealing a patch of bright orange hair. He's already seen it, but now that I'm bare for him completely, he's embarrassing me even more and diving back in, inhaling my scent and nudging my clit with his nose. His tongue flicks out, teasing my pussy and causing me to forget about how mortifying it is to have him sniffing me and only thinking about how good it feels to have him between my legs.

"This is perfect," Marron groans against me. His words vibrate against me, sending ripples of pleasure through me and causing my core to clench in anticipation.

"Finger me," I gasp, needing to feel something inside of me if he's going to make his face at home against me. He gives me a quizzical expression, obviously unsure of what fingering is. "Use your fingers inside of me. One and then two when I've stretched out."

"Anything for you," he says, his tongue flicking against my pussy once more before one of his scaled fingers takes its place. "Can I keep my tongue on you?" he asks, tilting his head to the side and letting it rest against my thigh until I answer him.

"Please, on my clit while you fuck me with your fingers."

Marron hisses a low sound as his tongue flicks back out and makes soft lashes against my swollen clit. I'm already ready to come again, my pussy making noisy sounds as Marron thrusts into me with his middle finger. He curls it just right inside me, and I feel my soul leave my body for a moment. He stops, eyes narrowing, finger stilling inside me. He makes the motion again, and when I make a high-pitched keening sound in the back of my throat, his face seems to set into a look of hard determination.

"More, I need more," I cry out.

Marron doesn't make me wait much longer before sliding a second finger in and thrusting it in the same way as the first. As he drags them out, he hooks them upward, pressing against a spot inside of me that has me seeing his goddess up close and personal.

"Marron!" I cry out his name, not knowing what I need but knowing that he can give it to me, whatever it is.

"I am here," Marron says, his fingers working inside of me so perfectly that I have to squeeze my eyes shut as pleasure washes over me. "I have you. Let yourself break. I will be here."

Two more strokes against that spot inside me is all it takes. The world doesn't just go fuzzy. It completely disappears. I don't know if I pass out or if the sensations send me to a whole other world for a few seconds. I only know that I feel wave after wave of pleasure as my entire world is consumed in darkness. When the darkness fades and the pleasure subsides, I shake softly, my body adjusting to the comedown.

Marron's holding me as I come to, his arms wrapped around me, curling me up in his lap as he rubs his hands down my back and whispers to me how much he cares for me. When he sees my eyes open, he smiles down at me.

"Welcome back."

"What happened?" I ask, unsure if I want to know that he broke me with the world's best orgasm.

"You trusted me with your pleasure, and I was greatly rewarded." Marron seems proud of himself, and it's not until his thumb strokes against my bare skin that I

realize he's taken my underwear off me. "You soaked them even more than I could have ever hoped for, but they did not look like they would be comfortable to wear, so I stripped you."

"I still want to feel you," I whine against his chest, moving to sit in his lap. He stretches his legs out, and I place my knees on either side of him.

"I would very much enjoy you riding me," he says, looking down between us, making sure not to hit me with his horns as he does.

His cock is standing up, glistening at the tip, and all but begging for me to guide it inside of me. I swallow deeply and wait for him to look back up at me.

"I've never done this before," I admit, not wanting him to be unhappy with me for not knowing what I'm doing. "I might not be any good."

Marron frowns at me, leaning back against the headboard as he places his hands on my hips. "You have already been the best. Nothing you can do will ever change that."

My toes curl behind me, and butterflies flutter in my stomach. I bite my lip, wanting more than anything to do it. Marron must sense my apprehension because he places a hand on my cheek and guides my eyes back to his.

"I am here with you," Marron says, somehow knowing the perfect thing to say to ease my worries. Then he relaxes against the headboard even more and uses his thighs to buck me closer to his cock. "Now ride me. If I am in charge this first time, I might break you again, and I've already done that once this night."

"If I do it wrong..."

"Then I will tell you," Marron reassures me before lifting me with his thighs again.

This time, I listen to his prompting and grab his cock. I tease the head of it against my entrance, biting back a moan as it breaches me. My body stretches to accommodate him as I take it at my own pace. I slide a little bit in before pulling out and sliding down more.

Marron moves his hips from my body, grabbing the top of the headboard and squeezing it as I continue to take him slowly. His teeth are clenched, eyes set in a hard determination as I continue to take him deeper and deeper, one inch at a time.

"Are you okay?" I ask, worried I might be hurting him with how he looks.

His teeth stay clenched, and he gives me a grunt and a quick nod. I bite my bottom lip and press down on him until I've taken all of him. My emotions swell at our joining, at this inevitability that's finally come true. It almost doesn't feel real.

Marron's impacted by it, even if his reaction is slightly different. His eyes flicker red, though I don't know what he has to be upset about. Then he grabs my hips and presses deeper into me. He swells and twitches, releasing his seed deep in me.

I run my fingers down his chest and abdomen, hoping to show him that I'm enjoying this, even if it's not making me orgasm. This closeness and connection that we're sharing is something else I crave. That and I know he'll be more than eager to continue pleasing me as soon as we're both ready again.

"Sorry." Marron's scales flush a darker shade as he looks at me. "I meant to last longer, but you feel so good." I blush at his words and try to think of how to respond. He continues before I get the chance. "Are you tired?"

"A little," I admit. Not only was it a long day of waiting for tonight, but whatever he did to me earlier that broke me for a minute or two made me more exhausted than anything else.

"Sleep, I will keep you safe," Marron murmurs. He places a hand on the back of my neck and pulls me down until I'm lying against his chest. His other arm is around my lower back, keeping me trapped against him.

"Uh, you know you're still inside me?" I ask, unsure if he thinks he'll be able to sleep this way.

The idea of falling asleep with him buried in me is more than appealing and somehow comforting. Like I'll be filled all night, close enough to Marron that nothing bad will happen to me.

"I am going to fall asleep every night inside of you, Tori," Marron says, not leaving room for any disagreement. Even if he did, he wouldn't be hearing any from me. "This is my home now."

He yawns loudly before stroking his hand up and down my back. I relax against his chest, finding that it's more comforting than anything else to lie like this.

"Not to mention, I need to make sure you are growing with my young soon."

I make a sound between a gasp of surprise and a snort of laughter.

"I am not playing, little mate. You will be round with my young more often than not

if I have it my way," Marron says. Just like his need to sleep inside me, I find that his words make me feel all kinds of warm and loved.

"How many babes do you want, Marron?" I ask, resting with my cheek against his chest.

His heart is beating rapidly underneath me, but he's pretending to be tired because I am, so I don't say anything about it. I relax against him, my eyes closing and my breathing becoming deeper.

