



Wanted By the Alien Warden

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TASHA

I stared at the blank screen in my office, wiping my damp palms on my pants every time another thirty seconds passed and no call came through.

I was nervous.

Anxious, even.

It had been more than three months since I'd seen the three human women I sent off to marry Zabrian ranchers in the new human-Zabrian interplanetary bridal program. Almost four months, actually, since I'd seen Cherry. She left Elora Station early without telling anyone instead of waiting for the official transport. It was time to find out how the first months of their marriages had gone.

Though I only got to know Cherry, Magnolia, and Darcy very briefly during their orientation here on the station, I still felt largely responsible for them. I was their touchpoint. Their human-Zabrian liaison. The one who'd single-handedly organized huge chunks of this program in the first place.

I needed to know that they were healthy, happy, and thriving in their new lives.

I needed to know that I'd done a good job.

Hence the sweaty palms.

I jiggled my feet, bouncing my knees beneath my hands as I frowned at my screen. We were supposed to be having a check-in call today. Maybe there were tech issues on the other end. Or maybe something was seriously wrong. My heart went sideways in my chest as I imagined all the scenarios that might involve the human brides being unable to contact me when they were supposed to. Illness, injury, a hostage situation –

“Hello?”

I nearly fell out of my chair when the word clattered into my small office. A moment later, two sets of human eyes – one blue, one green – filled my screen.

“Hello!” I squeaked, righting myself and scooting my chair closer. I cleared my throat, trying to maintain a professional tone. “Hello. Cherry? Darcy?”

“Yes!” said Cherry, pulling back a little bit so that more of her face was visible. “We can see you and hear you.”

“Excellent!” I replied, smiling and breathing a small sigh of relief now that I could see that they were obviously alive and not chained up in a basement somewhere. Although... “Where’s Magnolia?”

“Oaken’s property is too far to come all the way to the warden’s office just for the call,” Darcy explained. “But she should be able to use Oaken’s tablet and join in the call that way. Hopefully you’ll be able to get her signal. The warden said that as long as she can connect to our call locally, then his tower can boost the signal from here and you’ll see her, too.”

“The warden. That’s Warden Tenn?” I asked. Good lord, my voice was still all over the place. It didn’t help when I remembered the warden’s stern, hard, and undeniably good-looking face when I’d conversed with him months ago while setting up the first

phases of the bride program.

“Yes,” came the rocky rumble of a male, alien voice from somewhere out of sight. A heat crept into my cheeks, but I kept my face poised. A mask of pleasant professionalism.

Darcy and Cherry seemed to be satisfied with the place they’d set up whichever comms tablet they were using for this call. They stepped away, leaving it up on a table or a shelf that allowed me to see them, as well as a sparsely furnished room with wooden floors, bare walls, and big, rectangular windows. The warden’s office. Quite a contrast to my own office here on Elora Station, which was brightly-lit but windowless, all the surfaces shaped with the impersonal polish of metal and plastic.

“Well. It’s lovely to see you both,” I told Cherry and Darcy. “I’m so glad we could have this little chat. As you know, it’s been more than three months since your arrival on Zabria Prinar One, and I wanted to-”

A loud, jovial voice drowned mine out.

“We have given the shuldu water. Ah! Has it already begun?”

Two big Zabrian bodies – one golden, one orange, both shirtless – appeared on the scene. This was the first time I’d ever seen a Zabrian from the shoulders down. Warden Tenn, in previous communications, had been seated at a desk, with only his sternly handsome face, long white hair, and hat in view.

A shirtless Zabrian, it turned out, was quite the sight to behold.

The male with the sunset-orange hide lunged into the centre of the room, taking over most of my screen with all the various curves and bulges of his shoulders, abdomen, and pecs. He stepped closer, and soon the pecs were all I could see.

I was completely blinded by the man's boobs.

Professional, Tasha! You're a professional!

"Um, excuse me," I said with what I hoped was a convincing tone of authority, "I can't really see-"

"Oh! Of course!" He bent at the waist until his face was level with the tablet's camera, giving me a clear view of high cheekbones; a sharp jaw; and warm, dark eyes, with paler brown bolts in the centres. "Hello, Tasha! I am Fallon!"

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“Hello, Fallon.” I glanced quickly at my notes. “You’re Darcy’s husband?”

“Yes!” A massive smile split his face, and it was so big and so pure that I almost didn’t even notice the sharp glint of fangs there. “I am eternally grateful to be able to say that I am, indeed, Darcy’s husband!”

A groan – Darcy’s, I was fairly certain – emanated from somewhere behind Fallon’s happily grinning face.

“I have wanted to speak with you for some time,” Fallon said, his voice falling to a reverent hush. “I have wanted to thank you. For bestowing my beloved wife upon me. And-”

It was the strangest thing, but it almost looked like his eyes began to glow white.

“-to thank you for providing me with that most excellent guide to human women!”

“Guide to... Hold on. You mean that book I put together?” I felt my eyebrows rise, both with surprise that the man before me had actually read the thing, and with a slight flare of pride. I put a lot of time and work into that document in the hopes that it might smooth over any cultural confusion between the human women and their Zabrian husbands. Frankly, I was pleased as freaking punch that it had been both effective and appreciated. If someone had handed my last boyfriend a book on understanding me, he wouldn’t have even pretended to skim it before chucking it into a waste disposal chute.

“Yes,” Fallon breathed, his eyes now very, very bright white. “Without you and your

most illuminating guide, I would not know about the wonders of the clitorosaurus.”

“Oh, God,” whispered Cherry.

“Fallon,” moaned Darcy. “We have talked about this!”

Fallon’s face fell, and he looked so painfully disappointed in himself that I had the sudden urge to reach through the screen and pat him on his sadly drooping shoulder.

Only, I couldn’t do that, because I was too busy internally combusting at the thought that I’d left a typo in the document I’d sent him and the others.

A typo. Onthatword.

I was going to die. Just... Quietly pass away at the thought. Surrender to the sweet embrace of death so I didn’t have to confront the fact that I’d misspelled fuckingclitoris.

“I apologize,” Fallon said gravely. “Of course, I meant the clitorosseum.”

“Fallon!”

Jesus. Just how badly had I mangled the word?!

“Hold, please,” I croaked, scrambling to minimize the video chat with my heart pounding in temples and my cheeks. Once minimized, I could no longer see Darcy, Cherry, Fallon, or the other male who was presumably Cherry’s husband, Silar. But I could still hear them. Their words filtered into my panicky brain as I opened and rapidly scanned the document I’d written.

“Why are you bringing up impossible-to-pronounce bits of genitalia right now?”

Darcy chided. “We’re supposed to be showing her how nice and normal you guys are. And now she’s going to think we’re all fucking insane.”

I chewed my lip as I raked my gaze over the various biology and sexual health sections of the book I wrote. Clitoris... Clitoris...Phew. I spelled it correctly in English. Maybe something weird had happened when that word was spelled phonetically in Zabrian letters.

“Sorry about that,” I said, managing to speak around the heart that still felt lodged in my throat. “I just had to, er, check something.”

Check that I don’t need to start a new life somewhere where no one knows I’m a colossal idiot...

“Please do not apologize!” Fallon exclaimed as I maximized the screen and his face with its wide, white eyes reappeared. “I owe you my life.”

“Um. Well.” I cast about for a reply, a little flustered by the intensity of his enthusiasm. “You’re... welcome?”

“Alright. Enough about the book,” Darcy said, rubbing her temples as Fallon stepped back to stand beside her. Despite her words, Silar appeared to have something to add on the subject, muttering under his breath about frostbite, nipples, and when, exactly, was he supposed to worry about cold water? But I obviously hadn’t heard him right, because none of that made a lick of sense.

“I feel that we’re getting off track,” I said, trying to regain control of the meeting. “The intended purpose of this conversation is to-”

“Hello? Hello? Can you guys see us?”

A new rectangle split my screen, empty black at first, but soon blinking into brightness. Magnolia and a male with black hair and dark green hide both beamed at me. They looked like they were sitting outside in lush grass. Rose gold mountains gleamed in a jagged line in the distance behind them.

“Yes! So glad you made it,” I said, sincerely happy to see her. Magnolia was such a sweet, kind soul. It was a relief to have her included today and to make sure she was doing well. “It’s wonderful to see you! And to meet your husband. It’s Oaken, correct?”

Of course it was Oaken. I had my notes right in front of me and-

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“Oh, no!” she replied brightly. “Oaken isn’t my husband.”

I blinked. So did Magnolia. Her smile never wavered.

“Uh-”

“I am.” A smoke-and-gravel voice cut through the connection. The camera on the tablet Magnolia was using shifted, so that suddenly I wasn’t seeing her and a green-skinned male on her right, but I was now seeing her and a blue-skinned male on her left.

“Sorry,” I said, glancing at my notes and then back at the screen. “You’re Magnolia’s husband? But you’re not Oaken?”

“I am Oaken!” came a cheery voice from Magnolia’s right, which I assumed belonged to the big green guy no longer in frame.

“This is Garrek. My husband,” Magnolia said with a dreamy sigh, leaning her head against Garrek’s blue shoulder. Unlike Oaken, Silar, and Fallon, Garrek was wearing a garment on his upper body. It appeared to be a vest of some sort, made with delicate white lace. It seemed an odd sartorial choice, to wear such soft and pretty fabric when his face looked like it could incinerate someone with the force of its glare.

“Hold on. I have a Garrek here,” I said, squinting at my notes. “It says here Garrek chose not to participate in the bride program.”

“I changed my mind,” he said. Simple. Gruff. Blunt.

And not at all what I'd wanted to hear.

"That... That was not supposed to happen," I said, dismay pulling at me. "Garrek, you weren't even a participant! You said no!"

"But then I saw her."

Magnolia's smile got a little teary. Cherry made a quiet, "Aw!" sound.

I blew out a breath between tight lips, abandoning my notes and leaning back in my chair. This was not going at all as I'd hoped. The three women all looked healthy and well, which was great. But the program had rules. Protections. Plans. And now I was learning that those plans had changed without me even knowing about it.

"So you two are already married, then," I said, just to confirm. Good grief, the amount of paperwork this was going to cause on my end. I could already feel a headache building at the thought...

"Yes! The warden married us," Magnolia piped up.

"The warden did," I repeated through clenched teeth. Just where exactly was the warden, anyway? I'd heard him speak once earlier, but he'd never entered the frame.

"The ceremony was both legal," Garrek said with a warning growl, "and complete."

"Of course," I said quickly, trying to cover up my stress with yet another pinched smile. "Congratulations to you both. If the wedding has already happened and you obviously both consented to it, then there's no question as to the legitimacy of the union."

"There better not be!" A new face shoved its way into Magnolia and Garrek's

rectangle. A blur of teal skin and a shock of white hair, followed by the largest eyes I'd ever seen in such a cute little face. "If you say that they are not married and you try to take Magnolia away then I will end you."

OK. I take back the cute comment.

"Killian!" Magnolia gasped at the same moment that Garrek appeared to yank him out of the frame by his tail.

"Was... Was that a child?" I stammered. "And did that child just threaten to murder me?"

"He wouldn't have done it," Oaken said quickly, sliding half his emerald-tinted face apologetically into the camera's view. "Probably..."

"Oh! And, um, speaking of murder," Magnolia said with an awkward little laugh. "Have you guys told her yet?"

"Speaking of murder?" I repeated in disbelief. "What sort of segue is that?!"

"We haven't told her yet," Darcy replied with a grimace.

"Well," said Cherry with what looked like a whole hell of a lot of forced optimism. "No time like the present! I told you two before your weddings and it wasn't so bad. At least she isn't engaged to one. This should be a piece of cake!" She took a small breath, then stared steadily into the camera. "Tasha. This isn't a normal ranching colony planet. It's a penal colony."

"Excuse me," I said after a long moment. "I'm beginning to believe that I never actually woke up this morning, and this entire conversation has been some kind of stressful fever dream. When I wake up, we'll have the real call. Have a great day."

I risked a glance down, just to make sure my clothes hadn't disappeared at some point while I'd been talking. That would have been the perfect way to end this nightmare. I thought about Warden Tenn seeing me naked – even just in a dream – and felt my stomach sharply flip and then drop all the way down to my butt.

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“Oh, for fuck’s sake. You’re not dreaming. You’re awake. We’re not bullshitting you,” Darcy said. “These guys? They’re all convicted murderers.”

No. No, no, no.

How did we go from “penal colony” to “these guys are all convicted murderers?” Someone could have been sent to a penal colony for... I don’t know... Tax fraud!

But murder?!

And the women... Oh, God.

I was responsible for them! I was the one who sent them there!

This definitely had to be a dream. The most anxiety-inducing dream I’d ever had. I’d take being naked at work a thousand times over this.

“It’s OK!” Magnolia said quickly. “The murders were a long time ago. When they were just kids. By human standards the crimes wouldn’t even qualify as murder! It’s not like they’ve killed anyone on this planet!”

“Don’t say it,” Cherry quietly hissed at Silar.

“And we’re happy,” Darcy added firmly, her chin raised high. This was rather surprising, because when I’d met the three women on Elora Station a few months ago, Darcy had by far seemed like the least happy of the bunch. “We love our husbands. You don’t need to melt down over this. It doesn’t change anything for us.”

Fallon's face got all slack and dopey when Darcy mentioned that she loved him. Seriously, she wanted me to believe that that sweet, grinning, alien idiot killed someone?

But if it was true... If he had...

Brainwashed. The women had to be brainwashed. What the hell kind of insanity had I sent them into? What the hell had happened?!

"This is a lot to take in," I finally said, grasping for the right words. "You may not think it changes anything for you, but it will certainly change things for the program going forward. If it goes forward at all..."

"I would just like to interject," said a slightly frantic-sounding Oaken, "that I have never actually murdered anyone! And I would very much still like a bride if there is one yet willing and available!"

"If you haven't murdered anyone, then why are you in this penal colony?" I asked, narrowing my gaze at him. I didn't trust him. I didn't trust any of them. Least of all the stupid warden who'd apparently hid this tiny little detail from me the entire time!

"Well, I was convicted of murder," Oaken hedged, before hurriedly adding, "but that is not at all the same thing!"

Jesus fucking Christ. On a cracker. With cheese.

I pinched my arm. And kept on pinching, pinching, pinching.

I didn't wake up. This was real. I really did send three lovely, beautiful, innocent women into the alien claws of convicted murderers.

I had to fix it.

How?

I had no idea.

But I at least knew the first step I needed to take.

“It is unacceptable that this information was withheld from me for so long,” I said, anger turning to heat beneath my skin. “I am no longer satisfied with a virtual check-in and need to be convinced of your safety in person. You tell that warden that I am coming down there as soon as humanly possible!”

“No one needs to tell me anything. I can hear you just fine,” boomed his deep voice. Finally, the warden stepped into view. Violet hair, orange eyes, jaw like a goddamn anvil. His warden’s uniform fit his broad, bulky frame with astonishingly tailored perfection.

He tipped his hat towards me, making a silver Zabriskie badge flash in the sunlight. “You are more than welcome to come and see the conditions for yourself,” he said, and if I wasn’t mistaken, there was a hint of arrogant challenge in the words. “I look forward to your arrival.”

His orange eyes met mine. They seared briefly white.

And then, without warning, apology, or a goodbye, the bastard ended the call.

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TENN

“What is wrong with your hat?”

“Nothing is wrong with my hat,” I grumbled at Silar’s question. He, Cherry, and I stood outside my office in the mid-morning sun, waiting for the human-Zabrian liaison Tasha’s shuttle to arrive.

“Then why is it in your hands and not on your head?” Silar’s gaze went to my claws.
“Why are you rubbing the badge with your thumb that way?”

“Ooh,” Cherry said with a hushed sort of excitement, leaning around her husband’s broad frame to better see what I was doing. “Is this like a good luck charm type of thing? When I was a kid, I found this little piece of scrap metal that was shaped like a heart. I carried it around for years. I always rubbed it when I felt like I needed a little extra good energy in my life.”

“You have known me for some time now, Cherry,” I reminded her with a quelling glance. “Do I strike you as a superstitious male? Prone to poking and prodding at spare bits of metal, or my own cursed hat, because I require ‘good energy?’”

“Jeez,” Cherry whispered to her husband. “Who pissed in his breakfast?”

I whirled on her, nearly dropping my own hat.

“Who pissed where?”

“It’s just a human expression!” Cherry exclaimed, throwing up her hands in a gesture of placation. Silar instantly moved to position himself between us, but her face merely poked out from beyond the golden brawn of his arm. “It just means you’re out of sorts!”

“Out of what sort?” I shot back.

“You’re just... not yourself!”

“Who the blazes else would I be?”

“Fine. Let me put this another way.” She met my gaze steadily with her fearless human eyes. “Warden Tenn, you seem extremely stressed out.”

I shoved the hat onto my head and adjusted the stunner at my belt.

Before I could respond to Cherry’s observation – which felt rather like an accusation – Silar suddenly said, “The badge is shinier now. You were polishing it.”

There was little point in denying it. I had been polishing the blasted thing.

“Well, at least one of us has to make a good impression here,” I muttered at length. “And forgive me if I don’t leave that up to you, Silar. You didn’t even wear a shirt to your own wedding.”

Cherry chuckled and patted Silar’s eternally bare chest.

“Yes,” she said, “but Warden, you’re not marrying Tasha!”

I frowned.

“I think,” she went on, “that Tasha isn’t going to be worried about things like how good your uniform looks. She’s mostly going to be making sure that none of us humans have married legitimately homicidal maniacs. That we’re healthy and safe and getting our three square meals a day. That sort of thing.”

I did not know that human females ate meals shaped into squares. This was good, if odd, information.

I probably should have read that document that Tasha wrote...

Despite Cherry’s words about Tasha not worrying about my personal presentation, I was not entirely sure that I agreed with her. I’d only seen Tasha a few times through the screen on my data tab, but she consistently presented herself with what appeared to be immaculate care and grooming. Her pretty human face always smooth and clean. Her pale hair pulled neatly back, not a strand out of place. Her clothing spotless and unwrinkled.

There would be no getting the dust or wrinkles out of my own uniform. But I could at least make sure that the blasted badge was gleaming. Because even outside of the physical perfection of the image the human-Zabrian liaison put across, there was a strict professionalism and smoothness of composure that I believed contained a very, very strong will.

I did not think she was a woman to be trifled with.

I did not think she would be easily impressed, either. Especially after her dismay finding out about the reality of the men here.

Considering how the truth had come out, and Tasha’s reluctance about continuing the bridal program, I was already beginning our interaction at a distinct disadvantage. Something I was not particularly used to and was rapidly finding out that I did not

enjoy.

At all.

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“Forgive me,” I growled, “for wanting to begin the proceedings properly and putting forth the best chance possible at continuing the bride program here.”

“You do not think,” Silar said, his voice gone suddenly raspy and his eyes bright white, “that in potentially ending the program, they could take Cherry away.”

I was not even sure if he realized the way his tail looped instantly around her ankle, squeezing tightly. His body tensed, every muscle straining beneath his hide. Something extremely easy to see, considering he was, as usual, shirtless.

“No, Silar,” I said. “Whatever happens with the future program, you and Cherry are legally married. As are Darcy and Fallon, and Magnolia and Garrek.”

Not to mention the fact that if someone tried to take Cherry away from Silar now, they’d end up with their throat slit, bleeding out in some forgotten corner of his ranch.

That was what happened to the last human who tried to take Silar’s wife from him.

Technically, Silar was the only one who’d killed someone outside of childhood, and on this very planet, no less.

Well... Tasha doesn’t need to know that.

“I speak only of the program in a broader, future sense,” I explained. “If the program ends now, your marriage will remain intact. But Oaken will not receive a bride. And the convicts in the other provinces, like our neighbours under Warden Hallum’s

authority, will not get a chance to participate in the program, either.”

“And Zohro, too,” Cherry piped up. “Whatever he says about it, I’m convinced that he wants a bride.”

“He needs a bride,” I corrected her. I aimed my tail at Silar and poked him in the chest with it. “You all do. The more of you idiots that get married off, the less I have to worry about you doing something stupid. Or, when you do inevitably do something stupid, at least there will be someone else with some brains around to scold you for it before I have to,” I added with a sigh before wrapping my tail around the hook at the back of my belt.

“Thank you for acknowledging my brains, Warden Tenn!” Cherry replied with a grin and a tip of her hat towards me.

“You’re welcome,” I muttered absent-mindedly, my gaze going to the sky to seek out signs of Tasha’s shuttle. “I am nothing if not observant.”

Even someone who was not observant would find it hard to miss the fact that the human women were tougher than their small and fragile bodies made them at first appear. Cherry and the others had proven themselves to be clever, resourceful, and unafraid of the hard work this world (and their colossally clueless husbands) required. Before I got to know them, I had expected that at least one woman would balk and end her marriage after the thirty-day trial period.

None had.

Now I had to make sure Tasha did not balk either.

The far-off drone of engines told me that her shuttle was at last approaching. The metallic speck dove through the atmosphere in the distance, before flying at low

altitudes towards my property where it finally landed in an empty field. The ground coughed up reddish-brown dust, appearing almost like smoke engulfing the human-designed shuttle.

When the dust settled, I saw the shuttle's door was open.

And there she was.

I found myself standing taller, forcing my spine into a straightness I had not even known was possible before.

Then, I walked towards her.

Perhaps foolishly, my first thoughts as I approached were not thoughts of what I'd say to her. Nor were they thoughts of how I'd present my men so that she would forgive them for the rather egregious crime of being secret murderers who'd lured their human wives here under accidentally false pretences.

No, my first idiotic thoughts were an examination of the fact that the screen I'd seen Tasha on before had not done her justice.

Not even close.

Her face, which had been smooth and polished and pleasant in our virtual conversations, was so much more than that in person. No longer relegated to the realm of the two-dimensional, she took undeniably appealing shape before me. There was something so delectably saturated about her now that she was here. The skin that looked so petal-soft it made my claws twitch, blooming with luscious pinkness at her cheeks. The tied-back hair with its pale, warm lustre, like the setting sun glancing off metal. The human eyes, with their oddly circular points in the centre, so dark and deep and assessing as they met mine. The small-by-Zabrian-standards but

intriguingly rounded body, with the plushness at her chest, abdomen, and hips generously curved and accentuated by tight black trousers and a white top.

The dullness of the screens had been ripped away, like a cloud of dust dissipating, and Tasha stood before me with astonishingly vivid reality.

My first moments upon meeting someone who could very well become a powerful adversary to me, detrimental to my men and to my goals, and my immediate reaction was that she was beautiful.

Inconveniently so.

But I was not here to gawk like a fool who'd never seen a female in his adult life. I was not Silar or Oaken or Fallon. I was the warden, and I was going to get the first word in and steer this conversation somewhere that I –

“Hello, Warden Tenn.”

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I stiffened.

There goes your chance at getting in the first word.

Even her voice was different in person. As rich and warm as the rest of her. My tail went tight on its hook.

“Greetings, Tasha,” I said quickly. Recovering, I believed, somewhat admirably after the onslaught of her face and hair and body and voice.

But that recovery was quickly stymied when she raised her right hand in the air between us, aiming it at me like a stunner.

And I didn’t have a blasted clue what she meant to do with it.

I stared at it.

It was a very nice hand. Small, of course, in the way all human bits were small. Soft-skinned, like her face and throat. Slender little fingers with flimsy, bluntly-cut claws.

“Welcome, Tasha,” I said. “Welcome to you and your... hand.”

Tasha’s brows rose. Her eyes narrowed.

She did not smile.

Clearly, she did not appreciate my warm welcome to this world. I would have to find

other ways to please her well enough so that she decided to continue running the bride program here.

“You’re meant to shake it, Warden,” Cherry said quietly from behind me. “Didn’t you read the book she wrote?”

“Clearly not,” Tasha said, an edge of ice working its way into her previously rich, warm voice. Cherry stepped around me and clasped Tasha’s hand in her own while I felt my forehead crease at the fact that she was not in fact shaking Tasha’s hand at all, merely bandying it up and down.

“Forgive me. I do not have a hard copy of the document.”

“But you have a digital copy, do you not?” Tasha countered instantly. “I sent you the digital copy so that you could in turn share it with Oaken’s device.”

Blast. She remembered that.

And now she thought I was even more of a liar than before.

She’d been here less than a human minute and I’d already managed to muck things up more than I would have thought possible.

“Of course,” I admitted. “I do have the digital copy. But a warden’s time is so rarely his own. I spend most of my days keeping track of this lot who-”

“So these men need keeping track of?” Her voice was the cold slice of a knife, her eyes, with their dark centres, almost painfully piercing. Those eyes went to Silar, then slid dangerously back to me.

“No,” I said quickly. I could not have her thinking my men were not only murderers,

but incompetent goons at that. Even if they sometimes were. “I... I support the men here. Make sure that everything runs smoothly.”

“Hmm.”

My translator had no help to give where the huffy sound Tasha made was concerned. I could only surmise it was a sort of closed-mouth sigh, the result of a deep, incredulous dissatisfaction.

The idea of not satisfying the curvy, clever human before me left me feeling very...

Out of sorts, as Cherry had said.

It was a better phrase than I had at first given it credit for.

This would not do. I had to get this conversation back into territory I was familiar with. Territory where I was in charge and not helplessly floundering under the stare of a pair of pretty, judgmental human eyes with their probing, circular centres and those odd fringes of little golden hairs.

I thrust my hand out towards her.

I'd watched Cherry complete the human greeting. Blast if I couldn't do it, too.

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Tasha cocked her head. Her plush lips thinned, as if bitten from the inside, and I found it difficult to tear my gaze from her mouth.

Finally, she raised her hand again and placed it against mine.

Or, inside mine, really. My fingers swallowed hers. Her hand felt so incredibly delicate, nestled in my palm. Her skin so soft it made some previously unknown place inside me ache.

It also made a previously known place ache.

Namely, my cock.

I screwed my jaw shut and squeezed the hook on my belt with my tail until I felt the metal's bite.

My fingers grew taut with tension. I was afraid if I held on too tightly, I could crush her.

But perhaps those fears were at least somewhat misplaced. Because a moment later, Tasha adjusted the angle of her hand slightly and squeezed me with a surprisingly strong grip.

I felt the tight clasp of her grip both in my hand and echoing... other places.

Like my cock. Again.

I gave Tasha's hand a swift up-and-down pump and then unceremoniously dropped it. My hide, where she'd touched me, felt strangely hot.

Tasha's skin must have felt dirty, I supposed, given the fact she immediately rubbed the palm of her hand vigorously on her pant leg after I let her go. My tail unspooled from its hook and lashed the ground in irritation. I could basically guarantee that I had as good, if not better, hygiene than any other male on this planet. Except for, perhaps, Warden Hallum.

My closest neighbouring warden was fearsomely regimented in everything he did, whether that be keeping his men in line or keeping his claws clean. He would not have needed to furtively polish his badge moments before Tasha's arrival. It likely already would have been done before the sun rose. Disciplined and demanding, Warden Hallum was the perfect example of a man who'd spent cycles in the Zabrian Imperial Guard.

The very same Imperial Guard I'd once hoped to spend my life serving.

Before I ruined everything and got posted here instead.

Here, Zabria Prinar One, where I was now watching – with no amount of seething – Tasha wipe her hand on her clothing after touching me.

And with that, I knew that Cherry had been wrong when she'd tried to comfort me before.

I was just as much on trial as my men were.

If not more so.

TASHA

I hoped Warden Tenn hadn't noticed how freaking sweaty my palm was when we shook hands. Between the blazing alien sun overhead and the rough, calloused heat of his hand on mine, my sweat glands were going into overdrive.

The nerves certainly didn't help.

Luckily, I was pissed enough to keep my anxiety mostly at bay.

I was pissed that the brides had been brought here under false pretences. I was pissed that I couldn't protect them.

And right now, I was pissed that the warden had the audacity to be so astonishingly good-looking while he stood there, all dusty and swoony and rugged in his hat and uniform, without even a hint of guilt in his hard-jawed expression.

Liars had absolutely no right to be that gorgeous.

My last boyfriend had been a liar, too. But at least he hadn't been seven-foot-something of rippling alien muscle, topped off with the kind of brutal perfection in his face that would probably make little baby angels sing.

Baby angels? Good God, woman. Get a grip.

I had absolutely no business comparing this big, orange-eyed slab of alien male to anything remotely cherubic.

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I had even less business comparing him to my ex.

Aware of the way I was probably staring at him, I yanked my gaze from the warden's face to size up Silar, the only one who hadn't spoken to me yet. Even with my attention on him, the golden-skinned male said nothing. He withstood my appraising look in utter silence.

But even if he didn't speak, he didn't cower away, either. I didn't think his silence was one borne of fear or shame. There was something so still and solid about Cherry's husband. Stoic, even. He met my gaze with his own lashless blue one. Unlike the warden, I didn't sense any arrogance in him. I didn't sense any challenge in him, either. No blustering, no deception. He appeared to me as a calm, quiet man with a river of reserved strength running through him.

He certainly didn't look like a cold-blooded killer.

"So, when did you find out?" I finally said to Cherry. "About the conviction."

"Not long after we were married," Cherry said. "But Silar didn't know it had been kept from me at the time of our wedding. And I made sure to tell the other two before they got married. So that they could go into this with eyes wide open. Obviously, they decided to go through with it."

I nodded, taking in her appearance the same way I had with Silar a moment ago. She looked better than when I'd last seen her in person. When she'd first arrived months ago at Elora Station, she hadn't had much of anything with her besides the clothes on her back – a filthy factory uniform from New Toronto. A uniform I'd recognized,

because I'd once worn one just like it. She'd been friendly and excited about her marriage – so excited she ended up leaving before the official trip out here – but she'd also been paler then, and jumpier, often seeming anxious, or even frightened, about something.

I saw no signs of that anxiety in her now. Her face glowed, and her shoulders were relaxed. Her clothing, while dusty, looked like new, and it fit like it had been custom-made for her. She took Silar's hand in her own and smiled, perfectly at ease at his side.

Her husband's side.

The murderer's side.

Marrying a killer looked like it was the best damn thing that had ever happened to her.

Which was... good?

I didn't let myself give in to total relief just yet. Just because Cherry was over-the-moon with her convict husband didn't mean that everything out here was all hunky dory. I still needed to meet with Magnolia and Darcy in person. And potentially meet Oaken and any other Zabrian males who still wanted to participate in the program so that I could gauge their viability as potential husbands.

"When will we get to see Darcy and Magnolia?" I asked, this time to the warden. My heart lurched when I saw that his searing orange eyes had never left me.

"Darcy and Fallon's ranch is more than half a day's ride from here," Warden Tenn replied. "Magnolia and Garrek are currently staying at Oaken's property, which is many days' journey by shuldu. Faster if we took my slicer, but even so, you won't be

seeing her today.”

“I won’t?!” Oh, God. The sweaty palms were back with a vengeance. “But my shuttle is supposed to take me back to Elora Station later tonight!”

I turned around to look at it, a part of me afraid it had already left without me. I’d worked my ass off to finally get a job – and build a life – aboard the glittering commerce hub that was EloraStation. Getting abandoned planet-side, even if it wasn’t the dreary, smog-choked Terratribe I of my youth, made me feel like I was going to puke.

The shuttle was still there. Thank goodness.

“Tonight?”

I flinched at the smoky, barely-contained rage held in that single word. When I turned around to face the warden once more, his face was a violet mask of fury. His eyes glared and went briefly white beneath the shadowy brim of his hat.

“You mean to tell me that you were going to make your judgments – judgments that will impact the potential futures and happiness of two of my men, and the men under my fellow wardens in the other provinces – in less than one day?”

“I was planning to gather information and make my notes over the course of one day, yes. Then, I was going to go back and-”

“No.”

“No?” I sputtered, gawking at him. He may have been a warden, but he sure as shit was not the boss of me. “What do you mean, ‘no?’”

“I mean, that’s not good enough.” He raised his hard chin and squared his huge shoulders, looking every bit the male who could keep a bunch of convicted murderers in check with nothing more than a flick of his pale purple tail. “You need to do better than that.”

My stomach flashed cold at the same time my cheeks went hot. I’d only just arrived, and somehow Warden Tenn had managed to strike me smack dab in the middle of my biggest, squishiest insecurity. The fear that I wasn’t doing a good job. That I was failing, not only myself, but others, too. My ex’s voice, from when I’d first shyly told him I was applying to the liaison position on Elora Station, clanged inside my head. You think you can do better than this?

And then, when I broke up with him, the sneering, You think you can do better than me?

I was always trying to do better. Be better.

Even if, most of the time, I only ended up feeling like an imposter.

“My men,” Warden Tenn continued, his growling tone leaving no room for opposition, “deserve better than that.”

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My men, he calls them.

Warden Tenn was worried about his men. Worried about their happiness and what they deserved.

He's protective of them.

I recognized it in him as easily as I recognized my own protectiveness towards Cherry, Magnolia, and Darcy.

We probably both just wanted what was best for our people in this situation.

But what if what was best for one group, wasn't what was best for the other?

I sighed and shaded my eyes against the burning sun.

"What do you suggest, Warden?"

Some of the anger faded from his expression. He rubbed a big, calloused hand along the hard line of his jaw.

"Thirty days," he said, dropping his hand. "One human month. That's how long the trial marriage period is for the human brides. They are required to remain here for the full thirty days before making any final decisions. You should do the same."

"Thirty... days..." I coughed, struggling to draw air into my lungs for a second. "You want me to stay here for a whole month?"

“I do.”

Damnit. I could see the logic in it. If the brides had agreed to their thirty-day trials on this planet, then I should probably do the same. Get the full Zabria Prinar One experience, murder convictions and all.

“But... I hardly have any stuff,” I pointed out. “I don’t even have clothes!”

The warden appeared to stiffen.

“Silar and Fallon are both excellent at sewing,” Cherry said, patting my arm with her free hand. She then used that hand to gesture at her beautifully-tailored trousers and top. “Silar made this outfit for me. We can definitely get you some emergency clothes to wear.”

“It will take some time,” Silar said with a grimace. “I will have to work on the pieces at night, after the other chores are finished.”

“Oh, no, I don’t want you to have to do that,” I said hurriedly. Murderers or not, I knew that both Silar and Fallon had to have incredibly full schedules running their ranches out here with so little support from the Zabrian Empire. “I’m sure I can figure something out. I can-”

“I’ll do it.”

Cherry and I both turned to stare at the warden in startled surprise. Even Silar gave him a puzzled sort of look.

“What?” Warden Tenn said gruffly. “You think I can’t sew?”

“We didn’t say that,” Cherry replied dubiously.

“Well,” Warden Tenn grunted, sounding just a tad offended. “I can.”

