



The Arabis Triad

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction

Description: Three Alien Warrior Princes. One human female abducted by an evil race of Reptiles intent on taking over the universe by any means possible.

Evelyn: Evelyn Ford isn't prone to bouts of hallucinations, but she seriously wishes she was after weeks crammed into a tiny cage and tortured by Reptilian aliens. Then, she's rescued by three of the sexiest 'men' she's ever laid eyes on, if men have swirling magenta tattoos and black horns growing out of their head, that is. She knows they're aliens, and aliens don't mean anything good, so when she finds herself finally free, she bolts—right out of a space craft and into the wilds of a tropical alien planet. The Arabis Triad – Paxt, Coltan, Ashir

The Arabis Triad can't believe their eyes when they find their fated mate until disaster sends them into a wormhole to crash-land on a distant planet. Their mate doesn't understand who they are and what they mean to each other. To make matters worse, the crystal they've been searching for that will save their Homeland remains in the hands of the Reptiles. They must retrieve the Arabis Crystal before all is lost. But how can they do the impossible, when not only do they need to fight the scaled ones, but an evil strong enough to crush entire galaxies?

Can one human female fend off three sexy-as-sin alien warrior princes and find the love she never thought she would find, while fighting nefarious forces, or will she succeed in returning to her world nobody has heard of before?

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Chapter One

Evelyn

Evelyn didn't want to wake because that meant feeling again. Her body was one whole vibrant throb of brain-numbing pain. Blue and purple bruises dotted her skin. She was sure she had them on her back as well, but she couldn't turn her head over her shoulder to see. The bruises were lined with cuts and grazes, all of which she had no idea how they came to be.

The outside of her fists were bruised as well, but she knew how she got those—banging against cold, steel bars. It had made little difference except to add to the bank of soreness pulsating through her body with every wretched heartbeat.

She was pretty sure her right wrist was broken. Those Reptiles—monsters—had come to her cage and thrust a large purple crystal at her, trying to get her to take it. The cage was so small, she couldn't get away. She'd pushed her back against the wall, but one of them reached through the cage and grabbed her wrist hard enough to shatter bone. White-hot pain had flashed through her body. They'd tugged her closer and held the crystal against her palm. A mist of purple magenta had glowed around her, so intense it had blocked everything from her vision and in that instant, she felt no pain, as though it had taken it all away. Then, they'd wrenched the crystal from her grip and the pain had returned in a fresh wave of agony. She had collapsed on the floor.

The Reptiles had gone to the other girls, all in separate cages, and done the same thing. The others had complied willingly after they'd seen them break her wrist.

Through the haze of agony, Evelyn had recognized that the crystal didn't light up for any of the other girls.

Next, a second Reptile had appeared, carrying a blue crystal. He had thrust it at the girls in turn, until it lit up with Lucie Jackson, in the cell next to Evelyn. The crystal illuminated with beautiful tones of aqua greens and blues, reminding Evelyn of the Aurora Borealis. The glow floated around Lucie, twisting and ever-changing.

She also remembered thinking how strange it was for such an event to happen. Now, she'd seen some pretty funky things. She used to like putting herself in the line of fire—literally—to get the latest story, and had been to warzones to report on frontlines.

She now knew there were more horrors than even terrorists could conjure. The existence of aliens had been the first of a number of hard shocks she wasn't even getting close to coming to terms with.

The first had been seeing a bright light descend in the middle of the desert on the strip of road called the Nullarbor Plain where she'd been investigating the latest in a spate of disappearances. She stopped her car, got out her camera from next to her on the front seat, and then... then she'd come face to face with the vilest creature she'd ever had the misfortune to see.

Something like a cross between an iguana and a dinosaur from Jurassic Park, the creature had snatched her before she could even scream. She'd then woken trapped inside of some type of goo. She'd ripped through a skin-like membrane behind the goo to find the Reptiles scattering like flies beneath the onslaught of golden-skinned fighters in some sort of space-age costume event.

But they weren't costumes. They'd been real. Before she could take two steps from that disgusting cell, more of the Reptiles had appeared from a black hole behind her,

sank their claws into her shoulders, and pulled her through.

There was a series of moments when she didn't know if up was down before her mind cleared enough to discover she was imprisoned behind cold steel bars, in a cage so small she couldn't even stand up straight. Her back would probably be rounded for the rest of her life. Not that she had the energy, or the motivation to move at all.

She didn't properly know how much time had passed. Days. A week. A month. Time blended with no daylight to pass the day, and food and water were in scarce supply.

She and the other women were held in a cargo hold, with steel walls surrounding them. The only entrance and exit was through a large steel door that froze her blood whenever it opened, because that meant the monsters had returned. And when that happened, it was never good.

Apart from the never-ending cold that cut through to her bones, there was a vibration in the floor she thought might be an engine of some kind. In truth, she had no idea where they were. She could be in the back of a cargo truck, or the hull of a boat. All she knew was that she was in some kind of transport and they'd kept on moving since she'd been thrown in here with all the other women.

Each time the monsters returned, they would remove one of the women, then return her later more bruised and bloodier than before.

Then they had taken her. She had been strapped to a table, and the monsters had set to work cutting her skin with scalpels and collecting her blood. A strange drug had been tapped into a vein in her arm, shooting fire through her bloodstream.

Her mind had seemed to bend and expand, and she was sure she'd seen the ends of the galaxy. If that was death, she would have gladly taken it. She'd enjoyed skimming through nebula clouds, until she reached a distance that grew colder and

more foreboding.

A black fog frothed at the edge. The clouds were filled with ominous intent. They reached for her, as though she was able to open some sort of invisible door for it, and she instinctively knew if she touched the fog, it would be nothing good.

She'd wrestled her way back into her mind and catapulted into her body on the cold slab of metal. Agony shattered her. She'd blacked out again and then woken back up in the horrific cage.

That was when they'd come in with the crystals. Their black eyes gleamed, their hissing and clacking loud, their short arms waving about in excited animation. She'd curled in on herself, nauseated and exhausted. She would have thrown up, but there was nothing in her stomach. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten or drunk. God, what she wouldn't do for some water. She'd even drink her own urine at this stage.

Bear Grylls, eat your heart out.

She was so dehydrated, she hadn't peed in days. Neither had any of the other girls. In one way that was good, as there were no buckets to use. They'd held off until they couldn't anymore and had been forced to use the floor. The inside of the cargo hold smelt like a sewer. So did her skin and the rags she wore that had once been clothing.

She refused to be embarrassed about that. Then again, she was too sick to be worried about anything at all. What she was more worried about was that Susie hadn't moved for a very, very long time.

Evelyn wound her fingers around a bar. "Lucie." Her whisper was too quiet even for her own ears. She desperately tried to work some saliva into her mouth. "Lucie!"

Lucie slowly turned her head to look at her. Her brown hair was matted to the side of her head, her skin covered in god only knew what, but it was her eyes that worried Evelyn. They were blank and dull. Lifeless. She blinked slowly. So slowly that Evelyn thought she'd never open them again.

Anger poured through Evelyn. How dared those reptiles treat them like this! As though they were no more than test animals. As though they were nothing.

She worked her dry tongue on her lips. "Lucie. Can you see Susie? Is she... is she breathing?"

Lucie slowly turned her head toward Susie's cage on the other side of her. She dragged in a slow breath and her top slid to the side. Her ribs stood out like fingers, her skin stretched as tight as parchment paper over a carcass left out in the desert.

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Evelyn had to face the fact that if they weren't fed or given water anytime soon, none of them were going to last much longer.

Excruciatingly slow, Lucie turned back. The poor girl barely had enough energy to do that. One look at her expression told Evelyn the truth and the reality of their situation.

They would all end up like Susie.

Evelyn had barely enough fluid to cry. Their situation was totally hopeless.

"We're all going to die," Lucie whispered.

When she breathed, Evelyn detected a slight wheeze. She had enough experience with death to know that wasn't a good sound. She'd seen soldiers taken down next to her. Heard enough final breaths to know that if they didn't get out of here soon, they never would.

All the other women were too quiet, caught in their own version of hell. Maybe even others had died, slipping away while she'd been sleeping.

Her blood boiled with rage. Just give her a weapon and she would show those overgrown lizards exactly what they deserved. She didn't have much in the way of sympathy for them at all right about now.

A massive boom rattled the hold, smashing the cages into each other. Evelyn was tossed against the bars, her body erupting in a fresh round of pain. Her heart thudded like a jackhammer, pounding so hard it might crack ribs.

A red light above the closed metal doorway flashed on and off. Several more booms sounded closer. Shockwaves vibrated through the room. Banging erupted at the door, and the metal clanked open. Evelyn gripped the bars, her knuckles turning white.

Several Reptiles stood framed by the doorway. In their hands was a mean-looking weapon that resembled a semi-automatic. Some of the women cried out. Someone sobbed.

One of the Reptiles aimed the weapon at the last cage and let off a round.

There was a quiet click-click-click and Sally's body erupted in a spray of red. She was flung to the back of the cage and fell motionless to the ground. The creature aimed the end of the weapon to the next cage.

"No! Stop! Don't kill her!" Evelyn cried out, reaching through the cage at Dorothy.

The poor girl clutched the cage. A stream of urine ran down her thigh.

Two reptiles marched into the room. One opened Lucie's cage, reached in, and pulled her out. Lucie was so weak all she could do was groan as their claws dug into her arm. The Reptile slung her over its shoulder and scurried back through the door.

Another Reptile opened the door on her cage. Evelyn scrambled to the back of the cage, hitting the bars with her spine, her hands and feet slipping against the metal floor. The Reptile hissed as it reached in. Evelyn barely recognized the panicked sound she made as she kicked at it. Its claws sunk into her calf, hooking into muscle.

She tried to cling to the bars, but the creature yanked her so hard her fingers slipped. She was dragged across the floor of the cage, the bars smashing into her hips and ribs.

Her world tilted as the Reptile hauled her to her feet. She kicked at the Reptile,

screaming for all she was worth. Her toes struck scales and the creature hissed at her. She formed claws with her fingers and swiped at its face. One finger gouged into its eye. It sank into soft mushiness and she ripped the eye out. It dangled from the socket from a wet arterial tube.

Another boom rocked the room, followed by the screeching sound of metal against metal. Shouting sounded from outside the room. Male voices. She didn't understand the language. It didn't matter. All she was concerned about was getting away from the Reptile. There was no thought. Only instinct. She thrashed in a desperate attempt to get away.

She had to run. Had to save Dorothy. Had to escape. Had to—

Something hard thumped into her skull. White light exploded through her head. Her mind went numb. There was no sound. No sight. She flew through the air and slammed into the hard metal ground. Time hung suspended. Then pain exploded through her body.

She fought to scramble away, to think, to breathe, but she wasn't sure she even twitched a finger. A roar erupted above the pandemonium. Shouting, bodies thumping against metal, a squealing hiss fought to be the loudest. The chorus of male voices grew louder. Heavy footfalls pounded and she sensed massive bodies hurtling toward her.

This was it. She couldn't fight anymore. There wasn't a damn thing she could do about it, but accept her fate. She just hoped her death would be quick. She tensed, ready for claws to rip through her skin.

Instead, large hands scooped her up with great care. Gentle words whispered in her ear and as her vision cleared, she looked up into three male faces looking down at her as though they'd just found the rainbow and she was the pot of gold.

Chapter Two

Paxt

Paxt couldn't believe it. She was real, a flesh and blood female that the Fates had sent to only their Triad. Their mate. That he held her in his arms was an absolute miracle.

All around him were the sounds and fighting of battle—a mix of Ozar, Arabis, and Erion warriors fighting together, which was an event in itself—but the commotion dimmed as he took in the treasure he'd found. That was all right. His warriors would handle anything these creatures might throw out. They were battle-hardened professionals, and even though they had never come face to face with these scaled ones, they were more than equal.

Once they had left the Ozar Homeland, and Paxt had seen the Ozar Royals' mate—their pregnant mate—firsthand, both himself and his brothers had wasted no time making preparations to rescue the abducted human females their mate had told them about. The Ozar Triad had lent them the craft they'd taken from the scaled ones to lead the attack, and had shown how they had tracked crystals using the shard from their crystal tower—their now glowing crystal tower—which they had used to track the scaled ones transport craft in the middle of a deserted quadrant of the universe. Following them beneath invisibility shields were a fleet of ships from their Homeland, as well as from the Ozar and the Erion. For once, their planet was united.

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One miracle had resulted in many more, the best one being the female in his arms.

“Gods. She is hurt badly, brother,” Coltan said as he stared in wonder at her from Paxt’s side. He sounded worried.

Her slim fingers curved around Paxt’s biceps. She was in bad shape. Blood coated her skin. She was covered in filth, her hair matted and dirty. Her clothing hung from her bony frame no more than rags. Bruises, scratches, and gouges raked her skin. She trembled, cold to the touch. Her teeth chattered, and she began to mumble. He caught a few words, the translator the Ozar had fitted allowing him to understand both the scaled ones and the female’s language.

“Save... them.” Her eyes flickered closed and only half opened despite her trying to fight consciousness.

Worry pounded through his veins. They were not going to lose her just when he’d found her.

“She’s worried about the other females,” Ashir said. He brushed a matted strand from her forehead, revealing a gash that oozed a deep well of blood.

“She needs immediate medical attention,” Coltan said. “We’re taking her back to our ship.”

Their warriors had flown their personal war-cruiser while they’d led the fleet with the foreign craft. It had worked, allowing them to come close enough to this ship to enter, but now they had their mate. Their ship was fitted with the best medical equipment

and that was where she was going.

Paxt held her against his chest, taking care not to jostle her. She weighed no more than a feather, sharp bones poking through the clothing he would burn once he got them off her.

Her eyelids fluttered and a whimper left her lips. Red filled his vision as he was consumed with rage. She had been mistreated and abused in the most malicious of ways by the scaled creatures. They were no more than monsters in his eyes.

His gaze flickered over the cages and the state of the other females trapped within, sickened him to the pit of his stomach. They had survived in absolute squalor.

Bodies of dead scaled ones lay strewn over the floor, limbless and headless. It looked as though his warriors had ripped them limb from limb with their bare hands. A fitting fate.

The battle had ended, and his warriors rented open the doors of the cages to help out the pitiful, scared creatures inside. The females cowered in the cages, whimpering and sobbing. They were in a drastic state, in similar condition to their mate. It was deplorable. Some didn't stir. One looked as though she had been murdered while helpless in the cage.

"Easy with them!" he barked to his men.

His mate jolted, her eyes opening wide. She roused momentarily, staring up at him with a pain-filled look. "Please. Don't... hurt them."

"It's is all right, mate. We are here to help. We would never harm any female." He spoke softly. Even though she wouldn't grasp his words, he hoped she would at least understand his tone.

Her gaze drifted to an empty cage he wouldn't even keep an animal in. "They have Lucie... Help her too."

"One of the human females is missing. Track her down," Paxt barked to his warriors. Several bolted from the cargo hold.

"Highness. Our warriors have reported several shuttles leaving this ship." Trum, his highest ranking general, strode into the room. He looked as though he had enjoyed battle, with fresh blood coating his breast plate. He came to a halt as he scanned the pitiful contents of the room and his face twisted in horror.

"Gods. What did they do to these females?" Trum's gaze snagged on one of the human females. His eyes widened and his entire body went stiff. "I can't believe it. Our mate!" Trum murmured.

The rest of his Triad appeared right behind him. All their attention went to the one female, and they rushed to her cage to ease her out as best they could while avoiding her injuries. She cried out and their mate stirred, her eyelids flickering toward her friend.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead to calm her. "She is being cared for, little female. Do not worry."

Gods above, this cargo was more precious than he'd thought. For a non-royal triad to have found their mate was nothing short of a miracle. The Arabis Crystal must be near if Triads were able to find their mates at long last. The human females seemed to be a missing key between the power of the crystal and reigniting the mate-bond.

It was vital they retrieve the crystal so that others across their Homeland could find their Quads. There had been no new Quads formed at all throughout their Homeland since their crystal was stolen. That was horrifying enough, but when the Ozar had

invited them to their kingdom, he'd learned that the Ozar and Erion crystals had also been stolen. The theft of their crystals affected their entire Homeplanet. If not found, their species faced total extinction. If they weren't found and reinstalled, their home planet faced extinction.

He wanted to let Trum and his triad attend to their mate, but he had to interject, "Trum. What of these shuttles?"

Trum murmured to his brothers before standing to attention. Tension crossed Trum's face in the set of his eyes and straight line of his mouth. It was only the fact he was a highly disciplined general that he was able to stop tending to his newly found mate. Paxt wouldn't have even asked it of Trum if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

"My apologies, Highness," Trum said, his voice strained. "Several shuttles have escaped. The scaled ones have escaped with a human female and the Arabis and Erion crystals. The Erion Triad are in pursuit of one of the shuttles, no doubt the one with the Erion crystal on board."

The Erion Triad was already on the move. They needed to do the same. "Then we shall waste no more time. Can we track the direction of the Arabis crystal!" Paxt said.

Although he would have recovered both crystals if he could, it was imperative they recover their Homeland crystal. Those Erion bastards were more than capable of retrieving their own crystal.

An ear-splitting boom echoed ominously throughout the ship and the metal walls and floor about them shuddered. A groaning metal on metal sound vibrated through him, echoing throughout the entire ship. The floor tilted sharply. Paxt bent his knees and slid on the filth of the floor to keep his balance, holding their mate as gently as he could, but also trying not to drop her.

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A blade of fear sliced through his heart. Not for himself, but for the survival of their mate and the other human females in this horror of a room.

A message appeared on Trum's wrist-comm. His mouth pulled into a tight line. "The self destruct has been initiated."

Paxt turned to his warriors. "Evac everyone! Get them all out. Now!"

Paxt ignored the screams of the females and warriors who carefully, yet forcibly, cut metal bars to retrieve them out of their cages when the locks failed to open. It was for their survival. Coltan and Ashir helped those closest and it was done in a matter of seconds. They had no time to waste. A series of smaller booms, followed by a massive explosion rocked around them, chaotic and deafening.

"Out! Now!" Paxt boomed over the noise of the human female's screams and groaning metal.

There was a flurry of activity as the room emptied, only the dead left behind. Paxt offered a quick prayer for the fallen females before leading his brothers down the corridor. A precious two of them hadn't made it.

They bolted down the corridor. Smoke billowed through the vents, acidic and dark. Paxt held his mate's face to his chest to minimize smoke inhalation. She was limp, her limbs dangling with each step he took.

"Hurry!" Paxt said.

The corridors quickly emptied as warriors fled off into their shuttles. His Triad dove through the connective tunnel between the scaled one's ship and their craft.

"Coltan, pilot us away. Ashir, retract the tunnel." Paxt followed Coltan, leaving Ashir to separate their craft. The walkway whined and thudded into place as it retracted into the body of their craft.

The floor tilted as Coltan, already behind the pilot seat, reversed from the main body of the scaled ones' massive transport ship. There was a flash of white before the ship disintegrated in front of his eyes. Paxt managed to fold himself into the co-pilot seat, protecting their mate with his arms before the concussive waves of the explosion hit.

"Hold her tight, Paxt!" Coltan yelled as the blast smashed into them, sending them into a tight, uncoordinated spin. Tremendous vibrations hammered them. The acidic smell of burning electronics invaded his nostrils as well as the sharper smell of trioxygen. Their intelligent ship would self-mend, but it would malfunction in the meantime.

The vibrant whites, yellows, and reds of the explosion expanded in a brilliant imitation of a sun, a final stretch of matter, before contracting into a pinpoint of dark rubble and ash. The immense vacuum of space was too great even for a blast of that magnitude.

"Brace for backlash," Coltan said, voice calm.

They were too close to the ship to escape the suction of reverse impact. Paxt gritted his teeth as the engine strained and whined. As though they were on the tight end of an elastic band, their craft was thrown back toward the debris.

Coltan cursed as he fought for control. Paxt could only hope that Ashir had been able to harness himself in and was safe. Lights flashed over the console as the wreckage

grew larger in the viewscreen. An impact from a shard of metal would mean their immediate death.

Paxt stared at their mate. Even through the filth that covered her, she possessed an aching beautiful face built from delicate lines. If he was going to die, he wanted the last thing he saw to be of her.

Coltan roared as he forced the control of the craft against the magnitude of the explosion. The ship shuddered as pieces of debris slammed into the hull. Reverberating booms echoed through the walls.

There was a shift in the direction of their craft. Paxt strained against the grav-force as they skimmed over the top of the debris. They swirled in an out-of-control haphazard spin, but amazingly, slipped past the main bulk of the dead ship.

Slowly their ship evened out. Paxt's heart hammered in his chest. It was only by the skill of Coltan's piloting that they'd made it. He was about to commend his brother when a burst of black cloud appeared from nowhere in front of them. Coldness slithered up his spine.

"What's that, Coltan?"

Coltan shook his head. "I've never seen anything like it before."

A Reptile craft came from behind the explosion and shot into the clouds, disappearing into the darkness.

"Where did they come from?" Paxt said.

"Looks like some of the scaled ones escaped," Coltan said.

Another alarm sounded on the console, the one they'd installed with the tracking technology from the Ozar. As he watched, the magenta light that indicated the Arabis crystal dimmed until it went black.

“Son of adrumasturd,” Coltan cursed. “The Arabis Crystal is on board that ship.”

The clouds began to retract, billowing in on themselves as they shrank. They were going to lose their crystal.

“Can you track the craft?” Paxt barked.

Coltan swiped his fingers over the console, entering commands. “There’s no trace of the crystal from here. Paxt, if we don’t follow them now, there’s no telling how long it might take to find it – if we ever do again.”

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Paxt glanced down at the unconscious face of their mate. If they lost the crystal, retrieving her would be a bittersweet victory. They could not fully mate-sync with her, and their land would remain barren.

They had the best medi-bay. They were the best warriors of their Homeland. And this was a last-ditch chance. They, their Homeland, and their mate needed the crystal and those deplorable creatures had possession of it. Anger simmered in him, along with a bone-clenching determination. How they'd stolen all three crystals was a mystery for another day, but for now, there was no question what they had to do.

“Follow them,” he said.

Coltan's dark gaze glinted in agreement. He worked the console and their craft sped toward the quickly diminishing clouds. Every muscle in Paxt's body strained as they fought to reach the shrinking circle of darkness in the middle.

Their craft shook as they skimmed the outskirts. The temperature dipped and his breath condensed. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he glimpsed a horrifying face in the cloud matter before they shot into the hole. The clouds scraped the outer wings. Jagged lightning flashed and a dizzying wormhole spiraled around them.

The craft shuddered, but Coltan adjusted their speed, going faster than they had ever pushed their ship before. Grav-force slammed Paxton into the back of his seat. Every muscle screamed as he fought to hold their mate.

They burst through the wormhole, stars streaking past them. An unknown planet reared ahead of them. In the distance, the scaled ones' craft descended in a flash of

sparks and heated atmosphere. He didn't have time to think before they were plummeting down the same path.

"Hold her, Paxt. We're out of control." Coltan's white-knuckled grip was on the controls. His lips peeled back, revealing clenched teeth. He did his best to keep an even keel, but their craft was in the gravitational pull of the planet and they were in an out-of-control spiral. The craft shuddered as it skimmed the top of the sparse particles of the upper atmosphere, before tumbling down. "Going down."

Metal screamed. The air was now sweltering. The pressure inside the craft built, pressing on his skull with an invisible vise. They plummeted through clouds before a green canopy rushed beneath them. The tips of tall trees hit the hull. The engines screamed in a shrill whine.

Huge branches snapped like twigs as they crashed through the forest. Metal shrieked and cracks boomed as their craft hurtled through the flora. A low-hanging branch came fast into the viewscreen. It cracked as they slammed into it. Paxt covered their mate's body as best he could with his own to protect her as they were thrown about. The craft listed to the side. They bounced against massive trunks, slung one way and then the other.

There was an enormous crunch as they hit the ground. The sound of crushed rocks crunching against metal was overwhelming, until finally, they came to a complete, almost gentle stop.

He peered through the cracked viewscreen. Large, vibrant fronds waved over their craft in a languid breeze, the foliage so thick he couldn't see beyond the immediate flora. He dragged in ragged lungfuls of air, fighting to gain equilibrium. Silence pinged in his ears after the roar of their descent and landing. His body prickled with heat, sticky perspiration covered his skin.

They were alive! Impossibly. Amazingly alive. The only thing was he had no idea where they were and he had no idea how they were going to get back to their Homeland after going through a black hole like that.

Or if it was even possible at all.

Chapter Three

Ashir

The craft finally came to a stop, and he was alive—two things that had seemed doubtful until a few moments ago. His body was a mass of aches and pains, having been thrown about like a ball in a ballista match. He'd ripped out a panel and held onto the cables inside as the craft had started to tilt. He hadn't a clue what had happened, only that it wasn't anything good.

He struggled to his feet, heading toward the cabin, heart in throat. His brothers and their mate were in the cockpit—the three most precious people in the known universe to him. Gods knew what had happened to them up there.

“Paxt! Coltan!” His voice was hoarse. Hells, even his throat felt bruised.

He managed a couple of stiff steps before his limbs loosened up a little and he could jog down the narrow corridor, his broad shoulders nearly scraping each side. The ship was—or had been—a luxury craft suitable for royalty, but space was still a premium.

He snorted to himself. He barely thought of himself or his brothers as royalty. Having known thosedrumasheads since birth, he knew them as much as he knew himself. They rejected the pomp and ceremony as much as he did. It was only their parents and the aging royal court in the Arabis Homeland that upheld the old ways.

Since they'd just about given up on finding a mate and having children of their own to carry on the ways of the court, they'd spent most of their time in the training field, belting the hells out of each other and anyone stupid enough to step into the arena. Didn't seem much point in doing anything else. Not until the Ozar had contacted them with the recent, stupefying news which would change their entire future.

The planet now had hope, which was in the form of a female—a human female, a species he knew nothing about, and yet he'd known she was their mate as soon as he'd laid eyes on her.

He broke out in a cold sweat as he charged through the doorway into the cockpit. She was in bad shape. He could only hope that she hadn't suffered more in the crash.

His gaze traveled over the cockpit. The viewscreen was smashed, some of the shards were shattered about the small space. He glimpsed a lush world of vibrant greens in a hole as a humid breeze touched his hair.

Coltan and Paxt were stirring in their seats in the cockpit. His brothers were as tough as old hide. They would be fine. It was the limp female embraced securely in Paxt's lap that held his immediate attention.

He didn't know anything about human physiology, but her pale face, smudges of blood, and swollen limbs didn't look right to him. That, and she was too still, her chest barely moving in slow breaths. Paxt had held her tight, stopping her from any fatal injury she might have otherwise had. He would trust his brother to do that.

Ashir held a shaking hand to her forehead. Her skin was cold and clammy. She needed the medi-bed immediately. At least they were on their own craft, and it had been installed with the best of every modern convenience.

"She isn't regaining consciousness. We need to get her into the medi-bed at once,"

Ashir said, his voice hoarse. He'd never feared anything much in his life. Until now.

"Gods!" Paxt's hands looked impossibly large on her small body as he held her securely in the protection of his arms.

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Coltan staggered from the pilot's seat, his horrified gaze resting on their mate. "I'll take her there now."

Ashir took one look at the gash on his brother's forehead. "Don't be adrumasturd. You're hurt and might drop her. That's the last thing she needs."

"Take her, Ashir. You've had the most medical training between us all," Paxt said, wiping a dull strand of hair from her forehead. He hadn't taken his attention from her, which was the right thing to do. Ashir would trust both his brothers with the entirety of his soul with their mate, but now it was his turn to look after her.

"Give her to me, quick." Ashir nodded to Paxt and scooped an arm beneath her shoulders and knees and lifted her free from Paxt's reluctant grip. Her body rolled lifeless against his chest as she slumped into his arms.

"Hurry, brother. We've only just found her. We're going to damn-well fight to keep her," Paxt said.

Ashir hurried down the corridor to the medi-bay, Paxt and Coltan hot on his heels. He couldn't get there fast enough. Seconds passed as slowly as days, even though he rushed as much as he dared with her delicate condition.

They rarely had the chance to use it, their own healing abilities more than enough to mend any scrapes of battle. For once he was thankful for his overly cautious and caring mother who had insisted on putting it in.

Coltan slammed his palm onto the panel to operate the bed. The clear tubing retracted

into the healing unit at the base, waiting for its patient. As carefully as he could, he laid her down. It was built for a warrior of their size, and she took up as much room as a child.

“We have to remove her clothing for the unit to work properly,” Ashir said.

He slid open the buttons of her shirt. The material was so ragged it almost fell off, only held together by a stitch or two. He ended up ripping the rest of the material away. A strange elastic item hugged her breasts. He gently lifted her, undoing the clasp behind her back. The item came free, revealing high, pert breasts, tipped with rosy pink nipples.

Paxt sucked in a breath, his eyes widening. “She is perfect.”

Ashir’s cock tightened at the sight of their mate half undressed. Angrily, he shoved that thought aside as he took into account the abuse her slight body had taken. Deep, dark bruises marred her skin. Gouges left a bloody path over the perfection of her beauty.

“She is hurt, Paxt.” His voice was a harsh growl.

Paxt placed his hand on Ashir’s shoulder. “The ones that still live will pay with their lives, brother.”

Ashir gritted his teeth and nodded, unable to speak. Anger pulsed through his system. A tick worked at his left eye, the only outward sign of his anger. Inside, he seethed. He kept himself in check because their injured mate needed him to have a clear head.

“I will enjoy tearing them limb from limb,” Coltan said.

“Slowly,” Paxt agreed.

Coltan came around the other side of the bed and they removed the rest of her clothing. More bruising and gashes covered her legs. There wasn't a spare inch left undamaged.

"Gods," Coltan breathed. His hard-ass brother, the one that was usually the last standing in any battle, looked entirely lost and defeated. His hand fluttered over her form, too tentative to touch her. In the end, he settled by brushing a matted strand of hair off her forehead, revealing a delicate, arched brow of white-silver hair, so fine it reminded him of moonlight.

Paxt wiped her body with a fresh cleansing cloth he'd retrieved from the medicabinet stored in a wall unit in the medi-bay, removing some of the filth from her body.