"How many do you think you can have?" he asks as though it's a perfectly rational question.

"You can't answer a question with a question," I grumble, but my voice is still teasing. "How about I have as many as you want? So, how many is that?"

"Six." Marron wiggles underneath me just a bit as though the idea of having that many kids makes him so happy he can't help but move. "But that is just a dream. I am not the one having to carry them. So we have as many as you want and no more."

"Let me have one, and then I'll have a better idea of how many I want to carry." My words are quiet as sleep calls to me.

The only thing that keeps me from keeping my eyes closed is the reminder that we still haven't mated. I lift off Marron just enough to get my hand between us.

He holds me tighter, thinking I'm trying to wriggle him out of me. Instead, I gather the mixture of us that's been forced out as Marron's moved. I prop myself up on one of my elbows and bring my fingers to my lips. Marron watches me as I do it, his cock twitching inside of me again, filling me with even more of his release.

"I am yours, Marron. I've always been yours." I clean the rest of the mixture from my fingers before lying back down against Marron's chest. This time, when my eyes close, they're not opening again until morning.

"I might fill you a few times in the night just thinking about those words," Marron whispers as he uses his claws to play with my hair.

"Feel free to do anything we just did while I sleep." I hum a happy sound against his scales and then amend my statement before I fall asleep. "No butt stuff."

Marron makes a surprised choking sound and then nods so hard I can feel it jostling my body. "I can still touch your backside, yes? You only do not want me to put my cock in it?"

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"Mhm," I mumble and press a kiss to his pec. He nods again, not as hard as I let sleep cover me in its darkness.

17

Marron

I have never slept so well in my entire life. I have thought that every time I have woken with Tori in my arms, but now I am almost positive it cannot get any better than this. Especially as her loud nose sounds fill the room as I wake, telling me she is finding much comfort in my arms.

Last night, after Tori fell asleep, I took her up on what she told me. I started by just thrusting into her softly, slowly, making sure not to wake her or cause her any pain if she was still sore from taking me for the first time.

I do not think it says anything about my ability to make love that she started making her nose sounds when I released inside of her. I may have then found myself seeing how gently I could make love to her while she slept for so long that my cock finally softened.

When that happened, I wiggled out from underneath my mate, who I now know can sleep through almost anything. I washed between her legs and nuzzled the rough hair there until I was content with making sure her cunt felt as loved as I do when I am inside it. I thought about falling asleep with my head on Tori's thigh and my face pressed against her curls, but then I remembered how good she felt in my arms and decided it was best to hold her our first night as mates.

"Is it morning?" Tori asks, startling me by her abrupt awakeness. I did not even notice that her loud nose sounds had stopped.

Strange that she was just sleeping so hard, and now she is looking at me with wide eyes like she does not need some time to wake up like I do. I am not fully awake for at least the entire walk to Beren and Lyath's farm every morning.

My mate is better at waking than me, and it has me wondering if her refreshed state will mean she might be interested in riding my cock again. I did not manage to get her to ride me for very long last night before releasing inside of her, but maybe now she is more awake and willing to let me buck underneath her.

"It is." I swallow hard, trying to think of the correct way to ask my mate to slide herself onto me.

She looks up at me with a bright smile, and I think maybe I should think of something else because she seems much too bright and happy. I do not want to dampen that if she is not in the mood to make love with me.

"How many times did you release inside of me last night?" she asks, taking my breath from my chest in one quick question.

For a moment, I feel like a young who has just been caught doing something he was not meant to be doing. I remind myself that Tori told me I was allowed to use her body in that way, but it is another thing for her to ask me about it with a loving smile on her lips. It makes me feel like maybe I was not loving enough to her.

"Maybe five or six." I rub one of my horns. My scales feel too tight all of a sudden. "I hope that is okay. You told me I could, but now I am feeling uncertain."

Tori plops one of her hands over my lips to silence me. "You made love to me while I

slept?" she asks, but doesn't release my lips, so I can only nod. The tightness of my scales grows. "I like that. I want to know about it. So tell me what you did to me."

My eyes go wide, but the tightness of my scales eases some. Tori narrows her eyes at me and still doesn't release my lips. I think she will, so I can tell her, but she says one more thing before releasing my tongue.

"I used to fantasize about you crawling through my window at night and having your way with me."

I hiss long and hard against her hand, and she finally giggles and allows me to speak. "You are a strange female. I have not heard of one who wishes for her body to be used when she cannot remember it."

"Well, I only want it to be you, Marron. I only trust you enough."

My chest swells in pride, and my cock does the same. Yes, I have decided not to be ashamed of fulfilling my little mate's secret desires. If she wishes for me to fill her womb in her sleep, I will do it every single night.

I might even try to get her to find release while she makes loud sounds through her nose tonight. There is no way she will be able to sleep through that. Or maybe she will, and I will have to think of other ways to wake her. Suddenly, this seems like it will be one of my favorite things to do.

"Are you sore?" I ask, needing to make sure I will not hurt my mate before I ask her to use her small human body to bring me more pleasure.

"Just a little bit." She pushes against my chest and sits between my legs. Her eyes fall down my body, where I am most definitely flexing my muscles in an attempt to entice her into sleeping with me again. She must like what she is seeing because she reaches

out to my hardened cock and strokes it lovingly. "Want to see if I'm too sore?"

"Very much, yes."

I barely get the words out before my mate is straddling me and sliding herself down my length. I have only a moment to thank the goddess for blessing me so much before Tori tries to kill me with how vigorously she can bounce herself on my cock.

"Are you willing to tell us what happened to you a few days ago?"

Ralleth and Olivia sit in front of Tori and me in the dining hall. The only reason I am in the tribe is to get this over with and also to grab some food so I can keep my mate in our home for the foreseeable future until I am sure my seed has been planted in her womb. Even then, I think I will want to keep her to myself for a long while.

I tug Tori tighter against me. I might have made her sit in my lap as soon as we sat down in the dining hall. I also might have carried her around like I did last night.

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What can I say? I am a male, proud of how beautiful my mate is. How can I not wish to show off to everyone that this is the female whose soul I have managed to woo? I am proud of this. Probably more proud of her than I am of anything else I have ever done.

"Keep your hands on the table while we talk to your leader," Tori tells me in English.

Ralleth does not understand her words, but his mate does and tries to hide her smile. I hold my hands up and very purposefully place them on the table in front of me. Tori is right to ask it of me, though. I very much want to place my hands up her skirt.

I tried to convince her to let me fill her underwear with my seed before wearing it, but she told me that this could make her sick. It was one of the worst things I have ever heard in my life, but then she told me I could spill myself on her, and she would rub it into her skin if I wanted to do that instead.

