



Their Human to Share

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal, Science Fiction

Description: Simone

I'm done with aliens. The first one who told me he was going to be with me forever dumped me minutes before sending me through a glowing portal that dropped me off in the middle of the woods. The second alien is relentlessly pursuing me. Every time I push him away, he digs his heels in harder. It wouldn't be so hard to deal with if it weren't for my first mate showing back up in my life.

Rallan

I never thought I would be a male who is drawn to the small, weak, hair-covered creatures of my brother's tribe. Then I found Simone alone and terrified in the forest. My soul awakened when I first saw her, and it has not stopped singing in her presence. She is prickly and stubborn, but she craves me as I do her. I only need to show her that not all males will discard her as her first mate did.

Vex

There are two important things in my life. My job, getting all the human women safely on the new planet, is one of them. The second is Simone. When it was her turn to be sent to the new planet, I told her I hoped she could find happiness and not wait for me in case my plans didn't come through. Now, I'm in her tribe. I'm working with the others to build up a safe place for the humans to live, and I'm ready to reclaim my mate. I never thought she'd have found someone so quickly or that she'd hate me when she saw me again.

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Simone

Two and a Half Years Ago

This crowd is suffocating. Bodies press into me from all sides. They cram into me, pushing me forward. There are too many people in front of me. We're at a standstill, but people keep pushing for us to move forward. It's crushing, it's terrifying, and if there were any other way for me to survive the world ending, I'd do it.

If I want to survive the next storm hitting the city, I have to force myself through this crowd of bodies. We're all vying to get into this baseball stadium where we've been promised safety.

I suck down another lung full of air before the crowd behind me tries to swarm again. There are hundreds, no thousands, of us all trying to force our way inside into the safety we were promised. I can't even say that I'm not one of the ones trying to force herself forward because I am. Everyone is pushing and pushing, and there's an unyielding mass of bodies in front of me.

If I pass out, all of these women are going to trample me to death. If that happens, then my last few moments of life are going to be spent in terror with sweaty bodies pressed up against me, and not in a good way. If I'm going to die with sweaty bodies all around me, it better be because I'm enjoying myself too much in some weird freaky orgy.

Black spots creep into my vision as I try and fail to get another deep breath. I try to tell the person pushing into my back to stop for a second. I need her to ease up so I can breathe before pushing into me again. She isn't paying any attention to me, though. Tears run down her face. Her hands are clasped in another woman's who keeps telling her it'll be okay.

It's not going to be okay because every time I try to get a breath, I feel my lungs pushing a little more air out and refusing to refill.

Panic flares to life in me as I lash out at everyone around me. I'm clawing at some woman's hair, trying to force myself higher, like it's the height I need to breathe and not the pressure from all sides to ease. I'm mostly ignored due to everyone panicking as much as me.

The black spots in my vision grow, and my arms start to slow in their fury to get help. I can't move, I can't get enough air, and there's no one here to help me.

My vision fades, my limbs fall limp, and I start to lose consciousness. I think I'm dying. No, I'm almost certain that I'm dying.

Bright light pinpricks against my eyelids and the crushing pressure of bodies all around me starts to fade. I don't know if it's my mind giving me peace in my final moments or if the crowd is moving now that it's too late for me. That would be my luck.

"You can't die now," a warm, masculine voice whispers in my ear as a soft glow fills the darkness behind my eyelids.

I think it's an angel. I haven't believed in a higher power in a long time. This man holding me, cradling me as I die on this concrete pavilion leading up to some baseball stadium I don't even know the name of, is the closest I've ever come to believing.

He's like a guardian angel here to ease the panic in my final moments.

All of my senses start to fade, and I drift into a dark unconscious. The last thing I hear before I think I'm passing on from this life is a strangled plea whispered close to my ear. "I just found you. You can't leave me now."

My senses come back to me slowly, so much so that for a moment, I wonder if everything that happened before I passed out was some very realistic nightmare.

Everything comes back to me like a jolt. My muscles tense, and air rushes into my lungs as I gasp. It's like I'm still back in the crowd, being crushed under the weight of thousands of bodies all moving against one another.

A hand is on my back as I bolt upright. Another hand clasps one of mine. Then, there's that same calming presence from when I thought I was dying. My breaths are ragged and painful as I keep trying to inhale my lungs fully before releasing a breath.

I want to savor the air, not believing it's really making its way into my lungs. My eyes shoot open, wanting to know who it is that's trying to comfort me. Only, it's not a person.

"Deep breath," the glowing mass of white light murmurs to me in the same voice that told me not to die. I do as he says, sucking in another deep breath and holding it as I watch the way the energy of his body seems to move. "Let it out."

The rush of air hits what I'm assuming is the alien's face, but it's just more of a white glowing light that seems to ripple and pulse with energy. The shape of it is roughly a head shape, sitting on top of a neck shape, on top of what looks like a normal human's chest, if said chest was devoid of any features.

My eyes fall to the hand in mine, the way the energy splits off to create fingers that

are wrapped around mine. It should have me freaking out. I should be kicking and screaming and telling him or it to get away from me. Instead, I look back up to his face, where I would imagine his eyes would be if he had eyes, and I tilt my head to the side. I don't notice that my breathing is calm until the room around us grows silent.

"You're more beautiful than I thought possible." The glowing mass of energy that is this alien's head doesn't seem to move even though the words are coming from somewhere.

None of this makes any sense, so why is my mind taking all of this in like it's completely normal? No, not even that it's completely normal, but that I'm kind of into it. I'm into it, I'm relaxed, and I want to know why this energy alien man is holding my hand and calling me beautiful because I like it way too much.

I'm so focused on liking all of this that I don't even think to ask any questions. I'm sure I have some, somewhere in the rational part of my brain that's still unconscious.

I'm mesmerized by how the energy ripples through the alien in front of me. I try to memorize the way it moves because there's a pattern to it. I can't quite make it out, but I'm certain there's a method to the madness of the way it moves.

We stare at one another for long moments, or I think he's staring at me, too. Maybe that's just wishful thinking. He did say he thought I was beautiful, so I can't imagine him saying that and not looking at me, right?

"I'm sure you have many questions, and I will answer all of them." His warm voice fills the air around us, and I realize the pattern of the energy does shift when he speaks. My eyes widen, and I feel a twinge of pride at noticing something so small. The glow of the energy seems to brighten for a moment before it dims again so as not to hurt my eyes. "I'm still growing accustomed to having you in my life. I imagine

this will be a strange learning experience for both of us.”

“What will?” I ask, my rational brain starting to wake up and bringing all of the questions with it.

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“The fated bond,” the alien says, his body brightening again as he says it.

I choke on my next inhale, unsure if I heard this alien man correctly because he did not just say we’re both still learning about a fated bond. There’s absolutely no way.

Nope. I’m about to tell him as much when the energy ripples again, and his fingers squeeze mine tighter.

“There isn’t much time.” His head snaps to the doorway, and then he’s standing from the bed, removing his touch from me. “You have no reason to trust me, but I ask that you do. Please, know everything I do from this moment until my last, I do to keep you safe. No matter where you go or what happens to you, I will find you.”

“That’s a lot.” I shake my head and look around the room. It’s a makeshift medical room or probably a nursing station for sports injuries that weren’t too serious. “That’s a lot to throw at someone who just woke up from being almost crushed to death during the apocalypse.”

The alien’s energy seems to move faster through his body, and I feel my lips tugging up slightly. I’m almost positive this is his annoyed look, or at least I think it is. I’m sure he wants to say something, but then I realize the most logical explanation for what’s happening here.

“I’m hallucinating, aren’t I?” I plop my hands down on the bed by my side like I’ve got it all figured out. “Oh fuck me!”

I can’t stop the laugh from bubbling up and letting it escape. The sound seems to

make the alien hallucination I'm seeing brighten, and he stays that way longer than the other times.

"I've hallucinated some alien man that makes me feel safe, and if that isn't the saddest thing about this whole situation."

The sound of footsteps outside the room quiets my words and dims my humor. The same can be said for the glow of my imaginary alien friend. His attention snaps to the door when mine does, but then he walks back next to the bed and kneels beside it so his glowing energy head is close to mine.

"I'm glad I make my fated feel safe. Now, trust me, okay?"

His fingers reach up and stroke my face, and I feel nothing but a soft pressure as he cups my cheek. There's no warmth, no coolness, just the presence of him, and then it's gone. He walks to a wall across from my bed and leans against it, waiting for whoever is outside the door to come inside.

The doorknob turns, and I focus my attention to see if more energy aliens are going to come walking through. I frown when a human man walks into the room. There's something off about him, and not just because all of the men died not that long ago. There's something unnatural about him. It has my brain saying run.

I don't run, though. I turn my attention back toward the only thing that's made me feel safe since the world started turning to shit.

My glowing white hallucinated alien isn't leaning against the wall anymore. No, now it's a human man. Again, he's a strange human man, but he doesn't creep me out like the other one does.

Underneath the weird human disguise that he's wearing is my white, glowing alien. It

doesn't matter that now he's some generic-looking white guy with cropped blonde hair and dark brown eyes. It doesn't matter that I can't seem to stop myself from letting my eyes roam all over his body to take in exactly what his human skin looks like. None of that matters because underneath, I know who he is. Underneath the weird disguise, the doctor's coat, and the— wait?

“How's the patient?” the new alien asks as he walks toward my alien. My teeth grind together to keep myself from asking questions because I'm almost positive that now isn't the time for questions.

“She woke right before you arrived. I was about to come get you when I heard you down the hall,” my alien says. His eyes never leave mine, even as he speaks to the other alien. “Her vitals are normal, and there's no permanent damage that I can see. It was smart of you to set up crowd control points to stop this from happening to more of the females.”

The word female leaves a weird taste in my mouth, and a frown forms on my lips as I try to let it sink in. The doctor seems to notice this and tilts his head to the side in question but doesn't voice one.

Maybe it's a normal way to address women where he's from, even if I think the whole thing is gross. I can break him of that habit. I mean, I'm his fated, right? I should be able to ask him not to call me a female ever again.

“Some of us were curious when we saw how quick you were to offer her aid,” the other alien says as he looks over to me.

My frown is still on my face after hearing myself called a female, which is a perfectly good way of describing an animal. Wait, am I an animal to these aliens? Like, obviously humans are mammals or whatever. I remember some stuff from high school biology. Does this alien guy think he's fated to an animal? Is that bestiality?

I shake my head, forgetting about the two aliens staring at me. The new one looks confused, but my alien is staring at me with amusement flickering in his eyes. I can see the white of his true form flashing underneath his irises, and it does something in my belly to make butterflies erupt.

“It’s nothing that interesting,” my alien says with a noncommittal shrug.

He turns his attention away from me for the first time since I’ve been awake. As soon as his eyes aren’t on me, I want them back. I tick my jaw back and forth, eyes narrowing on him.

I can’t decide if I hate him for making me like him so much in such a short amount of time or hate him because I’ve never been a woman who falls so fast for a stranger. In fact, this is the first time I can remember feeling this safe around anyone who wasn’t my mom. I don’t like that he gets that trust without earning it.

“Not that interesting?” the new alien asks.

“No, I saw a female who looked like a good candidate for Unit A12 and didn’t want to lose one to something so reckless. If repopulation is the will of the Creator, it should be handled with the utmost urgency.”

“Hmm.” The other alien mulls over his words for a moment and then gives my alien a stiff nod. “Very well, see that she’s placed in the correct unit. I believe we already have other candidates there as well.”

“Wonderful,” the doctor says with an expression that makes me think it’s anything but.

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The other alien leaves and the room grows eerily tense. My alien doesn't turn to face me. He doesn't even shift his posture.

I open my mouth to say something, but he holds up a hand, motioning for me to stay quiet. I do as he says. As much as it pisses me off that I trust him so easily, I can't just make myself not.

So, I cross my arms and try to give him a look that says, 'I might trust you, but it doesn't mean I like it.' The way his lips kick up in the corner makes me think he's not getting the full effect of what I'm trying to do.

His human disguise is gone all at once, and he's kneeling on my bed next to me. He leans over me until our faces are close. One of his hands is on my lower back, trapping me. Or it'd be trapping me if I wanted to get away, which I do not. The other cups my cheeks, and I close my eyes to feel the safety in it. Things shouldn't be this easy. Things are never this easy.

"What's your name?" I ask, not liking that I keep having to refer to him as my alien or weird glowing energy man. "Mine's Simone."

"Vexarionaxnoryndrik," he says, his light growing brighter as a chuckle escapes his lips. "You can just call me Vex."

"No, just repeat it a few times and tell me when I mess it up," I murmur, noticing that his face seems to come nearer and nearer to mine with each word. "I want to learn it."

"What else do you want to learn?" he asks me, his words more seductive than

curious.

I'll kiss him. I know I will, but first, I need to make something very clear.

"First, I think you need to learn something." My words are rough as my need fills them. My hands clench at my sides, wanting to touch him, but I don't know if I can yet or if I'm touching his naked body. Is he naked right now? Yeah, that's all part of what I need to learn, but first, the whole female thing.

"I'll learn anything, tell me," Vexarionaxnoryndrik murmurs so low that I inch my mouth closer to where I imagine his is.

The need boiling inside me is all-consuming, but I somehow manage to keep my priorities straight for one more second. Or at least I think I can until his lips crash into mine. And yes, they're lips, soft and inviting.

He explores my mouth as I explore his. My hands move up to cup his head. It's more solid than it looks. His energy wraps between my fingers and ripples around me as I try to pull him closer to me.

We kiss for long moments until we're both out of breath. Well, I'm out of breath. I don't know what he is.

When he pulls away, I know neither of us wants to stop, but instead of asking him to keep going, I blurt out. "Don't call me female."

He throws his head back, a laugh erupting in the room. "No more calling you female. It's easy enough when it's just the two of us." He doesn't explain more before his lips are back on mine, and we're learning a lot more about one another in a very hands-on way.

Vexarionaxnoryndrik

“Vexarionaxnoryndrik, it’s come to the attention of the collective mind that you’ve been shirking the duties you were assigned when Unit A was opened two and a half years ago. It hasn’t gone unnoticed that when you’re required to share your memories of the previous months, there are pockets of memories you’ve kept restricted from the rest of us. We’ve allowed you to retain some of your secrets because there was no danger to Unit A or the experiments we set out to conduct. However, with the secrecy and now your refusal to answer our summons, I’m required to alert you to a total collection of your mind if you do not comply with me now.”

I keep my thoughts calm. The mental fortitudes I’ve set up over the years lock in place around all of my thoughts of Simone and my plans of joining her. If the collective mind wishes to know everything, then they will. I can at least hold out until I’m actually forced into revealing all of myself and leaving my mind open for my memories to be torn bit by bit.

I’m almost certain they’re bluffing. It takes major transgressions for the collective mind to agree to open a mind to reveal everything. In fact, I can think of only once in my lifetime that a vote has been cast, and that was for crimes much worse than mine.

“Vexarionaxnoryndrik, are you listening?” Amarithlumonarion is the elder speaking in my mind right now. He’s the one in charge of Unit A and this portion of Earth.

The elders are mostly the same, only differing in some of their values since different subsections of the collective vote on them. Elders are figureheads voted on by the collective mind every year to act as the ones who correspond with the Creator. They decide which planets we help, which Hands we offer our services to if their planets need assistance, and they keep the rest of us in line.

I never much cared that I was only one piece of a collective whole. When it's how you grow up, knowing a piece of yourself will always be available to everyone else, you get used to it. I didn't care about secrets or privacy until I met Simone. That's when I knew I needed to carve out a piece of my mind and keep it safe and secure from the others.

"I'm listening," I respond in my mind as I go over the latest lab results from the remaining women in Unit A12. It's still my job to ensure they're all fit to travel to their new home.

I was reprimanded after allowing Nia, A12-18, to move to the new planet much ahead of schedule and after being ruled infertile. I made a promise to Simone that I'd keep her friends safe, though, and the only place Nia would be safe was on planet 87.39.49. I'm sure the inhabitants have another name for it, but the Hands are more used to numbering everything. Even me. I'm technically Hand 23.34.12.15.48.01.

However, the latest Creator, a Hand who took on the role twenty-eight years ago—well, human years—decided we all needed names of our own. Our species needs to evolve with each new Creator, and it seems that Creator 562 decided we were to have our own names.

"Good, then explain to us what has been happening in the missing pockets of memories," Amarithlumonarion says, his tone coming across more tired than upset as he speaks to me.

He wouldn't be the first elder to get tired of the monotony of being an elder. Maybe he's one who actually cares about the other Hands. Some of the elders care more about having their minds have more sway than those of us who are working Hands.

"I don't feel as though the missing pieces of my memory have any impact on the work I'm currently conducting for the collective and the Creator." I've rehearsed

saying the words so many times that they slide through my mind like silk and into the collective as though they're not total lies.

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“That’s for the elders to decide at this point, Vexarionaxnoryndrik,” Amarithlumonarion says, trying and failing to sound more stern. He really must not have wanted to be the one to do the interrogation today. There are so many other important jobs he could be doing. Instead, he’s been assigned to speak with me.

“If you could tell me what you think I did, I’m sure I could clear up any confusion.” I roll my eyes as I say it but keep a respectful tone in my thoughts.

I have more important things to do right now, like going over these lab results. I need to make sure that every human female in Unit A12 is ready to be transported to the new tribe as quickly as possible. Once I’m sure they can all be transported, I’ll be sending more humans through. Only volunteers who know what they’re volunteering for and want to move to the other planet. I’ll send orphaned younger females as well, but I’ve been reassured by the humans currently on planet 87.39.49 that they’ll make sure the young are taken care of.

There’s a long pause from Amarithlumonarion, and for a moment, I think maybe he’s bored and doesn’t want to deal with me today. I’ll need to get approval from the collective mind soon, but I’m hoping to put it off as long as possible. Preferably, as soon as I’ve given the tribe on planet 87.39.49 enough time to prepare homes for the new humans.

If I tell the collective that it’s possible to rid ourselves of the burden of having to help this primitive Earth species, there’s a good chance they’ll listen to me. They’ll want to streamline things, though.

Right now, the biggest thing working in my favor is that this plan should work within

ten years. That'll be ten years faster than the proposals from other units located all over Earth. They're sending the humans in their units to other planets. Their plans are all said to be taking almost double how long mine will.

When I tell Amarithlumonarion about my plan, he should be more than willing to follow it, but I need to make sure everything goes right.

As soon as I think that, a soft humming sounds in my ears, and Amarithlumonarion is standing in my lab, looking irritated that he had to make a trip to this insignificant little planet. Not that it takes much effort on his part, but most don't enjoy having to deal with primitive species.

Humans could've reached stage three if they'd worked together just a little bit more instead of fighting so often. It's the main part of what keeps primitive species primitive. If a species can't get past the prejudices of its own kind, how could it ever thrive in a universe filled with others?

"You have thirty Earth minutes to tell me what you've been hiding. If I deem it worthy of keeping secret, then I will." Amarithlumonarion looks around my lab as though he was expecting it to be more than what it is. I'm sure he's disappointed he didn't find me in the middle of illegal activities so he could set up a punishment and be done with it.

"If I've gone through the trouble of hiding it for this long, why would I tell you?" I ask, not liking that I've already had to admit that there is something, or rather someone, that I've been hiding from the collective's mind this entire time.

"We all have secrets, but it took being here on Earth before you started keeping any." His tone softens as he watches me.

I'm still in my human skin because I'm used to wearing it most of the day since I'm

around the humans so often.

The skin isn't ideal for humans. Some of them still have a prey part of their mind that tells them I'm wrong, I am other, and they fear it. It's better to look slightly different than for them to see the real me and be unable to comprehend me at all. Only two humans have seen me like that, and only Simone has seen me in my true form for an extended period of time.

I've also grown accustomed to how I look with the skin on. On my first day here, I stole the appearance of a doctor on a poster in one of the advertisements in the stadium. I didn't think it'd end up being my permanent appearance, but now I don't know what other form I would take.

"Does your secret have anything to do with finding a fated?" Amarithlumonariion asks me.

It takes everything in me to keep my features schooled into neutrality. I work to keep my thoughts calm and empty in the part of my mind I don't keep locked down. He either sees through my calm facade or wishes to say something to me in the hopes I crack. Either way, he continues.

"None of this is being shared. You can see that when you open your mind to the collective. This conversation will remain among my own private thoughts unless it will cause harm to the collective. My job is to protect the whole, not the individual. If you aren't a threat, you've nothing to fear from me."

I do open my mind to the collective, and I cycle through as many memories as I can of the elder standing in front of me. I follow threads of memories to see what judgments he's made, what punishments he's doled out, and how he voted when it came to killing half of this planet's population. The memory is strong since it's still one of the more recent major decisions we've had to make.

It's only when I see the memories of him arguing with the others not to kill half of this planet that I decide to trust him. Only two of the twenty elders voted against the killings. It was the first vote that made me question if what we do is right.

"Give me ten years, and I can make this unit obsolete," I say, not wanting to reveal more of my plan than that until I get a gauge on how he feels about it.

"Ten years?" he asks with a sound that makes me think he doesn't believe me at all.

The current plan takes twenty to ensure that all the human females are fully matured before sending them to other planets where they might be useful and letting those who aren't useful die right here in this stadium when we've finished what we were sent to do.

I've changed the plan, though, and I've altered it for the better. I just hope he can see that and be willing to advocate for my plan to help save as many humans as I can.

"I have reason to believe that the inhabitants of planet 87.39.49 are preparing their tribe to accommodate even more females." I pause to see how the elder reacts. When his energy pauses and begins to ripple quicker, I know he's interested.

Amarithlumonarion isn't a male who enjoys needless killing, and if I can prove to him that fewer lives end this way, there's a good chance I can continue with my plan. Right now, I only need his approval to continue since he's the elder assigned to Unit A. As soon as we start allowing more females through, it will need approval from the collective as a whole. I can't see many of them caring if one primitive species is sent to live with another in greater quantities.

"What reasons are they?"

"Personal communications with the inhabitants of one of the tribes," I say. I stand tall

so as not to let him know that inside, I know he could call for my execution for communicating with a species without prior authorization.

We were already reprimanded pretty harshly for using female hormones on the inhabitants of planet 87.39.49 when they were asleep to aid in the mating process. That was when they didn't know of us. Now I've told an elder that I've spoken with this primitive species and didn't even try to hide that I was other.

"Show me," Amarithlumonarian says, reaching out an extension of his energy to me. It's a way of communicating our thoughts, memories, and experiences with one another without offering them up to the entirety of the collective. I hesitate for only a moment before allowing myself to reach out to him and show him my conversations with Ralleth and his mate, Olivia.

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The memories flash by like a whirlwind of information that will seem to Amarithlumonarion as though they're his own memories. The first time I stepped foot on the planet and let them all see me for who I am. How I told them, I had a plan to bring more women if they were able to make enough homes and find enough food. The few other conversations I've had with Ralleth before the storms came and stopped me from returning to the planet because of electrical interference. In less than fifty days, the tribe will be ready for fifty new humans to join them, and there will be room for more after that.

"Fifty humans every hundred days?" Amarithlumonarion asks.

"Currently, that's the estimation of a healthy trickle for them. We may have to adjust when the electrical storms come because they do cause a danger to the humans and the inhabitants of the planet."

"How many humans would that leave in the stadiums after they're all sent?"

"Far too many. With how they've been reacting to the females being sent to the planet, I don't predict more than the estimation of two thousand wanting to be sent anyway,"

It's not that I want the majority of these women to perish. In fact, I'd love it if all of them wanted to come to planet 87.39.49 with the others. They could live long, healthy lives there if they could get over the part where the males look different and learn to live without the same amenities they might be used to. My estimation of two thousand wanting to leave is on the high end, though, and that's with sending all of the orphaned children.

“Do you have any data to back up your numbers?”

I cycle through my memories for a recent survey I sent out to all of the subunits of Unit A to get a feel for how many women would be willing to leave if it meant being on a new planet with the possibility of mating with a different species. I was even able to get a visual sketch of what the inhabitants look like so the respondents had all the information they could need. Out of the thirteen thousand females currently being housed who are of the human age of adulthood, only fifteen hundred said they’d be willing to leave.

“And the remainder?” Amarithlumonarion asks.

“I’d recommend offering them sanctuary until their lives end or transferring them to one of the other units. There’s one just to the south of this continent where they’re having more success in sending larger quantities of females. Maybe we could work out a deal where the remainders are held in one unit until they die, and then we can leave this planet?”

I can hope and want for the collective to agree to house these creatures until they perish from natural causes. It’s more likely the collective will vote on eliminating the remaining humans from this unit as soon as I complete the transfer of females to planet 87.39.49.

Amarithlumonarion doesn’t respond with any negatives or positives to what I’ve said. It leads me to believe he thinks I’m being too optimistic with how I want the plan to go on the Earth side of things.

“If my plan goes through, I’d request to be the correspondent of planet 87.39.49,” I add when the silence has grown to an uncomfortable level.

Amarithlumonarion says nothing for a long moment, and I think he’s going to ask

more about why I'd want to take over the care of a primitive planet. They're considered jobs for those who lack the capability of having more depend on them. It's not a job that many ask to take, especially not ones who are also offering species-saving plans to help other primitive species. If my plan works and saves the collective ten years of having to waste their time in this unit, I'll be offered a promotion. Staying on as the planet's babysitter will be frowned upon by many.

"I'll recommend you for the position since the Hand who was sent there two Creators ago has been silent for some time now. So long as you're taking the position for the correct reasons, there should be no issues." Amarithlumonarion's body begins to hum as he prepares to transport back to the ship he's staying.

He begins to disappear as he's transported back to his ship. I don't know what causes me to ask, but I can't help but blurt out, "What's the correct reason?"

I'm not surprised when I don't get a response from him. In fact, as soon as his body has fully disappeared from my lab, I'm back to going over the results of the females of Unit A12.

A few minutes pass when the elder calls out in my mind again. "A fated is a blessing. None would keep you from them."

I grimace at the words because I know none of the others would keep me from Simone. No, they'd do the opposite. They'd force us onto one of the ships out in the planet's atmosphere, where we'd spend most of our time in a single bedroom, attempting to create another mind for the collective.

When a fated is found, their sole purpose is to create more Hands. It's why I've kept my relationship with Simone a secret, why I allowed her to go through the transport to planet 87.39.49. I hate every moment of being away from her. If I'd told the others I found my fated, I wouldn't be able to help anyone else. Simone's friends would be

separated, the other women who want a chance at a new life wouldn't get it, and planet 87.39.49 wouldn't have a chance of creating a whole new species.

It's why I've kept Simone a secret and why I'll keep her a secret until I can find a way to sever the tie between the collective's mind and mine.

3

Rallan

"Insufferable female!" I call out as soon as I step out of my room.

Nothing can be simple with Simone. I would not want it to be because she is very pleasing when she is upset or sassy or frustrated with me. It is one of the reasons I continue to call her an insufferable female because she huffs in the most delicious of ways. It's the closest I will get to her making any sort of sound of passion around me, and I cannot be asked not to hear it.

"Don't call me a fucking female!" Simone yells from right outside my home.

Of course, she is out on the porch, watching as the storms rage outside. She has done this every day, even after I have told her that it is dangerous. Does she care? I do not know, but it does not seem like she does at all.

"You are not a fucking female," I grumble under my breath as I stand in the doorway right behind her. I think she stands thisway on purpose. She is still close enough to the doorway that I can feel her body's warmth. I do not keep myself far from her. She could move if she wants, but she does not. "You have done no fucking as far as I can tell. I would have loved it if you did."

My smile is wide as she turns to look up at me, one of her eyes twitching and her

mouth agape in a fury that has my cock stiffening in an instant. I wish I could meet the male she shares a soul with already so I could thrash him for leaving her when she so obviously still cares for him. I know it is what keeps her from my bed because she would have been in it the first time we met if she trusted her soul.

I smile when I think about the first storms we weathered together. I found her naked in the trees near my brother's tribe. She was alone, scared, and fragile. Of course, I protected her. I also learned that I wanted her in more ways than just companionship, even though her companionship is the best I have ever had. Yes, we bicker and pick at one another, but we are also close enough to have deeper conversations.

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She has told me many times about how she would change things if she were in charge, how she wants to make changes that have a great impact, and how she was learning in her human schools how to try to make a difference in her world.

In turn, I told her about my ability to pleasure a female, something she would not find in any of the males in my brother's tribe because none of them had ever bedded a female. I thought at first this would be a wonderful way to woo her, to show her that I can make it very pleasurable for her. I even told her of all the females who still call upon me when they need their female needs taken care of. Simone did not find these talks very seductive, but I did learn that they riled her up to know I had bedded another. It was the first time I knew I enjoyed riling her up, and I have not stopped since.

"Do you only think with your dick?" Simone snarls up at me. If I wasn't thinking with it before, I sure am now that she has mentioned it.

"Only when it comes to you," I answer honestly.

Yes, I also think of the ever-pressing need to protect and care for her. She is my mate, even if she wants to deny it because she wants to martyr herself for a male who does not deserve her.

"You're disgusting." She shakes her head.

Her hair, her locs as she calls them, shake against her face in a way that has me wanting to wrap some in my fist. I want to use them to guide her eyes back up to mine, to hold her in place until she admits her true feelings for me. Even though she

fights this with all of her being, she wants me, and she is just as affected as I am. I do not do this, though. One, it would be highly dishonorable. And two, I only bed willing females. Simone will be willing. Eventually.

“Come inside and insult me some more,” I offer, moving my body only a fraction. If she does come inside, she’ll need to rub against me to do so.

Her eyes fall down my body, and my eyes flash with victory. She hates it when she allows herself to indulge in how I look and how I respond to her. She hates that if she could, she would spend her days staring at me.

It is good for my health that she enjoys looking at me. It has me doing exercises to make my muscles look bigger before I come to speak with her. I know she appreciates it and my never wearing more than a loose pair of shorts, even if she will never tell me.

“Put your dick back in its pocket,” Simone snaps, her eyes coming back up to mine, a new fury in them. A needy fury that she hates almost as much as she loves.

She is going to go inside and deal with her female needs. She has not done it in many days. Not that I keep track of the days she tells me she needs privacy, slips into her room, and makes stifled moans. She never tells me she needs privacy unless she’s going to touch herself, so really, it is her way of saying she wants me to know. If she did not she would do as she does on normal days and just go to her bedroom and close the door without saying anything.