“What happened to, ‘a warden’s time is seldom his own?’” I asked pointedly. “From what I understand, you’re every busy.”

Too busy to read the book I wrote, let alone make me some freaking clothes...

“I am busy,” he bit out testily. “But I...”

“But you what?”

White streaked through his eyes, then disappeared. He hitched up his pants by his belt and practically spat his next words.

“But I’d make time for you.”

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TASHA

“So, Cherry. Now that they’re out of earshot. Tell me... Are you alright? Like, actually? You’re not being held hostage? Or afraid for your life?”

Cherry snorted at me from her place on the bench beside me. We were currently seated in an ancient, wooden wagon, being pulled along by two massive, four-legged alien beasts called shuldu.

“OK, first of all? We aren’t out of earshot,” Cherry replied. “Those guys have insane hearing. They can probably hear every word we’re saying right now.”

I pursed my lips and glanced at Silar and the warden, both of them in their saddles atop the shuldu ahead of the wagon. Silar’s mount was a brown-reddish colour the exact same shade as the dusty ground. Warden Tenn’s mount was a pretty pale grey, dappled in white. Both creatures had gigantic horns arcing out from their heads.

“I don’t even see their ears,” I said, on a whisper this time. Just in case.

“They’re under the hats. And they are extremely cute, by the way.” She made two rounded fists and perched them jauntily atop her head before letting them fall. “Oh!” she then said, as if remembering something important. “If you’re taking complaints about the program, I actually do have one.”

I leaned in, wondering what horror she was going to reveal about her quiet killer of a husband.

But instead, she said, “I would have liked a book. A book like the ones the men received about human culture and, er... anatomy...”

Her cheeks flamed, dark red in the shade of the wagon’s covering.

“Oh, God. What happened?” I asked, dread sliming through my belly. What did she need to be warned about when it came to Zabrian anatomy?

“Nothing bad,” she said quickly, her cheeks even redder now. “But it would have been nice to know about the whole, um, Zabrian genitals situation in advance.”

““Zabrian genitals situation?”” I repeated uneasily, feeling my brows crawl all the way up to my hairline. She made it sound like some horrific historical event akin to a plague or a war.

I glared at Silar’s bare back, with its gold hide and his bright aqua mane of hair tumbling down, wondering just what the hell the guy had going on in his pants.

“It just would have been more fair,” Cherry said, sounding somewhat flustered now, “if we’d gotten similar information about the Zabrian males that they received about us.”

“I know,” I replied with a sigh, leaning my spine against the wagon’s back wall. “The Zabrian Empire gave me so little to go on. Including, apparently,” I added, my tone growing barbed, “anything about these guys’ convictions.”

Cherry sobered at once.

“I need you to know,” she said gravely, “that I don’t consider Silar, or any of the men here, to be murderers. Silar killed a man in self-defence when he was a child. That very same man murdered Silar’s mother. My husband watched his mother die and was

unfairly convicted as a murderer before he even hit puberty. He was sent here with no support, no contact with any other family... Nothing.”

Jesus. I sucked in a breath. Cherry blinked, her eyes growing shiny and red.

“Silar is the greatest man I’ve ever known. There’s a very good chance I would be dead without him,” she went on. With the obvious tears in her eyes, I would have thought her voice would waver, but it didn’t. It was strong, steady, like these were the truest words she’d ever spoken. “He’s the best husband I ever could have asked for.”

She gave a teary laugh and wiped at her eyes. When she spoke again, her eyes were fastened to her husband’s back. I watched her in profile as she spoke.

“All I’m asking is that you give him – all of them – a chance.”

“I’ll endeavour to be fair to everyone,” I said quietly and at length. “Including any future brides, should the program proceed. They deserve to know what they’re in for.”

“I agree,” Cherry said, nodding enthusiastically, her blue eyes coming back to me. “It’s why I told Darcy and Magnolia the situation before their weddings.”

I mulled over what she’d told me. Her explanation of Silar’s conviction would certainly make sense stacked against the mostly positive first impression I’d gotten of the man. He didn’t seem bloodthirsty or cruel, and Cherry seemed to be thriving in her marriage to him. I was going to inspect his ranch right now, to make sure that he was providing adequately for Cherry. He’d agreed to that instantly; he didn’t appear to have anything to hide.

“We’re obviously of the same mind, then,” I said. “And, in the spirit of making sure everyone knows what’s what, maybe I can write another book. This one about

Zabrian males. The empire wouldn't give me much information to use, but maybe I can collect enough notes while I'm here to put something together. I am staying for a month, after all."

A whole month... With him...

If the warden could indeed hear me, he did not look back.

"Yes!" Cherry said excitedly. "And we'll help you, too. I know Darcy, Magnolia, and I have lots of thoughts and, er, experience to contribute."

"Experience? Like experience with the 'Zabrian genitals situation?'"

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She gave me a genuine, if conspiratorial, smile. And that smile warmed me right down to the toes in my now-dusty boots. I'd worked so hard on the professional aspects of my life on Elora Station that I hadn't really had the time or energy to make any friends.

Although, even back on Terratribe I, I hadn't had many friends outside of Gerald...

When Cherry smiled at me, it felt like a friend kind of smile.

"Precisely," she said, still grinning.

"Great," I replied with a small laugh. "Maybe that can be the title of the first chapter."

After a long, hot, bumpy ride, we finally pulled off the main dusty road into a smaller laneway.

"We're here!" Cherry said. "Welcome to our home!"

I could see why she was so excited to show me the property she now shared with Silar. Leaning out of the wagon, I glimpsed a small but well-built house painted the warm yellow colour of Terratribe II butter. It was nestled among tall golden-green grass, the property enclosed along its sides, and presumably therear, with tall wooden fencing. The grass rippled in the gentle breeze.

It looked like something from a painting.

“You’re from Terratribe I, right, Cherry?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. I could see Cherry in my mind’s eye, pale from the grey skies of that world and grimy from the factory.

“Yes.” Her forehead wrinkled. “Why?”

I shook my head and smiled, but it felt a little pinched. Pained. Like my heart was hurting for something but I wasn’t sure what.

“All that blue sky.”

I’d been so focused on meeting the warden, making sure Cherry was well, and giving Silar the once-over, that I hadn’t had a chance to really... lookup.

Cherry gave a little gasp, then a knowing look.

“You’re from Terratribe I, too!” She nodded to herself, confirming her own suspicion without me having to say a word. “Magnolia and Darcy are used to the beautiful landscapes and having a big blue sky from Terratribe II. But for us...”

Silar appeared at the side of the wagon, having dismounted from his shuldu. He held out his hand to his wife. She put hers into his as if it were the most natural thing. As if they’d already done this a hundred times before. As she let Silar help her out of the wagon, the rest of her sentence came floating back to me on the summer wind.

“For us, It’s a whole new world.”

She certainly had that right. For someone coming from the industrial, barren, slate-skied colony planet of Terratribe I, or even the polished technical perfection of Elora Station, this expansive horizon, untouched to my eye besides Silar’s property, was breathtaking. Maybe even a little disorienting.

I stared up, squinting into that brightly yawning blue as I prepared to get down from the wagon. The vast blue blankness slapped me with sudden vertigo.

I blinked, then wrenched my gaze back down.

Only to be confronted with the scorching heat of two orange Zabrian eyes, directly before my own.

Zabrians really did have extraordinary eyes. There was no distinct, hard-edged iris or pupil like a human might have. Instead, the warden's eyes were a deep, solid orange, brightening to a collection of electric gold-orange veins in the centre. Like dozens of bolts of lightning reaching for the edges of his eyes all at the same time, each one originating from the same writhing, central point.

“Need help?”

“No, thank you,” I said primly, holding tightly to the side of the wagon. “I am perfectly capable of getting down on my own.”

At least, I was pretty sure I was. And if I wasn't, well...

Guess I'll fake it 'til I make it.

The warden watched me with stern intensity as I stepped out onto the wagon's wooden running board. He crossed his arms over his big chest and waited, that same tense challenge etched around his eyes and along the line of his jaw that I first saw in our last video call.

Frankly, it was rather fucking rude.

“Move back, please,” I huffed, making a shooing motion with my free hand. The

running board was a tall Zabrian's leg-length off of the ground. Which meant I'd have to jump.

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And the warden was in the way.

“I don’t think so,” Warden Tenn shot back immediately.

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t have a husband or a fiancé here. As the warden, I am responsible for your wellbeing in this world. Therefore, I will stand right here and supervise your descent from Silar’s wagon to ensure that you don’t do something... unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate?”

Why did I get the impression he’d been about two seconds away from saying “stupid” instead?

“Yes,” he said. “Unfortunate. Like landing poorly on your ankle. Or on your...”

His eyes zipped down to the region of my hips and then bounced right back up. He cleared his throat.

“Mywhat?”

“Your... Your backside.”

“My backside?”

“Did that not translate? Your...” He hesitated. “Your hindquarters.”

“My hindquarters?!”

“The part of you that would have a tail if you were to have one,” he huffed in a rush, visibly frustrated.

My ass. The warden thought I was going to fall on my poor little tailless, human ass.

“How about you just worry about your own hindquarters?” I hissed, face on fire.
“And I’ll worry about mine!”

“My hindquarters,” he replied with maddening confidence, “do not require any supervision.”

“Well, neither do mine!”

“Incorrect.”

My mouth gaped.

The man really just said I was incorrect. About my own butt.

Forget the genitals thing. The first chapter of my book on Zabrian males will be a scathing review of Warden Tenn’s absolutely nonsensical arrogance.

“Look,” I snapped, “this whole macho man, ‘I’m a big, rough and tumble warden’ schtick might work for keeping your men in line. But it doesn’t work on me. I’m not a convict or a citizen of the Zabrian Empire. You are not my superior. So if I fall and break my own human butt, well, that’s on me.”

Before Warden Tenn could respond, I took a tiny breath for courage and jumped.

I didn't land poorly on my ankle, like the warden had suggested I might.

I did, however, land with my right foot on top of his left boot. And it turned out that an alien warden's gigantic foot did not a stable landing pad make.

I was going down.

I wasn't sure what would be bruised most in the fall.

My human pride...

Or myhindquarters.

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At least the hindquarters had some cushioning...

My pride?

Not so much.

But that cushioning never got its chance to heroically take the impact. Huge hands seized upon my waist, dragging me into an upright position against Warden Tenn's body. The hard contours of his chest and abdomen pressed against my breasts through the fabric of his uniform. My heart bucked beneath my ribs.

"I told you I was responsible for you," he muttered, his orange eyes sparking white before returning to their original colour. "I will not let you break your butt."

"It's my butt!"

Yeah. That was really what I came up with. Something on par with what a stubborn toddler might dish out.

I think having his hands on my body is frying my fucking brain.

Warden Tenn didn't even bother dignifying my words with a response. He merely gave a quiet grunt, paused as if to make sure I wasn't going to fall over anyway just to spite him, then let me go.

"Are we ready for the tour?" Cherry asked from nearby. I jerked at the sound of her voice.

I'd nearly forgotten she and Silar were there. I truly needed to get my head on straight. My priority was keeping a clear mind so that I could adequately judge the conditions of the brides' lives out here.

I was not going to let Mr. Hot and Haughty Warden over here get in the way of that.

"Yes, please!" I said, moving briskly away from the warden's side to join Cherry and Silar. I stiffened slightly as I felt more than saw Warden Tenn bringing up the rear, walking in close step behind me.

Cherry led the way to the front door of the house while Silar took the shuldu and the wagon through a gate in the fence. I paused in the doorway, waiting to see if the warden would follow Silar.

He didn't.

"Aren't you going to go feed your shuldu or something?" I asked, turning back to glare at him.

"Silar will handle it," he said.

Apparently, he meant it. Because instead of looking chastened and heading outside to deal with his own mount, he began walking again, forcing me forward into the house. He dragged a wooden chair out from a small table and plopped his big, purple butt into it.

Fine.

I turned away from him, determined to pretend he wasn't there.

"So, this is the kitchen!" Cherry said, beaming. Something inside me went a little soft

and gooey at her obvious pride in her new home here. She chattered away, pointing out the wood-fired oven, the furniture that Silar had apparently made for her from scratch, and her big black cast iron pan that she'd brought all the way from Terratribe I.

"And this way is the bedroom," she said, leading me from the small but tidy little kitchen down a short hallway. We entered a room with a bed, closet, and set of wooden drawers. There were little signs of a cozy, quiet life scattered all over the place. Like a red scarf folded neatly atop the drawers beside what looked like a Zabrian leather belt, and what appeared to be Cherry's pyjamas laying in a haphazard pile atop the bed. In the closet hung a couple of sets of trousers that would fit a Zabrian male, and a multitude of pieces that would fit a Cherry-sized human. I couldn't help but notice with a small grin that Cherry had about 90% of the closet space devoted to her things.

"I see that Silar has made room for you," I said, pointing out the closet disparity.

"I mean, he basically has about three pairs of pants, one hat, a couple of belts, and boots," she said with a chuckle. "So he didn't have to exactly make room. Although he did make most of this clothing for me."

I could tell. A few pieces I recognized as the ones I'd purchased for her using the program's funds on Elora Station, and a couple others were what I'd packed to send off in a bag with Darcy and Magnolia to deliver to her. But the rest – and the things that looked like they were worn the most often – had clearly been made by Silar's big, careful hands.

"It's hard to picture somebody like Silar making his wife clothing," I remarked, gently fingering the flawless seam on a small leather jacket hanging in the closet.

"Because he's Silar?" Cherry questioned from behind me. "Or because he's a

convicted murderer?”

“Both, I suppose.” I let go of the leather jacket’s sleeve, letting it drop against the main portion of the garment with a soft swish.

“He takes care of me,” Cherry said with forceful emotion. Her gaze grew wistful. “The only other person who took care of me with the kind of tenderness he does was my Mama. But she died.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry,” I said. I never got a chance to learn much about Cherry’s story before she went AWOL from the station and took an early supply shuttle flight out here. I gave her hand a quick little squeeze in support of her loss, even as I felt a pang of shameful envy. I never knew my mother. I certainly couldn’t remember anyone ever taking care of me with anything I could remotely call tenderness.

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The fact that Cherry had apparently found such a special sort of love out here, with a criminal alien cowboy, no less, was nothing short of beautiful. Miraculous, even.

If it were true.

I gave her fingers one more little squeeze before releasing them and furtively shutting the bedroom door.

“We’ve got to be out of earshot now,” I whispered. Cherry looked unconvinced, one of her eyebrows popping up.

“Alright, fine. Here.” I hustled to the bedroom’s window, yanking it shut. Then, I swiped the quilt from the bed, sending her pyjamas flying to the floor. Holding the quilt tightly under one arm, I forcefully pulled Cherry into the closet with the other.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a laugh. But it wasn’t her usual friendly, happy laugh. It was the sort of laugh you would let out when deeply unnerved by something.

I knew it. Something wasn’t right. Therewassomething she wanted to tell me.

“Quick,” I whispered, tossing the quilt over her head. I got under there with her, then sat down on the floor, yanking her along with me.

“OK, no, seriously. What are you doing?” Cherry asked from the quilted gloom of the closet floor.

“I’m creating a sound barrier,” I breathed. “Or, trying to. But we should still keep our voices down.”

“They’re Zabrians,” Cherry responded at a maddeningly normal volume level, “not intergalactic spies.”

“They still might be listening. You’re the one who told me how good their hearing is,” I hissed. I liked and respected Cherry, but goddamn, she would not be a good partner to have in a heist situation. Or a hostage situation. Or any situation that required even the smallest amount of discretion.

Alright, maybe hunkering down in the middle of a tiny closet with a quilt thrown over our heads wasn’t exactly the height of discretion, but still...

Maybe we could create some kind of code language.

No. No time for that. Who knew when Silar or the warden would come in and interrupt us?

“Cherry,” I said on a quiet exhale, “are you in danger? Blink twice if you want me to get you out of here.”

“Girl, it’s so freaking dusty here!” she wailed, once againfartoo loud. She covered her eyes with her hands. “I blink about a million times an hour!”

“OK. Fine. Blinking is out.” It was difficult to see her face beneath the quilt anyway. “Grab my hand and squeeze it if you don’t feel safe here.”

“Safehere, as in this closet? With you? Because I kind of feel like suffocation might be on the table.”

A valid concern. There was no cooling system in this house, and the summer heat made things extra stuffy in here, something only amplified by the blanket.

“You’re avoiding my questions. I just need to know how you really feel now that Silar and the warden aren’t hanging around. So squeeze my hand if-”

I suddenly yelped, breaking my own rules about volume level. Cherry had grabbed a part of me and pinched it.

But it wasn’t my hand.

It was my ear lobe.

“What the hell was that for? I didn’t mention ears in the special code,” I whisper-shouted, rubbing at the stinging flesh as she pulled her hand away.

“Sorry,” she replied, patting my knee in a comforting but not-at-all remorseful way. “It’s something I do when Silar is spiralling. It may not look like it, because he’s so quiet and all, but there’s a lot going on in that big head of his. He can be a really anxious alien bean. I often find a nice, friendly little ear-grab gets him out of his own head and back into the present moment.”

“Glad to hear that it was meant to be nice and friendly,” I muttered.

“Of course!” Cherry replied, giving my knee another reassuring pat. “I’ve helped Darcy through more than enough mental breakdowns out here. I’m practically an expert by now.”

“I’m not having a mental breakdown!”

“We are currently hiding under a blanket in a closet,” Cherry pointed out dryly.

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“Alright, it doesn’t look great,” I admitted. “Wait. Hold on. Why was Darcy having a mental breakdown out here? Was it about something Fallon did?”

“It was about somethingshedid,” Cherry replied.

“Which was?”

“Falling in love with him.”

Oh.

“And, also,” Cherry added off-handedly, “that time she thought his dicktacle was a venomous snake and she very heroically tried to rip it off. The poor man was practically maimed. She felt so bad.”

Before I could even begin to try to understand Cherry’s anecdote about the heroic near-mutilation of Fallon’s “dicktacle,” the sound of a door opening penetrated the muffled wall of the quilt.

Not such a great sound barrier after all...

Heavy, measured footsteps approached, then stopped.

I didn’t need to lift the blanket to figure out who it was. I recognized the warden’s deep, spine-tingling voice well enough by now that I could practically picture his unimpressed expression when he asked, “What in the great blue blazes are you two doing?”

TENN

If it were not for the sounds of two human females breathing, I would not have located them as quickly as I did. They were not anywhere I'd have expected to find them in such a small room. And even when my gaze did discover the source of the sounds, I still could not actually see them. All I could see were two little lumps beneath a blanket on the floor of Silar's closet.

"What in the great blue blazes are you two doing?"

"Nothing!" came Tasha's indignant reply from beneath the bed-covering.

"Well, clearly you are doing something," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest and regarding the blanket-bumps with a furrowed brow. "You are sitting beneath a bed covering on the floor."

The blanket-bump on the right – Tasha, I was certain – shifted, as if squirming beneath my gaze.

"We are having a very important and very private meeting!"

"I see."

"If you see, why aren't you leaving?" she countered testily.

"How do you know I haven't left yet?"

"Because I haven't heard your big, loud boots go clomping out the door!"

“I would not describe my gait as clomping,” I said, glancing down at my so-called big, loud boots. “Unless,” I added, “clomping has a different connotation for humans. If it means anything close to walking with great power and determination, then yes, I concur.”

“Sorry, I have to get out of here,” Cherry gasped before tossing the blanket away from her side of the fabric fortress and crawling out of the closet. She got to her feet and tipped her head at me. Then, she tapped her index finger against her forehead, and then aimed it at me in an odd, one-fingered human salute of some sort.

With her partner having vacated the blanket meeting space, Tasha sighed audibly and got to work disentangling herself from the bed-covering. She bunched the blanket up and stood, carrying it over to the bed where she dumped it down.

“Is it typical,” I asked her as she smoothed her hair, “for humans to hide beneath blankets in closets in order to conduct their meetings?”

“I told you it was a private meeting,” Tasha said firmly, turning to face me. Her cheeks were very red, as was the skin on her neck. A tail of tension wrapped itself around the base of my spine as I fought down a sudden, blistering urge to reach out and touch those reddened parts of her body.

“If you want privacy, perhaps you should not be so loud about it.”

Tasha’s eyes grew large in her face, those odd little hairs nearly brushing her upper eyelids.

“You heard us?”

“I heard your cry.”

Tasha’s cheeks got even redder. Cherry laughed.

“Sorry,” Cherry said. “That was my fault. There was a pinching incident. Though, in my defence, I think that pinch was warranted.” She tossed Tasha a meaningful look that I could make little sense of.

“If you say so,” Tasha muttered, rubbing at her small human ear. My eyes followed the movement of her fingers against that soft little slip of skin.

“Come on. Let’s go find Silar and we’ll show you the rest of the property,” Cherry said.

She reached for Tasha’s hand and pulled her past me out the bedroom door. I followed close behind, keeping those two joined human hands in my sights as I wondered, and pretended not to wonder, what it would be like to walk with such smooth, slender fingers laced easily with my own.

Not just any fingers.

Tasha’s.

Once outside, Cherry and Silar continued with their tour of the property. Silar led the way through gardens and fields while Cherry filled the silence. Every once in a while, Tasha asked a pertinent question, but otherwise she seemed content to listen and observe, her keen dark eyes sweeping over the scene.

Even with her obviously discerning judgment and her mostly neutral expression, I could not help but think Silar's property had to be making at least a somewhat favourable impression on Tasha. I, myself, was impressed with the state of things.

The gardens were well-tended, the various plants blooming and the fruit trees bearing what would be an incredible harvest later in the season. Silar's bracku herd was healthy, as were his shuldu. Even the Terratribe II cherry tree, a plant not native to this world, appeared to be happy in its new place on the property. I was certain that it was a little larger now than it had been when I'd dropped it off here some time ago.

Everything was thriving. Just like Cherry and Silar were. Cherry no longer held Tasha's hand as we walked, but Silar's instead. Tasha walked on Cherry's other side, ignoring me completely.

It made me feel rather ridiculously like a young boy back at the Zabrian Academy. Every time that Tasha did not turn my way when she could have, it made me want to reach out and forcefully tug a bit of her pale hair from its neat twist at the back of her head.

An imbecilic notion, to be sure.

But a notion I entertained for far too long, and far too seriously, all the same.

"Well, I must admit," Tasha said as we returned to the house, "this is a beautiful property. A beautiful home."

"A beautifullife," Cherry emphasized, turning a dazzling smile upon her husband. Silar stared down at her in mute adoration. Then, he raised his hand and brushed a single knuckle along his wife's cheek, just below the delicate place beneath her eye.

Feeling as though I were intruding upon an intimate moment, I turned my attention to

Tasha instead. Her gaze was fixed upon Cherry's face, and the Zabrian hand that so tenderly caressed it. I watched Tasha's expression as it changed. Her features crumpled slightly, as if Cherry had pinched her again. Her eyes looked suddenly more glossy than before, and she gave a rather wet-sounding inhale through her nose.

She did not exactly look happy, but she did not seem aggravated, either. Was it surprise? Confusion? Perhaps it was unusual for human males to touch the faces of their wives this way.

I could not understand why that would be.

If I were married to a human like Tasha, I imagined I'd spend a great deal of time gently drawing the pads of my fingers, or the surface of my knuckles, or the tip of my tongue along the prettily curved contours of her face.

The tip of my... what?

And why in the great span of the empire am I fantasizing about what I'd do if I were married to her?

Marriage was something for the others. Not for me.

I'd craved it once, as a very young man.

And that foolish endeavour had become the greatest mistake of my life.

It was why I was out here, warden to the exiled convicts of our empire, instead of taking my place as a captain of the Zabrian Guard.

I could have been a general by now.

I shook myself out of those thoughts quickly. Regret was a road down which I'd long since learned not to travel. My life might not have been as beautiful as the one Cherry shared with Silar, but it was a life, and one that I'd become proud of in my own way.

And it was a life that had certainly become more interesting now that a certain pale-haired, dark-eyed, red-cheeked human was in it.

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Tasha cleared her throat and blinked rapidly.

“Well,” she said. “I must say I’m satisfied with what I’m seeing here. Silar, you’re obviously doing a very good job providing for Cherry. And caring...” Her voice cracked. “Taking care of her.”

I breathed out.

It appeared that one of my men had passed Tasha’s test.

Only four to go.

“If we leave for Fallon’s property now,” I told Tasha, “we could be there before dark.”

“I’ll come with you! I love visiting them,” Cherry said excitedly.

“I will ready the shuldu,” Silar replied.

“Oh, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” Cherry replied quickly. “I know you’ve lost a lot of time today already, and have chores to catch up on.”

Silar touched her face one final time and merely muttered, “Where you go, I go.”

And so it was that as afternoon bled out into evening, with Silar and I on shulduback and Cherry and Tasha in the wagon, we came upon Fallon and Darcy’s ranch.

TASHA

Seeing the sun set on Zabria Prinar One was strange for two reasons.

For one thing, it meant that the shuttle that had brought me here had officially departed, leaving me behind. I was trapped with an arrogant alien warden and his band of convicted but maybe (hopefully?) harmless murderers.

The second reason it was strange?

I'd never actually seen a sunset. Not like this, anyway. Not in person. Terratribe I was too dreary, and Elora Station didn't orbit a sun that would create colour like what I was witnessing now. Fallon's ranch was a rust-gold silhouette beneath a sky of orange and pink and purple the exact same shade as Warden Tenn's hide.

As the warden and Silar pulled on their reins and eased their shuldu to a stop in front of Fallon and Darcy's home, I jumped to my feet and rushed to the side of the wagon. I planned to jump out before Warden Tenn could come peacocking over here making stupid pronouncements about me breaking my butt.

I glanced at him, making sure he wasn't approaching yet, and froze.

He was dismounting. And it was astoundingly, infuriatingly hot.

His broad back tensed. One thick, muscled thigh swung backwards to meet the other, and then his whole big body heaved itself down with a powerful masculine grace, landing heavily but not-at-all awkwardly in the dust.

And now I was fully staring at him. Great.

I gritted my teeth and focused on the dusty ground before me. I jumped, and other than the way I felt my boobs nearly bounce out of my bra, I didn't manage to embarrass myself. I didn't fall, at least. Even if, compared to Warden Tenn's practised movement, I felt a bit like something clumsy and legless in comparison.

Like... a potato. A lumpy, knobby little root vegetable that somehow managed to get itself jostled out of its wagon. Potatoes were something people used to cart around on wagons, weren't they?

Before I could pursue that comparison to its inevitably depressing conclusion, the warden sidled into my field of vision. He did not look impressed.

"Warden Tenn," I asked him, squinting up at him as the sky shifted its colours, like a bird adjusting its wings, behind him, "do you know what a potato is?"

He cocked his head.

"It translates," he said at length. "We have varieties of starchy root vegetables that grow here. Why?"

"No reason," I said, waving his question away. I didn't even know why I'd asked it. I certainly hadn't asked in order to gear up for yet another question, which would have been, Do you like them?

I strode purposefully towards the door that led into Fallon and Darcy's home. This building was larger than Silar's, a long, ranch-style cabin made of solid wood. Despite my head start, Warden Tenn caught up in no time.

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Damn him and those long, muscly, not-at-all-potato-y legs.

“You could have waited for me,” he said on a quiet growl.

“I promise you, I wasn’t going to break my butt,” I sighed. “Can we get over this already? I am fully capable of jumping out of a wagon.”

“Your previous jump did not assure me of that.”

“That’s because your big foot was in the way!”

Warden Tenn inhaled swiftly, and looked like he was gearing up for some sassy reply, when the door to the cabin was flung open and a grinning, orange-limbed, blond-haired Fallon appeared.

“Welcome to our home!” Fallon called as the warden and I approached. Silar was unhitching the shuldu from the wagon, and Cherry appeared to be chatting his ear off about something as he quietly worked.

“Thank you, Fallon,” I said crisply. I wasn’t going to let his Old-Earth golden retriever act derail me. I’d already gone all mushy about Silar’s obvious devotion to Cherry and had basically already given him a pass. I needed to be alert to anything amiss. Darcy deserved it.

“There’s food!” Fallon said, grinning widely. “The warden told me you were on your way!”

Food. Oh, man. Food sounded really good right about now. Maybe that's why I was so freaking hung up on potatoes a minute ago.

"Are they here?" came Darcy's voice from somewhere behind the bulky body of her husband.

"Yes!" Fallon stepped out of the way, revealing a tidy sort of mudroom with a broom and a few spare tools and nicknacks that I didn't recognize but that I could only assume were of great importance to an alien cowboy. Beyond the mudroom, another open door showed a bright and cozy kitchen. Savoury scents drifted out. As Fallon turned and bounded ahead into the kitchen, my mouth watered, and my stomach tightened.

Then, God help me, it growled.

I should have known better than to bother hoping the warden hadn't heard it. Cherry hadn't exaggerated about their hearing. And, frankly, even a human with ear plugs in probably would have heard my stomach just now.

"Did you just... growl at me?" the warden asked in astonishment. He'd apparently removed his hat a moment ago, and he held it in his claws now as he stared down at me, his sleek white eyebrows raised.

"I didn't!" I protested, heat pouring through my cheeks. "My stomach did!"

"Your stomach growled at me?" His intense orange eyes made an agonizing exploration down my neck, to my breasts, to my belly. Where it stayed.

"Stop that," I cried.

"Stop what?" he asked, still staring at my stomach. I wondered if he could see the

way it swooped so sharply beneath his gaze.

“Stop looking at me!”

“I am trying to ascertain,” he said grumpily – grumpily! The nerve of this man! – “why your stomach does not like me.” His gaze returned to my face, set and serious. “Do any other parts of you have a problem with me?”

I opened my mouth to tell him that oh, yes, other parts of me had a problem with him. Starting with my brain, thank you very much.

But, unfortunately, some other parts of me had decided to stage a mutiny of the highest order. My heart, nipples, and, Jesus fucking Christ, the tingling place between my legs, apparently had no problem at all with the swaggering, orange-eyed warden.

I glared hatefully at him, trying to remind my body that I was in charge and the warden was a lying... liar pants. He never told me about the histories of the men here. He didn't even apologize for withholding that information from me. He was a scoundrel of the highest order, and he...

He had the cutest fucking ears I'd ever seen.

I gaped, forgetting the embarrassment of my stomach's growling and the righteous anger I harboured for my body as it dared to feel any sort of attraction to this male.

“What is it?” he asked, appearing for the first time ever-so-slightly uneasy.

Yeah, not so nice when someone stares at you like you're an alien. Now is it, Warden?

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to recover some semblance of professionalism. “I just

wasn't expecting your ears."

The ears in question twitched. Holy Terra. They were so... perky! And round! Cutie-patootie little Old-Earth mousie ears!

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“What do you mean?” he asked, a huge divot forming between his brows, his angry face an absurdly hilarious contrast to his ears. “You thought I did not have them?”

“No, it’s just that I’ve never seen a Zabrian’s ears before. You guys have had your hats on this whole time. And unlike your men here, we didn’t get any anatomy references to prepare us for what you looked like.”

Speaking of which...

I slipped my comms tablet out of my pocket, held it up, and took a picture. He reared back, then scowled, when the light flashed.

“What did you just do?”

“I took a photo. For my new book.”

“Yourwhat?” There was a hint of gravelly warning in his voice. A warning that I chose to ignore.

“My new book,” I informed him, putting my tablet back into my pocket. “If the marriage program is to continue here – and that’s a big if, Warden – I want the future brides to have all the information necessary to make their decisions. So I’m writing a book on Zabrian males, similar to the one I wrote on human females.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but I’d spooked him with my ominousif the bridal program is to continuethings.

He wanted brides for his men. Which meant he couldn't complain.

"And you need a picture of my ears for this?" he grudgingly asked after a taut silence.

"Oh, I'll need more than that," I replied with feigned cheeriness. "For the next thirty days, you get to be my own personal Zabrian-human liaison!"

The warden looked like he'd rather shit in his own hat.

Finally, he sighed and rubbed at his jaw.

"What does it mean?" he asked, suddenly softer now, his voice like a whisp of smoke against my skin. "What does it mean when a human's stomach growls?"

My spine wanted to melt. I gritted my teeth and steeled it.

"If you had read the book I wrote," I told him tartly before pivoting and heading for the kitchen, "then you would know."

7

TENN

Though it looked and smelled more than palatable, I ate little of the food Fallon and Darcy had prepared. Part of that was because it felt rather ridiculous to consume food that had been arranged in the shape of a smiley face on my plate, something Fallon had very proudly claimed credit for.

But the larger, more nagging part was that I could not stop staring at Tasha.

She was seated between Darcy and Cherry, the three human females on one side of

the table facing me. Silar and Fallon were stationed at the ends of the table, each one brushing elbows with his wife.

I was the only one seated on this side of the table.

And for the first time in a very long time, I felt a subtle, sudden creep of loneliness, like an intruder stealing through me in the dark, hoping to cause some secret pain before I noticed and beat it back down.

I liked my men. I spent a good deal of time with them.

But I was not entirely among them. When it came down to it, they were the convicts, and I was the warden responsible for them.

And here, now...

They were parts of couples, each of them with a wife at their side.

I had no one at my side. All I had was a face made of meat and cheese smiling lopsidedly up at me from my plate. That, and a pretty human woman across the table who steadfastly pretended that I did not exist while she ate.

As I was clearly not capable of ignoring her the way that she ignored me, I watched her. Watched the way her delicate jaw worked as she chewed her food. Watched the way the candlelight of Fallon's kitchen turned her eyes to dark and dreaming pools. Watched the way the frosty distance she held me at vanished when she smiled so sweetly and so sincerely at either Darcy or Cherry.

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As the meal progressed, even Silar and Fallon earned a smile or two from her. For the very first time, I found myself jealous of my men. Jealous! Jealous of these foolish, shirtless exiles who likely wouldn't know their claws from their tails if their wives were not there to tell them.

At least they know why a human's stomach growls.

I stabbed the face on my plate, right in its bracku cheese eye. And then I ate it.

“So will you go to see Magnolia next?” Darcy asked Tasha, pulling me away from the violence I was currently enacting on my plate. “It takes like a month to get there. So it's good you're staying that long.”

“It wouldn't take a month on my slicer,” I interjected. For the first time since we'd started eating, Tasha's eyes met mine from across the table.

“What's a slicer?” she asked.

“It is a vehicle. A type of hovercraft,” I explained. “The wardens each have one in case of emergency. It's much faster than travelling by shuldu.”

“Oh, that's very good to know,” Tasha said, bobbing her head up and down. “And, yes, I will definitely be going to visit Magnolia. I need to meet Garrek and make sure she's alright.”