Again, I am a blessed male. How could I not want to parade my female around the tribe on my shoulder, claimed as mine?

"Joll attacked me the first night of the mating ceremony," I say.

It is not something that will keep me up at night, and I most definitely do not need to protect him. I have not said anything before now because I wanted everyone in the tribe to know he was a liar.

I understand a male wanting my mate. She is easily the best mate to have ever lived. But that means I need to work hard to protect her.

Joll put her honor into question, and I wanted her to have the ability to reject him on her own, to prove to everyone that she did not choose him and would not be bullied into a mating just because he was making it out as though he was her mate. He thought to corner her by spreading lies and forcing her into a mating ceremony, and she was able to tell him in front of everyone that she did not want him.

"I do not know if Joll, Ere, or Nillin struck first. Thro might be able to tell you that." I continue telling them what happened. "But one of the three hit me in the back of the head. Thro says he and Jen saw a club left where I had fallen, so I assume that's what they hit me with. While I was passed out, they kicked me a few times, or that's what Jen told me. She was busy trying to hold Thro back so he wouldn't get hurt, so she missed some things." I tense behind Tori, needing to explain a little bit more. "I do not blame Jen for not seeing much. I am grateful to her. She is a small female and managed to hold my brother back. Them not being found is how they were able to follow Joll and his friends."

"You told Kal that Thro found you out in the trees on his way back to the farm," Ralleth says. It's not so much a statement as it is a question about how much of that is true.

"Thro and Jen followed Joll and the others as they dragged my body out into the trees. They took me the opposite way of the farms." I frown and flick my eyes down to Tori because I do not want her to hear this next part and worry more for me. Or really, I do not want her looking for Joll so she can slice into him herself. "If Jen and Thro did not follow them, I do not know when I would have been found. I was taken to a section that is not meant to be hunted for a few more days."

I hear the growl in Tori's throat right before she whips her head around, an accusing glare in her eyes. I might find it frightening if it did not make my cock come to attention in an instant. I like it when she is ferocious. It reminds me of the bite in my neck that is healing nicely.

"Calm, little mate, I am here, and I am yours." I move my hand to squeeze her thigh. I want to push my hand even higher and stroke the hair between her legs, but she might try to kill me if I do it right here in front of Ralleth and Olivia. She cares very much about what they think of her.

"You are mine," she grumbles as she turns around to face Olivia and Ralleth.

Olivia gives her a knowing look, and Ralleth beams at me like he understands the pride in having a female claim him. It is wonderful. I can only imagine how wonderful it must have been for Ralleth since no one in his tribe ever thought they'd even see a female again.

"Well, thank you for telling us what happened," Ralleth says, looking to his mate to ensure there is nothing else they need to say. "We will leave you to your food."

Ralleth and Olivia have just left their seats across from us when two others take their spots. Erkoz and Xoth are two brothers who have no reason to be talking to us, not when they are most likely scheming something. I have not known Erkoz to do anything that did not involve much scheming. I should know because Thro wants to be just like him when he is a grown male.

"There is some news that we must tell you." Erkoz's voice is serious for the first time since I've known him.

"No one has seen Joll, Ere, or Nillin since Joll was kicked out of the mating ceremony." Xoth picks up where Erkoz stops. "Kal escorted Joll out of the mating ceremony area, and Almaac escorted him back home. Ere and Nillin were allowed to finish the mating ceremony, but never showed up last night."

"I know nothing about where they have gone," I say, my brows furrowing as I try to figure out why Xoth and Erkoz are telling me this. "Do you think I have something to

do with it? I am not an aggressive male. I swear this, you can ask anyone."

"No, no," Erkoz cuts in. I do not realize I am shaking as hard as I am until Tori is twining her fingers in mine. "We do not think it was you." Erkoz's eyes fall on my little mate, still trying to soothe me with her soft touches.

"Have you seen your wardens recently?" Xoth asks my mate, who goes stiff in my arms.

I have a single moment to figure out what I am to do. It is an easy decision. Beren would do anything for those he claims as his. Now, it is my chance to prove that I would do the same for him.

"I was with Beren and Lyath right before the mating ceremony," I say, sitting up a bit straighter and moving my hand back to Tori's thigh to squeeze it and tell her to let me handle this. I do not know if she will play along, but I hope she knows I am doing this to keep her blood—our blood—safe. "I left them in my home right before the mating ceremony. Tori asked me to take her home soon after the ceremony started. Almaac's mate can tell you this is true. When we got to our home, Tori's family was there to celebrate with us."

Erkoz's brows pull together, and he gives me a disgusted look like he can think of nothing worse than having family in his home when he only wants to be with his mate. I can think of many things worse, but I understand why he does not appreciate what I am saying. Xoth is the clever one between the two, so he is the one I am worried about seeing through my lies.

"You took Tori home to claim her as your mate, and instead of doing that, you celebrated with family?" Xoth asks, giving me a look that tells me he does not believe me.

"I claimed him out in the trees," Tori pipes up from my lap, leaning forward in a challenge. "I couldn't wait and wiggled free of his hold so I could suck him off right out in the open."

Xoth and Erkoz look a little ashamed of hearing about my mate doing mate things with me. I would not have been as vulgar as my sweet mate in my lie, but it appeases the males' curiosity and makes them feel too awkward to ask follow-up questions.

"Make sure your blood knows they were with you in case anyone comes asking questions," Erkoz says, giving us both a look that tells us he and Xoth will support us in our lies so long as we do not give them any reason not to.

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"We were just about to head back," I say, lifting my mate off my lap.

This time, I do not throw her over my shoulder. I wrap an arm over her shoulder and pull her to my side. Her hand fists the back of my tunic, and her other hand grips my abdomen in a way that tells me she is trying her hardest to look calm until we get back home. I give Erkoz and Xoth one last glance. They are speaking amongst one another, not paying attention to Tori or me.

I hope this is a good sign that nothing bad will come of this. My mate deserves all the creatures who bring her joy to be in her life. I doubt anyone would do anything as drastic as kicking Beren or Lyath out, but I do not want them to be put in that situation.

"Marron," Tori's voice sounds worried as we exit the great hall.

"Shh."

I hush her, not wanting us to say anything until I am sure no one is listening. I walk us quickly through the tribe and do not speak again until we are deep in the trees, off the path, even though we're headed for Beren's farm.

"I will make this okay. I will make it right."

"Did my wardens do something to Joll and his friends?" Tori asks, her voice full of many emotions.