“You know that is not how it works.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Let me know when it goes away, and then I’ll come inside.”

I tell myself that I should not say the thought I am currently thinking. I know that I

should not, but sometimes you have to take a chance and hope that maybe this will be the time that the small human female looks at you with her dark eyes full of anger and lust and need and finally says your name in a way that tells you she is ready to make love. “It would go away faster if I could come inside you.”

Simone’s whole body tenses like she has been struck by the light in the sky, and my eyes go wide. Oh, I have definitely pushed it too far this time. She might murder me in my sleep now. She is going to wait until I’m drowsy after eating a full meal and napping in my favorite chair. She will heat one of the strips of metal I have out by my furnace in the fireplace inside. When the moment is right, she will seal me up good and tight because I have most definitely taken it too far.

I take a step back inside the house, not wanting to upset her even more when this has all been in good fun, as far as I could tell. Yes, I tease her and rile her up, but she does the same to me. It is what bonds us.

I have successfully backed all the way back to my room and am opening the door when I see the crack in Simone’s illusion. Her shoulders start to shake, then the rest of her body, and then I hear it. A laugh that is quickly covered by the back of her hand as she turns around to see me staring wide-eyed in horror because I thought I ruined everything.

“I fucking hate you!” she scream-laughs as she marches back inside the house and plops down on the couch. “So fucking dumb,” she mumbles under her breath as she shakes her head, but her smile never leaves her lips.

I stand a bit taller, my chest puffing out in pride to know that even if I cannot seduce my mate, I can still make her make the most pleasing sounds of joy I have ever heard.

I take a seat in my favorite chair and decide that while it would still be much fun to tease Simone some more, we do have more pressing matters. Especially if there is a

pause in the storms soon, so we can speak with my tribal leader.

“As much as you love talking about my cock, we should discuss what we are to tell Zathar when we go to speak with him.” I do not give Simone a moment to fight me on who brought up my cock first before continuing. I love that I can see her nose scrunch up and her brows pinch as she tries and fails to interject. “He will already have males that he will want to send to the tribe. I want you to make sure they are good enough for your sisters. There will be many who wish for a mate.”

“I’m going to have to trust you with a lot of this,” Simone says, her voice turning serious when she realizes I really am done teasing her. “I have no idea who any of these guys are, how they treat women, or anything. You’ve been living here for a while, right?”

“Most of my life.”

“So you know these men?”

“For the most part.” I shrug. “It is not as though I have notes on all of the males and how they have treated the others.”

“Oh!” Simone sits up straighter and cuts me off with a wave of her hand. “What if we ask the women? They’ll know who the good ones are, right?”

“They will, but they might also want to keep some of the males for themselves,” I answer, knowing that there are favorites among the unmated females. It is an honor to get to service their female needs since they have yet to find mates to call their own, but they do have a few brothers that they enjoy the company of more than others.

“That’s fine,” Simone says. “We really only need to know about the demons who want to go to the tribe anyway. It’s not like we’re taking all of them.”

“And how do you know they will be honest with you?” I ask. Not that I think the females would purposefully try to hurt a brother’s chances to find a mate because I know they would not do it maliciously. I do not want them to think they have to make up stories about a brother who they would still very much enjoy having around the tribe.

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“I figure you have a few that you trust,” Simone says like it isn’t meant to be a dig at me. I do not let her see that my past interactions with females make my scales feel too tight since she is not impressed with my experience.

I plaster a false smile onto my lips, hoping to seem as arrogant as she likes to think I am most of the time when it comes to talking about bedding and pleasuring females. “I would say more than a few. Would you trust their judgment?”

Simone lets out a snort of a laugh that I can tell is her trying to ignore just how jealous she becomes when thinking of me with other females. I do not rub it in her face as much anymore because her jealousy will only truly be good when she is claiming me and reminding me who I belong to. Until she is willing to do that, her jealousy just makes my chest pinch because I do not like thinking of hurting her in any way. I might be a little insecure about what she thinks of me, even if I try to keep her from seeing it.

“I trust them more than any other stranger in this tribe.”

I know I should not ask, but a part of me is hoping that she trusts them because they have wonderful taste in males. So, instead of talking myself out of asking, I blurt out, “Why would you trust them?”

Simone narrows her eyes on me, and for a moment, I think she is going to skewer me with a cutting remark that will have me having to fake my confidence once again. I have never been a male who needed much to think highly of himself. I have a wonderful body that I take care of. I was blessed when I became a grown male in that my size is quite large. And I am among the favorites of the unmated females. Not that

any of them will share my bed again. No, now I am a celibate male, waiting for his female to admit that she wants him. My cock has never been so abused in its disuse.

“I trust them because they at least have halfway decent taste in men,” Simone says. Her words are slow, like she’s having to force them out. I do not hide my smile or the way her words make my chest swell in pride.

“You would think them wanting to share my bed would make you trust them less,” I say, needling Simone to see if I can get more reluctant compliments from her.

Simone chews on the inside of her cheek, not in a timid and shy way like I have seen some of her sisters do in my brother’s tribe. Oh no, Simone chews on the inside of her cheek when she has something scathing she wishes to say but is thinking better of it. I have been on the receiving end of her cruel tongue when she is very angry, and she knows it will only have me wanting her more because I enjoy her when she is full of passion. Her angry passions are the next best thing to the passions she will show me when she admits she wants to warm my bed.

“I will listen to their opinions on the demons who want to go to the tribe,” Simone says slowly. “They’ll have more experience with them and can tell us if any of them are cruel or hateful.”

I nod because these are things that the females should be able to tell her. “There will be some brothers they have not bedded,” I tell her because I was not lying when I said the females have favorites.

“They’ll still know better than you how they treat women,” Simone says.

I nod, not knowing what else to say. I was hoping to get some more compliments, but unfortunately, Simone is thinking more so about what is best for her sisters in the tribe.

“I’m going to say that we get a list of demons from your tribe leader. You’ll go through it and tell me yes or no on them, and then maybe we ask a woman or two if any of the men aren’t safe to be around someone who won’t be able to fight them off.” Simone counts off the steps to her plan of finding males to allow into my brother’s tribe.

“If there are even enough males who want to go,” I tell her.

My brother’s tribe has many human females who will soon join his tribe, and they will all need males big enough to protect and care for them. However, there is something that my brother’s tribe and their females do not really know about other males of our species, males who know what a female of our kind looks and feels like.

“Why wouldn’t they want to go?” Simone asks, her brows crinkling because she honestly does not see what I have seen. “All of the others seem interested in humans.”

“Simone,” I start by saying her name and feel my cock twitch against the restraint of my pants when her eyes flash with lust for a moment. “You know I find you highly beddable. In fact, I often think of your naked body, which I have seen and have decided is the best-looking naked body I have ever laid eyes on.”

“Get to the point!”

“Sorry, yes, sorry.” I am not sorry. “Humans are an acquired taste.”

“Excuse you?” Simone narrows her eyes on me like I am offending her when I just complimented her very thoroughly.

“When my brother showed me his creature, I had to stop myself from recoiling. You are small, and weak, and covered in hair like an olack.”

I list off all of the things I tried to reconcile with when I saw my brother's mate. She was not attractive to me at all, and I could not figure out why my brother would want to bed her other than that he had been without a female in his life for many years. Then, I saw Simone out in the trees, and I realized that human females, or at least this human female, could be the most amazing sight to behold.

"Wait," Simone says, holding up her hand and rubbing at her temples as though she is realizing a flaw in her plans.

"I have already dealt with some of the fears of your ugliness," I say, not waiting for Simone to figure out what she wants to say. When she lowers her hand from her forehead to stare daggers into my soul, I cannot stop the thrill that runs through me.

"My ugliness?"

"Not all the males will think you are ugly. But the ones who do might need some nudging to want to help out in the tribe. That is why I have told them that if they end up being drawn to a human, they will think she is more beautiful than anything they have ever seen. They will want for nothing but her. Their very soul will sing when she is in his presence."

"My ugliness?" Simone asks again.

I ignore it and continue. "I would say about half the males will have no qualms about how humans look, but those that do will very much want to find their mate. We are very emotional creatures. You know this already. Even those who might find the humans they have met ugly will want to see if there is one for who their soul will be completed."

"They might find the humans they've met ugly?" Simone says the words slowly, her eyes burning into mine, even as I stare at her with more joy than I have felt all day.

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“Yes, they might,” I say, knowing very well my brothers have only met one other human and she is sitting here with me.

“I need you to think very carefully about what you just said.” Simone’s words drip with vitriol. I am her mate, which means her barbs do not hurt me, and her poison is not dangerous.

No, she is only upset because her female needs have been neglected for far too long. Maybe I will suggest for her to go to her privacy so that she can take care of herself. The more I think about it, the more I realize it’s the perfect thing to say. If I play my cards right, she might get glassy-eyed in lust for a moment in my presence before she leaves.

“You sound upset. Maybe you need your privacy now?” I ask, and then when she narrows her eyes on me even tighter, I add. “To care for your female needs. You are very obviously wound up tight. You need to do something to release all of your tension.”

“Rallan!” Simone shoots to her feet, her eyes wild in needy fury and her hands flexing and fisting by her sides.

I stand to meet her energy, taking two steps so we are much too close. She is a good two heads shorter than me, her small human stature only reaching my chest. She is not scared of me, though. She has never once been scared of me because even if she rejects me, her soul most certainly does not.

Her breathing is heavy and hard as she stares up at me. Her nipples stiffen under her

tunic in a way that only happens when she is furious at me or needy in her desperation for me. Right now, it is both.

I reach my hand up to touch her face and am surprised when she lets me cup the back of her head. Her nostrils flare, but she does not tell me to stop. I am sure she will in just a moment, but until then, I am going to enjoy the feel of my mate in my hands.

“Say my name again, and I will take care of everything,” I say the words in a teasing manner that I know will break this moment between us.

Simone has said my name, and we both know it means she wants to bed me. Humans do not have this custom, though. I have learned that if I am to get Simone worked up enough, she will eventually always say my name. It is a wonderful thing to know about one’s mate. It also means I cannot take her proclamation of wanting to make love with me by saying my name seriously. Each time she says it, I make sure to ask her to say it again to see if this will be the time she wants to follow through with what saying it means.

“Fuck you.”

Simone pushes away from me, her small hands hitting my chest in a manner that is much more caressing than a hit. I smile brighter, knowing she is trying to touch me to feel me and not to get herself away from me. I can let her pretend, though. Especially when she lets her palms linger for a moment before pushing away.

“One day you will. I hope it is soon,” I call after her when she marches down the short hallway to her room.

She sticks her middle finger up behind her, a signal she loves giving me that also means ‘fuck you.’ I am a lucky male with how often my mate tells me she wishes to make love with me. One day, she’ll admit it’s what she’s doing.

“I am assuming you are wishing for privacy now?” When she does not respond with anything other than slamming her door, I add, “So you can touch yourself to find release?”

There’s an angry squeal that comes from her room, and my lips pull up even higher. She is very much going to touch herself to thoughts of me right now. I imagine what she looks like when she does it as I sit back in my favorite chair, rest my head on the back, and close my eyes.

4

Simone

“Ah, Rallan and the human female,” Zathar, the leader of Rallan’s tribe, greets us as we enter the dining hall. It’s similar to the tribe where all of the other women are living, where I’ll be living after Rallan and I make this deal.

There are a couple dozen demons sitting at the various tables. All of them were making conversation until we were announced, and then all attention quickly turned to Rallan and me.

I’ve spent most of my time in the new tribe in Rallan’s home since there aren’t many demons I trust here. I mean, this is the tribe where the demons who kidnapped one of the other women came from. There were actually quite a few who were all wanting to do the same, but they’re no longer a problem. Zathar dealt with the men responsible for trying to convince others to attack our tribe to kidnap women, and those who were a part of it were either imprisoned or banished. Still, I wasn’t eager to go out and explore the tribe on my own without Rallan with me.

He did show me around everything and introduce me to a few others, but for the most part, he was busy explaining everything to Zathar. When it was time for me to offer

my part of the conversation, we only had a few days before the storms came back. So, Rallan and I have stayed cooped up in his home, enjoying—or trying to enjoy—one another's company.

“Zathar.” Rallan nods in the male's direction in acknowledgment of his greeting. He places a hand on the small of my back to guide me over to where his tribal leader is sitting.

I don't miss how there are mostly men in the dining hall. Demons who are all looking at me with curiosity and confusion. I hate that Rallan told me they might think I'm ugly a few days ago because now that's all I can think about. I'm not normally someone who's insecure, but I don't like knowing a whole species might find me unappealing.

Rallan must sense my tension because he's leaning down. “You are worried?”

“Nope,” I say a little too loud and then cringe when more eyes snap in my direction. I refuse to duck my head or lower my eyes. I might be worried about being seen as ugly, but I won't let any of them know that. Especially not Rallan, who will definitely use it against me somehow. “I'm perfectly fine.”

“Well, that is not true, but I will not force it right now,” he says, much too quiet for anyone else to hear but loud enough to have my heart flutter.

I hate that I react to Rallan in any way that might mean I find him attractive or arousing or anything other than the annoying ass that he is. I don't need another man in my life. Not when the first one that made me feel safe and cared for dropped me off in the middle of the forest, naked, alone, and fucking terrified. I keep trying to put myself in dangerous situations, thinking he might come back and offer some sort of explanation that makes sense, but he still hasn't, and I'm starting to wonder if he ever will.

“We are glad you have finally graced us with your presence. Many of us were eager to meet your female,” Zathar says.

“Not his,” I interject, much to the amusement of Rallan and his tribal leader, who only smiles brighter. He’s an older demon whose colors have dulled with time, and his mate sits next to him, just as cheery and happy as he is. Why shouldn’t they be happy? They have one another, and they look like they have for a while.

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“Yes, my mistake,” Zathar says easily. “Rallan has told me you are not fond of being called his. I must have forgotten.”

Rallan’s fingers tighten on my lower back as he moves to pull a chair out for me to sit in. Most of the others are watching everything happening between us, but their conversations are beginning to resume in hushed whispers and murmurs.

I glance around once more and notice, to my surprise, a handful of what I’m assuming are women sitting around the tables as well. There’s even one standing from her seat, eyes on Rallan as she debates something with herself. She furrows her brows before sitting back down but keeps her eyes on us.

“You wish to speak to me about males willing to go to the other tribe, yes?” Zathar asks.

It’s exactly what we’re here for, and I’m glad he’s not trying to make small talk before getting down to business. The tribe I come from had a shortage of women that will soon be rectified, but in order to house and feed all of the new women who will be coming, we need help from this tribe. We need demons willing to help build houses, go hunting, and, more importantly, help keep the tribe safe in case there are more out there who wish to force a human to be with them. It’s hard enough that we’re already so much smaller and weaker than the species that live on this planet.

It’s one of the reasons I proposed this plan. The other reason was that I thought it would make Vex come find me.

“My companion should have asked you to come up with a list of names of brothers

who might be interested in helping out in the tribe to make it suitable for more humans to live?" I ask. I make sure not to use Rallan's name, especially in front of all these other demons. He can get me so worked up that I say it when we're alone, but he's never gotten me that way when we're in front of others.

"He did, and we have." Zathar hands Rallan a piece of parchment with names written on it.

"Are all of these males willing to help even if they cannot find a mate?" Rallan asks as he sets the paper down.

"That is what they have said, and I trust them," Zathar says, his voice taking on a cool edge, almost like he knows that we have doubts about who he trusts since it's his tribe that has males come to kidnap humans. "I understand if you are hesitant, but they have all agreed to speak with you to make sure you are open to allowing them into your tribe's walls. This is just the first group I am willing to send, there will be more males who offer to go, and others from more tribes once they are made aware that mate bonds are beginning to form in greater numbers."

"Thirty males will be a great help," Rallan says, his arms crossing over his chest as he leans back in his chair.

I try to look just as nonchalant as him, but I'm sure I'm failing. I mean, I can already feel my eye twitching at the fact that we asked for a maximum of twenty-five names because we still have over thirty males in the other tribe who are able to help.

I clear my throat, trying to force myself to stay respectful because I am in the presence of the demon who runs the entirety of this other tribe. This tribe that seems to be prospering with hundreds and hundreds of inhabitants who all look healthy enough. Not to mention all of the nicer fabrics I've seen some of the others wearing. Nicer than the thin material that makes up my tunic and the pair of makeshift shorts I

made myself during the storms. I need to stay respectful because one day, I want my tribe to be this successful.

“We requested a maximum of twenty-five males.” I’m pretty proud that my words come out much more neutral than I expect them to.

I don’t miss how Rallan turns his head slightly to look down at me or how he untwines his arms so one is resting behind me on the back of my chair. He’s making sure they all know that even if I say something they don’t like, he’s still willing to protect me. I would hate the show if not for the fact that I might actually piss someone off before this is over if our demands are so easily discarded.

“My mate knew that you would be looking over the list to ensure the males we chose were of your liking.” I’m surprised when Zathar’s mate is the one who responds to me, but I don’t hate it. “I told him to add more names so that you did not feel as though you had to accept males you would not normally accept just to ensure you had enough help in your tribe.

I trace the front of my teeth with my tongue as I decide how to respond to her. “Thank you. That was thoughtful and actually pretty good thinking. I want to go over the list with my companion, and then we were hoping to hear from some of the women who might’ve interacted with them to make sure they’ve never acted aggressively toward any of them.”

“Of course.” Zanthar’s mate leans across the table and points at the paper. “I took the liberty of listing female references for each male because I thought that would be a wonderful way to show you that the males we chose have proven themselves to be caring partners.”

“Oh, wow.” I smile at the woman, loving that somehow we were both on the same page about this whole thing. Her eyessparkle with amusement as she matches my

expression. “Thank you, this will be so helpful.”

“Yes, my mate is the better half of this mating. I’m sure you can see that clearly now,” Zathar says with a laugh in his voice. “If not for her, I would have run this tribe into the ground long ago, but she is here, and so are we.”

A part of me, the part of me that somehow manages to cause problems by being too abrasive, wants to ask why they’re willing to help now when they were so against helping the other tribe for so long. I already know the answer. Their women are dwindling in numbers, and my tribe is about to have an abundance of them.

If Ralleth and the other demons of the tribe I come from are fine with receiving help from this tribe after years of barely being able to trade with them, then I’ll have to manage to be fine with it, too. So long as everyone in my tribe, my home, is safe, I’ll live with pretty much anything.

“You are still worried,” Rallan says more than asks, and the irritating man says it loud enough that our hosts hear him, too.

I shoot him a narrowed glare, but of course, he takes that as some kind of come-on. I’m pretty sure I could tell him I hate him, and he’d think it’s me hitting on him. Either he’s that desperate for someone in his bed—unlikely since he boasts about his attentions so frequently. Or, he actually really wants me. The latter is just confusing since I’m still very much hung up on a different stupid alien man who ditched me in the middle of the woods on this planet and still has yet to show his stupid glowing face to me at all. Not even when I was here doing this stupid thing of making sure everyone knows about humans coming to this planet.

A crash of thunder interrupts our conversation and has Rallan standing from the table. His body is tense, and his eyes lose the amusement that seems to always sparkle in them.

“You could stay with us,” Zathar’s mate says to me as I stand to join Rallan.

My eyes go a bit wide at the offer, and I look up to Rallan to give me an excuse not to have to stay here for a storm. Instead, he’s looking at the woman who was watching us earlier. His eyes are still serious, and his body is tense. I don’t like how he seems so caught up in watching her, and maybe, just maybe, I’m way more jealous than I try to let on about all of the experience he seems to have.

“Yes, my mate has already had a room set aside for you and Rallan if you want to stay to get to know some of our closest friends here,” Zathar adds, drawing my attention back to him and his mate. At least, he tries.

I’m still staring at Rallan, who’s staring at someone who isn’t me, before his throat works to swallow something down. Then, as though I didn’t just watch him stare down someone he’s most definitely had sex with, he turns his attention back down to me and offers me his hand.

“We should get going before the storms return,” Rallan says, his smile spreading across his lips and his eyes returning their mirth. “Do not want to be stuck here, do we?”

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“Were you listening at all?” I ask, staring up at him and forcing my eye not to twitch. I’m unsuccessful.

“I heard the thunder, which means a storm is approaching. If a storm is approaching, I know you will want to be in my home.” Rallan pauses, his head cocking to the side as though he realizes that he really did miss a piece of our conversation. “Do you want to stay here? I thought you would need your privacy.”

I hold in the shriek that threatens to escape my lips. I force it back down my throat and turn my attention back to Zathar and his mate.

Rallan was made to be the thorn in my side, the pebble in my shoe, the absolute nuisance that I can’t get rid of no matter how hard I try. Maybe that’s why he’s growing on me even though I don’t want him to. He sees all the worst parts of me, and he still likes me. It would be cute if it weren’t so irritating.

“I’m staying. You’re going.” I cross my arms over my chest and don’t even look back up at him. Out of the corner of my eyes, I can see his brows crinkling, his smile dimming. He doesn’t say or do anything to apologize for trying to embarrass me in front of all of these strangers.

“Do you have a room for her?” Rallan asks, his tone turning more serious again as he addresses Zathar. The male doesn’t hide the smile curling his lips as he gives Rallan a soft nod. “She should not be left alone with any males. Not even if she tells you it is okay. Her soul belongs to another already, even if he is a dishonorable male.”

I bite on the inside of my cheek, not taking the bait Rallan is throwing at me. He

doesn't often talk about Vex. I don't often bring him up. It's bad enough that he dropped me off on this planet, not even in the right place, and hasn't done anything to come get me even though he promised me he'd always find me.

I grind my teeth against one another, refusing to remember our last conversation. The conversation where he told me he understood if I found someone else to be happy with here. The conversation where he broke up with me right before kicking me off the planet. The conversation I replay in my head most nights even though I want to move past it since Vex isn't coming back for me.

"Anything else?" Zathar asks, his smile gone after mentioning that I'm a mated female.

They all thought Rallan was my mate, or at least had their suspicions. Now that he's made it clear he's not, well, the goodwill seems to have dimmed.

I can feel Zathar's judgment without him having to say anything. The same judgment I could feel at the other tribe everytime I told the others to stop calling Rallan my mate. They all know how he feels for me. I know how he feels for me, and I continue to rebuff him. He's an honorable male. He is strong and can protect me. That's what they all say, and to that, I just tell them I don't care.

"She does not appreciate being called a female," Rallan says, a cut in his voice that I'm not used to hearing. I'm definitely not used to him telling others that I don't like something that he takes great pleasure in calling me. "You may call her Rallan's companion or friend or your sister."

I turn my eyes up to him, opening my mouth to tell him that I appreciate him saying that. I didn't even know that he registered when I told him I don't like being addressed as female. In all honesty, I thought he heard that, and decided to disregard it because he enjoys calling me that because of how much I react to it. Before I can

do that, he's turning away from me and strolling back down the tables of the dining hall to the doors we came through earlier.

Zathar's mate starts talking to me, telling me about some of the demons on the list and trying to get me up to date with all that they've done to help out my tribe. I listen to her, nodding when I need to and asking questions when appropriate. We've only been talking for a few minutes when I notice the woman who was staring at Rallan earlier stand from her seat and start walking down the dining hall toward the doors.

"Who is she?" I ask, cutting Zathar's mate off on accident.

Thankfully, she doesn't seem to mind. If anything, she gives me a knowing look and offers up what she knows. "Veya is an unmated female who was very excited about your companion's return."

I choke on my next breath, trying to force myself not to have an actual reaction to what she just said. It's too late for that, though. She noticed, Zathar noticed, and a few others all looked over at me like I might be dying somehow before realizing it was probably just a weird human thing and returning to their food.

"I'm assuming you don't mean because of his stellar conversational skills?"

Zathar turns his attention to something else, obviously not enjoying his mate talking about another demon. I'll give him two more minutes before he takes her to their room to remind her who her mate is, just like the demons of my tribe do to their mates when they think they've spoken too friendly to or about another.

"No, I am not," Zathar's mate barely has a moment to get the words out before her mate throws his chair back and helps her out of hers. She tries to say one last thing to me before being ushered down the hall. "You may stay if you would like, or you may chase after him. I believe there is still a short while before the storms are here."

I don't need much more prompting than that. I didn't even want to stay here when I was offered to stay here. I just wanted to irritate Rallan, which I didn't do because he probably wanted me out of the house so he could get laid.

Nope, not on my watch.

Maybe if I were more of an introspective person, I'd think about why I care. Too bad I'm not that person.

All I know is there's a burning jealousy inside of me when I think of Rallan being with anyone in the past. What I'm feeling right now? Knowing he's alone in his home with a more than willing woman? I'm surprised I'm not seeing red.

Even when I feel the first trickle of rain on my face, I don't think about turning back around and going back to safety. No, I think only of making sure the only person who's with Rallan during a storm is me.

Maybe I'll think about the whys of it later when I'm thinking a bit more clearly. Probably not, since I love stuffing all the hard and uncomfortable feelings deep down inside. But maybe I'll surprise myself and figure out why I couldn't just stay put in the dining hall.

5

Rallan

My favorite seat is not as comfortable as it normally is. The calming sound of the rain pattering against my roof is not nearly as soothing as it should be. No, my body is tight with tension and a need to be back around my favorite creature. She has decided that she wishes to spend time with the others during these storms.

I snarl at myself, thinking about how I should have offered to stay with her. I should have told her that I didn't trust anyone else to keep her safe. That would not bode well for the males going to her tribe, though. That is the only reason I did not put up more of a fight about her not being with me.

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I shift in my seat, hoping somehow I will find the perfect way to sit in it so I will stop worrying about Simone and will instead enjoy my solitude. Not that I have ever really enjoyed solitude. I am a male who is used to being liked and friends with many others. I have not spent the storms alone in many, many seasons.

Yet, when Veya came knocking on my door right before the storms started, I sent her on her way. She was hurt for a moment before I explained to her that my soul had been called, and I could take no others anymore. Then she was very happy for me and told me she would very much enjoy getting to know my mate. I did not have the heart to tell her that Simone is not my mate yet. Or, really, I wanted to pretend a little more that I was already accepted. I am a patient male, but it is still nice to acknowledge that Simone is mine, even if it has yet to happen.

I huff to myself, deciding it will be almost impossible to find any comfort in my favorite seat or anywhere else in my home during this storm. Simone is not here. It has me more on edge than anything else. I stand from the chair, staring at it and baring my teeth as though I can scare it into being more comfortable.

I wish there were an actual physical reason for my discomfort and not the fact that I am trapped here while my mate is so far from me. I cannot even make it back to the great hall, considering the rain is hitting the house harder now. It would be foolish, and as much as I am a foolish male in many things, I am not about to die before I have even been with my mate.

The door to my home swings open. The wind causes it to slam against the inside of my house, and rain pours in as a very small, very soaked female stumbles in. I'm stunned into stillness for a moment before I force my limbs into action.

The door is the first thing I deal with because I cannot even calm my emotions enough to think of Simone being here. I grab the door, struggle to close it against the wind and throw the extra latch over it. I'm grateful I did not do that earlier because then Simone would have been trapped outside until I heard her banging on the door. The thought has my stomach turning, and I have to take a few deep breaths before I turn to face the little human who traveled through a storm to get here.

"What do you think you are doing?" I ask, trying my best—and failing—to keep my voice calm and devoid of the anger I feel at how much danger she put herself in.

"I think I'm here in my home to wait out the storm," Simone says, just as devoid of emotion as me, which means she is huffing and puffing her displeasure as well.

I can hear the vitriol in her words and the accusation that I have done something wrong when I know for certain that I have not. Oh no, it most certainly is her who has done something wrong because she is here, soaked through, and—

I turn away from her again, not liking that I cannot think clearly with her tunic soaked through. It clings to her curves and shows me almost the same view I had when I first stumbled upon her all bare.

"You should not be here," I snap.

My hands are balled into tight fists at my sides, but I cannot stop myself from aiding her when she so clearly needs it. I stomp through the house, making sure to spare the smallest of glimpses at Simone.

She seems just as angry as me, but I do not know how she could be. Her eyes keep darting around the house as though she is looking for something in particular. She is so concerned about finding whatever she is looking for that she follows me into my bedroom without me even asking her to.

“Why shouldn’t I be here?” Simone asks.

She moves around me once she’s in my room and begins to look around like she thinks she will find something to damn me with. I grab a spare tunic out of my wardrobe, but do not hand it to her just yet. First, I want to know why she is acting so strange.

She made it very clear she wanted to be away from me for this storm, and yet she just put her life in danger to get back to me. I do not like it. Well, a small part of me likes it because I think it is her soul telling her to be near me.

“It was dangerous to come back when the storms started,” I answer her question before asking one of my own. “What are you looking for? Maybe I can assist you since you seem so set on finding something.”

Simone, who is looking behind my door as though there is a secret hidden there, turns to face me. She has a hard look on her face and a stern determination in her eyes. “Where is she?”

I frown at her question, not really understanding who she could be speaking about. When I only tilt my head to the side, she places her hands on her hips. It draws my attention down, and I remember why I came to my bedroom. I need to get her something else to wear because, currently, her breasts are looking right at me.

Truly they are asking me to indulge myself and to feel their softness. But as much as Simone’s breasts might want my tender touches, she seems not ready to admit that to herself.

“Who is meant to be hiding behind my door?” I ask, holding out the tunic for Simone.

My teeth grind against one another when I see how wet her hair is, too. She is very

adamant that she does not enjoy her hair being wet unless she is cleaning it. When she has my tunic in her hands, I search my wardrobe for some more spare tunics.

“I saw someone follow you when you left the great hall.” Simone is a quick female. She asks the question, takes off her wet tunic, and replaces it with my tunic, all before I can turn around.

“You were watching to see who would follow me out of the great hall?” I ask, amusement beginning to soften my tone.

I do not like that Simone put herself in danger, but now I understand why. I turn around with a few tunics in my hand and motion for her to sit on my bed. She hesitates before she realizes what it is I intend to do.

I grab one of the thick coils of her hair and begin to dry it as best as I can. I have seen how much time she takes to dry them when she finishes her bathing, so I know this is an important part of her routine.

“Did you come back to the house because you were afraid I would spend a storm with someone who was not you?”

“No,” Simone snaps.

I do not believe her for even a single beating in my chest.