She wasn't looking at me anymore. Once again, I was struck with that boyishly idiotic desire to get her attention by any means necessary.

With more anger than was truly justified, especially for a warden in full control of all his faculties, I stabbed and ate my plate's other eye.

"I'll have to meet Oaken and Zohro, too," Tasha continued. "And the men in the other provinces."

The cheese lodged in my throat. It was only with great effort that I managed to swallow it.

"You never told me," I rasped, "that you intended to meet the convicts in the other provinces."

She stiffened at the word "convict." Perhaps, in Fallon's jovial company, she had forgotten what had brought these men here. Perhaps she had forgotten why she was supposed to be so suspicious of them.

"Well, of course, I should meet them," she said. "If they want to participate in the program, then I definitely need to speak with them before I agree to bring any more human women here to potentially marry them."

"I see." I rose from my chair, sending the legs of it scraping back against the wood floor. "Excuse me for a moment."

Cherry and Fallon both made questioning sounds as I left the kitchen, but Tasha and the others were silent. Though, even in her quietness, I felt Tasha's gaze on my back, burning through my uniform even after I'd left the house and closed the door between us.

I stalked away from the house towards Fallon's barn. An excited barking filled the cool night air, and Fallon's hound, Sora, came streaking from the building.

“Got the bracku settled for the night, girl?” I asked, scratching her furry black head as she panted gleefully, her tongue lolling out. “Well done. Back to your post for the night, then.”

She gave a high, happy bark before turning to lope back to the barn. I watched her black fur morph into shadows and then disappear inside as I mulled over what Tasha had just told me.

Visiting the other provinces. Blast. I hadn’t even considered she’d want to do such a thing. It could be arranged, of course. But it meant clearing it with the other wardens first. Warden Hallum’s province was closest. All the others would take more than a human month to travel to, even using my slicer.

This also meant that the future marriages of my men Zohro and Oaken might hinge upon the behaviour of convicts I had no relationship with or history of authority over.

At least it is Warden Hallum who is nearest, I thought grimly. I knew him to be a paragon of Zabrian excellence in discipline and leadership. Which meant he was as hard as a blade and twice as sharp. I did not expect that he would tolerate any nonsense, and if anyone could produce convicts that might pass Tasha’s judgment, it would be him.

With the stars and three moons sending silvered light down through the trees and long grass of Fallon’s property, I removed my data tab from my pocket and used it to contact Warden Hallum.

After only a few moments of waiting, his face snapped into focus on my screen. Smoke-grey eyes with centres of pale ice looked out above severe, sharply-cut cheekbones. His black hair was tied smoothly back, the dark strands a sharp contrast to the light yellow shade of his hide.

“Warden Tenn.”

“Greetings, Warden Hallum,” I said in reply. “How go things in your province?”

“Nothing new to report here.”

“I see.”

“I take it you have something new to report,” he observed coolly. “Considering this sudden call. And the recent update that I’ve had from the empire. Apparently, three of the human females have been successfully settled in your province.”

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“Yes. That’s actually what I’m contacting you about.” I cast a glance back towards the house, then returned my attention to the screen. “A fourth female has recently arrived.”

“Another bride?”

“No. The organizer of the program. The human-Zabrian liaison, Tasha.”

“I don’t see why this warranted a call to me.”

“Can’t a warden call another just to catch up a bit?”

Warden Hallum stared flatly back at me, no hint of amusement curving his harsh mouth.

“Never mind,” I said with a dismissive flick of my tail in the dust behind me. “I’m calling to alert you that things have... changed.”

His voice went knife-like. Cutting, cold, and precise.

“In what way?”

“There was a communication mix-up,” I explained. “Perhaps an intentional one. Apparently, the empire never informed the human side of the program that the men here are convicts. All three brides in my province know now, and they have chosen to remain with their husbands. But Tasha has only just found out. She has come here in person to inspect the conditions and meet the men. She is threatening to potentially

prevent the program from moving forward, both here and in other provinces in the future.”

“Other provinces,” he said on a low growl, “meaning mine.”

“Yes.”

Warden Hallum rolled his jaw.

“Your province was the test run,” he reminded me, his voice still so sharp I imagined it could – and would – cut a lesser man. “If it fails there, no other men will have their chance.”

“I know. But, frankly,” I added, bristling, “I think it is rather a testament to my men that they’ve managed to win their wives over, despite this obfuscation.”

Warden Hallum gave an unimpressed grunt at that. Clearly, he did not put much stock in the wooing capabilities of my men. Which, to be fair, neither did I. But against all odds, Silar, Fallon, and Garrek had all managed to win the love of their women despite their past crimes and their current idiocy.

“So, why are you calling me, then?” Warden Hallum asked. “I have not yet informed my men about the bride program. I was waiting until it was deemed successful in your province and I received the go-ahead to instate the program here as well.”

“I’m calling you because I need your help,” I replied. “Tasha has decreed that she would like to meet more of the unmarried males in the colony. Both Oaken and Zohro in my province. And the men in yours.”

A long silence. Then, “You are telling me that you will be bringing the human female Tasha here? So that she can inspect my men and judge their worthiness as potential

husbands for future human females?”

“Correct.”

Impatience gnawed at me. If Warden Hallum did not agree to presenting his men before Tasha for her judgment, or if they made a bad impression upon her, I was certain it wouldn't merely cost them their chances at wives, but Oaken and Zohro, too.

It truly did seem to me that this was all or nothing. For better or worse.

“So?” I asked, my voice coming out louder than I'd intended. “Will you do it? Will you and your men be ready to receive us when we come?”

Something went metal-hard in Warden Hallum's grey gaze. When he spoke, it was quiet, but so drenched in determination that it sounded more like thunder.

“I have never once faced an inspection that I did not pass, and I do not intend to start failing now,” he growled. “Bring the human here as early as you wish.”

“It will probably be a few days of travel by slicer. Two or three, I'd say. And a day or two of preparation before that.”

“Understood,” he replied. And then, in the moment before his face disappeared from the screen, he fiercely added, “We'll be ready.”

8

TASHA

“Oh, you need not help with that!” Fallon plucked my dirty cup – the one I'd been

trying to bring over to the sink – from my hands.

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“Are you sure? You guys made such an amazing meal,” I said sincerely. My stomach was no longer miserably growling. No, now it was replete with the warm glow of delicious food.

“It’s fine,” Darcy assured me, tossing her wavy pink hair over her shoulder. “He doesn’t let me do many of the chores, either.”

I glanced at Fallon, whose bare, strong back was now bent over the sink as he happily scrubbed food from plates that Silar dutifully delivered to him.

It didn’t appear as if these two were doing this for show. It looked like they did this stuff for their wives every single day.

“Let’s give her the tour of the house,” Cherry said to Darcy. “Especially since it’s getting so late. Are you sleeping here?”

She asked that last question of me, and I found I had no answer. I glanced around, forcing myself to stop when I realized I was looking for Warden Tenn.

I didn’t need his permission to sleep anywhere.

And if I didn’t sleep here tonight, then where?

At the warden’s place?

Absolutely not.

“You can definitely sleep here,” Darcy said. “We have a spare bedroom. It’s where Magnolia stayed for a bit when we first got here. I’ll show you.”

Leaving the men to the dishes, Darcy brought Cherry and me into a comfortable room with a large bed and a beautiful, plush quilt on top.

“Fallon made that,” Darcy said when she noticed me drawing my fingers along the puffy top of the quilt, the surface comfortably fuzzy with age and use.

“Oh, God. Are you going to throw that over our heads again?” Cherry groaned, but there was a teasing glint in her eyes. “Because I truly don’t know if the three of us are going to fit.”

Darcy sent her a questioning look, but before Cherry could answer, I swallowed my embarrassment to explain.

“I may have been trying to create a sound barrier,” I said in a flustered rush. “I know these guys have good hearing.” I raised my hands helplessly then let them fall. “I just wanted Cherry to have a safe space. In case there was anything wrong.”

I sounded like an idiot. But, surprisingly, Darcy only nodded seriously.

“Good for you,” she said. “I wish someone had done that for me with my last fiancé.”

“I didn’t know you were engaged before this!” I exclaimed.

“I was,” she said, her beautiful green eyes flashing, “to an absolute shit stain named Massimo. He really was the worst. Because of him, I came here expecting Fallon to be... Well, kind of terrible. Especially after I learned about the whole murderer thing.”

Cherry winced and nodded.

“But...” She reached down to touch the quilt her husband had made. “But Fallon changed everything. My life. My heart. Me.” She shook her head and laughed. “I mean, look at how much of a sap I’ve become!”

“Truly, the sappiest of saps,” Cherry said with a dramatic sigh, clutching her hands together beneath her chin and batting her eyelashes. “Someone should write a book about it.”

Well, it certainly seemed like I didn’t need to drag Darcy under a blanket to interrogate her like I’d tried with Cherry.

It really did look like both of them were... happy.

Something in my chest squeezed. When was the last time I’d felt the way these two women looked? When was the last time I’d radiated that kind of joy? Maybe when I’d received the offer of my current position and was able to move to Elora Station.

But even the shine of my new career and living space had worn off since then. I didn’t have friends on Elora Station yet. And the job I’d been so excited about was currently my largest source of stress, considering the whole I-sent-women-off-to-marry-murderers-without-knowing thing.

If Darcy and Cherry were happier here, married to exiled criminals, than I was with the life I’d worked so hard for...

What did that say about me?

Was this it? Was this all I had to look forward to? A future of being nothing but a failed and friendless human-Zabrian liaison whose greatest achievement was fucking

up an interplanetary marriage mission?

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Holy hills of Terra. That was a very bleak thought.

And as I had absolutely no use for pity, least of all for myself, I sucked it up and changed the subject.

“I told Warden Tenn about the book idea,” I said. “I really am going to write one while I’m here. He’ll help.”

“Oh, yay!” Cherry replied. She flounced over to the bed and sat down, her eyes alight with mischief. “We’ll help, too. Considering that we’re experts on the Zabrian genitals situation.”

Darcy snorted. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Yes, it is,” Cherry replied with a prim nod. “And Tasha promised that it could be the title of the first chapter.”

“Well, before I do anything,” I said, “someone needs to tell me exactly what this genitals situation entails.”

“Entails!” Darcy echoed shrilly. She and Darcy looked at each other and promptly burst into laughter.

“Oh, God, sorry,” Cherry gasped, clutching at Darcy who by this time had collapsed on the bed, giggling uncontrollably. “It’s just... It’s just... you said entails!”

“I... Yes? I did?” The two of them were positively rolling. Literally rolling on the

surface of the bed, until they crashed chaotically and went boinging away from each other.

“Holy fuck. I think I’m going to pee myself.” Darcy choked out. “Or that my spleen is going to split. Is that a thing that can happen?”

“I feel fairly confident,” I said, “after all the research I did for the human anatomy portion of the book I wrote, that laughing isn’t going to do anything to your spleen. Your bladder, on the other hand...”

Darcy took a shuddering breath and then swiftly sat up to face me where I stood. She passed her palm in front of her face, as if to indicate that a curtain was dropping on the laughter from the moment before.

“OK. Sorry. It’s just the guys, they have this...”

She pursed her lips against what appeared to be another bout of laughter. Instead of trying to speak, she positioned her hand between her thighs, crooked her index finger, and then wiggled it wildly.

“They... They have a finger down there?”

Darcy shook her head frantically, her face scarlet. Was she holding her breath?

Luckily, Cherry seemed to still be capable of speech. Or, capable of a hysterical sort of howl, which she emitted now.

“THEY HAVE A COCK TAIL.”

“Alright. Um...” I slipped my comms tablet out of my pocket, ready to take notes. “A cock tail. And is this separate from the dicktacle?”

“NOT THE DICKTACLE!” Darcy screeched, kicking Cherry and then nearly falling off the bed. “I TOLD YOU TO NEVER CALL IT THAT AGAIN!”

“Oh my God,” Cherry choked out. “I feel drunk.”

“I feel confused,” I said.

“I don’t blame you,” Cherry replied after a few steadying breaths. “It’s very confusing. Very mysterious, the Zabrian cock tail. That wonderful worm of-”

“DON’T CALL IT A WORM!”

“OK. Fine. How about a snake? Since that’s what you first thought it was. A sweet, slithery little pet snakey snake that-”

“CHERRY!”

“I feel that we may be losing sight of the purpose of this conversation,” I cut in awkwardly. “And also that Darcy is in danger of having a...”

“A mental breakdown?” Cherry provided helpfully. She glanced at her red-faced friend and grinned. “Nah. She’ll be fine.”

“It’s impossible to talk about this shit seriously,” Darcy moaned. “You just have to see it to fully experience it.”

I had to see it.

There was only one unmarried Zabrian male in this house that I could ask to help me with that...

“I’ve got it,” Cherry said with a suddenly fearsome determination. “We’ll draw it.”

“That could work,” I said, nodding and trying very hard to ignore a fresh little twist of disappointment. Disappointment about not getting to ask the warden to drop his drawers in the pursuit of my (purely academic!) curiosity.

And it wasn’t even just a question of academics! Future human brides to Zabrian males would need this knowledge! It was practically a righteous cause. Who was I to deny them that?!

Cherry already had her comms tablet in one hand, her other hand gliding over its touchscreen, leaving black lines in her fingers’ wake.

“Make it gold,” Darcy suggested. “More authentic.”

“Shh,” Cherry hissed. “I’m concentrating.”

“Are you?” Darcy asked doubtfully after a moment. “Because that doesn’t really look...”

“Shut up, Darcy! I’m not an artist, OK?!”

“Oh, no,” Darcy said soothingly to her friend. “You are very talented. It’s just, your talents apparently lie less in drawing Zabrian dicks and more in drawing-”

She glanced down at Cherry’s screen.

“-a lopsided sausage with a bit of droopy spaghetti tacked on the end.”

“Shit. You are totally right.”

“I’ll do one, too,” Darcy said, pulling out her own comms tablet and beginning to sketch something on her screen. “There. How’s that?”

“That’s actually pretty good,” Cherry said, sounding impressed. “Although, a little meatier, maybe?”

“You think?” Darcy asked, regarding her work with a critical eye. “I think it’s pretty accurate. Maybe Silar and Fallon have different levels of... meatiness. Is Silar a girthy guy?”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” Cherry said with a shrug, “but all I have to compare him to is human men. I don’t know how he’d compare to another Zabrian.”

Warden Tenn looks like he’d be girthy.

Not that it was any of my business. Because I had all the information I needed about the Zabrian genitals situation from these strange, messy, and slightly disturbing drawings.

Seriously. What the fuck was I looking at?

I was getting the sausage and spaghetti comment now. Cherry had drawn a big tube

with a dangly string hanging off the end of it. Darcy's linework was a little cleaner, but her picture was just as confusing as Cherry's.

"Which way am I supposed to be looking at this?" I asked, tilting my head this way and that. "Is that string bit meant to be, like, at the tip?"

"Oh, fuck me, I forgot the ball sack," Darcy said, smacking her hand against her forehead. "Hold on."

As I watched, she drew a big, swollen lump beneath her Zabrian dick diagram.

"This is underneath," she said, pointing at the round bit she'd just drawn. "This is the shaft. And this-" Her finger landed heavily, nearly accusingly, on the dangly bit. "-is the cock tail."

I stared in bewilderment at Darcy's screen.

"It's like an itty bitty lasso!" Cherry chimed in, as if that was supposed to make any sense at all.

"You guys," I said, stopping to close my eyes and rub my temples. "Please. I am begging you. Be so real with me right now." I opened my eyes to find Darcy and Cherry staring innocently back at me. "Are you fucking with me?"

Cherry dissolved into laughter once more, which, in my humble opinion, was rather a point for theyes-they-are-fucking-with-youside of things. But Darcy, when she shook her head, shaped her expression into something sober, nearly grave.

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“Oh, how I wish we were, my sweet summer child.”

“Oh my God. I said that to Silar once,” Cherry panted. “Do you know what he said in response?”

“What?” Darcy and I asked in unison.

“He... He said... Like, completely seriously! He said, ‘But my birthday is in winter.’”

She laughed so hard that she collapsed onto her back on the bed, which sent Darcy tumbling into giggles after her.

And after that, I didn’t last long.

Before I knew it, tears were streaming down my face. My ribs ached. My abs felt like I’d just tried and failed to copy Silar or Fallon’s workout routine.

I was laughing so hard I was legitimately in pain.

And it felt... good.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d laughed like this.

“My stomach hurts. Oh God,” Darcy grunted, dragging herself up into a seated position on the bed.

Fallon's voice suddenly boomed from the kitchen, making all three of us jump.

"Your stomach?" he called. Then, rapid footsteps and the flinging open of the bedroom door. His eyes were bright white as he entered the room. "What is wrong with your stomach? Do you require some tea? I will make it!"

"No, no. That's alright," Darcy said, but Fallon had already hightailed it out of the room, presumably to make the tea.

"I love how he and Silar were perfectly content to let us laugh ourselves silly over the... situation," Cherry said, wiping her eyes, "but the second you said your stomach was hurting he came bursting in here like an alien superhero."

"He loves making me tea. Ever since that first night I was here," Darcy said. "When I ended up in that freezing creek. He made me drink the tea Magnolia gave him and now he thinks it's like some magical, all-healing elixir."

"That's sweet."

Cherry and Darcy both looked at me with their brows raised.

"Are you calling our homicidal husbands sweet?" Cherry asked with a grin.

"I... I really think I am." I went to the doorway, watching as Fallon flitted about the kitchen, preparing tea while Silar wiped down the surface of the table. "I have to admit. This was not what I was expecting. At all."

"They're good men," Cherry said softly. "The warden, too."

"You like him?" I whirled around in surprise.

Cherry nodded. "I do. He's done so much for Silar and me." She paused. "You don't?"

"Don't what?"

"Like him."

"I..."

I may have been imagining how girthy he was mere moments ago...

Cherry and Darcy didn't need to know that.

"I don't trust him," is what I went with. "He wasn't honest with me about the situation I was sending you two, and Magnolia, into."

"But he didn't know!" Darcy said, shaking her head rapidly. "It was the higher-ups in the empire who decided not to disclose that lovely little fact. It wasn't until long after Cherry had arrived that Silar realized she didn't know about his past. Then she told us."

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Cherry nodded.

“Alright. Fine. But Cherry arrived months ago,” I pointed out. “And I’m only finding this out now.”

“I was busy.”

“Holy-! When did you get here?” I gasped, my hand flying to my pounding chest as I turned to find Warden Tenn directly behind me.

“Just now. And I would have told you before you sent any new brides,” he added.

“Uh huh,” I said, trying to decide if he was telling the truth or not. “Where were you just now?”

“I was making contact with Warden Hallum so that he and his men will be ready to receive us.”

Oh. Well, that was good, I supposed, since I was the one who’d decided to make that trek out to his province. At least Warden Tenn was listening to me in some areas, even if he liked ignoring whatever statements I made about my own butt.

“I also sent him that document,” the warden suddenly added, holding up his tablet. “The one you wrote.”

“Hopefully he reads it,” I said.

Warden Tenn's nostrils flared. A zip of white flashed in his eyes.

"The average human menstrual cycle lasts anywhere from twenty-seven to thirty-two days, though all manner of hormonal shifts, biological conditions, or even stress can effect it."

"Uh. What?" Darcy said under her breath. Cherry shrugged.

Warden Tenn ignored them both.

"Some human women wear white gowns for their marriage ceremonies, but not all," he went on, his shoulders set with determination. "In certain Old-Earth cultures, bright colours, like red, are associated with weddings. Some brides may wear a traditional lehenga or saree, hambok, kimono, or kente gown. Some brides may prefer a pantsuit. Wedding attire can be as diverse as the backgrounds of the brides, and what matters is that she feels comfortable, respected, and honoured, both in the ceremony and her future life with her partner."

"You... You..."

"I read it." He paused, then added, "Some of it. I had a look after sending it to Warden Hallum. It is very long."

"Well, there's a lot to know!"

The warden laughed. Like, actually laughed. A great big guffaw. I stared, slack-jawed, as he tipped his head back, his thick throat contracting with the sound.

"Indeed there is," he rumbled, his gaze coasting from my eyes to my mouth. "And I plan to learn it all."

“The tea is ready! Hello, Warden!” Fallon called jovially as he turned himself sideways and slipped into the room with a steaming hot cup for Darcy. As Darcy took a sip, she tossed Cherry a silent but very communicative look from above the cup. Her eyes were so big with whatever message she was trying to send Cherry she looked like they might be about to pop out of her head.

“What are you doing with your eyes?” Fallon asked loudly, bending down to closely examine his wife’s face.

No wonder the man didn’t get away with murder. Not a subtle bone in his big alien body.

“Nothing,” Darcy said, lowering her cup. “I was just trying to, er...”

“Figure out what Tasha will wear to sleep tonight!” Cherry finished.

That was absolutely not the silent conversation they’d been having a second ago, but it was nonetheless a subject that would need attention.

“I have a spare toothbrush, and you can obviously use all my soap and stuff,” Darcy said. “And I’d be happy to loan you a nightie or something, but...”

But my boobs and butt wouldn’t be able to squeeze themselves into anything of Darcy’s without some major blood flow issues.

“That’s alright,” I assured her. “I can handwash my clothes tonight and just sleep naked, I guess.”

Something croaked behind me. Like a very large animal getting choked.

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Or unexpectedly punched in the face.

“What’s the matter, Warden?” Fallon asked with concern. He crossed to the warden and slapped him on the back. “Is there a bit of bracku bone caught in your throat? Here! Open your mouth and I will check!”

“What? When have I ever required one of you lot to look inside my mouth?” Warden Tenn rasped, glaring at Fallon. “And you,” he growled, aiming his tail accusingly at me. “Just... Keep your clothes on. I’ll be back.”

He turned on his booted heel and swept out of the room. Fallon remained, looking like he wanted desperately to stay and chat with us about whatever the hell had just happened.

But unfortunately for him, a purple tail snapped back into the room, seized sharply upon Fallon’s belt, and then proceeded to haul him out the door.

9

TENN

“Ineed to make Tasha clothes. Or a suit of some sort. Or a dress. Or... Blast. What do humans wear to sleep?”

I had read extensively about human wedding attire, but had not yet found out anything about sleeping attire.

Maybe there was no sleeping attire.

Maybe they all slept naked. All the time.

Empire help me.

“They wear pyjamas!” Fallon said cheerfully as I pulled him through the kitchen and past Silar.

“That cannot be a real word,” I grumbled, finally releasing him.

“Oh, it is! Although, sometimes I believe they are instead called ‘jammies.’”

“That also cannot be correct,” I snapped, “because that is translating into something akin to a sweetened, puréed fruit spread. Although, Tasha also called me a ‘nacho man’ earlier, and my preliminary research tells me a nacho is a type of savoury, crunchy human snack. Often topped with cheese.”

“Humans do love cheese,” Fallon agreed sagely, as if this was some obvious and universal truth that I, too, should have already been aware of.

Fallon was easily one of the kindest men in this province, if not the entire colony. I had not, however, ever considered him to be one of the wisest.

Perhaps I’d need to adjust my view of him in this area.

Unlike me, Fallon had been married to a human woman for some time now. He’d spoken with her, eaten with her, spent time with her every single day.

Shared his bed with her every single night.

Her and her... jammies.

“Do you have extra fabric that would be suitable?” I asked. “I have some at my station, but I don’t have time to ride all the way there and back tonight.”

If I did that, then by the time I returned here, the sun would have already risen.

And Tasha would have spent the night without said jammies.

Naked.

Blazes. Had the crotch of my pants always been this tight?

“I will pay for it, of course,” I added quickly. “I’ll transfer the credits into your account.” The men worked hard out here, cultivating their herds for the empire in order to earn their credits. Anything they could not grow or otherwise create themselves, they had to order for delivery, and that did not come cheaply.

“Oh, that is not necessary, Warden,” Fallon said, giving me a broad smile and leading me towards a closet at the end of a hall near what I assumed was the bedroom he shared with Darcy. “I am happy to share my fabric with you so that you may make something for Tasha. Like I told her on the call before she arrived, I owe her a great deal. Consider it a gift.”

“Thank you, Fallon,” I said, knowing I’d still put the credits in his account all the same. “Now, what general shape are they? These pyjammies.”

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“Pyjamas. Or jammies,” Fallon corrected, opening the closet and rifling through the contents. “Or, sometimes, jammers.”

“Is there a difference between all these varietals?” I asked as Fallon heaped thin, shiny fabric into my arms.

“No. I do not believe so. Though there are different sorts of jammies. Nightgowns. Pants. Tops with long sleeves and short.”

“So many options,” I muttered. “Which one do you think Tasha would like?”

“I do not know,” Fallon said with a roll of his tail. “Why don’t you ask her? You’ll have to go take her measurements anyway.”

“Her what?”

“Her measurements. You’ll need to measure her to-”

“Blast. Fallon. I know.” Before being eliminated from the training ranks of the Zabrian Guard, I, like all the other recruits, had to make my own uniforms. This, of course, involved taking measurements. I just hadn’t thought ahead about actually doing that part with Tasha.

I rearranged the fabric as it threatened to spill out of my hands. Why the blazes was it so cursedly slippery? It was like trying to hold onto a jar of oil. Without the jar.

“What is this stuff?” I grunted, very nearly tearing right through it with my claws as I

tried to keep it off the floor.

“It’s called satin! No. Saltine? I forget. Darcy likes it, though. She says it feels nice on her skin.”

“Ah.” I cleared my throat, wondering if it would also feel nice on Tasha’s skin.

Herbare skin.

“Here,” Fallon said, adding another layer of fabric, this one much more substantial and less... glossy... into the pile. “For a daytime outfit or two. Once you’ve got her measurements, I will stay up tonight and help you make them.”

And all at once, I was reminded why I was doing this. Why I was doing my utmost to make sure this might all work out.

Because my men – all my men – were good. They deserved happiness. Fallon, luckily, had already found it.

Oaken, and even foolish Zohro, also deserved that chance.

And if I wanted them to get that chance, I’d have to start by making sure Tasha was properly clothed.

But I would do that myself.

“Thank you, but you just go to bed with your wife, Fallon. I will take care of Tasha.”

“If you say so. Ah! Here! The final bit!” Fallon gave me a long, flexible strip of leather with Zabrian units of measurement etched onto its surface.

“Thank you, Fallon,” I grunted. “I will leave you now. I have some measuring to do.”

In the kitchen, I passed Cherry and Darcy.

“See you later, Warden Tenn!” Cherry said as she joined up with Silar at the door.

“Goodnight, you two.”

“Goodnight, Warden,” Darcy said as she moved towards Fallon and their bedroom.

“What time can we expect you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Oh!” She glanced at Fallon, then all the fabric in my hands. “Are you staying the night, too?”

“Of course,” I said immediately. It had not even occurred to me that I might leave Tasha here to sleep without me.

Not that I was going to be sleeping with her, of course.

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“Sorry. I don’t have anything prepared for you,” Darcy said. “Do you need-”

“I need nothing. Do not trouble yourself.”

As if to prove it, I left her and followed Cherry and Silar outside to find my own shuldu as they mounted theirs. My grey and white mare, Rabbit, was comfortably ensconced in one of Fallon’s shuldu stalls for the night. I checked to make sure she had ample food and water, which she did, gave her a pat, then retrieved the pack I’d attached to her saddle before leaving my station this morning. Inside, I had travel essentials, including a small sewing kit.

When I returned inside the house, the kitchen was empty, the candles blown out. Darkened quiet rustled, soft as a cloak. Every nerve seemed to come to exquisite life inside me as I considered the door that led into the room Tasha occupied.

The closed door.

I supposed I should not just open it. That would probably be rude. And I perhaps might discover her in some state of undress.

Just because that was a tantalizing thought did not mean I would actually do it. Besides, why would she already be undressed when she had nothing to change into yet?

That was why I was here, clutching my travel pack with its sewing kit and this blasted slippery fabric, was it not?

I leaned forward until my nose bumped the door's surface.

"Hello, Tasha."

Silence.

"I am at the door," I added.

A small sound. It could have been a laugh or a sigh, neither of which were ideal.

"Come in."

I shifted my load of supplies to one arm and opened the door.

There were candles yet lit in here. Tasha stood, illuminated in the light as I lingered in the darkness.

And yes, I did linger, despite her call to come in. Because in the soft caress of the candle glow like this, while the rest of the house was entirely quiet, if not asleep, she looked so blatantly, painfully pretty that I felt it like a physical blow. A destabilizing wallop to the head.

"You could have just knocked, you know," she chided when I finally mustered the strength to step into the room.

"Knock?"

"The door."

"Knock the door? Knock it over? I do not see what that would accomplish," I said, coming fully into the space and dumping my supplies down on the bed.

“No, knock on the door.” She went to the door and closed it, shutting me in with her. I became suddenly aware of how small the room was. How her scent was so much easier to identify in the enclosed space. Sweet and strange and human beneath the dust and dry air.

Tasha raised her hand, formed a fist, and tapped her knuckles against the surface of the door to demonstrate her meaning.

“Noted.”

“What is all that?”

“Supplies to make you some clothing and...”

“And?”

Empire help me. I’d already forgotten the ridiculous human word for sleeping clothes.

“And... The things you wear for sleep. The jamborees.”

A smile touched her mouth. I wanted to touch it, too.

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Which was a reprehensively unprofessional attitude to take towards the human-Zabrian liaison I was supposed to be impressing. I should have been coming up with tactics to properly show her my men and this world. Not spending all my time wondering what her lips might feel like beneath the calloused pads of my fingers.

“Are you talking about pyjamas?”

“Yes. Of course I am. That’s what I said.”

That drew a startled laugh from her as I fetched the measuring strip from the pile.

“That is absolutely not what you said,” she replied.

“You probably misheard me,” I grunted. “I understand that human ears are not nearly as effective as a Zabrian’s.”

“I’ll be sure to put that in the book,” she said, rolling her eyes up towards the ceiling and then back down. It was a gesture I recognized, having seen both Cherry and Darcy do something similar, but I was not yet sure exactly what it meant.

“Well... Good, then,” I said. I held up the strip of hide. “Come closer.”

Tasha appeared taken aback.

“Are you... What’s that for?” She crept subtly backwards towards the closed door, taking tiny, shuffling steps, like I would not notice. As if, in the space that stretched between us, I was not aware of every single move she made, every breath she took.

“Are you going to go all warden on me and tie me up or something?” The colour drained from her cheeks. “Is that your plan to keep the bride program going? Are you planning to keep me here against my will until I agree?”

“What? No!” I shook the hide at her. “I need to measure you! For the clothing! And the jammeronis!”

“Jammies?”

“Once again, that is precisely what I said.”

She bit her lips between her teeth and peered at the strip dangling in the air. I caught both ends between my claws, tightening it and turning it so that she could see the numbers and lines on one side.

“They are units of measurement,” I told her.

Finally, she breathed out and stepped closer.

But not nearly close enough.

“What am I supposed to do from that distance?” I asked her. “Lasso you?”

The colour was back in her cheeks now.

I liked that.

I also liked the idea I’d just given myself. I swept my tail off its hook, tossed it between us, then looped it round her waist.

“Excuse me!” She cried, startled as I dragged to closer.

“You are excused,” I muttered. I pinched my tail where the tip met the part closer to my body. I kept my finger and thumb there as I released her waist, then I measured the tip of my tail to the place my fingers touched.

“Look,” I said, “one measurement is already complete.”

“Alright, well, you could have just done that with the measuring tape like a normal person.”

“I do not have any adhesive tapes with me.”

I also was not entirely sure that I qualified as a “normal person” by either human or Zabrian standards. No male in this colony likely did. But I decided that I did not need to point that out to her right now.

“You’re not going to use your tail for the rest of it, are you?” she asked, her eyes darting from the strip of hide to my tail.

“I wasn’t planning on it. Why? Do you want me to?”

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The question flamed through me. The idea that she might want the curl of my tail around her. A part of my body wrapping around hers...

“No, thank you!”

“That’s fine,” I said quickly. Too quickly. Like maybe it wasn’t really fine but it would be humiliatingly pathetic to admit it. “It’s more efficient this way, anyway.” I hoisted the strip of hide, brought one end to her shoulder, then laid it along her arm to her wrist, making mental note of the length.

“Aren’t you going to write these numbers down.”

“No. I’ll remember them.”

“All of them? Do Zabrians have really good memories?”

“I do not know if our memories are any better than a human’s,” I admitted, moving to her other side so I could repeat the process on her right arm. “But I have no trouble remembering the things that are important.”

That seemed to satisfy her for the moment.

Until I put the strip of hide against her right arm.

“Do you really need to measure both my arms? You just did the other one,” she pointed out. “Unless you’ve already forgotten the measurement,” she added archly, “because you didn’t write it down.”

“Nonsense,” I scoffed. “Your left arm is eighteen Zabrian microspans. I am merely measuring the right one to ensure that they match.”

“Of course they match!”

“Well, I’ll know that once I measure it, won’t I?”

She sighed and relaxed her arm, which she’d started to pull away from me.

“It is a good thing I measured,” I told her when I was finished. “Because that arm is a quarter microspan longer than the other.”

“No it isn’t!” she gasped, snatching her right arm away and cradling it protectively against her full chest. “You just measured it wrong.”

“I assure you, I did not.”

“Well... Then I’m sure it’s perfectly normal. I’m sure lots of humans have one arm longer than the other...”

“Is it?” I asked, moving behind her so I could continue measuring. “I did not come across that bit of information in the book you wrote yet.”

“Yes, well. Look for it in the second edition.”

“I will.”

I looped the measuring tape around her front.

“I am going to measure your...” I had a feeling she would not like it if I said “hindquarters” again. “Hips.”

“Fine.”

I tightened the strip of hide, trying not to stare at the delectable curves of her from back here. Once I had the measurement, I drew the strip up to her chest.

“Oh!” she cried as the strip went taut around that soft, fleshy part of her.

“Sorry,” I breathed. By the empire, she smelled so nice. “Too tight?”

“No,” she squeaked. But the quality of her reply did not convince me.

“Are your lungs... in there?” I asked, quickly noting the measurement and letting the strip of hide fall. “In your... in those parts?”

She made a choking, coughing sound that only seemed to confirm that I’d just compressed her lungs somehow.

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“You think my lungs are inside my boobs?!”

“Boobs. Hmm. This does not translate.”

“My lungs are inside my chest, under my ribs! Where they are supposed to be!”

“I see.”

I did not see. At all.

But I figured if I asked more questions now I’d merely get told to read the book. Which I planned to. I’d read it all blasted night if I had to.

“Alright. Let’s do your legs and we can be done.”