I look down at her, and when I see her eyes are glossy with tears, I kneel in front of

her and pull her tight to me so I can comfort her.

"I do not know, but if they did, it was because they were protecting you," I tell her, stroking the back of her hair until her shaking stops. "Let us go speak to your blood. I am sure they have a reason for their actions—if it was even them. There is a chance we came up with a lie for no reason, yes?"

Tori nods in the crook of my neck, rubbing against my bandage. My cock does not understand that now is not the time to attempt to impregnate our mate. It is relentless, though, and Tori is so close to me she can feel it as it strains against my pants and begs to rub against her.

My cock seems to lighten Tori's mood. She throws her head back and laughs, and then pulls me close to her before kissing me many times. "We talk to my wardens first, and then I'll care for my mate's needs."

"All of my needs?" I ask, making sure I am not misunderstanding her.

"All of your needs." Her hand runs down my chest, over my abdomen, and then cups my cock. "You can take care of mine, too."

"Always," I hiss before hopping to my feet.

Now, it is most important that we get things cleared up with Beren and Lyath so that I can go and see what needs Tori thinks I have. I am already planning on not telling her what I wish of her so that I can see what she is willing to do unprompted. Yes, that will be the most wonderful way to spend the rest of the day once we get this conversation over with.

Tori

There's no one in the fields when we walk up to the house, which is strange. I don't bother knocking on the door. It's late enough in the day that everyone should be awake.

"Nia!" I shout from the living area. I'm not about to bust into her room. "We need to talk!"

Jen comes walking out of her room, rubbing her eyes. She gives Marron and me a confused look, and then I give her one when Thro walks out behind her, rubbing his eyes like he just woke up, too. Marron frowns at the same time I give my cousin a look with a single raised eyebrow that's asking, 'what the fuck?'.

"He's been sleeping on the floor," Jen answers my unasked question, but her cheeks turn bright pink.

I feel bad for her because her crush on Thro has about six more years at least before he looks at her in any kind of way that's not as a friend. And that's if he feels called to her at all. Thro doesn't pick up on anything happening between Jen and me. Instead, he looks at Marron and then at me, and smiles a big, toothy smile.

"We are blood now?" he asks, running over and wrapping his arms around me.

"Yes, yes, she is your sister now," Marron says, flashing his eyes at Jen to make sure she isn't uncomfortable with him calling me Thro's sister. She rolls her eyes before turning back to the bedroom.

"I'm going to sleep," Jen says. "Let me know if anything fun happens."

"Oh!" Thro runs after her, shutting the door a bit too loudly when he goes to close it.

"We can go swimming. You said you wanted to do that. Or we could go looking for flowers to make dyes. You wanted to make some pink shirts, did you not?" Thro pauses to take a breath, which only means he's about to keep going. "Wait, are you truly getting back into bed? No, we are already awake. Let us go find something to do."

"I am sorry for your cousin," Marron leans down and whispers to me. "I am sure Thro will realize everything he missed when he is fully grown."

"She wouldn't want you to feel bad for her," I say. "Plus, she'll be old enough for the mating ceremony in a couple of years. Maybe she'll be over her crush by then."

"If she is not, it will be years before Thro can even feel the same toward her," Marron reminds me, as though Jen and I haven't had these exact conversations late at night.

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"I am lying in bed, then," Thro says. "I will not stop talking until you are annoyed enough to wake up. You are just wishing to sulk today, and I will not allow it. You are too happy a female to be sad today. Nope, not today, of all the happiest of days. We are blood now. Is that not exciting to you?"

"Oh shit," I say right as Jen makes a loud shrieking sound. It takes her half a second before she marches back out of her room. She stares daggers at Marron and me.

"What is wrong?" Thro comes running out behind her, and he tries to chase after her even though she's making it clear she wants away from him. She slams the front door and heads down the trail to the tribe. Marron grabs Thro by the upper arm and keeps him from leaving. "Let me go. I have upset my friend."

"Let her calm down," Marron says, trying to keep his voice soft even as Thro tugs at his hold. "She needs some time on her own."

"How would you know?" Thro snarls up at his brother. "You mate a female for one day, and now you know everything?"

"Thro," I say his name as kindly as I can. I speak to him in English because if Marron's learned it, Thro's probably been learning it, too. "Give her some time, okay?"

Thro narrows his eyes at me and then flicks his eyes up to his brother. "Do not tell her I understand. She tells me secrets sometimes in her language, and I like being the only one she trusts. She is my best friend."

Marron rubs his eyes and shakes his head. He leaves me to deal with Thro, though. I give him a nod and shoo Marron's hold on him. "Go back to your room for a little bit."

Thro doesn't look happy at being told what to do, but he only frowns again before returning to the room. He's just closing the door when Nia's bedroom door opens, and she and Beren walk out. They don't look like they just woke up at all. In fact, they look a little ragged, like maybe they haven't slept at all.

"What did you do?" I point my question at Beren because he's the one with the never-ending feeling that he has to protect everyone at all times, no matter what.

"You are a mated female with your own male," Beren says. "You should not be asking questions like that."

Marron hisses, stepping in front of me, making it clear I'm no longer Beren's to protect. Beren's eyes narrow a fraction, and then he frowns.

"Sorry," he sighs and moves further into the living room before plopping down on the couch. "We have been up all night. Lyath just fell asleep, and we are not waking him."

"Why were you up all night?" I ask.

Beren raises his brows at Marron, motioning with his hand as though he's supposed to tell me that I should be careful about the questions I ask other males now.

"My mate can ask whatever she wants to anyone she wants," Marron snaps, his temper flaring in a way I've never seen. "It is up to you to answer her without being disrespectful."

Jen's bedroom door is slammed back open, and Thro stomps through the house, his eyes bright red and his claws hanging heavy at the ends of his fingers.

"You do not disrespect my brother's mate." He points a finger at Beren and doesn't even shake. "He is kinder than I am, but I will not think twice. I have killed a male before. I can do it again."

"You've really done it now," Nia says, shaking her head. She moves to the kitchen. "Beren will apologize, but first, when's the last time you had any water?"

She doesn't wait for my answer before tossing a skin over to me.

"I do apologize," Beren says, keeping his eyes on Thro's since he's the one most upset about everything that's happening. "I am sorry. I wanted to make sure your brother would stand up for his mate. I want to make sure my ward is in good hands. It was cruel of me. I did not think of how it would make any of you feel."

Thro's breathing is still hard, his chest heaving as he takes deep, unsteady breaths. His lips pull back in a snarl, and then he turns away from him, rubbing at his eyes and the tears that are threatening to fall.

"Oh, I am a terrible male," Beren mutters.