I shift my position around, trying to find the most comfortable way to sit to dry her hair. I do not miss how she leans against me or follows my movements as I do. I say nothing when I throw a leg on either side of her, and she scoots back against me. I do not mention her hand falling to her side, and her little finger touches my thigh as though she thinks I will not notice it. These are all things Simone will deny as soon as I bring them up, so instead, I will annoy her as I do so well.

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“Oh, so you do not care that I have her waiting in your room, then?” I try to keep the smile out of my voice so it sounds as though I am being very serious.

Simone tries to bolt out from between my legs as soon as I ask, but my reflexes are much quicker than hers. I wrap my free hand around her waist and keep her seated right where she is.

“Let me go,” she says through gritted teeth. If I were to look at her face, I am sure one of her eyes would be twitching.

“Why? So you can go see if I was telling the truth about having someone waiting in your room?” I know it is what she wants to do, but I am curious if I can get her to admit that she is a jealous little mate.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“How about I tell you if she is there or not if you tell me why you came back?” I move on to a new section of her hair, letting my claws scratch gently at her scalp as I move. She would never tell me this, but she enjoys it very much. I can see it in the littlebumps that appear over her arms when I do it and then way she lets out a barely audible sound of contentment.

“I came back because this is where I’ve been staying during the storms.” Simone once again lies to me. “I decided I didn’t want to be in the great hall because I don’t know any of them.”

“Ah.” I pause, trying to figure out the best words to use to get under her skin. “So it

was not because you saw another follow me out?”

“Why would I care about that?” Simone asks, her voice breathier as I continue to work her hair.

I think she very much enjoys having someone dote on her. I wish she would tell me because then I could tell her I would dote on her in everything that I do. Yes, it could be what bonds us, not this bickering we are so good at. I know I would very much enjoy getting to help with her moisturizing, as she calls it, where she rubs oil all over her skin.

“I do not know why you would care since you have made it clear you are unhappy that you lust for me.” I shrug. “But you did return to my home, soaked through, and the first thing you asked about was where she was. I think that means you care at least a little about someone else being here.”

Simone makes a sound that I am sure is meant to be her rebuttal, but it is much too pleased to sound even remotely like she is upset. Yes, I have found a way to tame my vicious little mate, and it is with head scratches. It is strange, but I am keeping this information with me always so I can get her this relaxed in my presence again. Maybe I can convince her that every night, she should allow me to scratch her scalp. Maybe then she will warm to the idea of mating with me.

“You could just admit that you are a jealous female,” I whisper after long moments.

She has not spoken in so long that I am starting to wonder if she has fallen asleep. When she does not tense at my teasing of her being jealous or immediately refute it, I am sure she is finding her rest. She snuggles closer to me, though, making sure not to turn her face closer to the center of my chest.

It would be unfortunate for her to smell from my chest and find out she is, in fact, my

mate. It is why she does not cuddle closer to my chest but instead curls herself into my arm that is holding her. It leaves me enough space to continue working on her hair, and she is not in danger of lusting after me.

“Not jealous,” Simone says, the only sign that she is awake as she nuzzles closer to me. “Not even a little.”

“Of course not.” I keep my voice light, letting my fingers fall from her hair and down her cheek.

I do not move my body and instead decide that this will be how I sit forever if she sleeps like this. Maybe I can also convince her to share my bed with me every night after I have calmed her by giving her head scratches. Yes, this is a wonderful plan. I will tell her when she wakes next.

For right now? I will continue to dry her hair until I know it is as dry as if the rains never touched it, and I will bask in the warmth of knowing that Simone was almost certainly jealous that another female was in my home.

6

Vex

“You are sure you want to prepare a house?” Ralleth, the tribal leader and soon-to-be blood to Simone if he’s not already, asks me. He stands in the living room of the house he offered me when I told him I wanted one to share with his brother and Simone when they return.

To say I was unhappy when I first arrived on this planet and found out Simone had found companionship with one of the creatures of this planet would be an understatement. My plans all hinge on me being accepted into this tribe, so after three

days of destroying everything in my room on Earth, I returned to speak with Ralleth almost daily about my plans to bring the humans here.

I've already gotten permission from the elder in charge of Unit A, which means I only need to finish the work on this planet to allow more women to come through.

Ralleth and the other males of the tribe seem more than happy to make the tribe welcoming for new additions. They've even agreed to allow males from another tribe to move here to help with rebuilding. Their acceptance of doing what needs to be done has been astounding, even though I hate that it was my fated who decided to put herself at risk to tell the other tribe of humans.

If I'd known Simone planned on putting herself in so much danger, I would've sped up the timeline of my plan to get here sooner. The only reason I haven't gone for her is the storms, which stopped me from being able to travel, and the fact that everyone here has assured me Rallan will keep her safe. I wish it were me keeping her safe, but she will be here soon enough, and then I will continue being the one to protect her.

"They'll need somewhere to live," I answer Ralleth's question as I come out of one of the bedrooms.

The house is one of the larger homes in the tribe. I need the extra space because I hope to make one of the rooms a place where I can do checkups on humans and his kind alike. I have a vast knowledge of the human species after being their doctor for the last couple of years, and I've learned much about Ralleth's kind while studying their compatibility with humans.

I might not be completely trusted, but I'll still do my best to keep them all healthy. My success in being with Simone for as long as possible and my ability to leave the collective mind depend on integrating into this tribe. I'll do it to the best of my ability. Keeping them all healthy should be a good start.

“And you think they will want to live with you?”

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Ralleth doesn't mean for it to come across as condescending as it does. We've grown closer in the last few weeks that I've been staying in the great hall with him while we wait for the storms to finish. I received permission to come to this planet for extended periods of time and didn't hesitate to move here.

At first, Ralleth didn't like me at all. I might've exasperated this by very purposefully saying Simone's name all of the time because I knew it pissed him off to hear me say his brother's mate's name. It didn't matter to him that Simone was mine long before she came to this planet. I can only hope she'll choose to be mine again.

"I don't see why not," I answer with as dull a tone as I can. "You've said yourself that plenty of males here share."

"I did." Ralleth rubs the back of one of his horns, not making eye contact with me because, for some reason, he's now thinking something he's not voiced before.

He was happy when I told him I wasn't going to try to kill his brother. In fact, he laughed at me for a while before telling me that he was sure I would try my best even though I am a small male. Much smaller than all of them.

The point is, he seemed more than happy about me being willing to share then. So, I don't know why he's acting weird about it now.

"What aren't you saying?"

"Nothing." He looks at me with wide eyes and then immediately looks somewhere else. "Just that we do not know if my brother is a male who is willing to share. I

mean, I have spoken with him only a handful of times since I was a young male. We have not ever talked about his preferences for mating.”

“Ralleth.”

I try to keep my temper in check because I know it’s my biggest fault. I get even slightly upset, and somehow, my living spaces end up torn apart with things thrown all over the place. It’s something I worked on for a long time to get under control. Then Simone was sent to this planet. That was when I first fell off the rails of keeping my emotions in check. Now, it seems like any time she’s brought up, there’s a fifty-fifty chance of me destroying something.

“Do not be upset with me,” Ralleth says, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I am just letting you know. I would hate for my brother and his mate to arrive at the tribe happy and together and for you to feel saddened by their happiness.”

I grit my teeth together, hating how much my human skin is slipping. It’s so hard to keep it in place when I’m also trying to avoid breaking something.

“They’re happy together then?” I ask, knowing that Ralleth has already told me many times that his brother is mated to Simone or will be soon.

I have no idea how fast it took her to move on from me. Not that I blame her, because I don’t. I told her when I sent her to this planet that she should try to find happiness because I wasn’t sure if I was ever going to be able to be with her. It took me a little while to come up with a plan, but I didn’t think it’d be so long that she’d move on. I guess I can’t really blame her when all of the research I’ve done on the creatures of this planet has told me that they mate for life and feel strong callings to be with who they believe to be their mate.

“I would imagine since we have not been told that she has murdered him,” Ralleth

answers, a smile tugging at his lips. “I am sure you can relate to his feelings much better than I can. She seemed eager to murder him on more than one occasion. My brother seemed very pleased with this, so I believe it is what bonds them.”

I take a deep breath and then release it. I might not have believed Ralleth about his brother being Simone’s mate if not for all of the others who seem sure of it as well. Even Simone’s friends have told me that they’re pretty sure Simone feels something for Rallan.

Simone never told anyone she was with me, either. It makes sense she’d be just as secretive about finding a different mate. I let the breath out, forcing my skin to reform and cover my true form.

I’ve grown accustomed to my human skin, finding it to be more of a comfort. I also don’t feel the need to let the others in the tribe know what I truly look like. I’m already other enough from them that I don’t need to give them more of a reason not to trust me.

“Well, I still want the house ready for them when they arrive,” I say, forcing neutrality into my voice. “You said the storms are over for this season, and we only have thirty more days until the first batch of humans arrives. Simone and Rallan will be here soon whether or not they choose to live here with me. Worst case, I move out and leave the house to them.”

“You would do this?” Ralleth asks me, moving from side to side as though having to ask the question at all makes him uncomfortable.

“Believe what you want about me. I do truly want whatever Simone wants. If she still allows me in her life, wonderful, but I won’t force myself where I’m not wanted.”

“I do not think little of you,” Ralleth says, his lips pulling back as he bares his teeth at

me. “I would have thought after all of this time you would begin realizing that I am your friend. I do not wish to see your soul empty as mine would be if my creature did not choose to spend her life with me. I do not wish that for you. I do not wish it for my brother. I cannot think of any way to ensure it does not happen. Even thinking of one of you being unhappy for the rest of your life is not something I am fond of. It makes me feel a helplessness I have not felt since the humans began to bless this tribe.”

I let his words hang in the air for a moment, the sincerity in them causing a different kind of emotion to swell up inside of me. I swallow down the lump in my throat and force my eyes up to meet his gaze. “If I have it my way, we’ll be blood.”

When the words leave my mouth, Ralleth beams at me. “I think I would like that very much.”

I take one last look around the house, trying to get all of my emotions under control. It’s bad enough when my anger is the one making me lose it, but for it to be an overwhelming acceptance. Yeah, I don’t know what that makes me feel inside, but it’s new and it’s strange. It’s something I want to think about when I’m alone. Not when I have Ralleth staring at me as though he’s waiting for me to say something just as profound as he has. It’s weird enough that I want to hug him.

“Vex,” Ralleth calls my name, forcing me to turn back around. I should at least face him if he wants to say something else that’s going to end up making me feel more at home in this tribe than I ever did with the other Hands. “I think you are already my blood. Maybe that is something different for your kind. For mine, I think it’s okay to be blood to someone who you think of as a good friend. Almaac is my blood, even if I am never related to him. I think I can be your blood as well if you would like that.”

“Dude,” I mutter the human phrase easily before walking over to Ralleth and throwing my arms around him. He doesn’t even flinch at the contact. He wraps an

arm around my shoulders and pats my back.

“I take it you are fine being my blood then?” he asks with a chuckle when I push away.

“Why do you have to be so nice?” I mutter, pushing past him and going back outside. “You’re supposed to be the leader of the tribe. Be more cold and callous or something. “

“What?” Ralleth shakes his head, taking a few steps to catch up with me. “I have Almaac to be that way for me. It is good to have many opinions when you are a leader, I think. It also helps me not to have to decide everything on my own. Truly, it was never even supposed to be me who was the leader, but sometimes things happen in unexpected ways. I doubt Rallan will want totake my spot when he is back in the tribe, either. He has told me he very much enjoys not having responsibility, which makes sense if he is still similar to how he was when we were younger. You can be the voice of callousness for your bond when he is back. Yes, I think that is a wonderful idea.”

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“Alright, no more talking about your brother or Simone until they’re back,” I say, stopping in front of another of the abandoned houses. “How many rooms and how much work will need to be done?”

I start writing information down on a piece of parchment I grab out of my pack. The main purpose of our going out today is to survey all of the houses in the tribe to decide which ones will be good fits for new mated pairs. Ralleth already has others working on a plan to help get the women who want mates mated, and now it’s up to us to get houses prepared.

Almaac is in charge of the hunting, and two other males I’ve only met twice who are mated to one of Simone’s friends are working on creating larger farms for more crop yields. So far, the plan is all coming together.

I focus on that and not the fact that there’s a greater than zero percent chance that Simone has moved on from our relationship and will be happy without me. I force it out of my mind because I can’t bear to deal with it just yet.

Another time, when I’m in a better headspace and not so much is relying on me keeping my cool. Then, I’ll throw a colossal fit and probably destroy a chunk of the forest far from the tribe. Yeah, that sounds healthy.

7

Simone

My nerves are starting to get the better of me now that we’re lining everyone up

outside the walls of the tribe and doing a head count. There are twenty-three demons making the journey with us. They're all excited to go to our tribe and help get it ready for the first batch of humans, who should be arriving in about thirty days.

Half of my worry is that we picked the wrong demons. That somehow, I managed to pick the worst possible ones who are all chomping at the bit to say screw decency and kidnap all the women. I worry about this despite the fact that their tribal leader, his mate, Rallan, and a handful of women all vouched for them. The other half of my worry comes from not knowing if Vex is going to be in the tribe when we return.

I've tried not to let it show that I know him—more than know him—when he's brought up in conversation between the tribal leader and Rallan. I think I've been doing a pretty good job because Rallan doesn't look at me like I might have a breakdown, and he doesn't make jokes about it. He knows all about what happened between Vex and me, and he rarely ever brings it up unless he's talking about how much he dislikes him.

It's not that I'm worried about seeing him. Well, I am. But more than that, I'm pissed off at how he's acted. In the entire time he's been on this planet, working with Ralleth to set up the tribe for the new humans, he hasn't come to see me once. He hasn't checked to make sure I'm okay after ditching me in the woods. He hasn't made sure I'm safe with Rallan. I thought he'd at least care a little bit about me since we were together for over two years.

I know I said some shitty things to him on Earth, but he told me he was never going to leave me and that we'd be together no matter what. Then, he wakes me up early one morning and tells me I'm being sent to the planet and I shouldn't wait for him. He tells me if I find happiness with someone else, I should take it.

Basically, I was dumped by my first alien boyfriend after being told his soul was bonded to mine. He dropped me off in the middle of the woods with no clothes, no

protection, and a fucking storm starting up.

“You look more upset than normal,” Rallan says as he steps up beside me, placing a hand on my shoulder. Normally, I’d shrug it off, but right now, it’s grounding me.

“I’m having second thoughts about the ones we picked,” I answer.

At some point, I’ll have to tell him not to kill Vex when we see him. As much as I like pretending I feel nothing for Rallan, I do. I really, really don’t want to, but it doesn’t seem like my heart’s listening to me when it comes to the giant alien. It doesn’t help that no matter how much I’ve tried to push him away, he always seems to dig his heels in deeper.

“Do not question your decisions because of nerves,” Rallan says.

He squeezes my shoulder and all but forces me to push it off me because he’s testing to see if I noticed it when he first put it on me. Of course, he would push me like that. He can’t just let me inch closer to him without wanting everything. It’s annoying how much I like it, even when I meet his smile with a scowl.

“They could all be terrible,” I say, motioning toward the demons gathering around us.

The twenty-three demons are all fidgeting around with their packs and watching Rallan and me to let them know what to do. The plan is to get as far as we can today and then stay in the various safe houses tonight. Everyone knows where the tribe is, so even if we get separated, they’ll know where to go. It’s a three-day journey if everything goes right. That means three nights of cramming all these demons into a few safe houses.

“You think you would choose terrible males?”

Rallan moves to stand in front of me, too close. So close that I take a step back because I know it's what he's trying to get me to do. No, that's not true. What he's trying to do is get me to admit that I like him being so close that I'd actually prefer him closer to me. He doesn't push as much as he used to. Now, he does small things that could be played off as not being him trying to pursue me if I didn't know him as well as I do.

"No, I know I did the best I could with what I was given," I respond, looking up at him and narrowing my eyes in what I hope is a threatening glare. The way his lip is curled upward proves to me that I'm definitely glaring at him, and his dumbass loves it.

"Then you should not worry," Rallan says, spinning around to face his brothers. "You trust your mate, and he wouldn't choose males that would hurt your sisters."

"Who says I trust you?" I ask, not missing how his body flinches when the words leave my mouth. I don't understand why. He's not facing me, so I can't see what his mood is. I doubt I've said anything that's actually hurt him, not when I've tried to hurt him with my words before. He only ever gets hard when I do.

"Right, well." Rallan clears his throat, an uncertain waver in his words that actually has me questioning if he's lying to me. I've never once heard that tone from him. "Are you all ready?" He directs the question towards his brothers.

They're all watching us, every single one of them. Most of them have intrigued looks on their faces, just like we all thought they would. Those who are willing to go to our tribe are willing or wanting to mate a human.

They're watching us so they can learn how to interact with human women. I'll have Rallan tell them that I shouldn't be used as the example of what the rest of the women will be like. I don't want them scared off before we've even made it to the tribe.

“We will head out then,” he says when a few brothers give him nods of their readiness. He sweeps an arm in front of him toward the trail that leads into the forest. “You all know the way. You have a map. I will walk behind with Simone. She is a small creature and takes slow steps. No reason for you all to be slowed by Simone and her weak humanness.”

Rallan lays it on thick, but do any of the others notice or care? Nope, because Rallan has said my name a couple of times in front of all of them, making it clear to all of them that he’s claiming me.

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“Don’t say my name,” I huff as I start following the other males. “You know I don’t like it.”

“I do not know this at all,” Rallan says, chuckling behind me. Whatever had him so nervous just a minute ago seems to have passed. He’s already back to being an annoying ass. “Every time I say your name, your eyes flare with desire, and your body leans toward me. Your soul wants me. Your body wants me. I am very confused about which part of you is uncertain of me.”

“Uh, the most important part.” I whip my head to the side and up so I can glare at him some more.

He’s looking at me from the corner of his eyes. He lifts one of his hands like he’s going to put it on my far shoulder and pull me close to him. Part of me wants him to, and that’s the thought that has me forgetting whatever point I was trying to make. Stupid heart flutters.

“The most important part?” Rallan uses the hand I thought he was going to touch me with to rub the back of his neck. He gives it a soft squeeze before dropping it down again. A few of his brothers have slowed their speed so they can listen to us argue, but most of them are eager to get to the tribe and aren’t being slow just to eavesdrop. “I assume you are talking about your mind, are you not?”

“My mind?” I ask, confused about what he’s talking about, and then try to recover as smoothly as I can. “Yes, my mind is the most important part of me. It’s what makes me a person.”

“It is what makes you an insufferable female, you mean.” Rallan smiles brighter as he calls me the nickname he knows I hate. I don’t need to tell him I secretly like it. Just like the demon himself, it wiggled underneath my skin and made me grow warm with its familiarity.

“I hate you,” I mumble under my breath. I’m not quiet enough because a few of the others whip their heads around, eyes wide, as they look from Rallan to me. Yeah, I’m a model of healthy communication and nontoxic relationship building.

“Ignore her,” Rallan says, shooing his brothers away with a flick of his wrists. “My mate is a cranky female. Do not let her bristly exterior make you fear the other humans. I have yet to meet another just like her.”

“One, I’m not cranky.” I put my hands on my hips and add as much brazenness as I can to my words.

Rallan stops walking when he sees me stop and turns his body to face me. This time, when he steps closer to me, I don’t back down. He wants to make me run. He wants to push and push and push. Well, what if I don’t step back? What if I let him take up all my personal space? What is he actually going to do?

“Two, there are plenty of women just like me. Hot, talented, and opinionated. They’re great traits.”

“Opinionated?” Rallan asks with a disbelieving huff. “This is what you prefer your attitude to be called?”

“Yeah, opinionated makes me sound like a classy bitch and not just a bitch.” I wiggle my brows, unable to stop the smile on my lips.

“Never a bitch,” Rallan murmurs as he bends lower until his face is close to mine. “I

do not think you could ever be a bitch. Especially not when you haven't denied being my mate once today."

He keeps his face close to me for long enough to watch as I piece his words together. My left eye starts to twitch before I can even go back over how many times he's called me mate and what my reaction was each time. I suck in a short breath and press my lips into a tight line.

Rallan throws his head back and laughs as he straightens to his full height. He starts walking again, even as I reel from his observation. When he stiffened earlier, he was expecting me to tell him not to call me mate, and I hadn't even thought about it. And just now, when he said it again, I made a point to be difficult about what he said but not about calling me mate. I can't even deny it either. The smug asshole is walking away with a saunter he doesn't deserve, and it has me wanting to jump him.

"I— That— Urg—"

I don't manage to come up with anything remotely intelligent sounding as I run over to him. My face is burning, but I refuse to let him affect me more than he already has.

Whatever, so I didn't correct him for calling me mate. I can still push him away in other ways. I can keep a distance between us.

Sure, I've now conceded to allowing him to hold me when I go to sleep, but that's because he rubs my head so nicely. I can't help but fall asleep in his bed. And yeah, sometimes I catch myself leaning into his touches without noticing and then have to remind myself not to. And maybe, just maybe, I like it when he calls me mate, and it fills me with a warmth I haven't felt since Vex dumped me. Not that I've been trying to feel that warmth because I've very actively been trying to avoid it.

"Do not be upset," Rallan says. This time, he doesn't hesitate to throw his arm over

my shoulders and pull me close to his side.

I should push him off. I should tell him I don't like how I react to him. I should, I should, I should. But I'm tired of denying myself.

"I will give you many more opportunities to tell me not to call you mate. Starting right now, I think. Yes, my mate, Simone, is a prickly female, but she is also filled with love and kindness that she shows to everyone who is not her strong, powerful mate."

"Shut up," I whine against his side as I turn my head against his tunic.

His grip tightens on my shoulder, and I swear I can hear him mumble something about being blessed before his jovial voice finally concedes. "You are right. There is much walking to do. It would be wrong to waste all of my talking now when we are just beginning."

I let him keep me close, or rather, I keep myself plastered to his side and tell myself that it's because of how tight he's holding me. Silence isn't something Rallan does well with, so of course, he lasts all five minutes before he calls some of the other demons to walk with us so he can talk with them. I don't mind because I just get to listen, and he's done with poking me.

I don't extricate myself from his hold. Anytime Rallan seems like he's going to move his arm, I might tense, but I don't tell him not to move, so it's fine. This is all fine.

"When you grow tired, let me know so I can carry you." Rallan lowers his head as close as he can to me without removing his hold on me. He says the words so quietly that the others don't hear, and I appreciate that because I don't need them to know that there will come a time when I'm too exhausted to keep going. My options will be to end the day early and take twice the amount of time to get to the tribe or let Rallan

carry me.

I turn my face up to him and give him a small nod. The look in his eyes is one I haven't seen before, or maybe he keeps it locked away from me when I'm not the most complacent. It's a look of adoration and vulnerability that tells me if I were to reject him right now, it would cause actual wounds.

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An insult is on the tip of my tongue, and a forceful push of his arm flashes in my mind. I don't do either of those things. What I do is so much worse. I smile up at him. A soft, simpering smile that all but tells him he's grown on me. Yeah, sure, everything's fine.

8

Rallan

"Get off the bed," I grumble as I walk over to where three of my brothers have found fit to make themselves comfortable.

Honestly, I cannot blame them. It has been a long push to get to the tribe today. We thought we might make it early, but there is still too far to go before darkness is upon us. I was hoping that my brothers would all have made it and it would only be Simone and me in the safe house. Unfortunately, it was not meant to be.

"Sorry," Thalm says. He is the first to stand, allowing the others to shimmy off the bed behind him. "We did not know the female was joining us."

"Do not call her that," I snap a bit more harshly than I mean to. Again, it has been a long day.

Unlike my brothers, who must carry their luggage and supplies, I must do that and also carry Simone when her legs begin to ache and her feet begin to blister. I always know she is well and truly exhausted when she asks for me to carry her because she does not show weakness to anyone, least of all me.

“Sorry.” I turn toward Thalm and hope he hears my sincerity in the word. “I am tired, and it is making me foul.”

“Rest,” he says with a pat on my back. “You will feel much better in the morning. Your mate’s tribe is not much further.”

I do not correct him in saying Simone is not yet my mate. Firstly, because she is in all ways except physically. Secondly, she is asleep in my arms, so she is unable to huff and puff about it. So, I grunt in acknowledgment of what he has said and place Simone on the bed.

I scoot her as close to the wall as I can before turning back to my supplies. I rummage around for bandages, salve, and some sort of seed oil that Simone told me is good for her hair if it’s diluted in water. She often mentions needing a spray bottle, but I do not know what that is.

The three males, who were too slow to reach the tribe tonight, are already chatting amongst themselves on the pallets they have now made on the floor. None of them complain, none of them bicker. They are all more than happy because soon they will be in a tribe where they can be useful males who have the chance to woo the humans.

They watch me as I set out supplies and begin to clean the wounds on Simone’s feet. I hate that she allows herself to be injured before asking for help. I hate that if I suggest she needs help, she lashes out. Most of all, I hate that it seems as though I cannot take care of my mate when all of my brothers can see how her already bandaged feet need even more care.

No one speaks to me as I tend to her. The first night, a few of them asked questions of me, but when it was clear all the responses they would get from me were grunts and nods, they stopped. Normally, I am a cheery male, and I will be once we are back in the tribe. For now, I am irritable and a little grouchy. Who would not be when their

mate is hurt and continues to inflict hurt upon herself instead of accepting aid?

When I finish cleaning her feet, I apply the salve. Then, I wrap her feet tightly in fresh bandages and crawl close to her head so I can begin work on her hair.

I set out a small bowl of water that I mix with a small amount of oil she likes. I dip my fingers in, flick the excess off, and begin to apply the mixture to her hair.

“What are you doing?” Thalm asks me, peeking his head over the side of the bed. He has been in the safe houses with me every night, so he has seen me do this three times now. I do not know why tonight is the night he decides to ask his questions.

“Her hair is dry. She says it needs tending, but she is too exhausted to tend it herself,” I answer. I’m as surprised as my brothers when I say more than a single grunt.

“She does not know you do this for her every night. I have seen how she responds when she wakes up close to you in the mornings. It does not seem like a mate who knows how much care you give her. Should we tell her? Maybe this will make her happier to wake in your arms?”

“She knows all I do for her,” I murmur more to myself than to him. “I know she does because she would not lash out so much in the mornings if she did not.”

“Strange,” Thalm says. He stares at me for a moment longer, but I turn back to Simone when he doesn’t say anything else.

I continue working the mixture into the ends of her hair and work it up the length of her locs. When I get to her scalp, I run my claws against her skin until the bumps on her arms appear even in her sleep.

“So her soul has called to yours?” Thalm asks, startling me because I did not know he

was still watching me take care of my mate.

“It has,” I say, not turning to face him because I would like to finish soon so I can hold Simone through the night.

“And does yours call to her?”

I let my lips pull up in a smile even though I feel too tired for the motion. “It does, and she hates that it does.”

“Strange,” Thalm says again, and this time, it’s the last thing he says to me.

I finish with Simone’s hair, put away all the supplies, and then curl my body tightly around hers. In her sleep, she molds herself against me, and soon, we are both drifting.

“If you try to touch me one more fucking time, I’m going to cut your hand off,” Simone snaps at me as she swats my arm off her shoulders.

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I may have attempted to wrap my arms around her a few times today. Maybe more than a few. I lose count considering she has had my cock aching for her since she first glared at me and told me not to do any of my wooing today. I have never been so certain of a challenge in my life. If she did not want my pursuit she would not offer me such fun games.

“I’m serious,” she huffs and holds out her hand to push me away. I’m too far, and her hand swats at the air. She stares at it for a long moment as though the air itself has done something wrong and then throws an accusatory glare up at me.

“Would you like me to step closer so you may push me away?” I don’t expect a response, so I am not surprised when she makes a groaning sound much too loud and much too whiny to be anything other than adorable. She stomps past me to the open doors of the great hall.

All of the other brothers have gathered in the dining hall. Many of my brother’s tribe are curious about the newest males to join their tribe. Most made it last night so there is just a handful of us who are now joining them. I was told by Almaac when I first arrived that the newest males were allowed to sleep in the great hall for the first night since they arrived so late, but no one was to speak to them until they were given a moment to rest and take in their new home.

“Do not touch me. Do not make wooing eyes at me. And do not call me your mate,” Simone says as we enter the great hall.

Some of my brother’s tribe are standing along the walls, wary and unsure of the new males joining their tribe. Others are already mingling with my brothers in an attempt

to get to know them. I know the males we have chosen will be good males to the human females. I hope they are good brothers as well. It would be unfortunate if they did not get along.

“Why am I doing all of this pretending?” I ask. I do as she says, though. I make sure to keep my hands down by my sides, my eyes are straight ahead, and the word mate has not left my lips at all. “Your tribe knows you are my—“ I stop myself before I fail at her requests so soon. “They know you are mine, and so do my brothers. Why pretend?”

I get my answer in the way Simone’s eyes harden into icy dark pits, how her jaw flexes, and how her nose crinkles at the bridge like she wants to bare her teeth. This is not the fury I receive from her. No, the fury I get, I am now realizing, is only a fraction of her potential.

I follow her gaze to a peculiar-looking creature sitting next to Ralleth. A creature with glowing white eyes that seem to be staring at me with the same anger that Simone is glaring at him. I am not a stupid male. I know who this male is as soon as I see how Simone reacts to his presence.

As much as Simone and I bicker and fight, we also have conversations about our lives. So I know who Vex is before he has a chance to be introduced to me. I know who he is and what he did to my mate. It is clear almost immediately that none of the others know. Ralleth would not have Vex sitting next to him as though they are friends if he knew how my Simone was treated by the male.

“Rallan and Rallan’s mate,” Ralleth stands as I near where he is sitting with his mate. His creature stands as well, her eyes moving between all of us as though she’s trying to gauge what’s about to happen.

Simone doesn’t correct Ralleth for calling her my mate, but I think it is because she is

too busy killing Vex with her thoughts to have noticed. He notices, though, and the glowing in his eyes becomes brighter. Simone told me of this as well, so I am not concerned when I see how different he is from her and me.

“Ralleth, Ralleth’s creature, Vexarionaxnoryndrik,” I say the male’s name as if to show him that, yes, I know who he is, and I do not feel threatened by him. It also makes it clear his name has been shared enough between Simone and me that I can say it easily. He has a claim on the other half of Simone’s soul, but even that I am not worried about. I am not threatened because he does not deserve that claim.