“You know what?” she asked, twisting and reaching for the strip of hide. “I can do that myself.

“Absolutely not,” I replied, holding the strip out of reach. “Who knows what kind of shoddy job you’d do? You’d probably only measure the right leg and not bother to check the left. For all we know, one of your legs could be a full microspan shorter than the other.”

“Ugh. If it is, don’t bother telling me,” she groaned. “I don’t want to know.”

I completed the rest of the measuring swiftly (one of her legs was indeed shorter than the other) and picked up the shiny, milk-coloured fabric Fallon had indicated would

be appropriate for human sleepwear.

“What style do you want?” I asked her, unfurling the fabric.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” she said quickly.

“Of course it matters,” I replied instantly. “If you’re going to be wearing it, then it matters. It matters to me greatly.”

Her laugh, when it came, sounded brittle.

“I see. So instead of holding me hostage, like I thought a second ago, your real strategy is to just butter me up?”

“You want me to put butter on you?”

I supposed I could, if she asked.

Now, all I could think about was rubbing it into her skin.

And then licking it off.

“No,” she said, her voice breaking into the salty, creamy, astonishingly erotic delights of my imagination, “it just means that you’re using flattery to get what you want.”

“Pardon?”

“Flattery. Did that not translate?”

“It translated. I just have not ever been accused of such a thing before.”

A wrinkle formed between her brows. Perhaps the confusion was warranted. She did not yet know me very well.

Why did I want to rectify that so badly?

“I don’t have time or patience for things like false flattery, Tasha,” I told her. “This world has a way of stripping a man of all his most polished forms of insincerity. It only leaves room for the important things. Truth. Endurance. Survival.”

“Surely the sort of pyjamas I want isn’t anywhere on that list!”

“Incorrect,” I growled. “That issue is currently at the very top of my list. And Tasha?” Her eyes looked very big as they met mine. “It has nothing to do with my men or the program. Truthfully, I was not thinking of them at all. When I say what you want matters, it’s because it matters to me. Now stop arguing with me and tell me what sort of jamdanglies you’d like.”

“A one-piece of some sort would probably be easiest and fastest for you to make. Like a long shirt or something.”

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“I didn’t ask what would be fastest,” I reminded her sternly. “I asked what you wanted.”

“Well... If you insist.”

“I do.”

“Then... A two-piece set would be ideal, please. Pants and a top with long sleeves, if you don’t mind. It’s quite cool here at night, even in the summer.”

She said it almost shyly, avoiding my eyes and seating herself on the bed. She suddenly made herself very busy fiddling with the twist of hair at the back of her head, removing metal pins and setting them on the small bedside table. It was as if she could not sit quietly and face me – or herself – with the fact that she’d just asked me for something.

It made me wish she’d ask more of me.

It made me want to give her things. Things beyond a simple two piece set of jamberinos.

Did she have anyone else in her life to ask things of?

To give her things?

What a stupid notion. Of course she did. She literally wrote the book on human marriage. And she was so beautiful she had to be...

“Are you married?”

Tasha froze with both her hands poised behind her head. I was seized by the image of her seated there, her hands raised and arranged so artfully that way, her human face in profile, lit by the candle on the table. Elegant. Pristine. So lovely in the way that things were never lovely here.

It made me hurt a little bit inside.

“No,” she said.

The joy I felt at her reply was alarmingly savage.

She removed the final pin from her hair, and the length of it came tumbling down. It was much longer than I’d realized, the ends swishing around her waist.

I liked seeing her like this. Probably liked it too much.

This intimate unravelling.

She began to collect and then comb her shiny, pale hair between her hands. For a long moment, I made no progress on my sewing project. I was too busy staring at her, mesmerized by the movements of those clawless fingers through the shimmering, fragrant strands.

I wanted to do that for her. Let the strands of her hair run over my hands like water. Comb out the tangles. Wash out the dust.

But I had other things to do for her right now.

I turned my attention to the fabric and got to work.

TASHA

I watched Warden Tenn while I continued to detangle my hair with my fingers. He'd set himself up on the flat surface of the floor and was currently cutting swaths of white, silky-looking fabric into big, vaguely shirt-shaped pieces. He was quiet and focused, his large hands moving with surprising deftness.

I hadn't seen this side of him before. This silent, nearly studious diligence. The swaggering arrogance was tamped down, shaped into something careful. Something thoughtful.

Once my hair was smoothed-out, I had nothing else to do with my hands. I pressed them together between my knees, feeling suddenly awkward about watching Warden Tenn while he made my pyjamas.

"I'll be right back," I told him, deciding to use this time to get ready for bed. Before she'd retreated to her own bedroom, Darcy had given me some extra toiletries, like soap and a toothbrush. I made use of the outhouse – which was certainly rustic, but serviceable – and then washed up and brushed my teeth in the kitchen sink. The dark kitchen, aside from the apparently impossible-to-eliminate dust, was otherwise clean, Fallon and Silar having tidied it all up admirably.

Gerald and I had lived together before I left him for the job on Elora Station. I couldn't even remember the last time he'd done a chore without being asked. And when he did complete a chore I'd asked for, it was always half-assed and accompanied by an endless litany of passive aggressive complaints.

Every sign was currently telling me that a pair of alien convict cowboys were better partners than my non-criminal, human ex-boyfriend could ever dream of being.

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By the time I returned to the bedroom, Warden Tenn had made startling progress. The trunk of the shirt appeared nearly complete, and long strips were ready beside it, presumably to function as the sleeves.

“Wow,” I said, nodding in appreciation as I returned to my spot on the bed. “You’re fast.”

“I haven’t made clothes in cycles,” he grunted without looking up from his work. “But old skills come back quickly.”

“Just like riding a bike.”

“What?”

“It’s a human phrase. It means that things you were once good at are always sort of in there, ready to be dusted off when you need them.”

Warden Tenn made a thoughtful sound, then said, “I like that.”

My cheeks felt oddly hot at his proclamation. I cleared my throat and decided now was the time to thoroughly examine my nailbeds. Having just washed my hands, they didn’t look too bad, despite the dust.

“So,” Warden Tenn said. “What are your first thoughts?”

“About the pyjamas?”

He glanced up. His orange gaze was so warm.

“About the men. About the program’s chances of continuing.”

“Oh! Of course. Well, I must admit I’m quite happy with Fallon and Silar so far. It really does appear that they’re providing well for their wives. Cherry and Darcy seem happy, and Magnolia does, too, in the brief chat I’ve had with her.”

“I want you to know,” he said, his voice falling lower, serious and deep, “that I would not have agreed to proceed with this program if I thought any of my men were unsuitable. I believe it is the same for Warden Hallum, and the wardens of the other provinces.”

He finished with a seam, and snapped the thread off with his fangs, a surprising and bizarrely erotic action. I watched his mouth, with those flashing long teeth, as he continued speaking.

“I have been doing some research about human laws and criminal proceedings. You should know that none of my men meet the human standard for murder.”

“Cherry said something similar. But, if that’s the case, how were any of them convicted?”

Warden Tenn got to work attaching one sleeve to the body of the shirt. His stitches were even, neat, and incredibly quick, even with the slippery, satiny fabric.

“From my research, humans have legal arguments they can rely on in these sorts of cases, such as self-defence. The Zabrian Empire has no such thing. Causing the death of another, if you are not among one of the protected classes, cannot be defended by any means. If my men had been any older, they would have been sent to the mines for a lifetime of hard labour and imprisonment.”

“Protected classes?”

“The military caste, for example.”

“Does that include you?”

“It does.”

I tensed. He noticed, and used his sewing needle to gesture at his belt. “This is a stunner, meant for incapacitation. It is not a lethal weapon.”

Your whole body is a lethal weapon.

I almost said it as I absorbed the size and shape of him, his heavy, muscled body. The hands that could so easily crush a throat...

But that were currently occupied by making me delicate pyjamas instead.

“And before you get any ideas,” he said on a growl, but with mirth in his eyes, “the stunner is biometrically assigned to me. You can’t use it on me, or anyone else.”

“I wasn’t planning to!”

“That’s what you want me to think,” he smirked. “But a good warden must always be prepared for anything.”

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“Speaking of being prepared,” I said, ignoring the fluttering in my belly at his friendly, nearly flirtatious tone. “What’s the plan for the next few days?”

“I believe it would be best to travel to Warden Hallum’s province first,” he said as he finished up with the sleeve he was currently working on. “Zohro’s property is actually closer to the border than the mountains. For efficiency’s sake, I’ll ask him to meet us there. That way you can meet four of the unmarried hopefuls at once. Afterwards, we can journey to the mountains. Garrek, Magnolia, and their convict-ward Killian are still staying on Oaken’s property. I would not be surprised if they settle in the mountains permanently at this rate.”

“Is that, you know, allowed?” I asked, curious about just how much freedom the men had here. This was technically a penal colony, after all.

“Considering I am the one who would be responsible for allowing it? Yes. I have no problem with this. It may even be beneficial for Killian, as I believe he needs as solid a supportsystem as he can get. Garrek’s old ranch can be repurposed or used to house a future convict if necessary.”

“Killian. That’s the one who threatened to kill me on that call?” I said, my mouth pulling down. It had been just a little too easy to get swept up in the adoration Fallon and Silar had for their wives. But remembering Killian reminded me that, ultimately, these men had all killed people.

“He is immensely protective of Magnolia,” Warden Tenn explained. “He considers her his family. He never had a mother on Zabria.”

“I never had one, either. Doesn’t mean I go around threatening to ‘end people,’” I tutted.

Warden Tenn paused, his needle halfway into the fabric.

“But if you had found such a thing as a broken-hearted child,” he said softly, “after never having had it before, would you not do everything in your power to protect it?”

My throat closed up. My eyes burned.

Suddenly, I was eight years old again, alone in the Terratribe I foster care system. Alone, but for Angela, ten years my senior and more like a sister than a friend.

I remembered the day she turned eighteen. There was no cake, no celebration. No candles to be blown out or wishes to make. Nothing but her bags being packed for her and all but tossed out into the street.

I remembered the way I melted down. The hysterical crying that made me feel like my head would split in two. I remembered using my entire body to try to keep her with me. I’d gripped her sleeve so desperately that I tore the flimsy fabric.

And I remembered the intensely painful shame of that, because clothes without holes were so hard to come by, and she and I had so few of them already.

She wasn’t angry about the sleeve. She told me through her tears that it was alright.

I never saw her again.

Even now, twelve years later, panic filled my body as those memories rushed through me. That harrowing fear of being abandoned, of losing the one person I’d loved.

What would I have done, beyond ripping an old sleeve, had I had the chance?

Would I have actually hurt someone? Killed someone?

Probably not.

But maybe I would have threatened to.

I blinked back tears, trying to control my breathing as best I could. The past and the present crashed together. An old torn sleeve.

And a new one, carefully put together by the warden.

“There,” he said. “Nearly finished.”

Nearly finished with the shirt, at least. Not the pants. He hadn’t even started on those.

My body went suddenly boneless with exhaustion.

“Is it alright if I just wear the shirt part tonight?” I asked. I tried to disguise the weakness in my voice, the way it cracked, but I knew by the sharp look that Warden Tenn sent me that I hadn’t succeeded.

Instantly, he was moving. On his feet, two big steps, then down on one knee before me. The room brightened with a new source of light – his eyes.

“Are you alright?” Crackling urgency made his words quick, almost harsh.

“Just tired,” I said. I sniffed and blinked again, proud that I hadn’t let any tears escape. “I’m sure you are, too,” I added. “It’s been a long day.”

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“Sleep. And do not worry about me,” he said, every inch of him exuding authority. He handed me the finished top and then went back to collect all his other stuff from the floor.

“Zabrians,” he said, as he rose and strode for the door, “have excellent stamina.”

He paused in the doorway, then over his shoulder, he rather smugly added, “You can put that in your book. Goodnight.”

11

RIVVEN

I balanced the empty glass on the blunt end of my right wrist and I polished it with a spare rag in my left hand. The push and pull of the fabric across the glass’ surface removed layers of dust and revealed more and more of my wrist and forearm within. Pale blue healthy hide. Thick arteries and bunching muscle. And the knot of black scar tissue where the wrist abruptly ended, directly below the place where my hand had once been.

Once I was satisfied with the glass’ cleanliness, I inverted my arm, aiming my wrist downwards so that the glass could slide off and stand in the row alongside all the others I’d already cleaned today. The glass landed with a quiet thwunk on the wooden surface of my saloon’s bar. Without even having to look, my tail was already reaching behind me to the drying rack where yet more glasses – washed, but now in need of polishing – were waiting. Sun streamed in through the big windows at the front of the building, illuminating the single rectangular table with its various

mismatched chairs in the centre of the saloon.

In some ways, it was an entirely typical morning.

In other ways, it was not.

Because today, the warden had summoned the other convicts in our province to meet him here. It was not unusual for Xennet and Dorn to come to the saloon, or even the warden himself, from time to time. They were the ones who'd eventually be drinking out of the polished glasses and eating the meals I made.

But it was rare for all of us to congregate here on the same day, summoned as we had been by the warden.

“Am I late?”

The chaotic crashing of the saloon's door being thrust wildly open made it almost impossible to hear Xennet's question. He careened into the room like a spooked shuldu.

“Xennet,” I said calmly, “why have you got a knife in your hand?”

“What? Oh.” Xennet glanced down at the large blade clutched in his pale green fingers. “It is not just my hand!” Hoisting his tail, he brandished yet another blade, the handle held fast by the curling green length.

With a sigh, I aimed my own tail at theNo brandishing weapons insidesign behind my counter. It was one of many such signs, which also included other useful – and where Xennet was concerned, relevant – rules such asKeep your trousersonandNo pissing in the glasses.

“You know I can’t read that,” Xennet huffed. He had been one of the youngest among us when convicted and taken from his place at the Zabrian Academy.

“I know. But I also know you’ve got the rules memorized for how often I remind you of them,” I muttered in reply. “If you want to flail your knives around, take them outside.”

“I am not flailing them around,” he replied indignantly, whipping his weaponized tail in a direct contravention of what he’d just said. “I am simply being prepared.”

“Prepared for what? Why are you armed to the fangs for a meeting with Dorn and the warden?”

“Because,” he hissed, crossing the distance between us, his heavy boots thumping across the dusty wooden planks of the floor. His eyes glowed bright white beneath the brim of his hat. “It could be a trap.”

Empire help me.

“You think the warden,ourwarden,” I said slowly, to make sure I didn’t let Xennet miss even a single speck of the stupidity of what he’d just said, “has set a trap for us?”

I eyed his two knives, knowing he no doubt had more of them hidden on his person. “And if that were the case, do you really think you’d be fast enough with those things to avoid a stunner blast to the guts?”

Warden Hallum had extensive military training. Between that experience and the superior might of his stunner, there would be no contest between Xennet and him.

“What if it wasn’t Warden Hallum?” Xennet whispered loudly. “What if it was

someone else, imitating his voice and spoofing his data tab's address? They could be asking all of us to gather here for some nefarious purpose."

"Such as..."

"Such as... Such as dropping something heavy on the roof and making it collapse on us." He cast his white eyes up at the beams suspiciously.

"And if this roof collapse were to happen, what, exactly, will the knives do to protect you?"

"Well, I hadn't thought quite that far. But maybe I could sort of..." He stopped speaking in order to prioritize a physical demonstration of how he might fight off a body-crushing wooden beam with nothing but his blades.

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I hissed out a flat breath between my fangs and once again aimed my tail at the sign, this time underlining the **No brandishing** bit with savage, slashing force.

“Fine.” Xennet’s tail shoved its knife into a sheath on his belt with such carelessness I was surprised he didn’t slice his own trousers right off of his body. “But I’m keeping this one out,” he added defiantly, raising his right fist which still clutched its blade. “I’ll just stop brandishing it.”

“I knew you knew what the sign said...”

“Did I miss it?” Dorn was pushing open the door now, heaving his big, rust-red body into the saloon. His crimson eyes fell upon Xennet’s raised fist. “Isn’t there a rule about knives in here?”

“At least he’s got his trousers on this time,” I replied under my breath, coming out from behind the counter. “No, you didn’t miss it. The warden has not yet arrived.”

Dorn grunted and removed his hat.

“What in the great blue blazes happened to your hair?” Xennet exclaimed. He peered closely at Dorn’s reddish-brown hair, which appeared to have been hacked off at a length just slightly above his shoulders.

“There was an unfortunate incident with an agitated bracku’s antler getting caught in it,” Dorn said. “It was either I cut it off quickly or get gored. And between my hide and my hair, I’d choose my hide every time.”

I breathed through a sudden skirmish in the vicinity of my heart. So much time had passed, and yet the mere mention of an incident with a bracku still had the power to send me cycles into the past. My right hand, long since amputated, throbbed as if blood still flowed beyond the wrist.

“I am not so sure I’d choose my hide over my hair,” Xennet said with a frown, examining the ends of his long, glossy, silver-purple locks.

“You’d rather get an antler through the ribs than a haircut?” Dorn asked in disbelief.

“No,” Xennet replied. “I am only saying, maybe there could have been a better way. If you had a knife in your hand to cut off your hair, maybe you could have subdued the bracku instead.”

“Kill one of my prize bulls to save my hair? Ridiculous,” Dorn scoffed. “I’d choose good Zabrian credits over my hair just as easily as I’d choose my hide.”

“You would not have had to kill it,” Xennet continued with a heavy sigh, as if he were speaking to a simpleton. “But perhaps you could have distracted it a bit. Did you try giving it a little snack? Some of my bulls seem rather fond of hats these days. I have lost three this cycle alone.”

“No, Xennet,” Dorn said flatly, “while doing everything in my power to avoid a raging bull’s antlers, I did not have the presence of mind to attempt to feed it my hat.”

“Well,” Xennet said with a swish of his tail. “There is always next time.”

“It doesn’t matter if my hair is short,” Dorn said, dragging a chair out from the table and seating himself in it. “I have no one to impress out here.”

“Do not be so sure.”

The three of us snapped to attention as the warden entered the saloon. Even Dorn, who'd only just sat down, jumped out of his chair at Warden Hallum's approach.

Warden Hallum had the kind of presence that could easily fill a room twice as big as this one. And it wasn't due to his physical size. He was a large male, certainly, but no bigger than bulky, broad-shouldered Dorn. It was in the way he carried himself. Every move he made was one of precisely measured power, his steps controlled and quiet and yet heavy with intention. His spine was so straight I sometimes wondered if it had been reinforced with some sort of metal, maybe after an injury during his time in the Zabrian Guard.

Warden Hallum's grey eyes scanned the space, not missing the slightest detail.

"Xennet."

Xennet straightened up.

"Put that knife away."

While I could not say that Xennet followed the warden's orders with anything close to enthusiasm, at least he finally listened this time.

Warden Hallum watched Xennet for a moment longer, as if to make sure the younger, green-skinned male was not about to sneakily pull his knife back out when he wasn't looking. Once he appeared satisfied that Xennet was not going to do anything characteristically idiotic, Warden Hallum drew out his data tab.

"These," he said without preamble, spinning the screen of his device around to face us, "are human females."

The three of us stared. Five unmoving faces smiled back. An image of some sort. Not

a video or live call.

Without meaning to, I found myself leaning towards the warden's screen with great interest. Dorn, Xennet, and I did not have data tabs with functioning screens. Without visual capabilities on our devices, we hadn't seen any faces but each other's for many cycles.

The faces of the human females were familiar in shape, though smaller and much softer than a Zabrian male's. Their hide ranged in colour from the lightest beige to the darkest brown, and their hair came in varying textures: some straight and fine, some tied into dozens of braids, some spiralling from their scalps in dense, dark clumps.

Humans.

My throat felt strangely dry. My tail was tense on its hook.

They are very...

“Pretty,” Xennet breathed, leaning so far in that he blocked my view. I glared at his stupid purple-haired head and jabbed him in the ribs with my tail until he grudgingly moved back to his place. Maybe I needed to make another sign...

I glanced at Dorn. He hadn’t said anything yet, but his eyes had gone from their usual red to a hotly blazing white.

“Why are you showing us an image of these humans?” I asked the warden. Warden Hallum was a hard man, but he was fair. He was not in the habit of joking or teasing or dangling beautiful things – or females – in front of us when he knew that we could never have them. I did not think he would show us five strange, lovely faces on his screen if he did not have an important reason to do so.

“Because,” he answered in his deep, authoritative voice, “if you do everything I say and act like the men I know that you can be-” He gave Xennet an extra meaningful look. “-then you may get to marry one.”

Silence devastated the room, as sure as a stunner’s blast. My ears rang.

“Marry,” Xennet finally sputtered.

Dorn's eyes even whiter than before, if that were possible.

I raised my left hand in front of my face and saw the telltale white glow of my own gaze reflected on the pale blue hide there.

Shaking. My hand was shaking.

I forced it into a fist and dropped it.

"Marry, marry?" Dorn choked out. It sounded like he'd attempted to swallow a spoonful of dust before speaking. "As in, marriage?"

"Of course," Warden Hallum replied. "What other sort of 'marry' would I be speaking of?"

Something foreign, something I barely recognized as hope came to life inside me. I promptly strangled it and said, "The empire would never allow it."

"The empire has already allowed it," Warden Hallum replied. And then, unbelievably, he added, "The program was already gotten underway in Warden Tenn's province. Three human brides have been settled among his men."

"Three?" Xenet exclaimed. Suddenly, one knife was back in his hand, the other clutched by his tail, rules about brandishing all but forgotten. Or happily ignored. "There are three of us here! Why did the females not come to our province first?"

Xenet did not wait for Warden Hallum's reply. Instead, he marched furiously towards the door, as if he planned to walk himself all the way to Warden Tenn's province with nothing but his boots, his knives, and his own uniquely unstable form of optimism.

He did not even make it to the door before Warden Hallum's tail shot out and seized upon the metal hook on the back of his belt. Xennet stumbled, and then attempted to yank free.

"Don't make me pull my stunner," the warden barked, authority suffused in every word. "Put your blades away and return this instant, Xennet, or I promise you that I will lock you up somewhere even you cannot escape from when the human Tasha arrives."

Xennet's body twanged into tense stillness before he exploded into motion, sheathing his knives and sprinting back to the centre of the saloon.

"One is coming here?" he asked, his voice practically vibrating.

"Yes. She is coming here to judge you all. You must pass her tests."

Oh.

Oh no...

"What sort of tests?" I asked. Grimacing, I noticed how my handleless wrist felt suddenly heavier than it should have. I glanced around the saloon, then at the loft above that served as my sleeping quarters. Would a human female even consider living in such a place? Unlike Dorn and Xennet, I didn't even have my own herd. I had shuldu and gardens and the land around the saloon, but no real ranch.

"Yes, what sorts of tests?" Xennet echoed frantically. "I am very good with knives. Tell her that I am very good with knives!"

"Don't pull them out again," Warden Hallum growled in warning as Xennet reached to do it. "If they want to know about your knives, then they will ask."

“They?” I asked, my attention snagging on the word.

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“Warden Tenn will be accompanying Tasha here. She is currently with him in his province. They will arrive here in a few short days. And I emphasize short,” he said with extra force, “because there will be no do-overs and there will be no second chances. We must be ready.”

This was not surprising. Second chances had never been an option in any facet of our lives. It was a lesson we had all learned as children when we’d been sent here in the first place.

“We will be,” Dorn vowed with brutal determination.

“Of course you will be,” Warden Hallum agreed. “I will accept nothing less.” He held up his data tab once more, but this time it displayed a wall of text. “Warden Tenn has sent me a document replete with knowledge on the human species, their cultures, and their various marital customs.”

“Too many words,” Xenet hissed, baring his fangs and recoiling. “And we do not even have our own screens to read from!”

“You will use mine,” Warden Hallum explained. “We will meet here after your chores are done, every night until the human liaison’s arrival. We will study the text together.” His grey gaze went dangerously narrow. “And I warn you now that Tasha will not be the only one with tests.”

Xenet looked suddenly depressed. Dorn looked grimly resolute.

What I looked like in comparison, I could not say. I could barely untangle the

feelings rioting through me now. Anxiety and shock and, blast it all to Zabria and back, there it was again. The one thing I'd taught myself, forced myself, to never acknowledge. To never accept.

Hope.

12

TASHA

In the morning, I found a neat pile of clothing waiting for me outside the bedroom door. There was a sturdy-looking pair of brown pants, two more long-sleeved brown tops, and a broad-brimmed hat that looked like a smaller version of the warden's.

After Warden Tenn had left the room last night, I'd crept out to hand wash my underwear and I'd hung them in the bedroom overnight. After hanging in the dry air, they were no longer damp. I put them on, fastened my bra, twisted my hair into a bun, and then tried on one of the new outfits from the warden.

The new clothes fit perfectly. So perfectly it was almost annoying. I found myself running my hands up and down the seams, admiring the quality of the garments and the obvious competence that had gone into making them.

I wonder where he slept last night.

Not that that mattered, of course. There was no reason for me to even think about such a thing.

But...

I was fairly certain I'd taken the only extra bed.

He hadn't been in the kitchen or anything last night. Outside, maybe?

That's where he was now. I saw him through a window, speaking with Fallon as he appeared to be readying his grey and white-spotted shuldu. Only then did it occur to me that Silar probably took his wagon home last night, and I'd be riding that alien horse.

With him.

"Got everything you need?" Darcy asked, pulling me from thoughts of being in such close proximity with the warden.

"Oh, yes! Thanks!" I held up my extra clothes, including the ones I'd been wearing yesterday.

"Let me get you a bag," she said. She returned a minute later from her bedroom with a leather satchel. She held it open for me, and I dumped the clothes inside, followed by the toothbrush and toiletries.

"Thank you for all this," I said, meaning it. "I'll figure out a way to pay you back. Maybe the warden can help me coordinate something with Fallon's account. Or I can do a transfer to you."

"Oh, God, don't worry about it," Darcy said. "What kind of hostess would I be if I didn't provide the bare minimum for my guests?"

I smiled, feeling a little less disoriented in this world now that I had some things with me that I could call my own.

And maybe some friends to call my own, too.

Together, we all ate a quick, simple breakfast of cheese, meat, and preserved fruit.

“You do not mind that it is not shaped as a square?” Warden Tenn asked as I finished my last bite.

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“A square? Like, the food? No. Why, did something in the book give you that impression?”

“No.” He hitched up his pants. “Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

Now that I’d visited with Silar, Cherry, Darcy, and Fallon, I was anxious to continue on so that we could meet the other men and then check on Magnolia.

“So, unlike Cherry and Magnolia, I’m not much of a natural hugger,” Darcy said as she and Fallon followed Warden Tenn and me outside. “But I’m getting better.” She held her arms out at her sides.

“I’m game if you are,” I told her.

She grinned, and then enfolded me into her arms. I hugged her back, feeling an unexpected ache at the back of my eyes.

“Safe travels,” she whispered. As we pulled away from each other, she got out her comms tablet. “Give me your info,” she said, “and I’ll add you into our group chat.”

Once that was done, and I’d said goodbye to the beaming, blond-haired Fallon, there was nothing to do but get myself up into the saddle.

Which, as I stared at Warden Tenn’s beast, was very obviously going to be an impossible task. Even a human as tall as Darcy would probably be intimidated.

I really might break my butt this time.

“Can you reach the stirrup?”

Despite the morning’s heat, I shivered at the warden’s gruff voice directly behind me.

“I... I don’t think so.”

If I even attempted it, I was certain there would be a very good chance I’d rip the crotch of these new pants the warden had stayed up half the night making for me.

“Then I will lift you,” he said easily. “Try to relax and don’t do anything-”

“Unfortunate?”

“Right.”

A smartass retort was just building at the back of my throat when Warden Tenn’s hands on my body eliminated all possibility of speech.

This wasn’t like yesterday, when he’d quickly grabbed me so that I wouldn’t fall.

This felt... Slower. More intentional. His hands started at my hips, then moved in an agonizingly relentless slide up to my waist. His palms settled there, cupping my curves, his long, thick fingers splayed against the bottom of my ribcage.

My heart spasmed.

I held my breath.

The warden didn’t. I heard him let out a ragged-sounding exhale. He moved a little

closer, his front brushing my back. Tingles erupted, bursting from scalp to spine.

Sensation pooled between my legs.

I wanted him to move his hands higher.

Or lower...

No!

Ididn't want that. At least not the cerebral part of me. Certainly not. I was a consummate professional!

I just apparently happened to have a body that was rapidly becoming stupidly horny for this arrogant alien warden.

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It was probably because I hadn't slept with anyone in months. The last person had been Gerald, and that had never been a particularly awe-inspiring experience, even in the beginning of our relationship.

I was just feeling the effects of a very long, very dreary dry spell. Clearly, my hormones were going absolutely haywire in the presence of seven-foot-something of pure muscle and masculine Zabrian energy. Maybe I'm ovulating.

He might not even be single! There obviously wasn't anyone living with him out here, but maybe this was just a temporary contract. Perhaps, someday soon, he'd go home to someone else.

No. Not home to someone else, just home to someone. "Someone else" would imply "someone other than me."

Which was patently ridiculous.

What was even more ridiculous?

How much the thought deflated me, left me feeling bleak and depressingly empty.

It didn't matter if the warden had someone special waiting for him. I was here to do a job, do it well, and that's what I'd bloody well do.

Warden Tenn's fingers tightened. My skin prickled. I felt a momentary stab of sickly fear that I'd be too heavy, but that feeling disappeared as soon as he hoisted me easily into the air. He settled me on the saddle with no apparent effort on his part, then

pulled himself up after me. His chest pressed firmly against my back as he reached both arms around me to grab the reins.

“Let’s go, Rabbit.”

“Did you just call me Rabbit?” I asked.

“What? No. That’s my shuldu’s name.”

“Oh! A rabbit is an Old-Earth animal.”

“I see,” he said, steering Rabbit through the gate and towards the dusty road. The sun was climbing higher, and I found myself grateful for the protection of the new hat.

“If it’s a type of animal, why did you think I was calling you that?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I admitted. “That’s why I asked.”

His chest rumbled against my back every time he spoke. It was annoyingly pleasant and terribly distracting.

“If I were going to call you something besides your name, I wouldn’t be calling you something that refers to an animal.”

“Oh? And what would you be calling me, then?”

He paused for so long I thought he wouldn’t bother answering. But then, suddenly, he said, “Something pretty.”

I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt the sort of pleasure that went rushing through me then. Dizzying, heart-squeezing, brain-melting. I opened and closed my mouth several

times, my head completely emptied of thoughts except for, The warden thinks you're pretty.

Or, at the very least, he thought I deserved a pretty nickname.

No one had ever told me I deserved anything pretty before.

I wanted to run from the compliment. To reject it. It felt like I'd be protecting myself that way.

So I tried to tell myself that he was just trying to soften me up. Wear me down. Get past all my defences and leave me vulnerable to biased judgments in favour of his men.

But...

I remembered his words from last night. Words about this world stripping a man of all his most polished insincerities.

So what, then?

Was he lying last night when he'd said that?

Was he lying now?

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I didn't ask any of those questions. Instead, I blurted, "Are you single?"

"Am I... A single person?" I could hear the smirk in his voice as he said, "There is only one Warden Tenn."

I rolled my eyes.

"No, I mean, are you married? Or, do you have someone... Someone back home?"

Thank fuck he asked me if I was married last night. It made this ever-so-slightly less mortifying.

"No," he said. "I am stationed here on a permanent basis. There is no one waiting for me."

"Oh. That's..."

"What?"

"That must be kind of hard. Isn't it? You don't ever want to be married?"

He hesitated, then stiffly replied, "I wanted to be married once. Almost was."

My belly flipped, then tightened.

"What happened?"

God. Stupid, Tasha. Why are you even asking this? It's none of your damn business!

But the warden answered anyway.

"I was courting someone when I was a recruit, training for my place in the Zabrian Imperial Guard. It was early in our relationship and I didn't know who her father was. It turned out that he was a very high-ranking official – much higher ranking than someone like me. When our relationship was discovered, it was made abundantly clear to me that marriage was not a possibility."

"Oh, no. And there was nothing you could do?"

"Well, there were things she could have done. If she'd wanted to, she could have denounced her family's wishes to continue seeing me. But I learned too late she never had any intention of doing such a thing. She knew from the beginning that things would never progress into anything serious."

"But you didn't?"

"No, I did not. Her father was furious with me, of course. For daring to try to enter their sphere."

Oh, no. This was bad. I was having feelings for the warden. Poky, squishy, sappy sorts of feelings.

I wanted to freaking hug him. And that was dangerous. Horniness, I could deal with.

More deep-seated emotions were going to be much, much trickier.

"So what happened after that?" I nudged gently when he lapsed into silence.

“I was given a choice,” he replied. “I could be expelled from the military caste and stripped of my rank. Or I could take up a position as a warden here.”

All at once, with the crushing gravity of a boulder on my chest, I hated the Zabrian Empire. Hated their caste system, hated their laws, hated that they’d lied to get the human women here. I hated those who’d basically exiled Warden Tenn for the audacity of wanting to marry the wrong person. Hated the systems that sent traumatized children stumbling and alone into this world.

But the children weren’t alone, were they? They had the older convicts.

And they had the wardens. Just like the one behind me now.

“That’s terrible,” I whispered. “To be punished like that. Just for falling in love.”

“Love?” He sounded startled.

“Oh!” I felt myself blushing. “Sorry. When you said you were thinking of marriage, I kind of just assumed...”

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“I was very young,” he said. “And I was foolish. I was more infatuated with the idea of my own future than I was with my intended bride. I was trying very hard to put together all the pieces I thought were required for an acceptable sort of life. Rank, wife, career. But this life has its merits, too. And I have made my peace with it.”

I understood a bit of what he meant. I’d spent so long, and worked so hard, to get away from Terratribe I. To begin the kind of life I thought I’d always wanted. The fancy new job, the bright office, the clean but ultimately empty apartment...

Those things had always been my goals.

By all metrics I’d valued most, I was successful beyond my wildest dreams.

But sometimes, alone in my cold Elora Station bed, I had to acknowledge how terrifyingly hollow that success felt now that it was actually mine.

In Warden Tenn’s saddle, with the road stretching endlessly ahead of me, I thought about returning to Elora Station when all of this was done. And I felt my whole being contract with unexpected despair.

Rabbit’s crisply clopping hooves were the only sound.

We didn’t speak again until the warden’s station came into view later that afternoon.

Darcy Dubois Added Tasha Wallace to the Group

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Image file loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:There you go, Tasha. Now you've got the picture for your book.

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:Um. Is that what I think it is?

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:If you think it's a very faithfully and lovingly rendered Zabrian dick diagram, then yes.