Thro keeps his back to him, but Beren stands and walks over, so he stands in front of Thro. He kneels down so they are closer to the same height and places his hands on his shoulders. Thro doesn't flinch very hard, but he does, and it's a reminder of everything he went through before coming to this tribe.

"Thro, please, I am the most sorry male to have ever lived." Beren's voice holds more emotions than I've heard from him. "I did not think. Please tell me that you are not going to be upset with me forever. Moments, days, seasons, all of those are fine, but

tell me it will not be forever."

Thro rubs at his eyes again and then looks behind Beren to where Marron is standing next to me with a hand on my back.

"My brother is the best male," Thro says, his eyes falling down to Beren. "It was cruel to doubt that."

"It was very cruel," Beren agrees. "I only worry for my ward, but that is no excuse."

"It is not," Thro nods. He swallows hard and then nods. "I will not be mad forever. Probably not even for days. I do require moments, though. May I leave?"

"You don't need to ask permission to come or go," Nia butts into the conversation, handing Thro a plate of food and a skin of water. "But you do have to have some breakfast. I'm not having my blood going hungry because my mate was a dumbass."

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"Thank you," he tells Nia, taking the food and walking to the dining room. He loudly sets his food down and pulls out a chair. Once settled, he looks back at us and gives us a confused look. "What? She just said I can come and go whenever. I have decided to stay. I assumed that was included."

Beren laughs. It's a strange sound that we only hear occasionally. It's short and out of place, but it causes a smile to split Nia's lips and a reluctant one to form on Thro's. He shakes his head, decides to be angry again, and turns his attention back to his food.

"Are we okay?" Beren asks Marron and me from where he's kneeling on the floor. "I genuinely feel terrible. I did not think of how it would make you feel. I am on edge after last night, but I should not have treated you that way."

"Tell us what happened last night, and we'll forgive you," I say before Marron can tell him that all is forgiven.

Marron knows I can hold my own against the stupidity of dumb males. He's probably more upset about how worked up Thro was about the whole thing. He tries to keep Thro from hardships since he's already been through so much, and Beren just brought all of the past up without meaning to.

Instead of giving me a hard time about my question, Beren sighs loudly and returns to his seat on the couch. "Lyath, Nia, and I went to have a conversation with Joll and his friends."

"A conversation?" I lift one of my eyebrows, telling him I don't believe him. I take a sip of my water while I wait for him to continue.

"I am not lying." Beren looks at me as though I've grown a pair of horns. "We told his mother of how he lied about wooing you and how he grabbed you in the mating ceremony when you did not want him to. She forced him to pack his bag, and we helped her pack the rest of the house. She was embarrassed by her son's behavior. Was scolding him the entire time."

"And the other two?" I ask. "What happened with them?"

"They were staying with Joll's family. His mother was chastising the three of them the entire time." Beren tilts his head to the side, his brows pulling together. "What did you think we did?"

Marron steps in front of me, and this time, I let him because I don't want to explain to Beren that I thought the three of them managed to abduct and murder three males during the night and dispose of the bodies without alerting anyone.

"Before you get upset at me, know that I think you would do anything to protect those you care for," Marron starts.

"Of course I would," Beren snarls, his lips pulling back to reveal his teeth. Then the expression falls, and his eyes widen like he's realizing the unspoken words that Marron is about to say. "You thought I killed them?"

"I told you about Joll grabbing Tori, and you were very upset," Marron says. "We did not know where the three of you were during the night, and when Erkoz and Xoth asked us—"

"Erkoz and Xoth?" Beren asks, his brows pulling together. "I spoke with Ralleth and his mate this morning with Joll's mother to let them know why they were all leaving. Erkoz and Xoth were nearby but seemed more interested in their mate than getting up to mischief."

"Wait, so they knew that they all left?" I ask. "So we lied to them for nothing?"

"You lied to them?" Beren asks. "Why? You did not know if anything even happened."

"You are not the only male who protects those he cares about. We told them you three were celebrating our mating for most of the night."

Beren's face screws up at the thought of spending the whole night of my mating with Marron and me. He's not the only one. It's not like we want it to be a reality. After the disgust settles, a look of admiration seems to cross his features before he settles back into his happy face, which is his neutral face with slightly crinkled eye corners.

"You lied for us, to protect us," Beren succinctly wraps up this morning's events.

"For no reason, it seems." Marron shrugs. "I imagine Erkoz and Xoth now think we are very much liars, but I suppose that is better than being creatures who would not protect their blood. Not to mention, they are liars themselves."

"They cannot hate you," Thro calls out from the dining table. "You are brother to the most favorite male. Not to mention, you are blood to the only farmers in the tribe. I am almost certain you could do much before they think less of you."

"We are not the only farmers anymore," Beren says. I assume you showed your mate your new home."

"I did. We are very excited to have it. Thank you."

"Do not thank him," Thro calls out again. "He does not deserve it today. You can thank him tomorrow."

Beren's lips press together, but he gives us both a short nod of understanding. "I think I am meant to go to work today. It shall be your reprieve from me."

"Yes, go be busy so I may be mad at you in peace."

Thro waves Beren through the door with his fork. Beren shakes his head as he leaves, but doesn't counter anything Thro says. As soon as the door is closed, Thro turns his eyes to Nia with a sheepish look.

"I have forgiven your mate, but I will be making this worth it."

"He deserves it. Are you two staying, or are you heading back home?"

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"We should probably go tell Erkoz and Xoth that we lied," Marron says with a tight pull of his lips.

"Uh, fuck no," Nia shakes her head. "I'm going to tell their mate that her mates were assholes and let her deal with it."

"I think that means we can go back home." I hit Marron's hip with mine, reminding him of things we promised to one another on our way out here.

Marron shifts his body so he isn't facing Nia anymore, and I bite back my smile when I look down and see his cock straining against his pants. I shoot him a devilish wink that has him hissing at me in displeasure. I wiggle my brows at him and wrap my fingers in his.

"We're leaving," I call over my shoulder.

"Thro, do not visit us until I come to get you." Marron pins his brother with a look that tells him he will regret his decision if he even thinks of interrupting us. Thro opens his mouth to object, probably to say something like, 'The most favorite male should not be told he is not allowed somewhere.'

Nia cuts him off before he can form the first word. "We'll keep him busy on the farm. You two have fun. We'll see you when you're ready to be around others."

"Never," Marron whispers into my ear as he guides me out of the house. "If it is up to me, I will keep you trapped in my bed forever."

"Promises, promises."

I lift his hand to my mouth and wrap my teeth around his wrist. I give it a soft bite that has Marron hissing his pleasure. I'm off the ground and thrown over his shoulder before the squeal has a chance to form in my lungs.