“Rallan, Simone,” Vex doesn’t seem shocked to hear me use his name and doesn’t even hesitate to use Simone’s.

“Don’t say my name,” Simone snaps. Her words are harsh and dry as they crack through the air. Heads turn in our direction, at least the few who were not already watching because of how Vex is glowing from his eyes.

“Don’t say your name?” Vex shakes his head, fingers going to his temple as he presses against his face. When he stops, his eyes stop glowing and now resemble a pale version of Simone’s. “Are you serious right now?”

My teeth grind against one another as I listen to how he interacts with Simone. Does he enjoy her bristled edges as I do? Does he offer her banter and jokes in the same way as me? The idea of it has my stomach rolling because I do not wish to be anything like this male who has hurt my Simone.

“I’m not doing this right now,” Simone says as she takes a seat across from where Ralleth has sat with his mate in his lap.

I do not think Simone will allow me to pull her into my lap, so I sit in the chair next to her and purposefully throw my arm over the back of her chair. I do not touch her,

and I have yet to look at her for more than a moment, so I am still following her rules for this conversation.

“Please, just give me a chance to explain.” Vex begins to reach for her hand, which is placed on the table.

This causes me to say some things I maybe should not say. “She has told you she does not wish to discuss it now. Are you to discard her wishes as easily as you discarded her?”

There is no sound, no reaction, for a brief pause, and then everyone moves at once.

“Brother,” Ralleth says to me.

Simone turns to look at me with a mixture of fury, and what I am almost positive is appreciation.

Olivia shifts in Ralleth’s lap and he discreetly moves her to the other side of him until she is standing and stepping away from what is happening. Ralleth whispers something to her.

Vex is standing from the table. His chair is forced back so hard that it hurtles across the room until it crashes against the far wall.

“I did not discard her!” Vex shouts loud enough that brothers outside the walls can probably hear it.

I stay seated, my hand falling closer to Simone’s shoulder. I want to reach out and stroke her skin to soothe any worries she might have. I know it would soothe mine immensely. I do not only because she has explicitly asked it of me. I cannot discard her words when calling out another male for doing just that.

I do relish being able to keep my voice calm when Vex very obviously cannot. The sound of others leaving the dining hall barely registers in my mind when I feel like my mate needs to have someone held accountable for how she was treated.

“What would you call it?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. My voice is level and even, but it is still filled with as much venom as I can muster.

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Vex opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off because I am not done.

“What do you call it when you leave a defenseless creature, naked and alone, in the middle of the trees? What do you call it when she is hurt from her fall, blind due to her journey, and far, far from anyone who can help her? What do you call it when the woman your soul has called to is crying and curled up at the base of a tree, waiting for an animal of the night to kill her because she cannot move? Her body is exhausted from trying to find help, and her feet are bleeding. You think you did not discard her? Fine, you did worse. You left her to die. And when she did not, you did not even have the decency to find her and explain yourself.”

My eyes turn red at some point while I am doing my best not to hiss at Vex. I try to return them to their normal color. I am more than angry enough on Simone’s behalf, but I know that showing that much emotion right now will only aggravate the situation even more.

I want Vex to answer for what he has done to Simone. I want to know what he possibly thinks is redeemable about him. Not because I want to prove that he is not. I want him to be redeemable. This is the male that my mate shares part of her soul with. More than anything, I would wish for him not to be the dishonorable male he seems to be.

“What’s he talking about?” Vex asks, his attention turning to Simone. His hands are flexed at his sides, the white returning to the edges of his eyes. “Simone, what’s he talking about?”

I bite my teeth down hard so I do not answer for Simone. She has already told the

other male not to say her name, and now he wants her to relive one of the worst moments of her life. I am sure she can handle it on her own, just as she can handle everything on her own. It is why I keep myself in check and do not step in unless she looks like she is about to break. Of course, when I look down at her, she is staring at Vex with a blank stare as though she doesn't know him from any other male she has never given a second glance.

"It's exactly what he's said," Simone says. Her voice is devoid of emotion, something I am not used to, considering she is a woman of many, many emotions—usually multiple at once in vast quantities.

"No." Vex's face falls into a look of pure horror. I am happy to see this because it means he might not have known the harsh reality of his actions. The way he stumbles backward while shaking his head and muttering "no, no, no" does not inspire much confidence in his attempt to make up for how Simone was treated, though.

"I didn't know," Vex says as he looks back at Simone. Heartbreak fills his face, and his fingers press against the skin of his temples as though he is trying to hold it in place. "You have to believe me. I didn't know."

Simone shakes her head, not wanting to hear what he has to say. Honestly, I do not know how much I care for it either right now when emotions are all so high. Vex seems to catch on to Simone's mood because he stands up straighter and gives her a stiff nod.

"I'd like to explain myself if you ever find it in you to offer me that." He takes a deep breath and looks at me. "I'm glad she's found you. She deserves to have a mate that makes her happy."

"I had a mate that made me happy," Simone snaps. Her voice is like the light from the storms coming down and striking both Vex and me. It hurts him to know she is

talking about their mating as though it is over, and it makes me hurt because she is about to say something that will hurt me more than I wish for it to. It will not be a lie, though. “I don’t have a mate anymore. I don’t know if I ever want one again.”

“Simone,” Vex steps closer to the edge of the table, his fingers twitching like he wants to reach out for her.

“Don’t.” She stops him from saying anything else. She turns her eyes up to me, and this is the first time I look at her in a way she does not want. Not on purpose, in fact it is very much unwanted. I cannot help how my face softens when she looks at me or how her beauty makes my eyes brighten. “Can you stay and talk with them about your brothers? I think I want to go talk with my friends.”

“Of course.” I give her a soft smile and help her move her chair so she can leave. “You deserve much time to destress.”

Simone cocks one of her brows at me as though she thinks I will make a joke at a time like this. She is not wrong. It is something I do wish to do, but the opportunity has not presented itself, and I am not one to force humor.

“Do you have a home here?” Simone asks me.

It is Ralleth who answers. “We have cleared a home for him. I am sure your sisters will know which one. You may ask my Olivia if you need help.”

“Thank you,” Simone says as she gives us all one last look. Her jaw ticks when her eyes land on Vex, but when she looks up at me, I see the tension ease slightly. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

“Of course.” I smile at her. “Who else is to rub your scalp? You?” I snort at the thought. She is spoiled now because of my scalp-scratching abilities. I will keep her

spoiled because it means I get to hold her when she is sleepy.

None of us say anything until Simone has left the great hall. Even then, I watch the doors with my hands on my hips for long moments while I try to figure out how to tell Vex that I very much would like to do what we were brought here to do before we get more into his mating with Simone. Thankfully, by the time I sit down, he is back in a chair, his face masked in neutrality.

“I’m determined to bring the other humans here,” Vex says to me, his human eyes looking dead inside. “Whatever your problems are with me when it comes to Simone, I promise you I can be objective when it comes to keeping the other women safe.”

I cross my arms over my chest and lean against my chair. I tilt my head in Ralleth’s direction. I trust my younger brother. He has run this tribe to be as prosperous as it could be since it has been cut off from many of the other tribes for many years. If my brother trusts this male, who I hope I can one day trust as well, then I will let myself trust him in this.

“Vex has been a good friend to me these days since he has been here.” Ralleth chooses his words as well as he knows how. Which is not very well at all. I love my brother, and I know he is one of the most honorable males ever to live. He is quick to speak sometimes, though. “He will help us, and he will be in this tribe as long as he wishes to be. Whatever issues you have with a shared female are between the two of you when we are not discussing the tribe and how to help it grow. Understood?”

“Understood,” Vex and I say at the same time.

I sit back in my chair and let Ralleth and Vex explain to me what they have been working on while I was busy in my tribe. I then tell them about the males Simone and I chose to bring. We divide out the work, we decide who will live where, and we decide who will be in charge of different aspects of growing our tribe.

The entire time, I am trying to decide how much I am willing to believe Vex when he says he did not know what happened to Simone. I try to focus on how I feel about him deep in my soul.

By the time we finish talking, and he proves to be honest in being able to focus on only what needs to be done and to remain objective, I feel even more like he needs a chance to redeem himself. Now, I need to figure out if he deserves it or if Simone will even care if he tries.

9

Vex

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:26 am

Don't trash the house. Don't trash the house. Do not, under any circumstance, trash the house.

I repeat the mantra the entire time I'm walking back toward the house I was hoping to share with Simone—well, Simone and Rallan if he was willing. Surprise, surprise, neither one of them seems to be my biggest fan right now. Why would they be?

I could feel my power source dropping to death levels of low as Rallan told me what happened to Simone when she was brought to this planet. We knew the storms were causing issues with our technology. That's why I advocated for sending Simone and two others early. I was told multiple times by multiple different Hands in the transportation department that all three females sent were safe. I was told they were all taking to being in the tribe easily.

I felt like something was off. I could feel it in the way their minds tried to block something from me. I assumed it was something else that might've happened in their life, and to be honest I cared very little for anything in their lives. I didn't check the shared consciousness because I didn't want anyone to see me snooping around thoughts about Simone. I should've done that. I see that now, but even if I did, what was I to do?

No, I know what I would've done. I would have broken every single law that the collective mind has. I would've torn the universe in two to get to Simone, and when I did, I would've brought about the destruction of this planet. It would've been worth it to hold her in my arms, to be the one who protected her when she was scared and alone.

It wasn't me, though. I huff with irritation as I throw the door to my house open. I wasn't there for her. Even worse, I was the reason she was sent here in the first place.

I hate everything right now, and the anger sizzling underneath my human skin is itching for me to grab the nearest piece of furniture and slam it against the wall. Instead, I flex my hands at my sides and practice the meditative humming of my energy I haven't had to do since I was a child. Why couldn't I have been the one to protect her?

"This is a large house for just one male."

I spin around to find Rallan standing in the open doorway to my home. He's leaning against the frame with his arms crossed in front of his chest. I don't know why I'm flustered to be speaking with him, considering we just spoke for the last few hours. I was able to compartmentalize things. That's why.

Now I'm looking up at the male Simone found after I abandoned her on this planet. I should hate him, but I meant it when I said I was happy she found someone. She deserves happiness. I wish I were a part of that happiness, though.

"Did you not hear me because of the glowing?" Rallan tilts his head to the side, waving a hand in front of my face as though I'm catatonic. "Simone has told me much about you, but I do not know of any hearing impairments. That is something I will need to know."

"What?" I ask, my mind catching up with what's happening.

You wouldn't know that I'm a full-grown male from a species so much more advanced than even Simone's that it would take a multitude of years to explain it all to her in ways that she probably still wouldn't understand. I sound like an idiot, and I'm starting to think that I am one.

“Can you hear me?” Rallan asks, his lip ticking up in the corners. I’m almost positive this guy hates me, but I wouldn’t know it from the look on his face or the way I’m pretty sure he’s messing with me.

“Yes,” I answer with a bit more bite than he deserves. He gives me an unimpressed raise of his brows and it makes me even more flustered. “What do you want?”

“Well, I came here to speak with you. Then I saw that you are housed in a large home, and so now I am more curious about why this is the home you chose for yourself.”

I narrow my eyes at him, unsure if he’s genuinely curious or if he knows that I got it for the three of us. Is he waiting for me to admit it to rub it in my face that Simone wants nothing to do with me? That must be it. So, instead of answering him, I turn on my heels and make my way to the back of the house to grab some of my things.

“I’ll be leaving, don’t worry,” I call behind me. I’m not surprised that Rallan has invited himself in and is following me the short distance to my room.

“So, is this not your home?”

Rallan peeks his head into one of the other bedrooms that I have outfitted with a plush bed and a dresser filled with as many shirts and shorts as I could manage to create for Simone while planning everything with Ralleth during the storms. There are also a few bonnets tied up on a hook in the wardrobe made out of the closest thing to silk I could get on this planet. I had to bribe the other Hand here to get for me since I don’t have the ability to transport myself anywhere until I’m given control of this planet’s future.

“It’s not my home anymore,” I say, my words biting as I try to force down the swell of anger surging inside of me.

“You cleaned this home and made it livable, yes?”

This time, he’s right behind me. Way too close to me. His species is weirdly close to each other. Not just with their bodies but with their emotions and relationships. It’s been good for the humans because they’re also an emotional species. It’s still something I’m getting used to. I take a step back from Rallan so I can glare up at him.

“Of course I did.”

I push past him and make my way back to the front of the house so I can leave with at least some shreds of dignity. The meager little scraps will be what I use to lick my wounds in the great hall tonight while I try to figure out somewhere else for me to live.

I can probably convince Kal and Brirk to let me bunk with them until I find somewhere else. I don’t even need much, considering I don’t need to sleep. I just need somewhere that isn’t right here in the space that’s soon to be occupied by Simone and Rallan.

“And you are now leaving for what purpose?” Rallan keeps a steady pace behind me. And I’m just about to put my hand on the door when I can’t take the questions he’s not asking but slightly alluding to.

“I made this house for all of us to share!” I shout the words so loud that I know anyone outside can hear. I should be embarrassed, but I think those shreds of dignity are even smaller than I realized. “I thought, like an idiot, that when I saw Simone again, she’d understand why I sent her here, and she’d come back to me. I knew she found you, so I was going to find a way to be okay with you here, too. I rebuilt this house in my free time and hoped you two would like it. There, are you happy?”

Rallan stares at me with an odd expression on his face before his eyes narrow into

small slits. He leans closer toward me, his eyes tracing over what I'm sure is a very disfigured mask at this point since my emotions are all over the place. The human skin takes a lot of concentration to keep in place.

“How long were you mated to her?” Rallan asks, as though I didn't just yell at him. His voice is calm and even with a teasing quality.

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“Two years,” I say through clenched teeth, unsure why I’m not leaving the house like I told myself I was going to do.

The longer Rallan stares at me, his eyes softening, I find my troubles easing. He hasn’t started mocking me yet. He hasn’t thrown his head back and laughed at me for thinking Simone might even look at me again. He doesn’t do anything I was scared he’d do.

“We should sit,” Rallan says, turning without giving me a chance to tell him whether or not I want to sit and talk with him.

Do I follow him over to the living area and take a seat on the couch when he takes a plush chair near the fireplace? Yes. Yes, I do. I also watch Rallan’s reactions to the house. I didn’t do any decorating because I wasn’t sure what he’d enjoy for decorations. I did make sure the couch and chairs were all comfortable, and even reworked some of the furniture until it fit what I knew Simone would like. She told me once that she wished she could live in a giant marshmallow because it would be so comfy. I knew she was joking, but I’ve also found that she enjoys things that are soft and comforting.

“This is a nice home,” Rallan says after long minutes of just looking around. “How near is it to the brother who is the blacksmith?”

“I was told the male who does that is a little over a novice, so the job is yours if you want,” I say.

I try not to let embarrassment stop me from saying what I need to say. I planned all of

this out in meticulous detail because I wanted it to all be perfect. The one thing I didn't take into account was that Simone had almost died and that they both blamed me for it. Though, Rallan isn't treating me like someone he thinks tried to kill his mate.

"Ralleth told me about your occupation. I wanted to make sure everything was ready for you and Simone when you got here. So, there's an open workshop a few houses down. I went ahead and moved all of Kal's old blacksmithing stuff and figured if you weren't interested, we could always move it back to his workshop."

Rallan's eyebrows rise just like they did earlier, and this time, I realize it's actual astonishment. "You did all of this." He motions around the house. "And you prepared a workshop for me to work in?"

I grind my teeth against one another, my hand fisting in my lap. "I wanted to make this work."

Rallan leans forward, elbows on his thighs. "What did you want to make work?"

The humor in his voice is gone, the amusement in his eyes has vanished, and an eerie seriousness has taken over. I don't realize how comforting Rallan's carefree attitude is to counteract how high strung I am until it's gone.

"She loves you," I say, keeping the words low. I hate how they curdle my stomach because I know what her love means for her relationship with me.

"She does." Rallan doesn't deny the statement. Why would he? He can read Simone as easily as me, maybe even better, if he's already learned how to deal with her when she's being her difficult and amazing self.

"And I love her." I straighten in my seat, rolling my shoulders back to sit up

straighter. “I’ll do anything for her. She wants you and me, great. She wants just you. I’ll learn to deal. I want her happy, and I want her safe. Think as little of me as you want for how she arrived here, but trust that I didn’t know about it. If I had—“

I don’t need to explain what would’ve happened because the human skin flickers from existence as my energy becomes too much to control. Tendrils of me spread through the house, energy crackling and sizzling, looking for something to break. I rein it all in as fast as I can, not wanting to scare Rallan. I don’t need him going to the others and telling them that I’m dangerous. It could throw a wrench in this whole thing.

When I seal my energy back up tight and plaster the human skin firmly in place, I turn my gaze back to Rallan. His eyes are wide, and his smile is even wider.

“Oh, I think I would have liked to have known what you would have done for her if you had known,” Rallan says, a hint of awe in his voice. He shakes his head and then stands from his chair. He walks over to me, places a hand on my shoulder, and stares down at me with that same carefree look he was wearing when he came into the great hall with Simone. “You wish to woo her again?”

“Do you think I have a chance?” The question is meant more as a deflection, but it sounds desperate for an affirmation.

“Do you know how many times I had to hear, ‘Oh, he is not so bad’?” Rallan rolls his eyes, the hand on my shoulder squeezing softly and then falling to his side. “She has probably already forgiven you, but we both know she is not anywhere near close enough to admitting it to anyone.”

Rallan takes a step passed me, toward the front door before his words really settle over me. It hits me like a lightning bolt, and I’m scrambling out of my chair and following him to the door. He looks over his shoulder, smirking slightly as though to

say that now I'm the one following him when he was just following me. Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'll care once I get some of that dignity I lost a long time ago back.

"She's forgiven me?" I ask. The feeling in my chest is all-consuming, threatening to engulf me in either despair or pure joy, depending on what Rallan says to me next.

"Of course she has." He gives me an incredulous look. "Our mate is prickly, though." He rubs his chin, thinking about what to say next, and I'm just standing here hanging on his every word. "You will need to woo her, and with everything you have. It will take much." He looks down at me, one brow cocked higher than the other. "Do you think you can do that?"

"I was mated to her for two years," I say defensively. "I can woo her just fine."

"Good," Rallan says. He taps the doorframe twice before stepping out. "You will live with us then. It will move faster that way."

I grit my teeth together to keep myself from blubbering my thanks to him. So much for me thinking I'm above all of the emotions of this species. I live here during one storm season, and I'm already about to cry because this male is willing to help me get our shared mate to forgive me and give me another chance.

"If she kills me, it'll be your fault," I warn him, knowing Simone might actually have an aneurysm when she realizes that not only does everyone expect her to share a house with Rallan but also with me.

"She has yet to kill me, and I have tried to get her to try for many, many days," Rallan says, laughing over his shoulder as he walks toward the workshop with his blacksmithing supplies. "She is with her sisters now, but she will be at the house at some point tonight. Figure out if you want her to know tonight or in the morning that she is living with two males she pretends to hate, okay?"

Rallan doesn't turn around to see me nod, and I don't answer loud enough for him to hear. He assumes I'll do what he says. He assumes he's my only chance at fixing whatever I broke with Simone. He's right on both accounts.

At this point, he could tell me to dance naked around the great hall, and I'd do it. I thought he hated me, but I'm pretty sure he's my only hope of making the woman I love fall back in love with me.

10

Simone

The house that Deja shows me after I catch up with her and Nia for most of the day is amazing. I don't know why anyone thought I needed this much space, but the whole house is furnished, and I'm in love with it.

I decide my room is the one with the blankets and sheets that are dyed a soft red. Most fabrics in this tribe are a beige color of the fiber used to make all of the clothing and material. There are dyes to color the fabrics, but there's not much in this tribe since coloring their clothing isn't as important as just surviving.

In Rallan's tribe, they wore all sorts of colors, and I found myself liking the navy colors that contrasted with the red of his scales. I never told him, but his wardrobe is pretty much all navy now, so he somehow figured it out.

"Am I here on time?" Rallan peeks his head into the room I have declared mine with his arms full of supplies.

He's not wearing a shirt, which is pretty standard for him. I try to ignore the way his navy shorts cling to his muscled legs, and if he were to turn around, I definitely wouldn't be checking out his ass. Nope.

"On time for what?" I ask, eyeing everything he's holding like he has arms full of weapons instead of bandages and ointments.

He's been taking care of my feet every night when I pass out from exhaustion. I'm sure that's what he wants to do now, too. But I'm awake right now, and it feels too intimate. Especially after what happened earlier, where he called Vex out for how he abandoned me on this planet. If I let him do this now, in my room when there's plenty of space for him to be elsewhere, I feel like it'll mean more than I want to admit it does.

"Pretend all you want, but you and I both know you are not falling asleep until I have tended to your hair. Your feet you can sleep through easily enough, but you need me to scratch your head before your body can find rest."

"You make me sound like a dog," I grumble under my breath, but I don't fight Rallan's request to sit on the foot of my bed. He sets out all of his supplies, and I realize he has more than just stuff to tend to my feet.

"This is for your hair," he says as he sets a large vial of what I'm assuming is oil on the bed. He's been using it on my hair since I started letting him play with my hair at night. I told him about it once when we were in his tribe, and the next thing I knew, he had enough for it to last him a good year or two. "I have more in storage in the kitchen. The female I bought it from told me it would hold in its container, but we would need to use it within the year once it is opened."

I open my mouth to ask him why he did that for me, but I already know and I don't need to be hurting both of us even more.

As much as I hate Vex, I still have feelings for him, and it isn't fair to any of us if I can't decide between the two. Not to mention, I don't know which one I'd choose if I did have to choose.

If I'd been asked when I first arrived, it would be Vex no questions asked. But now I know Rallan. I know how pure his heart is, how much he craves caring for me, and

how much he would do for me if I gave him the chance. It's impossible not to fall in love with him. So impossible that I know I failed at it weeks ago. I can still pretend, though. Because it's the only thing that keeps me from hurting all three of us.

"It is not often you look distressed around me," Rallan says, his hand grazing my calf lazily to get my attention back on him instead of the thoughts eating away at me. "I do not like how I see it more and more often now. I would prefer your anger if you are still feeling like pretending."

I narrow my eyes at him, and his mood immediately brightens. "Yes, just like that."

"You're impossible." I shake my head and lean back against the headboard.

Rallan's brows move up his forehead as I shift my legs closer to him, allowing him—practically begging him—to keep touching me. I know I'm playing a terrible game. His touches feel too good and I've been waking up every morning in his arms. It's so hard not to lean into him for comfort. I want it so badly. I don't know when his stupid charm started working on me, but it's been chipping away at me for so long that I barely have any defenses left.

"Let me tend to your feet first," he says, letting his thumb linger on my ankle before lifting one of my feet off the bed. "I doubt you will rest for a day so they can heal."

"There's too much to do," I answer.

He starts unwrapping the bandages from my feet. Thankfully, we didn't have long to travel to get to the tribe this morning, so my feet are doing way better than they were yesterday. A hiss rattles through Rallan's chest as his eyes flash red for a moment before he snaps them up to my face, and they return to black. I tilt my head to the side, waiting for him to chastise me like he obviously wants to do. Instead, he says something that my translator doesn't pick up before shaking his head and returning to

taking care of me.

“You know I can do this on my own, right?” I say, raising my hands behind my head and leaning back on them

“You could, but you would not,” Rallan says. There’s no admonishment in his voice. It’s just a statement. A statement that ruffles me more than it should.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap.

I want to yank my foot away from him and do the rest of it myself. He must have guessed I’d try because his fingers wrap a bit tighter on my ankle, and his other hand holds my other leg down as I try to kick him with it.

“Is the trick to getting you wild in bed to remind you how terrible you are at taking care of yourself?” Rallan teases as I let out a shriek that is so unflattering I expect him to flee. Of course, if I think I’ve done the thing that will finally get him to leave me alone, it only means he loves it more.

I don’t answer fast enough for Rallan, or maybe he’s tired of teasing and decides to act. The only thing I know is one moment, I’m sitting against my headboard with my foot in Rallan’s hand. The next, I’m lying on my back, Rallan’s body between my legs and his face close to mine.

“Imagine how much easier this would be if you admitted that you want me.”

“Rallan.” I push at his chest. Or maybe I’m pulling him closer. I can’t really tell. He’s too close, and my stupid heart wants him too much.

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“Say my name again.” Rallan doesn’t stop his tongue from lashing against my lips. No, he does it again when I don’t start freaking out. “You know I want you, Simone. Tell me you want me, and I will take care of you. I will be honored to do it.”

I open my mouth and lick my lips in an attempt to taste him on my tongue. His eyes watch all of my movements, and when I only open and close my mouth a few times, his lips quirk up at the corners.

“Next time, perhaps you will make me the most blessed male.” He sits back up before I register that he’s not about to take all of my clothes off.

I should be grateful for him not pushing when I’m so close to breaking and letting him sleep with me. Instead, I’m livid. Not at him. Even though he’s the one who’ll be getting all of my anger. No, I’m pissed at myself for letting my stupid heart fall for Rallan, for still clinging to Vex, and most of all, for not listening to me when I told it we were done falling for aliens.

“You may be mad at me when I am done with your feet,” Rallan says, almost like he can read my mind.

“I can do it myself,” I snarl, wrenching my foot free of his hold, and this time he allows it. His teeth grind against one another before he puts the smile back on his lips and beams at me. “What could be amusing about this?”

“I have all of the supplies,” Rallan says, his hands moving to the bandages and salve that he brought with him when he came to my room. He pulls it all closer to him and keeps his eyes on me as mine flare with outrage.

He's right that he has all the supplies, but what he doesn't have that I do is the stomach to watch me hurt myself instead of admitting defeat. I throw my legs off the side of the bed and wince as my blistered and cut feet hit the rough stone floor. Rallan hisses as a gasp leaves my lips, but it doesn't stop me from standing and starting to walk toward the door.

"What are you doing?" Rallan hisses from the bed. He grabs my wrist as I try to pass him. He doesn't pull me back toward him, doesn't even tighten his loose grip on me.

As upset as he is about my feet, he's still going to let me do whatever it is I want to do. Just like he has every single day when he's let me walk my feet until they're bloody and I'm on the verge of exhaustion before I let him carry me. I take in a shaky breath, not wanting to pull away from him, not wanting to admit that I want him to take care of me.

"Will you help me without all the jokes?" I ask, so quietly I don't know if he's heard me until he's plucking me off my feet to cradle me before laying me back in bed.

"No more jokes," Rallan says, his smile softening to one that shows me there's no more teasing that's going to happen. "I will always take care of you, Simone."

I close my eyes and swallow hard. "No more saying my name either."

"For tonight," Rallan murmurs, his fingers working against my feet as he applies the salve and wraps them in new bandages. "I plan on returning to wooing you as soon as I can in the morning."

I'm tired and lonely, and I want more than anything to admit to Rallan that I want him. I just need to figure out all of my options. I need to know what to do about Vex before I do anything at all with Rallan.

I tell myself it's the exhaustion—mentally, emotionally, and physically—that has me needing Rallan even more. It's all of that exhaustion that has me sighing and moaning when he crawls into bed next to me and begins to care for my hair.

He's barely started on my hair before I undo the ties on my shorts and shimmy them down my body. I leave the tunic on because I've grown used to wearing it to bed. Rallan hisses when I throw the shorts onto the floor but doesn't make any remarks about it. It's been days since I've been able to fall asleep comfortably since I've been dressed in tight shorts every night that we've been travelling.

"I need to grab something really quick," Rallan says as he lays my locs back down next to my head. I mumble something incoherent since I'm so close to falling asleep. I hear him walk over to the wardrobe, open it, and grab something before closing it again. Then he's crawling under my blankets. I don't miss how I can feel even more of his cool scales than I should.

"If you do not have to wear pants, I should not have to either," Rallan whispers in my ear.

My eyes flash open, but the look of anger I want to give him is dulled in its intensity when my lids are only hooded, and lust is simmering under my skin. Rallan must know because he takes mercy on me.

He holds up a silky-looking material and tells me what it is. "This is for your hair, I believe."

This time, my eyes fully open, and I sit up in bed, a smile splitting my lips. "Is this a bonnet?" I ask, taking the silky material from him and looking it over. It definitely is a bonnet, and I'm quick about securing my hair and tightening it around my head. I turn back to Rallan when it's secure and throw my arms around his neck.

“Thank you.” I hold him close to me, my face buried in his neck as I thank him a few more times.

Rallan groans deep in his chest, his arms wrapping around me and holding me just as tight with one of his hands cupping the back of my head so I keep myself buried against him. Then, as though it pains him, he pulls away from me and lays us both down so we are facing one another in bed.

“I would love to take credit for how happy you are now, but this was not a gift from me.”

My heart stops for a second. I’m pretty sure not a single pump of blood happens. Then, it beats rapidly like I’m about to die.

“Vex?” His name is barely a sound as I say it, and I see the way it has Rallan’s nostrils flare.

“Yes, I am sure it was him. He is the one who built this house, and he is the one who made this room for you.” Rallan’s voice is softer than I expected since I’m pretty sure he hates Vex. The way he’s talking about him now, it doesn’t sound like he hates him. In fact, it kind of sounds like he appreciates that we’re currently sleeping in a house that my ex prepared for us. “He cares for you very much.”

My teeth clamp down hard because I don’t know how to take Rallan’s words. Rallan hates Vex. He’s made it clear everytime I’ve ever talked about Vex. He tells me that I can do better, that Vex doesn’t deserve me, and that I shouldn’t ever think about him again.

Now, after talking with him for a few hours, he’s not mad at him anymore. No, I don’t believe it. This must be another joke, and I don’t know what Rallan thinks will be funny about it. I’m not going to ask him so he can laugh at me and my emotions.

“I’m going to sleep.”

I turn over so I’m facing away from Rallan. I hope it’ll make him realize he’s unwanted. Instead, he shimmies closer to me until he’s the big spoon. His arm snakes around my waist, and he pulls me flush against him. I can feel that he’s hard against my back, but he doesn’t make any remarks about it or try to do more with it than just hold me.

“We will speak in the morning,” Rallan says.

I don’t fight him on it. I don’t tell him to find a different bed, and I definitely don’t tell him to stop holding me. He’s been holding me for weeks now, and I can keep telling myself it’s just because I fall asleep while he’s doing my hair. But we both know it’s because I like how it feels to be in his arms.

“Hey, Rallan?” I ask as sleep starts to soften my muscles and expand my inhibitions.