Ashir wanted to wipe it all free, of course, but time was of the essence. When she was healed, he would bathe her. They all would. His mouth watered at taking care of their mate together. So small, yet strong enough to unite a kingdom. The thought was staggering.

"Stand free." Paxt slammed his hand to the comm-panel and the transparent tubing quickly covered her. There was a quiet beep as the sensors monitored her entire body.

A list of injuries appeared on the screen. Ashir worked to unclench his fists as the list kept scrolling. Fractured ribs, a fractured right wrist, a hairline fracture in her upper leg. Various skin gouges, many that had also cut into muscle. A punctured lung. Internal bleeding in a kidney.

"Gods. How is she still alive?" Ashir spoke the horror he knew each of them felt.

"I'm not just going to kill them. I will torture them first," Paxt said.

It would happen. His brother didn't lie.

"I will be there right at your side," Ashir agreed.

"After you torture them, I will disembowel their innards and drape them across their necks while they draw their final breaths," Coltan said.

Paxt grunted in agreement.

"They'll still get off too lightly, even then," Ashir said.

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The medi-bed finished its analysis. Various lights flickered within the chamber. There was a quiet hiss as the chamber filled with mist that contained medications and nutrients her body needed. It was also imbued with a sedative so that she would be able to rest while her body healed.

There was nothing more they could do now. Even then, they stood around the medi-bed, looking at their precious wonder, none of them wanting to leave her side. Once they had her back in their Homeland and their bed, Ashir for one, would never let her out of his sight. He vowed to keep her in a constant state of sated pleasure so she would never remember what had happened to her.

“Any clue to where we are?” Ashir asked Coltan. He dragged his gaze from their mate to his brother. The gash on his forehead had disappeared into a thin red line as it healed.

He shook his head. “Those clouds drew us into a wormhole. Have you ever seen anything like them before, Paxt?”

Paxt shook his head, the numerous abrasions on his chest and arms also healing. “Never. But the scaled ones are also on this planet somewhere.”

“I followed them down to the surface as close as I could.” Coltan moved to the main comms-panel on the wall and worked through some commands. He sucked in a surprised breath and muttered, “Hells.”

Ashir stood next to his brother, reading the star map. His hands fell to his sides. “It can’t be possible.”

They were in the outreaches of the farthest galaxy of their known universe. It would have taken a good month, going at a hundred times the speed of light, to reach this planet from where they had been.

Coltan fiddled with the comms. They waited until the star-map populated again, showing their location to be the same as before as he checked for a second time.

“We’re here, all right,” he said. “Sudal.”

It was an uncharted, unpopulated planet. Apart from the wildlife that was undiscovered, it was a relatively harmless planet. There had been talk of turning it into a wilderness pleasure world, where people might come to hunt and relax on the shores of one of the large lakes strewn across the land, but distance had been a major hindrance to those ideas.

“How is that even possible? It’s so far away from the central galaxies” Ashir murmured, more to himself than his brothers. “And why here? Why this planet in particular? It’s basically an uncharted planet with no population or technology to speak of.”

Coltan shook his head. “It’s going to take us a month to get back to our planet from this distance away by the time Trum comes to retrieve us.”

“That’s two weeks before we have the help of our General and warriors. Two weeks to be alone on a planet alone with the scaled ones. They can do anything they like on a distant planet like this and they have the time to do it.” Paxt said. “Coltan, can you detect the Arabis crystal? They must have landed with it somewhere here.”

Coltan dashed from the medi-bay and returned with the scanner and chip of the Arabis tower they’d been able to track the crystal down with. He entered a command into the scanner. Beneath the chip, a topographical layout formed, along with a light

blipping to indicate the location of the crystal. Coltan had done a good job following them. It wasn't too far from where they had crashed. "Thedrumasturds have it right here."

A slither of unease worked through Paxt as he understood their position. "They have the crystal, they have time and they can work undisturbed doing whatever the hells they're doing with it."

"The only thing they don't have anymore are human females, thank the gods," Ashir said.

"They did have a whole cargo full of the poor females." Coltan's lips pressed together in displeasure, worry lines bracketed his mouth.

"The Ozar said the scaled ones are using the human females' energetic bodies to fuse our crystals power with. Using them as power boosters. Why else abduct so many," Ashir said.

"If they connected the power of the crystals to so many, the power they could generate would be unstoppable," Coltan said.

"This makes our mate a target while we're stranded here. We have to keep her protected at all times. If there's one thing they'll want, it is her," Paxt said.

Ashir ploughed his fingers through his hair. A pulse beat at his temple. "She's nothing to them but a tool to use."

"And she is everything to us, brother," Paxt said, and placed his hand on Ashir's shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

Ashir looked at the mist-filled medi-bed and placed his palm on the cool top. It was

so thick, he could barely make out the still, small form concealed inside. A powerful urge of protection washed over him, unfamiliar, but not unwelcome. It was as though his life now had an extra dimension, an extra element that had been missing before.

“Coltan, set the rescue beacon so that General Trum can retrieve us as fast as possible. We must prepare ourselves for the threat of attack from the scaled ones. First, we’ll treat our wounds and wash off the last battle. Then we’ll go outside and protect the perimeter. If they come to attack, I want to be ready,” Paxt said.

Ashir crossed his arms over his broad chest. There was no way he would ever let one of those Drumas-born pieces of turd get anywhere near her again. They’d already done enough damage. He would be happy to wipe out the whole shipload of them before they had a chance to even blink. Any species that harmed unarmed, helpless females deserved nothing less.

“I think we should be more than ready,” he said. “Once we have a secure safety net around our mate, I say we attack first.”

Chapter Four

Evelyn

Evelyn drifted through layers as delicate as concrete, forcing her way toward the light behind her eyes. It would be such a temptation to drift away from the aches and pains and heaviness of her body, but she needed to be on guard. Awake and aware. With a will born of sheer determination and her eyelids feeling as heavy as lead, she blinked awake to find herself in a cloud.

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Her brain whirled in confusion as she struggled to understand where was actually was. If she didn't feel like one big throbbing ache, she might think she was dreaming of flying through a cloud.

But she didn't dream anymore. No, her sleeping hours, as well as her waking hours, were filled with nightmares.

She looked about for the other girls in the cages, but the mist encasing her was too thick.

Then she remembered there'd been a fight, and she'd been picked up by a massive man-mountain. 'Picked up' wasn't the right way to describe how he'd held her against his broad chest as though she was the most precious thing in the universe. He'd claimed her, if she'd read the possessive glint in his eye properly. And she'd been trained to read even the subtlest of body languages.

Her heart lurched and her stomach dropped with a sickening thud. She might have gone from one nightmare to another. Apart from being somewhere she couldn't see, complete silence rung in her ears, which was an abrupt change after weeks spent living next to other women stuck in cages lined up along a wall.

She had to get out of... wherever the hell she was. She lifted her arm and hit a solid wall. Her breath caught and she pushed both hands against the immovable surface. She was stuffed into a container no bigger than a coffin.

Stifling the welling scream, she formed a fist and beat the hardness surrounding her. A tremor passed around her. Wherever she was, wasn't too solid after all. She

punched upwards, harder this time.

There was a hiss as the surface retreated down her body, and a swirl of cool air gushed over her skin. The mist cleared to reveal that she was on a thin bed in a room she'd never seen before.

And she was alone.

No doubt whoever had put her here had intentions she didn't care to wait around for. She swung her legs off the table and stood. Her vision blurred, her knees immediately buckled and she crumpled to the floor.

That was when she noticed she was naked.

Although they were only rags, she'd still been wearing clothing—a barrier however insubstantial—but now she was completely vulnerable.

Her breathing came in short pants as she remembered the sheer size of the man who'd picked her up as though she was as light as a baby. A man of that strength could do anything to her.

She managed to come up onto her hands and knees, her limbs shaking like a newborn colt. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to her feet. Her body sagged against the table as she waited for the lightheadedness to dissipate.

She blinked away the black dots, forcing them from her mind as much as she did the weakness that had claimed her body. She momentarily looked back at the table, resisting the urge to climb back on it, curl into a ball, and sink back into the warm depths of sleep.

Instead, she ran her fingers through her hair, grimacing as they snagged in knots so

large she'd have to cut them out. So much for the high-cost shampoo and conditioner she'd always bought. Her hair had once been a happy source of pride, the light color a testament to her Swedish heritage. She had always taken care to look after it, but her efforts had been wasted, thanks to those reptilian fuckers. If she never came face to face with one of those things ever again, she would be a very happy woman.

However, that just might be something that would happen if she lingered for too long. Anyone could come into this room and find her awake and vulnerable. She glanced around for something to cover her. She staggered over to a small side room, happy to see it was semi-recognizable as a bathroom, complete with a towel on a drying rack.

She picked up the towel and slung it around her body. It was still slightly damp and her skin prickled with goosebumps at the coolness, but beggars couldn't be choosers. A musky, and not unpleasant scent emanated from the cloth. Spice and pine and earthiness all rolled into a smell that pebbled her nipples and liquefied her insides.

She frowned, running a hand over the material, and then shook her head as though it could clear her mind. Here she was lost and alone, so scared she could barely think straight, and she was turned on?

It was official. She'd lost her mind. Actually, she'd lost it the moment she'd been picked up along that dark, lonely straight of road that was a long way between a whole lot of wind, sand, and absolutely nowhere. She wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for the missing women she'd been researching. They'd simply vanished off the face of the Earth. No leads. No crime. No trace. The authorities had no idea and their missing persons cases were being swept aside amongst the seriousness of more pressing crimes. This situation was merely adding to the what-the-fuck factor her life had become.

Her heart stumbled at the memory of the strangers she'd come to care about as much as family while they'd been imprisoned in those cages. That crash. Sally dead.

Dorothy. Lucie. Gone. All of them. Her breath hitched as a white-hot lump came up her throat and threatened to choke her. There was no telling what had happened to her friends. She could only hope that they had somehow survived.

Which was exactly what she must do.

Not wanting to linger, she crossed the floor to the open doorway and peered around it into the dark corridor beyond. There was no one there, and the heavy silence indicated she was alone. She tiptoed down the corridor, her shoulder pressed into the wall.

Light filtered around her, becoming brighter as she walked farther along the corridor. The air surrounding her grew hotter and more humid. A tropical breeze brushed over her. She took a deep breath of fresh air, her first breath after so long contained in the stench of that cargo hold she and the other women had been caged in. She nearly salivated. She would happily live outdoors for the rest of her life if she had her way.

She rounded a corner and realized where the breeze came from. A gash had rent right through the metal, creating a long jagged scar in the otherwise smooth metallic surface of the wall.

She cautiously approached, keeping her footsteps light, and peered through the gap. Beyond, lush rainforest beckoned. She kept a watchful eye, but there was no movement outside to indicate that anyone was out there.

She slid an arm and a leg through the slim gap. She'd lost more weight than she'd thought. There was no way she would have been able to fit through something that tiny, but now she slipped through easily. The jagged metal cut several gashes on her arms and across her back, but she barely felt them as she dropped onto the ground and into freedom.

She scrambled to her feet, locking the towel around her, and sprinted through the wide leaves of the jungle. Her heart raced as she clambered past branches laden with vibrant, shining leaves and vines as thick as her thigh. She darted over layers of soft, fallen leaves, pushing aside branches to create a path through the thick jungle, the uppermost thought in her mind to get away from wherever it was she'd woken up from and the massive man she feared, yet disturbingly burned for at the same time.

* * *

Paxt

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Paxt lead Coltan and Ashir back to the downed craft. They'd rigged up enough traps around the immediate area to ward off even the tiniest insect. Tomorrow, once they'd cared for their mate, made sure she was healed, fed, and washed, they would scout a larger area and search for food and water. They would probably be here a few days while they waited for Trum to come and retrieve them, and he would make it as comfortable as they could. For her.

Paxt mentally shook his head. He didn't even know her name and yet she'd changed him. All of them. Their Trio had become a Quad. A family unit. A cohesive whole.

When he'd listened to their mother talk about finding her mate, he'd only heard her with half an ear, certain that she'd was embellishing the truth.

He had thought it would be a case of simple biology, that nature would choose a woman for them to produce hearty and healthy offspring. He had no idea the impact it would have on him. He didn't think it would affect his soul.

"Do you feel it, brothers?" Paxt said.

There was a moment of silence. A moment where he thought that he was the only one feeling this connection. That he might be the odd one out.

"I feel her. In here." Coltan thumped his chest with his fist. "She's there. I can feel her essence. A new part of me has opened up. I never thought..."

"I thought our parents were full of drumasturd. Guess I was wrong," Ashir said. His gaze darted between Coltan and Paxt. "Don't tell me you didn't think the same thing

about them. Always kissing. Always hugging. I didn't understand it then, but it is all I can do..." He broke off, as if not knowing how to properly describe it.

"To not touch her," Coltan finished. "It's as if forcing yourself to keep your hands off her is a physical injury."

"And that touching her will be the best fracking thing in the entire universe," Paxt said.

They all shared a smile.

"Come. Let's see how she is healing." Paxt said.

They headed onto the craft and toward the medi-bay. The medi-bed was set to heal her through the night, keeping her sedated enough so that she would be completely restored in body, if not mind.

His heart rate sped up in anticipation of laying his eyes on her. It would soothe the anxiety that was building in his chest. He could only imagine what he would feel like palming her smooth, warm skin, kissing her, sinking his cock into her wet, heated depths—and watching his brother do the same to her. The erotic thought had his cock standing to attention within the close confines of his leathers. Not the most comfortable of feelings, but one he embraced, nonetheless. It meant he was fully alive for the first time in his life.

He rounded the corner of the room, brimming with anticipation—and stopped short.

The bed was empty. The tubing retracted.

Ashir roared, striding over to the bed, chest heaving. "What happened?"

Coltan stepped to the control panel. “The process was interrupted. She woke and touched the tubing. It’s programmed to release a patient upon waking so they don’t become panicked.” He sent Paxt a searing look, his eyes dark. “She is not fully healed.”

“Where did she go?” Ashir asked.

The room wasn’t disturbed. Nothing was amiss. It was as though she’d just disappeared into the ether. But that was impossible. Females didn’t disappear without reason.

Two strides took him to the cleansing room. A second glance told him a towel was missing. If she’d been abducted, he didn’t think her kidnapper would stop to clothe her.

“She can’t be far away. Check the craft. Every room. Every storage area,” Paxt said.

“You don’t think she’s been taken again?” Ashir looked as devastated as he felt. They’d failed her, and their life together had barely started, yet how could any of the scaled ones come onto their craft? They hadn’t heard a thing. It was more possible she’d woken and was confused. The situation was still dire.

“A towel is missing. She is still injured. She can’t have gone far.” Paxt spun from the cleansing room and into the corridor. “Find her, brothers. And be gentle. She will be scared and might not trust us.”

“How can she think we will harm her?” Coltan said.

Paxt laid a palm on Coltan’s shoulder. “Rujali told me that at first their mate didn’t understand the bond. Humans don’t feel the same thing. Not at first. She had been taken from her planet. Treated worse than an animal. We will need to go slowly.”

It was a distant cry from times of old, when mates once found, disappeared into the closest house for days on end. It was cause for celebration. All parties knew what it was and what it meant, but times had changed with the theft of the crystals. The natural order of their planet had been disrupted and they had to make concessions for that.

Coltan nodded. "It is to be expected."

"I will handle her with the utmost care. She means more to me than anything," Ashir said.

Paxt nodded at his brothers. "As will we all. Let's separate. We can look faster that way."

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Before he'd taken a step, an alarm sounded through the craft.

“What's that?” Paxt said.

Coltan bolted to the door. “Something's been caught in a trap.”

Chapter Five

Evelyn

She'd run as far as she could, which probably wasn't very far at all given how her limbs refused to cooperate and cold sweat broke out on her body despite the heat and black dots passed in her vision. The surrounding green leaves of the forest had become a blur.

Her toes caught on something. She stumbled and fell forward, but she didn't make it to the ground. A net surrounded her and she was whisked into a tree, bouncing like a crazy piñata.

She tried to wriggle, but she could barely move. One arm was thrust behind her, and her other elbow was caught in one of the squares between the netting. Pain ripped up her arm. She'd forgotten about the injured wrist, which was twisted against her stomach. Now there was no forgetting it.

She tried to get her arm free, but the more she moved, the tighter the net became until her lungs fought to drag in air. Her chest constricted. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't get enough oxygen. Her lungs burned and her throat swelled. A roar exploded in her

ears before the blackness began to devour her.

A sharp jerk jolted her body and she was falling. She tensed, expecting to slam into the ground. Instead, she landed in the firm hold of strong arms, pressed against a broad, muscular chest. She was barely aware of being lowered to the ground. The strands of the net disappeared and she sucked in air. It was all she could do but breathe in again and again and again. Her heart slowed, the vise around her chest disappeared, and she drifted back to her senses.

The dappled sunlight was blotted out by the broad shoulders of the three men who had uncaged her. One of them spoke, his voice a deep rumble, but the words didn't make sense.

She glanced down to see large hands splayed over various parts of her body. Her arms. Her thigh. One spanned the width of her waist. Her naked waist. Somehow the towel she'd dressed herself in had disappeared with being caught up in a net and nearly suffocating.

She was entirely vulnerable and all eyes were locked on her, insect under the microscope style. They could do anything to her, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it, except put up a flimsy fight.

She screamed, her heels and palms slipping uncontrollably over the wet leaves on the ground in her haste to get away.

Tatt-man went to grab her, but Man-bun snarled something, and his hand immediately dropped. She rammed into something hard and rough. A tree stump. If she could, she would get up and run off again, but in reality all she could do was pant, sweat, and try not to cry. Her body had hit its limit.

"Stay away from me!" She swallowed hard, her breath shaking in her throat. She

folded her legs and placed an arm over her breasts in an attempt to cover herself.

Boy-band, the dirty blond with the short back and sides, growled, a deep sound that came from low in his chest. He thrust something in her direction. To her utter amazement, it was the towel.

It took her a moment to work up the courage to snatch it out of his grasp and she hastily covered as much of her body as her shaking hands could manage. The men played stare-off for long moments, but at least they didn't make another move on her.

These were the men who had rescued her from the cages and the Reptile monsters, but that didn't fill her with any confidence. She'd still woken up in that coffin thing. There was no telling what the hell they'd been doing to her and she wasn't going back to find out.

She swallowed, her throat hard and dry. "Now what?"

Man-bun moved toward her, but she jerked, shying away as far as she could press herself back into the tree. If it could have swallowed her, she would have let it.

"Don't come anywhere near me." She pointed at Man-bun, the breath sawing in and out of her lungs. He rested his knee on the ground and came no further, thank god.

They spoke between themselves, their voices winding around her, filtering into her body like warm whiskey. Soothing. Calming. Good god, she was going insane. She had to get out of here. Get back in her own head, like before she found herself catapulted into the canopy in that net. There was an indefinable something about these men. If she let her defenses down, even a little, she'd be toast.

These men somehow had the capacity to change her life forever.

She wasn't going to let that happen. Not when the only thing she could think about was getting back home, and warning everyone about Reptile monsters and the missing women. There was a high chance she'd end up in an institution, but at least she'd have given fair warning.

"Talk all you want, but I'm not coming with you. So... you might as well all go away, Go on. Shoo. Leave me alone." She waved her hands at them as though brushing them away.

None of them moved, although the corner of Boy-band's mouth ticked upwards. That was strange. She had to wonder if they could understand her, however slim that chance would be. She wasn't going to stick around long enough to find out.

She weighed her options up. She was surrounded by large, dewy leaves and a thick forest of vines that let glimpses of sunlight filter through a dense canopy. The leaves to her sides were large and tightly packed together. One of them would cover her whole body. She could hide quite well, but the chances of running away with a lapse of attention on their behalf was next to nothing.

She studied Man-bun. He watched her with the patience and sharpness of a predator, his eyes black. His beard was close cropped, the same dark blond as his hair that had been hastily pulled into a knot on the top of his head.

All of them had blond hair. Boy-band was probably the darkest, but only by a fraction. Tatt-man wore his tangled strands to his shoulders. She risked a glimpse of his arms and chest. Swirls of black, highlighted with magentas and purples were inked into any spare real-estate of skin.

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And boy, did he have an expanse of skin. Taut, silky skin that covered hard muscle. He wasn't just ripped, he was chiseled. His biceps were as thick as her thigh and five times as sculpted. Even crouched, as they all were, he was a good head taller than the others.

Boy-band had classic good looks with a flipped-over fringe that kissed bushy brows. His lush lips threatened to break out in a smile at any moment, the fine lines that fanned from the edges of his eyes testament to that. The day's worth of stubble along his defined jawline only served to accentuate how handsome he was.

Even Man-bun was hot in that striking, intense ultra-predator kind of way, despite a look that might grace a New York catwalk.

All of the men were huge. All had massively defined muscles. She had to admit, they were extremely hot, and not a stuck-in-the-middle-of-a-tropical-jungle type of way.

Her gaze trailed upwards, and she swallowed heavily. Matte black horns curved from their foreheads. Man-bun's horns arched from his temple to disappear into his hair. Tattman's were tipped at the sharp ends, and Boy-band's twisted before they reached upwards toward the back of his head.

Horns and tats and good looks aside, they were also half-naked. Apart from bands of leather thrown sideways across the expanses of their chests, where various weapons were attached, they only wore tight leathers that did nothing to hide impressive bulges and thick thighs.

"Why are you all so super-hot?" And why was she even thinking about their sexiness?

Despite being on the verge of exhaustion and a well-deserved breakdown, she warmed as liquid heat swirled low in her belly, an erotic image flashing in her mind of all three of them kissing her. All together. At once. In a way that she not only returned, but demanded.

She inhaled once. Twice. She didn't seem to be able to get enough air. The breath left her body in a rush as every muscle tensed. She blinked rapidly, desperately trying to will the black dots away.

She wasn't going to have a breakdown. She was having one. Her body took it out of her hands. She sagged sideways as blood rushed in her ears. She was swamped with lightheadedness as her stomach punched with a swell of nausea.

God, oh god, oh god. She was going to faint.

There was a masculine roar and strong arms wrapped beneath her knees and shoulders. She was lifted up a great height as though she weighed no more than air and embraced into the security of a solid chest. A spice of earth and pine filled her senses. She pressed her nose into his skin and breathed in deeply. His scent helped to clear her mind a little.

Man-bun's eyes penetrated the fog rushing into her vision. There was a deep rumble that she belatedly realized was him speaking and then they were marching through the jungle.

"Don't put me back in that coffin thing. I won't be caged again." She clutched one of leather straps on his chest, ignoring the wicked-looking silver projectiles that were encased across it.

Her voice sounded pathetically wobbly. How woeful. The tough-assed investigative journalist was well and truly cowed at the moment. She didn't even have it in her to

scratch the surface to find that part of her that once defined her. She was too far gone for that anymore.

Man-bun frowned. His eyes burned liquid pools of black. Something like distress entered his gaze and he murmured words that, although she couldn't understand them, still soothed her.

To her surprise, he bent down and pressed his lips to her forehead, lingering. A sense of curious calm washed through her. His lips were soft, cushioned against her skin. He withdrew to nuzzle her hair with his nose. He breathed in long and deep, as though savoring that light touch.

She wrinkled her nose. All she could think about was that she hadn't had a bath for a long, long time and conditions in those cages didn't bear remembering, but then all thought fled when he tucked her more securely against his chest, bringing her closer to him. A tremor ran through his arms. He could crush her without too much thought, yet he held her so gently, so tenderly, she knew he never would.

He was the one that had rescued her from the Reptile cage. She was vulnerable, near naked, and all he'd done, all they'd done, was do their best to pacify her like one would a wild colt.

Being cradled in his arms, she might think they really did mean her no harm. What was confusing, though, was that kiss. It was as though she meant something to him, and there was a faint reflective call within herself.

She reached up, moving slowly and not quite understanding why, and cupped his jaw. His beard was so soft, she barely felt the short hairs against her palm. She registered that he'd stopped walking, his whole attention riveted on her.

She moved her thumb against his whiskers. They were slightly darker than his hair.

Wisps had escaped the knot, and stuck to the perspiration on his forehead. A golden tone burnished his skin, as though he'd been tanned by the rays from the sun. His face was symmetrical. Handsome. Desperately attractive. But even more than that, she felt an edge to him that came out in the slight furrow between his brows, the lines at the edges of his eyes, and the brackets at the corners of his mouth.

A slight scar ran along the left side of his face near his hairline that looked as natural as the features on his face. It was the sternness he radiated—strength, masculine power—that made something languid unfurl in the pit of her stomach. She knew in a flash of disbelief that she was attracted to him. Despite her circumstances, despite everything, she was attracted.

A wild cackle nearly broke from her, but she stuffed it way back down.

The heat in his dark eyes sizzled. She traced his bottom lip with the pad of her thumb. It was pillowed, yielding slightly with her touch. She dabbed her lower lip with the tip of her tongue, wondering what they'd feel like pressed in her mouth just as he'd kissed her forehead. Would he linger on her lips?

“I’m going crazy, but you don’t know how much I want you to kiss me right now,” she murmured, the words tumbling unbidden from her.

He gave a self-satisfied masculine growl before his head descended and his mouth found hers. He brushed his lips against hers. The tip of his tongue traced along the seam of her lips before his mouth crashed against hers.

She vaguely thought that yes, they were as soft as she'd thought they'd be before she was swept away with the experience of his kiss. His mouth molded to hers, his lips caressing, suckling, massaging until his tongue swept into her mouth in an indolent sweep.

His flavor exploded in her mouth. Indefinable. An aphrodisiac that sent a wave of sparks shooting through her body to the tips of her toes. She moaned into his mouth when his tongue brushed against hers in a slow, unhurried sweep. He pulled back and there was a moment when she wasn't aware of anything except her slowly cooling lips.

His intelligent eyes peered down at her. His mouth was glossed with their kiss and a satisfied smirk lingered on those plump lips.

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He'd kissed her! Just like she'd always wanted to be kissed. The type of kiss those romance novels told her it would be like. A kiss that satisfied on every physical level and wound its way into her soul. A kiss that indicated she would want more, much more, than just one.

He'd also kissed her right after she'd asked him to kiss her. She stiffened, comprehension washing through her. Her fingers firmed on the leather strap and heat washed through her body.

“Oh, my god. You can understand everything I'm saying, can't you?”

Chapter Six

Evelyn

Man-bun spoke, the lilting words sounding erotic in his deep rumbling voice. Her cheeks heated, realizing she'd said far more than just asking for a kiss. She'd said they were hot. All of them.

Fingers brushed her shoulder. She glanced up to see Boy-band offer a cheeky grin. A grin that was all too intimate to be sending a girl that had just been kissed by, and was in the arms of, another man.

Tatt-man swept a hand along her thigh. The towel had ridden up to reveal too much skin. She squeaked, pulling the material down.

He also wore that possessive, predator look in his eyes Man-bun had, and if she was

honest with herself, it wasn't totally unwelcome. She glanced at Tatt-man's mouth. Full, sensuous, and wholly kissable.

She stiffened, frowning. She hadn't meant to kiss Man-bun, and she certainly hadn't meant to enlist the interest of the other two. What the hell was going on with her? She must be sicker than she'd thought. Otherwise this was a dream and she was in a coma somewhere.

She glanced up at Man-bun, who regarded her with a considering expression. He spoke to his friends without breaking their gaze and Tatt-man and Boy-band slowly withdrew their touch. She was left curiously bereft, as though it was only natural that they all touch her at the same time.

She shook her head, trying to clear cobwebs, but it didn't work.

"I'm in a coma. I have to be. It's the only reason," she muttered to herself.

Her stomach twisted in on itself, emitting a loud growl. She clutched her abdomen, as though her touch would stop the devastating hunger ravaging her. She hadn't eaten in... a long time. Enough to leave her weak and doubling over with pain.

Tatt-man spoke a harsh word, and they bolted through the jungle. Although they ran, she was cushioned, so much she hardly felt a jolt. Leaves parted, and they approached the open door to the craft she'd just escaped.

A sinking feeling filled her body. She tightened her fingers on Man-bun's huge bicep. He glanced at her.

"You're not going to put me back into that coffin thing, are you?" Her eyes blurred with tears. She didn't think he would, but they were all so big, she wouldn't exactly have a chance to stop them.

He murmured to her, wiping away her errant tear. She sagged in his arms, too tired now that worry felt like too much effort.

Man-bun strode up the ramp, and the coolness of the corridors encased her bare limbs. They passed several rooms that looked like bedrooms and she stiffened all over again. They could do anything to her and she'd be helpless to stop them. Man-bun did that growly thing that had her wondering if he could read her mind before stepping into a room. A glance at bench utilities, and a table with chairs told her they were in a kitchen.

Tatt-man sat in a chair and held his arms out to her. Man-bun passed her over to him without a thought. A deep rumble sounded in Tatt-man's chest as she settled in his arms. He was just as solid and warm as Man-bun and his unique scent was just as pleasant.

Her gaze bounced between them both. No doubt they were large, alpha-possessive men, but there was no indication of dominance between them where she was concerned. Once she was settled, Man-bun spoke a few curt words to Boy-band and then moved to the utilities.

"I'm okay to sit on my own." She made to leave Tatt-man's arms, but they tightened around her, stopping her from leaving his firm, warm lap. His thighs jostled and she was more than aware of her naked buttocks against his solid thigh muscle.

He spoke a few words to her as he stroked her arms in a soothing manner. It seemed he didn't want her to move, and she was so tired she didn't have it in her to argue. She settled against his chest. He sighed in contentment as his arms folded around her.

A delicious smell ticked her nostrils, and all thoughts of dominating men fled her mind as Man-bun placed a bowl of savory-smelling soup on the table. He scooped some of the soup in a spoon and lifted it to her.

She frowned. “I can feed myself.”

Man-bun rolled his eyes in a confusingly human manner, spoke a short word, and placed the spoon on her bottom lip. Flavor burst in her mouth and her stomach lurched. It didn’t care how food got in there, so why should she?

Her mind was consumed with the warm, savory meal and she ate until her stomach protested its fullness. The bowl was only half empty, but lack of eating anything much over the past few weeks would have made her gut shrink. He scooped another spoonful, but she placed her hand over her belly.

“Thank you, but I don’t think I can eat anymore.”

Boy-band appeared, filling the room with more eye-catching testosterone. He held a silver instrument. She caught the questioning look he sent to Man-bun. They spoke and Boy-band slowly approached her.