"Tell me what you plan on doing to me today," Marron says as he picks up the pace and runs through the field toward our house. "Use all those human words, Tori. I want to know exactly what I have to look forward to."

"Everything," I laugh as the wind whips my hair around my face. "I want to do it all with you, Marron."

He hops the fence that leads to our farmland. "We have a whole life. I think we can make that work."

19

Tori

Seven and a Half Years Later

Thro groans as he twists on the bed. Two days ago, he started going through the changing, and he asked if he could stay in one of our spare rooms so he wouldn't traumatize Toron's children. Apparently, he's perfectly fine traumatizing mine, but then again, Wren and Lark are only three years old and probably won't remember all of Thro's moaning and groaning at all hours.

Marron wraps an arm over my abdomen, spreading his fingers wide over my growing belly. Vex has promised me there is only one in there this time. I told Marron if he knocked me up with twins again, I was going to seal him because it was exhausting.

It was exhausting to make them, to carry them, to give birth to both of them, and it has been exhausting still as they grow and decide never to want to sleep at the same time. The only reason we haven't gone insane is that we have so much family who enjoy helping out. I didn't get the whole it takes a village thing. Then I had twins as my first babies, and now I understand.

"Ahh," Thro's groan starts as a low guttural sound that intensifies as he twists in the blankets again.

"Is there anything we can do?" I ask.

I didn't realize what happened to the males when they went through the changing. I was told they grow and their bodies mature, but I didn't know it put them through so much pain when it happened. It makes sense, but it hurts to watch Thro in so much pain and know there's nothing I can do for him.

"We're making him comfortable, keeping the fire going, and I am making sure he eats and gets water," Marron assures me. "I was left in a safety building alone for the four days it took me to go through the changing. I promise I am doing everything I can to make sure my brother is in as little pain as possible."

I lean against Marron, wanting to wrap my arms around him and soothe the younger version of him who had to go through that all on his own with no one there to hold him or make sure he was as comfortable as he could be. I don't even want to think of how hungry and tired he must have been when it was over.

"You should try to sleep," Marron says. "The twins are asleep, and I will watch Thro."

I don't want to leave Marron on his own, but I'm exhausted. This next babe will be born soon, and the closer it gets, the more and more tired I've been getting. I only

hope they hold out until Thro is through the changing. I can't put Marron through his brother and his mate crying out in pain at the same time.

I curl up in bed, as close to the edge as I can safely get. Wren and Lark are both fast asleep. Their little scaled hands up near their faces. I wonder if they're going to start sucking their thumbs at some point. I used to do it when I was little, and my parents had to put a sock on my hand to break the habit.

I smile as I think about my little lizard babies and how much they look like their father. I fall asleep as I think about adding Robin to the family, and I don't wake up until the clouds are bright outside the next morning.

The first thing I notice when my eyes open is that I managed to sleep all through the night without a single babe crying and waking me up. That's suspicious enough on its own, so when my eyes land on the cribs and they're empty, I freak out a little bit. I sit up as quickly as a heavily pregnant woman can and wiggle my hips until my feet are on the ground.

"Marron!" I whisper-yell through the house.

Thro isn't groaning and moaning, so I think he's probably asleep right now, which is good. He needs as much sleep as he can get. I peek into the room Thro's been staying in. The bed's empty, and that's when I hear the first giggle—a sound that always manages to put a smile on my face.

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"Marron?" I call out a bit louder now that I know everyone's awake.

"In here," Marron calls back, his head popping up at the end of the hall. "Thro has finished going through the changing. You should see him now. He is bigger than me."

Marron says it with so much pride, like it's the best thing in the world that his brother is bigger than him. Technically speaking, Marron is considered a smaller male. Is he still almost two feet taller than me? Yes. So, why it matters how big he is has never bothered me, but it's a point of pride in the males. Apparently, it's a feature between males that extends beyond species.

"Yes, I am fully grown," Thro shouts, and when I enter the living space, I realize Marron was downplaying it when he said Thro is bigger than him. He is much bigger than him. By a lot. Not just in height but in muscles. If I didn't know for sure they share a shitty father, I wouldn't know they're related at all. "Marron told me I am not allowed to tell you that I now find females arousing."

Marron hisses, which grabs both of our children's attention. Their eyes go wide when they see that their father's gaze is red. He frowns at Thro, who throws his head back and laughs. It's still hard to make Marron angry, even when he's working on very little sleep and dealing with an annoying younger brother.

"I should kick you out now," Marron snaps.

A knock at the door drags my attention away from the brothers arguing in my living room. They continue to bicker behind me, and Marron threatens to seal his brother if he talks like that to me again. Thro laughs and says that his brother would never be so

cruel.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Jen, who's standing on my porch with a platter of food in a top that is way too low-cut to be anything other than her I'm-about-to-seduce-a-fully-grown-male outfit.

"You know what I'm doing here," Jen leans in and whispers. Her hair is curled around her shoulders, and she smells like she's rubbed some of the fragrance Olivia uses in our soaps on her skin. "Is he awake yet?"

"Yeah, and he's feeling much better." I lean against the door, blocking her way into the house. She narrows her eyes at me, but I give her a soft smile. "You look gorgeous, Jen. If he doesn't want you, he's an idiot."

"No, if he doesn't want me, I'm the idiot. I've had a crush on him for like eight years." She's holding the food platter so hard that her knuckles have turned white.

"Who is at the door?" Marron calls out.

"Are you ready?"

I give Jen a second to decide if she wants to do this or if she'd rather come back another time. She closes her eyes for a long moment, and when they open back up, I see her determination.

"I swear I better not have wasted eight years of my life," she mutters as she steps past me and heads into the house.

"Jen's here," I call out.

There's no point in introducing her since she's already in the living room when I say

it. But I'm not entirely sure what the protocol is in this situation, and it's making me feel more than a little anxious.

I grab the platter of food from her and set it on the coffee table. I don't miss how there's no sound other than soft toddler babbling from Wren and Lark as Marron attempts to keep them entertained.

Thro's sitting on the couch, his elbows on his knees, his head resting on his hands. His eyes are wide, focused solely on Jen and where she's standing a few feet away. He blinks a few times. Then, a few more. And the silence is getting awkward.

"Can I sit?" Jen asks her attention fully on Thro. Her cheeks are bright pink, but I can't figure out what Thro is thinking for the life of me. He looks at where she's pointing to the couch next to him. "Or is that your couch right now?"