“Hm?” The sound vibrates down my back from where his chest is pressed against me.

“If Vex got the house ready for us, where’s he staying?”

I let my head loll back a bit more until I’m right against him and can feel his chin resting on the top of my bonnet. He doesn’t answer for long moments, and when he finally does, I don’t know if it’s the beginning of my dreams or if he’s actually answering. I only know that I don’t really hear anything as I let sleep take me away.

“I am thinking we start with the houses closest to the great hall. Not all males will

want to live that close, but it will be safer for the newer females.” Rallan’s voice is what wakes me in the morning, but I don’t know who he’s talking to. Not that I care very much since I can feel his arm wrapped around my body.

During the night I must have managed to snuggle between Rallan’s legs with my head resting on his upper abdomen. I smack my lips and nuzzle closer to him. I can feel a huff of laughter come from him as he places a hand against my back and strokes me through my tunic.

“No, I understand that, but we need to get work done on Beren and Lyath’s farm as well,” Vex says, not sounding the least bit perturbed that I’m currently snuggled up with someone who isn’t him.

Wait.

My eyes shoot open, and I push away from Rallan so fast that I take the blanket with me as I scramble away from him.

“Come on, man,” Vex says as I all but fall out of bed, yanking the blanket with me to keep me fully covered.

“I didn’t know she was going to leave me naked in bed,” Rallan says with a laugh.

I shoot him a glare. He just places a pillow on his groin where his dick is out of its pocket. I turn my glare to Vex next, who has the decency to look embarrassed to be sitting on the foot of my bed, having a conversation in my bedroom while I’m fast asleep.

“What are you doing here?” I snap.

“Your mates were discussing our plans for the day before you woke up screaming

and crying and kicking,” Rallan chuckles again, and it takes everything in me to ignore his comment. I’m not taking the bait, no matter how good he is at dangling it in front of me.

“You live here too?” I ask Vex. He gives me a barely-there nod. “He knew?” I tilt my head in Rallan’s direction, and again, Vex nods. “Okay, I hate both of you. I’m going to find Deja and Nia. Don’t come looking for me. Don’t bother me.”

I march out of the room with my blankets, not even giving them another look.

“You are not wearing pants!” Rallan calls out when I’m close to the front door.

I put on my most angry face and return to the room to grab a fresh pair of shorts and a new tunic. I narrow my eyes at the men sitting on my bed. Vex looks guilty. Good. Rallan looks like he’s enjoying himself immensely. Not good.

“Have a wonderful day, Simone,” Rallan says with a smile way too big for how terrible of a morning this has started out. Then he kicks at Vex. “Say goodbye to our mate. You cannot woo her if you cannot even tell her to have a good day.”

My left eye twitches as I realize what’s happening. I’m being teamed up on. It’s made so much worse to know that my ally, or who I thought was my ally, is actually a traitor. “No one is wooing me.”

Rallan rolls his eyes. “I have successfully wooed you,” he says and then turns back to Vex. “Tell her to have a good day, maybe say her name, and then also mention how beautiful she is. She is the most beautiful female. I am sure you know this.”

I open my mouth to say something right as Vex does. We see each other and close our mouths. Then I start to speak about telling them that I hate them again, but Vex starts to tell me to have a good day. Overall, it’s awkward and unnatural, especially

when I remember how easy our relationship was before he dumped me. I turn from the two scheming jerks, not giving them a chance to attempt their wooing any longer.

“I’ll fix this,” Vex calls out right as I get to the front door. Somehow, this makes everything worse.

“That was not telling her to have a good day,” Rallan groans, and I hear his horns hit against the headboard. “How did you woo her the first time if you are this bad at it?”

I don’t hear Vex’s response because I’m walking out of the house and toward the great hall. The only thing I know is that I need to come up with a plan. The last time I let my heart be swept up by an alien, he dumped me, and I ended up thinking I was going to die naked and alone in the middle of the woods on an alien planet. I doubt things could get that bad again, but I’m not willing to take that chance.

I thought since they hated each other, I could rely on never having to choose between them. If they’re working together, though. Then my excuse of having to choose is moot, and now I have to face the fact that I don’t want to be with them because I’m scared.

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Nope. I don't want to think about that. I want to think about how I'm about to give them the coldest shoulder they'veever received, and I'm going to find Nia and Deja to keep me company while I do it.

11

Simone

"How are my favorite females doing this morning?" Rallan asks as he saunters into the house that Nia, Deja, and I are cleaning.

I shoot him a scathing look, but Nia and Deja both smile at him like he's not public enemy number one. No, they both 'ooh' and 'ahh' over his simple question, all because they know it's going to irritate me. Worst. Friends. Ever.

"This house is about ready for furniture, but we'll leave that up for the males to do," Deja says as she wipes her hands on her tunic.

I've been helping out with cleaning the repaired houses for the last couple of weeks. Deja helps me most days. When Nia can get away from her farm, she helps, too. This is the tenth home we've completely cleaned since the storms stopped.

The reason I'm out here so often asking for more work is that I can't stand being in the house with Rallan and Vex. Not withouthaving more and more thoughts that make me want to be with both of them. Deja and Nia help me out when they can because— fine, they're good friends. They also help me talk through my feelings for the two aliens.

If they had it their way, I'd tell Rallan and Vex I want them both, and it would solve all of my problems. It doesn't matter how many times I tell them that I'm fine with wanting two of them. It's the fact that two of them could leave me that has me not wanting to open up to either of them

"Oh good," Rallan says, stepping closer to me like I'm not telling him to fuck off with all my body language. "Then you will not mind if I take my mate for the rest of the day. Vex and I have many things to discuss with her."

"No, you—" I start to say, but I'm cut off when Nia takes the broom I'm using from my hands, and Deja all but shoves me towards Rallan.

"She can go now," Nia says.

"All yours. We can finish up here," Deja adds.

I scowl at both of them, whipping my head around so I can see their traitorous faces when I all but hiss at them. "Are you both serious?"

"You have been ignoring us for many days now," Rallan says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and tugging me to his side. I grind my teeth together and look at him like he disgusts me, which only has him glowing. "Come now, we all know your heart is softening to us even if you are still acting this way."

"She was talking about you earlier!" Nia shouts as Rallan walks us out of the house. I can feel blood boiling in my face, and I swear to myself that I'm going to kill my friends. More humans are coming, so I'll have new people to be friends with soon. I don't need Brutus and Judas as friends anymore.

"Are you going to tell me what you were speaking about, or should I return to your friends?" Rallan asks with a smile.

I take a deep breath, my nostrils flaring as I release it through my nose. “I would prefer if you dropped it.”

“There is no fun in that.” Rallan’s eyes flicker toward Nia and Deja, but then he nods to himself and turns back around. “But I am a good male to my mate. Even when she is being prickly.”

“Shut up,” I mumble, but my heart isn’t in it.

My heart hasn’t been in much recently except for beating faster every time I’m near Rallan or Vex or, even worse, both of them at the same time, which seems to be every morning.

As much as I like to talk a big game about pushing them away, Rallan has firmly planted himself in my heart and my bed. Not that we’ve done anything in bed other than snuggle, but we do it every single night. I tell him it’s because I fall asleep too easily when he’s doing my hair and that his scales keep me cool through the night. He doesn’t believe me, but he also doesn’t push it.

Vex is always in my room in the morning, discussing with Rallan their plans for the day. I’ve started to pretend that I’m asleep because after barging out of my own room three mornings in a row, it became very clear they weren’t going to stop.

If anything, they’re making it normal for both of them to be around me. No, not normal, per se, because I still feel a twinge of heartbreak every time I see Vex, but it’s grown less and less. I even find myself wanting to talk to him like we used to. I want to ask what has happened on Earth, why he’s here, and if he’s staying. The only reason I don’t ask is because if he says he’s not staying, I don’t know how I’ll handle it.

That’s the main reason I haven’t been more curious about what he and Rallan think

they're doing when they talk about wooing me. If Vex isn't staying, then I'm not getting my hopes up in making this work.

"Where are we going?" I ask as Rallan leads me away from our home and toward the tribe's gates. Sometimes, we'll leave the safety of the wall to visit Nia and her mates on their farm, but Nia's still back at the house I just left.

"It is a surprise, but it will be one you like, I think." Rallan doesn't look down at me with his stupid smile, but he does place a hand on my back to keep me moving when I want to grind to a halt.

"Come on," Rallan laughs as he sees me trying and failing to stop moving while he continues to push me gently yet firmly to get me to keep moving forward. "You cannot let your mates do one nice thing for you?"

"I don't have mates," I snarl.

This time, when I grind my heels into the grass. Rallan stops next to me, his hand still on my back. He pauses for just a moment before kneeling in front of me, his hand wrapping around my hip and tugging me closer to him so I'm all but standing between his legs where he's squatted down.

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“You have two mates,” Rallan says. His gaze is filled with amusement, but there’s a hardness to it that I don’t see very often. “One of them you have already mated, and I am very jealous it is not me. I would give anything to be a male you are actually mated to, but that does not change the fact that you are my mate, and I am yours. Can you accept this?”

My throat feels rough and dry as I work to swallow. My molars scrape against one another as I try to force myself not to say something cruel. I know I should if I want to keep my distance from Rallan and Vex. I should keep using hurtful words and bad attitudes to keep them at arm’s length. The only problem with that plan is that it isn’t working.

If I say something awful to Rallan right now, he’ll shake his head and call me an insufferable female. He’ll still crawl into my bed tonight and take care of me. In the morning, I’ll wake up in his arms, my face nuzzling close to him because deep down inside, I know I want him. I want them both.

“I can accept that,” I whisper, my eyes staring straight into Rallan’s. I might sound meek right now, but it’s only because I haven’t allowed myself to voice this out loud. I’m still the same me, but maybe now I can admit that I might have fallen for two aliens when really I should’ve fallen for none.

“Good.” Rallan beams, his face turning more boyish and playful. “Then you will also accept that Vex is trying to make things right with you. I know you may not trust him after how he left you here, but you are not speaking to him at all.”

“I thought you hated him,” I grumble.

I push at Rallan's chest to try to make some space between us. He falls back on his ass and pulls me even closer to him until I'm standing between his outstretched legs. He holds my hips tight until I'm plastered against his chest. If I tilt my head downward, our faces are close to one another

"I did," Rallan says in a soft whisper. The air tickles the tip of my nose as he speaks, and his tongue flicks out against my lips. "He was the male who stole your soul from me. The male who promised to keep you safe and cared for and failed so spectacularly. I hated him until I saw his entire being breaking when I told him of how you came to be in my life. I hated him until I saw the look of helplessness wash over him at knowing he failed as a mate. And when I realized he was broken over what happened to you, I decided to give him a chance to redeem himself."

"He broke up with me," I say, the emotion in my voice coming out even though I hate being vulnerable. Not in general, because Nia and Deja have both seen me cry plenty of times. I don't want to be vulnerable in front of someone I am trying not to fall for.

"I think you should at least speak with him before you decide he is irredeemable," Rallan says, moving one of his hands up to my shoulder and then cupping the back of my neck. "I think you will find he has done much more for you than you realize."

"You trust him?"

I don't know why it's so important for me to know if Rallan trusts Vex or not, but now that I've asked. I'm holding my breath while I wait for his answer. I've grown to trust Rallan's judgment on a lot of things. Even though he acts like an idiot most of the time, he's pretty intelligent and has a good sense of spotting bad intentions.

"I do," Rallan says, and then his lips twitch up in a smile. "My brother trusts him even more. I am almost positive he likes Vex more than he likes me."

“Why do you think that?” I lean into his hold, not missing how his eyes widen as I relax into him.

He covers his surprise quickly, knowing he might scare me off if he makes too big of a deal of me allowing him more liberties. His hand slides lower on my back to gently cup my ass as his other hand stays on the back of my neck. I whimper, needing more touching, more closeness.

“Ralleth told me if I did not make things work out between the three of us, I would need to make plans to leave the tribe once the first females make it through the portal,” Rallan says. My eyes go wide, but before I can tell him how fucked up that is, he’s laughing and silencing me by continuing to speak. “Do not worry. I was told I could keep you if I were exiled. So, I would have been a happy male either way. I want you happy as well, that is why I am trying to help Vex fix his errors.”

When he finishes talking, his fingers dig in a bit rougher against my ass, and his hand on my neck pulls me closer until our mouths are just barely not touching. His tongue lashes against my lips, begging me to place my lips on his. It’s the closest we’ve ever been besides the snuggling we do at night. This feels like more. Like Rallan is asking me to give him more. Not that he isn’t always asking for that in his own way, but this feels different.

“I don’t know if I know how,” I murmur, inching my lips closer to his, feeling my eyes grow heavy with lust.

“How to do what? Trust him? I can make sure he doesn’t hurt you again. If it is kissing that you are unsure how to do, well, I will not know if you do right or wrong.” Rallan smiles at me but doesn’t ease up on how tight he’s holding me.

“Okay,” I whisper. It’s a breath of a word before I place my lips on his.

A hiss rattles in his chest so loud I can feel it vibrating through me. I smile against his lips at how much I affect him and then kiss him some more. Now that I'm doing it, now that I'm pulling his bottom lip between my teeth and biting down on it softly, I wonder why I haven't been doing this the entire time I've known him.

Rallan holds me tight to him, and I reward his patience with kiss after kiss after kiss. I don't stop until I'm out of breath and my lips are swollen with use. Rallan is breathing hard as I pull away, and when he sees the need still in me, he huffs at himself and pulls me into him in a hug this time.

"I will reward your trust in me in so many ways anytime you wish it," Rallan says as he nuzzles his head against my neck and groans as I wiggle against him. "But we are needed somewhere right now."

I whine when he pushes me back a couple of steps and rises to his feet. Now that I've opened myself up to the possibility of being with him, I kind of want to be with him in all the ways someone can be with another.

The look in his eyes and the straining hardness in his pants tells me he feels the same. His brows pull together before he presses his lips into a tight line.

"You have terrible timing, you know this? Vex is waiting for us or I would be taking you back to our home to make love to you."

"I think this is the part where you call me insufferable." I lean against him, taking his hand in mine as we begin walking toward wherever he's taking me.

"Yes, such an insufferable female," Rallan teases. "You will need to reward me for my persistence tonight when we crawl into bed together. I think this is only fair."

I snort a laugh and shake my head. I can't say that I hate the idea. Well, I could say it,

but it would be a lie. I'm about to banter with Rallan some more when we make it to a clearing a short walk away from the tribe.

The clearing is small, but it's right next to a section of the river that flows through the tribe. Next to the bank of the river is what appears to be a picnic set up on one of the blankets taken from our home.

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Vex is pacing next to the blanket. His back is to us, and his hands are running through his hair. He's obviously stressing about something. I take a guess that we're late to whatever this is meant to be

"He is very bad at wooing." Rallan leans down so he can whisper in my ear so we don't interrupt Vex doing whatever it is he's doing. "How did he convince you to mate with him the first time? I could not imagine this worked on you?"

I roll my eyes, knowing Rallan loves teasing me for mating Vex. He's been doing it more and more since we moved back to the tribe. I figure it's because he's grown closer to him and no longer sees him as public enemy number one. Back before he ever talked to Vex, he'd never bring him up unless it was to tell me I was too good for him.

"I already told you he saved my life. That's how I fell for him," I answer just as quietly as Rallan.

"I saved your life, and all I have gotten is grief," Rallan huffs, but I can tell he's still joking. I'm about to tell him he just got a lot more than grief from our little—or long—make-out session that made us late to this picnic. Instead, Rallan stands to his full height again and drags me by my hand toward Vex.

"Sorry we are late," Rallan calls out, causing Vex to startle and whip around. His eyes fall on me, narrow on my lips, and then he casts an accusatory look at Rallan. "We were late because our mate decided she was done fighting her need to sate her female desires with my body."

“That’s not—“ I object, my eyes wide, hand yanking from Rallan’s grasp.

“It is what happened. Do not listen to her. She is being combative today. You know how it is.”

Rallan turns to face me. There’s a wicked gleam in his eyes that tells me he’s gotten everything he wants out of what’s happened so far. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he had this all planned out. There’s no way he could’ve known I’d kiss him, though. Unless he’s been inside my mind and realized just how low my defenses have gotten because of how much he cares about me.

Oh, he’s good. Good and horrible all at the same time.

“I am curious as to how she would use you to sate her needs, though.” Rallan casts a glance at Vex, who’s clenching his fists down by his sides. He’s obviously not in the know about Rallan’s scheming. “Maybe you should show me.”

One second, Vex is standing by the picnic blanket. The next, he’s standing in front of me, a determined shine in his slightly glowing eyes as he cups my face and brings my lips to his.

His kiss isn’t like Rallan’s, where I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. This is a claiming. Whether it’s him reclaiming me or him showing Rallan which of them I mated first, I don’t know.

“This wasn’t the plan,” Vex says as he leans back just enough to give us both room to breathe. His eyes don’t leave mine as his fingers move from my cheeks to around my head and neck, holding me close to him.

“This was always my plan.” Rallan shrugs. He walks over to the blanket and sits down, watching to see what Vex and I will do. “I knew you would not agree to it

because you think to woo her with your actions and your words. Both of which you are bad at.”

Rallan shakes his head, looking like he wants to add more about how bad Vex is at wooing me when compared to him. In all honesty, Vex was always bad at saying the right thing or doing what I wanted without me having to ask.

His mind just works different because of what he is. Caring about someone else’s feelings and wanting to make them happy was a foreign concept until he saw me for the first time. He’d do anything for me, or at least I thought he would before he broke up with me. Everything else we were figuring out through trial and error and a ton of talking.

“Explain this plan to me,” I say just loud enough for Rallan to hear. I don’t want to leave Vex right now, not when this is the closest we’ve been since we broke up. It’s not that I want to forgive him right this instant, but my body’s begging me to forgive him for about the next fifteen minutes. Then I can go back to being mad at him.

“Easy,” Rallan says. “My plan is to seduce you, make Vex mad because he still struggles with the idea of sharing, and then watch him make love to you.”

I make a choking sound. Not only is Rallan’s plan ridiculous, but it’s also kind of working. He realizes this, too, because he’s leaning back on the blanket, grabbing a couple of pillows, and tossing them next to him.

“You think I’m going to fuck him in front of you?” I try to sound incredulous, but it comes across as more hopeful. Not that what Vex and I are able to do is considered sex in the way Rallan’s used to.

I want to whack my head against a tree trunk. I’m not supposed to be playing into this plan. I’m supposed to be outraged and upset and a little bit sexy while I throw a fit

about them trying to get in my pants.

“You liked grinding on me while we made out. Just do that. Let’s do that. I need to know you’re mine.” Vex reminds me of how much I enjoyed being with him, and the need in his voice only makes me want to concede.

I whine low in my throat at how desperate I am for his attention, how badly I want to do exactly what he’s said. “Vex.”

“I know,” he says, his lips finding mine for one searing kiss. “I know you’re mad. You have every right to be. I want to explain it all, but your mate is an asshole. He knows how upset I get when I think of you with him.”

I nod, hoping to convey to Vex that I want him—even if a part of me wants to deny it all day long. I push him back toward the blanket, and his body relaxes with so much relief that I can practically feel the tension around us soften.

He gives me a shy smile before wrapping his fingers in mine and pulling me toward the blanket where Rallan has made himself nice and comfortable. The demon looks so smug and proud of himself, and I can’t say that I blame him when he successfully orchestrated this.

“How do you want me?” Vex asks, his eyes taking on a paler appearance, the glow behind them growing. I don’t know how long he’ll be able to keep up the human skin he wears before he lets it fall and shows me his true self. It’s the version of him I always got in the bedroom because he couldn’t concentrate hard enough on keeping the human skin in place when we were physical.

“On your back, Vex,” I murmur.

I place my hands on his shoulders and push him down. He follows my directions,

maneuvering one of the pillows Rallan set out so he can get comfortable. Vex shoots Rallan an ‘I’mwinning’ glare that Rallan matches because, as far as he’s concerned, they’re both winners in this situation.

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“No crazy stuff,” I whisper against Vex’s lips as I straddle his hips. His eyes burn bright as I begin to rock against him softly. “Just a little making out.”

“Okay.” He nods in agreement, the human skin disappears, and his glowing, white energy body takes its place.

He wraps his fingers around my neck and one on my hips as he brings his lips to mine and helps me to keep a steady rhythm against his thigh. He lets me stay in control for a few minutes before he groans and starts to take over. His energy flicks across my skin in long tendrils of pleasure. They skate underneath my tunic and underneath my shorts. When I moan in pleasure, he makes a growling sound before rolling me onto my back.

“Can you make her release like this?” Rallan’s voice has me moaning even louder as Vex’s energy tendrils grip me harder. He wasn’t lying about not liking Rallan being with me, but he’s trying. The jealousy is kind of hot, though. Especially when it results in him trying to make me find him more appealing than Rallan by using all of his tricks to bring me closer to orgasm.

“I can,” Vex seethes, his attention moving to Rallan, though I doubt Rallan can tell where his eyes are. Or, really, it’s not even eyes so much as where they’d be if he had them.

“Good, do that.” Rallan doesn’t seem bothered in the slightest that Vex is pissed at him for interrupting or for telling him what to do. If I were to look up at him, I’m sure I’d see the same mischievous smile that he’s always wearing. He’s getting what he wants, so I need to make sure Vex does, too.

“Make me come.” I grab Vex’s cheeks and pull his attention back to me. The request has the tendrils of energy on my body, thickening against my skin and pulsing with pleasurable waves of energy that have me wriggling and moaning.

“You want to come, Simone?” Vex asks, his head nuzzling close to my neck as he wraps his lips around my earlobe and gives it a soft nip. “You want to be reminded of how good I make you feel?”

I moan and tilt my hips closer to him, begging him with my body to make me feel good. “You’ve gotten better at your dirty talk.”

Vex laughs against my neck, his tendrils sliding further up my shorts until they’re pulse on either side of my pussy. I want to beg him to touch me like he used to, to caress my clit with the energy, to cover my body with his, and make me come while I’m screaming his name.

“You told me you liked the idea of it, so I’m working on it,” Vex says, his tone turning a bit more serious than I want. “I’ve been working on a lot of things, Simone. I want to be better I want to prove to you that I can be worthy of you.”

“Less talking,” Rallan grumbles from above us, reminding us both that he’s watching as Vex tries his hardest to make me come by just grinding against me. I don’t know what it is about knowing they’re both here with me, but it ignites something in me. I grab Vex’s head and pull him close to me, my hips working to grind myself against him.

His energy doesn’t touch me how I really want him to, and I know it’s because I told him I only wanted to make out with him and grind on him. He’s doing what I want, and it makes it even hotter. Not to mention how I can feel him so close to where I want him, and knowing he’s not going to touch me there unless I beg.

I whine into his mouth, my back arching as pleasure ripples through me. Vex pins me to the blanket with enough of his strength to remind me just how good he used to treat me when we were together. He grinds into me in the same rhythm until my orgasm begins to fade, and my eyes blink open.

“So fucking beautiful,” Vex says, his tendrils slimming until they’re barely skating over my skin. I smile and then let my eyes drift over to where Rallan is sitting.

“He is correct. You are very beautiful,” Rallan says, a smile tugging at his lips like he’s succeeded in his plans for the day. “I believe she is now complacent enough to listen to you explain why you should be allowed to share our bed with us.”

I groan and let my head fall back against the blanket. “Can I not have one second of peace.”

“I am your mate,” Rallan says as though that’s an answer to my question.

“He’s not wrong. He is your mate,” Vex adds as he rolls off of me and lies on his back next to me. “It’s the only thing keeping me from killing him.”

“Won’t hear any complaints from me,” I mumble, and Rallan wraps his fingers around my ankle and tugs me close to him.

“You do nothing but complain. Let us not pretend now, little mate.”

My face warms at his touch, at how teasing he’s being, and how horny I still am. So horny, in fact, that I’m kind of disappointed that Rallan hasn’t taken up the spot between my legs when Vex rolled off of me.

I crack my eyes open and see Rallan’s knowing eyes. “I’ll help you with your female needs tonight just as I told you I would. We need to discuss some things first.”

I groan and roll to a sitting position. “Fine, what do you guys want to talk about?”

12

Vex

I don't know how Rallan did it. I don't particularly care. I just made out with Simone and made her orgasm, and she didn't seem like she hated it. If I weren't so pissed off at Rallan for discarding our entire plan, I'd thank him for getting Simone to even talk to me. I don't even know what game he's playing right now. The plan we came up with together to get Simone to talk with us has gone off the rails.

“Are you hungry?” Rallan asks Simone.

He begins to pull out some prepared food from the basket I brought when I set this whole thing up. My part in the plan was to get the picnic ready, and Rallan was meant to grab Simone. He wasn't supposed to bring her to me twenty minutes late with swollen lips and a glassy look in her eyes that told me they'd done more than walk to the meeting spot.

“Did you poison it?” Simone asks, narrowing her eyes on the food Rallan is setting out on the blanket for all of us.

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He shoots Simone a grin that makes it clear he doesn't find her as scary as she wants him to. He's been with Simone nonstop since she came to this planet, and he helped her through some of the worst moments of her life. He's seen her at her worst, and he still has nothing but love and admiration for her.

"If I were to poison you, I would go the rest of my life with a neglected cock." Rallan rolls his eyes as he hands Simone a fork. "I have no plans of not using my cock ever again, so no, you are in no danger of poison."

"Your poor neglected dick, except I can hear you jerking off every day before you come to help me with my hair." Simone snarls at him but accepts the fork.

She digs into the food as though she hasn't eaten all day. She's been off on her own most of the day, so there's a good chance this is her first meal. She can become distracted and forget to take care of herself sometimes. Especially when she's working on something she's passionate about, like preparing the houses for the other humans.

"You listen to me touch myself?" Rallan wiggles his brows at Simone, who scowls at him. "Do not worry. I listen when you touch yourself as well."

Simone makes a shrieking sound to show her displeasure, and at the same time, I cast an accusatory look at Rallan. There's a lot I'm getting used to, and one of the biggest ones is knowing there's a male who wants Simone as much as I do. Not to mention, she might want him more than she wants me. The only thing that makes it almost okay is that Rallan has no issues with sharing her with me. Nope, it's a me problem, and I'm still trying to figure out how far he can push things before I get too upset.

“Can we move on?” I snap.

I don't enjoy this version of flirting he's able to get out of Simone. She'd skewer me if I were ever to tell her that she's flirting with Rallan, but that's what she's doing. Even Rallan knows it if his amusement is anything to go off of. It makes me wonder how long they've had this kind of relationship. Probably the whole time with how at ease he makes her.

She doesn't worry about offending him or softening herself for him. She's unapologetically herself and I'm envious he was able to make her so comfortable so quickly.

“Yes, you are right.” Rallan turns his full attention to me. “Explain to our mate why you broke up with her soul before she was sent here. It is what is keeping you two from finding happiness in one another, which in turn is stopping Simone from finding happiness on my cock. Fix it, please.”

“Do you ever think about not saying everything you're thinking?” Simone snaps at him. “Why the fuck do you need to bring up your dick in every conversation.”

Rallan shrugs. “I will stop bringing it up as soon as I can pin you down and imprint the feel of me forever inside you.”

Simone's eyes go wide. For a moment, I think she's going to say something else to him, and their banter is going to keep going forever. Instead, her eyes grow glassy, and her toes curl into the blanket. It's even worse than their banter because she's getting turned on by what Rallan's saying.

“This is the look I want on your face whenever my cock is mentioned.” Rallan leans back on his arms, his legs stretching out in front of him as he takes up half of the blanket. “But not right now. We have other things to do. Vex, speak to her, or I will

continue wooing her. We both know I am much better at it than you are.”

I huff before wrapping an arm around Simone’s waist and pulling her closer to me. Rallan doesn’t fight me on it. I doubt he’d fight me on anything. He just goes with whatever’s happening and wears a smile while he does. The only time he’s ever been anything other than happy was when he was calling me out for not protecting Simone. He was furious then.

“Rallan told me you’ve been telling everyone I broke up with you,” I whisper in Simone’s ear as she takes another bite of her food. I can tell when she registers my words because her whole body goes stiff.

“You did,” she says in a low, angry voice that tells me I need to tread carefully. Rallan watches us like we’re his entertainment. He’s not going to be any help if Simone decides to kill me. “I’m pretty sure your exact words were, ‘I hope you find happiness. If you find someone else, know that I want you to be happy.’ How’s that not you breaking up with me?”

“I didn’t say we’re breaking up. I didn’t tell you that you are no longer my mate.” I furrow my brows, trying to figure out how she could have misunderstood me so much.

“You told me to go find someone else to be happy with!” Simone sets her food down on the blanket and turns in my grip so she’s facing me. “Why the fuck would you say that if you still wanted to be with me?”

My teeth grind against one another, and I take in a deep breath. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again, but that didn’t mean you were no longer my mate.”

“You didn’t know if you would see me again?” Simone asks with a bewildered expression. “So we might not have ever seen each other again, but we were still

together?”

“Yes,” I say, my lips turning into a straight line, my brows pulling close together.

Simone puts her face in her hands and rubs her eyes. She turns to face Rallan, who just shakes his head, telling her he’s not helping either of us right now. “Vex, for humans, if someone tells us they hope we find someone to make us happy, it’s because we don’t plan on being the one to make that person happy.”

“I understand this. I couldn’t make you happy while I was still on Earth. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to join you on this planet, so I told you I hoped you found happiness. Just like humans do.”

“No, but like, you told me to be happy without you.” Simone tries to clarify what she’s saying, but it confuses me more because she’s just repeating herself.

“I wanted you happy here, yes.”

“Without you?”

“Without me.” I tilt my head to the side. “What aren’t you understanding?”

Simone throws her hands up. “If you want me to be happy without you, how does that mean we’re still together?”

“Simone, you own my soul. Every piece of me is yours and will be yours until I die. Even then, you’re so stubborn that you might follow me into the next life just to prove you own me there as well. I can want you to be happy with another and still know that you’re my everything. We may not have been physically together, but there was never a moment where our souls weren’t connected.”

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Simone frowns, and for a moment, I think she doesn't like what I've said. Then her tears start to rim her eyes, and I think I've really, really messed up. She turns to face Rallan again, and this time, he speaks.

"Is it really so hard for you to believe that we would be honored to be yours even if we could not have all of you?" He reaches up to cup Simone's cheek, wiping away a single tear before it can fall. "He has never been without you, even if you thought you were without him."