“What are you doing?” Panic fluttered in her chest. They were going to do something to her, and judging by the looks, she wasn’t going to like it. “No. Please. I’ll be good. Don’t... don’t hurt me.”

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It was pathetic how she sounded—she wasn't like that—but she couldn't cope with any more torture. Not after being treated with a semblance of caring.

Tatt-man's arms tightened. She struggled, but it was useless. She couldn't budge a limb. Boy-band leaned in close, his clean scent wrapping around her.

He placed the end of the silver device behind her ear. There was a click and a sharp pain exploded in her head.

She jerked. Tatt-man's hold loosened and she was able to rub the sore spot behind her ear. "Holy fuck! That hurts! What did you do that for?"

Boy-band placed the device on the table, looking pained. She sent it a distrusting look and sidled away from it. As long as no one touched her with that again, she'd be good.

"I'm sorry my mate, but that needed to be done," Boy-band said.

She froze. Then, she tapped her ear. "Say that again."

"We are sorry, but it was the only way we could implant the translator device. We would have given you one while you slept, but you woke too soon," Tatt-man said.

His deep voice vibrated his chest in a way that made her want to cuddle up to him like a cat. She didn't need to feel that way right now. She really didn't.

"We apologize for your pain, but we didn't want to cause you any more distress than

you're already under. You asked not to go back in the medi-bed," Man-bun said.

It was wholly disconcerting to understand his words. "How could you understand me?"

"Our translators were uploaded with your language before we left to find you," Boy-band said.

"But—how could you even know my language. You're... you're... aliens!"

There. She'd said it out in the open. They looked human enough at a glance, but their skin color wasn't natural. Boy-band's brows were slanted a little bit differently and nobody had eyes as naturally black as Man-bun. Not to mention their black horns growing from their temples were as individual as the men themselves. That, and she definitely knew that humans weren't the only species in the universe. She'd learned that the hard way.

"That is a matter of perspective," Boy-band said.

She gaped at him. "Did you just... make a joke?"

"It was a bad one. I apologize for my brother, mate." Man-bun sent Boy-band a chiding look. He was clearly the leader of this little group. It was where she sat with them that was entirely unclear. And then there was the use of that word again.

"Mate? As in, 'friends' mate?" she asked, but it didn't sound like they used it in the usual sense of the word either.

Tatt-man's chest expanded. The possessive look he sent her seared through her.

"You are our mate," he said. "Our chosen. The one that will bind our Triad into a

Quad. You will gift us with children and be the center of our universe for the rest of our days.”

Holy. Fuck.

And there it was. The cause of the possessive looks and overprotective gestures that niggled her. She scrambled from Tatt-man’s lap. She must have taken him by surprise because he didn’t put up too much of a fight. She nearly landed on the floor but Boy-band’s strong grip beneath her arms kept her upright.

She twisted away from him and backed up until she struck a solid wall. She covered herself with the towel with hands that were shaking so much it was hard to even clutch it. She wound her arms around her abdomen to keep the towel in place, panting hard enough that she became lightheaded.

“Did you have to say it like that? You idiot, Ashir.” Boy-band ran a hand through his short hair.

The strands were thicker than normal hair. Then again, he wasn’t normal. He was a freaking alien who had staked a claim. They all had, if she had interpreted correctly.

A hysterical giggle welled in her chest. She clamped her fingers over her mouth so that it didn’t escape.

She worked saliva back into her terror-dried mouth. Experience told her that if she could make them see her as a person, a thinking being, that she might get out of this hostage situation, but appealing to their humanity was something of a long-shot.

“Your name is Ashir?” she asked Tatt-man.

He nodded, looking endearingly chastised. His horns seemed to droop, if that was

possible.

“My apologies. I shouldn’t have told you like that. I know it is a shock for humans. Your species doesn’t have the same thing in your society,” he said.

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She shook her head, latching onto his comment. “No. We don’t. We have marriage, but not this thing you told me about. This ‘mate’ thing. We don’t do that. At all. Nope.” She could barely think, let alone get her mind around three men—three extremely sexy men with a heat level off the scales—and one woman, her.

The idea was so foreign it wasn’t funny. Yet still, a flicker of heat wound lazily into the pit of her stomach. She wasn’t unadventurous, but three men was at the far, far end of her limit.

Especially that ‘until the rest of our days’ comment. There’d be no walking away if she didn’t get away now. This was some serious commitment she had no intention of entering into.

“That is the history of our species. It’s also a surprise to us to learn that we have found our mate with a human,” Man-bun said.

She licked her lips. Three sets of eyes tracked the movement, which she quickly stopped. “Yeah. So, you can see it’s probably a better idea to find someone of your own... species.”

Man-bun crowded her, tucking a strand of hair behind her head with a gentleness belying his size. She looked up, noticing the top of her head only came to his shoulder.

“That cannot happen, mate,” he said.

“Evelyn, My name is Evelyn.”

“What a pretty name. It suits you.” His eyes crinkled as he smiled. The effect was stunning, transforming his serious expression into something heart-stopping. “Evelyn. I am Paxt. That is my brother Coltan. You have been introduced to the idiot, Ashir. There is only one mate for a Triad. There will be no other. We go our whole lives looking and when we find each other, it is a cause for celebration. Do you not feel the connection inside you?”

She squirmed. She did feel something and it felt alotlike lust. Lust she didn’t want to feel. There was also a warm thread, a touch of consciousness that wasn’t just hers, but she quickly discounted it. She ached from head to toe. She was beyond exhausted and her head throbbed with the beginnings of a migraine.

She steeled her voice. “No. I feel nothing. I just want to go home.”

The men shared an uneasy glance. Coltan approached her, standing shoulder to shoulder with Man-bun—no, Paxt. She peered up at him, coming only to his shoulder as well.

“Evelyn.”

She shivered hearing her name on his lips. He stroked her jaw. She let him, drifting away with that gentle touch.

“The scaled ones brought you to our universe,” he said. “We have never heard of your planet before. We have no idea where it is. We would not see you so upset and would return you if we could.”

“What are you saying?” Her voice was strained. Hollow.

“There will be no returning you to your Earth. You are of this universe now.” Ashir stood next to his brothers, crossing his arms over his chest.

His tattoos seemed to float and swim in her vision. Side by side, she distantly recognized their familial coloring before her pounding heart threatened to beat a path out of her chest.

“We will protect you. Care for you. Give you everything you need,” Coltan said.

She needed to set things straight with these men—aliens. She wasn’t going to lead them on, because if there was a slight chance of getting home, she’d take it, and they seemed like the sort that took commitments seriously. Like, scary seriously.

“If you gave me everything I need, you’d find a way to take me home. I’m not your mate. I will never be your mate. You’ve made a mistake. I’m not going to give you what you want. Stop this, let me leave and find your proper mate. Your true mate. I’m not that woman. I’ll never be that woman.”

Even as she said those words, there was a wrongness about them she couldn’t define. She tilted her chin, nerves and muscles stretched, bracing for anger. An argument at best. That usually happened when she told men what they didn’t want to hear.

What she didn’t expect was for Coltan to sweep her off her feet and cradle her in a tender hold. She clung to his shoulder to stop her limbs from trembling.

“I see you do not believe us,” he said, “but that is all right. It is our job to show you just how important you are to us. We are going to care for you now and show you what we know to be true. There is no one else for us. Only you. You are our home. Our life. Our reason for being. Soon you will know that as well and there will be no debate about being anywhere else but at our side as our one and only true mate.”

They towered over her, intense and immovable and her breath stuttered in her lungs. This was all kinds of crazy. They acted as though she hadn’t even spoken. And now she was cradled in Coltan’s arms as he carried her down the hallway and into what

could only be a bathroom, his brothers right behind. She wondered how the hell she was going to get away from them.

If she'd even succeed.

Chapter Seven

Evelyn

“Didn’t you hear a word I just said?” She pushed both palms flat on his chest, trying to get out of his arms, but he tightened his grip, not enough to hurt her, just enough to make her realize she didn’t have a hope of getting away unless he wanted to put her down.

Her mouth watered at the sight of the shower. She’d been living in filth for so long, she’d almost forgotten what it felt like to be clean. She could smell herself, and it wasn’t pretty. She had to give kudos to these men, declaring their romantic intentions while she looked like this. It was no ordinary feat.

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She caught her reflection in a mirror and gasped. She held a shaking hand to her cheek. “Oh, my god.”

Her skin was mottled and sickly, her hair was plastered to her scalp with dirt, filth, and god only knew what. She was nothing more than skin and bones, though she’d had curves before she was abducted. Her eyes were wide and sunken, her lips chapped.

She ducked her head, closing her eyes against the flood of tears ready and waiting to escape.

“Put me down. Please,” she whispered.

Coltan set her on her feet. She kept her back to the mirror, not wanting to see her reflection. A glimpse was hard enough. She huffed a laugh.

“What is so funny, mate?” Coltan asked.

“I have to give you ten out of ten for wanting me. I look absolutely terrible.”

Gentle hands rested on her shoulders, and she looked up into Ashir’s face.

“You have been through a nightmare,” he said. “I would have given anything for you not to have experienced that. That you did and lived, tells us how strong you are. It is to be admired. You are our mate. We see through the dirt and the scrapes. They can be washed away and healed. Those are only momentary, and right now we will treat one, and then the other. We see the true you underneath your skin. Believe me when I

tell you that you are absolutely stunning.”

Tears stung her eyes for a different reason. He certainly knew what to say to make her feel a little better. She didn't think anyone had said anything like that to her. Ever. Maybe her mother. Certainly not her stepfather.

But she couldn't really believe him, could she? The only case of insta-love she'd written about was an article for the weekend edition which was about different species of animals that were victims of their own hormones. The males of the species fought to win the rights to the females, ensuring the strength of their offspring. It was nature's way of securing the survival of the fittest, where only the strongest survived.

However, there was no fighting here. In fact, they were falling over themselves to be nice to her. Was she ovulating? She'd been through so much, she would probably get her period on top of everything that had happened. Day counting had slightly gotten away from her.

Maybe she was in peak condition to become pregnant and these guys were just victims of their own hormones. She would get a period—or maybe she wouldn't, if they had anything to do about it. Then they'd realize the mistake they'd made and walk away, leaving her alone, barefoot and pregnant.

Wouldn't be the first time a man did that to a woman. Men just like dear old Dad, may he rot in hell wherever he was.

She had to remember they were aliens, for Pete's sake. They could be capable of anything. Hormones or not, there was no way they could feel anything for her, except maybe pity. They didn't even know her. She sure as hell didn't know them. It was downright strange to be talking about never-ending love and commitment. She almost snorted at the concept.

“Well, that shower looks really tempting,” she said, “—and I’m beyond due, so... thanks for bringing me here, but I think I can take it from here.”

A confused glance bounced between them.

“We will aid you,” Paxt said.

Good to know he was the spokesperson, but she was so not up for this discussion. All she wanted was to feel clean and then to get some sleep. In that order.

“I’ve been showering myself for over twenty-five years now,” she said. “I’m good to keep it that way.”

“You are in no condition to bathe yourself. We will help,” Coltan said.

“I’m not two years old!” she snapped, even though she wanted to stamp her foot like a toddler. All she wanted was a shower. Why was this so hard?

Ashir rested his hands on her shoulders. “No, you definitely are not, but you are injured. Exhausted. Anyone would need help. We are here to help you.”

She didn’t want to think how good his hands felt, but she also knew it wasn’t a good idea getting naked in a shower with three men who wouldn’t think twice about stripping down along with her. She was at the end of her rope. “I’m not having sex with you!”

A low purr sounded from Paxt. “We do not ‘have sex’ with females who need help. Believe me, mate. We will not ‘have sex’ with you unless you ask us to.”

Ashir brushed her hair back from her shoulder, leaving a trail of goosebumps. He leaned in close and nuzzled her ear. It. Felt. So. Good.

“And you will ask,” he whispered.

Coltan tucked his knuckle beneath her chin and gently lifted her head. “Let me add, we do not ‘have sex’. We will make love to you. It will be more than a mere bodily function, and it will be when we are already. Now, mate, we will care for you, and then while you are resting, we will prepare the area and make it safe. This is an unknown planet and we are unfamiliar with the animal life. We need to make this a safe site, which we will be able to do once you have been cared for to our satisfaction.”

Her brain stuttered with the last word of that sentence.

Paxt moved into the shower stall and started the water. Steam filled the little room. Her mouth salivated at the thought of water washing away the filth on her skin. Becoming clean was too much for her to deny, even if she had to get in there holding this scrappy towel.

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“Okay. You win.” She stepped sideways.

They parted, allowing her to move across to the shower. Keeping one eye on them, she placed her palm beneath the flow of water. It was nicely warm. Neither too hot nor too cold. Perfect.

Now she didn’t care if she had an audience or not. It was too much temptation. She stepped beneath the flow, keeping her back to them, tilted her head back, and let the water run over her face and through her hair. She moaned. She would never take a shower for granted ever again.

The towel became soaked and heavy, and it slipped to the floor. She gasped, covering herself as best she could, and came eye to chest with Paxt.

He calmly handed her a washcloth. “Take this. I will aid you upon your request.”

Her gaze dropped downwards of its own volition to see him soaking wet and still in his leathers. She relaxed marginally.

“That doesn’t look comfortable,” she managed.

“And neither will you be if I take them off. Now turn around.”

She blinked up at him, dumbstruck. “What?”

He poured a gel into the palm of his hand from a container. A flowery fragrance permeated the air. “I will wash your hair. It is matted and will be difficult for you to

properly treat it.”

“That’s shampoo?” She eyed the solution, and then noticed they were the only ones in the room.

“I sent Coltan and Ashir to secure the perimeter. We thought you would be more comfortable with just one of us.” Paxt waited for her, cupping the shampoo in his hand.

It looked innocuous enough. She turned around, holding the washcloth to her chest.

“I’m going to wash your hair now, mate,” he said. “Is it okay to touch you?”

She momentarily thought about taking the container of shampoo from him, but she couldn’t hold the little hand-towel and properly use the shampoo in the tangle that was her hair. It also looked like he was doing his best not to overstep. Feeling a little more in control, she nodded.

“I’m going out the hair cleanser in now.” His fingers threaded in her hair, moving slowly in little swirling movements, just at the top of her head. There was nothing sexual about his touch. He massaged the shampoo in much like a hairdresser would, functional and perfunctory. She waited for his touch to change, to become more than it should.

It never did.

His contact was firm, gentle, and there was a part of her that wished it was more, but then the scared, vulnerable side of her shoved the thought away.

She needed to think about something other than his fingers working the dirt from her hair. “Tell me about your… planet.”

“It is beautiful.” He let out a sigh. “There are three Homelands divided by great oceans that contain aquatic creatures. The Drod have huge fins and tails and can travel great distances very quickly. They are very hard to catch. The Qil are slower and glow in the dark waters. They are very tasty.”

“They glow in the dark?”

“Yes. It makes them easy to catch when fishing at night.” He helped rinse her hair out and then applied a fresh lot of shampoo.

“We have fish like that too, but they’re found at the bottom of the deepest oceans. I don’t think anyone eats them. I don’t think anyone wants to,” she said.

“They are not to be eaten?”

“I guess you could. They’re just really ugly. And I don’t think there’s a lot of meat on them,” she said. Just thinking about the prehistoric-looking creatures was enough to give her the shivers. “Although some people would probably consider them a delicacy.”

“Ahh. If you want delicacies, then you will need to try our pastries. Do you like sweet things?”

Did she ever. She was known for her regular mid-morning coffee and donut, or she was a casualty of too-low blood sugar.

“I do like a treat.” Or two.

His sexy chuckle went right through her body and straight down to her groin. “Then we shall get some for you.”

He rinsed her hair again. She felt a silken strand, surprised at the lack of knots.
“That’s some good shampoo you have there.”

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He picked up her wet, smooth hair and let it slip through his fingers. “The color of your hair is beautiful. Like moonlight. Let me condition it so that it stays this soft.”

She groaned out loud as he worked in some gel-like solution, the tips of his fingers massaging it into her scalp. Her legs were going to give out if he kept up this sort of treatment. The florally scent was more prominent, and she latched onto that and not what it was doing to her body.

“I like the way it smells.”

“The Zelse flower,” he said. “It grows everywhere on our planet and has a very prominent perfume. Our gardens are filled with them.”

She always liked gardens full of flowers. If she had a few hours to spare, she would sit outside in the sun, close her eyes, and give herself up to the sounds and aromas of the botanical garden in her home city. Her head dropped forward before she snapped awake again, eyes blinking furiously.

“Give me the washcloth,” he said, and his open palm appeared at her shoulder.

“What..?”

“You are falling asleep on your feet. I wish to finish bathing you and then you will rest the way your body is telling you to.” His tone brooked no debate.

She clutched the cloth to her breasts. As flimsy as it was, it was her only form of protection. “I...”

“I will only wash you. I will not take my mate while she is half asleep and recovering from injuries. I am not that type of despicable male. Cloth. Now.” His palm remained at her shoulder.

He hadn't touched her inappropriately and he'd had a lot of chances to do that. He could have overpowered her at any moment if he'd wished, but he hadn't. He had been truthful so far and there was nothing in his demeanor to make her think it wouldn't continue.

That shivery little undercurrent in her mind wished that he wasn't quite so proper, that he would try and steal a touch—it wouldn't be unwelcome—but to want anything like that now would mean that she would never get away and return to Earth, because these weren't men to lead on. These weren't men that would be told no. However she wanted to end up with them was how she needed to start.

“Evelyn. You can barely move. It will take but a moment and then you can rest,” Paxt said.

With trembling hands, she gave him the cloth, feeling more vulnerable than she ever had. There was something wholly intimate about standing naked in a shower without even the flimsiest of protection, like a wash cloth.

The cloth returned to her body with perfumed soap. He massaged it onto her skin, starting with the back of her neck and shoulders. There was nothing more to his touch than to clean her. He rubbed the cloth over her back, taking care with the various bruises and scratches all over her body. He brushed over her buttocks and down her legs. When he cleaned her upper shoulders and breasts, he didn't pause, only worked the cloth over her, cleaning away the filth.

Her head fell forward again and she rested her head against the cool wall. It was so hard to stay awake. Now that she was clean, it seemed her body was taking control

over her mind. Her legs trembled with the effort to keep herself upright.

Paxt tossed the cloth to the floor and turned off the water. She was surprised he'd finished washing her already. She'd blanked out for a few moments there when he'd picked up each foot and cleaned between her toes.

She didn't have time to cool, before warm air breezed about her body, drying her skin and hair in moments, which was a good thing because she didn't think she was up to drying herself with a towel.

Before she could think, Paxt scooped her up. She pressed her legs together and covered her breasts with her arm, but when she glanced up at him, he wasn't even looking at her.

Another pang hit. Disconcerting. Confusing.

She hadn't noticed where Paxt had taken her until he placed her onto the softest bed she'd even lain in. The mattress molded to her body and then she was covered in a warm blanket.

Paxt crawled up beside her and spooned her from behind, his body on top of the blanket, scooping her back against his chest and curling around her. It wasn't claustrophobic, or intrusive. Instead, she felt protected. Safe.

"Sleep, Evelyn. Let your body rest. We are here to protect you." His warm breath tickled her ear.

Before conscious thought could stop it, sleep rose up and cocooned her in its warm embrace where she dreamed of caring, sexy aliens with sharp horns and sculpted muscles, and her startling yet undeniable surge of lust.

She didn't want them to protect her. She didn't want to feel safe in their arms. She certainly didn't want to feel the lust for not one, but all three of them. That was dangerous ground. Land she didn't want to traverse. She wanted to get back home, back to her life, her friends, her job. Her planet.

She had to resist them any way she could. If she succumbed to them, there would be nowhere for her to get back to. If she couldn't deny temptation, her life would never be the same ever again. She would belong to them mind, body and soul and they would keep demanding those things from her until she gave it to them.

These were not men to trifle with. They were all or nothing. If she had any strength left in her, she needed to escape. There was no way they were going to just let her walk out of here. If she didn't go soon, she didn't think she'd ever get another chance. Whatever it took to get away, she would have to do it. There was no choice.

Chapter Eight

Paxt

Their mate was exhausted, and despite being so terrified, fell asleep immediately. She wasn't scared all the time though. Her body had betrayed her arousal, the scent while he washed her wholly distracting. It had come and gone, suggesting she waged a mental war with herself.

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That was all right. He could work with that. Despite her words, on some level she felt the mating bond. It would only be a matter of time before she was theirs, but he wanted her head and her heart, not just her body.

Her species did not have the bond and he wondered what drew them to partner with each other. Did they even have that level of intimacy in her culture? There was so much he wanted to know about her, so much he wanted to share, but that was all right too. They had the rest of their lives to discover each other.

For now, he was content to hold her safe, sated that he had bathed her and cared for her. She was almost unrecognizable after he'd finished. Her skin was a delightful pink.

Her hair was even more of a discovery. The strands were finer than his. They were like spun silver etched with moonlight, so soft he barely felt it over the callouses on his hands.

As he'd washed her, he'd fought down the rage welling in his chest thinking about what she'd suffered. Not even her sublime naked form was enough to obscure the horror of her bruises and abrasions. There'd be time enough for discovering her sweet body when she was well. His first and foremost concern had been washing and healing her.

She was soft perfection, as a female should be. He would need to warn his brothers to always treat her gently, even in the height of passion. He traced the outline of her form over the blanket he'd wrapped her in, over the dip of her waist and the swell of her hip, her body so tiny in relation to his.

Already his protective instincts were undeniable. He would gladly stand between her and any harm that might befall her, take physical injury so that she would remain unscathed as was true and right. Evelyn didn't know how precious she was. She couldn't possibly know the pleasure he derived simply through lying next to her, keeping her safe in the sanctuary of his arms.

But it had been a while now. Their mate was fast asleep and needed her rest, and he wanted to talk with Coltan and Ashir. Carefully, he unwound his arms from beneath her and eased off the bed. He took a moment to watch her. Her face was peaceful and he hoped she was having sweet dreams.

He crept from the room setting the alarm on the door before he left, and made his way to the eating area. If his brothers weren't outside, they would be in here. He found them both eating a meal at the small dining table, the contents of their meal half finished. They'd been conversing, but as he entered, both Coltan and Ashir broke their conversation and tipped their anxious faces toward him.

"Well?" Coltan asked.

Paxt ran a hand over his face. He really needed to get out of these leathers. The dryer had not done that good a job of drying them off. Things were starting to chafe and it wasn't a pleasant feeling, especially given the low level arousal pulsing through his veins.

Once Evelyn was well, he knew their bond would strengthen and he wouldn't be able to ignore the pull of taking their mate. Putting that to the back of his mind, he concentrated on his brothers.

"She is sleeping," he said. "The medi-bed didn't heal all of her injuries, but I'm hoping rest will do a big part. At least her bones healed, but there are numerous scrapes and bruises left."

Ashir clenched his fist. “I will kill every scaled one I find.”

“As will I. Did you do a patrol while I bathed our mate?”

Ashir nodded. “There were no more disturbances. Our message has reached Trum and he has set course for this planet, but it will take two weeks before they arrive.”

“And what of his mate?” His mind flicked to the female Trum had rescued alongside their Evelyn. He hoped she was recovering.

“She is frightened. Confused. In much the same condition as our mate. They didn’t want to leave her alone and so they made her comfortable on board the Head of Fleet,” Coltan said.

“They’re flying the Harbinger?”

That was a good craft. Stealthy, sleek, with enough firepower to bring down a cruiser—or a craft of scaled ones. There was enough room on board for a battalion, and he was sure Trum was bringing one with him. He was also sure they would be ready and waiting to kill any scaled ones they came across. Who knew how many human females had been abducted, and how many of them would turn out to be true mates?

“What of the Erion Triad?” The last thing Trum had said was that they’d gone after one of the scaled ones’ crafts.

“They managed to recover their crystal with the human female the scaled ones had taken with them,” Ashir said.

“Is that the female our mate was worried about when he found her in the cage?” Paxt said.

Coltan nodded, "It is."

Paxt relaxed a little. They could at least offer their mate some good news. "Have they restored the crystal to their tower?"

"As far as I know yes, however I haven't heard of any Quads forming," Ashir said.

Paxt frowned, "That doesn't sound right."

"I think this situation goes deeper than any of us understand right at this moment," Coltan said.

Paxt had to agree. He couldn't worry about the Erion now though. They still needed to plan the retrieval of their own crystal. "Have you found the exact location of the scaled ones on this planet?"

Paxt coded a meal into the meal-preparer and waited for it to rehydrate. He hoped their mate would like some of their rations. It could be trial and error discovering what she might like to eat. Hopefully, their food wouldn't be incompatible. He rested back against the counter and crossed his arms while he waited.

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“They are two valleys over. I sent out a drone to see exactly what to expect. Their craft is in several pieces scattered throughout the fauna. It looks as though it will never fly again,” Coltan said,

“What’s the current condition of our craft? Can we get to them?” If they could fly in, they could beat them with a surprise attack and then retreat far away to the other side of the planet, wait for Trum and their entourage, and enjoy their mate.

“Booster’s shot, besides the gash in the fuselage.”

“Drumasturd,” Paxt said. Without the boosters, there would be no lift off, even if they could survive the vacuum of space with a great big rip in the hull in the first place.

All told, they were grounded until Trum came. The food prep dinged, so Paxt fetched his meal and sat at the table with his brothers.

“We have a plan.” Coltan set aside his empty plate. “Once our mate is settled a little more, we leave her here protected in the craft and make our way to the scaled ones’ craft. We are stronger than they are and we will win a surprise attack. From there, we retrieve the crystal after we kill every last one of them for doing what they did to Evelyn.”

Paxt grunted as he ate. It was a good plan. Especially the killing part. He would enjoy that. It had the added benefit that they could be sure they would be safe while they were stuck on this planet. No more scaled ones. No more threat. He couldn’t wait to work out some anger.

A pathetic-sounding whimper crept into the room. The three of them shared a glance and then bolted from the meal area, their food immediately forgotten. Coltan was the first to barge into Paxt's sleeping room.

Evelyn was twisted in the blanket, her arms and legs weakly flailing. The blanket had dropped away, revealing a pert, pink-tipped nipple. A sheen of perspiration coated her skin. She tossed her head from side to side as she emitted another gut-wrenching moan, clutched in a nightmare only she could see.

Coltan lay beside her and gathered her against him. A frown marred her brow as she thrashed about, baring more of her upper body. Coltan drew the blanket up, and his finger brushed her nipple. She stopped moving, uttering a deep sigh before the frown returned.

"Touch her nipple again, Coltan," Ashir said. "I think it calmed her."

Coltan hesitated, before dipping his hand below the blanket and grazing her nipple with his palm. Paxt's cock twitched in his still-damp pants. He shoved the feeling aside. Now was definitely not the time to be aroused. Not when their mate suffered. True to his word, Evelyn stilled, turning her upper body into Coltan's touch.

"I don't want to touch her like this. Not when she's asleep," Coltan said.

"She's not asleep anymore," Paxt said as Evelyn's blue eyes blinked open, glazed and hazy from sleep.

Her gaze locked to Coltan's as he stroked her breast once more. She let out a throaty sigh that bypassed Paxt's resolution and went straight to his cock.

"Coltan, gently massage her breast," Paxt said.

The blanket over Coltan's hand moved as he did as he was asked.

"Do you like that, mate? Does it help keep the nightmares away?" Coltan asked softly.

She made a little sound almost as though she was trying to deny what her body needed, but she arched her back, her gaze trained on Coltan. Her tiny breasts were outlined beneath the blanket, her erect nipples visible beneath the material. Ashir sat on the edge of the bed, watching Coltan satisfy their mate.

"Do you like Coltan touching you, mate? Do you like how his hand feels on your breast?" Ashir asked.

Paxt's body trembled with restrained tension. Like his brother, he wanted to throw himself at their mate's feet, but also knew it would be counter-productive.

Evelyn's gaze turned to Ashir and instead of fear lacing her eyes, they were drowsy and accepting. Her tongue darted out to lap her bottom lip, leaving it dewy and wet.

"May I have the pleasure of touching you also, mate?" Ashir asked.

Paxt held his breath as they waited for an answer. She nodded, just once, a small gesture, but one that told of a rising trust. Ashir slipped the blanket from her body, unveiling her like the gift she was.

Paxt kept his attention locked to her face, watching for any sign of distress. The blanket fluttered over her body, revealing her thin torso. The breath left Ashir's lungs in a whoosh as all of them started at her beauty.

Ashir slowly reached to her, swallowing her petite breast with his large hand. He flattened his palm and rubbed the little rigid peak, moving in gentle tiny circles.

“She responds beautifully when you caress her nipple. Like this.” Coltan pinched a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it between his fingertips.

She uttered an adorable little sound and arched her back. Again, just a little movement, but one that told Paxt she was enjoying herself. He followed the tantalizing pull toward them—his family—and settled on the end of the bed.

Her blue eyes locked onto him. He brushed his hand over her blanket-covered shin. “Is Coltan right? Do you like what they are doing to you, mate? Feeling your tight little nipples, rolling them between their fingers? Both of their hands on you at the same time?”

She dragged in a shaky little breath. It seemed their mate was indeed enjoying herself, yet didn’t want to let on. Maybe he needed to spike her interest.

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“Would you like them to taste you as well? Coltan. Ashir. Lean down and taste our mate’s nipples. Tell me if they are as sweet as they look.”

Coltan and Ashir each took a breast and delicately licked and suckled her. Her pants became louder and color flushed her cheeks. Slowly, so slowly, her hands came up to splay through their hair.

Coltan groaned out loud, placing an open palm on her waist.

“Are they sweet, brothers?” Paxt said.

Ashir lifted his head. “The sweetest.”

The sounds of licking filled the room. She lifted her knees, and the blanket pulled to the side. He caught a glance of her nether lips, rounded and as pink as the rest of her skin. He tugged the blanket and it fell from her knees, pooling on the bed. Her slit glistened in her arousal. It was the most glorious sight he had seen in all his years, their mate becoming inflamed by their administrations.

He looked back to her face. She’d closed her eyes, her plump bottom lip caught between white teeth. He was glad to see her losing herself in their private world of sensual touch. She wasn’t afraid. Two brothers were touching her. Now he wanted to see if she would accept all three of them.