Thro stares up at her, shifting so there's more space beside him. As soon as Jen sits down, though, he moves onto the coffee table so he's straight across from her. He leans more on his knees, his face close to hers as he narrows his eyes on her.

"What's up?" Jen asks, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

She and Thro have been inseparable since they were teenagers. On Thro's end, it's always been friendship. On Jen's, it's been unrequited love. I don't know who I'll feel worse for if this doesn't go well.

"Thro, either speak to her or get out of her face." Marron nudges his brother's thigh with his foot.

Thro shoos Marron away with a flick of his wrist and returns to staring at Jen. His gaze looks like he's judging her or examining her. I don't know. Thro always has something to say. Right now, he's just being silent and staring at Jen. I'm not even at a

good angle to look at his groin. Not that I want to, but at least then I'd know if my cousin aroused him. That would be a good sign, right?

Thro lifts a hand to Jen's face and waits for her to nod before placing it against her cheek. His eyes widen as he strokes her before he grabs a strand of her hair, pushing it behind her ear. His fingers trace down her neck, over her shoulder, down to her—

Marron clears his throat, alerting them that the house's owners are still right here. Thro frowns at his brother and jerks his head to the side as if telling him to leave.

I choke on a laugh at the idea of Thro telling Marron and me to hide in the back of the house so he can try to seduce my cousin. When Marron shimmies so he's even comfier on the couch, Thro scowls at him. The scowl is replaced with a signature Thro smile when he turns back to Jen.

"I do not know if I am more startled at the realization that you have always been beautiful or that I have called you my blood for so long," Thro says, returning his hand to Jen's face. He rubs away a tear that's fallen down her cheek. "Maybe it is because you have been my best friend for so many years. You are stronger than I am, because I will not wait years, Jen. I am not waiting seasons. We will be lucky if I wait days."

Jen snuffles and gives him a bright smile. "The mating ceremony starts tonight. I asked Nia to pull some strings to get us a spot."

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Thro gives her a smile that rivals any I've ever seen him have. "Do you want to smell my chest to see if we are meant to be mates?"

Jen leans closer to him, and I slap the back of my hand against Marron's shoulder. He looks absolutely repulsed and is, thankfully, already scooping our children up and moving toward the front door. I waddle behind him, not needing to see whatever is about to happen. I'm not about to cock block my cousin, though. Not when she's been waiting years to get her male.

"I am happy for them, but I am repulsed at the same time," Marron says as he pulls the front door shut.

The crops are high right now and almost ready for harvesting. A few males from the tribe are helping out, but today is their day off. Marron will walk through the fields later to ensure everything looks good, but right now, we're walking back toward Nia's farm.

"Were you worried?" I ask, bumping his hip with mine.

"Not even a little," Marron says.

He has Wren in one arm and Lark in the other. Carrying them like they're sacks of seeds. They're giggling and kicking their feet, thinking their father is playing with them when, in all actuality, they're just way too easy to entertain.

"Thro told me about some dreams he was having when the changing started to end. I'm surprised he didn't wake you this morning when he called out for his mate over

and over."

"Oh." A look of surprise covers my face. "Well, then she was worried about nothing."

We're made acutely aware of just how little she needed to be worried, as loud moans from our house remind me that I walk way too slowly now that I'm so pregnant. My surprise turns into an awkward disgust, and Marron lifts our children to his head to cover his ears with their little bodies.

"Walk faster, Tori!" Marron shouts at me, a look of amusement on his face when he sees me waddling as fast as I can with my hands over my ears. "Hurry, or we will die in the most awful of ways."

I throw my head back and laugh, but I listen to Marron and hustle my waddle until I'm walking at what I would consider a very pregnant jog. Marron makes sure he doesn't make me walk too fast, and when I get tired, he sets the kids on the ground and offers me a seat in his lap while we rest.

"I am happy things worked out between your cousin and my brother," Marron nuzzles his face between my neck and shoulder. Wren and Lark chase each other around near us, falling to their butts and playing in the dirt when they get distracted.

"I'm happy to have you as my male," I say to him, lifting my hand behind me until I can feel one of his horns.

He hisses against my neck, opening his mouth and taking my shoulder in his mouth. He's never broken my skin with a mark, but he does like holding me between his teeth. I've bitten into him a few more times, but it's usually only used for special occasions like our anniversaries.

"We should see if Nia wants to watch her blood this evening while Jen and Thro are

in the mating ceremony. We can get some alone time, maybe practice making a fourth babe."

I slap the back of my hand against Marron's chest. "I am still very swollen with your young."

"I know." He sounds pleased with himself as he pulls my tunic up enough to reveal my abdomen. He palms it between his hands and hisses softly against my neck again. "I am almost positive this is one of the promises I gave you. More often swollen than not, yes? I am just proving I am an honorable male."

I lean back against his chest, "Mhm, the most honorable. Let's get these babes to their blood so you can keep being honorable with me."

Marron groans against my neck and then helps me to my feet. "I will always be honorable with you. Always."

I stare up at Marron as he grabs a kid in each hand and hoists them up on his waist. He smiles down at them with adoration and joy. He's never raised his voice at them, and he's never gotten frustrated with them. Even when he's exhausted, he has patience that I will never understand.

Sometimes, he watches them as they sleep and tells me how he doesn't understand how a male could be so angry at his babe to hit them. He loves our children and promises them he will always protect them.

I stare up at the father of my children and shake my head because I don't know how I managed to mate the most amazing male.

"I love you," I tell him in English.

His eyes flash in amusement, "I love you, too. Always."

20

Marron

Fifteen Years Later

The house is cluttered, and there has not been a moment of silence since we invited everyone over yesterday afternoon. Not that I mind in the least. My mate told me she wanted to celebrate one of her human traditions many, many years ago, and since then, we have made a habit of having everyone come to our home for a couple of days to exchange gifts.

"Wren found all of the gifts yesterday," Tori says with her hand on her hip.

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She glares at me, and I must look anywhere but at her because my daughter was not alone in her search. Tori was busy talking to her cousin, and the young and I might have found it the perfect opportunity to check every single area in the house where Tori might've hidden the gifts.

"Did she?" I ask. I don't need to look at Tori to know she does not believe me innocent.

"Mhm." She moves closer to me, placing one of her hands against my abdomen, much too low to be something appropriate since we are in the dining room, not hidden away in our bedroom. She is a cunning female, so she probably planned this somehow.

"Well, I am sure she will still pretend to be excited when she gets them this evening." I take a big gulp as I look around the room to make sure no one is about to walk in on us now that Tori's hand is most definitely traveling lower and lower until— "Mate."