"And you're just okay with that?" Simone asks Rallan, not turning to face me. It's okay. She's still trying to figure out how she feels about misunderstanding what I meant when I said I wanted her to be happy.

"Am I okay with sharing you?" Rallan tilts his head to the side. His eyes drift over to me and crinkle in the corners. "I have never been a male who was frightened of sharing a female. It helps that Vex is so terrible at wooing you. It allows me to prove I am the better of your mates."

"Not even mated to her," I mumble under my breath, loud enough for both of them to hear. Rallan's eyes flare with the challenge in my words, and Simone turns to face me with her lips slightly parted. "What? It's true."

"Vex," Simone starts to chastise me, but I take a page from Rallan's book. I crawl closer to her, cupping her face between my hands and taking her lips in mine until her eyes grow hazy in lust again.

"Say my name again, mate," I growl against her mouth.

I hope she'll take me up on it so I can pleasure her out here in front of Rallan again and prove to him that only one of Simone's mates has claimed her in all ways. I'm a jealous and petty male. I can't help it. I've never had to share like this, and after having Simone all to myself for two years, I'm still getting used to the idea.

"Not yet," Rallan interrupts my progress with Simone by wrapping an arm around her chest and tugging her closer to him. "We still need to see if you will kill me if I touch her."

"It can wait," I snap at him, not wanting to waste this moment with Simone now that some of the distance between us is closing. "I want her."

"Do you want to make love to him right now?" Rallan asks Simone. She licks at her lips, her eyes telling me she does, but she seems to think better of it and shakes her head. Rallan gives me a knowing look like he knows she's lying to us. "Well, you will have to attempt to seduce her another time. Now, it is my turn."

I grumble under my breath how this is all bullshit, and I don't miss the way Simone smiles at me. She might not have forgiven me just yet, but she's closer to giving me a second chance now than she's been since she was dropped off on this planet. I hate to admit it, but Rallan's helped a lot in getting her to trust me. Now, I have to trust that he knows what he's doing when it comes to pushing me.

Rallan stands from the blanket, offering his hand to Simone.

"I think we should take a bath," he says. He gives me a wicked smile before tugging Simone close to his body. I don't get a chance to object before they're moving, causing my jealousy to bubble up inside of me.

Rallan

I am the best mate that any female could ask for and the best male to share a mate with, considering I have made all of this happen. Simone, who has been ignoring Vex and me because she is scared of him hurting her again, has now kissed me and found release using Vex's body. Sure, he was mad when I brought Simone to our meeting spot late, but even he cannot deny that I did it to make us all grow closer to one another.

"I think we should take a bath," I tell Simone, offering her my hand to help her to her feet.

Yes, the plan was to bring Simone out here to eat and talk, but my plan was to get her to admit she has a want for Vex and me as her mates and to get her naked. I have succeeded in the first part of my plan, and now it is time for the second.

Simone looks longingly at the water and then over to Vex and me. I can see her thoughts moving in her head. She thinks that she needs to be strong now, but what she really needs is to trust in her mates to keep her safe. We have both saved her life. Keeping her safe now is easy.

She struggles with the fact that she does not want to rely on us in case we ever leave her, something I will never do. Vex has other things he needs to do, but that will not last forever. He will talk with Simone about them instead of just breaking her soul as he did before.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Simone responds to my question about bathing with an answer that even she does not believe.

"No, it is a wonderful idea," I counter. I loosen the strings of my shorts as I move toward the water. I leave her to stand on the blanket while Vex works on making sure

his skin is in the right places.

Today was the first time I saw what he really looks like for an extended amount of time. It is a strange look, but I am able to enjoy watching him bring Simone pleasure. I have no issue with sharing a mate, and Vex says that he does not, either. He is a filthy liar, but we will get him used to me touching his mate in the same ways he does.

“He’s right,” Vex says, his human skin now back in place. He bares his teeth as he agrees with me. A storm seems to cover his face as he thinks about what I am proposing.

“You’re joking.” Simone rolls her eyes. She crosses her arms under her breasts and lifts them in a way that she knows I like.

“Your mate struggles with me touching you and looking at you. Imagine how he will feel when I am to pleasure you. So, come get in this water with me so that I can show your mate just how good I can make you feel, and let’s see how angry we can make him, yes?”

I watch Vex as I speak, noticing how his hands flex and fist at his sides over and over. When Simone tilts her head to the side, like she’s debating taking me up on my offer, his lips pull back again. He doesn’t reach for her, though. He doesn’t try to stop her when she takes a step toward me.

“You know he could probably kill you, right?” Simone asks as she drops her hands to her sides and plays with the hem of her shirt.

“If he did that, he would then have to deal with you all on his own,” I reply.

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My shorts are low on my hips now, barely staying up. The only reason I have not dropped them yet is that I am waiting for Simone to agree to get in the water with me. I know as soon as she has decided to join me because she moves to tie her hair up messily on top of her head so she doesn't get it wet.

"You're good with this?" Simone casts her eyes toward Vex.

He is very purposefully not leaving the blanket. He stands on the edge of it, his entire body tense like he might make a go for her at any moment. He is a determined male, though, and he loves Simone as much as I do. That means he is going to open himself to new experiences.

If we are lucky, he will find that he enjoys watching me touch our mate. I know I very much enjoyed watching him with Simone. Even if he does struggle with watching me, at least we know now that he is fine with me watching. He told me he feared his reaction to that just as much as he feared his reaction to watching me.

"I want to be," Vex says. His teeth are clenched together so tight I can see when his jaw ticks back and forth. "I want to share you, Simone, so go to him, and I'll keep myself from killing him."

That's all the encouragement I need. I turn from the two of them, let my shorts fall to my ankles, and step out of them. Simone likes my backside. I mean, she has never told me this, but I have felt her eyes there many times. Today is no different.

Her gaze scalds me with how much need she has. She has forced herself to stuff her needs deep down inside of herself. When she allows her eyes to linger on things she

wants, all of those needs burn through in her eyes. This is how I know her eyes are on me as I walk into the warm water.

I can hear Vex mumbling something, but I am too far away to hear what it is. I'm sure it has to do with how our mate likes to watch me. I doubt he is happy about that.

"You're an idiot," Simone scolds me as she comes splashing into the water behind me.

I don't turn to see if she is bare because I already know she is not. That is fine. I will strip her once she is dripping wet and aching for me to touch her bare skin.

"I am your mate," I say over my shoulder, walking until the water covers my hips before turning to face her.

Simone is wearing one of the beige-colored tunics that most of the others in this tribe wear. Since the tribe was separated from the others for so long, they did not have access to as many dyes as other tribes.

I would feel bad for all of the dyed clothing I have if not for the fact that I have given most of my wardrobe to other brothers here so I could fill my wardrobe with more of the dark colors Simone likes on me. Not that I wear very many shirts because I enjoy how she cannot stop herself from looking at my chest and arms when I am bared to her.

The good part about the undyed fabrics that she is wearing is that the water takes away most of her covering as it wets her clothing. Her shorts are probably nice and transparent now if I were to haul her out of the water and examine her in all the ways I wish to.

Even her tunic is beginning to cling to her dark skin up to her abdomen. I am far

enough in the water that it will not reach her breasts, but that can be remedied with a few well-placed splashes in her direction.

I must be as easy for her to read as she is for me because she is wrapping her arms over her chest and giving me a scolding look.

“Don’t you dare,” she snarls at me.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” I lie.

I offer her my hand, hoping she will take it so I can drag her deeper into the water with me. If her clothing gets too wet, she will give Vex and me a wonderful show until it dries.

“What are you hoping to accomplish with this?” Simone asks.

She takes my hand and lets out a small squeal when I tug her close to me. Her abdomen is pressed against my hardened cock.

“I am hoping to get you to moan my name a few times, but I will also be happy if we can make sure he does not come to steal you away from me.” I do not give her a moment to register my words before I spin her around so she is facing where Vex is now pacing along the shore.

“He does not like thinking about sharing you with me,” I tell her, using one of my hands to wrap possessively around her neck. I hear the moan as much as I feel it vibrate in her throat. I like the way she feels in my hands, and I want to know how much she trusts me.

“He’s not mad yet,” Simone says.

Her breathing is quicker than normal, and I can feel her pulse beating rapidly beneath my fingertips. I want to know how fast it will beat if I let my claws extend just slightly so she knows they are there. Would it make her moan and lean back against me like I think it would? I hiss low in my chest to keep myself from acting on these impulses just yet. There will be plenty of time for that once we know Vex can handle seeing my hands on her body.

“I’m going to try to make him mad,” I say. I let my free hand drag through the water to where the hem of her shirt is floating. I push my hand between the fabric and her skin. My fingers take in how soft her skin is and how she seems to push into my handlike she cannot get enough of my touches. “If I do anything you do not like, you tell me.”

“That’s going to be hard,” Simone groans as she presses her backside closer to me. My cock is hard against her back, and she wriggles in my hold to tease me. “Everything you do seems to be so good.”

I smile to myself, shaking my head at how very different this version of my mate is from the prickly human she tries to make herself out to be when she is scared of how big her emotions are. “Is the secret to making you so complacent to arouse you?”

I expect her to bristle at my teasing, but she moans again. “I’m so tired of fighting it.”

“No more fighting then,” I whisper low enough that she has to lean closer to me to hear my words. “At least right now. I do enjoy your sharp tongue and biting words. Maybe you bring some of your spikes the next time we do this. I think I would very much enjoy taming you.”

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Simone snorts as she side-eyes me. I can see the fire still inside of her, but she is correct in how tired she must be of always having to fight her need for Vex and me.

I bring my palm higher up underneath her tunic until I feel the soft swell of her breasts. I graze the plush skin with my knuckles, making sure not to make contact with the stiff peaks until she thrusts her breasts into my palms. Or at least ask me to touch them. This slow teasing is payback for how she has been slowly teasing me since I first met her.

“He doesn’t know you’re touching me,” Simone whines as she leans her head back against my scales.

“How can we fix that?” I ask, knowing that the only way to fix it is to be either more noticeable in my groping or by stripping Simone. Either one is fine with me, but she will be the one to ask it of me. Watching her grow with need and fury at being denied what she wants because she’s refusing to ask only has my cock twitching against her.

“Did you know how perfect you would feel in my hands every time you rejected my wooing?” I murmur, ignoring the scoff she gives me as my touches remain soft and imperceptible underneath her tunic

“Rallan,” Simone whimpers as my knuckles graze over the underside of her breasts again. The sound of my name on her lips has me tightening my hold on her neck just a fraction on impulse. Her eyes flare with desire, but I soften the hold.

“You’re not scared of me, are you?” I ask, needing to know for certain that my mate

trusts me. I may want to do things that some might say are questionable, but so long as we both enjoy what I want to do, I care very little for others' thoughts about me.

"You're not exactly scary," Simone laughs as she says it, causing my chest to swell.

"Good, remember that," I warn her before kneeling behind her in the water so I'm just as tall as her. My hand on her neck keeps her pressed tight to me, and my other hand continues to brush soft touches against her chest. I let my voice drop, a dark hiss emphasizing my words. "I'm going to strip you, I'm going to touch you wherever I want, and you're going to let me." I press my hand on her chest flat against her to hold her in place as she tries to wiggle in my hold at my words.

"What are you doing?" Simone asks, the confusion in his voice worrying me for a moment.

"I am a male who has been denied his mate for a long time." I let my tongue lash against her neck as I speak. I want to soothe her worries, but I will not lie to her. "I want you more than I want anything else. I have dreamt of pinning you down, running my tongue along your entire body, and then finding a home between your legs. Now that you are accepting, now that you want to be mine, I plan on taking you in every way I have imagined. It requires your trust, though. I need you to trust I will only ever do something to bring you pleasure when we are making love. I need you to trust that I will always care for you and protect you. What we are doing now, all this teasing to get Vex mad, you must trust me in it. So, do you trust me, little mate?"

Simone's throat works as she takes a deep swallow. Her dark eyes seem even darker as the black circles in the center grow wider. She licks her lips before nodding. A look of apprehension covers her face for just a moment before I see her give in to trusting me to take care of her. It has my chest swelling in pride and, of course, my mind swimming with all the things I wish to do with her, if not for trying to take this slow to make sure Vex does not kill me.

“I could make love to you right now,” I murmur against her neck as I move my hand from her chest out from her shirt. “I could lift your tiny body up and impale you on my cock, and there’s nothing you could do about it.”

Simone whimpers, but it’s not a scared sound. No, it’s one of want. One of desire that has all of my thoughts begging me to make good on what I am saying. Instead, I move my hands to the neckline of her tunic.

“How long has it been since your mate has seen your tits?” I ask before ripping the tunic down the middle.

Simone lets out a shriek as the material splits, baring her to the open air. She doesn’t try to cover herself, but she does give me an accusing glare.

“This is okay?” I ask, moving my hands to circle her wrists so I can pull them behind her, keeping her open and on display for both Vex on the shore and me right behind her.

“It’s fine,” Simone says with a bite in her voice like she is finding some more of her fight. The renewed fire has my cock swelling even more. She wiggles in my grip, drawing both my eyes and Vex’s eyes to the way her breasts bounce just above the surface of the water.

“What are you doing?” she snaps at me when she realizes my focus has been taken completely.

“Watching your tits bounce,” I reply. I shift my eyes back to the bank, and she catches it as well. “Vex seems to be enjoying the show as well.”

Simone opens her mouth to say something that I’m sure is meant to hurt me, but I move my free hand up to cup one of her breasts, and her arousal stops her.

Vex is standing on the edge of the water, no longer pacing, but his hand is still working through his light hair over and over again. I can't see his teeth grinding, but it's too light out to see if his eyes are glowing. Still, I can tell from his body language that he is more than upset with me. That is why we are far away from him in the water. Even if he wants to come to get Simone from me, there's plenty of time for her to get away from me so he doesn't kill me. I hope.

"I think I want you completely naked," I say.

Simone makes a sound of surprise, so I wait for her to calm down and give me a lusty look. I'm quick with my claws and have her shorts shredded before she can yell at me about them being one of her only pairs. We both know she now has plenty, thanks to Vex. She can spare this pair for the greater good of me getting what I want to test Vex's will.

"You asshole!" Simone jerks in my hold as I move to grab her wrists again. I smile down at her. How could I not when I'm getting what I want? Vex is standing with his hands on his hips now, but he doesn't know just how naked I have his mate.

"He doesn't know you are bare for me," I tease as I run my fingers over the apex of her thighs. She moans as I skate them over the coarse hair between her legs, but I don't spread her for better access. No, I will do that, but not until Vex knows just how much of our mate I have access to. "We should let him know."

"You wouldn't dare," Simone snarls at me, seeming to realize just how much of her I wish to have on display.

It is too late for her to voice an objection. I am already standing up behind her, maneuvering her wrists so I can hold her arms above her head. Her body stretches to accommodate my hold on her, and her breasts jut out as she's pulled taut. I hiss low in my chest, loving the way she looks.

I will want to do this to her again in our home sometime. Maybe I can tie her to the bed so her body is stretched out and at my mercy. My cock twitches at the idea. I force the thought down and tell myself it is something I can do another time. Right now, I need to get her out of the water enough to tempt Vex.

“I need more hands, so I can hold up your legs as well. Think of how mad he would be if I were to spread you out like a feast just for me.” I lick at my lips at the thought. What I really want now is to taste between her legs. I am sure she is slick after finding her pleasure by grinding against Vex. It will be plenty for me to suckle on.

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“He’s going to murder you,” Simone snaps at me, reminding me of what we’re doing. She isn’t wrong. The closer I get to the shore, the more anger I can see tensing in Vex’s body. Tendrils of white energy are skating across the shoreline and licking at the water.

“How long since he’s seen your cunt?” I ask.

I don’t give her enough time to answer or prepare for what I have planned next. I heft Simone out of the water and work to grab her thighs between my palms and hold her so she is folded chest to thighs with her back against my chest.

I spread her legs wide, laughing when she tries to cover herself with her now-freed hands. It’s too late to try to hide, especially when Vex is nothing but thousands of tendrils of energy that are all coming straight for me.

“Trust me,” I say, hoping Vex is a fast male.

I turn around and toss Simone into a deeper part of the river. The tendrils of glowing energy scurry past me much faster than I can keep up with. Before Simone has a chance to hit the water, Vex reforms into his body and catches her. This is good. If she were to get her hair wet now, she would be the one to murder me.

“I think we will need to work on your anger!” I call out.

Vex stomps through the river with Simone cradled in his arms. He shoots me an angry glare, but deep down, I know that we have made much progress today. I am more excited to see how much we can make tomorrow.

Vex

“I think today was a success,” Rallan says as he tugs Simone’s sleeping body between his legs like he loves to do.

I don’t know how he convinced her to crawl into bed with him after she said she was going to cut his dick off for throwing her in the river. He only laughed, told her she was seductive when she was that angry at him, and then wrapped her in his arms until she fell asleep.

The plan was to do a bit more once we got her back home. After I was a little more aggressive than we hoped I’d be, we decided that it was best not to push for more while I’m adjusting to the new dynamic.

“I thought I’d handle seeing her with you better than I did,” I admit.

I sit on the foot of the bed, the same as I do every morning when I come and talk with Rallan about what our plans are for the day. I’ve gotten used to him as a male, as a friend. What I’m still not used to is that he’s going to want to touch Simone in the same way I do.

Somehow, watching them snuggle at night and in the morning hasn’t been difficult. I don’t know what makes it different. I do know that seeing him strip her earlier today had me aching to be near her. It also made me feel like I needed to rip her from his arms and claim her as mine.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly being fair.” Rallan chuckles as Simone nuzzles closer to his abdomen. “I was trying my hardest to make you as mad as possible. I cannot think of anything that would make a male who shares his mate more upset than watching her

exposed and not being near to enjoy it for himself.”

I can't help the way my lips tug upward as Simone throws an arm over him and tangles her legs around one of his. I've watched them sleep almost every night since we've shared this house. I'm aware of just how close Rallan keeps her at night. I'm pretty sure he'd have her tied to him if he could. He settles for pulling her between his legs, wrapping his arms tight around her, and holding her to him as he sleeps on his back all night. Simone must love it because she doesn't wake up to get away from him. She sleeps soundly through the night.

I used to wish that I needed sleep so that I could hold Simone all night without feeling bored. Now she has Rallan to do that for her. I can get work done around the tribe and come back to watch them sleep every once in a while.

“I think we should attempt me touching her in bed next,” Rallan says. It pulls my attention away from how they're tangled in one another. When I do nothing but stare at him, he continues. “You have no issues with me holding her all night even though you know my cock is pressed against her.”

My nose scrunches up at the visual that I don't need. I know Rallan sleeps naked. He's made that clear every morning when he gets up for the day and stretches out. Sometimes, his genitalia is out of its pocket. Sometimes, it's not. One thing remains the same: he's always naked. It's also clear he enjoys himself while sleeping with Simone.

“See, the worst you do now is look disgusted,” Rallan laughs. “I think you are worried about how you will react because you have never been in this situation before.”

“Neither have you,” I counter.

“Yes, but I grew up knowing many males who shared. Even in my tribe, there are plenty of brothers who share mates and even more who all enjoy the company of the same female even if they are not mated.”

I frown at the thought of sharing Simone with even more people. Rallan, of course, somehow knows what I’m thinking and huffs another laugh.

“How many females did you bed before Simone?” he asks, as though it’s not a personal question. He frowns at my obvious discomfort and tries to make me feel more comfortable. “She knows she is not my first female. I doubt she will care if you have bedded others as well.”

I swallow deeply, a habit I picked up from other humans I watched interact with one another. I tried to keep my eyes on all of their mannerisms so I could look more like them. I thought it would make Simone feel more comfortable around me. Not that she ever seemed uncomfortable. She was easy to be with. Much easier than I thought she would be when I found out I had bonded to another species.

“She’s the only one,” I mumble under my breath, unsure if I should be feeling less or more male than him right now. “My kind, we don’t feel any attraction to anyone until we find our fated. It’s how we’ve advanced technologically so quickly. We’re unburdened with lust and love until we find a compatible mate.”

Rallan’s brows furrow for a moment before he casts his eyes down to Simone. His eyes soften first, then the rest of his body, as he watches Simone take soft breaths against him in his sleep. “It is understandable that she would be the one to make you feel. She is a remarkable human, is she not?”

“She is.” I smile and reach out to cup her cheek. Rallan doesn’t stop me. If anything, I’m pretty sure he shifts closer to me so I can feel her soft skin against mine. Rallan places one of his hands on top of mine, and my eyes shoot up to his.

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“Does this make you angry?” he asks, and the earnestness in his eyes tells me he’s just trying to make this mating work. So, I answer him with a short shake of my head. His attention moves back down to Simone. “You are not as angry a male as you would like us to all think you are. I have yet to see you break anything, and I was warned by Simone’s friends and by my brother that you were prone to throwing things.”

I snort and pull my hand back to my lap. I let myself fall back onto my back at the foot of the bed, my head resting on Rallan’s shin and my eyes watching the ceiling. “I haven’t thrown anything since Simone’s been back in the tribe.”

“But you have thrown things?” Rallan asks as though he’s curious about me and not like he’s judging me for having very real, very problematic anger issues that I need to get under control.

“I have.”

I don’t like telling others about my shortcomings. In the collective mind, any weakness can be exploited by others, and my inclinations toward violence when things don’t go my way can be used to exile me. Not that I’d mind being exiled.

I’ve thought about throwing a big enough fit back on Earth just to get my mind separated from the others so I can join Simone. The only reason I don’t is because I know there are so many humans on Earth who could thrive on this planet.

“I think I would like to see this,” Rallan says, the hint of curiosity turning into full-blown amusement. “I think it would be entertaining to watch you destroy things. Do

you do it with the weird glowing things?”

“They’re my body.” I frown harder and glance at him out of the corner of my eyes. “I’m made up of energy that I contort into this shape. So, I guess, yeah, I break stuff with my glowing things.”

“Yes, I would like to see it,” Rallan says with a nod like me telling him it’s my body doesn’t phase him in the least. I’m about to tell him that I don’t want him or Simone to see me like that when he continues. “When you transformed at the river, it was very interesting. I knew it was you somehow as the energy skated across the top of the river, but when I threw Simone, I was mostly hoping you could reform in time.”

“Didn’t you make her tell you how much she trusts you over and over again before you did that to her?” I ask, cocking one of my brows at him.

“You told me you would not be listening,” Rallan counters, which is a fair point. I can hear and see way better than the humans or demons, but I did promise Rallan I’d allow him to woo Simone on his own out in the river.

“It’s hard when I knew she was out there being touched by you,” I say as a defense. “I needed to know she was enjoying herself. It made it easier to stay on the shore.”

“Not easy enough,” Rallan says.

“Yeah, yeah, well, you pulled her out of the water with everything on display. Was I supposed just to stand there and let you taunt me like that?”

“I was curious how long you would last.” Rallan shrugs, and it’s then that I realize he had no interest in keeping me on the shore today. He wanted to test me to see how far he could push me before I came for Simone. Now, I just need to know why.

“You knew I would come for her?”

Rallan scoffs like I’ve said something stupid. There’s a brief pause where he realizes that I’m serious in asking, and then he clears his throat. “If there is one thing I have learned from the males in my tribe, it is that you do not deny one partner access to the shared mate. Males have fought over much less, and I wanted to see if you were similar to my species in that way.”

“I didn’t fight you, though.”

“No, you protected our mate,” Rallan says. “You might not have protected her when she was left on this planet, but I do not think that you will not protect her with every part of your being. If you had known, I am certain you would have kept her safe from all the woes of this planet. Instead, you did not know, and I was blessed to find her. Now, we can protect her together.”

“That doesn’t explain why you came up with this elaborate plan of bringing her to the river to see if I could handle you touching her.”

“You think it is all about you,” Rallan wiggles lower in the bed until he’s on his back. This is his universal cue that tells me that this conversation will be over soon because as soon as he’s done wanting to talk, he’ll pretend to be asleep until he actually falls asleep. “Maybe you should think about everything I got out of today. I felt my mate’s lips on mine, watched her break apart on her other mate, and then got to grope her while she was soaking wet. Today was a wonderful day for me. I got everything I wanted out of it.”

I blink a few times, unsure if Rallan is being serious right now. We planned the trip to the river three days ago. There’s no way he’s been thinking of ways to undermine the plan to change it just enough to get what he wanted. There’s no way.

“Are you serious?” I ask, scowling when I see Rallan close his eyes and squeeze them tight. It’s ridiculous because I can tell he’s forcing them together to pretend to be sleeping. “Rallan, are you seriously telling me we made up a plan together, and the whole time, you were scheming ways to change it just enough so you could kiss her?”

I don’t get a response. Of course, I don’t get a response. I’m left to debate on my own whether or not Simone chose a second mate clever enough to pull something like that off. I think about it for so long that before I know it, Rallan’s breathing has deepened, and he’s fast asleep with his arms locked around Simone.

I shake my head at the thought of him being clever enough to pull today off and then stop thinking about it. Whether or not he actually planned this, he did get everything he wanted, just like he said.

I stand in the doorway, watching them sleep for a few more minutes. When I’ve had enough, for now, I pat the doorframe twice and head back out into the tribe.

I don’t need sleep to recharge my body in the same way that Rallan and Simone do. Sure, I need to recharge once every few days, but it’s more of just cycling through my own energy. It takes a few minutes at most and then I’m fine to continue as normal.

My plans for the night consist of doing rounds around the tribe to make sure nothing feels amiss. When I finish doing that, I work on the houses we’re fixing up for the first round of humans and the males who have come to help.

When I get bored, I’ll go stand in the doorway of Simone and Rallan’s room and watch them sleep. Really, I don’t get nearly as much done at night as I do during the day, but watching them sleep calms me in a way I never knew I needed.

So, when I’ve only been working for an hour before I find myself standing in the

doorway, counting their rhythmic breaths, I'm not surprised. I wouldn't be surprised if one day I find myself standing here all night just watching them.

15

Simone

“Rallan’s mate?” Dath rubs his eyes as he stares down at me. I should care that he’s holding a pillow to cover his obviously nude groin, but right now, I need to talk to my friend. I’ve decided to bother Deja since the trail leading to Nia’s house isn’t completed yet. I don’t trust myself not to get lost on the short walk outside the tribe’s wall. “It is early. What are you doing here?”

Dath’s red eyes are narrowed with slumber, and he barely keeps them open for more than a few seconds at a time before having to reopen them. He’s a big alien, like bigger than all of the others, since he went through some sort of weird transformation that turned him into an even bigger version of an already big species. He’s actually a giant teddy bear on the inside, at least according to Deja. Sure, he’s killed other demons for her, but we ignore that part when we talk about how sweet he is.

“Is Deja awake?” I ask, staring up at him and rocking back on my heels.

“Is she?” Dath tries to register my question and then shakes his head. “No, it is early. She will not be awake for a while. Are you alone?” He looks behind me like he might see Vex or Rallan somewhere nearby.

I wiggled out of Rallan’s grip early this morning. It was more difficult than I thought it’d be. He likes holding me to him when we sleep, which was annoying at first when I was still trying to tell myself that I didn’t want to be with him. Now, it’s like sleeping with a weighted blanket that keeps me cool enough not to sweat through all

of my water. It's inconvenient when I'm trying to sneak out of the house.

Thankfully, Rallan can sleep through almost anything and didn't budge when I wrenched myself free of him.

I don't know where Vex is this morning. He doesn't sleep, so he could be doing all kinds of work. I'm more surprised he hasn't found me by now. Rallan, I at least know, is a deep sleeper, but I thought Vex would be close. Maybe he was, and my sneaking was extra successful. I tried to get to Deja's house without either of my aliens noticing I was gone, and so far, I've been successful.

"So Deja's not awake?" I ask again, thinking maybe something might've changed in the last few seconds.

Dath's brows furrow and his lips tug downward in confusion. "No, she is still sleeping." He looks inside his house and then back down at me. "You may come sit and wait if you would like, but I am going to get back in bed with my mate."

I want to say that yes, I'll wait, but then I think about how awkward it'll be if I'm just sitting in their small workshop. I've been inside before. I'm going to be sitting on a chair that's probably right next to a table littered with drawings of my friend. Some of them will be safe for my eyes, and then there will be a whole heap that will make me never view my best friend in the same way ever again. Not to mention Deja and Dath will be sleeping probably a few feet away as I pretend not to be looking at the softcore porn that Dath draws of her.

"No, I'll just come back later," I sigh.

Dath nods as though he understands. "You are welcome anytime, but maybe wait until the clouds have lightened next time, yes?"

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave him away.

I have to force a shriek from leaving my throat when he turns his back to me to go back inside his house. Apparently, he didn’t think to move the pillow from his front to his back, and so I get an eyeful of ass that doesn’t belong to either of my mates. Dath doesn’t even seem to notice. He just closes the door and leaves me in my own mortification.

“Vex’s mate?” someone calls out to me.

I’m surprised they don’t call me Rallan’s mate since most of the demons in this tribe and the demons we brought from the other tribe all know me as being with Rallan. It doesn’t matter that I’ve told them repeatedly that I’m not with him. It’s a battle I’ve lost enough times to know to give up. Not to mention, I also kind of like it now.

I turn to see who’s called me and am surprised when it’s Ralleth walking back toward the great hall. I look around like Olivia might show up at any second because I’ve never seen them very far from one another.

He notices me looking for her and beams. “My mate is still asleep. She has been very tired these last few days and not feeling very well. I was actually searching for your mate to come take a look at her once she wakes.”

“Oh,” I frown, not liking that one of the women isn’t doing great right now.

No one has been sick since we’ve been here. Sure, some people have been hurt, but it hasn’t been anything that can’t be handled. I’d hate to know what happens if someone actually gets sick out here. It’s not like the demons have the same medicine that we had on Earth, and definitely not the advanced technology that the Hands have.

“No, no, do not worry. My mate is strong, and you would not know she is not feeling

well. She is just sick in the mornings sometimes. By lunch, she is always feeling better. She has told me not to worry, but I am her mate. How could I not?"

Realization dawns on me, and I nod my head along with what he's saying. I hope I'm keeping my expression neutral because I'm not about to be the one to explain to Ralleth that there's a chance his mate might be pregnant. I don't know for sure, obviously, and there's a chance she might also just be sick. Either way, it's not my place to say anything, so I try to look normal as I change the subject.