“I’m going to touch you now, mate, on your sweet lips down here. Are you ready for my touch?”

She opened her mouth on a sigh and threw her head back.

“Evelyn, tell me, are you ready for my touch, as well as Coltan and Ashir?”

Her bottom lip trembled. Coltan flicked her nipple with the tip of his tongue, before pulling her sensitive breast into his mouth. Paxt caught the edge of a smile on his lips. He wasn't above unfair playing, and in this instance, it was a good game play. Evelyn's body was lax and languid. She was receptive for more.

He threaded steel into his voice. “Tell me, Evelyn. Now.”

Her mouth parted. “Please.”

The word was no more than a sound on a breath, but he heard it. They all did, and he wasted no time. He traced a path up her leg with an open palm, along her shin bone to her knee. He swirled his fingertips along her calf, marveling at the softness of her skin. He knew from their bathing it was, but that touch had been functional. This touch was different.

He spread his palm on her leg, trailing toward the juncture of her thighs. He rubbed his thumb along the seam, her lips beckoning. However much the temptation, he needed to work slowly.

So lightly she might not even have felt it at all, he traced the outer curve of one plump lip, and then the other. He didn't miss the slight squirm of her hips, or the minute thrust against his hand. A wicked smile played across his mouth as he teased her, drawing needier and needier reactions from her.

He dipped his thumb into her wet heat, sliding it up and down her seam, spreading her slickness as he worked. Her panting became ragged when he flattened his hand and covered her slit, from her sweet little rosebud to her highly sensitive clit. Keeping

the pressure on her clit, he stroked his middle finger through her seam and into her honeyed entrance.

Her breath caught as her mouth fell open. Her back arched. Coltan replaced his mouth with his hand on her breast and placed a trail of light kisses up her chest and along her jaw. He nuzzled her ear and sucked the lobe into his mouth.

Paxt thrust his finger in and out of her entrance, pressing the heel of his hand against her clit. Coltan glanced at Paxt as he laved her ear before making his way to her mouth.

She turned her head, meeting him. His mouth lightly touched hers. Once. Twice. She moved upwards, catching his mouth with hers. He deepened the kiss, thrusting in with his tongue. Paxt matched each thrust of Coltan's tongue with a dip of his finger inside her.

Her channel was delicate and tight, but as he pleased her, she released a flood of fluids, making it easy to slide in a second finger.

“Do you like our hands on you, Evelyn? Our hands and our tongues on your delicious body. There's one place where we haven't tasted you yet, mate. On your sweet little core, right here. Your little hole I'm playing with right at the moment. Would you like all of our tongues on your body, Evelyn? Right here in the entrance to your beautiful body?” Paxt said.

A raw moan came from deep within her chest. Her thighs splayed open just that little but more; whether or not she even realized it, her body knew what it needed. Paxt wanted more than that, though. She needed to decide

“Evelyn. Tell me if you want my tongue on you right here. I need to hear you say it, Love. Tell me, do you want me to suck your little nub, kiss it, stroke it? Do you want

my tongue where my fingers are, deep within you? Tell me, Evelyn. Tell me now.”

Coltan released her mouth and he locked gazes with her. Paxt pushed his fingers in deeper, rubbing her clit with his other hand. Her skin flushed from her cheeks all the way down her body.

Ashir played with one breast, while Coltan lazily massaged the other. She was open for them. Relaxed. Ready.

Paxt leaned over her and whispered in her ear. “I can’t hear you, Evelyn. Tell me you want my tongue on you, or I won’t do it. I want to hear the word. Just one little word and then we will bring you to your peak.”

Chapter Nine

Evelyn

Oh, my god, oh, my god, oh, my god.

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Evelyn could scarcely process anything at the moment. She seemed to be floating on a sea of sexual arousal so potent she could barely form thoughts. One little word, that was all she needed to say, and she would reach the brink of what her body was searching for.

Yearning for.

All resolutions of ‘running the hell away before she got in too deep’ were out the window, with only the flick of a hot wet tongue and warm, sensitive hands.

All six of them.

She never thought she’d be a polygamist, or a polyandrist. If the truth be told—she was easy.

That was more painless to reconcile than maybe she was so desperate for physical attention, so starved for kindness, that just for once she wasn’t the super responsible person that bore the weight of the world on shoulders that barely stood up to the strain.

She had experienced something so horrific she would be scarred for life and she needed to feel something more than pain and injury to take her mind off it, the consequences be damned.

In the back of her mind, she knew she was being irresponsible, that she should be making a better decision, that she should say no, but when she opened her mouth to reply, the only word that came out instead was, “Yes.”

And then Paxt descended. His tongue stroked her all the way from her saturated entrance to her clit, where he kissed her like he would a mouth, before sucking on the bundle of highly-sensitive nerves at the apex of her slit.

At the same time, Coltan's tongue swept into her mouth, and Ashir tugged a rock-hard nipple into his mouth. Her orgasm exploded from deep inside her, erupting from her clit, spiraling upwards through her body, and then blacking her vision and her mind.

She rode the glorious wave, every muscle rigid. The air caught in her lungs and she screamed into Coltan's mouth.

Ashir broke suction on one breast to lave the other, his fingers unerringly fondling the nipple that had been in his mouth. Coltan nuzzled her ear, his tongue tracing the shell. Warm breath caressed the sensitive place at the nape of her neck. Her skin erupted in a cascade of goosebumps. Paxt twirled the tip of his tongue around her clit and thrust two fingers into her entrance.

She went rigid again, as another, stronger, longer orgasm rolled through her. Someone screamed, and a far-reaching corner of her mind knew it was her. Every cell in her body sang in ecstasy, as golden waves spiraled through her body. She was helpless but to lie there and let it take her away.

Slowly, she returned to her body, and then her mind.

Their hands still ran over her body, long soothing strokes that took the remaining tremors and sent them into the ether. She barely had enough energy to keep her eyes open.

Her limbs were boneless, her body sated, her mind untroubled. It was glorious. She was surrounded by a wall of hard muscle instead of cold metal fear.

She was warm.

She was safe.

How she understood that for sure, she couldn't tell, and she was far too exhausted to even try to wrap her mind around the fact she knew they would never harm her.

"Sleep, Evelyn. We will be here to keep the nightmares away." Paxt said.

As the warm blankness of sleep descended, a part of her, newly awakened to a sense she didn't know she had, realized they told the truth.

* * *

Evelyn rose slowly through languid layers of sleep. She loved waking up like this, instead of the blaring of an alarm that spiked adrenaline in her blood and made her heart race.

Much better on the weekend, when she had two whole days in which to sleep as long as her body needed without the stress of instant action. At the moment, her bed was unusually comfortable. And warm. The doona must have plumped up into a big long lump that framed the length of her body.

Then a warm palm brushed her arm.

Someone was in the bed with her. She jolted.

"Shh, mate. You're safe. I'm here with you." A warm nose nuzzled the side of her neck from behind. A kiss was placed just beneath her ear.

Memories flooded back. Reptiles. Cages. Three hot aliens. The best sex she'd had in

years—maybe ever.

A hand on her shoulder stopped her from bolting upright. Her senses returned in sharp reality. It wasn't a doona behind her, but a very warm, very naked man with muscles from his toes to his head, a hard one in particular resting in the small of her back.

She peeked over her shoulder, clutching the blanket to her chest in a white-knuckled grip. Ashir offered her a shy smile as he came up onto his shoulder and peered down at her. His hand was still on her bare arm, radiating a heat she found confusingly soothing.

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“Please excuse my lack of clothes,” he said. “You stirred again with nightmares. We thought it was best we keep you asleep. A warm body holding you was the only way to settle you.”

“So you had to come into my bed naked?” Not that she had minded so much last night.

A sexy smile snaked over his kissable mouth. She found her attention riveted to those lips and she knew how effective they could be. “It isn’t your bed. We’re in Paxt’s private cabin.”

They were so intent on sharing last night, it flashed though her mind they had shared with each other. But their attention had been focused on her. They hadn’t kissed or touched each other.

“You have different cabins?” she asked.

“Of course. This craft is big enough to have one for each of us,” Ashir said.

This close, he was absolutely stunning. His shoulder-length dark-blond hair was roughly pushed back from his forehead. His beard lent him the look of a man from yesteryear in a totally hot sort of hipster way.

Tattoos branched up from his chest to end in swirls and shapes along his neck. From what she saw of his hand, the back was covered with strange symbols, bright magentas and purples nestled between thick midnight black.

She always had a thing for tats. And now horns, it seemed. She swallowed hard. As hard as the rod that throbbed along her back.

“So then, when will you give me a cabin of my own?” Her voice was low and hoarse. Could she be more obvious!

His smile broadened, and a glint lit his eyes with a spark of deep purple. “This is your cabin. Coltan’s cabin is also yours. As is mine. Every room you see in this craft is yours. You own it all.”

Her mind stumbled. That little niggling deliberation she should have acted on last night came back to her in full force. What the hell had she been thinking?

“I think you have the wrong idea about me,” she began.

He chuckled, a deeply masculine sound. Humor danced in his eyes. He stroked her cheek with the back of a knuckle. “I know you more than you know yourself at this moment. There is no wrong idea to be had. You simply need to understand what you are us and you will never question it again.”

“But...”

He pressed a gentle, lingering kiss on her shoulder, and a warm shiver shimmied over her skin. She drew in a shaky breath. He’d barely touched her and yet she yearned for more. A smile changed his kiss and her breath snagged. He was incandescent when he smiled, sexy yet still retaining a boyish quality. He knew exactly what he did to her, and it was without ego. He simply enjoyed her reaction.

“Do you like me doing that, mate?”

Her head fell back to the pillow. “My name is Evelyn.”

“Evelyn.” He growled her name, sending a shiver through her body. “Well, Evelyn. I have you to myself for the first time in a day, and I intend to show you how strong our bond can be.”

She frowned. “A day?”

He kissed a path down her arm. “Yes. Paxt was the first to stay with you. And then Coltan. And now it is my pleasure.”

“Then... how long have I been sleeping for?”

“A day and a half on this planet. I’m not sure how that corresponds to the time of your physiology, but you needed to heal and we thought it was best you sleep. But now that you’re awake, we can start our campaign to show you how and what we feel about you.” The kisses ended at her elbow and then traced a path back up, stopping at her breast. His warm breath floated over her nipple that went instantly erect.

She licked her lips, remembering just how that mouth felt on her nipple. And her reaction to it. Her gaze flickered between his mouth and his eyes.

All she could think about was the wicked things he’d done the night—day—before. Her body took control over her mind. She arched her back, just slightly, but enough for her nipple to graze his lower lip.

He chuckled before leaning over her and devouring her nipple. A sigh bordering on a groan was wrenched from her throat when he flicked the hardened nub with his tongue. She barely wondered how someone could possibly be so good at this, when he flattened his palm on her thigh.

He pressed the full length of his body against her back. From shoulder to toe, he wrapped around her. His hand slid up her thigh, past her throbbing core to palm her

belly. His fingers massaged her soft skin, while his mouth laved her breast.

Her eyes fluttered closed at the overwhelming sensation. She'd been with boyfriends before, but none had done anything like this to her. Her reaction was so fast, so complete. It bordered on wanton, but in no way did she feel devalued. She wasn't used to going from zero to a hundred in a millisecond. It had never happened before. No one had managed to come close, and even though her mind was so reserved, her body knew what it wanted. She couldn't deny the pull any longer. It was simply too powerful.

Her legs parted. "Touch me, Ashir."

"As you wish." His voice vibrated against her breast.

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His hand dipped over her abdomen to cover the part of her that throbbed. If he didn't touch her there, she was going to combust. As if sensing her sweet ache, he used a finger to part through her slick seam straight into her core.

A groan was ripped from her at the satisfying invasion. He withdrew to the tip and then plunged back inside. His thumb brushed her clit, lightly circling the sensitive nub before pressing down. Her hips bucked, sliding against his hand to increase the penetration.

"Kiss me, Ashir," she said, breathless. "I need you to kiss me."

He suckled her breast deeply before letting go and moving so that she could lie on her back. She parted her legs and wrapped her arms about his shoulders as he bent to kiss her. His tongue plunged into her mouth in sync with his finger. He adjusted his grip and slowly inserted two fingers into her. A tremor ran through her body, and a deeper ache grew in the pit of her stomach.

The look on his face was intense. She was intrigued by the way his horns formed from his temples. She reached up and traced the length of his horn from skin to tip. It was hard, yet velvety soft. It was also hot and throbbed under her fingers. A deep shudder worked through his body. She gasped and retracted her hand. His pupils expanded, bleeding all the color to black.

"It's sensitive," she said. Clearly their horns were not like any horns on the animals back on Earth.

"They are very sensitive. Like touching my cock," Ashir said.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

Ashir chuckled. “You can touch me there whenever you please. I welcome your touch and am honored by it, but right now it is me who wants to pleasure you.”

He continued to slide his fingers through her cleft, grinding the heel of his hand onto her slit.

She heedlessly rubbed herself against his hand. Sweet pressure built, but it wasn’t enough. A nerve deep inside lit with dark need and couldn’t be quenched with mere mouth and fingers. She needed...

“More.” The word was torn out of her on a ragged groan.

Ashir removed his fingers and rolled over her, settling between her thighs. She tilted her hips, wanting him right where she ached the most, but he adjusted himself so that he couldn’t penetrate her.

“Ashir. Please!”

“No, my mate. You are not ready for this. I know your body hurts, but I also know you need more time with us. It will be my pleasure to sate you. Now relax and give me the honor of tending to your needs.”

That deep, gravelly voice whispering in her ear brought her closer to the brink. He settled more fully between her thighs. He tilted his hips and the thick length of his hard cock slid through her wet folds.

She threw her head back and gasped as it rubbed so deliciously against her clit. He withdrew and then thrust again, sliding through her, ramming his groin against her. Her toes curled and her legs fell apart as deep sensations spiraled up from nowhere

and roared through her. She tensed, riding out the glorious waves. Ashir thrust again and again, faster, riding out her orgasm, and when she began to relax down from its heights, he arched, grinding against her. His body tensed and he groaned into her ear. His cock throbbed in his own release. Liquid heat spread over her belly between them.

He sagged over her, while still taking the weight of his torso on his elbows, catching her in a slow, languid kiss that sent aftershocks through her body.

He broke the kiss, his face inches from hers. “Thank you, my mate. That was perfect.”

She pretty much thought it was perfect as well. The only thing that would make it even more perfect was if he’d actually penetrated her. And then Coltan. And then Paxt.

A frown formed on her brow. Where had that thought come from? One lukewarm boyfriend was all she’d needed before. She’d never been one to experience this type of attraction, this all-consuming need that was a living thing.

Maybe she was just psychologically scarred and this was one way her mind was coping with everything. It wasn’t so bad, three men who fell over themselves to ‘sate’ and ‘satisfy’ her. It was the kind of stuff fantasies were made of. And right about now, she could do with all the ‘sating’ and ‘satisfying’ anyone would give her.

“I came to see if our mate needs food only to find she now needs to be cleaned up,” someone said from nearby.

Evelyn’s eyes snapped open.

Coltan lounged against the doorframe, hands crossed over his massive, chiseled chest,

regarding her with humor in his eyes and a curve on his lips. “What am I going to do with you now, mate?”

Chapter Ten

Evelyn

Evelyn’s brain short-circuited. She hadn’t even looked to see if a door was open and someone might see what she was doing. She’d had sex without even considering her privacy. She never did that. Yet she’d been so entirely swept away, so deliciously consumed in what Ashir was doing, the world had faded away. She was so surprised that Coltan had snuck up on her that it caused her post-orgasmic brain to stutter without actually clinging to any thought.

Coltan approached the bed, his large body looming over the both of them. Ashir gave her a lingering kiss before standing, leaving her naked body on full view with the remains of his ‘satisfaction’ evident on her belly.

She squeaked and went to cover herself with a blanket, but Coltan scooped her up before she could do anything. “You won’t need that in the shower.”

“What about Ashir?”

Ashir retrieved his leathers from the ground and casually stepped into them, lacing them at his trim waist. She noted that tattoos covered his entire body, from his groin to his buttocks and down to swirl around his calves. He was a glorious, walking artwork. It was a pity half of it was covered by his pants.

“I’m going to wait,” Ashir said. “I like smelling of my mate.”

She gasped as he leaned and gave her a quick kiss on her mouth. “I’ll go tell Paxt that you’re looking after Evelyn,” he said to Coltan. “Bring her into the kitchen after her shower and I’ll prepare her something to eat.”

He sauntered out of the room, as though thinking nothing of leaving her with Coltan after what they’d shared.

She glanced up unsure at Coltan, ultra-aware of the evidence of Ashir’s excitement on her stomach. “Ahh. You can put me down. I can walk.”

He kissed her forehead. “Nonsense. It is my pleasure to have you alone in my arms.”

His fringe flopped over his left eye and before she knew she’d even done it, she threaded it backwards using her fingers as a comb. She snatched her hand back.

A slow, sexy smile appeared on his mouth. “Never fear you might offend me, Evelyn. I will accept anything you give me, no matter how small or how big an action it is.”

She worked up a lot of courage to say the next words. “But Coltan. I’ve just been with your brother.”

He cheeks flared with heat. The word ‘slut’ ricocheted around in her head. The evidence was pretty hard to hide.

“I know,” he said. “I saw you and I thank you for bringing Ashir such pleasure. It was beautiful to watch you care for him like that.”

Her mouth hung open. “You saw?”

“I came to see how you fared, and to ask Ashir if I could lie with you. It was my turn, you see. I saw you both reach your peak and I can only hope that you will honor me like that as well. But for now, you need to be cleaned and then you need to be fed, otherwise I’ll be remiss in caring for you properly.”

Even though all three of them had made love, she still grappled with their complete lack of jealousy. Either she really was lost in her own mind and was living out a fantasy while her body was still filthy and caged in a cold, dark room, or...orwhat?

If she was living a fantasy, wasn’t it best to be here, rather than lodged in a reality in which she suffered?

And if this was a fantasy, her brain could certainly throw up a good one. She should have written romance novels, rather than sticking to journalism.

Coltan walked her into the bathroom leading off the bedroom. Paxt’s room, she remembered. The bathroom in here was smaller than the one Paxt had cleansed her in by the med-bay, but to her eye, it was just as technologically advanced.

He set her onto her feet and, keeping one arm hooked about her waist, pressed the

hand-screen set on the wall. Water fell from the ceiling, steam curling tantalizingly toward her.

She couldn't help but step beneath the flow, letting the water stream down her body. The florally scent that Paxt had used before tickled her nose as large hands massaged her shoulders, the gel creating sudsy white bubbles on her skin.

"Relax, Evelyn," Coltan said from behind her. "—and let me work the kinks out of your muscles."

She thought she'd already had the 'kinks worked out of her muscles,' but Coltan's fingers were dexterous, kneading out knots she didn't know she had. A mental groan rolled through her.

"How are you so good at this?" she asked.

"It's a hidden talent. When I went to school and learned how to read and write, I also took a course in massaging the muscles of tired mates."

Despite herself, she smiled. "You're fibbing."

His hands dripped down her back, massaging out lower knots. "Of course. I have never had my hands on my mate before. Now I find I have a new skill in which to please you and that makes me happy."

The water continued to fall, the sound echoing around the small chamber. She gathered up courage. "Coltan..."

"Yes, Evelyn?"

She held a tight breath. "I'm not sure about this mate thing you keep calling me."

“Of course you aren’t.”

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Now that was unexpected. She glanced at him over her shoulder, her gaze drifting down, before she gasped and her eyes widened. She turned back quickly, mostly so he wouldn't see her cheeks go red.

His grin went wide. "I'm not stupid enough to wreck a pair of leathers like my brother."

He was buck naked, and what a glorious sight he was. She drew in a shaky breath. Even though she'd had an orgasm with Ashir, her body warmed with arousal once again.

"Get out of your head, Evelyn."

"Huh?"

His fingers worked down the outside of her arms. "We know humans don't have a mating bond. Tell me, don't your species feel a special link with their intended?"

His touch dropped to her hands, massaging each finger and adjusting ligaments that really did ache.

"If you're talking about love, then people find each other. They date, which means they go out with each other. Learn about each other. In some cases, feelings develop, and in other cases, they don't. If feelings develop, then they will like each other, maybe lust after each other, and then fall in love. If they fall in love, then they marry. Or not. But it's normally between a man and a woman. One man. One woman."

“There’s nothing biological about it. Nothing fated?”

“No. It’s a choice. Generally speaking.”

His hands massaged her waist, drifting over her stomach. His thumbs grazed her breasts and she shucked in a quick breath. “In our Homeland, there is one Triad to one Fated. We know the bond as soon as we see each other. Until recently.”

His fingers slid higher, and he brushed her nipples. They went rock hard in an instant.

She swallowed, trying to focus on the conversation. “Until recently?”

His hands captured her breasts, massaging in the soap. He stepped forward, pressing her against his chest. “Our crystals were stolen, and without them, there have been no new Quads formed for a decade. No mates. No children.”

“Crystals?” She wondered if that was the thing the Reptile had made her touch, and when she had, it had sparkled with light. “How do the crystals work?”

Coltan nuzzled her neck. Tingles erupted deep in her belly, her core becoming heavy and achy. She tilted her head to allow him better access.

“Ours is the Arabis crystal. It gives us our connection to our mates. We feel you. Inside us. That is why you are so special to us, Evelyn. We knew you were our mate because the crystal was close when we saw you, otherwise we might never have felt the connection.”

She reached back, finding his huge thighs, and curled her fingers around them. “They made me touch a crystal when I was there. In that cage.”

His hands trembled, but then he rolled her nipples between his fingers. She arched her

back and threw her head against his shoulder.

“They made you touch the crystal?”

“Yes,” she said, and took in a deep breath. “All of us. When I touched it, something strange happened. It happened to Lucie as well, but not to any of the others.”

One hand dropped down her belly, coming to rest just above her pubis bone.

“What happened, Evelyn?” He kissed the lobe of her ear, drawing the sensitive tissue into his hot mouth.

“It lit up. Pink and purple light came out of it. Like a Christmas tree. It was beautiful.”

“And what of Lucie? What happened to her when they made her touch the crystal?”

“Hers lit up with greens and blues. It was also beautiful. That’s when one of them grabbed me from the cage.” She shuddered. “I’m so worried about her.”

“We have word that Lucie has been rescued and is safe with the Erion royals. They made it back safely to our Homeplanet,” Coltan said.

Her knees went weak with relief. She gasped out a breath and her eyelids drifted shut. “Thank God.”

“I knew that news would bring your relief. Tell me, Evelyn, what did the scaled ones do when they saw the crystals light up?”

“They became very excited about it. I guess if your planet needs them to make babies, they’re pretty powerful. What do they want them for, Coltan?”

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“Nothing good. But we know where our crystal is, and we plan to retrieve it.”

He nuzzled her neck, his hand trailing lower. A finger finally slid through her soaking folds, just tracing the curve beneath her body. It was hard to think when he was doing things like this to her.

“But why did it light up for me? And the other crystal for Lucie?”

“Because you are our true mate. One we haven’t found for ten long years.”

He entered her with a tilt and dip of his finger. “Now you understand why you are so important and precious to us, and how we will do anything to bring you the pleasure you deserve.”

One hand delved into her center, while the other massaged her breast. She slipped her hand behind her, fingers circling his rigid cock. There was more to this issue, but at the moment, she couldn’t form a coherent thought even if she wanted to. She couldn’t possibly believe in the magical power of this crystal. More logically, it had to be related to her body’s electrical current, or something similar.

She’d written an article about water diviners, and the divining rods worked better with people who conducted more natural electricity. When she’d touched the crystal, there’d been an electrical exchange and a resulting light show. Certainly nothing to suggest fated mates or anything that would enable her to become a baby machine to three hot, hunky guys.

But they weren’t human, were they? They were aliens from a culture she knew

nothing about. Relationships might work that way on their planet—with their own species. She wasn't their species, though. She was human, and that was the trouble with the whole concept.

They all thought she was something she was not. That she would unite them and form this Quad. It wasn't going to happen.

They seemed like nice guys—really nice guys, if she was being totally honest with herself—and they'd rescued everyone they could from the cargo hold, including Lucie.

Maybe if Earth did have this mate thing, children wouldn't be brought up by abusive and neglectful parents. She wouldn't have suffered a shitty childhood she'd brought right along with her to adulthood. She couldn't quite reconcile the actions of these aliens to the bastards she'd had the misfortune to know.

In the end, men were all the same. They would hurt her, physically or emotionally, and she would leave them before they could inflict more damage. It was the way of the world. Maybe this mate thing was what Earth needed.

Give it up for the magical capabilities of a crystal. No sweat. No fuss. No need for fathers to leave wives and children when it wasn't working. They knew it would work before they even set eyes on each other, by the sounds of it.

But, as nice—who was she kidding, they were seriously hot, virile species of the opposite sex—as Coltan, Paxt and Ashir were, she knew she would also leave them. She didn't want to stop them from finding a woman from their own planet and building a life with their true mate. If she stayed around, they'd never find her.

A pang of jealousy was like a stab to the heart. Frowning, she wondered why she'd even felt that.

“Hmmm. I can hear those gears churning in your head. If you’re thinking, I’m doing something wrong,” Coltan said.

He spun her around to face him, lifted her up, and put her back to the wall. She wound her arms about his neck and her legs about his waist. She squeaked when she realized the compromising situation she’d put herself in.

She went to drop her legs, but he stepped close, grinding himself against her lower body, trapping her. In doing so, he smashed his abdomen against her clit. He tilted his hips, rubbing himself against her.

She held him tight, limbs trembling as he crushed his lips against hers. His tongue swept into her mouth, dancing against her own. He kept up the pressure, his cock sliding in the cleft of her buttocks.

Sweet pressure built and built. She tensed, every muscle rigid in anticipation before a final slant of his hips had her soaring over the edge. She screamed into his mouth and he swallowed the sound. He followed her over the edge as his cock throbbed behind her.

This was perfect. They all were perfect.

She only hoped she had the strength to leave when the time came.

Chapter Eleven

Coltan

Coltan knew Evelyn’s mind was heavy despite having received pleasure. If only she could understand how momentous it was that he and his brothers had actually found their fated mate. How miraculous. Yet, maybe she didn’t understand how deep their

connection was. He had to put it down to the fact her species just didn't have such a thing, if what she said was to be believed. He could barely comprehend just one man to one woman.

What happened if something happened to her mate? How could she protect herself and any offspring they might have? And to leave finding a mate without the help of the Fates! How could that last a lifetime and beyond?

She also had not mentioned any mate-sync, and again, he had to wonder if that existed for her. It would seem that she might need more time to adjust to her new life.

That was all right. He and his brothers were more than up to the task of showing her what it meant to have mates.

When they were able to mate-sync her, all would be revealed. There would be no question in her mind as to how they felt. Four souls would become one, and each would know what the others felt. Truth. Confusion. Sadness and love. She would know it all.

For now, maybe they should meet her halfway. Show her how they felt doing something human. Like this 'date' activity she spoke of.

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He had an idea, one which his brothers might also like.

She trembled against him, eyes heavy-lidded and muscles soft. His male pride was happy he'd been able to satisfy her. Only then had he allowed himself to find his own release.

He helped lower her legs that were still wrapped around his hips, and soaped her with a soft cloth. He kept an arm about her waist to help support her. When he finished, he stopped the water and set the drier. Warm air circulated around them and they were dry in a few moments.

"I'd love to take this technology home," she said. "No need to spend an hour on your hair. Just blast it with this super-drier thing and you're good to go in a second. GHD, eat your heart out."

He picked her up, delighted when she wrapped her arms about his neck and relaxed against his chest. She was already getting used to their touch and how they liked to handle her.

One of his brothers had laid out a gown on top of the bed that their sister, Celethe, had given them before they'd left, saying if they did find their mate in one of the human females, then she might not have a wardrobe available to her. He vowed to send her a thank you comm.

Evelyn lifted her head as she stared at the gown. "Oh, that's so beautiful. Where did you get it from?"

The gown was made from the colors of the Arabis crystal, the silk a wash of oranges and magentas, one color bleeding into the next, reminding him of artwork their artisans created with water paint.

“Celethe, our sister, had gowns packed before we left. I’m not sure what she arranged, but knowing her ability to keep our seamstress busy, you will be well-stocked.”

Coltan set Evelyn on her feet. She picked up the dress and held it in front of her. Although he liked to see her better without any clothing on at all, he had to admit the vibrant colors offset her moonlight hair and pale skin to perfection.

She slipped on the dress, the swirls of silk fluttering to her knees. She beamed up at him.

“You are breathtaking, Evelyn.”

She self-consciously brushed her palms over the material, her cheeks turning a charming shade of pink.

He took a moment to contain his basic urges, selecting a fresh pair of leathers from the hidden drawer in the wall they were stored in and slid them on. The temptation to rid her of the dress and ease into her welcoming heat was almost too much. He tied the laces, taking care to make adjustments for his hardening shaft.

He’d never had this response to a female before. Then again, he’d never had a mate before. Being a royal meant he had slept with other females—he was not inexperienced—but such activities were not taken seriously. Not when a Trio could meet their mate the very next day. Hells, the very next hour, if the Fates were inclined.

Now he knew the difference. He'd lusted after females, but that was like watered down Inclin wine. The perfume from the flowers the wine was made from was intoxicating in its own right, let alone after they were distilled. A small tumbler was all that was required for a massive kick in most cases.

"Do you think so?" Evelyn said. She scrunched the material of her gown at her thighs with restless fingers, then, noticing what she was doing, smoothed the creases away.

He frowned at her nervousness. She wasn't fishing for compliments. She genuinely had no idea how stunning she actually was. Had no male ever complimented her before? If they had done their job, she would know beyond a doubt about the quality of her looks, both inside and out.

He cupped her cheek, and she turned her gaze up at him. "I do not give compliments where they are not due, but you, my dear Evelyn, are absolutely magnificent."

Her cheeks went from a subtle pink to a deep red. She fidgeted. "You're a smooth talker, that's for sure."

"You don't believe me?" He was amused. He had never met anyone quite like her. He caught her chin between his knuckle and thumb. "Then we need more than just my opinion. If you hear it from two more, will you believe me?"

Her mouth opened. "I..."