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:Definitely was not expecting to see that when I opened this chat. Wow.

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:I humbly accept your compliment.

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:Are you sure about the humble part?

Incoming Tablet Communication Cherry Dawson:Tasha needs it for her research. She's writing a book about Zabrians, like the one the guys got about us!

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:Very helpful, Darcy. Thank you. And thank you for adding me to the chat!

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Sunglasses emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Cowboy emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Artist emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Eggplant emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Cherry Dawson:What the heck is that last one? The purple one?

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:It's a Terratribe II eggplant. Also known as the vegetable representation of a dick.

Incoming Tablet Communication Cherry Dawson:OH MY GOD.

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:What???

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:AHH CHERRY I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO SAY!!!

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:?

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Incoming Tablet Communication Cherry Dawson:That vegetable dick... The dickplant, if you will... Is a very nice shade of purple...

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:AND WE KNOW SOMEONE ELSE WHO'S PURPLE!

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:Oh... Oh no...

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:Are you regretting joining this chat yet, Tasha?

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Of course she isn't. She's a woman of taste. I can tell.

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:Thank you. I think?

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Angel emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Kiss emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Heart emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:Actually... I'm not regretting joining this chat at all.

Incoming Tablet Communication Cherry Dawson:Heart emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Magnolia Jones:Heart emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Darcy Dubois:Heart emoji loading

Incoming Tablet Communication Tasha Wallace:Heart emoji loading

14

TENN

“What are you smiling at?”

I’d dismounted outside my office, and was about to help Tasha down as well, when I saw her pleased expression.

“What? Oh, nothing.”

“You’re smiling at nothing?”

She lifted her hand. In it was her small human tablet. “I was just chatting with Darcy and the others.”

“About what?”

“Um...” Her cheeks, already pink, darkened further. I’d learned about this in the book last night. Blushing, it was called. It could be due to all manner of things. Heat. Embarrassment. Anger.

Arousal.

Blast. Just because I’d spent most of the ride back here half-hard and dry-mouthed

didn't mean that Tasha was experiencing anything similar. That was rather pathetically hopeful thinking.

I supposed her easily-reddened cheeks were a bit like a Zabrian's eyes going white. It told me she was feeling something. But whether that something was simply a result of the summer weather, or something else, was entirely a mystery to me.

"Nothing," she repeated.

"Ah. And thus, you smile at nothing."

Her smile returned. And for a moment, I felt very unsteady in my boots.

"Exactly."

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I lingered for a moment, absorbing her expression, her face. She looked good in the garments I'd given her. The brown tones complemented the warmth of her skin tone and the burnished depths of the dark parts of her eyes.

"Unfortunately," Tasha said, "I recognize that I actually do need help to get down from Rabbit, here. So...?"

"Of course." I gripped her waist, revelling in the perfect shape of her beneath my hands as I lowered her to the ground. I released her at once, before my hands could have a chance to disobey my brain and continue holding her the way they desired to.

"If you need rest, we can stay here tonight and leave at dawn tomorrow," I told her as I took hold of Rabbit's reins and led her behind the building towards the stall she shared with my other shuldu, her brother, Lapin. Tasha followed quickly, needing to take a full two steps for every single step of mine.

"That's alright. I'm fine with a short rest while we get packed up. I'd like to get going as soon as possible."

This did not surprise me. Everything I'd experienced so far had shown me that Tasha was someone who cared deeply about her work. It made sense to me that she would not want to delay her duties for long.

"Fine," I said, removing Rabbit's saddle and reins. Lapin whinnied at her return, tossing his white head. "Feel free to go do anything you need to do. I have to make sure these two have enough water and supplies for the days we are gone." As I spoke, I began to brush down Rabbit while simultaneously snatching up the hose with

my tail. I cranked the tap at the side of the shuldu stall, and aimed the hose into the first of several buckets I would fill.

“Thanks,” she said. She dipped her head then began to walk swiftly away, heading first for the main building of my station, then veering off to the side when she noticed the outhouse. I watched her the entire time, unable to stop myself. I was fascinated by the way her short human legs propelled her body over the land. I only tore my attention from the sweetly generous curves of her tailless backside when the bucket I was filling overflowed. Water crept up to the soles of my right boot.

“Blast,” I muttered under my breath, shaking water from my boot and aiming the hose into another empty bucket nearby. “That wasn’t my fault,” I told Rabbit defensively. “She distracted me.”

Rabbit snorted loudly before she lowered her head to drink.

Once I’d filled ample containers with fresh water and inspected Rabbit and Lapin’s fenced-in pasture to ensure they’d have enough grass to sustain them while I was gone, I went in search of Tasha. Even that brief time away from her felt uncomfortably wrong. I was her guardian here. Her guide and protector. I couldn’t let her wander all over the property on her own.

Luckily, she had not gone far. After visiting the outhouse, she’d made her way onto the porch at the front of my building. There was a chair upon the porch, and she’d settled herself into it. She’d removed her hat, and her head was tipped back, her eyes closed.

I want to suck on her neck.

The perverse need jolted through me. My cock had had some time to calm in her absence, but its flesh was sent instantly stiffening once more.

An absurd desire, to be sure.

But I couldn't shake it.

Her creamy neck was arched back, slender and so exposed. Her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat. I wanted to taste that place. Take the tempo of her heartbeat with my tongue.

And then suck on her.

By the blazes, you're a warden, I reminded myself fiercely. A good warden should always be in control, held tight and strong with the force of nothing but his own power.

Surely Warden Hallum would not be standing here, hard-cocked and desperate to discover the taste of a delectable human's neck, as I was. No, he was a good Zabrian male, one who'd achieved enormous respect in the Zabrian Guard before choosing to come here of his own accord.

But perhaps that was a good thing. Because if another male was imagining doing to Tasha's skin what I was now, there was a good chance I'd have my stunner aimed at his heart before anyone – including my own good sense – could stop me.

Which, frankly, did not say good things about my current mental state.

I left Tasha to her rest, stepping into the building to collect the things we'd need. Tent and bedroll. Food supplies. Waterskins. A few basic tools and knives. Extra clothing for me and fabric in case I needed to make more for Tasha while we travelled.

By the time I had a large pack ready to add to my smaller travel pack from the previous night, Tasha had roused herself. She pulled herself out of the chair and put

her hat back on.

“Sorry,” she said. “I must have dozed off a bit there. I promise I don’t normally sleep on the job.”

“Take your rest whenever you need it and do not think of justifying yourself to me,” I told her. “Anyone with eyes can see you’re good at your job.”

“Oh. I...” She swallowed, blinked, and looked away. “That’s a lovely thing to say.”

You’re a lovely thing to see.

I sighed internally, wishing that this new Tasha-worshipping voice inside my head would kindly shut up.

“Do you need any help?”

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“No. I have retrieved anything. Unless there is anything else specific you will need to travel.”

“No, I’m good,” she replied. “Darcy already gave me a few supplies.”

“Then, if you are ready?”

“I am.”

“This way.”

I hoisted the large pack onto my shoulder, retrieved the smaller travel pack and Tasha’s bag from the shuldu stall, and led her around the other side of the building to the open-walled garage. My hands full of bags, I used my tail to grasp the large tarp and rip it off the slicer. Dust exploded into the air. Tasha covered her mouth and coughed.

I placed our bags in the storage compartment at the back of the slicer. Once the dust had mostly settled, Tasha came closer to inspect the vehicle.

“What’s this called again?”

“A slicer,” I explained. “You’ll ride behind me.” I indicated the padded seat in the centre of the long, narrow vehicle. “It’s solar-powered with hover capabilities. It’s much faster than travelling by shuldu. It will be a few days of travel to Warden Hallum’s province at most.”

“Wow,” she said softly, walking slowly around the slicer. Her fingertips brushed one of the handlebars, then curled experimentally around it. My cock gave a hot leap in my pants at the sight.

This was going to be a very long month, if I was going to get hard every time I noticed her bare neck or she deigned to touch something even remotely phallic in shape with those pretty fingers.

I was sensing a rather pathetic amount of masturbation in my future.

Maybe I could make her a big scarf. And some very thick mittens.

Yes, Tenn. Because that makes sense in the dead heat of summer.

Masturbation. That is truly how I would have to survive.

Masturbation and suffering.

My suffering only increased when Tasha hopped up, hitching one thigh over the seat until she was straddling it. She placed her palms flat between her spread thighs for balance, her back arching.

I'd never been envious of an inanimate object, like a slicer's seat, before.

I was now.

As Tasha wiggled her delightful backside and got into a more comfortable position, I occupied myself with fantasies about what it might be like if she were straddling me that way. My lap. My cock.

My face.

“What should I do with my hat?” she asked. “Will it go flying off?”

“It would, if you were wearing it,” I answered belatedly. “You’ll be wearing my helmet.”

I detached said helmet from the side of the slicer.

“Your helmet? What will you wear?” she asked as she removed her hat so I could put it in the storage compartment. I placed the helmet on her head and got to work adjusting it so it would fit.

“I’ve got a hard head,” I murmured, giving the chin strap a final tug. Tasha’s face looked very small beneath the round, black case of the helmet.

“So I’ve noticed,” she replied. As far as I could recall, she hadn’t actually touched my head, but she seemed very certain. An observant female, to be sure, if she could tell such a thing just by looking at me.

Feeling rather exposed, I snapped down the helmet’s protective face visor before getting into the seat ahead of her. It had been many cycles since I’d had someone on the slicer, and even then it had only occasionally been one of the convicts.

Never a female.

“You’ll have to hold on to me,” I told her, my voice roughening. I distracted myself from her proximity by pulling two lengths of hide from inside my hat and securing them beneath my chin so I wouldn’t lose it on the ride.

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I flicked my claws over the controls, starting the engines. The slicer lifted off the ground, causing Tasha to gasp and throw her arms tightly 'round my waist. I allowed myself one tiny moment to revel in her touch.

Then, we took off.

15

TASHA

Warden Tenn's driving made me think of an Old-Earth phrase. "Like a bat out of hell."

I didn't believe in hell, and I'd never seen a bat, but there didn't seem to be any comparison more apt than a crazed winged creature flying as fast as possible because it was being pursued by some great evil.

At first, it was terrifying. It was all I could do hold on tight and not puke inside my helmet. The land was a blur beneath us. In dizzying contrast, the sky seemed not to move at all above.

But after the first few heart-stopping kilometres (or maybe dozens of kilometres, because holy Terra, who knew how fast this thing was going?) things began to subtly shift from Oh God I'm going to throw up and die to OK maybe I'm just going to throw up to This is actually sort of fun.

Fun. I was having fun. With the alien warden in charge of an entire province of

convicted cowboy murderers.

Not something I had on my bingo card.

But there was no denying it. My cheeks ached from the smile splitting my face behind the helmet's visor. The previous nausea in my stomach transformed into zippy little flips and flops that I actually felt echo in my clit. And because we were hovering, despite the chaotic speed, the ride was very smooth.

Warden Tenn's back was hot and hard against my chest, and when I wasn't scanning the horizon ahead, I was dazzled by the muscle-popping, vein-throbbing sight of his exposed forearms as he gripped the handlebars and steered the slicer with practised ease. Though I couldn't see it, I was deliriously aware of his ass between my thighs. The only uncomfortable bit now was the small metal hook on the back of his belt that was digging into my belly. I considered that a small price to pay for the experience I was currently having.

Fun. Seriously. Who'd a thunk it?

We didn't slow down until the sun began to set, becoming wide and orange as it sank through the sky. Warden Tenn steered us into a scraggly stand of trees, guided the slicer back down to the ground, then cut the engines.

"Stay here," he said, dismounting.

"Alright," I croaked, pretending to merely agree with him. As if my legs hadn't gone to jelly about an hour ago and my chest wasn't currently breathless with giddiness. My whole body trembled. If I tried to get off this thing now, I'd be on my ass faster than the warden could say "hindquarters."

Warden Tenn took some time inspecting the area he'd chosen for our camp. When he

seemed satisfied, he returned to the slicer and began taking things out of the storage compartment at the back.

“No sign of ardu holes or genka activity. This will do for tonight.” He dropped the bags on the ground, then pulled out what looked like a big bundle of leather wrapped around poles. While I tried to figure out how to get the helmet off with my noodle arms, Warden Tenn got to work assembling what I quickly came to realize was a tent.

One tent. As in, singular. The opposite of plural.

And definitely the opposite of what you’d need for two people.

If any situation had ever called for a plurality of tents, it was this one, damnit!

My exuberance from the ride was instantly doused like a flame under cold water. I could practically hear the hiss.

“Is that for you?” I called over once I’d gotten the helmet off.

“It’s for us,” he replied, grunting as he pulled the leather for the tent taut.

Us.

Together.

In the tent.

The singular tent.

“Um. That’s alright,” I stammered. “You don’t have to share with me.”

He stopped then to give me a look that told me very clearly he was questioning my sanity.

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“I’m not about to make you sleep outside,” he replied.

“Alright...” I said. I licked my dry lips. “You know, I was chatting with Magnolia more earlier. Before I fell asleep on that chair. She said Garrek gave her his tent to use when they were travelling, and he slept outside.”

He snorted. “I’m not sleeping outside.”

“Why not? Garrek did.”

His orange eyes flared briefly white. He finished up with the tent and closed the distance between us with big strides.

“Because I’m not Garrek,” he growled. “I’m the warden.”

“So, what, that makes you captain of the tent, then?”

“It makes me captain of everything.” His fangs gleamed in the dwindling light. “Including you.”

Ooh. Insufferable man.

I sighed, forcing myself to be calm. I was probably asking for too much. It was his tent, after all. I hadn’t come here with any supplies of my own. Maybe I needed to be a little less argumentative and a little more grateful.

“Sorry. I do appreciate it. It’s just... I worry that it’s not exactly... Appropriate.”

I expected some kind of instant, sassy retort, but none came. Instead, his eyes burned white again. It was extra noticeable as the darkness of evening gathered. He hesitated, and I was struck by the realization that he had probably already realized it was inappropriate.

He wasn't even trying to deny it.

Instead, he coughed a bit and then said, "I need to finish your pants."

Pants. He meant the pyjama pants. My palms grew damp. Blood rushed to my face.

That's how he was planning to sidestep the whole appropriateness issue.

By making sure I had some fucking pants on while we shared that teeny tiny tent.

I suppose some pants are better than no pants, at least...

Would the warden wear pants?

Oh, God.

While Warden Tenn got to work sewing, I eased myself off the slicer once I was sure my legs wouldn't give out. I found a private spot to pee, cleaned my hands, then returned to see that he'd brought out what looked like some dried meat and pickled vegetables.

"There's water, too," he said, aiming his tail towards a huge leather waterskin while he sewed.

"Thank you," I said. I opened it up and chugged, panting by the time I finally closed the lid. I was a lot thirstier than I'd realized. Water dribbled down my chin, and as I

reached up to touch that wetness, I caught the warden staring. I grimaced, self-conscious, as I wiped it away, wondering what he thought. I felt so...messy in front of him. Unprepared and unpolished. And it wasn't just because of the spilled water.

It was because of everything. It was because of me.

He'd told me earlier that anyone with eyes would see that I was good at my job. That praise had made my insides go into absolute freefall. A terrifying, head-over-heels pleasure much like the slicer ride. But I didn't want to let myself give into it.

So, instead, I just sat down and ate my dinner.

"What do you know about the men we're going to visit in Warden Hallum's province?" I asked between bites.

"Very little," he admitted as his needle dipped and flowed. "I know there are currently three convicts under Warden Hallum's supervision. Their names are Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven. None of them have convict-wards."

Three men to meet. That wasn't too overwhelming.

"I've been wondering," Warden Tenn said. He paused to bite off his thread before continuing. "Are there any diplomatic implications of the information that was withheld from you about the men's pasts? Are there any higher human authorities who are included in your decision-making about whether the program will continue?"

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“Not really,” I told him. I took another swig of water, making sure not to dribble any this time. “This program wasn’t arranged between two government bodies. I’m actually employed by a corporation based on Elora Station. They specialize in selling travel services and advertising space. The Zabrian Empire hired them to coordinate this project. And they hired me.”

That made me think, though...

What if I decided the program shouldn’t go ahead?

And instead of making any kind of difference, I simply got fired and replaced with someone else who’d do the work in my stead?

Somebody who didn’t care as much as I did?

“I see,” Warden Tenn said, interrupting the suddenly sour turn of my thoughts. “And how long have you held your current position?”

“Almost seven months, now. I spent a few months getting the advertising sorted out, communicating with the empire, organizing travel plans, and writing that book, of course.”

“And you like your work?”

“I... I do,” I replied, a little surprised and flattered that he seemed so interested, not solely in my job and how it would pertain to his men, but in me. My feelings about it all. “I mean, it’s definitely the best job I’ve ever had.”

At least, it was before I had to deal with the stress of unwittingly sending human women off to potentially get chopped up by alien axe murderers...

“You’ve had other jobs before this?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said with a bitter laugh. “Nobody gets by on Terratribe I without working. Unless you’re, like, some rich politician’s wife or something. I worked in a shuttle engine factory for more than ten years. I did everything I could to move from the assembly floor into staffing, and I took night classes on subjects like communications and business. All that experience helped get me my role on Elora Station as the human-Zabrian liaison for this program.”

Warden Tenn tilted his head slightly as he regarded me. His eyes deepened to umber and amber now that the sun’s last rays were disappearing.

“You have worked very hard.”

Ah. Poop. That should not make me feel like I wanted to weep. I really needed him to go back to the annoying warden instead of this serious, sincere, I see you, Tasha, warden.

“Haha,” I chuckled awkwardly, trying to disguise my wet, sniffly inhale. “Yeah. I did. I wanted to do whatever it took to get off Terratribe I and build a new life on Elora Station.”

The ghost of a smile tugged at his lips.

“And you’ve succeeded.”

“Ah, yup.”

Why did that feel like a lie?

“I, too, have succeeded in one much smaller and less impressive feat,” he said. He stood and shook out the shiny pants. “Here you are.”

“Oh! Thank you,” I said, scrambling to my feet to take the newly completed garment. “I’ll go try them on. You should eat,” I said, using the pants as a sort of flag, flapping them in the direction of the food he hadn’t yet touched. I clutched the pants close to my chest with one arm, scooped up my bag with the other, and scurried into the tent.

Between the lack of sun outside and the substantial leather walls of the tent, it took ages for my eyes to adjust. Eventually, I could make out just enough in the gloom to get my pyjamas on, the completed set.

Oh, boy. I wanted to cry again. The pyjamas were the whisper of heaven on my skin.

It was like getting hugged by a fucking baby angel.

What is it with me and baby angels these days? And bats out of hell?

You’d think the warden was some ancient demon or fallen god, with all the symbolism my stupid brain was coming up with.

“Tasha?” Warden Tenn’s voice drifted through the muffling leather. “Let me know if I may enter. I cannot knock upon the tent as you directed me to do with the door. I fear it will fall down.”

I laughed quietly, then halted.

Was that a note of concern I detected in his voice?

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“Everything fits,” I called. “No worries there.”

I exited the tent, intending to help him clean up a bit, only to find he’d already eaten and put everything away. I picked up my waterskin and used some of the water to wash my face, then got out the toothbrush and paste Darcy gave me, scrubbing my teeth.

As I got ready for bed, the warden did the same. Only, his version involved being very hot and half-naked. I gaped, my toothbrush stilling against my molars, as he stripped out of his uniform’s shirt. Packed muscle rippled and tensed beneath his hide, the colour turned a velvety indigo under the light of the three moons and stars. He doused his face and ears with water, then swiped the moisture along the hard planes and muscled curves of his abdomen and chest.

Then, his hands went to his belt.

Oh fuck.

I spat out the toothpaste, clumsily rinsed my brush (nearly soaking my own boots in the process), and sprinted for the tent. I skidded inside it just as I heard the click of a metal buckle and the sound of a big warden’s trousers hitting the ground.

I can’t believe he was going to drop his pants right in front of me.

I can’t believe I’m not horrified.

If anything, I was almost beginning to regret my hasty exit. I could have taken a little

longer with my teeth. Maybe gotten a better look at what Darcy and Cherry had tried so hard to draw last night...

No. Bad Tasha!

You were the one going on and on about what's appropriate!

I put down my things in the tent, breathing hard. I sat down on top of some kind of leathery bedding, pulled off my boots, and set them outside while being very careful not to look at anything going on out there.

A few minutes later, I heard the rustle of fabric.

Then, he came inside.

"Do you have pants on?" I squeaked.

"Of course. Why? Would you prefer I took them off?"

"No! Sorry! I just... I saw you start to take them off outside..."

"I cleaned up and put on a fresh pair."

"Ah. Of course. Thank you."

"Thank you? You are thanking me for putting on clean trousers?"

"No! Yes? I don't know." Holy hell, I needed to stop talking now. Of course, I didn't. Because that's what a sane person would have done and, obviously, I was no longer included in that demographic. "Thank you for the pyjamas, Warden Tenn. They're amazing."

He was nothing but the barest hint of a silhouette in the darkness.

Until his eyes went bright white.

“You don’t have to call me warden,” he said. “You can just call me Tenn.”

My stomach flipped.

“I don’t know. That seems a little...”

“Inappropriate?” he said wryly.

“Maybe?”

It was probably stupid to keep worrying about that. Even though he’d put on pants, the man was shirtless as he lowered himself down beside me. We were about to spend the night together, for better or for worse.

He stretched out on his back, his hands behind his head. His eyes either went back to their original colour, or he closed them. I couldn’t tell which, but either way, the white light vanished.

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I thought he'd maybe already gone to sleep when he suddenly spoke.

"What would it take," he asked quietly, "to get you comfortable enough with me to simply call me by my name?"

"I... I don't know. Time, I guess?"

He chuckled softly.

"Perfect," he said, throaty and warm. "I've got nothing but time out here, Tasha. And if you want it, I can give you it all."

16

TENN

At the beginning of the night, I ceded Tasha the entirety of the bedroll. I was well warm enough without it, and I knew that sharing a bedroll would be even more difficult for her standards of professionalism than sharing the tent would be.

The only problem was that sleeping Tasha seemed to feel differently than awake Tasha.

She fell asleep quickly. Much more quickly than me. No, I was busy trying to ignore the pounding of my heart in my engorged shaft as she breathed softly beside me, her sweet scent filling the tent. Too busy myself, I spent my time reading the book she wrote on my data tab.

That worked as a distraction. At first. Until, in sleep, she began to shift and slide and sleep-side closer.

It started subtly, with a stretch and a roll that left her bedroll open. Then, like an animal burrowing in search of heat, her body moved of its own volition towards mine. I lay, stiff as the metal frame of my slicer outside, when she touched me. First, with the surprisingly cold tip of her little nose against my arm. Then, asleepy sigh, and the delirious press of a human thigh hitched up over my abdomen.

Her leg was not very heavy. Tell me, then, why it suddenly became so difficult to breathe?

Perhaps this was punishment for the information that was withheld from her before. And she now meant to torture me with snuggles.

Masturbation and suffering, Tenn. That truly is your new lot in life.

The suffering was all well and good. I was chest-deep in it now. There was, however, no way to relieve the stiffness of my cock. Not like this, not with her so innocently, torturously asleep beside me.

I would have thought, in the midst of that sort of agony, that sleep would have been impossible. But clearly, it wasn't, because when I woke next, dawn had already heaved itself over the horizon. A greyish light seeped into the tent as I blinked dust and sleep from my eyes. I inhaled slowly, my nose and mouth pressed tightly to soft, fragrant hair.

Humanhair.

Blast it all to Zabria and back. My body had evidently participated in the same sleep shifting that Tasha's had. We were on our sides, facing each other. My arms were

around her back, one of my open hands serving as her pillow, the other...

The other was inside her shirt.

Blast. How...?

Yes. There was no avoiding it, no denying it. In sleep, my mutinous, perverted hand had wandered inside the jamjigolo top I'd sewn for her. My left palm was sealed to her spine, my fingers splayed across her lower back.

By the empire, but she was soft.

And I... I wasn't.

My cock gave a hot throb.

I could not let her find me like this. Wrapped around her, my hand not only on her, but inside her jamjimmies. She'd probably end the bridal program and leave the planet on the strength of this scandal alone.

I drew back, just a little, and was about to pry my hand from the sensuous warmth of her skin. But as soon as I tensed to do it, a pucker formed between her slim, pale brows, and she made a sleepy sound of complaint.

Well. What the blazes am I supposed to do with that?

If I moved even one portion of a muscle, she'd awaken, and it would all be for naught, anyway.

I'd just have to stay here for now.

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I sighed without thinking. My breath coasted over her face, making stray hairs rustle across her forehead and cheeks. Her full lips tipped up at the corners, then parted.

I remembered seeing Cherry and Darcy kiss their husbands at their wedding ceremonies. I'd felt slightly intrigued but mostly baffled by the human custom.

I was not baffled now.

Now, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to taste Tasha's slightly open mouth with mine. Her lips were so pink, plush and wet on the inside.

This was not helping the hard cock situation.

If I kept staring at her mouth and imagining putting my tongue inside there, I was going to ejaculate in my trousers. Which, of course, was unacceptable.

I stopped staring at her mouth, but then I was staring at her flushed cheeks, or the delicate shells of her eyelids, or that hair I longed to sift through my claws. It was all bad. Every bit of her was a perfect storm of warden-destroying temptation.

So I closed my eyes and did not look at any bit of her.

This proved to be wise, as not long afterwards, she stirred. I knew the moment she left sleep's safety and entered consciousness, because the previously languorous quality of her limbs immediately evacuated the premises, leaving her rigid and breathing shallowly.

“Fuck.”

I feigned sleep, figuring that my wakefulness would not help now. I kept my breaths deep and even.

Now, it was Tasha’s turn to disentangle herself from me without causing me to wake. She seemed to think that this current entanglement of our positioning was her fault. She didn’t shout in anger or demand that I remove my hands from her.

No, like a convict herself, one who had something to hide from her warden, she slithered out from under my arm, pushed it back to my side, and then hurried from the tent.

When she was gone, I breathed out, wretched and ragged.

Then, I shoved my hand down my pants.

I hesitated, my heated organ trapped in my fist. Was I really going to do this? Was I really this weak? So weak that I was going to stroke myself to climax, alone and pining for the human who’d just left me here?

Yes. Yes I was.

Perhaps it was not simple weakness, I reasoned as my hand jerked powerfully. Perhaps I was just weak for her.

I wasn’t sure that was any better. But it certainly felt truer.

Quick. I’d have to be quick. Who knew when she’d be back? I could only imagine what she’d think if she found me now with my hand in my trousers while I huffed the last remnants of her scent from the bedding.

I didn't need to force myself to be quick, though. A few rough pumps of my fist and I was already there, already pulsing with that hot edge of release. My stiff flesh jumped in my hand. My cock tail spasmed and writhed. Beneath it all, my sack drew tight, contracting with pleasure.

I barely pulled down my pants and wrenched the bed roll out of the way in time. Choking back a groan, I painted the dirt with the glistening ropes of my desire. The mess I made swam before my throbbing vision. My lungs burned.

With a raspy grunt, I covered the seed I'd spilled with loose dirt. I shoved myself back into my pants.

Then, I got to work packing the bedroll and swiftly taking down the tent so that Tasha would never see what I'd done.

17

TASHA

Warden Tenn and I got ready for the day and ate in relative silence. I wasn't sure if he was simply responding to my lack of conversation, or if he had his own stuff on his mind. Whatever it was, we were both quiet as we prepared to head out for our day of travel on the slicer.

Well, outwardly quiet, anyway.

Inside? I was a screaming, hysterical mess.

Thank God Warden Tenn hadn't woken up before I'd left the tent. Jesus Christ, I'd practically climbed the man in my sleep! I was using his palm as a cushion! My very own purple, personal travel pillow!

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I'd basically sexually harassed the man in my sleep. And to top it all off, before I'd woken fully and realized what was happening, I'd liked it. In that dreamy state of near-wakefulness, I'd relished the warmth of his body against mine. I'd felt safe and cozy and happy.

And horny. Terribly, terribly horny.

I was a horrible person. It was a good thing I didn't believe in hell. If I did, I'd be depressingly certain I was headed there.

But no, now I was just depressed in a much more general sense.

Lucky me.

On the slicer, we made what I assumed had to be good headway, considering our impressive speed. The dry, dusty landscape grew more and more dotted with trees, until we were traveling alongside thick forest. I tried to focus on the changing land, the alien beauty of it all, but it became harder and harder to ignore the press of Warden Tenn's belt hook against my belly. I began shifting on the seat, as well as I could at these speeds, anyway.

Not only did it not help, but Warden Tenn noticed.

Abruptly, the slicer slowed, then lowered to the ground. He twisted around to give me a hard look from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Do you need to urinate?"

“What?” I cried, rearing back at the intimacy of the question. “No!”

“Then why the blazes do you keep wiggling so much? You’re throwing the slicer’s balance off.”

“Oh! Sorry. I didn’t even know I could do that.”

“What is it?” He dismounted and stood beside the slicer so that he could stare me down without cranking his neck. “Something’s bothering you.”

“It’s...” The words clogged up my throat. I’d never been good at this. Never been good at expressing my pain, or asking for things. It never got me anywhere in foster care, or in the factory, or with Gerald. And here? Now? In front of this unfairly hot alien warden, I was supposed to tell him that his belt was poking my stomach roll too hard?

Fucking mortifying.

But...

This wasn’t foster care. This wasn’t the factory. And this sure as hell wasn’t Gerald.

This was Warden Tenn. With those warm orange eyes, so intense on me, rimmed not with impatience, but with concern.

“It’s your belt hook,” I cried before I could chicken out. “It’s...” I gestured at my stomach. “It’s poking me. Really hard.”

He went very, very still. His eyes blazed bright white.

“Are you injured?” He sounded like someone had their fist wrapped ’round his throat.

“No, nothing like that! I don’t think it’ll even leave a bruise.”

He flinched at that word. Bruise. Like I’d jumped off the slicer and slapped him right across the face.

Then, his hands were flying. His fingers wrenched apart the buckle, and he yanked his belt from his hips like he was trying to punish it.

Oh, lordy. He was mad. His hard jaw worked. His eyes were still that mystifying white that seemed to accompany bouts of surprise or negative emotion.

Was he angry with me?

“What... What is it?” I asked as he slammed open the storage compartment on the slicer and threw the belt in like he never wanted to see it again. When he closed the compartment, he took a moment to stare blankly down at the lid.

Then, his white eyes seared a laser-like line up to mine.

“Next time something’s hurting you,” he said on a guttural growl, “you don’t go wiggling around, ignoring it, or trying to solve it yourself. You tell me. You tell me right away.” He released the closed lid and came around the side of the slicer. His calloused fingers found my chin. My entire body spasmed at the firm yet tender touch.

“I don’t care what’s causing it. I don’t care if it’s me. You tell me.” A raw, raging emotion tore through that white gaze. “Especially if it’s me. You tell me, Tasha.”

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I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. If I so much as opened my mouth right now, I was certain a sob would come spewing out.

No other man had ever cared about my hurts this way.

Not one.

And here Warden Tenn was, looking like he wanted to fling himself off a cliff, just because a part of his uniform had been poking me.

What the hell is this?

"You understand me, Tasha?"

Why did it sound like he was begging?

"Forget the bride program. Forget liaising. Consider that your number one job if you have to."

"My number one job?" I managed to croak.

"Yes," he replied forcefully, his fingers contracting against my jaw and throat. "When you're hurting, you tell your warden. That's your most important duty. That's your job."

He lowered his face so that I felt his next words against my mouth more than heard them.

“Fixing it is mine.”

Wordlessly, I nodded. It took all my control not to nuzzle into the touch of his hand at the side of my face. Thankfully – or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it – he removed his hand immediately afterwards and returned to his seat ahead of me on the slicer.

“Without that hook,” he said, “I’ll need somewhere to put my tail.”

Before I could respond, the strong, prehensile length of purple flesh looped itself around my waist, tightening pleasantly. His tail gave a small tug, and I leaned forward against his back, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“Is that better?” he asked, the question vibrating through his back and into my chest.

“Is this alright?”

I should say, “No.” I should put more space between us. I should forget the way he just spoke to me, looked at me, half commanded me and half begged me to tell him about my pain.

I didn’t do any of those things.

“Yes,” I said.

That evening, we parked, ate, and found a creek to clean up and hand wash some laundry. While I hung up my clothes to dry, Warden Tenn dutifully boiled drinking water for my waterskin. Apparently, he had no trouble drinking water out here straight from whatever source it came from. But after his whole, “tell me your hurts and I’ll fix them” thing this morning, I figured giving myself a waterborne illness or alien parasite was probably not going to go over well. I didn’t have a cannister to sterilize my water, so we had to go old school to protect my flimsy human

constitution.

I would have liked to linger at a fire for a while before bed – anything to delay the awkwardness of getting in the tent with him again – but Warden Tenn put it out as soon as my water had boiled enough in his travel pot.

“It’s too dry out here,” he explained. “We’ve already had one bad fire this season. Nearly destroyed Garrek’s whole ranch.”

“Alright,” I said, blowing on the hot pot of water to help it cool. Once it was more warm than scalding, I carefully poured it into my half-empty waterskin. “I guess I’ll just go to bed then.”

“Good idea.” He made no move to join me. For some stupid reason, that stung. I tipped my waterskin at him in a goofy sort of salute meant to hide my feelings of rejection, then hurried into the tent.

Inside, the bedroll was open and ready for me. It was surprisingly comfortable. I put down my waterskin, took off my boots, and snuggled down.

It smelled like Warden Tenn. A spicy, leathery concoction that had no right to be as pleasant as it was. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, willing sleep to come.

It didn’t. Which was crazy, considering I was exhausted from the day’s travels.

I blew a raspberry through tight lips and rolled onto my back, staring at the tent’s dark ceiling.

Why was he still out there? He was the one who’d insisted we share the tent!

This was not going to work. Absurdly, almost scarily, it seemed like I wouldn’t be

able to fall asleep without him at this rate.

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Kicking off the bedding, I crawled to the tent's entrance and poked my head out.

Warden Tenn was seated on the ground with his bare back to the tent. He was positioned as if he was watching the fire, even though he'd long since put it out.

He must have heard the rustle of the leather. Or maybe those big, cute Zabrian ears picked up my breathing. Because I saw them twitch.

"Um, excuse me?" I hesitated, then, feeling as exposed as if I'd stripped naked outside the tent, I added, "Tenn?"

Just Tenn. No warden tacked on the front.

The moons and stars gave me more than enough light to see every muscle in his back draw tight at the sound of his name.

He rose and turned.

"Yes, Tasha?"

"I..."