"Did you find him?" I ask.

"Your mate? No, not yet. I checked out by the farms because I thought he might be out there. I was going to see if Olivia was awake yet and then venture around the tribe." Ralleth pauses, his head tilting to the side in a gesture that reminds me of his brother. Rallan is more teasing and conniving than his younger brother, though. Ralleth looks at me with nothing but good intentions and kindness I don't even think he knows how to scheme. "Would you like to join me? I think it would be good for us to get to know one another since we are blood."

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead, but I'm not about to say no to learning more about Rallan through his brother. I also want to know why Ralleth is more comfortable calling me Vex's mate than Rallan's mate.

"Yeah, sure, I'll wait here while you go check on Olivia." I give him a smile, hoping that I look casual and not at all like I might be overthinking this whole thing.

Vex didn't have any family to meet on Earth. Of the few boyfriends I had, I only met one set of parents, and it was awkward. Sure, the demons are different, but I can't help but feel like Ralleth will be judging whether or not I'm a good match for his brother.

“I will be so quick,” Ralleth says with a smile that definitely must be genetic because I’ve seen the same one on his brother every single day. He sticks to his word, though, and is only in the great hall for a few minutes before joining me.

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“Olivia still asleep?” I ask.

“Very much so,” Ralleth says as he comes to stand next to me. I follow his lead and start walking deeper into the tribe. “She will be asleep until the clouds have lightened quite a bit. I normally would be as well, but I am finding it harder to sleep through the night the closer it gets to your sisters joining us.”

“Are you nervous about everything running smoothly or nervous they won’t like it here?”

I’m nervous about all of them coming. I want them to be happy in their new home, not scared or alone like I was.

Vex told me he’s offered the humans the option to come to this planet instead of staying on a dying Earth, but not a lot of women are taking him up on the offer. There are hundreds of women who want to come, but that’s way less than the thousands of women currently living in the stadium.

“I think I am worried about both,” Ralleth answers. “My brothers and the males Rallan brought from his tribe are working their hardest to make sure the tribe is prepared for new humans. There is still the chance that things do not go as we planned. Then, if everything goes well, but your sisters are not happy here, that is something I do not know if I will be able to fix.”

“I think if they’re choosing to come here, they’re at least open to finding happiness here,” I tell him, wanting to ease some of his worries.

There are a lot of conveniences of modern life on Earth that I miss, but I also know I've never felt more loved or more part of a family than I do in this tribe on this strange alien planet. So, even if it's not the same happiness I was used to on Earth, I don't think I would change anything.

"Were you open to finding happiness when you came?" Ralleth asks, his tone shifting, almost like he knows this question is personal and that my answer doesn't reflect what I think the other women might feel when they come.

"No." There's no reason to lie to him, not when he was there to witness how I acted in my first week in the tribe.

I picked fights with Alice, told Rallan I hated him loudly and on more than one occasion, and was kind of rude to everyone. I did just go through the worst breakup of my life and was abandoned on an alien planet in the middle of the forest where I could've died, but none of them knew that. I'm not exactly chatty about it to anyone besides Nia and Deja.

"I did not know what all you went through when you arrived until Rallan told us all the first night you were back in my tribe," Ralleth says after a long silence. "You are a strong female, much stronger than you should have to be."

I feel blood rush into my cheeks at his words, but I don't look up at him. I don't think I'm bad at taking compliments, but right now, when he's complimenting me on surviving, it makes me feel funny. So, I ignore it and hope the conversation switches quickly.

Thankfully, we stumble across Vex, patching up the roof of one of the houses. Ralleth grabs my elbow gently and pulls me to a stop before I call out for Vex.

"I want to tell you something before we interrupt your mate's work." Ralleth looks

around like he's unsure if he should be telling me whatever it is he wants to say. When he's sure no one is around, he speaks. "I do not know what happened on your planet with Vex. I do not know if he deserves the coldness you give him or the distance you put between yourself and him. I do know he is an honorable male, and if I may, I think you should offer him a chance to woo you."

I roll my lips between my teeth to keep my smile from splitting my lips. Ralleth looks so earnest right now, and he's pleading on behalf of a male I've already decided I'm going to give a second chance. What I want to know is why Ralleth feels this strongly about it.

"Why do you think he should woo me?" I ask, hoping I don't sound as amused as I feel. I'm curious what sort of impact Vex could've had on the demons if Ralleth's on his side.

"When he came to our tribe the first time almost a hundred days ago, the first thing he asked for was you. He did not know you were not in the tribe, and he came to speak with you."

Ralleth wrings his fingers together before kneeling so we are at eye level. He lifts his hand to sit on my shoulder and hesitates for a second like he's not sure if he's allowed to touch me. I reach up and grab his hand to lower it onto my own shoulder. I've seen plenty of demons do this with one another and their mates. It's just how they make sure the other participant in the conversation understands what they're saying is important to them.

"Every day he has been here it has been with the intention of bringing the best life to the human females that will be joining us. He has explained to me many times that if anything even slightly bad happens to them, he will bring them justice. He is a powerful male, I am sure you are aware, and he has offered his protection to all of your sisters. He has told us all this manytimes. He even speaks with the newer males

to ensure they are here for the right reasons.”

Ralleth takes a deep breath, his eyes flicking up to the roof Vex is working on before flickering back down to me.

“He hurt you, and I would never force a female to give a chance to a male who hurt them. I know his soul, though, and I know it will always belong to you. Even if you do not choose to be with him, he has told me he will make sure your sisters make it here safely, make sure you are happy with your mate, my brother, and then he will leave. I would very much like for him not to leave. He has been a good friend, and I think the tribe is safer with him here. So, maybe you find it in your human nose soul to allow him a chance to woo you, yes?”

This time, I do let my head fall back and laugh. There’s something so ridiculous about the brother of one of my mates pleading for me to give my first mate a second chance when I’ve already decided to do just that.

I know as soon as Vex realizes Ralleth and I are near. I can feel his eyes on me, and then he’s next to me. His hand wraps around Ralleth’s as he plucks the other man’s hand from my shoulder and frowns at him.

“Don’t touch my mate,” Vex says, calling me his mate with the nonchalance of someone who already knows I’ve decided to give him another chance, even though I’m pretty sure I just decided to do that this morning.

“Don’t be mean to my mate’s blood.” I turn a narrowed gaze at Vex, who’s staring at me with none of the intensity he was staring at Ralleth with.

“I can be mean to my blood whenever I want,” Vex counters, his lips ticking up in the corners when he sees my nostrils flare.

“So you are wooing her then?” Ralleth breaks the moment between us by reminding us that he’s still there. Vex turns to face him and gives him a nod. “Good, good. I was worried that Rallan would keep your mate all to himself. I am glad he is willing to share.”

I snort at the thought of Rallan being the one causing issues with sharing. Vex must feel the same because he’s looking down at me out of the corner of his eyes. There’s laughter dancing in his eyes, and it reminds me of the good times we used to have, sneaking around the stadium.

“Well, your blood needs to know if his mate’s sick,” I say, turning the topic back to why we were looking for Vex.

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“Oh?” He drops the tease in his voice. His face takes on the same seriousness he always wears when working. “What seems to be wrong?”

He motions for us to start heading back toward the great hall. Ralleth is a few feet in front of us. He’s trying to give Vex and me some semblance of privacy so we can act as mates do. I shake my head at it, but then I feel Vex’s fingers wrap in mine, and his body shifts closer.

“Olivia has been fatigued for about a week, and she is sick in the mornings. She has thrown up almost every morning, at least once before lunch. She keeps telling me she is fine, but I am not so sure,” Ralleth explains it all over his shoulder so he doesn’t see when realization falls on Vex or the smile that spreads across his face.

“I’m sure it’s nothing serious,” Vex says.

Ralleth makes a sound of acknowledgment before pretending to ignore us some more. He’s trying to give Vex a chance to woo me, even though not a lot of wooing can happen when Ralleth is here. So, I lean close to Vex and ask about Olivia.

“How happy are you?” I whisper in his ear. This is what he worked so hard for on Earth. He was looking for women who could procreate on this planet, and here he is about to confirm whether or not one of us is actually pregnant.

“New life makes me happy no matter how it comes about, Simone.” His eyes flash white for a moment.

When we were dating on Earth, Vex told me we could never have children because

there was a high chance they would be born with a connection to the collective mind. He made it clear he didn't want that life for anyone, especially not a child who didn't have a choice in being part of it or not. It's also why we can't have sex in the usual way, because his kind are highly virile when they find their fated.

Our relationship is different now. Maybe we can't have children together, but that doesn't mean we won't be able to grow our family.

"If I'm mated to both of you..." I let my words trail off, allowing Vex's mind to catch up with the implication I'm making.

I can see exactly when it does, the way his head tilts to the side just a fraction, how his whole body goes stiff for a second, and then the way his eyes glow in a way that I've only seen back on Earth when he was so happy he couldn't contain himself.

"You are teasing me right now, aren't you?" Vex asks.

It's a fair question because I haven't exactly been jumping his or Rallan's bones since we've all kind of agreed that I'm with both of them. That's what I was going to talk to Deja about this morning. I want to know if I'm making a smart decision.

Not that I think I can stay away from them for much longer. Every day, they grow on me more and more. After hearing Ralleth all but sing Vex's praises even he's growing on me way more than he should when he dumped me.

"I don't know," I tell him, answering his question honestly. I know that a part of me wants to forgive him right this second, wrap my arms around him, and get back to how we were on Earth. The part of me that was hurt is still hesitant, though. "Maybe we can talk about it?"

Vex's face softens and his smile seems genuinely happy with the offer. "I would be

honored to talk about anything with you, Simone.”

“You’ve improved on your wooing.” I bump his shoulder with mine, remembering the first morning I woke up with him in my room, and he was stumbling over his words.

“Your other mate is really good at hyping me up,” Vex leans in and tells me like it’s a secret between us. “You wouldn’t believe how many times he’s made me say affirmations about how I’m a good lover.”

“Is that what the two of you do when I leave in the morning? You chant that you’re good lovers to each other?” I ask it a bit louder.

I need Ralleth to hear it so the gossip will spread like wildfire. He’s a good leader, sure, but he’s also the most gossipy bitch I’ve ever met. Not that he’s told me anything juicy, but he tells others who tell Deja and Nia, who tell me.

“I believe this is the part where Rallan would call you an insufferable female,” Vex groans when he sees Ralleth obviously looking at us over his shoulder. Vex turns his full attention to Ralleth. “It’s not like that.”

“I do not judge. There are plenty of brothers who lie with one another. There is nothing to be ashamed of,” Ralleth says, turning his head forward as though it makes up for his snooping. Vex shoots me a glare that tells me I’m going to pay for this in some way.

“I’m going to see if Rallan is awake,” I say cheerily as I untangle my fingers from Vex’s and turn down the path toward our home. Vex reaches up and grabs my upper arm before I get too far, a look of worry crossing his features.

“I have to go back to Earth today.” My heart drops as his words register. “Only for a

couple of days, and I'll be back. Rallan already knows. It's why we wanted to talk to you yesterday."

Something about his words makes the entirety of the world stop all movements before it crashes into me, telling me he's leaving me—again.

"So, you wanted to get me used to having you back in my life before ditching me again." I spit the words out, all the good feelings I had before he told me, leaving me in an instant. "I wondered why you guys didn't try to fuck me last night. Have a change of heart of getting off just to leave?"

"Simone, it's not like that." Vex runs his fingers through his hair, his eyes darting to where Ralleth is standing. He isn't facing us, but he's doing it on purpose to give us the illusion of privacy. He's waiting to return to his mate. Vex will go with him. He can't stop himself from caring about this tribe and its future.

"What's it like?" I ask. "Because from my perspective, you said a lot of sweet words yesterday to get me naked, and now you're leaving again."

"I'll be back," Vex snaps, his cool composure cracking under my anger. His illusion slips as tendrils of his energy spider across the ground near his feet. "You don't trust me, fine, but you trust Rallan, and he knows I'm coming back. So just go crawl back into bed with him, and when I come back, maybe you'll stop treating me like I'm the worst thing that's ever happened to you."

My cheeks feel like an inferno as he calls me out on how poorly I've been treating him. My nose crinkles as my teeth pull back. "Before you, I didn't know what a broken heart felt like."

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“Before me, you were dying to crowd crush!” Vex yells.

I lunge for him before I can stop myself. I’m stopped by an arm wrapping around my abdomen, and Vex is stopped from coming at me by Ralleth placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Get your hands off of me!” I scream and kick at whoever is pulling me back down the trail away from Vex and Ralleth.

“You are extra feisty today,” Rallan chuckles behind me. “I do not think Vex can handle you when you are this upset with him, so come take your aggression out on me.”

Vex tenses, his gaze watching as Rallan pulls me further away from him. I don’t know if he can hear us or not, but he looks completely deflated. Ralleth is saying something to him, and then they’re turning to walk back toward the great hall.

As soon as the door to our home closes, I feel the weight of what I just did. My body goes limp in Rallan’s hold. I turn to face him, burying my face against him as he wraps his arms tight around me. I don’t stop the tears from falling. I don’t feel weak when I finally let my emotions through. I feel empty and broken. More than anything else, I feel like my heart is breaking again.

“He’s leaving me,” I cry against Rallan’s tunic.

I should hate Rallan for laughing at me. I should hate the low rumble that vibrates through his chest. Instead, it brings me comfort because if he’s this calm about all of

it, maybe it'll be okay.

"I think you need to show him you care for him in a much different way. When he comes back, maybe you ride his cock. That would make me feel so close to my mate. Maybe it will make up for how you tried to rip his soul from his body today."

"You're disgusting," I mumble. Instead of pushing him away, I pull him tighter to me and let him keep being his annoying self until my tears finally calm.

16

Rallan

I'm sitting up in bed, tracing lines up and down Simone's back when Vex returns from his meeting on Earth. I hear him stomping around in the bedroom next to ours before he comes in. His eyes fall on how naked I managed to convince Simone to get tonight.

I promised her back scratches until she fell asleep and her tunic came flying off. I also may have known Vex was coming back tonight, and I wanted to see if he would be upset with his mate naked and wrapped up in my arms.

"Clever." Vex rolls his eyes as he leans in the doorway. He crosses his arms over his chest, and his lips flatten into a tight line. I don't stop stroking Simone's back or watching as she breathes in and out. After a few moments of silence, Vex decides to say more to me. "Is she still mad at me?"

"She was not mad at you," I tell him, knowing he might not believe me. "She was scared because her soul clings to you even though I am right here and eager for her to need me just as much."

Vex looks taken back for a moment, before he relaxes against the doorframe even more. “What did you two do while I was gone?”

“Well, she used many colorful words to describe me and my neverending need to be inside of her. Then we worked on the houses, and at night, we did everything the same as always. Why? Did you think I was going to bed her while you were away?”

“It crossed my mind,” Vex says, pushing away from the doorway to come sit on the bed with us.

“It crossed mine as well,” I tell him. It crosses my mind most moments of most days, so it is not like I am telling him anything he doesn’t already know. “She will be happy you are back.”

“Will she?” Vex looks at me, his hand reaching out to stroke Simone’s back, taking my place. I let him because he has been gone from her for many days and needs this connection.

“She cried for you when you left,” I tell him.

It is not that I want him to feel bad. I want him to realize that our mate cares for him just as much as we care for her. She may be terrible at showing it, but her soul needs us both more than she will ever tell us.

“I didn’t want her to cry.”

“I know this, and she knows this,” I say. “She went looking for you right after you left. She wanted to apologize for what she said.”

“She doesn’t need to apologize,” Vex says, his teeth clenching tight.

“I told her this, but when she decides something, she is not one to be easily swayed.”

“Well, I’m sorry I wasn’t here to listen to her apology.”

I wave away the worried expression that is now on his face. He needs not worry because I have handled it. Just as I handle most of our mate’s fiery moods. “I convinced her the best way to apologize to you would be to bed us. I think she was very receptive to my suggestions.”

Simone snorts. It’s the first sound that I’ve heard from her in a long time. I look down at her with narrowed eyes and crinkled brows. How long has she been awake?

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“We know you’re awake now,” Vex sighs. “You can stop pretending.”

“If I stop, will you keep rubbing my back?” Simone’s voice is muffled against my abdomen.

“I’ll rub your back for as long as you want, so long as it means you want me near you,” Vex says, his voice filled with the conviction of a male who has been without his mate for a long time.

“Plus, the longer he does it, the longer I can feel your tits against me,” I add, making sure they are aware that I am still part of this mating.

Simone shifts on top of me, probably now aware of just how sensitive her breasts are and how much she likes how they feel against my scales. I can feel her nipples hardening against me, telling me where they are pressed against me.

“You are aroused at me reminding you of how bare you are?” I ask, teasing her because her other mate is back, and maybe we can do something about how badly we all need one another.

“How bare is she?” Vex asks, his eyes falling down her body. The blanket is thrown over her lower half, but she is without her shorts, just like she is every night. Vex knows how she sleeps, so he is only asking as a way to get Simone even more worked up.

“Pull the blanket down so you can see,” I tell him. I interlock my fingers in Simone’s so she cannot try to hide from us now that we’ve finally gotten her naked, in bed, and

willing.

“Did you two plan this?” Simone asks, her voice higher pitched as the blanket is dragged down her body. Her fingers flex between mine, telling me I was a smart male in holding her hands. Her backside is pleasant to look at, but I know the front of her is even better. What I really want is to flip her over, spread her thighs, and get a better view of what’s between her legs.

“I didn’t plan any of this,” Vex says as his fingertips trail further down her back until he’s cupping her backside. Tendrils of his energy splinter from his grip and skate along her skin. Simone moans against me, her lower half wiggling in Vex’s hold on her.

“I planned it all, and it ends with us both filling your womb,” I say proudly, not caring at all that either of them might think it too forward.

I have been without my mate, without any relief for my poor disused cock, for too many days. It is time, and even Simone must know this because she’s moaning and nodding her head like she is eager to be filled by two males.

“Before we do that, I think I need to repent for how I treated our mate,” Vex says, his grip tightening on her hips as he flips her onto her back.

I hiss as I watch her arch her back and show herself off to us. Even Vex doesn’t seem upset about me touching her, admiring her.

I told him he just needs to be close to her when it happens, and he will be fine. I think he is finally believing me because when I go to cup her breasts, he does not say anything. No, his eyes glow in delight, and then he is crawling in between our mate’s legs and spreading her wide.

“Repent with your mouth,” I tell him. I let one of my hands slide down Simone’s stomach until it is between her legs. She is wet and warm and so needy for us. I run my fingers through her slickness as a hiss escapes my lips. When I am able to silence it, I spread her lower lips with my hand. “I have wanted to see how you can pleasure her with your mouth for many days.”

Simone gasps as she realizes that I want to hold her open while her other mate helps her find her pleasure on his tongue. Her gaze becomes glassy, and her lids heavy as she relaxes against me.

Vex doesn’t need much prompting before he grabs her thighs and holds her tight to him. He works her like a male who knows his female inside and out. He has been with her for much longer than me. He has had time to catalog what she enjoys and to master it.

He flicks his tongue over the bundle of pleasure between her legs, and she gasps and moans his name. He sucks it into his mouth, growling softly as his tongue laps and suckles at her wetness. Simone cries out for him over and over until she is begging him not to stop. He pulls back, his chin covered in her slick and a wicked glow in his eyes.

“Do you want to see something that will make her scream?” Vex asks me, his eyes burning bright as he stares down at Simone and how she’s trying to reach for him to pull him back down to her core.

“More than anything,” I whisper, not knowing what it is that I am agreeing to witness.

Vex’s true body emerges in an instant. It shifts form until almost all of Simone’s body is covered in glowing white tendrils of energy.

The glowing tendrils begin to vibrate, and Simone throws her head back to scream her pleasure. I do not care much that I have no idea what he is or what he is doing. I only care that he can make our mate feel like this.

“Hold her through it,” Vex’s disconnected voice speaks from somewhere as his body continues to vibrate across Simone’s skin.

She writhes underneath me, her mouth open in a silent plea to Vex not to stop. I wrap one arm over her chest, holding her against my body. The other moves to her head to stroke her cheek as she starts to come down from whatever it was Vex just did to her.

“So, so good, fuck, so good,” Simone whimpers and moans as she starts to regain some of her ability to think and speak. Her whole body goes limp in my hold, and her eyes flutter open to look up at me. She smiles a small genuine smile that has my cock straining against her back.

Vex appears between her legs as his tendrils slide from her body and make up his body again. “Your turn.”

“I cannot do that,” I say with wide eyes. “I do not even know how I can compete.”

Simone wriggles in my hold until she is on her knees. She locks her arms around my neck, bringing her face close to mine. Vex is right behind her, a hand on her lower back, like he needs to touch her so that he does not forget that she is with both of us and does not need to be upset.

“He can’t fuck me, Rallan,” Simone says my name, and all other thoughts leave my mind. “He’s not like you in that way. So you need to do that for both of you.”

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“Say my name again,” I beg, my hand going up to her neck, pulling her mouth close to mine.

I do not care about the reason Vex cannot bed her in the same way I can because he can do things I cannot do. Simone barely gets the first sound of my name out of her mouth before I kiss her, or more like I flick my tongue into her mouth and swallow up my name on her lips.

Simone pushes at my shoulders, and when I have had my fill of her, I let her pull away.

“Fuck me, Rallan,” Simone says with a determination in her eyes that would have me releasing this instant if I were a weakermale. “Please,” she begs, and I can do nothing but give her everything she needs.

17

Simone

Rallan grabs my hips and lifts me up to straddle his groin. He’s hard and cool underneath me, and I want nothing more than to feel him inside of me.

“Please,” I murmur against his lips.

Yes, this stupid male has me begging him for him after all this time of teasing and teasing. He should be jumping at the opportunity to be with me, but he’s just grinding himself against me.

“Calm,” he murmurs against my ear as he lifts me again to slide me down his length. “If it is true that he cannot be inside you, then you will need much preparation to take me.”

“No,” I whine as he slides through my folds again. I’m soaking wet, and each ridge of his cock against my clit only has me needing him more. “I want you now.”

“Simone,” he chides me. His eyes fill with amusement as he grabs one of my hands and brings it down to his length. He wraps my fingers around it, and it’s then that I realize my fingers can’t reach one another. My eyes go wide as Rallan keeps my hand trapped on his cock, using his own hand to force me into jerking him off.

“You’re going to kill me,” I whimper and lean into him, letting him use me to find his pleasure.

I don’t even know what else to think about other than I’m about to be torn in two and I can’t think of a better way to go. Vex’s grip on my shoulders tightens and releases like he’s giving me the most pathetic massage ever. I turn to look up at him, and he gives me a chastised look.

“Sorry, I just need to know you’re here,” he murmurs, relaxing his hold again before gripping me tighter.

“You can wrap your body around her for all I care,” Rallan says, his focus shifting lower as he moves one of his hands between my legs and slips a finger inside me. He hisses and squeezes his eyes shut as his cock twitches in my hold.

“Goddess help me,” Rallan says through gritted teeth. “You are going to be the death of me.”

“I would hope so,” I say with a smile as he starts pumping his finger in and out of me.

Vex is still right behind me, his hand kneading my shoulder muscles over and over until he lets out a snarl. “I’m moving her down your body because I need to be behind her, and neither of us wants me grinding on you.”

“Fine, fine,” Rallan says, his finger pulling out of me before sinking in again. My breath catches each time he does it, and by the time he adds a second, I can feel a second orgasm building up inside of me.

“Lean back against Vex,” Rallan says as he removes his hand from me and grabs my thighs to switch up how I’m sitting on him.

He brings my feet flat on the bed on either side of his abdomen, and Vex grabs my chest to pull me back. Rallan pulls his cock out from underneath me and lets it slap wetly between my thighs. I let out a moan of pleasure as Rallan uses the tip of his cock to stimulate my clit. Rocking it into me over and over again, I arch myself into him.

“Please, fuck, Rallan, please.”

His resolve must crumble with how much I’m saying his name because his eyes flash red for a second before he looks behind me to where Vex is holding me.

“I might hurt her,” Rallan says, his voice tight with restraint.

“You won’t,” Vex’s voice is dark and gravelly as he answers. He’s not lying, or at least he doesn’t sound like he is. Either he has more belief in my body’s ability to take Rallan, or he trusts Rallan to go slow with me. From the way Rallan’s body tenses and his eyes crinkle I think he knows it’s Vex’s way of warning him away from being too rough with me.

“Deep breaths, mate,” Rallan says as he presses the tip of himself to my entrance. He

closes his eyes again, his breathing ragged as he starts to press inside of me. “Hold her still,” Rallan hisses, his fingers pressing hard into my hips as I try to wiggle my way further down his length. Vex tightens his grip on my chest and holds me against him.

“Go slow this time,” Vex whispers in my ear. “I’m struggling with sharing you, but I’ll get used to it. Just give me a second to acclimate.”

“But I feel so empty,” I whimper and turn my face so I can press my lips against Vex’s. He growls as his eyes flash white, and then he loosens his hold, letting me slide further down Rallan before he can stop me.

“Fuck,” I gasp against Vex’s mouth, and it seems to break all of Rallan’s composure.

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“She’s mine,” Rallan’s eyes flash red as he tugs my hips down, impaling me on him in one swift motion that has me throwing my head back and crying out his name. Vex doesn’t like that because he’s grabbing the back of my head and pulling my lips back to his.

“Kiss him while you ride me,” Rallan snarls and bites his teeth at us.

He uses his hold on me to lift me up and slam me back down on him over and over as the pleasure continues to burn into an inferno in my core. Rallan fucks me so hard I can’t keep kissing Vex for very long before he’s just swallowing every cry and moan straight from my lungs.

“How long has it been since you’ve had a cock inside you?”

“Too long,” I cry out. Tears prick my lashes as my orgasm builds into something that I need more desperately than I’ve ever needed anything. “It’s been so long, please, Rallan, don’t stop.”

“He’s not stopping,” Vex growls against my neck as he sucks the skin hard enough to bruise. I cry out again, this time my nails go to Vex’s back, scratching down his human skin in ways that would hurt him if he were like me. He looks up from the crook of my neck, the light in his eyes dulled, telling me he’s in control of himself. “Fuck her harder, Rallan, she can take it.”

I cry out as Rallan redoubles his efforts. I shatter on top of him as my orgasm tears through me. Rallan keeps a steady rhythm of fucking me as Vex holds me up and cradles me through the high of my orgasm. As I start to come down, I feel Rallan

twitching inside of me, his hands holding me flush to him as he fills me to the brim with his come.

My tears aren't sad tears at all, just really good sex tears, and neither man worries about them. Rallan breathes deep and hard before rolling me off of him and lying me down on the bed.

"I will get some rags to clean her," he says with a nod to himself before disappearing through the door. I stare at him as he leaves, my eyes on his ass because I do love his butt. Vex laughs when he catches me ogling my other mate and then turns serious when I look at him. He traces my hairline with the tip of his fingers before pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"One more thing you need to do," Vex murmurs against my temple as he reaches between my legs. He inserts two of his fingers, thrusting them in and out as though to remind me that he can still fuck me, even if it's not in the same way.

"Do you need to claim her?" Rallan asks as he reenters our room. "I know this was hard for you, so I can watch as you remind her who her first mate is."

"No," Vex says, even as he fucks his fingers into me until I'm moaning his name. He pulls them out when he's happy with how I'm back to being needy for an orgasm and brings his fingers up to my mouth. "She still needs to claim you."

Rallan hisses long and hard as Vex traces my lips with his fingers that are covered in my wetness and Rallan's come. I open my mouth, sticking my tongue out to show I'm more than eager to claim Rallan as mine. Vex presses his fingers to my tongue, and I wrap my lips around them, sucking them clean.

"I'm Rallan's," I say, turning my gaze up to meet his and not missing how he's looking down at me with so much devotion it's almost scary. "I'm yours."

“Insufferable female,” Rallan murmurs as he tosses the rags off to the side. “I have been yours since I first saw you out in the trees. Vex may not need to claim you again, but it turns out that I do.”

He crawls between my legs, his fingers making contact with my aching core before his cock. “Can you take me?”

“She can take you,” Vex says, standing from the bed so he can lean against the wall near the headboard. “Pretty sure she wants to ride your cock on her own. Let her bounce on it so you can see how those pretty tits move.”

“Vex,” I snap at him, not needing him to get Rallan more worked up than he already is with the mating just happening. Of course, it’s too late for that, and Rallan’s eyes are red. He’s probably jealous that I’ve used Vex to come in ways that didn’t need a penis. I’m rolled from my back onto Rallan’s abdomen in one swift motion.

“Do that to me, please,” Rallan says, blinking a few times until his red eyes are back to being black. “I would like to watch your tits bounce for me, and I would like it now if possible.”

“Only because I owe you for being mean to you for so long,” I grab the base of Rallan’s cock and slide onto it, taking it slow to make sure I’m not going to hurt myself by fucking him again so soon. He bottoms out inside of me, and then I start to bounce on him, rocking on his cock so I can grind my clit into him and get enough of a bounce so my tits are jiggling as I move.

“The death of me,” Rallan groans as he fists the blankets at his sides. “You, Simone, are going to be the death of me.”

And I try to be. I ride him until he’s coming inside of me, and then Vex is telling him of another way he might want to fuck me. Over and over again, they make up for all

our lost time. When it's over, I'm sweaty, sticky, and sore from the tip of my toes to my forehead. I fall to the bed after my sixth orgasm and do not get back up until I wake up in the morning.

18

Simone

"The only ones left in the great hall are the human females and their mates," Rallan says as I walk up to where he's speaking with Vex. They're going over a list that Vex has been checking things off of all day. "The unmated males are all outside, hopefully in their own homes."

"They've been warned not to overstep?" Vex asks, his attention planted on Rallan even though he's talking to about five others.

"I have warned them, Ralleth has warned them, and there are a few others who are unmated out there making sure they behave themselves," Rallan answers, his eyes crinkling in the corners when he sees me step next to Vex and slide my hand in his.

"Good," Vex tries to keep the conversation going over what else needs to be done, but I've thrown him off his game now.

Rallan shakes his head, giving me a knowing look. I act bashful, not wanting them to know that I know just how much I affect them both.

Vex clears his throat, trying to retain his composure. "I'll be on Earth for approximately two hours to ensure all of the women come through. Is there anything you all need from me before I leave?"