He picked her up.

"Hey, I can walk you know," she said.

"The floor will be too cold for your feet, and Ashir the idiot did not bring you any shoes with that gown. I will take you to eat and we will discuss the merits of your

beauty.”

Her mouth firmed into a straight line that he didn't like seeing there. “Let's not ask them. I'm not a needy person like that.”

“It's not anything to do with being a needy person. This is all about understanding how we feel about you and that we will always speak the truth,” Coltan said.

“That's the thing. How the hell do you know what you feel about me? You don't even know me.”

He halted in his step and turned toward her. “Evelyn. Mate. Our connection. The mate connection. It is a soul connection bestowed by the Fates. It is true we don't know each other, but we will have a lifetime to learn. Our quirks. Our dislikes. Our joys. A soul connection is the deepest possible union ever to be formed. You will feel the link if you listen to your heart closely enough, and once unveiled, it cannot be reversed.”

Her slender fingers wrapped around his forearm as he stood before her. He liked that she'd initiated touch with him. “But what if it's wrong? What if you don't like me after you get to know me? You're going to be stuck with me.”

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He frowned as he regarded her. Her eyes were open and clear. She was sincere in her question.

“You have nothing to doubt.” He ran his fingers along her hair, reveling in the silky feel. “The Fates do not get Quads wrong.”

She sighed, her hand dropping from his forearm. “Things go wrong all the time, Coltan. I don’t want you to make a mistake. Any of you. I’ve seen it too many times not to be concerned with this fate talk.”

He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. He didn’t want her to justify any of her concerns. This was a tender moment, one in which they all needed to show her how much they cherished her so that she would have no more concerns.

“There is nothing to get wrong,” he said. “On our world, once a Quad forms, it is perfect and lasts for a lifetime.”

A sad smile twisted her luscious mouth. Even her eyes went dull. “It sounds too good to be true. You’ve obviously not been to Earth.”

“What has happened to you to make you feel this way?” he said.

Her face lost all expression, forming into a well-practiced clear slate. “Nothing has been done, Coltan. We just don’t have mates or Fates or anything similar on Earth. We have a saying—if things are too good to be true, they generally are. You have to understand this is difficult for me.”

He suspected that wasn't the whole of it, but he also knew she had shut down. If he pressed, he would only succeed in driving her further away. They would get to the bottom of things. Now was the time to appeal to her human side and learn about each other.

“Would you like to go on a date?”

Her mouth curved with an amused smile. “Do you even know what that is?”

“No, but you will tell us. Come. Let me take you to your other mates and we will discuss this.”

“You really don't have to do this, Coltan.”

“No. I do not have to do this, mate. I want to. That is the difference. First you will eat, and then we will talk about this date.” He lifted her slight form, loving the welcome weight of her in his arms, the subtle scent of the soap from her skin and just beneath that, her natural feminine fragrance. She put her arms about his neck. Her soft breasts brushed his chest and his cock went rigid as though there was a switch in his pants. He lifted her higher so she didn't feel his shaft prodding her.

Paxt and Ashir stood as he carried Evelyn into the meal prep area. A banquet had been laid out on the bench. Evelyn placed a hand over her stomach, but he still heard it rumble.

Paxt sat and held his hands out to her. Coltan delivered her safely into his brother's lap.

“I can sit by myself,” she said. “—just like I can walk for myself, you know.”

Paxt chuckled, surprising Coltan. He sent his brother a look over Evelyn's head. Paxt

never made that sound.

“We know you are very capable, but we like caring for you,” Paxt said.

“I’m known to be an independent woman.” Her eyes grew wide as Ashir placed the dishes on the table in front of her. “Oh, my god. You eat burger and fries as well?”

Is that what that was? He had no idea what the foreign-looking food Ashir had prepared was.

“I got the recipe from the Ozar Triad’s mate, Riley. She said you would like this meal. She said she ate enough to feed an elephant when she found out we could fabricate it, if that makes any sense,” Ashir said.

Evelyn glanced up at Ashir, her eyes sharp. “Riley? She’s human? Do you know her last name?”

Ashir shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t. I can ask in our next communication with the Ozar, if you like.”

Evelyn nodded. “That would be great. Thank you.”

“Do you know this Riley?”

“I know of her name. I think she was one on a great long list of missing people I was investigating,” Evelyn said. She placed a thin, light yellow piece of food in her mouth and closed her eyes, before snatching more and eating them by the handful. “Oh, these are good.”

Ashir puffed out his chest, looking far too pleased with himself. Colors flashed within the black swirls on his markings.

Coltan would ask for permission to speak to the Ozars' mate to make her happy. He'd heard human females liked sweet meals that would make them happy as well. He mentally catalogued to make Evelyn something sweet that she would love just as much.

"Evelyn was telling me about a human custom called a date," Coltan said to Ashir and Paxt.

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Evelyn waved him off. “Coltan. It’s okay. You don’t need to.”

He was silently pleased to hear his name on her lips, but now was not the time to listen to her objections. “I told you, need and want are two different things. Our mate needs to learn how precious she is to us. She is having a hard time believing her own worth. I suggest we take her out to the nearby lake, where we will spend time and get to know each other.”

“She doesn’t believe, does she?” Paxt weighed a serious expression on Evelyn. “Then that is remiss of us. We will do what we need to do, mate. Have no fear. The lake has been secured. After you eat, we will go there and—actually, what does one do on this date?”

Evelyn shrugged. “You eat. You talk. Other things.”

Her face did that curious thing where it changed color. There was something else she wasn’t telling them. Interesting.

Paxt pursed his lips as he regarded her. “Then we will prepare. Ashir, pack food, please. Coltan, arrange the supplies we will need. I will find something for your feet. Would that be acceptable, mate?”

She looked between all of them. “Uh... sure? That sounds great.”

There was apprehension in her voice, but she would soon learn she had nothing to be uneasy about. Soon she would never doubt them again.

Ashir and Coltan bustled about while Paxt had the pleasure of holding Evelyn on his lap and watching her eat.

Her rounded bottom against his firm thighs was sweet torture. He adjusted himself so that she wouldn't feel his rigid cock. Although he would like nothing more than to sink himself into her heat, they were meant to be putting her at ease, not making her feel like a sex toy, and Ashir and Coltan had been with her already. His time would come, but only when she was fully relaxed and at ease.

This was all new for her and she needed time to adjust. Coltan's idea about a date was a good thing. Although they knew each other on a soul level, it would be good for her human mind to get to know them. He could think of nothing better to do with his time.

They had secured the immediate area with detectors and traps. Nothing bigger than the size of the smallest insect would get through. The scaled ones had given no indication that they were moving from the area of their crash, so were contained. Paxt had sent out drones to detect any traps the scaled ones might have set themselves, but had yet to receive any data from which to formulate a plan of attack. It was just a waiting game at the moment.

"Do you like this food?" Paxt asked.

Evelyn nodded and a sheath of silky hair fell over her shoulder. "Sure. Everyone likes fast food. It's what I usually ate. Not a lot of time to prepare meals for myself, you know?"

He frowned. "You had no time to prepare meals? What of the people who cared for you?"

All females in their Homeland were cared for as a family unit.

She choked, her face going that shade of red again. “Can’t say Mum did much for me past the age of eight.”

“But... you were a child. It is a parental duty, as is the duty of her trio of brothers to care for the females in their family,” he said.

She shrugged a slim shoulder and took another bite of the soft, tan-colored piece of food she seemed to like. “I managed.”

He hated to think of her as a child, having to look after herself, “I can’t imagine a Homeplanet like yours, who would make children fend for themselves. It is abhorrent.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to give you the wrong idea. It wasn’t like that for everyone. For the most part, parents look after their children. My mother, well, she just had problems, you know?”

He regarded her, but she kept on eating as though nothing was wrong—as though it was normal for her. “And what of your mother now?”

“We’re not exactly close. She moved interstate to live with her new boyfriend. Or maybe it was the guy before that. Don’t know. Good luck to her.” She turned to face him, a determined glint in her eye, “Don’t judge her. She did the best she could. Single mum and all that. It’s a hard life for a woman. Turned me into the woman I am today, so in a way she did me a favor.”

She’d put up a hard wall. He could understand that. It was to protect herself. If she had a parent who had loved her in the way she deserved, she wouldn’t feel the need to protect herself emotionally. No wonder it was her first instinct to push them away and not accept their bond. She had been deeply scarred and would need nurturing and gentleness to see that she didn’t need to protect her heart. Not ever with them. It was

another reason to go slow and show her that she could rely on them.

“And what of your father?” he asked.

She made a derogative sound. “The sperm donor, you mean? Don’t know. Never met him.”

He was about to question her further, when Coltan came back into the room. He held a pair of combat boots. “These are the smallest I could find. The slippers Celethe packed are only acceptable for walking around the hallways in the palace and not for bush-land.”

Paxt was about to object when Evelyn gasped and reached for them. “I love them! They’re perfect. Thank you, Coltan!”

To his utter surprise, she smiled. Her lush behind wiggled against him as she bent to put them on her feet. He stifled a groan and forced his mind to mundane things, like border patrol, to command his baser instincts, wondering how the hell he was going to control his urges when she did things like that to him.

She’d found a way into his heart, although, to a large extent, it was the bond, but it was also her. The way she spoke, the expression on her face, her strength faced with these extreme circumstances. Her smile over a simple pair of boots. He was glad he’d have the rest of his life to enjoy her, learn about her.

Love her.

His heart stuttered with the enormity of that realization. He actually had a life to look forward to with a mate, his family. Children.

That was something worth fighting for. With the scaled ones here on this planet, he would do anything it took to protect her. He realized what life was really all about now that he finally had it, and he also knew that if something ever happened to Evelyn, life could truly hurt him.

He held out hand for her to take, “Come, my mate. Let’s get you some fresh air.”

As her hand folded in his, he was more aware of the danger they were in. Danger that had the power to cut him deep if the scaled ones attacked and reclaimed their victim.

Chapter Twelve

Evelyn

Evelyn secured the final strap on her new boots and stood, concentrating on the way they conformed to her feet and calves. They were a little big, but that left wriggle room for her toes, and the straps around her calves would stop them from slipping up and down. Now she felt like her old self.

The dress was pretty, and she felt feminine, but she was a jeans and t-shirt type of girl. She ached to put on her leathers and helmet and ride her bike on the open road.

She twirled, liking the way the boots fit. “These are fabulous.”

“They are combat boots,” Paxt said, throwing his brother a scandalized glance.

Maybe the women on their planet were more feminine than she ever would be. Just another reason she needed to stop whatever it was they were determined to have between them and leave.

“Just like mine at home. I have something similar when I ride my bike,” she said.

If she could have found the pants and jacket to go with them, she would be a happy girl.

“Bike?” Paxt asked.

“Yeah. A motorcycle. A kind of motorized vehicle on two wheels.” It was hard to describe something they might not have on their planet. That sinking feeling built in her gut again.

“We have something similar, however it uses anti-grav technology. It is for a single or dual rider and can skim the tops of trees. A rider can cover a great distance, however they are not particularly safe,” Coltan said.

“Sounds something similar what I ride—rode, whatever—but it doesn’t skim trees. You don’t fly it. You drive it along a road.” She was intrigued by the thing Coltan described though. A motorbike that could also fly. That sounded... fascinating.

“I have several at home. I would be honored to take you out on one,” Coltan said.

She gawked at him. “Several?”

“We all have them. My brothers and I race. It’s not often they are able to beat me,” Paxt said.

“So you say. He cheats, mate. Don’t listen to him,” Coltan said.

Ashir walked into the room, a pack strapped to his large shoulders, and surveyed his brothers, “You two drive like the elderly. They don’t go a click over twenty. Often I take a nap, waiting for them at our chosen destination.”

There certainly was some sibling rivalry going on, but it seemed healthy, as though they were an extension of each other in a good way. She’d never had a sibling. It would have been nice on those nights when things weren’t so pleasant. Then again, perhaps it was better never to have had a brother or sister considering her less than ideal childhood.

“Ashir is the slowest of the lot. He arrives when we’re ready to go!” Coltan said, but the grin on his face belied the pretense in his posturing.

“Well, I think I’d give you all a run for your money,” she said. “If it’s anything like your flying skills, I’d win hands down.”

She got that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach again when all three turned their gorgeous eyes to her. Moments stretched and she was about to apologize when a broad smile appeared on Ashir’s mouth. Coltan’s brows lifted to his hairline as he chuckled. She looked at Paxt beneath her lashes. Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything. She didn’t really know them and anything she said might be misconstrued, but Paxt’s laugh was the most contagious.

He stood, picked her up, and swirled her around in his arms. “By the gods, the Fates always get it right. Brothers, I see no sense in waiting to take our mate out on this glorious day. Are we ready?”

“In this, we agree.” Coltan slapped Paxt on the back and walked out of the room. Ashir grinned at her and followed.

She tapped Paxt’s shoulder when he went to follow. “I can walk, you know. I have these new boots and everything.”

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“It is my pleasure to carry you,” Paxt said.

As they progressed down the corridor, the smell of fresh, warm, humid air greeted her. She glimpsed into open rooms as they passed, counting four bedrooms, a room filled with supplies, and another with bits and pieces of technology she had no idea about.

“Yes, but I need to walk,” she said. “It will be good to stretch my legs after so long not being able to.”

Paxt stilled and let her slide down his body. She was aware of every ridge and dip of his muscular frame, and of the hardness from a part of him that had her blushing. Surely he still couldn’t be aroused?

“Forgive me. It is hard to control my base bodily functions when you are so close,” he said.

Well, there was the answer to that question. He could. He was. And he was completely unashamed, if the heat in which he looked at her was any indication.

An answering quiver of excitement pooled low in her belly.

His fingers tightened infinitesimally on her shoulders. “The exit is just here. Come, let’s go before I act rashly.”

She nodded and turned around to the full force of a tropical, warm day. She breathed in deeply. It was so good to feel fresh air in her lungs. As she ascended the threshold,

she was reminded how it felt stepping from the cocooned coolness of a plane and onto the tarmac in far north Queensland.

Around her, a slight breeze brushed enormous bright-green leaves. Talk about accelerated growth in a tropical climate. She hadn't realized how thick and lush the flora was when she'd stumbled through it before. Then again, she hadn't been thinking too clearly at all, given the circumstances.

Running from the safety of the jet was such a stupid thing to do. There could be anything out here, but when she looked to where Ashir and Coltan waited at the base of the ramp, grinning, she knew she wouldn't have to fear anything that might be lurking behind a leaf.

She walked down the ramp, her boots clanging with each step. She was going to get hot in them, but for the moment, a lightness touched her heart and no amount of hot feet was going to pull her out of it. She'd gone through too much not to take a small measure of enjoyment when she could. She only hoped the other girls were doing okay.

When she reached the ground, Ashir caught her chin beneath his knuckle. "Hey, your mind slipped for a moment. Everything fine in that head of yours?"

She smiled, willing the cloud of darkness away. "Just wondering how the others are doing. I never asked about them before. I should have thought of that."

Coltan nodded, forking his fingers gently through her hair. "I don't think you were in any condition to think about anything else but yourself. As you know, Lucie is in the care of the Erion royals."

"Is she their... mate... also?"

“They wouldn’t have taken her without knowing that to be true,” Ashir said. He was so serious, she almost asked for him to smile again. She liked seeing him smile. “They will take great care of her. You have our word.”

Deep down, she knew it was true. If Lucie was treated with the same consideration she was, then her safety would be assured. These aliens didn’t seem to mistreat women. In fact, they seemed to find anything like that completely abhorrent.

They should come to Earth sometime. It would be an eye-opener for them. They could teach a few things to a whole lot of men.

She placed her hand over Coltan’s. “I believe you.”

His expression softened, the lines around his eyes easing.

“As soon as we hear more about your friend we shall share it with you, but for now, you are our concern. You need our date and that is what we are going to do,” Paxt said. “Come. Let us show you the lake.”

He took her hand, and they walked after Ashir through a path only he could see, followed by Coltan. She was surrounded by big, burly bodies that were poised to protect her from anything untoward.

The tight muscles bunching her shoulders eased as cool, dewy leaves brushed her arm. Paxt slowed, and the next she knew, he presented her with a gorgeous flower. The blood-red petals were delicate and frilled. Perfume filled the air. He brushed her hair and placed the flower behind her ear.

He smiled at her. If she thought he was handsome before, he’d just transformed to stunning.

“Perfection,” he whispered.

Her heart stuttered.

He didn’t want her to answer, but simply took her hand and kept walking as though what he’d gifted her was no big deal. She’d never had a boyfriend who’d given her even supermarket flowers for Valentine’s Day, and none who had taken her out for dinner without expecting ‘payment’ when they’d brought her back home. In the end, she’d given up. It wasn’t worth the effort.

Still, it was more than that. Her heart hadn’t stirred one little bit with any of them, but now, there was a lightness—a rightness—in her chest. One simple gesture was more thoughtful, and more honest, than she’d ever experienced. Even from her mother.

She had to think about something else, otherwise she was going to be a mess.

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“You said that all boys on your planet are triplets?”

“Yes. Boys are born first, and then a girl in the second pregnancy,” Coltan said.

“Always?”

“Yes. It is the way it had always been,” Paxt said.

“Wow. That’s... amazing. I can’t imagine having a planet full of triplets and one sister,” she said.

“That is not the same for your planet?” Ashir asked.

“Some people have one child. Most have two, although some people have more. There have been families that have twenty children.” She had written an article about those families once. Her mind was blown at the organization required for such a big household. Really hard to imagine when she had no siblings.

She’d tried to picture herself being a sister in one such household, but her mind hadn’t stretched that much. It had pretty much stopped at the caring parents. Although there were lots of children, there was also lots of love. They lived in such harmony she’d been privately jealous.

“That sounds strange,” Ashir said.

She couldn’t help but huff out the semblance of a laugh. “Now you know how I feel.”

Paxt seared her with an unreadable expression. “Indeed, and now we are here.”

He brushed aside a prehistoric frond to reveal a postcard-worthy view. She stepped onto sand that was so soft she sank down into it.

Fine pale pink sand carpeted an area between the vivid green underbrush and a deep blue sparkling body of water. Overhead, a light blue sky shimmered with sparse fluffy clouds. She might have been fooled into thinking it was an untouched part of Earth, if it wasn't for the two suns overhead.

She was speechless. The water looked so tempting. Her skin was coated in a sheen of perspiration from the humidity, making the water even more enticing. She'd taken a steps toward it before she'd even realized and then wondered why she was alone.

She turned around to see Paxt, Coltan, and Ashir stripping out of their clothes. There was a whole hunk of male flesh and muscle on display and she didn't quite know what to do with it.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was no more than a high-pitched squeak.

Ashir threw his pants to the ground. He stood before her, unembarrassed by his body, his thick cock at full-mast and pressing heavily against his belly. “I'm going for a swim. Are you coming in?”

“I don't... you don't... have any swimwear,” she gasped.

Coltan shucked his pants to next to Ashir's. “Swimwear? You wear clothing when you swim?”

“Well, of course. Doesn't everyone?”

“It is much nicer to swim without the hindrance of clothing.” Paxt ambled past her.

She was helpless but to stare at his mouth-watering rear end as he walked without hesitation into the water.

Her mouth went suddenly dry.

“We’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready, little mate.” Ashir winked at her, then stalked into the water, disappearing beneath the depths in a splashy dive.

“Show off,” she muttered to herself.

“Take your time. But not too long.” Coltan joined his brothers, diving beneath the surface only to re-emerge some distance away.

She glanced at the piles of discarded clothing, wondering what the hell she should do. The suns beat a near oppressive heat on her shoulders, and the water looked cool and refreshing. Already the three of them were swimming and taking no notice of her.

She slipped her feet from the boots. The sand burned against her soles.

“Ah! Hot. Hot. Hot!” She threw the boots to the side and ran to the water until it reached up her calves. The cool water swished over her feet, soothing them.

“Are you coming in?” Paxt called. He stood waist deep in the water, his skin shining.

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“Well...” There was nowhere to put her dress without it getting wet and she wasn’t going to walk back on that hot sand. “Maybe I’ll just stand here.”

“Do you hear our mate, brothers? She is scared of the water,” Ashir said.

“I’m not afraid of the water. I don’t want to get my dress wet,” she said.

“I think that is just an excuse. Maybe she can’t swim,” Coltan said.

“I’ll have you know I’m a very good swimmer.” She’d won several high school carnivals, and her regular exercise consisted of weekly laps at the local pool.

“I can hear the hesitation in her voice. I think she needs help.” Paxt walked toward her. Drops of water ran down his face. His bun was undone, and his wet hair trailed halfway down his back, making him look like something out of Conan the Barbarian.

She’d always had a thing for that show, but here, now, it was coming for her in multicolor.

She stepped back, the water only covering her feet, but the sand behind her was too hot to walk on. Paxt towered over her, and he swept her off her feet so that she was cradled in his arms.

“Let me go!” She pushed against his chest. His skin was burning, even though he was wet with cool water. It already felt delicious on her overheated skin.

His only reply was a cocky, half-smile.

She pointed a finger at him. “Don’t do it.”

“And what am I going to do, other than look after my mate?” he asked, moving into deeper water.

She threw her arms around his neck, climbing up his torso. “I know exactly what you’re thinking about doing. And you’re not looking after your mate.”

He didn’t stop walking. “But she is hot and I have the remedy of cool water to soothe her skin.”

The surface soaked the hem of her dress. “I can’t wet this dress. I don’t have anything else to wear.”

“You won’t hear a word of complaint out of me,” Paxt said, loosening his hold.

“Paxt... I’m warning you...”

It didn’t come as a complete surprise when he held her out and let her go. She held her breath against the smile that burst across her face, before shock rippled through her mind. She’d let her guard down, having fun as if she hadn’t been abducted, tortured and now lost on an uninhabited planet with three hot aliens doing their best to seduce her.

What’s more, she was giving her heart away to them when she should be guarding it, but how the hell was she meant to protect herself when she was falling for them so quickly?

Chapter Thirteen

Evelyn

The water closed over Evelyn's head and she floated, savoring the welcome coolness and weightlessness it provided. A sigh rippled through her. She hadn't thought she would miss the simplicity of water, but she'd been wrong. On this planet, or another planet, it was the same. Had they known how she might feel about it?

Finally, she stood. It was still shallow, the water only coming up to her waist, and she faced down Paxt. "You've ruined this dress."

His gaze travelled down her, lingering on her breasts. "From my view, it's made a vast improvement."

Frowning, she glanced down to see the material was completely transparent. Her breasts were on full display, her nipples pebbled through the coolness of the water. "Typical male."

She swatted the surface of the water and sent a spray over Paxt. He blinked, caught totally by surprise. The expression on his face was so comical, she burst out laughing.

"Don't tell me no one has splashed you before." She sent another spray over him for good measure, taking great delight in watching him blink through the onslaught.

"No one who has lived to tell the tale," he said.

"Nonsense. As a child, he always would splash everyone else, and yet not let anyone splash him back," Ashir said.

"He would run to our parents and tell how we both would attack him, saying it was unfair that it was two on one," Coltán said.

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“Would it also be unfair if it was three against one?” she asked, glancing at both Coltan and Ashir.

“I see no parents he could run and cry to,” Ashir said.

Paxt crossed his large arms over his chest. “I did not run and cry. And it was unfair, two against one. It was only because the two of you knew you could never win against me.”

“Sooky la la,” Evelyn said, and ignored their confused expressions, waving it away. “Forget it. All I know is I have to get you back after ruining this beautiful dress from your sister.” She splashed him again.

“Do not start something you have no hope of winning,” Paxt said.

She raised a brow, enjoying herself for the first time in forever. It was so good to play around. To feel free. To have fun. “What makes you think you’ll win?”

“Yes, Paxt. What makes you think you’ll win?” Ashir scooped up a bucket load of water in his hands and sent it over Paxt’s head.

“I warned you.” Paxt swung his arms, spraying them all with sheets of water.

She gasped, and as the shock wore off, began pummeling water as hard and as fast she as could in the general direction she thought Paxt was.

She screwed her eyes shut against the barrage of water, ducking her head into her

chest, gasping in breaths. Strong arms surrounded her. She was thrown into the air and came down with an enormous splash, dropping below the surface.

She came up spluttering, catching sight of Paxt grabbing Ashir in a headlock. Both of them fell below the surface of the water. Paxt came up again, this time heading toward Coltan. Quick as anything, Paxt powered his shoulder into Coltan's solar plexus and threw him away with a roar.

Evelyn gasped. Coltan was not a small man by any means, and he was packed with muscle that would weigh a ton.

Paxt set his eyes on her, drilling into her with heated intent.

A fire of a different sort ignited between her legs, making the water feel that much cooler. It lapped all over her body, her skin extra sensitive. She stepped backwards, but Paxt charged at her so fast she barely was able to take another step.

He caught her in his iron embrace, hauling her out of the water and pressing her to his rock-hard chest. "Do you yield?"

His gaze simmered, dark and dangerous. She struggled in his hold, something writhing inside her—a hole inside her heart that she never knew existed and yearned to fill. She didn't know what to make of it, yet was desperate to have it replete. She pressed her palms against his skin, aware of hard muscle beneath the silky texture. Hard and soft at the same time.

"No." Her voice was low. Husky.

He held one hand behind her head, the other around her waist. His rigid cock pressed into her soft belly. She shivered as desire spread through her, igniting illogically, yet coming from a place of rightness.

“Evelyn. Do you yield?”

She knew he was speaking about something else entirely. He tilted his hips, dragging his cock along her belly. Slowly, her arms came around his neck, her legs about his waist. He tilted his hips again, this time gliding his cock against her slit.

She moaned, the sound coming from deep within her chest. Delicious sensation shivered through her body. Her skin sparked, sensitive to the water, to his hold, to the intimate part of her body opening like a flower and pressing against his hardness.

There was heat at her back as Coltan settled behind her. He trailed his hands over her shoulders and down her arms, his fingers making lazy circles on her skin. Ashir stood beside her. He moved her wet hair from her face, planting his lips along the sensitive dip of her neck.

“Open your eyes, Evelyn.” Paxt rasped.

She hadn’t realized they were closed. She only managed to open them halfway, too heavy to go any further. Paxt was millimeters away, his gaze fierce and intent. His mouth hovered so close. If she just moved toward him a little, she’d be able to have his lips where she wanted them.

The hand on the back of her head firmed, locking her in place. His expression turned almost feral. His cock dragged along her slit, long and slow and burning. She was empty. She needed to be filled. Her fingers dug into his shoulders.

Coltan’s palm slid along her back, the tips of his fingers skimming the cleft between her buttocks. She gasped as he grazed her rosebud. Dark heat throbbed inside her.

She rubbed herself along Paxt’s shaft, but hands on her hips prevented any movement. Desperation clawed at her. She needed to be touched. Needed the

pressure to be released. She clawed at his shoulders. Desperation she couldn't put a name to built into an inferno, from nothing to all consuming.

"Please." The word was drawn out. Pleading.

"Do you yield?"

She barely recognized Paxt's voice. It resembled churned-up gravel.

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She nodded, her breath coming in short pants. Coltan's fingers slid between her buttock cheeks, a fingertip slowly ringing her rosebud. She'd never done that before. Never been interested, but now... now it seemed like a good idea. It seemed like the very thing she needed to do.

Ashir's palm slid between their bodies, cupping her breast. He pinched her nipple, just enough that it stung slightly.

She hissed, arching her back into his touch. "Need you. Please."

"Yield, mate. Say the word, and we will take care of you." Paxt's mouth touched hers, teasing.

She chased his lips and he pulled back, chuckling when she growled. She wanted his mouth. Ashir's hands. Coltan's fingers. Paxt's cock. She couldn't think of anything else. This need was all consuming. Insatiable.

She tried to move her hips to alleviate some tension, but Paxt held her tight. His cock throbbed between them in time with his pounding heartbeat, the thick base pressing right against her clit. She ground herself against him, but the peak remained elusive. She couldn't take any more.

She bared her teeth, snarling her words, "Yes. Damnit. I yield. Now give me your cock. All of you. I want all of your cocks."

The answering growl that came from Paxt was made from pure, male satisfaction. He tilted his hips. The tip of his cock found her entrance and he eased inside.

“Yes...” She fell backwards against Coltan’s chest.

Paxt’s fingertips dug into the soft skin at her thighs as he slid inside, easing into her until his groin met hers.

“You are beautiful, mate,” he said.

Coltan’s finger pressed at her back entrance. The tip of his finger entered, inching out and sliding back in to the knuckle. He eased down, whispering into her ear. “This is where I will be, mate. I will stretch you until this little hole is wide enough for my cock.” He thrust inside her again. “I will fuck you right here until you scream.”

Ashir pressed his lips to her mouth. “I will take your mouth. You will open wide for me and accept me in this warm, wet hole of yours.” He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding into her mouth. She met his thrust with her own, their tongues dueling and stroking against each other. His hands massaged her breasts, pulling and tweaking her nipples.

Coltan kept up his assault on her rear entrance. He slid out to the tip.

And thrust back in again.

She gasped into Ashir’s mouth. Her hands flailed. She clutched Paxt’s forearm with one hand and Ashir’s arm with the other, holding on as Paxt slammed into her again. And again. She wrapped her legs around his trim waist, pincering him between her thighs.

Her body jolted again and again as he thrust. It was too much. Not enough. The pain sweet enough to be glorious. That delicious sensation in her body rose toward that magnificent crest. Every muscle tensed, clenched. She strained. One heartbeat. Two, and she soared, peaking over.

The world around her went white. Her body locked as her orgasm rocked her body. She vaguely heard Paxt roar as he strained against her in his own release.

Hands soothed her body. Gentle voices told her how well she'd done.

Paxt pulled out and someone washed away the evidence of his arousal. She was hauled against Ashir's chest. Her muscles trembled as she wound her arms about his neck and her legs about his waist. Her body became heavy as they walked out of the water.

Coltan tugged her wet dress. "Let me get this off you, mate."

Hands splayed beneath her and her dress was removed. The suns beat down on her wet skin. A warm, gentle breeze caressed her hair. Her eyes were so heavy. She rested against Ashir's chest and let him carry her over the sand to the vegetation.

"Come, let's get back to the craft," Paxt said.