Oh, Christ. What was I supposed to say now?

Excuse me, good sir, but I apparently cannot get comfy and fall asleep while you're out there pulling this weird alien emo act and staring at the ashes of the fire you just put out?

“Yes?” he prodded.

“I just... You told me to tell you if... If...”

“You’re hurt? What’s wrong?”

How the hell did he do that? Close such considerable distance with what seemed to be no effort at all? In the span of a second, he was before me, his gaze white and searching.

“Does loneliness count?”

Holy Terra. I was such an idiot. This was legitimately embarrassing. He was probably going to laugh at me. Or turn that fine purple ass right around and-

“It counts, Tasha.” Hoarsely, he repeated the words. “It counts.”

I didn’t have to ask him to come in. I merely held open the flap of the tent.

And he came.

I scooted backwards into the bedroll, fighting a wave of giddiness that he was here with me.

At this point, I figured I was possibly the stupidest human who’d ever lived. To get so excited about the fact that Tenn had done something as simple as come into the tent with me.

But, damnit, I was happy.

I lay down, and Tenn lay down, too, taking the same position he had last night – on

his back with his hands behind his head.

I tried to relax beside him, but now I was faced with a whole new problem. Before, I couldn't sleep because he wasn't here.

Now, I couldn't sleep because he was.

“Should we talk?” I whispered. “I could ask you some questions for the book I need to write on Zabrian males. You did promise to help me, after all.”

He gave a soft rasp of a laugh.

“I promised no such thing. You decided that all on your own.”

I grinned. My blood felt oddly fizzy in my veins, like Terratribe II sparkling wine.

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“Yes, well. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I’m here.”

My breath caught. Those two simple words had speared me in the strangest way. Tenn’s eyes cast a white glow along the walls and ceiling of the tent.

“Alright. First thing I want to know. What the heck is going on with the white eyes? Why do they change colour?”

“That is... a representation of intensity.”

“Intensity?” I rolled onto my side to face him. Then, I raised my hand above his face. His eyes sent my hand’s shadow stretching across the tent.

“Intensity of feeling. And I’ll have you know, I had my eyes under very good control before you came along.”

“Is that an accusation?” I asked, wiggling my fingers and watching the shadows dance across the leather.

“Merely a statement of fact.”

“Hmm.” I let my hand drop. I almost let it fall directly on his chest, but at the last second drew it against my own body. “So you didn’t experience this sort of intensity before I got here?”

“No. I did not.”

Well that was... Interesting? I wasn't sure I really had much more info than before.

“You can ask me something, if you want,” I said. “If there are any human customs you're curious about. Or if there's anything in the book you're unsure about, now that you're reading it.”

“There is one thing,” he said after a taut silence, “that I am curious about.”

“Oh?”

“It is not something I have questions about. I'm rather more curious about experiencing it.”

“What is it?” I asked, propping my head up on my elbow to better see his face. His eyes seemed to grow brighter as they turned my way.

“The human kiss thing.”

I just about fell off my own fucking elbow.

“You... You want to try kissing someone?”

“No. I don't want to try the kiss thing with someone,” he said instantly. “I only want to try it with you.”

“O-Oh.”

Was it hot in here? And had the tent always been this freaking small? It seemed like every bit of space was filled with Tenn. His body, his presence, the intensity of those

white eyes as they never left my face.

I had to say no. Right? For all my squawking about appropriate boundaries and agonizing over how close I'd gotten to him in my sleep last night. Oh, God, what if I'd be, like, corrupting him with my kiss? Zabrians didn't seem to have any sort of kissing custom. It'd be like I was adulterating him with my perverted human lips.

But he wasn't a child. He was likely even older than me – at least, I got that impression. And he'd been with a woman before, at least someone he'd been in a relationship with, if not in love with. What was one measly human kiss compared to that?

It would be fine.

Probably...

I mean, he'd asked for it! I was helpinghimout! He'd said he was curious. That was it. This was probably like a sterile science experiment to him. An interesting little slice of human experience he could file away in that big purple head of his.

“Tasha?”

“Alright. Deal.”

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“Deal? I was not aware we’d made a deal.”

“Well, we did. So, pucker up, buddy.”

Lit by the light of his own eyes, his face took on a bemused expression. But that expression quickly darkened into something much more terrifyingly like hunger as I brought my face to his.

It would just be a chaste little kiss. That’s what I’d planned, anyway.

But what I hadn’t planned for?

The absolute explosion of sensation that rocked me when my lips touched Tenn’s. Every nerve came to painfully bristling life. One brush of my mouth on his, and my nipples were hardening, my skin tingling everywhere.

“Oh!”

Tenn swallowed my gasp, his mouth surging, hot and open, to meet with mine.

“Where do I put my hands?” he panted against my mouth a few seconds later.

“Where... Wherever you want,” I whispered shakily.

“Don’t tell me that,” he groaned. “You might not like the places I’d put them.”

What places?What places?!

The question screamed through my head as Tenn crashed his lips to mine once more. I held back a shameful moan, opening my mouth to the claiming onslaught of his tongue.

Fuck me. How was he already so good at this? He'd never kissed someone before, and here he was, making me shiver and clench my thighs together like he'd been doing this all his damn life. Was this a Zabrian thing, to conquer so completely whatever it was you put your mind – or mouth – to?

Or was this simply something unique to Tenn?

I didn't have an answer, and I gave up on trying to find one. Instead, I simply submitted completely to the rough, ravenous glide of his mouth. He finally decided where to put his hands, settling the firm heat of them on my waist.

This time, I couldn't hold back my moan. My tongue slid against Tenn's, and my back arched towards him without me telling it to. I wanted his hands to slide up. To cup my breasts. Run those calloused palms across the sensitive peaks of my nipples.

This was bad. Really, really bad. Poor Tenn had asked me to try out a kiss to satisfy his alien curiosity, and now my horny human ass was about two seconds away from ripping off the beautiful satin shirt he'd made me and sticking my bare tits in his face.

I couldn't bear the confusion that would cross his expression if I did that. Cringing, I remembered when he'd measured my chest back at Fallon's. He'd thought my boobs were my lungs. How the hell would he react if I started dangling the odd, floppy bits of flesh he'd thought were literally internal organs in front of him?

The humiliation of that thought alone was enough for me to break free of the fever of his kiss. I drew away from him and sucked in oxygen like I'd been drowning. Maybe, in a way, I had been.

“Well. Um. There you go!” I said with false cheer. I patted Tenn’s firm chest. It heaved beneath my hand. His eyes were so bright I couldn’t even look him in the face.

“That’s it?”

“What do you mean, ‘that’s it?’”

That was probably the best fucking kiss I’d ever had, and here he was with the nerve to ask a question like that?

Then again, this was Warden Tenn we were talking about, here. The man practically seemed to be made of nerve.

“That’s it,” I said, smiling so hard and so fake that it hurt. “That was a human kiss.”

More like a full-blown human make-out session...

“I... I see. Very illuminating.”

If anything was illuminating, it was those big white lightbulb eyes Tenn was giving me. He pulled one hand from my waist, scrubbing it roughly down his face, blocking out the light for a few seconds.

“What did you think?” I hated myself for asking the question. Hated the insecurity in it. Hated that I wanted him to say something to make me feel better about all this.

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“Don’t know,” he rasped. “Let’s try again so I can have a more informed opinion.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I said after a moment’s indecision. And it was not a short moment, either. Because I was a weak, weak woman.

But I had to hold firm. If I tried kissing him again, I really would stand to make a complete and utter fool of myself. Even now, my clit was throbbing needily.

Kissing him again would just be torture at this point.

Even if not kissing him, rather frighteningly, also felt like torture.

“So, what now? We just go to sleep?” He sounded incredulous.

“I guess so. We do have a long day of travel ahead tomorrow.”

Tenn flopped onto his back.

“You’re right,” he said. “You need your rest.”

“So do you!” I said. He was the one doing most of the work out here. I was basically just along for the ride.

“Rest is just about the last thing on my mind,” he said. “Besides, I told you about Zabrian stamina.”

Oh, no. He should not be using the word stamina around me right now. It was

sending my mind in all kinds of pervy directions.

But all pervy-ness ceased when Tenn suddenly said, in a harshly bitter voice, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For the hook. On my belt. I wish you’d told me sooner.”

“Oh, Tenn. No. Seriously, it’s fine. Here, look.” I hoisted up my shirt a few inches, baring my belly. “No bruise. See? Just like I told you.”

There was a red mark, but it had already mostly faded throughout the afternoon. Even so, he homed in on that mark instantly, his eyes providing enough light to guide his knuckles to the spot.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I whispered.

Tenn let out a sigh between his fangs, gently tugged my shirt back down, and muttered, “Good.”

That was what I fell asleep to mere moments later.

The echo of Tenn’s gruff voice in my head.

Good.

18

TENN

Tasha may have been able to fall asleep after the revelation that was human kissing, but I could not. Every breath I took, every tiny movement, threatened to send my cock spewing into my trousers. So, when I was certain Tasha was settled and that I would not wake her, I rose and stole from the tent.

I stalked aimlessly through the darkness, my fingers flexing and clenching at my sides, my crotch tight and aching. I wanted to do a million things at once. I wanted to kiss Tasha again. I wanted to let out a whoop. I wanted to grab someone by the shoulders so I could shout in their face about what had just happened. About what I was feeling.

I wanted to go back to the tent and kiss her again. And again. And again.

And then I wanted to do even more.

Did all the men feel this way when they'd first kissed their women? Did Fallon and Silar and Garrek all feel this... This tempest when they touched their wives? Tasha had done nothing but rain down her human sweetness upon me. And now, I was all cut up. Broken open. Ravaged as if by a storm.

I'd never felt so alive.

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The kiss had been a terrible idea.

And it had been the best moment of my life.

It had taught me things. Taught me how deeply I could feel. That kiss had illuminated all the sharpest teeth of my hunger, teeth that had never once pricked me when I'd briefly courted Zavinnia.

I'd tasted Tasha, and I knew it would not be enough. Would never be enough.

It would have to be. That was like a stunner to the guts to admit, but it was true. Tasha had not come here looking for a man like me. She was not a bride, seeking out the best possible future.

She'd already found her best possible future. On Elora Station.

The life she'd work so, so hard for.

A life that I could never be a part of.

And there was the pain, then. Which felt bitterly unfair. I'd known her for so short a time. And already, I was grieving the inevitable loss of her.

That pain, emanating from my chest, moved downwards, clashing with still-pulsing arousal in my groin. Stalking through the trees, I came to the cold creek we'd washed in earlier and stripped down until I was naked. I waded, then dove, into the ink-black water, letting the coldness soothe me.

It wasn't enough. I stood in the waist-deep water, panting, my cock jutting and swollen despite the cold. I worked it roughly in my wet fist, tension carving up my body.

Tasha wasn't tense. Tasha was stretched out, or maybe curled up, and sleeping. Safe, soft, warm in the bedroll. My bedroll.

Without me.

The first time I'd ever experienced rain in this world, when I was still reeling from the loss of what had felt like everything, I'd stood beneath the skies as they'd opened, tipped my head back, and opened my mouth.

Tasha tasted like the rain. So pure it was almost sacred.

The things I wanted to do to her now...

There was nothing pure about them.

With a restrained grunt, I came, thrusting against the cold water.

This was all I was going to get. Tasha tolerated me. She'd indulged my request about the kiss. But she hadn't been affected by it like I had been.

She broke away from the embrace like it was nothing. Turned from me and let sleep take her while I shuddered and barely maintained control, my eyes whiter than they'd ever been.

In a month – less than a month, now – she would leave.

Return to her beautiful life and never look back.

I trudged, dripping, out of the water, letting the cool night air suck the moisture from my hide. When I was sufficiently dry, I dressed and returned to the tent. Tasha was curled on her side. She looked so small that way. It made me want to put myself between her and the rest of the world. To protect her, the same way she tried so hard to protect the other human brides.

They all had a Tasha to look out for their interests.

Who did Tasha have?

A foolish question. I already knew the answer as I lay down beside her.

Tasha had a warden, that's who.

Tasha had me.

For now, anyway.

But a sorrow-tinged fear nipped at me as I gazed at her sleeping face in the dark.

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I was afraid that I would never be happy with “for now.”

I was afraid – maybe more afraid than I had ever been before – that what I really wanted was forever.

19

TASHA

When I woke up, I was both relieved and disappointed that Tenn had already left the tent. It was nice not to start my day with the utter humiliation of having tried to fuse my body to his in my sleep.

But there was an acrid emptiness left behind. The punch of that loneliness that I’d felt last night when I’d asked him to come into the tent. I rolled onto my side, facing Tenn’s side of the tent.

We’d kissed last night.

And now he was gone.

Ugh.

I kicked off the bedding, rebelling against this annoying, creeping sadness. Tenn was just outside the tent. If I wanted to go see him right this second, I could. Judging by the quality of the light, it looked like it was already another beautiful, sunny morning on Zabria Prinar One.

A wonderful day to get to work.

“Good morning,” I said as I emerged from the tent and shoved my feet into my boots. Thank goodness I’d at least brought appropriate footwear if not enough clothes and other supplies to sustain my stay.

“It is a good morning,” Tenn said, rising from where he’d been crouched on the ground, unpacking food for breakfast. “Clear skies. Not much distance left now. I anticipate today will be our final full day of travel. We will reach Warden Hallum’s province tomorrow. I have sent him a message confirming this.”

“Oh, wow. That was fast!” I said, taken aback.

Tenn flicked his tail. I noticed with a shy warming in my belly that he wasn’t wearing his belt with the hook today. Without the hook to hang itself on, his tail seemed like it was at loose ends and looking for things to do.

“Not any faster than anticipated,” he said, flicking his tail again. “I told Warden Hallum it would be two or three days of travel after a day or two to prepare.”

“So we’re right on schedule, then.”

“Yes.”

That should have been great. That should have satisfied me, made me happy.

But it didn’t. Instead, it reinforced the ache of that loneliness I’d felt before. Which was silly, considering we were about to meet even more men. I’d be surrounded by people. Loneliness made no sense.

Unless it wasn’t loneliness at all.

Maybe it was simply missing Tenn.

I'd grown used to this little bubble we'd created together on our trek. Just the two of us, riding the slicer and sharing the tent. Tomorrow, that would end.

But he still has to take you back to his province, I reasoned, fighting panic. You'll get to repeat this journey with him on the way home!

On the wayback. Not home.

Home was Elora Station. Wasn't it?

"I'll be right back," I said, hoping he couldn't read any of the confusion on my features. I hurried into the treeline to go pee. But once I was finished, I still didn't feel quite ready to return to him yet. I knew I'd have to soon. I had a job to do and we had kilometres of distance – or spans, as Tenn said – to cover yet.

Instead, I started to walk.

I'd never gotten the chance to explore a real forest before. The only trees I'd ever seen on Terratribe I were leafless stalks of black and grey. There were indoor gardens and various biomes to explore on Elora Station, but I hadn't visited any of them yet. I'd told myself that I would do so – that I'd do all the fun, touristy things on Elora Station – when I had someone to do them with.

Water from the cold creek nearby bubbled merrily. I was surprised to find myself assigning such emotions to a simple natural phenomenon, but I couldn't think of any other way to describe the subtle optimism of the water making its way over the land and the rocks. The sun spilled down through the thick, green needles and leaves of the various tree varieties, dappling the forest floor. Even the dusty dirt, which had been such an annoyance on this trip so far, took on a quality I could appreciate. It

created a soft carpet beneath twigs and fallen needles, hushing each of my footfalls and softening my path. Even the air brought me pleasure, making my silky pyjamas flutter with the kiss of its breeze. It wasn't too hot yet, everything comfortably warm and clear.

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I kept walking, and for the first time in my life, I just took my time and enjoyed the act. I wasn't hurrying somewhere. I wasn't trying to reach some final destination. I was just... here. Walking.

And loving it.

I could do this every morning.

I couldn't, obviously. Because I didn't live here.

I had no reason to stay.

Tenn's face flashed in my mind. The feel of his hands on my waist, his mouth moving over mine, echoed forcefully in my body.

I shoved it all aside. There was no point in ruminating on all the ways I'd allowed myself to get too close to Tenn. I wasn't a bride in this world. He wasn't my fiancé or my husband. He was the warden. I was the liaison. And in less than a month, I'd be leaving.

Besides, he had no interest in marriage. He'd only wanted it when he was young. Even then, he hadn't been thinking of love.

Love. Oh, God.

Was I falling in love with Tenn?

Jesus take the fucking wheel.

Unfortunately, I remained in control of the wheel – or my feet – and while having my internal mental breakdown, the toe of my boot got hooked under the gnarly root of a tree. My arms windmilled wildly as I attempted not to fall forward. But I overcorrected, and I did fall, more sideways, and then backwards.

“Ow!” I hissed. It wasn’t just the impact on my legs and ass that hurt. It was the scrape and poke of what felt like a hundred tiny little teeth.

I’d fallen right into an alien bush. A brambly one, by the look and feel of it. Luckily, it appeared that my pyjamas weren’t snagged anywhere.

Thank goodness for small kindnesses.

I leaned forward in an attempt to stand. And felt about a dozen places on my scalp pinch painfully.

Oh, hell no. My pyjamas hadn’t gotten caught anywhere.

But my hair had.

It was down this morning after getting washed last night. I hadn’t tried to detangle it yet, and those knots only made it all the easier for my hair to snag...

And get stuck.

OK. Forget all those nice things I was thinking about walking around here a minute ago. This forest sucks.

I tried to twist my head to get a better look at what I was dealing with, but that only

made things worse, pulling existing knots tight and getting new brambles caught in the loose strands.

I was trapped. By a fucking bramble bush.

And now, I had a decision to make. Was it better for Tenn to realize I'd been gone too long and come looking for me?

Or to suck it up and call for help?

I never got the chance to make my choice. Because that very moment, I heard the authoritative boom of Tenn's voice in the morning air.

"Tasha?"

I couldn't lean out of this bushy area, so I couldn't see him until he was almost directly in front of me. He paused in the clear path I'd been walking in. His ears twitched.

Then, he spun to face me. Surprise registered on his hard face when he saw me on the ground, my hair spread across the brambles and branches like tangled streamers. He hitched up his pants and left his hands on his hips, cocking his head.

"What the blazes have you managed to do to yourself?"

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“I don’t know!” I exclaimed. “I tripped and fell in this bramble bush from hell! And now I’m stuck!”

“Stuck?” His brows lowered heavily. “How are you stuck?”

I tugged my head, making the branches shake with ominous meaning.

“My hair is stuck, that’s how!”

Tenn’s eyes flamed white for a moment before he cast his gaze up at the sky. He pressed his lips together. His throat tightened.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, affronted. No, I was more than affronted. I was offended. Shocked, appalled, and aghast.

This insufferable warden was laughing at me.

Or, trying not to, I guessed. But pretty much failing.

“Tenn!” I shouted. “Stop laughing! I’m really stuck!”

“I can see that now,” he said on a funny-sounding gasp.

Ooh. Fuck this man. Fuck this man so hard he... he...

Great. Now all I can think about is fucking him. And that is not going to help me get out of this stupid bush. Especially if he won’t help me!

I used Tenn's laughter to fuel me, letting rage stoke the fires of strength in my body. Yes, I could do this. I was righteous in my fury. I was invincible.

I girded my loins and put all my strength into wrenching my head forward.

I gave up almost instantly, tears flooding my eyes. My scalp was going to fucking fall right off at this rate.

My attempt did, however, pull me free of one little brambly branch. It came loose from the trap of my hair with a wicked snap! Momentum sent it flinging away, and then violently back towards me. It smacked me right in the middle of my forehead.

"Ouch!"

Well, that seemed to get Tenn's attention, at least. He sobered instantly.

"Are you alright?" he asked, crouching before me, his eyes still white.

"I will be," I hissed, "when you help get me the hell out of here!"

He ignored my words for a moment, staring intently at my forehead where the branch had so rudely smacked me. His eyes moved from my forehead to the other branches that held me fast.

Then, without even seeming to have moved, he suddenly had a knife in his hand.

"How did you do that?!" I gasped, flinching despite the fact that this was Tenn. And Tenn would never hurt me.

I may not have known him long.

But that much, I did know.

“Don’t move,” he murmured, leaning in close.

Heat simmered beneath my skin. I gazed at the open collar of his uniform’s shirt, where the base of his thick, purple throat was exposed. His leather-and-spice scent washed over me.

I wish I could bottle that scent. Take it with me when I go.

“Are you going to cut my hair?”

He looked horrified by the suggestion. Absolutely stricken.

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“What? No!” he said fiercely. “I’m cutting the branches. Many of the brambles will remain in your hair, but we can deal with that after.”

We, he’d said. We can deal with that.

He was going to help me. With something as small and stupid as a bunch of brambles caught in my hair, due entirely to my own clumsiness. He’d laughed at me for a moment, sure. But there had been no malice in it. Only warmth, underpinned by the certainty that he would get me out of this eventually.

How depressing would it be, I wondered to myself, if I admitted that Tenn is probably my best friend?

It was too pathetic to even put into words. Especially when I dared acknowledge just how beyond friendly most of my feelings were for him these days.

I stayed still, just as he’d told me to, letting his scent and the warmth of the sun bathe me. Closing my eyes, I gave in to the physical sensations: his chest brushing mine, the gentle tugs at my scalp as he freed my tangled strands, the occasional stroke of a knuckle or thumb against my ears or throat. Leaves and brambles rustled gently around us as the knife snapped and sliced easily through their branches.

“There.”

I opened my eyes, slightly disoriented, like I’d been under some sort of spell.

“All done?” I asked.

“All done.”

Gingerly, I tried moving my head. There was no resistance.

“Thank you,” I said. I felt my head with my right hand, wincing as I encountered dozens of tangles and spiky brambles in my hair.

“Come out of there, would you?” Tenn cajoled. “Or you’re going to get snagged again and ruin all of my hard work.”

“The hard work hasn’t even happened yet,” I told him with a sigh as I got to my feet and carefully stepped out of the brambly mess. “I still have to fix all this,” I said, waving my hand around my head, “and I don’t even have a comb.”

“I have a comb.”

“Oh! You do?”

“Of course I do. You think I don’t comb my hair? I’m not Silar.”

“Well, I don’t know! I’ve never seen you use it. Can I please borrow it?”

“No.”

For fuck’s sake.

“Why not?” I asked, barely restraining myself from stomping my foot like a two-year-old. “Why would you bother telling me you have a comb if you weren’t planning on letting me borrow it?”

“Because lending it to you would be useless,” he said in a maddeningly statement-of-

fact tone. “You can’t see what’s going on back there.”

“So, what, exactly, do you propose?” I asked him as we returned to the area of our camp.

“I propose,” he said, sitting down on a fallen log near the tent and indicating the place between his thick thighs, “that you sit down, be good, and let me do it for you.”

Be good.

God, how I wanted to be good for him.

Too much. Way too fucking much.

“Fine,” I muttered, hoping I sounded more belligerent than obedient. “Where’s the comb?”

But Tenn’s tail was already way ahead of me. His tail seized upon his pack and dragged it over to where he was sitting on the log. He started rifling through it, and when his hand emerged, his knife had been put away. In its place was a beautiful wide-tooth comb made of some kind of shiny white material, shot through with streaks of gold. It reminded me of Old-Earth marble, or opal.

“That’s a beautiful comb,” I said, sitting down between Tenn’s legs on the warm grass.

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“It is,” he agreed. “It was my mother’s. She gave it to me when I first joined the training ranks of the Zabrian Guard.”

I craned my neck to look back at him. His eyes were orange once more.

“Are you still close?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “Neither of my parents have spoken to me since the scandal that sent me here.”

I clenched my molars together to keep my mouth from dropping open. I’d never had parents. But to think that you could have parents somewhere out there, parents who’d once loved you, who’d raised you, who would completely give up on you like that...

It hurt.

I was hurting for him.

When you’re hurting, you tell your warden

I tightened my jaw and didn’t say a word.

“I thought about getting rid of it after I was sent here,” he said, studying the white-and-gold material of the comb. “It didn’t really seem right to keep it, considering that it was a gift for entering the Zabrian Guard which I had then been ejected from. But...” His free hand coasted over the rough surface of my hair. “I am very glad I kept it now.”

“You are?”

“I am. And I am even, I must say, a little bit glad you got caught in the brambles this morning, Tasha.”

“What?” I asked with a bout of surprised laughter. “Why?”

His response made the laughter die in my throat.

“Because,” he said in a low voice, “I’ve been wanting to comb this beautiful hair from the very first day I met you.”

“You... What?”

“Technically the first night,” he amended, gently gathering all my hair together in one hand. “In the spare bedroom at Fallon’s ranch. When I watched you take those pins out of your hair. It spilled all over your shoulders. Just so astoundingly beautiful. I was dying to touch it.”

He’d wanted to touch me that very first night. He was dying to...

“You think my hair is beautiful?”

“Any fool with eyes would think so,” he answered with a slightly sarcastic click of his tongue, like I’d asked a very silly question. Then, quietly, so quietly I almost missed it, “Your hair is not the only part.”

Not the only part, what? Not the only part he’d wanted to touch that night?

Not the only part he thought was beautiful?

My heart rose to my throat, where it lodged painfully. Tenn didn't say anything else, instead getting to work on my hair.

He combed my hair the same way he sewed my clothes. Competently, thoroughly.

Carefully.

And it felt so fucking good. So good it made me want to lean further back towards him, to cry, to run. Having his strong hands gently tugging apart my tangled strands, to feel him work the comb along my scalp and through the ends, felt like it was ripping something inside me open and healing it at the same time.

No one else had combed my hair for me since I was eight. After Angela left, my guardians in the system cut it short so that no one would have to deal with it. It was part of the reason I wore it so long now as an adult. To take back a little bit of control, to assert myself over at least that part of my body, my life.

I would have let him cut it.

But he'd refused. He'd taken the longer path, the path which involved so much more work. The painstaking path that involved combing every twig and bramble out from my hair.

I was feeling fewer and fewer tugs now. The comb was gliding, smooth and easy, through my tresses.

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But still, Tenn didn't stop. He kept going, long after he'd run out of brambles to evict.

"How does it look?" I asked, when I could no longer justify sitting there enjoying his touch.

His voice came out in a throaty rasp as he gathered all my hair in both his hands.

"Perfect."

I turned to look at him. But before my gaze made it up to his face, it snagged somewhere else first, as surely as a strand of hair on a bramble.

"Tenn... Are you..." My eyes bugged as I took in the bulge at his crotch. "Are you hard?"

He shifted on the log, ran his hand along his jaw, then blew out a harsh breath.

"Yes."

Oh, wow. Not even trying to deny it. Maybe there was no point in trying to hide it when it was so visually obvious. My head was basically directly in front of his crotch, after all.

My tongue darted out to wet my lips. My skin felt sensitive and hot. My pussy clenched.

"You need not concern yourself," he grunted. "I'll deal with it." He sighed again. "I

really liked combing your hair.”

Clearly.

Pure, ecstatic joy exploded inside me. I never would have expected that something as simple as combing my hair would have such an effect on someone like Tenn. He struck me as a male who took pride in maintaining control at all times.

And here he was. Hard simply from touching my hair.

It was probably because he was just as desperate for some lady loving as his men were. It sounded like the only woman he'd ever been with was years ago.

He may not have wanted to admit it, but he was just as alone out here as his men.

Even more so, since some of those men now had wives.

He moved his feet, as if to stand.

“Wait!” Before I could stop myself, I gripped his thighs with my hands. “Could... Could I see?”

White fire flared in his gaze.

“You want to see my cock?”

Cock. Oh. That's... That's a word.

A hard, thrusting, erotic growl of a word I never in a million years would have imagined hearing from his mouth.

“Yes please,” I breathed. When I registered how humiliatingly desperate I sounded, I quickly added, “For the book! So that future brides can get a better sense of Zabrian anatomy.”

He let out a shuddering breath.

“You’re not going to take a picture this time, are you?” he growled. But even as he asked the question, his hands were already moving to the fasteners at his crotch. Fasteners, that, if I were being brutally honest, did not look long for this world at the rate his swollen cock was shoving against them.

“I won’t take a picture,” I promised.

Just a mental picture...

“Alright,” he grunted. He gripped the sides of his trousers’ opening, holding them together while he hesitated. “Just...”

“Yes?”

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“Just... don’t run.”

What the hell? What kind of thing was that to say right before I got my first eyeful of Zabrian dick? At least I’d already seen the diagram from the others. I was prepared.

Except, I wasn’t. Not really. When Tenn released the two sides of his trousers and his thick cock jutted forward, I was fairly certain I felt my soul leave my body for a second.

Beautiful. Alien. Terrifying. Massive. Purple.

Adjectives pounded through my brain in time with my stuttering heartrate. Tenn’s hands gripped the log on either side of his hips, his claws digging into the bark. He gritted his fangs and stared up at the sky.

I stared at his cock.

Holy Terra.

The girls hadn’t exaggerated the girth of Zabrian anatomy. I wasn’t sure I’d even be able to get my fist around the base of Tenn’s shaft. It was heavy, hard, and tapered to a smooth, bruise-coloured tip. My tongue was dry against the roof of my mouth as my eyes traced the matrix of swollen veins thatthrobbed all over his shaft. Beneath the shaft was a round sack, so dark purple it was nearly black.

“Where’s the – oh! There it is!”

I spied the infamous cock tail, only right now, it was more like a cock ring. A tendril of purple flesh wrapped tightly around the base of Tenn's dick.

"Are you," Tenn rasped, "getting what you need?"

Getting what I needed? Um, no. Unfortunately, what it felt like I needed right now was to shed my pyjama pants, straddle his hips, and see just how far I could bounce on that dick.

But that would be insane. Not to mention hypocritical. Last night, I'd been the one to say that a second kiss was a bad idea. I couldn't now tell him that I really needed to mount him. For science.

"You can touch it..."

I jolted, dragging my eyes up to his face. He was looking at me now, his chin angled down towards his chest, his eyes feverish white slits.

"If it's useful," he tacked on the end.

That would be extremely useful. Useful to my own sense of perversion, that is. I couldn't even pretend it would be for research now.

"Is that... Is that alright, though?" I asked. "Do you want that?"

"Yes." The fearsome hiss of his response went straight to my clit. "Please, Tasha."

Please. Please?! The man had not said please to me once so far!

Maybe he realized that fact. He gave a scraping sort of laugh.

“How does it feel,” he murmured, “to be the only one in this world capable of making a Zabrian warden beg?”

He was begging me.

I was dying to touch you.

And now, I was the one dying to touch him. I knew I should stop this. Stop this now.

Instead, I raised my shaking hand.

At once, his cock tail was unspooling, a writhing, tiny tail of flesh that secured itself tightly around my middle finger. Tenn groaned deeply when that happened, and a bead of moisture appeared at his tip.

“Oh. Wow,” I breathed. I shuffled closer on my knees, squeezing my thighs together. “What does this... Um, what is the cock tail for?”

“Zabrian females,” he panted, “have one internally. They entwine together... Inside...”

I used my other hand to gently pet the cock tail where it was wrapped around my finger. The cock tail squeezed, and Tenn’s entire shaft visibly jerked. Clearly, this was an immensely erogenous zone.

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I wondered if he'd miss it, considering I didn't have one, when we...

When we didn't have sex. Because that was obviously not going to happen.

I wasn't even sure if this counted as a hand job. Was I merely exploring?

Or was my goal to actually make him come?

The latter. Definitely. There was no way around it. Now that the idea of making him explode was in my head, I couldn't get it out.

I wrapped both my hands around his shaft and gently squeezed.

Tenn's next inhale sounded like someone had just stuck a knife between his ribs. Sharp, jagged, pained. But obviously not too pained. Because the muscles of his legs contracted tightly, shunting his hips upwards. He needed more.

I could give him that. Today, at least. Just this once.

Using both hands, I stroked up and down, establishing a relentless rhythm. I relished the velvet feel of his hide, the rock-hard heat of him, the ropes of veins beneath my palms. The surface of the log cracked, bark crumbling as Tenn dug his claws in deeper. His tail – his normal, big one – flicked its way over to me, wrapping itself around my waist just like his cock tail had done to my finger.

I wondered if he even knew that he was doing that. His eyes were closed now, his nostrils flaring, every muscle and tendon in his neck and jaw bulging.

“Tasha,” he hissed. A violent shudder wracked his frame. His eyes snapped open, furious and white. “Blast, Tasha, I’m going to-”

He came before he got the rest of the words out. I gasped, flinching, then shivering with pleasure, as viscous fluid shot forward and coated my cheek, chin, and even the tip of my nose.

Tenn gave a vicious, charred-sounding groan. His shaft throbbed inside the clutches of my fingers. His cock tail fluttered and clenched. Another jet of come spewed, this time hitting my mouth.

Acting purely on instinct, I opened my mouth to taste him.

Tenn made a choked sound of surprise. His white gaze was fastened to my tongue.

The tongue that was currently licking his hot, salty come from my lips.

Shit.

Was that weird? It had to be weird. A human guy might think watching a woman lick his semen off her face was hot.

But what the hell would a Zabrian warden think?

“Sorry!” I said. I scrambled up, pulling my hands away from his genitals. His cock tail let me go, but only with what seemed like a stubborn moment of hesitation.

“Sorry? Why are you sorry?” Tenn croaked.

“Sorry for licking your... That was...” Jesus, I couldn’t say “inappropriate” now. Not after I’d just had both my hands wrapped around his dick. “That was not right.”

“It was wrong?” He sounded confused, maybe even concerned. “I am sorry that I-”

“Oh, God, don’t you apologize!” I cried. A dribble of come dripped from the tip of my nose. Tenn’s eyes went there at once.

“Tasha, your face. Let me-”

“It’s fine! I’ll get cleaned up!”

“Tasha-”

“And then I’ll pack,” I said, already stumbling towards the creek. “And then we’ll go.”

20

TENN

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We made shockingly good time on the slicer.

Well, perhaps it was not so shocking. I was driving fast. Much faster than I usually did. Every time I remembered Tasha's slender fingers on my flesh, the way I'd spewed so horrendously all over her face, every part of my body clenched. Including the parts responsible for the slicer's speed.

She hadn't been disgusted, I was certain. She'd touched me without complaint.

And when she'd noticed the semen on her mouth, she'd licked it.

My crotch got tight just thinking about it. Having the plush curves of her body pressed into my back certainly didn't help.

But if licking had been any sort of good indication about her feelings, the words she'd said next certainly were not. That was not right.

I came all over her face. She licked it. And decided it was wrong.