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“We can handle everything on this side of the portal,” Ralleth answers for all of the others. “My brothers will be honorable males, and we will get all of the females situated in their rooms for the night. Tomorrow, we might have more issues, but that will just be getting everyone acquainted with the new rules and their new life.”

“Everything will be fine,” Rallan says, placing a hand on Vex’s shoulder before turning toward the other demons. “I think we should all go and double check to make sure there are enough tunics for the humans, yes?”

The others don’t seem very interested in checking tunics for probably the fifth time, but when Ralleth and Rallan both nudge them away from Vex and me, they leave with a flicker of understanding.

I wait until they’re far enough away that they won’t hear our conversation. Not that it’s a bad conversation, but I don’t want them to hear me tell Vex why he should come back on time.

“Is everything okay?” Vex asks, turning to face me. He wraps his free arm around me and pulls me into a soft hug. His lips find my temple and he presses a kiss to my forehead before pulling away.

“I just want to make sure you’re going to come back,” I say, feeling the needling anxiety that I get whenever I think of Vex leaving me. I know it’s leftover worries from when I first came to this planet. Still, every time he leaves, I worry it’ll be the time he doesn’t come back.

“I’ll always come back for you,” Vex says, his eyes hardening. He hates my anxiety

about his devotion as much as I do.

“I know, I know,” I say, trying to calm him and my own nerves. “But just to make sure you know how much I want you to come back.” I lean in close to his ear and suck his lobe into my mouth. He groans softly as I drag my teeth across it and then pull back so I can whisper in his ear. “If you make it back tonight, I’ve promised Rallan he can tie me up.”

Vex’s eyes flash bright white, and his grip on me tightens. “Well, I better not let either of you down.”

“You better not.” I bite my lips and then press them to his. He growls low in his throat, holding me tight to him as he claims my mouth as his.

I can feel him breaking apart, his energy skating along my cheeks and up my arms. He groans into my mouth before pulling himself away from me.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” Vex laughs as he shakes his head and presses his fingers to his temples, trying to get his mask back in place.

“Trouble with who?” I arch a brow at him. “I’m pretty sure the only one allowed to get you in trouble is me.”

“Yes, and if I’m late getting to Earth, I’ll be late getting back,” he tells me, squeezing me one last time before dropping his hand from me. “You have promises to keep.” He doesn’t wait for me to say something else before turning from me and making his way toward the great hall doors. “I’ll see you tonight!” he calls behind him loud enough that plenty of others are turning their attention to us.

“You told him,” Rallan asks, surprising me with how close he is when I just watched him go somewhere else with the other demons. He sees the confusion on my face and

explains himself. “I came back over here when he was putting his tongue in your mouth. You know I enjoy watching that.”

“You’re an idiot,” I laugh and lean against him. “But yes, I did tell him.”

“Good, then you can stop worrying and come help me with getting the rest ready for your sisters.” Rallan tugs me close to him before dragging me toward the tables we’ve set up near where the portal will appear. “We need to set out clothing for everyone and then make sure all of the rooms are ready. There should be plenty of work to keep your mind off Vex being gone.”

“Thank you.” I bump his hip with mine, smiling up at him. He gives me a confused look, probably not used to me saying nice things. “For trying to get my mind off of him being gone.”

Rallan shakes his head. “Thank me with your body tonight.”

I roll my eyes, but it doesn’t stop the butterflies from exploding in my abdomen every time he says something like that.

“Out, out!” Rallan herds the other males toward one of the tables in the dining hall that they’re allowed to be at. It’s on the other side of the partitions that we have set up to separate the entirety of the dining hall from the great hall entrance. Once all of the males make it to the table and sit down, Rallan moves the last partition so that the dining hall is blocked off.

“If you need anything, you only need to call for one of us!” Rallan yells from the other side of the partition. I wince at how loud he is like he thinks that the flimsy partitions also block sound somehow.

“Will do,” I call back to him, not daring to yell as loud as him even though it’d be

funny.

“Oh, also, tell us when the portal opens!” he calls just as loud, and I think he must be trying to be funny. There’s no way he thinks he needs to be that loud. “We are all curious!”

“Yeah, you got it,” I respond before walking away from the partition and going to sit with the other women while we wait for the portal to appear.

“Do any of you guys know how to make a clock?” Kendra asks as she picks at the hem of her tunic.

“Like a whole ass clock? With gears and stuff?” Nia asks. I have to give her credit for not busting out laughing and Kendra credit for not taking the questions as insults.

“I’m just saying life would be a little easier if we had some clocks to tell the time.” Kendra smiles, her face staining a soft pink at the realization of how silly her question is now that she’s said it out loud.

“Ignore my sister. She’s a little stupid when she’s anxious,” Diane teases and wraps an arm around Kendra.

“I imagine the portal will open soon,” I say, rolling my shoulders and trying to drive away some of my anxieties. We’re all nervous about the new humans coming. We want them to love this place like we do because if they don’t, they’re still trapped here forever. “Vex said he wanted everyone here before nightfall in case someone gets lost like I did.”

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“Did you ever think this is what life was going to be like when the Hands made us all do that stupid vote on whether or not to send us here?” Olivia asks. She sits with her head resting on her hands, staring at where the portal will open.

“Fuck no,” Skylar throws her head back and laughs. “I was so scared when they told us we were going, and then you went and voted yes and made it so all of us had to vote yes, too.”

“Oh, I was so pissed at you for that,” Diane adds, turning her attention to Olivia. “You went and martyred yourself, and then I had to, too, or I’d look like I was being a baby about the whole thing.”

“Who was it that flipped the camera off?” Nia asks, looking around at all of us.

Skylar groans and tries to cover her smile with her hand. “I was mad, okay? It was not my finest moment.”

“I went back to my room and cried for hours,” Alice says. When none of us are surprised, she huffs. “You could at least pretend that’s out of the ordinary for me.”

“We could, but then we’d all be liars,” I say, giving her shoulder a soft shove. Alice and I were not friends when I first arrived. In fact, I was surprised when she didn’t hate me. I guess a part of my tough love rubbed off on her in a good way and she was able to finally tell her alien man that she wanted to be with him. I mean, she got kidnapped before she did, but still, I like to think I had a hand in getting them together.

“Oh, I think they’re coming!” Deja stands from her seat, her fingers wringing in front of her. We all jump to our feet and watch the air, hoping Deja is right because all of this waiting is exhausting.

As if on cue, the portal begins to glow a few feet away from where we’ve set up the closest table. We all move at once, going to our designated duties. Kendra and Diane are on tunic and short grabbing duty while Nia, Deja, Olivia, Skylar, Alice, and I are grabbing women as they come through the portal and getting them to a chair so they can sit while they wait for their eyesight to return.

I take a deep, shaky breath, my lips rolling between my teeth as I wait for the first new person to come through. One second, there’s no one, and then we have our newest member stumbling through and blindly reaching out for something to hold onto.

“I got you,” Olivia says as she takes the woman’s hand in hers. “You’re safe. Let me get you a chair. Just follow me.”

Kendra runs toward them with a tunic and shorts that should fit. She’s just setting them in the woman’s hands when a second woman comes through, and this time, Skylar is there to guide her to a chair.

Over and over we help new women get adjusted to being in their new home. I forget about Vex not being here. I forget about the demons on the other side of the partition. I forget about everything other than helping the new women find a home in this place. Because there’s so much happiness to be found here.

1 Year Later

“I think I am going to put a babe in you,” I say as I thrust into Simone.

She had barely woken from her slumber when I rolled her underneath me on her stomach and found a nice home for my cock inside of her. She lets out the most wonderful sounds in the mornings when she wakes right before a nice hard lovemaking session.

“Hm?” Simone groans as she tries to move her head to the side so she can look at me as I thrust into her with a bit more power. I always start slow because I do not want to injure my little mate, but she has grown accustomed to me at this point. It does not take many soft, sweet thrusts before she opens for me, and I can take her in the way, we both love so much.

“A babe, in your womb,” I grunt as I feel her backside slap against my hips. I hiss at the feeling of her soft and compliant underneath me, my thrusts scooting her up the bed as I plow into her nice and hard. “I want to put one there.”

“A baby?” Simone asks, her words still groggy with sleep. I would find it insulting that I haven’t woken her fully with how hard I’m fucking her, but I also know this has been our routine for many, many days. Perhaps she is too used to it, and I will need to adjust how I make love to her in the mornings. Maybe I will have Vex come do the thing he does that exhausts our mate.

I sit up, my cock pulling out of Simone as I reach for her hips to lift her onto her knees. She arches her back to give me easier access, and I slide back inside of her. I love how she grips me as I pull out just to slide back in.

“Rallan,” Simone gasps my name as her pussy begins to flutter around my cock. I smile to myself, knowing my mate will wake up fully with a good morning orgasm.

There is no better to wake up, surely. Her fingers twist in the blanket, her legs shaking as her muscles grow taut. She is tense with anticipation as I keep a steady rhythm. "Please, please, don't stop." She is sounding much more coherent now, and I reward that by doing as she asks.

"Fuck!" Simone cries out as I feel her spasming around my cock. I hump her harder, falling onto my hands so I am laid over her back as I thrust harder, deeper, wanting to make sure she remembers who her pussy belongs to. She moans and whimpers as her orgasm ends, and I still continue my lovemaking. "Rallan, please."

"Please, what?" I ask, knowing I can get her to beg for almost anything right now. She is at her most complacent and kind right after she has shattered on my cock.

"Please put a babe in me," she whines a high-pitched sound.

My whole body stills. Well, almost my whole body. My cock is following her command as it releases every last drop of my seed deep within her. The rest of me? Well, it is still trying to figure out how to breathe when our mate has stolen all of our breath.

"I think you broke him," Vex laughs from the doorway.

I don't turn to face him. I can barely even control my body right now. I am too stunned at the most beautiful words I have ever heard coming from my mate's lips. Maybe she has broken me.

"Rallan?" Simone looks over her shoulder and sees nothing but my chest since I am still leaning over her. She shimmies my cock out of her and rolls onto her back. "Are you okay?" She grabs my neck in her arms and drags my attention down to her face.

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“I—“ I cannot think of what to say.

“You should just tell him because it might make him break a little more and fix whatever’s going on with him right now,” Vex says, walking closer to the bed and sitting next to me.

He puts a hand on my forehead, touching it like he does to the human females when they are not feeling well. He has told me many times he has no idea what they think he’s doing when he does it but that it makes them feel better.

“I am not broken,” I mumble, finally able to move my limbs.

I lean back until I’m sitting on my knees and eye Simone suspiciously as she spreads her legs in front of me, all but showing off how she is ready to take me again. I place a hand on her abdomen, wanting to see it swell with my young. It would be the greatest honor. One I would cherish.

“Did you mean it?” I ask, tilting my head to the side and hoping my mate knows I cannot take her teasing in this. I can handle it in most things, but this would hurt me greatly if it were turned into a jest.

“Oh, now you have to tell him. He looks so sad,” Vex laughs and pats me on the shoulder before leaning back against the headboard and crossing his feet at the ankles. “Come on, I have appointments to make, and I want to see what he does.”

“See what I do when?” I ask. I look between Simone and Vex as I try to figure out what they are talking about.

Simone grabs my face between her palms stroking my cheeks as she forces me to look deep into her eyes. “I want your young, Rallan.”

Her hand moves to cover mine on her abdomen. I swallow deeply, wanting to take her again and make sure she is carrying my young before the day is over. She is smiling at me right now, though. A mischievous smile that tells me there is something she has been keeping from me.

She tilts her face up toward mine, and I bring my lips down for her to kiss. “I’m going to have your young, Rallan.”

A hiss burns through my chest at her statement, and I can’t help but turn my eyes to Vex for confirmation. “How long?”

“She had me run tests last night,” Vex answers, not hiding anything more from me. “She told me she was telling you this morning.”

I look down at my little mate, who will soon be swollen and round with my young. She smiles up at me like she is blessed to be carrying my babe when it is me who is the most blessed.

“You deserve a reward for this,” I murmur before grabbing Vex by the shoulder and dragging him to take my spot between our mate’s legs. “Do the thing where she forgets her name.”

Simone opens her mouth to argue, but Vex beats her to it. “It would be my honor,” he says as he turns into a wriggling mass of glowing energy that brings our mate the most amazing of pleasures.

“Fuck, I love you,” Simone groans before she loses the ability to speak. Her eyes flare open, looking straight into mine. “Both of you. I love you both so much.”

“Shh.” I stroke her cheek as Vex’s body covers hers almost entirely. “We love you too. Now let Vex show you how much.”

She throws her head back as Vex’s body begins to vibrate. When he finishes with her I’ll hold her until she remembers the world, and then I will tell her how happy I am to have a young with her.

20

Simone's Epilogue

5 Years Later

I waddle more than walk toward the great hall. Technically, I’m supposed to be in bed resting since I’m so close to going into labor. I haven’t even felt a fake contraction yet, and I know what they feel like after I almost murdered Rallan for getting me pregnant with Savi.

The pain of that first birth seemed to disappear when I thought about having a second, but now that this baby is about to be born, I’m remembering with brand new clarity just how much I hated being in labor for almost two full days.

I push those thoughts out of my head, determined to find Rallan, Vex, and Savi because I need to see my boys right this second. I knew I was going to be alone in the house when I told them I wanted to read and have alone time this evening. I got bored of that after about five minutes and wanted my boys back. Unfortunately for me, it’s Rallan’s turn to help out in chaperoning the mating ceremony. Vex told him he would help so I could have the alone time I thought I wanted.

The great hall is filled with humans and demons when I enter. Normally, on the first day of the mating ceremony, there are fewer people inside, but it’s a particularly cold

night. Well, as cold as it can be on a planet whose lowest temperature is like eighty degrees.

I smile as I look around, one hand on my abdomen, rubbing soft circles to soothe my babe as I look around and enjoy seeing so many happy couples and throuples and, well, whatever groups of four or more are called.

“Simone!” Olivia comes walking over to me, her daughter clinging to the back of her skirt and tugging on it for her mother’s attention. Olivia bends down to grab her and hefts her into her arms. “Are you looking for your mates? I think they’re still back there with the males, but they haven’t started yet if you wanted to go talk with them.”

“Who’s with the women tonight?” I ask, not wanting to step on any toes if I interrupt the mating ceremony. It isn’t a very formal affair, but the ones in charge of it take it seriously and want the males who go through it to take it seriously, too.

“It’s Nia tonight, so she’ll be happy to see you.” Olivia looks around until her eyes snag on someone that she waves over. “Go with your father. He’s stronger than me, and you’re getting heavy,” Olivia says to her daughter as she nuzzles her face close to hers and places a kiss on her forehead. Ralleth takes their daughter easily with one arm and wraps Olivia up in his other. “Need me to show you, or are you good to go on your own?”

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“Oh, I can find it on my own,” I tell her, giving her a soft smile. I’ve chaperoned my own share of the mating ceremonies, so I know which room the first-day sniffing is done in. “You guys have a good night,” I call over my shoulder, not missing how Olivia and Ralleth are already busy chatting with one another.

I laugh to myself and then think good for them. I know when I’m around my mates, everyone else disappears. That goes double for when Savi wants my attention. He’s my favorite little guy, and soon, he’s going to have a sibling that I’m going to love just as much.

I take quiet steps up to the door where the mating ceremony will be held. I don’t hear any sounds for a few seconds and I think that maybe I’m even earlier than I thought I was.

I peek around the corner and jump when I see a room full of demons, all being absolutely silent. Some of their eyes go wide when they see me, and Vex and Rallan both turn to face me to see what the others are worried about.

Vex holds a finger up to his lips, telling me to be quiet, as Rallan continues to bounce in place with Savi in the sling strapped to his chest. I tiptoe closer to them, curious about why they’re all being so quiet. Even all the unmated males in the room are quiet and watching us.

“Why are we being silent?” I whisper when I’m close enough to Vex and Rallan.

“Your son is not feeling well,” Rallan says, giving me a smirk because he knows he only calls Savi my child when he’s being extra fussy. So he might get that from his

mother. I'm not surprised it's genetic.

Vex steps up behind me so he can rest his chin on my shoulder as he whispers directly into my ear. "He's cried nonstop for the last hour. He's not feeling well, and he's very unhappy about it."

"So you guys are having the mating ceremony in silence?" I ask, looking around the room at the males who don't look put out by it. I know I'd feel cheated if I was looking forward to finding my mate and had to be extra quiet because of a needy child.

Technically, there's no talking during the sniffing portion of the mating ceremony, but before and afterward, the participants are allowed to talk amongst each other.

"It's been postponed until we got him to sleep," Rallan whispers, his hand cupping the back of Savi's neck as he continues to rock him in his arms. "We just sent word to Beren's mate that she can bring the humans."

"Oh, just let me take him," I reach for Savi, but Rallan wraps his arms tight around our babe. I narrow my eyes on Rallan and debate whether or not I'm about to fight him on this.

"You shouldn't have to ruin their night because of our child," I emphasize the word 'our' because Savi's stubbornness comes from both of us, and Rallan can't deny that.

"He is not ruining the night," Rallan whisper-hisses the words before turning to the other males. "Is my son ruining your night?"

All of their eyes go wide at once, and they shake their heads in unison. I'm almost positive I hear one of them blow smoke up our asses by saying it's an honor to be in our son's presence.

“I’ve tried taking him,” Vex tells me, wrapping his arms low on my abdomen and holding me close to him. “Your mate refuses to be separated from his young right now.”

Rallan narrows his eyes on us, his fingers flexing against Savi’s small body, still peacefully unaware of the conversations happening in the real world. “My son is in pain. I will be the one to comfort him.”

“Such a good mate,” I run my fingertips over the scales of Rallan’s arms and smile when he relaxes. “You take care of all of us, don’t you.”

Rallan’s lips part, his breathing getting heavy. He’s probably exhausted from watching over a crying child and from having torock him nonstop for who knows how long. I turn to look at Vex, who seems to know what I’m thinking.

“We’ll handle this,” Vex says, tilting his head toward the unmated demons, still standing stock still, waiting for the ceremony to start. “How about you take our son home and try to get some rest.”

Rallan narrows his eyes on us, trying to figure out what game we’re playing. He must decide sleep is well worth it because he’s giving us a soft nod and walking out of the room with a soft bob as he continues to rock Savi in his arms.

I let out a soft laugh as I leaned into Vex’s hold. “Have you ever been in charge of one of these?”

“How hard could it be?” Vex asks, looking at the row of unmated demons, all watching us with wide eyes. “You guys know you’re going to sniff the humans and then go back home, right?”

One of the men closest to us speaks as all the others nod. “We get one sniff on each

of their necks, and after we have smelled them all, we leave to go back to our homes. We don't talk to the females again until tomorrow when we are allowed to woo them."

"See, this will be easy," Vex says. He pulls a chair out from one side of the table and motions for me to sit. "The part that's going to stress me out is how close you are to giving birth. You shouldn't be out of bed."

I roll my eyes and wave away his concern. Unfortunately for me, he might be right. It's almost like my body is waiting for the most inopportune time to start bringing this babe into the world. As soon as Nia comes walking in with all the human women, I feel my first contraction.

I suck in a sharp breath that has Vex looking at me, but I lie and tell him I'm fine. Thankfully, the contractions are spaced pretty far this early, and we're able to get through the wholemating ceremony with only a handful of contractions trying to alert me to the baby soon to enter this world.

"You should be glad I love you," Vex snarls as he turns to face me after everyone leaves the room.

"Mhm," I agree as I feel the start of another contraction. "Scold me later. Just get me home now."

Vex's eyes shine a glowing white before he wraps me in his arms and carries me through the great hall bridal style all the way back to our house. Rallan is still rocking Savi as we enter the house, and he goes into overdrive mode as soon as he realizes what's happening.

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They take care of me through another long delivery, and when it's all done, our family has grown, and Savi has a little sister.

21

Vex's Epilogue

10 Years Later

“Dad!” Vell comes running into my legs with her brother hot on her heels with a bug in his hands.

I force myself not to laugh. I will not laugh at the trauma being imposed on my daughter by her brother. I'm somewhat successful as I scoop her into my arms and set her on my shoulders, far away from the beetle Savi is now watching crawl up his scaled arms.

“What's going on?” Rallan pokes his head into the living room to make sure our children aren't killing one another.

“Savi has a bug,” Vell takes big gulps of air as she tries not to cry. She's not successful, considering I can feel the wetness of her tears on the top of my head. “He tried to touch me withit!” she wails at the last part, and I have to swallow hard to stop laughing. Rallan's forcing a frown on his face, but I can see the laughter in his eyes.

“I will get rid of the bug,” Rallan says, trying to sound serious. “Savi, come outside and leave your sister and father alone.”

“I just wanted to show it to her!” Savi pouts. “It’s purple, and she likes purple.”

“I am sure she would have liked it more if you had asked to show her a bug instead of chasing her with it, yes?” Rallan says as he pats Savi on the shoulder and guides him outside. The beetle’s now crawling under his tunic and might get lost in the house if it drops, but at least Vell seems like she’s done crying.

“How are you doing, sweetheart?” I ask as I go to sit on the couch.

I grab Vell by her arm and lift her off me. She giggles as I plop her on the couch, and then she’s standing up on the cushions, wrapping her arms around my neck. Savi and Vell aren’t mine in a genetic sense, but as far as they’re aware and as far as our family cares, they’re both mine. For that I’m eternally grateful to both Simone and Rallan.

“Are you leaving?” Vell asks in a conspiratorial whisper that she says way too close to my face. I’m so surprised that she knows that I’m leaving and that she’s completely forgotten about the bug already that it takes me a second to answer her question.

“Only for a little while. A couple of days at most,” I answer, running a hand over the tips of her horns that are starting to form. She and Savi both look so much like Rallan that it’s pretty unbelievable from a genetic standpoint. Then again, none of this should really be possible, but somehow, humans and this species are compatible.

“Why?” Vell pats my face with her hands, aiming for the same soothing touch her mother and I do for her when she’s upset. She’s not as coordinated as she should be, and it’s more like she’s slapping me. “You can stay here with us.”

“I’ll be back.” I furrow my brows, trying to figure out how my daughter knows I’m leaving and why she’s worried about it like her mother. “I always come back.” I lean

my forehead against hers and whisper. “Want to know a secret?”

She nods, her black eyes going wide.

“This is the last time I’ll ever leave,” I tell her. When a smile breaks out across her face, I let myself smile, too.

“The bug is taken care of,” Rallan announces as he comes back into the house with Savi hoisted up under one of his arms like luggage. He’s laughing and kicking his feet, but he’s still small compared to his father. “What are you two scheming?”

“No scheming here,” I say as I lean back on the couch. Vell narrows her eyes on me before plopping down next to me, crossing her arms over her chest like me, and leaning back on the couch beside me.

“No scheming,” she nods and agrees with me, which makes me bite my tongue to keep from smiling.

“Ah, very believable.” Rallan rolls his eyes, earning him a giggle from Vell as she crawls from the couch and runs over to him. “You think you can keep secrets from me and then beg for a hug?” Rallan scoffs and then squats down to wrap an arm around Vell as he sets Savi back on the ground. “Because you can. Always come to me for hugs. Even when you are grown and think you do not need them, yes?”

When she doesn’t respond, Rallan tickles her side, and she squeals in agreement. I watch them for a moment longer before standing from the couch. I try to get Rallan’s attention without making a big deal out of my leaving. He catches my eyes and nods in understanding.

“Let us go visit your cousins and make some paintings for your mother,” Rallan says as he grabs our children by the hand and ushers them out of the house and most likely

toward Dath's workshop.

I don't know if Dath's even there right now, considering the final group of humans is coming tonight. Most of the original tribe is at the great hall preparing for the arrival of the new women. That's where Simone's been all day. Rallan would be there too if not for needing to watch our kids.

I go through the house, looking at everything to make sure the house is safe before allowing my energy to vibrate and open a portal back to Earth. I won't be able to use the Hands' technology to transport myself once I remove myself from the collective mind, but for now, I still can.

"Welcome back, Vexarionaxnoryndrik," Amarithlumonarion says as I step back onto Earth wearing the human skin that's become second nature for me to keep on my form.

"Good to see you," I say through gritted teeth.

I don't dislike the elder. I just dislike everything about being part of the collective. I don't like how I have to lock my children away in a tiny section of my mind so the others don't know about them. I hate how Simone and Rallan aren't in my shared memories at all because they wouldn't be safe if they were.

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“I doubt you mean that, but this will be the last time I see you, so I’ll choose to believe you,” he says, smiling at me in a way that makes me feel like we’re on the same side.

I know he’s unhappy with the collective mind and what we’ve done, especially on Earth. He thinks he makes his biggest impact by being an elder, though. I think I make the biggest impact by choosing to live for myself instead of the collective.

“Are the final humans ready for transport?” I ask, walking over to the glass divider that separates us from the portal the human females will take.

There’s a group of about thirty women and twelve children huddled together, waiting their turn to get through the portal. The last of the children are the infants who still had mothers on Earth when we started this whole experiment. I blink away my distaste for what’s happened here as I turn from the window and face the elder.

“They’re beginning the transport now.” Amarithlumonarion nods. His eyes glow as the portal opens. Like me, he turns away from the window, and we stare at the far wall in silence for a long while. “Do you know what happens to this unit when you leave?”

“I’ve done everything I can for those who wanted aid,” I say through clenched teeth. “I can’t save everyone. Not if they won’t save themselves.”

The elder nods, a solemn look in his eyes like he understands the hard decisions I’ve had to make. I roll my shoulders when the silence becomes awkward and then glance over my shoulder to see how many more females are left to go through the portal.

Still more than half, so I settle back into where I'm standing and get used to the awkward air around us.

"Your request to take on the responsibility of the planet was approved yesterday afternoon," Amarithlumonarion says without looking at me.

My brows rise at the notification. I figured since I hadn't been told whether or not I was being given the responsibility, I wasn't getting it. I made plans to return to Simone and just sever the tie to the collective, but if I'm being given control of the planet it makes it easier. No one will come looking for me if I go silent.

If I were still in charge of reproductive advancements and genetic outsourcing, someone might be curious why I disappeared on a remote primitive planet. If I'm in charge of said primitive planet, no one in the collective will care about me at all. I doubt anyone will notice I've gone silent for decades, if not longer. Long enough for me to live a full life with Simone.

"Thank you," I murmur. I'm not quite sure what I should say in this situation. Technically, this is a demotion, and I want the other Hands to think of it that way as well.

"I hope you're happy with whatever you choose to do with your life," Amarithlumonarion says as his body begins to vibrate. He disappears back to his ship somewhere above the Earth's atmosphere leaving me on my own to finish waiting for the transports to finish.

I let out a long breath now that I'm free of having to pretend so hard. I still have to pretend somewhat because of all the Hands watching me who are in charge of transporting the last humans.

I stand in the observation room until the last human passes through the portal. When they've all gone through, I go over the diagnostics to make sure everyone ended up

where they were supposed to be, and then I give the order to dismantle the transportation room.

“Thank you all for helping to achieve the Creator’s plan for this species.” It’s the best and only speech they’ll get from me—the only thanks as well. Before any of them get a chance to say anything or ask any more of me, I transport back to my home.

“Vex?” Simone’s voice catches me off guard as I stumble around in our living room, reaching out for something that feels familiar while I wait for my eyesight to come back. It’s the worst part of transporting. “Why are you back? What happened?”

Simone’s voice is thick with emotion, and as my vision clears, I can see that her face is puffy and her eyes are rimmed red with tears. I’d hoped that her being with the others and getting the new humans situated would keep her mind off of me being gone for a little while.

I thought it’d take me a few more days than normal to be away since I’d planned to visit the Hand in charge of this planet to have her help me separate my mind from the collective before they realized I ran away. I didn’t have to run away, though, because this is my planet.

“They gave me this planet,” I say, a smile splitting my lips as Simone throws herself into my arms. Her body shakes with more tears as she cries, and I stroke her back, telling her it’ll all be okay. “I should stay part of the collective mind for a few months at least so they don’t question when I go dark. But I’m never leaving you, Simone. Never.”

“Good,” she huffs against my neck before turning in my arms. “Rallan!”

Rallan comes barging into the house, both children hanging onto his limbs like they were playing outside before he came rushing inside. When he sees me, his gaze softens, and he seems to understand what Simone wants.

“I believe your mother wants a family night,” Rallan says as he tosses Savi onto the couch and then does the same to Vell. Both children giggle and try to get him to throw them again, but they settle when Simone sits on the couch and pulls them close to her.

“I vote on charades,” Rallan says with a smirk in my direction. I’m terrible at charades, and the children make fun of me. Right now, though? I don’t even argue with him. I grab a few pieces of parchment, tear them into squares, and pass out the writing instruments.

“No stipulations?” Rallan asks with raised brows.

Maybe I usually put a whole bunch of rules on charades, but not today. Today, I’m going to beat him in this stupid game without having to alter the rules to help me.

“No rules.” I narrow my gaze on Rallan, and the children seem to know the rivalry is very real right now.

“I want to be on Dad’s team!” they both squeal.

Simone rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Which dad?” she asks them. Savi points at Rallan just as Vell points at me. “So that leaves me to be the moderator again.” Simone huffs about having to moderate, but she loves getting to poke fun at both of her mates as we make fools of ourselves.

“Alright.” I clap my hands together and motion for everyone to put their things to act out in the small bowl we use for charades. I grab the first piece of paper from the bowl, already somehow knowing this is from Rallan and that it will be awful. I read over it a few times and then glare at him.

“What?” His lips kick up on one side because he knows there’s no way I can get our daughter to guess this. “You said no rules.”

I sigh and then lie on the ground, trying my best to get my daughter to guess that I'm a worm. I'm almost positive if she's ever seen one, she's blocked it from her memory.

It's all worth it when Vell starts shouting random things, and it's even better when Simone starts laughing. At some point, she looks at a scrap of paper, reads what Vell is supposed to guess, and just shakes her head.

"That's time." Simone ends my misery early, and I'm grateful for her.

"You're a cute worm," she whispers in my ear when I sit on the couch next to her. She wraps her fingers in mine as Rallan begins to act out some sort of food. Simone's eyes don't leave me for long moments, and when my lips pull into a smile, she swats at my arm.

"I love you too," I tell her, knowing it's what she was thinking. "You, Rallan, and our children. I love you all more than anything."