She moaned. She didn't want to go back inside. She'd had enough of being stuck indoors. She wanted to feel the sun and breathe fresh air. The sun on her skin was just perfect and she began to drift into a light doze.

"Please. Just a little more time outside." She nuzzled Ashir's chest, breathing in his fresh, outdoorsy scent. Heavenly.

"We have to check our traps, and whether the drones have returned any information," Paxt said.

"Just a little more," she murmured, her eyes falling closed. She was sated. Relaxed. At ease.

Finally.

Ashir chuckled, the sound reverberating against her ear. “It is all right, brothers. I will stay with our mate while you check. Bring us back some food when you return. I think our mate will be hungry with her recent exertions.”

“Very well, but don’t let the sun burn that delicate skin of hers,” Paxt said.

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“I packed a fresh dress for her, once she is dry. Don’t let her catch a chill,” Coltan said.

“Geez, I didn’t think a bunch of alphas could be such old women. Go, I’ll be fine.” She nestled against Ashir’s chest, as content as she’d ever been in her life. She closed her eyes and concentrated on feeling that special skin to skin contact.

“Our mate has spoken,” Coltan chuckled.

“Very well. We will return,” Paxt said.

He placed a kiss on her forehead, and she smiled up into his face. Coltan gave her a lingering kiss on her mouth. The fire inside her simmered to attention.

Although they’d just had sex, she wanted more. She could think of nothing better than spending a lazy afternoon learning each other’s bodies.

“Come back soon,” she muttered.

“We will, mate,” Paxt said.

Paxt and Coltan disappeared back into the jungle. Ashir settled on a carpet of cool leaves. She stretched out beside him, slung an arm over his waist, and rested her head on his shoulder. She sighed as she nestled against him.

She must have drifted off for a few moments, but opened her eyes when a shadow fell over her, blocking out the warm suns’ rays. She was about to tell one of them to

move out the way, when her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the shadow.

Her heart hammered, the breath sticking in her lungs.

A Reptile bludgeoned Ashir's head with a heavy metallic rod. He was thrown sideways, twisting awkwardly on his neck, blood splattering over her arm. Before she could scream, something hard slammed into her head.

Darkness was immediate.

Chapter Fourteen

Coltan

Coltan dug through the clothing that Celethe had packed for their trip. He chuckled. Their little sister was a true romantic at heart. Finding a mate was not only a thing of fantastic tales now-a-days, but that one life-changing event that everyone on his Homeland lived for. He had never known such happiness.

He was more than determined to retrieve the crystal so that the Arabis Homeland would once again prosper. The crystal had already unlocked an instant connection with Evelyn. He couldn't hazard a guess as to why. The Fates had to be involved. Finding a mate was a fated-blessed connection, after all, and far beyond his ability to understand as a mortal being.

It wasn't just their Triad that had already found their mate. The Ozar had as well as others, such as Trum. If the Erion had taken Evelyn's friend Lucie, then he could assume they had also found their mate as well. It was miraculously astronomical. The connection between the power of the crystals and the human women were indeed exceptionally strong if it could unite Traids with their fated to form the Quads their population was dependent upon. Someone, this being that had stolen both the crystal

and the human female, had discovered the power of the connection. To what end though, he had no idea.

Only that the rest of their Homeland could now find their mates. New Quads would be formed. Children would be born. Their Homeland would flourish. They would herald in a new time of prosperity for their planet—all because of one human female relaxed and sated in the arms of his brother, soaking in the sun. After he killed the scaled ones for torturing such a perfect creature, he would send thanks to the Fates for sending her to them.

He picked out a sky-blue dress. It would match the color of Evelyn's eyes, although seeing her in her naked form was what he preferred. He was sure she would accept all of them soon, and they would complete their bond and fully mate-sync. That was such a private and personal happening and one that he could hardly fathom himself.

Often, his parents, especially his mother, would tell them about the bond. He ignored the look of pity he'd often catch in her soft gaze when she thought they weren't looking. That wistful look that they would also find their mate and have children of their own. She would be happy. It was a happiness he just now understood.

Heavy footfalls sounded in the corridor. Coltan turned as Paxt burst into the room.

"Grab your weapons."

One look at Paxt's face, and he knew it was serious.

Coltan threw the dress on the bed, racing to the weapons room. "What is it?"

"The drone has returned. There's activity not far from the crash site, but the sensors picked up movement at the lake," Paxt said.

Coltan's heart stalled. "Where we just were?"

Paxt merely nodded. His expression was grim, eyes dark, mouth flat. Coltan had never seen his brother so worried. It only fed the black dread that was filling the pit of his stomach. He clenched his teeth, forcing his mind to clear. He couldn't have thoughts clouding his judgement. He didn't know what they would find, but he needed to have a free head.

Without another word, Coltan slung on a loaded chest strap and hip holster and reached for anything nearby. He grabbed his favorite sword in one hand and his pulser in another, spearing his brother with a dark look. If anything had happened to Ashir or Evelyn, he would kill every last fucker he could.

"Let's go."

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They bolted out of the ship and through the dense underbrush. The trail was longer than he remembered it being. Every leaf he had to brush away, every branch he jumped over only slowed him down. Sweat poured down his forehead, stinging his eyes, but he gripped his sword and pulser harder and pushed on.

Paxt burst out onto the beach and Coltan skidded closely behind him. Water lapped along the shoreline. The suns beat down overhead. A breeze caressed his skin.

The shore was totally empty.

Pat knelt down to the last place he'd seen Ashir and Evelyn, his expression burning. When he looked at Coltan, his eyes pulsed with anger. "They have been hurt."

Stunned, Coltan stumbled to where Paxt pointed. Splatters of blood stained the pale pink sand, sullyng its beauty with violence. There were divots and gouges surrounding the area. Whoever had been here, had taken their family.

Coltan curled his fingers around the hilt of his sword. "They will die."

Paxt placed his hand on Coltan's shoulder. "We will get them back."

Coltan could only nod. Anger pulsed like a writhing, living entity in his blood, barely contained and looking for an excuse to break free. If he didn't get a rein on his emotions, he wouldn't be good for anything. Not for what he had to do.

Paxt slid the flexi-screen from a hip pocket and accessed the drone data. Several dots moved across the terrain, racing toward an area that was bleeding red unlike any

drone-data reading he'd seen before. As he watched, the color and size grew in intensity.

“What does that indicate?” Coltan asked.

“That stationary one is the crystal. The other two are Evelyn and Ashir. Whatever is happening to them, the power of the crystal is increasing the closer they get.” As they watched, the light indicating the crystal grew larger with each blip.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. This was so not good. “We have no time to waste, brother.”

“This way.” Paxt started off through the trees.

Together, they followed a path that led them toward the blinking dots. Coltan noted broken twigs and leaves, indicating that something had travelled before them. He could only hope that Ashir and Evelyn had not suffered. He couldn't bear the thought.

The deeper they jogged through the underbrush, the more the heat cloyed around him. Perspiration ran over Coltan's skin and down his back in rivulets. The humidity was punishing. If only he could backtrack to a few hours before, when they were swimming and carefree and blissfully unaware of what would happen in their immediate future.

What made it even worse, in a way, was that there was so much at stake. Not just their lives, but Evelyn's, and the entire future of their Homeland. There was only one mate for a Trio. There would be no other for them. No mate. No children. Only empty days without family to fill the missing gap of happiness.

Coltan was so caught up in his thoughts that he almost fell over Paxt when he crouched against a low rise. He caught himself in time and settled next to his brother.

He followed the line to where Paxt pointed. Paxt's hand on his shoulder stopped him from lurching to his feet at the sight.

A scaled one had Evelyn's limp form thrown over its shoulder. Two others had Ashir's struggling body between them. Ashir snarled at them as he tried to pull free from the bindings at his wrists and ankles.

A scaled one hit Ashir over his head with a truncheon. His brother's body went limp, fresh blood coating over the dried remains of a previous injury on the side of his face.

The scaled ones hissed and clacked to each other. One of them came over and issued some kind of order to the others, then they walked through a clump of leaves and disappeared.

Coltan looked at Paxt, eyebrow raised. Paxt indicated that they reverse their steps. Coltan followed until Paxt hunched down behind a thick trunk.

"They've gone into a cave." Paxt held up the flexi-screen. Indeed, the topography indicated they'd gone beneath the ground, quite a distance it looked like.

"I didn't even see the entrance," Coltan admitted.

"It was hidden very well. Now we know what they've been doing. They haven't just been sitting around, there's something going on underground. See?" Paxt said.

The light had stopped blinking, and was now a solid dot. Fringes of magenta and purple ringed the red.

"The colors of the crystal, but it shouldn't be able to do that to the screen," Paxt said.

"There are many things I didn't think possible before we met Evelyn, but the Ozar

spoke of a bigger plot. They must be doing something and it involves our Evelyn. The energy reading is growing. It looks like they're harnessing it somehow and it's growing the closer Evelyn is taken to the crystal. It seems Rujali was correct when he said the scaled ones need human females. If this is what I think it means, then the entity they also spoke about needs the energy to come through into this dimension," Paxt said.

"We have to stop it then, brother. Whatever it is, it can't be any good. For any of us."

Paxt's eyes went dark and fierce. He didn't wear that expression often, but when he did, he was set to unleash the hells. "This is a battle bigger than you and me and our family, Coltan. Even our Homeland. It might mean the destruction of our entire universe if we don't stop them now."

In the pit of his stomach, Coltan knew he spoke the truth. They had to attempt something to stop whatever was happening, but it could mean they would never come out. There might be no happy ending to this fight.

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He gave his brother a quick nod. "I understand. Paxt, I'm glad to call you brother."

Paxt stood and hugged him without a moment of hesitation. He slapped him on the back. "As am I, brother. As am I."

Paxt released him. Coltan nodded and together they made their way to where the scaled ones had disappeared, taking care to stay hidden using leaves and trunks. They crouched behind the last line of flora before the entrance to the cave, waiting to make sure they were alone.

Coltan slowly drew aside a leaf. Cool air, tainted with the smell of earth, washed over him. He stepped inside the cave, waiting for Paxt to join him. It was dark inside, yet the gloom was lit by little yellow glowing dots all over the cave walls. Coltan looked closer to see that the glowing dots were a variety of phosphorescent lichen. On their own, they were tiny, but en masse they emitted a light bright enough to see that the cave was indeed quite deep.

Paxt indicated to move inside, and together, they cautiously crept along the wall and into the depths of the cave. The air became cooler, damper. The sweat on his body dried, and he shivered.

Sounds echoed toward them, quiet at first, then louder as they moved closer until he heard the individual hissing and clacking of each scaled one. Light streamed beyond a bend in the wall.

"Let her go!" Ashir's furious voice bounced off the walls. It was good to know his brother had recovered from the head injury.

Coltan glanced at Paxt, who gestured to wait. He agreed; they needed to see what they would be up against. They couldn't just charge in.

“Take that off her. Can't you see you're hurting her!” Ashir roared.

The light flickered, and there was a curious buzzing sound. The hair on Coltan's arm stood on end and the air crackled with a living energy. The dull light increased into a blinding intensity that whitewashed the rock walls of the cave.

Ashir roared, a sound filled with anger and pain that abruptly stopped. It was followed by a cry that dove straight into Coltan's gut and pierced his soul. A sound that began as a whimper, then escalated to one of complete and utter agony.

Evelyn.

Her scream was cut short.

Chapter Fifteen

Paxt

Paxt bolted around the corner, heart in throat. A group of scaled ones huddled around her. She was splayed on a table, arms tied to supports out to her side. Unconscious. Naked. Vulnerable.

Ashir was tied on the table next to Evelyn, also unconscious. Dried blood streaked across his face, and his head listed to the side. Straps on his wrists, chest, and ankles held him to his table.

Both were hooked up with wires attached to their heads, palms, and hearts. The Arabis crystal was held by a device against Evelyn's forehead. It glowed bright

magenta and purple, throwing light over her face tight with tension.

Somehow, it was activated, something only their crystal towers could achieve.

Whatever the scaled ones were doing, it needed to be stopped. Misuse of such power could annihilate worlds. In a flash, there would be nothing left of this planet and everything on it but a few specs of dust.

And they were putting Evelyn at risk.

Black clouds circled the ceiling, rotating in a swirling pattern that pre-determined a raging storm. A stiff wind stirred the dust from the floor and whipped his hair in his eyes.

He didn't have time to think why clouds were in a cave, before he slashed his sword through the back of one scaled one, slewing it open from shoulder through his backbone. Its body split and fell in opposite directions, green blood spewing over the floor with a wet splat.

Coltan shot another with his pulser. Hissing and clacking, the scaled ones broke away from Evelyn. Paxt shot with one hand, while slashing with the other.

A scaled one lunged at him but before it could get anywhere near, he struck and slid his sword through its throat. Its eyes bulged. Its head tilted back as a slender green line gushed its olive toned blood. The head fell back as the body crumpled to the floor.

Coltan roared as a great red slash opened along his back, deep crimson drops bleeding across his skin. He lashed out, severing the head of the scaled one that had injured him.

Coltan's muscles strained as he doubled his efforts, slashing, hacking, shooting. He spun about attacking the scaled ones. Severed bodies collected at his feet as he attacked. Limbs detached. Blood splattered. From the corner of his eye, Coltan fought hard, his style smooth and true as he cut through scales and flesh. His chest heaved as he panted. The blood rushed through his veins as he waited for another attack. It took a few moments through his fighting rage to see that they had downed them all.

"Evelyn. Ashir." Paxt dropped his sword and pulser and staggered to their prone forms. He ripped the wires off their bodies, leaving little ends on their bodies, embedded beneath their skin. He worked them out as gently and as quickly as he could, concentrating hard to not leave the finest of the wires behind.

Overhead, the clouds boiled and billowed. A scream rent the air, and his skin crawled. The enraged sound grew louder as he worked the wires. Coltan held his sword and pulser at the ready.

The crystal glowed bright, throwing intense heat from the surface. Evelyn's delicate skin turned red and blistered. The scream intensified, spearing through his head. Paxt helped to ease the remaining wires from her, working them from deep within skin and muscle.

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He cleared three, then four. There were more remaining. A thin trickle of blood eased out of the tiny holes. A drop dripped from the end of the next wire he removed. He tossed it aside, and continued to work more freely. As he removed the wires, the clouds grew transparent, and the breeze weakened. The scream withered away, leaving a definite chill to the air.

Paxt eased the last wire out and threw it on the floor. The clouds disappeared and the crystal stopped glowing.

Coltan removed the crystal from Evelyn's forehead. Her skin was burned, red, raw, and oozing blood. A light shimmered from the wound, and a line of blood trickled into her hairline.

A bright magenta light glistening with deeper hues of vibrant purple was visible beneath the welling blood coming from the gash. He gasped, seeing a perfect tiny gem embedded in the middle of her forehead, glowing with the colors of the Arabis crystal in the exact location the crystal had been placed.

His mind reeled, not completely understating why, and now wasn't the time to work anything out. Evelyn was still unconscious. His blood froze as he grasped Evelyn's shoulders and shook her gently. "Evelyn. Wake up."

Beside her, Ashir groaned, opening his eyes groggily. "Paxt? Coltan?" His eyes widened when he saw their mate and he bolted up straight, muscles straining as he went to leap off the table. "Evelyn!"

Coltan steadied him with a hand on his shoulder. "She is safe. We have killed the

scaled ones.”

Ashir’s gaze darted to the fallen bodies on the ground and then to Evelyn. He leapt off the table, sending it clattering in its side. His hands fluttered over her body. “Gods. What did they do to her?”

“I don’t know, brother. Why isn’t she waking up?” Ashir said.

Paxt had never heard his brother so enraged. There was a scruff behind them. Paxt spun as a scaled one slipped around the bend of the cave. “Coltan, you and Ashir take Evelyn to the medi-bay. We’ll revive her there.”

“I’m going with you.” Fresh blood started to drip down Ashir’s forehead from one of his head wounds as he staggered on his feet.

“Both you and Coltan need medical attention and can’t fight. I go alone. I’ll meet you back at the craft.” Paxt picked up his pulser and sword. Without further argument, he bolted around the corner as the scaled one’s tail disappeared through the leaves covering the entrance. It was wounded. He knew because between him and Coltan, none of the scaled ones had been spared. Not even by accident. For an impaired creature, it moved fast.

Paxt sprinted down the tunnel and burst through the leaves. A rustling alerted him to the whereabouts of the scaled one. It wasn’t trying to be quiet, just fast. Heart pumping, Paxt bolted in the general direction, breaking leaves and jumping over branches in his haste to catch up to the creature.

Branches seemed to barricade his path and drop in front of his face to slow him down. He slashed as fast as he could. If he could catch this one, they might get some of the answers they needed, but running hampered by the thick foliage was slow work.

He pushed aside a massive leaf. An ear-splitting explosion filled the air and a wave of heat brought him off his feet, throwing him backwards in a burst of white and yellow light. He crashed back to earth, the breath bursting from his lungs. His vision swam in a haze of blurred greens. A high-pitched tone blasted his ears. He tried to stand, to even sit, but he couldn't move the right way to do so.

There was tapping on his face. He managed to gather enough of his wits to see someone peer down at him. Coltan! He'd explicitly told him to take Ashir and Evelyn back to the medi-bay. It took a moment to realize Coltan was speaking, but he couldn't hear his voice over the ringing in his ears.

He gripped Coltan's forearms, squinting into his brother's face, forcing his way past the noise in his head.

"...explosion. Are you hurt?"

"Explosion?" That must have been what forced him off his feet. "What exploded?"

Coltan helped him into a sitting position. It was hard to move; his body was a mass of dull aches and sharp pains.

"Not sure. Have to get you both to the medi-bay. You don't look so good, Paxt," Coltan said.

Paxt's grip tightened on Coltan's forearm. Panic raced through him. The explosion. What if it hurt her? "Evelyn!"

Coltan nodded, his gaze concerned yet firm. "She is safe. Ashir is looking after her back at the cave. The explosion came nowhere near there. Brother, did you get that scaled one you ran after?"

Paxt shook his head, and then winced when his vision swam. “It moved too fast. I wonder...”

A thought gripped him. Ignoring his brother, he hauled himself to his feet and staggered in the direction of the explosion. It was easy to find after a few crooked steps.

A path had been cleared by the force. Branches lay limp on the ground, the leaves wilted and sagging in tumbled heaps. A few barren branches were the only impediment between them and a hulking mess of twisted metal and charred remains. Nothing was left except a blackened husk of the corpse of a craft.

Paxt came to a halt. “The scaled one’s craft.”

“Gods. If you were any closer...” Coltan said.

“Why did it explode like that?” Paxt wondered out loud.

“You said the scaled one moved very fast. Headed in this direction?” At Paxt’s nod, Coltan continued. “My guess is, it either tried something that didn’t work, or set off a self-destruct.”

Paxt swayed. “But...why?”

Coltan put his arm around Paxt’s shoulder, turning him away from the wreckage. Paxt didn’t miss Coltan’s wince when his own wound pulled. “Easy, brother. You hurt too.”

Coltan nodded and dragged in a deep breath. He was covered in blood, bruises and dirt. Paxt knew he hadn’t fared better. They all needed medical attention. This could wait. “We’ll come back. Do some tests. Find out for sure. But for now would you please come? Evelyn needs treatment. We all do.”

Paxt had no strength but to let Coltan turn him from the still-burning metal hull and the strangeness of the explosion. He was right. Their priority was Evelyn.

He gritted his teeth and pushed past stiff muscles. He felt as though he’d finished ten sparring rounds in a row with his brothers. It was only through inner strength that he moved away from Coltan’s support and managed to stagger back to the cave. It was easier going through the underbrush as they retraced the path he’d made in the mad dash after the scaled one.

He was too weary to think too much about what had happened. His focus was on his brothers and mate and getting back to the safety of their craft.

He spotted Ashir cradling Evelyn to his chest sitting against the wall of the cave entrance, but she was still unconscious. At least they had the crystal. He couldn’t possibly conceive if it had been stolen, or worse had been blow up by the scaled one in that explosion.

“We have it, brothers. We have it,” Paxt said, kneeling next to Ashir and Evelyn.

His hand shook as he slid his finger along the cool, straight edge of their Homeland’s crystal. It was literally the salvation of their race. His movement continued upwards, to palm Evelyn’s cheek. Equally as precious as their crystal. Their savior. Their future.

“We have her,” Ashir said, brushing her hair from her face.

“Yes. We have her. We all have her,” Coltan said.

Paxt lifted her from Ashir’s embrace and they set out retracing the path back to their craft. It was the longest hike he’d ever undertaken, even when he’d been separated from his brothers and lived in the wilds of their Homeland for a week in the male coming of age ceremony when he’d reached maturity—and that had been a long week.

Finally, the dull metal of their craft gleamed through the rich vegetation. They headed straight away to the med-bay.

Paxt set Evelyn’s too-still form on the bed and closed the healing panel over her. She was pale, her skin a dull gray compared to the usual healthy pink. She was a shell without a soul.

She’d already been through so much. He was sick to his stomach seeing her like this. He would give anything for her to be well and laughing, head thrown back in passion. She’d come a long way, slowly coming out of her shell. It had been beautiful to witness, but now he feared she might never be the same again.

“I should have protected her better.” Paxt’s voice was dead, filled with loathing.

Ashir put his palm on top of the panel, his eyes locked on Evelyn’s face as healing

mist filtered over her body.

Coltan approached Ashir with the med-scanner. “Let me see what damage they did to you.”

“I don’t deserve it.” Ashir brushed past Coltan, but Paxt stopped him with a hand to the middle of his chest.

“It is no one’s fault, merely a series of events we didn’t calculate for.”

“We don’t blame you for being taken, brother,” Coltan said.

Ashir’s face scrunched up. “If I had been more vigilant... I should have been able to stop them.”

“I know you would have done anything within your power to stop them from taking her if you could have. That they inflicted so much damage to your thick skull tells me they used undue force to subdue you,” Paxt said.

Ashir looked down at the floor.

“We cannot blame one of us when there are three of us to take care of our mate. Maybe we shouldn’t have returned to the craft. Maybe we shouldn’t have listened to what Evelyn wanted, but then what type of mates would we be if we didn’t listen to her? Even her being here is beyond normal. The Fates went to extraordinary lengths to send her to us. What we need to do now is think with clear heads. Let the medi-bed heal her body. We need to heal ourselves so that we will be strong enough to care for her when she wakes. Because she will wake, brother,” Paxt said. He had to cling to the hope that the Fates wouldn’t be so cruel as to send them such a gift only to take her away again. “If there’s a way to wake her, we will find it.”

“What if we were too late?” Ashir said.

Coltan frowned at the scanner after reading Ashir’s body. “You’re extremely high in radioactivity.”

He crossed to the panel showing a scrolling list that monitored Evelyn’s body and tapped through sections.

“Evelyn shows more of the same thing. You need to be treated immediately.” He pointed to an empty chair. “Sit, and before you complain, it’s either that or the other medi-bed.”

“Do you remember what they did to you, Ashir?” Paxt asked as Ashir dropped down in the chair with a sigh.

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He slumped forward, his head falling into his hands. Paxt almost thought Ashir wasn't going to answer when he sat back, brushing his hair from his face. He looked drawn and exhausted. Paxt felt much the same way.

"I don't even know if I dreamed what happened once they got me tied down," Ashir said. "Maybe it was a hallucination."

Coltan positioned a probe to each of Ashir's temples and then administered a shot to his arm. "This will drain it all out, but it might take some time. Might as well tell us anything, no matter how trivial you think it may be."

Ashir rested his head against the back of the chair and sighed. "As I said, I'm not sure if I was dreaming or not, but, and this is going to sound crazy, I was trapped along a beach. It was very similar to the shore and lake we took Evelyn to, but it was dark. Cold. There was no color, only black and gray. The sky overhead was made from very dense clouds that never stopped moving. Like they were alive. I thought I saw her on the beach. I started to walk toward her, but the clouds dropped from the sky and surrounded me. I couldn't see anything, or move. Then my body was forced backwards and I woke up on that table to see... see Evelyn..." His voice cracked. He closed his eyes, his head lolling to the side as his body went limp.

Coltan sent Paxt an unapologetic look. "I also gave him a sedative. He needs to sleep and rest. He'll need it to rid his body of the radioactivity." His brows rose. "Now, your turn."

Paxt closed his eyes, splaying his fingers through his hair. He grimaced when he caught dirt, stones, and knots. Coltan was right, though. If he didn't sit soon, he

would drop, and then he would be no good to his brothers or his mate.

He jabbed a finger at Coltan. “Do not sedate me.”

Coltan patted the spare medi-bed. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Sit, and I’ll see what damage that explosion did.”

Managing not to grumble, Paxt stretched out on the bed. His tired body groaned with relief.

Coltan passed the scanner over his body. “Multiple abrasions. Lacerations. Cracked rib. Make that two. How were you still standing, brother?”

Paxt grimaced. “Just fix me and make it quick. We have too much to do.”

Coltan tapped the screen at the head of the medi-bed. The transparent panel began to cover his body. “I’ll set it on the fastest setting, but you’ll go under.”

Paxt waved an impatient hand. “Do what you must. But... what about you!”

“I’ll get to my wounds after I see to you. You’re the most stubborn of us all,” Coltan said.

“I’m not!” There was a hissing, and healing mist billowed around him. His body went heavy and his lids dropped. Coltan hadn’t wasted any time.

The last thing he heard was Coltan swearing at him, something about being a stubborn Drumas turd of a brother, that he hated being the only one awake in a room of sleeping bodies, and he’d better hurry up and heal because they had a mate now and he needed all of them more than life itself.

It was a notion he wholly agreed with. He loved his brothers with his soul and he was in love with his mate with his heart. He couldn't conceive of a life without all of them, but if Evelyn didn't wake up from what the scaled ones had done to her, he didn't know if he could live. Not even for his brothers.

He had no idea what they'd done to her and she hadn't stirred at all during their trek back. He couldn't begin to understand how or why or what had been left behind in her forehead. Or what permanent damage might have been done to her.

He tried to sense her through the connection of their bond, but there was nothing in reply. Darkness descended and washed him away, along with the sickening, wrenching hole in his stomach.

Chapter Sixteen

Evelyn

White-hot pain raged through Evelyn's body. She didn't know where the pain began or ended. She was caught in a never-ending stream of torture. She couldn't see. Speak. Hear. But she felt.

God, did she feel.

The torrent caught her up, tossing and turning her, twisting her, rupturing her inside out. She must have blacked out because the next thing she knew, she'd been washed up on the shores of a cold beach. Her head throbbed and there was a searing hot pain from the middle of her forehead.

At first she thought it was the same lake her guys had taken her to. But there were no warm suns and she was standing thigh deep in frigid water. Her legs were so cold, they hurt. Clenching her teeth, she forced one foot in front of the other and tumbled

onto the cold sand.

She blinked, her sluggish brain taking a long moment to catch up where she actually was. Above her, a black sky churned with unnaturally billowing clouds. The shore extended indeterminably in either direction. In front was a representation of the rainforest she'd walked through, but instead of the fresh, vivid greens, the prehistoric leaves were made of shades of gray. Deep, dark shadows nearly swallowed them. Behind her, a flat artificial ocean undulated into a distant horizon. The air was stale and dull, filling her lungs with heaviness despite the crisp breeze.

She crossed her arms over her stomach, absently scratching her itching skin. She peered one way and then the other. There was nothing, but utter silence, apart from the sound of wind in her ears.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded dull, as though she was inside a soundproof studio.

She didn't understand where she was. Where was Paxt? Coltan? Ashir? This seemed like the lakeside, but it was definitely not the same.

She didn't want to go walking off into the jungle. It didn't look friendly at all. Instead of welcoming bright green foliage, it was dark green and filled with ominous shadows. The beach stretched indefinitely from either side, blending into unknown darkness. The suns had vanished and the light was fading fast. Swimming was out of the question. She brushed away goosebumps that smattered over her chilled, bare skin as a brisk breeze washed over her.

How the hell had she ended up here?

The last thing she remembered was... Her breath caught. A Reptile had been standing over her, blocking out the sun. He had hit Ashir's head. A wet, sickening crunch. Then, nothing.

She spun around. "Ashir?"

This wasn't right. Nothing about this was right. Her skin prickled and the hair on the back of her neck rose. Someone was watching.

"Who's there?" She trembled as raw terror bore under her skin. She worked saliva into her mouth. "Come out now!"

There was a pause. Then the air pressed against her as though it had form. Her hair whipped about her face and she had to hold it back so she could see.

Above, the clouds billowed and dropped, racing toward her. She stepped back, dread taking hold, but her limbs were stiff and cold. All she managed was a couple of rigid steps and then she was unable to move any farther. The sheer intensity of fear locked her in place.

Everything darkened until it was somewhere between dusk and midnight. The clouds unfurled to the sand. They transformed, and a man stepped from the swirling mists.

Her mouth fell open but nothing came out. All she could do was stare at the epitome of a well-dressed English gentleman. The man—or whatever it was, because it was

still made from shades of black and gray clouds—stopped before her. Not a speck of sand coated his shining, black leather shoes. His pants were ironed with a crisp line incised from hem to waist. A pin-striped, double-breasted jacket was done up over a well-formed cravat. On top of his head perched a bowler hat.

All in monochrome cloud.

He—it?—peered at her. Although his expression was carefully blank, her mind screamed that this wasn't right.

He didn't blink, simply stared at her.

Still as death.

She licked her lips, working up the grit to speak. "Who... who are you?"

She really wanted to ask what he was, but she didn't want to do anything that would piss it off. His not-rightness emanated in waves. That reptilian, lidless stare was unnerving.

"I am your friend, my dear." He spoke with a crisp, upper-crust British accent.

There was no way he was her friend. He was... something even beyond her nightmares. He was a force of evil she had no name for.

"What d-do you w-want?" she stammered.

A shadow of a smile touched his mouth. It was contrived, as though in doing so it would put her at ease. Instead, it did the opposite.

He stretched his palm to her. "Take my hand, and I'll show you."

She clenched her fists. There was no way she was going to touch him. “Don’t touch me. Tell me what you want.”

His palm stayed where it was, not moving an inch. He could have been a statue, or a robot with a few human-like commands.

He stretched his mouth, showing even teeth that were grayed out. “I need your help. You see, I’m stuck where I am. A little like you’re stuck here as well. If you take my hand, I can help you get back to your planet. That’s what you want, isn’t it. A way back home? Away from those barbarians?”