How I would make such a thing not wrong, I had no idea. There was no way I could have held back the explosion of my orgasm while she knelt between my thighs with my cock in her hands. And I didn't see how the blazes I could be responsible for her going ahead and licking it! If she didn't like the taste, that was, frankly, her own fault.

Except, it still felt like my fault.

And it still felt like something I wanted desperately to fix.

My mounting frustration and the increased speed of our travels meant that we entered Warden Hallum's province that evening instead of tomorrow, much earlier than anticipated. It had been many cycles since I'd been here last, so I consulted the small screen with its illuminated map in the centre of my slicer's instrument display.

We were rapidly approaching Warden Hallum's station. There was no point in stopping to make camp now. We'd reach his place before the sun even fully set. And as much as I craved Tasha beside me more and more – so much so that it now felt like a hollowing sort of hunger – I was certain that she would have vastly preferred sleeping inside a building, in a bed or cot, if Warden Hallum had one available, than on the ground with me.

The trees grew denser, no longer only on one side of us, but springing up all around. It was only a combination of my vaguest memories; the map; and a well-worn path, obviously trodden by shuldu hooves, that led us through the darkening forest.

Warden Hallum's station was in the centre of a clearing inside a thick knot of trees. It was a small but well-constructed building of perfectly fit-together logs. A lantern or candle came on inside one of the windows.

And then, the front door opened.

Warden Hallum did not merely step out into his porch. The movement was like a command. A smart, relentless forward motion that he just as easily brought into utter stillness as I landed the slicer and cut the engines.

"Warden Tenn," he said in greeting. The orange light of late evening gleamed on the badge on his hat. Perfectly polished, as predicted. Blast.

"Hello, Warden Hallum." I dismounted the slicer and then turned to Tasha, who was already beginning to remove her helmet. She'd gotten quite good at it on her own –

unsurprising, for a woman the prided herself on her competence – but I chose, at that moment, to help her with it anyway. Even though she didn't need my help.

It was likely an asinine notion. But I suddenly felt rather savagely compelled to touch her in front of Warden Hallum. To lay a silent claim upon her.

To show the other warden that this was my human.

Yes. Asinine.

She wasn't mine, and no amount of selfishness on my part would change that.

And yet, there I stood, still undoing the straps and buckles of her helmet for her. I pulled the helmet off her head, my eyes seeking hers, but she was already shimmying off the slicer and striding purposefully towards Warden Hallum with her hand outstretched.

At least Warden Hallum wouldn't know what to do with that. So I would not have to watch him take her hand and-

He took it.

He took it as naturally as if he'd been shaking human hands his whole blasted life. His yellow fingers closed over Tasha's as she stepped up onto the porch. He gave her hand a controlled set of three pumps up and down.

He read the book. Probably the entire cursed thing.

Blast him to Zabria and back.

Seething, and hating that I was seething, I stalked towards the porch. I stood beside

Tasha, so close that my arm pressed against hers. Without my belt hook, my tail slithered around on the porch step behind me, and it required a great deal of will not to wrap it 'round her waist.

“It is good to meet you, Tasha,” Warden Hallum said, his grey eyes shadowed by his hat. “I must admit I was not expecting you tonight. But my men are ready for you. I can have them gathered quickly. You need only say the word.”

“Oh!”

Why was she saying, “Oh!” that way? Like she was both surprised and delighted by Warden Hallum?

“That’s not necessary,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s getting late, and I don’t want to drag them all out here now.”

“Plus, she needs her rest,” I cut in, annoyed that I had not yet been a part of the conversation thus far.

“Of course,” Warden Hallum said, his grey eyes flicking to the place my arm was pressed against Tasha’s. “I’ll bring out some food from the cellar. I have only one spare room with a cot in it, though.”

“That’s OK,” Tasha said, “we-”

“She can have it,” I growled. “I’ll sleep in the tent outside.”

I thought I felt Tasha’s eyes on me from the side then, but when I glanced her way, she was staring straight ahead, her smile looking oddly tight.

“Perfect,” she breathed. “Lead the way, Warden Hallum.”

Lead her, he did.

And I hated every blasted moment of it.

TASHA

Warden Hallum brought me inside his building, then showed me to a small, tidy room at the back.

“These will be your quarters,” he said, returning after a moment and handing me a plate of sliced meat and various fruits and vegetables he’d grabbed from his cellar.

“Thank you very much,” I said, taking the plate and putting it on the wooden bedside table. “It’s perfect.”

It really was a lovely room. Not a speck of dust to be seen. How was that possible? Every other room I’d been in on Zabria Prinar One so far had had dust. The stuff was everywhere.

Not here, apparently.

Even more impressive was that we’d arrived early, so he wouldn’t have had extra time to clean. Which meant Warden Hallum must have kept it this clean all the time.

“There is a basin there for washing,” he said, indicating a medium-sized bucket in the closet. “You can access clean water from the taps in the kitchen and any of the hoses attached to the outside of the house. The outhouse is directly beside the building.”

“I appreciate it.”

Warden Hallum lingered in the room with me, as if waiting to see if I had anything else to say. He stood perfectly still with his hands behind his back. His uniform was just as spotless as this room was. Despite the lack of conversation, he didn’t seem to

register even a hint of awkwardness. Just stood there. Like a black-haired, grey-eyed statue. I glanced at my plate, then fidgeted a bit, picking at my fingernails.

This is the kind of guy who could break a man by doing nothing but staring at him in total silence.

I couldn't think of a single thing to say. Warden Hallum was intimidating.

Tenn, when I'd first met him, had been intimidating, too. But for different reasons. He was intimidating because he'd shown himself to be so competent, so commanding, and so unfairly hot.

Warden Hallum also appeared to be competent, and commanding...

And cold.

Not that he wasn't attractive. I'm sure some lady out there would have appreciated the cool, calculating quality of his steely grey eyes. That lady just wasn't me.

I shivered.

Warden Hallum unexpectedly broke the silence.

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“There are extra blankets in the closet.”

It took me a second to realize that he’d noticed me shivering, and he knew what it meant because he’d read the book. For some reason, that didn’t make me feel better. He was almost too observant. Like he could take one look at me – at anyone – and know everything about them. Every desire, every fear, every flaw.

“Thank you.” And then, when he still didn’t leave, I tentatively added, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

He finally left the room, closing the door behind him.

I breathed out, letting myself relax. I hadn’t realized how much tension had gathered in my shoulders in Warden Hallum’s demanding presence. Stretching my neck by leaning my head towards one shoulder, then the other, I walked to the window and cracked it open. Cool night air rushed in.

Along with the sound of someone swearing.

“Tenn?” I called, opening the window wider. I had a feeling Warden Hallum wouldn’t be out there making that kind of racket.

Tenn was directly beneath my window, attempting to set up the tent on a rocky, uneven stretch of ground.

“What are you doing out there?” I asked, leaning my forearms on the windowsill.

“I am setting up my tent,” he gritted out. “Or, trying to.”

“Why don’t you go over there?” I asked him, pointing at a much nicer, flatter spot between some trees about five metres from the back of the house.

“Too far away,” Tenn grunted, finally succeeding in getting the tent to stand up.

“Too far away from what?”

“From you. Obviously.”

Obviously?

Excuse me, sir, but that actually is not obvious at all!

Especially after he’d been so insistent on me sleeping inside and him taking the tent. When he’d said as much to Warden Hallum, it made me feel like he was embarrassed to be seen as wanting to share a sleeping space with me. And yet here he was, trying to get as close as he possibly could without actually tunnelling into the solid wood wall from the outside.

“How’s your room?” Tenn asked, switching subjects before I could internally combust over my own confusion. Now finished with the tent, he tossed his bags into it, then came to the openwindow to hand me mine. Despite the fact that he was outside standing on an incline, and I was in the house, our height differences meant our faces were exactly level with each other.

“Thanks,” I said, taking my bag and dropping it on the floor. “The room is good. Very clean. Warden Hallum is certainly an interesting guy.”

Tenn frowned. White sparked in his eyes. “He’s not that interesting.”

“He’s just different, that’s all.”

“Different from what?”

“Well... From you.”

“But you still prefer me.” Technically, Tenn’s sentence was a statement. But there was a warble of uncertainty, a subtle shift in his tone, that turned it into a question.

Affection filled my chest until it became hard to breathe. If I leaned out this window, just a little bit more, I could kiss him.

“Yes, Tenn,” I murmured. “Never thought I’d say this, but you are definitely my favourite Zabrian warden.”

“Good,” he said quietly.

His gaze went to my lips. Goosebumps broke out along my arms. The wind gently buffeted me, pulling a few loose strands of hair from my bun. Tenn caught one of those strands between his claws and held it gently for a moment. Then, he tucked it carefully behind my ear.

“You really don’t have to sleep right here,” I said, even though I was secretly glad he’d chosen to be so close. “You’re going to be on all those poky rocks the whole night.”

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“I am not afraid of a few rocks. Besides, what if you need something?”

“Something... Something like what?”

“What if you require my protection?”

I laughed. Tenn’s gaze still lingered on my mouth.

“I’ll be safe inside. And you’ll be out there! What, exactly, do you plan on protecting me from like that?”

He placed his hands on either side of the window outside, bracketing the opening, and leaning so close that his next words fanned across my face.

“Does loneliness count?”

I blinked, stunned to hear my question from the other night turned back on me that way. I remembered how he’d replied, and nodded, my throat growing hot.

“It counts.”

Tenn’s breathing grew slightly uneven. The white returned to his eyes. Awareness snapped between us like an electrical charge.

My lips parted.

“Get some rest.” Tenn suddenly pushed off from the wall and retreated to the tent.

“We have lots of work to do tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Right. We’d be meeting Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven for the first time. I needed a clear head. So far, I’d only met Zabrian convicts who’d been tempered by the presence of their wives. This would be my first time meeting unmarried convicts face-to-face. I swallowed, and pretended not to feel the way my neglected lips tingled.

“Alright,” I said. I closed the window, filled my washbasin, got ready for bed, then slipped under the covers. As much as I’d gotten used to sleeping beside Tenn, being in a real bed again was heavenly, and exhaustion soon pulled me down into the depths of sleep.

I dreamed of myself in that bed. In that very room.

With a white glow coming in through the window.

The next morning I woke at dawn, refreshed from my sleep in the bed and fuelled by the fact that I’d be meeting more of the men today. Since it was so early, I thought I might be the first one up, but after getting dressed and heading out into the kitchen, I found Warden Hallum already waiting for me there. He, too, was dressed, his uniform crisp and his boots impossibly clean.

“Breakfast,” he said, indicating food laid out on the table.

“Thank you,” I said. I glanced around the kitchen.

“Looking for Warden Tenn?”

Damn. He really did see everything.

“He’s awake,” Warden Hallum said. “He’s cleaning up with a hose outside. When he’s finished, we’ll go.”

“Go? Go where?” I’d assumed that, since there were only three men to meet, they would all congregate here.

“One of my men, Rivven, suffered an injury many cycles ago,” Warden Hallum answered. “As a result, he does not work on a ranch like the others, but rather runs a saloon. His saloon is located at a central point, roughly equal distance from the properties of Dorn, Xenet, and myself. We will all meet there.”

A saloon? Interesting. I hadn’t realized that there were any other career options for the men out here.

“Alright. That’s fine with me,” I told him.

“Good,” he said. “I will go prepare the shuldu.”

By the time I was finished eating and had retrieved my hat, the two wardens were outside, each of them holding the reins of a shuldu. I wondered, for a painful second, if Tenn was going to pull another moment like last night when he’d decided for the both of us that I’d sleep away from him. Was he going to make me ride with Warden Hallum?

No offence to Warden Hallum, but I could not imagine anything more uncomfortable than sitting on a saddle in front of him for an entire shuldu ride. It would be like sitting in front of a big, cold rock. A grey one. With very sharp edges.

But Tenn was already making his way towards me, leading the large sable shuldu by the reins.

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As he came, I found myself powerless against the image of him, the picture he created. His broad, confident steps. The strong lines of his shoulders and biceps and the tension of his forearm as he held the reins. That brutal jaw, thick neck. The eyes like orange flames and hair like silver-dusted snow.

“Good morning,” I said, feeling suddenly shy after not being with him all night.

“Good morning. Are you ready?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

Tenn tipped his hat towards me. Then, he released the reins and clasped my waist, lifting me up the way he’d done before with Rabbit.

I’d gotten so used to leaning forward and holding onto him on the slicer that having him behind me now was intoxicating. His arms caged me in. His frame cast a shadow over me as he bent at the waist, his front flush against my back.

“Follow me,” Warden Hallum said, mounting his massive black shuldu and turning it towards the path we’d travelled yesterday.

On our shuldu, we exited the forest at a solid clip. There were a few times that I worried I might get bounced right out of the saddle, but Tenn’s tail was there, fastened tightly around my waist, keeping me secure like a shuttle seatbelt.

Once we were clear of the trees, we followed a broad dirt road through rolling hills dotted with swaying golden-green grass. Eventually, a large wooden building came

into view in the distance.

“That is Rivven’s saloon,” Warden Hallum called over to us. “They should all be gathered now.”

As we approached, I could see that he was right. Three figures stood outside the saloon, appearing to wait for us by the road. I was surprised to see that, unlike what I’d seen of men like Fallon, Oaken, and Silar, they were all fully dressed. They were even matching, wearing the same outfits of black and white and....

Holy fucking Terra. Were those tuxedos?!

Yup. There was no way I was wrong about that. As Tenn brought our shuldu to a stop and I got a better look at the three Zabrian males before me, I could see that they were absolutely wearing tuxedos, complete with bowties and cummerbunds.

And cowboy hats. Couldn’t forget the cowboy hats.

Interestingly, they removed their hats after Tenn helped me down and I got closer. I hadn’t really noticed any of the others do that before. Had I written that in the book somewhere? That it was polite to remove your hat?

I must have. Where else would they have gotten the idea?

And why else would they be wearing tuxedos?!

“Tasha, these are my men,” Warden Hallum said after dismounting. He aimed his tail at each of them in turn. “Dorn. Xennet. And Rivven.”

I looked at the three men.

Three pairs of very white eyes stared back.

“Hello. I’m glad to meet you,” I said. I approached the small group, aware the entire time of how close Tenn followed at my back. I held out my hand to the first man. “Dorn?”

The largest of the three men, both in width and height, took my hand in his rust-red one.

They definitely read the book.

We were off to a good start.

“I’m Dorn,” he confirmed, giving my hand a hesitant wobble before letting go. His reddish-brown hair was shorter than any other Zabrian male I’d encountered thus far. It appeared to have been cut messily, and was tied back in a low ponytail that was only a few inches long.

“And you’re Xennet?” I held out my hand to the next one.

“Yes!” He grabbed my hand tightly and shook it a lot harder than Dorn had. Glossy, pale purple hair was pulled back from a regal, almost elfin-looking face with light green hide.

“Um. Great,” I said. My hand was beginning to go numb.

“That’s enough, Xennet,” Warden Hallum said.

He dropped my hand. I let blood flow return to my fingers before I finally came to Rivven. Like the others, Rivven’s hair was pulled back. It was a deep midnight blue in colour. His hide was blue, too, but paler. The colour of clear winter skies.

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He held out his hand.

His left hand.

That threw me for a moment. His right arm remained at his side, and I quickly realized why. His right arm ended at his wrist, the hand obviously amputated some time ago.

The injury Warden Hallum had mentioned?

“Hello, Rivven.” I smiled, and raised my left hand to clasp his.

“Hello. And welcome,” he said gruffly, releasing my hand after giving it a tentative shake. “This is my place here. I don’t... I don’t have a herd.”

“Yes, Warden Hallum told me. That’s fine.”

Rivven looked startled.

“It is?”

“Absolutely,” I replied as we all walked into the saloon. “I’m sure there are many human women who’d rather work in a place like this than help run a ranch.”

“Oh.” Rivven looked like he wasn’t sure what to do with that information. It was like he wanted to be pleased about it, but was too afraid to let himself.

“Please have a seat, Tasha,” Warden Hallum said, indicating a single rectangular table with a bunch of mis-matched but sturdy-looking wooden chairs. Beyond the table was a polished wooden bar with plates, glasses, and various jugs and containers behind it.

“You too,” Warden Hallum told his men.

I chose a chair on one side of the table. Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven sat down across from me.

Tenn didn’t sit. He stationed himself directly behind me, so close that I was surprised he didn’t end up resting his hands on top of my shoulders. Warden Hallum decided not to sit, either. He stood with his hands behind his back near the door we’d come through.

“My men are ready,” Warden Hallum said. “They have been studying your text closely. They are prepared to do whatever it takes to earn a place in your bridal program. Put them through whatever tests you wish to.”

“Thank you, Warden Hallum. I can tell you guys have read the book! But I don’t exactly have any tests to give any of you. I’m just hoping to get to know you better. To determine your compatibility with a potential human bride, should the program continue.”

“Ask them questions, then,” Warden Hallum suggested.

Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven waited tensely.

Alrighty, then.

I guessed I’d just jump right into it.

“Would there ever be a good reason,” I asked the convicts before me, “to hit your wife?”

All three men visibly stiffened.

“No,” Rivven and Dorn answered in firm unison. Warden Hallum look satisfied with their answers.

Until his grey eyes went to Xennet, who had not yet replied.

“Well...” Xennet hedged.

“Well?” Warden Hallum repeated frostily.

“Well, what if she is choking?” Xennet exclaimed. “I might need to give her a whack! On the back!”

“A whack... on the back...” I echoed, blinking.

“No, Xennet,” Dorn interjected. “Do you not remember that chapter? If a human is choking you lick... something.”

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I attempted to hold back a snort. Warden Hallum betrayed no emotion on his face, but the muscles in his cheeks and jaw looked tight.

His mouth opened, and I assumed he was about to reprimand the three tuxedo-clad alien cowboys before me, when Rivven spoke, bringing him up short.

“It’s called the Heimlich,” he said. “If a human is choking, you perform the Heimlich manoeuvre to dislodge the food and help her breathe.”

“Oh. Right,” Xenet said. “I would like to change my answer, Tasha. If my human is choking, I will do the lick manoeuvre instead.”

“We will review that chapter,” Warden Hallum growled, pinning Xenet with a pointed gaze. “Please continue, Tasha.”

“Thanks. Alright. Let’s see... If your wife was upset, or exhibiting some sort of anxiety or emotional distress, what are some things that you could do to help?”

All three of them remained silent for a good, long while. This was a bit of a tough one, I had to admit. Before I’d arrived this morning, these guys had never even met a human woman. Comforting women could be hard even for men who’d spent their entire lives around us.

Finally, it was Dorn who ventured forth with his answer first.

“I could... feed her?”

“Good!” I said, nodding. He visibly brightened at my praise.

“Pet her!” Xenet cried, apparently not one to be outdone.

“I... I suppose. You mean like a massage?” I asked. “Physical touch can be quite calming. It helps release the bonding hormone oxytocin.”

Tenn shifted behind me, making the wooden floorboards creak. I could have sworn I felt some part of him brush the back of my neck.

“I would feed her and then pet her,” Xenet said, padding his answer.

“You can’t steal my idea,” Dorn grumbled.

Feed her... Pet her...

Hold on.

Were they talking about how to calm a human, or a freaking shuldu?

“Rivven?” I asked, suppressing a sigh. “What are your thoughts?”

He rubbed the blunt end of his right wrist with the clawed fingers of his left hand, hesitated, then haltingly said, “I would try to find out why she was upset.”

“Very good,” I said, impressed. “And then?”

“And then I’d fix it.”

OK. I like Rivven.

“I would also do that!” Dorn said quickly. “After feeding her.”

“I thought you said we couldn’t steal each other’s ideas?” Xenet hissed.

“This is not stealing,” Dorn scoffed. “This is merely... resource sharing.”

“Brainstorming?” I suggested.

“There are no storms in my brain,” Xenet exclaimed, looking rather offended. “I assure you that my brain is very calm! Very normal!”

Yes... Clearly...

“What would you do,” came the unexpected rumble of Tenn’s voice from behind me, “if you found your female in a thorny bramble bush?”

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I twisted to scowl at him for lobbing his weirdly specific question into the fray. But the others were already speaking, so I quickly faced forward again.

“Why would she be in a bramble bush in the first place?” Dorn asked, plainly confused. As he should be, because it was a ridiculous question to ask.

“She probably fell,” I explained, blushing.

“Is she upset to be in the bush?” Dorn asked.

“If she is upset,” Xenet said, “then I would feed her! I would bring her a very nice snack in the bush!”

“Let’s all just assume she doesn’t want to be in the bush,” I groaned. “She’s stuck.”

“How could she be stuck?” That was Dorn again. The man had a hell of a lot of questions. I guessed I couldn’t blame him for wanting to get as much information as possible about the scenario so that he could have the best chance at coming up with a reasonable response. There was a lot hinging on this for him. For all of them.

“Because she has very long and beautiful hair,” Tenn explained, “and all the various strands have become tangled in the brambles and branches.”

“I could pull the bush out by the roots,” Xenet said thoughtfully.

“Your objective is to get the woman out of the bush,” Warden Hallum reminded him sternly, “not get the bush out of the ground.”

Dorn fingered the rough, uneven ends of his short reddish-brown ponytail. “I suppose I could cut her hair if necessary.”

“Or the branches,” Rivven added.

“Or, I could douse her head in oil!” said Xenet excitedly. “Then she would slide right out!”

“Practically speaking, I guess that would work,” I admitted. “But I’m not sure the woman in the scenario would appreciate that tactic.”

“Oh.” Xenet looked deflated. Which was extremely cute and actually quite encouraging. He was disappointed that this imaginary woman in a bush would be unhappy with his actions. Which meant he wanted, ultimately, to please her.

“Let’s move on from the bush question, shall we?” I said. “Hopefully, none of your potential wives would find themselves in such an outlandish situation.”

“It can happen,” Tenn grumbled from behind me.

“Yes, Tenn. That-”

“To even the most impressive and competent of women.”

I ignored the way my belly seemed to fall all the way down to the place between my legs at his words.

“Thank you, Tenn,” I said dismissively through a forced smile. “Gentlemen – let’s continue.”

The rest of the morning continued in much the same fashion. I asked the men

questions, and they gave me their best – if often unorthodox – answers, all while Tenn did his utmost to derail things with his embarrassingly specific scenarios. Such as, “What would you do if your wife came here with no clothes?” and “How would you protect your wife if she was constantly putting herself at risk of breaking her own butt?”

You know, only the most pressing and significant questions. The sorts of subjects that would likely define human-Zabrian diplomatic relations for centuries to come.

Not.

But even so, I considered the morning to mostly be a success. Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven were obviously completely inexperienced when it came to women, but they were earnest. They all worked hard, wracking their brains to come up with answers to my questions. No one had given me any real red flags yet. Except maybe Xennet. But his was more of a brown flag. Some muddy spot between red and green. He didn't seem malicious. He just gave me slightly chaotic, loose cannon vibes. I'd have to learn more about him before I made any final decisions.

We stopped for a short lunch. It was prepared by Rivven, who seemed relieved to get a break from the interrogation and spend some quiet time alone in the saloon's kitchen.

And after that, we were right back to it.

By the time Warden Hallum called a halt to the proceedings, Dorn, Xennet, and Rivven appeared to be absolutely exhausted. Their tuxedos were rumpled. Their faces were drawn.

Frankly, they looked like they'd just come back from a war.

“Dorn and Zennet will have to leave soon,” Warden Hallum informed me, “if they are to return to their herds before dark.”

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“Of course,” I said. “We’ll continue this tomorrow morning?”

“Yes,” Warden Hallum answered for his men, all three of whom appeared to have lost the ability – or maybe the will, after today – to speak.

Buck up, boys, I wanted to tell them. If you actually plan on marrying a human woman, then you ain’t seen nothing yet.

22

TENN

“Are you willing to share,” Warden Hallum said to Tasha when we’d returned to his property for the night, “your initial impressions of my men?”

I wanted her to tell him, “No,” because if she was going to share anything with a warden then it was going to be with me. But she was too generous, and too professional in her role here, to be as selfish as I was.

“My initial impressions are positive,” she said. She tilted her head to one side and rubbed the back of her neck.

“What’s wrong with your neck?” I asked. My voice came out low. Rasping. Soft. I’d say it was as soft as her skin, but nothing was as soft as that. “Is it hurting?”

If it was hurting, she was supposed to tell me.

“What?” she dropped her hand. “Oh. No. Not really. It’s just been a long day, that’s all.”

“If you have any notes for my men,” Warden Hallum said, “or any areas for improvement, I will work on it with them.”

I scowled at him. Did he not just hear her talk about her long day? He didn’t need to keep pestering her when she was so obviously tired. But Warden Hallum was not known for his empathy. He was known for his diligence and his ability to accomplish objectives.

His current objective was, obviously, to acquire human brides for his men.

Perhaps I could not blame him for that. I had the same goal.

But I could blame him for not caring enough about Tasha’s needs. And I planned to.

“I don’t have specific notes at this time,” Tasha said.

It was dark now. The moons and stars splashed silver light down upon her face and her hair. Like even they wanted to touch her, but had to make do with illuminating her from afar instead.

“I just need to spend more time with them,” she went on. “The other men I’ve met so far – like Silas and Fallon – they’re already married. In a way, I’m viewing them through the filtered biases of their wives. Their human wives trust them, so it makes it easier for me to trust them. Even Oaken, who is unmarried, has been living alongside Magnolia for quite a while, now. So I’m inclined to see him as trustworthy, too. But I don’t have that with your men. Or with Zohro,” she added, glancing at me.

“Zohro should be here tomorrow, if all goes well,” I told her.

“That’s good,” she said, tipping her chin down and then bringing it back up. “I look forward to meeting him so I get to know him, too.”

“I understand your hesitations,” Warden Hallum said. “You do not know my men as I do. But you should know that I would not recommend the program proceed if I did not have full confidence in their goodwill towards a future wife.”

“I appreciate that Warden Hallum, thank you. I know Tenn has said something similar.”

“None of my men,” Warden Hallum continued, “have committed a crime as an adult. None of them have enacted any violence against another person in this world.”

Tasha looked so profoundly good, so beatifically kind, when she smiled in response to Warden Hallum’s words.

The very same words that punctured my gut like a venom-coated thorn.

Because one of my men had committed a crime in this world.

A second murder.

And I hadn’t told her.

I’d reasoned with myself, that very first day, that she simply didn’t need to know about what Silar had done.

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But now...

Now, as I gazed at her beautiful face and wanted nothing more than to deserve her, to please her, to earn her trust in me...

I knew I had to tell her.

Not right now, perhaps.

But soon.

23

TASHA

Tenn was uncharacteristically quiet as we headed off for Rivven's saloon the next morning. It was only the two of us on shulduback today. Warden Hallum said he had some traps to check – traps he apparently used to catch various animals for fur and meat. He planned to join us when that task was finished, but he wanted to do it now and beat the rain.

After being apart from Tenn the past few nights, I would have been excited to have some alone time with him. If it weren't for the fact he'd apparently gotten up on the wrong side of the bedroll this morning. The weather only added to the gloomy atmosphere. This was the first cloudy day I'd experienced on Zabria Prinar One. Heavy, opaque grey clouds pressed down from above. A humid wind swiped at us as we rode.

When we arrived at the saloon, we discovered Rivven alone inside.

“The others are not here yet,” he said, straightening up from where he’d been bent over, wiping down the bar.

“That’s alright,” I said. “We’re a little early today.”

I paused to see if Tenn had any of his usual sassiness to contribute to the conversation. But he just lurked, grumpy and quiet in the corner of the saloon. His jaw worked in silence, like there was something he did want to say, but he’d chosen to chew on the words instead.

“Riveting, Tenn. Truly,” I said with a roll of my eyes. My reply was probably a lot more barbed than the situation called for, but it seemed I couldn’t help it. Tenn’s mood somehow felt like a personal rejection. And that made me anxious. Anxious enough to lash out, with sarcasm if nothing else.

But I couldn’t stew about Tenn right now. Not when poor Rivven was standing there so awkwardly in his tuxedo.

“Apologies,” he said, his mouth twisting with concern when he caught me glancing at his outfit. “I have forgotten my bow.”

His bow. Like he was a gift.

He could be a gift to someone.

“I think you mean bowtie,” I said gently. “But it’s alright. Really.” I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “As much as I appreciate you and the others dressing in such, er, formal attire... You really don’t have to wear that every time you see me. Silar and Fallon in the other province certainly didn’t. They just wore pants and...

Well, that's about it, actually, aside from their hats."

"I see." He looked down at himself. "Should I change?"

"I leave it totally up to you. Do whatever makes you comfortable."

Relief washed over his features.

"I'll change."

He went behind the counter, then pushed open a door and disappeared behind it.

"You'll never get him in another shirt again now," Tenn mumbled under his breath.

"That's enough out of you," I said, spinning to glare at him.

"Enough out of me? I've barely spoken this morning."

"Exactly! You... You know what? Let's go outside."

If I was about to have a loud argument with Tenn, I didn't want it to be in Rivven's saloon where he would hear us with those big Zabrian ears.

Outside, though it was now later in the morning, the sky was even darker than before. A rumble in the distance told me we probably didn't have long out here before the skies opened up and pummelled us. We walked through the long grass beside Rivven's saloon into the area behind the building. There was yet more grass back here, most of it getting flattened by the rising wind, as well as a few trees and what looked to be an old, unused shed or outbuilding of some kind.

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Once I'd stomped an appropriate way into the area behind Rivven's saloon, I stopped.

"What is going on with you today?" I asked Tenn. "You're being so moody."

I wanted him to respond with anger – anger like my own – so that we'd be on some kind of equal footing.

But he didn't look angry. He looked...grim.

"I have kept something from you."

My heart lurched.

"Something I no longer feel comfortable hiding."

My palms, pits, and forehead started sweating. My mouth went so dry I couldn't even form the question, couldn't even ask him what it was.

He didn't need me to ask. He continued on his own.

"Last night, Warden Hallum indicated that none of his men have ever committed another crime after their childhood convictions. I... I allowed you to believe the same was true of my men. But it is not."

I swallowed against a sudden bout of nausea.

"Who?" I whispered.

He let out a short breath, then met my gaze steadily and said, “Silar.”

“Silar?” I exploded. A fat drop of rain landed on my chest. “He was the first one to get a bride!”

“He was,” Tenn confirmed. I blinked, then swiped away another raindrop. Wind pressed my clothing tightly to my body.

“What kind of crime?” I asked. Because now that we were in this, I needed to know it all.

“Murder.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me!” I shouted. “Are you serious right now, Tenn?”

This whole time, I’d been trying to give the men here a fair shot.

This whole time, I’d been trusting Tenn.

And now...

And now, it was all going to shit.

As if agreeing with me, the sky puked up all its rain on our heads. A torrent of water soaked us. Lightning forked in the distance, followed by a bone-shaking blast of thunder.

I thought there was another stroke of lightning, but it was Tenn’s white eyes, piercing through the rain.

“We can’t stay out here!” he bellowed.

“Fine!” I pointed to the shed, then trudged through the spewing rain towards it.

It wasn’t all that much better inside the shed. Half the roof of the empty, dirt-floored building was already gone. Maybe blown off in a storm like this one.

But the half of the shed with a roof over it was mostly dry. We stood beneath its rickety shelter.

“Start talking.”

“Cherry was in debt to a criminal organization. She was on the run. It was why she sought to become a bride in this world,” Tenn said. “Did you know this?”

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“No!” I hadn’t heard anything about this. But it certainly made sense. It would explain the fear I’d seen in her on EloraStation. And it would also explain why she’d been so anxious to come to a world as isolated as this one.

“She was tracked here by a member of that organization,” Tenn went on. “He attempted to kidnap her, and would have killed her if he’d succeeded. Silar killed him instead.”

I didn’t answer at first. My own breathing was so loud inside my ears that for a while, it drowned out even the cacophony of the rain.

“So Silar was protecting her,” I finally said.

I expected Tenn to agree instantly, but instead he sighed, and said, “Well. Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly? Why else would he have killed someone!”

I rubbed my temples. I wasn’t sure if it was the shift in the weather or the stress of this situation, but my head was beginning to pound something fierce.

“I want to be completely honest with you, Tasha. And, in the spirit of that sort of honesty, I must admit that Silar easily could have subdued the human male without killing him.”

Oh, Jesus.

“It was a human?” I groaned.

“Yes. It was a human. Silar killed him out of anger. Because he would have hurt Cherry. Because he put his hands on her, and aimed his weapon at her.”

“And you’re just telling me this now,” I said, bitterness creeping up my throat. Why the hell should I be surprised by this? Why should I feel betrayed? Tenn had kept information from me before. He could have told me about the men’s convictions long before that check-in call. But he didn’t.

And he didn’t tell me this. This, which was so much worse.

“You should have told me before now,” I said quietly. “The ironic thing is, humans actually have a legal defence for a caselike this. It sounds like it was a crime of passion. Where rage renders you incapable of thinking and behaving rationally.”

“I believe this would apply in Silar’s case,” Tenn said after a moment. “I am surprised that is an acceptable legal argument among humans. Your authorities must be quite lenient.”

“We’re lenient? You’re the one who completely let it slide! You hid it!”

“I did hide it,” he admitted fiercely, almost angrily. “Because it would have destroyed him, Tasha! Destroyed them both. You were not there. You did not see Cherry’s panic at the idea her husband would be taken from her. She was willing to make a false confession and take the fall for his crime. Did you know that?”

“No! Of course I didn’t. I-”

“And now, for the first time,” he interrupted viciously, “I finally understand. I understand what it’s like to care for someone so deeply that you’d go to the mines for

her. I understand what it's like to know, in the deepest parts of yourself, that you would kill another man simply because he'd laid his hands upon her."

"Her..."

"You, Tasha!" he thundered. "I mean you."

Real thunder boomed, as if to echo him.

I blinked rain from my eyes.

Only it wasn't rain.

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying that I would do anything to earn your trust back. Starting with telling you my very last secret. The only other thing I've hid."

Oh, God. What else? What else could possibly be so bad he hadn't told me so far?

What else could be worse than murder?

"I love you."

His eyes seared me.

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“I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone or anything,” he went on, raw agony slicing through his gaze. “I’d give up my badge for you. I’d go to the mines for you. I’d turn myself into a worse criminal than any of my men for you.”

“Tenn...”

“I want to keep you.” His voice went ragged at that. Like he was ripping the words right out of his body. “And I’d never ask it of you, Tasha, because I know how hard you’ve worked for what you have. I know how hard you’ve worked to find your place. To earn that place. And I am happy for you, truly. Even if it absolutely shatters me to know that your place, that perfect life you’ve built, is not with me.”

My perfect life.

My perfect, empty life.

The one I’d already been dreading going back to. The one that felt completely foreign to me now.