"Do you want to know a secret?" Tori asks, stroking my cock in slow, agonizing strokes. We have not had relations in the last couple of days since we have had guests. The children know not to come into our room without knocking, but I do not trust my brother to give us the same courtesy.

"I want to know all your secrets," I manage to get the human words out, even though secret is only a prolonged hiss as words fail me.

"I hid fake gifts in the most obvious spots," Tori says as she pulls her hand from my pants and pushes at my chest. I take a step back without really thinking, and then her

words register, and I look down at her with narrowed eyes.

"Those are not our gifts?" I ask.

Tori shakes her head, a mischievous glint in her eyes that makes it clear she has been planning this for many days. No, even longer than that, since she was so upset the young and I managed to find all our gifts last year.

I may have told her I would not look this year, which is true. I searched, but I did not look. I do not know how much of a difference that makes to my mate, but now I know I didn't spoil her fun.

I let out a long breath and then laugh as I wrap my arms around my little mate. I love her, and I would have also pretended to love her gifts. She usually is very good at getting the young and me gifts that we love more than anything, but this year...

I had to have a conversation last night with all of them, telling them that we are grateful for any gifts their mother gets us, and we will all pretend to be the happiest of creatures, even if we are unsure why she chose what she did.

"You all are the worst," Tori grumbles, but she keeps a smile on her face as she does. "Did you know I had to rope your brother into this? He's the one who cleaned the bones. I couldn't do it. It made me want to gag."

I grimace as I think about the little tag attached to a trio of what I assumed were olack bones. The tag was labeled with my name, and I remember how Robin held the bones up with a curious expression, and then a look of horror when he realized. No, it was not even Robin. We were all a little horrified at the gifts their mother got us.

Wren's name was etched into a stick. Sure, it was a very nice, thick, and sturdy stick, but still, it was a stick. She gave it a curious expression before setting it back into the

hiding spot and gave a soft smile to her younger siblings, nudging Lark to do the same to his gift, which was a rock. To their credit, they were good sports about it and helped me to convince the younger ones to be appreciative.

Robin found a water skin that was worn down until it was leaking, with his name attached to it. Raven had a root vegetable that was already starting to soften and go bad. And our youngest, and least impressed with the gifts, Jay, was gifted a piece of fabric shredded in sections, making it clear it was scraps from one of Nia's latest attempts at creating new clothing.

"Why am I not surprised that Thro had a hand in this?" I ask, pressing my lips into a tight line to not give away that I now want to go around the house again to see if I can find the real gifts. Yes, yes, being surprised is fun as well, but searching for gifts and finding them like a great treasure is even more fun. "I am surprised he did not convince you to give us all a pile of olack dung."

"He did," Tori says, bumping my hip with hers as she walks past me. "Like I said, there are a few different spots where we hid things."

I stare at the back of my little mate. I am almost positive this is her giving me permission to continue my search. Surely, she would not leave a plethora of fake gifts around if she did not want the children and me to see how clever a female she is. When she casts me a look of encouragement over her shoulder, I know this will be the most fun celebration we have had.

"Children!" I bellow as I step into the living room, leaving Tori in the dining room all by herself, not even caring that I will no longer feel her small hand in my pants. No, this is much more important.

Well, not much more, but it can wait until tonight when we can close the door and ensure we have our own time. I will even kick Thro out of the house to go back to his

own home with his mate and their young, so I do not need to worry about him somehow interfering in my lovemaking.

"Did you tell him?" Thro asks as he runs into the room, his eyes falling somewhere behind me. Most likely on my mate, who is probably thinking very highly of herself right now.

"Did she tell Dad what?" Wren asks as she enters the kitchen. Her siblings are not far behind. All of them are just as confused as she is. They all know we do not open gifts until this evening.

"I know you all found your gifts last night," Tori says, standing beside me. Her arm wraps around my waist, and she leans into me. Our young, for the most part, make sure to put big smiles on their faces, just like we discussed last night.

"Such amazing gifts!" Lark says in a very unconvincing way, and then he shoves his younger siblings on the shoulders so they all add on.

"Yes, I have been in much need of a new water skin," Robin says, just like we practiced last night. He looks up at me with a worried expression, and I give him a small thumbs-up so he knows he did well.

"Happy," Jay says in a voice that is anything but happy, but his smile is so big it looks like it could verge on painful if he forces it even more.

Tori sniffles softly. Before I realize she is emotional and in need of comfort, she is wiping at her tears. The children keep their smiles on their faces as their eyes begin to look panicked. Thankfully, their mother does not make us worry for too long before she speaks and reassures us that she is not having sad emotions but happy ones.

"Did you all decide to pretend you liked the gifts?" she asks.

Wren, Lark, Robin, and Raven all give her a perplexed look like this is anything they had prepared themselves for, and they aren't sure if this is where they are to tell the truth or if they are meant to be pretending still.

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Jay has no such issue. "Yes, Dad made us pretend, and Wren and Lark said they'd make me sleep outside if I didn't pretend good enough."

At that admission, I shoot a small frown at my two oldest children, who do not look in the least bit chastised for being called out. No, they look almost smug because Jay did as they said.

I shrug internally, knowing that Thro and I had our ways of dealing with one another. Who am I to judge my children's relationship with? I will talk with them later about making sure they know they cannot force their brother to sleep outside just because they are unhappy with him, though, just to be safe.

"Well, I think you did very well," Tori stifles her laugh. "Now, I made a special game this year for your gifts."

"A game?" The children all seem to ask at the same time. I would be with them if I did not know their mother's plans.

"Yes, a game." Tori's smile grows even more as she takes in our children's curious looks. "Your uncle and I spent a long time hiding fake gifts all over the house and the farm, and it's up to you to find your actual gifts."

"Right now?" Lark asks, looking around the room like someone might tell him he needs to wait.

"Right now," Tori says. Just as the words leave her mouth, Lark is sprinting from the room and out of the house, not even stopping when Robin calls out for him to wait.

Wren looks skeptically at her mother for a moment, looking for something that I do not know. When she determines that she knows everything she needs to know, she moves from where she's standing, and Raven follows after her, questioning her on where they will search first.

Jay stares longingly at where his siblings have now all disappeared. I scoop him up off the ground and place him on my shoulders before he can pout. "Looks like you are my partner. Where are we to search first?"

Before we leave the room to begin our search, I glance over my shoulder toward Tori. She is already speaking with Thro and Jen, but gives me a mischievous wink before returning to their conversation.

What a wonderful mate I have. I will need to remind her even more often now. Yes, it is the least I can do to make sure she knows just how much the children and I adore her. The most amazing mate and an even better mother. I am a blessed male living the most blessed life.