Evelyn frowned. She did want a way home, but how did he know that? And as for barbarians, well, Paxt, Coltan, and Ashir were big, alpha men, but they were far from barbarians. They’d treated her with the greatest amount of respect. They’d rescued her. Cared for her. Loved her. They had taken nothing she hadn’t freely given.

“What did they rescue you from? A cage? And what did they bring you into? A cage of a different variety, no matter how they dress it up,” the man said.

Her heart froze. “How did you... did you read my mind?”

His dead eyes glinted with a sharp inner light. “I am aware of many things, my dear. Your thoughts are just one of them. How else would I know that your greatest wish is to ride your bike out on the open road? It’s the only time you feel totally free, isn’t it? You can forget the demons. Put aside those who hurt you. You don’t have to think about anything else other than the next kilometer. I can take you back to those... men, but you will never be free with them. They will control you with their needs. With their cocks. They will impregnate you and then they will have total control over you. That isn’t what you want, is it? To be cornered into a life you’ve spent all your adult years trying to escape? Take my hand. I’ll make sure you get back home. They can’t do that. Only I can do that.”

Evelyn crossed her arms over her chest in an attempt not to feel so bare. How did he know so much about her? Did her mind throw out those thoughts? She wanted to return, and yet her life wasn't entirely how he said. She was lonely there. So alone. People she thought who would love her, didn't. She'd suffered for it. But now she'd experienced the difference. In such a short time, she'd been loved.

There was a faint throb deep within her chest. A tug of consciousness. A connection to something beautiful and warm and accepting. That was what she wanted. That was home, no matter where she might be in the universe. She could go back to Earth, but she would never have there what she'd experienced here. It had only been a start, but for the first time in her life, it was something she wanted.

"I don't... think that's right," she said.

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The smile sharpened, the edges flattening out into a sneer. “They will impregnate you. What if you’re the same type of mother as your own? Would you want to put your child through the same traumatic childhood of abuse that you suffered? You know what that’s like. You don’t want to put your child through that if you can help it. Best to go back to a place where no one expects you to have children. You can stay on your own. safe in the knowledge you won’t inflict anything like that on anyone else. You can go back to your life of solitude.”

Solitude and pain. And a loneliness that was so great that some days she’d physically hurt from it. It had been her decision to stay alone, to be alone, though. She’d never really opened her heart to anyone. She was afraid. Unable to have faith in herself that she wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of her mother. Events had taken her life out of her hands, but she’d found the opposite of her life back home.

She focused on the connection of her men. If she concentrated hard enough, she could feel all three of them individually. She tested the bonds, and what came back to her was none of the things she might have expected. None of the things she’d seen in her mother’s relationships, or the way her ‘stepfathers’ treated her.

There was no trace of selfishness. No hate. No control. No malice. No jealousy. Only longing, desire, warmth. Love.

She gasped. “You lie!”

“Do I? You barely know them. They will change as all men do. They will lead you on until they have you and then they will change. It is the way men treat women. You see it happen all the time. They cannot be trusted. They will trample your heart until

there is nothing left to give. You've seen it happen time and again with your mother. How many boyfriends has she had now? Twenty? Thirty? They leave after they've used her. What makes you think it will be any different for you?"

She put a hand to her forehead. Those were her thoughts, but spoken aloud like that, they sounded warped. Even more, they were sohopeless.

Is that what she believed? Did she sound like that? If she had—and deep down she knew she had—then how much had she missed out on? No love could penetrate that kind of darkness. She hadn't let any light through to know the difference.

Her heart had only softened when events had been taken out of her hands and she'd been forced to see how blind she'd really been. Self-harm came in many forms. Emotional denial based on lies—andfear—had forced her into self-isolating solitude. She had a chance at happiness now, even if she couldn't return to Earth. What really was there for her, anyway?

She tested the bonds between them all again. The connection was stronger now. Alive. Filled with warmth. That was what she wanted. Desired. Yearned for. She deserved that. And for once in her life, she was going to choose a different path.

"It won't be like that for me," she said.

"You are a little fool. It will be no different. You will end up like your mother," he said. His hand remained reaching, almost as though he couldn't move any closer toward her.

Evelyn clenched her fists until they hurt. "I'm nothing like my mother, and those men are nothing like hers. I will not take the same path as her.And I will not take your hand!"

A high-pitched scream erupted all around her. His expression turned into something furious. He lifted his arms and clouds blustered and billowed around him. His face expanded, and morphed into a creature from her worst nightmares.

Holes where his eyes had been, and a gaping, hollow, mouth. His nose disappeared, as did his clothes and body. He rose above the clouds, spewing and boiling, blocking out the sky. Gray turned into absolute darkness. Ice coated her skin and his words froze her further.

“Then you will die here!”

Chapter Seventeen

Coltan

“She hasn’t woken. Why hasn’t she woken?” Ashir poured the same angst in his voice that thrummed throughout Coltan’s entire body.

Coltan’s grip tightened on the spongy mattress of Paxt’s bed. They’d thought if she felt something familiar beneath her, she might wake. They thought all she needed to do was sleep off the effects of the medi-bed and she would wake. They thought, given it had been two days and she had not eaten or drunk a single thing, that she might wake. But it had been false hope.

Her still, pale form lay lifeless beneath the blanket they’d placed over her naked body to keep her warm. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed. Her heart beat. But that was it. There wasn’t even any eye movement behind her closed lids. Not a twitch or a murmur. She might be dead if it wasn’t for the blood pumping through an automatic heart.

Coltan thrust his hands through his hair, pulling his locks with clenched fists. “If I

could work that out, she'd be awake by now."

Exhaustion wove through his mind and body like a weary beast. He hadn't eaten properly or slept since they'd taken her freshly-healed body from the medi-bed two days ago. None of them had.

"It is not your fault, brother." Paxt slumped in a chair, facing the bed.

All three of them stared at her without the first idea of what to do.

Yesterday, Paxt had confirmed the scaled ones' craft was damaged beyond recognition. His drones had conducted missions to search for survivors, but there were none. No others had survived and there were no others to provide any answers to what they had done to Evelyn.

Apart from the semi-sentient beasts on this planet, they were totally alone. Trum was halfway to their location. If Evelyn was still unconscious by then, they would at least have access to better medical facilities.

And they had their crystal. At least there was that.

Paxt kept it locked in a safe place in the dead center of the craft where nothing could steal it ever again.

"What is that shimmer on her forehead?" Ashir asked.

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“You know it’s from the crystal,” Paxt said.

Coltan sighed quietly. His nerves were brittle, and Ashir’s endless questions were wearing them thin. They all were on edge. One wrong word and they’d be at each other’s throats, and that was the last thing their mate needed.

“Yes, but... it’s changing. Look.” Ashir indicated Evelyn forehead with a pointed finger.

The gem shimmered with the Arabis crystal’s colors. Even the medi-bed had failed to remove it. It seemed as though it had fused with her body. But now, two days later, it had grown larger and more pronounced. It rose from her skin, forming a multi-faceted crystal-gem, her skin surrounding it perfectly, accepting it as it would a fingernail or strand of hair. It was a part of her.

As he watched, the gem began to glow with a bright pink light. “What the hells?”

Paxt shot up from his seat, moving toward Evelyn. The light leaned toward him. He jerked back and the light glowed upright.

“Do that again, Paxt. Lean toward her,” Coltan said.

Paxt frowned and hunching over her again. Once again, the light bowed in his direction.

Her hands twitched.

Coltan jumped up. “Did you see that? She moved!”

It was only a twitch, but still—she had moved!

“She needs the crystal, Paxt. Go and get it. I think... I think she may need its help to awaken,” Coltan said.

Paxt bolted from the room, his heavy footfalls echoing down the corridor.

Ashir stood, his expression hopeful for the first time in days. “Do you think that might be it?”

Coltan shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’m willing to try anything. Tell me about your hallucination when the scaled ones had tied you down. You thought it was a dream, but now I’m not so sure. Tell me about that beach you saw.”

Ashir shrugged. “It was dark. Cold. I saw her, but then clouds descended from nowhere and I couldn’t get to her. That’s it. But I’m sure it was just a dream.”

“Or it could be more than that. The entity the Ozar spoke about, it’s from another dimension. We know nothing about it. For all we know, it comes from a place of thoughts and dreams,” Coltan said.

“And nightmares,” Ashir said.

Coltan nodded. “And nightmares.”

Paxt came back into the room, cradling the crystal in his hands. As he approached Evelyn, the crystal glowed brighter, matched by the gem now fully formed on her brow.

“Fates! It’s working!” Ashir said.

“Put it on her, Paxt,” Coltan said. Excitement thrummed through his body. He watched her face, waiting to see her blue eyes open.

Paxt lay the crystal on her stomach and arranged her hands to hold the crystal. They all waited. The crystal glowed bright, but she remained motionless. His skin went hot as he waited for something.

Anything.

“It’s not working...” Ashir’s voice cracked.

“I thought... for sure.” Coltan said. It was all he could manage.

Paxt slumped onto the bed and trailed his fingertips along her face. The crystal erupted with light. He jerked away, and the glow died.

“Do that again, Paxt,” Coltan said.

He cupped her cheek and the Arabis crystal’s light increased. Her fingers twitched and she turned her head into his touch.

Then, she stilled again.

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Paxt's gaze darted over the both of them. "She needs all of us. Touch her and touch the crystal. Do it. Now."

* * *

Evelyn

Evelyn had totally lost track of time. She was frozen to the core, her body shivering with a frigid cold she was sure would never go.

Clouds swirled around her, caging her in with the solidity of metal bars. She couldn't see a damn thing, nothing but the cold, black sand beneath her feet. Her yelling was dulled, her throat raw from screaming.

At one stage, she thought she'd caught sight of Ashir, but she wasn't sure if it was her imagination clutching at straws. Heat hammered in her throat, those last moments replaying through her mind. She could only hope he was all right.

Hunger gnawed her stomach. She was parched, so dry her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. The water from the lake lapped at the shore, tempting her. Salty. Completely undrinkable. She sank into the cold sand, tucking her body into a ball in an attempt to stay warm, but it left her back open to the chill and made her ribs ache.

What she wouldn't give to be back on the shore of the real lake, making love to her mates... herhusbands.

All three of them, as ludicrous as it sounded. Not so long ago she didn't want one,

and now she had three.

She shook her head, huffing a chuckle. It was strange. Being caught in a cage of clouds had let her think with no distractions. She'd spent hours—maybe days—with nothing else to do but focus on her thoughts. Enough time to get her head around the recent events. Amazing what changes a few days could make to a life. Irrevocably. She could never go back to the way she had been. She didn't want to.

She just wanted to be treated and held with the care they gave. At first, she hadn't known what it was, but after so long pondering it, she could name what she felt. Cared for. Cherished. Loved.

It had taken her a while to attach the meaning to the words. She'd never had anything to go by, except television shows and romance novels. Now she knew what they were writing about. That knowing, deep down inside that made her soul sing. It righted all her wrongs and gave her something to live for. It was undefinable, intangible, but as real as anything she could physically touch.

So different than what she was used to. Evelyn could now see she'd set herself up to fail even before she'd entered into a relationship. Better to be rejected by an asshole than to potentially lose her heart. It was less painful.

She probably would have continued to live her life that way, if Paxt, Coltan, and Ashir hadn't been different. They had forced her to see the contrast, with their special brand of never-take-no-for-an-answer.

She'd pushed them away. Been unsure. Uncertain.

But now.

Now she missed them. She wanted them. She needed them. She would give anything

to find her way out of wherever she was, and then she would grab what they offered with both hands and never let go.

She now saw the bond for what it was—a gift of a life that she'd had no chance of achieving before.

Anger erupted through her. It was the first time she ever had a chance of happiness and it had been ripped away from her.

She threw her head back and screamed, “Let me out of here, you bastard!”

Then she screamed and screamed and screamed.

Finally, spent and panting and more exhausted than before, she clenched her fists and opened her eyes. And frowned.

The clouds glowed with magenta, the color slashing through the dull black, jarring her from so long only seeing monochrome. The tint grew and as it expanded, the clouds recoiled and thinned. Sunlight made the pink glow from behind.

Hope stirred a rapid beat of her heart.

She reached upwards, her fingers stretching as she rose up on her toes. “Help me! Please! I can't get out of here.” Warm wetness trickled on her cheeks that she belatedly realized were her tears. “Paxt! Coltan! Ashir! Please, please, please find me. Please.”

A squall battered around her, whipping her hair into her eyes, strong enough to knock her off her feet. She landed on the cold, damp sand, her vision hampered. The black edged into the color, bleeding it away. The light receded, sending her back into shadows.

Panicked, she came up on her knees, anger pulsing through her. She was done with accepting bad deals in life. She had something more than great and she was going to seize it right here, right now. No one had the right to take love away from her. She wouldn't let them. She wasn't going to give away that sort of power ever again.

She staggered to her feet, fighting against the buffeting wind that fought to take her back down. She ignored the frigid cold and her shaking body. She would fight for what she wanted.

“No. I won't let you go,” she yelled to the sky. “Come back. I want... I want you. All of you. I don't want to live without you. All of you, and I want to be your mate. Please, come back. Please. I... I love you. All of you.”

She squinted in the sudden brightness as pink and warmth surrounded her. She felt light. So light that she lifted upwards, a few grains of sand falling from the soles of her feet. She didn't look back as the light washed out her vision and swept her away.

Chapter Eighteen

Evelyn

She was warm. Too warm. Bordering on hot. Maybe the light had taken her to a hot planet this time, instead of a glacial beach. But she didn't want that. She wanted her men.

If Paxt would get off me, we wouldn't be so hot. Her eyes shot open.

Coltan peered down at her, his face slack with shock. "Evelyn? Are you... awake?"

"Are you real?" She lifted a hand that seemed far too heavy. "Is that really you?"

"It's us. You're here. You're back!" Paxt cupped her cheek, his eyes unusually bright.

"We're all here. Just for you." Ashir lay beside her on her left. He reached towards her, his hand shaking. "We'll always be here for you."

Gods, it worked. It actually worked. She recognized the broken voice, but she hadn't seen Paxt's lips move.

"Did you say something?" she asked.

"I... not out loud," Paxt said.

Ashir gasped. Mate. Can you understand me?

Evelyn frowned, her gaze moving to Ashir. “You didn’t speak either. But... how can I hear you?”

“The mate-sync,” Coltan stuttered. “Gods. We’ve mate-synced without the bonding sex. How has that happened? Has that ever happened? Is it even possible?”

Paxt shook his head, looking at her with wonder on his face. “Never before. You are the first, sweet Evelyn.”

His palm on her cheek trembled.

“I can’t believe it,” Ashir said.

Confusion whirled in her mind. I wish someone would just tell me what the hell’s going on.

“Nothing short of a miracle,” Coltan said.

This was even more confusing than being stuck at the beach and spoken to by that cloud-man. A shiver coursed through her. She pushed aside the thought, not wanting to dwell on whatever the hell he was.

“Gods. What did he do to you? I’ll kill him.” Ashir’s eyes blazed.

“Wait. You... you saw what’s in my mind?” she asked.

Why didn’t anything make sense? She tried to sit up, her head spinning. Why did she feel so weak? Her arms were nothing but limp strands.

A strange crystal was cradled in her hands. It was the same crystal the Reptiles had forced her to touch. A gentle warmth and a faint hum of energy emanated around it. Magenta light glowed brightly, bringing with it a sense of peace. A tingling sensation buzzed along her skin where the crystal touched her. Something inside told her to treat it carefully, that it was as precious as life itself.

There was pressure on her forehead and she reached to brush it away – only it didn't move. She gasped as she felt the press of something hard, yet warm that was embedded in her skin. The tingling sensation that emanated from the crystal washed through her body, coming from a stone lodged in her skin.

“What's that!” Her heart skipped as dread pooled in her stomach, breaking through the gentle warmth from the crystal. ‘What's happened to me?’

Paxt took her shaking hand and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “Evelyn, the scaled ones did something to you.”

“What? What did they do?” She tried to ignore her rising panic, but it was impossible. She felt a delicate pulse of calm washing through her—calm that wasn't hers. “What's happening to me?”

Coltan cupped her cheek. Her gaze flicked to his. “We were too late...” He swallowed as his words dried up.

Ashir rose from the bed, his shoulders slumped and head down. “My mate, it is my fault. I couldn't stop them from taking you. They overpowered me and I could not protect you.”

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She didn't like seeing him so dejected. A throb of anguish seeped through her. She held her hand to him, needing to touch him, to comfort him. "Please, Ashir." Only when she prompted him did he come to her. She curled her fingers into his hand, needing his comfort. "I don't blame you. They came out of nowhere. We were surrounded. There was nothing you could have done."

She squeezed his hand, needing to ease his misplaced distress. She didn't blame him at all. She didn't blame any of them and she had to make that clear, "None of this is your fault. You rescued me! I... I'd probably be dead by now if you hadn't have come."

"I still failed you." His face crumpled, his broad shoulders slumping even further. She didn't like to see him like this, as though all of the light had gone out of his body. It wasn't Ashir. He was light and energy and playful happiness and she... she... she was in love with him. In love with them all. It was a realization so powerful, it had allowed her to escape. She'd seen the bond, their connection and she'd reached for it, accepted it and it had brought her back.

A tremor worked through Ashir's hands as his eyes gleamed with inner light. As though he knew what she'd just felt. She had to tell him there was no blame. She was grateful for them. For so much.

"Ashir. All of you. I don't blame you. Please believe me. If anything, I thank you. You keep saving me. Again and again and again." She didn't want them to think any of this was their fault. "If anyone needs to be blamed, it's those Reptile creatures. Not you. Never you."

She touched the hardness in the center of her forehead when it pulsed in agreement, a frown tilting her brows. “What is this thing? Can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Judging by the expressions on their faces, even if she didn’t have a stone stuck to her face, it was huge whatever it was.

Paxt licked his lips. “When we found you, the scaled ones had the Erion crystal placed on your forehead.”

She touched the hardness, an awful feeling gathering in her gut, “Is this where they had it?”

Paxt nodded. “Yes. They attached the crystal between you and a machine. We don’t know what they were trying to do, but it was powerful whatever it was. We were able to stop the scaled ones from continuing their experiment, however when we took the crystal away from you... it left a mark.”

Her gaze flickered between all three of them. Paxt’s muscle continued to tick. Coltan’s mouth flatlined and Ashir was crumpled. She fingered the hardness, that felt more like a multi-faceted stone. It felt exactly like the crystal she still held against her chest. Realization dawned on her. “It’s a part of the crystal, isn’t it? It’s joined to me.”

“A part of the crystal has grown inside you. It’s beautiful Evelyn,” Coltan said.

Serenity washed through her, along with a pulsing sense of comfort. These weren’t her emotions. She was too anxious to feel such calm, then where the hell...? The crystal throbbed and she gaped. It came from the crystal in her forehead. A sense of rightness followed her realization. “Oh my God. It’s... it’s talking to me! I can... I can feel it.”

Masculine agitation crashed through the calm. The muscle ticked at Paxt's temple, the rage he cast out was as overpowering as the distress she picked up on. The emotions were distinct and powerful—and not hers. Unease slithered through her.

"I... I can feel you too." Panic welled up. She couldn't think lying down like this, she had to sit up. She tried to move, but her limbs were so weak.

"Wait. Let me help. You've been... unwell." Paxt gathered pillows from a hidden storage unit in the wall.

Ashir helped her sit while Paxt propped them behind her. She rested back, panting slightly with the effort. She looked between her husbands, ignoring the hysterical giggle that threatened to erupt. Maybe this was all a dream. The stress of everything had finally caught up with her and her mind had finally broken.

"Can you please tell me what the hell is going on? Why can I feel you in my mind. I can feel you, can't I. Please tell me I'm not going insane" she said.

Paxt looked to Ashir. "Brother, would you mind getting our mate something to eat and drink while I explain, as best I can, what has occurred?"

"Of course." Ashir rose from the bed and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Those were lips she remembered. He felt so good. Tasted even better. She immediately wanted another kiss. And more. Her body ignited with arousal from nowhere.

Ashir cupped the back of her head and caught her in a sensuous kiss that heated her entire body. She groaned into his mouth. God, how she wanted him. How she wanted them all. She itched beneath her skin with an aching need to join with them all. She wanted their cocks in her. At the same time.

"Ashir. Enough. Let her eat, drink, rest. And then we will think about claiming sex,"

Paxt said.

Ashir swept his tongue inside her mouth before reluctantly pulling away. He breathed heavily as he rested his forehead against hers. Mate. You will have to keep your thoughts to yourself, otherwise I cannot control my reaction to you.

“Paxt is right. You need to eat.” Ashir groaned and pulled away. He gave her a lingering, heated look before stalking from the room.

“It will be like this until we have fully bonded. And even then, it might take weeks for the urge to join to abate.” Paxt adjusted a massive bulge in the front of his pants that looked more than uncomfortable.

Slowly, her mind cleared from the overwhelming desire that had swept her away.

“Paxt. Coltan. What’s happening?”

“It’s been days since we brought you back here, Evelyn. You wouldn’t wake up. We... we didn’t know what to do. We tried everything and yet you remained unconscious. We discovered you reacted to the crystal. It reacted to all of us. We think, because it is a part of you, it’s power was enough to bring you back, along with the connection of our bond. I think in doing so, it mate-synced us in the process,” Paxt said.

There was so much information in what he’d told her, that her mind buzzed, clinging to the only thing that didn’t make any sense in this whole crazy episode. “Mate-synced?” she asked.

Coltan sat on the bed, stroking her arm. “We hadn’t told you this, but usually when a Triad becomes a Quad, we have bonding sex. We all join with your body and through that connection our souls are linked. We join mind, body and soul. We can feel what each other feels. Hear what we think. It is the closest possible connection. The

blessing of joining as a Quad.”

She blinked at him. “Do you meant that... we’re...bondedsomehow?”

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Paxt nodded. “It is the way of our Homeland. We would have told you when you were ready to join us in every way possible. We... had no idea this would happen now.”

Moments stretched as she looked between Paxt and Coltan. Her heart thudded heavily. Blood rushed in her ears.

Bonded. Thoughts. Feelings. Soul.

What if they discovered they didn’t like her? That she wasn’t the good person they thought she was. What if she let them down? They didn’t know anything about her. She was a complete stranger to them.

Ashir appeared in the doorway, a tray in his hand and thunder on his face. “Why is our mate distressed?”

“She is overthinking.” Paxt leaned forward and brought his lips to hers.

His kiss was commanding. Urgent. She became caught up in the mastery of his caress, the thrust of his tongue, his taste, his smell. His eyes glazed with restrained desire, his lips glossy. He breathed heavily as he looked down at her, heavy-lidded and languid.

He pressed his palm over her heart. “Do you feel that? Me? Us? Close your eyes and feel our connection. Do it, Evelyn.”

His authoritative words cut through the haze of just wanting to kiss him. She closed

her eyes, doing what he said. There was a pulsing warmth within her chest that wasn't there before. Curious, she focused on it. It wasn't just one presence, rather all three of them. She detected Paxt's command, Coltan's caring, and Ashir's exuberance. She couldn't believe it, and yet it was there. An unseen connection pulsed between them. Their thoughts brushed her mind like a gentle caress and a deeper, headier emotion caressed her soul.

She reached out, let them envelop her. Their essences washed through her and when it did, their emotions were stronger. Deeper. Textured with multihued threads she would never know if she didn't feel them in her heart.

They touched her soul, wound around it and through it. They were separate and yet as one. And she knew each of them on an intimate level she could never otherwise fathom. Not just likes or dislikes or the things of ego and personality.

But things of the soul.

They were so bright and clear. Pure. Love as clear as air flittered around her. Gentle. Forgiving. Firm when needed. Always giving. Without end. That was what had brought her back. It was the bond she'd felt.

"Is that..." She had to clear her voice when her throat thickened with emotion. She pressed her fingertips to her mouth, hands shaking. She was only able to whisper, "Is that... how you feel about me?"

"Yes, my love. It is how we feel about you. So now you understand that we know your soul and you know ours. We have a lifetime to discover the other things, but our souls are linked. We know you and you know us. Never forget that," Paxt said.

She covered her face with her hands, letting the rush of tears fall. Arms surrounded her, comforting and familiar. She leaned against Paxt, accepting the support he gave.

She knew—reallyknew—he offered it unselfishly, only wanting to see her comforted.

There was no hiding from the essence of a soul. She'd seen theirs and they'd seen hers. It was undeniable in its beauty.

“So beautiful,” she whispered. “I can't believe this is happening.” She couldn't believe she'd been abducted by Reptiles at first either, until the cold, hard reality had set in. She drew a deep breath, letting go of the unreality of her situation. This was real, this was happening and she found she didn't mind it at all. In fact, now she knew how they felt about her. She knew that their connection wasn't based on lies. It was light and golden and completely unbelievable if she thought about it too hard, but it was also right. There really was a bond that connected them all. What they felt for her was... breathtaking. Beautiful. Glorious. Complete and utter love.

Paxt wiped the tear that tracked down her cheek, his touch more mobbing and intimate that she could have ever thought possible. She gave him a watery smile and felt his answering pulse of undeniable affection.

Paxt pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “It is. Now you understand how precious it is. How preciousyouare tous.”

She nodded into his chest. Words were not adequate. She was completely overwhelmed, as she sensed they all were.

“Now, you must eat. And rest.” Paxt's voice was thick with emotion. “And then, when you are ready, we will complete the bond. The old-fashioned way.”

She blinked up into his handsome face, and then shifted her gaze to Coltan next to her and then to Ashir at her feet. They touched her as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

She breathed out a chuckle, feeling lighter and clearer—and happier—than ever before. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

* * *

It had been three days filled with kissing, touching, and caring. But it wasn’t enough. Evelyn could feel their thoughts to know they suffered as much as she did, and yet all three were so concerned she wasn’t fully healed to seal the mate-sync they hadn’t done any more than that.

No amount of telling them how she was healed, that there was nothing wrong with her, that she was breaking, on edge with sexual tension, would make them change their minds.

She was taking things into her own hands.

She’d showered. Washed and dried her hair until it shone in soft strands down her back. Applied a moisturizer that smelt like magnolias so that her skin was dewy and extra soft. She’d removed every hair on her body, apart from her head. She was bare—down there.

She sauntered to the bed, the air caressing her newly depilated skin. She shivered, and goosebumps broke out over her, erotic and arousing. Or maybe it was in anticipation of what she was going to make happen.

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She stretched out on the bed, lying on her side and placing her head in her upturned palm. She pictured herself as she lay provocatively naked and sent out her thoughts to all three of them.

Three seconds later, footfalls sounded in the corridor and her three men knocked against each other as they tried to come into the room at the same time. She was their entire focus, their heated gazes as physical as their bodies.

“Mate. Do you know what you’re doing to us?” Paxt’s voice was as strained as the front of his pants. How he’d walked about for three days straight with a raging hard-on was beyond her. She had to persuade him that she was, in fact, hale and hearty, otherwise they’d all go without again.

She slowly lay back on the bed and brought both hands to her breasts, tweaking her hard nipples between her fingers. The sharp bite of her own touch made her shiver. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she looked at Paxt. “You know what I want you to do to me.”

“But... you’re still recovering,” Coltan said.

“You’ve been through a lot,” Ashir said.

“Yes. And you’re still putting me through it.” She could see she was losing them. It was time to bring out the big guns.

Forming an image in her mind, she blasted it out to them, loud and clear: Ashir in her mouth, Coltan in her back entrance, and Paxt in her pussy.

She knew the exact moment they received her message because three massive aliens stalked towards her with raw intent on their faces.

Chapter Nineteen

Evelyn

Athrill raced through Evelyn. Her men imbued pure heat and desire. She fed off their emotions, balancing on the fine edge of an orgasm before they'd even laid a finger on her.

They were so hot and they were all hers.

Her pussy was swollen. Heavy. Sensitive. She spread her legs, almost whining at the anticipation of their touch.

They were already half-naked, but they shed their weapons as they came toward her. The thump of swords, guns, and whatever else hit the floor where they dropped it. They didn't stop to look.

Paxt untied the lacings of his pants and eased the sides apart. The tip of his weeping cock, framed by the leather, was slowly revealed. He hooked his thumbs into the now loose waist and drew them down his hips, kicking them off somewhere to the side. She didn't notice where. Her full attention was on his massive cock that he took in hand and slowly stroked.

"Be careful what you wish for, mate," he said.

"Oh. She's made sure we all know what she wishes for." Coltan's knees sank onto the mattress, so close she could reach out and touch him.

Her hand twitched.

His gaze flicked to her hand and back to her face. “Uh, uh, uh, mate. For now, you just watch.” He unlaced his leathers and drew them down his lean hips. His cock bobbed, long and thick. He sent her a roguish grin. Totally Boy-band. “Like what you see?”

“Oh. Yes.” She liked what she saw. Very much.

Her gaze shifted over to Ashir, standing behind Coltan. His tattoos trailed down his trim waist, chiseled abs, and lean hips. His hair had grown a little since they’d been here, long enough to fall below his shoulders. His beard remained neatly trimmed, accentuating his straight jawline and bringing out the blue of his eyes.

She let her gaze drop to his groin. She was pleased to note the bulge grow even larger. “Your turn, Tatt-man.”

His brows drew together, confusion on his face. “Tatt-man?”

She licked her bottom lip, watching his gaze trace the movement. “Just go with it.”

“As you wish, mate.” He unlaced his leathers. His cock sprang free, and he whipped his leathers down to his feet.

The tattoos flowed down his waist and onto his cock. Deep black swirled with brilliant magenta and purples. She knew those colors. The same was now imprinted into the middle of her forehead like a glittering gem. The colors of the Arabis crystal.

“Come here.” She reached for him, her voice husky.

There would be no more waiting.

Ashir bent to her. She reached for his cock, wrapping her hand around the hard length as he claimed her mouth with his. He massaged her breast with expert strokes.

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She moaned into his mouth as his tongue plunged in deep. Her tongue danced with his, stroking, lashing, caressing. She fondled his cock up and down, loving the feel of silky skin over heated stone. His hips jerked in time with her administrations, rough, not steady. His hands trembled on her body when she ran the pad of her thumb over the tip and she smiled into his kiss. Her big, bad alien was so, so sensitive. She traced over his shaft, just to feel the tremor work through his body again.