Tenn loved me.

And, in a desperate moment of self-preservation, as the rain fell and the wind screamed and the wood of the old shed creaked, I didn’t want to believe him. I wanted to pretend that this was just another lie. Some horrible rouse that would do nothing but humiliate me in the end.

But then, I thought of all words he’d spoken over our past days together, some of

them innocuous on their own...

But devastating all stacked up.

I'd make time for you.

I'd give it all to you.

I was dying to touch you.

How does it feel to be the only one who can make me beg?

He loved me. He said he felt shattered, but I was the one who could literally hear the splintering of my heart.

"Tasha," Tenn hissed urgently.

I felt that urgency quickening in my blood. I had to tell him that I felt the same. I hadn't forgiven him, but I wouldn't run away from this. Not now.

That shattering sound increased. A horrible cracking so loud it seemed to emanate from outside my body.

"Tasha!"

Tenn's hands seized upon my shoulders.

He shoved.

I went stumbling backwards, right out the doorless entry of the shed. I almost righted myself, but once I was outside, my boots didn't stand a hope in hell against the slick

grass. I slid, then fell heavily backwards. My ass took the brunt of the impact before I slammed onto my back.

I gasped and gagged, the wind completely knocked from my lungs. My tailbone felt like someone had just taken a sledgehammer to it.

I finally did it, I thought weakly as my head spun. I finally broke my fucking butt.

Fighting nausea, I forced myself to sit up.

And then, through the unrelenting blur of the rain, I watched the rest of the shed's roof collapse.

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TASHA

It's amazing, really, what pure terror can make your body do.

Thirty seconds ago, I'd barely been capable of sitting up.

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Now?

Now, I was fucking running.

Right back into the shed.

I found Tenn motionless in the mud. One of the roof's heavy wooden beams had his right arm and shoulder completely pinned. Which maybe wouldn't have been too lethal, if it weren't for the fact that there were huge, black nails sticking out of the beam.

Those nails had torn the skin at the side of his throat. Blood pumped out of him like a fucking firehose of black.

No!

Mud seeped into my pants. I didn't even know I'd fallen to my knees. Panic had me in its grips, shaking me like a broken doll.

Stop the bleeding. Move the beam. Get him out. End this merciless fucking rain.

Go back in time to five minutes ago so that I might have never pointed at this shed and made him come here.

"Tenn!" I screamed.

No answer. I couldn't see his face like this. He was on his stomach, his head

wrenched to the side, his features hidden beneath the beam.

“Fuck!” I ripped off my shirt, one of the ones he’d made me, and shoved it against his bleeding neck. But I couldn’t wrap it around like a tourniquet, could I? What if he suffocated?

He’d suffocate if I didn’t get this fucking beam off of him!

I gripped it and heaved with everything I had, but it was no use. I was too small, too weak, too human.

“I’ll be back. Please don’t...”

The end of that sentence terrified me too much to say it.

I stumbled out of the shed and ran.

Rivven did a double take when I slammed through the door into his saloon. His eyes widened, and went white, when he took in my bare stomach and bra.

“I need your help,” I sobbed.

For a second, he looked horrified at my tears. And then, a stoic mask of determination slammed into place. In the chaos of my fear, his words from yesterday came back to me with vivid force. What he’d said he’d do for an upset human female. That he would find out what was wrong.

And he would fix it.

Please, Rivven, let that be true, I begged silently as I tore back out of the saloon. Rivven was hot on my heels and he easily overtook me with his long legs once we

were outside.

“The shed!” I shouted. Those Zabrian ears of his must have caught the word despite the thunder that nearly drowned me out. He sprinted to the shed, a streak of dark leather, long hair, and pale blue hide in the rain.

By the time I caught up, Rivven was down on one knee by Tenn’s head, his right shoulder shoved against the beam. His boots fought for purchase in the slippery muck. Every muscle in his bare torso strained. The tendons in his neck looked like they might pop right through his hide. For a terrible, wonderful moment, the beam budged.

But his boots slipped, and his grip gave out. My shaking hands shot to my mouth, barely holding back a scream.

“Blast,” he breathed through clenched fangs. Dark blood seeped from his mouth, trickling down to his chin. He must have bit himself somewhere. “Too heavy.” His white eyes sought mine. “Go to the road. Get the others. I’ll try to keep the weight off him as best I can.”

“I... I don’t want to leave him.”

“You have to,” he grunted, once again shoving his shoulder against the beam and straining. “If you want to save him.”

That was all the convincing it took.

I was off like a shot, stumbling shirtless through the storm. By the time I reached the road, I nearly collapsed with relief to see the dark, sodden shapes of two riders in the distance.

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“Help!” My throat felt like it was bleeding. I ran into the road, waving my arms wildly.

They must have seen me, because what had been a slow shuldu trudge a second ago suddenly became a furious gallop. Xennet and Dorn raced down the muddy road, vaulting off their mounts as soon as they reached me.

“The shed out back!” I flung my trembling arm in the direction of the disaster. “They need you. Please!”

But if they were the sorts of men who cared about words like “please,” they didn’t stick around to hear it. They were already gone, running around the side of the building. Just before I started running, too, I noticed that, like Rivven had been earlier, they were both dressed in their painstakingly-made human tuxedos. The fabric was entirely soaked through.

Soon, they’d be soaked with worse than just rain. Mud and blood would ruin the special outfits they’d made for my arrival.

My heart nearly cracked right down the middle.

I didn’t let it. Not yet, anyway.

There was too much work to do.

ZOHRO

As I rode my shuldu through the endlessly pissing rain, I asked myself, for what felt like the thousandth time, why, in the great bloody blazes, was I doing this?

Why was I out here in this storm, every part of me soaked, from my hat to my pants to my boots? Why was I leaving my herd – and all the work that went along with that – in order to spend days travelling to Warden Hallum's province? Why was I willing to subject myself to the unsavoury company of the convicts from said province, in as absurd a location as a saloon?

The very same saloon that was now coming into view ahead?

I swiped water from my face. A pointless exercise, considering it was replaced immediately by yet more rain.

Asking these questions was also a pointless exercise.

Because I already knew the answer. I was doing this – the trudging, the travelling – because, against all my better judgment, I wanted a human bride.

There. I'd admitted it.

The very thing I'd fought so hard against when Warden Tenn had first told us about the possibility was now the thing I coveted most.

Coveted. I could think of no better word.

I'd hated the idea of having a human bride.

But then I'd seen the ones meant for Silar, Fallon, and Oaken, with their pretty smiles

and strange eyes and I...

I'd coveted. Not those three women, specifically.

But one for myself.

And so, when the warden had commanded me to come here, telling me to line myself up alongside Warden Hallum's men, like I was a bull to be judged in a fair, I'd swallowed my complaints and done it.

Well, not all of my complaints.

But at least I was here, wasn't I?

"Almost there, Wyn," I muttered. I patted Wyn's golden neck, dark and slick from the rain.

The saloon was a long building of wood construction. Apparently, it was the establishment run by some fool named Rivven.

Rivven was not outside to greet me on my approach, which I would have considered rather horrendously rude, if I hadn't been distracted by the sight of three men coming around the side of the building.

Three men....

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Carrying the body of a fourth.

I jolted with recognition.

I knew that body. I knew those limp purple arms, the hanging white hair.

They've gone and killed the warden.

I launched myself off of Wyn's back, my tail already going for the knife at my belt.

Warden Tenn may have been the most insufferable authority figure alive.

But he was still my warden.

"You there!" I shouted, shifting my knife to my hand. "Stop!"

They did not stop. They barely seemed to register me at all, so focused were they on disposing of the warden's body. I was about to charge at them, when a fifth figure came into view. I hadn't seen this one before. It was too small, hidden by the bulk of the biggest male.

She was too small.

Through the pounding rain and the drenched fabric of my hat, I heard her frantic words.

"I'm here with you, Tenn. We're going to get you fixed up. Everything's alright,

now. Everything's alright."

Perhaps Warden Tenn wasn't dead, then. But considering that he was currently limp in the arms of these nameless scoundrels, everything was most certainly not alright.

The group went inside the building. Biting back a hiss, I followed at a run.

I opened the door on total mayhem. Shouts and commands rang out, go here, put him there, no, not there, you dunce! That sort of thing. There was one long table in the centre of the room, and the sight of Warden Tenn's body being heaped atop it triggered a slew of memories.

This was not a saloon.

It was an operating theatre.

"Who are you?" asked one of the three males – a green-skinned one – when he noticed me.

"I am Zohro, son of one of the greatest Zabrian surgeons in living memory. Get the blazes out of my way."

The man's eyes shone white through the strands of purple hair plastered to his face. He looked like he might try to argue. Or physically fight me. But an obviously more sensible man – this one with red eyes and very ugly short hair – dragged the first male away before he could continue getting in my way.

I stepped up to the table. My eyes, trained from the very earliest days of childhood by my father, scanned Warden Tenn's form, assessing.

Unconscious. Not good.

Bleeding profusely from the side of the throat. Also not good.

Zabrian blood typically clotted quickly. But some wounds were just too deep, and bled too fast, for that to do much good.

Wounds like Warden Tenn's.

But if watching my father save lives had taught me anything, it was that nothing was over until the patient's heart stopped beating.

And sometimes, not even then.

"You," I said, aiming my knife at a blue-skinned, white-eyed male. "Get me a sewing kit."

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TASHA

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I stared, half confused and half in awe, at the confident, commanding male who'd taken over the scene just about as quickly as he'd come upon it. If I hadn't known any better, I would have assumed he was a warden.

But I was pretty sure I'd just heard him refer to himself as Zohro. The last man from Tenn's province I was meant to meet.

I was also pretty sure I'd heard him call himself a surgeon. Which seemed... Dubious. Unless he meant a veterinary surgeon to the animals on his farm.

But honestly? At this point?

I'd take whatever help that I could get. Even the delusional sort.

And seeing the way Zohro so easily took command of the chaos inside the saloon made me feel like maybe, just maybe, this might actually be OK.

"You," Zohro said, pointing a knife directly at Rivven's chest. "Get me a sewing kit."

Rivven instantly turned and ran to the back of the saloon. He didn't stop when he reached the bar. He simply leaped right over it.

"You," Zohro said, this time using his dark pink tail to point at Dorn, since his knife was now busy slicing away Tenn's shirt. "Get me clean towels and hot water."

"What can I do?" Xenet asked.

“You...” Zohro squinted at him, then scowled. “You just stay out of the way. And you.”

I stiffened, realizing Zohro was addressing me.

“Tell me what happened.”

“We were outside,” I said, my voice cracking. “We took shelter from the storm inside an old shed. But the roof....”

“It fell?” Zohro finished impatiently when my words trailed off. I nodded mutely.

“You are uninjured?”

“Tenn, he... He pushed me out of the way.”

I wasn't sure if Zohro caught that last bit. He was now muttering away to himself. “Dislocated shoulder. Broken collarbone.” But he didn't seem to actually be paying much attention to those injuries right now. He'd dropped his knife, and both of his dark pink hands were now entirely devoted to holding my soaked shirt against Tenn's torn neck. “Where the blazes is the sewing kit?”

“I've got it!” Rivven slid across the bar. His boots hit the floor hard when he landed. “I sterilized the needle.”

“Good,” Zohro said. “Get it threaded for me.”

I reached for the sewing kit, not wanting to waste any time in case Rivven couldn't do it one-handed.

But he didn't need any help. His tail proved nearly as dextrous as a second hand

would be. He was able to hold the needle perfectly still between his right wrist and the tip of his tail, which meant his left hand was free to thread it.

By the time that was complete, Dorn was back with the water and towels.

“Mop up whatever blood you can,” Zohro instructed, “so I can see what the blazes I’m doing.”

Then, he pulled my shirt away.

I wanted to collapse when I saw how much blood came pouring out of Tenn. But Zohro had none of the same freezing fear that I did. Instantly, he was bent over Tenn’s neck, his arm moving in sharp, precise motions. Dorn and Rivven did as Zohro had commanded them, their towels soon soaked through with black.

So much black.

Please, please, please...

“Are you alright?”

I swallowed a yelp, then turned to find that Xenet was right beside me. He wasn’t as large as Dorn, but compared to a human, he absolutely towered. I tilted my face up to better meet his white gaze.

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“Your face is paler than before,” he said. “We learned in the book that it might mean a human is sick.”

“Not sick,” I said hoarsely. “Scared.”

“Stitching’s done,” Zohro announced. “You two. Hold him here and here. I need to set the shoulder.”

I couldn’t see what was happening, but I heard the harsh pop of Tenn’s bone moving back into its socket.

Even the pain of that didn’t wake him.

And then, I worried I might be truly broken. I worried that this might be the end.

I might never see him again.

I couldn’t take it. I’d crumble under the weight of it. Feeling suddenly seasick with grief, I turned and grasped onto the person closest to me. I buried my face against Xennet’s arm and wept.

“Should I pet you now?”

Those words, so innocent and so bizarre, snapped me out of my crying jag.

“No, thank you, Xennet. I’m...” I sniffed hard and wiped my eyes. “I’m alright now.”

I left Xenet to stand beside Zohro, who was currently arranging Tenn's arm across his bare, bloody chest.

"He should wake up soon. Shouldn't he?" I whispered.

"Theoretically? Yes. There could be a head injury there, but I didn't see any signs of one. No scalp lacerations. No swelling. So it's probably the blood loss."

Zohro grasped a spare towel and began scrubbing his blackened hands with it.

"If he wakes up at all before night falls," he said gravely, "he'll probably live."

"Probably," I repeated through numb lips.

"The probability is good," Zohro said. "If he wakes tonight, even once, even if only briefly, that--"

"Tasha!"

The table nearly overturned. Purple limbs thrashed. My heart stopped.

"Restrain him!" roared Zohro. "He's going to tear his blasted stitches!"

"Tasha!" Tenn tried to bellow, but it came out weakened and raw.

Xenet grabbed Tenn's ankles. Rivven and Dorn each took one of his shoulders.

"Watch that collarbone," Zohro snapped. "And you! Human! Get in his blasted eyeline before he bleeds out!"

"Tenn!" I ran to the end of the table where his head was. I bent over him, making sure

my face was directly over his. He clenched and strained, fighting against Rivven and Dorn as he stretched himself towards me, eyes white and wild.

“Stop moving,” I begged him, cupping his face with my hands. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

He said only two more words before he slipped back into unconsciousness.

“Marry me.”

He went limp against the table.

TENN

I woke to the rather unnerving sensation that a shuldu had stomped – and stomped several times – on my right shoulder, chest, and neck.

When the blazes had I gotten under an angry shuldu's hooves?

I cracked my eyes open, and found myself groaning with the effort.

Even the groan hurt. The sound felt as if it throbbed out of the side of my neck before it reached my throat.

It was agony. All of it.

“Tenn?”

Except for that.

“T...sh...” I mangled her name. Not enough breath in my lungs to fully shape the syllables.

But when my tired eyes blearily focused in on her, she was smiling anyway. Smiling like I'd just completed the most impressive feat she could have put before me. Like I'd just passed every possible test. Like she was proud of me.

Sunlight spilled in from a window I thought I recognized. Only, I was certain I'd never seen it from this angle before.

I was certain I'd been on the outside looking in.

"We're at Warden Hallum's," Tasha said. She was sitting in a chair beside the bed I was lying in.

Herbed. The one she'd been sleeping in while I'd spent my nights outside in the tent.

I wanted to reach for her. But when I tried to lift my right arm, there was no corresponding movement. Nothing but an alarm blaring through my nerves.

My arm... Did I lose it?

"You're in a splint. Your shoulder and collarbone were both injured." Tasha leaned forward and gently patted what I now realized was my right arm, strapped sideways against my chest.

"Don't try to talk," she said. "You've lost a lot of blood. There are stitches and bandages on your neck. Just... rest. OK? And listen."

Her hair was down. I watched the way the sun adorned each strand. Beads of light gathering like brambles.

"Yesterday, we went to Rivven's saloon. Do you remember that?"

I couldn't verbally say yes.

But I could drag my tail up and put it into her lap.

She grasped my tail. And held it tight.

"Yes? Yes. OK. And you told me... You told me about Silar. And we were fighting.

But there was a storm.”

It all came back like thunder. The rain and the sky and the look of betrayal on her beautiful face.

I told her that I loved her...

And then...

There was nothing.

“The roof collapsed. On top of you.” Tasha’s eyes glistened. “You saved me.”

I remembered it. A mere sliver of it, anyway. The dread I’d felt when I’d heard the beam’s ominous crack.

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And the white-hot panic when I had realized she was directly beneath it.

Empire, let this be real. Let this not be a dream.

Let her be safe.

She clutched my tail against her stomach. Her hands felt so warm. So real.

“You also asked me to marry you.”

Now that, I did not remember.

“Well, you didn’t actually ask. You kind of ordered me to. It was veryyou.” She chuckled, her gaze softening. “Very warden-esque. That was the moment I knew you’d be alright.”

I blinked and raised my brows at her, as if to silently say, “Alright?”

I did not feel alright. I could not speak. Could barely breathe. Pain was everywhere.

I’d never felt so weak.

But Tasha was here with me.

I’d succeeded in saving her.

Alright...

Yes. I supposed I was.

“You should get some more rest.”

I stiffened, but she quickly soothed me with a sound like the one in the middle of her pretty name. “Shh. I’m not going anywhere.”

I believed her, up to a point. As sleep began to drag me down, I tried desperately to do the math. To count up how many days were left in the month she’d agreed to spend here.

I could not come up with the sum before I fell asleep.

When I woke next, the sun appeared to be just as bright as before. As if no time had passed at all.

But Tasha, when I saw her in her chair, was wearing different clothing. Her hair was pinned back now.

Plus, I didn’t feel nearly as badly as I had before. I swallowed, and only felt the echo of an ache in the side of my neck.

“How long was I out?” My words came out a little croaky, but intelligible.

How long had I been asleep? It had to have been several days.

“Less than a day,” Tasha said. “We spoke around this time yesterday.”

“I... I do not believe it.”

She grinned.

“Believe it. That’s some fancy Elora Station magic you’ve got floating around in your veins right now. And by magic, I mean some kind of new nano-particle... Something.”

“Medicine?”

“Yes. I ordered it from Elora Station using Warden Hallum’s comms tower signal. It came straight here. Sonic freight. Zohro had to leave to check on his herd after being away so long, but Warden Hallum was able to administer it intravenously while you were asleep.”

I was not entirely sure I liked the idea of Warden Hallum injecting me with things while I was asleep.

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I was definitely sure that I did not like the fact that Tasha and Warden Hallum had been alone together this entire time.

But I was alive. And healing far more quickly than I ought to be. So, really, did I have any grounds for complaints?

“Who paid for it?” I asked. Gingerly, I tried sitting up, and when I found it did not hurt beyond the feeling of someone pressing on a bruise, I continued until I was propped mostly upright against the bed’s wooden headboard.

Tasha watched me closely for signs of pain. When she was satisfied I wasn’t about to pass out from the simple act of sitting up, she cleared her throat, tucked a non-existent hair behind her ear, then mumbled, “I did.”

“You did?Sonic freight?That must have cost a fortune!”

“Well, I’m saving quite a bit now that I’ve given up my lease on Elora Station. So it all balances out. Besides.” Something sparkled in her eyes. Mischief. Or maybe wickedness. “I’m sure my husband’s got some credits to help get me through.”

Her husband.

The agony was back. But this time, it was not physical.

“You’ve... You’ve taken another husband.”

A wealthy one, it seemed. Did she do that simply to pay for my treatment?

I would have rather spent the rest of my life in pain than that.

“I haven’t taken another husband, you dope,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m talking about you.” Tasha rose from the chair, then came to sit on the edge of the bed.

My tail went ’round her waist. Just as it had so many times before.

Husband, she’d said.

You, she’d said.

I pulled her against my chest.

“Careful!” she gasped. “Your collarbone!”

“It’s fine,” I growled, pressing my nose to the top of her head and inhaling deeply.

“Are you sure? Zohro said that it was badly broken.”

“I’m sure.”

It really didn’t hurt much. In fact, everything hurt less now than even a few moments ago, when I’d first awoken.

“I’m so glad,” Tasha breathed. “I got you the good stuff. Obviously, it’s working. It’s repairing everything from the inside out. Rebuilding bone. Creating new blood cells. Repairing tissue. Before it arrived, we thought we might need to do a blood transfusion. Warden Hallum was able to check your blood type in some files.”

Tasha nuzzled closer. My body buzzed at her proximity.

“Out of everyone in the province, Xennet was the only match,” she said. “He offered to donate right away.” Her voice quietened. “Those three saved you, you know. They got the beam off you. Carried you inside. They did everything Zohro told them to, without complaint. They really made a great team, all in all.”

“Remind me to thank them,” I murmured against the top of her head.

“Oh, I think I’ve thanked them enough for the both of us.” She drew back so that I could see her face. “I’ve decided that the bride program will go ahead. When I saw how they all jumped in to help you without a second’s hesitation... I mean, Xennet was literally about to open his freaking veins for you!”

She plopped herself back against my chest.

“They’re good men. Now, we are going to make some changes to the program. We’re going to be operating on a province-by-province basis, with Warden Hallum’s men being next in line. Nobody’s going to get a bride without any sort of screening. And I’m going to bring the next group of potential brides here for some kind of social event. To meet Oaken, Zohro, and the other three men before they decide if they want to marry. Plus a few other things, like weekly wellness check-ins for the first few months after a wedding takes place, completed in person by the wardens.”

“It seems you and Warden Hallum have made many plans without me,” I grumbled.

She raised her head once more. Brought her face close to me.

“Are you jealous?”

“Yes,” I growled miserably.

“You shouldn’t be.” Her lips brushed mine. “Because he’s not the warden I’ve fallen in love with.”

Love. The word lit small fires inside me. I wanted to shelter them. Afraid that even the smallest wind would blow them out. Make all of this less real.

“I was about to tell you that,” Tasha whispered. “When we were out in the shed. I was literally right about to do it when... Well, you know what happened.”

“You love me?”

“I do.”

“And you’ll marry me?”

“I will.”

Glorious elation. Like pure sunlight in my veins.

Like Tasha’s hair in my hands.

“But your life on Elora Station. Your career,” I said, remembering with a sinking heart why this never would have worked.

All the things she had worked so hard for. All the things she treasured.

Even as I said the words to remind her of what she really loved, my tail was tightening around her waist, as if to keep her here even if her own better judgment tried to make her go.

“I don’t want that life anymore.” Her eyes were calm. Clear. And so brilliant. “I don’t think I ever really did. It’s been empty for a long, long time. But here, with you...” She took my left hand in both of hers. “It doesn’t feel empty now. Oh! And I still have my career! I’ve been allowed to continue my work from Zabria Prinar One. I might have to travel to Elora Station every once in a while, like to meet the next batch of brides, but otherwise...”

“Otherwise?”

“Otherwise, I’ll be here. I’m staying.”

“Don’t... Don’t tease me, Tasha,” I begged her. “I know I lied to you when I kept things from you before, and I am so, so sorry for that now. But if I find out you’re not being truthful with me now... Blazes, I think that it will break me.”

“No more lies,” she whispered. “What’s between us, Tenn? It’s the truest thing I’ve ever known.” Her mouth was a breath from mine. Emotion infused her voice when she added, “I’ve already seen you broken once. Never again.”

And then, she was doing that kiss thing again, the thing I’d fantasized about dozens of times since we’d first tried it. Her lips a silken slide over mine. She sighed into my mouth, her entire body relaxing.

I, however, was not relaxed. Desire slammed into me like a brick, like a boulder, like the lethal weight of a falling beam. Within moments, I was rock-hard, my cock

straining. Blood rushed, surged, swelled.

Groaning, I opened my mouth, desperate for more of her. Her little gasp, like I'd somehow caught her by surprise, pleased me more than I would have thought possible. Between my tail and my one good arm, I moved her until she was no longer lying against me but straddling my lap. I broke from the kiss, looking right into her face, making sure she saw me, making sure she knew, as I ground my hard cock upwards against her backside.

“Holy...” she breathed. “That nano-medicine has really helped with the blood flow.”

If anyone was an example of excellent blood flow right now, it was Tasha. Hot crimson bloomed in her cheeks.

And she was so lovely. So painfully, perfectly sweet. Above me in the sunshine, her face flushed, her lips damp and slightly swollen. Swollen because I had made them that way with my own.

Raising my left hand, I dragged my knuckles along the curve of her cheek. Her expression became pinched, then crumpled. She turned her face into my hand and kissed the palm.

I let her have my hand for a moment. But just a moment. I only had the one hand available, and I had many tasks for it to complete.

Starting with taking down her hair.

My fingers slipped around to the back of her head. One by one, I began to pull out the pins. She remained still, watching me, letting me do it. By the time I was finished, I was rocking rhythmically against her, rutting upwards as her hair sluiced down.

“Let me see the rest of you,” I breathed.

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Her lips parted. She grasped the hem of her shirt, then pulled it up over her head, tossing it to the floor.

I bit back a moan when she removed the second, smaller piece of clothing underneath, baring her abdomen and chest to me. I knew my eyes were terribly white as they took in her enticingly soft flesh, with those strange, heavy curves at the top, tipped with dark points as flushed as her face.

“Have you gotten to... to the sexual anatomy part of the book yet?”

“Not yet.”

Blast. Would she tell me I had to go read it before I kept touching her?

That beam didn't kill me, but stopping now actually might.

“I guess you'll just have to learn from the real thing, then,” she murmured. She swept my hand up in hers, then pressed it against one of the curves on her chest. Breathing in sharply, she arched into my touch.

“Sorry. Does it hurt?” I gritted out. I remembered how she'd flinched when I'd measured this part of her back at Fallon's.

“No,” she replied shakily. “It's just sensitive.”

“Sensitive in a good way?” I rasped, moving my hand to explore that little pinkish-brown nub at the tip.

“A very good way.” She moaned, and I nearly came right then.

“Let me see the rest,” I said, fighting for calm, for control.

A warden should always be in control.

But I felt it unravelling. Fraying.

I’d wanted her for so long.

From the very first moment I saw her.

And now, she was here, wriggling out of her trousers and underthings. A flurry of pulling and kicking, and then she was naked. So gloriously naked.

My tail and my left hand seized her plush waist.

“Closer.” My voice did not sound like my own.

She moved forward, slowly, shyly, on her knees. A patch of golden-brown hair was nestled between her perfect thighs.

Groaning, I lurched forward, pressing my face to that place.

By the empire, how I loved her hair.

All of it.

“Oh!” Tasha cried. She flinched backwards, but I held her in place. I dragged my nose through the curls, following the musk of her scent until I encountered wet, petal-soft flesh.

Her cunt.

And then, I was kissing her there, even though I had no idea if that was an acceptable practice to a human or not. All I knew was that I wanted to do it. That I had to. Like I might die if I didn't.

Tasha gripped my hair in her hands, though she did not try to push me away as I touched my lips to that exquisite wetness. But lips were not enough. Breathing raggedly, feeling a hot, early spurt of semen soak my pants, I let loose my tongue to taste her. She trembled, and I gripped her backside fiercely, pinning her against my face as I explored every part of her.

There was no cock tail, but there was a swollen place near the front that made her spasm and shake every time I touched it with my tongue. I was a student of her body, every sound and move she made, every panting reaction, my guides.

I hadn't taken the time to read the blasted book before.

I would take the time now.

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But, really, it did not take so much time at all. Even with the intoxicating novelty of what was happening, I felt that she was already becoming so entirely known to me. With every swipe of my tongue, every glide of my lips, I learned. Like she was a map I could memorize, I devoted myself to the terrain of her pleasure.

“Oh, Tenn, I think...” Her fingers clawed at my scalp. “I’m coming!”

I came, too. Not fully, but enough that it would have embarrassed me if I had not been so brutally aroused by her. I ignored my own spasming cock, focusing entirely on the keening moans coming from her mouth, the quivering of her muscles, the new gush of wetness against my face.

I sucked it down like a starving man.

“Let me... Let me, for you... I want to...” She writhed in my grip until I finally, regretfully released her. She shimmied down, kneeling between my legs, her fingers falling to the strained fasteners at my crotch.

Maybe this really was a dream. It had to be. Never could I have in my waking life deserved to see Tasha like this. Naked and kneeling, her slender fingers so devoted to freeing my cock. The slight pressure of her touch there was nearly enough to make me come again. I was still hard, my cock throbbing terribly, as if it were a wound that needed healing.

Much like I’d done with her hair pins, she worked the fasteners one by one, until they were pulled apart and my cock was free. I wondered, my chest heaving, if she’d stroke me again, like she had that day before we’d come here.

But she didn't. She drew herself up higher on her knees, adjusting her position until...

Until the slickness of her cunt pressed down upon my tip.

"Blazes, Tasha," I swore, my hips already surging hungrily up to meet her. She sank down, and I lost myself to the magma squeeze of her insides. My cock tail went wild, snapping like a feral thing.

Moaning, Tasha reached for it, offering it her finger to entwine with. It wrapped fully around her finger at the same moment that she drove her sweet body further down onto my cock.

"God," she groaned, rocking her hips, sliding just a little further down, "you're so big."

"And you're so beautiful," I choked out. I gripped the curve of her hip, obsessed with the way my purple fingers sank slightly into her flesh.

"Tenn," she cried, "I can't get all of you in me!"

"You don't have to," I promised. Even like this, even with only half my shaft encased in her milking heat, I was about to come again. "You're perfect. You're doing such a good job for me."

Whimpering, she began to bounce on her knees. Her slick inner walls clamped around me, squeezing, sucking me from the inside, until there was nothing I could do but explode. My cock gave a great throb, then spewed.

"Oh! Oh! There... I... Again!" Tasha gasped between frantic spasms of her hips. And she spasmed inside, too, convulsing around my twitching, coming cock. I held her

there as she fell apart in her pleasure, grinding through my orgasm, keeping our bodies connected for as long as I possibly could.

I'd waited so long for this moment.

I would not let it end too quickly now.

Even if we still had hundreds of these moments ahead of us.

A whole lifetime of them.

28

TASHA

"Are you sure your arm is feeling good enough to do that?" I asked Tenn dubiously as he leaned over his work, painstakingly inspecting his stitching.

"Of course," he scoffed. "It's been fine for days."

"If you say so." I sat down on the bed in Warden Hallum's spare room. The bed we'd been sharing ever since Tenn woke up five days ago.

"Try this on," he said, putting down the sewing needle and thrusting the white fabric at me. "I want to see how it fits."

"You've got all my measurements in that big head of yours, don't you?" I teased, taking the garment from him.

Teasing aside, I couldn't wait to try it on.

It was my wedding dress.

Custom-made by my fiancé.

I shucked off my pyjamas, trying not to notice the way Tenn's gaze grew white and heated as it coasted down my exposed curves. I quickly stepped into the dress and pulled it up, settling the straps against my shoulders. The skirt fell beautifully, all the way to my ankles.

"Can you do me up?"

Tenn's throat worked. He cleared it, then stepped in close behind me. I shivered as I felt the brush of his knuckles on my bare back. He took his time with the fasteners back there, heat emanating from his body.

When he was finished with the fasteners, he didn't pull his hands away. He let them fall to my waist, caressing there, like he couldn't get enough of the shape of that part of me.

"Well? How do I look?" I asked breathily.

"Perfect."

My breath quickened when Tenn's hands tightened on my hips. It almost halted completely when I felt the swollen press of his cock against my lower back.

"I should check," he growled, "how much movement the skirt has."

His tail hooked under my skirt and wrenched it up. Since I'd only been wearing my

pyjamas before, I didn't actually have any underwear on right now. My hips angled backward of their own accord when he dragged his swollen heat across my flesh.

"Perfect," he said again, sounding out of breath now. His tail stayed beneath my skirt, slipping between my thighs to stroke my clit as his head nudged my opening.

"Again?" I breathed. We'd already had sex this afternoon. I'd only just washed up and changed.

"Again," he groaned, "Want you so bad. It's never enough."

It was as if the desire from earlier had never left me. My pussy felt slick and swollen and needy. I parted my thighs further without him having to ask me to, and placed my hands against the wall. One of Tenn's hands squeezed my hip. The other splayed across my lower back.

He pressed inside me, and I saw stars.

"Oh, fuck," I moaned, tilting my head back, my spine arching as I drove my hips back to meet him. His cock tail fluttered across my skin, his other tail strumming my clit until I thought my knees might give out.

"Can't wait to do this," Tenn growled, establishing a demanding rhythm, "when you're my wife."

"I... I'm already wearing... The dress," I panted, ecstasy building alongside Tenn's momentum.

"Why do you think I need to have you again right now?" he rasped, giving me an extra fierce thrust. "Saw you in it. So blasted beautiful. Couldn't help myself."

Oh, God.

Tears gathered in my eyes at the same time that my orgasm gathered between my legs.

Tenn loved me. He wanted me. The sight of me in my wedding dress – the one he was making for me – was enough to drive him out of his mind.

I'd never felt so precious.

Tenn gave a sharp grunt when my pussy clamped down upon him.

“Yes, Tasha,” he moaned, shoving himself deeper into my trembling, tightening body. “You’re so good. So, so good.”

His praise sent me higher, flinging me out of myself and then drawing me, tumbling, back in. And he was right there with me, bucking helplessly into me, tensing up, then shunting forward with the force of his cresting pleasure.

“Can’t wait... to marry you,” he choked out between strangled-sounding breaths.

“Me too,” I whimpered as he began to slow.

“You’re sure you want have the wedding here?” he grunted, his cock giving a twinge inside that made me gasp.

“Yes. I want to do it as soon as possible. Before we go see Magnolia. Besides, Rivven and the others are so excited to witness their first human wedding.”

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Tenn stilled, then made a sound of displeasure.

“What is it?” I asked, trying to look back at him over my shoulder.

He gave an especially hard thrust. His tail began to move again, stroking my screaming clit with a speed and force so relentless it nearly felt like a vibrator.

“Don’t like hearing other men’s names in your mouth,” he groaned, beginning to fuck me anew, “when I’m inside you.”

“You... You really are the jealous type, aren’t you?” I barely got the words out. I was going to come again.

“When it comes to you?” he growled, quickening his pace until his cock and his tail were a shuddering blur of friction against me, inside me. “Absolutely.”

“Tenn!” I shouted as my next climax roared through me.

“That’s better. Again.”

“Tenn! Oh, God. Tenn!”

“That’s right, Tasha. My fiancée. My perfect little wife. Keep my name in your mouth when I fill you.”

I did it. He finally let go inside me, coming with a hoarse bellow. And I did exactly what he’d told me to.

He was the warden, after all.

My warden.

My husband

My Tenn.