“You will undo me, mate,” he said, pulling away from their kiss.

“That’s the idea,” she said.

A low growl sounded next to her, and she turned to Coltan.

“My turn to taste.” He bent toward her.

His kiss was harsher, a little wilder than Ashir’s.

She still held Ashir’s cock in hand, which she continued to caress while she kissed Coltan. She reached with her other hand, finding his hard, thick length. A groan ripped from his chest when she began to stroke up and down his hard shaft.

“Our mate looks very busy, but also very lonely. Let me help.” Paxt curved his hand over her pussy. His long fingers slid through her slick clit. She jerked as her pussy came alive beneath his touch.

Her legs fell apart as he knelt on the bed. He ground his palm onto her clit as he entered her with his finger. He slid in without resistance she was so turned on.

Yes, right there Paxt.

An answering chuckle filled her head. It wasn't hard to guess. You were broadcasting your need pretty loudly.

I really like this mind-think thing.

She was swept away as he entered her with two, and then three fingers. Her inner muscles contracted as an unexpected orgasm speared through her. She went rigid, overcome with the blissful waves.

Paxt impaled her with his tongue and his fingers worked her clit. She managed to drag air into her lungs and she screamed in her mind and out loud as her orgasm was coaxed into a life of its own. White stars danced in her vision as sweet sensation caressed her body.

When she finally came down, she slowly became aware that Paxt was lapping at her pussy and that Coltan and Ashir were stroking her breasts, arms, stomach.

“That was...”

Actually, there were no words. She couldn't even think. All she could do was feel, every sense heightened. Her skin tingled, and heat rushed through her veins, a desperate need climbing towards an unknown peak. She clutched at Ashir, then Coltan, and then Paxt. Her legs twisted, and her head tossed to the side. Her grip tightened on Ashir's hand. Fire roared in her veins.

It was indefinable, but she thought she could never rest if she didn't get... She just wanted... She needed...

Please. She nearly sobbed.

“Our mate is ready,” Paxt growled.

Coltan and Ashir lifted her. Paxt took her place on the bed, lying in his back. He held out his arms and Coltan and Ashir lowered her to straddle Paxt. She tilted her hips, her slick groove sliding up and down his cock. She rose, pushing on his chest with her hands while she worked her hips. Her head fell back.

Wet heat found her breast. Paxt suckled one stiff nipple and then the other, twirling his tongue around her stiff bud before devouring her breast. She sighed, arching it into his mouth.

Such a clever mouth.

You’ll love how clever my cock is too, Paxt’s voice flowed into her mind.

Paxt tilted his hips so that his cock lined up with her entrance. Coltan began to lower her. Paxt’s cock head entered her, stretching her with a delicious sweet pain.

Her body lowered slowly as she took in his full length. Her legs stretched over either side of his hips as she bottomed out on his groin. She groaned out loud. She was so full. She moved her hips experimentally. She slid in and out a little, sending electric sparks erupting from her inner channel to spark all the way to her extremities.

Paxt gripped her hips, bringing her down and thrusting up into her. Her clit rubbed on his taut abdomen, building pressure. He slanted his hips, rubbing her clit and thrusting shallowly into her, helping her reach higher and higher. Coltan slipped his fingers through her cleft and found her little rosebud, coating her in her slippery juices.

“That’s it, beautiful. Let us give you what you want,” Coltan rasped.

He eased the tip of his finger inside. It slipped easily in up to his knuckle. A groan was torn from her as another orgasm rippled through her. Tension built and then she tipped over the edge and was tumbling again.

Paxt banded his arms around her as he brought her to lay over his chest. “That’s right, beautiful. Let us take you away.”

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She panted, coming down from her third orgasm. She was wrung out. How the hell was she going to be able to accept all of them now? Her limbs trembled. She found she could barely move. Multiple orgasms could have that effect on a girl.

Coltan pressed a kiss to her forehead. “We are all doing this. Not just you. We will help.”

He moved behind her as Paxt gripped and separated her buttocks. Warm liquid oozed between her cheeks and Coltan’s finger rimmed her rosebud, working the oil in and around her hole.

“That’s it, beautiful,” he said. “Just making sure you’re nice and ready for me. Going to love taking you in your tight little hole.”

His warm body bent over hers. The tip of his cock touched her entrance. The ring of muscle stretched and burned.

God, he was so big! His large hand splayed between her shoulders, keeping her down and locking her in place.

“Just relax,” he said. “That’s it. That’s my girl.”

He eased in and out, sliding just that much further in with each long, slow thrust. She tucked her forehead against Paxt’s chest and shivered as a dark sensation gripped her.

Stretched as she was with two massive cocks impaling her, she thought she might have torn in half, but instead her body gave way, letting Coltan become fully seated

within her. The pain was deep, but then it burst into bliss as it spiraled up her spine. She groaned as he slid home, his heavy balls banging between her cheeks.

Paxt's cock twitched and throbbed. His fingers tightened on her hips. She was sure they were going to leave marks, but she couldn't have cared less. Ecstasy swirled, just out of touch. She tried to move, but cocks and hands stopped her.

Paxt's breath came out in a hot burst against her forehead. "Keep still, mate. I'm right on the edge and Ashir has yet to take your mouth. Can you lift your head for him and accept him in your final hole?"

Ashir slipped his hand under her chin, tilting her head. She looked up into his handsome face, seeing the same burning desire there that ran rampant throughout her own body.

"I love you," she said in a soft voice. "I love you all."

Ashir tucked a strand of hair from her forehead. A powerful rush of love washed through her system, leaving her undeniably knowing how they felt about her. Tears prickled her eyes with the intensity of the emotion.

"You know how we feel about you. How we've always felt about you," Ashir said.

She smiled. "I do. Now give me that colorful cock of yours. I want to eat you up."

A dark gleam entered Ashir's gaze as he fisted his cock. He approached the bed and she opened her mouth to accept him. He ran the tip of his cock along her bottom lip, teasing her a little before slipping into her mouth.

She sucked and licked as his flavor burst in her mouth. He eased in and out, gently fucking her face, but it was too gentle. She reached out and caught the base to stop

him from retreating as she swallowed more of him. The tip of his cock hit the back of her throat. He tossed his head back, and a low groan ripped from his throat.

He looked down at her, his expression fierce. He gripped the back of her head, winding strands of her hair in his fist. “I think our mate is ready.”

Oh, yes. She was more than ready. She sent out the erotic image of them all linked together. There was a collective groan, and then she was lost to building bliss as they worked their bodies into her.

They all retreated, and then slammed into her at once. Overwhelming sensation spiraled, igniting with a force of its own. A glow of intensity mixed with pinks and purples twisted and swirled within her. Each forceful thrust of their bodies into hers pushed her higher and higher into a bliss-laden rapture.

She soared over the edge, and then was lost to sight and sound as she was caught up in the most powerful orgasm she’d ever experienced. She was out of body. Out of mind. Caught in a frenzy of paradise.

There was a distant roar and hot streams filled her up. Ashir’s flavor burst in her mouth, more intense than before. He was absolutely delicious, and she gulped him down. Both passages filled with searing heat—the heat of her men which she readily accepted.

Her heart hammered, her breathing shaky and loud in her ears. Their cocks eased out of her, and she whimpered with the loss. They eased her back on the bed. Her bed.

“Open your eyes, little mate. There is more,” Coltan rasped.

She forced open heavy lids to find Coltan between her legs. He fisted his still-hard cock as he settled between her legs, one arm coming next to her shoulder. The bed

dipped with his weight as he drew himself over her.

“Are you ready?” He lifted his brow at her.

She’d already had four orgasms. She didn’t think any more could come out of her body.

She gasped as Coltan rimmed her pussy entrance with his cock head. “But...”

His gaze burned. “After this, you will never doubt our love for you again, little mate. Do you hear us?”

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Paxt and Ashir settled on either side of her. Ashir took a breast in his mouth, the heat liquefying her insides. Paxt traced his fingertips along her arm, watching, and then bent to kiss her. His tongue thrust into her mouth as Coltan nudged her thighs open.

Coltan cock slid right inside her without any resistance. Her body rocked as he thrust again and again, sliding all the way in to touch the top of her womb.

She didn't think she could possibly orgasm again. Coltan impaled her, bottoming out. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh was ripe in her ears.

Ashir lapped her breast and tweaked her nipple between his teeth. Paxt's tongue swept as he claimed masterful control over her mouth. She was reduced to pure sensation, played solely by her mates.

Coltan reached between their bodies and pressed on her clit. She soared in an instant. Her body went rigid as she flew. He thrust again and again and she was filled with streams of his delicious hot cum. Her body drank him in, thirsty.

Pink lights danced in her vision.

Ashir stroked her forehead. "Brothers. Look."

Evelyn opened her heavy eyes to discover she wasn't imagining the light. The bedroom was saturated in the crystal glow from her forehead.

"Does it hurt?" Paxt's concerned gaze looked down at her.

She raised a shaky hand to touch the gem that had formed in her forehead. It was solid, smooth, and comforting. A humming glow came from it and filtered into her body, calming her. Whatever it was meant no harm. Instead, she was filled with life.

Tendrils of energy appeared from the gem, growing longer. They circled her men, weaving around them.

“Do you see that?” she asked, breathless.

“See what, mate?” Coltan asked.

He still rested inside her, but eased out. She missed his warmth, but she still needed more.

She reached for Ashir’s hand, knowing the final piece of the puzzle was him. “I need you. Will you take me in my pussy, Ashir?”

He frowned. “Are you sure. The light... I think you are too weary for me.”

She tugged him down to her, threading her fingers into his hair and locking him so that their lips touched. “I will never be too weary for you, do you hear me? I want you just as much as I want Paxt and Coltan. Now come here and make love to me. That’s an order.”

She kissed him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth, caressing his lips with hers.

He ended the kiss with a jerky breath. “As you wish.”

He settled between her legs, and a sense of rightness filled her. The room grew brighter with the light emitting from the gem. She caught his buttock with her heels, bringing him close enough for his hard cock to nudge along her slit. She shivered, so

sensitive now that the merest touch was enough to spiral her upwards.

Bursts of color expanded in her gaze, building heat and urging her on. “Ashir. Please.”

“Your merest wish is my command, mate.” Ashir slid inside, stretching her, filling her.

She was so close to completion now. She gripped Paxt’s hand, and reached for Coltan with her free hand.

Ashir slid in and out in smooth thrusts. She closed her eyes and the colors danced even brighter behind her lids. A hum filled her ears, expanding in quality until it was like a chorus of harmonious voices. She arched her back as sweet tension built in her body, growing tighter and tighter with each heavy thrust.

Her body rocked, Ashir’s movement becoming harder and faster. He reached beneath her waist, raising her hips to thrust even deeper, finding a spot within that awakened something deep inside her. He ground into her, his cock throbbing, spurting inside her.

It pushed her over the pinnacle. Colors blasted her vision, sinking into her mind, body, and soul. The tendrils that joined them all crackled with energy. A spark drifted toward her, becoming larger and brighter.

There was a face inside it, a little girl laughing with cherubic cheeks and long, curly hair the color of moonlight.

Evelyn reached towards the spark. It nuzzled the palm of her hand and she caught the echo of a child’s laughter before the light drifted down her body and sank into her abdomen. Her stomach heated as new life filled her.

Their daughter was on her way.

A palm cupped her cheek, and she lifted her heavy eyelids to look up at Paxt. He wore a look of pure joy, mixed with a healthy dose of disbelief.

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Coltan settled next to her. Ashir gently pulled from her body. He came behind her and arranged her in his lap. She was surrounded by the three men who loved her more than the universe itself and finally, she was complete.

“I saw her.” Paxt pressed a kiss to her temple.

“We all did,” Ashir said.

“You did?” She was so happy that all of them had shared the same vision. She rested her head against Ashir’s chest. They’d all seen their daughter, knew the life that had planted inside her.

Her fingers curled over her abdomen. Love surrounded her and filled her until she could burst with joy. She’d just found home.

Exhaustion tugged at her bones. Her eyes grew heavy and she lost the battle to keep them open.

“Sleep, little mate. And then we will tell you what a miracle this is,” Coltan said.

“Miracle?” Her tongue seemed to be twice as thick, but she managed to say the word.

“Yes. A miracle, Triplets always come first, and then a girl. But you’ve just turned that on its head. You’ve turned everything on its head. In a good way,” Paxt said.

Questions bombarded her brain, but she was too weary to keep them there. She let the warm darkness of sleep take her away, safe and sated in the arms of her mates.

Chapter Twenty

Evelyn

The rays of both suns shone down with an almost uncomfortable warmth, glittering off the surface of the water that lapped lazily along the shore.

Evelyn thought she might have felt even a little trepidation coming here again, but things were so different than that first time. She was with her mates, so she was safe.

The Reptiles on this planet were all dead, that had been confirmed many times. Coltan had constant drones scouring the immediate and larger areas, searching day and night, and nothing had come back but plants and wildlife. She was safe.

She was living in a wild, tropical, uninhabited planet filled with exotic, prehistoric flora. It was stunning. The only animals were semi-sentient herbivores that were so gentle and shy she'd yet to see even one.

Paxt was fishing. Several of the fish-like creatures lay in a container on the shore, into which he tossed the creatures as he caught them. He stood in the water up to his knees. Naked. He didn't want to get his leathers wet. Not that she minded. She liked the view too much.

She rolled her head lazily to the side. The sand was soft beneath her body as she lay on a towel next to her mates, sunbathing naked.

Ashir opened his eyes. "Yes, mate? What would you have me do?"

His gaze rolled up and down her body. Arousal sparked in an instant. They were so in tune with her. After a week of doing nothing but lazing about and making love, she guessed that was its natural conclusion. Not to mention the mind-speak thing helped a

lot.

Best. Honeymoon. Ever.

“It’s what you did to me before that has me in this predicament. I’m getting burned in all of my untold places,” she laughed. She was as naked as Paxt, and Ashir and Coltan who dozed on either side of her. They’d thoroughly made love to her on the soft, pale pink sand and it had been wonderful, but now she needed to cool down before she embarked on anything else like that in the near future. “And have I told you, this sand gets everywhere?”

“Would you like me to lick you clean?” Coltan rolled onto his side, resting his head on an upturned palm.

She shivered. The thought had merit, but she needed more protection than that. “Not unless you have sunscreen in that saliva of yours.”

“Let me rub it on you.” Coltan’s gaze blazed with a heat that simmered just below the level of her control.

Sighing, she sat up. She wanted to clean up a little after their previous activity. Besides, she really did want a swim. What was the point of living on a deserted tropical planet if you couldn’t skinny-dip once in a while? Especially with three sexy mates intent on tending to your every intimate need.

Hearing her thoughts, Paxt turned. He grinned, showing even white teeth. He had a devastating smile. He was already handsome, but that grin made him magnificent. While they’d been here, he’d tanned, his skin turning a deep, golden brown which only served to accentuate the chiseled dips and ridges of his musculature.

Ashir’s tattoos were more deeply etched into his body, the heat from the sun making

the pinks and purples glow brighter. Coltan's hair had grown, so much so she'd had to refrain from calling him Boy-band. He tied it in a messy knot at the back of his head, giving him a rakish air he wore quite well. These men could grace the cover of any glossy magazine and make millions of female hearts pound with excitement and longing.

Her heart flipped knowing they were all hers.

And you are all mine, mate. Paxt's voice sounded in her mind. You would like to swim.

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This mate-sync had its perks. She smiled, getting up from the sand. “That sounds great.”

Then we will make love to you again before the sun sets. That was Ashir’s thought.

She shivered in anticipation, her greedy eyes roaming over his naked form still lying prone on the sand. The evidence of his excitement was on view and he made no effort to hide it. He grinned and put his hands behind his head. She laughed and rolled her eyes. She couldn’t be mad. Not when she wanted the same thing.

Just after a swim.

The little life in her agreed with the idea of a swim. She couldn’t get over the fact that she was already getting to know her daughter. Sometimes, she had flashes of a beautiful little girl laughing. Other times, it was the glimpse of a feeling or the flash of a smile in her mind. She was never far away and always surrounded in glowing pink light.

She was going to be a very special little girl.

Evelyn ran down to the shoreline and into the water. After being heated by the suns, the tepid water was still a shock to her system. She stopped when she was knee deep .

Paxt threw his fishing rod onto the shore and strode towards her, all male predator.

She squealed and went to run away, even knowing it was useless. In an instant, he picked her up, cradling her to his chest. “You’ve scared all the fish away.”

“Haven’t you caught enough by now?”

A glint entered his eyes. “I’ve caught the biggest fish by far, however I think she should be returned to the water.”

He strode towards her. Drops splashed at his thighs and her naked behind.

She clutched his shoulders. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“You said you wanted to swim.” He feigned an innocent look. I’m only trying to help my mate with her request.

“But I like to go in at my own speed.” She inched higher up his body, but he didn’t stop his progression into the water.

“Your reaction doesn’t make sense. You said you wanted to swim. You need to get wet to swim. That is logical,” Paxt said.

She tensed as water rose over her hips, cooling her delicate areas too much too fast. “Yes, but it’s cold!”

“But you also said you were hot and wanted to cool down. That is what we are doing.” He sank into the water, taking her with him, yet keeping her in his arms. Water lapped at her neck and his shoulders. Her body regulated quickly and she sighed with the pleasant sensation.

“You’re a brute.”

“Is that what you now require of me?”

His stare was playful, but intent. She was his whole focus. There was a way about

him that made her forget about the rest of the world. Or anything she thought she wanted. Now a swim wasn't so high on her priority list.

Other needs were building.

I can help with that too, mate.

His mouth descended on hers and she became swept away with his kiss, as she usually did.

She couldn't believe she was so happy. A week ago, she would have laughed in the face on anyone who could have seen her future, and now she was just grateful the universe, after an extraordinary run of events, had sent her this way.

She could only hope the other women were doing as well. Lucie in particular. Sighing, she ended the kiss, caught up in worry about her friend.

"There's no need to worry about them," he said. "Word has been sent. Lucie has been taken back to the Erion Homeland and is safe."

"You've spoken with them? What happened to her?" Evelyn sat up straight.

Paxt nodded, 'I have spoken with Trum. He informed me the Erion made it off the scaled ones' craft, also killing several of them in the process. They managed to return to our Homeplanet safely and have cared for their Lucie. She has received the best medical attention.'

"Thank god she is alright," Evelyn said. Her shoulders lost some tension, hoping that if Lucie had found her mates, that the girl was as happy as she was herself. She smiled. "I can't wait to catch up with her. I know she's safe, but if she's anything like me, this will all be new to her. It's kind of hard to accept, you know?"

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There were no fated mates on Earth. No Triads who formed Quads, and certainly no mate-sync. And all that after being abducted and tortured.

“I’ve told you, no one on Earth believes that there are aliens,” she continued. “It’s a shock to me. It’ll be a shock to her, and to the other women, as well.”

“It is quite obnoxious to think that there is no life other than on one single planet,” Paxt said.

She tapped his chest. “I know that, but you have to understand there has been no contact. In fact, it’s the furthest thing from people’s minds. They have busy lives to lead. Careers. Families. Bills. I guess they’re not missing what they don’t know.”

“It will only be a matter of time. Life has a tendency to reach out to other life,” Paxt said.

“It already has.” And not in a good way. Who knew how long the Reptiles had been abducting people from Earth. How many women had died? Or worse? Her thoughts turned darker. “Maybe they know about what’s happening. The military hoards all kinds of secrets.”

She wouldn’t put it past them to keep or even allow happenings like that in exchange for technological advancement. What she wouldn’t give to write about it. World exclusive... with photographic evidence.

“You can talk to her if you’d like,” Coltan said.

She came back into the moment from her dark thoughts to discover Coltan and Ashir had joined them in the water. “I can?”

Coltan shrugged as though it was no big deal. “Yes. You can call her from the bridge. Although it takes some time to travel here, we can still communicate in no time at all. I’ll set it up with the Erion when we get back if you like.”

Evelyn nodded. “I’d like that very much. Can I talk to the others as well?”

“You can talk to all of them. They have been housed throughout the Homelands. Some have even been claimed by other Triads and have formed Quads throughout the planet,” Ashir said.

Evelyn sat up straight in Paxt’s arms. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“We would have, but you have been resting and recovering and we didn’t want to worry you.” Ashir frowned, looking adorably concerned.

Coltan swept her wet locks from her shoulder and kissed the sensitive spot at the base of her neck. “And you’ve been interested in other things. We also wanted to please you by keeping you in a state of complete and utter sexual-satiation.”

She shuddered as his hot tongue teased her flesh, made even hotter with the relative coolness of the water.

“I seem to remember being in this situation not so long ago.” She sighed, tilting her head so that he could work his magic on her skin.

“Yes. And I liked the way that turned out,” Ashir said, lifting her hand and suckling on her fingers.

Paxt turned her to straddle him. She eagerly wound her legs around his waist. Her clit rubbed on solid muscle and a sharp thrill raced through her. It certainly didn't take much these days.

I like the way you respond so well to us. Paxt kissed her, deeply, passionately, as though he had all the time in the world. She guessed for the next week or so, they did.

Coltan slid his hand down her back and worked two fingers down her crevice, curving beneath her buttocks and erringly finding her entrance. She was already soaked and he slid into her core without resistance. He pumped his fingers in and out of her slowly, and her hips tilted with each plunge.

Feels so good, Coltan.

A rumbling chuckle answered her. I know.

As I know you also like this. Ashir nibbled the soft flesh on her earlobe, sending cascading shivers over her skin. She'd never considered her earlobe to be an especially erogenous zone, but she was happy to be shown differently. She was in heaven. Mentally. Sexually. Spiritually.

Paxt deepened their kiss as her arousal grew. She gripped Paxt's horn and curled her fingers around the base. It pulsed in her grip and she held on as Coltan plunged his fingers inside her with strokes no longer aimed at stirring her arousal, but now to push her over the edge. Ashir sucked on her lobe, catching the tip between his teeth. His hand reached between herself and Paxt, tweaking her nipple.

Her climax crashed over her with an unexpected wave.

That's right, sweetheart. Let us take you away. Paxt's voice slid like silk through her mind.

Her muscles tightened and she screamed into Paxt's mouth, blinded by ecstasy. Coltan and Ashir held her as Paxt gripped her hips, and before her orgasm had even subsided, he thrust into her. She reached a new golden peak as, with a few hard, deep thrusts, Paxt found his own release.

He eased out of her and turned her around in his arms. She was a boneless pile of pleasure, yet she reached for Coltan as he pressed against her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he sought her entrance and gently pushed inside. Smiling, she curled both hands around his horns and slid her fingers from temple to end, as though she was stroking his shaft, knowing exactly what she was doing to him.

Every muscle in his body locked and a deep shudder worked through him. When he opened his eyes, he pierced her with a gaze so deep it sent chills through her. She shivered as a dark sensation slithered through her. She drew her hands back and forth, rubbing them all over his horns.

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“You’re playing with fire, mate,” Coltan rasped.

“So, put it out,” she said.

She closed her eyes, tossing her head back on Paxt’s chest as Coltan surged inside her. Ashir’s unique flavor exploded on her taste buds as he kissed her, his tongue plunging into her mouth with practiced sweeps, while Coltan urged her to another muscle-searing climax.

She sobbed as golden wave after golden wave of pleasure erupted within her. It wasn’t a mere union of flesh. It was much more profound than that. It was a joining of the physical and the spiritual.

She regained some of her senses and Coltan eased out of her. Ashir looked as though he might step back, but she held her arms out to him.

“Come here, Ashir.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiled. She knew he was on the edge, and yet he still held back knowing it might be too much for her.

You should know I’ll always be there for you. All of you.

Paxt settled her in Ashir’s arms. She slid her fingers along his horns, teasing him while she rose and eased herself down onto his hard, thick shaft until she was fully

impaled. He tilted his head, relishing her touch. She gripped a horn and caressed it like she would his cock. A deep groan was wrenched from his chest.

Grinding her knees into his hips, she rose and then let herself ease back down again. A deep shudder throbbed through his body. He cupped her buttocks, helping her climb and descend in her own time.

Arousal grew and pleasure crowned. Ashir growled when her movements were too slow to bring them to the peak they both aimed for. His fingers curved into her soft flesh. He slid her up and down his shaft, tilting his hips to grind against her clit.

All she could do was to settle her head against his chest and cling to his shoulders as another orgasm caught her in its delicious sensation. Ashir forced her down onto him. His cock throbbed as he unleashed his pleasure inside her. A deep groan reverberated through him as he shuddered through his release.

When she came back to her senses, she drifted between them as they gently washed her body. She took a moment to study them. She would never get enough.

Paxt noticed her open eyes and smiled that devastating grin down at her.

“Thank you, my mate. That was unspeakably wonderful,” Coltan said.

She placed her hand on his cheek, looking up at all her mates. And I thank you. The tiny life inside her stirred, reminding Evelyn of her presence. She thought her heart might explode with joy. I love you all so much.

She had it all, everything she wanted and more than she could possibly imagine.

As we love you, mate. Always and forever.

She lay back, simply enjoying the moment, appreciating her mates, and thanking the Fates for bringing them together.

Prologue

Evelyn

“Lucie?” Evelyn couldn’t believe she was actually seeing Lucie again, but the big screen that doubled as the window in the cockpit didn’t hide a thing, even if she could only use a fraction of it from being smashed during their crash onto the planet. Even two weeks after rescue, Lucie seemed as worn and beaten as she had in the cages.

Lucie nodded. She peered at Evelyn, but her eyes were glazed. She wasn’t herself. Not that Evelyn had much to go on. Naked, starved, and tortured didn’t exactly bring out the best in a girl, but she didn’t seem to be recovering at all. In fact, she could be becoming worse, if that was possible.

Evelyn knew she’d been in the care of the Erion Triad. After they’d rescued the women from the cages, they’d chased the Reptiles who had tried to escape with the Erion crystal, but the Erion fleet had caught them. They’d retrieved the crystal and killed the Reptiles responsible. The Erion Triad been on their way back to help when the Reptile ship had blown up. The whole fleet had then returned to Negari and the Erion Triad had recognized Lucie as their mate while they’d been blown off course and gone through the wormhole and crashed on this planet.

However, despite the love and care Evelyn knew Lucie had received from her Triad, Lucie was withdrawn and reserved. Even caged and imprisoned, she was more animated than now.

“Is everything okay, Lucie?”

“Huh?” Lucie scratched her arm, leaving red welts.

“They’re not... mistreating you, are they?”

“Oh. No. Not at all. I’m fine.” Her attention wavered and she started at something to the side of the monitor.

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Lucie's large deep hazel eyes were too big in her pale face. Her skin was waxy, her hair limp. While Evelyn had filled out, the vestiges of torture removed through the continued love and care of her mates. Her soul sang, and her body showed it. Lucie—didn't.

Concern flickered through Evelyn. Lucie was definitely not herself. Lucie's eyes slid back to Evelyn. Something dark shifted deep inside them, there in an instant and gone the next.

Concern changed to alarm. In that flicker, there was a recognition of the darkness she had come to know intimately on that cold beach in Nowhere Land.

It couldn't possibly be, but so much had happened to her that shouldn't actually be possible, Evelyn wasn't going to let anything pass. Who knew what this thing was capable of doing.

"Lucie, there's something I have to say to you." Evelyn chewed her lip. She didn't want to tell her everything that had happened to herself. Honestly, she didn't think the girl could take all of it, but maybe there was some sort of connection between recent events and what might be happening to Lucie now. The Reptiles had become as excited about Lucie as they had with her. And that other crystal had glowed just as much for Lucie as the Arabis had done for her.

"Something... strange... happened to me while I was here. I don't know where I went, but it was somewhere between worlds. Like I was dreaming but not. While I was there, this... entity... came to me. It was dark, Lucie. It wanted to use the power of the crystal through me. You know these crystal are pretty powerful, don't you?"

Lucie nodded slowly. She licked cracked lips. She hesitated, as though mentally checking something, before she spoke. “They put the crystal back in the tower, but it’s not glowing. They said it would glow, but it isn’t working. If it doesn’t glow, the people can’t find mates. Can’t have babies. They’re dying out. It’s something to do with me.” Her eyes filled with bright, unshed tears. “I’m stopping it somehow. It’s all my fault!”

Evelyn clutched the side of the console. She should be there in person, to really see what was going on, but they were still light years apart. Trum was making good time coming to get them, but he had yet to arrive and then they had to return. It would be weeks before they would get to Negari. She had to settle for the communication she was currently using.

“You are in no way responsible, Lucie. This thing that wants the power, it abducted us alongside the Reptiles. Brought us here. It means to use us somehow. You have to resist it, Lucie.”

Lucie looked away, scratching the same spot without realizing she was bleeding. “I don’t know...”

The hairs stood up on Evelyn’s arms. “Lucie. Has it contacted you? In your dreams? Your thoughts? Has this thing spoken to you? You have to tell me. I can help you. We can help you.”

Lucie turned wild eyes on Evelyn. The look she wore was stark. Terrified. She leaned in so close Evelyn could see the unhealthy, manic glaze in her eyes magnified tenfold. “You don’t understand. I’m the only one who can stop it. I must... I have to... It’s all up to me.”

“Lucie. Tell your mates what’s happening,” Evelyn said. “They’re the only ones strong enough to help you. You can’t do it on your own.”

Lucie put her hands on her ears, clenching her eyes shut. Her face screwed up as though she was waging an internal war. “No! Stop! Nothing can help me. Nothing!”

She stepped back, and then turned and bolted from the room, leaving the door hung open.

Evelyn jerked forward. “Lucie? Lucie! Come back.”

This was bad. So, so bad.

Paxt, Coltan, and Ashir bombarded into the cabin.

“What is it, mate? We felt your distress,” Paxt said.

Evelyn rose from the pilot’s chair, pursuing the warmth of their embrace. Paxt caught her in his strong arms. She peered up at him, clinging to him, seeking his comfort readily offered.

“It’s Lucie,” she said, voice quivering. “I think that entity is somehow speaking to her, like it was in that dream-state, but for real. She doesn’t look well at all. I told her what had happened to me. I thought it would help her to hear it. To warn her. But she... she ran. She thinks the Erion crystal not powering up the tower is her fault.” Evelyn swallowed hard. “I think she’s in danger.”